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Philosophy, out of Bounds: The Method and Mysticism of Simone Weil

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FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF ARTS & SCIENCES

PHILOSOPHY, OUT OF BOUNDS:
THE METHOD AND MYSTICISM OF SIMONE WEIL

By

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If It's Alive, It Will

Angel Olsen

*It's true you are one of my favorite books to read
I have to thank you now, you've changed the way I think
and with each page I turn, there you are
and with each word I read, rings true in my heart*

*While I was waiting I found something I was missing
Might not have been a man, but why waste good-willed love on wishing*

*Please don't confuse me with your devastating stare-downs
I'll hold your mirror, all you have to do is turn around
So you can see the face you make when you are giving of your soul
Are you the only one who doesn't already know*

*My friend, if it's alive, it will do anything
and if it's strong, aware, believe it will go there
and if it's full of love, know it is capable of
Emptying itself out at any point at all
Just know the height you reach is the distance you could fall*

*Know your own heart well, it's the one that is worth most of your time
Know your own heart well, and be surprised by what you find*

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is exposition on the themes of method and mysticism in the work of Simone Weil. Nearly a decade before the onset of her first mystical experience, Weil developed a method to be rigorously applied in daily philosophical reflection. She outlines this method in her dissertation on Descartes (1929-1930). I examine the question of how Weil applied method to philosophical reflection on her mystical experiences (onset 1938-1939). I analyze Weil's mystical experiences as a type of transformative experience in L. A. Paul's strict sense of the term. On Paul's view, an experience is transformative if it is both *epistemically* and *personally* transformative. An experience is *epistemically* transformative if the only way to know what it is like to have it is to have it yourself. An experience is *personally* transformative if it changes your point of view, including your core preferences (Paul, 2014). I present a thought experiment and textual evidence to motivate the claim that Weil's mystical experiences meet Paul's conditions for transformative experience. I then propose two epistemological facts that can be revealed by philosophical reflection on mystical experience. First, it is possible to read meaning erroneously in the appearances of things. Second, it is possible to come to hold to the certainty of a conviction for reasons that elude the intellect. My findings suggest that Weil's late views on philosophy accommodate these two epistemological constraints, thereby demonstrating a possible connection between Weil's mystical experiences and her mature views on the nature, scope, and proper method of philosophy. However, my preliminary findings also suggest that Weil's early work on method may have anticipated these epistemological obstacles prior to the onset of her first mystical experience. Thus, further exposition of Weil's method is needed to support or elucidate the claim (Rozelle-Stone and Davis, 2021) that Weil's epistemology underwent significant changes because of her mystical experiences.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

How would you react to the presence of God?

Imagine, one day, novel thoughts or impressions suddenly start to occur to you, and formidably impose upon your awareness as those of God. You experience the presence of God, so to speak. Presumably, when the anomalous activity subsides, you are left with significant questions, doubts, and emotions concerning your strange, new experience.

If you are an atheistic person, then you may question your sanity. Presumably, you took yourself to have good reasons for believing that God does not exist. Perhaps you had carefully considered traditional philosophical arguments concerning God's existence and were persuaded by an argument from the problem of evil to accept the conclusion that God does not exist. After all, in your view, there was abundant, uncontroversial evidence of human and animal suffering, and no uncontroversial evidence of an omniscient, omnipotent, or omnibenevolent being. In fact, apart from now thinking you were in the presence of God, you cannot recall any good reason whatsoever for believing God exists. And it strikes you as wrong to just believe a proposition, like *God exists*, because it suddenly occurs to you to be true.

An agnostic person might also question their sanity in the aftermath of such a strange occurrence. Let us suppose that they, like the atheist, had considered arguments concerning God's existence. Perhaps they too found the argument from the problem of evil persuasive but could not dismiss the possibility that what appears as unnecessary or evil suffering from the human vantage point could conceivably be necessary or good from the vantage point of some cosmic or higher order intelligence. However, the further difficulty of how to reconcile this mysterious possibility with a traditional conception of God as omnibenevolent could remain

beyond the scope of their interest, imagination, or what they view as the epistemic constraints of a finite human intellect. And, again, it does not seem right to just accept a proposition, like *God exists*, because it suddenly occurs to you to be true.

Suppose further that you are by disposition and training a philosopher. Nevertheless, the conviction is born in you that God exists. Disturbingly, while you are able and willing to doubt your sanity, you find it much more difficult to doubt your newfound conviction. You aim to proceed with skepticism. For example, you doubt your conceptual understanding of God. You also resolve to stay open to all opinions or explanations for the mysterious occurrence that do not appeal to the concept of God. That said, you see no way to reconcile your lived sense of the profundity of the experience with the descriptive facts surrounding it. Thus, the mystery remains, and you, as a philosopher, are unsettled by it.

You are determined to retain a critical perspective to the thought that God exists. You dive headfirst into meditation practice with the express aim to develop your mindfulness of *any* thoughts that occur to you from now on, strange or familiar. Nevertheless, the sense of certitude that accompanies the thought 'God exists' remains or intensifies whenever you think it. You believe God exists, though you intellectually hold steadfast to the possibility that you are somehow wrong in your belief or understanding of that proposition, especially given the tremendous uncertainty surrounding the circumstances that resulted in your sudden conviction. In one respect, you feel acceptance, love, and tranquility, in another, you are unsettled, suspended in more intellectual uncertainty than you have ever experienced before. Your methodological preference for discursive reasoning over, say, intuitive knowledge appears to have been overridden in this instance. But has it been compromised altogether?

You have been hurled headfirst into an experience that transforms your thinking and values. If René Descartes' evil genius *were* to manipulate or supplant your thoughts, then, as it turns out, your intellect is nowhere near as resilient to foreign incursions as you had previously imagined (see Descartes, 16-17). In fact, reading Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* felt nothing like your present predicament, you strangely, quietly concede. You begin to worry about the possibility that years of training in philosophy have not adequately prepared you for this moment.

You decide to consult philosophical literature on transformative experience for guidance. You are initially struck by the attention paid to the question of how one can *rationally choose* to undergo a transformative experience (Paul, *Transformative Experience*, see 1-4). As you read further you learn that transformative experience, as a term of art in philosophy, captures a rich variety of seemingly more familiar (less strange) experiences: traveling abroad, going to college, becoming a spouse or a parent, enduring the loss of a loved one. The philosopher L.A. Paul explains that an experience counts as *epistemically* transformative if the only way to know *what it is like* to have it is to have it yourself, whereas an experience counts as *personally* transformative if it changes your 'point of view,' including your 'core preferences.' Notably, for your experience to count as a 'transformative experience' in the strictly philosophical sense both these conditions must be met (Paul, "Teaching Guide for Transformative Experience," 1-2). You decide to consider if your strange, new experience meets *both* of Paul's conditions and, thus, counts as a case of transformative experience in the strictly philosophical sense.

Helpful to the task, there is a logical distinction the philosopher William James employs in his lectures on the varieties of religious experience to clarify his approach to analysis of religious experiences such as mystical experience (see James, 1936, 4-7). James distinguishes

between two different orders of inquiry concerning *anything*: “First, what is its nature? how did it come about? what is its constitution, origin, and history? And second, “What is its importance, meaning, or significance, now that it is once here?” (James, 5). Answers to the first order of inquiry can be referred to as *existential judgments* or propositions. For example, an ‘existential judgment’ or proposition about what caused the strange occurrence (the *thing* in this case) might be, ‘The strange occurrence was caused by a neurological event in the brain.’ Answers to the second type of question can be referred to as *propositions of value* or, James suggests, *spiritual judgments*, or, I suggest, *value judgments* (James, 6). For example, the existential judgment ‘The strange occurrence was caused by a neurological event in the brain’ might solicit this further ‘value-judgment,’ ‘It is more reasonable to dismiss the strange occurrence as unimportant or inconsequential.’ You decide to try to bear in mind this distinction between the two orders of inquiry, and notions of ‘existential judgments’ (or propositions) versus ‘value judgments’ (or propositions of value), with respect to the strange occurrence, as well as any subsequent evaluation of it.

You now move to consider Paul’s first condition for a transformative experience. Is the *only* way to know ‘what it is like’ to have a mysteriously induced, seemingly full-blown, mystical experience of contact with God to undergo it yourself? Here you are unsure, partly because you are a philosopher (anything is possible?) and partly because you had not seriously attended to the question of what it might be like to have such a strange thing happen to you until necessity demanded it. What you can perhaps grant is that whatever you previously imagined it might be like to undergo such an experience, it was, at least in the descriptive sense, seemingly on track yet vague and underdeveloped (you start to see, hear, or otherwise detect something strange, you afterward question your mental wellness). In other words, it seems that such

‘existential judgments’ about what it might be like track with the truth of the experience. On the other hand, your existential judgments were inadequately developed in the sense that, ‘You are skeptical or uncertain about the cause of the strange occurrence and yet believe God exists regardless’ was notably absent among them, as were further facts about the experience that now strike you as *salient* to an adequate understanding of *what it is like*.

Moreover, in the evaluative sense, your ‘value judgments’ as to what the facts would *mean to you* failed to forecast your current predicament entirely. Your sense of the profundity of the experience is acute and reverberating; nothing you can recall anticipated the immensity of meaning or value cascading therefrom. In other words, you do not think this result would have made sense to an earlier version of you running the identical, hypothetical thought experiment. *Surprise!* For these reasons, you decide your experience counts as meeting the epistemic condition for a transformative experience: namely, the only way for you to know ‘what it is like’ to have an experience of contact with God was to undergo it yourself.

You move on to consider Paul’s second condition. Did the experience change your ‘point of view’ and ‘core preferences’? You think to yourself. The facts of the world are both strange and familiar: you now see God everywhere; you still see God nowhere. Put another way, you now see meaning and value in mundane circumstances, you still see (regard) meaning and value as something you cannot see (in the literal sense). If the totality of what you experience can be compared to the famous rabbit-duck illusion, then it is like your intellect perceives both: God exists everywhere; God exists nowhere. Oh, yes, you discover that reflection on your experience lends itself to the sort of paradoxical expression that you would previously have dismissed as nonsense. Or, at least, this is how it seems to you now, or how you might endeavor to express the change to your point of view if pressed. Regardless of the newfound challenge of expressing

your experience in language, it is obvious to you that your point of view is changed; you are confident on this front.

But have your ‘core preferences’ changed? It depends on what one counts as a core preference. For now, your ‘core’ as a ‘thinking thing’ seems intact. On one hand, you recall your core preferences prior to the strange occurrence included trying to be honest and good, and those remain intact, though new aspects concerning their significance (what they might *mean to you* in terms of your conduct) seem magnified to your awareness. If they have changed, then perhaps they have sharpened in focus in unexpected ways. On the other hand, your core preferences arguably also included securing a post in philosophy so you could make money and pay your bills. And it seems these latter core preferences have lost luster, so to speak. Put another way, they matter significantly less to you than they once did. You now regard them as just one of among many possible means to some further end, namely, to *live well*. You decide your experience counts as personally transformative because your point of view has evidently changed and your core preferences seem to be changing in at least some ways; namely, your value-judgments concerning them have changed, or are in flux, in ways that cause significant changes to your daily conduct and concerns.

Notably, it is not obvious that what counts as a transformative experience in one person’s life would count as a transformative experience in someone else’s life. Consider this further point James makes with respect to existential versus value judgments: “Neither judgment can be deduced immediately from the other. They proceed from diverse intellectual preoccupations, and the mind combines them only by making them first separately, and then adding them together” (James, 6). Thus, it is quite possible that the existential facts themselves are insufficient to determine the value of a thing (James, 7). One man’s transformative experience might be another

man's wasted Tuesday evening, as it were. For example, imagine you read a book that radically transforms your thinking and values, so much so that you enthusiastically recommend the book to others. One of your colleagues decides to read the book and later describes it as nonsense and a waste of time. It *seems* inconceivable or incomprehensible to you but the descriptive facts bear out; your colleague read the same book, same translation, from start to finish. If you are intellectually honest with yourself (and resist the knee-jerk reaction to conclude that your colleague is either ignorant or acting in bad faith), then you are compelled to concede that it is possible for another person (who appears competent) to have read the exact same series of letters and symbols as you, and yet evaluated them so drastically differently. This is the sense in which I mean to say it may be possible that your transformative experience be another man's wasted Tuesday evening, even if it seems inconceivable or incomprehensible to you that this be the case.

This is also what it means to argue, as James does, that the existential facts themselves may be insufficient to determine the value of a thing (James, 7). The hypothetical thought scenario where you think yourself in contact with God is quite possibly a similar case. That is, it is altogether possible that someone else might have dismissed the strange occurrence as the result of stress, poor sleep, or a bit too much to drink the previous night, though this may strike you as inconceivable in your present state.

Nevertheless, let us return to meditate a moment longer on the mental landscape you now inhabit that issued from your transformative experience. Whatever your former views on epistemology or metaphysics were, those may be out the window, or at least up in the air. You still take yourself to have had good reasons for believing whatever it was you once believed to be true (God does not exist; Knowledge requires justified, true belief). But you now find yourself wedded to the conviction that God exists; in fact, it is the belief about which you feel most

confident. The proposition ‘I think, therefore, I am’ has been demoted. For reasons you cannot adequately explain, you are now more confident in the existence of God than you are in your own existence! After all, your view of yourself was always that of a contingent being. The truth of the matter seems to have come unhinged from your intellectual musings on it. *This* is the strange, new mental landscape you now inhabit. You let it sink in.

So, now what?

You decide it necessary to take up the question of what it means to have a transformative experience like this for how you are to methodically approach philosophical inquiry moving forward, your philosophy of philosophy, as it were. After all, according to the literature, philosophical reflection on our transformative experiences can be a way for us to confront our epistemic limitations and their existential consequences (Paul, *Transformative Experience*, 177). Indeed, a person can choose to embrace a transformative experience precisely for the sake of what it reveals to them (Paul, 178). Your transformative experience reveals to you the salience of two facts. First, it is possible to be seized by a profound sense of meaning or value you read in the otherwise mundane appearances of things. By analogy, consider the case of the person who says they can see or feel God’s presence when they walk on a nature trail (or the ‘*He sure does paint a pretty picture!*’ types). Second, it is possible for you to hold a conviction, at any moment in your life, for reasons that elude your intellect. But what follows from these once remote possibilities turned salient facts? You are compelled to consider what this means for how you are to proceed in your philosophical thinking and practice.

The full force of circumstance now demands you conceive a philosophical orientation that can accommodate these strange yet salient facts about your lived experience in an intellectually honest and tenable manner. Further, it seems you are at an intellectual impasse with

respect to the existential order of inquiry James describes (i.e., What is the nature of this transformative experience? How did it come about? What is its constitution, origin, and history?). The existential fact of the matter may simply be that you experienced an episode of aberrant or neurodivergent activity in the brain and its antecedent natural causes may very well be amenable to explication. But you are not a cognitive scientist, psychoanalyst, psychologist, or a historian of religion, you are a mere philosopher. What method of investigation is available to you?

The philosopher Simone Weil observes that Socrates' own method prioritized asking what an idea present to the mind *means*, as opposed to asking if it is *true* or *false*: "If we were clever, we would struggle the way the sophists do, opposing declarations to declarations; but we, simple men that we are, we want above all to consider in themselves, by themselves, what those things are that we are thinking" (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 42). Perhaps then you can still examine the evaluative order of inquiry stemming from that strange moment onward (i.e., What is its importance, meaning, or significance, now that this transformative experience has happened?). Specifically, you can consider the methodological consequences for philosophical reflection that issue from such a transformative experience once it has come to pass. In fact, inquiry into Weil's philosophical approach led me to conclude she was compelled to attend to such revelation from personal experience. And that, ultimately, her late views on the nature, method, and scope of philosophy are significantly informed by her purported mystical experiences.

Weil's late work demonstrates how a philosopher, a lover of wisdom and truth, can proceed to do philosophy whilst undergoing a certain variety of transformative experience, namely, mystical experience. The term 'mystical experience' is here employed as shorthand to

express the idea of a personal (religious or spiritual) experience where one believes themselves to have been in the presence of (or in direct contact with) God, though I acknowledge there is wide technical variance in this concept where it is employed as a scientific or philosophical term of art (see Gellman, 2018). In the wake of such a mystical experience, it is understandable that a philosopher might question how they are to reason about what has happened. I suggest at least two significant epistemological obstacles can accompany such mystical experience: namely, the subject can come to hold a conviction for reasons that elude their intellect and the subject can come to read significant meaning or value in the otherwise mundane appearances of things. These facts present as significant obstacles or concerns (at least in part) because they are often associated with mania, delusion, hallucination, or other disorders of mind. Thus, if these logical possibilities become salient facts (revelatory facts, in Paul's sense) to a philosopher's lived experience, then, if they retain their wellness, it is reasonable to expect they consider the consequences for their method of work.

Weil's late views on philosophical inquiry bear the imprint of such revelation from personal experience and can thus be understood in connection to her mystical experiences. These late views include: the methodical requirement to prioritize the evaluative order of inquiry over the existential order of inquiry, the methodical requirement to question and introduce order to how one is to reflect on (and read) meaning or values in things, and the methodical requirement to factor in for the convictions one holds that are not born of discursive reasoning in philosophical reflection. Again, it is understandable how these and other concerns might arise in the wake of a transformative experience as strange and formidable as mystical encounter. Ultimately, I am curious as to what extent Weil's rigorous methodological orientation to philosophical inquiry prepared her for (or conceivably, even laid the groundwork for) the

mystical experiences she purportedly underwent late in her life. However, I do not here provide an adequate or comprehensive answer to that question that satisfies me. Instead, I work to establish and clarify possible epistemological and methodological connections between Weil's mystical experiences and her late statements on philosophy so that such scholarly understanding and systematic exposition of her method might advance in the future.

Motivation for this investigation stems in part from concerns raised by a lead scholar of Simone Weil, Eric O. Springsted, about philosophical treatment of Weil to date. In his introduction to her late philosophical writings, Springsted observes the following:

Numerous books and articles on Weil have treated her from a philosophical point of view. But doing so can present certain problems, most generally when one fails to see where her interests and concerns go far beyond what academic philosophers normally treat. There are a number of places where this happens. Above all, to approach her in a strictly philosophical way will often completely miss- often deliberately- a genuine and central theological commitment in Simone Weil the thinker, or will miss it *as* a theological or religious commitment. Her Christianity, as unorthodox as it often appears, is not an addendum or a conclusion to a chain of reasoning from elsewhere. For her, there really is an act of God that takes place in Christ's Incarnation and Crucifixion that determines the nature of the world and of human beings. This conviction was something she herself admits she came by unexpectedly through personal experience, and not by a process of reasoning. She even goes so far as to suggest that her reason wasn't quite such what to do with what was indeed a certitude in her life. Yet, lest one mistake things on the other side, it also needs to be understood that this religious commitment did not make serious and unremitting philosophical reflection beside the point for Weil. Far from it. She is not just an anthology of mystical insights. So, how this commitment *and* philosophy go together is of the first order for understanding Weil. It is a matter of getting it right on both sides of the equation. (Springsted in *Simone Weil: Late Philosophical Writings*, 2)

Springsted's observation is that philosophical treatment of Weil's work tends to sidestep or understate the role of her spiritual or religious convictions on her thought. If this is so, then it is possibly, precisely because many of those convictions issued from her personal spiritual experiences, as opposed to reasoned argumentation. From a disciplinary standpoint, philosophers typically subscribe to the methodological assumption that arguments and views can be evaluated

sans consultation with the firsthand experiences or biographical facts of their authors. Thus, the connection between Weil's mystical experiences (or any other personal or biographical facts about her) and her philosophical views is, arguably, an atypical focal point for philosophical analysis.

Moreover, traditional philosophical analyses of Weil's works have certain merits. For example, in his own introduction to *The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil* (1971), the philosopher Miklós Vető observes that in much of the early scholarship on Weil, "biographical, or, rather, hagiographical concerns predominate, and elements of the strange, the tragic, and the picturesque are to be found to the detriment of solid and methodical investigations into ideas" (Vető, 1). Indeed, the philosopher Lissa McCullough notes similar concerns in her introduction to *The Religious Philosophy of Simone Weil* (see McCullough, 1, 12). That said, Vető also acknowledges that, "anyone unaware of the circumstances of her life has no chance to truly understand Weil's thoughts" (Vető, 1). It is my view that Springsted is correct to observe that understanding Weil's particular views on what philosophy *is* and *is not* (that is, on the nature, method, and scope of philosophical inquiry), her philosophy of philosophy, can benefit from a sympathetic engagement with these unusual facts about her personal experience; whereas, to ignore, suppress, or dismiss consideration of her mystical experiences in connection to her late views on philosophy precludes such illumination.

Weil observes that "The most commonplace truth when it floods the *whole soul*, is like a revelation" (Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 116, her italics). Along these lines, I propose certain epistemological insights can issue from a mystical experience. The first is that the subject, having undergone a mystical experience, can understand how it is possible to read significant meaning, possibly erroneously, in the appearances of things. The second is that the subject can

understand how it is possible to hold a conviction for reasons that elude their intellect. Moreover, the gravity of these insights can present as formidable to the intellect. It is thus understandable how a philosopher in this situation might grapple with the question of how they are to orient themselves to their own thought and method moving forward. Weil likely confronted something like this dilemma, yet her conclusion was clearly not that philosophical inquiry ends where transformative experiences like hers begin. Her late essays on philosophy are testament to that fact. Thus, understanding the connection between Weil's personal religious experiences and her arguably stringent views on the nature, method, and scope of philosophy are, as Springsted observes, "of the first order for understanding Weil" (Springsted, 2).

In the next chapter I give the reader an introduction to Weil's life and work. I then give an overview of secondary literature on her method. In the process, I draw the reader's attention to certain tensions related to philosophical treatment of her work.

In chapter three I examine Weil's late (post mystical experience) essays concerning the nature, method, and scope of philosophy, including "Essay on the Concept of Reading," "Some Reflections on the Concept of Value," and "Philosophy" (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 2015). These late essays showcase, among other things, her intellect grappling with the facts that one can read significant meaning, possibly erroneously, in the appearances of things and that one can hold convictions for reasons that elude their intellect. Moreover, these essays contain several significant statements of her views on what philosophy *is* and *is not* that I suspect are more understandable with reference to her mystical experiences than without. Informed by this reading of her late works, I examine the question of whether Weil's views on method in philosophy were thus significantly revised to accommodate her mystical experiences.

In chapter four I revisit the tensions in secondary literature noted in chapter two with reference to the discussion in chapter three. I consider the results of the preceding discussion in connection to future scholarship on Weil's epistemology and method, as well as future scholarship in the philosophy of philosophy.

CHAPTER 2

OVERVIEW

2.1 Introductory Note

Simone Weil (February 3, 1909 - August 24, 1943) lived and died in Europe at a time of significant social upheaval and political uncertainty. In response to the German occupation of France in World War II, Weil's family, French but of Jewish ancestry, would relocate and eventually depart Europe to the United States (Coles, 14-15). Thus, in 1942, the year prior to her death, Weil entrusted a portfolio of her notes and writings to her friend, fellow French philosopher, Gustave Thibon. Thibon, deeply moved by the writings left in his care, would posthumously publish selections therefrom in the volume, *Gravity and Grace* (1947), a text reputed for its significant spiritual insights (Thibon in Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, xii-xiii). It is also a primary source for Weil's religious metaphysics.

To help explain his publication of Weil's work, Thibon shared passages from their correspondence. Notably, the excerpt below gives us a glimpse into Weil's personality, as well as her own view on the relationship between biographical facts about an author and the truth value in a text they have composed:

You tell me that in my notebooks you have found, besides things which you yourself had thought, others you had not thought but for which you were waiting; so now they belong to you, and I hope that after having been transmuted within you they will one day come out in one of your works...I am not a person with whom it is advisable to link one's fate. Human beings have always more or less sensed this; but, I do not know for what mysterious reason, ideas seem to have less discernment. I wish nothing better for those which have come in my direction than that they should have a good establishment, and I should be very happy for them to find a lodging beneath your pen, whilst changing their form so as to reflect your likeness. That would somewhat diminish my sense of responsibility and the crushing weight of the thought that through my many defects I am incapable of serving the truth as I see it when in an inconceivable excess of mercy it deigns to allow me to behold it. I believe that you will take all that as simply as I say it to you. In the operation

of writing, the hand which holds the pen, and the body and soul which are attached to it, with all their social environment, are things of infinitesimal importance for those who love the truth. They are infinitely small in the order of nothingness. That at any rate is the measure of importance I attach in this operation not only to my own personality but to yours and to any other writer I respect. Only the personality of those I more or less despise matters to me in such a domain... (Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, xiii-xiv)

From this passage we can observe the following about Weil. First, Weil's priority concern was for getting at the truth of things. That much is made clear here and throughout her writings: "For me personally life had no other meaning, and fundamentally has never had any other meaning, than waiting for the truth" (Chenavier, 2; see also McCullough, 13). Second, when it came to the evaluation of the truth value of a text, Weil, like many philosophers, viewed biographical facts about the author as either irrelevant, a liability, or a distraction (see McCullough, 1-2): "The eulogies of my intelligence are positively *intended* to evade the question: "Is what she says true?"" (Miles, 2; see also Chenavier, 20). Third, perhaps strikingly, any desire to receive acknowledgment for authoring a truthful text or innovative idea appears absent from Weil's personality.

So why discuss biographical facts about Simone Weil at all?

2.1.1 Project Method

To answer that question let us review the motivation for the method of the present investigation which stems, in part, from critical observations advanced by lead scholars on Simone Weil. First, recall Springsted's concern (chapter one) that traditional philosophical analyses of Weil's views do not give an adequate account of the significant role convictions, born from Weil's personal spiritual experiences, played in the development of her thought (Springsted in Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 1-3). Second, recall Vetó's observation that, "anyone unaware of the circumstances of her life has no chance to truly understand Weil's

thoughts” (Vető, 1). Thus, following Vető’s observation, we review biographical facts that help to situate Weil’s life and work in historical context. And, following Springsted’s concern, we consider biographical facts about Weil’s spiritual experiences that can help us better grasp her late philosophical writing.

Motivation for the method of the present investigation further stems from my own observation of philosophical treatment of Weil. In secondary literature on Weil, it is stated that her epistemology was changed by her mystical experiences— e.g., “Shaped by her social-political and religious thought, Weil’s epistemology would change over time, especially in light of her mystical experiences” (Rozelle-Stone and Davis, 2021). But what exactly is *meant* by the claim (its full significance) remains unclear or underdeveloped. Perhaps it is meant to indicate Weil goes from not believing in God or being agnostic to believing in God; however, this would be an unsatisfactory account of the epistemological challenges posed to Weil in virtue of her mystical experiences and how exactly the arguably method-obsessed Weil grappled with them. Thus, this investigation aims to reflect on what exactly it can *mean* to suggest Weil’s epistemology, founded as it was on rigorous attention to method, was changed by her mystical experiences. It is conceivable, for example, that Weil’s view on the epistemic limitations of an intellect (e.g., what we can come to understand about the nature or constitution of the universe through philosophical reflection) expanded while her *method* of philosophical reflection remained significantly intact.

A caveat is in order. As noted in chapter one, this method of investigation is arguably atypical from a disciplinary standpoint insofar as it involves significant consideration to the fall out of Weil’s (in this case, the author’s) lived experiences, specifically, her mystical experiences

conceived of as transformative experiences, for her late views on philosophy. Thus, in chapter four, we return to consider the limitations associated with this methodological deviance.

But let us also take this opportunity to clarify and distinguish the aim of the present investigation from the method.

2.1.2 Project Goal

Notably, the present inquiry does not aim to answer the question: Is she speaking the truth or not? That is for readers of Weil to judge for themselves. In fact, I agree with Weil (and arguably many philosophers), that the truth value of a text can often be judged without consulting biographical facts about the author. That said, who can deny that attention to an author's idiosyncratic experiences can sometimes help us make better sense of their idiosyncratic views? And a better understanding of Weil's views on the philosophy of philosophy, particularly her views on proper methodology in philosophy, is the primary purpose of the present investigation.

Nevertheless, disciplinary reserve with respect to this method of investigation is warranted. All too often, the invocation of biographical facts about the author of a heterodox view functions as either an *ad hominem* attack or an illicit appeal to authority, in either case, a logical fallacy. Moreover, these fallacies bear out in the several cases of invective and hagiographical treatment of Weil that philosophers have already observed (see chapter one). However, these are not the objectives of the present investigation.

Neither is the object of the present investigation to avoid answering Weil's priority concern, "Is what she says true?" However, to avoid a hasty evaluation of Weil's late views contemporary philosophers need clarity on a related question. Namely, what did Weil *mean* by saying all she said concerning the nature, scope, and proper method of philosophy toward the

end of her life? And, related to the task of answering *that* question, we consider if and how her lived experiences, specifically, her mystical experiences, may have informed her account of what philosophy *is* and *is not*.

In sum, the priority *aim* of the present investigation is to establish a clarifying connection between Weil's mystical experiences and her arguably heterodox views on the nature, method, and scope of philosophy, one that adds insight to the reader's understanding of Weil's late views on the philosophy of philosophy (as opposed to arguing for or against those views), and one that equips readers to consider anew the significance of Weil's views on method to future scholarship on Weil's epistemology.

2.2 Biography

Who was Simone Weil?

Perhaps most obviously, Weil was a philosopher. As fellow schoolmate, the feminist and existentialist philosopher, Simone de Beauvoir, observed in her memoirs: it was Weil who placed first on exams in History of Philosophy and General Philosophy and Logic in 1926 (Bingemer, 7). And, in fact, it was Weil who passed the entrance exams for the École Normale Supérieure (ENS) in first place in 1928 (Coles, xx). Another of her contemporaries, the French existentialist philosopher, Albert Camus, described Weil as, "The only great spirit of our time" (Craufurd in Weil, *Waiting for God*, Postscript: About the Author, 11), and saw to the publication of several of her political essays (Rozelle-Stone and Davis, 2021). The Anglo-Irish philosopher and novelist, Iris Murdoch, observed a "profoundly disciplined life behind her writings" and "an authority which cannot be imitated" (Rozelle-Stone and Davis, 2021). Simone Weil was thus recognized as a philosopher among philosophers.

Nevertheless, in the Western hemisphere, Weil is arguably better known for her religious mysticism than for her philosophical acumen per se. This is despite the fact, observed by the

American literary critic, Leslie A. Fiedler, that, “she published in her lifetime no intimate testimony to the secret religious life that made of her last few years a series of experiences perhaps unequaled since St. Theresa and St. John of the Cross” (Fiedler in Weil, *Waiting for God*, xii). This is also despite the fact Weil *did* compose several philosophical essays and political articles during her late period; that is, from the start of World War II in 1939 to the year of her death in 1943.

That said, Lissa McCullough observes that methodical exposition of Weil’s late writings (1939-1943) poses significant challenges for scholars (see McCullough 8-10). This is partly due to the fact Weil herself faced significant difficulties composing her thought during that period (McCullough 9-10). In support of this claim, McCullough points to evidence from correspondence between Weil and the French philosopher, Jean Wahl, during her exile from France: “I cannot detach myself sufficiently from what is going on to make the effort of drafting, composing, etc.; and yet a part of my mind is continuously occupied with matters absolutely remote from current events (though current problems are indirectly related to them). My solution is to fill notebook after notebook with thoughts hastily set down, in no order or sequence” (McCullough, 9). Elsewhere, in a letter to her mother, Weil admits the following with respect to her mature thought: “It’s a dense mass. What gets added to it is of piece with the rest. As the mass grows it becomes more and more dense. I can’t parcel it out into little pieces” (McCullough, 9-10). Consequently, Weil’s corpus includes thousands of pages of meditative notebook entries, scattered, fragmentary notes, and unfinished essays; while voluminous, the state of her writings from this late period require sustained attention, with a view to the whole of her thought, for methodical reconstruction (McCullough, 8-10).

In fact, Weil held that proper evaluation of a philosopher's ideas involves sustained attention to the whole of their thought *from the point of view of their author* (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 34). Indeed, Weil exemplified this sympathetic approach in her treatment of Descartes (McFarland and Van Ness, 21-88). Consequently, she was disappointed by the hasty evaluations others made of her own thought:

They listen to me or read me with the same fleeting attention they give everything else, taking each little fragment of an idea as it comes along and making a definitive mental decision: "I agree with this", "I don't agree with that", "this is brilliant", "that is completely mad [...]". They conclude: "It's very interesting", and then go on to something else. They haven't tired themselves. (McCullough, 10)

While the effort is still underway for philosophers to adequately expose and accessibly reconstruct Weil's thought, many readers and commentators have nevertheless judged her as everything from spastic, self-deceived, or insane to in league with the most original philosophical, political, and religious thinkers of the twentieth century (see Craufurd in Weil, *Waiting for God*, Postscript: About the Author, 2-14). Regardless, if sustained attention to Weil's corpus from a sympathetic point of view is indeed necessary for an adequate grasp of her thought and methodological trajectory, then it may require a labor of love before any one reader is properly situated to judge her philosophical legacy.

Let us turn to review a biographical timeline of Weil's life; it serves the reader as a reference point for the subsequent investigation.

2.2.1 Early Period: 1925–1934

Pre-Mystical Experience: Philosophical Training, Teaching, and Work. Simone Weil's training in philosophy began in the late 1920's in France. She passed her baccalaureate exams in philosophy in 1925 (Coles, xix), having studied the previous year under the French philosopher, René Le Senne. Le Senne's influences included Maine de Biran and René

Descartes. Notably, it is Le Senne who reportedly exposed Weil to the idea of contradiction as a tool of philosophical investigation (Rozelle-Stone and Davis, 2021). The significance of contradiction in thought and action is an idea Weil employed and developed throughout her life and works and that we return to later.

From 1925 to 1928 Weil studied with the French philosopher, Emile-Auguste Chartier, known by the pseudonym, Alain (Coles, xix). Alain was a student of Jules Lagneau and both men were influenced by Maine de Biran and Descartes. Weil was, in turn, one of Alain's students, and, along with the ideas of Descartes and Lagneau, Alain's ideas are displayed in her dissertation, *Science and Perception in Descartes* (McFarland and Van Ness in Weil, *Formative Writings*, 24 and 29), which she worked on from 1929 to 1930 at the ENS (McFarland and Van Ness in Weil, *Formative Writings*, xi). Weil's dissertation was completed under the supervision of the philosopher Leon Brunschvicg; however, Weil reportedly consulted him minimally or not at all and produced an independent work that he did not like and consequently assigned the lowest passing score (McFarland and Van Ness in Weil, *Formative Writings*, 23).

Besides her French predecessors, Weil was significantly influenced by the thought of Plato and Immanuel Kant (McCullough, 29; Vetö, 8), among others, and inspired by elements of Stoicism (like the idea of *amor fati*), Christianity (like the act of Jesus Christ on the Cross), and Pythagorean thought (McCullough 3 and 7; Veto, 3; Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*; Weil in *Late Philosophical Writings*, 40; Weil in *Waiting for God*, 40). After passing her dissertation defense, Weil earned the competitive *agrégation* diploma in 1931 that allowed her to teach as a professor of philosophy in the upper lycées (Chenavier, 6; Coles, xx). Weil would work as a philosophy teacher off and on from 1931 to 1938, with leaves for health, work, and travel interspersed throughout this period (Bingemer, 26; Chenavier, 7, Coles, xx).

Alongside her academic career, Weil was politically active throughout the early 1930's (Chenavier, 6-19). In the summer of 1932, she traveled to Germany (Vető, 209) where she studied the country's political and revolutionary climate. Among other things, she wrote critical analyses of Communist and Nazi party activities (Chenavier, 7-8). In 1932 and 1933, back in France, she engaged in demonstrations for unemployed workers and marched alongside workers' unions (Coles, xx). Weil's compassion and desire for solidarity with the poor, workers, or those otherwise suffering was consistent throughout her life and manifested in a variety of ways, including, notably, her asceticism, labor efforts, and philanthropic allocation of resources.

Weil composed several political essays during this time including, notably, “Reflections Concerning the Causes of Liberty and Social Oppression” in 1934 (Chenavier, 8-9), a text her former philosophy professor, Alain, regarded highly (Vető, 6). In fact, Veto notes, Alain described it as “Kant continued” (Vető, 6). Shortly thereafter, to better understand the conditions of industrial laborers, Weil requested a leave from teaching to engage in factory work (Chenavier, 9).

2.2.2 Middle Period: 1935–1939

Factories, Wars, and Mystical Encounters. From December 1934 through 1935 Simone Weil labored as an unskilled factory worker and recorded a daily journal of what proved to be a formative, if not transformative, experience in her life (see McFarland and Van Ness in Weil, *Formative Writings*, 151-154; Weil, *Formative Writings*, 155-226; see also Weil, *Waiting for God*, 25-26). She worked various jobs during this period including as a power press operator, at a stamping press, and on a milling machine (Coles, xx). By Weil’s own admission, the conditions of factory work took a significant physical and psychic toll on her (Bingemer, 21; Chenavier, 32; McFarland and Van Ness in Weil, *Formative Writings*, 151-154 and 155-226;

Weil in *Waiting for God*, 25-26). However, the work also served as a significant learning experience for her. In addition to physical exhaustion, she experienced humiliation and social degradation regularly and observed firsthand the psychological result of such working conditions was to depress or altogether eliminate any revolutionary impulse in her person (McFarland and Van Ness, 153). In other words, oppressive work conditions were maintained, in part, by a socialized sense of inferiority among the workers that, in turn, engendered docility (Chenavier, 33; McFarland and Van Ness in Weil, *Formative Writings*, 153).

In August of 1936, Weil, deeply sympathetic to republican cause in the Spanish civil war, joined an international group allied with an anarchist trade union to assist their war effort (Coles, xx). Although she reportedly vowed never to learn how to use a gun (Fiedler in Weil, *Waiting for God*, xx), she nevertheless sustained a significant noncombat injury that returned her early from the frontline (Bingemer, 24). This too proved to be a significant learning experience for Weil. She observed firsthand how the circumstances of war could occasion people, regardless of what side they fought on (and not exempting herself) to act in unjust or depraved ways (Bingemer, 24; Chenavier, 10). Her experience in the Spanish civil war led her to more critical reflections on the prospects of revolution (Fiedler in Weil, *Waiting for God*, xx). Indeed, her vacillating reflections on pacifism versus participation in war were continuously informed by her lived experience of twentieth century warfare (see Chenavier 12-13).

Weil's religious experiences began in the late 1930's. In the spring of 1937, Weil traveled to Italy while on leave from teaching (Coles, xxi; Weil, *Waiting for God*, 26). There she visited the chapel of Santa Maria degli Angeli in Assisi where, she reported, something stronger than her compelled her to go down on her knees for the first time (Weil, *Waiting for God*, 26). In 1938, Weil had another significant experience while attending liturgical services at Benedictine

abbey of Solesmes back in France (Coles, xxi; Weil, *Waiting for God*, 26). She described the experience in some detail in a letter to her friend, the Dominican priest, Father Joseph Perrin:

I was suffering from splitting headaches; each sound hurt me like a blow; by an extreme effort of concentration I was able to rise above this wretched flesh, to leave it to suffer by itself, heaped up in a corner, and to find a pure and perfect joy in the unimaginable beauty of the chanting and the words. This experience enabled me by analogy to get a better understanding of the possibility of loving divine love in the midst of affliction. It goes without saying that the thought of the Passion of the Christ entered into my being once and for all. (Weil, *Waiting for God*, 26)

On this same visit, Weil was introduced to the literary genre of seventeenth century English metaphysical poetry (Weil, *Waiting for God*, 26). In subsequent exploration of the genre, she discovered a “beautiful poem” called “Love” by George Herbert (Weil, *Waiting for God*, 27; see Fiedler in Weil, *Waiting For God*, xxiii for poem; the poem is also reproduced on page 150 of this document). Her first mystical encounter reportedly happened while reciting this poem amidst a violent headache: “It was during one of these recitations that, as I told you, Christ himself came down and took possession of me” (Weil, *Waiting for God*, 27). Such are the circumstances of her first report of contact with God.

As noted, personal testimony of Weil’s mystical experiences is limited (Rees in Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, ix). Significantly, however, there is a letter she wrote to Father Joseph Perrin that details her spiritual development (Weil, *Waiting for God*, 21). Passages therein offer evidence of what it was like for her, as a philosopher, to undergo a mystical experience. Notably, she addresses the 'problem of God' thus:

I may say that never at any moment in my life have I 'sought for God.' For this reason, which is probably too subjective, I do not like this expression and it strikes me as false. As soon as I reached adolescence, I saw the problem of God as a problem the data of which could not be obtained here below, and I decided that the only way of being sure not to reach a wrong solution, which seemed to me the greatest possible evil, was to leave it alone. So I left it alone. I neither affirmed nor denied anything. It seemed to me useless to solve the problem, for I thought that, being in this world, our business was to adopt the best attitude with regard to the

problems of this world, and that such an attitude did not depend upon the solution of the problem of God. (Weil, *Waiting for God*, 22)

Weil thus acknowledged that she had not seriously attended to the possibility of direct contact with God until necessity demanded it: “In my arguments about the insolubility of the problem of God I had not foreseen the possibility of that, of a real contact, person to person, here below, between a human being and God” (Weil, *Waiting for God*, 27). She concluded that, “God in his mercy had prevented me from reading the mystics, so it should be evident to me that I had not invented this absolutely unexpected contact” (Weil, *Waiting for God*, 27) and that, ultimately, experience of the transcendent “can only be known through direct contact, since our faculties are unable to construct it” (McCullough, 6). While limited, her testimony reveals that the strange, new experience was unanticipated and caused her to re-examine her attitude to the question of God’s existence.

But what exactly did Weil experience? Concerning the first episode of direct contact she reported that, “in this sudden possession of me by Christ, neither my senses nor my imagination had any part; I only felt in the midst of my suffering the presence of a love, like one can read in the smile on a beloved face” (Weil, *Waiting for God*, 27). Notably, her intellect sparred with the data of this first contact: “Yet I still half refused, not my love but my intelligence. For it seemed to me certain, and I still think so today, that one can never wrestle enough with God if one does so out of pure regard for the truth. Christ likes us to prefer truth to him because, before being Christ, he is truth. If one turns aside from him to go toward truth, one will not go far before falling into his arms” (Weil, *Waiting for God*, 27). Thus, Weil experienced the presence of love amidst (and in the wake of) significant suffering and her intellect responded to the strange, new experience with uncertainty and skepticism.

Nevertheless, Weil continued to undergo these mystical experiences and their significance intensified. She translated and began to recite the Lord's Prayer (Our Father prayer) in Greek with the same "absolute pure attention" she viewed as requisite for any serious philosophical reflection (Weil, *Waiting for God*, 29). She described the results thus:

The effect of this practice is extraordinary and surprises me every time, for, although I experience it each day, it exceeds my expectation at each repetition. At times the very first words tear my thoughts from my body and transport it to a place outside space where there is neither perspective nor point of view. The infinity of the ordinary expanses of perception is replaced by an infinity to the second or sometimes the third degree. At the same time, filling every part of this infinity of infinity, there is silence, a silence which is not an absence of sound but which is the object of a positive sensation, more positive than sound. Noises, if there are any, only reach me after crossing the silence. Sometimes, also, during this recitation or at other moments, Christ is present with me in person, but his presence is infinitely more real, more moving, more clear than on the first occasion when he took possession of me." (Weil, *Waiting for God*, 29)

Weil's testimony of her mystical experiences, while limited, does give us some data. Namely, her mystical experiences involved the repeated impression of the presence of God. She considered the content of these experiences as new and relevant data concerning the question of God and they increased in frequency, intensity, and clarity after her first encounter.

But how did her mystical experiences influence her view of philosophy? Perhaps surprisingly, Weil came to view Plato, whose work as a philosopher she held in the highest esteem (Chenavier, 1; Vető, 3), as a mystic (Weil, *Waiting for God*, 28): "[In Plato] there is no question of God so long as real contact has not been established by mystical experience, and not even then except by allusion. This is the opposite of the Christian way, in which one speaks of God long before they have the least suspicion of what that word signifies. The advantage is that the word by itself has a power, the disadvantage is that the authenticity is lessened" (McCullough, 44). Weil's revelation concerning Plato's status as a mystic is itself evidence of a significant connection she perceived between mystical experience and the vocation of

philosophy. Along these lines, it is a helpful advance where Vető observes that Weil shared with Plato the sense of “harmony between reason and mystery,” and, indeed, acknowledges as much in connection to Weil's methodical orientation to mystery (Vető, 3). We return to this aspect of her method later.

Subsequently, Weil implicitly acknowledged an arguably significant epistemological shift circa 1938-1939, when, in 1942, she recalled, “the word God had no place at all in my thoughts [...] until that day— about three and a half years ago— when I could no longer keep it out” (McCullough, 4). We can infer the idea of God formidably impressed itself upon Weil’s thought around the time of her first mystical encounter. It is thus evident these mystical experiences were meaningful for Weil. However, it is not yet obvious how exactly she viewed them in connection to Plato or the vocation of philosophy per se.

2.2.3 Late Period: 1939–1943

Post Mystical Experiences: World War II and Late Philosophical Writing. Weil's life took several significant turns in the 1940's and her work pace accelerated (Springsted in Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 7). In September 1939, in response to the German invasion of Poland, Britain and France declared war on Germany and Weil's family returned to Paris (Coles, xxi). Meanwhile, from 1939 to 1940, Weil worked to complete her milestone study, “The *Iliad* or the Poem of Force” (Vető, 7). In early 1940, months before the Germans had marched through the Netherlands and Belgium toward France, Weil composed her “Memorandum on the Formation of a Front-Line Nursing Squad,” a plan she conceived wherein she and other women would provide immediate support to French soldiers on the front lines as they fought German troops. However, her repeated requests to serve at the frontlines of combat were categorically rejected by French government officials (Coles, 15). Notably, in 1944, a corps of American

Army nurses would realize something like Weil's hope to provide morale and medical support to soldiers at the front lines of the war (Collins, 2021). In the spring of 1940, Weil read the Bhagavad-Gita and, after the Armistice, moved with her family to Vichy and then Marseille (Coles, xxi), where she became involved with the group and literary magazine *Cahiers de Sud* (Coles, xxi; Vetö, 211).

In 1941, Weil began to study Sanskrit (Coles, xxi). She also met and began her correspondence with the Dominican priest and French resistance worker, Father Joseph-Marie Perrin (Coles, xxi; Vetö, 211). Their correspondence included several letters and essays she wrote him that were posthumously published in *Waiting for God* (1951), another text reputed for its significant spiritual insights. It was Father Perrin who assisted Simone Weil to secure a job as a farmhand (another labor experience she had sought after) for Gustave Thibon in the Rhone Valley, thereby introducing them (Coles, xxi). Weil and Thibon became friends during this time. As Thibon later observed, Weil's return to Marseille after her labor efforts in the grape harvest corresponded with a proliferation in her notes and writings (Chenavier, 17; Perrin and Thibon, 121; Springsted in Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 7).

Indeed, Weil's most explicit remarks on the nature, scope, and proper method of philosophy were written in this late period. They can be viewed in her unfinished essay on the concept of reading (spring 1941), her essay on the concept of value (early 1941), and "Philosophy," a journalistic report published in the *Cahiers du Sud* in May 1941 (Springsted in Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 7). These works, along with remarks from her New York (1942) and London (1943) notebooks, provide evidence of Weil's late views on philosophy (Springsted in Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 7).

As noted, Weil accompanied her family to New York in May 1942. From there, she planned her return to Europe to assist the French resistance effort (Coles, 17). Weil sailed to Liverpool in November of that year and joined the Resistance movement in London, after being temporarily held at a detention camp upon her return to the continent (Coles, xxi). In 1943, she worked as a writer with the Free French organization in London (Coles, xxii) where she completed her last political works. Notably, these included, “Draft for a Statement of Human Obligations” (1943), “On the Abolition of All Political Parties” (1943), and “The Need for Roots” (1943). In April 1943 Weil was hospitalized for tuberculosis in London and remained so for months (Coles, xxii; Vető, 212). She was eventually transferred to a sanatorium in Kent and died shortly thereafter in August 1943 (Coles, xxi and xxii; Vető, 212). World War II would end less than two years later in May 1945.

2.3 Literature Review

Simone Weil's ideas have influenced thinkers and writers of diverse backgrounds and interests. This is because, beyond philosophy, Weil was a polymath whose writing spanned topics in politics, history, sociology, psychology, religious studies, theology, mathematics, science, art, literature, mythology, and mysticism (McFarland and Van Ness in Weil, *Formative Writings*, 5; Springsted in Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 1; Rees in Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, x). She even engaged in creative writing, including the composition of poetry, prose, and a play (Fiedler in Weil, *Waiting for God*, xiv). Consequently, secondary works on Weil also span several disciplines, including Philosophy, Religion, History, Political Science, Psychology, Nursing, Literature, Education, and Business (Lipton, “University of Calgary: Simone Weil Bibliography,” 2017).

In philosophy, the first methodical exposition of Weil's religious metaphysics was completed by Miklos Vető in 1971, “under the sympathetic eye of Iris Murdoch” (Vető, xi). In 1988, Mary G. Dietz completed a methodical exposition of Weil’s political thought, *Between the Human and the Divine: The Political Thought of Simone Weil* (Dietz, 1988). Additionally, Robert Chenavier (2009) and Eric O. Springsted (2015), among others (McLellan, 1990), have provided helpful, overarching insights on Weil’s philosophical thought. And, in 2014, the philosopher Lissa McCullough published an insightful methodical exposition of her own on Weil’s late religious philosophy that does reference Weil’s mystical experiences (McCullough, 2014). Additionally, several philosophers have taken up various aspects of Weil’s religious, ethical, aesthetic, and political thought (see Rozelle-Stone and Davis, 2021).

Analysis of the epistemological themes that distinguished Weil's philosophy is, however, limited; this is especially true with respect to her early work and lectures (see commentary by McFarland and Van Ness in Weil, *Formative Writings*, 7-9). And while methodical exposition of Weil's views on the proper method and scope of philosophical inquiry is still underway, it likely requires interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary collaboration (see commentary by McFarland and Van Ness in Weil, *Formative Writings*, 24). For example, Weil’s arguably “most neglected” text, “Science and Perception in Descartes,” details her epistemological approach in considerable detail, but a significant grasp of Cartesian mathematical and philosophical thought (and, arguably, Weil’s own mature thought) is needed to undertake an adequate exposition of this work (McFarland and Van Ness, *Formative Writings*, 7-9 and 24-29). Along these lines, Vető is encouraging of future scholarship: “The image I formed of Weil, the path I took through her work are, to be sure, only one possible image and one possible path...” (Vető, x). Nevertheless, Weil’s status as a mystic complicates the inquiry into her epistemology and method. As noted,

some philosophers claim Weil's epistemology was significantly changed by her mystical experiences (Rozelle-Stone and Davis, 2021); however, what exactly is implied by the claim is not self-evident, nor, as it turns out, is the claim itself uncontroversial.

The claim that Weil's epistemology significantly changed because of her mystical experiences is contentious. This is because many Weil scholars are, in fact, emphatic about the significant epistemological *continuity* in her thought (see, for examples, McCullough, 8-9; Rees in Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, vii; Vető, 7-8). Specifically, Vető insists on the unity and continuity, as opposed to any (post-mystical experience) break or discontinuity, of Weil's thought (Veto, 7-8). Indeed, Vető argues that such continuity can be demonstrated by situating Weil's philosophical thought in relation to that of her intellectual predecessors, Kant and Plato (Vető, 7-8). Thus, Vető's position is that the continuity of thought in Weil's work can be satisfactorily demonstrated sans treatment of her mystical experiences per se. Moreover, the lack of explicit appeal to mystical testimony in Weil's own work (Rees in Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, ix) may be taken as evidence that she did not view them as indispensable to the exposition of her philosophical thought (Rees in Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, ix). Nevertheless, L.A. Paul's work on transformative experience (2014) gives contemporary philosophers a novel way to approach the revelatory fall out of such mystical experiences as those underwent by Weil and, thus, to consider anew their conceivable impact on her epistemological orientation and method.

There is an apparent tension here that is worth drawing out. On one hand, there are Weil scholars who would subscribe to the view Weil's philosophical thought can be understood as continuous without philosophical treatment of her personal, religious, or mystical experiences per se. Those who would insist, with Vető, that the perceived "break" between Weil's early and

late work is “only superficial” (Vető, 7) and that the “inability of most critics and readers to conceive there is no break between the first and last works is that they can or will not accept that this young anarchist, agnostic, and practically Marxist professor is the same person who was later “captured by Christ” who thinks that “God alone, and absolutely nothing else, is worthy of our interests”, who asserts that “crucifixion is the end, the accomplishment of a human destiny”, and who asks, “How can a being whose essence is to love God and who is located in space and time have any vocation other than the Cross?”” (Vető, 7 and 8). On the other hand, there is a proliferating body of philosophical scholarship on transformative experiences that hinges on the epistemological significance of transformative experiences, such as mystical experiences, for those who undergo them. Further, as noted, there are those Weil scholars, among them philosophers, who observe a significant epistemological change in orientation in her late (post mystical experience) works (Rozelle-Stone and Davis, 2021). We return to address this tension in chapter four.

2.3.1 Heterodox Methodology?

Let us reflect on yet another apparent tension evident in Weil scholarship. On one hand, there is the fact, observed by Weil scholars, that the philosophers who most significantly influenced Weil's thought are arguably as traditional and orthodox as they come: Socrates, Plato, Descartes, Kant, Spinoza, and Rousseau, for example (Rozelle-Stone, 2021). Moreover, the observation bears out; references to the ideas and works of traditional philosophers like Socrates, Plato, Descartes, Kant, Spinoza, Leibniz, Rousseau, Marx, and Ancient Stoics, are prevalent throughout Weil's writings and teaching on philosophy (see Weil, *Lectures on Philosophy*, 2002). That much is readily demonstrable.

On the other hand, however, there are the facts, similarly demonstrable, of Weil's heterodox mysticism and the diversity of her religious resources of inspiration, including, most notably, mystical encounter, but also Christianity, Hinduism, texts of Ancient civilizations, texts of other mystics, mythology, folklore, and poetry (see Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 2015). Additionally, there is Springsted's observation that philosophical treatment of Weil as a "classical metaphysician" (that is, in his words, a philosopher who built their position to have it compared to other philosophers' positions) fails to account for distinctive aspects of her epistemological orientation to philosophical inquiry that contraindicate such traditional modes of philosophical analysis (Springsted in Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 3).

Specifically, contra Vető, Springsted argues that Weil's originality stems from her capacity to address traditional philosophical and spiritual questions without endorsing the metaphysics of philosophical predecessors whereas Vető maintains Weil was a "classical metaphysician" (Springsted in Vető, Series Editor's Preface, vii), meaning she was building a position to be intellectually compared to that of other metaphysicians, like Kant and Plato (Springsted in Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 2-3). But, according to Springsted, "that is exactly what is at stake, at least insofar as Weil herself saw the nature of philosophy, because she did not think philosophy was that at all" (Springsted in Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 3). Springsted's claim is that such traditional comparative analyses, a hallmark of contemporary philosophical practice, were, in fact, viewed critically by Weil, as standing in opposition to proper methodology in philosophy. And, as we see in chapter three, several of Weil's late statements on what philosophy *is* and *is not* arguably support Springsted's criticism.

So how exactly is Simone Weil's methodology different from methodological orthodoxy in contemporary philosophy?

Perhaps unsurprisingly, that is a challenging account to give. As Weil scholar, Richard Rees, observes, “It is difficult to convey by extracts the characteristic quality of her mysticism, which might be paradoxically described as an uncommonly refined common sense” (Rees in Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, xii). Along these lines, it is instructive to meditate on the opening remarks of Simone Weil's 1943 London notebook:

The proper method of philosophy consists in clearly conceiving the insoluble problems in all their insolubility and then in simply contemplating them, fixed and tirelessly, year after year, without any hope, patiently waiting. By this standard, there are few philosophers. And one can hardly even say a few. There is no entry into the transcendent until the human faculties—intelligence, will, human love—have come up against a limit, and the human being waits at this threshold, which he can make no move to cross, without turning away and without knowing what he wants, in fixed, unwavering attention. It is a state of extreme humiliation, and it is impossible for anyone who cannot accept humiliation. Genius is the supernatural virtue of humility in the domain of thought. That is demonstrable. (Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 335)

A contemporary philosopher can be acquainted with the thought of Plato, Kant, Descartes, Spinoza, and Rousseau and still not know exactly what to make of Weil's above remarks on method. This is because it is not self-evident to us what Weil means by them. In other words, if her above remarks about the proper method of philosophy “can be paradoxically described as uncommonly refined common sense,” then the emphasis is on the *paradox*.

To appreciate the distance between Weil's (post mystical experience) remarks on the proper method of philosophy and methodological orthodoxy in contemporary philosophy one can consider the following. Most any contemporary philosopher can read Edmund Gettier's brief remarks on the conditions of knowledge and can, regardless of whether they agree with him or not, understand and apply his method to diverse cases (See Gettier, 1963). It is not clear how the same can be said for Weil. Further, to understand and apply her method, it is not sufficient to trace her ideas in connection to her intellectual predecessors; one must equally avoid suppression

of any distinctive aspects of Weil's thought. Let us thus make a point to squarely examine the arguably distinctive or heterodox aspects of Weil's epistemological orientation.

Weil's methodology involves several thick and mutually reinforcing (or synergistic) concepts, including, notably, attention, humility, contradiction, reading, mystery, and detachment. By referring to these terms as “thick” I mean that they each have special significance or technical aspect(s) assigned to them by Weil. Thus, if a reader interprets these concepts solely by reference to their contemporary colloquial use, without consideration to Weil's particular employment of these terms throughout her works, then they risk losing out on her meaning.

What follows is an introductory overview of Weil's methodological concepts to assist readers in orienting themselves to distinctive aspects of her epistemology. It also prepares the reader to undertake the investigation into her views on the nature, scope, and limits of philosophy in the next chapter. Finally, it functions as a review of secondary literature on Weil's methodology.

2.3.2 Attention and Humility

The significance and centrality of the concept of attention to Simone Weil's thinking is difficult to overstate, as Weil scholars have observed (see, for example, Chenavier, 2012; McCullough, 28-34; Rozelle-Stone and Davis, 2021; Springsted in Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 16-17; Vetó, 41-55; von der Ruhr, 2007). Attention is a thick concept for Weil; understanding how so can give us crucial insight into Weil's understanding of philosophy.

The methodological roots of attention can be traced back to an early, formative, if not transformative, experience in Weil's life. She reported the experience in her late period thus:

At fourteen I fell into one of those fits of bottomless despair that come with adolescence, and I seriously thought of dying because of the mediocrity of my

natural faculties. The exceptional gifts of my brother, who had a childhood and youth comparable to those of Pascal, brought my own inferiority home to me. I did not mind having no visible successes, but what did grieve me was the idea of being excluded from that transcendent kingdom to which only the truly great have access and wherein truth abides. I prefer to die rather than live without that truth. After months of inward darkness, I suddenly had the everlasting conviction that any human being, even though practically devoid of natural faculties, can penetrate to the kingdom of truth reserved for genius, if only he longs for the 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. Later on, when the strain of headaches caused the feeble faculties I possess to be invaded by a paralysis, which I was quick to imagine as probably incurable, the same conviction led me to persevere for ten years in an effort of concentrated attention that was practically unsupported by any hope of results. (Weil, *Waiting for God*, 23)

From this passage we can observe that Weil's orientation to the faculty of attention is, indeed, methodological. Further, it is significantly rooted in a conviction born of personal experience. Notably, Weil would subsequently acknowledge the significant effect of her protracted effort of attention on her intellectual vocation: "Never in any case whatever is a genuine effort of the attention wasted. It always has its effect on the spiritual plane and in consequence on the lower one of the intelligence, for all spiritual light lightens the mind" (Weil, *Waiting for God*, 58).

Weil stressed the crucial significance of attention to thoughts, emotions, and actions. First, there was the ideal standard of conduct she set for herself: "Attention alone—that attention which is so full that the 'I' disappears—is required of me" (Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 118). By this she means the attention required of her involves an absolute suspension of any egoistic or self-interested motive, such as pride or ambition (Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 116-122). Second, Weil addressed the importance of attention in teaching philosophy to students in her middle period (Weil, *Lectures on Philosophy*, 205-206). And, by her late period, Weil held that proper instruction on how to develop the faculty of attention was the "first duty" of all teachers (Weil, *Waiting for God*, 63), and, further, that the development of the faculty of attention "forms the

real object and almost sole interest of studies” (Weil, *Waiting for God*, 57). But what exactly did Weil *mean* by attention and what was her method to develop this faculty? She gives us her answers in an essay (from her late period) she composed for students (Weil, *Waiting for God*, 57-65).

In the essay, Weil begins by clarifying what attention *is not*. For example, it has nothing to do with the outwardly visible demonstrations of concentration we typically perform when instructed to “pay attention” (Weil, *Waiting for God*, 60). Things like squinting or contracting our brows, holding our breath, or stiffening our muscles have nothing whatsoever to do with the operation of “true attention” (Weil, *Waiting for God*, 60). In fact, in Weil’s view, an effort of attention does not involve, nor does it benefit from, muscular exertion or physical exhaustion (Weil, *Waiting for God*, 61).

Instead, the operation of attention is properly conceived as a negative effort (Weil, *Waiting for God*, 61). Notably, this negative effort can be motivated by an impersonal desire for truth or by love; but it is not properly motivated by an act of willpower as the will is associated with a muscular effort on Weil’s view: “The will only controls a few movements of a few muscles, and these movements are associated with the idea of the change of position of near-by objects” (McCullough, 34-36; Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 116). Weil’s description was thus:

Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object; it means holding in our minds, within reach of this thought, but on a lower level and not in contact with it, the diverse knowledge we have acquired which we are forced to make use of. Our thought should be in relation to all particular and already formulated thoughts, as a man on a mountain who, as he looks forward, sees also below him, without actually looking at them, a great many forests and plains. Above all our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object that is to penetrate it. (Weil, *Waiting for God*, 62)

This negative effort involves a renunciation of the self (McCullough, 34), or what Springsted describes as a “sacrificial suspension of the ego” (Springsted, “Contradiction, Mystery, and the Use of Words in Simone Weil,” 14). In other words, we must suspend our personal search or stake (“the self’s own goals”) in the object (or subject) of our observation if we hope to understand anything about *it* (see Vető, 43).

It is hard to overstate the difficulty involved in such a “negative effort” of attention and, paradoxically, relatively easy to dismiss it. Weil stressed the difficulty associated with this negative operation where she wrote: “Something in our soul has a far more violent repugnance for true attention than the flesh has for bodily fatigue” (Weil, *Waiting for God*, 61-62). This is because true attention involves a self-abnegating discipline of the mind that is contrary human nature insofar as it is contrary our will (McCullough, 34). It is thus easy to be self-deceived and practice some counterfeit of true attention.

However, an exercise may help the reader appreciate the extent of the difficulty when it comes to performing such a negative effort of attention. Set a timer for one minute and try *not* to think any thoughts; instead, simply pay (exclusive, uninterrupted) attention to your breath. Also, try *not* to control your breathing whatsoever during this exercise; simply close your eyes and observe your breathing for sixty seconds. Let your motivation be the desire to observe your breathing. For most of us, it is a challenge to make it ten seconds, let alone one minute, in this exercise before the incursion of some unrelated thought interrupts and distracts us from our effort. Nevertheless, Eastern meditative practices are premised on the human capacity to develop exactly such discipline in attention. Along these lines, Weil observes: “The capacity to drive a thought away once and for all is the gateway to eternity” (Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 118).

Besides the fact that our attention is susceptible to seize by racing or wandering thoughts and distractions, Weil is principally concerned with another, related epistemological obstacle. It has to do with the egoistic and overzealous tendency we have when it comes to forming our opinion on a subject, or finding a solution to a problem, that leads to our “premanding a result,” in McCullough’s words (McCullough, 31). This impulsiveness significantly undermines our efforts at true attention: “All wrong translations, all absurdities in geometry problems, all clumsiness of style, and all the faulty connection of ideas in compositions and essays, all such things are due to the fact that thought has seized upon some idea too hastily, and being thus prematurely blocked, is not open to the truth. The cause is always that we have been too active; we have wanted to carry out a search. This can be proved every time, for every fault, if we trace it too its root” (Weil, *Waiting for God*, 62). Thus, while the effort to cultivate attentive patience can be motivated by a pure, impersonal love of learning or desire for truth, it can, and often is, thwarted by our more personal, or immediate, preoccupations, ambitions, interests, or desires (“the self’s own goals”). We want to make a judgment or solve the problem and move on. There is, however, a possible remedy to our egoistic impulsivity. Namely, we can cultivate the virtue of humility to the limit in the intellectual domain.

But how do we set about to accomplish *this*?

The virtue of humility, along with other virtues (like patience) that it engenders, can be reciprocally developed through methodical examination of our errors in the intellectual domain (Weil, *Waiting for God*, 60). This can be achieved by, for example, taking “great pains to examine squarely and to contemplate attentively and slowly each school task in which we have failed, seeing how unpleasant and second rate it is, without seeking any excuse or overlooking any mistake or any of our tutor’s corrections, trying to get down to the origin of each fault”

(Weil, *Waiting for God*, 59-60). According to Weil, “There is no better exercise than such tracing down of our faults, for this truth is one to be believed only when we have experienced it hundreds and thousands of times. This is the way with all essential truths” (Weil, *Waiting for God*, 62). What is the upshot of such a rigorous habit of self-scrutiny? We can nurture the virtue of humility in the intellectual domain; and that is something far more significant to the operation of true attention than any immediate academic success (Weil, *Waiting for God*, 60). This is because, on Weil’s view, humility is the root of love (Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 97) and, indeed, all “authentic virtues,” including charity, temperance, and patience (Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 104), and these in turn can work in service to the operation of true attention.

Of course, developing humility to the limit in the intellectual domain is easier said than done. Weil cautioned of the “great temptation” to do the exact opposite of her prescription, namely, to pay little or no regard to our past mistakes and to avoid rigorous examination of critical feedback (Weil, *Waiting for God*, 60). This is the knee-jerk reaction of the ego or self. In other words, we impulsively (and defensively) recoil from evidence of our intellectual (and moral) wrongdoings and limitations. Weil thus gave instructive insight where she noted: “Humility is not a bad opinion of one's own person in comparison to other people. It is a radically bad opinion of one's own person in relation to what is impersonal in oneself” (Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 182). Her idea here is that we have within us the capacity to access universal truths, which are themselves impersonal, but it is necessary to slough off personal preoccupations, ambitions, interests, and desires to realize such intellectual (and moral) capacity. Thus, on Weil’s view, it is necessary and good to develop a methodical habit of confronting and understanding the limitations associated with our necessarily fallible and finite intelligence. And,

if we can practice humility in this way, then it can help us overcome subsequent epistemological hurdles to the operation of true attention.

Notably, Weil observes that intellectual humility is indispensable to the philosophical quest. This is not trivially true for Weil; the significance of the virtue of humility, like that of the faculty of attention, is difficult to overstate (recall her earlier remarks on proper method in philosophy). She is explicit on this point where she writes: “Humility is the most essential virtue in the search for truth” (Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 270). Moreover, she observes: “The connection between humility and true philosophy was known in antiquity. Among the Socratic, Cynic, and Stoic philosophers it was considered part of their professional duty to put up with insults, blows, and even slaps in the face without the slightest instinctive reaction of offended dignity” (Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 335). Along these lines, Weil, like Socrates, was often teased, ridiculed, and otherwise disparaged for, essentially, saying how the truth looked from her vantage point, as well as living her life in accord with her own values, no matter how strange, ridiculous, or foolish she appeared to others.

In sum, true attention and humility are, from a methodological standpoint, indispensable to philosophy on Weil's view. This is so despite formidable difficulties involved in their operation and development. If Weil reads as pessimistic on these points, recall that on her view any explicit appeal to personal reward or compensation can only serve to undermine our efforts by corroding our motive. Nevertheless, she arguably throws intellectual types a bone where she writes: “Quite apart from explicit religious belief, every time that a human being succeeds in making an effort of attention with the sole idea of increasing his grasp of truth, he acquires a greater aptitude for grasping it, even if his effort produces no visible fruit” (Weil, *Waiting for God*, 59). This is also the case where she reveals: “Even if our efforts of attention seem for years

to be producing no result, one day a light that is in exact proportion to them will flood the soul” (Weil, *Waiting for God*, 59). While it was not Weil's principal concern, the intelligence stands to benefit from the cultivation of true attention, perhaps not immediately, perhaps never obviously, but the results may later manifest in our scholarly works, creative pursuits, or humanitarian efforts (Weil, *Waiting for God*, 58-65).

A final word with respect to the cultivation of true attention is in order. Consistent with Weil's mysticism, there can be more than one methodical path available to us. This is because, as noted, there are mutually reinforcing connections between attention, patience, humility, compassion, and love. With respect to love, for example, McCullough observes that on Weil's view maximally true attention is indeed motivated by a pure, impersonal love of what exists beyond the “self” (McCullough, 29-30). But what exactly is *impersonal love* on Weil's view, and can it too be cultivated?

First, there are more ways than one to properly conceive impersonal love on Weil's view. For example, it can be conceived as the *amor fati* of the Stoics; that is, it is the acceptance and consent to necessity and the fateful order of the world in accord with the will of God or the laws of nature. But it can also be operationalized in the Christian sense; that is, to accept and “love thy neighbor as thyself” and “love thy enemy as thy neighbor.” Such love involves the consensual acceptance of the existence of another person that may appear to be radically different from us. As Weil observes, “The love of our neighbor in all its fullness simply means being able to say to him: “What are you going through?”” (Weil, *Waiting for God*, 64). It thus requires we have a desire to understand the subject's point of view (regardless of their status as friend or foe) about what it is they are going through (as opposed to what we assume or judge them to be going through).

In other words, on Weil's view, such love requires our recognition that the subject of our attention exists and that they too suffer (Weil, *Waiting for God*, 64). But this is insufficient. It also requires we be able to observe them without evaluating or judging them: "The effort that brings a soul to salvation is like the effort of looking or listening [...] It is an act of attention or consent" (McCullough, 36) / "This way of looking is first of all attentive. The soul empties itself of its own contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth." (Weil, *Waiting for God*, 65). Of course, this too is easier said than done. Along these lines, the Indian philosopher J. Krishnamurti once remarked that observing without evaluating was, indeed, the highest form of human intelligence (Rosenberg, 28).

To learn to observe and listen to others compassionately, that is, with love or acceptance and without hasty judgment, requires we desire to understand the other's needs, values, or desires above or before our own (often competing) needs, values, or desires. Weil observes the difficulty thus:

Not only does the love of God have attention for its substance; the love of our neighbor, which we know to be the same love, is made of this same substance. Those who are unhappy have no need for anything in this world but people capable of giving them their attention. The capacity to give one's attention to a sufferer is a very rare and difficult thing; it is almost a miracle; it *is* a miracle. Nearly all those who think they have this capacity do not possess it. Warmth of heart, impulsiveness, pity are not enough. (Weil, *Waiting for God*, 64)

And while such a path of compassion to true attention can be approached methodically, it is arguably no less arduous than the intellectual path. That is why Simone Weil can suggest attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity. Nevertheless, just like there are texts dedicated to teaching practical methods to discipline attention through meditation, there are texts dedicated to teaching practical methods to cultivate the attentive focus and compassionate communication skills Weil advocates for in her essay to students (see, for example, Rosenberg,

2003). This is what it means to say there is more than one methodical path to the cultivation of true attention on Weil's view.

2.3.3 Contradiction and Mystery

A clear grasp of what Simone Weil means by the term contradiction, particularly when it is employed as a method of investigation in philosophical inquiry, is indispensable to readers of Weil; it can help avoid significant confusion or misunderstanding about what she is saying.

For contemporary philosophers, let us start from the familiar: the principle of non-contradiction. We employ the principle of non-contradiction, whereby two contradictory propositions cannot both be true in the same sense and at the same time, as a method to determine the validity or soundness of arguments. Of course, Weil understood and could employ the principle of non-contradiction in this way. Notably, however, Weil viewed the principle of non-contradiction as a principle of grammar (Weil, *Lectures on Philosophy*, 78). And, as Springsted observes, language and grammar are not an infallible guide to reality for Weil; they are symbols (Springsted, "Contradiction, Mystery, and the Use of Words in Simone Weil," 2). Thus, on Weil's view, the orthodox application of the principle of non-contradiction finds its limits in the limits of language, that is, in symbols, and not in the world or the nature of things.

If language is thus limited as a resource for method (Weil, *Lectures on Philosophy*, 69-76), then where can, say, contemporary philosophers turn for evidence of the reality of an external world? Apparently, the same place as everybody else. For Weil, reality is indicated to us by the fact that there is a difference (tension) between our conceptual understanding of a task (theorizing) and the subsequent act of performing it (practice). For example, reality is indicated by the difference between my thinking or saying "100 miles" in my head and my walking 100 miles, or the difference between your conceiving a problem and coming up with the solution in

your mind, and the process of you realizing your solution in time and space. In other words, reality is indicated by all that is not contained in the words as symbols, or all the obstacles not foreseen in conceiving the solution to a problem: “The simple fact that making 100 paces is different from saying 100 paces is a proof of its reality” (Weil, *Lectures on Philosophy*, 72). On Weil’s view, if we apply method strictly to language, that is, to symbols, we remain in the limits of a sort of language game (Weil, *Lectures on Philosophy*, 72-72). We must also apply method to our actions in an orderly manner if we are to improve upon our understanding of reality, conceived of as necessity (that is, all that is determinate, conditional, and contingent in the order of the world), on Weil’s view (McCullough, 15).

Excerpts from Weil's instruction to her students concerning the relationship between method, language, and reality can help guide us along:

In science, in reasoning, one sees in the problems one is dealing with only what one has put there oneself (hypotheses). If in actions there was nothing except what we ourselves suppose them to contain, nothing would ever get done, since there would be no snags. All sorts of accidents can occur between the time when I have seen what the problem is and the time when I have acted. Reality is defined by that. It is what is not contained in the problem as such; reality is what method does not allow us to foresee.

Why is it that reality can only appear like this, in a negative sort of way? What marks off the 'self' is method; it has no other source than ourselves: it is when we really employ method that we really begin to exist. As long as one employs method only on symbols, one remains within the limits of a sort of game. In action that has method about it, we ourselves act, since it is we ourselves who found the method: we really act because what is unforeseen presents itself to us.

One can never give a proof of the reality of anything; reality is not something open to proof, it is something established. It is established just because proof is not enough. It is this characteristic of language, at once indispensable and inadequate, which shows the reality of the external world. Most people hardly ever realise this, because actions which proceed from reasoning are rare. Or to put it more exactly, it is rare that the very same man thinks and puts his thought into action. (On the one hand we have the engineer who does the thinking, and on the other the worker who does the work.) (Weil, *Lectures on Philosophy*, 72-73)

In other words, the fact that reality exists independent of our thinking about it is evidenced by our continuously lived experience of the *tensions* (contradictions) between our thoughts and the world. Weil's instruction to her students concerning the syllogism subsequently drives home her point with respect to the limits of the principle of non-contradiction (Weil, *Lectures on Philosophy*, 78): “The syllogism. Example: Socrates is a man, men are mortal; so, Socrates is mortal. Any proof of the syllogism would be absurd. The syllogism is, to put it briefly, nothing but a rule of language to avoid contradiction: at bottom, the principle of non-contradiction is a principle of grammar. In general, all ordinary reasonings, which are immediate and performed without effort are more or less explicit syllogisms. The rules of the syllogism are studied in formal logic” (Weil, *Lectures on Philosophy*, 78). Thus, reality is conceived of as something given (established) yet not something subject to proof by the rules of logic, since logic operates on symbols. An arguably heterodox consequence of Weil's view, at least from a contemporary disciplinary standpoint, is that action upon the world is indispensable to proper method in philosophy: “Philosophy (including problems of cognitions, etc.) is *exclusively* an affair of action and practice. That is why it is so difficult to write about. Difficult in the same way as a treatise on tennis or running, but much more so” (Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 362). The emphasis, of course, is Weil's own.

We have now cleared a path to introduce Weil's distinctive method of contradiction as a tool for philosophical investigation. When we encounter a tension or problem between our thought and the world, that is, when the world does not conform to our thoughts, or when it altogether surprises our expectation, such an experience is evidence of a contact with reality that we can actually work with through reflective observation: “The contradictions the mind comes up against—these are the only realities: they are the criterion of the real” (Weil, *Gravity and*

Grace, 99)/ “Reality for the human mind is contact with necessity” (McCullough, 20). Some examples can help get at what she has in mind. If we think ourselves Casanova and are continuously confused, frustrated, or shocked when our advances are rebuffed, then that is because reality has not conformed to our thoughts or expectations, and we perceived the tension (contradiction). Similarly, if we think ourselves Quasimodo (the Hunchback of Notre Dame) and are confused or shocked when Esmeralda appears to pay attention to us or treat us with the least bit of care or concern, then that is because reality has not conformed to our thoughts and expectations and, again, we perceived this tension (contradiction). Similarly, when scientists are confronted by a persistent anomaly that confounds or contradicts their established theoretical expectations, something much the same is going on; namely, the universe has not conformed to their theoretical expectations, and they observe the tension (for examples, see Kuhn, 1996). And for pretty much the same reason, we can say reality exists quite apart from our collective scientific understanding of it.

Nevertheless, let us stay focused on the case for the individual. How are we to proceed when we detect such a tension or contradiction between our thoughts or expectations and lived experience? We can try to discern the contrary thoughts, ideas, or propositions that both appear to contain some truth from our present vantage point: “Method of investigation: as soon as we have thought something, try to see in what way the contrary is true” (Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 102). An example from Weil’s own life illustrates this methodological approach in action.

Recall the initial shock Weil experienced with respect to her first mystical encounter: “In my arguments about the insolubility of the problem of God I had never foreseen the possibility of that, a real contact, person to person, here below, between a human being and God” (Weil, *Waiting for God*, 27). Recall, also, that her intellect wrestled with the data: “Yet I still half

refused, not my love but my intelligence” (Weil, *Waiting for God*, 27). Despite Weil’s admission that God came to “seize her soul while suppressing her senses,” (Chenavier, 48) she nevertheless practiced her method of contradiction on her newfound conviction thus: “A case of contradictories which are true. God exists. God does not exist. Where is the problem? I am quite sure there is a God in the sense that I am quite sure my love is not illusory. I am quite sure that there is not a God in the sense that I am quite sure nothing real can be anything like what I am able to conceive when I pronounce this word. But that which I cannot conceive is not an illusion” (Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 115; for an additional example of her method in action, see Weil, *Waiting for God*, 30). Thus, the method of contradiction involves reflection on the tension between two contradictory ideas that both appear to contain some significant truth from our present vantage point.

What is the upshot of Weil’s method of contradiction? Arguably, the upshot appears to be a highly idiosyncratic, intellectual attitude of agnosticism, or perhaps, an “uncommonly refined common sense” view concerning her understanding of God. Notably, however, the appropriate application of Weil’s method of contradiction can help us cultivate detachment from our personal point of view in the quest for truth, and such impartiality is, in turn, indispensable to proper method in philosophy.

A contemporary example of the application of Weil’s method of contradiction can demonstrate its prospective value to philosophical inquiry. For the sake of familiarity, let us take the case of free will. When I came to study philosophy at university, I was certain I had free will. And I had twenty-six years of experiences to back me up, or so I thought. Then, I took my first philosophy class on free will. I learned more arguments for and against the existence of free will than I knew what to do with. Along the way, I had the sudden revelation that I was unsure what

my definition of free will even was. There was a shock to my system, as it were. Eventually, I acknowledged the arguments and evidence against my original position were exceedingly reasonable, and, consequently, particularly offensive to a certain sense of myself that I held stock in.

The grip of personal attachment I had to my original position, that free will exists, coupled with the personal desire that I be right (or fear that I was wrong), prevented me from being impartially receptive to the possibility that the opposing proposition, free will does not exist, could be true. Indeed, the personal stake I had in my original position prevented me (for a time) from reading the opposing arguments and evidence charitably or without prejudice and thereby passing over or preemptively dismissing relevant information. My judgments were biased (and hasty), so to speak. After all, the principle of non-contradiction implied that only one of the contrary propositions (Free will exists / Free will does not exist) could be true.

So how could I have improved my methodological approach to the problem of free will? I could have diversified my strategy. That is, I could have applied Weil's method of contradiction to navigate the problem. Instead of rebelliously doodling in my notebook whenever Derk Pereboom (a proponent of the view free will does not exist, see Fischer, Kane, Pereboom, and Vargas, 2007) came up, I could have jotted down this exercise: A case of contradictories which are true. Free will exists. Free will does not exist. Where is the problem? I am quite sure there is free will in the sense that I am quite sure that I can doubt the thoughts that occur to my mind and that such Cartesian skepticism is not an illusory power; it is significant. I am quite sure that there is no free will in the sense that: fill in the blank with classical arguments for incompatibilism plus evidence from the sciences that indicate free will is illusory (see Fischer, Kane, Pereboom, and Vargas, 2007).

Notably, if I were to take Weil's method to heart, those notes would only mark the start to my subsequent investigation into the problem of free will. The result of high fidelity to Weil's method in the case of the free will debate is, arguably, an intellectually agnostic attitude on free will that is optimally detached and equally receptive to learning any new information, data, arguments, or opinions on the matter (Weil, *Waiting for God*, 30). In a sense, the antithesis of Weil's approach is enshrined in the popular quip, "If you're too open-minded, then your brains will fall out." Along these lines, consider Weil's remarks on what is demanded of her in virtue of her philosophical vocation: "The degree of intellectual honesty that is obligatory for me, by reason of my particular vocation, demands that my thought should be indifferent to all ideas without exception, including for instance materialism and atheism; it must be equally welcoming and equally reserved with regard to every one of them. Water is indifferent in this way to the objects that fall into it. It does not weigh them; they weigh themselves, after a certain time of oscillation" (Weil, *Waiting for God*, 40). That said, if I had been a student in Weil's philosophy class, then I probably would have obstinately argued that a definitive answer to the question of free will was preferable to reflecting at the point of an intellectual impasse for an indeterminate length of time. And how might Weil have responded?

There is, in fact, a significant connection between Weil's employment of contradiction and her pedagogical style that we can take this opportunity to observe. Consider notes from her last journal entry before her death: "The most important part of teaching = to teach what it is to *know* (in the scientific sense). Nurses" (Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 364). Notably, Weil's dissertation on Descartes treats this exact topic of what it means to know in the scientific sense. She is particularly instructive where she writes: "I used to believe, with regard to any problem whatever, that to know was to solve the problem; now I realize that it means to know how the

problem concerns me. To actually answer a question, or to know under what conditions it is in my power to answer it, or to know that it is insoluble for me—these are three ways of knowing, and for the same reason they constitute knowledge” (Weil, *Formative Writings*, 66). The method of contradiction is a way we can properly orient ourselves to the epistemological obstacles present in the question of free will. I do not solve the problem by dogged appeal to my *N sample* = *I* lived experience. Nor does collective scientific inquiry guarantee us a solution. Thus, in response to my objection, Weil may have drawn critical attention to my personal desire for the value of certainty over the truth; since knowledge of the truth might very well demand we wade impartially at an intellectual impasse for an indeterminate length of time.

From a pedagogical standpoint, and for present purposes, whenever Weil draws the reader’s attention to a contradiction, she at minimum wants us to perceive a tension, some opposition or problem that she has observed and that is relevant in the context of the discussion. Weil often wants us to examine the root of the problem and to consider what is at stake in solving it, under what conditions it can be solved, or if it is even possible for us to solve it. For example, there are cases of *apparent* or *soluble* contradictions that the mind comes up against, that can, in fact, be more readily solved; these include cases that can, for example, be resolved by analysis and proper predication of opposing terms (Springsted, “Contradiction, Mystery, and the Use of Words in Simone Weil,” 3-4). Weil likewise describes cases of *insoluble* contradictions; these are cases that can, for example, involve incommensurability between opposing terms or ideas. In some of these cases, it may be possible for the intellect to introduce or construct an overarching nomenclature to compare, resolve, or reconcile the contradictory propositions (Springsted, “Contradiction, Mystery, and the Use of Words in Simone Weil,” 4-6). In other cases, however, such a construction is impossible, or requires we properly situate our attentive

focus at the intellectual impasse, much like cases of Socratic aporia (see, for examples, Plato's 'Euthyphro,' 'Protagoras,' 'Gorgias,' and 'Meno' in Cooper, 1997).

As noted, scholars have observed Weil's method of contradiction is significantly connected to her methodological orientation to mystery (see, for examples, Fiedler in Weil, *Waiting for God*; McCullough, 2014; Springsted, 1985; Vető, 1994). Mystery, on Weil's view, is a way we can orient ourselves to a certain variety of *insoluble* contradictions wherein we remain open to the possibility of new insights even where we sense our epistemic limitations. Thus, as Springsted observes, Weil's method of contradiction can be used not only to cultivate impartiality and detachment ("emerging from the point of view") but with the aim to develop a methodical orientation toward the role of mystery in our investigation of the world (Springsted, "Contradiction, Mystery, and the Use of Words in Simone Weil," 10). In support of this argument, Springsted (along with Vető, 3-4) appeals to the following passage from Weil's notebooks:

The notion of mystery is legitimate when the most logical and rigorous use of the intelligence leads to an impasse, to a contradiction which is inescapable in this sense: that the suppression of one term makes the other meaningless and that to pose one term necessarily involves posing the other. Then, like a lever, the notion of mystery carries thought beyond the impasse, to the other side of the unopenable door, beyond the domain of the intelligence and above it. But to arrive beyond the domain of the intelligence one must have traveled all through it, to the end, and by a path traced with unimpeachable rigor....Another criterion is when the mind has nourished itself with mystery, by a long and loving contemplation, it finds that by suppressing and denying the mystery it is at the same time depriving the intelligence of treasures which are comprehensible to it, which dwell in its domain and which belong to it. (Springsted, "Contradiction, Mystery, and the Use of Words in Simone Weil," 6; from Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*)

From this we can observe that Weil did, in fact, have a methodological orientation to mystery. Further, she held that even when the intellect was stymied by a mystery, it was conceivable that loving, patient contemplation on the insoluble contradiction could nevertheless solicit revelatory

insights for the intellect that are, ultimately, comprehensible to it. In this way, Weil arguably renders explicit a methodological orientation to mystery implicit throughout Plato's work. But how exactly do we apply Weil's method? Weil scholars give us their answers.

Springsted points to a familiar problem in philosophy of religion, namely, the problem of evil, to demonstrate the strategy. The 'problem of evil' in philosophy hinges on the tension (contradiction) between asserting that evil (typically conceived as suffering or affliction) exists and asserting that God exists. Springsted spells out the tension: "Logically it appears that a good and omnipotent God either would not allow evil to exist in his creation, or would suppress it immediately should it arise. The fact that evil exists therefore calls into question either God's goodness or omnipotence or both" (Springsted, "Contradiction, Mystery, and the Use of Words in Simone Weil," 6). Thus, Springsted suggests, we have a mystery: Why would a good and powerful God allow evil to exist? Notably, this is an apt description of the dilemma as it is often presented in introductory philosophy courses; that is, as a sort of puzzle or game for students to solve through the application of rules of logic, including the principle of non-contradiction (see, for example, Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," 1979, 335-341).

Springsted explains what would happen if we exclusively applied the principle of non-contradiction to the problem of evil: "Now if contradiction were taken in its formal logical sense, affliction would be sound evidence for God's non-existence. If, however, mystery is invoked, although the tension between God's goodness and affliction is not weakened, the two may co-enlighten each other, as Weil thought they do on the cross, even if the finite intelligence cannot in fact or in principle bridge the gap" (Springsted, "Contradiction, Mystery, and the Use of Words in Simone Weil," 7). His observation is instructive insofar as it contrasts application of both methods and thereby draws out the distinctiveness of Weil's approach.

Arguably, empirical evidence for the truth of the existence of evil is omnipresent in the world. Indeed, Weil was, by her own admission, “obsessed with idea” (Weil, *Waiting for God*, 25). Moreover, the *insolubility* of this contradiction (between God's goodness and the existence of evil) was not alleviated by Weil's mystical encounters; indeed, if anything, they magnified her awareness of the tension (Rees in Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, ix). Elsewhere, she reflects: “The mystery of the cross of Christ lies in a contradiction, for it is both a free-will offering and a punishment which he endured in spite of himself. If we only saw in it an offering, we might wish for a like fate. But we are unable to wish for a punishment endured in spite of ourselves” (Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 102). Weil's method of contradiction nevertheless allowed her to accept propositions concerning God's goodness and the existence of evil without suppressing the truth she perceived from her vantage point in those contrary ideas.

McCullough also examines Weil's employment of mystery in an instructive manner (see McCullough, 43-50 and 166). Drawing on examples of contradiction from Weil's notes and writings, McCullough makes the following observations:

Just as the unity of relative contraries (light-dark, high-low, true-false, good-evil) produced a natural harmony, the unity of absolute contradictories (temporal-eternal, world-God, necessity-good) issues in supernatural harmony. Among the supernatural contradictories that serve as the basis of ascending movement by the intellect, according to Weil, are the doctrines of God both One and Three; Christ both God and man; the Eucharist both earthly matter and the body of God. The fact that it is impossible to conceive together, by means of relation, the two ideas that make up these contradictories results in precisely the point aimed at: God, the object of contemplation, is transported by the infinite: “If the unified conception is impossible, and yet the whole of attention is brought to bear on it, it is a transcendent harmony” (N 341). (McCullough, 40)

Again, on Weil's view, the method of contradiction can function as more than a means of detachment from point of view. Depending on what sort of contradictions, paradoxes, or mysteries the mind is contemplating, and how, the balancing act between contrary ideas can

occasion a revelatory insight, one that may even serve as a “lever” for the intelligence to transcend a current level of discordant understanding (“emerge from point of view”) and solicit harmony (“equilibrium of contraries”) in understanding (introduce an “overarching nomenclature”). Such an application of Weil’s method of contradiction to mystery is arguably analogous to the pedagogical function of koans in Zen Buddhism (Springsted, “Contradiction, Mystery, and the Use of Words in Simone Weil,” 10-13).

2.3.4 Lived Experience

Simone Weil was the antithesis of the armchair philosopher (for further discussion of the “armchair method” and “armchair philosophy,” see Timothy Williamson, *The Philosophy of Philosophy*, 2007, 1-9). Along these lines, consider the following observation Williamson makes concerning the philosophy of philosophy: “The traditional methods of philosophy are armchair ones: they consist of thinking, without any special interaction with the world beyond the chair, such as measurement, observation, or experiment would typically involve” (Williamson, 1). Weil held a contrary position: the necessity to act on the world to grasp reality is taken up from her early dissertation on Descartes onward. In fact, her statement that, “Philosophy (including problems of cognitions, etc.) is *exclusively* an affair of action and practice” (Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 362) was recorded in what was nearly her last journal entry before her death (Springsted in Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 14). The fact that Weil had a methodological orientation to lived experience is further observed in her reflection on the necessity for philosophers to develop a philosophy of work. That is, she wanted us to conceive of a way to better understand reality as it exists beyond personal perspective (beyond the “armchair,” so to speak) through contradictions experienced in manual labor (Chenavier, 25-27; Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 1-62; Weil, *Formative Writings 1929-1941*, 21-88).

Weil scholars have observed the significance of lived experience to her method. Robert Chenavier, for example, helps to draw out this point. First, he explains Weil's motivation to travel to Germany: "From as early as 1931, she considered Germany the country where real consideration was given to the problem of a social regime, which in France was the subject of no more than theories and discourses. By leaving for Germany, she made manifest a constant preoccupation in her life: to think and write in contact with reality" (Chenavier, 7). Indeed, Weil's analysis of the German political situation on the ground prior to World War II led to a series publication in France (Chenavier, 7). Further, her time in Germany, along with her labor efforts alongside the workers' unions and revolutionary parties in France, informed her analyses of several issues, including communism, party politics, and the prospect of revolution (Chenavier, 5-43).

Of course, travel to a foreign country to study a topic of interest arguably does not constitute a significant deviance from methodological orthodoxy in philosophy, although some philosophers might question the necessity of it. But the point is a stronger one for Weil. Because lived experience is indispensable to analysis, armchair theorizing is insufficient to the task. Chenavier's remarks on Weil's decision to engage in the year of factory work further expose her position:

A few months before carrying out her project, she wrote one of her students at the *lycée* of Le Puy saying that she was taking a sabbatical of one year in order to enter into the labor force "and also enter into some contact with that famous 'real life'" (cited in *La Vie*, 319; SWL, 213). This is clear evidence of her desire for truth conceived as contact with reality. If, as she insisted in 1937, "the most important [problem] for the worker movement"—that of the most desirable system for factories—had not been posed by the theorists of socialism, it was because they were "poorly situated to treat this subject, since they themselves had not been numbered among the cogwheels of the factory" (*La Condition*, 304). (Chenavier, 9)

By contrast, many a philosopher would question the need to, say, request a year sabbatical to work in factory floors or sweat shops to adequately conceive problems of labor. From a disciplinary standpoint, it is not, methodologically speaking, necessary to know *what it is like* to experience such and such a thing to determine and analyze the relevant existential facts surrounding it. In fact, a contemporary philosopher might put forward the worry that the significant duress Weil underwent working in factories biased her subsequent analysis of labor conditions. Notably, on this point, Hannah Arendt observes the opposite consequence where she remarks that possibly only Weil treated the topic of labor, “without prejudice and sentimentality” (Rozelle-Stone and Davis, 2021). It is a significant question, though we do not treat it here, whether, or to what extent, a philosopher’s lack of direct experience and exposure to (or stake in) a given subject matter bolsters or biases their analysis. Regardless, Weil’s insistence to expose herself directly to harsh factory work conditions for a protracted length of time to better inform herself on the topic exemplifies divergence from methodological orthodoxy in contemporary philosophy.

Weil's lived experience of factory work informed her understanding of certain contradictions in Marxist thought, as well as her own (Chenavier, 26-36). Through her experience working in the factories, certain tensions she perceived in Marxist thought, between, for example, oppressive work conditions and the possibility of proletariat revolution, took on new significance. Along these lines, Chenavier observes, “For Weil herself, the rough contact with real life, which she nevertheless sought, meant that all the reasons on which the sense of dignity, the respect for oneself are based, “were radically shattered in two or three weeks under the blow of brutal and daily constraint.” All of this aroused in her what she suspected the least: “The docility of a resigned beast of burden” (*La condition ouvrière*, 59, SL, 22).” (Chenavier,

33). For Weil, Marx's theoretical ambition of proletariat revolution under capitalist conditions of oppression, as well as her own theoretical ambition to discern a philosophy of work that would empower individuals to engage in a process of enlightenment through their manual labor, were shocked by real world constraints imposed by working conditions at industrial factories.

As a result, her attentive focus transitioned from revolutionary to reformist (Chenavier, 34). Chenavier observes, “Above all she asked what could be done in the actual conditions to establish a new internal industrial regime, and she replied that all that could be done for the time being “is to look for the most human organization compatible with a given level of production” (*La Condition*, 210)” (Chenavier, 34). In response to the necessary constraints, Weil directed her reflection to the question of what immediate measures could be taken to improve conditions for factory workers; and she worked alongside industry specialists to advance technical solutions (Chenavier, 35). Weil not only developed ties with unskilled workers, but she also negotiated with other stakeholders in the factories—including an owner, technical director, and engineer—all toward the end of improving the workers’ conditions (Chenavier, 34).

In this way, one can argue that Weil was a proto-field philosopher, since she began with problems defined by non-philosophers in real-world settings, sought to make contributions deemed successful according to “more-than-disciplinary” standards, and remained as open as possible to seeing “the problem” from the vantage point of various “stakeholders” operating at different levels of the organization (for more on field philosophy, see Frodeman and Briggie, 2016, 122-126). Weil's emphasis on the value of lived experience for knowledge arguably does have kindred analogues in field philosophy and feminist epistemology, particularly standpoint theory (for more on feminist social epistemology, see Grasswick, 2018). However, Weil’s methodological insistence that doing philosophy intimately involve reflection on the tensions and

contradictions that constitute a philosopher's daily lived experience nevertheless distinguishes her from traditional disciplinary scholars. Springsted drives the point home where he writes:

Where any of these concepts conflict, or move towards each other, cannot, for Weil, be put outside of how they conflict or are resolved in life. One can put words together to question whether there is a value or not, but doing so is senseless, because we thinkers seek purpose; the conflicts and resolutions to problems of value, and other problems, also, need to be thought in relation to what Wittgenstein called "the rough ground." These are the problems of active thinkers, who themselves live life at some very different levels and some very different ways. That does not let the thinker off the hook. It does require that where the contradiction needs to be understood and where resolution needs to take place is in the lived context, where the contradictions are not smoothed over, and where the peace gained thereby is the peace of the thinker, not the consistency of the written thought. (Springsted in Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 18)

In this methodological respect, Weil is more akin to Socrates than contemporary philosophers in academic institutions. That said, inconsistencies in Weil's thought or writing are too often attributed erroneously by the hasty reader. In the next section, we review distinctive aspects of her writing style that may help readers avoid such mistakes.

2.3.5 Writing and Pedagogy

Truth, Myth, and Revelation. Arguably the most distinctive feature of Simone Weil is her writing style. Readers of Weil can meditate on her "Pascal-like aphorisms" for the spiritual wisdom they enshrine, but, as Weil scholars have observed, she is not merely an "oracle" or "anthology of mystical insights" (Springsted in Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 2); there is significant method, coherence, structure, and unity to her thought (McFarland and Van Ness in Weil, *Formative Writings*; 7-8; Springsted in Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 2; Rees in Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, vii-xiv; Vető, 1-9). Despite these observations, if a reader is not acquainted with how Weil employs method throughout her writing, then it may strike them as nonsensical or unintelligible. Even sympathetic readers of Weil stand to benefit from such an acquaintanceship with her writing style insofar as it was pedagogically oriented. Along these

lines, we examine some “characteristic” writing devices that Weil employs to communicate meaning to her reader, including analogy, paradox, extreme statement, the “equilibrium of contradictions,” and exposition by myth (Fiedler in Weil, *Waiting for God*, xxvii).

Weil engaged in a highly analogical style of reasoning (Springsted, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 2). That much is made evident from the outset of her notebooks. For example, the section “*Educational method*” is followed by the subheading, “Physics taught *solely by analogy* (Descartes),” and includes a list of examples of what Weil has in mind (Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 3). Though not recorded for a public audience, Weil's personal exercise notebooks give insight to her process and the development of her thought (Rees in Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, viii). Now, how methodologically distinct, or heterodox, it is for a philosopher to present their ideas or arguments by way of analogy is debatable. For example, one need not look further than Plato's *Republic* for an uncontroversial precedent of highly analogical reasoning being employed to present complex philosophical ideas (see the discussion of the tripartite soul in connection to the Socratic conception of justice, as well as the allegory of the cave, in Plato, *Republic*, 2004).

Next, as Fielder observes, Weil often employs paradoxes to signpost to readers (as well as herself) where critical reflection is necessary (Fiedler in Weil, *Waiting for God*, xxvii). In fact, we can readily observe the pedagogical function of Weil's method of contradiction in her employment of these devices. Let us start with an example from her notebooks: “Paradox: all images of a straight line are equally far from the perfect straight line. And yet they are more or less near to it. This leads far...” (Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 7). Elsewhere, she instructs: “The correlation of contradictories is detachment. An attachment to a particular thing can only be destroyed by an attachment which is incompatible with it. That explains: ‘Love your enemies...’”

(Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 101). Examples of paradox permeate her writing on Christian theology.

Fiedler draws out this pedagogical function of Weil's writing by considering a few of her more shocking or extreme statements in this domain: "He who gives bread to the famished sufferer for love of God will not be thanked by Christ. He has already had his reward in this thought itself"/ "Ineluctable necessity, misery, distress, the crushing weight of poverty and of work that drains the spirit, cruelty, torture, violent death, constraint, terror, sickness— all these are God's love!"/ "Evil is the beautiful obedience of matter to the will of God" (Fiedler in Weil, *Waiting for God*, xxvii). Fiedler observes that Weil employs such extreme statements, or paradoxes, to help the religious reader squarely confront and critically reflect on the tensions and contradictions on which the ethics of Christianity are grounded, that is, on the absurdity or radical nature of the things they purport to believe (Fiedler in Weil, *Waiting for God*, xxvii).

Fiedler also observes the methodological connection between Weil's employment of contradiction as a writing device (what Fiedler refers to as the "equilibrium of contradictions") and her orientation to the quest for truth. Consider his following remarks:

Corresponding to Simone Weil's basic conviction that no widely held belief is utterly devoid of truth is a dialectical method in which she balances against each other contrary propositions, not in order to arrive at a synthesis in terms of a "golden mean," but rather to achieve an equilibrium of truths. "One must accept all opinions," she has written, "but then arrange them in vertical order, placing them at appropriate levels." Best of all exercises for finding the truth is the confrontation of statements that seem absolutely to contradict each other. "Method of investigation—" Simone Weil once jotted down in a note to herself, "as soon as one has arrived at any position, try to find in what sense the contrary is true." (Fiedler in Weil, *Waiting for God*, xxviii)

Along these lines, Weil's statements that, "Every truth contains a contradiction," and "When a contradiction is impossible to solve except by a lie, then we know it is really a door," give further

evidence of the connection Weil perceived between contradiction, mystery, pedagogy, and the quest for truth (see Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 99; Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 269).

For Weil, truth is conceived in connection to revelation, which is universal and permanent (Chenavier, 54); further, her protracted study and commentary on world religions, folklores, myths, and poetry make evident her regard for such texts as potential resources to occasion revelatory insights (see Fiedler in Weil, *Waiting for God*, xxx, xxix; Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*). Thus, in addition to shocking statements or paradoxes, Weil often appeals to metaphors, myths, and fictional stories to convey meaning to her reader. Fielder highlights a few examples from Weil's writings:

In a similar manner, other folk stories and traditional poems can lead toward revelations of fundamental truths: the “the “two winged companions” of an Upanishad, who sit on a single branch, one eating the fruit of the tree, the other looking at it, represent the two portions of the soul: the one that would contemplate the good, the other (like Eve in the Garden) that would consume it. Or the little tailor in Grimm's fairy tale who beats a giant in a throwing contest by hurling into the air a bird rather than a stone teaches us something about the nature of Grace. And finally, we discover from “the great symbols of mythology and folklore” what Simone Weil considers to be the truth most necessary to our salvation, namely, “it is God who seeks man.” The fate of the world, she knew, is decided out of time; and it is in myth that mankind has recorded its sense of true history, the eternal “immobile drama” of necessity and evil, salvation and grace. (Fielder in Weil, *Waiting for God*, xxix-xxx)

Thus, on Weil's view, truth can be sourced not only from non-fiction prose or logic arguments but from creative fiction writing, myths, fables, religious stories, and a diversity of texts.

Does Weil's pedagogical attitude toward myths distinguish her among philosophers? Notably, Fiedler proposes that Weil's methodological tendency toward “exposition by myth” is partly inspired by “her own belief in multiple revelation,” and partly inspired by, “her master, Plato, who at all great crises of his thought falls back on the mythic in search of a subtle and total explication” (Fiedler in Weil, *Waiting for God*, xxix). In support of Fiedler's claim, we can, for

example, contemplate the mysterious appeal to the myth of Er at the end of Plato's *Republic* (See Plato, 2004, Book 10).

It is indeed the case that, on Weil's view, loving contemplation of certain music, art, or poetry—such as the mystical poems of the Upanishads or Homer's *Iliad*— can occasion revelatory insight (Fiedler in Weil, *Waiting for God*, xxix); however, as Chenavier observes, it is also the case that on Weil's view reliably discerning the truth value in such diverse texts requires the reader develop and employ an impartial method of 'reading' (Chenavier, 52). In fact, we can observe Weil's disapproval of those who fail to read texts properly: "There are idiots who speak of syncretism in connection with Plato. But there is no need to syncretize what is all one thing. In Thales, Anaximander, Heraclitus, Socrates, Pythagoras, there is the same doctrine, the single Greek doctrine, expressed through different temperaments" (Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 351). But how can a philosopher set about learning how to read diverse texts with an eye to properly discerning their kindred meaning or the universal truths they may enshrine? We return to this question in the next chapter.

2.3.6 Reading and Detachment

The term reading, like attention or contradiction, is a thick concept in Simone Weil's thought; that is, it is a technical term with methodological significance beyond the scope associated with colloquial use of the term. For example, developing the capacity to entertain contradictory readings of a situation or event can assist our effort to detach ourselves from our personal point of view (e.g., our own immediate interests or egoistic concerns). Similarly, the virtue of detachment, like that of humility, requires protracted effort and has associated difficulties, on Weil's view.

In the next chapter, we examine Weil's late (post mystical experience) essays on the nature, scope, and method of philosophy. They give us, among other things, her meaning of the concepts of reading and detachment in their methodological context. Another benefit of close examination of these late essays is that the pedagogical expression of her method is exemplified in their composition. We then flash back to her early (pre mystical experience) dissertation on Descartes to consider if evidence therein supports or challenges the claim that Weil's epistemological orientation or method underwent significant revision in response to her mystical experiences.

In the final chapter, we return to address the apparent tensions that surfaced in our review of the secondary literature: Namely, is Weil's philosophical methodology orthodox or heterodox? And is there more evidence to support the thesis of the significant epistemic continuity or the thesis of significant epistemic discontinuity with respect to Weil's pre/post mystical experience thought and methodology?

CHAPTER 3

PHILOSOPHY, KNOW THYSELF

3.1 Big Picture

Recall chapter one. We began with a question: How would you react to the presence of God? Then, with the help of a hypothetical thought scenario, we tried to imagine what it might be like to undergo a certain variety of transformative experience, namely, a mystical encounter. The point of the exercise was to try and imagine what it might have been like for the philosopher, Simone Weil, to undergo her first mystical encounter by adopting a sympathetic point of view. We did so on the hypothesis that protracted reflection from this sympathetic point of view can help us to understand Weil's (post mystical experience) views on philosophical inquiry, the focus of the present chapter.

The reader was also instructed to bear in mind a logical distinction between two orders of inquiry when reasoning about a transformative experience (James, 5-6). First, there is the existential order of inquiry. Recall, questions in the existential domain have as their object to evaluate existential facts, and cast existential judgments, concerning the transformative experience. For example, a subject could question what *caused* them to have a transformative experience, in this case, a mystical experience, in the first place. Notably, different answers to this question might be advanced by cognitive scientists, psychologists, atheists, theologians, friends, family, etc.

Recall, however, that in the thought scenario we envisioned, the subject of the transformative experience finds themselves at an intellectual impasse with respect to the casual question in the existential domain. This is because our supposed mystical encounter was, like Weil's, sudden and unanticipated. Thus, the existential cause of our mystical experience remains

a mystery to us. We cannot explain the strange occurrence, nor can we dismiss it. Instead, as philosophers, our initial line of defense in such a strange scenario is to exercise doubt (retain an attitude of skepticism) concerning our judgments in the existential domain. Moreover, as philosophers, we typically subscribe to the view that the existential domain of inquiry can benefit from consult with scientists, historians, and other disciplinary modes of analysis.

Nevertheless, a philosopher who undergoes such a formidable transformative experience must find a way to continue to tack about in the sea, so to speak. Besides, we have our own methodological path forward in the wake of a transformative experience. And it consists in more than exercising radical skepticism or agnosticism concerning the mystical encounter. While we are not confident to advance a hypothesis about what caused our mystical experience, we can still *observe* it and *question* it (we can look and we can ask). Indeed, we can pick up William James's second order of inquiry. Recall, a question in this domain has as its object to assess the value (significance, importance, or meaning) of a thing (in this case, a transformative experience) once it has occurred (James, 6). For example, we can pose questions concerning the philosophical significance of undergoing a mystical experience. Specifically, what might this transformative experience *mean* for how one practices philosophy moving forward?

Concerning this line of inquiry, we *observe* certain epistemological facts can issue from mystical experience. First, we realize it is possible for the subject to hold to the truth of a conviction (possibly, erroneously) for reasons that elude them (e.g., God exists; God is good; God is love; God loves me, etc.). Second, we realize it is possible for the subject to read significant meaning (possibly, erroneously) in the appearances of things (e.g., God is trying to communicate with me; mundane events strike us as miraculous; patterns or sequences of numbers ascribed special significance; see God in nature, see Jesus's face in a coffee mug, etc.).

We thus arrived at a question no philosopher can, in good conscience, dismiss, suppress, or otherwise ignore: How can a philosopher proceed to do philosophy given these revealed epistemological facts (liabilities?) concerning their thought?

In this chapter, we learn Weil's answer to this question. That is, we learn exactly how it is a philosopher can proceed to do philosophy given an acute awareness of such epistemological obstacles. As we are about to see firsthand—and, fortunately, we need not look hard—Weil's late essays on the nature, scope, and method of philosophy bear the imprint of these revelatory concerns. Indeed, Weil's late views accommodate these epistemological facts. Along the way, Weil gives us her methodological concepts of reading and detachment. Further, her essay on the concept of reading exemplifies the pedagogical nature of her writing style. We thus expose ourselves directly to Weil's philosophical methodology in action, and can, in this way, improve upon our understanding of it from chapter two.

3.2 Primary Text Selection 1: Essay on the Concept of Reading, 1941

Simone Weil composed "Essay on the Concept of Reading" in the spring of 1941 (Springsted in Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 21). The essay was thus composed after the onset of Weil's mystical experiences that, recall, began in 1938. Notably, Springsted observes that Weil likely had plans to expand this essay. However, it was posthumously published in its present state in a journal founded by her acquaintance, the fellow philosopher, Gaston Berger, in 1946 (Springsted in Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 21).

Springsted suggests that Weil's concept of reading does not appear to be in response to any other thinker. Instead, it is original to her. Moreover, the concept of reading Weil develops in this essay shows up throughout her notebooks and is employed in other essays from 1941 onward (Springsted in Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 21). In this essay, Weil has readers

grapple one of the epistemological facts that (I suggest) can issue from philosophical reflection on a mystical experience, namely, the revelation that it is possible to read significant meaning (possibly, erroneously) in the appearances of things.

In the essay, Weil guides the reader to confront epistemological difficulties associated with our capacity to read meaning in appearances (or, colloquially, “into things”), independent of having undergone a transformative experience. This is because, on Weil’s view, we are all subject to this epistemological fact regardless of whether we believe ourselves to be or not. Stated another way, we face this epistemological obstacle regardless of whether circumstances have rendered us acutely aware of the fact or not. However, Weil holds that, properly conceived, protracted attention to the epistemological difficulties posed by our readings presents, “in one package all the possible problems of value, to the degree they are concrete” (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 27). In other words, on Weil’s view, understanding the epistemological challenges imposed by our readings has significant prospective value to a philosopher, or indeed, any methodically oriented thinker.

A close reading of this primary text serves us in the following ways. Not only does Weil’s writing style in “Essay on the Concept of Reading” exemplify the pedagogical expression of her philosophical methodology in action, but the discussion also therein crucially sets us up to make sense of two further essays from this period, “Some Reflections on the Concept of Value” and “Philosophy.” And these two essays give us significant insight into Weil’s arguably heterodox, late views on the nature, scope, and proper method of philosophical inquiry. Let us turn then to examine Weil’s concept of reading.

3.2.1 The Mystery of Reading

Simone Weil's thinking and writing was preoccupied with the concept of reading. And, consistent with the methodological practice of her philosophical predecessors, including Socrates and Descartes, Weil's priority concern was to clearly understand the meaning of this idea that was present to her mind. The result of her protracted attention to the concept of "reading" comes in the form of a concise essay wherein she ultimately encourages readers to conceive and develop a methodological orientation of their own to readings.

Weil opens the essay with the following remarks: "We shall attempt to define a concept that has not yet found a suitable name, but for which the name "reading" may be the best one. For there is a mystery in reading, a mystery that, if we contemplate it, may well help us, not to explain, but to grab hold of other mysteries in human life" (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 21). First, to say that the idea has not yet found a suitable name is to preview the fact that arguably nearby concepts, including sensory perception, interpretation, imagination, and conditioned reflex fail to furnish, either independently or in consort, an adequate description of the phenomena Weil has in mind. She thus proposes the term "reading" for adaptive use. (Note, if you have ever had the experience of being told, "Don't read too much into x," where x is, say, a text message, email, or statement you received from another person, then you can start from this colloquial reference to "reading" to get a sense of the phenomena Weil is concerned to examine.) Next, to say there is a mystery in reading is to signal to her reader a tension or problem related to the phenomenon in question that deserves our protracted attention. Finally, to say we may not be able to explain the mystery, but that we can nevertheless contemplate it in a manner that allows us to grab hold of other mysteries, is to signal to the reader that trying to understand the roots of the problem posed by reading (as opposed to trying to eliminate, falsify,

or dismiss the problem) is indispensable to philosophical inquiry. Understanding the roots of the problem of reading is thus principal aim of Weil's guided inquiry.

Next, Weil invites the reader to consider what is arguably most mundane, ordinary, or familiar to our everyday experience, namely, our sensory perception of an external world:

All of us know that sensation is immediate, a brute fact, and that it seizes us by surprise. Without warning a man is punched in the stomach; everything changes for him before he even knows what happened. I touch something hot and I jerk my hand back before I even know that I burned myself. Something seizes me here—it is the universe, and I recognize it by the way it treats me. No one is surprised by the power punches, burns, or sudden noises have to grab hold of us, for we know, or at least believe, that they come from outside of us, from matter, and that the mind does not play any part in the sensation, except to submit to it. The thoughts we ourselves form may bring on certain emotions, but we are not seized by them in the same way. (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 21-22)

From this passage we can observe the metaphysical backdrop of this guided inquiry is Cartesian dualism. But Weil's main point here is (the arguably mundane observation) that the exterior, material world appears to impose itself on us in a manner distinct from how our interior thought affects us. We can accept Weil's point here insofar as we admit the fact that our protracted effort to imagine what it might be like to undergo a mystical experience (in chapter one) did not seize us in the same way as were external circumstances to impose such a transformative experience upon us. Similarly, when philosophers employ a thought experiment as an "intuition pump," say, for example, when we consider how we would react if we saw a drowning child in a pond, we do not start to panic, throw off our shoes, or scream for help. And why is that? It is because we are not "seized" or "gripped" by our own thought experiments or intellectual musings in the same way as when exterior, material circumstances impose themselves upon us (Springsted in Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 8).

Nevertheless, there is a tension, a "mystery," as it were, that complicates this otherwise mundane observation. Weil spells it out thus: "The mystery is that there are sensations that are

pretty much insignificant in themselves, yet, by what they signify, what they *mean*, they seize us in the same way as the stronger sensations” (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 22, italics mine). In other words, there are times when our interior mental activity grips us in a manner not so readily distinguishable from exterior, material circumstances. Weil gives an example to motivate the significant problem she sees. In the example, two women have each received a letter stating their son has died: “The first one glances at it, faints, and until the day she dies her eyes, her mouth, her movements will never again be the same,” while the second one, “remains unmoved, her face, her posture do not change at all” (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 22). The difference between the two women? The first woman can read; the second woman cannot (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 22). Where then is the mystery?

The first woman is gripped by the thoughts she herself reads into external appearances in a manner that is difficult to distinguish from had the exterior world imposed itself on her without her playing any part in the process. Of course, “It isn’t the sensation, it is the *meaning* that has seized the first woman by striking her mind, immediately, as a brute fact, without her participation in the matter, just the way that sensations strike us” (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 22, italics mine). And what of the actual sensations themselves in this case? The black marks on the white sheet of paper, given over as they were to the women’s sight and touch, were not significant in themselves; that is why the illiterate woman can remain unmoved (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 22). On the other hand, the literate woman can drop to the ground faster than if she were suddenly punched in the gut by a stranger because she reads significant meaning in the appearances of the black marks on the white sheet of paper. Thus, the mystery is that *meaning*, which we might otherwise conceive of as mere abstract thought, can, at times, “seize,”

“grip,” or otherwise impose itself upon us in a manner phenomenologically indistinguishable (from the first-person standpoint) from brute, physical, exterior force.

Let us revisit a hypothetical scenario from chapter one to help us carve out the role for our (value-laden) interior point of view in reading. Recall the scenario where you tried to imagine what it might be like for you if your friend read the book that most significantly transformed your thinking and values and subsequently, categorically dismissed it as nonsense. That scenario is theoretically possible, in part, because the sensory data associated with black marks on the pages of paper that constitute your favorite book are pretty much insignificant in themselves; that is, they require a reader with a certain point of view to give them measure and meaning. That said, on Weil’s view, the tension here cuts deeper than competing interpretations of a book. This is in part because, unlike our interpretations, we experience our readings as categorical. Moreover, we read meaning (values) in the appearances of not just texts, but sights, sounds, and indeed, all manner of sensory experience. And, since we cannot immediately, readily distinguish our readings from the “brute facts” of an exterior world, we react strongly when others do not read the reality of a situation as we do. The problem of reading is magnified to us in this way.

Weil wants the reader to grasp the significance of the problem (indeed, the mystery) of reading as acutely as she sees it. And what better way to do so than to make the problem of reading our very own? Along these lines, Weil provokes readers with the following:

Thus at each instant of our life we are gripped from the outside, as it were, by meanings that we ourselves read in appearances. That is why we can argue endlessly about the reality of the external world, since what we call the world are the meanings that we read; they are not real. But they seize us as if they were external; that is real. Why should we try to resolve this contradiction when the more important task of thought in this world is to define and contemplate insoluble contradictions, which, as Plato said, draw us upwards? (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 22).

Note, Weil is not here challenging the reality of an external world; she is challenging our grasp (“readings”) of it. Weil wants us to orient ourselves to the problem of reading (meaning or values in the appearances of things) as we might the epistemological obstacles presented by Descartes concerning deceptive thoughts (e.g., metaphysical possibility of “evil genius” manipulating our thoughts) or sensory illusions (e.g., seeing a mirage) in *Meditations on First Philosophy* (Descartes, 13-17). Notably, however, the problem of reading seems distinct and severable from those presented by Descartes. To ask why we should try to resolve this “contradiction” when the more important task is to define and contemplate *insoluble* contradictions is to signal to the reader that the problem of reading is susceptible to resolution. Further, it is to foreshadow the possibility that protracted attention to the problem of reading can occasion us to develop and employ impartial reading techniques that can, in turn, help us properly orient our attention to other philosophically significant problems (i.e., mysteries, insoluble contradictions) in a manner that can enlighten us (“draw us upwards”). That is, once properly conceived, reading can be employed as a methodological tool in philosophical inquiry.

But let us not get ahead of ourselves; the concept of reading must first be distinguished from several nearby concepts. First, Weil makes the point to distinguish reading from ordinary sense perception: “What is peculiar here is that what we are given is not sensations *and* meanings; what we read is alone what is given” (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 23). She elaborates by way of example:

Proofreading is difficult because while reading we often see letters that the typesetters have actually forgotten to put in; one has to force oneself to read a different kind of meaning here, not that of words or phrases, but of mere letters, while still not forgetting that this first kind of meaning exists. It is impossible not to read; we cannot look at a printed text in a language we understand that is placed in front of us and not read it. At best, one could do this only after a lot of practice. (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 23)

Weil is here saying we can read values even where sensory data is absent. For example, we know that nearly half the letters can be removed from a phrase or sentence on a page and meaning can typically still be attributed by the reader. This is a working premise for the popular television game show, Wheel of Fortune. Additionally, Weil is saying it is possible to read an alternative meaning in the appearances of things, as we often endeavor to do when editing our own writing. For Weil to then say that it is impossible not to read is to emphasize (make us acutely aware of) the fact we cannot escape reading meaning in the appearances of things entirely, since we cannot escape point of view. Finally, to say that it may nevertheless be possible “after a lot of practice” to avoid reading certain values in appearances that come before us is to foreshadow the possibility of an impartial method of reading.

Next, Weil distinguishes reading from interpretation. Specifically, our readings are more categorical for us (immediately given and absolute) than are our interpretations. At this point, Weil introduces, by way of analogy, a positive description of what “reading” consists in:

The “blind man’s stick,” a favorite example of Descartes, furnishes an image analogous to reading. Everybody can convince himself that when handling a pen his touch goes right through the pen to the nib. If the pen skips because of some problem with the paper, the *pen’s* skipping is what is immediately felt; we don’t even think about the sensations in our fingers or hand through which we read. However, the pen’s skipping is really only something we read. The sky, the sea, the sun, the stars, human beings, everything that surrounds us is in the same way something that we read. What we call a correction of sensory illusion is actually a modified reading. If at night, on a lonely road, I think I see a man waiting in ambush instead of a tree, it is a human and menacing presence that forces itself on me, and, as in the case of the letter, it makes me quiver even before I know what it is. I get closer and suddenly everything changes, and as I read a tree, and not a man, I no longer quiver. There is not an appearance and then an interpretation; a human presence has penetrated to my soul through my eyes, and now, just as suddenly, the presence of a tree (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 23)

Weil’s appeal to the Cartesian example of the “blind man’s stick” not only illustrates her point that our sensations are distinct from our readings, but that our sensations can, at times, be

inconsequential to our readings. Our senses are akin to the blind man's stick; we can modify them to adjust our reading of obstacles in our environment; nevertheless, our readings, wedded as they are to any distortive influence on the part of the senses, are additionally wedded to other distortive influences that issue from our interior point of view. In other words, to quote Anais Nin, "We do not see things as they are, we see them as we are." Or perhaps, as Springsted observes, what Weil means by "reading" is akin to what Wittgenstein means when, in a similar discussion on how aspects of things are seen by us, he observes "we interpret it and *see* it as we *interpret* it" (Springsted in Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 8). What distinguishes our readings from our interpretations is their seemingly instantaneous and absolute grip on us as unmediated representations of the facts of world.

Is there a first-person way to distinguish our readings from our interpretations? To the degree you regard your assessment or view on something as just one possible interpretation (e.g., your opinion), then it is probably safe to assume it is just that, akin to an interpretation in the colloquial sense of the term since such an agnostic attitude reveals you register epistemic limitations, or reasonable alternatives, to your viewpoint on the matter. That is, you can sympathize with an alternative or contradictory perspective on the matter. On the other hand, to the degree you regard your understanding (assessment or view) of something as the indisputable ("objective") fact of the matter concerning the "reality" of that thing, then it is probably more akin to your reading of the appearances. As Springsted observes, "It is important to pay attention to Weil's distinction between what she is calling "reading" and what is simply thought. What she is not saying is that we first interpret something and then see it as that, as if there were a choice or act of will that plays a role, or as if there were some option in what we are seeing or as if we were consciously adopting a point of view" (Springsted in Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 8).

Our readings are thus distinguished from our interpretations by the epistemic guarantee that seemingly accompany them from our personal vantage point; when we are reading, we believe or judge ourselves to be “seeing” the facts of the exterior world *as they are*, plain and simple, as it were.

Next, Weil distinguishes our readings from our imagination. Consider her following remarks:

If I hate someone, he is not on one side and my hatred on the other; when he comes near me it is odiousness itself that approaches; the perversity of his soul is more evident to me than the color of his hair. Moreover, if he is blond, he is a hateful blond, if he is brunette, he is a hateful brown. Esther in drawing near to Ahasuerus did not draw near to a man she knew could put her to death; she drew near to majesty itself, to terror itself that reaches her soul through her eyes; that is why the very effort of walking towards him makes her stumble. She herself says so; what she looks at with fear is not the face of Ahasuerus, it is the majesty that is etched there, and she reads that. We speak generally in such cases of the effects of the imagination, but it may well be better to use the word “reading.” This word implies that is a question of effects produced by appearances. However, they are appearances that do not actually appear, or hardly ever; what does appear is something else that is related to appearances as a phrase is related to letters. We see it as an appearance, suddenly, as a brute fact, from outside, and, according to the evidence, pretty much irrefutably. (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 23-24)

Let us follow Weil’s lead here and rely on our life experiences to make the problem of reading our own. We can, for example, reflect on people’s strong reactions to former U.S. president, Donald Trump. Recall how differently his statements and conduct were “read,” in Weil’s sense of the term, by his supporters versus his detractors. On Weil’s view, it is not quite right to say his supporters were merely in admiration of figments of their imagination; nor is quite right to suggest his detractors were merely loathsome of figments of their imagination. Strong reactions to the former U.S. president reflected, in part, the meanings and values we ourselves read in the appearances of his words and conduct.

We are perhaps now situated to employ Weil's method of contradiction to contemplate the mystery of reading in our own life. Along these lines, Springsted suggests that the problem (that is, the "contradiction") with "reading" can be formulated thus: "On the one hand, what we read seizes us as if it were utterly external; our mere musings and thought experiments do not provoke the same strong reactions in us. On the other hand, we also know that these meanings somehow come from us" (Springsted in Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 8). Springsted motivates the epistemological dilemma thus:

Where this is philosophically interesting is that because there is such a sense of immediacy, and of the direct givenness of the world, we are tempted to give a realist's imprimatur on what we read. But that would be a mistake—despite the seeming guarantee that readings come with, they do depend on us. It would, however, be just as much a mistake, and perhaps even epistemologically incoherent, to suggest that these readings are just invented or unreal. To do so is to try to permeate what appears most real, what has the most prima facie evidence for being the world's touch, with a sense of unreality. Because what we read comes with such a sense of reality itself, as Weil points out, this gives rise to all sorts of philosophical disputes, because when we are reading we are doing much more than just trying out a position to see if it fits or not; when we read, nothing could seem clearer to us than what we are reading is the case, pure and simple. Even more to the point, ethical debates, because readings for Weil usually involve one's sense of the good, become intractable—and particularly fierce. It is also where academic debate, unsurprisingly to those who understand the nature of reading, can be largely irrelevant to ethical decision making. (Springsted in Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 8)

Let us play off a previous example to further motivate the dilemma. A Trump supporter can point to all the good things they perceive our former president to have accomplished in four (short but sweet?) years; nevertheless, their reading crucially depends on their (value-laden) interior point of view. Similarly, a Trump detractor can point to all the bad things they perceive the president to have done in four (painfully long?) years; nevertheless, their reading crucially depends on their (value-laden) point of view. Of course, both people could state reasons to resist the conclusion their reading of the facts is just one possible interpretation, namely, their opinion.

And the real kicker is both people could conceivably even point to much of the same empirical evidence in support of their respective views because of the fact they read different values or significance in the existential facts cited; that is, they read different meaning in the appearances of things.

As the preceding example suggest, we are not typically predisposed to question or doubt our readings, wedded as they are to our sensory evidence and interior point of view. Instead, if anything, we are often predisposed to refuse, ignore, dismiss, denigrate, or otherwise devalue readings that contradict our own. Along these lines, Weil observes the following:

If I see a book bound in black, except to philosophize, I do not doubt that black is there. If I look at the top of a newspaper and see “June 14,” I do not doubt that it was printed on June 14. If a being that I hate, or that I fear, or that I despise, or that I love approaches, I above all do not doubt that I have in front of me the odious, the dangerous, the despicable, the lovable. If someone, reading the same newspaper and looking at the same place in it, seriously told me, after several tries, that he did not read “June 14” but “June 15,” that would bother me. I wouldn’t know what to say. If someone does not hate, fear, despise, or love the way I do, that also bothers me. How? He sees these beings—or if they are distant, he sees the indirect manifestations of their existence—and he does not read the odious, the dangerous, the despicable, the lovable? That is not possible. This is a case of bad faith; he’s lying; he’s crazy. (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 24)

The strong, emotional reactions Weil describes above are akin to those we feel at times toward people whose readings contradict our own. For example, reflect here on those people whose political beliefs, philosophical views, or text or news media tastes you consider diametrically opposed to your own. Indeed, recall how you regarded those who did not read the *danger* of the spread of the virus this past year as you did. Or recall how you read people wearing face masks in indoor, public spaces during a global pandemic, versus how you read those who did not wear face masks in indoor, public spaces during a global pandemic. Weil is not here engaging in hyperbole; she is saying how it is we often react to readings of a situation that contradict our own.

Weil next distinguishes reading from conditioned reflex using the example of danger.

The presence of danger often “seizes” or “grips” us as if it were rooted exclusively in the world external to us; nevertheless, danger too reflects values we read in appearances. Consider the following:

It is not quite right to say we believe ourselves in danger because we are afraid; on the contrary, we are afraid because of the presence of danger since it is danger that gives rise to fear. However, danger *is* something that I read. Sounds and sights are by themselves devoid of danger, they are no more dangerous than the paper and ink in a threatening letter. But in the case of the threatening letter the danger that I read takes me beyond those things, and makes fear come to me. If I hear an explosion, fear lives in the noise and comes to take my soul by hearing; I no more can refuse to fear than I can refuse to hear. If I know what the sound is, the same thing happens when I hear the “ack-ack” of a machine gun; it doesn’t if I don’t know. It is not, however, a question of something that is analogous to a conditioned reflex, it is a question of something analogous to reading, where sometimes a combination of novel signs that I have never seen seizes my soul right where the wounding meaning penetrates, along with the black and the white, and just as irresistibly... If I read in a noise honor to be won, I run towards the noise; if I read danger and nothing else, I run far from the noise. In both cases, the necessity of acting the way I do, even if I regret it, is imposed on me in a clear and immediate way, as the noise, with the noise. I read in the noise. (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 24-25)

When a child feels themselves petrified in bed at night by the sight of crumpled clothes in the dark corner of their room, or an occasional, strange sound that pierces through the darkness, the corresponding visual and auditory sensations they experience are devoid of danger (though the child is not, strictly speaking, imagining them); nevertheless, the child is seized by the presence of danger they read in mundane appearances. If I see a wasp nearby, then I read danger and react strongly despite myself (e.g., beat my best 50-yard dash time); in that moment, I can no more refuse to be terrified of the wasp than I can refuse to have caught a glimpse of it in the first place. With respect to the distinction between my conditioned reflexes and my readings, I am aware that I can read the danger of a wasp sting in novel sights and sounds because the first time I saw a hummingbird I mistakenly read it as a wasp and, much to the amusement of a friend, reacted

accordingly. For a brief period after the 9/11 attacks, I occasionally seized with terror when I heard a loud plane flying overhead because I read in the auditory appearance of a plane overhead the threat of a nuclear warhead being dropped. Of course, my readings at that time were not the result of a conditioned reflex to the (otherwise familiar) sound of planes flying overhead. The “wounding meaning” penetrated the otherwise mundane appearance as the result of the (then recent) terrorist attack.

Weil next centers our attention on the fact that, from a strictly analytic standpoint, the meanings we read in appearances are merely another form of abstract thought. And yet, these value-laden thoughts exert a force over our emotional reactions, conduct, and judgments that is distinct from other abstract thoughts and akin to when material circumstances impose on us: “Thus meanings, which if looked at abstractly would seem to be mere thoughts, arise from every corner around me, taking possession of my soul and shaping it from one moment to the next in such a way that, to borrow a familiar English phrase, “my soul is no longer my own.” I believe what I read, my judgments are what I read, I act according to what I read; how could I act any other way?” (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 25). Weil once more drives home the point by way of examples:

If in the normal course of life there are actually few crimes, it is because we read in the colors that penetrate our eyes that when a human being is standing in front of us that there is something to which we owe a certain measure of respect. It is the same thing as with the case of the man who, on a lonely road, first sees a man looking out for passersby, and then a tree. It is in the first case above all an unreserved response to a human presence, and the idea that there could be a *question* of a man is an abstract one that is weak and that comes from within him, not from the outside, and that has no bite. Then suddenly is triggered within him, without transition, the fact that he is alone, surrounded only by plants and things. The idea that a man could have been there where he now sees a tree has become in turn a weak idea. In the same way, during peacetime, the idea of causing the death of a human being comes from the inside, it isn’t read in the appearances—one reads, on the contrary, in the appearances the prohibition of killing. But in a civil war, put somebody in contact with a certain category of human beings and the idea of

sparing a life is weak, coming from the inside. There is no transition possible in going from one state to the other, the passage happens as by the pulling of a trigger. These are, of course, extreme examples, but all of our life is made from the same cloth; meanings impose themselves on us successively, and each of them, when it appears and enters into us through the senses, reduces all opposing ideas to the status of phantoms. (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 25-26)

These examples are intended to drive home the categorical quality that is the signature grip of our readings on our awareness. That is, it is the imposition and stronghold of our readings on our awareness that crucially distinguishes the phenomenology of our readings from other modes of abstract thinking or hypothetical reasoning we engage in. These examples also set the stage for us to question how it is we are supposed to orient ourselves to our existential judgments, wedded as they are to our fallible readings. We return to this concern momentarily.

Recall, on Weil's view, we cannot change the fact *that* we read; however, we can change *how* we read through an apprenticeship of attention. We can indirectly influence the way the universe grips us by being mindful and proactive about the sorts of activities we engage in. Weil describes the process thus:

I possess a certain power over the universe that allows me to change appearances, but it is an indirect one that requires work; it isn't there by simply wishing. I put a sheet of white paper over a black book and I no longer see black. This power is limited by the limits of my physical strength. I also possibly possess a certain power to change the meanings that I read in appearances and that are imposed on me. However, this power is also limited, indirect, and it too requires work. Labor in the normal sense of the word is an example of this work because every tool is a blind man's stick, an instrument for reading, and every apprenticeship is an apprenticeship in reading. When the apprenticeship ends, meanings come to me from the nib of my pen or from a phrase embedded in printed characters. For the sailor, for the experienced captain, his boat has become in a sense an extension of his own body; it is an instrument by which to read the tempest, and he reads it very differently than a passenger does. Where a passenger reads chaos and unlimited danger, the captain reads necessities, limited dangers, resources for escaping and an obligation to be courageous and honorable. (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 26)

To say we possibly possess a certain power to change our readings that is limited, indirect, and requires work is to emphasize the need to methodically approach the process; we cannot change our readings by merely wishing or willing it so. I cannot, for example, wish away my reaction to wasps. However, as Springsted observes, “If we are wired for fear when a snake or lion appears, we can also, as the ancient Stoics and early Desert Fathers knew very well, do something about how we see things. If reading has a forceful emotional component, our emotions themselves can be altered so that they read the world differently” (Springsted in Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 9-10). On Weil’s view, such an apprenticeship in Stoicism requires a methodical focus of attention with a bodily component. For example, it may indeed be possible for me to transform my readings of wasps indirectly over time by protracted attention to the principles of Stoicism and (plenty!) applied practice (e.g., immersion therapy).

Concerning our judgments, we can apprentice (methodically focus) our attention to the task of distinguishing our *observations* from our *evaluations* which can, in turn, help us develop a critical orientation to our judgments. Recall the Indian philosopher J. Krishnamurti’s insight that observing without evaluating is the highest form of human intelligence. If our readings render it a challenge to sever our observation from evaluative judgments, or other forms of value-laden analysis, then we can do something about it. Indeed, there are practice manuals (apprenticeships) to help us distinguish our observations from our evaluations by stating observations in less value-laden terms (see Rosenberg, 25-36). For example, the following poem draws critical attention to the difference between “observations” and “evaluations”:

*I’ve never seen a lazy man;
I’ve seen a man who never ran
While I watched him, and I’ve seen
a man who sometimes slept between
lunch and dinner, and who’d stay
at home upon a rainy day,*

*but he was not a lazy man.
Before you call me crazy,
think, was he a lazy man or
did he just do things we label “lazy”?*

*I’ve never seen a stupid kid;
I’ve seen a kid who sometimes did
Things I didn’t understand
or things in ways I hadn’t planned;
I’ve seen a kid who hadn’t seen
the same places where I had been,
but he was not a stupid kid.
Before you call him stupid,
Think, was he a stupid kid or did he
just know different things than you did?*

*I’ve looked as hard as I can look
but never ever seen a cook;
I saw a person who combined
Ingredients on which we dined,
A person who turns on the heat
and watched the stove that cooked the meat—
I saw those things but not a cook.
Tell me, when you’re looking,
Is it a cook you see or is it someone
doing things that we call cooking?
(Ruth Bebermeyer in Rosenberg, 27)*

What the poem says is that what some of us read (in Weil’s sense of the term) as “lazy,” some of us may read as “tired” or “easy-going,” and what some of us read as “stupid,” “insane,” “crazy,” or “evil,” others may read as a different way of knowing. As it turns out, it takes protracted attention (an apprenticeship) and (plenty!) of practice before some of us can achieve proficiency in stating our observations sans such evaluation. But, on Weil’s view, it is possible that we undertake such an effort in a methodical manner.

Let us pull an exercise from the American psychologist Marshall B. Rosenberg’s training manual on nonviolent communication (see Rosenberg, 2003) to demonstrate how method can be applied to the process of reflecting on our readings. You can assess your own proficiency at

discerning between an observation and an evaluation by completing the exercise below. Note the statements below you believe to be neutral observation (O) versus those you believe involve evaluation (E); the “correct” answers, according to Rosenberg’s training manual, are recorded alongside each statement for you to compare with your own:

1. John was angry with me yesterday for no reason. (E)
 2. Yesterday evening Nancy bit her nails while watching television. (O)
 3. Sam didn’t ask for my opinion during the meeting. (O)
 4. My father is a good man. (E)
 5. Janice works too much. (E)
 6. Henry is aggressive. (E)
 7. Pam was first in line every day this week. (O)
 8. My son often doesn’t brush his teeth. (E)
 9. Luke told me I didn’t look good in yellow. (O)
 10. My aunt complains when I talk with her. (E)
- (Rosenberg, 34-35)

An apprenticeship in non-violent communication requires protracted attention and technical practice at distinguishing (and reformulating) our evaluation-statements into observation-statements. This means reflecting and revising our statements of observation to reduce or neutralize their value-laden aspects (for concrete and methodical ways to reformulate language in this manner see Rosenberg, 2003). In this way, the practices of Stoicism and Nonviolent Communication are two examples of apprenticeships that involve a bodily component and can be employed in a methodical manner to indirectly transform our readings over time. Meditation is a third example.

Not only can we change how we read meaning in appearances by engaging in apprenticeships, but we can change how others read meaning into appearances. Consider Weil’s following remarks:

Action on oneself and action on others consist in transforming meanings. A man, a head of state, declares war, and new meanings rise up all around 40 million people. The general’s art is to lead enemy soldiers into reading flight in appearances and in such a way that the idea of holding fast loses all substance, all effectiveness. He can

do it, for example, by stratagems, by surprises, by using new weapons. War, politics, eloquence, art, teaching, all action on others essentially consists in changing what they read. (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 26)

Weil here refers to the rise of Adolf Hitler in Germany, the onset of World War II, and the significance of those transformative events for how people read. A person can affect how others read meaning in appearances by surprising their expectation (for example, with a sudden or unanticipated declaration of war). Thus, a good general might introduce an altogether unfamiliar weapon at the start of a combat with the aim to surprise the expectation of enemy soldiers such that they read unknown danger, or their own under-preparedness, in the appearances of things and thus retreat. Weil's repeated efforts to coordinate voluntary demonstrations at the frontlines of war (e.g., the Frontline Nurses) were premised on her understanding that surprising war-time expectations had the potential to transform the readings of soldiers on both sides of the war. Teaching is yet another example. When I teach my students logic, I am teaching them how to read meaning in the appearances of symbols; some symbols are familiar to them but carry new meaning they must learn how to read (e.g., \rightarrow) and some of the symbols are altogether unfamiliar to them (e.g., \exists). A liberal arts education is an apprenticeship that has as its object to transform students' thinking and values. Another apprenticeship in attention occurs when we exclusively give our protracted attention to liberal or conservative news media outlets; in either case we subsequently learn to read distinct meanings in appearances of the world (i.e., texts) as the result of that apprenticeship.

We may desire an existential explanation for our readings. For example, what causes us to view certain news media outlets as preferable to others in the first place? But, as Springsted observes, Weil is not concerned to give an account of where readings come from, at least not in this essay (Springsted in Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 9). Instead, Weil is concerned with

how it is we can work with the fact that we read meaning in appearances in a methodical manner. Weil's attentive focus makes sense insofar as her own readings had been transformed by experiences she could not fully explain (i.e., mystical encounter). Nevertheless, Weil does suggest that an existential answer might be available. Springsted explains that for Weil, "our readings are part of what might be called our natural history, including our bodily reactions and cultural and individual historical factors, for it is by similar factors that they can be changed" (Springsted in Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 9). In other words, historical, sociological, psychological, and biological facts about us can help to explain how and why we read the way we do. Thus, Weil leaves open that our readings are theoretically susceptible to explanatory account via the existential order of inquiry.

Weil is principally concerned to motivate readers to develop a critical methodological orientation toward their own readings. Along these lines, Weil instructs as follows:

Whether it is a question of action on oneself or action on another, there are two issues to deal with, that of technique and that of value. Texts, whose appearances are characters, take hold of my soul, then abandon it and are replaced by others. Is one worth more than the other? Is one truer than the other? Where does one find a norm? Thinking a text to be true even though I am not reading it, that I have never read it, assumes that there is a reader of this truthful text, which is to say, it assumes God. But as soon as we do that there is a contradiction, for the concept of reading does not fit our concept of God. Even if it did, it still would not let us order our readings of texts according to a scale of values. (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 26-27)

When it comes to our readings, there are two issues we must confront. First, there is the fact that we are continuously seized by the meanings we ourselves read (possibly erroneously) in the appearances of things. Consider the example of a student who first reads the philosopher, Ayn Rand, and is transformed to read libertarian or capitalist values into appearances, and next reads the philosopher, Karl Marx, and is transformed to read socialist or communist values in appearances, and finally has the experience of taking a political philosophy class with their new,

favorite professor (that is, exposure to yet another text) that transforms their thinking and values to read anarchism as the highest ideal. Is one of these readings of text more truthful or valuable than the others? If so, then it is not obvious how the student is to make that determination, or how they can trust the determination they make. On Weil's view, what we need is methodological technique that allows us to pass from one reading to the next and to assess the texts we read according to a scale of values (criteria).

Weil states that if we think it is possible a text be truthful even if we have never read it nor ever will, then that presupposes there is a reader of the truthful text. One way to make sense of this claim is to acknowledge we have implicit faith in an unbiased point of view that gives the text measure and meaning. Weil suggests this presupposes God; presumably, this is the case insofar as it requires a reading unencumbered by the epistemic limitations that accompany personal perspective or point of view. However, Weil points out, the concept of reading does not fit our concept of God (there is a contradiction) because reading implies epistemic constraints (point of view) and God is, presumably, not subject to those. Moreover, even if these contradictory concepts could be reconciled, Weil insists that this would not help us to order our own readings of texts according to a scale of values. The presumption of the existence of the vantage point of God or some cosmic order does not itself give us an impartial or practical method for ranking the meaning (values) we read in texts.

Weil's concluding remarks are pedagogical in nature. They reveal her method throughout the inquiry is akin to Socrates in that she means us to inhabit a state of aporia as an epistemological and methodological improvement from where we started. Weil encourages the reader to center their attentive focus on the question of how it is we can further introduce method

into how we read meaning in appearances given the difficulties discussed. Weil signals to readers the prospective upshot to protracted contemplation on the mystery of reading:

Still, posed this way, the problem would perhaps be worth meditating on. For posed in this way it presents in one package all the possible problems of value, to the degree they are concrete. A man who is tempted to keep a deposit for himself will not keep from doing it simply because he has read *The Critique of Practical Reason*; he will refrain from it, because it will seem to him, despite himself, that something in the deposit itself cries out to be given back. Everybody has experienced something like this where it seems that one would actually like to act badly, but cannot do it. At other times, one would like to act well, but one cannot do it. Figuring out whether one who reads returning a deposit this way reads better than someone who reads in the appearances all the desires he might be able to satisfy if he kept the money is to seek for a criterion that would allow one to decide the matter, to seek out a technique that would permit one to pass from one reading to another. That is a problem that is more concrete than trying to decide whether it is better to keep or give it back. Furthermore, by posing the problem of value this way around the concept of reading puts it in relation to truth and beauty as well as to the good, and it is not possible to separate them. Perhaps doing this, the connection of these three things, which is a mystery, would be made a bit clearer. We do not know how to think these things as one, and yet they cannot be thought separately. (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 27)

With these final remarks to guide and possibly motivate us, Weil ends the essay. Notably, we started with one mystery, the mystery of how to discern if or when we are reading meaning (values) erroneously in the appearances of things, and end with two, the second, presumably related, is Plato's charge to contemplate insoluble contradictions (e.g., how can three values be one value, and vice versa) that draw us upwards.

Let us review the methodological trajectory of the essay. We started from a place of self-assuredness: We all know what it is like when external, physical, material forces impose themselves on us (e.g., you inadvertently touch a hot stove, instantly recoil, and are burned). And we all know that such experiences of a world exterior to us are phenomenologically distinct from our merely imagining them. Doubt is then introduced by the fact that there are occasions where we feel the universe has seized us when what has seized us are our readings of values in the

appearances of things (e.g., danger where it does not exist, offense or malice where it is not intended). The tension is magnified by the fact that when we are reading certain values in the appearances of things nothing can seem more certain to us; readings are experienced as categorical (e.g., The man is dangerous; The woman is evil; He is offensive. She is rude. The verdict is unfair; The mountain top is beautiful; The child is innocent; My grandmother is a saint, God was present, etc.). Moreover, our readings, wedded as they are to our sensory perception, render alternative viewpoints difficult to seriously entertain or possibly accept. Nevertheless, the fact remains that we can, and often do, mistakenly read meaning in the appearances of things as unmediated representations of the facts of the world. Furthermore, we do not have a failsafe way (i.e., techniques or criteria) to evaluate when and how this is so. Critical acceptance of the fact we are continuously reading meaning (possibly erroneously) in the appearances of things (i.e., epistemic humility), as well as our protracted attention to the establishment of criteria and development of techniques that orient us critically to our own readings (e.g., developing our capacity to seriously entertain contradictory readings of a situation), are needed if we are to engage in philosophical reflection.

Notably, Weil does not advocate her method of reading in this essay. While she may have had plans to extend the essay, it is also consistent with what Weil wrote that she prefers we think these problems through for ourselves, ground them in our own experience, and develop our own philosophical and methodological orientation to them. And, of course, we have options. The first is to dismiss the problem outright. We can deny that we read values in appearances and try to give an account of how we know this is so. Or we can agree that we do engage in reading but try to give an account of why this does not, in fact, present a serious epistemological obstacle for us. However, Weil does none of the above. Her late views on philosophical methodology are, as we

are about to see, centered around the problem of reading insofar as they are centered around concrete problems of value grounded in a philosopher's lived experience.

Springsted observes the following hierarchy of readings on Weil's view. At the first level, we read largely or exclusively from a self-centered or egoistic viewpoint: "What is good is what pleases us and gives us pleasure; what is evil is what hurts us and frustrates us. Things are read utterly egocentrically here" (Springsted in Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 10). For example, if a friend of mine fails to respond to a request to meet and I immediately read in that appearance that they are intentionally ignoring me and hate me, then I am reading at this egocentric level. This can be seen by the fact that there are other possible reasons that they have yet to respond that have nothing to do with me or my value-laden assessment (e.g., they have not seen the message yet). At this level, we are reading meaning erroneously in the appearances of things and in an egocentric manner.

At the next level, we read from a perspective where everything happens with equal importance. We observe that things happen according to a rigorous order and that the goodness of the order does not depend on us (Springsted in Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 10). This is the methodological orientation of the Stoic which Weil regarded as worthy of emulation; its signature feature is an openness to read the facts of the world as they are, as opposed to as how they impact us. This is also the level of reading that is required of scientists: "It is something that science should foster, even though scientists individually may talk and calculate one way professionally and then be utterly petty and self-centered in every other aspect of what they do. If so, they are theorizing one way, but actually reading another" (Springsted in Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 10). For example, if a scientist were to suppress or dismiss findings or evidence that contradicted their favored hypothesis or theory, then that scientist would be

operating from an egocentric point of view. A properly scientific perspective arguably includes openness to the possibility of new data or evidence that can theoretically falsify or overturn one's previous findings or current scientific knowledge.

Finally, there is the ideal Weil set for herself. As Springsted observes, "at the highest level, what goes on in the world, as far as we read it, goes on as if we ourselves had positively willed it the way that we will a pencil to move along a sheet of paper; we don't first think about it and will all the intermediate steps, we just see and feel the paper" (Springsted in Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 10). This is the *amor fati* of the Stoics; it is to love the world as one with us and the will of God. While we may be tempted to dismiss this ideal as either a distorting, rose-colored reading of the universe, or as a sign of resignation to fate, neither was the case for Weil. It was, in part, a means to balance her egoistic readings by seriously entertaining a contradictory vantage point. Recall, Weil was living as a Jewish refugee during World War II and arguably worked herself to death trying to support the French Resistance. To accept and love the world as it was at that time, as the will of God and as if she herself willed it so, was anything but an exercise in romanticism. Weil may have viewed this level of reading as an impossible ideal; it was nevertheless the standard to which she held herself accountable.

We know from Weil's notebooks that she works to read the following hierarchy of values in the appearances of things: "to read necessity behind sensations, to read order behind necessity, to read God behind order" (Springsted in Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 10-11). We also know Weil conceives necessity as, "an ensemble of laws of variation determined by fixed and invariant ratios," and as, "obedience of matter to God" (Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 90). Below this description of necessity, she writes: "reality = contact with necessity" (contradiction): necessity is not tangible. Harmony, Mystery" (Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 88). Lastly, recall

Weil's remarks concerning God that, "I am sure there is nothing which resembles what I can conceive when I say that word," and yet, "I am quite sure there is a God in the sense that I am sure my love is not an illusion." Weil orients herself to an understanding of God as goodness, order, mystery, or all that cannot be conceived by her. To state Weil's approach to reading meaning in the appearances of things in another way: Weil reads the physical laws of the universe behind sensations, a rigorous yet good order behind those physical laws, and a loving mystery behind that good order.

Weil's own method of reading is akin to the *amor fati* of the Stoics. For the Stoics, *amor fati* means a love of fate and the order of the world as consistent with the will of God. Stated another way, it is about accepting and embracing what has happened and is happening as reflecting the change and necessity that govern the physical universe and seeing or being able to appreciate the beauty and goodness therein. Along these lines, consider Weil's following remarks:

In the beauty of the world brute necessity becomes an object of love. What is more beautiful than the action of gravity on the fugitive folds of the sea waves, or on the almost eternal folds of the mountains? The sea is not less beautiful in our eyes because we know that sometimes ships are wrecked by it. On the contrary, this adds to its beauty. If it altered the movement of its waves to spare a boat, it would be a creature gifted with discernment and choice and not this fluid, perfectly obedient to every external pressure. It is this perfect obedience that constitutes the sea's beauty. (Weil, *Waiting for God*, 76)

It is in this way we can choose to read the beauty of the ocean, nature, the universe, or a person or moment independently of how they impact us. Doing so can counterbalance the egoistic reading. This is why Weil can say, "Love is not consolation, it is light," and why, on her view, it is better to observe, "I am suffering," than, "This landscape is ugly." The upshot of reading like this is that it can counterbalance our more egoistic, immediate, or self-centered readings of the

world with a contradictory or alternative reading of the goodness or beauty in the order of the world *in itself* and thereby help us transcend certain limitations to our personal point of view.

The philosophical concern at this point, Springsted aptly observes, is the question of how exactly Weil establishes this (or any) order to her readings (Springsted in Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 11). In other words, what methodological criteria or techniques did she use to establish or clarify her own hierarchy of values? To take up this question is to examine Weil's thinking on values and, ultimately, to inhabit the center of her philosophy of philosophy (Springsted in Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 11). We now turn to Weil's essay on the concept of value. Central to the discussion therein is the fact that we can hold convictions (strong beliefs of value) for reasons that elude us. Further, Weil's essay on the concept of value gives us insight to her views on the nature, method, scope, limits, and aims of philosophical inquiry.

3.3 Primary Text Selection 2: Some Reflections on the Concept of Value, 1941

Here we examine another unfinished essay Weil composed early in 1941 (Springsted, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 29). The essay was inspired by a series of lectures given by the French poet and philosopher, Paul Valéry (Springsted, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 29).

According to Thibon, Valéry was one of the very few of Weil's contemporaries that she spoke of with "unmixed praise" (Thibon in Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, xi). In his lectures, Valéry proposes an analogy that Weil regards as instructive, namely, "that with respect to a value of a work of art there is an economic analogy in the relations of the author, the text, and the reader and those of the producer, product, and consumer" (Springsted in Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 29). The reader, as it were, is an integral part of the equation in the discernment of the value of a text (e.g., a work of art) composed by an author, philosopher, artist, or otherwise. In this way, Valéry's analogy helps illustrate Weil's concept of reading. To say a consumer is unable to read the value

in what the author of an artwork has placed before them is analogous to saying a person is not properly situated to read the measure and meaning of a text.

Despite her admiration, in this essay, Weil aims to critically clarify one of Valéry's claims, namely, that, "philosophy is poetry" (Springsted in Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 29). Valéry comments on philosophers' "grand philosophical systems" that each presume to explain everything while contradicting one another, comparing their systems to poetry (Springsted, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 29). Weil challenges this view of philosophy. She argues that, despite widespread appearances to the contrary, "true philosophy" does not engage in such system-building or creative construction. Weil offers an alternative understanding of what philosophical inquiry consists in, describing the nature, scope, method, aims, and limits of true philosophy. Along the way, Weil states her methodological orientation to detachment and explains the indispensable role of this value in genuine philosophical reflection. She views her philosophy of philosophy as in the philosophical tradition of Socrates, Plato, Descartes, Lagneau, Kant, and all "true masters of thought," contrasting it sharply with those philosophers, among them Aristotle and Hegel, who she views as mistakenly taking themselves to be constructing, creating, or saying anything new or un-convicted of contradictions under the sun. These are the so-called "system-builders" and the value of their product can be compared to the work of poets. In sum, we get Weil's concise remarks on what philosophy *is* and *is not* as part of a critical clarification to Valéry's claim that philosophy is poetry.

There are significant, methodological points to observe in this essay. First, it presumes the problem of reading. Second, it presumes and embraces the second epistemological fact I suggest can be revealed by mystical encounter, namely, the revelation that a subject can hold to the certainty of a conviction for reason(s) that elude them. Third, perhaps most notably, and as

we see shortly, the entirety of Weil's philosophy of philosophy is restricted to reflection concerning James's second order of inquiry, namely, inquiry on values (e.g., what is the importance, worth, significance, or meaning of a thing understood as an appearance, thought, or idea in the mind). It is, in effect, a philosophy of philosophy for those who are compelled by argument, intuition, or circumstance (e.g., mystical experience or mental health diagnosis) to accept or take seriously the epistemological obstacles posed by their readings and, in response, choose to adopt a methodological suspension in doubt concerning the existential facts of the world. In sum, the essay represents a concise statement of Weil's views on the philosophy of philosophy from well after the onset of her mystical experiences. Thus, as suggested in chapter one, we see precisely how Weil's mature views on the philosophy of philosophy transparently accommodate the epistemological constraints I suggest are imposed by mystical experiences. In this way, we learn how it is possible for a philosopher to endeavor to proceed to do philosophy in the wake of a certain variety of transformative experience, namely, mystical experience.

3.3.1 On the Nature and Scope of Philosophical Reflection

Weil's essay on value picks up where her essay on reading leaves off: the question of how we can orient ourselves to problems of reading (problems of value) in a methodical manner. As it turns out, the activity of reflecting on values is the crucially distinguishing feature of philosophical inquiry. Weil's opening remarks are unambiguous on this point: "The concept of value is at the center of philosophy. All reflection bearing on the notion of value and on the hierarchy of values is philosophical; all efforts of thought bearing on anything other than value are, if one examines them closely, foreign to philosophy" (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 30). Thus, on Weil's view, the purpose of philosophical reflection is to understand the nature and

hierarchy of values and this activity circumscribes the scope of philosophical inquiry (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 30).

Next, Weil restates another significant point established in her essay on the concept of reading. Namely, we cannot escape our interior notions or impressions of value (point of view) nor the fact that values direct our thinking and action. Weil puts the point thus, “For, as a matter of fact, the notion of value is always present to everybody’s mind. Everybody orients his thoughts about actions to some good, and no one can do otherwise... In a sense, the law of human life is: since the choice of life is one between life and death, then first, reflecting about and then living in any specific situation itself implies a choice of values” (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 30). Notably, Weil adds the following caveat: “It is true, of course, that people almost never direct their thought to the values that they live by. But that is because they believe they have reason enough for holding the ones they do” (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 30). In this way, Weil indicates that we can all be subject to the second epistemological fact I suggest is imposed by mystical experience; namely, we can hold convictions (strong beliefs about value) that direct our thinking and conduct for reasons that, upon reflection (as we are about to see), elude us more than we think. But how exactly are we to understand the nature of value on Weil’s view?

For Weil, strictly speaking, value is conceived as an object of reflection or a character of thought: “Moreover, value is exclusively an object of reflection. It cannot be an object of experience” (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 30). Examples of values Weil cites include, notably, the three listed at the end of her essay on reading, namely, goodness, beauty, and truth, as well as a fourth, detachment (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 27, 30-33). We can add to this list other Platonic values, including justice, moderation, wisdom, and courage, as well as

numbers. To say value cannot be an object of experience is to clarify the grammar and scope of true philosophical inquiry by taking seriously the fact that we read values in the appearances of things. It is also to demarcate the scope of philosophical inquiry (whose object of study is reflection on the thoughts and values present to the mind) from the scope of scientific inquiry (whose object of study is the physical or empirical world).

Weil further distinguishes the epistemological scope of philosophical inquiry from the sciences (and other ways of knowing) by a statement of contradiction or paradox. Recall, when reading Weil, the function of this method of expression, extreme statement or paradox, is pedagogical in nature. The aim is to direct the reader's attention to a tension Weil views as significant to the discussion at hand. In this case, our attention is drawn to the fact that we need to conceive the method of philosophy differently from how conceive scientific ways of acquiring knowledge about the world:

Knowing how to judge between values is for everybody the supreme necessity. But it is also something that no one will ever find out. That is because all human knowledge is hypothetical; that is, the certainty of demonstrations rests on previous demonstrations or axioms, and the facts that one affirms, thanks to physical sense, are only admitted insofar as they are linked to other facts. But value cannot be a matter for hypothesis. A value is something that one admits unconditionally. At each instant our life is oriented according to some system of values. At the moment when it directs our actions, our system of values is not accepted with conditions or provisionally or reflectively; it is purely and simply accepted. Knowledge is conditional, values are unconditional; therefore values are unknowable. (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 30)

Let us work to unpack the meaning of this passage. First, we can observe that on Weil's view, the task of philosophy, which is to judge between values (i.e., to order, rank or assess values) is indispensable (the "supreme necessity") to a life well lived. To then say it is also something that we will never "find out," is to indicate that the method of investigation in philosophical inquiry needs to be conceived differently than it is in the sciences. And this is so because the values we

admit at each moment we hold categorically, that is, unconditionally, unlike the hypothetical knowledge we have of the world. Regardless of whether we recognize or can articulate it, there is a system of values that directs our thinking and conduct. Contrastingly, the method of investigation in the sciences is conducted by way of hypotheses that we accept provisionally. That is, we observe and accept the possibility that our best scientific theories can be falsified by new or anomalous data or findings. To say that values are “unknowable” is to distinguish the method applied to understand values from the method of how knowledge of other things might be arrived at (Springsted in Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 12). Thus, on Weil’s view, the philosophical command to ‘Know Thyself’ requires a method of investigation unto itself.

Springsted restates the relevant point thus: “Whereas the search for knowledge of something depends upon the use of other knowledge that we have, and the result of our search is then as probable as our current knowledge is—and we know that it changes, which is the adventure of thinking—that simply is not the case with values. Because we are committed to certain values, and this commitment directs our reflections, we cannot and do not look and treat those values as merely probable. We regard them as certain” (Springsted in Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 12). The difference at stake is analogous to the difference between the question of how we *read* scientific data and the question of what the empirical evidence itself reveals. And the fact is well-trained scientists acting in good faith can and do come apart on their readings concerning the significance of findings, as well as their value-judgments concerning the best scientific theories to advance to account for the data.

The philosopher of science Ernan McMullin furnishes an example that illustrates how values function in scientists’ thinking as they reflect on the existential facts admitted by the physical sciences. McMullin describes the case of the “notorious disagreement” between Niels

Bohr and Albert Einstein concerning the acceptability of the quantum theory of matter. Notably, the disagreement did not concern the predictive accuracy of the theory. Einstein believed the theory lacked coherence and consistency with the rest of physics, as well as simplicity, the value most prized by Einstein, according to McMullin. Notably, Bohr agreed with Einstein concerning the lack of consistency with classical physics, he simply did not see this value as the most important in theory selection. In Bohr's eyes, the predictive fertility of the new theory was the more important consideration. Notably, the scientists did not seem to disagree about the predictive accuracy of the theory. McMullin explains their disagreement thus, "The differences between their assessments were not solely due to differences in the values they employed in theory-appraisal. Disagreement in substantive metaphysical belief about the nature of the world also played a part. But there can be no doubt from the abundant testimony of the two physicists themselves that they had very different views as to what constituted a "good" theory" (see Ernan McMullin, "Values in Science," 1982). This case shows how competent thinkers can and do come apart on their readings of significance of the existential facts admitted by the physical sciences. It also helps us makes sense of Weil's claim that values are better understood as objects of reflection, or characters of thought, and not as objects of experience.

Let us return to the task of understanding philosophy's scope, on Weil's view. Weil says the question of the *value of philosophy* is, in fact, beyond the scope of philosophical inquiry (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 30, italics mine). This is because there is no method available to us to answer that question. And why is that? It is because we cannot stand outside ourselves or entirely escape personal point of view (part of the problem of reading). There is only the method we introduce to philosophical reflection. And while we can work to cultivate critical distance from the thoughts that occur to us (e.g., through the practice of meditation), we

cannot escape the fact we read meaning in appearances. Springsted draws an analogy between philosophical reflection conceived in this way and the standard meter in France:

For philosophy does not just think *about* the concept of value, in the way one might analyze any other subject; in this regard, it does not produce results with respect to this as subject matter. Philosophy's thinking, which is purely reflective, is the thinking and reflecting on value. For, as she observes, value is not empirical; it is strictly a matter of reflection. In this regard, philosophy's own value is itself "beyond discussion" in much the same way, one might suggest, as the standard meter in Paris is beyond measurement. That is to say, it assesses value and is the principle of assessment, and that distinguishes it from what is assessed; there is no way of thinking in order to assess *its* value. The question simply disappears. (Springsted, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 11)

Strictly speaking, since philosophical reflection is the means or method we employ to assess, order, or rank the values that are the characters of our thought, the question of the value of philosophy itself is (quite literally, on Weil's view) outside the legitimate scope of epistemological inquiry. Philosophical reflection is the measuring tape, so to speak, of the values we already admit unconditionally, often unbeknownst to us.

If we are feeling stymied by the tension implied by Weil's paradoxical statements (i.e., "Knowing how to judge between values is for everybody the supreme necessity," and "Values are unknowable"), then it is because it is not obvious to us how we are to proceed given the customary grammar and method we employ in the search for knowledge in the sciences or other areas of inquiry. And even if we decide to entertain Weil's grammar to investigate, assess, rank, and better understand the values that direct our thinking and conduct, it is not obvious that we have deduced anything less subjective than a personal inventory of how we read and order our self-interested projections of value. We would then be forced to conclude the entirety of philosophical thought is nothing more than a collection of subjectivist theories of cognition.

Fortunately, Weil holds the exact opposite view concerning the prospects for true philosophical reflection. While, she explains, it is the case that, "subjectivist theories of

cognition are a perfectly correct description of the condition of those who lack the faculty, which is extremely rare, of coming out of themselves,” Weil insists that true philosophical reflection necessarily requires we employ this “extremely rare” method of “coming out of ourselves” which involves a protracted methodological effort of detachment (Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 362). Along these lines, perhaps surprisingly, Weil maintains, “the rigor and certitude of philosophical reflection are as great as they can be: the sciences don’t come close” (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 32). We now turn to examine the significant role played by contradiction and detachment in genuine philosophical reflection. As we are about to see, on Weil’s view, reflecting on the contradictions present in our own lived experience, while working to practice detachment as the “supreme value,” is the characteristic activity of the “extremely rare” method of “coming out of ourselves” that crucially distinguishes philosophical method.

3.3.2 Method of Reflection on Values: Contradiction and Detachment

Recall, where we are now is apparently stymied (Springsted in Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 12). According to Weil, values are the object of philosophical reflection yet we cannot approach understanding values in the same way we customarily approach inquiry about the empirical world. We need to discern or develop our own method of investigation to explore our values. Weil insists on as much: “But one cannot give up on knowing them, for giving up would mean giving up on believing in them, which is impossible, because human life always has a direction” (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 30). In other words, we can either live the unexamined life, which is the playing out of a system of values that directs our thinking and conduct unbeknownst to us (for reasons that elude our intellect), or we can endeavor to live the examined life wherein we develop techniques that allow us to observe, explore, track, inventory, discern, order, evaluate, rank, and better understand this system of values. For Weil, like

Socrates, the latter approach is a necessary requirement of a well-lived life; and it is the work of true philosophy. But how does one set about doing this work?

Contradiction. First, on Weil's view, we need to recognize that there is a contradiction at the very center of our existence, and to task ourselves with reflection on it. With respect to values, Weil observes the tension thus: "But one cannot give up on knowing them, for giving up would mean giving up on believing in them, which is impossible, because human life always has direction. Thus at the center of human life is a contradiction" (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 30). Values are always operating in our thinking and conduct, regardless of whether or to what extent we recognize or understand their role or influence. We cannot give up on trying to understand the values that move us without giving up on ourselves. The difficulty is compounded by the fact that values operate in our thinking, as Springsted observes, "not as readily defined or clearly articulated concepts, but more like the way a standard for measuring that cannot be measured might operate" (Springsted in Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 13). Why this is so, on Weil's view, is because values, such as truth, beauty, and the good, are ends unto themselves and such ends cannot be defined: "Everything that can be taken as an end cannot be defined. Means, such as power or money, are easily defined, and that is why people orient themselves exclusively toward the acquisition of means. But they then fall into another contradiction, for there is a contradiction of taking means for ends" (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 31). To restate the tension yet another way: We are directed by and believe in values (ends) that we ourselves do not fully grasp or understand (i.e., they are not clearly or fully defined concepts to our mind) and we only sometimes attempt to step back or critically distance ourselves from what is happening in our lives to scrutinize them (thus fail to systematically apply method to reflection).

Some examples can help clarify the process of philosophical reflection Weil has in mind, as she acknowledges the relevant tension is difficult to express with language: “These considerations seem abstract because of the difficulty of expressing them in words. Nevertheless, this contradiction continually constitutes under diverse forms the essential drama of every human being, and it is easy to give as many concrete examples of it as one wants” (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 30). Weil has us consider the contradiction at the center of the lived experience of artists:

For example, every artist knows that he cannot have an explicit criterion that lets him affirm with certitude whether one work of art is more beautiful than another. However, every artist knows that there is a hierarchy of aesthetic values, that there are some things more beautiful than others, and that there are some things that are beautiful and others that are not. If he didn’t know that, he wouldn’t make the effort to do artistic work, to correct a work, or to continue working. The condition of the artist striving always to a beauty he cannot know mixes anguish into every effort of artistic creation. But this condition is not just true of artists—it holds for everyone analogously. (Springsted, 30-31).

Here we observe the following in the case of artists. They can and do apply a standard to their artistic process quite apart from any capacity to define the value of beauty or express the hierarchy of aesthetic values they employ to judge works. Springsted restates the point thus: “It is not just that [the artist] knows what she likes, even if she can’t exactly say why. It is that she judges her own works as better or worse, and does so unavoidably. We have a standard, we apply it rigorously, but we also know that somehow *in concreto* it has been realized only in a very imperfect way” (Springsted in Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 13). On Weil’s view, this artistic process is analogous to when a thinker reasons about perfect geometrical relations by applying them to, and having them suggested to her by, imperfect straight lines drawn on papers, boards, or other surfaces (Springsted in Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 13).

Weil insists that this contradiction—of striving to apply values that are not clearly defined to our minds (e.g., in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions) for reasons we do not entirely grasp—is not merely the condition of artists, but that it is a tension at the center of the lived experience of people more generally. And philosophers are no exception. Drawing on the grammar of geometry, Weil explains, “By transposition, one finds an analogous contradiction in every human situation. Hence, it is inevitable that all philosophic thought equally has a contradiction at its center. The logical rule of non-contradiction is not applicable in philosophy” (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 31). What Weil means by this is precisely what Descartes means when he observes that classical geometry is convicted of contradictions: “What geometer does not obscure the clarity of his subject with contradictory principles, as long as he thinks that lines have no width and surfaces no depths, and then forms some of these from others, without noticing that the line, from whose flowing movement he conceives that a surface is generated, is a real body; and that, moreover, the line that lacks width is nothing but a mode of a body” (Weil, *Formative Writings*, 51). In other words, Weil means that true philosophers, whose job it is to carefully observe, inventory, rank or order the values they hold and that are revealed by their thinking and conduct, will necessarily grasp the fact that the chain of their thoughts in this domain is convicted of contradiction. It is the work of philosophers to observe and inventory the contradictory facts that constitute our thinking on values, not to obscure or suppress those facts (hence Weil’s disdain for so-called “system builders” who aim to suppress or eliminate the contradictions in their thought). Along these lines, recall once more Weil’s observation: “Philosophy (including problems of cognition, etc.) is *exclusively* an affair of action and practice. That is why it is so difficult to write about. Difficult in the same way as a treatise on tennis or

running, but much more so.” What does it look like to map the contradictions we observe with respect to the role played by values in our lived experience?

Weil’s approach can be applied to philosophical reflection on a past moral dilemma we have faced. Along these lines, consider Weil’s following instruction: “Since value is nothing but an orientation of the soul, posing a value to oneself and being oriented towards it are one and the same thing; if one thinks at the same time two values that might pull one in two different directions, one will be oriented above all towards the value to which one awards the higher rank” (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 33). Whether or not we feel comfortable saying so, our decisions, even when they appear to run contrary our expressly stated values, do reflect a fact of the matter as to the value we assigned the greater weight at that moment in time. Combine Weil’s observation here with the fact we can (and often feel we must) act even when we are uncertain about the right thing to do and we have instructive reflective fodder to apply Weil’s approach to philosophical reflection.

To practice Weil’s approach: Select a value (or strong belief of value) you hold. Ideally, select a value you take yourself to have clear grasp of in terms of how it functions in your thinking and conduct. For my own I select the value of non-maleficence. I hold the conviction that one should avoid causing unnecessary harm. I then observe how the value of non-maleficence operates in my thinking and conduct, in my daily lived experiences. For example, once I learned I could live a reasonably healthy existence without consuming animals (that significantly suffer in the industrial process of raising them to be packaged as food), then I felt compelled to develop habits and a lifestyle that did not involve consuming those animals to meet my nutritional needs. In this way, it seems I am living in accord with my values. However, by applying Weil’s philosophical approach retrospectively, I can better discern the extent to which

my past and present efforts at non-maleficence are, in fact, significantly convicted of contradictions. I can also better discern the extent to which I have yet to understand what this value (end) of non-maleficence *means for me* in terms of my thinking and conduct, as well as where it ranks relative to other values that I take myself to hold or that are directing my thinking and conduct. Let us rehearse the reasoning that led to this understanding.

Instead of focusing on the consistency of my efforts to avoid consuming animals, I focus instead on instances where I experienced tension, uncertainty, or inconsistency with respect to my efforts at non-maleficence. On Weil's view, the exceptions I make, and tensions I experience, reveal other crucial values that are at play, not merely failures, or instances of weakness of will, though that is one way to think of them (and the only way I previously had). For example, on past trips to visit family in Egypt, I was regularly invited to familial feasts centered around the consumption of animal meat. From a cultural standpoint, such offerings represent a gesture of bountiful love, good will, and celebration on the part of my aunts. These were meals they likely did not indulge in regularly due to cost; and they involve considerable time and effort to prepare. At the time, I did not want to eat the meat; however, I could not bring myself to in any way disrespect or diminish the tireless effort my aunts had invested. The meaning and significance of sacrificing an animal as an offering is, culturally speaking, hard to overstate and so I did sit and eat the meat. Notably, I initially felt guilty, though not as bad as I thought I would feel, after I consumed it. On one hand, I had failed to honor my commitment to non-maleficence as I understood it. On the other hand, I sensed what I was doing was the right thing for me to do. I conceived of the option to turn down the food as causing emotional harm or disrespect to my family and, at the time, I judged the past physical harm to the animals as less valuable to the present situation than the significance of hurting the feelings of my aunts or distancing myself

from my family or cultural heritage in those moments. Did I henceforth decide that I would eat any meat prepared for me by my aunts? No. There were a handful of times while I was in Egypt that I ate what was placed in front of me by family and then no more. Why? I am uncertain, even now. I eventually returned to declining to consume meat altogether, regardless of who prepared it or the effort they made. In this way, I observe my thinking and conduct with respect to the value of non-maleficence is convicted of contradiction.

Let us consider another example of how my thinking and conduct with respect to the value of non-maleficence is convicted of contradictions. I recently adopted a stray kitten, Diotima. Cats are carnivores. Diotima is no exception. Diotima gets salmon, tuna, sardines, and other variety of fish daily, sources of nutrition that would be beneficial to me yet I do not feel comfortable to consume. In this way, I observe that my thinking and conduct is yet again convicted of contradiction. Animals suffer in the industrial process that produces Diotima's cat food. There is a tension here in my values and I continually experience it. But I am feeding her the cat food, nevertheless. And it seems to me the right thing to do. I also flea comb Diotima. Occasionally, I take the fleas outside; but most times I drown them. It seems there is inconsistency with respect to when I assign non-maleficence the highest value, and I experience the tension. I draw attention to cockroaches Diotima torchers knowing the likely result is they will be crushed to death by my roommate. I could get them outside myself. I know I am capable to save them most times because I have done it sometimes. These are contradictions in my lived experience. It seems, at times, I value my personal time, convenience, or safety (or whatever other egoistic value) over the life of another being that I am capable to spare and that it is not necessary to kill. In these ways (and probably countless others), I am continually convicted of

contradictions with respect to my thinking (and conduct) concerning the value of non-maleficence; I do not always avoid causing unnecessary harm.

What is the value in reflecting and mapping these contradictions in my thinking and conduct? I observe that in the cases of my eating my aunts' cooking and feeding Diotima animal products that while it seems to me like I did the right thing, I cannot adequately explain or account my reason(s) for thinking so. What values was I "awarding the higher rank" in those cases? In the case of my aunts, perhaps it is something like filial piety or respect to tradition, but I am uncertain; that is, there were possibly other factors or values at play. In the case of feeding Diotima animal products, I am reasonably certain that is necessary for her growth and wellness, yet I am uncertain as to why her health should have any more value than the life of other animals or my own. That said, she is under my care and suddenly, based on my conduct alone, it is reasonable to conclude I value my cat's life significantly more than the lives she consumes. I cannot state reasons that satisfy me as to why this is so, but the contradiction nevertheless reveals apparent inconsistencies or obscurities in my reasoning. In the cases of the flea combing and cockroach spotting, my sense is that my apparent inconsistencies in conduct reveal the fact I do sometimes value my own convenience, time, or comfort over the life of another being. Here I am still tempted to read the failures to remove those animals, unharmed, as instances of weakness of will. Regardless, one virtue of Weil's approach is that I work to cultivate this critical methodological orientation to my thinking and conduct. I can observe and question myself about competing values at stake in the moral dilemmas that present on the "rough ground" of my actual lived experience.

It may be the case that our thinking and conduct is convicted of contradictions in far more ways than we can ever hope to demonstrate. Nevertheless, on Weil's view, protracted reflection

on those contradictions in our thinking and conduct is at the heart of philosophical reflection. True philosophical reflection reveals how out of touch we can be with the values that govern our thinking and conduct. Consider the frequency with which, as Weil puts it, we fall into the contradiction of mistaking means for ends. When I discuss with students their views on the purpose of life, I typically probe them by, for example, asking why they are sitting in my class. What is their goal? Students typically describe a chain of reasoning that dead ends at the desire to “make money.” When asked to what end or for what reason they want to make money, then it gets a bit more difficult for them answer. After more questioning (e.g., Is the purpose of your life then to make money?), they typically come to a point where they can express with a bit more clarity what values matter to them (that are directing their thinking and conduct right at that moment) and that they believe they can only realize by making money (e.g., properly caring for loved ones). But, often, the notion that money is the necessary means to realize their most important values or goals (even when they appear unsure as to what those values or goals are) has been taken for granted as true. This is what Weil means when she says we often fall into the contradiction of taking means for ends.

While it is incumbent upon everybody to confront such tensions and obscurities in our thinking and conduct, it is the necessary function of a true philosopher:

With respect to contradictions, all philosophical thought contains them. Far from being an imperfection of philosophical thought, it is an essential characteristic of it without which there would only be the false appearance of philosophy. True philosophy does not construct anything. Its object is given, namely, our thoughts. It only makes an inventory of them, as Plato said. If in the inventory it finds contradictions, the inventory does not depend on philosophy to suppress them, for then it would lie. (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 35)

When philosophers prize the value of internal consistency of a theory above the truth revealed by their lived experience, they undermine the superior value (truth). Along these lines, Weil

observes, “Those who deny the reality of the exterior world, at the moment that they say they deny it, have the sense of the reality of their table and chair as any peasant does. They distinguish between their perceptions and their dreams just as any peasant does” (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 35). Weil’s point is this. When abstract theorizing becomes unhinged from the philosopher’s lived experience in this way, it undermines the quest of true philosophy (truth). According to Weil, such overzealousness is the result of “excessive ambition” or the desire to argue for views (seemingly unencumbered by strict scrutiny of tensions or contradictions in our thought) that seemingly explain everything (comfortably or conveniently) from our personal point of view and thus secure for us a false sense of certainty about the order of the world (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 35).

In a final effort to motivate to what is at stake, philosophically speaking, when we do not ground philosophical reflection in our lived experience, and work instead to suppress or eliminate apparent contradictions, Weil borrows an example from geometry:

In order to take an example that is clearer, saying that a line has a discrete length and at the same time contains an infinite number of points implies a contradiction; it is thinking the same thing as both finite and infinite. But the Greeks who said a line is composed of a finite number of points were only pushed to do so by the desire of eliminating this contradiction; they didn’t think what they were saying, because one can’t think it. One cannot think *parts* of lines, repeated in the line a finite number of times, other than as definite lengths, and thus one cannot think of them as being indivisible, for no matter how small you make them, you can still divide them further. The contradiction that one wants to eliminate reappears; it is better to expose it from the beginning. (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 34-35)

The cost of the pretense of consistency, as opposed to the recognition of a tension or contradiction in thought, is error, that is, further distance from the truth. Weil wants philosophers to recognize the cost of personal or local ambition is the truth. So much of what she writes means to throw the counterbalance in favor of protracted reflection on inconsistencies, tensions, and contradictions in our thinking and conduct (in other words, to insist we impartially wade in our

uncertainty). The upshot to Weil's approach is arguably captured in a famous quote by her philosophical contemporary, Simone de Beauvoir, "I tore myself away from the safe comfort of certainties through my love for truth— and truth rewarded me." We are closer to the truth when we wade agnostically at an intellectual impasse than when we presume or argue for the certainty of demonstrations where they do not exist. This is also the pedagogical function of Socratic aporia.

We hold convictions we do not fully grasp for reasons that elude us. We can reflect on values and try to map the contradictions in our thinking and conduct at each moment. In this way, we ground philosophical reflection on values in our daily lived experience of the world. Such protracted reflection on our thinking and conduct is indispensable to a life well-lived because it can help us deduce an order and hierarchy in the system of values that directs the process of living and dying. Moreover, it is the task of philosophers to establish this order. But this approach arguably still appears indistinguishable from a highly idiosyncratic or subjective mapping of our personal values to the best of our (very) limited ability.

On Weil's view, this subjectivism is true for thinkers who dismiss, disregard, avoid, or sidestep the challenging work of confronting contradictions that can detach us from our personal point of view. Along these lines, Weil observes the following:

We make decisive progress if we decide to expose honestly the contradictions essential to thought instead of vainly trying to brush them aside. Doing that would mean that a large number of formulas devoid of sense would disappear from philosophy, but also the sciences, making them more precise, not less. With respect to the completed systems constructed with the intention of eliminating all the essential contradictions of thought, we see that they do have value, but only as poetry. This is exactly what Valéry was trying to say. (Springsted, 36)

Weil is unyielding on this point: Failing to marshal the requisite level of epistemic humility to confront and accept the tensions and inconsistencies in our thinking precludes the possibility that

we “come out of ourselves” and observe things as they are, as opposed to as we are. To practice true philosophy, we must be willing to be bedfellows with uncertainty, tension, inconsistency, contradiction, and agnosticism for an indeterminate length of time. But that is not all. Crucially, according to Weil, we must also methodologically prioritize “detachment” as the “supreme value” in our thinking and conduct. To do true philosophy we must not only contemplate contradictions, but we also must, for methodological reasons, try to cultivate detachment as the superior value. It is in this way that subsequent philosophical reflection on the nature and hierarchy of values can possibly accomplish a certainty of demonstration (deduction) unavailable to the physical sciences.

Detachment. What does detachment require of us? While Weil maintains that proper philosophical reflection, unlike scientific inquiry, is infallible, she also insists that most people (including many so-called philosophers) lack the discipline of detachment needed to engage in such philosophical reflection:

Do we then have to conclude that philosophical reflection is infallible? Yes, if we actually engaged in it. But human nature renders philosophical reflection pretty much impossible. For since the mind is always straining towards some value, how can it stand back, detaching itself from the value to which it is moving in order to consider and judge it, and to rank it in relation to other values? This detachment demands an effort, and every effort of the mind strives toward a value. Thus in order to make this effort of detachment, the mind has to regard this detachment as the supreme value. But in order to see detachment as the superior value, it is already necessary to be detached from all other values. So there is a vicious circle here that makes the exercise of reflection look like a miracle. The word “grace” expresses this miraculous character. The *illusion* of detachment, however, is frequent since one often mistakes a simple change of values for detachment. (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 32)

Weil emphasizes the difficulty of the practice of detachment and flags the challenges for us. First, it is human nature to be value-oriented and directed. The sort of effort required to genuinely detach ourselves from the values reflected in our thinking, conduct, personal

ambitions, goals, etc. involves a radical revision in our daily sensibilities and conduct. To say the *illusion* of detachment is frequent is to draw attention to counterfeits of true detachment, such as mistaking an apparent change in values (e.g., change of view on a subject) as evidence of genuine detachment.

What does it look like to exercise detachment as the “supreme value”? Weil says the level of detachment necessary to engage in genuine philosophical reflection consists in the following: “being detached not only towards the values one has adopted beforehand, whether yesterday or a year ago, but toward *all* values without exception, including the ones that are guiding one’s actions right now” (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 32). Weil uses the hypothetical example of an athlete running a race to illustrate what detachment *is* and *is not*. An athlete at the start of a marathon is unlikely to ask himself why he wants to win or if he is right in wanting to win; however, after several hours of the agony of the contest, such questions might occur to him. Is this a sign of detachment? No, according to Weil, it is simply a sign that because of his exhaustion, rest has become more valuable to him than gain. This simply reflects a change in his orientation to the system of values, not a detachment from all his values without exception (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 32). And what would it look like to be a genuinely detached athlete in such circumstances? In Weil’s words, “An athlete who, at the very moment when he is breathless and concentrating on winning, ranks rest equally with winning, pleasure with eating well, work well done, friendship, or any other possible object of desire, and then compares these diverse objects impartially, well, then, he would be the picture of detachment. That would be a miracle” (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 33). On this view, detachment requires a level of disassociation from one’s immediate interests, thoughts, or desires that is, indeed, contrary human disposition.

Methodologically prioritizing “detachment” as the “superior value” quite literally means radically transforming our daily way of being in the world such that we no longer strive toward personal goals in the manner we are accustomed. As much is implied by the following passage, where Weil calls for the death of the ego (represented by our local or personal interests, ambitions, or desires):

One sees quite well by that illustration that philosophy does not consist in accumulating knowledge, as science does, but in changing the whole soul. Value is something that has a relation not only to knowledge but also to sensibility and action; there isn't any philosophical reflection without an essential transformation in sensibilities and in the practices of life, a transformation that has an equal bearing on how one sees the most ordinary of circumstances and also the most tragic ones of life. Since value is nothing but an orientation of the soul, posing a value to oneself and being oriented towards it are one and the same thing...Reflection supposes a transformation in the orientation of the soul that we call detachment. It has for its object establishing an order in the hierarchy of values, thus again a new orientation of the soul. Detachment is a renunciation of all possible ends without exception, a renunciation that puts a void in the place of the future just as the immanent approach of death does. This is why in the ancient mysteries, in Platonism, in the Sanskrit scriptures, in the Christian religion, and very probably everywhere and at every time, detachment has always been compared to death, and the initiation into wisdom as a sort of passage towards death. (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 33)

To engage in the sort of protracted philosophical reflection that distinguishes true philosophy, on Weil's view, it is necessary to hold and maintain detachment as the supreme value. Weil here has in mind the orientation, sensibilities, and conduct of the ancient Stoics. Remaining agnostic on values by methodologically prioritizing detachment means we no longer imagine or strive to a particular or personal future (with its necessarily implied set of values); we operate in the present and reflect on the past. Detachment can eventually allow us to hollow out the values (e.g., God or goodness is also all that I cannot conceive when I say the word), to impartially observe and study them, and to eventually rank them by reflection on, for example, those instances where we clearly sense two values pulling us in different directions. We learn to observe human behavior in an impersonal way. An example of this is when we try to impartially consider the question of

whether Euthyphro is correct to report his father for the death of a slave; arguably, the competing values in that dilemma include justice, filial piety, and the good. Through such impartial observation, while suspended in a state of aporia, it is possible to discern certain relations among values.

If we have not yet renounced our personal stake in things via a protracted effort of detachment, then the order we observe in values will continue to significantly reflect the distorting influence of our local interests or concerns. The process of detachment allows us to think with clarity, impartiality, and precision at points of moral tension that arise in daily living. Contemplation on contradictions can help us detach from personal point of view. It is because detachment involves the death of one's ego, and a high degree of epistemic humility, that Weil describes true philosophical reflection as the "miraculous" and "extremely rare" method of "coming out of ourselves." On this view, philosophy is not a vocation for the faint of heart.

3.3.3 What Philosophy Is and Is Not: The Purpose and Aims of Philosophy

What counts as philosophy on Weil's view? Arguably, much of what we think of as doing philosophy on the modern conception is rendered suspect on Weil's view. Specifically, philosophers that seek to emulate the method, grammar, or aims of scientific inquiry, as well as those who argue endlessly for or against their views, fail at true philosophy. Consider Weil's following remarks:

The assertion that philosophical reflection is infallible is absolutely contrary to common opinion; generally, it is thought that there are only conjectures in philosophy. What motivates this opinion are the contradictions between philosophical systems and the ones on the inside of each system. People believe that every philosopher has a system that contradicts all others! (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 33)

Philosophers who attempt to construct systems in order to eliminate these contradictions are those who justify the appearance that lets people think philosophy is something conjectural. For such systems can be varied infinitely, and

there is no reason to have to choose one over another. But from the point of view of knowledge these systems are below even the level of conjecture, for conjectures are at least inferior thoughts, and these systems are not thoughts. One cannot think them. One cannot, because if one did, even for an instant, one would eliminate during this second the contradictions at stake, and one cannot eliminate them. The contradictions that reflection finds in thought when it makes an inventory of it are essential to thought. They are present to their thought even during the time when thinkers are elaborating or exposing their system, it is just they are using words in a special sense that doesn't conform to what they are thinking. This comes from an excessive ambition. (Weil. *Late Philosophical Writings*, 35)

The sort of activity Weil denounces might include, for example, when philosophers “bite the bullet,” that is, the habit of accepting a premise or conclusion that is contraindicated by their lived experience, for the sake of internal consistency among the views they profess. Recall, along these lines, Weil cites the denial of an external world by certain metaphysicians (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 35). Elsewhere, Weil cites Hegel and Aristotle as examples of philosophers who fall short of the greatness of Plato because of their fixation on constructing comprehensive theories that sought to eliminate contradictions essential to true philosophy (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 42). In other words, the distorting influence of their local interests (or overzealous ambition to explain everything with one manufactured theory) predictably results in weaknesses (errors) in their account: “With respect to the completed systems constructed with the intention of eliminating all essential contradictions of thought, we see that they do have value, but only as poetry” (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 36). According to Weil, this is the comparison Valéry was trying to make (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 36).

If true philosophers are not constructing elaborate theories free of contradiction, then what are they doing? Weil describes one difference in her essay on *Philosophy* (1941), which we turn to next. In sum, true philosophers focus on the task of understanding what an idea present to their mind *means*, as opposed to prematurely advancing arguments for or against views (Weil,

Late Philosophical Writings, 41-42, italics mine). True philosophers observe and question the meaning of ideas. An example of this is probing students about what they *mean* by the term “God,” versus, say, prematurely presenting them with arguments for or against the existence of God and tasking them with choosing the better argument.

According to Weil, the activity of true philosophy is enshrined in the methodological approach of certain canonical figures in contemporary academic philosophy. In her words, “there is a tradition, genuinely philosophical, that is as old as humanity itself, and that, we hope, will last as long. This tradition does not inspire, as from a common spring, *everyone* who is a philosopher, but very many are inspired by it. There are philosophers who might be different from each other in numerous ways but whose thoughts are nearly equivalent. Plato is the most perfect representative of this tradition” (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 33). In addition to the works of Plato, Weil approvingly cites the *Bhagavad-Gita* and Egyptian and Chinese texts within this tradition (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 33). Finally, Weil also cites her more immediate philosophical predecessors—Descartes, Kant, Lagneau, and Alain: “This philosophical tradition, that is what we call philosophy. Although one could approach it for its variations, it is one, eternal, and not susceptible of progress” (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 33-34). Thus, on Weil’s view, we should expect to find these exemplars of true philosophy have thoughts that are “nearly equivalent” (since there is an objective hierarchy of values) and that they demonstrate a priority methodological commitment to understanding what the ideas present to their mind *mean*.

Weil’s claim that the thoughts of these various thinkers is “nearly equivalent” or “proceed from the same mind” might not seem obvious. Weil holds that the truth of this observation is in part obscured by limitations of language:

The profound identity of these philosophers is hidden by the apparent differences that come from difficulties of vocabulary. Language isn't made to express philosophical reflection. Reflection can only use language by an adaptation of words that transforms their sense, without their new signification itself being able to be defined by words. This signification only appears by looking at the ensemble of formulas by which an author expresses his thought. It is therefore necessary not only to know all these formulas but to have a sense of them as a whole, and to consider them from the same point of view as the author—to be able to place oneself at the center of the thought of the author. (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 34)

Along these lines, we can consider Descartes' repeated appeals to the notion of "clear and distinct ideas" throughout the *Meditations*. According to Weil, to grasp Descartes' meaning, the reader needs to familiarize themselves with his use of this formula throughout the totality of his works and from a vantage point sympathetic to Descartes. And while it is easy to observe apparent inconsistencies or obscurities in Descartes' *Meditations*; it would take considerably more care and attention to attend to the entirety of Descartes' works to grasp the true level of cohesion and meaning expressed therein. Weil compares reading a philosophical work in this way to carefully studying a work of art; we are merely observing a heap of colors until we look at the painting from a certain vantage point (the author's) where all the colors (ideas, thoughts, or formulas) are well ordered (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 34).

In addition to the limitations of language to convey an author's meaning (or to express philosophical reflection more generally), equivalencies in thought among thinkers is further obfuscated by methodological deficiencies in attention, humility, and detachment on the part of both readers and thinkers. Along these lines, Weil observes the following:

Thus to compare the assertions of different authors doesn't make any sense. If one wants to compare them, it is necessary to put oneself at the center of each one's thought and then to give an account of whether their works proceed from the same mind. Now, a philosopher will hardly make this effort with regard to his predecessors, and as a consequence will not know whether he offers a parallel to them or not. But whether he knows it or not hardly matters. It is true that there are authors that are not inspired by this tradition; that is not surprising, since

philosophical reflection implies detachment and detachment is a sort of miracle. Many authors who believe themselves to be philosophers, and are believed to be such, are incapable of reflection, in the rigorous sense of the word, or are not capable of it in a sustained manner so that one could say that their work is inspired by it. (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 34)

The requisite level of attention, humility, and detachment necessary to understand an author's meaning is substantial. The work necessary to compare the statements of two or more authors is compounded. And to write true philosophy requires even more challenging work. We can contrast Weil's expectation here with contemporary professional norms. For example, we can read competing arguments on a subject and consider ourselves reasonably well situated to render a judgment as to the better argument among the ones we read sans protracted consultation with the oeuvre of each of the authors. In the contemporary analytic tradition, we typically operate on the assumption that meaning is either sufficiently given in the text (terms clearly defined) or they are not, and in the latter case it is the text that is regarded as deficiently ambiguous or imprecise. We do not concern ourselves with the possibility that our attention, humility, or detachment are insufficiently developed to give proper measure or meaning to the texts we read.

If the requirements to engage in genuine philosophical reflection are so nearly impossible as to be described as "miraculous," on Weil's view, and philosophy itself is, "one, eternal, and not susceptible of progress," then what exactly is the point of engaging in philosophy? According to Weil, there are at least two aims of genuine philosophical reflection. The first is personal and involves the transformation of one's soul that manifests as a transformation of oneself—one's thinking, sensibilities, and conduct. Recall: "One sees quite well by that illustration that philosophy does not consist in accumulating knowledge, as science does, but in changing the whole soul..." / "Reflection supposes a transformation in the orientation of the soul that we call detachment. It has for its object establishing an order in the hierarchy of values, thus

again a new orientation of the soul” (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 33). On this view, the Platonic “ordering” of our soul is facilitated by engaging in an inquiry on values while holding a certain value, namely, detachment; this is the “passageway through death” or “initiation into wisdom” that is the vocation of true philosophers (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 33).

Springsted describes this first aim of philosophical reflection as the goal of personal transformation (Springsted in Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 14). In his words, on Weil’s view, “Philosophical reflection is the giving over of oneself to reality. It begins and has its being in that willingness to begin anew, and to take otherness into itself and give itself to a world not of its own making” (Springsted in Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 14). This self-mastery through understanding the hierarchy of values is intimately connected to the notion of salvation, or the saving of one’s soul, on Weil’s view (Springsted in Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 15). Along these lines, Springsted observes, “The simple connection of philosophy as asking what things mean with salvation, with saving one’s soul, and then opposing it to building a beautiful system with everything in its place, is an astounding insight. It could even be life-changing if it were taken seriously and at its greatest depth...But, in any case, what we can now see is that what is above all crucial to philosophy for Weil is that it is a practice, a transformation of the self, of the thinker, an inquiry about value while holding a certain value” (Springsted, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 15). In other words, the first goal of philosophy is to understand and align ourselves (our thinking and conduct) with the hierarchy of values exposed by philosophical reflection (i.e., Know thyself); it is to consent to live aligned or harmonize with the system of values that orders the world and thereby save our soul.

Additionally, there is second aim to doing philosophy that extends beyond personal salvation to helping others. Recall, on Weil’s view, philosophy is not susceptible to progress and

Plato was the most perfect representation of the tradition. For Weil, the only reason to write on a subject after Plato is to express Plato's ideas using vocabulary or examples that are more culturally relatable or accessible to others. With respect to truth, Weil observes the following: "The only renewal of which it is capable is that of expression, as when a man expresses himself to himself but still has to speak as he would to the people around him, in terms drawn from the conditions of his age, or his civilization, or the place where he lives. It is desirable that such a transposition be done from one age to another, and it is the only reason why there is any value in going to the effort of writing on a subject after Plato has written on it" (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 34). To state it plainly, on Weil's view, the only reason John Rawls or any other thinker should bother to write on justice after Plato is to try and express (translate) the truth in Plato's *Republic* in culturally accessible (suitable) language, metaphors, or analogies. Along these lines, arguably, C.S. Lewis's transposition of Plato's allegory of the cave in the children's story, *The Silver Chair*, exemplifies the legitimate goal of transposition. Thus, the goal of philosophers is to come back into the cave, so to speak, to try and draw others upwards to see the truth that is, "one, eternal, and not susceptible to progress," not to ape scientific inquiry where it aims at mastery, exploitation, or mechanistic control of the physical world.

3.4 Primary Text Selection 3: Philosophy, 1941

The essay, "Philosophy," was published in *Cahiers de Sud* in 1941 under Weil's anagram, Emile Novis (McFarland in Weil, *Formative Writings*, 19). It was ostensibly to function as an academic review of three lectures given at The Society of Philosophical Studies. However, Weil's own mature views concerning the nature of philosophy are here on public display (Springsted, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 37). For example, as Weil scholar, Dorothy McFarland,

observes, Weil's thesis concerning multiple revelations or transpositions of truth is authoritatively pronounced to a reading audience of academic philosophers (McFarland, 20).

It is a select set of passages we examine from this final late period essay. Namely, we focus on Weil's statements concerning method in philosophy, as well as her authoritative pronouncement on philosophy's connection to mysticism. In terms of Weil's method, we can observe the following. Weil employs a series of analogies to express methodological comparisons she views as legitimate between philosophy and the arts, sciences, geometry, and mysticism. By doing so, Weil arguably draws more into focus how she understands the methodological activity of philosophy. And, again, the essay ends with Weil's authoritative pronouncement concerning the connection between philosophy and mysticism. To close, I restate my findings concerning Weil's late views on the philosophy of philosophy, before turning at last to the question of whether there is enough evidence to support the hypothesis that her mature views on philosophical method issued, ad hoc, from the epistemic constraints imposed on her by her own mystical experiences.

3.4.1 On Method: An Analogy Between Philosophy and Art

Weil opens with an affirmation of the first speaker's effort to draw a connection between certain Eastern philosophical themes and artistic expression: "the texts that he cited were entirely drawn from Taoist writings and Buddhist writings near to Taoism. Listening to them, one soon sensed that claiming a relation between philosophy and painting was nothing forced, for these texts have a clear relation to artistic meditation" (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 38). Weil then spells out her own observation concerning the methodological similarities between philosophy and art:

A "painter-philosopher" is not a new idea for us, if we have ever read Leonardo da Vinci. If Leonardo was unique among us for saying that painting is philosophy that

uses lines and colors, he was not likely unique in thinking it. Isn't true art a method for establishing a certain relation between the world and the self, and between oneself and others, and isn't that the equivalent of philosophy? To be sure, many artists in the West have thought about it differently, but these are not the great ones. The great ones have without a doubt thought about the relation as the painter did in the marvelous anecdote cited by M. Brion: having vainly invited the emperor to enter the grotto at the bottom of his painting, he went in alone and never returned. (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 38-39)

We can observe the following from this passage. First, for Weil, it is sensible to compare the method of the great artist with the great philosopher, insofar as they share the aim to express a hierarchy of values or establish the relations among values. Correspondingly, for Weil, mediocre philosophers and mediocre artists share more in common with one another than with the truly great in their discipline.

Recall Weil's claim that system-building philosophy can have poetic virtue; Weil means this in Plato's sense that poets can be (periodically) "divinely" inspired to say good and true things (express correct opinions), but they do not fully understand the wisdom or meaning enshrined in their words (lack knowledge). True philosophers, on the other hand, take great pains (e.g., detachment, cultivation of attention, humility, etc.) to establish certain relations between the various values that direct them in their understanding of self and interaction with others. For Weil, both the great artist and the great philosopher can aim to share their good with others, but that they are nevertheless committed to their path quite apart from any skill or success to convince others to see as they see. For Weil, the anecdote of the painter who enters the grotto in their painting alone expresses a similar truth to that in Plato's allegory of the cave. We can observe this rigorous and methodical approach to living aligned to one's thinking and values most clearly in the case of Socrates (as seen, for example, in Plato's *Apology*), but also in the case of Ancient Stoics and Weil herself.

Weil also uses the review as a suitable occasion to restate her thesis concerning multiple revelations of truth in connection to Plato's theory of recollection. With respect to Eastern philosophical thought, she observes the following:

What is foreign to us in this thought? If we paid attention to it, we should recognize it as being something that is already present to us. Each Taoist formula strikes a chord in us, and these texts evoke one by one Heraclitus, Protagoras, Plato, the Cynics, the Stoics, Christianity, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Not that Taoist thought is not original, profound, or new to a European; but, like all that is truly great, it is both new and familiar; we remember it, as Plato said, by having known in on the other side of the sky. This country that is on the other side of the sky, which Plato remembered, isn't it the same country where, according to one of the texts cited by M. Brion, the wise man plays beyond the Four Seas and beyond space? (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 38)

Weil is here drawing on Plato's theory of recollection but expressing it in her own words, drawing on relevant or familiar cultural examples, and stating it in conjunction with the thesis of multiple revelations of truth. Indeed, part of the work Weil takes herself to be doing here and throughout her mature writings is transposing the truths she observes in Plato—along with select authors or texts she repeatedly, approvingly cites—by expressing them in culturally relevant terms, examples, and ideas that are accessible, have purchase, or are familiar to her audience. A methodological implication of the passage is that if we paid attention, in Weil's sense, and knew how to read, also in her sense, then the connections she observes between the various authors and texts cited above would be more readily apparent to us.

3.4.2 On Method: An Analogy Between Philosophy, Science, and Geometry

Something similar can be said when comparing the method of the great philosopher to that of the great scientist as was previously suggested by comparing the great philosopher to the great artist; namely, the "greats" have more in common (in terms of their method) with one another than with the less skilled in their respective disciplines. Weil affirms the methodological

potential of analogical reasoning (reasoning by analogy). Further, Weil praises Pythagorean thought as an exemplary expression of philosophical method applied in this manner:

Hippocrates had the experimental method as clearly, if not more so, than anybody in the following centuries. This was shown by the beautiful quotation chosen by M. Cornil with a surety of judgment worthy of a parallel subject: “I praise reasoning whenever it applies itself to experience and methodically links phenomena. If it takes as its point of departure facts as they evidently succeed each other, it will find the truth by the power of the meditation that insists on each particular object and then classifies all of them in their natural order of succession...I believe that every art is constituted by the procedure of observing all the facts in particular and then grouping them analogically.

M. Cornil threw a great deal of light on that which Hippocrates’ greatness consists: not in his attachment to experience, for in his time there were plenty of good empiricists, nor in his attachment to philosophy, for any number of philosophers delivered themselves on medicine, but in the methodical use of philosophical thought, in particular Pythagorean thought, to make a continual investigation of experience. The Pythagorean method, as seen in Plato’s *Philebus*, asks for the theoretical reasons that in all study of limited objects—which are by definition due to proportions and are countable—are meant to classify the uncountable variety of particular cases. (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 39-40)

Weil goes on to give what she views as modern scientific examples of the application of the Pythagorean method: “The Hippocratic theory of “four humors” and the theory of critical days of an illness are applications of this method. Knowing that health and sickness are defined by relations, relations between the body and the soul, between the parts of the body, humors, organs, functions, or between the human being and the environment and that there then is health when there is an equilibrium and harmony between them is a Pythagorean idea *par excellence*, and also a chief Hippocratic principle. It is an idea that we are far from exhausting” (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 40). One observation we can make from these passages is that adequate exposition of her mature views on method requires careful study of Weil’s analysis of Pythagorean texts, as well as her related use of the formula of equilibrium; these methodological themes are not only presented here but prevalent throughout her late period works.

Weil goes on to compare Greek science and modern science in strong favor of the former. This is because, on Weil's view, the Greeks centered all disciplinary analysis on geometry which provided a unifying, normative, and indispensable framework to thought: "But in another sense, Greek science is far from us, far *above*, for the interrelation of its branches is apparent in all of the branches of the sciences, and it is apparent in all forms of thought. For the Greeks, epic poetry, drama, architecture, sculpture, their conception of the universe and of natural laws, astronomy, mechanics, physics, politics, the idea of virtue, each of these things bears at its center the concept of equilibrium that accompanies the concept of equilibrium, the soul of geometry" (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 41). Weil held that the Ancient Greeks' understanding of geometric principles and equilibrium is what oriented their work to the Good (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 41).

3.4.3 On Method: An Analogy Between Philosophy and Mysticism

The final lecture Weil reviews is the dissertation defense of her colleague, the fellow French philosopher, Gaston Berger. Berger's thesis was on the topic of conditions of knowledge and engaged with the work of the "great" (by Weil's standard) German philosopher, Edmund Husserl (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 41). Weil praises Berger's contribution by likening it to her methodological exemplar, Plato. The passages below arguably contain Weil's most explicit public statements concerning methodology in philosophy:

But in the ensuing discussion—a task that the exceptionally clear mind of Berger made easy, even if one hadn't read the book in question—Plato was necessarily evoked. Berger's method, which consists, when one deals with an idea in the mind, not in asking if it is true or false, but what it means, is the same as Socrates' method: "If we were clever, we would struggle the way the sophists do opposing declarations to declarations; but we, simple men that we are, we want above all to consider in themselves, by themselves, what those things are that we are thinking." This is also the method of all the philosophers who belong to the Platonic tradition, such as Descartes or Kant. However, they have never formulated it, and have not given a clear enough account of it, which has hurt them.

Truly said, there are only two kinds of philosophers, those who use this method and those who construct a representation of the universe according to their own taste. It is these latter philosophers alone who can be said to have “systems” whose value consists only in a certain poetic beauty and in the various marvelously penetrating formulas that are strewn throughout them, as is the case with Aristotle or Hegel. But the first sort of philosophers are the true masters of thought, and it is good to follow in their footsteps as M. Berger does. His method allows him to eliminate insignificant problems. He refuses, for example, to pose the question of the value of knowledge, since knowledge is a given that is mixed with thought and that no thinking being can get away from. He also refuses to pose the problem of the existence of objects, because any existent foreign to us is given in our time, and is not any less exceptional, and we continually experience it. That is an excellent point of departure.

It is a singular thing that the philosophers who follow this method are all oriented towards salvation; M. Berger is no exception. It was pointed out, as if it were original to his view, that he makes detachment a condition of philosophical reflection and that it is incumbent upon everybody; but, that is pure Plato: “It is necessary to turn toward the truth with the whole soul.” For the rest, given this point, it is original, but he thinks simply as Plato did, and gives an account that Plato gave twenty-five hundred years ago; philosophy is to turn one towards the truth with all one’s soul. (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 42)

Weil takes this opportunity to instruct readers again as to what proper method in philosophy *does* and *does not* include. Proper method in philosophy is exemplified in the approach of Socrates, Plato, Descartes, Weil, and those philosophers who systematically prioritize trying to understand what an idea present to their mind *means* and to proceed only with thoughts or ideas clearly grasped. Indeed, several more of Weil’s theses on the philosophy of philosophy are restated or implied, including the fact that philosophical reflection needs to be grounded in the thinker’s lived experiences, philosophy is, “one, eternal, and not susceptible of progress,” philosophy necessarily requires “detachment,” and it orients the thinker, “towards salvation,” that is, the saving of their soul.

Does the textual evidence in Plato, Descartes, or Kant support Weil’s claims? It depends how we read these authors. Arguably, dialogue after dialogue of Plato’s works demonstrate the

taking up of a question about what an idea *means*. Along these lines, I suggest Plato's *Symposium* as a methodological exemplar of Weil's view. In expert fashion, Plato lays out several contradictory views on what love is, signposts the apparent tensions between each, without rendering an explicit verdict on which views were true or false. On this view, Plato's *Symposium* seeks to inspire contemplation and meditation on the concept of love, to solicit occasions of aporia by way of contemplation on contradictions, while remaining open to the possibility of synthesis. Plato's *Republic*, to take another example, establishes, by way of analogy, an order in the hierarchy of the values in the soul in relation to the value of justice. Weil cites Plato's call to detachment as a condition for initiation into wisdom and implies that for Berger (or herself) to restate this requirement in their own words is simply to transpose that truth already observed by Plato. And, again, anyone who has read Plato's *Apology* or are familiar with the story of Socrates can access an exemplar of the sort of detachment Plato and Weil have in mind.

We can also look to Descartes. By the second meditation, Descartes arrives at the cogito only to question what is the "I" that he is certain exists: "But I do not yet understand sufficiently what I am—I, who now necessarily exist... What then did I used to think I was? A man, of course. Might I not say a "rational animal"? No, because then I would have to inquire what "animal" and "rational" mean. And then from one question I would slide into many more difficult ones" (Cress, 1993, 18). The methodological implication is clear here and arguably throughout *Meditations*: Descartes wants to proceed, as much as possible, only with those ideas whose *meaning* is most clear and present to his understanding.

Finally, we have the methodological exemplar of Weil's own essay on the concept of reading. This essay on the concept of reading demonstrates proper method with respect to

thinking and writing in philosophy. I suggest that Weil's effort in the essay on the concept of reading is analogous to reading aloud to children (while pointing to the letters) to teach them how to read by modeling the activity for them. In other words, Weil is there instructing philosophers on how to philosophize by modeling the activity for them. To introduce method to our reflection on the problem of reading as it presents in our lived experiences is to attempt to engage in the sort of philosophical reflection that can culminate, on Weil's view, in an examined life (the life well-lived) and the saving of one's soul.

Weil concludes the review by instructively dismissing an objection presented to Berger that, "didn't seem very pertinent anyhow" (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 43). It is here Weil takes the opportunity to explicitly affirm a connection between mysticism and true philosophy:

For example, one member of his committee believed that he saw the book betraying a tendency toward mysticism and an attraction towards Hindu thought—as if there were heresies in philosophy! Without doubt, Oriental mysticism often covers up some bad merchandise in the West, but that isn't its fault. If in philosophy one were to push aside the thoughts that seek to conceive what we call the transcendental, then it would be necessary to admit to philosophy only those that Plato called "the *uninitiated*." Fortunately, we aren't there yet in our universities, because M. Berger did get his doctorate *magna cum laude*" (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 43).

We can observe the following from the above passage. For Weil, mysticism is understood in connection to the effort to conceive transcendental ideas, that is, any effort to conceive ideas that are spiritual or immaterial, such as values or the notion of God. For Weil to then suggest that ignoring, suppressing, or dismissing such thought would require restricting admission in philosophy to only "the *uninitiated*" (and reassuring her audience that we aren't there "yet" in the universities) is to suggest that contemplation on the transcendent is a necessary part of the process in true philosophy (indeed, it is a gift of protracted effort at philosophical reflection). It is also to suggest that while the academic profession of philosophy may be moving more toward the practice of adjudicating between arguments to determine what is true and false (opposing

declarations to declarations), or aping the method of the sciences, to restrict it to such activity is to undermine the practice of true philosophy.

For Weil, then, it appears to be the case that true philosophy is an activity accessible to post-mystical experience status. This is because, strictly speaking, it involves reflection on values and the meaning of ideas present to one's mind. It does not require rendering existential judgments about the truth or falsity of the appearances of things in the world. It requires engaging James' second order of inquiry, inquiry on values, meaning, and significance, not casting judgments concerning existential facts. It takes seriously the fact that we can and do read meaning erroneously in the appearances of things; and the fact that we can and do hold convictions for reasons that elude our intellect. Are we then to conclude Weil's mature views on the nature, scope, method, and limits of philosophy issued *ad hoc* from her mystical experiences? It might be tempting to conclude as much were it not for the simple yet undeniable fact that an even cursory reading of Weil's early (pre-mystical experience) work, "Science and Perception in Descartes," reveals the extent to which Weil's method was articulated and likely put into practice by her early twenties.

3.5 Primary Text Selection 4: Science and Perception in Descartes, 1929-1930

The essay, "Science and Perception in Descartes," was, in fact, Weil's dissertation in philosophy. The work was composed between 1929 and 1930 when Weil was twenty-one years old (McFarland in Weil, *Formative Writings*, xi). The dissertation is, in effect, an expert transposition of the thought of Descartes concerning proper method in inquiry about the world. It is also said to contain the "entire teaching" of Alain on Descartes (McFarland in Weil, *Formative Writings*, 23). Additionally, Weil draws on the work of Jules Lagneau in her analysis of the role of bodily movement in perception (McFarland in Weil, *Formative Writings*, 29). McFarland

observes that Weil's dissertation has been "largely neglected" by scholars (McFarland, *Formative Writings*, xii); she suggests this is due, in part, to the fact that many scholars lack the requisite proficiency in Cartesian mathematical or philosophical thought to adequately evaluate Weil's statements in that work (McFarland, *Formative Writings*, 24). Nevertheless, "Science and Perception in Descartes" is an indispensable text for philosophers and Weil scholars interested to understand her epistemology and methodology, especially "Part Two," where Weil furnishes her own Cartesian-inspired series of meditations and arrives at the outline of a rigorous method for knowledge of oneself and the world through action upon the world.

Weil argues that while the modern scientific view has drawn its foundation in significant part from the works of Descartes (a widely recognized and perhaps uncontroversial statement in itself), there are key, foundational aspects to the method of Descartes that have been overlooked. For example, Weil cites several passages from Descartes that demonstrate the extent to which he concerned himself with common-sense perception and real-world application of his ideas. Weil then contrasts this with the practice of modern scientists who posit theories or hypotheses with little or no concern for whether scientific concepts, as they have formulated them, align with common-sense perception or are suitable to real-world application. Weil argues that modern scientific inquiry thus disproportionately reflects the biases of scientists and contributes to the false view that scientific knowledge is expert knowledge held by an elite class that is inaccessible to the common-sense perception of workers (in this sense, she compares aspects of the modern scientific enterprise, unfavorably, to the illegitimate rule exercised by certain religious institutions). Weil then cites several passages from Descartes that demonstrate the extent to which Descartes held the exact opposite view: namely, that the highest level of knowledge in whatever discipline is accessible to anyone willing to pay proper attention. In this

way, Descartes shared Weil's conviction that, "any human being...can penetrate to the kingdom of truth reserved for genius, if only he longs for the truth and perpetually concentrates all his attention upon it" (see McFarland in Weil, *Formative Writings*, 24-25 and Weil, 44-55).

For present purposes, I restrict the scope of my investigation into Weil's dissertation on Descartes to the following to questions. First, is there any cursory evidence to suggest that Weil was concerned with the epistemological difficulty (obstacle) posed by the possibility of reading meaning erroneously in the appearances of things? Second, is there any cursory evidence to suggest that Weil was concerned with the epistemic difficulty (obstacle) posed by the possibility of holding a conviction for elusive reasons? If so, then we can take this as preliminary evidence to undermine the hypothesis that the epistemic constraints I suggest were imposed by Weil's mystical experiences (later in life) caused her to significantly revise her views on proper method or scope in philosophical inquiry.

3.5.1 Epistemic Constraint: The Problem of Reading Meaning in Appearances

Weil employs "reading" as a methodological term throughout her investigation, "Science and Perception in Descartes." It appears that the problem of reading, as Weil understood it, has roots in Cartesian skepticism concerning the possibly erroneous or distorting influence of the faculties of imagination and sensory perception on human understanding. Along these lines, Weil rehearses the example, furnished by Descartes, of the cavalryman that returns from battle and (as he is resting) senses pain, believes himself wounded, and asks for a surgeon. A surgeon is called for only to discover that what the cavalryman was feeling was a buckle or strap that had become twisted under his armor and was pressing against him in a manner that caused him to feel pain (Weil, *Formative Writings*, 37). In the case of the cavalryman, Descartes observes the following: "If his sense of touch, in making him feel the strap, had imprinted its image on his mind, he

would not have needed a surgeon to tell him what he was feeling” (Weil, *Formative Writings*, 37). In Descartes’ example, it appears the cavalryman reads meaning, erroneously, in the appearance of a physical sensation (touch) in exactly the sense Weil is concerned to critically scrutinize.

Additionally, what we can say with certainty about the world beyond us (the existential domain) is significantly reined in on Weil’s view: “If the swimmer thinks that the ambiguous feeling that makes the water present to him is the effect, or mark, or image of a coolness, a transparency, a resistance that is not constituted by that very feeling, he is saying more than he knows. So I can say nothing about the world...As soon as I give a name to what I feel, I am saying, as Protagoras observed, more than I can know” (Weil, *Formative Writings*, 56). By the end of Weil’s analysis, we arrive at a way to methodically engage the world through the order and application of number to motion and sequence of the body (we can know the world as extension). The stated upshot of Weil’s method is that we can come to know ourselves through self-conscious work and that this knowledge, “contains all there is to know, and that there is nothing else” (Weil, *Formative Writings*, 86). This does not mean that a series of useful facts, scientific facts which allow us to exercise some predictable measure of control of surrounding objects, cannot be arrived at; it simply means that such knowledge is not certain or indubitable, like the cogito and certain other simple ideas, like arithmetic and geometry, which can be arrived at through proper attention and meditation.

As Weil moves from her textual analysis of Descartes in Part I to her first-person, experimental replication of the Cartesian method as it is exemplified in *Meditations*, Weil’s concept of reading gains traction. Indeed, reading is conceptualized and operationalized as an integral obstacle to cultivating one’s epistemic capacity to ‘Know thyself.’ Recall Weil’s (late

period) remark (in the 1941 essay, “Philosophy”) that the great philosophers, including Socrates, Plato, Descartes, and Kant, had failed to furnish an adequate account of their method (which, recall, involves asking what an idea present to their mind *means*) and that it hurt them. The epistemological obstacle posed by reading is arguably part of the relevant omission Weil has in mind. Along these lines, consider Weil’s following remarks:

Consequently, although I cannot create a single one of my thoughts, all of them—from dreams, desires, and passions to reasoned arguments—are, to the extent they are subject to me, signs of myself; to the extent that they are not subject to me; signs of the other existence. To know is to read this double meaning in any thought; it is to make the obstacle appear in a thought, while recognizing in that thought my own power. (Weil, *Formative Writings*, 63)

And now I am able to know, and by the very means I had dimly foreseen, that is, by reading in the feeling of my own existence, in its coloring of pleasure and pain, its clothing of appearances or illusions, only the obstacle submitted to and overcome. To know in this way is to know myself, to know under what condition I am master of myself; this is the only knowledge that matters to me, and, further, it is the only knowledge there is. (Weil, *Formative Writings*, 64)

All of these thoughts have a meaning for me again; the question is to know what the meaning is. The imagination seems uncontrolled in all thoughts that bear the mark of passion, that sometimes impose themselves on me as forcibly as sense impressions, that then change, as I change, and escape me. Thus at times something at the bend in the road frightens me; what is it? Not a sense impression; impressions have no more access to my thought than do the strange designs formed by the letters when I am reading. What frightens me is the idea, formed by the imagination out of what I see, of a hostile and powerful will that threatens me. A few moments later my imagination forms another idea: that of some harmless being, a tree. Sometimes, afterward, I can play with my fear, evoke it again if I want, but then it either escapes me altogether or it seizes me in spite of myself. In all things that surround me that I would like to believe are independent of me I observe similar games of the imagination. In every way the ideas that I have of these things clearly show the presence of the world in me and not my grasp on the world, for they are formed in me at least partly in spite of myself. I am subject to them, so they bring me nothing but ignorance. (Weil, *Formative Writings*, 71-72)

In attributing lines and directed movements to the world, the ideas of geometry and physics not only go beyond what I can know; they are not even true. Does this mean they do not teach me anything? Strictly speaking, they cannot be said to teach me anything, since I know everything there is to know when I know that the world is extension. Still, they do teach me—not insofar as I am understanding, but insofar

as I am also imagination. They help me to suppose that, in those impressions which I originally read thoughts that are alien to me, hidden thoughts, the true text is extension. (Weil, *Formative Writings*, 77)

Throughout Weil's dissertation, the problem of reading is associated with the "deceptive imagination" (Weil, *Formative Writings*, 75). And she offers guidance on how to read texts as signs of extension, distances, sizes, ratios—in other words, ordered numbers—that can equip us to engage the world in a way where our understanding of self (linked with our power to doubt or affirm) can help us to make advances in our understanding despite the continuous incursion of distorting influences of the active imagination (Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 79). Notably, Weil's late period essay on reading crucially distinguishes the concept of reading from both physical sensations and the imagination. This advance may reflect Weil's effort to formally operationalize reading as a methodological concept or tool in epistemological inquiry and in this way to explicate method she regards as implicit in the work of Descartes, Plato, and other true philosophers.

When comparing Weil's pre-mystical experience account of reading with the post-mystical experience account, it appears she moves to sever the concept of reading from the concept of the imagination. This might have something to do with how Weil understood the data of her mystical experiences. Recall, Weil claims that imagination and physical senses played no part in her mystical experiences (that such data cannot be the result of the imagination and that her faculties could not make this up). Why Weil thinks this so is unclear. Perhaps, Paul's condition that the only way to know *what it is like* to have (such a transformative experience as) a mystical experience is to undergo it our self becomes especially relevant or gains traction at this point of tension with our own intuitions. Nevertheless, it also remains possible that any subsequent (post mystical experience) distinction between reading and imagination reflects

Weil's protracted attention and mature reflection on the concept of reading and thus would have been included in her late works independently of any data mined from her mystical experiences. Regardless, the idea of reading and the difficulties associated with it are present (albeit in an arguably under-developed form) in Weil's pre-mystical experience work on Descartes.

3.5.2 Epistemic Constraint: Holding Convictions for Elusive Reasons

The second epistemic constraint hypothesized to result from mystical experience is the fact that the person who undergoes a mystical experience can hold steadfast to the truth of a conviction (e.g., God exists) for reasons that elude their intellect. As noted in chapter two, Weil affirms her own "everlasting conviction" concerning the power of attention— "that any human being...can penetrate to the kingdom of truth reserved for genius, if only he longs for the truth and perpetually concentrates all his attention upon it"— at a point of a near suicidal depression in her youth, implicitly in the dissertation, and explicitly in the letter to her friend detailing her spiritual autobiography. That conviction lacks reasoned argumentation; however, as McFarland observes, "This core conviction that truth is accessible to all may be the single most unifying factor underlying Weil's psychology" (McFarland, *Formative Writings*, 24-25). And again, Weil views Descartes as sharing this conviction insofar he affirmatively states the ability of any human being, learned or not, to discover truth and improve their understanding on any subject whatsoever, if only they direct their attention properly (McFarland in Weil, *Formative Writings*, 24).

In the dissertation, Weil also acknowledges an "overriding conviction" about the reality of the external world as she experiences it (Weil, *Formative Writings*, 67). Weil observes that at each instant of living in the world there is always something alien that imposes itself on her: "This is what makes me almost invincibly convinced that, if my daydreams exist only for me, on

the other hand, this paper, this table, the heavens, the earth, Paris, all exist independently of me. But this conviction is not a proof. I have never believed my anger exists independent of me, and yet don't I get angry suddenly, often even when I want to remain calm" (Weil, *Formative Writings*, 60-61). Thus, Weil recognizes the lack of proof for a certain conviction she holds with respect to the question of what exists beyond herself despite an almost invincible sense of epistemic certainty that accompanies her reading in the appearances of things the existence of an external world.

From this admittedly restricted analysis we arrive at an impasse with respect to the question of whether or to what extent Weil's mature views on the philosophy of philosophy issued from her mystical experiences. This cursory reading of Weil's dissertation offers textual evidence to suggest Weil was aware and concerned with the epistemic constraints I suggest were imposed on her by mystical experience from well before the onset of her first mystical encounter. Moreover, Weil's dissertation makes evident the considerable extent to which Weil's views on the nature, scope, and method of philosophy were established (though arguably less developed) prior to the onset of her mystical experiences.

As intriguing and novel as it initially seemed for a philosopher to claim to have undergone mystical experiences and nevertheless continued their vocation, the more surprising result is that the textual evidence does not seem to suggest a radical revision to Weil's philosophical method. Even her willingness to invoke the concept of God is present in her earlier work, though it is the philosopher's impersonal conception of God— "the universe in God (or, to put it another way, in itself)"—is explicitly how she describes God in her dissertation, associating God with the will or power of the universe (Weil, *Formative Writings*, 43). Indeed, the loving or more personal understanding of God which issues from Weil's mystical experiences

does seem to correspond with a change in her epistemological orientation to the concepts of mystery and God during the late period. For example, *loving* contemplation at an intellectual impasse (e.g., certain insoluble contradictions understood as mysteries) can issue in revelatory insights: “The intellect cannot control mystery itself, but it is in perfect possession of the controlling paths that lead to mystery, that climb up to it, and over the paths that lead back down. It thus remains absolutely faithful to itself in recognizing the existence in the soul of a faculty superior to itself that leads thought beyond it. This faculty is supernatural love” (Vetó, 163). Thus, the poet’s insight that “love is a deeper season than reason” perhaps finds its philosophical expression in the application of Weil’s method. Indeed, Weil’s methodological embrace of mystery and the tradition of mysticism as analogous to the Platonic initiation into the rites or mysteries of wisdom is where the argument for epistemic discontinuity possibly becomes most defensible insofar as epistemic access to the realm of truth presumably somehow can improve upon itself through such protracted loving philosophical contemplation (i.e., previous epistemic limitations can be transcended by the intellect that lovingly and patiently contemplates legitimately arrived at mysteries).

The questions I thus arrive at are even stranger and more mysterious than those I started with. First, did Weil’s rigorous regime of attention, in conjunction with the philosophical method she outlines in her early work, inadvertently lay the groundwork for her mystical experiences? Second, did Weil’s mystical experiences then strengthen her resolve to write, as Iris Murdoch observes, with such “un-imitable authority” on the nature, scope, and proper method of philosophical inquiry? It is easy enough to pose such strange questions. Yet nothing short of a comprehensive exposition of Weil’s epistemology or replication of her method may be required to answer them.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

In chapter one, we considered what it might be like, as a philosopher, to undergo a mystical experience. I proposed we conceive mystical experience as a type of transformative experience in L.A. Paul's strict sense of the term. What this means is we took seriously Paul's idea that a transformative experience issues in a significant epistemological change of status for the subject who undergoes it. I then suggested what epistemological changes can issue from mystical experience. First, a mystical experience can reveal, to the subject who undergoes it, the fact that it is possible for them to suddenly come to hold to the certainty of a conviction for reasons that elude them. Second, a mystical experience can reveal, to the subject who undergoes it, the fact that they can read significant meaning, possibly erroneously, in the appearances of things. Finally, I suggest that such revelation from personal experience would register as a significant epistemological change of status to a philosopher. And a philosopher would likely consider the implications of the epistemological fall out of their mystical experience for their method of philosophical reflection moving forward.

I then show how Simone Weil's late views on philosophy bear the imprint of such revelations from lived experience. That is, I show where there is textual evidence to support the claim that Weil gave serious consideration and accommodation to these epistemological facts in her late exposition on proper method in philosophy. In chapter three, I show how a close reading of Weil's 1941 essay on reading reveals the extent to which Weil confronts and problematizes the fact that we inescapably read meaning, often erroneously, in the appearances of things. Next, I show how a close reading of Weil's 1941 essay on the concept of value reveals the extent to which Weil confronts and problematizes the fact that we are directed by values (and what are

convictions if not significant beliefs or statements of value) for reasons that elude us. Indeed, we learn that, on Weil's view, these epistemological constraints underwrite human intelligence irrespective of whether we have undergone a mystical experience or not, though we acknowledge the possibility that the occasion of mystical experience can perhaps render us more acutely aware of them. Regardless, I have tried to show how Weil's mature views on the nature, method, and scope of philosophy centered around confrontation and accommodation of these epistemological insights in philosophical reflection.

I was curious whether or to what extent Weil's views on method were revised *ad hoc* to accommodate her mystical experiences. On this question my findings are preliminary and further research on Weil's method is needed. Specifically, Weil's 1929-1930 dissertation on Descartes requires close and careful study as therein she details her method for philosophical reflection and action in the world. My own reading of this work suggests Weil was grappling with these epistemological obstacles nearly a decade prior to the onset of her mystical experiences (1938-1943). Indeed, my own reading of Weil's oeuvre supports McFarland's observation about the nature of Weil's thinking. Concerning Weil's 1941 essay, "Philosophy," McFarland writes: "The article accurately reflects the flowing, spreading nature of her thinking and her habit of never, while broadening and deepening her thought, discarding any prior stage of it (in this case her philosophical training). "Philosophy" provides a glimpse of Weil's tendency to be always turning and returning on her central self, a little like a planet orbiting in a solar system" (McFarland, *Formative Writings*, 20). I agree with McFarland's assessment that more work needs to be done on the content, links, and continuities that inform Weil's early, middle, and late works (McFarland, *Formative Writings*, 20). I also agree with McFarland that "Science and Perception in Descartes" remains perhaps the most neglected text by philosophers and Weil scholars

concerning Weil's epistemology and method. Weil's dissertation is indispensable to a systematic exposition of her epistemology and method. I could not give adequate treatment to Weil's dissertation in this work.

Recall also, from chapter one, Springsted's concern that philosophical treatment of Weil does not give an adequate account of the role played by spiritual or religious convictions (born by Weil's personal experiences) in her philosophy:

Above all, to approach her in a strictly philosophical way will often completely miss—often deliberately—a genuine and theological commitment in Simone Weil the thinker, or will miss it *as* a theological or religious commitment...For her, there really is an act of God that takes place in Christ's Incarnation and Crucifixion that determines the nature of the world and of human beings. This conviction was something she herself admits she came by unexpectedly through personal experience, and not be a process of reasoning. She even goes so far as to suggest that her reason wasn't quite sure what to do with what was indeed a certitude in her life. Yet, lest one mistake things on the other side, it also needs to be understood that this religious commitment did not make serious and unremitting philosophical reflection beside the point for Weil. Far from it. She is not just an anthology of mystical insights. So, how this commitment *and* philosophy go together is of the first order for understanding Weil. It is a matter of getting it right on both sides of the equation. (Springsted, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 2)

My project method took seriously the role of Weil's mystical experiences in connection to her philosophical method. We observed Weil's methodological orientation to convictions born by her lived experiences. Weil's method involves a continuous wrenching apart and detachment from the thoughts and ideas that occur to her mind through meditation on contradictions.

Weil employs this method to convictions born by her daily lived experiences: "The correlation of contradictories is a detachment. An attachment to a particular thing can only be destroyed by an attachment which is incompatible with it. That explains...Love your enemies..."/ "We have to elucidate the way contradictories have of being true. Method of investigation: as soon as we have thought something, try to see in what way the contrary is true" (Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 101-102) / Thus: "A case of contradictories which are true. God

exists: God does not exist. Where is the problem? I am quite sure that there is a God in the sense I am quite sure my love is not illusory. I am quite sure there is not a God in the sense that I am quite sure nothing real can be anything like what I am able to conceive when I pronounce this word. But that which I cannot conceive is not an illusion” (Weil, “Atheism as a Purification,” in *Gravity and Grace*, 114-122). Notably, Weil’s steadfast intellectual effort at detachment is compatible with her love of God since, as she explains it, love, faith, and intelligence are three strictly individual faculties (Weil, *Waiting for God*, 34). Her philosophical vocation was compatible with her daily renewed love of the universe in God. For Weil, our thinking and conduct is at all times directed by a system of values. It is incumbent on philosophers to detach ourselves from our personal interests and ambitions, as well as the convictions born by us that are directing us, if we are to properly understand the order and hierarchy of values. The central focus of her late writings on philosophy is to give an account of the method involved in this sort of philosophical reflection.

That said, the project method employed in this investigation comes with significant limitations. They are these. First, there is the possibility, observed in chapter one, that one man’s transformative experience be another man’s wasted Tuesday evening. To motivate the claim Weil’s mystical experiences were indeed transformative experiences I presented a thought experiment and cited Weil’s personal testimony. Weil’s testimony reveals her deliberate and protracted effort to continue to undergo mystical experiences, as well as their increasing frequency and intensity. Thus, it seems reasonable to suppose she did not view her first mystical encounter as a wasted Tuesday evening. That said, we simply do not know if Weil conceived the epistemological fall out of those mystical experiences in the ways I have proposed. Here I can only offer the same consolation Weil gives at the end of her effort to expose Descartes’ method:

“A rough outline of this sort does not even need to comment on the texts themselves; it is enough if it simply allows us to approach them afresh and more fruitfully. And so it can best be concluded by citing (as Descartes did to justify his *Optics*) the example of the astronomers “who, although their assumptions are almost all false or uncertain, nevertheless...do not cease to derive from them a great deal of knowledge that is very true and certain”” (Weil, *Formative Writings*, 88). Recall, on Weil’s view, even creative fiction can serve as a vehicle for the transposition of truths. Along these lines, whether Plato’s *Symposium* was a historical event or pure creative fiction arguably matters nothing whatsoever for the insights born by the reader of this text. And, for the exact same reason, whether, for example, Diotima is a fictional character or historical figure matters nothing whatsoever for the insights born by the reader of Diotima’s account of love in Plato’s *Symposium*. This is why Weil can assign virtually no significance (“infinitesimal importance”) to the biographical or historical facts concerning the author of a truthful text. In sum, even though my thought experiment is fictional, and even granting my assumptions about the epistemological fall out of Weil’s mystical experiences were wrong or off base, it is still possible this investigation helped us grasp a better and more true understanding of Weil’s philosophy than what we started with. That is my sincere hope.

Another challenge to this project method is the arguably cherry-picked selection of Weil’s mystical experiences, as opposed to other transformative experiences, in my analysis of her late works. In other words, we can question why this analysis elevates the role of Weil’s mystical experiences as opposed to other transformative experiences? There is, after all, the occasion of Weil’s early childhood experience of melancholy from which came her “everlasting conviction” concerning the power of protracted attention to penetrate to the kingdom of truth. There is also the significant suffering Weil underwent during the year in factory work and the debilitating

headaches she experienced throughout the course of her life. Despite (but more probably because of) these personally lived experiences of extreme suffering Weil held that, given we have done all we can to reduce suffering, enduring what is truly unavoidable suffering can serve as a resource of spiritual insight, knowledge, and understanding: “Suffering, teaching and transformation. What is necessary is not that the initiated should learn something, but that a transformation should come about in them which makes them capable of receiving the teaching” (Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 83). Indeed, Weil cites all these earlier experiences, alongside her mystical experiences, as significant to her spiritual development (Weil, “Spiritual Autobiography,” in *Waiting for God*, 21-38).

This project method did not even equip us to impartially weigh in on the tensions cited in chapter two since it, in effect, presumed epistemic *discontinuity* when it employed Paul’s criteria of transformative experience in analysis. What then can we make of the hypothesis that there is significant epistemic discontinuity in Weil pre/post mystical experience thought? First, we need to be explicit as to what exactly we *mean* by this supposition. My reservation with the claim of significant epistemic discontinuity is that (especially when left unclarified) it obfuscates the considerable extent to which Weil’s method was conceived and practiced, with constancy and rigor, from her early training in philosophy onward. Part of the work that remains to be done by philosophers (perhaps with the aid of Plato, Kant, and Descartes scholars, historians of Pythagorean texts, mathematicians, or other interdisciplinary Weil scholars) is a systematic exposition of Weil’s epistemological and methodological trajectory from the early outline she develops in the dissertation throughout her lectures and works, including the exercise notebooks.

In chapter two, I suggested another implicit tension in the literature on Weil. It concerns the question of whether Weil’s views on proper method in philosophy were orthodox (traditional)

or heterodox? Perhaps unsurprisingly, our answer to this question depends on us. That is, it depends on our own personal (idiosyncratic) views concerning traditional methods of analysis in philosophy, as well as the legitimacy of cultural or professional norms that govern the contemporary practice of philosophy in the academy. Nevertheless, we now know Weil's answer to this question: hers is the tradition of the true masters of philosophical thought, of whom Plato is the "most perfect representative," and which includes several other canonical figures in the contemporary analytic tradition.

While my project method did not resolve the two tensions presented in chapter two, Weil's own method of contradiction can guide our philosophical reflection and future scholarship on them. For example, we can inventory all the ways in which it seems true Weil's philosophical method is continuous (or orthodox) alongside an inventory of all the evidence in support of its discontinuity (or heterodoxy). Perhaps, proceeding agnostically in this manner, we can contribute to a better interdisciplinary understanding Weil's epistemology and honor her method all at once. In this way, we may hope to address Springsted's concern that contemporary philosophical treatment of Weil disregards or contradicts Weil's own stated views on proper method in philosophical investigation.

With respect to future work on Weil's method, I suggest that philosophers (and Weil scholars more generally) proceed with an integration (hypo)thesis concerning the connection between Weil's philosophical method and her mysticism. The letters Weil writes to Father Perrin (see, for example, "Letter V: Her Intellectual Vocation," and "Letter VI: Last Thoughts," in Weil, *Waiting for God*) provide textual evidence to support the hypothesis that Weil did not abandon her method (and more generally the light of her own reason) in philosophical reflection

concerning the content of her mystical experiences, as well as her spiritual or religious convictions.

With respect to ongoing research in the cognitive sciences on mystical experience, the analytic philosophical framework modeled herein, which utilizes logical distinctions first employed by the philosopher William James to study mystical experience, as well as criteria for transformative experience advanced by Laurie Paul, may be useful to future conceptual analysis and scientific research on mystical experience. With respect to future work in the philosophy of philosophy, I hope the investigation herein on Weil's epistemology and method can be more adequately developed and that future exposition of Weil's philosophy of philosophy can be developed sufficiently so as to be considered alongside other contemporary analytic views on the philosophy of philosophy, including, for example, Timothy Williamson's work, *The Philosophy of Philosophy* (2007), and Edouard Machery's recent work, *Philosophy Within Its Proper Bounds* (2017). Robert Frodeman and Adam Briggles's recent work, *Socrates Tenured: The Institutions of 21st Century Philosophy* (2016) also comes to mind as a candidate for such comparative analysis of contemporary views on the proper disciplinary boundaries of our vocation. I think careful consideration to what all these authors say with respect to the proper method and boundaries of philosophy (e.g., all that is kindred with one another and all that is in tension with one another) can help illuminate our understanding of the queen discipline.

Now, one may wonder what authority Weil's statements on method and the philosophy of philosophy should have for contemporary philosophers. After all, hers are not *our* transformative experiences. How do we, the so-called *uninitiated*, orient ourselves to Weil's views? William James observes that, in fact, mystical states, when well developed, usually *are*, and have the right to be, authoritative over the subjects who experience them (James, 414-415, his italics).

However, James also points out that no authority issues from them which would make it incumbent on any subject who stands outside of them to accept their revelations uncritically (James, 414-418). Notably, James observes that the experiential data of mystics are not unlike our own insofar as mystical encounters are, “face to face presentations of what seems immediately to exist” (James, 415). In other words, mystical experiences are direct perceptions of fact for those who undergo them in a manner analogous to what sensations are for us, though the sense of epistemic certainty (or guarantee) that accompanies insights born by mystical experiences may appear less susceptible to doubt from the subject’s point of view.

Notably, James makes some further observations with respect to the question of the veracity of subjective reports that issue from mystical experience. In his words, “They break down the authority of non-mystical or rational consciousness, based upon the understanding and senses alone. They show it to be only one kind of consciousness. They open out the possibility of other orders of truth, in which, so far as anything in us vitally responds to them, we may freely continue to have faith” (James, 414, 418-420). While mystical states challenge the exclusive epistemological dominion of non-mystical states, they need not be understood as diminishing or undermining the insights born by non-mystical readings of value: “As a rule, mystical states merely add a supersensuous meaning to the ordinary outward data of consciousness. They are excitements like the emotions of love or ambition, gifts to our spirit by means of which facts already objectively before us fall into a new expressiveness and make a new connection with our active life. They do not contradict these facts as such, or deny anything that our senses have immediately seized” (James, 418-419). This is because, James observes, there can never be a state of facts to which new meaning may not be truthfully added if the mind has ascended to a “more enveloping point of view” (James, 419). Thus, James concludes, it remains an open

question whether some mystical states do not possibly issue in such “superior points of view,” where the subject can read a more expansive and inclusive meaning in the appearances of things (James, 419). Perhaps such a superior point of view is precisely the gold Weil sought to gift us.

Love

George Herbert

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,

 Guilty of lust and sinne.

But quick-ey'd Love, observing me grow slack

 From my entrance in,

Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,

 If I lack'd anything.

A guest, I answer'd, worthy to be here:

 Love said, You shall be he.

I the unkinde, ungratefull? Ah my deare,

 I cannot look on thee.

Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,

 Who made the eyes but I?

Truth Lord, but I have marr'd them: let my shame

 Go where it doth deserve.

And you know not, says Love, who bore the blame?

 My deare, then I will serve.

You must sit down, sayes Love, and taste my meat:

 So I did sit and eat.

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Mary Marcous received her training in philosophy at Stetson University and Florida State University. She has taught philosophy at Florida State University and Florida Agricultural & Mechanical University. Mary is the daughter of beloved parents, Carmen Rivera and Atef Marcous, sister to inspiring siblings, Cary and Michael Marcous, aunt to Athena, and mother to Diotima.