

# The Impersonal and the Other

## On Simone Weil (1907–43)

Joke J. Hermsen

TILBURG UNIVERSITY

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All that is impersonal in a human being is holy. Perfection is impersonal. The 'I' in us is mistaken and sins. (Weil, 1988 Vol. 1: 39)

*Fascinans et tremens.* Simone Weil, the 'red virgin' of France, the political martyr and philosophical mystic, evokes both admiration and irritation in her readers. Simone de Beauvoir wrote that she was 'jealous of this heart that was capable of beating throughout the entire universe', but her former classmate at the *École Normale Supérieure* was called 'a masochist driven by Jewish self-hatred' by Paul Giniewski. Simone Weil: mention her name, and there is always someone who gets to their feet to call her insane, a madwoman, not a philosopher, not a 'genuine' thinker. Like Trotsky, who thought he was dealing with a 'fool', a 'salvationist', but who nevertheless got into endless political discussions with her at her parents' home, an assimilated Jewish intellectual family. A 'walking corpse', thought Georges Bataille, who got to know Weil at the *Cercle Communiste* in Paris in the 1930s.<sup>1</sup> No, a 'deep thinker', thought her friend Maurice Blanchot, and Albert Camus also thought it would be impossible 'that there would be a philosophical revival in Europe that would not make allowance for the demands that Weil made on it'.

Well, in retrospect it turns out to be quite disappointing. Though writers like Camus took it upon themselves to publish Weil's work posthumously after the war, and though it has been translated into many languages since then, her thinking is hardly an object of study at any faculty of philosophy.<sup>2</sup> Though authors like Emmanuel Levinas, Maurice Blanchot, Ingeborg Bachmann, T. S. Eliot and Hannah Arendt give

evidence of their great admiration – and sometimes also irritation – for Simone Weil's political and mystical thinking, she is more or less ignored at academic philosophical institutes. This is a pity, because in texts like *La Pesanteur et la grâce* (1947), *L'Enracinement* (1949) and *Attente de Dieu* (1952), Weil raises the themes that have dominated the philosophical debates of the postwar epoch. She not only illuminates the relation between I and other from an ethical–political perspective, but, foreshadowing Levinas, also puts it into a metaphysical–ontological context. With the aid of her concept *décréation de soi*, Weil has given an original interpretation to the transcendental subject.

During her brief life – at the age of 34, Simone Weil died of the consequences of malnutrition and tuberculosis in London during the war – only a small number of political essays of hers appeared in print. Thousands of pages of her other *cahiers* and manuscripts she gave to friends to dispose of as they saw fit, to keep them, throw them away, or even publish under their own names. Weil wrote not only about the most diverse subjects from politics, mathematics, philosophy, history and physics, but also in a great many different genres, ranging from political pamphlets, aphorisms, letters, stories and poems to literary essays and novels. She can therefore justifiably be said to have a philosophical style that is 'other'; an 'other' philosophical style, with regard to the traditional western philosophical style, which is highly systematic, technical or 'professional philosophical' as Hannah Arendt (1971) puts it. Weil's way of writing is fragmentary, open, eclectic, sometimes ambiguous; she uses literary metaphors, philosophical statements and religious themes all at the same time to express her thoughts.<sup>3</sup> The otherness of her style emerges not only in the interdisciplinarity of her work and the diversity of genres, but also in her highly idiosyncratic and remarkable way of expressing herself.

The tremendous assertiveness with which Weil vents one thought after another may occasionally strike one as presumptuous, all the more so since she is aiming high in what she means to say. As befits a Platonic thinker, she wants to think no less than the Good, the True, and the Beautiful, preferably all conjoined in the Divine. An ambitious project, that might lead one to expect the thinker to be beset by doubts once in a while. But Weil hardly ever seems to waver. She presents her thoughts like prophetic truths shaped like brief aphorisms, which leave the reader nothing but humble assent.

That the reader is prepared to do so at all is because Weil manages to formulate her thoughts in such a fascinating way – simple and enigmatic at once – that they rarely strike the reader as trivial. She does not smooth out paradoxes but, if possible, brings them out into the full glare. We do not find long-winded sentences full of woolly imagery or a surplus of adjectives, but a 'nudity of expression', as she herself called it in *La*

*Personne et le sacré*, which brings out the affirmative character of whatever is being said even more boldly.<sup>4</sup>

The struggle for expression not only concerns the form, but also the thought and its entire inner being. As long as nudity of expression has not been achieved, thinking has not attained its true grandeur. (Weil, 1988 Vol. 2: 61)

Simone Weil rarely poses a question but provides ‘answer on answer’, as Maurice Blanchot wrote.<sup>5</sup> Though the voice Weil uses is ‘a white voice of the impersonal truth’, she does not force her own conviction or opinion upon us but searches in her writing for an impersonal or ‘desubjectivized’ voice that is not tied to the perspective of the I, which, for Weil, is always illusory. The voice is not a conceited I, but a voice that has tried to empty itself out, to erase itself, to make itself white, so that it can serve for a dimension that is beyond the subject’s struggle for power.

Accruing fame or power to herself was the very last thing Weil was aspiring to. She cared little for herself and asked little for herself: living in a high-employment area as a lecturer in philosophy, she refused to receive wages that exceeded the average unemployment benefits. This invested her personal life with an aura of mystical martyrdom. What most biographies fail to recognize, however, is that such a lifestyle was in keeping with her main concept of *décréation*. Rather than putting herself at the centre of attention, Weil wished to catch a glimpse of that which exceeds the I and can be indicated as the good or impersonal and inexpressible Other. The remainder of this article makes clear how this ‘Other’ not only shapes the ethical relation between I and other but also incites another ‘impersonal’ way of thinking and speaking.

## ZIM-ZUM OR THE ABSENCE OF THE OTHER

How are we to understand Weil’s notion of a radical otherness, which sometimes appears as abruptly as it disappears? Did this ‘Other’ in all its mysterious absence and inexpressibility already play a role in Weil’s long political struggle in the impoverished French industrial towns? Was it already listening in on her Socratic philosophy lessons at various secondary schools, despite its invisibility? No, ‘even the word “God” had no place whatsoever in my thoughts’, she wrote to Joë Bosquet, ‘until the day I could no longer refuse him’ (Weil, 1962: 181).

From the moment this Other definitely forced itself upon her and Weil, after much hesitation, called it ‘God’, she connects it with the gods from Greek and Egyptian antiquity – she explicitly mentions Dionysus, Prometheus and Osiris – rather than with the Old Testament Jewish God, which, in *Lettre à un religieux* (1951a), she frankly calls a nationalistic and belligerent ‘Zeus of Hosts’, who does not exact love but obedience to the

law. This is a ground for her Jewish biographer Paul Giniewski to typify her as a case of Jewish self-hatred, even in the title of his biography: *Simone Weil ou la haine de soi* (Giniewski, 1978), though he appears to forget that Weil was as critical of the Christian tradition as of her own Jewish background.<sup>6</sup> Weil's Other or God is not a 'backloving' Christian deity, not an arbiter who judges our deeds and forgives our sins, but simply represents a principle: the good or the *principium bonum*: 'Dieu est le bien, c'est une certitude' ('God is good. That is certain'; Weil, 1947: 42). However, this God does not 'exist' as such, *is* not in this world, and can therefore only be known as a *desire* for the good.<sup>7</sup>

In Weil's view, the good has vanished from the world, or, rather, only exists as an absence because it has had to withdraw from the world in order to be able to create it. 'So that the world may be, God must cease being everything; he must make place for the world', Weil writes in *La Pesanteur et la grâce* (Weil, 1947: 52). In other words, the world is the place from which the divine has withdrawn, so that those in the world are faced with the absence of the divine or the good: 'Dieu ne peut être présent dans la création que sous la forme de l'absence' ('In the world, God can only be present as an absence'; Weil, 1947: 126). Which is why this God is the Other par excellence. Peter Winch remarks: 'Weil insists on the need for a representation of the world including a void. . . . We must want this void, for the good which we can neither visualize nor define represents for us a void' (Winch, 1989: 131).

Despite Weil's criticism of the Jewish tradition, the doctrine of the creation, and especially the *Zim-zum* theme from the cabbalism of the Jewish mystical group of the *chassidim*, has a similar narrative structure. *Zim-zum* signifies contraction, a withdrawal of one thing to make way for the birth of something else. In the beginning, God created heaven and earth, but in this narration this did not occur as a kind of expansion, but, as with Weil, as a withdrawal of God. This means that there was actually another beginning that preceded this beginning of the world. In this beginning, there was only God, and he was everything and in everything, all in all. The world that was then created by him was not a world he produced from himself, but a world that arose the moment he withdrew himself from it. 'La création, pour Dieu, n'a pas consisté à s'étendre, mais à se retirer.' The world is therefore not the result of God's urge for expansion, but a remainder that is left over after God has abandoned it: 'Creation is for God not an act of expansion, but of renouncement.' Right from the start, what remains, the world, has therefore been deprived of God and hence of the good.

In the world, we are faced with this absence of the good, that is, with evil. For Weil, evil is not so much the opposite of the good, as in traditional metaphysics, but a *privatio boni*, the absence of the good. Whatever evil happens in the world does therefore not prove that God

does not 'exist' but only 'proves' that the divine is lacking.<sup>8</sup> The question whether God exists or not is of no importance to Weil. She will even go beyond that: 'Thinking that God exists still means thinking that he is present. The atheist who says that God does not exist is closer to God than the believer.'<sup>9</sup>

Negative theology is founded on the idea that God is invisible and unapproachable due to his greatness. He is present everywhere and in everything, but any positive statement about him is inadequate due to our human confinement. Therefore, human beings should content themselves with saying what he is *not*, and the human perspective suggests nothingness and the void as locations where God might dwell.

For Weil, who in a way seeks to link up with the mystical side of this tradition, things are a little more complex. For her, God is not the one who is omnipresent and inexpressible, but the one who has had to abandon the world while creating it: 'We can only know the withdrawal of God; God manifests himself as the one who withdraws himself' (Weil, 1947: 126).

God or the good being inexpressible is therefore not due to his greatness but to the simple fact of his absence. The world is not the result of a God boasting of his great works, but a remainder that only reminds us of his absence. While creating, God relinquished being everything and thus created the world as not-everything or nothing. The essential problem of creation, therefore, is not how something is created from nothing, but the reverse, how nothing is created from everything so that something might happen from the void. 'A deep thought', finds Blanchot:

Il faut qu'il (n')y ait rien: que le rien soit, voilà le vrai secret et le mystère qui commence douloureusement en Dieu même – par un sacrifice, une rétraction et une limitation, un mystérieux consentement à s'exiler du tout qu'il est, et à s'effacer, à s'absenter, pour ne pas dire disparaître. Là où il y a un monde, il y a douloureusement défaut de Dieu. Oui, pensée profonde. (Blanchot, 1969: 169–70)<sup>10</sup>

## DESERTEDNESS AND DESIRE FOR THE GOOD

As the world exists by virtue of God's disappearance, the sentence that Christ uttered on the cross – 'My god, my god, why hast thou deserted me?' – should in fact be interpreted as the *conditio sine qua non* for our existence in the world.

God and humanity are like two lovers who have missed their rendez-vous. Each is there before time, but each at a different place, and they wait and wait. (Weil, 1951–6 Cahier I: 141)

This desertedness is both the condition and the fundamental spirit of the human condition. Neither fear, as with Heidegger, nor freedom, as

with Kant, characterizes existence, but desertedness. In this sense, everyone is crucified and deserted by God. This is not false pathos, but Weil's expression of her innermost experience. It is also the reason why the cross acquires an important symbolic significance in her thought.

The horizontal bar of the cross symbolizes the *nécessité* of the world that arose from God's withdrawal. It is the world governed by the laws of nature, in which the struggle for existence and all its power mechanisms are at the centre: 'Everything in nature, including psychological nature, is subject to such a raw force, which is just as inexorably downward-bound as gravity' (Weil, 1951b: 53). The vertical bar symbolizes the desire for what is necessarily lacking in necessity, namely God or the good. Weil considers the order of necessity, to which all living beings are subjected, as the mould of himself that God left behind when he withdrew himself. This mould may be read as a text – 'The world is a text with different meanings' (Weil, 1951–6 Cahier I: 43) – and who does so may find traces of the good in the order of necessity, left behind by God as a signature.

Thus the cross unites necessity and desire. The rising bar of desire not only balances the horizontal and immensely heavy bar of necessity, but also lifts it, as if desire wishes to lift necessity to the possibility of the divine or the good. In confirming the necessity that characterizes all things of the world, those aware of being crucified can hold onto the desire for the good of the infinite Other.

Weil's interest in the Christian doctrine does not go beyond this cross: 'La croix seule me suffit' ('Only the cross will do for me'; Weil, 1947: 83). She never mentions the Resurrection, Ascension, the Holy Spirit, and least of all a reconciliation doctrine in which Christ died a substitute death for our sins. If the Resurrection story had been omitted from the gospel, she says, 'faith would have come more easily to me'. For Weil, the idea of the Resurrection and the promise of an afterlife not only obscure the fundamental experience of human existence, but also take the sting out of the tragedy of Christ itself, as it did for thinkers such as Nietzsche and Salomé. Moreover, the doctrine of redemption hardly leaves any scope for affirming life in the world in all its diverse manifestations. Both delight in the beautiful – God's signature in this world – and the pain of suffering – the experience of desertedness – provide access to one and the same experience: the conviction that our desire fundamentally yearns for something that is beyond us.

This brings us to a recurrent paradox in Weil's thinking: only through affirming the world can we trace what is beyond that world: 'The world is the closed gate and the entrance at the same time' (Weil, 1947: 83). As we shall see, this paradox attempts no more and no less than to bridge the gap between such apparently conflicting thinkers as Plato and Nietzsche.

## ATTENTION AND CONFIRMATION

Attention for the world – *attention* – and waiting for the good – *attente* – are crucial to Weil. Though she is indebted to Plato, who separates a world in which all is illusion from a world of ideas in which all is perfection, Weil does not get bogged down in this dualism but fuses it into what seems a paradoxical thought: ‘There is not a single good in this universe, but this universe is good’ (Weil, 1947: 95).

Weil starts with the Platonic idea that the good on the one hand and the necessary on the other are separated by an infinite distance. Humans are generally unaware of this and remain victims of their own illusions. They warm themselves at the fire of their delusions and thus obstruct their desire for that which has withdrawn from the world. Humans avoid this desire because it is a desire that cannot be satisfied, as it only yearns for what is absent. This absence of the good or the radically Other can do nothing but get the movement of desire itself going, a desire that therefore always *remains* desire. In fact, the withdrawal of the good inaugurated this desire, or, as Weil puts it in her *Leçons de philosophie* (1959): ‘God has hidden himself, so that we might notice him.’

At the same time, however, the desire for the good is also a passionate love for all that falls within the order of the necessary: ‘All, without exception, joy and suffering without distinction, must be received with the same attitude of inner love’ (Weil, 1949: 244). Here Weil cuts through Platonic dualism, which only pays attention to the upper world of ideas while ignoring the lower world; she has both dimensions intermingle – the divine on the one hand and the world on the other. She believes that ignoring reality, as Plato does, in order to be able to contemplate the ideas is a dead end; only by paying ultimate attention to the reality of the lower world can we find a trace of the good of the upper world.

Thus, Weil not only links up with the Stoics’ *amor fati* – the Greek philosophical tradition she possibly admired most and which she thought was distorted beyond recognition by the Romans, who turned the Stoics’ *amor* into a ‘insensibilité à base d’orgueil’ (Weil, 1949: 245) – but also with Nietzsche’s life-affirming philosophy.

Classic stoicism was a universal love for everything, a ‘stoic resignation’, as it is coarsely called today. The relation between the world and humankind is at the heart of the Stoic religion; man is sensible inasmuch as he loves the world. No resignation, but joy. Compassion and analogous feelings are altogether wrong. One must accept all suffering with joy. (Weil, 1959: 188)

Weil considers the world as a work of art because it is characterized by a ‘finalité sans fin’. Here, Weil adopts Kant’s description of beauty and transfers it from the work of art to the world itself: the world wants nothing and has a goal in and of itself. ‘The arrangement of things, beings,

events only consists in that they exist and that we should not wish they did not exist or should have been different' (Weil, 1952: 48). The beauty of the world proves 'that it was meant to be', and we can do nothing but love this world, if only because it is the only memory we have of that which it lacks.

Weil's approach to the absent good is not a turning away from the world but a different kind of attention – a depersonalized and decollectivized attention to the beauty of the world. 'It is the beauty of the world which permits us to contemplate and to love necessity' (1951b: 190).

Beauty is the supreme mystery of this world. It is a gleam which attracts attention and yet does nothing to sustain it. Beauty always promises, but never gives anything. While exciting desire, it makes clear that there is nothing in it to be desired, because the one thing we want is that it should not change. If one does not seek means to evade the exquisite anguish it inflicts, then desire is gradually transformed into love; and one begins to acquire the faculty of pure and disinterested attention. (cited in McLellan, 1990: 285)

This impersonal or disinterested attention can only be seen through eyes that have 'decreated' themselves, 'just as God renounced himself when he created the world', remarks Weil. This decreation in itself has the structure of a pure desire that stays desire and is never satisfied, a desire desiring the good.

Whereas all other desires are sometimes effective and sometimes not, according to circumstances, this one desire is always effective. The reason is that, whereas the desire for gold is not the same thing as gold, the desire for good is itself a good. (Weil, 1970: 316)

'Homo naturae non nisi parendo imperat', Bacon wrote, and Weil repeats his words: 'Humankind only commands nature by obeying her.'

According to Weil, this obedience is the 'actual, unwritten law of human life', or the order of necessity. This necessity is characterized by 'a network of immaterial relations that regulates the mechanisms of reality and their interplay of powers and forces, through the order of nature' (de Lange, 1990: 53).<sup>11</sup> This includes chance, contingency and fate, which require to be affirmed just the same.

Nature wants nothing. As long as humankind believes it is all about putting will against will, he is conquered in advance. (Weil, 1988 Vol. 1: 373)

So Weil believes that humankind should not behave like a superior individual vis-a-vis things and the world or focus her or his attention exclusively on the beyond or the hereafter. On the contrary, she wants humankind to open up to the world and surrender to it, because it is only in this way that she or he can gain a perception of what has withdrawn from that world. Often, however, humankind is prevented from doing so by the sharply delineated boundaries of her or his own private 'I'. This is

why Weil developed her famous concept of *décréation* or the 'decreation of the 'I'.

## THE IMPERSONAL AND THE OTHER

Lack of attention for the world and preoccupation with her or his own position in it generally prevent humans from submitting to the confinement to which God condemned the world when he created it by leaving it. The individual attempts to cover up this confinement precisely by limitation's means, that is, by waging a fight and exerting power over others. Weil tried to exchange opposition to people and things, which is a given of individuality, with openness and genuine attention for the other. In order to be able to see and acknowledge the other, the individual must abandon the bastion of the isolated perspective of her or his I and 'decreate' her- or himself, just as God 'decreated' himself when he created the world. 'God can only love in us our agreement to withdraw ourselves, so that he might pass by, just like, he, the creator, has retired himself so that we could be' (Weil, 1947: 52).

Only if the individual abandons her- or himself does she or he create a space for the other or Other: that is, not only for the concrete other who dwells in the world, but also for the Other whose absence has left behind a trace in us. The divine, or the Other in us, asks for the exchange of our identity, because the Other can only show itself to those who have abandoned themselves: as if the presence that humankind pretends is with her or his 'I' veils the absence she or he is as a trace of the good. 'God loves himself through the creature that becomes empty, that becomes nothing', Weil noted in *Intuitions pré-chrétiennes* (Weil, 1951b: 147). For Weil, humankind's decreation is in fact the completion of the last step in the creation that has handed over God to humans; a decreation that returns to the 'decreated human' the fullness of her or his being of which the human was deprived during her or his existence as an individual: 'Decreation as a transcendence of creation; that only gives the creature an awareness of his full being' (Weil, 1951–6 Cahier III: 91).

Weil's thinking is special in that she links her concept of the transgression of identity – which has many varieties in contemporary philosophy, like Levinas's '*des-interestment* of the I' – to the much more encompassing story of the creation of the world through *Zim-zum*. Thus, she provides a historical-theological explanation for the 'eternally human' tendency not to accept oneself as *principium individuationis*. Just as the good withdrew from this world, which turned it into this world's Other, humans will have to release themselves from themselves so as to be able to have another taste of the good. For Weil, loving the good therefore means 'enduring emptiness, and hence accepting death. There is no way

to love the truth with all one's soul but through tearing oneself away from oneself' (Weil, 1951–6 Cahier II: 30).

In *La Personne et le sacré* from 1943, Weil emphasizes that there is 'something holy in every being'. What is 'holy', however, is not the person: 'Neither the person nor the human person in him or her is holy to me. . . . Far from it: it is that which is impersonal in a human being. All that is impersonal in humankind is holy, and that alone' (Weil, 1988 Vol. 2: 40). This impersonal dimension is buried 'deep in the heart of any human being, from the cradle to the grave'. It is 'an invincible thing, which, despite all experiences of crimes committed, endured, or witnessed, expects to meet with good, not with evil. This, above all, is what is holy in humankind' (Weil, 1988 Vol. 2: 40). The impersonal in humankind is the holy, 'whose only source is the good'. Here, Weil in fact describes a stratified subjectivity consisting of a personal and an impersonal part. 'We are always two', is therefore what she writes in her *Leçons de philosophie*: 'Dans toutes les circonstances, être un homme c'est savoir séparer le "je" et le "moi"' (1959: 131–3).<sup>12</sup>

Elsewhere, in *La Pesanteur et la grâce*, Weil calls these two dimensions of subjectivity 'having and being'. Humans do not possess their own being, only their own 'having'. Humans cannot know their own being; it is hidden away from them. It is precisely the impersonal part of subjectivity that withdraws from identity and constitutes the unnameable singularity of human beings. It is also the 'place' where human dignity resides. The personal part of humans, which they can 'have' and know, consists of the factual specifics of their existence: race, sex, class, profession, age and so on.

What he or she may know of himself, is only what the circumstances have given him. The 'I' is hidden for the 'me'; the I is on the, invisible, side of God, is in God, is God. (Weil, 1947: 49)

As with Weil's interpretation of the cross, affirming both bars – the bar of necessity (the personal I) and the bar of desire (the impersonal I) – she does not wish to opt for either of the two but wishes to recognize that our being exceeds our 'having', even if we cannot name it. It is precisely this surplus of being, this impersonal, unknowable surplus, that Weil calls holy.

The transition to the impersonal self can only take place 'by means of a concentration of an uncommon quality that can only be achieved in solitude. It never occurs with those that consider themselves members of a community', she writes in *La Personne et le sacré* (Weil, 1988 Vol. 2: 42). Weil believes that a transition from the collective to the impersonal is impossible because the 'we' of group identity prevents it.<sup>13</sup> Weil defends a radical kind of individualism that strongly criticizes collective politics. Humans need to be alone in order to think, and every thought that is

spawned by a group is not a thought but a dogma. Following Socrates and Arendt, among others, Weil considers solitude a precondition for thought. However, as we discuss later, the other can indeed play a part in this process.

'We wish to turn the individual rather than the community into the highest value' Weil writes in *Oppression et liberté* (Weil, 1955: 32) and she does not even hesitate to characterize the social group as the 'cradle of suppression and the breeding ground of the lie' because it provides us with 'an illusory representation of our reality and the place we have in it'. In fact, such a collective does nothing but destroy the I and replace it with a dogmatic 'we', which bars independent thought and pursuit of the good. Hence, humans will first have to rid themselves of their group identity and then of the personal part of themselves, in order to be able to make the transition to the impersonal.

Nevertheless, Weil considers the subordination of the person to the community a necessity. It is a given of the factual order, just like the gram is subordinate to the kilogram on a pair of scales. The person is in fact always subordinate to the community. However, Weil revokes this thought at the end of her essay *La Personne et le sacré*:

A pair of scales can also function in such a way that the kilogram is surpassed by the gram, on the condition that the one arm is a thousand times longer than the other. Then the law of balance governs with sovereignty over the inequality in weight. (Weil, 1988 Vol. 3: 73)

Weil does not wish to choose between either the personal or the impersonal part of human beings, but she wants to achieve an equilibrium between both dimensions. She wants to bring to the surface a continuous interaction between the 'I' and the impersonal 'holy'. The impersonal 'self', in other words, is to be given a place within the contours of subjectivity, so that whatever 'I' does, is not purely derived from the 'I' itself, or is not purely prompted by self-interest.

The 'white, impersonal voice' is silent for a considerable length of time and then murmurs words that do not have their origin in the reflection of the order of the One and the Same, but that originate from the lips of the Other, as it were, and from what has not yet been thought. The distinction between personal and impersonal speech may be compared to the distinction Levinas makes between *le dire* – speaking the unnameable – and *le dit* – speaking the quotidian in his *Other than Being* (1971). For Weil, the impersonal voice – this 'ouverture sur l'inattendu' – is no doubt related to the unnameable and thus to a thinking voice. For in *La Source grecque* (1953) Weil describes 'thinking' as 'an interval between impulse and act', as 'waiting' and 'searching nothing in particular, emptying out oneself'.<sup>14</sup> Who or what, however, starts off such impersonal speaking and thinking? Is it not an exceedingly solipsistic affair?

And why would humans not simply confine themselves to complying with their impulses?

### THE OTHER'S 'CAPACITY TO REFUSE'

If the transition to the impersonal can only occur in great solitude – in both 'factual and moral seclusion' – does not Weil formulate a strictly individualistic ethics, or at least a purely solipsistic enterprise which excludes any concrete other? Remarkably enough, in her text on the Iliad, collected in *La Source grecque*, Weil introduces a new concept that assigns an important part to that concrete other. She mentions the other's 'capacity to refuse' – 'son pouvoir de refus' – which interrupts the plans and intentions of the 'I'. The other is capable of saying 'no' to me, which interrupts my intentions, prevents me from continuing on my path, and forces me to think about the way in which I can convert the other's 'no' into a 'yes'.

The other can break through my intentions not because she or he is infinitely superior to me, as with Levinas, but because she or he is my equal and simply capable of refusing passage; she or he can raise an obstacle, as it were, forcing me to halt. I can do nothing but make allowance for this other, because I will first have to find a way to remove the obstacle by either changing my intentions or convincing the other of my intentions. Either way, I will have no option but to contemplate my intentions. In this standstill, in this non-intentional moment of waiting and thinking that is actually enforced by the other, the relation between me and the other is changed and the desire for the good as the infinite other – which had previously been covered up by my plans and intentions – is rekindled.

Thus, it is the concrete other who forces open my individuality and points me towards the good. In *La Connaissance surnaturelle* (1950), Weil characterizes this desire for the good or the other as 'man's essence itself':

The pursuit of the good, which is present in all humankind because each human being desires and the object of each desire is the good, this pursuit of the good is man's essence itself and is the only good that is always unconditionally present in each human being. (Weil, 1950: 249)

As the good can never be acquired, longing for it is nothing but living in permanent expectation of it and wishing for desire as desire, as a never-ending movement. 'The desire for the good is only the desire to desire, not to possess', as Blanchot (1969: 164) remarks in his essay on Weil. Each desire is a desire for the good: Weil repeats Diotima's words from Plato's *Symposium* but adds that the desire for the good is the good itself. This once again highlights the difference between 'having' and 'being'. Due to the

absolute otherness of the good, we can never *possess* it, but if we live up to our desire for it and 'depersonalize' ourselves in doing so, we may achieve a state of *being* that is reminiscent of the good.

Weil is not intent upon doing the 'good', for in her view this is beyond humankind. Levinas's reproach that Weil is aiming at a kind of *Christian charity* is therefore misguided (Levinas, 1976: 160–70). She only wishes to remove all obstacles that get in the way of a desire for the good. Once this has been done, it is followed by 'the negative exertion of doing nothing and opening up to whatever is outside ourselves' (de Lange, 1990: 98).<sup>15</sup> Weil's ethics, therefore, is an ethics of liberation from individuality and from all power struggles connected with it. This liberation or decreation of the I, which is always one's own choice, is accompanied by suffering because the I must surrender her or his certainties and attainments. One must pull oneself up by the roots, Weil writes, cut down the tree of the I, make it into a cross, and carry it on one's back every day, and thus 'être enraciné dans l'absence de lieu' (Weil, 1947: 50). A rather uninviting prospect, such a nomadic existence that drifts forever in expectation of the good. However, for Weil it is worse and even criminal to be always devoid of any desire that takes one outside the confines of individuality and to be forever only pursuing 'being oneself'. Peter Winch thus states correctly that

Weil's ethics distinguishes from demands for rights, the shrill nagging for claims and counterclaims we find in Rawl's *Theory of Justice*; this contract would mean for Weil: everybody tries to get the best deal for himself [*sic*]. In Weil's ethics, the I seeks to understand itself and the other, through an understanding of the other. The I seeks an understanding that precludes the distinction between me and other, that is what Weil calls the impersonal. (Winch, 1989: 188)

On the basis of the above, Weil distinguishes two kinds of suffering. *Souffrance* is what she calls the suffering of the one who dares to risk her- or himself; it is the consequence of the voluntary surrender of one's own I. *Malheur* (misfortune) is what she calls the suffering of the one whose I has already been captured and imprisoned by forces outside her- or himself, which prevents this I from giving her- or himself away. Such an I cannot track down the good, which is what she or he is essentially suffering from. In *La Pesanteur et la grâce*, Weil calls this 'the ultimate accident, that I have destroyed it from the outside, because from then on it cannot destroy itself anymore' (Weil, 1947: 35). Or as Robert Coles remarks about Weil in his biography: 'She distinguished voluntary and imposed suffering and was able in her special way to combine theology to the social and political analysis she had sought to construct' (Coles, 1987: 124).

In *L'Enracinement* (1949), Weil devises a political model for postwar Europe and argues that most people have already been so alienated from themselves by the social structure of capitalism – few chiefs and many

slaves – that the decreation necessary for contemplating what is beyond them has become an impossibility. Weil wishes to create conditions for existence in which 'each human being is at liberty to reap the fruits of self-detachment', as Frits de Lange (1990: 52) puts it. This liberty constitutes the humanity of people. To withhold such a liberty from them means in effect to take away their humanity and their desire for the good.

Weil's ethics of liberation acquires another dimension here: before the I can liberate itself from itself, it will need to be liberated from those social chains that will prevent it from doing so at all costs. Self-liberation is preceded by social liberation, for it is only in liberty that one can divest oneself of individuality and pursue the good. On her mystical ontology of the withdrawal of the good, therefore, Weil founds a social ethics that opposes the suppression of the other and creates space for genuine receptiveness to the Other.

#### APPENDIX: BIOGRAPHY

- 1909 Simone Weil was born in Paris.
- 1928–31 Student at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris, where she finishes, just before Simone de Beauvoir, as the best examinee.
- 1931–4 Teaches philosophy in Le Puy, Auxerre and Roanne. She is politically active in the workers' movement and involved in demonstrations by the unemployed. Writes numerous short articles for trade union journals.
- 1934 Writes *Reflexions sur les causes de la liberté* and *Oppression and liberté*.
- 1935 Works at the Renault factory.
- 1936–7 Simone Weil leaves for Spain to fight on the side of the anarchistic syndicalists. Writes: *Let Us Not Begin the Trojan War Again!* and *La Condition ouvrière*.
- 1938–40 Becomes a teacher at Saint Quentin. First mystical experiences in Italy and Portugal. Writes: *Some Reflections on the Origins of Hitlerism* and *La Source grecque*.
- 1942–3 She flees Paris with her parents and goes to New York via Casablanca. Writes: *Attente de Dieu*.
- 1943 She gets a visa for London, from where she hopes to be able to participate in the French Resistance. To her regret, she is only given a job as an editor in De Gaulle's France libre. She writes many of her works – *L'Enracinement*, *La Personne et le sacré* – during the last couple of months before her death on 24 August 1943.

## NOTES

1. Simone Weil is described by Bataille in his novel *Le Bleu du ciel*, in which she is represented by the principal character Lazare. See Surya (1987: 175) and de Lange (1990: 156): 'Weil distanced herself from Bataille's identification of revolution with catastrophe: "One cannot be a revolutionary if one does not love life. The revolution is a battle against everything that stands in the way of life."'
2. At the end of the 1980s, the French publisher Gallimard decided to publish the complete works of Weil in 16 volumes. Four volumes have so far been published (see Bibliography).
3. This eclectic way of writing is something she shares with other female thinkers, like, for instance, Wollstonecraft, Salomé, de Beauvoir and Kristeva, as I have pointed out in the introduction to *Het denken van de ander* (Hermsen, 1997).
4. The most important sources of inspiration for Weil are the early Greek thinkers Heraclites, Plato and the school of Pythagoras. She also refers frequently to the pre-Christian traditions of the Egyptians, the Cathars and the Babylonians; see Kahn (1978).
5. In 'L'affirmation (le désir, le malheur)' in *L'Entretien infini*, Blanchot writes:

Ce qui surprend dans ce discours, parmi bien d'autres traits, c'est la qualité de l'affirmation et la transparence de la certitude. . . . Même dans ses notes, les questions sont rares, les doutes presque inconnus. Est-elle donc si sûre de ce qu'elle pense? Pas tout à fait. Affirmer est souvent pour Simone Weil la manière de questionner ou de mettre à l'épreuve. (Blanchot, 1969: 156)

6. In *Lettre à un religieux*, Weil gives no fewer than 35 reasons for not being able to join the Catholic Church; her biggest reproach concerns the cruel, ruthless and all-uprooting imperialistic policy of the church both within Europe and without it: 'The missionaries' zeal has not Christianized Africa, Asia, and Oceania, but has rather crushed those areas under the cold, cruel, and lethal dominion of the white race' (Weil, 1988 Vol. 4: 42).
7. See Wittgenstein's statement: 'What is good, is also divine. Queer as it sounds, that sums up my ethics' (cited in Winch, [1989], who also compares Weil's view of language with that of Wittgenstein). In her *Cahiers*, Simone Weil writes:

I am absolutely certain that there is a God, in the sense that I am absolutely certain that my love is not illusory. I am absolutely certain that there is not a God, in the sense that I am absolutely certain that there is nothing real which bears a resemblance to what I am able to conceive when I pronounce that name, since I am unable to conceive God. (Weil, 1951–6 Cahier I: 127)

8. 'Pure Goodness is not anywhere to be found in this world. . . . The existence of evil, far from disproving the reality of God, is the very thing that reveals him in his Truth' (Weil, 1952: 87).
9. See also Frits de Lange's study, *Totale beschikbaarheid: het ethos van Simone Weil*:

It is important to realize how the Good as absence also feeds thought and only manifests itself as an empty spot, around which thoughts come into being. Weil's ethos circles ceaselessly around the emptiness of the hidden Good. Her mysticism encompasses the experience of that which cannot be experienced, the speaking of the unspeakable: 'The Good always seems to flee,' writes Weil. (de Lange, 1990: 88)

10. English translation: 'There has to be nothing; nothing has to be, that is the true mystery that begins with God, through a sacrifice, a renouncement and a limitation, a mysterious agreement of exile from everything that is, to fade away, to disappear. Where there is a world, there is necessarily the missing of God. Yes, profound thinking' (Blanchot, 1969).
11. See also Blanchot, who describes Weil's rendering of humankind's paradoxical attitude towards the necessity of nature:

De même que le monde ou règne la nécessité mécanique et qui est vide de Dieu, est aussi, par le vise même, ce qui le plus près de l'essence divine, de même ce qui est nature en nous est prêt à se renverser en sa nature, si nous consentons à en supporter le poids. (Blanchot, 1969: 163)

12. 'In all circumstances, being human means to separate the "I" and the "me".' In Hermsen (1999), I compare this two-layered structure with Arendt's resumption of the Socratic *dialogue intérieur* in *The Life of the Mind* (1971).
13. See Weil: 'Perfection is impersonal. . . . People living in the collective have no access to the impersonal, not even to subsidiary forms of it. A group of people is even incapable of doing an addition' (Weil, 1988 Vol. 2: 42).
14. See also Blanchot, who quotes Weil:

'L'attention consiste à suspendre sa pensée, à laisser disponible, vide et pénétrante à l'objet. La pensée ne doit rien chercher' and his own comment: 'l'attention est le vide de la pensée orienté par une force douce et maintenu en accord avec l'intimité vide du temps'. (Blanchot, 1969: 175-6)

15. Blanchot quotes Weil:

Il y a hors de moi un bien supérieur à moi et qui m'influence pour le bien toutes les fois que je désire le bien. Comme aucune limite n'est possible à cette opération, ce bien hors de moi est l'infinité, c'est Dieu. (Blanchot, 1969: 164)

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Joke J. Hermsen works as a senior researcher at the Department of Philosophy at Tilburg University. She has published extensively within the field of feminist philosophy, literature and gender studies. Recently she edited *Het denken van de ander. Proeve van een vrouwelijke ideeengeschiedenis* (Kampen: Kok Agora, 1997), and published her first novel: *Het dameoffer* (Arbeiderspers, 1998). She has also recently published a collection of articles on Hannah Arendt (Leuven: Peeters, 1999).

