

# Spirituality and Global Ethics



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Edited by

Mahmoud Masaeli

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# SPIRITUALITY AND GLOBAL ETHICS

MAHMOUD MASAEI

Religious scholars make a distinction between the esoteric and exoteric sides of belief systems. Esotericism, understood as inner or spiritual consciousness, points to the mystical, speculative, and intuitive transpersonal perspectives of belief. It refers to the inner essence or spiritual path that is assumed to be common to all religious faith systems (Guénon, 2005, 2001; Faivre, 2010; Nasr, 2013, 1997). Even those of non-religious beliefs such as Buddhism, Taoism, and indigenous spirituality, which do not wholly fit into the commonly understood faith systems of worshipping Supreme Reality, have an inner or esoteric awareness at the centre of their beliefs and practices (Davidson, 2004; Wayman, 1973; Komjathy, 2013). If esotericism centres on this inner awareness, it must conceal a certain spirituality that is only transmittable to those who could successfully pass through a process of preparation and transpersonal practices to understand the mystical dimensions of existence. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this inner view of existence became a mystical and spiritual practice, bringing with itself a mysterious blend of Eastern spirituality, esotericism of the Abrahamic faith systems, and non-religious and occult belief systems. The 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a broadening of inner consciousness; it embraced modern science's presentation of mystical quantum physics, astronomy, and mathematics, as well as its move toward understanding healing beyond the health and biological sciences. Today, esotericism pertains to a broad variety of religious mysticism, non-religious occultism, and perennial philosophy, but all of them proceed from inner consciousness. Hence, they are all spiritualists.

In contrast to the inner, exotericism takes the outer dimension of everyday consciousness into account and favours the possibility of the popular understanding of the essence of existence. This everyday understanding is the outer which must be comprehended, and the public can grasp its truth without the need for any transpersonal initiative and transformation of consciousness. The allegorical and mystical levels which are required for the most essential character of the belief system are denied because they

are not attainable by the public. Rather, exotericism refers to knowledge of the external, the highest, and the foundation of belief. Dedication to religious piety and fundamentalism replaces the spirituality of inner contemplation and devotion. On the other hand, while esotericism affirms many paths from the start, from people leading upward toward the discovery of truth, hence confirming plurality, exotericism remains obstinately intolerant of plurality and instead supports only a one-way path from the Supreme (top-down authoritative) to the mundane. In this way, exotericism endorses the popular understanding that the fundamentals of a belief system are tenable by the severe method of teaching rituals and dogma by leaders. In contrast, esotericism promotes an active striving for the discovery of truth from within, the inner spirit, and the intellectualization of comprehension attainable through initiatic training and the sufficient preparation to receive the manifestation of truth.

The inner and the outer are the boundaries distinguishing the two main accounts of belief systems. Exotericism, looking at the external dimension of belief systems, articulates the knowledge of Supreme Reality in the image of God. Through this articulation of knowledge, exotericism looks for methods of submission and ways of worshiping God. Thus, religious rituals originated from the literal reading of the sacred texts that pertain to the external facet of belief systems, reflecting exotericism. Outwardly looking at belief, exoteric approaches are exhibited in the highly constructed Islamic tradition, Christian orthodoxy, and Conservative Judaism; these approaches, in turn, deny and suppress the Sufis of Islam, the mystics of Christianity, and Kabbalistic Judaism. To clarify a point of confusion, it must be noted that sometimes exotericism coincides with a particular kind of spiritual piety, as it is claimed by Islamic hardliners, encouraging an austere ascetic and God-fearing life. But, this coincidence is far away from the spiritual insights which inspire a harmonious blend of the innate journey and the outer striving for the discovery of the truth. Indeed, allegorically speaking, asceticism remains attached to the exoteric view of religion. That is why there is a need to distinguish between spirituality as the kernel and exotericism as the shell – the former as the subtle and the latter as the simple. The first looks for methods of submission; the second is keen to reunite with truth. The first looks for knowledge of submission; the latter is thirsty for the love of uniting with the truth. Here are some insights.

When you do things from your soul, you feel a river moving in you, a joy (Rumi).



On the journey to the truth, one must stay on the path of love and enlightenment (Khemetic saying).

A journey of a thousand miles starts beneath one's feet (Laozi).

To work without the inner peace of God is Hades, and to work with His joy ever bubbling through the soul is to carry a portable paradise within, wherever one goes (Bhagavad Gita).

You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart (Jeremiah 29:13).

With each experience, we grow and become more aware of the inner beauty that lies within us. Ultimately we are truly our own leader (Kabbalistic quotes).

Here, the distinction changes experiences of everyday life. Exoteric views draw on the orthodoxy of religion to 'frighten' adherents into conforming with a belief system and instilling in them a fear of God. The history of religion in both the West and the Islamic world bears witness to how this view of the divine aggressively denied inner spirituality, and how spiritualists paid for their own inner journey to reunite with the truth. Institutionalized authorities have labelled the spiritualists as heretical while trying to stifle this voice through different means of suppression and persecution. Against this background of religious orthodoxy, esotericism admires love as the spiritual journey for souls to come into unification and integration with the Divine Essence. This admiration renders pathways to God multiple, countless even, and open to individual hope and striving towards union. Everyone can directly initiate their personal inner journey towards harmonious wholeness; the gates are open to all, excluding no one. What happened was that the promise of inner spirituality became more appealing to the public.

I am your lover, come to my side, I will open the gate to your love.  
 Come settle with me, let us be neighbours to the stars.  
 You have been hiding so long, endlessly drifting in the sea of my love.  
 Even so, you have always been connected to me.  
 Concealed, revealed, in the unknown, in the un-manifest.  
 I am life itself. You have been a prisoner of a little pond,  
 I am the ocean and its turbulent flood. Come merge with me,  
 leave this world of ignorance. Be with me, I will open the gate to your love  
 (Rumi).

Tightly intertwined with these subtle intellectual reflections, esotericism extended the scope of its appealing voice beyond religion, becoming the

spiritual philosophy of life for the public without the need of being essentially religious. It has become common, notably in the West, to identify oneself as a spiritualist, or as having spiritual ideas and beliefs without being affiliated with any religious institution or movement. The current spiritual trends such as the New Age Movement evidence this affiliation. Integrated into this emerging spiritual atmosphere is the influence of Eastern mysticism, including Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sufism as the most commonly welcomed views on the experiential union with the Truth, the Sacred, or the Divine. In this way, spirituality proves to be an ambiguously defined term, used not only by religious people, but also by occultists, supernaturalists, and magical perspectives on an extraordinary experience of union. What brings all these tendencies together is a love for retaining good human qualities such as compassion, forgiveness, tolerance, dialogue, mutual learning, love of each other, and the establishing of oneness.

It is noteworthy to inquire the reason for such a widespread emergence of a spirituality beyond religion. The reason simply is that spirituality turned into an alternative way of looking at the meaning of life, celebrating the equality of human values, the quest for experiencing the sacred, and mystical perspectives in the face of both orthodox religious systems and dismissal by scientism and materialism. Indeed, it turned into a site of resistance for the voices of difference against the suppressive and one-sidedness of the rival religious philosophies of life. On the other hand, it is an exodus for those who desire to get beyond the excessiveness of rampant individualism and materialist fetishism. That is why beyond the field of religion there are other (transcendental/secular) spiritual systems of thought. These systems have the capacity to cooperate with religious esotericism, improving the culture of love by confronting both religious orthodoxy on the one hand, and anti-religious extremism on the other. The promise is eloquent; spirituality is a definite response to today's world of exclusion, accusation, suppression, and terrorism of the different others. In fact, spirituality implies essentially a willingness to recognize the different and multiple pathways to attain peace of mind, whether this includes the worship of God or not.

The condition of globality has provided an unprecedented opportunity for spiritual perspectives to grow. Being defined and understood in terms of global connectedness and networking, the dissolution of the normative importance of borders, the rapid spread of information across borders, and the intensification of global consciousness, the condition of globality has deeply affected how people conceive of themselves in the global village.

Ideas, perspectives, beliefs, and philosophies of life are easily expanding out of their local/national containers. While the forces of globalization influence local identities and cultures, people have the chance to express themselves in different global settings. This process of interpenetration of the local and the global is undeniably spreading around the global village. This thorough intensification of worldwide interactions, communication, and social relations links distant localities together in a network of interaction beyond the old traditional boundaries and restrictions. The consequence is a spectacular mutuality through which local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa (Steger, 2009). In such a condition, due to the intensification of global consciousness, it is impossible to keep people, their sense of who they are, and their ideas and views of life within the orthodoxy of religion or the severity of conventional perspectives. There is little doubt that the process of globalization has paved the way for enjoying individualism more, increasing chances of competition, providing exciting possibilities to search for growing benefits. It is also incontrovertible that the era of globality echoes excessive capitalism, unbridled multinational corporations, and the continual exclusion and marginalization of those who cannot keep pace with this process. Nonetheless, it is also undeniable that such a process of global networking has smoothed the formation of the sense of a *global we* – the emergence of an active global community which is taking responsibility for the renaissance of the stifled voices of the excluded others.

In the condition of an evolving *cosmopolis*, a dual movement is evident. People could manifestly associate themselves with *centrifugal* forces, escaping from already constructed and ordered centers of loyalty and becoming associates of the *centripetal* forces that are regrouping themselves around new identities and allegiances. Illustrated here is the pivotal importance of the condition of globality for the awakening of stifled forces. While the evolving global transformations strengthen people's capacity to leave institutionally ordered belief systems, it simultaneously enables them to rearrange themselves around alternative perspectives. These fundamental transformations cultivate a fabulous landscape for the growth of spirituality. Here are some examples: the spreading of spirituality in all aspects of life with the goal of providing peace of mind, the inspiring power of spirituality in the process of healing, the reliance upon spirituality as a pivotal thrust addressing religious extremism, the individualization of spirituality among consumers to tailor to the patterns of consumption, the increasing significance of cyberspace in spiritual areas, spirituality being nourished in management, and the

encounter between spirituality and unbridled materialism. In a world of agony, spiritual attitudes are releasing themselves from the retractions of religion to become capable of opening new horizons of hope, love, and compassion. Globality is becoming a fertile terrain for global spirituality.

In light of these observations, the authors who have contributed to this volume address three fundamental questions about the interplay between ethics of globality and spirituality: What are the practical implications of spirituality for the condition of life in a turbulent era of violent religious/non-religious extremism? In what way can spirituality, the view of love, compassion, tolerance, and mutual recognition encounter mistrust, enmity, separateness, and violence? How, and in what way, could spirituality contribute to a global ethics?

This book will consist of papers presented at an international conference on *Esotericism and Global Ethics: A Conversation on the Return of Spirituality in the Cotemporary Lifeworld* held at the University of Ottawa on October 15, 2014. Based on the experience and debates over the importance of spirituality in today's life, this book aims at discovering a common ground in a variety of spiritual traditions of thought on humanity. The editor of the book essentially suggests that establishing a link between spiritual traditions and global ethics could have a higher *intrinsic value* for improving the principle of humanity in today's turbulent world of mutual accusations and violence. However, we cannot disregard the *instrumental value* of the topic as well. The hypothesis is that exploring a common ground among spiritual traditions operates as a deep, convincing counter-argument against the current emerging religious extremism and terrorism. Ultimately, the topic has a *constructive value* as well, since it provides a fertile terrain to learn from each other's shared ideas and beliefs; hence, it has the potential to improve the process of mutual learning and provide a new sense of solidarity.

This book follows three thematic parts. The first part is entitled *Divine Intimacy*. This part will explore the humanist potentials inherent to the spiritual traditions of the Abrahamic faith systems that contribute to global ethics. The second part is labeled *Transcendental Intimacy*, exploring the spirituality of non-Abrahamic traditions and the ways in which they can come to a positive dialogue on common grounds. *Secular Intimacy* is the title of the third part, which is dedicated to philosophical/rationalist debates around spirituality beyond divine and transcendental systems. This volume can be adopted for the higher level courses in human rights, ethics, global studies, political science, philosophy, and religious studies. The title

also has its own addressee beyond academia and will be of special interest to policy analysts, international advisors, and religious/political consultants. No doubt, the title is itself attractive for the public as well.

The novelty of the book lies in its multidisciplinary/interdisciplinary approach to exploring the role of spirituality in real life in an era of global connectedness and networking. More particularly, the book invests a positive role to spiritual traditions of thought in the practical sense of improving mutual understanding, the strengthening of solidarity in (global) civil society, and the striving for respect for those who have been labelled as different “others”. By adopting dialogical wisdom in search of the truth among seemingly contradictory spiritual systems, the book highlights for believers and practitioners the potentials for fusions of horizons. And finally, the book has the potential to serve as a sort of counter-extremism manifesto in this turbulent era of terrorism and extremism.

The main objectives of the book include the following:

- Introducing the main concepts, ideas, and perspectives that form the historical background and foundation of spiritual traditions in different contexts;
- Presenting the common grounds in spiritual traditions of thought;
- Illustrating the importance of spirituality and its contribution to a global dialogical ethics;
- Examining the reciprocal impacts of spirituality, ethics, and politics and their potential for improving mutual understanding and recognition in the turbulent era of religious extremism.

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# SUFFERING DIVINE THINGS: SIMONE WEIL AND JEWISH MYSTICISM

RICO SNELLER  
LEIDEN UNIVERSITY

## Executive Summary

To what extent can man suffer God? The verb ‘suffering’ as such is ambiguous, for it can either mean bearing ‘pain’ (‘to suffer *from*’), or tolerating something. In other words, ‘suffering’ can be both intransitive and transitive. Whereas the first meaning seems to be predominantly passive, the second, while still fairly passive, is more active. In both cases, however, a kind of interpenetration of both ‘parties’ is implied: that which I am suffering is somehow inside me, whether I want it or not. Anyhow, the question, ‘can man suffer God?’, turns out to be in need of clarification before it can be answered at all.

In this contribution, I will study a Jewish author who ‘exchanged’ her Judaism for Christianity: Simone Weil (1909-1943). I will try to see what she writes about suffering God, it being my hypothesis that *suffering* God is a more adequate notion than the vaguer ‘experiencing’ God. Suffering *God*, or rather, suffering *divine things* might be a notion accounting for the conflation of *ethical*, *spiritual*, and *global* dimensions. I will try to shed some light on Simone Weil’s views by relating them to some motives from the Jewish mystical tradition: ‘cosmoeroticism’, *kawanna* and *tsimtsum*.

**Keywords:** Divine things, Simone Weil, Jewish mysticism, elation of the soul, Cosmoeroticism, Kabbalah, Affliction

## Introduction

Simone Weil is famous for her spiritual and philosophical writings circling around topics such as inwardness, intimacy, attention, love, implicit faith,

social concern with the powerless and have-nots, and the like. Her writings can hardly be put into a genre. Clear-cut distinctions between philosophy, politics and spirituality merge here, which might seduce someone already espousing the ideal of a global ethics to question such distinctions. ‘Philosophy’ mostly seems to presuppose a certain degree of ‘rationality’, a *capability* to think and reflect. But what if this capability is radically challenged without, conversely, being denied? This is what takes place in Weil’s writings, I believe. Moreover, while being apparently ‘Christian’, these writings subtly transcend the theological-dogmatic level. Weil herself relies on what she calls ‘implicit faith’ (*foi implicite*). Meanwhile, she is drawing on variegated sources, such as the Gospels, the medieval mystics (Francis of Assisi, John of the Cross), Homer’s *Iliad*, Pythagoras, Plato, and Stoic writings (Marcus Aurelius). Those astonished by the blend of these rather dissimilar authors, find themselves confronted with Weil’s testimony about their inner unity: “I know by experience”, she says, “that the Stoic virtue and the Christian virtue are the same. Authentic Stoic virtue is first and foremost love” (Weil 1966, p.77/1973, p. 96).

### Love as Elation of the Soul

The abovementioned central topics in Weil are interrelated, as will appear soon. Love is one of them. Is it still possible today, one may ask, to approach love from an original perspective, both philosophically and spiritually? I will try to show that Weil’s conception of love is most interesting in both ways and indispensable for a contemporary reflection on a global ethics that is more than merely formal or procedural.

What is remarkable in Weil’s account is that love (*amour*) is characterized by a centrifugal movement of *elation* or widening-up (*latus* means ‘wide’ in Latin). As such, it is opposed to *friendship* (*amitié*), which seems to be rather determined by a centripetal movement of *con*-centration. While *amitié* relies on a bond between individuals and is particularizing, *amour* is a love for the neighbor: “the neighbor is a being of whom nothing is known, lying naked, bleeding, and unconscious on the road. It is a question of completely anonymous, and for that reason, completely universal love” (Weil 1966, p.80/1973, p. 98).

Weil’s explicit reference to the Gospel of Luke (the parable of the good Samaritan in *Luke*, X, 25-37) inadvertently reminds us of Hermann Cohen’s (1842-1918) famous claim that already the Hebrew Bible contains this universal conception of neighborly love. Involved in a



polemics with ('Christian') biblical scholars stating that the Old Testament version of the Gospel's commandment in *Leviticus* XIX, 18 ("Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.") merely refers to the Hebrew kinsmen, Cohen ardently upholds the opposite. The Hebrew word translated by 'neighbor', *re'a*, he asserts, rather designates the stranger or the alien,<sup>1</sup> the implication being that Judaism is universalistic from the onset.

Weil, in line both with the Gospels and Cohen's explanation of the Hebrew Bible, defends a position that likewise takes love to be a universal affect. As such, it is a radical alternative to friendship. Such a position may be surprising since love is often interpreted as particularizing, elective and selective.

"Our love", Weil holds, "should stretch as widely across all space [*doit avoir la même étendue à travers tout l'espace*], and should be as equally distributed in every portion of it, as is the very light of the sun." A "complete impartiality" should characterize it (Weil, 79/97).

Moreover, she continues,

"When a soul has attained a love filling the whole universe indiscriminately, this love becomes the bird with golden wings that pierces an opening in the egg of the world. After that, such a soul loves the universe, not from within but from without; from the dwelling place of the Wisdom of God, our first-born brother. Such a love does not love beings and things in God, but from the abode of God [*de chez Dieu*]. Being close to God [*Etant auprès de Dieu*] it views all beings and things from there, and its gaze is merged in the gaze of God" (79f/97f).

The claim which is made here is metaphysical. It can only be accepted by those acquiescing in this love. This love is not an easy task since it requires one to somehow 'extend' the soul (which would be a mortal sin for any Cartesian). The usual, 'critical' consciousness, which scrutinizes all claims to check their justified or unjustified character, is to be exchanged for a different posture. It is, however, not only the Cartesian 'rational', or Lockean 'empirical' consciousness, which would fail to access this posture; phenomenological 'intentionality' would equally fall short of it.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. H. Cohen, 'Der Nächste', in: *Jüdische Schriften* I, Berlin 1924: "Die Gottesnähe hat die Menschennähe gestiftet. „Friede, Friede dem Fernen und dem Nahen. Der Ferne ist der Nahe geworden" (206) (*Jesaja*, LVII, 27).

Is love, as centrifugal and elating, necessarily opposed to friendship, supposedly centripetal since elective? Remarkably, in another context, friendship is redefined in terms of ‘distancing’: “Friendship is a miracle by which a person consents to view from a certain distance, and without coming any nearer, the very being who is necessary to him as food” (204/205). Here, friendship is not any longer an attempt to appropriate, but rather the supernatural virtue of showing respect for the otherness of the other. As such, it closely resembles pure compassion and gratefulness. Thus conceived, friendship comes remarkably close to renunciation: “Friendship has something universal about it. It consists of loving a human being as we should like to be able to love each soul in particular of all those who go to make up the human race. [...] [*S*]o he who knows how to love directs upon a particular human being a universal love” (205/206, my italics, RS). What is preponderant according to Weil, it seems, is the way we relate to the other. Election should not be preferential but extensive, universalizing, and elative (e-lative, ‘widening’).<sup>2</sup>

### Cosmoeroticism

The topic of love as the elation of the soul is far-reaching. To provide a historical background to this idea, I would like to confront this conception of love with a particular strand in Jewish mysticism which the Israeli Kabbalah scholar Moshe Idel calls ‘cosmoeroticism’ (Idel, Ch. 5). Cosmoeroticism, Idel explains, comes down to a supposedly *impersonal* form of love which relies on an innate impulse rather than on the volitional erotic propensity we are already familiar with. The implication of *cosmic* love is that *all* living beings participate in the erotic impulse. What we call *personal* love may even be a derivative of this *impersonal* love (Idel, p.

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<sup>2</sup> Also cf. Spinoza, *Ethica* V, prop. 32: “Whatsoever we understand by the third kind of knowledge, we take delight in (*eo delectamur*), and our delight is accompanied by the idea of God as cause.” In Rousseau’s epistolary novel *Julie ou la nouvelle Héloïse* we read Julie saying: “je suis environnée de tout ce qui m’intéresse; tout l’univers est ici pour moi; je jouis à la fois de l’attachement que j’ai pour mes amis, de celui qu’ils me rendent, de celui qu’ils ont l’un pour l’autre; leur bienveillance mutuelle ou vient de moi ou s’y rapporte; je ne vois rien qui n’étende mon être, et rien qui le divise; il est dans tout ce qui m’environne, il n’en reste aucune portion loin de moi; mon imagination n’a plus rien à faire, je n’ai rien à désirer; sentir et jouir sont pour moi la même chose; je vis à la fois dans tout ce que j’aime, je me rassasie de bonheur et de vie. O mort! viens quand tu voudras, je ne te crains plus, j’ai vécu, je t’ai prévenue; je n’ai plus de nouveaux sentiments à connaître, tu n’as plus rien à me dérober” (VI,8, my italics, RS).

193). Cosmoeroticism, then, is not equivalent to attempts to sexualize reality, as is the case in some ancient religions (Hanegraaff/Kripal). As opposed to the latter, it draws on continuities (with a higher and lower degree of intensity) rather than on polarities. Cosmoeroticism can already be found in ancient thinkers such as Empedocles who, as Idel reminds us, sees Eros as “a cosmoerotic process which, along with strife, governed all major events in the universe” (Idel, p. 181f). “Neoplatonically oriented Jewish authors”, Idel continues, took Eros to be “a cosmic power, somehow running between God and man via all cosmic hierarchies” (Idel, p. 181f). This cosmic power was supposed to be tending towards a higher ontological plane (God) and to be an essential ingredient both to reality and personality.

Kindred traditions were far more widespread than is sometimes assumed. Idel highlights different Neoplatonic, Neo-Aristotelian and Pseudo-Empedoclean writers, who transmitted their cosmological ideas through Islamic thinkers to medieval Jewish authors. These ideas, deprived of their sexual connotations, were even shared by anti-mystical authors such as Maimonides, who explained the motion of the celestial spheres by highlighting their *desire* to become similar to God (Idel, p. 182). Gersonides, an early 14<sup>th</sup> Century Provençal Jewish thinker, even interprets the verb *va-yikhal* (‘and He completed’, viz. the creation) which is used in the creation account of *Genesis*, as ‘and He desired’ (i.e. the creatures God had made). A similar view can be found in Gersonides’ contemporary, Rabbi Hasdai Crescas: God’s love, in Crescas, is directed towards his creation (Idel, p. 182).<sup>3</sup>

Cosmoeroticism is based on nature’s innate propensities, in other words, on natural processes. Those inspired by it usually testify to antinomian affinities, i.e. a proclivity to neglect the given, positive law. In the context of this book’s focus on *global* ethics, it is highly interesting that cosmoeroticism is tantamount to the rise of more *universalistic* leanings in Judaism.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> As regards the *wa-yikhal* translation, Idel refers to Vajda, p. 250f. Vajda himself mentions a 1547 Venetian manuscript of Gersonides’ *Commentary on the Pentateuch* which I have not been able to consult.

<sup>4</sup> Idel opposes cosmoeroticism to *theoeroticism*, which is more based on ritualistic activities (*hypernomian* performances), based on the human *will*. These activities are theurgic attempts, based upon *sympathetic* affinities, rooted in *isomorphic*

Two forms of cosmoeroticism can be distinguished, an internal and an external form. While for the purpose of this article the latter seems most relevant, the former is not completely without importance, either. *Internal* cosmoeroticism, Idel explains, is identical to some form of mutual attraction of different parts within the human constitution itself, e.g. of the *soul* and the *intellect*, or of the *body* and the *soul/intellect*. In Hebrew, this is called *milhemet ha-yetzer* or *milhemet ha-yetzarim* ('war of the instincts'). See, for example, the 13<sup>th</sup> Century Kabbalist author Abraham Abulafia. However, Idel also underlines the Sufi term *jihad al-nafs* ('spiritual battle') or the Latin *psychomachia* (Idel, p. 184f). Experienced as an inner delight, internal cosmoeroticism is part of a religious process intended to induce delight within the divine realm.

*External* cosmoeroticism, on the other hand, is an outbound form of attraction: the cause loves its effect, and the effect loves its cause. It is mostly Moses Cordovero (16<sup>th</sup> Century) who generated a tradition of such external cosmoerotic motives. Cordovero claims that an attraction of the *higher* entities depends on the *lower* (their shape and preparation, or inner urge); the initiative always seems to come from below. *Isomorphism* enhances attraction: to provoke the (male) influx, the lower entities (female) make themselves God-like.

An interesting point in Cordovero is that cosmoeroticism is not only the expression of an interaction between different layers of reality but also a *prerequisite* for its very existence (Idel, p. 192). Cosmoeroticism is ultimately a reflection and a mirroring of an inner-divine attractivity: "every love and delight (*ta'anug*) that anyone feels can be traced to the supernal worlds" (Idel, p. 200).<sup>5</sup>

As an illustration, I will quote here a passage from Elijah da Vidas, one of Cordovero's main students:

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correspondences: the religious act below is supposed to induce changes within the divine realm, cf., Idel, p. 201.

<sup>5</sup> Also cf. Walter Benjamin, who claims that a flow of uninterrupted self-communication (*Mitteilung*) of all creatures pervades nature. Even nature is pervaded by a mute, nameless language: the residuum of the creative word of God, Benjamin, p. 157. Ludwig Klages argues that sexuality (*Sexus*) originates in Eros, not vice versa. Eros, he states, rests upon polarities (of geniuses, arch-images or souls). If a gendered polarity is at stake, it will be independent of the gendered person (Klages, p. 485). Cf. "Je reicher eine Regung an Begierde, um so mehr Sexus, je reicher an Preisgebung, um so mehr Eros (...). *Nur der Sexus, nicht der Eros ist eifersuchtsfähig*" (488; my italics, RS).

“all the emanation is called love ... and because of love everything exists, and without the love that each cause has for its effect to emanate upon it, the world would be destroyed, and it would return to the chaos. All the degrees are linked to each other from the beginning of the degrees to their end. And if someone were to think that the Keter [the source of emanation, RS] withstands its emanation to Hokhma [a subsequent emanation, RS], because of it the world would be destroyed... Since this is the desire of the effect to suck from its cause, and it is conspicuous that each effect needs its cause to emanate upon it in order to live, and this is the reason why the effect is never separated from the cause, and its love is with it...The existence of love is the link of the cause to the effect effected by it, in order to emanate upon it as the father [does] upon the son” (*Reshit Hokhma*, Gate of Love, chap. 6, 1:457, in Idel, 193f).

### **Attention, *attention*, *attente***

So far we have been studying Weil’s notion of love as elation. I have situated this notion against a medieval Kabbalistic setting featuring cosmoeroticism as a universalizing penchant which pervades nature.

To answer the question as to how such a love can actually, if at all, be experienced, we need to study two related notions central in Weil’s work: ‘attention’ and ‘affliction’ (*malheur*). Together, these notions somehow make up for love as the elation of the soul, attention being the latter’s *exemption*, and affliction its *exhaustion*. I will explain this below.

‘Attention’, as the Latin root already indicates, is closely related to *attendre*, *tendre* or *attente*: ‘to wait’, ‘to reach out for’, ‘waiting’. When combined, the terms refer to ‘wakefulness’, ‘vigilance’, ‘watchfulness’, ‘attentiveness’, ‘observance’, ‘alertness’ (*attention!*), ‘awareness’, etc. An appropriate term that I think conflates these connotations is ‘to focus’/‘focusing’. This term would be an alternative for the proximate though slightly different ‘attunement’, the word by which Heidegger’s *Stimmung* and *Einstimmung* (in *Sein und Zeit*) are usually translated, and which would not fit here. To focus does not equal attuning, since whereas the latter entails accommodation or adjustment, as though an agreement were to be reached, the former is more radical; it entails an attentive letting be, an observant allowing, if not a full ‘allowance’. At the background of recent philosophies such as radical empiricism (James, Bergson), philosophy of life (Dilthey, Klages), existentialism (Heidegger, Jaspers, Marcel), psychoanalysis (Freud), and, obviously, phenomenology (Husserl), Weil’s emphasis on *attente* and *attention* can be seen as one of the numerous attempts to overcome the narrowness of classical (Lockean,

Humean) empiricism. Full experience, Weil would argue, requires patience, attentiveness, and focus. In the following, I will frequently use ‘focus’ as a translation for the French *attention* due to this word’s explanatory virtues.

Let us now have a look at the following questions: How should one be focused? What should be the object of my focus? And, what will be the effects of focusing?

### I How to be focused?

“...any human being,” Weil writes in her spiritual autobiography, “even though practically devoid of natural faculties, can penetrate to the kingdom of truth reserved for genius, *if only he longs for truth and perpetually concentrates all his attention upon its attainment* [fait perpétuellement un effort d’attention pour l’atteindre]. He thus becomes a genius too” (Weil 1966, p. 39/1973, p. 64; my italics, RS).

This passage brings a new psychic reality into play: *desire*. Waiting should coincide with desiring. However, desiring cannot be merely haphazard or arbitrary. It should be directed at, and will *only* be successful in, the “realm of spiritual goodness [*domaine du bien spirituel*], whatever its form” (Weil 1966, p. 39/1973, p. 64),<sup>6</sup> Weil adds. This “realm of spiritual goodness” echoes the “kingdom of truth” (*royaume de la vérité*) in the previous passage. It is not described any further, but we could be sure that this *domain*, on the one hand, and *attentiveness*, on the other, are mutually implicative and elucidating. I would even surmise that already *asking* for the appropriate direction of our focusing would come down to begging the question, and would be proportionate to an *absence* of the requisite focus. What one ought to desire is to become susceptible to the truth (Weil 1966, p. 87f/1973, p. 107).<sup>7</sup> Desire is not directed at truth itself but at becoming a proper receptacle of truth. For, in fact, all our desires are in a way always already fulfilled (Weil 1966, p. 109/1973, p. 109).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> “Le désir possède par lui-même une efficacité dans ce domaine du bien spirituel sous toutes ses formes”.

<sup>7</sup> “Toutes les fois qu’un être humain accomplit un effort d’attention avec le seul désir de devenir plus apte à saisir la vérité, il acquiert cette aptitude plus grande, même si son effort n’a produit aucun fruit visible”.

<sup>8</sup> “Tout ce que l’homme désire vainement ici-bas est parfait et réel en Dieu. Tous ces désirs impossibles sont en nous comme une marque de notre destination, et ils sont bons pour nous dès que nous n’espérons plus les accomplir.”

Furthermore, Weil's addition "whatever its form" suggests that the spiritual domain is manifold; it might be as multiform and diverse as reality itself. It is not likely to be a sphere of objects, let alone an objective sphere, but rather a sphere elucidated by the way we ourselves relate to reality. Desire, therefore, cannot be identified with a longing for concrete objects. Another mistake Weil warns us not to make would be to identify 'desire' simply with common 'prayer': "During all this time of spiritual progress I had never prayed. I was afraid of the power of suggestion that is in prayer" (Weil, 47/70). In her private life, Weil even went as far as *chanting* the Lord's prayer's Greek original, as though it were a mantra, rather than praying it: "I begin again", Weil admits, "until I have once succeeded in going through it with absolutely pure attention" (Weil 1966, p. 48/1973, p. 71). The requisite attention is a proper attitude which will be self-confirming. It cannot be an attitude liable to an overall assessment.

However, in another letter the opposite is stated: the essence of prayer is *attention*: "prayer consists of attention [*la prière est faite d'attention*] the orientation of all the attention of which the soul is capable [*de toute l'attention dont l'âme est capable*] toward God" (Weil 1966, p. 85/1973, p. 105). These statements need not be contradictory, though, if we but define 'prayer' as departing from 'attention', rather than moving towards it. For attention to truly be *prayer* and not simply oratory, it must be exhaustive, full, integral, and dedicated. Any suspicion or self-reflexivity must be relinquished. Furthermore, there seems to be an equivalence between these interrelated notions: *âme* ('soul'), *attention*, and *capability*. As if capability or ability as such can only *arise* from attention, and as if attention itself en-ables, the soul being the pre-eminently en-abling.<sup>9</sup>

## II 'Object' of Focusing

Strictly speaking, if our eager, attentive longing is not to be conceived as directed towards *objects* proper, how, then, are we to explain Weil's sudden 'humanistic' focus? "For nothing among human things," she states, "has such power to keep our gaze fixed ever more intensely upon God, than friendship for the friends of God" (Weil 1966, p. 51/1973, p. 74). Weil leaves the reader without an answer, but we can try to interpret. It should be noted first that she speaks about friendship (*amitié*) here, and

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<sup>9</sup> Also cf. "Ce regard [i.e. the look at the suffering neighbor] est d'abord un regard *attentif*, où *l'âme* se vide de tout contenu propre pour recevoir en elle-même l'être qu'elle regarde tel qu'il est, dans toute sa vérité. Seul en est *capable* celui qui est capable d'attention" (Weil 1966, p. 97/1973, p.115; my italics, RS).

not about love (*amour*). However, rather than at preferential friendship, she seems to aim at a self-transcending friendship. The “friends of God” are usually the widow, the orphan, and the foreigner, or the poor. However, in the immediate context, it could just as well designate her letter’s addressee himself, i.e. the Catholic priest J.-M. Perrin. Friending God’s friends entails the unfriending of ‘preferential’ friends, and so, one might say, it involves love. Moreover, in the same context, Weil seems to reject Perrin’s suggestion to face (*regarder en face*) “faith, dogma and the sacraments”, and rather to substitute these for “God’s friends”.

Following Weil’s argument, and trying to explain its slightly unexpected humanistic twist, I assume that friendship for God’s friends enables us more than anything else to focus on God intensely. By so doing, one would give up objectivity and primarily develop a *focus* consisting of an *attitude* that overcomes any subject-object divide.

For a confirmation of this hypothesis we only have to consult another letter sent to Perrin, written a few years later:

“If no one consents to take any notice [*faire attention*] of the thoughts that, though I cannot explain why, have settled in so inadequate a being as myself, they will be buried with me. If, as I believe they contain some truth, *it will be a pity* [*ce sera dommage*]. I am prejudicial to them. The fact that they happen to be in me prevents people from paying any attention [*qu’on fasse attention*] to them. I see no one but you whom I can implore to give them your attention [*implorer l’attention en leur faveur*]. I should like you to transfer the charity you have so generously bestowed from me to that which I bear within me [*je voudrais qu’elle se détourne de moi et se dirige vers ce que je porte en moi*], and which I like to think is of far more value than I am myself” (Weil 1966, p. 83/1973, p. 100; my italics, RS).

Let us take a closer look at these passages, in which Weil refers to what might be termed the ‘object of focusing’.

What strikes us first is that Weil, suggesting that it will be “a pity” (*ce sera dommage*) if the truths she is bearing will be buried with her, quotes her very addressee, Perrin, who had previously lamented that it would be “a pity” (*ce serait dommage*) if Simone willingly neglected *une grande chose*: “You said: “Be very careful [*Faites bien attention*], because if you should pass over something important [*une grande chose*] through your own fault it would be a pity [*ce serait dommage*]”” (Weil 1966, p. 50/1973, p. 73). This word from Perrin, Simone acknowledges, had gone “to the bottom of my soul [*jusqu’au fond de moi-même*]” (*ibid.*). Next,



Weil's relation to her inner truths is similar to Jesus: "Christ likes us to prefer truth to him because, before being Christ, he is truth. If one turns aside from him to go toward the truth, one will not go far before falling into his arms" (Weil 1966, p. 46/1973, p. 69). Thirdly, the observer should observe with a loving or caring glance ("the charity" must be transferred, must direct itself "from me to that which I bear within me"). Finally, the importance lies in these inner truths rather than in Simone Weil herself, who is simply their keeper. Somehow even, being their keeper makes her susceptible of divine anger more than anybody else - as if God's vents his anger preferably on his beloved ones! Unless it is so that keeping these truths makes one vulnerable and fragile, more responsible even, in this world.<sup>10</sup>

### III Effect of Focusing

The effects of focusing will be twofold. First, divine presence ('attendance') is enforced, as though in a theurgy.<sup>11</sup> Next, the soul is somehow mended, and an evil is removed from it.<sup>12</sup>

In the following passage, we find a beautiful description of the effects of focusing. It brings us back to where we started, with the experience of joy and elation:

"At times the very first words [of the Lord's prayer, RS] tear my thoughts from my body and transport it to a place outside space where there is neither perspective nor point of view. Space opens itself [*L'espace s'ouvre*].<sup>13</sup> The infinity of the ordinary expanses of perception [*l'espace ordinaire de la 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 that of sound. Noises, if there are any, only reach me after crossing this silence" (Weil 1966, p. 48f/1973, p. 72).

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. "Mais peut-être que Dieu se plaît à utiliser les déchets, les pièces loupées, les objets de rebut" (Weil 1966, p. 49/72).

<sup>11</sup> "C'est seulement cette attente, cette attention qui peuvent obliger le maître à un tel excès de tendresse" (Weil 1966, p. 95/1973, p.113).

<sup>12</sup> "Toutes les fois qu'on fait vraiment attention, on détruit du mal en soi" (Weil 1966, p. 92/1973, p. 111).

<sup>13</sup> This sentence ("L'espace s'ouvre.") has erroneously been omitted in the translation.

## Attention as Self-Exemption

We will now see that the essence of attention is *self-exemption*. This comes down to a self-emptying of anything *proper* (“où l’âme se vide de tout contenu *propre*”, my italics, RS), i.e. of any capacity, expectation, anxiety, self-interest, or resistance:

“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. [...] Above all our thought should be empty, waiting [*en attente*], not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object that is to penetrate it” (Weil 1966, p. 92f/1973, p. 111f).

It should be noted that this self-exemption need not altogether *dispense* with acquired knowledge or insights. It only needs to *suspend* them, as if they were needed as receptacles rather than as tools. They need to be put *at disposal*.

What can be expected as a ‘reward’ are “the most precious goods”, since “[w]e do not obtain the most precious gifts by going in search of them but by waiting for them [*doivent ... être... attendus*]. Man cannot discover them by his own powers, and if he sets out to seek for them he will find in their place counterfeits of which he will be unable to discern the falsity” (Weil 1966, p. 93/1973, p. 112). Which “precious goods” would meet this precondition of not being susceptible of searching, only of waiting? A popular saying already has it that the most precious gifts of life are for free: love, life, health, friendship, happiness, etc. These goods will be given on the condition of any (direct) *intent*, *intention*, *intentionality* to be disrupted in favor of *attending*, *attention*, *attentiveness*.<sup>14</sup>

Once more we can resort to the Jewish mystical tradition to find an illuminating background to these ideas about attention and self-exemption. I am referring here to the notions of *kawanna* (‘intention’) and *tsimtsum* (‘contraction’), respectively.

The Hebrew term *kawanna* expresses a form of mystical focus realized during prayer. In *kawanna*, attention is deflected *from* God’s being himself

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Kant who contends that consummate goodness (God’s kingdom) should be the *Gegenstand*, not the *Objekt* of our good will, i.e. its ‘indirect object’, see: *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*.

onto his presence in creation (*shekhina*). In the 16th Century Kabbalist Isaac Luria, for example, prayer becomes a symbolic representation of the world process at large. It should be (re)conceived as a mystical action (re)organizing the world the praying subject pervades in his or her *kawanna*. *Kawanna*, then, is put at the service of *devekuth* ('cleaving onto the divine'). The words of prayer serve as safeguards during inner withdrawal lest the praying person will be overwhelmed (the same function is ascribed to mantras in meditation). Prayer, if properly said, *mends* the world in a messianic way, since it belongs to *tikkun* (world reparation). Man cooperates with God in this process (Enelow, p. 252-288).

*Tsimtsum* ('contraction'), the other relevant background notion to Weil's self-exempting attention, was the Hebrew term by means of which Luria tried to express the divine creation of the world. Creation being different from production, it comes down to God's inner retreat providing space for otherness. It is an act of divine renunciation or abstinence from commanding where God could have commanded. Besides, the profound mystical notion of *tsimtsum* also paved the way for the 'theosophical' philosophies of Hegel and Schelling, if not even for Heidegger's 'ontological difference'.

Interestingly, Simone Weil, giving a completely different bend to this divine 'contraction', puts *creation* and *attention* on the same line. The divine self-contraction or renunciation amounts to God's *creative* attention. Attention attends creation. Note that *con*-centration, required for attention and focusing, is closely related to *con*-traction.<sup>15</sup>

The implication of these ideas is that the human influence on, and responsibility for, the inner side of the world is enormous. If Simone Weil offers a contemporary version of these medieval mystical ideas (which would be my claim), then her contribution might greatly *enhance* a truly global ethics.

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<sup>15</sup> Cf: "Cette attention est créatrice. Mais au moment où elle s'opère elle est renoncement. [...] L'homme accepte une diminution en se concentrant pour une dépense d'énergie qui n'étendra pas son pouvoir, qui fera seulement exister un autre que lui, indépendant de lui", Weil, 1966, p. 133/1973, p. 147.

### Affliction, *malheur*

So far we have been discussing Simone Weil's conception of love as elation, and its corollaries such as attention, self-exemption, and creation. Thus conceived, love may be seen as a way to *suffer* God, or divine things, *precisely* for its renunciatory virtues. Elation, I would argue, creates susceptibility. It extends the range of excitation while renouncing 'subjectivity'. Any ethics pretending to be *global* could learn from Weil's conception of love since it might be any global ethics' very prerequisite.

There is more to be suffered from God, though. Beyond love, there is human misery or, as the English translation has it, affliction (*malheur*). Affliction, Weil asserts, is a form of slavery; it is the enslavement of the soul. Affliction exceeds (mere) physical suffering (*douleur*) since it regards how one ultimately *relates* to this suffering. *Douleur*, however, can lead to *malheur*. *Douleur* can still have a pedagogical virtue, *malheur* not anymore (Weil 1966, p. 117/1973, p. 132).

In a text entitled 'L'Amour de Dieu et le malheur' ('The Love of God and Affliction', *sic!*), Weil tries to analyze affliction. Ultimately, she relates it to God.

What is characteristic of affliction? In the first place, affliction uproots. It disrupts life *integrally*, both body and soul: "Affliction is the tearing up of these roots. [*Le malheur est le déracinement*]" (Weil 1966, p. 174/1973, p. 180). Next, affliction disconnects one's link to God for some time. It makes him absolutely *absent* (even more than a deceased person). Affliction also makes one feel cursed (*maudit*), especially when one is innocent. Also, affliction captivates one's desire to resist. It poisons the soul with inertia. It could even go as far as making one resist one's benefactor. (One cannot avoid thinking here of what Freud has called *Wiederholungszwang*, the 'repetition compulsion'.) Finally, affliction is completely anonymous and blind. It transforms victims into pure objects (Weil 1966, p. 100ff/1973, p. 118ff.).

Weil's account of affliction is completely in line with her account of the effects of *force*, which is described in another text on Homer's *Iliad*. The main character in the *Iliad*, she argues there, is *force*. Force is brutal; it encapsulates living beings either by killing them, or (even) by *not yet* killing them. Numerous passages taken from the *Iliad* illustrate this thesis (Weil, 1999/1965). "The human spirit [*L'âme humaine*]", she contends right at the beginning, "is shown as modified by its relations with force, as

swept away, blinded by the very force it imagined it could handle, as deformed by the weight of the force it submits to” (Weil, 1999, p.529; 1966, p. 6).

However, what does human affliction have to do with God? How does it make the miserable person suffer divine things? Weil’s comments here are as profound as they are enigmatic. They can only be understood at the background of what has been stated about divine self-contraction and renunciation. Affliction, Weil suggests, is to be interpreted in light of inner-divine *love*. Human affliction is ultimately due to the *inner-divine distance* allowing for love:

“This universe where we are living, and of which we form a tiny particle, is the distance put by Love between God and God. We are a point in this distance. Space, time, and the mechanism that governs matter are the distance. Everything that we call evil [*le mal*] is only this mechanism” (Weil 1966, p. 110f/1973, p. 127).

‘Evil’ (*le mal*; cf *malheur*: ‘misery’, ‘affliction’), she argues, is ultimately *distance*: the distance brought about by time, space or matter. Distance includes absence and precludes, or rather, *occludes*, intimacy. For, “wherever the virtue of supernatural light is absent, everything is obedient to mechanical laws as blind and as exact as the laws of gravitation” (Weil 1966, p. 111/1973, p. 128).

This passage leads us to the astonishing conclusion that evil is unilluminated love, i.e. love that is *not yet* visible. It would explain the propinquity in Weil’s texts of love and affliction, *both* defined in terms of contraction and exemption.

Simone Weil explains this equivalence herself by saying that the necessity governing matter becomes obedience *as soon as* love irradiates it. Once brightened, necessity becomes *beauty* (Weil 1966, p. 112f/1973, p. 128f).

“Affliction [*La malheur*] is a marvel of divine technique. It is a simple and ingenious device which introduces into the soul of a finite creature the immensity of force, blind, brutal, and cold. The infinite distance separating God from the creature is entirely concentrated into one point to pierce the soul in its center. The man to whom such a thing happens has no part in the operation. He struggles like a butterfly pinned alive into an album. But through all the horror he can continue to want to love. [...] For the greatest suffering [*la douleur la plus grande*], so long as it does not cause the soul to faint, does not touch the acquiescent part of the soul, consenting to a right direction [*qui consent à une bonne orientation*]. It is only necessary

to know that love is a direction [*une orientation*] and not a state of the soul (Weil 1966, p. 120/1973, p. 135).

Those who are overwhelmed by affliction are ‘pierced’ at their center, and will be enclosing or encompassing the entire distance pervading God. Could it be that, according to Weil, utter human affliction produces the extremist form of *theophany*, if not *theosis*? Does it not bring the sufferer completely *outside* time and space (“*hors l’espace et du temps*”, “*une toute autre dimension*”, Weil 1966, p. 120f/1973, p. 135f)? Despite utter despair, *love* remains a focusing point, a point of orientation (rather than a state of the soul). This orientation corresponds to what we have seen about love as elation: love is the attitude reaching out for the extreme while relying on, and departing from, self-contraction.

### Love as Compassion

It is time to bring what has been said to a more explicit relation to what is called today ‘global ethics’, the main theme of this book. Through considering Simone Weil’s reflections on love, friendship, and affliction in terms of suffering divine things, I intended to offer a background against which such a global ethics might be conceived. More concretely, before anything else, such an ethics would be an ethics of *compassion*. True justice, Weil argues, should be identified with agents’ *love* for their neighbor – and with their *friendship*, provided it be extensive in kind. For only such a justice-as-love will allow for compassion and respect for the sufferer’s dignity. Justice is meant to re-establish an equilibrium between the benefactor and the beneficiary. The benefactors are to act by pure generosity and compassion, *as if* there were a perfect equilibrium, *even if* they were superior in power. Such justice, Weil argues, reproduces the Creator’s original generosity. On the other hand, the beneficiary will by his or her gratefulness, *participate* in this virtue (130/144). The conception of global justice defended by Weil is one intended to restore the equilibrium between all involved parties, rather than one that sets up a divide between them and creates patterns of power and dependence.

“To wish for the existence of this free consent in another, deprived of it by affliction [*qui en a été par le malheur*], is to transport oneself into him; it is to consent to affliction oneself, that is to say to the destruction of oneself. It is to deny oneself. In denying oneself, one becomes capable under God of