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Stuart Jesson
London Jesuit Centre/The Heythrop Institute, UK
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8826-0314
sjesson@jesuit.org.uk

# "A Certain Way of Thinking": Derrida, Weil and the Philippi Hymn

Abstract:
Toward the beginning of one of her notebooks, Simone Weil interrupts a dense series of reflections on war, force and prestige to write, in parentheses: "(To think on God, to love God, is nothing else than a certain way of thinking on the world.)" In some respects, this one sentence is a crystallization of everything Weil wrote about God. The thought of God is somehow inseparable from a new mode of attention to and valuation of things "here below"; that is, from "a certain way of thinking." In the discussion that follows I reflect on how this "certain way of thinking" might be understood, in dialogue with a few exemplary moments from Derrida's late work, Martin Hägglund's reading of Derrida, as well as some biblical scholarship on Philippians 2: 5–11, and a number of richly suggestive comments from Weil's notebooks. I show that the conceptual *aporias* that, on Derrida's account, reliably emerge from ethical reflection are inchoately affirmed by Weil and (a certain reading of) the Philippi hymn. More than this, I will suggest that when read in this way, the latter allows for a new interrogation of the role that the experience of conceptual *aporia* may play in *metanoia*, the changing of mind.

Keywords:
Derrida, Weil, metanoia, aporia, kenosis, God

## 1. Derrida and *Aporia*: Thought as Suffering

The issues that I aim to explore here concern not so much the specific content of any one of Derrida's analyses, but something rather vaguer that underlies a number of related themes (decision, gift, forgiveness, justice and hospitality, in particular). In his later work Derrida analyzed these themes, and in each case, found that to

think these concepts, to think *with* these concepts, is to find oneself torn between two incompatible conceptual poles, or forms of thought, and yet unable – or even forbidden – to dispense with one or the other. These irresolvable tensions are sometimes described in terms of the formula "heterogeneous-yet-indissociable." For example, we find that we cannot separate justice from law, even though we are compelled to distinguish the two as being alien to each other. There is something "infinite" about justice, something that concerns the incalculable singularity of the other.[1] Law, however, necessarily concerns prescription and calculation, and, it seems, can be exercised mechanically without any sense of an infinite call from the singular other. But for Derrida, despite what seems like a qualitative difference, the distinction is not straightforward, and justice and law can neither be fully distinguished nor finally separated: justice is always beyond the law, and yet justice demands law; justice demands that it be exercised in the name of a legitimate authority, and law always claims to be acting in the name of justice.[2] Under these conditions, the experience of thinking becomes the experience, firstly, of impasse or *aporia*, in that there appears to be a conflict that we cannot pass beyond or resolve, and secondly, of an irreducible impurity, in that differences that appear to be necessary and inevitable nevertheless remain confused, their boundaries unclear. This experience is affirmed – clearly at times, but by implication throughout – as being necessary for any responsible ethical reflection, as if the willingness to suffer the *aporia* is a kind of entry requirement for ethics, a test or ordeal: "A sort of nonpassive endurance of the *aporia* [is] the condition of responsibility and of decision… . Such an experience must remain such if one wants to think, to make come or to let come any event of decision or of responsibility."[3] As Derrida puts it in one interview, *aporia* – the impasse – does not paralyze, but paradoxically turns out to be the condition of any movement at all.[4]

As a result of this, it is tempting to say that Derrida's work is based upon a conviction not dissimilar to the ancient thought that wisdom comes through suffering. One suffers the inability to think what one is nevertheless compelled to think, so that the twists and turns of conceptual thought come to mirror the suffering of lived experience: thought as something one suffers; a "nonpassive endurance." It is also tempting to say that above and beyond any definite claims about particular ethical concepts, it is as a result of the seriousness of this underlying conviction that Derrida's work has had the biggest impact within theological and ethical discourse. A few brief examples will have to serve to make this point. Ted Jennings, in his book *Reading Derrida/Thinking Paul*, emphasizes the Levinasian tendency in Derrida, which works as a continually "disquieting tendency" which prevents the formation of good conscience.[5] Developing a phrase that Derrida used in relation to the idea of gift ("we can think what we cannot know").[6] Jennings writes: "Not only can we think what we do not know, but it also seems to be the case that thinking is decisively connected to what we do not know. Thinking requires a certain impossibility even to get underway precisely as thinking, especially if thinking means something that aims to stay with, rather than liquidate, the question."[7] In a similar vein, John D. Caputo has articulated the basic posture of deconstruction in terms of a restless "sighing," as if the relentless attention to the openings and fissures in any conceptual scheme were a sign of "a messianic discontent," akin to "the impatience of the

1) Derrida, "Force of Law," 254.

2) Ibid., 251.

3) Derrida, *Aporias*, 16. See also, for example, "Force of Law," 253.

4) Derrida, "Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility," 73.

5) Jennings, *Reading Derrida/Thinking Paul,* 26. Derrida comments more informally on this point in an exchange with John Milbank in "On Forgiveness: A Roundtable Discussion," 69. See also Derrida, *Aporias*, 20.

6) Derrida, "On the Gift: A Discussion between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion," 60.

7) Jennings, *Reading Derrida/Thinking Paul*, 84.

prophets."[8] Finally, for Simon Critchley, the "ethics of deconstruction" can be described as an accompanying counter-activity to the activity of philosophical thinking itself: philosophy "reduces plurality to unity and otherness to sameness," such that deconstruction is understood as a kind of continual repentance; opening what has been prematurely closed.[9] What Derrida appears to offer, in short, is a form of philosophical activity in which thinking comes close to being a form of *metanoia*, one which necessarily takes the form of suffering (it is perhaps not surprising that Derrida's late work has found some of its most devoted readers in theology departments). Even when deconstruction is understood to be radically atheistic, and these theological appropriations are challenged (as in the work of Martin Hägglund) it is still framed in a way that suggests that it involves resisting a deep and enduring temptation; the desire to deny, suppress or overcome temporality.[10]

This basic point can be seen most easily in Derrida's unusually clear descriptions of the structure of responsibility.[11] Over and over again, Derrida tried to show that responsibility – as an experience, and as a thought – is intimately linked with a kind of ordeal, or even trauma. This ordeal is intimately linked with the experience of decision. A decision is suspended between two possibilities, which, although seemingly opposite, are complicit in taking away the burden of the moment of decision. On the one hand, there could be the sense that a reliable body of knowledge provides one with a guarantee that one is making, and will have made, a right decision; on the other, the sense that the lack of reliable ethical knowledge or principles relieves one of the burden of responsibility, or allows one to defer it (his main target is more obviously the former; the latter is the interpretation of his early work he attempts to distance himself from). Responsibility is dependent upon decision (that is, one has to *take* responsibility, to assume something), and yet decision is dependent upon responsibility (that is, without the need to answer for oneself in some way, there is no weight, no burden, no need to decide). In other words, in order for there to be *responsible* decision, the responsible subject must be somehow suspended between these two possibilities, so that one does not disappear into the certainty that knowledge promises, nor relax into the ease that unprincipled spontaneity appears to offer:

> In order to be responsible and truly decisive, a decision should not limit itself to putting into operation a determinable or determining knowledge, the consequence of some pre-established order. But, conversely, who would call a decision that is without rule, without norm, without determinable or determined law, a decision? Who will answer for it as if for a responsible decision, and before whom? Who will dare call duty a duty that owes nothing, or, better (or, worse), that must owe nothing?[12]

So on the one hand, a decision is an experience of a double injunction, but on the other hand it is also an experience of opposed temptations, both of which might restore good conscience. So the "disquieting tendency" of Derrida's analyses aims to strip away the veneer of good conscience, so that we may be exposed to the experience of decision, which is suspended between normativity and creativity, not at some kind of ideal meeting

8) Caputo, "What do I love when I love my God?," 307. It should be noted in passing that Caputo's interpretation has Derridean deconstruction – especially concerning the relationship between desire and the unconditional – has come under significant pressure from Martin Hägglund's reading of Derrida. Given the depth and complexity of Caputo's subsequent response to Hägglund, I will not comment on this disagreement here.

9) Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction,* 29.

10) Naas' discussion of Hägglund in "An Atheism that (Dieu merci!)," especially 64–66.

11) See in particular Derrida, "The Deconstruction of Actuality," "Nietzsche and the Machine," and "Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility."

12) Derrida, *Aporias*, 17.

point or combination of the two, but through the experienced trauma both of their coincidence, and their lack of harmony.

This analysis is taken to its extreme in *The Gift of Death*, where Derrida stresses that ultimately each ethical decision involves a terrible sacrifice: I must decide to give (time, attention, resources, protection) to *this* other at the expense of all the *other* others. But because *every* other wholly other,[13] no principle can possibly ground, or justify, this decision.[14] In his analysis of Kierkegaard's Abraham, Derrida tries to show that there is a sense in which each decision puts us in the position of "the knight of faith"; that is, alienated from the reassuring coherence and universality of "the ethical." Put differently, the claim is that the "fear and trembling" which – for Kierkegaard – characterizes the religious sphere can in fact be seen to structure the ethical sphere as well.[15] Just as Kierkegaard tried to strip away the familiarity and assurance that surrounds the idea of faith, so as to expose its abyssal depths, so Derrida tried to do something similar with ethical concepts and experience. The implication of this may not often be discussed explicitly, but seems to be clear: there is something mystifying about any attempt to possess "good conscience," that is, to be secure in the knowledge of the rightness of one's decisions. In this sense the deconstructive analysis merely aims to uncover something that is always already there, but which can be evaded through the construction or maintenance of false forms of thought: concepts that seem to possess solidity or self-same purity, and a corresponding confidence or certainty. And so there is a form of suffering that deconstructive analysis aims to uncover, and produce, and it is assumed to be a necessary undergoing of great ethical significance, a kind of intellectual purification, even though it is precisely "purity" that it opposes.

Thus far, it could appear that the way in which Derrida conceives of "the ordeal" that marks ethical thought is basically Levinasian. For Levinas, entry into the ethical arena is always a form of trauma, as I encounter the face of the other, which can never be given any determinate meaning, or conceptually mastered, but which nevertheless calls me into responsibility, a responsibility which always exceeds my capacity. However, in important ways, Derrida's understanding of the nature of the ordeal at the center of ethical life is quite different.[16] In Derrida's account of various ethical themes the experience of *aporia* is not just related to the ungraspable singularity of the other, but is also linked to the impossibility of reconciling two "orders," of meaning that are entangled in our most important ideas. As already noted, in describing the problematic relation between these two orders, or poles, Derrida often uses the phrase "heterogeneous-yet-indissociable": the two orders are both alien to each other, and yet impossible to separate either in thought or in practice.

This structure could be explored through a number of different themes, but here we will focus on hospitality. On the one hand, we have what Derrida terms "*the* law of unlimited hospitality," which commands unconditional welcome: to be open to whatever or whoever it is that arrives at one's door, to welcome "before identification."[17] On the other hand, hospitality always turns out to be a conditional phenomenon, because it always depends upon sovereignty of some kind, which must be protected and maintained. In order to welcome anyone, I must have some kind of power over a certain domain, and because this power of sovereignty will always necessarily be finite, there will always be collusion between hospitality and power, a relationship which gives rise to laws of hospitality, selection, and ultimately violent exclusion (my house always remains *my* house;

13) Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 68.

14) Ibid., chapters 3 and 4.

15) Ibid., 78–79

16) On the question of Derrida's relationship to Levinas, see Critchley's influential reading in *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, 107–44, and Martin Hägglund's challenge to Critchley in *Radical Atheism*, 76–106.

17) Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, 77.

I only welcome certain identified others, not all and sundry; I welcome them to a limited extent and for a limited duration).[18] For Derrida, the real difficulty – the ordeal – here is not the thought of an impossible "beyond" of a call to unconditional hospitality; rather it is the impossibility of the necessity of having to *relate* the unconditional to the conditional. This relationship is essential, as Derrida points out:

> But even while keeping itself above the laws of hospitality, *the* unconditional law of hospitality needs the laws, it requires them. This demand is constitutive. It wouldn't be effectively unconditional, the law, if it didn't have to become effective, concrete determined, if that were not its being as having-to-be. It would risk being abstract, utopian, illusory, and so turning over into its opposite. In order to be what it is, *the* law thus needs the laws, which, however, deny it, or at any rate threaten it, sometimes corrupt or pervert it. And must always be able to do this.[19]

In other words, the unconditional demand demands to become manifest, apparent, real; but in doing so is destined to be betrayed. The unconditional is necessarily oriented to that which will cause its disappearance. And similarly, particular *laws* of hospitality are only coherent against the horizon of *the* law of hospitality, because hospitality, in order to *be* hospitality cannot be *simply* "dutiful" or mechanical obedience to given laws. The necessarily exclusive conditions of hospitality always gesture toward unlimited openness of "absolute" hospitality, which they nevertheless prevent.[20]

In summary, it seems that Derrida's work rests on the underlying conviction that a certain kind of suffering is constitutive of a certain kind of thinking, which can be understood in both terms of impurity, and the heterogeneous-yet-indissociable relationship between two opposed orders of meaning. The discussions below aim to show that similar conceptual dynamics appear in Weil notebooks and (a certain reading of) the Philippi hymn, but more than this, that this dynamic is related to revaluation, or *metanoia*, in a way that is not emphasized in Derrida's own work.

## 2. Hägglund and Weil: "the Unscathed"

What does it mean to think on God, to love God; what kind of thinking is this "certain kind of thinking"? Derrida begins his essay "Faith and Knowledge" with the link between religion and "the unscathed": "*the holy, the sacred, the safe and sound, the unscathed* <indemne>*, the immune* (sacer, sanctus, heilig*, holy, and their alleged equivalents in so many languages*)."[21] For Martin Hägglund, "the unscathed" is constitutive of religion as such.[22] Religious desire is secretly fuelled by the thought of the negation of temporality, and so equates to the imagination of absolute death. As he states in the introduction to *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life*:

> Derrida does not limit himself to the atheist claim that God is dead; he repeatedly makes the claim that God is death. That God is death does not mean that we reach God through death, or that God rules over death. On the contrary, it means that the idea of immortality – which

18) Ibid., 55.

19) Ibid., 79.

20) Ibid., 81.

21) Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge," 42.

22) Hägglund, "The Radical Evil of Deconstruction," 129.

> according to Marion is "the idea that we cannot *not* form of God" – is inseparable from the idea of absolute death.[23]

Because (apparently by definition), the thought of God is the thought of an absolute purity, immune from all loss, erosion or change, we must conclude that to think on God, to love God, is (impossibly) to love nothingness, because exposure to the violence of time is the condition for anything to happen at all. The love of God is a kind of attack on life, insofar as life depends on what Hägglund calls "survival." In an essay on deconstruction and psychoanalysis, he describes the relationship between the "trace structure" of time and "survival" as follows:

> The structure of the trace follows from the constitution of time, which makes it impossible for anything to be present in itself. Every now passes away as soon as it comes to be and must therefore be inscribed as a trace in order to be at all. The trace enables the past to be retained, since it is characterized by the ability to remain in spite of temporal succession. The trace is thus the minimal condition for life to resist death in a movement of survival. The trace can only live on, however, by being left for a future that may erase it. The tracing of time is the minimal protection of life, but it also attacks life from the first inception, since it breaches the integrity of any moment and makes everything susceptible to annihilation.[24]

Since *all* desire must first of all be the desire for survival, for living-on, and since living is necessarily exposure to what comes from an unknown future, we *cannot* desire that in which there is no future, no temporal movement, no becoming. In this sense, all life, and all desire for life, is necessarily internally divided between the desire to live on, and the necessity to remain open to erasure: "The co-implication of life and death spells out an autoimmunity at the heart of life as such."[25] However, for Hägglund, it seems that the conception of "the unscathed" is "auto-immune" in a unique way, because it envisages an *absolute* immunity (God as immutable, inviolable, incorruptible). But such a concept is structured by a refusal of the very conditions that make all life, and desire for life possible as such.[26] For Hägglund, then, to think on God, to love God, would be to think on an imagined opposite to the conditions of life as such.

Weil's thought opens up an intriguing dialogue with Hägglund's Derrida for two reasons. Firstly, we find that in so many places, her account of religious desire, spiritual transformation, or ethical purification, seems to conform very closely to Hägglund's analysis of the nihilism of religious thought. For Weil, to desire God is indeed to desire death, to desire to no longer be, or, in Weil's terms, to be "decreated."[27] God is indeed thought, at times, as self-sufficient repose, a goodness that has no need, openness, or possibility of corruption; "the supreme and real good, eternally satisfied by Himself."[28] Perhaps most importantly, her account of spiritual transformation implies that finite, temporal life is destined for annihilation in this perfect good, such that moral and spiritual progress involves an anticipation of this erasure;[29] a journey toward the nothing-

23) Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, 8.

24) Hägglund, "Chronolibidinal Reading: Deconstruction and Psychoanalysis," 7.

25) Hägglund, *Radical Atheism,* 14.

26) Hägglund, "The Radical Evil of Deconstruction," 131; Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, 8–9.

27) See Veto, *The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil*, ch. 1 for a comprehensive exposition.

28) Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 136.

29) Ibid., 152.

ness.[30] Superficially, there are grounds in Weil's writing to confirm Hägglund's thesis that the thought of God is nothing other than the thought of absolute death, and to think on this God, to love this God, would involve a furious and impossible negation of life.[31]

Secondly, however, we find that in very many respects, Weil's comments on time, desire, and attention are intriguingly similar to Hägglund's own analysis of "chronophobia," and to his analysis of the "chronolibinal economy of desire."[32] For Hägglund, all human desire is marked by a chronophobia which, in turn, is the basis for, and inseparable from, a corresponding chronophilia. We fear time, because nothing is ever present-as-such, and every living present is only possible as such insofar as it opens itself to its own erasure. Yet at the same time, and as a result, we want more time, time in which to live on; we want more of what we cannot fully accept.[33] For Hägglund, the religious impulse has to be understood as a heightened form of chronophobia; a fear and disgust of temporal existence so deep and profound that it imagines an opposite. However, we frequently find Weil herself describing an underlying pathology of human desire in terms of similar allergy to time: "All sins are an attempt to escape from time. Virtue is to submit to time, to press it to the heart until the heart breaks."[34] On Weil's account, there is an important connection between temporality and what she calls "imagination": the "imagination" is continually at work in an ongoing attempt to deny our temporal condition. A Schopenhauerian passage from the beginning of a short essay on the love of God makes this point clearly:

> To believe in God is not a decision that we can make. All we can do is to decide not to give our love to false gods. In the first place, we can decide not to believe that the future contains for us an all-sufficient good. The future is made of the same stuff as the present. We are well aware that the good which we possess at present, in the form of wealth, power, consideration, friends, the love of those we love, the well-being of those we love, and so on, is not sufficient; yet we believe that on the day when we get a little more we shall be satisfied. We believe this because we lie to ourselves. If we really reflect for a moment, we know it is false. Or again, if we are suffering from illness, poverty, or misfortune, we think we shall be satisfied on the day when it ceases. But there too, we know it is false; as soon as one has got used to not suffering one wants something else… . A thing everyone can do is to keep his attention fixed upon this truth.[35]

The "certain kind of thinking" that Weil aspires to involves a painful awareness of the internal conflict in all our desiring.[36] For Weil, there is a fundamental mismatch between, on the one hand, human desire (and the ways of thinking about the world that such desire gives rise to), and, on the other, the reality of temporal existence. Somehow, our desires and expectations are set up to be frustrated, insofar as they aim at perfect satiety, or secure and final possession of a good; something which is necessarily impossible for temporal beings ("Limited desires are in harmony with the world. Desires which contain the infinite are not").[37] But for Weil, the result of this is not *just* a cycle of dissatisfaction, renewed desire, and further frustration, at an individual

30) Ibid., 310.

31) Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, 32–34; 46–48.

32) Hägglund, *Dying for Time: Proust, Wolf, Nabokov.*

33) Ibid., 155.

34) Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 102; Weil, *Notebooks*, 22.

35) Weil, *Science, Necessity and the Love of God*, 148.

36) See, for example the reflections in *Notebooks*, 495–98.

37) Ibid., 48.

level. It is also that we in fact lose contact with reality as such. We relate to anything outside ourselves through the veil that the imagination throws over things, which means that anything we experience is judged on the basis of a standard set up by our own inability to accept temporal finitude. This basic point is made at various points throughout Weil's notebooks but is particularly apparent in a comment from the Marseille notebooks that concern love: "not to desire that that which one loves should be immortal. Standing in front of a human being, whoever it may be – not to wish him either immortal or dead."[38] Love, then, depends upon an embrace of temporal finitude. To wish someone dead (the aim implied in hatred) is to wish the temporal form that they are to cease, to put an end to it. On the contrary, to love someone without accepting their inevitable death – to exclude the possibility of their death from one's love – is to wish them to be a different kind of being altogether (one immune to the passage of time). Both hatred and love are united by their refusal to accept the being as they are: real, but temporal, and limited.

On Weil's account, then, the capacity to pay attention to the world, and to discrete others, is only possible through an acceptance of the way in which we are subject to what Weil calls the "violence" of time, if we press it to the heart, until the heart breaks. If we cannot accept, and affirm, our complete submergence in temporal passage, then all our love, and attention, will be evasive, insofar as it is driven by a desire for stable, unchanging realties that can be securely possessed by the ego. However, it appears that Weil linked this acceptance of time *with* an orientation toward transcendence. Or, she thought that the honest acceptance of finitude and the love of God, properly understood, were intimately linked; possible as a result of the same kind of thinking. In many respects, Weil is concerned with the form, not the content, of this "certain kind of thinking." There is no space to do justice here to the depth and complexity of her reflections in this vein, let alone the interpretive difficulties that arise as a result of the fragmentary nature of her written legacy. However, there are good reasons to think that the seeming contradiction noted above – and others with a similar structure – are integral to Weil's project, and that her commitment to this approach predates the mystical experiences that caused her to begin her explicitly religious reflections. For Weil, honest thought about the world involves a certain trauma: one has to accept and endure the mismatch between human desire and the conditions of any possible experience.

This basic point can be seen in Weil's critique of Marx: implicitly in her long essay "Reflections Concerning the Causes of Liberty and Social Oppression and Liberty," and then explicitly in essay fragments written in London just before her death. In the pre-war essay Weil criticizes Marx from a number of different angles: the failure to recognize way in which oppression necessarily results from specialization; the failure to take his "materialistic method" to its logical conclusions; superstitious belief in the unlimited increase in productivity; the lack of clear meaning in the term "revolution."[39] Weil goes on to argue for the importance of formulating as clearly as possible a conception of perfect liberty (understood not in terms of the absence of restraint or resistance to desires, but in terms of a relationship between thought and action);[40] whilst at the same time accepting the impossibility of such a state. Here we have the beginnings of the thought that a certain kind of impossible desire ("desire without an object")[41] is intimately linked to the *possibility* of any imperfect, and limited but actual, justice. Liberty should be conceived of *in* its impossibility, and desired nonetheless; only then will one possess the cold lucidity necessary to give an adequate account of the nature and extent of oppression.[42] This thought is

38) Ibid., 40.

39) Weil, "Reflections Concerning the Causes of Liberty and Social Oppression," 38–53.

40) Ibid., 81.

41) Weil, *Notebooks*, 421, 553.

42) Weil, "Reflections Concerning the Causes of Liberty and Social Oppression," 79–83.

developed more starkly in the later fragments on Marx: Marx failed to accept the essential contradiction in the human condition: "that man is subject to force, and craves for justice."[43] The only way to give a perfectly lucid account of human relations, and the workings of force amongst them, is through "the incomprehensible notion that there is a unity between the necessity and the good, in other words, between reality and the good, outside this world."[44] If the unity is not located "outside" the world, we will inevitably be led toward self-deception, as a result of the need to locate it *somewhere*, and so end up failing to be sufficiently materialist.[45] Her central objection to Marx then becomes clear: Marx conceived of this unity at the wrong "level"; rather than looking up, he looked ahead.[46] The problem is not that there is a contradiction at the foundation of his thought (subjection to force; the craving for justice) but that he failed to contemplate the contradiction, and accept it, or suffer its trauma. In more conventional theological language: Marx was an idolater (as, according to Weil, are "the majority of the pious").[47] But for Weil, "idolatry" is not primarily about how one thinks on God, but about how one thinks on the world, how one loves the world: it is that which prevents contact with reality, because it means a failure to accept finitude *as* finite.

The point, then, is that it is impossible to separate the transcendent impulses in Weil's thought from her concern to provide a cold, lucid account of the workings of force. Her account of an insatiable desire for transcendent good arises from within her attempt to understand oppression, and she ends by concluding that acknowledging the transcendent aim of human longing is the condition of the possibility of acceptance of finite, temporal existence, and any (equally limited and finite) intervention for the good in social, political, and economic life. The "certain kind of thinking" that Weil spent her last years trying to describe, then, is curiously indeterminate: on one side, it appears as a ruthless turning away from all finite good "here below"; on the other side, it appears as a relentless critique of the failure to accept the real, ineradicable and constitutive constraints of human life.

This point can be seen more clearly in the way in which key oppositional pairs of terms are used in her writing, especially at those moments where Weil tries to articulate something like a fundamental shift in perspective, or a moment of revaluation. There seems to be a basic structure in these many of these descriptions: a transformation of perspective that comes in the wake of some kind of traumatic acceptance and affirmation. As a result of this logic, conflicts like the one briefly outlined above are structurally essential in Weil's thought, and some questions concerning her conception of transcendence may be *necessarily* unresolvable. More than this, Weil herself seems to have been aware of this, as one of the more famous entries in her notebooks suggests: "The world is the closed door. It is a barrier, and at the same time it is the passage-way."[48] The section that immediately follows this is one of Weil's clearest articulations of mystical insight, or transformation of perspective:

> If we want only the absolute good, that is to say, if we reject all the existing or possible, sensible, imaginary or conceivable good that is offered us by creatures as being insufficient; if we prefer to choose nothing at all rather than all that, then, (with time), being turned toward that which we cannot possible conceive, a revelation of it comes to us – the revelation that this nothingness is

43) Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*, 150.

44) Ibid., 150–51.

45) Ibid., 149–51.

46) Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 308.

47) Weil, *Oppression and Liberty,* 151.

48) Weil, *Notebooks,* 492.

> really the fullest possible fullness, the main-spring and principle of all reality. Then we can truthfully say that we have faith in God.[49]

Similar moments occur throughout Weil's work. Although these ideas are not articulated systematically, each of these descriptions seems to have a similar structure: refusal of illusion, difficult acceptance (without despair), and affirmation followed by some kind of opening-up: a change in dimension, or perspective.

The presence-absence opposition appears throughout the notebooks, especially related to discussions of the absence of final good "here below," which is, in turn, linked to the need to maintain a desire for what one nevertheless knows to be absent, and inaccessible, as already noted. In one sense, Weil's use of this opposition is a result of her metaphysics; God is the good that lies outside the world, immune to any change. In *this* sense, her work might offer further support for Hägglund's diagnosis: that the thought of God is linked to the negation of temporality, which equates to absolute death. In another sense, however, the language of presence and absence works in a very different way, such that the distinction is found to be unstable. For Weil, our sense of the distinction between presence and absence is conditioned by the operation of the sinful ego. Our sense of what it *means* for something to be "present" in the first place – and therefore of what we feel to be absent – is determined by the acquisitive ego that can comprehend only that which can be accessed immediately.[50] We think things are present, and real, when we feel that we can acquire, assimilate, or possess them. So, from the perspective of the needy greedy ego things are felt to be "absent" if they are not accessible in this way; because their existence does not seem relevant (as she says at one point: there are a great many people who do not feel "with their whole soul" the difference between the destruction of a town, and their own permanent exile from it).[51]

If we take this point seriously, it seems that revelation cannot simply consist in an unveiling, in which "this nothingness" is found to really be fullness, because the shift in perspective is so closely related to the sense that at the same time one learns how to pay attention to reality in a different way, and the categories through which one comprehends the world are in the process of being changed. The good is inaccessible to a certain form of acquisitive desire, which means that if one recognizes this, and if one continues to desire the good nonetheless, one is forced to desire in a different way – without movement; or as she says, "to contemplate the desirable without approaching."[52] Once one "waits," and continues to desire without an object, so that one confronts the full force of one's desire, but stripped of the impulse to possess, one finds that one's way of determining what is "present" has been undermined, and the opposition between presence and absence is no longer stable. So, when Weil writes of finding God present through God's absence, or present as absent, and so on, she is trying to write as if situated in the midst of a transformation of perspective, which necessarily means that the meaning of these terms is unstable. One does not know, anymore, what it means for something to be "present." In this way, the recognition of the radical transcendence/absence of the good, which is vital in her thought, is not straightforwardly a metaphysical statement about transcendence, but is also about the mode of human evaluation and apprehension: the indeterminacy belongs to this "certain way of thinking."

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49) Ibid.

50) Ibid., 489–90.

51) Ibid., 366.

52) Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 71.

## 3. From "Although" to "Because": Revaluation and the Logic of *Kenosis*.

The considerations above bring us to the question of revaluation, or *metanoia*, the changing of mind. On Nietzsche's reading, the rhetoric of reversal (weakness as strength; foolishness as wisdom; all that was considered gain, now taken as loss) is the sign not of a fundamental change of perspective, or deep repentance, but rather of an imaginary and spiritualized revenge, borne out of impotence.[53] On this reading, the Judeo-Christian "slave revolt" in morals is a reactive and yet superficial affair; a mere negation, unable to escape from the logic of domination it nevertheless opposes. Even after one sifts out some of the extravagance and pettiness of Nietzsche's attack, a genuine problem remains: how to understand the "reversals" that characterize some of the most powerful New Testament teachings, not to mention the central image of a crucified God. In the discussion below, I hope to show that in one particularly significant case – the Philippi hymn – the logic of revaluation can be useful read in parallel with Derrida's account of ethico-political *aporia*. As we will see, not only does the conceptual dynamic that emerges display intriguing similarities to Derrida's understanding of the conditional/unconditional relationship, it also suggests something further, which links the experience of conceptual impurity to *metanoia*, or the possibility of revaluation.

Whilst the "ethical" interpretation of Philippians 2: 5–11 has at times been contentious within biblical studies, I am happy to assume here – along with a number of biblical scholars – that this passage is, one way or another, central to understanding Paul's vision of life in Christ.[54] Perhaps more importantly, as Wayne Meeks pointed out, Paul's use of the hymn aims at something more fundamental than behavior: before the humility of Christ can instruct believers on the way they are to behave, it must show them something about how they are to *think*.[55] This point is developed in a more recent study of this text. Michael J. Gorman links Paul's use of the hymn to a "narrative soteriology," and suggests that Paul conceives of sanctification in terms of *theōsis*, where God is understood as essentially "cruciform."[56] Christian life is centered on the task of becoming like God, but the understanding of what is *meant* by "God" is transformed by the revelation of Christ crucified. And so for Gorman, Paul's understanding of holiness should be thought in terms of participation in the cruciformity of God, or in his paraphrase of Leviticus, the command to "be cruciform as I am cruciform."[57] The voluntary self-humbling and self-emptying of Christ is held by Paul to demonstrate not only the essentially "cruciform" character of God, but also the basic shape of life in Christ.

However, the crucial point for this discussion is that for Gorman, this new form of life does not emerge from a simple description of what or how God is, but from an ambiguous textual dynamic, found in the first lines of the Philippi hymn, which the NRSV translates as follows:

> Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
> who, though he was in the form of God,
> did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,
> but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.

53) See Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* for the classic articulation of these ideas.

54) See Fowl, "Christology and Ethics in Philippians 2: 5–11" for an argument that the story narrated in these verses functions as a model that Paul "phronetically" applies to common life. See also Wright, *Climax of the Covenant*, 56–98.

55) Meeks, *In Search of the Early Christians*, 107.

56) Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God*.

57) Ibid., 106.

The interpretative difficulty that Gorman is interested in concerns the translation of the first line of the hymn, and specifically whether the participle *hyparchōn* should be understood primarily concessively (which would give "*although* he was in the form of God" – favored by the translation above) or causatively ("*because* he was in the form of God"). Gorman argues that this ambiguity is not accidental, but linked to the depth and difficulty of the underlying thoughts being expressed. On Gorman's account, the text has a surface structure ("*although* he was"), and a deeper structure ("*because* he was in the form of God").[58] For Gorman, these two possibilities have very different theological implications. The former implies that the movement of self-emptying and descent contrasts with the identity of the one in descent; the latter implies that the descent emerges naturally from the identity, as he writes: "[o]ne implies that Christ's condescension was a contravention of his true identity, while the other implies that it was the embodiment of his true identity."[59] For Gorman, the theological world of the "because" is deeper and stranger than the more familiar world implied by the "although." This movement from surface to depth is crucial, otherwise one misses the full import of what is being said: "God, we must now say, is essentially *kenotic*, and indeed essentially cruciform. *Kenosis*, therefore, does not mean Christ's emptying himself of his divinity (or of anything else), but rather Christ's *exercising* his divinity, his equality with God."[60] In other words, we have here a transformation of what is meant by "God," or a revaluation of what "divinity" consists in.[61]

Gorman argues that a similar dynamic is found at important junctures of Paul's letters, and that it is of central relevance to his understanding of life in Christ. This can be summarized in terms of a formula: "although [x], not [y] but [z]" or "although [status], not [selfishness] but [selflessness]";[62] this, Gorman says, is Paul's basic storyline, and an important underlying structure in his thought.[63] This structure is seen most clearly in Paul's words about his rights as an apostle: although Paul has the rights of an apostle, he does not use them, but rather gives them up in order to serve; however, in doing so, he actually *expresses* his identity as an apostle and shares most fully in the gospel.[64] This means that Paul's thought has a complex, and somewhat indeterminate relation to the whole idea of status:

> The "[x]" in the pattern represents a status that is already possessed and that can be either exploited for a selfish gain or not. Moreover, the evidence of truly possessing such a status is in the refusal to exploit it selfishly and thus to use it in such a selfless way that its use seems to be a renunciation of the status but is in fact a different-from-normal-manner of incarnating that status.[65]

58) Ibid., 16–29.

59) Ibid., 26.

60) Ibid., 28.

61) See also Wright, *Climax of the Covenant*, 83–87 on this point.

62) Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God*, 22.

63) See 1 Thess 2:7; 1 Cor 9:12–23; 2 Cor 8:9; Rom 15:1–3 for statements expressing a similar logic. Equally, this also seems to be the logic of John 13: 3–4. I am grateful to Dr Matthew Malcom for conversations clarifying this point.

64) See, for example 1 Thessalonians 2: 7; 2 Corinthians 12: 15.

65) Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God*, 24. The potential for this structure to be collapsed into a superficial paradox of straightforward (and therefore potentially endless) reversal is brought out in Monty Python's *The Life of Brian*. After hearing the beleaguered Brian vigorously and explicitly denying that he is the Messiah, an avid follower declares, after an awkward pause: "Only the true Messiah denies his divinity!" To which an exasperated Brian replies: "What?! Well, what kind of chance does that leave me? Ok, I *am* the Messiah!"

If we were to employ the terms used by Vladimir Jankélévitch in his *Le Pardon*, we might say that here there is an "even though" which implicitly upholds a logically prior "because":[66] if the pre-existent Christ descends, and takes the form of a slave *although* he was in the form of God, this can only be because exaltation and honor belong, in a more basic sense, properly to God. But hidden within this familiar logic there is a counter-intuitive thought expressed through another "because" that attempts to explode this logic altogether by proposing that the self-emptying *reveals* the true nature of God. Descent, self-emptying, humbling, and so forth are no longer contrasted with divinity, but expressive of it.

Just as Jankélévitch saw this "inverted because" as a sign of perversity and superficiality, this move has been condemned in similar terms: of reflecting the *ressentiment* of "those who are denied the deed," as Nietzsche's *Anti-Christ* states: "God degenerated to the contradiction of life … In God nothingness deified, the will to nothingness sanctified!"[67] If life *is* expansion and growth, then the image of an essentially self-emptying God can only mean the worship of death and decay. More than this, it is also possible to read this as a self-defeating thought, as one reading of Paul's discussion of the rights of an apostle might confirm: if being an apostle *means* not acting from a sense of what one is and is not due, refusing to insist upon one's rights, and so forth, then in what sense were those rights *ever* the rights of an apostle? Surely the most "apostolic" apostle would no longer even think in terms of rights, and would have consented to forget utterly that he ever thought that such things existed (of course, Paul does not in fact seem at all ashamed to insist on the rights that he forgoes, and flag up his forgoing of them). Similarly, if the divinity of Christ is most fully *expressed* in the refusal to hold on to divinity, in what sense is it divinity that is thereby let go of?

However, although this accusation is tempting, things are not this simple precisely because the text – and Paul's theology more broadly – does not allow us to simply contrast one perspective with another, or make possible a single "purified" perspective. In Derrida's terms, alongside the heterogeneity of the two orders of meaning there is also a fair amount of indissociability. The text, it seems expresses, or speaks out of, a transformation of understanding, but it is not a transformation that ever yields a completed perspective, or that arrives at any settled point, or a consistent mode of evaluation. The humility of Christ never becomes a self-evident expression or manifestation of divinity, and some trace of the logic of "although" remains in any attempt to push the logic of the "because." So we might say that what Derrida's reading of the *aporias* of responsibility, hospitality, and so forth – and Gorman's reading of Paul – have in common is the sense that one can never master the thoughts that one is nevertheless compelled to think. One cannot finally distinguish between two movements or impulses of thought that remain heterogeneous, and yet bound together.

## 4. *Aporia* and *Metanoia*

Some of Derrida's terminology seems helpful in describing the conceptual dynamics at work in both cases above: Weil's complex reflections on God and the world, Paul's use of the liturgical hymn in his letter to the Philippians. However, we can perhaps also learn something more about how the experience of *aporia* might be related to *metanoia*, the changing of mind, from Gormans' reading of Philippians 2 in particular.

Derrida often gives the impression that the *aporias* that his work is concerned to uncover – these impossible encounters between forms of thinking that cannot, or must not, cohere – are in some way formally identical. But what is also suggested in the conceptual turmoil under the surface of these verses from Philippians is also something like a journey, albeit one that is never complete: a never-finished repentance. One way of

66) Jankélévitch, *Forgiveness*, 131.

67) Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, 140.

describing the relationship between the "surface" structure of the "although" (in which divinity and descent are contrasted) and the "because" (in which descent reveals divinity *as* divinity) is in terms of common sense acting as a receptacle for something subversive that moves within it, *but which never fully escapes it*. Except that crucially, in this case, it appears that the whole point is that the receptacle is transformed as the struggle takes place; that is, one's sense of status and propriety, one's sense of "high" and "low," of what is praiseworthy, and so on. The status that is attached to the pre-existent Christ plays two very different roles at the same time. In first case, the equality that Christ has with God is the background against which the descent, humility, emptying, and so forth, appear *as* remarkable; in the same way that norms concerning who deserves what function as a background against which the "exception" of forgiving makes sense: the rule that makes the exception an exception. At the same time, however, the *meaning* of Christ's equality with God is also that which is reconfigured by the hymn, and the way in which it is reconfigured seems to undo the first role, because if God is seen as essentially "cruciform" or "*kenotic*," there is no longer the same contrast between "rule" and "exception." Descent is precisely what one would expect if God were characterized most essentially by what is known, in human affairs, as "humility."

But this last point hides something extremely important. In human affairs we do not, ever, lose the sense of distinction between high and low, and of the varying kinds of treatment that correspond to each. We can see, then, why the seeming impurity, or the lack of completion and fixity, might be important here. The point is that one will always have *some* sense of what sorts of status merit respect and honor, of what is higher and what is lower, of treatment in proportion to relative status. One will be never completely done with social valuation, one will never live without such estimations, or think free of such estimations. Put differently, the point is that even if one rids the world of gods one does not thereby rid the world of "the form of God," and systems of valuing that proceed from this form.[68] In a sense, Gorman portrays the tension between the logic of the "although" and the "because" in the Philippi hymn as a crucible in which a fundamental change in perspective, evaluation, and expectation could continually take place. That is, the undergoing of the *aporia* as a *metanoia* which is well underway, but never finished: a certain way of thinking which is always re-thinking.

68) I am indebted to Goodchild's *Theology of Money* here. Goodchild argues persuasively that money functions in a religious way by positing itself as the "value of all values."

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