

READING NATURE AS *SĀDHANĀ*¹ IN SIMONE WEIL

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INTRODUCTION

The story and journey of Simone Weil [1909-1943], reputedly “the most spiritual writer of this century,”² inspires and yet perturbs. For in her life we find something to emulate, but we are simultaneously confronted with an example against which we are forced to measure our own. And, sad to say, we find ours wanting.

To read Simone Weil is to undergo a profound experience. One is challenged to mount a perspective out of the ordinary and the familiar, to climb up a perch from which to view reality in a much more exhaustive manner and with a much more profound insight. It is to come to grips with an unmistakable “gift of the gods who resided in her.”³

In the following discussion, we offer a philosophical rendition of how Simone Weil finds, in nature, a pathway to God, ironically, in that character of nature where others would have seen only a desolate and abandoned road that leads to nowhere. We also attempt to recuperate the metaphysical underpinning of her own hermeneutic reading of nature.

ELEMENTS OF PHILOSOPHY

Three important points, among many others, may be mentioned about how Simone Weil conceives of philosophy and its task. The first is that philosophy is not just the dialectic engagement of reason with reality. More basically it is an exercise in attention.⁴ As she argued, in *Gravity and Grace*, “the authentic and pure values – truth, beauty, and goodness – in the activity of a human being are the results of one and the same act, a certain application of the full attention to the object.”⁵ To philosophize for her, therefore, is to endeavor to be faithful to what is given in experience, by allowing that experience to reveal itself as itself rather than to impose upon that experience the prior categories of the self. Thus, the act of philosophizing is not a questioning of but an attending to reality, “not a positive effort of will but a ‘motionless expectancy,’ an unremitting patient, single-minded attentiveness.”⁶ It is the receiving and not the building up of truth.⁷

The second is her conviction that philosophy must return to the beginning. Her fascination with a number of significant Greek thinkers is an indication that the continuing practice of philosophy always and necessarily requires a journeying back to the place of birth, a gathering around the world of the Greeks, where the quest for wisdom began. This desire to revisit the ancient Greek tradition was meant to discover how philosophy was initially celebrated.

Weil found out what many other thinkers, like Pierre Hadot, had come upon, namely, that philosophy during the Hellenistic period was aspired to as an act of living and a way of being.⁸ It was an invitation to each human being to transform the self. For this reason, we discern the palpable demand she imposes upon herself to conduct her life according to her convictions. Lawrence Cunningham, writing to commemorate the 30th year of her death, eulogized Weil in these elegant words:

It may be quite true that the grandeur of her soul went far beyond the genius of her intellect... In the last analysis, it may just be that it is the quality of her life – its devastating seriousness – that is at the heart of her significance for our own time... she attempted to live out her convictions to the fullest.⁹

The third element in her conception of philosophy is her firm recognition that there is really only one route that wisdom must eventually take. The quest for wisdom may take other paths, but she believed that the greatest questions on the human condition are ultimately existential spiritual questions. In a short essay, "God in Plato," she declared: "The wisdom of Plato is not a philosophy, a search for God by means of human reason... Plato's wisdom is nothing but an orientation of the soul toward grace."¹⁰

It must certainly be this preoccupation with the divine that best integrates and unifies the whole range of her teaching, which is but an outward expression of her inner persona.¹¹ For she believed that attention "only reaches its true dimension when it is religious." (GaG, 120)

READING NATURE

Weil considered the natural world as a veritable theophany, a manifestation of God in and through its manifold structures:

The essence of created things is to be intermediaries. They are intermediaries leading from one to the other and there is no end to this. They are intermediaries leading to God. We have to experience them as such. (GaG, 132)

This is a stance which she inherited from a long tradition of thought that subscribed to the notion of a 'liber naturae' in whose 'pages' could be read the imprint of God.

From the earliest writings and practices of the Eastern Christian Churches, from which it spread to the West, it was believed that God could be known from two principal sources: the Book of Scripture and the Book of Nature. The visible things of nature were thought to be an adumbration of the invisible God, and it was thought possible to discern, in and through each created reality, the divine presence that is within and at the same time beyond it. It is to treat each thing as a sacrament, to view the whole of nature as God's book.¹²

And so she insisted that the reading of nature must invariably embody a religious tenor.¹³

This tradition that looked upon nature as mediating the divine presence, however, was overturned in Western civilization by the advent of classical physics, in particular, and by the scientific revolution of the 17th century, in general. Diogenes Allen examines the extreme turn in the understanding of nature introduced by this new science as follows:

Unlike the Aristotelian physical universe, the new mechanistic science of the 17th century rejects all values. Values are not present in nature, nor exemplified by nature. So there is no hierarchy of being which reflects the perfections of God. In addition, nature in its operations is indifferent to human welfare. The universe is not designed for our benefit. It took more than a century after Galileo and Descartes for this feature of the new science of nature to become fully apparent. But the fact that the problem of evil was such a major concern of the late 17th and early 18th centuries indicates that in spite of frequent praise of God as a magnificent engineer, there was an uneasy realization that nature was not designed with human well-being in mind.¹⁴

Now while it may be conceded that science has changed tremendously since the 17th century – nature is no longer reckoned as a great machine and science is no longer perceived as advancing explanations of reality in exclusively mechanistic terms – nonetheless, "one feature of the original scientific revolution of the 17th century has remained intact: the indifference of nature to human well-being."¹⁵

The problem, then, for Weil is how to recuperate a supernatural reading of nature in the face of what science propagates as the indifference of nature to human welfare. Allied to this difficulty is the fact that for Weil there are various levels of reading nature. There are readings of nature that are debased because they eclipse the eternal truths that nature contains. She scored the sciences of nature,

like astronomy and chemistry, as well as the magical or superstitious appropriation of nature, as found in astrology and alchemy, as prime examples in a descending order of this debasement: “Contemplation of eternal truths in the symbols offered by the stars and the combination of substances. Astronomy and chemistry are degradations of them. When astrology and alchemy become forms of magic they are still lower degradations of them.” (GaG, 120)

She considers the kind of science which brings us farther away from God as “worthless.” (GaG, 60) “Science, today, will either have to seek a source of inspiration higher than itself or perish.” (GaG, 119) Weil persistently demanded that we feel the reality and presence of God through all external things, without exception, as clearly as our hand feels the substance of paper through the penholder and the nib.¹⁶ She, therefore, enjoins: “Let no activity – physical labor or study – be an obstacle in the way of seeing the ‘atman’¹⁷ in all things.”¹⁸

Weil proposes to counter this degenerate reading and to retrieve a supernatural reading of nature through what she called “superposed readings.” (GaG, 123) This requires mounting an elevated plane from which to look at the world of nature more expansively and profoundly.¹⁹ She says: “If I am walking on the side of the mountain I can see first a lake, then, after a few steps, a forest. I have to choose either the lake or the forest. If I want to see both lake and forest at once, I have to climb higher.” (GaG, 90) From this higher perspective, the limited and inadequate viewpoints offered by other readings of nature can be transcended. Then we will be able “to read necessity behind sensation, to read order behind necessity, to read God behind order.” (GaG, 90)

Weil also employs the metaphor of the experienced captain whose ship has become an extension of his body and as an instrument for reading the storm. The benefit of experience allows him a privileged reading of the storm, which is denied the ordinary passenger in his ship. This makes him remain calm, rising above his fear, and exploring ways of navigating the ship to safety.

The captain, because he has gone through an apprenticeship, is able to read more adequately than the passenger; for though there is danger, and fear in the face of danger is appropriate, the danger is not limitless, because the captain knows what can be done to avert it. The captain is able to give a more adequate reading of the reality that grips both passenger and captain. Though our world is the meaning we read, what is important is to rise to a higher level that enables us to make more adequate readings – that is, to receive other and more adequate meanings. There are even higher levels than that occupied by an experienced captain, whose perspective enables him to make a more adequate reading of a storm than a passenger can. The higher levels reveal different and progressively more sophisticated meanings concerning the natural world; and these meanings are superimposed on each other.²⁰

The metaphor of the captain reminds us of Weil’s favorite allegory of the cave in the Republic of Plato.²¹ It takes one unchained prisoner to come out of the cave and behold reality bathed in true light, and then to return to the darkness of the cave and inform the rest of the prisoners of his discovery, before they in turn are able to see beyond the shadows projected on the wall. To move to a higher level necessitates the assistance of someone who has gone up to the higher level. We find a parallel to this requirement in the Advaita of Sankara, who prescribes learning from a master as the primary stage in the process of advancing to the knowledge of the ultimate reality, which consists of true liberation and, therefore, eternal bliss.²² For our superposed reading of nature, Weil will be the guru who will lead us in the way to the peak and show us how to read necessity behind sensation, order behind necessity, and God behind order.

To read necessity behind sensation is to overcome the effects of the ego upon the reading of reality. It is to grasp reality as it presents itself, devoid of the blurring impositions of the self. This requires a disengagement from the perspective of the self to which everyone is easily enslaved and by which he is often deceived. “Perfect detachment alone enables us to see things in their naked reality, outside the fog of deceptive values.” (GaG, 46). Indeed, the inclination to self-centeredness permeates the thoughts and actions of everyone. He sees everything from his selfish perspective and supposes that everything exists for his enhancement.

Just as God being outside the universe is at the same time the center, so each man imagines he is situated in the center of the world. The illusion of perspective places him at the center of space; an illusion of the same kind falsifies his idea of time; and yet another kindred illusion arranges a whole hierarchy of values around him. This illusion is even extended to our sense of existence, on account of the intimate connection between our sense of value and our sense of being; being seems to us less and less concentrated the farther it is removed from us. (WfG, 158-59)

This self-centeredness is without a doubt an illusion that incarcerates man in a world of unreality and dreams. There is only one way out of this impasse:

To give up our imaginary position as the center, to renounce it, not only intellectually but in the imaginative part of our soul, that means to awaken to what is real and eternal, to see the true light and hear the true silence. A transformation then takes place at the very roots of our sensibility, in our immediate reception of sense impressions and psychological impressions. It is a transformation analogous to that which takes place in the dusk of evening on a road, where we suddenly discern as a tree what we had at first seen as a stooping man; or where we suddenly recognize as a rustling of leaves what we thought at first was whispering voices. We see the same colors; we hear the same sounds, but not in the same way.²³ To empty ourselves of our false divinity, to deny ourselves, to give up being the center of the world in our imagination, to discern that all points in the world are equally centers and that the true center is outside the world, this is to consent to the rule of mechanical necessity in matter and of free choice at the center of each soul. (WfG., 159-60)

METAPHYSICAL RETRIEVAL

Weil advances a radically new metaphysics that shifts from a superficial view of reality as contingent to a penetrating discovery in reality of the principle of necessity. Weil says: "This world, the realm of necessity, offers us absolutely nothing except means. Our will is for ever sent from one means to another like a billiard ball." (GaG, 133) She states further: "The criterion of reality. It is necessity – always – in all orders of reality." (TNS, 361) It is a metaphysics that one can adopt only after waging some sort of Kantian revolution, that is, a turning back on the categories of traditional metaphysical engagements and renouncing the self-centeredness that possessed such thinking. This reversal is explained as follows:

One way in which self-centeredness can be punctured is by the operations of the natural world. Its reality impinges on our bodies. We are material beings, and as material beings we are subject to wear and tear, accidents, illnesses, aging, and death. When one of these impinges on us, our usual way of responding is egocentric. We say or think, "Why did this happen to me?" "What did I ever do wrong?" This is often said or felt with a sense of indignation, outrage, offense, self-pity. These are just a sample of a host of quite automatic and normal reactions to adversity.... These automatic responses can be the occasion of *reflection*. They can be the occasion to ask oneself: "Why did I think I was immune to such misfortune?" "Why did I think that pleasant and unpleasant things are parceled out according to some scheme of merit?" Such reflections can lead us to recognize more fully something we already know: we are material, and as pieces of matter we are vulnerable to injury, illness, and decay. To realize this is to realize our status, our place, to realize what we are. It is to come to terms with a hard fact. Indeed, it is to come to terms with necessity.²⁴

Things in the world happen because they must happen. Things must be like what they presently are, and that is why they are precisely what they are. "Not to accept an event in the world is to wish that the world did not exist." (GaG, 129) To continue insisting upon a view of the world as contingent – especially of the world as subservient to human welfare – is to miss the whole point

about our existence. It is to fail to grasp the real, to remain just in the level of our limited cognition. It is to look at the world without God in the picture.

Contrary, therefore, to traditional metaphysics, Weil would assert that it is not the contingency of the world that demands the existence of the necessary cause, but its necessity. For if the world were simply contingent, then it would ultimately be a matter of chance and, therefore, completely meaningless. That would have been entirely the case if the world were all there is and there were no God. That is not what Weil accepts as true, however; she holds instead that “there is a reality outside the world, that is to say, outside space and time, outside man’s mental universe, outside any sphere whatsoever that is accessible to human faculties.”²⁵ That is the reason why the world is not absurd:

Just as the reality of this world is the sole foundation of facts, so that other reality is the sole foundation of good.... That reality is the unique source of all the good that can exist in this world: that is to say, all beauty, all truth, all justice, all legitimacy, all order, and all human behavior that is mindful of obligations. (GtG, 38)

There is no reason, therefore, why everything that comes into our life will not be received without question and appraised as making sense because it is necessary. This is what it means to read necessity beyond sensation.

ORDER AND GOD IN NATURE

The second level in the threefold scale of superposed reading proposed by Weil is to recognize that the distribution of the sensations of pain and pleasure is the outcome of an order that pervades nature or, better still, of an order that nature must obey, rather than of some overarching intention within nature. There is an order of the working of nature that is validated by the findings of modern science.

Quoting from Scriptures, Weil wrote: “The sun shines on the just and the unjust... God makes himself [a] necessity.” (GaG, 38) This implies that the order that should be read behind the necessity of nature is no other than the constancy by which its forces and mechanisms work. It is said that nature does not jump. Neither is it selective nor does it play favorites. It runs its course regardless of who or what lies in its path. Nature is impartial; this is the order it follows. Richard Rees puts it thus: “The truth is that *all* events are in conformity with the will of God, and the divine Providence is not an anomaly or a disturbing factor in the order of the world but, on the contrary, it is itself the order of the world, or rather its regulating principle.”²⁶

Some may find it unsettling that the operations of nature can cause as much, and sometimes even more, suffering than the good that they bring about.

The physical world involves wear and tear; plants and animals must consume something in order to live; freedom implies in turn the possibility of the abuse of freedom. Much more disturbing than the existence of suffering is the *distribution* of suffering. Microbes and viruses, earthquakes, floods, and the outcome of human actions do not distinguish between those who stand in their paths. If those people who disobey God suffered or suffered more as a consequence of their disobedience, it would make sense. But what we find is that both those who seek to obey God, and those who disobey him are equally vulnerable to suffering and equally liable to prosper. The operations of the natural world and the consequences of human actions do not punish and reward people according to whether they obey or disobey God.²⁷

Only a superposed reading of nature will enable us to reconcile this seemingly anomalous order of nature with the God supposedly behind it. Only then can we see that nature operates the way it does because that is how it has been so designed by God. Then we are able to see that this order in fact is a sign of the good and the beauty that nature bears.

The sea is not less beautiful in our eyes because we know that sometimes ships are wrecked by it. On the contrary, this adds to its beauty. If it altered the movement of its waves to spare

a boat, it would be a creature gifted with discernment and choice and not this fluid, perfectly obedient to every external pressure. It is this perfect obedience that constitutes the sea's beauty.... All the horrors produced in this world are like the folds imposed upon the waves by gravity. That is why they contain an element of beauty. (WfG, 129)

The order of nature may also be interpreted as its blind and, therefore, perfect obedience to the will of God:

The mechanism of necessity can be transposed to any level while still remaining true to itself. It is the same in the world of pure matter, in the animal world, among nations, and in souls. Seen from our present standpoint, and in human perspective, it is quite blind. If, however, we transport our hearts beyond ourselves, beyond the universe, beyond space and time to where our Father dwells, and if from there we behold this mechanism, it appears quite different. What seemed to be necessity becomes obedience. Matter is entirely passive and in consequence entirely obedient to God's will. It is a perfect model for us. (WfG, 128)

Weil finally reckons this perfect obedience of nature as good and beautiful, thereby deserving of our love:

The beauty of the world gives us an intimation of its claim to a place in our heart. In the beauty of the world brute necessity becomes an object of love. What is more beautiful than the action of gravity on the fugitive folds of the sea waves, or on the almost eternal folds of the mountains? (WfG, 128-129).

To read God behind order is the final step in the superposed reading of nature. God can be read behind the order of the world because the divine logos is the principle of this order. Weil adopted the Greek approximation of logos as ratio, proportion, and mediation. The presence of this logos is what renders the universe to be a *kosmos*, a stable and balanced order.

Weil explicitly connects the Greek philosophers who use logos as the rational principle of order in nature to Genesis and John. In Genesis 1 God's word ("dabar", translated in the Greek Septuagint as logos) is what gives form to creation and keeps it from reverting to chaos. This is reiterated in the opening of John's Gospel: In the beginning was the logos, and the logos was with God and the logos was God... all things were made through him and without him was not anything made that was made (John 1:1,3). In addition, Weil tells us that we should always translate logos as Mediation, not as word.²⁸

It is this logos, the principle of order of the world, which makes it possible for Weil to read God behind the order of the universe. She says: "In everything which gives us the pure authentic feeling of beauty there really is the presence of God. There is as it were an incarnation of God in the world and it is indicated by beauty." (GaG, 137) "Beauty – the manifest presence of reality; of a transcendent reality. But that is implied. Reality is only transcendent. For all we are given is the appearance. To on." (THS, 361)

This order, due to its impartiality that strikes others as indifference to human welfare, is sometimes perceived instead as strong proof to convince people that there is no God. David Hume already identified this indifference of nature as a "decisive reason to disbelieve in the hypothesis that nature is designed by an intelligent and benevolent deity."²⁹ Weil herself found this world a "closed door... a barrier." (GaG, p.32)

However, this is not the final word to be said on the matter. This is exactly where a superposed reading of nature becomes expedient. For it is only through such a reading that this world becomes "the way through" (GaG, p. 32) which we can encounter God. It is through this reading that nature becomes like a windowpane through whose clear glass we can see the light of the sun, indeed, the full brilliance of God shining through the grandeur of nature. We are then able to hear distinctly and forcefully the sound of the whole of creation vibrating ecstatically with the love of God.

Weil challenges us to vanquish our complacency and renounce our penchant for mediocrity, to leave behind our commonplace and simplistic reading of nature that labors under a self-centered perspective. She says: “God could create only by hiding himself. Otherwise there would be nothing but himself.” (GaG, 33) Elsewhere, she says: “God can only be present in creation under the form of absence.” (GaG, 99). We should then refuse to stay on the surface and be content to remain there. The seeming absence of God is the eloquent sign of His presence and it is as well the subtle invitation for us to read deeper.

Given her self-effacement, Weil would be the last person to trumpet this superposed reading as her own making. She would remind us, in her characteristic fashion, that the exemplar for this is God himself. “He emptied himself of his divinity. We should empty ourselves of the false divinity with which we were born.” (GaG, 30) We have to recover the instant of “perfect nudity and purity in human life” (GaG, 32) that we received at our moment of birth, so we can remove the blinders created by our false sense of self-importance, and which cover our sight. Unless we do so, then we can never read God behind order, order behind necessity, and necessity behind sensation. “Except the seed to die... It has to die in order to liberate the energy it bears within it so that with this energy new forms may be developed. (GaG, 30)

CONCLUSION

Where others see a closure, Weil sees an opening; where others see a hindrance, she sees an opportunity; where others see a wall that blocks, she sees a ladder that allows us to climb to the other side. She counsels us to always take this attitude of intellect. It is true that no belief is utterly devoid of truth. However, if we grant that, we have to affirm in turn the presence of truth in what is contrary to that belief. Weil advocated a balancing against each other of contrary propositions not in order to arrive at a synthesis of thoughts, since that would be too simplistic a method, but in order to achieve what she called an equilibrium of contradictions.

We are always urged to adopt this attitude of intellect for “we know by means of our intelligence that what the intelligence does not comprehend is more real than it does comprehend.” (GaG, 116) Intelligence cannot be separated from humility, from a posture of receptivity, from a stance of *disponibilité*. Authentic intelligence is synonymous with genuine humility and for Weil, this consists of “the knowledge that we are nothing in so far as we are human beings as such, and more, generally, in so far as we are creatures.” (GaG, 116).

ENDNOTES

¹ *Sādhanā* is a Sanskrit term which means “a way to God.”

² George A. Panichas, ed. *The Simone Weil Reader* (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1977), xvii-xviii.

³ Robert Coles, *Simone Weil: A Modern Pilgrimage* (Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc., 1987), p. 19.

⁴ Simone Weil, who was enamored of Asian thought, would have found in this wisdom story narrated by Anthony de Mello, in *The Song of the Bird*, an eloquent illustration of what she means by attention: “Buddha once held up a flower to his disciples and asked each of them to say something about it. One pronounced a lecture. Another a poem. Yet another a parable. Each trying to outdo the other in depth and erudition. Mahakashyap smiled and said nothing. Only he had seen the flower.”

⁵ Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*. trans. Emma Craufurd (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Limited, 1952), 108. [Henceforth, references to this text will be abbreviated GaG and added at the end of the text.]

⁶ Richard Rees, *Simone Weil: A Sketch for a Portrait* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1966), 162.

⁷We can find a parallel to her notion in the latter thought of Martin Heidegger who proclaimed the *end* of philosophy as an opportunity offered, a 'lichtung,' a clearing, an opening presented for the possibility of a new and perhaps more original way of thinking. Thus, in *The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking* (1977), he writes wistfully: "Perhaps there is a thinking which is more sober-minded than the incessant frenzy of rationalization and the intoxicating quality of cybernetics... Perhaps there is a thinking outside the distinction of rational and irrational, more sober-minded still than scientific technology, more sober-minded and hence removed, without effect, yet having its own necessity" (391). Heidegger showed undisguised raving over the unparalleled place and role of 'Dasein,' a positing of the possibility of man to attain authentic human existence and of his openness to 'gelassenheit.' 'Dasein' is, as it were, a 'lichtung,' an opening, in which Being as 'anwesenheit,' as presence, is granted. Man, however, cannot by his own bring about 'gelassenheit.' "...Man does not have control over unconcealment itself, in which at any given time the real shows itself or withdraws" (299). The event of 'ereignis' is wholly dependent on the unilateral initiative of Being. The revelation of Being is not for 'Dasein' to bring about. If it should transpire at all, only Being can make it happen. Philosophy for Heidegger, therefore, as it is for Simone Weil, demands humility, the kind that translates into the virtue of waiting and is nurtured by the practice of attention.

⁸Cf. Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*. ed. Arnold I. Davidson. trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1995), 265-75.

⁹Lawrence S. Cunningham, *Simone Weil: Thirty Years After, America*, vol. 129, no. 4 (August 1973), p. 97.

¹⁰Simone Weil, "God in Plato," in *Intimations of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks*. ed. Elisabeth C. Geissbuhler (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1957), 85.

¹¹Gustave Thibon, one of very few people she allowed to glimpse into her innermost being, chose to characterize Simone Weil, in his introduction to *Gravity and Grace*, by highlighting what he called her 'limpid mysticism.' He confessed: "Never have I felt the word *supernatural* to be more charged with reality than when in contact with her."

¹²Diogenes Allen and Eric Springfield. *Spirit, Nature, and Community: Issues in the Thought of Simone Weil* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989), 53.

¹³Weil employed the term 'reading' to mean a judgment of value, or to denote an interpretation, a stipulation that is akin to the definition of present-day 'hermeneutics.' She maintained that we are always reading events and people for, accordingly, everything that enters our awareness is invested with meaning.

¹⁴Diogenes Allen. "Simone Weil on Suffering and 'Reading,'" *Communio*. XI (Fall 1984), 298.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*. trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Capricorn Books, 1959), 44. [Henceforth, references to this text will be abbreviated WfG and added at the end of the text.]

¹⁷Various traditions of thought form part of the aggregate source from which Simone Weil derived some of her insights. These include Oriental philosophies like Taoism of ancient China and Hinduism of ancient India. The term "atman" is taken from Hinduism and it refers to the universal Self that is present in the world and which is identical to Brahman or the ultimate reality. Cf. Eliot Deutsch, *Advaita Vedanta: A Philosophical Reconstruction* (Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1969), 48; One of the entries in *The Notebooks* is this verse from the *Mundaka Upanishad*: "Two birds, companions who are always united, cling to the self-same tree. Of these two, the one eats the sweet fruit and the other looks on without eating." The 'eater-bird' represents the "jiva" or the empirical self while the 'witness-bird' is what represents the "atman." So the "atman" is, as it were, the immanent presence of "Brahman" in the empirical world; in the context of Weil, her use of the "atman" would refer to the presence of God in nature.

¹⁸Simone Weil, *The Notebooks*. trans. Arthur Wills (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1952), 96. [Henceforth, references to this text will be abbreviated TNS and added at the end of the text.]

¹⁹There is a parallel doctrine in the Taoism of Chuang-Tzu. It is called the higher point of view. It means seeing things in the light of heaven, from the point of view of that which transcends the finite. Cf. Fung Yu-Lan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*. ed. Derk Bodde (New York: Macmillan Company, 1990), 112-17. Cf. also John M. Koller, *Asian Philosophies*. (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1998), 279-83. To abandon the limited perspective is to abandon the strife that it engenders, and to adopt an unlimited perspective is to enjoy

the peace and tranquility of the infinite. “Relax in the realm of the infinite and thus abide in the realm of the infinite.”

²⁰ Allen and Springfield, *op.cit.*, 60-61

²¹ Cf. Robert C. Solomon, *Morality and the Good Life: An Introduction to Ethics through Classical Sources* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1984), 51: “This entire allegory, you may now append, dear Glaucon, to the previous argument; the prison-house is the world of sight, the light of the fire is the power of the sun, and you will not misapprehend me if you interpret the journey upwards to be the ascent of the soul into the intellectual world according to my surmise, which, at your desire, I have expressed – whether rightly or wrongly God knows. But, whether true or false, my opinion is that in the world of knowledge the Idea of good appears last of all, and is seen only with an effort; although when seen, it is inferred to be the universal author of all things beautiful and right, parent of light and of the lord of light in the visible world, and in the immediate and supreme source of reason and truth in the intellectual; and that this is the power upon which he who would act rationally either in public or in private life must have his eye fixed.”

²² An earnest study of the ‘mahavakyas,’ the great sayings of the *Upanishad*, is exhorted for the purpose of discovering their true meaning. The guidance of the sages is necessary in this initial phase. This is called the hearing phase because it involves chiefly listening. “The listening and studying orient the mind to what is to be sought and provide a framework, grounded in others’ experiences, by means of which the aspirant’s own subsequent experience can be interpreted and made commensurate with the tradition.” Cf. Deutsch, *op. cit.*, 106.

²³ There is a beautiful Hasidic tale narrated by Henri J.M. Nouwen in *The Path to Peace* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1995), 45-6: “The rabbi asked his students: ‘How can we determine the hour of dawn, when the night ends and the day begins?’ One of the rabbi’s students suggested: ‘When from a distance you can distinguish between a dog and a sheep?’ ‘No,’ was the answer of the rabbi. ‘Is it when one can distinguish between a fig tree and a grapevine?’ answered another student. ‘No,’ the rabbi said. ‘Please tell us the answer, then,’ chorused the students. ‘It is, then,’ said the wise teacher, ‘when you can look into the face of human beings and you have enough light [in you] to recognize them as your brothers and sisters. Up until then it is night, and darkness is still with us.’” This dawning of a loving recognition of the other may be likened to the transformation of which Simone Weil speaks.

²⁴ Allen and Springfield, *op.cit.*, 64.

²⁵ Simone Weil. *Gateway to God*. ed. David Raper (Great Britain: William Collin Sons and Co. Ltd., 1974), 38. [Henceforth, references to this text will be abbreviated GtG and added at the end of the text.]

²⁶ Richard Rees, *op.cit.*, p. 159.

²⁷ Diogenes Allen. *Three Outsiders: Pascal, Kierkegaard, Simone Weil* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1983), 101.

²⁸ Allen, “Simone Weil on Suffering and ‘Reading,’” 300.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 302.

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