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‘The question in each and every thing’: Nietzsche and Weil on affirmation¹

Abstract: This paper identifies and offers commentary upon a previously un-remarked consonance between Nietzsche and Weil when it comes to the idea of a universal love of the world (‘affirmation’ in Nietzsche’s terms, or ‘consent to necessity’ in Weil’s). The discussion focuses on five features of the Nietzschean account of affirmation, which are as follows: 1) that the possibility of affirmation has the form of a fundamental question at the heart of human life, which (2) has an all-or-nothing character (it is universal in scope and pervasive in influence); that (3) genuine affirmation is rare, difficult or traumatic in an existentially revealing way, primarily because (4) affirmation means facing up to the lack of finality in the world, and in particular the problem of meaningless suffering, which means that (5) affirmation is tied up with a fundamental revaluation. The first half of the paper outlines the parallels between Nietzschean affirmation and Weilian ‘consent to necessity’ in relation to the first three of these, which are also the most general. The second half of the paper explores the fourth and fifth, so as to suggest a way of reading the underlying similarity between these two projects: both are attempts to rediscover the possibility of an all-embracing affirmation of reality in the absence of any existential teleology, and when eschatology has been presumed to be impossible. In other words, both Nietzsche and Weil are compelled to find a way of achieving a transfigured perspective *on* ‘the whole’ in the absence of any transformation *of* ‘the whole’.

Keywords: Nietzsche, Weil, affirmation, eschatology, teleology, death of God

‘Reality has, in a sense, need of our adherence.’²

The stark contrasts between the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche and Simone Weil should be obvious to anyone who has read them both. On the one hand, we have Nietzsche’s disavowal of transcendence, and his determined attempt to root out all remnants of belief in a ‘true world’; on

¹ I am grateful to participants of the 2018 meeting of the American Weil Society and to staff and students in the School of Humanities at York St John University for thoughtful comments on earlier versions of this paper, and to Lissa McCullough for her helpful correspondence on the relationship between Nietzsche and Weil.

² Weil (2014, p. 293).

the other, we have Weil's full-blooded, Platonic affirmation of a 'reality outside the world'.³ On the one hand we have Nietzsche's fierce diatribe against compassion and his unapologetic elevation of will-to-power; on the other, we have Weil's repudiation of force and earthly greatness, and her ethic of patient attention and compassion. Weil, we hear, felt physically repulsed by Nietzsche's writings, and Nietzsche, we may speculate, would most likely have seen Weil's thought as a particularly vindicating example of the nihilism that he diagnosed in all Christian morality. Nevertheless, despite this enmity, there are intriguing similarities between the two in other respects. This has not escaped the notice of thoughtful commentators, but there have been to date few in-depth discussions of these similarities.⁴ The purpose of this paper is to show that in one particular respect—their conceptions of affirmation and consent respectively—the similarity is so striking as to warrant serious exploration.

I will not be making any claim here about the *influence* of Nietzsche on Weil, which I lack any knowledge of, beyond the few details provided in a number of biographies.⁵ Weil had probably studied Nietzsche relatively seriously (at the very least, she expressed the intention to do so),⁶ and knew enough about Nietzsche's thought to know that she disagreed with his reading of Greek tragedy (especially his views on Dionysius) and to sense that she was repulsed by his writing, but also to suspect that their thought was similar in some ways.⁷ Despite this professed repulsion, this paper claims that the conceptual landscapes within which Nietzschean 'affirmation' and Weilian 'consent to necessity' are each situated are strikingly similar. Further to this, I will argue that the intellectual strategies and conceptual difficulties associated with each are deeply akin.

The discussion that follows is structured around five features of the Nietzschean understanding of affirmation. Nietzsche's views on affirmation are far from straightforward, and the task of interpretation necessary to reconstruct them is contentious. Whilst a powerful case can

3 Weil (2015b, p. 219).

4 Goodchild (2017) puts Weil into sustained dialogue with Nietzsche, in a discussion that reads Weil's philosophy of time in relation to Nietzsche's critique of the Platonic elevation of being over becoming; McCullough (2014) includes some useful comments on Nietzsche in passing; Hamilton (2000) briefly utilises a quotation from Weil in his critique of Nietzsche's conception of nobility. Broc-Lapeyre (1980) offers a sustained reflection on the significance of Weil's brief comments on Nietzsche in a letter to her brother, and goes on to analyse the similarities and differences in Nietzsche and Weil's account of power, especially in relation to their attitudes to ancient Greek thought. In an unpublished paper delivered at the American Weil Society in 1999, Martin Andic explores the roots of Weil's conception of amor fati in Marcus Aurelius' Meditations, but only briefly notes the differences between Weil's use of the term and Nietzsche's. Finally, one of the first significant discussions of Weil's thought to be published in English, by Taubes situates Weil in relation to Nietzsche's 'death of God'.

5 There are signs of Nietzsche's influence, at least, in Weil's use of the phrase amor fati to describe Marcus Aurelius' stoicism; in fact the Latin phrase is Nietzsche's own, and does not appear in any Roman stoic writer. See Hadot (1998, pp. 143-5).

6 See Pétrement (1976, p. 69).

7 Weil (2015c, p. 122-3). Although, as Broc-Lapeyre (1980) points out, this letter (to her brother, André) was drafted three times, suggesting that these brief comments on Nietzsche were carefully considered.

be made to suggest that Nietzsche has a systematic and coherent account of affirmation,⁸ there are also some good reasons to suspect that there are serious tensions within his thought in this area.⁹ Without reaching any conclusions on this point, and at the risk of provoking the ire of at least some Nietzsche specialists, I will suggest that for Nietzsche: (1) the possibility of affirmation has the form of a fundamental question at the heart of human life, which (2) has an all-or-nothing character (it is universal in scope and pervasive in influence); that (3) genuine affirmation is rare, difficult or traumatic in an existentially revealing way, primarily because (4) affirmation means facing up to the lack of finality in the world, and in particular the problem of meaningless suffering, which means that (5) affirmation is tied up with a fundamental revaluation. Although these features do not, by any means, exhaust Nietzsche's account of affirmation, I will assume that together they capture some of the most important aspects of his views. In each case, I will try to show that we can find an intriguing parallel in Weil's thought, and that even where there are stark differences between the two (which of course, there are) there are deep and important similarities in intellectual strategy lying under the surface.

So as to frame the more detailed discussions that are to follow, I would like to venture some very broad reflections on the significance of the projects that I take Nietzsche and Weil to be engaged in. In very different ways, Nietzsche and Weil both hoped that their thought would reclaim, or even redeem, the world. This can be seen clearly in one of the most instructive passages in Nietzsche's late works, from *Twilight of the Idols*, in which he explains that his work should be understood as a thorough-going rejection of the idea of purpose.¹⁰ In denying purpose (for individuals, and for 'the whole' in which they are entangled), Nietzsche claims to deny all judgement, and the denial of all judgement is, he claims, 'the great liberation': 'only this begins to restore the *innocence* of becoming. The concept of 'God' has been the biggest *objection* to existence so far . . . We reject God, we reject the responsibility in God: *this* is how we begin to

8 See Reginster 2008.

9 On the question of the relationship between affirmation and illusion see Came (2013, esp. pp. 217-224); on the connection between affirmation and suffering see May (2011 esp. pp. 82 & 100). See also Gemes (2018).

10 The following abbreviations will be used when citing the works of Nietzsche, in accordance with convention : A (The Anti-Christ); BGE (Beyond Good and Evil); BT (The Birth of Tragedy); D (Daybreak); EH (Ecce Homo); GM (On the Genealogy of Morals); GS (The Gay Science); HH (Human, All Too Human); TI (The Twilight of the Idols); WP (The Will to Power); Z (Thus Spoke Zarathustra). Note that numbers are to the original numbered sections/paragraphs in the original texts, not to page numbers. Where these are not numbered sequentially through the whole work, chapter/section numbers or names are used in addition (e.g. GS 276 is to the 276th section of The gay science, but GM II: 16 is to paragraph 16 of the second essay of the Genealogy and TI 'Morality as Anti-Nature': 5 is to paragraph 5 of the section entitled 'Morality as Anti-Nature' in Twilight of the Idols).

redeem the world.’¹¹ This same point is also expressed in ‘How the “True World” Finally Became a Fable’ from the same book, which conveys the sense that the effect of Nietzsche’s devastating critique of Platonic/Christian accounts of a transcendent ‘true world’ will be the complete transformation of the world rather than, as one might think, its disenchantment: ‘The true world is gone: which world is left? The illusory one, perhaps? . . . But no! *we got rid of the illusory world along with the true one!*’¹² The point here is that the world that is left, once the ‘true world’ is faded, is now a transfigured world, rather than the one remaining side of a binary pairing (true/apparent, being/becoming, etc.): it has been redeemed, restored to innocence. In his own estimation, then, Nietzsche’s philosophy aims at nothing less than complete re-claiming of the world; a ‘Yes-saying that blesses’ as he puts it in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.¹³

In her own way, Weil also articulates a ‘yes-saying that blesses’. In her essay ‘Forms of the Implicit Love of God’, Weil laments the way in which, as she sees it, Christianity has lost the ancient sense of the beauty of the world: ‘This is strange. It is difficult to understand. How can Christianity call itself catholic if the universe itself is left out?’¹⁴ Later on in the same essay we find Weil expressing her central exhortation as a response to this omission: ‘Let us love the country here below’. And for Weil, too, the result of this love will be transformation:

We feel ourselves to be strangers, uprooted, in exile here below. We are like Ulysses who had been carried far away during his sleep by sailors and woke up in a strange land, longing for Ithaca with a longing that rent his soul. Suddenly Athena opened his eyes and he saw that he was in Ithaca. In the same way, every man who longs indefatigably for his country, who is distracted from his desire neither by Calypso nor by the Sirens, will one day suddenly find that he is there.¹⁵

Here Weil articulates powerfully the sense that a certain kind of love, when maintained in the midst of a sense of alienation, has a revelatory power: the world, in its entirety, can be ‘read’ in a radically different way.¹⁶

11 TI ‘The Four Great Errors’: 8. See also Z III: ‘Before Sunrise’ for an earlier expression of the same thought. Zarathustra also teaches ‘redemption’, from revenge (Z II ‘Of the Tarantulas’), from suffering (Z II: ‘On the Blessed Isles’), from the past (Z II: ‘On Redemption’) and from the redeemer himself (Z II: ‘Of Priests’).

12 TI ‘How the “True World” Finally Became a Fable’. See Clark (1990, pp. 109-117) for a detailed discussion of this passage in relation to Nietzsche’s developing ideas about truth.

13 Z III: ‘Before Sunrise’.

14 Weil (1977, p. 94). See also p. 45-7 for similar comments.

15 Weil (1977, p. 107-8).

16 Weil (1977, p. 93). See also her more systematic account of the notion of ‘reading’ in Weil (2015a).

In the background of both projects, sensitive readers might hear echoes of the work of God as it is described in Genesis: pronouncing the world to be good, and blessing it.¹⁷ Crucially, though, both Nietzsche and Weil stand totally opposed to any eschatological or teleological reading of the world: the world is not ‘for’ anything, nor does it have any destiny beyond itself (even though both envisage, in different ways, a mystical transformation of the individual self). For Nietzsche, this is because the world is conceived as an endlessly recurring array of forces, without end, purpose or equilibrium, and because there is no ‘outside’ to which it *could* be oriented.¹⁸ For Weil, it is because that ‘outside’ to which the human desire for good is oriented is found at a different ‘plane’, so that one cannot make any progress towards this good in time, one can only turn in its direction - that is, one can look ‘up’.¹⁹ It is also because, for Weil, the will of God is *already* fully expressed in the world: time is already, in a very mysterious way, the moving image of eternity.²⁰ And more than this, both Nietzsche and Weil—for very different reasons, and with very different forms of life in mind—share the conviction that the goodness of the world is retrieved, or restored, by a certain kind of human love, and that the ‘goodness’ that is thereby retrieved is ‘beyond good and evil’. It might be said, then, that they both hold out hope for *something like a cosmodicy*²¹ whilst confronting a world stripped of any possibility of eschatology or teleology. With this in mind, the discussions that follow can be taken as indirect reflections on broader questions that lie well beyond the scope of the paper itself.

Affirmation

We can begin by considering the first three features of Nietzsche’s account of affirmation, which are also the most general. Firstly, the possibility of affirmation, or something like it, sits front and centre in his account of the human condition. At the beginning of *The Gay Science* we find Nietzsche ‘permitting’ himself the expression of the thought that will be ‘the reason, warrant and sweetness’ of the rest of his life:

I want to learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things; then I shall be one of those who make things beautiful. *Amor fati*: let that be my love henceforth! I do not want to wage war against what is ugly. I do not want to accuse; I do not even want to accuse

¹⁷ Genesis 1: 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 28 & 31.

¹⁸ Nietzsche (2008, pp. 238-241); TI ‘The Four Great Errors’: 8.

¹⁹ Weil (1968, pp. 153-9).

²⁰ Weil (2014, p. 12).

²¹ See Janaway (2017) for a discussion of the appropriateness of the terms ‘theodicy’ and ‘cosmodicy’ as descriptors of Nietzsche’s project.

those who accuse. Looking away shall be my only negation. And all in all and on the whole: some day I wish to be only a Yes-sayer!²²

Later on, in *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche again characterises his own life in terms of this ambition, and explicitly states that his work cannot be understood except in terms of affirmation, insofar as Dionysius represents the radical ‘Yes-saying’ of affirmation: ‘Have I been understood? Dionysius versus the Crucified’.²³

Moreover, it is no exaggeration to say that the idea of affirmation can be understood to be the centre of his mature philosophy in both its negative and its positive aspects.²⁴ In an important sense, Nietzsche’s account of affirmation is most forcefully put forward through negation: affirmation is what Judeo-Christianity *fails* to do. Each of the key terms used in this diagnosis—the ‘slander’ against life,²⁵ a disgust with life,²⁶ a denigration or condemnation of life;²⁷ pushing the centre of gravity outside of life,²⁸ and so on—are taken to be the opposite a life-affirming attitude. In fact, without this underlying assumption, the famous critiques of ‘slave morality’/‘*ressentiment*’, ‘bad conscience’ and ‘the ascetic ideal’ make little sense. For example, it is not simply because the slave morality is part of a power struggle that it is loathed by Nietzsche, but because it is a power-struggle based on a prior hostility to, and condemnation of power and struggle as such. That is, it is a condemnation of life, and this condemnation is born as a result of an inability, or unwillingness, to affirm life as it is.²⁹

Positively, the idea of affirmation is central to the teaching that Nietzsche himself considered his most important, his ‘thought of thoughts’: eternal recurrence.³⁰ Nietzsche describes this thought as ‘the highest possible formula of affirmation’.³¹ In *The Gay Science* we find the following, justly-famous words:

22 GS 276. See Han-Pile (2011) for a helpful discussion of ‘*amor fati*’ in Nietzsche’s thinking.

23 EH ‘Why I am a Destiny’: 9.

24 Reginster (2008, pp. 1-4).

25 TI ‘Reason in Philosophy’: 6

26 GM II: 7

27 TI ‘Expeditions of an Untimely Man’: 34; ‘Morality as Anti-Nature’: 5

28 A 43

29 Lawrence Hatab’s careful discussion of the differences between ‘life-enhancement’ and ‘life-affirmation’ is helpful here. See Hatab (2005, pp. 44-47). This point is often missed in discussions of Nietzsche’s Genealogy, in particular, because it is easy for readers to take the exposure of hidden power dynamics as a condemnation. But Nietzsche’s philosophy cannot support such a condemnation; after all, what is to distinguish the disavowed will-to-power at work, say, in an ethic of patience, humility and compassion from the overt will-to-power expressed in a warrior ethic? Only if the former are somehow ‘life-denying’ in a distinct way can they be distinguished, and downgraded.

30 Nietzsche (2006, p. 239).

31 EH ‘Thus Spoke Zarathustra’: 1

The greatest weight: What, if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: "This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, an in the same succession and sequence—even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!" Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: 'You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine!' If this thought gained possession of you, it would change you as you are or perhaps crush you. The question in each and every thing, "Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?" would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight. Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life *to crave nothing more fervently* than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal?³²

There is enormous scholarly debate about how, exactly, the prospect that the demon announces would be liable to 'crush' the hearer, and of the way in which the thought of eternal recurrence is related to affirmation, and what is thereby affirmed.³³ But the second two features of the Nietzschean account of affirmation emerge unproblematically here: its 'all-or-nothing' character and its difficulty.

It is clear in this passage that there are only two responses to the demon—despair or exultation—which means affirmation is an all-or-nothing affair. This itself is intriguing, and worth further comment, as very often we find the opposite tendency at work in Nietzsche's thought: Nietzsche frequently attempts to complicate dualistic accounts of reality, or human life. In *Beyond Good and Evil* we read that the most fundamental 'prejudice' of the philosophers is the belief in opposite values in the face of a reality—a 'mad chaos of confusion and desire'—that consistently refuses to submit to such binary oppositions.³⁴ This conviction is found in many of Nietzsche's most penetrating analyses. In a remarkable passage from *Daybreak*, for example, Nietzsche gives an account of the origin of dreams: a numberless range of competing 'drives', eager for

³² GS 341.

³³ See Nehmas (1984), Clark (1990), Heidegger (1991) and Klossowski (2006) for a good sample of some important interventions; then more recently Hatab (2005) and Loeb (2013) for critical overviews and original responses to the literature. See Reginster (2008) for an influential discussion of how eternal recurrence coheres with affirmation, and Gemes (2018) for a response.

³⁴ BGE 2.

satisfaction, which seize hold of the same physical stimuli to produce an unending range of different dreams.³⁵ Or, in the *Genealogy*, we find Nietzsche emphasising the way in which the same set of external practices can acquire a plurality of different meanings,³⁶ or the way that one ‘ascetic ideal’ is transformed into range of seemingly opposed manifestations.³⁷ When it comes to affirmation, however, we find that Nietzsche assumes that the ‘question in each and every thing’ has only two possible answers, and that these are opposed, and mutually exclusive.³⁸

More than this, the suggestion in ‘The greatest weight’ is that affirmation is radically inclusive, and necessarily includes every moment of one’s life, whether joyous, trivial or demeaning. And it does not just include every moment of one’s *own* life; Nietzsche suggests that the thought of eternal recurrence implies saying ‘yes’ to the endlessly recurring totality within which one’s life is lived, and lived again: there is a question—the same question—in ‘each and every thing’. This inclusivity is what we would expect, given that life affirmation is put forward as the antidote and opposite to the life-denying values that, on Nietzsche’s account, are equally universal in scope.³⁹ As John Richardson has argued, although Nietzsche discusses affirmation in quite a range of ways, there is a clear impulse to move from partial, conditional expressions of affirmation towards a stronger, more universal and unanimous ‘Yes’; to find *everything* good as such, not just in relation to some higher goal, or as part of some larger whole.⁴⁰ So the term ‘affirmation’ tends to be used to convey the sense that we have, somehow, to deal with, or respond to what is variously referred to as ‘life’, ‘the whole’, etc., rather than simply having to deal with, or respond to *particular* things and events, or their attributes. Or rather, for Nietzsche, we might say that the latter are always instances of the former, so that the two cannot be separated, as Zarathustra teaches:

Have you ever said Yes to one joy? Oh my friends, then you also said Yes to all pain. All things are enchained, entwined, enamoured – – if you ever wanted one time two times, if you ever said “I like you, happiness! Whoosh! Moment!” then you wanted everything back! – Everything anew, everything eternal, everything enchained, entwined, enamoured, oh thus

35 D 119.

36 GM II: 12.

37 GM III: 1.

38 See Richardson (2015, pp. 116-17) for comment on this foundational dualism.

39 See, e.g. TI ‘Reason in Philosophy’: I, 6.

40 Richardson 2015, pp. 91-95.

you loved the world – – you eternal ones, love it eternally and for all time; and say to pain also: refrain, but come back! For all joy wants – eternity!⁴¹

There seem to be two slightly different reasons for this intuition. The first concerns interdependence. Although there is significant controversy over the extent to which Nietzsche affirms a thorough-going determinism, it certainly seems as though he assumes that the conditions of the possibility of any particular moment within the whole include every other moment, or part, of the whole. This metaphysical thought is existentially significant, insofar as it means that all the things that I most love or desire are necessarily connected with all the things I despise. This point recurs time and again in Nietzsche's account of Judeo-Christian morality, as he tries to show that all 'goodness' is at root dependent upon, and inseparable from its opposite. This is why, in his account of *ressentiment*, Nietzsche writes as if the 'no-saying' that constitutes the imaginary revenge of the impotent is somehow directed at particular members of the noble class *and* at reality itself at the same time;⁴² he takes the former to necessarily imply the latter.⁴³ Secondly, it seems that despite his disavowal of the 'great errors' of metaphysics, Nietzsche nevertheless assumes that 'the whole' has an underlying character of some kind, and that it is possible to be confronted, in thought, by this character. This means that in addition to the way in which each particular moment of affirmation is implicitly related to 'the whole', it is also possible, somehow, to affirm 'the eternal hourglass' of existence *directly*: universal affirmation can have a *single* concern, or focal point. It might be that the whole is nothing but a 'sea of forces flowing and rushing together, eternally changing',⁴⁴ but insofar as it is possible to affirm or deny, it is something towards which one can be oriented as such.⁴⁵ Somehow, in one's interactions with the world and with oneself, one is always in an unavoidable affirming or negating relationship with life as such.

41 Z IV: 19, 10. See WP 1032 for a more direct expression of the same point: 'The first question is by no means whether we are content with ourselves, but whether we are content with anything at all. If we affirm one single moment, we thus affirm not only ourselves but all existence. For nothing is self-sufficient, neither in us ourselves nor in things; and if our soul has trembled with happiness and sounded like a harp string just once, all eternity was needed to produce this one event—and in this single moment of affirmation all eternity was called good, redeemed, justified, and affirmed.'

42 GM I: 10, 11

43 See, e.g. HH I: 107; D 113; GM III: 13. We can note here a point of disagreement amongst Nietzsche scholars concerning the extent to which affirmation implies judgement; that is, the extent to which it has an intentional content. John Richardson argues that Nietzsche's writing on affirmation should be understood in terms of the conviction that everything is good, so that affirmation is implicitly tied to a judgement about the nature of things (2015, p. 93). In contrast, Simon May suggests that one of Nietzsche's underlying convictions is that the request for justifying reasons is itself a sign of nihilism, so that the truly Nietzschean affirmer would not need or desire a corresponding judgement.

44 WP 1067

45 There is a significant question about whether Nietzsche conceived of affirmation as primarily affective or reflective – or rather, which of these should be thought of as more fundamental. See Gemes, 2018 for a discussion of this distinction. As Gemes points out, the idea of eternal recurrence seems to imply a reflective affirmation, but Nietzsche often talks as though learning to 'feel differently', rather than simply to 'think

This brings us to our third feature: genuine affirmation of life is rare, difficult, or traumatic in some vitally important and existentially revealing way. This point is already made in ‘The greatest weight’, but is most vividly dramatised in one of the central passages of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*—‘Of the Vision and the Riddle’—where Zarathustra sees a young shepherd with a black snake that has crawled into his throat, and ‘bitten itself fast’. Here the snake seems to represent disgust at an existence that can inspire only horror and which seems, initially, to be impossible to affirm. And yet, at Zarathustra’s prompting, the shepherd bites off the head, and springs up, transformed: ‘No longer a shepherd, no longer a man – a transformed being, surrounded with light, laughing! Never yet on earth had any man laughed as he laughed! O my brothers, I heard a laughter that was no human laughter – and now a thirst consumes me, a longing that is never stilled.’⁴⁶ Affirmation, then, is traumatic and difficult, and requires overcoming of some kind; this means that it can be taken as a challenge by those who are strong enough to stomach it, even as it crushes those who can only ‘flee’ from it.⁴⁷

The characteristics of existence that make affirmation difficult—in fact, which bring it to the threshold of impossibility—are also those which lie at the root of the ‘great errors’ of metaphysics and religion.⁴⁸ The ‘great errors’ of philosophy, morality and religion arise from a deception that is itself rooted in hostility to life as such. But equally, Nietzsche very often implies that this hostility itself has a deeper root, namely, the fact that life, as it really is, is very difficult to affirm as it really is. In other words, reality is tragic in some pervasive and ineliminable way. In his assessment of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche describes the problem of the ‘Zarathustra type’ as the problem of ‘how someone with the hardest, the most terrible insight into reality, who has thought “the most abysmal thought”, can nonetheless see it *not* as an objection to existence, not even to its eternal return, - but instead find one more reason in it *for himself to be* the eternal yes to all things’.⁴⁹ So, the ‘Yes-saying’ that Nietzsche aspires to should not be understood as in any way an obvious, or natural, response to the nature of things, and it does not just come about naturally once metaphysical, moral or religious errors have been dissolved.⁵⁰ On Nietzsche’s

differently’ (D 103) is the ultimate aim of affirmation. This issue, in term, relates to the nature of nihilism. Gemes suggests that the nihilism of disorientation and the nihilism of despair, as analysed by Reginster, both proceed from an affective nihilism, which Nietzsche outlines in GM II.

46 Z III: ‘The Vision and the Riddle’. In his fascinating account of the doctrine of eternal recurrence and the idea of ‘backward willing’ in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Paul Loeb suggests that the young shepherd is in fact Zarathustra himself. See Loeb (2010, pp. 179-185).

47 EH ‘The Birth of Tragedy’: 2

48 See TI ‘The Four Great Errors’ for one of Nietzsche’s accounts of these errors.

49 EH ‘Thus Spoke Zarathustra’: 6.

50 This can be seen, for instance, in his insistence, throughout the *Genealogy*, that atheism and scientific naturalism have not freed themselves from the nihilism of the ascetic ideal, as one might suppose. See GM III: 23-26.

account there is deep resistance to affirmation not just in the human psyche, or in the psychology/physiology of particular ‘types’ of person, and not just within a particular culture, or resultant set of values—although all of these *do* oppose or prevent affirmation in important ways—but in the world itself.⁵¹ In other words, as Nietzsche writes elsewhere, ‘[t]hat lies are necessary to live is itself part of the terrifying and questionable character of existence’ (WP 853). As we will see, the ambition to find in the ‘hardest, most terrible insights’ a reason for affirmation is one that Simone Weil also nurtures.

Consent

To summarise the preceding section, we can say that for Nietzsche, affirmation is understood in terms of a positive response to a fundamental question, a response which is universal in scope, pervasive in influence, and difficult or traumatic in an existentially revealing way. As we will see, much the same may be said of what Simone Weil writes about consent to necessity and in what follows, I aim to bring out the ways in which Weil’s understanding of this idea resembles Nietzsche’s account of affirmation in these three senses. This is not at all to imply that Weil uses the phrase ‘consent to necessity’ to refer to the same thought that Nietzsche has in mind when he writes of ‘affirmation’, as though one term translated the other. And, of course, we should not expect to be able to understand what is meant by either of these terms without understanding the place that each occupies within the complex philosophy of which it is a part. However, I do hope to show that when we consider the ways in which Weil writes about consent (and an associated cluster of ideas), the role she takes it to play in human life, and its connection with other key themes in her work, then the parallels with Nietzschean affirmation seem striking.

Firstly, then, at the heart of Simone Weil’s thought is the idea of loving consent to, or acceptance of, reality as it is – a kind of yes-saying; as she writes, somewhat mysteriously, in the midst of a series of notebook reflections on suffering: ‘[r]eality has, in a sense, need of our adherence. In that way do we become creators of the world.’⁵² This ‘adherence’ is sometimes described as a distinct act, and at others as a pervasive attitude and/or as the inner truth of other kinds of love and attention. The idea that the central human task is to lovingly consent to reality is implicated within all of her most central concerns: her early analysis of oppression; her subsequent

51 Commentators disagree about the extent to which Nietzsche’s early convictions about the irredeemably tragic nature of reality persist in his mature thought, and this issue has a bearing on the question of what is the primary cause of the difficulty of affirmation. The stance I take in this paper is influenced by Lawrence Hatab’s persuasive argument about the importance of tragedy in Nietzsche’s late thought. See Hatab (2005, ch. 2; 2008, ch. 6).

52 Weil (2014, p. 293).

proposals for a society based on the sanctity of labour; her influential reflections on the nature of attention; her ideas about supernatural ‘use’ of suffering; and the religious metaphysics that she was working out in the final years of her life. Weil gives her most systematic account of this consent in the essay ‘The Pythagorean Doctrine’, which was probably written in Casablanca in 1942 whilst the Weil family waited for their transfer to New York.⁵³ In an attempt to show the deep consonance between (her reconstruction of) Pythagorean thought and Christianity, Weil explores the idea of mediation and, in a typically ambitious manner, sketches out the ways in which all forms of fundamental differences—between God and God, between God and humans, between individual humans, and between God and matter—are brought into harmony through mediation. The central part of the essay concerns the idea of ‘necessity’—‘the network of limits, which hold all things in a single order’—which mediates between ‘the principle that limits’ (i.e. God) and ‘inert matter as such’.⁵⁴ In other words, ‘necessity’ refers to the natural order itself, ‘an ensemble of laws of variation, determined by fixed relationships and invariants’⁵⁵ and is that which we encounter *continuously* in all our dealings with the world. In fact, we also encounter necessity in our will itself, which is just one more part of the natural order, and therefore subject to its own limits.⁵⁶

Weil initially suggests that there are three kinds of relationships that we might have with necessity: it can be our slave, social power or in fantasy; it can be an ‘absolute and brutal master’ (as when one experiences severe hunger, cold, or pain); or there is the possibility of an equilibrium in productive labour, whereby one’s knowledge of necessity supplies the possibility of obeying nature so as to command it.⁵⁷ However, it is also possible to contemplate necessity, and here, Weil believes, is the possibility of entering into a fundamentally different kind of relationship with the world: ‘the relationship of the object contemplated to the contemplation’.⁵⁸ In contemplating necessity the contemplative intelligence is, somehow, ‘at the intersection of two worlds’; only half-submerged within the network of events. This contemplative stance gives the possibility of consent to necessity; to love the necessity to which one is subject, whilst remaining subject to it. But the act of consent is not itself, Weil insists, part of the world at all:

53 Pétrement (1976, pp. 468-9).

54 Weil (1998, p. 177).

55 Weil (1998, p. 178).

56 Weil (1998, p. 181).

57 Weil (1998, p. 180).

58 Weil (1998, p. 182).

The faculty in man which looks upon the most brutal force, as one looks at a picture, naming it necessity, is not the portion of man which belongs to the other world. That faculty is at the intersection of the two worlds. The faculty which does not belong to this world is the faculty of consent. Man is free to consent to necessity, or not. This liberty is not actual in him except when he conceives of force as necessity, that is to say, when he contemplates it. He is not free to consent to force as such. The slave who sees the lash lifted above him does not consent, nor refuse his consent, he trembles. And yet under the name of necessity it is indeed to brute force that man consents, and when he consents, it is indeed to a lash. No mover, no motive can be sufficient for such a consent. This consent is madness, man's own particular madness, the madness that belongs to man, like Creation, like the Incarnation, together with the Passion, constitute God's own madness. These two madresses answer each other.⁵⁹

So the part of the human person that is most like God is the part that has the capacity to direct attention to reality as such, to affirm it in love. Neither mind nor will are 'outside' of necessity; each are, in their own way, conditional and subject to unavoidable limits. It is only consent (which, it turns out, is nothing other than love: 'even in a certain manner an excess of love')⁶⁰ that is able to face reality as such in this way, that has the power to say 'yes', so as to be the earthly answer to the divine 'madness'. Love sees the beauty of reality as such, and consents to this beauty, however terrible.

The second and third parallels can be treated together. Just as Nietzsche's understanding of affirmation meant that one could not affirm one thing without affirming everything, so Weil takes it that consent is an all-or-nothing affair, one that will be deeply traumatic and meet with the most intense resistance. The words 'and when he consents it is indeed to a lash' express one of Weil's deepest convictions: all beauty in the world is intimately tied to the possibility of one's own destruction. This is not just because any biological equilibrium inevitably breaks down in death, but also the fact that natural forces can, by their nature, bring about the most awful suffering. The same 'perfect obedience' that makes waves beautiful will ensure the destruction of unfortunate sailors under certain conditions.⁶¹ All suffering, in fact, is experience of necessity: 'Each time that we have some pain to go through we can say to ourselves quite truly that it is the universe, the order and beauty of the world, and the obedience of creation to God, which are entering our body'.⁶² Just as

⁵⁹ Weil (1998, p. 182; 1977, p. 71).

⁶⁰ Weil (1998, p. 183).

⁶¹ Weil (1977, p. 70).

⁶² Weil (1977, p. 73).

Nietzsche's vision of the way in which all things are 'enchained, entwined' led to the terrible thought that life could only be affirmed *at all* if it was affirmed completely, so Weil assumes that the deepest love of the world necessarily expands until it includes everything, however terrible. She has an overwhelming sense of the inseparability of all things: 'each thing, being in its place, permits all other things to exist'.⁶³ If one senses, with horror, the power of a 'little piece of iron' to reduce a human being to nothingness, one senses one's subjection to space and time:⁶⁴ the feeling, felt by those in affliction, that 'the whole universe' is pressing down on them is, in one sense, completely true.⁶⁵ And to 'consent' to this will mean to take this 'pressing down' as the love of God dispersed throughout the creation, as she writes in another essay on ancient Greek thought:

What we call the design or the designs, the plan or plans, of Providence, are only imaginings invented by ourselves. What is authentically providential, what is Providence itself, is this very order of the world itself, the stuff of which it is woven, the woof of all events, and which, beneath one of its aspects, is the pitiless and blind mechanism of necessity. [. . .] Of a perfect poem one can say only that each word is in the place where it is absolutely appropriate to be. Likewise for all beings (including oneself), for all things, for all happenings which insert themselves into the course of time [. . .] Every event that takes place is a syllable pronounced by the voice of Love himself.⁶⁶

It is possible, then, to love the world, to consent to it, but such love and consent pushes one to the most counter-intuitive position one can imagine: to affirm 'every event' as being equally part of its perfection.⁶⁷ Weil interprets the verse in the Sermon on the Mount that compares the perfection of God to the rain that falls on the righteous and the unrighteous in terms of the natural order: God's perfect will is expressed in the regularity and necessity of the causal network and its 'perfect obedience'. Necessity, she writes, is the 'veil of God'.⁶⁸ It is the very nature of the natural order to be indifferent to justice, which means, paradoxically, that insofar as the beauty of the world is a manifestation of God's goodness, God's goodness is expressed *through* this complete indifference.⁶⁹

⁶³ Weil (1998, p. 185).

⁶⁴ Weil (2014, p. 26).

⁶⁵ Weil (2014, p. 433).

⁶⁶ Weil (1998, p. 104).

⁶⁷ This idea appears throughout the notebooks and essays, e.g. Weil (2014, pp. 22, 401; 1970, p. 263; 1977, pp. 137-8; 2003, p. 278-80).

⁶⁸ Weil (2014, p. 266).

⁶⁹ Weil (1998, p. 184).

Furthermore, human action is, in one sense, simply another part of necessity, so that when I suffer at the hands of another, whether as a result of deliberate cruelty or carelessness, I also experience the order of the world ‘entering my body’. Although there are important differences between Nietzsche and Weil when it comes to the analysis of both individual human action and social life, and even though their valuations of power stand in the starkest opposition, they are agreed that human will and action, in both its individual and social manifestations, should be likened to ‘natural’ events, operating according to natural principles.⁷⁰ One of Weil’s most persistent themes is the universal tendency to exercise all the power at one’s disposal, as if in accordance with a natural law: ‘[t]he soul, like a gas, tends to occupy all of the space left open to it’.⁷¹ Alongside this conviction is another: that one of the deepest the illusions that accompanies the exercise of power is the belief that when one exerts power over others one acts freely, rather than in accordance with a very-nearly exceptionless law. Whilst the primary focus of this point is on the illusions that accompany the exercise of power, it applies also to those who suffer at the hands of the powerful: one must come to learn that, in certain sense, ‘they know not what they do’. More than this, consent to necessity implies some kind of affirmation of the injustice that crushes the weak, even as one hates and opposes such injustice. Love of neighbour and love of the world are, then, in a profound tension, because the love of neighbour causes one to protest against the suffering of the afflicted, even as both their suffering and the forces—both ‘natural’ and human—which cause it are an ineliminable part of the world that one loves. Consent to necessity, then, leads to a lived paradox: I must love the existence of all those that do evil, even whilst I hate the evil that they do.⁷²

Interestingly, the passage from *The Gay Science*, quoted above, shows Nietzsche wrestling with a similar problem: of how to affirm the existence of those who can only accuse and condemn (‘I do not even want to accuse those who accuse’). If one wants to fully affirm ‘life’ as such, then one has to affirm all things, even (and perhaps especially) those that are, in other ways, to be resisted, opposed or condemned; most notably, for Nietzsche, the catastrophe that is European

70 See Goodchild (2017, pp. 17-19) for some helpful comments on Weil’s implied critique of Nietzsche: the difference between the interaction between and natural forces and that between human social forces is that the latter lack a principle of limitation, which allows equilibrium; the dynamics of social prestige, thirst for domination, etc. are dangerous because they are structured by an infinite desire for good, displaced to a lower level: ‘What they want is no less than all. All the riches of Troy as booty, all the palaces, the temples and the houses as ashes, all the women and all the children as slaves, all the men as corpses.’ (1998, p. 36).

71 Weil (2014, p. 198). For related comments, see Weil (1998, pp. 31-2; 34-5; 52; 2015b, pp. 168-70).

72 Weil (2014, p. 340).

nihilism, and its accusatory, life-denying tendencies.⁷³ The problem here is that, for Nietzsche, ‘accusation’ itself is based on a dualistic picture of the person that he rejects; one which separates do-er from deed, in order to blame the former for the latter. In contrast, Nietzsche understands his own philosophy as an attempt to ‘return man to nature’; that is, to articulate a thorough-going naturalism that understands human action within the same framework as everything else.⁷⁴ This means that the attempt to conceptually distinguish do-er from deed is a mistaken attempt to remove humans from the natural sphere, in which it makes no sense to blame the powerful for exercising their power.⁷⁵ Weil herself often used the image of ‘levels’ to try to resolve this, and other, similar, problems: what is true at one ‘level’ (that one ‘consents’ to necessity) may be false at another level (one cannot consent to the exploitation of the weak, or to the forces that drive those who do so). These issues deserve a detailed discussion which is not possible in the available space, but we can at least conclude that the ‘all or nothing’ nature of both Nietzschean affirmation and Weilian consent push them to wrestle with problems that are intriguingly similar in form: how to articulate an existential posture that is based on an all-encompassing ‘yes-saying’ that nevertheless includes an uncompromising no-saying.⁷⁶

Finally, we can point out that just as, for Nietzsche, one’s answer to the question ‘in each and every thing’ is somehow implied in all one’s dealing with the world, so, for Weil, the consent to necessity can be felt everywhere, and pervades and shapes our way of living. Again, in content, Nietzsche and Weil are diametrically opposed here: for Weil, consent to necessity involves the renunciation of the capacity to say ‘I’, it means humility, compassion and detachment; it means to be ‘decreated’⁷⁷. For Nietzsche, of course, affirmation of life means affirmation of will-to-power, which means the stronger overcoming the weaker. But despite this contrast, the *form* of their reflections is very similar, because Nietzsche also presumes that the ‘yes-saying’ can be discerned at every point in life, so that it transforms one’s way of living, one way or another. Space does not permit thorough exploration of how Weil conceives of this transformation, but we can briefly note the following passage, again from ‘The Pythagorean Doctrine’, which follows her reflections on the relationship between love and intelligence, and the importance of contemplating the ‘fidelity’ of things to their natural limits: ‘The first lesson of this contemplation is not to choose but to consent

73 On this point, I am influenced by Maudemarie Clark’s discussion of Zarathustra’s nausea. On Clark’s account, Zarathustra’s most severe challenge, which the thought of eternal recurrence expresses, is to affirm life in non-instrumental way, which also means to affirm the recurrence of the ‘small man’ who causes his nausea at existence. See Clark (1990, pp. 270-77).

74 BGE 230. Brian Leiter is the most influential proponent of the naturalistic reading of Nietzsche. See Leiter (2013).

75 GM I: 13.

76 See Richardson (2015) for a detailed examination of this problem in Nietzsche’s thought.

77 For detailed accounts of the notion of decreation in Weil, see Veto (1994, pp. 11-40) and McCullough (2014, pp. 171-212).

impartially to the existence of all that exists. This universal consent is the same thing as detachment, and any attachment, even the weakest and most legitimate in appearance, is an obstacle to it.⁷⁸ Genuine love of the world as such precludes any ‘attachment’ to particular portions of the world (for example, one’s native country, or the Church): one can have obligations, but no attachment, to the particular.⁷⁹ In each particular relationship or movement of desire, one’s unavoidable relationship with reality as such is implied, and at stake – the two are so closely interwoven as to be indistinguishable.

Finality, suffering and revaluation

Having set out the affinity between Nietzschean affirmation and Weilian with the broadest brushstrokes, we can now consider the similarity in more detail, as we explore the connections between affirmation/consent and finality, suffering and revaluation.

The final section of the *Genealogy* ends with a powerfully suggestive but inconclusive passage about the relationship between suffering and nihilism. In the preceding sections, Nietzsche describes the many transformations of the ascetic ideal, which is, at its heart, a fundamental ‘no’ to existence, a turning of life’s energies against life. Nietzsche, then attempts to unmask modern science⁸⁰ and ‘honest atheism’⁸¹ as the final and purest forms of this ascetic ideal (‘not so much its remnant, as its kernel’) insofar as they are driven by an unconditional valuing of truth and ‘thus affirm another world from the one of life, nature and history’.⁸² This leaves the obvious question of how to the persistence and ubiquity of something that is—according to Nietzsche—fundamentally at odds with life. Why is the ascetic ideal so successful? The answer is that the ascetic ideal filled a vacuum in a way that nothing else could:

Except for the ascetic ideal: man, the *animal* man, had no meaning up to now. His existence on earth had no purpose; ‘What is man for, actually?’ – was a question without an answer; there was no will for man and earth; behind every great human destiny sounded the even louder refrain ‘in vain!’ *This* is what the ascetic ideal meant: something was missing, there was an immense *lacuna* around man, – he himself could think of no justification or explanation or affirmation, he *suffered* from the problem of what he meant. Other things made him suffer too, in the main he was a sickly animal: but suffering itself was not his problem, instead, the fact that there was no answer to the question he screamed, ‘Suffering

78 Weil (1998, p. 187).

79 Weil (1977, p. 46).

80 GM III:25.

81 GM III: 27.

82 GM III: 24; GS 344.

for what?’ Man, the bravest animal and most prone to suffer, does *not* deny suffering as such: he *wills* it, he even seeks it out, provided he is shown a *meaning* for it, a *purpose* of suffering. The meaninglessness of suffering, not the suffering, was the curse that has so far blanketed mankind, – and *the ascetic ideal offered man a meaning!*⁸³

Thus far, the key questions in this passage (‘what is man for, actually?’ and ‘suffering for what?’) can be read in two ways. Firstly, as themselves an *expression* of the ‘powerful instinct’ for casting suspicion on life, insofar as the questions presume a lack some kind, or find life wanting in some fundamental way. In this case, the problem would not be so much that one failed to find a meaning for suffering, but that one looked for a meaning in the first place.⁸⁴ Secondly, we could see these questions as somehow unavoidable given the inevitability of suffering, and the existence of creatures capable of asking the question ‘why?’ in ever more abstract ways. In this case, it would be more that life itself has a tendency to make itself questionable.⁸⁵ Support for both readings can be found elsewhere in Nietzsche’s work, and space does not allow a thorough consideration of the interpretative difficulties here.⁸⁶ But the sentences that immediately follow give further weight to the second reading, that is, to the thought that in some way the trauma to which the ascetic ideal is a response is irreducible and originary:

Up to now it was the only meaning, but any meaning at all is better than no meaning at all; the ascetic ideal was, in every respect, the ultimate *‘faute de mieux’ par excellence*. Within it, suffering was interpreted; the enormous emptiness seemed filled; the door was shut on all suicidal nihilism. The interpretation – without a doubt – brought new suffering with it, deeper, more internal, more poisonous suffering, suffering that gnawed away more intensely at life: it brought all suffering within the perspective of *guilt* . . . But in spite of all that – man was *saved*, he had a *meaning*, from now on he was no longer like a leaf in the breeze, the

83 GM III: 28.

84 Something similar is suggested in WP 12a. As Gemes (2018) points out, there is a paradox for Nietzsche here: at times it seems as though the most instinctively affirming life would never feel the need to ask the question ‘why?’ in the first place, nor reflect on the value of things. This means that any reflective affirmation (such as is expressed in the thought of eternal recurrence) is already implicitly non-affirming.

85 As is suggested earlier on in the same essay: GM III: 13, 14.

86 For example, within WP 55 we see signs of both interpretations: on the one hand, it seems that the collapse of belief in God provokes meaninglessness precisely because belief in God was predicated on taking the world as meaningless in itself in the first place; on the other hand, we are also told that the thought of ‘existence as it is, without meaning of aim, yet recurring inevitably without any finale of nothingness’ is ‘the most extreme form of nihilism’ – in other words, there is a kind of meaninglessness in reality, that one must confront.

plaything of the absurd, of ‘non-sense’; from now on he could *will* something, – no matter what, why and how he did it at first, the *will itself was saved*.⁸⁷

So it seems that the threat of meaninglessness, and meaningless suffering in particular, plays a central role in Nietzsche’s understanding both of the *difficulty* of life-affirmation, and of the distortions that arise when life-denying values are created, in the *absence* of affirmation.⁸⁸ The prospect of meaningless suffering exerts a powerful pressure on thought, and gives rise to the attitudes and corresponding categories which end up devaluing existence: ‘aim’, ‘unity’, ‘being’, for example.⁸⁹ As a result, the only feasible alternative to religio-moral nihilism, will be one in which suffering itself can be affirmed, or, at least, no longer found to be an objection to existence. In other words, the new affirmation will require revaluation – a ‘revaluation of all values’. Nietzsche’s alternative to nihilism—his way of ‘saving’ the will—is intimately tied up with his account of eternal recurrence, because it shows what affirmation would have to be like if it was to be a genuine *alternative* to nihilism—one that could operate in the absence of an answer to the question ‘suffering for what?’—rather than another disguised form of nihilism. Affirmation, on a Nietzschean account, is not something that simply what emerges when one stops ‘accusing’ or ‘denying’ life; it must be bought at a price, so to speak.

As we can now see, many of Weil’s reflections on suffering also dwell on the idea of a pervasive lack of finality ‘here below’,⁹⁰ and this issue relates closely to the way in which she understood the deep transformation of perspective which she so often tried to describe. Weil’s discussions of suffering frequently dwell on the idea that suffering can be much more easily tolerated when there is some kind of associated aim, vindicating purpose or ‘compensation’ available (even if it is only available to the imagination). This means that suffering—whether it is one’s own, or that of another—is the great producer of lies. In a letter written in 1942, we find a condensation of Weil’s ideas about suffering, truth and the love of the real:

87 GM III: 28; see also WP 4.

88 Nietzsche’s critique of compassion is instructive here: the compassionate lament suffering, and so ultimately condemn existence insofar as to lament suffering is also to hold in view a true world from which all suffering and resistance is removed. See, e.g. BGE 225; A 30. But this ‘instinct of hatred for reality’ (A 30) is itself a consequence of the capacity for suffering, as the final section of the Genealogy above indicates.

89 See WP 12a. See also Bittner (1994, esp. pp. 133–4; 136) for a careful analysis of this issue in the first essay of the Genealogy. Bittner argues that Nietzsche backtracks on his claims about the relationship between suffering and illusion, so that he can make the ‘slave revolt’ the product of a conscious intention, and therefore find someone to blame for it; in other words, Nietzsche himself succumbs to the tendencies he describes in the essay itself.

90 Weil (1977, pp. 98, 132).

I believe that the root of evil, in everybody perhaps, but certainly in those whom affliction has touched and above all if the affliction is biological, is day-dreaming. It is the sole-consolation, the unique resource of the afflicted; the one solace to help them bear the fearful burden of time; and a very innocent one, besides being indispensable. So how could it be possible to renounce it? It has only one disadvantage, which is that it is unreal. To renounce it for the love of truth is really to abandon all one's possessions in a mad excess of love and to follow him who is the personification of Truth.'⁹¹

In other words lies are, in Nietzschean terms, 'necessary to live', even though living with deception means that one is distanced from the reality in which one lives. This thought recurs again and again in Weil's writing,⁹² but the following two examples have a particularly Nietzschean tones: 'life constrains one to believe what one requires to believe in order to live'⁹³ (compare this Nietzsche's comments on knowledge as a 'condition of life' in GS 110);⁹⁴ '[l]ife as it is given to men is unbearable without recourse to lying' (compare with Nietzsche's comments about lies being necessary to live, quoted above).⁹⁵

Weil's main term for this overpowering tendency towards self-deception is 'imagination'. One of the primary forms that this imagination takes, according to Weil, is to suppose that 'the future contains for us an all-sufficient good', which is the same as believing that the future is made of fundamentally different 'stuff' to the present.⁹⁶ Insofar as we are caught in this kind of imagination, we avoid confronting the fact that there is no final good to be found in the future, and that the world itself is without any kind of 'finality'; that is, does not contain anything that corresponds with the deepest human desires.⁹⁷ At one point Weil writes of the way in which to a person enslaved, fatigued and unable to pursue their own ends, 'any end whatever is like a stick to a drowning man'.⁹⁸ Her point is that regaining the possibility of a clear aim means that one can restore one's sense that the temporal direction of one's life corresponds to some kind of teleological progress – a progress that could justify or compensate for the present suffering. But this would

91 Weil (2015c, p. 139).

92 Most well-known are her descriptions of the way that 'thought is unable to acknowledge the reality of affliction' in 'Human Personality' (2015b), but the less well-known 'Morality and Literature' is also instructive (Weil 1968).

93 Weil (2003, p. 246).

94 This point is subsequently developed in Nietzsche's later reflections on the will to truth, where the belief that life necessitates deception then raises the question of how an unconditional 'will to truth' arises. See, for example, BGE 4 and GS 344.

95 Weil (1968, p. 149).

96 Weil (1968, p. 148). Weil is very close to Schopenhauer here: the will gives rise to 'imagination', which means that we are able to avoid acknowledging the basic futility involved in all willing. See Broc-Lapeyre (1980) for discussion of the similarity between Schopenhauer and Weil on the question of will.

97 Weil (1977, p. 98).

98 Weil (2014, p. 546).

mean to restore an illusion, because the future will not, and cannot contain such a good. So for Weil, ‘imagination’ is the name of a pervasive deception which is pervasive not because of individual weakness or perversity, but because of a basic lack of fit between human desire and the reality in which they find themselves. This means that Weil’s account of the ground of this pervasive deception is the one that Nietzsche rejects: humans have—or rather *are*—the desire for an infinite good—something that is good and nothing else—but since this good is ‘absent’, there is a compulsive need to redirect this love onto something present and attainable. This, in turn means that there is a nearly irresistible pressure to think about the world in such a way as to make sense of this redirection; for the miser to believe that their imagined treasure really is what they most deeply want.⁹⁹ The only existential shock that can awaken a person from imagination—and this shock can take the form of beauty or affliction—is the recognition that there is *nothing* ‘here below’ (which is to say, nothing that can be attained through exercise of the will) that corresponds to this desire, even though the desire itself is still real.

In this vein, the following words, from ‘The Pythagorean Doctrine’ echo Nietzsche’s discussion of these questions at the end of the *Genealogy* in an intriguing way:

The principal effect of affliction is to force the soul to cry out “why”, as did Christ Himself, and to repeat this cry unceasingly, except when exhaustion interrupts it. There is no reply. When one finds a comforting reply, first of all one has constructed it oneself; then the fact that one has the power to construct it shows that the suffering, however intense it is, has not attained the specific degree of affliction, just as water does not boil at 99 degrees centigrade. If the word ‘why’ expressed the search for a cause, the reply would appear easily. But it expresses the search for an end. This whole universe is empty of finality. If it does not renounce loving, it happens one day to hear, not a reply to the question which it cries, for there is none, but the very silence as something infinitely more full of significance than any response, like God himself speaking. It knows then that God’s absence here below is the same thing as the secret presence upon earth of the God who is in heaven.¹⁰⁰

Consent to necessity has to pass through a trauma, which is to acknowledge both the absence of any answer to the deepest question (‘why?’), and the impossibility of satisfying the deepest desire (the desire for good/God). And this trauma, when accepted, brings about the possibility of a fundamental revaluation: absence is found to be a ‘secret presence’ once it is accepted and loved, and silence is experienced as being like speech once one gives up looking for a reply.

⁹⁹ It is interesting to note the similarity between Weil’s understanding of desire, and Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory. See de Kesel (2013) for a persuasive argument that Lacan’s thought was influenced by a number of comments in *Gravity and Grace*.

¹⁰⁰ Weil (1998, pp. 198-9; see also 1970, pp. 82-3; 137)

Weil does not use the term ‘revaluation’, but it seems like an apt one to describe what she attempts here and at a number of other critical junctures. The thought expressed here is repeated in a number of different places in slightly different ways, using a variety of concepts or images: the void that, once accepted, is found to be full of grace;¹⁰¹ the desire that, once one accepts it cannot be satisfied, becomes its own fulfilment;¹⁰² the lost child who, if they have the courage to stay where they are and wait, rather than running around looking frantically for their mother, will be found sooner;¹⁰³ and perhaps most dramatically, the prisoner who beats their head against their cell wall until they faint, and wake up on the other side of the wall.¹⁰⁴ Although these images and their connotations are quite different, in each case the structure is the same: the refusal to lie; followed by love or acceptance of the absence/constraint; followed by a transfiguration and revaluation of the world. It is intriguing to note here that it is almost as though Weil has written in a rebuttal of the Nietzschean accusation into her account of the love of God: she stresses that the void/absence ‘here below’ cannot be loved on the basis of a hope that the desire for an infinite good will be satisfied elsewhere, in a ‘true world’. Rather, it is essential that the void/absence is accepted, consented to, and loved *as such*, and the absence lived through for a time; otherwise, one risks loving a fiction under the name of God.¹⁰⁵ It is not that one maintains two loves: one for the world, another for God; it is that the love for God must pass through the world in which God is absent, yet refuse to deceive itself, despair or be diminished.¹⁰⁶ One has to love the country ‘here below’ whilst somehow remaining true to a desire for a good which has no home ‘here below’. So despite the stark dualism that one finds, say, in her ‘Draft for a Statement of Human Obligations’, it seems that despite this dualism, her philosophy of metaphysical desire is explicitly formulated in such a way that, by definition, one cannot do what Nietzsche accuses Judeo-Christianity of doing: rejecting the world for the sake of the beyond; condemning the world with reference to the beyond, etc.

The revaluation just described is most evident in the way in which Weil writes about suffering. Weil’s reflections in this area are full of tensions and even seeming contradictions, and this is not surprising, because she has to find a way to articulate two seemingly opposed truths: suffering can be loved, and found to be valuable as a form of contact with reality; suffering has no

101 Weil (2014, pp. 147-150; 491).

102 Weil (1970, p. 316).

103 Weil (1968, p. 159).

104 Weil (2015b, p. 26-7).

105 Weil (1977, p. 107).

106 It should be noted that Weil’s thought is very ambiguous at times on this point. Sometimes she writes as the real trial is to love the world, even though the world is ‘necessary, but not good’; at other times she writes as though the real trial is to love God, who is absent. It seems, however, that the ambiguity points to the fact that they are seen as two facets of the same trial.

‘purpose’ in the manner sometimes conceived of in theodicies.¹⁰⁷ We can learn to ‘read’ suffering in such a way as to see it as a sign of reality, and beautiful insofar as it is ‘necessary’, but we must avoid the belief that it is part of any teleological progress towards a higher good, or that there is any justice in its distribution. The following passage is typical:

To turn suffering into an offering is a consolation, and it is thus a veil thrown over the reality of suffering. But the same applies if we regard suffering as a punishment. Suffering has no significance. There lies the very essence of its reality. We must love it in its reality, which is the absence of significance. Otherwise we do not love God.¹⁰⁸

The seeming lack of connection between the last two sentences in fact highlights, again, the basic convictions that have already been pointed out: the world, as a whole, is not ‘for’ anything; to realise and accept this, and to continue to love it as ‘one’s country’ is the basic spiritual task, which, in turn, means to love God as creator. Far from being its antidote to meaninglessness, the love of God begins, in some sense, with the embrace of reality *in* its ‘absence of significance’; this absence is the ‘closed door’ that becomes a passageway.¹⁰⁹ It is not at all obvious what the word ‘reality’ signifies in the phrase ‘we must love it [suffering] in its reality’, but Weil often writes as if the terms ‘real’/‘reality’, if used correctly, possessed their own revelatory force, as we can see in the following reflections on beauty, truth and joy:

To believe in the reality of the outside world and to love it – these are but one and the same thing. In the last resort, the organ of belief is supernatural love, even in regard to earthly things.¹¹⁰

Joy (pure joy is always joy in the beautiful) is the feeling of reality. Beauty is the manifest presence of reality.¹¹¹

The beautiful = manifest presence of the real. Joy, sensation of the real.¹¹²

So it is as though the shift that consent to necessity accomplishes is a radical revaluation in which finite reality itself is a cause for rejoicing, quite apart from any questions about what it is ‘for’. This is, on some accounts at least, exactly what Nietzsche’s thought of eternal recurrence achieves. When one’s life is seen as eternally recurring, one has to face the impossibility of any finality, completion, or achievement: everything will be (and has already been) undone, and done, and undone again, endlessly, such that one cannot say that the means were for the sake of the ends, or

¹⁰⁷ I have discussed these tensions elsewhere, see Jesson 2014.

¹⁰⁸ Weil (2014, p. 484).

¹⁰⁹ Weil (2014, p. 491).

¹¹⁰ Weil (2014, p. 299).

¹¹¹ Weil (2014, p. 360).

¹¹² Weil (1970, p. 72). See also Weil (2003, p. 250) for more developed comments along these lines.

indeed, what was means, and what was end. In other words, it means all intentionality is underwritten by a more basic lack of intentionality. This completely rules out any compensatory or justifying structure: one cannot will the bad in view of its being ‘outweighed’ or ‘made up for’ by some future state of affairs, or as a necessary means to some good.¹¹³ It is plausible to suggest, then, that whatever it is that Weil is trying to draw our attention to when she writes of the love of the ‘reality’ of something bears some resemblance to whatever it is that Nietzsche hoped that we would catch sight of when we consider our lives as recurring eternally, without change, achievement, progress or finality.

Regardless of whether this resemblance is conceded, it certainly seems as though the determination to link affirmation/consent to a thorough-going revaluation of suffering leads to similar difficulties for both Nietzsche and Weil. In the quotation from the notebooks above, we see a clear expression of Weil’s conviction that even the worst suffering can be seen, and lived, as a sign of reality, and therefore as something that can be loved. Once again, space prohibits the thorough discussion that this issue deserves, but we can at least note that it is on this point Nietzsche and Weil provoke the same suspicion: of the aestheticization or mystification of suffering. Both, albeit in very different ways, are led to articulate an exceptionless affirmation that includes the very worst, and as a result, are pushed to claim more about the possibility of revaluing such suffering than either had legitimate reason to claim.¹¹⁴ Nietzsche certainly knew suffering of a certain kind but, as Martha Nussbaum has argued, either did not understand or did not wish to understand the kind of degradation that characterises the suffering of those who are deprived of basic goods.¹¹⁵ Similarly, despite her fierce determination to understand the very suffering that Nietzsche seems to be oblivious or indifferent to, Weil’s attempt to see in affliction a revelation of the inner truth of *all* creaturely existence—and thereby as a means of attaining the sense of ‘contact’ with reality—runs the risk of providing a spiritual justification for the actions of those whose actions unnecessarily cause such affliction.¹¹⁶

113 For further discussion about means-end relationships and eternal recurrence, see Clark (1990, p. 271-3); Hatab (2005, p. 83-5; Reginster (2008, pp. 229-35).

114 And in fact, Weil herself, in a letter to Father Perrin, seems to admit as much, when she writes that the most serious barrier to her own ability to love God/world in the way that she described was the affliction of others. See Weil (1977, p. 42).

115 Nussbaum (1994, pp. 158-9). See also Fraser (2002, pp. 134-5) for a related critique.

116 See Taubes (1955, pp. 13-15). Taubes’ critique does not seem to do justice to complex ways in which Weil was wrestling with the question of how to reconcile her commitments to compassion, social critique and organised movements for change with her emergent religious metaphysics as she wrote the material that would end up in *Gravity and Grace*. Nevertheless, the basic point that she makes in this early article helpfully points out a basic problem with Weil’s strategy.

Conclusion

I hope to have shown that the parallels between Nietzschean ‘affirmation’ and Weilian ‘consent’ are significant, both in terms of some of the basic commitments they each suppose, and in terms of the conceptual dynamics that accompany their articulation. Even where Weil’s thought is diametrically opposed to Nietzsche’s (as it is on nature of the desire for transcendent good, for example), her reflections are often framed in a such a way as to deal with the problems that Nietzsche’s critique poses (that is, how to avoid loving a consoling ‘fiction’ under the name of God as a way of avoiding affirmation of the here-and-now).¹¹⁷ For both Nietzsche and Weil, affirmation or consent are only truly tested when they face, and endure, the ‘immense *lacuna*’ around human life which is the lack of finality ‘here below’. It is only then that they produce both a revaluation of all values, and a transfiguration of the one who affirms/consents. For both Nietzsche and Weil, then, it seems as though affirmation/consent are attempts to describe a mode of living designed to operate in the absence of metaphysical teleology or religious eschatology; that is, to be a mode of valuation that can still operate once we have no option but to concede that humans, and the reality in which they find themselves, are not *headed* anywhere. The question of whether this concession is as necessary or obvious as both Nietzsche and Weil assume it to be is, of course, another question, as is the question of whether an honest and whole-hearted love of the world really precludes any hope for redemption from its ‘bondage to decay’ as, again, both assume. One way or another, I hope that reflection on the visions of affirmation and consent described above may be a useful preparation for anyone who feels it necessary to ask such questions.

¹¹⁷ I am grateful to Linn Tonstad for helping to clarify this point during informal discussions at the Suffering, Diminishment and the Christian Life conference, at Ushaw College, Durham, 10th January 2018.

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