



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## Creation as divine absence: A metaphysical reframing of the problem of evil

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### Abstract

The philosophical ‘problem of evil’ goes back at least as far as Epicurus and has remained a powerful argument against the existence of God in contemporary philosophy. The argument is rooted in apparent contradictions between God’s divine attributes and various conditions of human existence. But these contradictions arise only given certain assumptions of what we should expect both God and the world to be like given God’s existence. In this article, I argue that we can utilise the work of the twentieth-century French philosopher Simone Weil to craft a coherent metaphysical picture of God, creation, and suffering that rejects these common assumptions. Further, I contend that this picture very plausibly follows from commonly accepted tenets of traditional monotheism. Given this, I argue that this Weil-inspired framework provides serious reasons for reframing the problem of evil and its corresponding theodicies by presenting a radically different view of how God must relate to creation. Yet, this picture does not necessarily vindicate the theist. I argue that this picture may leave us with a new question about creation in the face of evil. Namely, is it possible to understand God’s initial creative act as Weil describes it – as an act of love?

**Keywords:** Simone Weil; Problem of evil; Metaphysics; Philosophy of religion; Christian Platonism

### Introduction

The philosophical ‘problem of evil’ goes back at least as far as Epicurus and has remained a powerful argument against the existence of God in contemporary philosophy. The argument is rooted in apparent contradictions between God’s divine attributes and various conditions of human existence. But these contradictions arise only given certain assumptions of what we should expect both God and the world to be like given God’s existence.

In this article, I argue that the work of the twentieth-century French philosopher Simone Weil undermines these common assumptions, or at least undermines the justification for assuming their truth. Further, I contend that this picture very plausibly follows from commonly accepted tenets of traditional monotheism. Given this, I argue that this Weil-inspired picture provides serious reasons for reframing the problem of evil, and corresponding theodicies, by presenting a radically different idea of how God must relate to creation. Yet, this does not necessarily vindicate the theist. I argue that this picture may leave us with a new question about creation in the face of evil. Namely, on this framework, is it possible to

understand God's initial creative act as Weil described it – as an act of love? The final part of my article will focus on an objection to this Weil-inspired conception of creation as an act of love. I conclude by sketching an answer to this question inspired by, and compatible with, the sparse but intriguing remarks made by Weil herself.

It is important to note that understanding, interpreting, and rendering consistent Weil's work – especially on God and metaphysics – over the whole of her work has resulted in a large and disparate literature. There are complicated debates about almost all of the claims about her metaphysics that I will discuss and refer to. I therefore do not wish to present my views on her work as the consensus across the Weil literature, but merely as one way in which her words may be understood, and the way in which I understand them. It is equally important to stress that I do not mean to use Weil's ideas to imply a kind of theodicy. Indeed, Weil herself was very much against the use of theodicy in discussions of God and evil, and in her work she does not directly address the philosophical 'problem of evil' argument at all (Weil 1947, p. 75.) Additionally, even given her metaphysics, evil still presents a 'problem' for God which may demand a response, and which I discuss later in the paper, in the section titled "*Reframing the Problem of Evil: On Initial Creation*". Rather, I will argue that Weil's metaphysical framework can reveal ways in which standard versions of the problem of evil, as well as theodicies responding to these arguments, may need to be reframed, as they rest on tendentious metaphysical assumptions.

### The problem of evil

In his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (2007, p. 74), David Hume describes an early version of an argument that is well-known today. He writes, 'Epicurus's old questions are yet unanswered. Is [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then is he malevolent? Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?' From his musings on Epicurus, Hume formulated the logical 'problem of evil' for the existence of God:

**P1:** If God exists, he *would* prevent evil/suffering as much he was able (omnibenevolent).

**P2:** If God exists, he would be *able* to prevent all evil/suffering (omnipotent).

**C1:** So, if God exists, no evil/suffering would exist (1, 2).

**P3:** Evil/suffering exists.

**C2:** So, God does not exist (3, 4).<sup>1</sup>

Rowe (1978), modifies this argument by adding a condition to premise one – 'without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse'. Rowe further contends that there exists suffering that is preventable without losing some greater good or permitting some equally bad evil and that, therefore, God does not exist.

Since then, the problem of evil has taken on a variety of other forms. A more popular version in contemporary philosophy of religion is the inductive version of the problem. Rather than seeking to establish that the God of traditional theism is logically incompatible with the existence of evil, this evidential version attempts to establish the high probability of atheism, given the existence of evil. This version of the problem rose to popularity with the work of Rowe (1979, 1986, 1996) and has continued in the work of others like Draper (1989, 2004):

**P1:** There exists a very large amount of gratuitous and unnecessary suffering in the world.

**P2:** The best explanation of (1) is that God does not exist.

**C:** So, probably, God does not exist.

And finally, Fyodor Dostoevsky, in his novel *The Brothers Karamazov* (2003) describes a third version of the problem of evil. The conclusion of this version does not establish anything about the likeliness of God's existence, but rather works as a proof that we ought not to be theists, or at least not be engaged in worshipping/pursuing God, given the existence of evil. The book's argument can be reformulated approximately as so:

**P1:** If there is a God, then this God sometimes allows horrendous suffering that he could prevent.

**P2:** If some being allows horrendous suffering that it could have prevented, then we should not worship or follow that being.

**C:** If there is a God, then we should not worship or follow this God.

While all three versions differ significantly in their technicalities, the basic problem is rooted in apparent contradictions between God's divine attributes and various conditions of human existence. But these contradictions arise only given certain assumptions of what we should expect both God and the world to be like given God's existence.

### *Assumptions of the problem from evil*

While versions of this argument vary, most of them assume that the following three things must hold true on traditional theism:

1. We should expect a perfectly good being to prevent creaturely suffering as far as it can do so without thereby giving up some greater good (where 'greater good' is very broadly construed).
2. For any particular instance of creaturely suffering, an all-powerful being could have prevented it.
3. Suffering (broadly construed) is bad/evil/to be prevented.

Assumption 1, held widely by both theistic and sceptical philosophers of religion, is often the turning point in the literature, upon which arguments are made. Eleanor Stump (1985, 58), writing in defence of the classical conception of God in light of the existence of evil, admits, 'if a good God allows evil, it can only be because the evil in question produces a benefit for the sufferer and one that God could not produce without the suffering'. Assumption 2 seems to follow from a standard definition of 'omnipotence': maximally powerful, able to do anything that can possibly be done. At the very least, assumption 2 seems trivially true in the sense that God could have chosen to not create creatures who could suffer in the first place.

Importantly though, these claims (and primarily the first two) have not lacked their challengers. The body of literature devoted to defending the existence of God against the problem of evil – arguments generally referred to as 'theodicies' – have often taken at least one of these assumptions to task. Marilyn Adams's influential *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (1999) argues explicitly against the first assumption, on the basis that God lacks moral obligations to his creation. Without such obligations to discharge, a perfectly good being should not be expected to prevent each preventable instance of evil done to creatures. Further, she argues that being perfectly loving, rather than requiring preventing all instances of suffering, only requires that God provide his creatures with an existence that

is, ultimately, good. From here, Adams argues for the unique position of Christian theism to fulfil this requirement. Peter van Inwagen, in his (2006) Gifford lectures, rejects the first assumption for similar reasons. The third assumption – that creaturely suffering is intrinsically bad and, therefore, demands prevention from any perfectly good being who could prevent it – is almost certainly the most widely accepted of the three assumptions among all contributors to the debate. It seems difficult, perhaps even callous, to question whether suffering, pain, and the worst instances of human misery, could be anything other than intrinsically bad. To say otherwise would, in fact, seem to be the equivalent of accepting a kind of radical scepticism about our perceptions of things – specifically, our moral intuitions and convictions about how we ought to treat people.

Yet, Weil's approach to the topics of God, evil, and suffering can help us radically re-frame the problem of evil, undermining (to some extent) all three of these commonly shared assumptions. Additionally, this Weil-inspired picture undermines these assumptions while still recognising, perhaps better than anyone, the horrific depths of human suffering, and the unfathomable immensity of the love of God for each person. In thinking through Weil's remarks, we must begin where she always begins: with the metaphysics.

### Weil's metaphysics

One of the most central debates in philosophical theology concerns how similar God is to his human creations. In contemporary work this is often called the debate between so-called 'classical theism' and 'theistic personalism'. Theistic personalism holds that God is person-like in similar ways to us; that is, God is passable, God makes choices and decisions, God can change his mind, and so on. Theistic personalism is the realist tradition of understanding how people through the ages have spoken about God. In other words, such language is *sometimes* metaphorical, and may often lack full technical precision, but is mostly accurate.

'Classical theism', as it has come to be known in recent literature (arguably coined in Davies 2004), is the view that God is 'personal' but ultimately not a 'person', and language conceptualising God as a person who emotes, deliberates, changes his mind,<sup>2</sup> and so on, are ultimately metaphorical (if divinely sanctioned metaphor). Both 'classical theism' and 'theistic personalism' have become rather unhelpful terms: some classical theists hold that God is properly described as a person, but that it is sufficient for this description that God is an intellect. Such a view seems to be what Aquinas asserts when he writes, 'yet that which the word signifies, namely that which subsists in an intellectual nature, is appropriate to God; and for this reason, the term person is properly ascribed to God' (*De Potentia Dei*, q.9, a.3, co.). Regardless of this intramural dispute, a central tenet of the debate concerns whether God has being, in an ontological sense like objects, or whether God is *beyond* being, and therefore cannot be said to *exist*, strictly speaking, as you or I exist. There are exceptions to all of these descriptions and categories, and varying understandings of how to delineate theistic personalism from classical theism (along with others who consider personalism to be compatible with classical theism). Situating Weil's view in this contemporary debate is not necessary, however. It is enough to simply discuss her own remarks, which I believe will not seem strange and unfamiliar. The picture I will present contains three concepts, all of which can arguably be gleaned from Weil's metaphysics. These concepts are central to understanding what I am calling the 'Weilian' picture of God and creation: axiarchism, divine retraction, and 'gravity'.

### Platonic axiarchism

Weil was a 'constant reader of Plato'<sup>3</sup> and extremely proficient in Greek from the age of twelve. It is Plato whom she most credits with her conversion to Christianity, and her

taste for his worldview comes into sharp relief in parts of her writing that, for example, laud mathematics as the ‘study of the interwoven fabric of finite and infinite’ (Weil 1970, p. 5), echoing her understanding of the Greek picture that mathematics ‘was a theology’ (*ibid.*, p. 80.). It would not be an exaggeration to say that Weil considered Platonism itself to be a proto-Christianity, as argued in her esoteric work *Intimations of Christianity among the Greeks*.

The Platonic influence is evident as she works out her metaphysics throughout her journals as well. Yet, her metaphysical views are no mere reiteration of the historical Christian Platonists. Indeed, Weil seemed to care relatively little for figures like Augustine and Origen, and she read and cited them for apparently only scholarly reasons rather than reasons of personal admiration (Springsted 2004, p. 210). She sought to join her Platonic picture of reality with some of the mystical views of other religious traditions; in doing so, she created a unique picture of the metaphysics of God and creation that is deeply mystical and Platonic, thoroughly un-Aristotelian, and contains a complex mass of theological implications.

One way of understanding Weil’s metaphysics is as involving a kind of ‘axiarchism’. Axiarchism is the metaphysical view which holds, broadly, that what explains the existence of everything is that its existence is good. Axiarchism – sometimes also known as ‘axiarchy’, as below – has been taken, in modern and contemporary literature, to come from or entail the idea that we exist in the best possible world. Derek Parfit writes:

Axiarchy might be expressed as follows. We are now supposing that, of all the countless ways that the whole of reality might be, one is both the very best, and is the way that reality is. On the Axiarchic View, *that is no coincidence*. This claim, I believe, makes sense. And, if it were no coincidence that the best way for reality to be is also the way that reality is, that might support the further claim that this was why reality was this way. (1998, 19–20)

On its surface, axiarchism seems straightforwardly false in a way that is almost silly: it can’t be true, because so many terrible things exist! But being so classically situated, it is unlikely that Weil held to Parfit’s style of axiarchism – that the world must be (in an evaluative sense) the best way it could possibly be. A more compelling kind of axiarchism can be understood through the lens of Platonic metaphysics.

In his *Republic*, Plato’s Socrates describes a form that is above – and decidedly different from – all of the other forms: the form of the Good. He writes, ‘[N]ot only do the objects of knowledge owe their being known to the good, but their existence and being are also due to it; although the good is not being, but something yet beyond being, superior to it in rank and power’ (*Republic*, 2004 509b5). Unlike the form of Triangle, where participation in the form of Triangle grants some degree of triangularity, participation in the form of Good is the origin of being itself. Plato equates goodness and existence – or at least understands them as co-extensive. Something has being to the extent that it participates in the form of Good. This is, of course, not to say that Plato failed to recognise badness, disasters, and so on. Rather, Plato (or, Plato’s Socrates, as he is commonly read) understands ‘objects of knowledge’ (that is, objects, rather than forms or ideas) to exist in varying degrees. There is a sense, for the Socrates of the *Republic*, in which the well-built house has *more being* than the poorly built one.

This is, of course, not a universally agreed upon reading of Plato, but it is one that has existed for a long time, influencing the ‘deprivation accounts’ of evil endorsed by Plotinus, Augustine (*Confessions*, book VII; *Enchiridion*, chapter 11), Aquinas (*Summa Theologiae*, first part, question 49, Article 1), and Weil. She writes:

A case of contradictories which are true. God exists: God does not exist. Where is the problem? I am quite sure that there is a God in the sense that I am quite sure my love is not illusory. I am quite sure that there is not a God in the sense that I am quite sure nothing real can be anything like what I am able to conceive when I pronounce this word. But that which I cannot conceive is not an illusion. (1947, p. 114)

This passage helps us to understand Weil's discomfort with giving an 'ontological description of God as divine "object"' (Dupre 2004, 15). What 'exists', what there is, seems to depend on who is asking the question. Creatures like us exist as a 'void' of being, through divine absence, and occupy a realm that God, by definition, could not. All of this is confusing, of course. Let me try to explain what it means.

### *Divine retraction*

Although Weil's most obvious influences are the pre-Socratic and Classical Greeks, she also draws on the mystical traditions from Judaism and Hinduism; for example, her picture of creation is most likely taken from the *Lurianic Kabbalah* – in particular, the *Tzimtzum*. Isaac ben Solomon Luria, a sixteenth-century rabbi and Jewish mystic, was responsible for many influential Kabbalistic works that appear to have been important to Weil. One of the main pillars of his worldview is the doctrine of *Tzimtzum*, which means something like 'retraction' or 'withdrawal'. According to *Tzimtzum*, 'to create the world God first had to make room for it by contracting himself' (Goldschmidt and Lebens 2020, 517). God, conceived of as infinite (*En Sof*), cannot exist as infinite if something additional exists. To create, therefore, requires God to *shrink* himself, leaving a void in which things may be created.

Goldschmidt and Lebens (2020) describe the traditional understanding of the *Tzimtzum* as entailing the following: 'God's omnipotence must have literally contracted, so as to make room, in logical space, for the creation.' But, they object, 'This is to water down one's theism – by stripping God, even if only temporarily, of his omnipotence' (p. 517). To account for such an unpalatable outcome, they argue for 'radical Hasidic idealism', contending that God did not really create anything at all, but that 'creation' is part of God because it is all ideas in God's mind.

Weil's discussion of divine hiddenness reveals the extent to which she was influenced by the Jewish mystical tradition (Hart 2017, p. 44).<sup>4</sup> She writes, 'God could only create by hiding himself. Otherwise there would be nothing but himself' (Weil 1947, p. 38.) As part of creation, humans are for Weil essentially this kind of void: existing in the way that shadows can exist as an absence of light. To create anything at all, then, requires an act of divine 'abandonment' of the world to 'inert matter' – absence that allows the conditions for independent existence (Weil 1970, p. 100.) On this feature of Weil's thought, Veř (1994) writes, 'For God the act of creation was not an expansion of self, but was much more a renunciation or abdication. This universe is an abandoned kingdom; its price is the withdrawal of God, and its very existence is the cause of separation from God.'

This relationship between creator God and creature, at the most foundational level, sounds at first unhelpfully mystical. Yet, there are examples within our own physical world that can help us understand the concept a bit better. Take the following example. If the whole world, every corner of it, were perfectly illuminated, then in order to create a distinction, light would have to be prevented from reaching certain areas. That then allows for a distinction between the illuminated and the unilluminated. We can even reify these places linguistically by calling them 'shadows'. Shadows are nothing more than 'places where light is blocked', and unless you are Peter Pan, you cannot pin down a shadow, outrun it, or affect it in any way except by shining light on it. The light can only affect the shadow by destroying

it. Do shadows exist? Of course, they do. But what their existence consists in is an absence. For the shadow, light does not exist, and vice versa. Light is a shadow's anti-thesis. The kind of existence a shadow has is, ultimately, a testament to and revelation of the light (Sorensen 2008).

This is not a perfect analogy. Nor would be the example of bubbles in the water as pockets of waterlessness. Nor would be the example of holes. It is a helpful tool that only gets us so far. But through these examples we are able to slightly demystify how Weil understands what the relationship must be like between the God of classical (Platonist) theism and his creation. For Weil, the nature of this relationship radically affects what our assumptions of the world should be, given theism. Because we are the product of Divine *kenosis* – self-emptying – Weil writes, ‘God himself cannot prevent what has happened from having happened ... It is the abdication by which he lets us exist. He stays far away from us, because if He approached He would cause us to disappear’ (Weil 1970, 140).

### On god and causes

Weil's view of the created world is directly opposed to *occasionalism*, a picture of God's relationship to worldly events popular among religious philosophers in the Christian, Jewish, and Islamic traditions. Nicolas Malebranche's view (1958–1984) is perhaps the best-known example of *pure occasionalism*.<sup>5</sup> For the occasionalist, it is God who upholds the regularities in earthly events that we witness, by causing all of them with law-like consistency. Occasionalism sits on one extreme end of the spectrum of views on God's relationship to causes in the created order. Weil's view could be understood as occupying the opposite extremity.

Weil writes, ‘As regards direct causality, God's power in this world is something infinitely small’ (Weil 1970, 296.) For her, God exercises *no* causal agency in the world, putting her picture at odds not only with occasionalism, but also with the more standard picture of God's actions in the world – namely, that the natural order proceeds as usual *unless* (in rare instances like miracles) God chooses to intervene.<sup>6</sup> One could be forgiven for reading Weil here as a kind of Christian deist, who conceives of God as the creator of the universe who steps back after initial creation to allow the universe run entirely on its own accord. In fact, this would be to deeply misunderstand the sense in which, for Weil, God lacks causal power in the world. The deistic picture of the world is deeply dualistic: the divine exists, creates the universe, yet both the divine and the universe can exist separately after initial creation. For Weil, no such dualism is possible. There is only God, and God-void. So, while this entails that God's causal powers within creation (which is, for her, essentially God-void) are ‘infinitely small’, nevertheless creation is utterly dependent upon God along every dimension, at every moment.

### Gravity and creation

Finally, understanding Weil's metaphysics involves understanding her picture of creation. Here, Weil borrows the Hindu concept of *prakṛti* (roughly, the embryonic state of material nature) as derived from the *Bhagavad-Gita*: ‘*Prakṛti* ... does everything – even good – even evil – both good and evil, everything. Mankind has no power whatever, yet he does have responsibility’ (*The Notebooks of Simone Weil*, p. 96). Unlike God, who is not bound by laws of necessity, in our realm of negation all that happens is determined by naturalistic causal relations. The Eternal cannot intervene in these relations. Weil's God, in creating, creates a space that is off-limits to him. ‘God ... must renounce unbounded freedom if a world determined and ordered by finite limits is to exist. ... God lets his hands be tied, so to speak, and he himself does the tying’ (McCullough 2014, p. 86).

For Weil, God does not exert any direct control over the world or anything in it. ‘Gravity’ acts as a kind of catch-all term for the general laws of nature, and of cause and effect in particular. Rozelle-Stone and Davis (2023) offer the following description:

‘Gravity signifies the forces of the natural world that subject all created beings physically, materially, psychologically, and socially, and thus functions as a downward “pull” on the attention, away from God and the afflicted.’

‘Gravity’ also connotes what she takes to be an effect of living in a world governed by such laws – an inclination to self-assertion, self-preservation, and the coercion of others, a set of natural human inclinations Weil ends up reifying under the concept of ‘force’. We are ruled by gravity. God is not. Insofar as being in the world entails that one is governed by the laws of the world, God is not in the world. Yet, the world has not been utterly resigned to the laws of gravity; there is another set of laws at work. Weil writes, ‘Creation is composed of the descending movement of gravity, the ascending movement of grace and the descending movement of the second degree of grace’ (Weil 1947, p. 4.) Grace, for Weil, helps us find God in a world ruled by laws of gravity. But we will return to this a bit later.

### The problem of evil, revisited

Most versions of the problem of evil conclude that the world should contain no evil, or much less evil than it currently does, if a tri-omni God exists. A world void of evil is generally not expected in a universe without a powerful benevolent God. The conclusion that we should expect a less evil universe also only follows given some assumptions about God’s sovereignty, namely, that it entails the power to tinker with creation. If Weil is right, this idea contains a metaphysical confusion: light cannot tinker with darkness (without destroying it), substance cannot tinker with void (but for the same). For Plato, the sense in which the Form of Good affects those things that partake in the form is not an active sense. Likewise, the form of Triangle cannot tinker with individual triangles, and so on. This is not because the Good, or Triangle, is not a person (as opposed to the God of classical theism), but due to the fact that forms are metaphysical simples. That is, forms lack parts.

Weil’s metaphysical picture of God’s relation to his creation changes the terms of the initial comparison of worlds. The standard picture of omnipotence, which allows for infinite ability to effect change in the world, gives us a comparatively easy metric for determining how much evil and suffering we should expect there to be. On this view, there must now be some kind of justificatory reason for God’s allowing each instance of evil or suffering. Or, it at least needs to be argued that God would not need such a reason. But much, if not the majority, of instances of great suffering seem very likely to serve no greater purpose whatsoever – for example, a deer caught in a forest fire who slowly and agonisingly burns to death (Rowe 1979). Thus, all other things being equal, a world in which each instance of evil is allowed by God for some specific purpose begins to look far less likely than a world where each evil needs no such justification. Weil, however, has no expectation that God would prevent evil and suffering (barring a reason to not interfere). To imagine God interacting with creation in the way we might imagine a child to play with a toy train set is, for Weil, to have a radically incorrect view about the metaphysics of creator and creation.

### Affliction

Insofar as Weil conceived of anything like a ‘problem of evil’, it might best be summed up here, again in Thibon’s editor’s introduction to Weil’s *Gravity and Grace*: “How can we escape from that which corresponds to gravity in ourselves?” By grace alone. ... Whereas gravity



is the work of creation, the work of grace consists of “decreating” us, p. xxii.’ Here, Weil recognises a problem posed by evil, although she understands it as a more general problem of ‘gravity’, which is to say, the laws of physical nature (laws of cause and effect, which bring about pain and suffering), and the ways in which our physical world draw us toward self-assertion and violence (dispositions to exercise control and coercion over others). This is a problem for Weil, not just because of the badness of suffering, but because of the power these laws have to keep us from uniting with God. God’s ‘grace’ to humans, for Weil, is the provision of a path *out* of the state in which we exist as creatures; we can, if want to, acknowledge the means by which we exist independently of God (namely, that we exist in virtue of God’s withdrawal), and relinquish this independent existence. Humans can unite with God, Weil holds, by following a process of kenosis – self-emptying or renunciation – by which God brought them into being. This state, which she calls ‘the void’, is mediated by the experience of afflictions, a special class of sufferings that reveal the depths of human emptiness and misery and, thereby, mimic the moment of death (that is, the loss of all things).

[T]he void by definition is empty (*vide*) – of idols, futural self-projections, consolations that compensate un-thinking, and attachments of collective and personal prestige. As such, its acceptance marks individual fragility and destructibility, that is, mortality. But this acceptance of death is the condition for the possibility of the reception of grace. (Rozelle-Stone and Davis 2023)

It is the grace of God that allows us to endure the laws of gravity, not by overpowering these laws, but by allowing us to cease to be subject to them. This is not something that happens immediately or fully, and it requires that one cease, little by little, to be a *subject* at all. Meeting God fully requires that we accept the ‘void’, and accept the destruction of the internal and external self that afflictions bring through the experience of the void. For Weil, de-creation does not culminate in the complete and eternal destruction of the person; nor does it involve coming to see the self as ultimately illusory as, for example, a Buddhist worldview may affirm in the Buddhist doctrine of *anattā*. Rather, Weil says, ‘He whose soul remains ever turned toward God though pierced with a nail finds himself nailed to the center of the universe ... at the intersection of creation and its Creator’ (Weil 1951, p. 38.) When we willingly give up our existence as a state of the *absence* of God we receive back paradoxical existence as a creation *unified* with God. Affliction, therefore, is God’s primary act of grace toward humans. Weil writes, ‘Grace fills empty spaces but it can only enter where there is a void to receive it, and it is grace itself which makes this void’ (Weil 1947, p. 10).

It should be made clear that afflictions are not, for Weil, a kind of useful plague sent down to humans by God in order to bring them to him. Recall that, on her understanding, God cannot tinker with creation the way that an engineer might tinker with her invention. God is to creation as light is to shadow, and where he enters in, we disappear into him. Affliction is, however, an inevitability of all who are living under the laws of gravity, revealing a ‘constant and irreducible [misery] which is as great as it can be in each man’ (*ibid.*, 78), and gravity itself is an inevitability of a creation separate from God. So, while God’s absence in the world is the source of our afflictions, the afflictions are also our means of uniting with him. By allowing us to experience, and therefore become aware of, the absence of God, we are simultaneously made aware *of* God, and aware of the inverted spectrum of the created order. None of this is a necessary result of experiencing affliction, however; affliction is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for the kenotic surrender of the self. Weil writes, ‘Affliction in itself is not enough for the attainment of total detachment. Unconsoled

affliction is necessary. There must be no consolation – no apparent consolation. Ineffable consolation then comes down’ (*ibid.*, 12).

### Arguments from evil

Returning to the logical problem of evil, Weil’s metaphysical picture of the world (or at least my understanding of it) would make premise two an absurdity:

- (1) If God exists, he *would* prevent evil/suffering as much he was able (omnibenevolent).
- (2) If God exists, he would be able to prevent all evil/suffering (omnipotent).**
- (3) So, if God exists, no evil/suffering would exist (1, 2).
- (4) Evil/suffering exists.
- (C) So, God does not exist (3, 4).

If something like classical theism is true then, given the way that God relates to creation, God’s ability to act to change/manipulate discrete events in creation is severely limited. But for Weil, giving up this understanding of divine omnipotence is a feature rather than a bug, because it preserves a crucial aspect of the Christian story – that creation involves God relinquishing, God pouring out his divinity for the sake of creating something wholly independent of God. She writes, ‘Because he is the creator, God is not all-powerful. Creation is abdication. But he is all-powerful in this sense, that his abdication is voluntary. He knows its effects, and wills them’ (Weil 1970, p. 120.) This is why Weil sees creation and incarnation as being two aspects of the same movement of God.<sup>7</sup>

Weil, like most theists, would also likely take issue with premise one of the above formulation of the problem. After all, God could have prevented all instances of creaturely suffering by simply not creating anything at all. So, if God exists, premise one of the above argument cannot be true. Rowe’s addendum makes the premise less obviously problematic: ‘If God exists, he would prevent evil/suffering as much he was able to *without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse*’ (italics not in original). If we take as a given that Weil would want to reject premise two, then it may be open to her to accept the revised version of premise one as something nearly trivial: the only way God could prevent any given instance of suffering/evil would be to avoid creating anything capable of suffering at all. And, one might argue, this would be to lose some greater good.

On Weil’s metaphysics, the force of the evidential problem of evil also seems to be undermined, but for a different reason. Namely, an extremely evil world would be expected given the existence of God and the relationship between God and creation, thereby making the supposedly superior explanatory power of atheism less obvious. Our example *inductive* problem of evil went as follows:

- (1) There exists a very large amount of gratuitous and unnecessary suffering in the world.
- (2) The best explanation of (1) is that God does not exist.**
- (C) So, probably, God does not exist.

In fact, Weil maintains that creation contains the maximal amount of evil that it could possibly contain.<sup>8</sup> She writes:

This is because we do not know that human misery is a constant and irreducible quantity which is as great as it can be in each man, and that greatness comes from

the one and only God, so that there is identity between one man and another in this respect ... God has created a world which is not the best possible, but which contains the whole range of good and evil. We are at the point where it is as bad as possible; for beyond is the stage where evil becomes innocence. (Weil 1947, pp. 78–79)

For Weil, being self-conscious of our condition requires the ability to be aware of evil *qua* evil – an ability that indicates the presence of goodness. Pure evil, therefore, is a state of (a sort of) innocence or naivete. It is unable to become regenerate, because it is unaware of what it is and of what it lacks. Were it aware of these things, it would not be *purely* evil, as knowledge of the good would preclude this. God is recognisable in the evilness of our world *in absentia*, and this recognition itself is the sign of redemptive good. Contra the ordinary narrative, on this picture, *atheism* rather than *theism* may lack sufficient resources to explain the sheer amount of deep evil encountered in the world, though Weil herself does not explore this possibility.

Weil says, '[T]he absence of God is the mode of divine presence which corresponds to evil – absence which is felt. He who has not God within himself cannot feel his absence' (*ibid.*, 27). Creation as absence of the Divine – the source of Good – results in a world teeming with evils of every kind. But even while we exist in the shadow of the good, God has not made a race of doomed creatures. Our bridge to God is the cry of the soul feeling his absence at the deepest level. As Thibon writes, 'The words of the Redeemer: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" ... are enough proof for her of the divinity of Christianity' (Editor's introduction, Weil 1947, p. xxviii.) To elaborate, for Weil, since our primary access to God is through awareness of his absence, the deepest depths of affliction can be our deepest encounters with God. For Weil, the response of Christ in that moment, the feeling of utter divine absence, displays a kenotic response only possible given the simultaneous presence of God's grace.

### **Reframing the problem of evil: On initial creation**

On Weil's picture, God still chose to create, to 'retract' and leave a void that was separate from himself. Given the laws of gravity that would rule such a realm, perhaps Weil's picture simply sets the stage for a different kind of problem of evil. Perhaps God still needs to be 'bailed out', as it were, on account of the initial decision to create. Further, Weil's metaphysics seems to land a blow to God as well as humanity, since God is reduced (in a sense) to less than what God had been – a necessity for the kind of creation Weil has in mind. It may seem as though we still need a justification, or at least a story to tell, about why Weil's God should decide to create at all. Everitt (2004, p. 243) phrases the problem succinctly as follows:

So, putting the story in temporal terms, the theist is envisaging a succession like this. First the cosmos consisted of just God (let us call this cosmos 1). Then God decided to create a world, as a consequence of which the cosmos consisted of God plus the world (let us call this cosmos 2). The question we need to raise is whether the theist can consistently say either that the change from cosmos 1 to cosmos 2 was a change for the better, or that it was for the worse.

The Neoplatonists, whose transcendent Good is impersonal, have no concept of the Good 'deciding' to create something. For Plotinus, 'the One' emanates Being by a principle of contemplation. Such emanation is not causal in a physical, diachronic sense; rather, the 'contemplation' by which all exists and all is united, stands as a timeless relation that the

One bears to ‘the many’. Plotinus believed that the One’s contemplation of emanation is what makes the emanated objects what they are. Weil conceives of almost a mirror-image of Plotinus’ picture of creation. For Weil, the world is not created when being emanates from Being (as Plotinus held), but rather when Being withdraws to create a void. The objects of creation, then, are not beings emanated (or, rather, emanating) from the source of Being, but rather a void of being. From this, Weil maintains a kind of creation *ex nihilo* (albeit an atypical, heterodox one).

As a Christian, Weil presumably wanted to maintain that God willed to create – at least, she never said anything to the contrary. And if creation for Weil remains an intentional act, then this raises an obvious objection. If God cannot tinker with the details of creation then, realising the lack of control he would have over the experiences of his would-be creatures (and therefore the likelihood that it would be quite bad, at times), shouldn’t God have chosen not to create anything at all? (See Franklin 2022, p. 458.)

For the Lurianic Kabbalist, as well as the Plotinus-style Neoplatonist, this objection carries no weight; perhaps non-creation would have been better (in some sense of ‘better’) but, on these views, creation happens by necessity, continuously flowing out of the nature of the Divine One – not as an act of will. By contrast, the Christian view of creation typically holds that creation was intentional, not a product of necessity. Divine choice to create has traditionally been central to Christian orthodoxy, grounding the claims of the love of God for creation. Yet, in choosing to create a world that will contain, as Weil herself claims, the ‘maximum amount’ of suffering, has God not made a cruel, even unthinkable choice? In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ivan (an atheist) poses the following question to his brother Alyosha, who is living in a monastery and discerning a call to monasticism:

‘Imagine that you are creating a fabric of human destiny with the object of making men happy in the end ... but that it was essential and inevitable to torture to death only one tiny creature ... would you consent to be the architect on those conditions?’ (Dostoyevsky 2003, Bk 5, Ch. 4).

Ivan is here proposing a world that is wildly better than our own – only one single creature is tortured to death, in exchange for the eternal bliss of all others. This question deeply disturbs and disarms Alyosha who, eventually, must admit that he would not consent to the creation of this world.

Weil’s remarks on this particular topic are sparse, though she recognises the need to grieve the world that was created. She writes that when one prays the Lord’s Prayer, ‘one asks God’s forgiveness for our existence and one forgives him for causing us to exist’ (Weil 1970, p. 296). Providing a theodicy, apologetic, or otherwise formal justification for the creation of the world is of no use to Weil; perfectly calculated rational trade-offs of pain for pleasure is, for her, no real perfection. Though she ultimately says little (or, little that is clear) about God’s initial creative act, what she does say indicates that divine creation must, at bottom, be an act of love. Weil writes, ‘God denied himself for our sakes in order to give us the possibility of denying ourselves for him. This response, this echo, which it is in our power to refuse, is the only possible justification for the folly of love of the creative act’ (Weil 1951, p. 145.) The word ‘folly’ is important here, signalling something characteristic of Weil’s picture of love: that love does not calculate and plan its moves, but is constantly bubbling over with the inclination to *decrease* so that the beloved other may *increase*. Creation as an act of love is not a foreign concept to us. The voluntary decision to have a child is often born of love – love for our partners and love for the children who do not yet exist. Similarly, bringing a child into the world requires a deep relinquishing of self – a kind of retraction. We have to get smaller, to become less a part of our own life, to make room for

the new ones when they arrive. Yet, as O’Hear (2020) notes, the parent–child analogy is far from perfect. Weil is insistent that God ‘can only love himself. His love for us is love for himself through us’ (Weil 1947, p. 32). Such a way of thinking would seem to belie a warped picture of parental love; parents’ love for their children ought to be ultimately toward the children themselves.

These are loose thoughts, difficult to pin down with rigour in a precise and analytical way. Yet, Weil appears to be doing much more than fitting the act of creation into a story that emotionally appeals to us by having a familiar narrative. Throughout her notebooks, Weil uses creation (in general, not merely special creation) as a model for demonstrating her theory of love. She writes, ‘For God, the Creation consisted not in extending himself but in withdrawing. He refrained from “commanding wherever he had the power.” Creation, the Passion, the Eucharist—always the same movement of withdrawal. This movement is love’ (Weil 1970, p. 81). She continues a few pages later:

‘Pure intelligence is at the intersection of nature and the supernatural. This consent [to create] is a folly which responds to the triple folly of God (Creation, Incarnation, Passion) but, to begin with, to the first of the three’ (*ibid.*, 89).

In the preceding sentences, she discusses this ‘consent’ as a non–forced ‘necessity’, again forcing the comparison to the Neoplatonists. Contrary to Plotinus’ One, however, the necessity with which God creates is *love* rather than impersonal indifference or compulsion. The connection of creation with love lies in the act of retracting the self. For Weil, Divine creation involves God’s retracting of his infinite self to make a void in which creation could dwell. Weil sees this sacrificial minimisation of the self as the core element of pure love, as well as a common feature among all acts of creation.

It is (Divine) love that she finds, not only compatible with, but one and the same as, ‘pure intelligence’. When God creates, it is both an act of love and a movement of the intellect by necessity, an act of ‘folly’ in that perfect infinitude becomes willingly finite. Weil wants to argue that there is something about creation (along with incarnation and the passion) which displays the essence of love. The essence of love for Weil is as follows: ‘The Father is creation of being, the Son is renunciation of being; this double pulsation is one single act which is Love or Spirit’ (Weil 1970, p. 102). Love is characterized here as involving a double–movement that occurs simultaneously, of creation and abdication; growth and wilting; life and death. For Weil, these are opposites only superficially. At the level of ultimate reality, they are two sides of the essence of love.

### *Kierkegaard and the silence of love*

The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard describes his own version of a ‘double–movement’ which is strikingly similar to Weil’s picture of creation and retraction. In this section, I want to briefly describe Kierkegaard’s version as a way of helping to illuminate aspects of the Weilian account I discussed previously. In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard, writing under the pseudonym Johannes de Silentio, tells the following story: ‘[A] young lad falls in love with a princess, and this love is the entire substance of his life; and yet the relation is such that it cannot possibly be realized, that is, it cannot possibly be translated from ideality into reality’ (1983, p. 41 ). Kierkegaard is here describing a union–creating love: the knight’s love was the ‘entire substance of his life’, p. 41, making the impossibility of an earthly, physical union utterly unthinkable. For whatever reason (Kierkegaard does not elaborate), the Knight and Princess’s relationship could not be instantiated ‘in reality’ – that is, in the world we live in (Kierkegaard 1983, p. 41). Silentio acknowledges that most people, if they found themselves in a similar situation, would respond by abandoning their

love for the princess, writing off continued hope in the union as foolishness. Silentio harshly describes these people as, 'the slaves of the finite, the frogs in the swamp of life' (*ibid.*, p. 41.) In other words, the person who cannot, or will not, continue to love the princess is stuck irremediably in the finite, rather than understanding his situation from the perspective of eternity. Silentio sees such a response as foolishness given the nature of the love – a totalising union in which the knight's entire being is inextricably wrapped up in the princess' being and in his love for her.

Then Kierkegaard introduces another character. The *knight of faith*, like the knight of infinite resignation, accepts that his union of love with the princess is the deepest aspect of himself, and also recognises that attempts to 'move on' from this love will involve the loss of his own self. Unlike the knight of infinite resignation, however, the knight of faith does not resign his love for the princess to the spiritual realm or the afterlife. The knight of faith knows that his very existence depends on real union with the princess in this life, and he knows equally well that this union is impossible. The knight of faith makes what is well-known (but little understood) as a 'leap' into faith acting on his dual conviction both that he could never be with the princess in this life and that he *would* be with the princess in this life (*ibid.*, 36.) This involves what Kierkegaard refers to as a double-movement: a movement of relinquishing, followed immediately by the receiving back of the thing relinquished. It is crucial that this double-movement is essentially paradoxical, requiring both utter conviction that the love relinquished is foregone forever, *as well as* unwavering faith that union must, and will, be attained.

Silentio's Abraham is, as the pseudonym would suggest, forced into silence as his act results in the 'suspension of the ethical': the suspension of the possibility of referential speech, as one leaves the realm in which the proper evaluative framework is a moral law or code of conduct. For Kierkegaard, the possibility of an 'Abraham' as he imagines him shows the limits of the 'ethical', and the necessity of a higher mode of existence to capture the true nature of an authentic life of individual faith. Abraham's act of faith, for Kierkegaard, was to accept the fate of being unable to explain himself, ever, to anyone. The real life of faith is true individuality, not in an 'aesthetic' sense (where true 'individuality' is a maximally interesting persona/life)<sup>9</sup> but in Abraham's sense. To be an individual requires being alone – requires, in Weil's terms, experiencing 'unconsoled affliction ... no consolation – no apparent consolation' (Weil 1947, p. 12).

Like Kierkegaard's double-movement of faith, which ends in fulfilled union as the result of an unspeakable act of faith, Weil's double-movement of kenosis and grace results in a healing consolation (in the form of union with the divine) that she describes as 'ineffable'. In both Weil's and Kierkegaard's accounts, we find agreement that the Good is larger than the category of the ethical, and that, insofar as our language of goodness exists in ethical terms, words will always fall short of capturing what is most deeply good. This seems especially true of creative activities. One may tell the tale of Van Gogh's decision to paint *The Starry Night*, but this story will likely not reveal this choice to be obviously morally *superior* to other choices he might have made. Likewise, I can describe my process of deciding to have a child, but I cannot do so in ways that portray it as the logical result of ethical deliberation, and I likely cannot do it in ways that capture the deep goodness of it.

To the extent that Kierkegaard's thought is useful here, I believe it to be in this way: it helps to shed light on the puzzle behind our apparent inability to offer definitive reasons for creating things in general. That is, while the 'problem of creation' for theism may not have an answer, this fact alone simply places it alongside most other decisions to create things. 'Should she have written/painted/directed this particular piece rather than others? Rather than nothing?'; 'Should she choose to have another child?' These questions, in some complicated and difficult-to-explicate way, miss the mark. At least in many cases, they appear to fall away in the face of the creation itself.

## Conclusion

If we tally up the units of pain and pleasure, does creation come out ahead of non-creation, or behind? I imagine that to Weil, such an approach would miss God entirely, who, being the source of the Good, would not be the proper subject of ‘goodness’ in the evaluative sense. Out of the necessity of love, God voluntarily takes on a diminished form, so we can spring up in his void. Out of the necessity of love, we, through affliction, relinquish our grip on our selves, accepting total emptiness. And out of the necessity of love, these movements of emptying result in the second movement of grace, the ultimate union of creator and creation. For Weil, the more salient problem of evil is not that it presents evidence against the existence of God, but rather that it acts both as a barrier to, and a necessary means of, union with him. Silence is, I think, a fitting way to end this discussion on the ‘problem’ of evil and creation. What Weil offers us is a full picture of God and creation, which flows from a rich and compelling metaphysics, and this picture reveals a dark chasm of divine absence. Weil pushes us to ask ourselves what we can see in those shadows.

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## Notes

1. Interest in the logical problem of evil was largely revived in contemporary philosophy by J.L. Mackie’s ‘Evil and Omnipotence’ (1955), which offers a deductive proof against the possibility of the existence of God, as traditionally conceived, with slightly different premises. Namely, Mackie argues that the following group of three propositions cannot all be held together:

1. God is omnipotent.
2. God is wholly good.
3. Some evil exists.

2. In this article I will sometimes use gendered pronouns to refer to God. This is simply for the ease of switching back and forth between the historical sources (who unanimously use ‘he/him’) and my discussion of them, although I note the problems with using gendered language in this context.

3. <https://ndpr.nd.edu/reviews/the-christian-platonism-of-simone-weil/>.

4. See also O’Hear (2020, 127): ‘It is perhaps worth noting here that the notion of an absent or self-absented God is to be found in medieval Jewish thought, and is by no means original in Simone Weil.’

5. Some might prefer to put Al-Ghazali in this spot, but recent interpretations have questioned whether he himself accepted occasionalism, or only provided arguments for such a view (Lee 2020). See al-Ghazālī’s 2000 work *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*.

6. See Augustine (*Reply to Faustus the Manichean*, II, 3), and Aquinas (*Summa Theologiae*, Pars I, q. 105, aa. 6).

7. See also Wood (2022) for an explication of this same (or very similar) idea the incarnation is actualised within all of creation, and that the act of creation constitutes an act of divine incarnation.

8. This is the opposite of the analysis of the world given in Leibniz’s *Theodicy*, (1998) in which he argues that the actual world is also the best possible world that God could have created.

9. Kierkegaard’s *Aesthete*, a persona from his pseudonymously written *Either/Or* (1987) considers individuality to be an aesthetic feature of a person that tracks the (morally neutral) degree of excitement or interest their life contains.

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