

Chapter 1

The Notion of Decreation

The basic vision of Weil's metaphysics is the sinful condition of humanity. She undoubtedly wants to see everything in relation to God, but she is a theologian only insofar as she must locate and base discourse on the redemption of human existence. The key idea of this metaphysics of conversion is decreation; the term is itself significant. The privative *de-* points to the passion for reduction and annihilation erected as moral imperative, the strictly metaphysical context of which is indicated by "creation." The word itself is a neologism invented by Péguy, who used it, moreover, in a diametrically opposite sense.¹ Weil herself never provided any exact definition. Although certainly it was a question of more than a simple attempt at terminology, she was not very decided about its use and hesitated even over its spelling. Sometimes "decreation" is a single word, but more often one finds "de-creation" or the verb "de-create."² What is certain is that it is the only term that adequately expresses her fundamental intuition:³ that of the self-annihilating vocation of human beings (2:206 = N 275), a vocation stated in the ancient commandment of the *Theaetetus* on the imitation of God and which finally—as we shall see—is founded in the very essence of God. But "how" to imitate God, or rather "which" God to imitate? By way of answer Weil only outlines theories of a "distinction" within divinity. This distinction is profoundly influenced by her experience of Christ, but it bears only rather superficial marks of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. At bottom, it is a matter of a vision of reality containing in its totality only two true perfections,

necessity and love, which will thereby become the two faces of God. The act of creation itself will reveal this duality.

To create is certainly to give proof of power; it is a matter of establishing existence, communicating being, and, moreover, establishing eternal laws. But all that is but one implication of creation: God, being powerful by definition, can act as he will, create everything he wishes, call non-being to existence. Non-being is very malleable; it offers no resistance. Even the problem in the most formal sense of some modification in its relation to God is not posed, for, as St. Thomas says, "before" creation non-being was in no relation to God. The true problem does not lie there: it is to be sought in the idea of divine perfection, in its necessarily flawless essence to which nothing can be added and from which nothing can be subtracted. "Before" creation, God was "all in all"; now there is something "outside him." "Before" creation, the Eternal reposed in the luminous and unalterable halo of its perfect actuality; "now" it is bound by a thousand twisted threads to that swarming of beings we call the universe. How is this possible? The answer to the "how" implies the one to the "why."

For God the act of creation was not an expansion of self, but much more a renunciation or abdication.⁴ This universe is an abandoned kingdom;⁵ its price is the withdrawal of God, and its very existence is the cause of separation from God (cf. CS 222 = F 260). Theological reflection customarily opposes creation and passion, but at heart they are one. The Book of Revelation expresses this profound truth in the passage on the Lamb sacrificed since the beginning of the world,⁶ which the *Cahiers* echo in declaring, "The crucifixion of God is an eternal thing."⁷ If creation is a sacrifice on God's part, then it is not a means of growth, but on the contrary the very form that his love takes on in order to give, and to give himself, to his creatures. Thus it is not the power of God that spills over into creation, but his love, and this overflow is a veritable diminution.⁸

The sacrifice of creation, the fact that the Lamb has been sacrificed since the beginning of the world, appears as a primordial rent between the two divine persons;⁹ thus the

“space” that God left in the world is located not so much outside God, but instead “between” God and God. This metaphor will enable Weil to dramatize the obstacle creation represents for the loving union between the Father and the Son. It therefore remains to be established whether it is all of being that interposes itself between God and God in this way, or just one of its ontological levels. The solution to this choice cannot fail to reveal the basic lines of this entire metaphysics.

As abdication, sacrifice, and renunciation, God is love. He is God the Son, having nothing to do with might and power,¹⁰ having no part in the events occurring in the material universe. His only presence in the world is facing a human soul, where he remains standing like a beggar imploring it to do and to love the good (cf. CS 92 = F 141). This basic humility forms a radical contrast with the most striking image we could have of the Father: majestic and terrible power. However, power has another meaning also which is, indeed, the true meaning: it is *necessity*, that is to say, the *fascinans* and *tremendosum* the intelligible harbors in its breast. Thus the power that is the very sign of a radical transcendence ultimately explains what is as it were crushed in its presence. It seems obvious that all discourse bearing on God must designate him—implicitly or explicitly—in relation to reality, that is to say, insofar as he is its cause; thus the two different faces of God will be opposed as two causes, two different causalities. Plato in the *Timaeus* (48a) speaks of the good cause and the necessary cause, while Kant distinguishes noumenal causality and phenomenological causality. In Weil, the necessary cause of the *Timaeus* will be subsumed and merged into the causality of phenomena: its violence, its opacity, its blind resistance will be integrated into the great mathematical clarity of the structure of appearances. The good cause of Plato will, however, welcome and recover the Kantian causality of noumena whose perfect rigor and severity will be as though softened by the love expressed through the “persuasion” spoken of by Plato.¹¹

Weil was always fully convinced that all reality was completely determined by necessity,¹² and it is basically to exonerate divinity from all responsibility in the cruel mechanism of this

world that she found herself led to posit God as Power separated from Love. On another level, one might also say that she wants to defend God against his own power by depicting him as liberty, love, or "the good beyond being," perhaps beyond even his own being. At the same time, she means to keep God in the perfect shell of absolute and intelligible necessity, or rather, it might be said, she wished to be able to deify necessity. Thus the powerful intellectual fascination that the implacable determination of the material world always exercised over her emerges reinforced by the religious duty of adoration of the creator, of which this fascination basically had always been an intuition.

Necessity appears above all mathematical in nature to this Cartesian thinker (*IP* 160 = *IC* 192-93). It is a network of immaterial and powerless connections that are nonetheless "harder than any diamond" (*En* 243 = *NR* 288). These are pure and abstract relations that compose the very essence of all that is real, for it must be understood that "Reality is only transcendent."¹³ Seen from this angle, necessity loses all its numinous or moral connotations and offers itself to the contemplative eye or the intellect of the scholar like the crystalline clarity of the intelligible, the level at which purity and reality ultimately coincide. Alas, that sublime spectacle appears quite different to the human being exposed to risks and at the mercy of contingent existence. If the acceptance of necessity as destiny is the virtue characteristic of the Stoic philosopher, that same destiny will appear to ordinary mortals as pure arbitrariness. The sage will speak of its majestic impartiality, but the ordinary person will only be able to accuse it of cruel indifference. But can one bring such accusations against an impersonal force, a simple network of relations? Is it the diamond's fault if it is hard? Can one reproach statistical laws for not making distinction of persons? These questions are as old as the universe; if they are being asked here, it is uniquely to draw attention to a certain ambiguity in Weil's thought in the way she envisions the relation between God and necessity.

If necessity is the fundamental meaning one can attribute to the power of God, then the very transcendence of the latter

seems compromised. God is no longer the source of reality; he is as it were reduced to being its intelligible structure. But Weil hesitates to draw such a conclusion. She says instead that, while in creating the world God had withdrawn himself from it, he delegated his power to necessity, "entrusted" it with his material creation.¹⁴ Necessity is the limit that God imposes on Chaos;¹⁵ it is the master of this world but continues to bear the divine signature (CS 308 = F 339), being a principle of order. Whether it be mediator (IP 151 = IC 182) or compromise (CS 269 = F 301) between God and matter, necessity as truth of being will always represent the divine essence, and for this reason Weil has fewer difficulties leaving its true relation to God in obscurity. For her, transcendence manifests itself by relation to existence and to evil, not to essence and ideality. God is source and archetype, not master, of truth; thus the idea of his continuity with the network of essences, an idea left, moreover, imprecise, does not present anything problematic. But is there a continuity between God and necessity inasmuch as the latter is master of the life of rational beings, that is to say, of the misfortunes and perils that blind destiny metes out in such abundance to mortals? Must one think that even in this guise necessity may be attributed to God?

Weil always rose up violently against the notion of Providence insofar as it was taken to mean direct intervention of the prime cause in the functioning of secondary causes.¹⁶ However, her unshakable conviction, on the one hand, of the necessary character of everything that happens in the world, and on the other of the fact that this necessity is but the face of God turned toward the universe, forces her to admit "a providential order" (independent of human goals) (IP 31 = IC 97) in the world; she goes so far as to say that, "Necessity is one of the eternal dispositions of Providence" (CS 307 = F 336), that "God. . . wills necessity" (2:193 = N 266), indeed, "God makes himself necessity" (2:75 = N 190). Still, be it only the faithful servant of God or his fundamental attribute, necessity presents itself in continuity of essence with God. In other words, being as such, whose truth is necessity, cannot represent that obstacle interposing itself between God and God. All

the reality of the being of the Universe is concentrated in these forceless, diamond-hard relations; the very reality of being is thus too directly tied to God to be able to oppose itself to him. The material universe through its intelligible structure having been as it were "subsumed" into an aspect of God himself, it is only in light of the special meaning Weil attributes to "creation" that one can understand how "the abdication constituted by the creative act" is able to rend God from God. Despite a confusion and ambiguity that, it must be admitted, go beyond the purely terminological level, the internal logic of Weil's thought seems to suggest that for her "creation" is only the creation of autonomous beings, and that only those invested with free will are creatures. A note in *La Connaissance Surnaturelle* clearly identifies "creature" with autonomous being and "creation" with the world of these autonomous beings: "Genesis separates creation and original sin because of the requirements of a narration made in human language. But the creature in being created preferred itself to God. Otherwise would there have been creation? God created because he was good, but the creature let itself be created because it was evil. It redeemed itself by persuading God through endless entreaties to destroy it" (CS 70-71 = F 123). This is taken up again later: "Is not this gift of free will creation itself? That which is creation from the point of view of God is sin from the point of view of the creature."¹⁷ Question and answer are explicit: in creating human beings, God gave them the gift of free will, which entails autonomy. It is only autonomous existence and not being in itself that separates God from God. Both human beings and matter are between God and God, human beings as a screen and matter as a mirror; but it is the screen only that is an obstacle in the exchange of love between the Father and the Son through that perfectly transparent mirror that is material creation (CS 48 = F 102). Material things, by the presence in them of necessity, are in perfect continuity with God. This continuity will be broken only at the moment when autonomous beings assume an independent, and thus separate, existence: it is a crime to be other than God,¹⁸ a crime shared by all those who will use their free will, thereby dissolving

the bond creator-creature (3:192 = N 539). If this is so, then we see the obstacle between God and God more clearly: it is the realm of autonomy.¹⁹ "Evil is the distance between the creature and God," and if it disappears, creation itself will disappear also (2:303 = N 342).

At this point we have completed a sketch of Weil's ontology. Between the two pincers of Love and Power-Necessity, autonomy asserts itself. In other words, *truth or being is separated from the good by evil*. The idea of decreation will thus be introduced as an ontological requirement: that which ought not to be should remove itself or be removed. In more "religious" terms: "If one thinks that God created in order to be loved, and that he cannot create something that is God, and that he cannot be loved by something that is not God, one meets a contradiction...all contradiction is resolved in becoming. God creates a finite being who says I, who cannot love God. By the effect of grace, little by little the I disappears, and God loves himself through the creature who becomes empty, who becomes nothing" (2:289 = N 330-31).

At once ontological requirement and religious commandment, the dissolution of sinful existence is the idea through which the metaphysics of man will reveal itself as being at the very center of all metaphysics. That which is to be dissolved is the evil third, that malignant excrescence on the body of the real, that unjustifiable violence that rends the beautiful harmony of the good and necessity. Autonomy is evil, and "its name is legion." The autonomous condition itself is called *existence*. It is existence that, through decreation, must be reduced to *being*. Being is real and perfect, while existence is but a faulty shadow; only by driving the shadow away does the real acquire its plenitude: "De-creation as transcendent completion of creation: annihilation in God that gives the annihilated creature the plenitude of being of which it is deprived so long as it exists."²⁰ Whatever Weil may understand by the good or the necessary, what interests us here is the description of that which is neither one nor the other and which constitutes precisely our earthly condition. In order to abolish that condition—Weil would harshly say—it is necessary "to live

while ceasing to exist so that in a self that is no longer the self God and his creation may find themselves face to face" (3:80 = N 464). The "self" corresponds to "someone." When one ceases to be centered on the self, one renounces being someone; one gives complete consent to becoming something (CS 223 = F 261). Being someone, one affirms one's self and therefore one is a screen between God and his creation. That screen is abolished to the very extent to which one uses up one's individuality,²¹ one's personality, to which one no longer speaks in the first person.²² The word "person" has acquired in modern times a respectable connotation, but it is, at bottom, identical with the ego or the I, terms directly suggesting egotism, egocentrism, a certain violence and rapacity.²³ "The person in us is the part of us belonging to error and sin," says a note from London,²⁴ but this succinct formula only takes up again, in an abridged form, the substance of an earlier definition: "The ego is only the shadow projected by sin and error which blocks God's light and which I take for a being" (3:10 = N 419).

Creature and existence, enjoyment of individuality and of free will, person or personality, "I" or ego—all of these express a fundamental intuition of the status of the human being; but they really only designate *one* of its components, even if the others are as it were buried under the shattering weight of the latter. Before looking more closely at what is so buried, we must consider the manner of this burial itself. The two notions which come up continually in Weil's writing to designate personal existence are *crime* and error: "man begins not with ignorance but with error," wrote the young student beginning her advanced studies (OC I. 161 = FW 31). This means that human unknowing is not a simple lack of knowledge but the unmistakable perversion of knowledge itself. For the convinced Socratic thinker that she was, error meant "fault always in the moral sense of the word."²⁵ The most important of our errors, our fundamental error in the sense that it is the basis of our very existence, is to seek within perspective. Every finite being is subject to the law of perspective, which is distortion in a double sense. To be subject to perspective does not simply mean that there is an inevitable gap between the way in which

the world is "in itself" and the way in which it presents itself to us. To have a perspective means to have a point of view, that is to say, to be at the center of a field of vision (cf. CS 29 = F 84). Human beings who live in space and time cannot avoid finding themselves at such a center of vision; what is of gravest consequence is that they eventually consider themselves centers on the moral and metaphysical level as well. The effects of physical perspective obey strict general and normative physical and psychological laws, while moral and metaphysical perspective is particular to each individual. Physical perspective is an innocent and superficial manifestation of the fundamental fact that each human being accepts himself or herself as a center of reference irreducible to any other. To be a center of reference means to interpret the universe as a function of one's desires, beliefs, and ambitions.²⁶ Such an interpretation cannot fail to be terribly deficient, for "people, being finite beings, apply the notion of legitimate order only in the immediate neighborhood of their heart" (IP 73 = IC 133). On the other hand, perspective blurs the very sense of reality (2:143 = N 234) in forcing us to appreciate other beings only according to their importance with respect to ourselves. One is as it were riven to one's point of view, one is chained by one's perspective, and thus one is incapable of "going around" what one is looking at to convince oneself of the truth and manner of its existence.²⁷ Such is the genesis of knowledge in an autonomous being whose intelligence, exposing the relations of the real, imitates the poor butcher of the *Phaedrus*, incapable of cutting along the joints of a chicken.

Knowledge and method are universals; to be deficient in these is the sign of our individuality. When a child carries out an addition and makes an error, the latter bears the stamp of his or her person.²⁸ Truth is impersonal; of course, one strives to discover truths, but when these are present, they alone exist and the self is nowhere to be found (2:335-36 = N 364). While the distinctive trait of the person is to affirm himself or herself by existing as fully and forcefully as possible, the very nature of the intellect, that faculty executing the correct operation, "consists of being a thing that is effaced by the very fact that

it is being exercised."²⁹ In fact, it is not the intellect but the imagination that acts in the heterogeneous knowledge secreted by autonomous existence. Pure intellect is without center; all reality is for it equivalent. It deciphers things; it does not interpret them. It is quite different with the imagination, it being only the *eikasia* of the Line (cf. 2:272 = N 319) or that imagination "of wrong constructions" spoken of in the *Regulae*. In this domain Weil was resolutely pre-Kantian; for her, the imagination is never creative, it only "fabricates." It secretes illusions, the essential one of which is the dream of autonomous existence itself. It is through the imagination that the immediate passage from error to crime is accomplished.³⁰ Much more than simple constructions of images, dreams, and illusions is involved. A passage from the *Cahiers* is very enlightening: "To conceive the notion and possibility of evil without imagining it . . . is what is meant by Ulysses bound and his sailors with their ears full of wax" (1:174 = N 110). To see and hear the Sirens while being bound means to know them rationally without involving one's own self, that is, while keeping a certain distance. The imagination is inseparable from the desire that would have pushed Ulysses toward the Sirens if he had not been so firmly tied; it is a central, essential element of that very desire leading me to remove the distance between myself and some external thing or person.

Ordinarily one understands by the imagination the discovery, or rather the invention, of new things; that is to say, an imagined thing has the "vocation" of becoming a real thing. For Weil the imagination takes on another meaning. It changes its objects into *imaginary* things; it deprives them of their autonomous reality. Present in the imagination as objects of my desire or as obstacle to my will, things or persons are no longer beings that are sufficient unto themselves. Existing only in relation to me, they have become as it were unreal; they serve only to maintain that precarious balance we call personality. Once that balance has been shattered by the blow of external reality, all our desire tends toward reestablishing it.³¹ Often one does not have the means; one is not determined or strong enough to eliminate the deadly presence of the

external obstacle. Then "the void-filling imagination" rushes forth to supply the self with lies, consolations, little tasks to carry out (cf. 2:89 = N 199). In general, that is not enough to keep us occupied for very long, and it remains only for our anger to come back in and take our revenge within the imagination, where it may rage without hindrance (cf. 2:80 = N 193). But if occasionally we have the power to translate our hate and our destructive desires into action, we will not hesitate, for the object of our passion no longer has any true existence in our eyes. At the moment when we violently hate (or desire) a being, the fire burning in us has already consumed that person; he or she is already ashes even if retaining external form, and the least movement will make him or her collapse. The ego will tolerate no obstacles in its path and, thanks to the imagination, obstacles are as it were emptied of content, pulverized in advance. An imaginary act is necessarily an unreal act, for it meets only shadows (cf. 2:287 = N 329). To kill someone, for example, is an act whose "essence is imaginary" (2:132 = N 227), for if murderers knew that their victims really existed, they would not be able to thrust their knives into them. Not to see obstacles is the terrible secret of the carnage of the victorious warrior (SG 21 = IC 34) and of the misdeed of the criminal (cf. 1:174 = N 109); victims are in their eyes only shadows without substance, inert and inanimate objects. Thus an imaginary act is sinful because in being unaware of them, one violates the boundaries of another being.

We have finally reached the point where personal and autonomous existence, that is to say, the self, appears in its true sense: the negation of the other. The imagination, in giving us a fictitious point of reference, arrays us in an "imaginary royalty" (2:109 = N 213), makes us set ourselves up against the sole true center of reality. It is the absolutely diabolical center in the human being,³² for it incites us to usurp the place of God,³³ and once seated on one's throne one will without fail be unaware of others. Indeed, it is here that the terrible consequences of distorted perspective emerge: we are incapable of recognizing that others have as much right to esteem themselves centers as we do.³⁴ The world is essentially the

coexistence of beings, and "All crimes, all grave sins are particular forms of the refusal of this coexistence."³⁵ The first prescription of the metaphysics of man for Weil is to acknowledge that coexistence, to protect it, and, if necessary, to reestablish it. When we meet a being who, through suffering and affliction has been reduced to the state of an inert and passive thing, we must stop and turn our gaze toward that person, as did the Good Samaritan of the Gospel. Exerting and exerting oneself in behalf of an unfortunate person without expecting any reward, without any personal motive, one accepts being diminished in favor of the independent existence of a being other than oneself (*AD* 106-07 = *WG* 146-147) One is no longer at the center of the world; one gives from this moment on one's loving and active consent to coexistence with another being; one "preserves" the other. This preservation is the work of the "impersonal decreed person" (*CS* 77 = *F* 129); it implies the acknowledgment, in the universe, of relationships that are independent of us—the acknowledgment, that is, of reality as such. An error in the understanding of these relationships, like the mistaken addition of the child, bears the mark of the self, as does the act which destroys another being. In the action of the decreed human being, recognizing and preserving the veritable relations between beings and things, there is no trace of the "I" (2:65 = *N* 183); these actions are an imitation of the intellect, something that effaces itself by the very fact that it is being exercised.

If the very meaning of autonomy is the refusal of coexistence with other beings, then we have defined human beings as a function of their relations with their neighbor.³⁶ We shall see that this characterization is not limited to the self, that is, to that which ought not to be, but to those two other levels that will reveal themselves as representatives respectively of necessity and of the good in humanity. For the moment let it suffice to point out that through her view of autonomous existence and imperious commands to destroy it, Weil marvelously explains Christ's integration of the second commandment into the first (cf. 1:216 = *N* 281). If one accepts that beings have an existence independent of our imagination, then one imitates

the sacrifice of God in creation: he renounced being everything and made room for other beings.³⁷ To act in this way signifies that “[w]e participate in the creation of the world in decreasing ourselves by ourselves” (2:257 = N 309). If nevertheless—and such is the character of sinful existence—one despises and fails to know one’s neighbor, it is because one rejects God by putting oneself in his place. Or rather: one wants to imitate “divinity through power and not love, through being and not non-being.”³⁸ To imitate God through power is the claiming of the imaginary kingdom, called the Fall of man or the sin of Adam by Christian theology. By abandoning their natural place at the periphery, human beings place themselves at the center, and this revolt against God implies at the same time the will to dominate one’s fellow man; whereas if they remain at the periphery out of loving respect for the Lord, human beings will keep the right perspective in order to be able to respect and love others. This love of one’s neighbor is an emanation of love for God. And it is precisely our love for God that conditions the love we bear our neighbor, in that it is nothing other than imitation of him as Love; it is the same attitude of sacrifice and abnegation whether it concerns God in relation to humanity or humanity in relation respectively to God and neighbor. Thus the very “program” of human life is given by this note in *La Connaissance Surnaturelle*: “I am the abdication of God. . . . I must reproduce in inverse sense the abdication of God, refuse the existence which has been given to me.”³⁹ But why then has this existence been given?

This hard and desperate question has been asked countless times, and the answer Weil outlined can hardly contain truly novel elements. She repeats that God gave us autonomy (*AD* 136 = *WG* 179–80) and the power to think in the first person in order that we might be able to renounce it out of love;⁴⁰ he “forgives us for existing at the moment when we no longer wish to consent to exist except to the extent it is the will of God” (*CS* 226 = *F* 263). Indeed, God perpetually begs back the existence he gave us.⁴¹ But why did he give it to us? Why did he provoke this gaping flaw in the interior of his self by creating human beings? Why did he let himself be torn

throughout the whole length of space and time? Why did he choose to suffer the otherness of human beings and their profound evil will to sink more and more deeply into it? These "whys" must remain without answer, for they try feverishly to uncover the "cause" of this madness of God that is the creation of the world (cf. *IP* 148 = *IC* 182); in actual fact, the creation had no cause. God created because he loved the world; thus the world is the fruit of his pure generosity (cf. *IP* 128 = *IC* 166). As for the structure of the material world, it flows infallibly from God in the form of Necessity, and as Aristotle rightly observed, they are coeternal. And the presence of the good, of the infinitely small, supernatural point in the soul, is owing solely to the inexplicable generosity of the God who is Love. But the question of autonomy remains entire: even if one no longer dares formulate it in terms of "why," we must at least ask, "where does it come from?" One thing is sure—as Plato said—God is beyond cause. But—the question keeps returning—must not what is finite come from the infinite? Can the contingent repose and found itself upon itself? Weil searches and hesitates. She uses images: "We are in relation to God like a thief permitted to carry off gold by the goodness of the person whose home he has entered. . . . We have stolen a bit of being from God to make it ours. God has given it to us. But we have stolen it."⁴² Through such metaphors there emerges the outline of a profound doctrine on evil and human finitude. We shall come back to it. For now, let us be content to treat a less ambitious question. If one is incapable of giving a satisfactory answer to the *why* of autonomous existence, at least its practical use (even in the Kantian sense of the word) can provide an area for research.

For Weil, the assumption of our autonomy⁴³ was certainly a "happy fault," for it is the very means of its own destruction, the very dimension of its own dissolution. Moreover—and the following is only something very traditional—autonomy is the test of the love we bring to God. Without free will—affirms tradition—one could not truly *choose* the love of God. Not truly traditional, at least according to the letter, is Weil's conviction that the only good use one can make of autonomy is to suppress

it entirely.⁴⁴ Being always the expression of a choice, of the choice between good and evil, it is "a notion of the lower stage" (cf. 2:341-42 = N 368), for the decreated human being should be beyond the possibility of choosing evil.

That there may have been some underlying self-destructive passion and will to expiate in Weil is a fact that might shed light on the empirical genesis of her ideas on decreation; but the essential thing, from the philosophical point of view, is that she resolutely condemns self-torture or suicide, the latter being only an "ersatz of decreation."⁴⁵ What concerns us here is the passivity and obedience of this entire process; we can only consent to our destruction by making a primarily negative use of our will (2:396 = N 404). It is its only good use, for "humanity. . . was created with a will and the vocation to renounce it. . . . Adam. . . was in a state of sin by virtue of the fact that he had his own will."⁴⁶ It is one's own will⁴⁷—with the help of the imagination—that says "I" in us; it is precisely the "I" that must be destroyed from within.⁴⁸ Certainly the external destruction of the ego, the scorn of the surrounding world, suffering, the agony of death, are always means of decreation, on condition that we consent to these in some manner. What really matters is that the process of the destruction of the "I" begin from within, because a purely external destruction of the "I" is something "nearly infernal," having nothing to do with decreation; it can even completely ruin all hopes for it. When the blows of external destruction are very strong and the process of "killing the I" is still only at its beginning, the destruction of the ego will be partially completed from the outside in spite of the cooperation of the individual, and this entails an imperfect decreation (2:295-303 = N 336-342). This is the case when death arrives before the "I" has had time to kill itself.⁴⁹

Despite the violence that can accompany the death of the ego, it is basically nothing other than the exposure of its nothingness, of its non-being. We must know that we are not, and at the same time we must want not to be: "Our sin consists in wanting to be and our punishment is believing that we exist. Expiation is wanting not to be, and salvation for us consists in seeing that we are not."⁵⁰

This profound intuition of the nothingness in human beings is already expressed in all its power in the pages of her *Journal d'usine* (*Factory Journal*), and here we will not hesitate to use descriptions that can be considered elements of the empirical genesis of a metaphysical idea. The continual headaches from which Weil suffered and her general physical weakness allowed her to know from experience the distress and fragility of the human being, in particular during the year she devoted to harsh physical labor (cf. *AD* 37 = *WG* 68). Fatigue, pain, worries, various fears, the impression of her absolute subordination, the insane rhythm of the work—all these engendered “[t]he feeling that I possess no right, whatever it may be, to whatever it might be⁵¹. . . that I didn’t count, that (*CO* 141 = *SL* 38). . . I counted. . . for zero” (*CO* 136 = *SL* 33). This feeling of not counting for anything, of having no importance of any sort can enter into the very heart of a human being (*CO* 144), and Weil relates that one afternoon while taking the bus she had suddenly had a “strange reaction,” and that she asked herself: “How is it that I, the slave, can get on this bus, use it for my twelve *sous* just like anybody else? What an extraordinary favor! If someone had brutally made me get off, telling me that such convenient modes of transportation were not for me, that I had only to go by foot, I think it would have seemed entirely natural to me. Slavery had made me completely lose the sense of having any rights.”⁵²

“Not having any rights” implies that one does not count for anything; to Weil, this state was not the result of some degradation but rather the very expression of the truth of our condition.⁵³ A whole gamut of definition on the negativity of human existence is located in the wake of the idea of autonomy, and one can thus easily have the impression that the nothingness in question is the third component of the human being. Indeed, the *Cahiers* say quite explicitly that “one is nothingness as a human being, and more generally as a creature.”⁵⁴ The context of this passage, which speaks of Lucifer, removes all doubt as to the meaning of “creature”; it concerns autonomous beings—human beings and angels. Still, this reduction of autonomy to nothingness would be a too facile subterfuge for

being rid of it, and Weil would then be only too faithfully continuing the narrow and lazy tradition of mediocre Platonists. We can rely on her texts; they will help to show how different the dialectic at work in them truly is.

Decreation, which is at heart self-knowledge, reduces the human being to nothingness, but curiously this reduction implies an "intensification" of our reality. Looking at negative integers, there is diminution going from minus ten to minus twenty in terms of absolute quantity, but the succession of numbers shows a gain. To approach zero is thus to grow. As for us, "[w]e are born far below zero. Zero is our maximum" (CS 327 = F 354). We are born below zero because of original sin, and we will reach zero only thanks to decreation. There is therefore a profound difference between zero, that is to say, nothingness, and negativity. Essentially one is nothing, but as a sinner one becomes "a negative being" (2:202 = N 272). These two texts explain the profound logic of this entire thought: from the viewpoint of the ontology of the two attributes of the real, autonomy is only apparent, thus unreal.⁵⁵ However, that does not at all compromise its profound actuality and the powerful opacity it turns so resolutely toward God. That human beings are zero or nothing means that we are as it were transparent in relation to God, that we oppose no resistance to him, that indeed we are in continuity with him. One must not lose from sight that the negative labels that would-be Platonists attach so easily to this world are ultimately metaphors intended to designate the *direction* of things in relation to the absolute. Nothingness—in the strict sense of the word—in such a language is that which, offering no resistance to God, is in perfect transparent continuity with him. These two modes of continuity will reveal the two other components of the human being.

The necessity that represents God as Power in the universe is the structure, the meaning, and the very essence of this world, of which our body and our mental faculties are only parts (*En* 244–45 = NR 288–90). The world is completely subject to the domination of necessity, and with the world the human

being also, as a material being. The nothingness of humanity reveals itself above all through the flawless docility of its belonging to that network of forceless, diamond-hard relations closing around it on all sides. From the beginning, the "practical" and "theoretical" meanings of necessity, master of the world, support each other in Weil. On the one hand, in such a representation of the universe she finds the intelligibility and order she cherished most of all. On the other, a quasi-mathematical outline of the world,⁵⁶ the regularity of the events infallibly succeeding each other in the universe, the impossibility of escaping the order of the world in which the material being finds itself—all this harmonized quite well with her basic vision of the nothingness and enslavement of humanity, of our irremediable weakness and absolute subjection to external necessity. The intellectual vision of determinism, united to the moral vision of human nothingness, led her to unmask with indefatigable vigor the lies and errors human beings entertain in their relation to necessity. The dreamer and the tyrant believe it is their slave; in deprivation, suffering, and affliction, it seems an absolute and brutal master; finally, in a methodical activity there seems to be a sort of balance. Necessity offers human beings sometimes obstacles, sometimes means toward the attainment of their goals. It would appear that a sort of equality exists between human will and universal necessity.

But all these attitudes are only illusions. The balance of methodical action is unreal, because "[i]n the state of intense fatigue, human beings cease to adhere to their own actions and even to their own will, perceiving themselves as a thing that drives other things because it is itself driven by a constraint" (*IP* 145 = *IC* 180–81). As for blind violence, it only seems to be such, being seen from our erroneous perspective (*IP* 149 = *IC* 183–184). And, insofar as the dreamer or tyrant is concerned, each passing moment can inflict the cruelest refutation of his illusions.

In any event, human beings are subject to necessity, and Weil never tires of repeating that our vague desires to free ourselves from it are doomed to failure; enslavement is written into the very essence of our condition. This obviously does

not mean that one is thereby acquitted of responsibility for leading an autonomous and sinful life; for if, as part of the material world, one cannot extract oneself from its laws, as a free being one always retains the power to consent or not to consent to evil. The double Kantian causality recovered and penetrated by the language of the *Timaeus* should have helped Weil to explain this parallelism, but she does not manage to clearly state the relation between necessity and liberty (cf. 2:337 = N 365). Let it suffice to say that her fundamental intuition is that humanity is always subject to necessity; it belongs to us only to choose the order of the necessity of which we will be part. The choice ought to be conceived as extending over our whole life: "Our sin consists in wanting to be" (CS 175 = F 218); that is, one permanently chooses autonomy;⁵⁷ for autonomy itself, inasmuch as it is expressed in physical attitudes and actions, is but a form of necessity, of the necessity according to which unfolds the existence of the ego in expansion. But what is the role of necessity in the metaphysical scheme of human beings? Human beings share the destiny of all material beings that have their whole reality in intelligible laws. Possession of a body and mental faculties is due only to the interpretation of this necessity through perception, because basically one is only network, relationship, law, relation. Inertia, impotence, the fragility of our flesh, which escapes continually from the requirements and commands of the ego, are all the striking expression of this docility to universal laws, the very essence of matter. However, this intelligible and passive essence is completed and complicated by an active intelligibility, called intelligence or intellect. Without wishing to use the traditional arguments on the rational soul conceived as the highest level of the intelligibility of the human being, we may affirm that the principal representative of the sphere of the "necessary" in Weil's anthropological scheme is intelligence.

In intelligence, which is but its supreme form in this world, necessity seems to fold back upon itself. It becomes like its own mirror in which it is understood in all its limpidity. Noisy agitation becomes calm, pulsation and vibration cease, events divest themselves of their passional attributes, and the relational

skeleton of the world is brought to light in its mathematical nakedness. At this moment, intelligence contemplates necessity peacefully and is subject to it only in the way the eye of the reader is to the printed text he or she is in the process of decoding (cf. *IP* 146 = *IC* 181). It is like a mirror, the virtue of which lies in its not having any part in the image it is reflecting, in its not having any dimension of its own, in lacking any substantiality of its own, in not having any opacity. All this, of course, only paraphrases the beautiful formula on the intellect that is effaced by the very fact of being exercised. This brings us back to the notion of dissolution of perspective and self-reduction to nothingness.

The recognition and acceptance of the right of others to exist in the same way as we ourselves exist must be preceded by knowledge of the fact that they *are* and of the fact of *what* they are. Objective knowledge of an external reality is possible only insofar as one sets oneself aside, that is, insofar as one is reduced to nothingness. This means—at least in the case of pure intelligence without relation to supernatural love—abandonment, the suspension of perspective. All true activity of the intelligence bears on the mathematical necessity constituting the very order of the world, that order “through which each thing, being in its place, allows every other thing to exist” (*IP* 151 = *IC* 185). Necessity is therefore the worker and guarantor of the coexistence of beings, and Weil is able to say that “[t]he understanding of necessity is an imitation of creation” (3:104 = *N* 480). In effacing itself, intelligence allows pure truth and the reality of things to appear, thus bringing itself into conformity with the image of that withdrawal of God permitting the universe to function independently of him. The most important truth thereby allowed to emerge is that of the existence of others; a relation of intersubjectivity is therefore affirmed even with respect to intelligence. However, the recognition of the other at this level still remains completely formal; it is not really possible that the other in no way infringes upon the goals and aspirations of the ego in expansion, that is, when it presents itself as an objective and neutral fact and not as a true self. To a certain extent, the intellect anticipates