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Simone Weil's *Venice Saved: Pity, Beauty, Friendship*

Simone Weil held the literary and dramatic arts in high esteem. In her most well-known and systematic essay, 'Human Personality', she writes of the ability of certain authors to find words that express the truth of affliction, words that '[...] give resonance, through the crust of external circumstances, to the cry which is always inaudible: 'Why am I being hurt?'' (HP87).¹ These poets, whom Weil names as Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Shakespeare (when he wrote *Lear*) and Racine (when he wrote *Phèdre*) are men of the 'highest genius', and they 'inhabit the realm of impersonal good' (HP87). Authors such as these inhabit a place from which their person does not obstruct the truth of suffering and affliction. Their writings do not carry the stamp of their person, but are vessels through which a cry that is otherwise silenced can be heard. For Weil, confrontation with affliction, with the cry of injustice itself, can occur through the literary form of authors of genius, and because of this the contribution of the literary arts to the understanding of human life is, for her, invaluable. And so, whilst one might expect Weil-the-Platonist to be sceptical of the power of fiction and art to approximate truth, she actually affords several key figures in the Western canon the rare ability to illuminate truth and allow the cry of injustice to be heard.²

Of all Weil's treatments of the literary and dramatic arts her most famous is an essay on Homer's *Iliad*, which we will have occasion to return to later in this article. This essay, 'The *Iliad* or the Poem of Force', develops a radical re-reading of Homer's classical text by putting forward a new thesis on the central protagonist of the play. If Achilles is traditionally seen as the figure around which the play turns, Weil makes him an understudy to a greater driver in the narrative: *force*. For Weil, the *Iliad* provides the means for the exploration of this original concept, which she broadly defines as: 'that x that turns anybody who is subjected to it into a *thing*' (Weil 2005: 183). In this essay, force is presented as having both a metaphysical and social element: On the one hand force governs the end of life when a person is turned into a corpse (a thing), whilst on the other it determines the end of socio-political life when one fails to be recognised and acknowledged by others. Whilst we do not have space to examine the concept of force in any detail here, it will not be controversial to say that in Homer's poem Weil found the most truthful and full representation of a concept that until then she herself had not found adequate expression for.³ And

so once again, it is possible to see Weil afford the literary and dramatic arts a rare ability to occasion thought and give rise to the truth of things.

Given the power of the literary form to reveal truth, then, it is no wonder that Weil herself turned to the historical play in order to think through issues key to both her life and philosophy. In her own historical but unfinished play *Venice Saved* (*Venise Sauvée*), Weil develops a narrative that rotates around various central issues of the human condition, including the motivating power of pity, the experience of beauty, and the miracle of true friendship. These are by no means the only ideas interrogated in Weil's play, but they are the ones that are most explicit in relation to her broader philosophical commitments, and which give us a way into *Venice Saved* that allows for an understanding of some of its guiding aims and motivations, as well as an insight into Weil's more general philosophical commitments. In the following, therefore, I will provide an overview of the narrative arc of the play before connecting several of its themes, characters, and scenes to Weil's broader philosophical project through these three key themes of human motivation: *pity*, *beauty*, and *friendship*.

Set in 1618, *Venice Saved* tells the story of a Spanish conspiracy to overthrow the city of Venice in the name of uniting Europe under the Habsburg dynasty.⁴ Weil began writing her play in 1940, three years before her untimely death and the same year that France fell to Nazi Germany.⁵ The play's narrative is uncomplicated and takes as its protagonist the mercenary Jaffier. Jaffier is a 'foreigner'. Not born in Venice but Provence, Jaffier is portrayed as an outsider, as someone who in Weil's technical vocabulary she would describe as uprooted; a person exiled not only from their home but from themselves too.⁶ At the beginning of Act Two, Pierre, Jaffier's closest friend and the central architect of the conspiracy, is called away and Jaffier is instructed to take charge of the siege. But with the evening of the conspiracy drawing closer, Jaffier becomes wracked with pity for the city he is about to destroy, and in return for a promise that his fellow conspirators will be spared he reveals the details of the plan to Venice's governing body: *The Council of Ten*. The Council ultimately break their promise, and Jaffier, now a traitor to both the conspiracy and his friends, is reduced to agonising despair as he contemplates the suffering and eventual death of his friends at the hands of the Venetian state. Finally, Jaffier's betrayal becomes too much for him to bear, and in a state of extreme suffering he joins what is left of the conspirators in order to die by the sword.

Pity

One of the guiding themes of *Venice Saved* is also a guiding problem in Weil's wider philosophical project and the broader philosophical tide of the day, namely: What motivates human beings to action? This general philosophical problem becomes concrete in the play as: What motivates Jaffier to betray his friends? Whilst this can be seen as the question that underlies the ebb and flow of the play, the reader is also given an explicit and unambiguous answer: *pity*. More specifically, Jaffier betrays his friends and saves Venice out of pity for the beauty of the city. It is pity, then, that motivates Jaffier's betrayal, and it is ultimately pity for its beauty that saves Venice from near inevitable destruction.

In the second act of the play Weil builds a psychological picture of Jaffier through a conversation he has with his fellow conspirators. Early on in Act Two, Jaffier is questioned by Pierre as to his readiness for the sack. More specifically, he is asked if he feels any *fear* that may compromise his ability to carry out his duties. In asking this question, Weil presents Pierre as taking fear to be a primary motivator for human action and inaction, and a particularly insidious emotion for a soldier to suffer. As a seasoned mercenary Jaffier is clear in his reply that he feels no fear regarding the task before him, and yet he continues that he nevertheless feels disturbed by a feeling of pity at the idea of such a beautiful city being ruined. Not understanding the power pity can have in the right soul, Pierre is quick to reject Jaffier's concerns, stating in unequivocal terms that:

'Pity never stopped anybody. It's a superficial emotion. It often affects men with generous hearts, but never gets to the bottom of their soul. Those who say they were stopped in their tracks by pity are only using the word to disguise their fear' (Weil 2019: 69).

Here, Pierre is explicit that pity is a superficial emotion used only to disguise the much deeper and more basic feeling of fear, an emotion that for him gets to the bottom of the soul. As someone whose life has been governed by conflict, Pierre, like Achilles, only knows the motivating power of force and the associated feelings it gives rise to. In her essay on the *Illiad* Weil describes the Janus-faced effect of force for both those who wield it, and those who suffer it:

‘Such is the nature of force. Its power of converting a man into a thing is a double one, and in its application double edged. To the same degree, though in different fashions, those who use it and those who endure it are turned to stone’ (Weil 2005: 204).

For Weil, force turns both the conqueror and the conquered to stone, that is, to an inert thing subject to a power that extends beyond them and that they have no control over. Fear is the currency within which the force of war trades, and this too cuts both ways. As much as the feeling of fear in those they intend to terrorise, the mercenaries are also dominated by the constant thought of fear. For them, fear takes over their thought as both something to be guarded against, and something to instil in others. The thought of fear is, then, all-encompassing. It is for this reason that Pierre cannot understand pity as anything other than an excuse for what is more fundamentally fear. Fear has taken hold of his perception of the world, and thus his account of human motivation, and this comes at the expense of those other sentiments that Weil takes to be equally motivating for the human condition. Pity is one of these emotions, and its strength is such that despite Pierre’s protestations that ‘no city has ever been preserved through the pity of an enemy [...]’ (Weil 2019: 83), it nevertheless proves more powerful than the detailed plans and weaponry of the mercenaries. Hence, whilst Weil’s account of the all-perverseness of force tends towards the Hobbesian, and thus towards a bleak picture of human life and motivation, it is nevertheless countered by an even stronger belief in the altruistic power of those base feelings animated by the recognition of the violent effects of force on both those who wield it, and those who suffer at its hands.

Beauty

But it is not pity alone that saves the city of Venice. Pity is always motivated, and in *Venice Saved* Jaffier’s pity arises from the beauty of the city, which he remarks no man could ever make, only God (Weil 2019: 82). Like pity, Weil portrays beauty as uniquely motivating and as a form of defence against the necessity of force. Here, beauty is depicted not in the typical aesthetic sense of something that merely pleases, or that we form a unique kind of judgment about, but as something that can be mobilised against weapons of war and the violent desires of peoples. Indeed, Weil is explicit in pointing this out when in Act Two Scene 13, she has Violetta announce: ‘its beauty is a better defence than that of soldiers, than the concerns of statesmen!’ (Weil 2019: 82). Whilst Violetta’s claim is brief, it nevertheless ventriloquizes Weil’s wider philosophy of beauty

whereby its experience contains an explicit ethical prescription to renounce personal will and undo the imaginary divinity of the self.

The place of such an ethical prescription in Weil's treatment of beauty can be best understood by looking at her use of a particular aesthetic concept found in Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, namely, the notion of *purposiveness without a purpose*. At the beginning of the *Critique of Judgment* Kant distinguishes between different kinds of judgments, including judgments of the good, the agreeable, and pure aesthetic judgments of the beautiful. What distinguishes a judgment of the agreeable from that of the beautiful is a personal relation to the object of judgment, which Kant names as an 'interest'. The agreeable is, therefore, that which has a specific relation to the individual who judges, and to this end cannot be universalised into a claim that holds for everyone else by dint of this personal interest. Thus, because it cannot be universalised, a judgment of the agreeable cannot be a pure aesthetic judgment of the beautiful. Equally those things we judge to be good are also distinct from the beautiful, for in a judgment of the good a particular concept is brought to bear on the judgment and this precludes it from being a purely *aesthetic* judgment. As Kant explains, in a judgment of the good a particular is held up and judged against a universal concept of what that particular approximates (CJ §4, 207–10).⁷ To this end all judgments of the good involve a concept of what the object of judgment *ought* to be, and thus are cognitive judgments aimed towards an end concept, rather than being a purely aesthetic judgment. This final point is central to Kant's aesthetics, for he argues that all judgments of the good contain the concept of a *purpose* (CJ §4 208), and in this are always made in relation to an idea outside of the judgment itself. In contrast to this all judgments of beauty are disinterested and *purposeless*, which is to say, refer to nothing other than the feeling of pleasure or displeasure of the judging subject (CJ §5 209).

And yet whilst aesthetic judgments of beauty can involve neither an interest in, nor concept of, the object of their judgment, all judgments of beauty must nevertheless be occasioned by, or aimed at, a particular object judged to be beautiful. Hence, whilst judgments of the beautiful cannot contain a determinate end towards which their judgment is aimed, all judgments of the beautiful are nevertheless grounded in the 'mere form of purposiveness' (CJ §11 221) in the presentation of the object. What this means is that the object of beauty exhibits the *form of purposiveness*, but without a determinate concept of a purpose that would render it a cognitive rather than aesthetic judgment. The main point here is that beauty, for Kant, negates any kind of finality, for if an end

or purpose were to be bound up with an object of judgment then it would involve an interest, thereby negating the condition of disinterestedness necessary for a true aesthetic judgment of taste.

The absence of purpose in a judgment of beauty for Kant is mirrored in Weil and positioned as a key constituent in both her aesthetic and ethical philosophy.⁸ In her essay ‘Forms of the Implicit Love of God’ Weil is clear on this, stating that the ethical demand to renounce the self through a process of decreation has an aesthetic ground:

‘The imitation of the beauty of the world, that which corresponds to the absence of finality, intention and discrimination in it, is the absence of intention in ourselves, that is to say the renunciation of our will.’ (WG133)⁹

Here, the specific kind of ethical action that decreation demands, whereby the subject surrenders their personal will in order to give back to God what He renounced in Creation, is shown to be a mirror of the beauty of the world. If the will always aims beyond the self towards those external things that it desires, and in this makes itself a means to an end, then the experience of beauty shows the subject another way of being. In reflecting on something that exists for its own sake and not for an end outside of it, the beautiful compels the subject to imitate this absence of intention and make themselves and their actions an end only unto themselves. This is the beginning of the process of decreation, and Weil is clear that because beauty is the easiest ‘opening’ onto God it is also the way through which decreation most frequently begins. As she explains: ‘The soul’s natural inclination to love beauty is the trap God most frequently uses in order to win it and open it to the breath from on high’ (WG118). For Weil, beauty is an opening onto God for it presents an occasion to renounce those drives and motivations that constitute the false divinity of the self. In this it occasions an extreme decentring of the one who experiences it, thus setting in motion a radical revaluation of one’s motivations and commitments to the world. Beauty, then, invites us to renounce the false ends towards which we are aimed, and in this it leaves one directionless and open to the guidance of the supernatural.

Like those before him who experienced God in the beauty of the world, Jaffier is not immune to its power, remarking that since the beauty of Venice can only have been created by God, the greatest thing a man can do is preserve such beauty (Weil 2019: 13). Such a claim on the motivational power of beauty is linked to one of Weil’s most frequently used analogies when

theorising beauty, namely, that beauty demands to be looked at, rather than eaten. The distinction between looking and eating runs throughout Weil's work and points to two competing ways human beings relate to the world and God.¹⁰ To eat what demands to be looked at is to satisfy our hunger—our desires—, but it is also to destroy that which we desire, thus making our soul restless in the pursuit of further objects to consume. If looking and eating were the same process, we could be nourished without also destroying what nourishes. As Weil puts it: 'Eternal beatitude (cf. the myth in the *Phaedrus*) is a state where to look is to eat.' (NB637). The goal of the decreed life is not, therefore, a state of passive looking, but a way of being whereby looking and eating become a single process, thus putting an end to the human being's circuitous struggle of lack, desire and fulfilment. In contemplating the beauty of Venice, Jaffier comes to renounce any desire to 'have', or to eat the city of Venice. He puts his base desires for having to one side and finds nourishment in looking alone, nourishment in the preservation of beauty rather than its destruction, and it is in this that begins his decision to save Venice and betray his friends.

The beauty of Venice that motivates Jaffier's betrayal has, therefore, two key moments that are part of one and the same movement. In experiencing the beauty of Venice, Jaffier aims to imitate the absence of finality in the beauty he faces, thus putting to one side his desires, will, and all that follows from his person and that function only as a means to a greater end. At the same time as this Venice becomes for him something that nourishes without end. Jaffier is no longer motivated by having Venice, by eating Venice as a means to sustain his own temporary desires for power, but by preserving Venice and recognising its beauty as an end in itself. This experience of beauty-without-finality provides the opportunity to renounce all personal ends and desires, and with this allows the one who experiences it to attend to the world under an aspect of eternity wherein eating and seeing are part of one and same action. In the experience of the beauty of Venice, then, Jaffier begins to renounce his self and his desires, for as Weil states: 'There is no trace of 'I' in the act of preserving' (GG70).¹¹

Friendship

Whilst the experience of beauty has traditionally been given as that which tends towards pleasure, it is not without pain in *Venice Saved*. This is not so much because of the actual experience of beauty, but because of the ethical demand that beauty occasions. Indeed, the radical decentring that beauty calls forth does not merely have an effect on the person who takes up its

challenge, but also on those who surround them. In renouncing his will in the face of Venice's beauty, Jaffier not only puts his own person to one side but also those who are associated with his person, including his comrades in the conspiracy. In her essay 'Forms of the Implicit Love of God' Weil is clear that beauty is a form of divine love for it can motivate us towards the process of decreation. But in addition to beauty, Weil also cites friendship as a way that we can love God through a renunciation of personal freedom.¹² Indeed, throughout *Venice Saved* Weil is at pains to highlight the particular friendship between Jaffier and Pierre, writing in Act One that Jaffier entered the sack out of friendship for Pierre, and that Pierre is willing to sacrifice everything but this friendship for the sack. But of all the times Weil highlights the importance of friendship in *Venice Saved*, it is what Pierre notes at the beginning of Act Two that best expresses Weil's broader philosophy of friendship. Here Pierre gives up his place in the sack and instructs Renaud that Jaffier should be the one to take his place. Renaud fails to understand his motivations, stating that 'I for one would not give up for anything the reward that I've been promised for my part in the conspiracy' (Weil 2019: 66). At this point Weil interjects in the narrative discourse of the play with a note. She writes that Renaud seems to think that the accumulation and exercise of maximal power is akin to a natural law, and thus for a human being to voluntarily relinquish an almost certain gain in power seems to go 'against nature'. After this note the dialogue returns with Pierre replying to Renaud that he fails to understand his motivations because he does not know what true friendship is. Here, Jaffier and Pierre's friendship is held up as something that appears in opposition to the perceived natural law that everything must strive to further its power in the world. As we've already seen, beauty demands such a relinquishing of power for it is an implicit love of God that motivates attention over having. But as well as beauty Weil also posits friendship as an implicit love of God, as something that when truly expressed goes against the erroneous belief that the nature of things is to continuously accumulate and express power. Weil's argument for this is found in the same essay on forms of the implicit love of God, and in what follows I will offer a brief summary of its most important claims as they relate to *Venice Saved*.

At the outset of her account of friendship Weil begins by noting that friendship is different to charity for whilst the latter is indiscriminate, the former is an explicit expression of preference for another human being. This preference, she continues, may be based either on a good we find in the friend, or in the fact that we find something necessary in them that we cannot do without. If the former then there is something in the friend that we desire as a good. As an example of this

Weil says we that we go in search of sea air not because we *need* it, but because we like it, because we *desire* it (WG153). In terms of the friendship between people, this example is far from obvious. Nevertheless, she may mean something like this: I may form an attachment with a friend because of a good I desire in them; if the sea restores my health and I desire it because of this, so my friendship with someone may also be based on a restorative good they bring me.

But it is the second kind of attachment that is most interesting for her wider metaphysics of decreation, namely the kind of attachment found at the level of *necessity*. As Weil explains, when one forms an attachment to a friend through necessity, there is something that one needs, that is to say, something that one *cannot do without* in that friend. Indeed, such a relationship may be considered necessary, she continues, if the loss of that friendship involves a decrease in the life energy of the one for whom the friendship is necessary (WG155). From this claim on the necessity inherent in true friendship, Weil goes on to make a significant claim on the possibilities of friendship. To quote:

‘When a human being is attached to another by a bond of affection which contains any degree of necessity, it is impossible that he should wish autonomy to be preserved both in himself and in the other. It is impossible by virtue of the mechanism of nature. It is, however, made possible by the miraculous intervention of the supernatural. This miracle is friendship.’
(WG156)

Friendship, she suggests, is a miracle since it makes possible the impossible. What Weil means by this might be understood in the following way: Friend X cannot admit of friend Y’s autonomy, since Friend X *requires* Y to satisfy her needs. The absence or freedom of Y is unthinkable for X because X needs Y; that is to say, X *demand*s Y at the expense of Y’s freedom or autonomy. And yet friendship allows both friends to retain their freedom whilst at the same time being absolutely necessary for one another. As Weil concludes, there is a harmony in friendship, namely, a harmony between liberty and necessity (WG156), and it is this harmony between opposites that friendship cultivates that constitutes its status as something supernatural, as a *miracle*.

Weil returns to the supernatural ground to friendship in *Venice Saved*. Here she suggests that Pierre’s friendship with Jaffier extends beyond the natural insofar as it allows Pierre to

relinquish power and affirm the autonomous existence of Jaffier without at the same time seeing this as a diminishment of his own power. But it is precisely this supernatural element to friendship that leads Jaffier into extreme suffering, for in the culmination to the play Jaffier is confronted with the competing ethical demands of the beauty of Venice, and his friendship with Pierre: On the one hand the beauty of Venice gives him the occasion to imitate its lack of finality and renounce his own desires and motivations, including those that tie him to Pierre and his comrades. Whilst on the other hand his friendship with Pierre is also a method of decreation that allows for the diminishment of the will and the affirmation of the free existence of an other, and in this should be nourished and cultivated as an implicit love of God.

Jaffier's extreme suffering at the end of the play, what Weil more technically describes as his affliction (*malheur*), is a result of the dual demands of beauty and friendship and which in the play come to represent the impossible bind of the human condition. For Weil there is suffering at the heart of human life, for what is required of the human being by the demands of the good is impossible to achieve in the finite form of the human individual. As she notes:

“[...] we are made up of contradiction, since we are creatures, and at the same time God, and at the same time infinitely other than God.

Contradiction alone makes us experience the fact that we are not All. Contradiction is our wretchedness, and the feeling of our wretchedness is the feeling of reality. (NB411)

Jaffier's affliction in the final scenes of *Venice Saved* arises from the feeling of this contradiction at the centre of human life. Torn by competing demands too much for one individual to consolidate, Jaffier is confronted by affliction, by a reality beyond the imaginative structures of everyday life. For Weil, Jaffier's affliction is the result of the recognition that we are not all, and are therefore unable to consolidate the impossible demands of the good. Jaffier's affliction is the pain he feels in the realisation that our daily life is constituted by intricate structures designed to paper over the absence and impossibility of the good in this world. To this extent *Venice Saved* ends with Jaffier's experience of human nature as such, with what Weil calls *the void* (*le vide*). In experiencing the impossibility of the good, Jaffier is confronted with the void, with reality, with the impossibility of human life, and as such he chooses death by the sword, which is one of only two options for those who have become aware of the reality of the human condition, for as Weil

comments: ‘Whoever for an instant bears up against the void, either he receives the supernatural bread, or else he falls’ (NB156). In confronting the impossibility of his situation, Jaffier falls and in his falling he exemplifies the tragic impossibility of human life that guides Weil’s entire religio-ethical thought.

In *Gravity and Grace* Weil writes that it is not given to man to create, and the failure to recognise and accept the impossibility of creation leads us into error. The only options open to the human being, she continues, are preservation and destruction (GG69-70). Jaffier chooses to preserve Venice, but it comes at huge personal cost, for as Weil continues in *Gravity and Grace*: ‘There is no trace of ‘I’ in the act of preserving’ (GG70). Motivated by the sometimes-competing demands of the experiences of pity, beauty, and friendship, Jaffier relinquishes his self in order to affirm, and thereby preserve, the existence of something other than himself. The finale of *Venice Saved* is a vision of affliction arising out of the recognition of the impossibility of truly good human action. It is a vision not meant to console, but to reveal the truth of the human condition. In this Weil attempts to follow those authors touched upon in the introduction, Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Shakespeare, and Racine, who succeed in representing the truth of affliction and beauty in the literary form. Whether Weil’s play succeeds in revealing even a kernel of the truth of the human condition might be contested, but it undoubtedly succeeds in providing a condensed expression of certain key problems that motivated both her life and philosophy.

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¹ All references to Weil's essay 'Human Personality' are from Weil 2005 and are abbreviated as HP followed by the page number of the above volume.

² On the dual treatment of truth and affliction see HP88

³ The concept of force is briefly explored in a fragment entitled 'Reflections on Barbarism' appended to the essay 'The Great Beast', but it is not explored in any great detail. See Weil 2015: 142-144

⁴ The events of 1618 have been fictionalised in several different accounts before Weil's play. On Weil's sources for the play see Panizza and Wilson in Weil 2019: 11

⁵ It is evident that Weil's play can be read much more historically than is undertaken in the present article. Weil's immediate motivation for the play is undoubtedly the social and political environment of Europe in the 1930's and 40's, and there are several studies that draw out the key dual themes of empire and totalitarianism that dominated mid-20th century Europe, and which can be seen as drivers to Weil's play. On this see for instance Panizza and Wilson's chapter 'The Genesis and Purport of *Venice Saved*' in Weil 2019: 11-21, and Little 1970. Whilst the play's relation to its historical moment is vital and important, the aim of the present article is to provide an introduction as to how certain key themes in *Venice Saved* relate to Weil's wider philosophy, and so will not develop the historical account of the play in any detail.

⁶ Weil's most sustained treatment of rootedness and its antithesis uprootedness is to be found in the first and second sections of her work *The Need for Roots*. See Weil 2002b

⁷ All references to the *Critique of Judgment* are from Kant 1987 and abbreviated as CJ. Section numbers are followed by page numbers of the Akademie edition of Kant's works as used by Pluhar in Kant 1987.

⁸ Weil is clear in her use of Kant's concept for her own ethico-aesthetics: 'Beauty is the only finality here below. As Kant said very aptly, it is a finality which involves no objective. A beautiful thing involves no good except itself, in its totality, as it appears to us' (WG121). See also Thomas 2020 for a more detailed reading of Weil's use of Kant's aesthetic schemata.

⁹ All references from Weil's collection of essays *Waiting on God* are from Weil 1983 and are abbreviated as WG followed by the page number of the above volume.

¹⁰ See, for instance: WG121, NB461, NB637, Weil 1998: 149. All references to Weil's Notebooks are from Weil 2004 and are abbreviated as NB followed by the page number of the above volume.

¹¹ All references from *Gravity and Grace* are from Weil 2002a and are abbreviated as GG followed by the page number of the above volume.

¹² Weil also cites the love of our neighbour and religious practices as forms of the implicit love of God. See WG94-152