Simone Weil – Love and Language

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Introduction: a remark on the relation between faith and reason

European philosophy - the natural environment of what we call reason - did not generate itself, although there was a time when it believed in its self-creation *ex nihilo*. Philosophy has a great mother - religion. Religion is the background against which philosophy loomed, the soil out of which it grew. I will not try to characterize this soil and this background directly; I hope that the reasons for my reticence will become clearer in the course of my argument. From the very moment of its birth, European philosophy was destined to question the relationship between itself and its soil: myth. This became a particularly burning question (literally) when Christianity entered into the life of Europe, transforming all its institutions and traditions so profoundly that their continuity became problematic. This Christian abduction of Europe involved the second birth of everything European, including European philosophy. This rebirth should not be thought of as an erasure followed by a new script, but rather as the supplying of a new context, a new irremovable perspective changing irreversibly the sense of that which it attends - a viral infection rather than a flood or an earthquake. From the moment of Europe's abduction, the pre-Christian past of philosophy must be understood as a kind of projection - whether critical or friendly - onto the baptism of Europe. Thus, the pre-Christian

past of philosophy cannot be wrested from this new context. The context itself - the Christian background of philosophy - places philosophy in a confusing position for two reasons: first, this background's *content*, namely, the doctrine of a transcendent God, a creator absolutely different from his creation, whose judgments are unpredictable and whose essence is opaque (but who is, nevertheless, also a human being with the gift of language). As we can see, from a philosophical point of view, this doctrine is, in fact, not a doctrine at all but a kind of commandment which enjoins philosophy to speak about the unspeakable.

Second, because of the very fact of its *presence*, which one could say is a path to what is at once both central and transcendent, precisely philosophy is the only "one" who can say this because whoever says anything in Christian Europe is always and only philosophy. However, it is a *presence* which is not equal to *the speaking* about the bond; thus, it is not philosophy. This confronts philosophy with the fact (and with the necessity of referring to this fact) of its own silence or abdication of an end that is nevertheless followed by something else - namely, by religion.

Consequently, philosophy, which is speaking *par excellence* - speaking aware of its speaking - faces challenges from its very beginning (its Christian beginning) which exceed its means. First, it must speak about the unspeakable; second, it must prepare itself for silence, for its retirement in favor of religion. The tone of philosophy in Christian Europe is, therefore, a necessarily apocalyptic tone. Like Heidegger`s *Dasein* which finds its most proper *modus* of being in *Being-toward-Death,* philosophy in Christian Europe finds its own most proper *modus* in *Philosophizing-toward-Religion.* The question concerning this apocalyptic condition of philosophy - namely, the relation between philosophy and its roots in Christian Europe, till now the only Europe which we can imagine (although, as I will discuss later, this situation may be about to change) - assumed the shape of a question about the relation between faith and reason. Both of these terms must be understood as broadly as possible; it is the attitude towards their relation which decides their content. Reason is determined in opposition to faith and faith is determined in opposition to reason. The history of this question is monumental and would fill an enormous library. It should be no surprise, therefore, that I cannot include it in the present essay, wherein I attempt merely to give an account of the connection between some ideas distressing my unskillful thinking, never losing the hope that it can be useful for somebody. All that I intend to do here is to sketch - with very heavy strokes - several possible attitudes towards the relation between faith and reason and to tie the produced *ad hoc* ideal types to historical evidence.

1. *Reason takes up the cause of faith.* The first attitude may be called *scholastic*, although I believe that the seventeenth century rationalistic metaphysics of Descartes and Leibniz stands close to it as well. The apocalyptic condition of philosophy is basically denied here. It should be said, however, that one who looks for its traces will probably find them - because, as Leszek Kolakowski observed of the human sciences, one who wants to prove any given thesis can never run short of evidence (thus, the thesis and its consequences are important, not the evidence). The scholastic attitude assumes that faith and reason are homogenous: this can spell out only a kind of assimilation and submission of the religious to the philosophical. Reason and faith are thought as complementary, although they play different roles. Reason, employing principles the correctness of which is guaranteed by God, delivers *knowledge*, while faith seeks *redemption*. After reason says all that can be said, faith comes and does its work (but the consequence of this is not necessarily Pelagianism, because redemption is not guaranteed by reason; that is to say, it depends not on theoretical factors, i.e., on the truth or falsehood of knowledge delivered by reason, but on grace, the decision about which falls on the side of faith. Reason itself - as opposed to the one who reasons - is, from the very beginning, already redeemed). The mystery of the religious exists, although it is not really a mystery, but rather a practical fulfillment of what was thought in the form of a theory. This act of fulfillment does not change the validity of what was thought. On the contrary, it ultimately affirms it. Although, as we said before, this attitude is indifferent to the quarrel between Augustinianism and Pelagianism, its optimism about the capability of human reason is somehow in conflict with the Augustinian conviction concerning the misery of man. This is why the Augustinian pole of Christian thought tends to another attitude, which may be described as follows.

2. *Faith accuses reason.* This attitude, in its purest form, may be found in Tertullian, as well as in Kierkegaard and Shestov. The greatest of the Russians, Fyodor Dostoyevsky (whose novels have an intellectual energy equal to that found in the greatest philosophical treatises, but turned against philosophy), is perhaps also its protagonist. I call this attitude *logoclastic*. It views reason as an obstacle to faith; knowledge is the *condition for the impossibility* of redemption. The mystery of faith is not only *not* exhausted by speaking about it, but every kind of speaking is, in the face of this mystery, a blasphemy. This attitude originates in a particularly strong experience of the apocalyptic situation of Christian philosophy, the conclusion of which is the suicide of reason: reason leaves religion to itself. But the paradoxical result of this circumstance is that mystery, since it is not counterbalanced by any-

thing, ceases to be mystery. The enigma of faith demolishes reason and itself disappears. We are justified in seeing a connection between the *logoclastic* intentions of medieval nominalism - a nominalism which seeks to demonstrate the nothingness of reason in the face of God′s omnipotence - and the positivistic spirit of modern science. The progress of modern science concurred with an attitude toward the relationship between faith and reason which may be described in the following way.

3. *Reason accuses faith*. This attitude, which I call *emancipatory*, is to be found in certain currents of the Enlightenment (but should not be identified with the whole of the Enlightenment; for example, the thought of Kant exceeds this attitude). Faith is here thought to be an obstacle standing in the way of reason, a dark cloud dispelled by the light which reason, when it acquires knowledge, sheds on the truth. If, in the case of the *logoclastic* attitude, mystery destroys reason, now reason blows mystery away. The difference between the *emancipatory* and the *scholastic* attitudes consists in the fact that the former lacks religious sanctions and does not guarantee an ultimate (apocalyptic) affirmation of the correspondence between the order of reason and the order of the world. This has far-reaching consequences, consequences which are revealed when reason, in its fervent contest with the prejudices of religion, discovers that it too is no more than a prejudice and thus, turns against itself.

4. *Reason accuses reason*. This attitude I call Nietzscheanism. Reason recognizes that its own presuppositions are, in fact, religious. The most important of these presuppositions is truth itself, in the name of which it previously warred with religious prejudice. I find this attitude not only in Nietzsche and (with some reservation) in Heidegger, his great reader and critic, but also in Wittengenstein and in Hegel. All these philosophers were trying to overcome the traditional concept of truth rooted in the Christian myth, in favor of a kind of circular, dynamic structure, which one may call the "process of truth`s self-generation." This concept is a new, self-excluding notion of reality (having the structure of Wittengenstein`s ladder, which must be thrown away after it is used). This notion of reality leaves no room for philosophy, with its opposition between faith and reason. I cannot discuss here the differences and the similarities between the figures who constitute this most influential current in present-day thought (I will try to discuss it in another place: namely, in my thesis "Nietzscheanism, Christianity, Skepticism"). The most convenient place to observe the inner coherence of this extremely differentiated current is in the thought of one of the most intellectually refined heirs to this tradition, Jacques Derrida. Let us hear what he has to say about the difference between signans and signatum (sign and signified), which is in fact the difference between knowledge

and its object and therefore, the difference between the order of reason and the order of the world - consequently, the ground of the notion of truth as adequacy: "... one cannot retain the convenience of the 'scientific truth' of the Stoic and later medieval opposition between signans and signatum without also bringing with it all its metaphisico-theological roots. To these roots adheres (...) the distinction between the sensible and intelligible - already a great deal - with all that it controls, namely, metaphysics in its totality".[1] Reason, when it becomes Nietzschean, recognizes that its theme (speaking about the unspeakable) and direction (philosophizing-towards-religion) arise from its rootedness in Christian myth. In order to escape the dominion of this myth, it must first rid itself of itself. But why does this emancipation, which goes so far as to lead to its self-liquidation, remain, roughly speaking, an aim or, more cautiously, a dream, a concealed nostalgia of self-combating reason? My hypothesis is that this dream is an echo of the epiphany of another myth, different from the Christian one. I believe that the meaning of this other myth may be conveyed metaphorically as a war of the elements. If we think of the Christian myth as the soil out of which philosophy grew, this other myth - let us call it the Nietzschean myth (although Nietzsche was not its creator, but rather its prophet or perhaps its apostle) - would be like a wind blowing away the soil, leaving behind a wasteland. The "salt of the earth" is gone and the earth cannot bear fruit. As we can see, this event is ambiguous: it may be described in the "logic of metaphors" specific to Christianity, but on the other hand it exceeds this logic. It turns against the functioning of those metaphors in Western culture, bringing "something" new, but in a way which prevents us from speaking about it. Two kinds of troubles attend this ambiguity: the trouble with the incurableness of reason and the trouble with the incurableness of faith.

a) The incurableness of reason: the problem of leaving the domain infected by Christianity. Let us hear Derrida: "Of course it is not a question of 'rejecting' these notions,[2] they are necessary and, and *at least at present*[3] nothing is conceivable for us without them. It is a question at first of demonstrating the systematic and historical solidarity of the concepts and gestures of thought that one often believes can be innocently separated. The sign and divinity have the same place of birth. The age of the sign is essentially theological. Perhaps it will never *end*. The historical closure is,

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[1]   Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1974), p. 13.

[2]   i.e., teleologically rooted notions of sign and signified

[3]   Italic added

however, outlined."[4] Philosophy tends to re-establish itself among concepts which should lead us beyond philosophy (it re-creates its *closed* structure in an *end*-less variety of ways). This generates a game of "cat and mouse," which Derrida calls "deconstruction."

b) The incurableness of faith: the shifting of the boundaries between *Nietzscheanism* and the attitude which I call *logoclastic*. There is a temptation to give a religious significance (in the traditional sense) to the variety of deconstructive strategies. By "traditional sense," I mean a sense according to which religion opposes reason and therefore, constitutes reason in its traditional form as well. I suspect that the thought of Derrida develops from *Nietzscheanism* towards a sort of *logoclastic* religiosity, similar to Levinas`s. Of course, Levinas is not only a *logoclast*, although a large portion of his writing can be understood in this way. He is also one of the few contemporary defenders and renewers of metaphysics. With some reservation, I think that the author of *Totality and Infinity* may be counted among the representatives of the last attitude which I will indicate:

5. *Faith takes up the cause of reason*. I call this attitude "*tragic skepticism.*" In the case of the *logoclastic* attitude, the mystery of faith is a battering-ram which breaks down reason; in the case of the *emancipatory* attitude, reason is the light which illuminates the darkness of mystery. Tragic skepticism: reason contemplates mystery, but it does not illuminate it; mystery binds reason but does not break it. Let us hear the words of Simone Weil, who will furnish us with an example of the functioning and dilemmas of tragic skepticism.

> *The proper method of philosophy is to understand the unsolvable problems clearly in their insolubility and only to contemplate them with attention, indefatigably, year after year, without any hope - just waiting. According to this criterion, there are few philosophers. Few is too weak.*

Second Introduction: Simone Weil

Here I will discuss only one aspect of the thought of Weil, a thinker who has fascinated me for years. Even now, I cannot resist feeling that this attempt is premature. Nevertheless, I know that this feeling will never leave me; its disappearance would mean only that Simone Weil had ceased to be a source of inspiration for me. Simone Weil´s attitude towards the relationship between faith and reason can be reconstructed by examining the way in which she uses the words "love" and "lan-

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[4] Of *Grammatology*, pp. 13 -14

guage." In the case of Weil, such a reconstruction is necessarily a violation: her thought does not tend to a systematic form, does not produce technical categories. She analyses every problem in an original way, unphased by any contradictions which arise. In fact, she summarizes her "method of investigation" as follows: "If you have thoughts about something - see how far their contrary is true." I must confess, that in the course of reading Weil, I have come to have more questions and doubts than answers to the problems which I will discuss here. But I have the impression that these doubts and questions are somehow instructive and that they lead me forward - but to where, I do not know. The following considerations are an attempt to describe one such path which leads to the unknown.

1. Let us enter the labyrinth with a quotation: "A case of obviously contradictory propositions: God exists, God does not exist. Where is the problem? I am absolutely sure that God exists, in the sense that my love is not an illusion. I am absolutely sure that God does not exist, in the sense that nothing corresponds to whatever I may think when I utter this name. But what I cannot think is not an illusion." (M 59)

Some remarks: this passage does not exhibit dialectical thinking in the Hegelian sense of that term. It does not presuppose the "unity in the contradiction" of subject and object (of "thinking" and "that which corresponds to it"), a unity which might be called "the Absolute" or "God." God is the object of thinking. Thinking looking for its object comes to a contradiction. It obtains two contradictory existential propositions. At first glance, this situation seems to be similar to the Kantian antinomy of pure reason. However, reason (or "thinking," as Weil puts it) does not, as it does in Kant, fall into this situation in a natural way, by itself so to speak (when reason goes too far, i.e., it forgets its limits. Kant speaks here of the "death of healthy philosophy" - a natural death in the case of skeptical unresolutness in matters of the quarrel or euthanasia in the case of arbitrary dogmatism). For Weil, reason falls into an antinomy in its confrontation with love. What is more is that even the theme of God´s existence is introduced into reason ("thinking") and its limited possibilities ("whatever I may think") by an external factor - i.e., love. What is the status of this language which engenders propositions about God's existence and non-existence? Until now, we can say only so much about this language: namely, that it stands in two relations. It refers either to *love* (thus, claiming that God exists) or to *reality* (thus, stating that God does not exist). What does Weil think reality is?

2. We can look for the answer in her essay about the *Iliad*. Weil´s reading of the *Iliad* is metaphysical, not philological. The *Iliad* tells us how the things are; it utters the truth about reality. For Weil, metaphysics is poetry, first of all. An epistemo-

logical effort is a poetical effort ("Poetry: to explain. The spectacle of the universe is the first poetry. The developing of attention, thanks to which man starts to think about the things in the universe" PL 128). Thus, poetry is the very opposite of an arbitrary product of the imagination; beauty is not what pleases. Only beautiful words are true. Only true words are beautiful. But this is not an empty play of definitions. The truth contained in words is not simply given as true: i.e., as beautiful. Both the production and the "*reading*" of beauty require a certain effort, the development of attention. "The world is a text of many meanings and one proceeds from one meaning to another by working. This is an effort in which the body always takes part, as in the learning of a foreign alphabet: it should, so to speak, enter one's hand through the writing of the letters. Apart from this, every alteration of thinking is an illusion" (M...). Thus, the truth about reality is not simply a true proposition in the logical sense. Although the truth of words (i.e., their beauty) can perhaps decide the logical value of a proposition (although not without generating the difficulties mentioned above), it cannot be reduced to the latter. The *Iliad* is therefore not only a *result* of the attention of genius, but also a *challenge* which demands the metamorphosis of the reader. For those who give it this attention, it shows itself to be "the purest and the most beautiful of mirrors" (RP 56). Before we consider what kind of work one has to do in order to see the *Iliad* as a mirror, let us look into the mirror.

3. In the mirror, reality manifests itself as war. The subject and the object of the special circular structure of war is force. "The true hero, the true subject, the center of the *Iliad* is force." (A 183) Force acts through people; people are the necessary mediation whereby force refers to itself. This self-reference is the essence of war. Force uses people in such a way that it kills them, turning them into things. It accomplishes this in two ways; it does it now or later. "From its first property (the ability to turn a human being into a thing by the simple method of killing him) flows another, quite prodigious too in its own way, the ability to turn a human being into a thing while he is still alive." (A 185) "It will surely kill, it will possibly kill, or perhaps it merely hangs, poised and ready, over the head of the creature, it *can* kill, at any moment, which is to say at every moment." (A 185) Between the action of this force and death appears time, but an injured time. It is an injured time because the dimension of the future is replaced by death. This interval encloses a space within which the game of mastery and slavery is played. The one who is defeated but not killed - not yet that is, because he can be killed at any moment - becomes a slave. The one who can kill but does not kill - again not yet, because he may kill at any moment - acquires the power of a master. The

conviction that he possesses force intoxicates the one who assumes the role of the master. At first, reality itself seems to be a game to him, a realm which lies outside the rule of force. From this realm beyond force, he appears to control force. The master's "days [are] empty of necessity, days of play, of revelry, days arbitrary and unreal." But the mastery of force is an illusion. "Force is as pitiless to the man who possesses it, or think he does, as it is to its victim; the second it crushes, the first it intoxicates. The truth is, nobody really possesses it. The human race is not divided up, in the Iliad, into conquered persons, slaves, suppliants, on the one hand, and conquerors and chiefs on the other. In this poem, there is not a single man who does not at one time or another have to bow his neck to force." (A 191) War is conducted by the blind justice of necessity - *nemesis*. Master becomes slave and slave becomes master; it is only a question of time, a time deprived of the future. "For those whose spirits have bent under the yoke of war, the relation between death and future is different than for other men[5]. For other men death appears as a limit set to the future; for them, however, death *is* the future (...) Regularly, every morning, the soul castrates itself of aspiration, for thought cannot journey through time without meeting death on the way." (A...) Thus, thought is immobilized in the present. War turns people into living corpses (still living, living in the "still"). The unbearable, never-ending, and always-beginning pain presents them with the only possible vision of deliverance. It appears:

> *...in an extreme and tragic aspect, the aspect of destruction. Any other solution, more moderate, more reasonable in character, would expose the mind to suffering so naked, so violent that it could not be borne, even as memory. Terror, grief, exhaustion, slaughter, annihilation of comrades - is it credible that these things should not continually tear at the soul, if the intoxication of the force had not intervened to drown them? The idea that an unlimited effort should bring it only a limited profit or no profit at all is terribly painful (...) If the existence of the enemy has made a soul destroy in itself the nature put there[6], then the only remedy the soul can imagine is the destruction of the enemy. At the same time the death of dearly loved comrades arouses a spirit of somber emulation, a rivalry in death. (A...)*

The passion of injured time is the desire for extermination and suicide. Here, moderation is foolishness. A realm beyond force does not exist.

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[5] "other men" means here only those whose illusions about the existance of a realm outside of force are not yet destroyed.

[6] i.e., the dimension of the future

4. The *Iliad* is the purest and most beautiful of mirrors. It is a beautiful mirror because it is a pure mirror. What can be said about a pure mirror? First, that it cannot be seen. One sees only the things which the mirror shows. One cannot see a pure mirror because it is not engaged with the things it shows; it does not participate in their folly and supplies them with nothing. The *Iliad* is characterized by an "extraordinary sense of equity," but this equity, this perfect purity of the surface of the mirror, would be dark and dead if there were no light for the mirror to reflect. This light Weil calls *bitterness*. "However, such a heaping-up of violent deeds would have a frigid effect, were it not for the note of incurable bitterness that continually makes itself heard, though often only a single word marks its presence, often a mere stroke of the verse, or a run-on line" (A...). What a peculiar gaze one must have to see bitterness between the lines of the poem.

5. "At the very best, a mind enclosed in language is in prison," (A 89) says Weil. Truth cannot be found in propositions which state a relation (God exists; God does not exist). Truth shines through the spaces which separate propositions; its notes can be heard in their accentuation. This is how a certain version of Plato's parable of the cave begins. The way upwards can be identified with the work of interpretation ("in which the body always takes part") which must be completed in order to perceive the truth and beauty of the *Iliad*. What the *Iliad* shows us in the image of war is affliction. "Just as truth is a different thing from opinion, so affliction is a different thing from suffering. Affliction is a device for pulverizing the soul; the man who falls into it is like a workman who gets caught up in a machine. He is no longer a man but a torn and bloody rag on the teeth of a cogwheel." (A 90) Opinion and suffering have this in common; they are given to everyone, without their making any effort. Truth, on the other hand, is a tone which we strain to hear in opinion; affliction is a scream which we strain to hear in suffering. To hear affliction: what does this mean? "To listen to someone is to put oneself in his place while he is speaking. To put oneself in the place of someone whose soul is corroded by affliction, or near danger to it, is to annihilate oneself." (A 91) The work of interpreting the world, "in which the body always takes part," leads the body to the Cross. The origin of the bitterness which shines through the pages of the *Iliad* comes from the cup of bitterness from which the Son of Man drank. The light which enables the *Iliad* to be a mirror, showing war as affliction, is the light of the Gospel. He who understands this, due to the work of attention, love, or justice (all of which, for Weil, refer to the same thing: namely, the ascending movement), has already left the cave and looks into the sun of truth. But the parable does not

end here. "The created world consists of the descending movement of gravity,[7] the ascending movement of grace, and the descending movement of another grace, grace to the second power." The man who climbs up into the light is sentenced to descend into the cave once more, where he either betrays and denies the truth or is killed. In the first case, he enters the Trojan war again where fate either allows him to exult in the illusion of a realm free from force or destroys this illusion with one gesture. In the second case, his body, stretched on the cross, becomes a mirror for all of us.

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Let us return to the antinomy of reason in love (God exists; God does not exist). Have we gotten closer to the solution of the problem? Not at all. We may have gotten closer to understanding its tragic insolvability. One can come to the conviction that "God does not exist" only if God exists and gives us, with his crucified body, the only point of equity removed from war and its lies and illusions - the only mirror in which war shows itself as war, as the total, destructive game of force. But the words "God exists" are a lie if they are not represented by a death on the Cross. It is impossible for us to say them if we are alive; we can only contemplate this impossibility with indefatigable attention, without any hope - just waiting.

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[7]   which, in the essay about the Iliad, is called force