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ATTENTION, ASCETICISM AND GRACE:  
SIMONE WEIL AND HIGHER EDUCATION

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Academic work is one of those fields containing a pearl so precious that it is worth while to sell all our possessions, keeping nothing for ourselves, in order to be able to acquire it (Weil, 2001a, p. 65).

The past two decades have witnessed a revival of interest in the work of Simone Weil. Weil died in 1943, aged just 34, but the writings she left behind have influenced philosophers, theologians, classicists, novelists, literary theorists, and social activists, among others. To date, however, Weil's books have attracted relatively little attention from educationists (exceptions include Liston, 2008; Smith, 2001; Tubbs, 2005). This is surprising, given the obvious connections between Weil's ideas and those advanced by a number of other educational thinkers. These links are especially strong in areas such as spirituality and education, feminist theory in education, and critical pedagogy. Weil

worked in schools and some of her writings address educational questions directly. More broadly, it might be said that in Weil's epistemology and ethic, the basis for a distinctive approach to teaching and learning can be found.

Weil grew up in a relatively privileged and highly intellectual Parisian household. One of two children, her brother André went on to become one of the most accomplished mathematicians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Simone had, from an early age, a strong commitment to the poor and deprived herself of certain items of food and clothing as an act of solidarity for workers in need. Always a deep thinker, as an adolescent she suffered from an overwhelming sense of despair, and at one point considered committing suicide. She paid little attention to her appearance and, despite her outstanding scholarly ability, felt herself to be clearly inferior to her brother. She went on to study philosophy with Emile Chartier (Alain, as he became known) at the *École Normale Supérieure*, excelling in her studies and emerging, one step ahead of Simone de Beauvoir, at the top of her class. She obtained work as a teacher at Le Puy. While teaching, she remained a determined political activist, joining manual workers in their labours and giving books, food and money to the less fortunate. The ill health that was to plague her throughout her life was evident during this period, and Weil suffered from severe headaches, among other problems. In her teaching, she cared little for examination results, detested the emphasis on mindless repetition, and tried to encourage creative, critical thought. She spent nine months working in an automobile factory to gain more direct experience of working class life but was forced to leave due to illness. She participated briefly in the Spanish Civil War (on the side of the Loyalists). Around this time she also began to pay more systematic attention to spiritual questions. Two pivotal influences were Gustave Thibon,

a lay theologian, and Father Perrin, a Catholic priest. Weil's Jewish heritage did not prevent her taking up Christian themes as a key focus of her later work, but she refused to join any Church. She died in London, a victim of both tuberculosis and her self-imposed regime of rationing herself to no more food than she believed would be available to her country people involved in the war. (For further biographical details, see Fielder, 2001; McLellan, 1990; Nevin, 1997; Smith, 2001; Tubbs, 2005.)

This paper identifies some of the key concepts in Weil's thought – gravity, grace, decreation, and attention – and considers their educational implications. It is argued that much can be learned from Weil in seeking to recover the 'soul' of higher education. The term 'soul' is employed here not in a religious sense but rather as an indication of something deeper, more essential, in higher educational life than the world of surface appearances. This point has wider significance in considering the nature of Weil's language and the potential value of her work. In her later writings (e.g., Weil, 2001a) Weil makes frequent reference to 'God', in a manner that can be uncomfortable or off-putting for those working in secular disciplines in the university. She also speaks elsewhere (Weil, 2002) of 'the needs of the soul'. Her use of such terminology is, however, built upon a broader platform of philosophical understanding and her comments on matters of faith are likewise of importance well beyond the theological sphere. Education is one domain where this is most readily apparent.

It is not possible to do justice to the scope of Weil's thought in one paper. I shall concentrate on several themes relevant to teaching and research in the arts and humanities in higher education. Weil, I hope to show, helps us to understand the potentially redemptive value of suffering in learning; she allows us to rethink the process of

knowing; she reminds us of the need for humility in teaching; and she demonstrates the importance of linking principles with practice in ethics and education.

### GRAVITY, DECREATION AND GRACE

Weil argues that our natural condition is one of *gravity*; the only exception is *grace* (Weil, 1997, p. 45). What does she mean by this? Our natural tendency, Weil suggests, is to take the easier path – to immerse ourselves in what is comfortable, avoiding wherever possible difficulty and suffering. Baseness and superficiality are a result of gravity. When one human being shows another that he or she needs another and the latter withdraws or hesitates, this too is due to gravity. Gravity of the soul is like gravity in the physical world: it draws us, with the force of a law, downwards. As human beings, we can expect things to happen in accordance with the laws of gravity, unless there is supernatural intervention. The source of our moral energy lies outside us, just as is the case with the sources of our physical energy (food, water, air, and so on). We tend to believe the basis for our preservation, as both moral and physical beings, lies within ourselves, but we are mistaken. It is only when we suffer privation that we feel a need, and cannot find it in ourselves. Indeed, we must be delivered from ‘self’: Weil refers to this as a process of *decreation*. If we think we gain this deliverance by means of our own energy, we will, Weil says, be like a cow pulling at a hobble and thus falling on to its knees. We liberate a certain amount of energy within ourselves, but this in turn degrades more energy. We need, instead, to feed on light, and when this capacity has been lost, all faults are possible.

Creation, Weil claims, 'is composed of the descending movement of gravity, the ascending movement of grace, and the descending movement of the second degree of grace ... Grace is the law of the descending movement' (p. 48). Affliction lowers us in some respects but can also raise us in the domain of moral gravity. Moral gravity makes us, as Weil puts it, 'fall toward the heights' (p. 48). We have a tendency, Weil maintains, to spread suffering beyond ourselves. When affliction is too great, we become degraded. The energy supplied by higher emotions is limited, and when a situation demands of us that we go beyond this limit we tend to fall back on lower feelings such as fear, envy, resentment, and the desire for outward recognition and honours. These lower emotions are richer in energy, but they are also degraded.

If we take the path of not exercising all the power at our disposal (and this includes the power to do harm to others), we endure what Weil calls 'the void'. This, she stresses, is contrary to the laws of nature, to the force of gravity, and grace alone makes it possible. Grace, Weil says, 'fills empty spaces, but it can only enter where there is a void to receive it, and it is grace itself which makes this void' (p. 55). Accepting the void requires supernatural energy, but for the void to be created first there must be 'a tearing out, something desperate has to take place' (p. 56). The void, then, emerges from a 'dark night of the soul', and Weil herself experienced this, to varying degrees and in different ways, at several pivotal moments in her short life. Indeed, Sonia Kovitz argues that Weil 'spent most of her life in this obscure, dark and terrible state' (Kovitz, 1992, p. 263). One must, Weil says, go through a period with no detectable reward, external or internal, natural or supernatural. Attaining total detachment – experiencing the void – requires more than affliction; it must be affliction with no apparent consolation. This means being

willing to accept a kind of death. 'To love truth', Weil observes, 'means to endure the void and, as a result, to accept death. Truth is on the side of death' (p. 56).

Reality as we ordinarily perceive it is the result of our attachment; it is 'the reality of the self which we transfer into things' (p. 59). Independent reality can only be discovered through detachment. Detachment necessitates the emptying of desire. If we can detach our desire from all good things and wait, our waiting will be satisfied; it is then that 'we touch the absolute good' (p. 58). Weil comments further: 'Always, beyond the particular object whatever it may be, we have to fix our will on the void, to will the void. For the good which we can neither picture nor define is a void for us. But this void is fuller than all fullnesses' (p. 58).

Relentless necessity, wretchedness, distress, the crushing burden of poverty, and of labor which wears us out, cruelty, torture, violent death, constraint, disease – all these constitute divine love. It is God who in love withdraws from us so that we can love him. For if we were exposed to the direct radiance of his love, without the protection of space, of time, and of matter, we should be evaporated like water in the sun; there would not be enough "I" in us to make it possible to surrender the "I" for love's sake. Necessity is the screen set between God and us so that we can be. It is for us to pierce through the screen so that we cease to be. (pp. 78-79)

Decreating – piercing this screen – is not merely an intellectual process. Intelligence, Weil says, 'has nothing to discover, it has only to clear the ground. It is only good for servile tasks' (p. 58). The good appears to be a nothingness, because 'there is no *thing*

that is good. But this nothingness is not unreal. Compared with it everything in existence is unreal' (p. 58). Imagination is not always helpful either, for it is 'continually at work filling up all the fissures through which grace might pass' (p. 62). Imagination is 'essentially a liar' (p. 62), doing away with the third dimension we find in real objects and complex relationships. The past and the future can hinder the potentially beneficial effects of affliction by providing 'an unlimited field for imaginary elevation' (p. 62). Time can become a substitute for eternity. We must learn, Weil suggests, to live in the present in a manner that corresponds to finality, reaches through to the eternal.

As individuals, we have the distinctive capacity to say 'I'. For Weil, the only free act we have been given to accomplish is to destroy that 'I', to give it over to God. If, through grace, we begin the process of destroying the 'I', affliction cannot harm us. If we have attained a state of perfection, having completely destroyed the 'I' in ourselves, affliction can no longer destroy the 'I' from the outside.

But affliction produces an effect which is equivalent, on the plane of perfection, to the exterior destruction of the "I". It produces the absence of God. "My God, why has thou forsaken me?" ... Redemptive suffering is that by which evil really has fullness of being to the utmost extent of its capacity ... By redemptive suffering, God is present in extreme evil. For the absence of God is the mode of divine presence which corresponds to evil – absence which is felt. He who has not God within himself cannot feel his absence. (p. 72)

Not all forms of suffering are redemptive. Weil speaks of ‘expiatory’ suffering as a kind of shock we feel in return for harm we have done to others. Redemptive suffering, by contrast, is ‘the shadow of the pure good we desire’ (p. 123). We should seek not to avoid suffering but to experience it fully. We should love suffering not because it is useful but because it *is* (p. 131). Joy and sorrow are not opposed to each other; rather, it is in the varieties of both joy and sorrow that differences are to be found. If joy is ‘the overflowing consciousness of reality’, suffering ‘while preserving our consciousness of reality is better’ (p. 132). Suffering is to joy what hunger is to food (p. 136). Redemptive suffering ‘strips suffering naked and brings it in its purity up to existence’ (p. 143). Pleasure may be innocent, Weil notes, provided we do not seek knowledge in it; knowledge should be sought only through suffering. Weil concludes:

It is necessary to have had a revelation of reality through joy in order to find reality through suffering. Otherwise life is nothing but a more or less evil dream. ... We must attain knowledge of a still fuller reality in suffering, which is a nothingness and a void. In the same way we have to love life greatly in order to love death still more. (p. 136)

### IMPLICATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

What can we learn from Simone Weil in reflecting on higher education? In many respects, the contemporary university seems a world away from the ideals Weil articulated. Knowledge has become a commodity to be traded and exchanged in the

same way as other goods and services. There is an emphasis on competition between and within institutions, and considerable sums of money are devoted to advertising and other forms of marketing. An individualistic attitude is fostered. There are strong incentives for academics to become intellectual entrepreneurs, and students are encouraged to put themselves and their careers ahead of other considerations in their higher educational decisions. The university of today is a heavily bureaucratic institution, with a complex array of committees, Boards, and working groups. Those in positions of leadership are often seen more as managers than academics, and the university, in its structure, operation and ethos, has much in common with the modern corporation. In such an environment, it is easy to lose sight of some of the deeper educational, epistemological and ethical goals that arguably should underpin university life. Simone Weil reminds us, indirectly, of why these goals remain important. Her work, it might be said, is helpful in recovering the ‘soul’ of higher education.

### *The Importance of Attention*

One of the keys to seeking the kind of redemption Weil advocates is *attention*, and education has a potentially pivotal role to play here. Weil’s account of attention appears in a number of books, including *Gravity and Grace* (Weil, 1997) and *Waiting for God* (Weil, 2001a). This concept has long been regarded as central to Weil’s philosophy, and has been explored and applied by Iris Murdoch (2001) and a number of other thinkers (e.g., Cameron, 2003; Pirruccello, 1995). In *Waiting for God*, Weil addresses the theme

of attention in relation to school studies, but her ideas clearly have relevance for higher education as well. Weil describes attention as follows:

Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object; it means holding in our minds, within reach of this thought, but on a lower level and not in contact with it, the diverse knowledge we have acquired which we are forced to make use of. Our thought should be in relations to all particular and already formulated thoughts, as a man on a mountain who, as he looks forward, sees also below him, without actually looking at them, a great many forests and plains. Above all our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object that is to penetrate it. (Weil, 2001a, p. 62)

Weil argues that the development of attention is the underlying goal of all school study, even if this is not acknowledged or recognised. Most school tasks, she suggests, have their own intrinsic interest, and children may declare their love of particular subjects, but underpinning all of these activities is the need to develop the power of attention. On this account, a lack of aptitude or taste for a given subject need not impede progress in the development of attention. Indeed, Weil claims, having to struggle to solve a problem or study a theorem can be an advantage. Genuine effort of attention is never wasted; '[i]t always has its effect on the spiritual plane and in consequence on the lower one of the intelligence, for all spiritual light lightens the mind' (p. 58). Weil maintains that students should apply themselves equally to all their tasks, not concerning themselves with their

natural abilities and preferences, with no wish for external success in the form of high marks or examination passes (p. 59). Students should, to be sure, attempt to complete a task correctly and well, but the deeper purpose underlying all such efforts is the development of the habit and power of attention.

Weil prompts us to rethink the process of knowing. Developing our capacity for attention is both an epistemological and a moral process. Weil notes that ‘every time ... a human being succeeds in making an effort of attention with the sole idea of increasing his grasp of truth, he acquires a greater aptitude for grasping it, even if his effort produces no visible fruit’ (p. 59). A desire to know, as applied through an effort of attention, thus becomes a process of knowing, even if this is not self-evident to the knower at the time. Similarly, ‘[i]f we turn our mind toward the good, it is impossible that little by little the whole soul will not be attracted thereto in spite of itself’ (Weil, 1997, p. 170). The benefits of our efforts in studying will sometimes only be felt after many years have passed and often in domains seemingly disconnected from the original areas to which the effort had been applied.

If we are to be open to the truth, we must not seize on an idea too hastily. We must want to learn, but we should not be too eager, too active in seeking to know. This is, in part, what makes the development of attention so difficult. From Weil’s perspective, ‘[w]e do not obtain the most precious gifts by going in search of them but by waiting for them’ (Weil, 2001a, p. 62). Weil elaborates:

In every school exercise there is a special way of waiting upon truth, setting our hearts upon it, yet not allowing ourselves to go out in search of it. There is a way

of giving our attention to the data of a problem in geometry without trying to find the solution or to the words of a Latin or Greek text without trying to arrive at the meaning, a way of waiting, when we are writing, for the right word to come of itself at the end of our pen, while we merely reject all inadequate words. (p. 63)

It is not a matter of coming to understand new things so much as coming to ‘understand with our whole self the truths which are evident’ (Weil, 1997, p. 169). This demands a certain drawing back from the object of study. We can better obtain the fruits of our efforts through an indirect method, much as we might allow grapes to fall by pulling at the bunch (pp. 170-171). Paulo Freire, the great Brazilian educationist, advanced a similar idea, arguing that if we are to come closer to understanding the object of study, we must gain some distance from it (see Freire, 1998; Freire & Shor, 1987). For Weil, it is crucial that we avoid becoming too attached to the object of our efforts; we should not want it too much, or become excessively devoted to it (Weil, 1997, p. 170).

In higher education, we often encourage students to develop self-discipline in their studies. This involves, in part, a strengthening of the will – a mustering of intellectual energy in a determined effort to complete a task. Weil’s work suggests a subtle but important shift in focus here. Attention, she says, should not be confused with a kind of forced application of muscular energy. Students, when instructed to pay attention, will often contract their brows, hold their breath and stiffen their muscles. When asked after a short period what they have been paying attention to, they cannot say. Study is often characterised by this sort of muscular effort – an effort that tires us out but provides only an illusion that we have been working effectively (Weil, 2001a, pp. 60-61). It is not the

idea of effort that is out of place here but the form of effort and the object to which it is applied. As Weil points out, '[w]hat could be more stupid than to tighten up our muscles and set our jaws about virtue, or poetry, or the solution of a problem? Attention is something quite different.' (Weil, 1997, p. 169). Will power may be needed in getting through a day of manual labour, but for Weil it has little value in study. 'The intelligence', Weil says, 'can only be led by desire. For there to be desire, there must be pleasure and joy in the work. The intelligence only grows and bears fruit in joy. The joy of learning is an indispensable in study as breathing is in running' (Weil, 2001a, p. 61). Attention does involve effort, but it is what Weil calls a 'negative' effort. Attention in itself does not lead to tiredness. Tiredness can make it very difficult to pay attention. When we are tired, it is often better to stop working altogether and to relax for a while before returning to face our task afresh. As Weil puts it, '[t]wenty minutes of concentrated, untired attention is infinitely better than three hours of the kind of frowning application that leads us to say with a sense of duty done: "I have worked well!"' (p. 61).

Attention, then, is a matter of watching and waiting and through it, Weil believes, we move nearer to God. Attention is also fundamental in caring for others. Those who are suffering and unhappy need, more than anything else, people willing and able to give them their attention. Pity and kind-heartedness are not enough. The capacity to give one's attention to someone who is suffering is 'a very rare and difficult thing; it is almost a miracle' (p. 64). Developing the power of attention through study assists not only in our acquisition of academic knowledge but in our understanding of others and our ability to help them when this is most needed. We must, Weil suggests, come to see ourselves, our tasks and others in a new way:

The love of our neighbour in all its fullness simply means being able to say to him: “What are you going through?” It is a recognition that the sufferer exists, not only as a unit in a collection, or a specimen from the social category labeled “unfortunate,” but as a man, exactly like us, who was one day stamped with a special mark by affliction. For this reason it is enough, but it is indispensable, to know how to look at him in a certain way. [...] This way of looking is first of all attentive. The soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth. (pp. 64-65)

### *Humility, Suffering and Educational Growth*

Weil shows, through both her writing and her life, the importance of humility in education. Reflecting on academic weaknesses can be helpful in developing our power of attention; there is value, she suggests, in contemplating, carefully and slowly, tasks we have failed (pp. 59-60). But if this process is to work well we need to set aside the ‘lower emotions’ to which earlier reference was made. An act of decreation is required, where we, as far as this is possible, remove our selves from the process and concentrate on the task and the problems themselves. Humility is necessary if we are to accept that there is much we do not know. In fact, Weil seems to imply something stronger than this. From Weil’s work it could be surmised that a certain kind of *humiliation* can have educative value. There is in Weil’s writing, and in her life, a willingness to embrace, if not actively seek out, a kind of suffering that leads us to *despair* (cf. Liston, 2000, 2008). One can

imagine Weil's world being populated by the sort of characters we find in the novels of Fyodor Dostoevsky. We might say, after reading Weil, that education, if it is to truly transform, must involve a 'dark night of the soul' through which we must struggle (see Kovitz, 1992). We should *want* this affliction (Weil, 1997, 2001a), this suffering, for the opportunities it brings – for the prospect of growth. This is not a masochistic process, though it might seem at first glance to come close to this. It is not a case of wanting to be *punished*, so much as wanting to find, through suffering, a kind of redemption. We cannot want this too much, however (and this is one of the difficult aspects of Weil's ethic), but must *wait*, receiving both suffering and joy with a kind of patient equanimity that does not come naturally to us. So, educational suffering is suffering that *teaches* us, guides us, leads us closer to the void – opens the way, or plays a part in opening the way, for grace to enter. But we can only *learn* from this suffering if we are of a sufficiently open, 'obedient', consenting frame of mind.

In our classes we should, if we take Weil seriously, encourage students to embrace, quietly and calmly, the suffering they undergo in their often turbulent higher educational years. This pivotal period in the emerging adult's life is often characterised by the forces of gravity, as Weil understands that term, more than at any other time. Shallowness, self-centredness, excessive attachment (these days, we might say, for example, to cell phones!), and a tendency to seek the easy way out are all often fully in evidence during these fragile years. Yet, this confirms rather than diminishes the importance of the kind of redemptive suffering to which we have just referred. Learning the potential value of despair is never more needed than it is at this stage of life. Cultivating the power of attention provides a gentle corrective to the turmoil, the constant 'noise' (both internal

and external) that intrudes so strongly on our inner space. This form of inner work is as necessary for those of us who are teachers, at any level, as it is for students. Indeed, giving ourselves to others – attending to them and reducing our focus on ourselves – is an important part of this work. Teaching can thus become both the means through which decreation and the development of attention are made possible in others and the process through which we seek, or wait for, grace in ourselves.

In *Gravity and Grace* Weil pleads: ‘May God grant that I become nothing’ (Weil, 1997, p. 80). She reasons thus: ‘Once we have understood we are nothing, the object of all our efforts is to become nothing. It is for this that we suffer with resignation, *it is for this that we act*, it is for this that we pray’ (p. 80). For Weil, the self – its ego, its attachments, its desires, its habits, its susceptibility to *gravity* – is a burden we must struggle, all our lives, to shed. This idea runs completely counter to the spirit of our times. In higher education today there is every incentive to become self-centred; to focus *more* on ourselves, not less. Obtaining qualifications, winning jobs and gaining promotions will often depend on this. Weil had almost total disregard for such trappings. As a teacher, she allowed students to perform poorly in their examinations, convinced there were higher goals to be pursued in education. Her comments in *Gravity and Grace* are consistent with this:

The authentic and pure values, truth, beauty, and goodness, in the activity of a human being are the result of one and the same act, a certain application of the full attention to the object. ... Teaching should have no aim but to prepare, by training

the attention, for the possibility of such an act. ... All the other advantages of instruction are without interest. (p. 173)

Weil's stance is not without its problems. While serving as a teacher, Weil was happy to rub against the grain of authority in fraternising with the unemployed and refusing to teach merely for examination results. Yet, in her declaration of pleasure at the possibility of her teaching licence being revoked there is, as Fielder (2001) points out, a note of 'false bravado' (p. xix). A similar point might be made about some of her other actions: the period she spent in factory work, her participation in the Spanish Civil War, her planned involvement in the struggle in France during the Nazi occupation. There is in all of these actions 'something a little ridiculous' (p. xix). Weil could always turn to her parents to bail her out of trouble. The same could not be said for many of the people with whom she sympathised. The language Weil uses in reflecting on herself also warrants critical examination. At times Weil's words seem to be almost an act in self-loathing. She speaks of herself as unworthy and ignorant. It would not be too difficult to interpret some of her statements as a form of posturing. At one point, for example, she says: 'I am really nothing in it all. If one could imagine any possibility of error in God, I should think that it had all happened to me by mistake. But perhaps God likes to use castaway objects, waste, rejects.' (Weil, 2001a, p. 30). Later in the same letter she talks of feeling 'hatred and repulsion' towards herself (p. 31). In another letter she claims: 'I am such a poor unsatisfactory creature' (p. 44), a person with 'miserable weaknesses' (p. 45) unworthy of salvation. This is not just Weil's projected view of herself, but her

portrayal of the way *others* view her: ‘...for other people, in a sense I do not exist. I am the color of dead leaves, like certain unnoticed insects’ (p. 53).

Another way to view these statements, however, is to see them as Weil’s attempt to attain a degree of consistency between her words and her deeds. Weil could not determine the circumstances of her birth, any more than the people with whom she sympathised could determine theirs. We might say today that in depriving herself of food prior to her death Weil was not so much engaging in an act of genuine resistance as suffering from the effects of a disease (anorexia nervosa). But before we are too quick to pass judgement we might perhaps pause to reflect on how far we have been able to link principles with practice in our own lives. Most of us, I suspect, fall well short of what we would regard as ideal. Weil may have spent just nine months in a factory, but that is nine months more than many intellectuals. Weil may have had her parents as a ‘safety net’, but (to continue the analogy) she walked a tightrope as if such a net did not exist. Her suffering was real, even if some of it was self-inflicted. Weil’s asceticism was not (just) a philosophical ideal but a way of life. Finally, Weil’s attempts to diminish herself in her words can be seen as just that: an effort to achieve the nothingness, the decreation, she regarded as essential for the intervention of grace.

### CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Simone Weil was an extraordinary woman. It must be remembered that all we have from her, her writings and recollections (by Weil herself and by others) of her deeds, occurred within such an abbreviated period of time. Thirty four years is a very short life. Most

intellectuals are just beginning to formulate their pivotal ideas at such an age, and it is remarkable to think that had Weil enjoyed good health she might still have been with us in the 1990s or even the first few years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Weil's work has particular relevance for teaching in the arts and humanities. In the contemporary university, these areas are perhaps the most vulnerable, always under threat when cuts are made to staffing and operational budgets. Yet, they are arguably more important than ever. For, as Weil shows, it is precisely in times of adversity, of affliction, that grace can sometimes best be found. The struggle to retain robust arts and humanities programmes in higher educational institutions is not merely an intellectual or political battle but a process of reclaiming the heart of the university. It is in the arts and humanities, more than in any other area of the university curriculum, that critiques of some of the trends most opposed to Weil's view of the world – utilitarianism, technocratic thought and crude materialism, among others (cf. Weil, 2001b) – are to be found. Knowledge in its commodified form, indistinguishable from mere information, is not knowledge as Weil conceived of it. Similarly, the logic of performativity, now so deeply entrenched within the university, deals, Weil might have said, with the world of appearances rather than the deeper mysteries of being. In a performance-driven higher educational environment, all that matters is that which can be measured. For Weil, it is that which cannot be measured that matters most – and the arts and humanities have, potentially at least, a key role in returning us to that. It is this ineffable quality that makes Weil's epistemology inseparable from her understanding of aesthetics and theology. The 'mystery of the beautiful in nature and in the arts', from Weil's perspective, is a 'sensible reflection of the mystery of faith' (Weil, 2003, p. 60).

To take Weil seriously, then, demands of us that we be prepared to examine not only some of our most cherished ideas but *ourselves* in a fresh light. The difficulty of this task cannot be underestimated (cf. Weil, 1978, pp. 190-194), and in this sense, among others, Weil's work is profoundly unsettling. The feeling of discomfort Weil creates hints at the distinctive contribution her thought can make to debates over secularism and religious education. One starting point in tackling these questions is current policy and curriculum guidelines, and critical discussion in these areas is much needed. Weil, however, offers something different. Mario von der Ruhr notes (2006, p. 27), correctly in my view, that Weil's conception of education is theocentric. But this is not a theocentrism tied to a specific church or to any organised religion; it is more an orientation to life. Weil reminds us that theology is encountered in numerous places in higher education; not just in arts and humanities subjects but in literature, mathematics, the sciences, and elsewhere (cf. Finch, 2001; Morgan, 2005; Weil, 1957, 1968, 2005). There is a unity to Weil's thought and she would have resisted any attempt to confine the pursuit of questions relating to 'God' or 'the Good' to the discipline of theology or to a religious studies curriculum.

The breadth of Weil's influence is testimony to the power of her work: she speaks to many, opening up pathways for others to continue. Education is one such pathway, and this paper has barely scratched the surface in exploring some of the implications of Weil's thought for teaching and learning. There is much more that might be said, for example, about Weil's political philosophy and its significance for education as a process of social change. There are clear links between Weil's concept of attention and the process of meditation, as this has been understood in various Eastern and Western

traditions, and there could be gains for educationists in pursuing such comparisons further. Weil's approach to knowledge and knowing, and her understanding of the human personality, also merit deeper educational investigation. These are just some of the many potentially fruitful avenues for ongoing inquiry. We should be grateful to Simone Weil, with her shortcomings as well as strengths, for making such work possible.

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