

## PRIMAL SCREAMS: THE INFANTILE CRY IN SIMONE WEIL

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### Abstract

*The main thesis of this essay is that non-linguistic infantile cries towards the nondefinable constitute, for Simone Weil, the essence of the human. The author begins by surveying, for the first time, Weil's depiction of the infant's cry as a scream of an infinite desire towards nothing definite. In the second part, in which the author analyzes the infantile cry introduced in Weil's later writings this desire, it will be presented as fundamental to being. The infantile cry expresses mutely a desire for the indescribable good. Since it is cried from birth till death, its designation as infantile is revealed to indicate not one's age but one's nonlinguistic essence. While recent scholarship emphasized the importance of silence in Weil's thought, no attention had been given to the significance of the ineffable to her philosophy. By studying the infant and infantile cry, this essay will show how the inarticulate desire towards the unattainable comprises the truth of being.*

**Keywords:** Weil, infant, cry, desire, inarticulate, affliction, good, soul.

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*This is the word of someone who cannot.*  
(Lispector 2012, 27)

In one of her first notebooks, Weil states that all infants know that they have a right of property to the moon. (Weil 1994, 179) This could easily be seen as a banal, cliché or senseless saying, to be quickly read and ignored. This essay seeks to argue otherwise, and show that infantile desires are fundamental to Weil's philosophy, constituting an essence of being.<sup>1</sup> My argument will be divided in two parts. The first section will focus on Weil's depiction of the infant's cry as the expression of an avid and endless desire which, due to its premature state, is not directed to a specific object or subject, but manifests a hunger that has no end. This hunger, according to Weil, is not simply an essential infantile physical

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<sup>1</sup> Monique Broc-Lapeyre is the only to have marked the absence of a study of the infantile in Weil's scholarship and to have contribute to it. See: Broc-Lapeyre 2006, 108. And 2008. In addition, Jean-Marc Ghitti mentions the infantile cry several times in his book yet does not claim for a philosophical signification of the infantile in Weil. See Ghitti 2021.

characteristic: it defines metaphorically the very being of the infant. This point will be argued further when I turn, in the second section, to the infantile cry as it appears in Weil's later writings. For her, something in the human forever remains infantile, as an inarticulate longing for that which cannot be attained. Although Weil shows how the infantile cry is screamed in a state of affliction, when one is so hurt that all mental and physical abilities are diminished, I will suggest that harm is not a necessary condition for the expression of the infantile desire: harm reveals instead that a diminished ability is the necessary human condition. My aim is to show that an endless infantile i.e., non-linguistic, and inexpressible desire directed towards no thing, defines the human essence. As I read the infantile throughout the corpus of Simone Weil, the question of infants and their rights to the moon will be revealed to be the question of the human, a question that arises from the soul's desire for the unreachable.

### 1. Born to cry

To understand in what way all children know that they have a right of ownership to the moon, we first need to see what it means for an infant to know and to possess, as well as what, for them, is the moon. In a later notebook, Weil states "[a] child does not will to obtain the bright object or the milk" (Weil 1970, 325). Weil answers our question when she declares that what an infant wants is undifferentiated; it is not specified. Dismissing at once both the wish for a shiny object and for milk, Weil states that an infant wants both either - and neither - of the objects before it. Unable to identify an object as such, "he simply desires, he cries" (Weil 1970, 325).<sup>2</sup> An infant's cry is therefore the mark of a desire. Even if it seems as though this desire is directed at something, it is, nevertheless, essentially objectless. Not making a singular request, unable to distinguish between *things*, the infant who cries does not cry for a *thing*, it does not say *anything*, asks for *no* thing. It just wants, wants, wants.

Emphasizing further how the infant's desire is not directed at identifiable things, Weil states that the infant "makes no plans for getting them" (Weil 1970, 325). As it cannot understand the identity and the meaning of the object, the infant cannot know what it desires, and, therefore, cannot plan to seek it. The infant who

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<sup>2</sup> Translation modified.

cries does not desire an object's quality: it neither knows nor distinguishes between food or toys, as it cannot differentiate between hunger, thirst, or play. It cries for nothing either definable, since it is not an object, or achievable, since it cannot be achieved through an object. This lack of strategy to hold the objects is evoked further in the French, where Weil writes that the infant "ne combine pas les pour obtenir" (Weil 2006, 229). No matter what it does, intelligibly or physically, the infant cannot translate desires into thoughts and actions; it is unable to combine will and discursive intelligence in order to get what it wants (Weil 1970, 325). Although it invests everything in the cry, shouting with all its voice "incessantly" and "indefatigably" (Weil 1970, 99), when "[h]is whole body and soul are concentrated on the single fact of desire", Weil asserts, "[a] child stretches his hands and his whole body towards anything bright, even if it is the moon" (Weil 1970, 325).<sup>3</sup> It is not the celestial body of the moon that infants deem their own: when they cry, infants claim anything as theirs. With limited mental and physical capacities, they desire anything, within and beyond their reach, anywhere in the universe.

The crying infant does not grasp the object of its desire, literally and metaphorically. While it cries, "a child...is unattached; it is oriented, and yet not towards anything in particular; it is oriented gratuitously." (Weil 2004, 470). The infant does not cry "for" a reason; it has no known agenda. The cry is futile, screamed in vain; it has no meaning. In the French, Weil describes this non-calculated orientation with the expression "à vide" (Weil 2002, 168). This formulation, where 'vide' stands for 'emptiness', indicates that the object for which an infant cries is unidentifiable: a no-thing. Moreover, since *à* acts as a preposition indicating a place, a destination, the infant cries "to" the "vide", "towards" the nothingness. Weil depicts this behavior as a "non-specifically oriented form of orientation" (Weil 2004, 470). A directionless direction could be understood further as lacking an addressee: the cry is not only directed towards no *thing*, but also towards no *one*. Not yet able to identify the other as other, the infant is not crying to an identifiable one-ness, which could be called by a proper name, or identified by a role, or any other designated distinction. Since the infant is not crying for an object, towards some thing, or some one, crying one's desire is revealed to be not a form of speech, as in the articulated communication of a known

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<sup>3</sup> Translation modified.

intention. Instead, it is essentially - even radically - indeterminate; it is not a part of a signifying language but pre-linguistic, unintelligible, resting outside of discourse.<sup>4</sup>

In an early text, where she describes love, Weil explains how the infant's cry towards no thing and no one is maintained in its relation to a caregiver, despite the satisfaction of its physical needs for food and psychical needs for care (Weil 1988, 278-279).<sup>5</sup> For Weil, love is constituted by a conflict between two ideals. The first ideal is portrayed through pregnancy, where the platonic myth is almost realized (Weil 1988, 278).<sup>6</sup> Pregnancy nearly fulfils the classic conception of the ideal of love because two separate beings become one (Weil 1988, 278).<sup>7</sup> For Weil, this is the ideal of any affection, even the purest of friendships, and does not manifest itself only physically, by a singular body containing another, but also in the oneness created through gestures, caresses, smiles, in the tones and murmurs that transmit sense outside of verbal communication, expressing, with no words, more than words can express (Weil 1988, 278). Through body movements, a facial expression, a touch, at the very least a glance, where love enters through the eyes, two unify (Weil 1988, 278).

Love's second ideal is presented through the notion of food, "la nourriture" (Weil 1988, 278). Weil gives breastfeeding as an example, where the infant who suckles tries to enter the mother's body: as it drinks the milk, it inversely

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<sup>4</sup> For Broc-Lapeyre, an infant's cry expresses distress and frustration. Although I agree with this claim in general, I find it contradictory to describe the infant's cry with such defining terms. I will therefore follow Weil by using instead the terms of desire, lack and hunger. See: Broc-Lapeyre 2006, 108.

<sup>5</sup> The text was published under the title "Sur Freud" and marked under texts written between 1928-1931. However, the original document in Simone Weil's archive in the Bibliothèque Nationale is titled "Freud - I". It is found in an envelope titled "Philosophie, 1<sup>ère</sup> années d'enseignement 1931-34 (?)" along with what seem to be preparatory essays Weil had written for her philosophy classes. Since, as I show here, Weil's class notes taken by her students at that time make references similar arguments, this title and dating appear to me as correct.

<sup>6</sup> See also Weil 2004, 12-13.

<sup>7</sup> In his essay, "On Sublimation and The Erotic Experience: Simone Weil and Hans Loewald", Aviad Heifez suggests that "The Platonian myth to which Weil refers [...] is probably the one told by Aristophanes in his discourse on Eros in the *Symposium*. According to this myth, human beings originally had two heads, four hands, and four legs and were powerful as such. After provoking the gods, Zeus decided to weaken them by cutting each of them in two. Since then, each half—a human being of today—longs to unite with its original other half." Heifez 2017, 350.

incorporates the mother (Weil 1988, 278). Out of desire, the infant could also bite the breast, showing how this love ideal comprises destruction. With the violence involved in eating, love becomes cannibalistic, and even sadistic, harmful to the other. Weil gives many examples for such manifestations of love, like a child breaking its toys, or the eating of the Eucharist in communion (Weil 1988, 278). She even suggests that children favor pink desserts because their color resembles the color of the mother's body: eating them is an ongoing attempt to consume her (Weil 1988, 418).<sup>8</sup> Under this ideal of love, the loved object is looked at as a thing, and, therefore, as something one can make its own (Weil 1988, 278). Mythical and literary mothers also manifest this kind of love, and Weil gives numerous examples, such as Niobé, whose fault was "in believing that her children belonged to her" (Weil 1970, 307), Ugoline, who ended up eating her children (Weil 1970, 285), Racine's Phaedra, about whom she states "Hippolyte is really more necessary to the life of Phèdre, in the most literal sense of the term, than food" (Weil 2004, 292), as well as instances from the tales of the Grimm brothers, where a mother's wish for a white child means that if it is fulfilled, and the child is born, she must be dead (Weil 2004, 234). These examples show how, under the ideal of love as nourishment, love could be fatal, and the desire for union could end in annihilation.<sup>9</sup>

Weil asserts that the tension between these two ideals dominates all love relations. The desire to unify with the other while maintaining a non-antagonistic separation, as in pregnancy, comes along the desire to incorporate the loved one by all possible means. She marks these two options as either a desire for union that respects the other's sacredness, or a desire that sees the other as an object, and attempts to incorporate it notwithstanding the loss (Weil 1988, 278). Weil defines this tension throughout her writings as the conflict where we cannot look and eat at the same time (Weil 2002, 159),<sup>10</sup> where looking means that the other is admired as a distinct self, and eating means the other is incorporated through

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<sup>8</sup> See also Weil 2004, 461. In another place, Weil notes how children have the sensibility to *avoid* eating a favorite dessert exactly because of the fear of destroying a loved object. Weil 2004, 416.

<sup>9</sup> It is interesting to note with this regard that Oedipus is not a main figure for Weil. She references another figure in relation to adult killing of children, Gilles de Rais, a 15<sup>th</sup> century child serial killer. See Weil 2004, 109. For Weil's references to loss involved in eating, see Weil 2004, 416.

<sup>10</sup> See also Weil 2004, 637. Weil 1992, 166. Weil 2009, 229.

destruction. While this is a significant struggle for the human (Weil 1970, 286), she insists that the double ideal could come together not only without one destroying the other, but in mutual nurturing (Weil 1988, 278). This could occur in sexual relations between two loving beings, as well as between an infant and a mother - a paradigmatic example for Weil (Weil 1988, 278-9).

In notes taken by Anne Reynaud in Weil's philosophy class in Roanne, Weil describes how, in breastfeeding, the infant's cry stemming from a bodily instinct to eat, "[f]ilial instinct", correlates to the mother's bodily instinct to nourish, "maternal instinct" (Weil 1995, 37). Weil argues that the two acts come simultaneously, as two parallel physiologic needs that meet, the need to suck, the need for suckling" (Weil 1995, 37). In earlier class notes written by Yvette Argaud when Weil taught in Le Puy, she is mentioned saying that a child suckles without having learnt how (Argaud 1931-2, 18)<sup>11</sup>, and in Weil's notebooks she says that "there is no question of work" in the mother's production of milk (Weil 1970, 99). Breastfeeding for Weil is therefore not the result of an intentional effort, mentally or physically, but manifest instead an interconnectedness. Feeding and being fed are concurrent, outside of any externally prescribed order or of an economy of giving and taking. Naming these relations the society formed by the mother and the child (Argaud 1931-2, 41), the mother-infant duo is not a for-profit business corporation but a society where no thing is exchanged, where each take part irrespectively of any calculation, interest, or gain.

This is also true for immaterial psychic needs. As Weil points out, "the first pleasure is that of sucking, the sight of the mother gives the child a feeling of pleasure" (Weil 1995, 38). The child is nourished by looking at the mother just as it is nourished by drinking her milk: the mother's very presence gives comfort, energies and strength. As Monique Broc-Lapeyre remarks, physical and psychical instincts and needs are intertwined for the infant, who desires both food and love (Broc-Lapeyre 2006, 108). Breastfeeding is a space of physical and psychic nourishment, where the mother's body correlates to the infant by both giving milk and being together. Nourishment as love could be given by a physical consolation, a caress, a lullaby. The infant is held and kept warm, cuddled and played with. It

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<sup>11</sup> Page number based on the typed notes in Simone Weil's archive in the Bibliothèque Nationale. See also *Cours de philosophie Le Puy 1931-32 Notes prises par Yvette Argaud Augmentées par les notes prises simultanément dans la même classe par Elisabeth Chanel* Edited by Darzi, Elinore. Heifetz, Aviad and Maes, Gabriël. Forthcoming.

is embraced, physically, but also in thought; it is considered: taken into account. It is attended. The caregiver feeds the child, looks at it, looks *after* it. The breastfeeding infant submits all to the mother's breast (Weil 1988, 278), and in turn, the mother gives the infant life: as she holds it, she keeps it alive. Here, too, nourishment is not given to simply quiet a demand: the two are in alliance, the mother feels every pain of the infant as if it is hers, and when she smiles, the infant smiles (Argaud 1931-2, 41).

The union between the caregiver and the infant does not, therefore, consist of two distinct separate selves, where one has a wish that the other fulfils: they form a correlation where one is for the other so much so that one is the other. As this togetherness is selfless and unconditional, the mother and the infant become indistinguishable, indefinite, invisible and undefined to the other. The joining of the two does not result in a union where one is effaced, but in a blissful harmony, both physically and symbolically gratuitous, where two equals zero (Weil 1970, 99).<sup>12</sup> This privileged relationship is a rare occasion of fusion that serves Weil as a model for love. "A mother's love is the best image of it here below" (Weil 1970, 127), she notes, and it is the first time in one's life that such love is possible.

Weil stresses that the ideal of every human being is to return to this unity (Weil 1988, 278).<sup>13</sup> In saying so she is implying that, since it is an ideal, the unity of love is desired by all throughout life, and the struggle between love's two ideals is never surmounted for good. Despite magic-like moments of fusion, and although the relation between the mother and the infant is described as "[e]teran beatitude" (Weil 2004, 637), a separation between the two persists. Weil maintains that in the beginning, the soul loves "in emptiness" (Weil 1992, 210), "à vide" (Weil 2008, 333); when an infant cries, it does not know if anyone will answer. Even after falling asleep to a good night kiss, it still awakens in a shout. When Weil defines the "vide" as a state "*when there is nothing external to correspond to an internal tension*" (Weil 2004, 147, emphasis in original), she insists that the infant who cries experiences a dire internal tension, a desire to which no

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<sup>12</sup> See also Argaud 1931-2, 41. Weil's reference to nature does not speak of an idealistic way of being, which would manifest itself, for instance, as the female essence to bear children, but as a comportment that lacks thought and force, if and when it occurs. If these are natural instincts, the instinct to harm is natural, too, as Weil recalls numerous times through the examples to which I referred under the notion of eating.

<sup>13</sup> This is also the case of Narcissus, see Weil 2004, 12.

exterior thing correlates. This wanting is helpless. When she adds that "a child does not stop crying if we suggest that perhaps there is no bread. It goes on crying just the same" (Weil 1992, 210), she emphasizes that the infant's cry evades any order, logical or chronological. Argumentations are futile, as no thing, not even a good excuse, could satisfy the infant who just wants.

There is nothing childish, in the sense of indulging, carefree, minor, or unimportant in this demeanor. Weil affirms: "nothing is less puerile than a little child" (Weil 1970, 325); an infant's cry is utterly serious. Crying 'à vide' therefore echoes the graveness of the infant's desire, its avidity and its strength. The significance of the infant in Weil's philosophy derives from "the power and fixity of desire" expressed in its cry (Weil 1970, 325).<sup>14</sup> An infant's mind may not yet know a thing, but, according to Weil, when it cries, its soul "knows for certain only that it is hungry" (Weil 1992, 210).<sup>15</sup> For Weil, this hunger is undeniable and of the utmost importance. For this at once psychological and physical desire, "food is the irreducible" (Weil 2004, 316). The nourishment for which one cries from one's hungry soul cannot be simplified or expressed in general ideas. It also cannot be reduced to a satisfaction, to a singular object given or an action done once and for all.

Even if it cries for no "thing", this cry is **everything** for an infant: everything is at stake. In her notebook, Weil writes "[a] child that is crying doesn't want you to think that he doesn't exist, or to forget that he does exist" (Weil 2004, 293). The infant who cries, cries its existence: its being. It cries that it is alive, living and breathing. It cries therefore it is. The infant's cry is an intimation of life; it cries human existence defined as an incessant hunger, at once desire and lack, which, having no possible and ultimate resolution, remains beyond absolute fulfillment.

## **2. Everybody's got a hungry heart**

The infant's cry has remained almost unnoticed in Weil's writings; her mentions of it are brief, scattered in her notebooks, preparatory essays for teaching and class notes taken by her students. Its significance to her philosophy is revealed once read along her last notebooks and essays from New York and London, and, more

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<sup>14</sup> Translation modified.

<sup>15</sup> I will elaborate on the notion of the soul in Weil's writing in the next section. Here, Weil uses the term as she differentiates between the adult, who is defined by mental capacities, and the child, who does not yet have these abilities.



particularly, in the essay "Collectivité – Personne – Impersonnel – Droit – Justice".<sup>16</sup> In this text, Weil introduces another cry, which persists beyond the early years of childhood, lingering in the human throughout life, from birth to death (Weil 2005, 71). This cry, an *infantile* cry, is made by every human, and is not a matter of a person's age. Weil defines the infantile cry as stemming from a "profound and childlike" part of the heart or the "depth of the soul" (Weil 2015, 72, 74), in contradiction to cries articulated in language, which result from a thought process. Verbal expressions, according to Weil, consist of personal protestations made by a self who speaks for a self, its own or another. In contrast, infantile cries are nonlinguistic, since they originate in the depth of the human, from the heart and the soul. As they do not stem from a part that concerns the self, they are also impersonal: screaming something that belongs to all humans.

Weil's distinction between personal and infantile cries could first be understood by looking at the difference she marks between the cries of adults and infants:

A child a few months old which is attracted by some bright object may cry for it to be given him. He may hold out his hand until it drops from fatigue, and then hold it out again, for hours at a time. In the end his mother will notice, and be unable to resist. She will give him the object. (Weil 1970, 101)

A little child who sees something bright is so totally absorbed in his love for the shiny object that his whole body leans towards it and he quite forgets it is beyond his reach. Then his mother picks it up and puts it near him (Weil 1970, 325).

While both the infant and the mother desire, the two stand in opposition, since the infant, as shown above, has no mental or physical capacity to identify its desires and, therefore, to have a defined will. The infant desires no object: it is only crying that it wants. On the contrary, the mother's psychic and physical abilities enable her to identify her desires as well as to pursue them. According to Weil, her comportment consists of a crying, too; yet her cries stem from "the thing within me which incessantly, in diverse accents of sorrow, exultation, triumph, anxiety, fear, pain, and every other emotional nuance, keeps on crying

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<sup>16</sup> The text received different titles throughout the years and is best known under the title "La personne et le sacré". It was first published under the title "La personnalité humaine, le juste et l'injuste » in: Weil. 1950. *La Table Ronde* 35, pp. 9-33.

‘me, me, me, me’” (Weil 1970, 231). The mother cries “I”: she screams because she wants her personal desires to be fulfilled.

The examples above show two personal cries: the first is the mother’s personal desire for, say, silence, or for the calmness of her crying baby. The mother is disturbed or bothered by the infant’s endless crying, and desires that it stops. It is her own personal will that is fulfilled by handing the brilliant object to the crying infant. This desire rests on an additional assumption, since she perceives the infant as a person, too, wanting a particular object, and having a particular need. The mother thinks that the baby is crying for a definite reason, because it wants something for itself, because of a lack that objects could fill. Handing the brilliant object to the infant therefore presupposes that this is what the infant desires, although it cannot express it in words but only in screams.

Either regarding one’s own desire or the desire of another, for the constituted and self-identifying adult, desires can, and – more importantly, will reach satisfaction. Personal cries emerge from a general belief that a desire “has a hold on the future, that it has a right to eat soon if it is hungry, to drink soon if it is thirsty” (Weil 1970, 101). A conscious, desiring self sees its personal desires almost always already as fulfilled (Weil 1970, 113): in thought, in language and through bodily power, whenever a desire arises the adult contemplates, translates, symbolizes, and reasons it into action, using every means to fulfill ends. The infant, on the other hand, cries its desires regardless of their meaning or the feasibility of their fulfillment: although it cries a desire, both its object and its realization remain unknown. Weil’s definition of the infantile cry enacts this very logic. It stands against the adult’s personal comportment, and, like the infant’s cry, intimates a desire made to no end by one who has no notion of self and no ability. To point out how and when adults scream such cries, Weil turns to moments when mental faculties no longer identify and express wills in language and when physical capacities meant to pursue or fulfill wishes are disabled. The infantile cry emerges when a desiring soul is all one is.

Weil describes this state through a hypothetical situation she envisions. She observes a random passerby walking down the street, and inquires what could ever hold her back from hurting him, “if I am allowed to do so and if it takes my fancy” (Weil 2005, 71). As she contemplates causing him a horrible harm, piercing this anonymous person’s eyes, she imagines the pain of hurting his body, his sight, ruining his ability to see, damaging it forever, and turning

him blind (Weil 2005, 71). This dreadful physical pain, nevertheless, is not what prevents her from touching him.

In her writings, Weil differentiates indeed between two kinds of pain: "mal" and "malheur". A "mal", that could translate as 'harm', is a discernible pain, something that can be observed, discussed, and testified. In the example of the passerby, blindness is a harm, a suffering relating to the physical loss of eyesight. When Weil says "[a]s a blind man he would be exactly as much a human personality as before. I should have destroyed nothing but his eyes" (Weil 2005, 71), she insists that, as awful the atrocity of turning someone blind may be, doing so would not hurt any attributes besides this person's eyesight. For Weil, the harm caused to his eyes does not damage his ability to maintain a notion of self, that could be expressed, for example, by the capacity to speak of his pain, to cry "I", to look for - and maybe even to find - possible healing. Such harm "[l]eaves no trace in the soul" (Weil 1992, 118).

But physical harm could also inflict further pain. "Malheur", affliction,<sup>17</sup> Weil explains, could be caused by a 'mal', like the infliction of violence, being turned blind, in difficult work conditions (Weil 1991, 299), by the force of the law (Weil 2005, 88), or when a loved one is lost (Weil 1970, 323). Yet, she stresses, "affliction is not an evil" (Weil 1970, 319).<sup>18</sup> While harm can bring someone to a state of deep sorrow, grief, horrible agony and distress, it could also hit so hard that the pain would escape any causal logic, evading any discernable or identifiable order.

For Weil, affliction is essentially indefinite and undefinable:

There is both continuity and the separation of a definite point of entry, as with the temperature at which water boils, between affliction itself and all the sorrows that, even though they may be very violent, very deep and very lasting, are not affliction in the strict sense. There is a limit; on the far side of it we have affliction but not on the near side. This limit is not purely objective; all sorts of personal factors have to be taken into account. The same event may plunge one human being into affliction and not another (Weil 1992, 119).

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<sup>17</sup> Here I am following Emma Craufurd's translation, in Weil, Simone. 1992. *Waiting for God* Translated by Emma Craufurd. New York: Harper and Row.

<sup>18</sup> The original writes "le malheur n'est pas un mal", which can also emphasize the difference between affliction and harm.

Unlike a precise: numeric, objective, factual level, no thing can mark the limit beyond which harm becomes affliction. Similar events can cause different reactions in different people, Weil clarifies. Still, she stresses, a boundary exists between harm and affliction; yet it is an *indefinable* one. Affliction is a liminal state where one is hurt so hard that the identification of the harm, like becoming blind, and the identification of its source, like a stranger in the street, cease to be possible. No general rules, terms or conditions can explain affliction. Pain becomes wholly unpredictable, arbitrary, and random.

According to Weil, affliction cannot be reasoned or described as a specific condition since it cannot be fathomed:

Human thought is unable to acknowledge the reality of affliction. To acknowledge the reality of affliction means saying to oneself: 'I may lose at any moment, through the play of circumstances over which I have no control, anything whatsoever that I possess, including those things which are so intimately mine that I consider them as being myself. There is nothing that I might not lose. It could happen at any moment that what I am might be abolished and replaced by anything whatsoever of the filthiest and most contemptible sort.' To be aware of this in the depth of one's soul is to experience non-being (Weil 1992, 332).

A hit striking so brutally, affliction hurts both physically and mentally, pushing one to such debased state that it disables any intelligible competence. One cannot explain it logically, rationally, or even phrase it as a namable feeling, like terror, hurt, or distress. One can only rationalize it as the result of an external, distant, and mechanical game of circumstances (Weil 1992, 125 and 2008, 368-369),<sup>19</sup> a "hasard": a random matter of coincidence – or fate – hitting indifferently, as if by the force of gravity. Weil describes the conditions of affliction as metallic, stressing both their material and figurative coldness, a machine-like hitting done in complete apathy and blindness. Against such force, one has absolutely no power or control; it cannot be foreseen, evaded, or stood against. Affliction thus takes everything from the self, anything one ever considered its own. This includes things one considered constitutive of one's being: it takes away one's very notion of being, one's notion of self. One is left destitute, bare to the core, so degraded that one becomes replaceable, or even disposable. All is lost: one is doomed to a confrontation with nothingness.

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<sup>19</sup> See also Weil 2005, 76.

Affliction hurts both the body and mind to the extent that one's soul is so crushed that it creates a zone of silence, where people are confined like on an island (Weil 1991, 299). Social isolation is another essential part of affliction (Weil 1992, 119). The afflicted are alone and abandoned; they are torn away from the community. No longer regarded as a part of a collective of being, as if on a deserted island, they lose their personhood. Instead of being someone, the afflicted are no longer able to identify. They no longer say "I" (Weil 2004, 337). Becoming a mere *thing* (Weil 1992, 125), they do not matter; insignificant, they are ignored and cut out altogether from the world of being. "Human beings can live for twenty or fifty years in this acute state" (Weil 1992, 119), Weil notes, marking to what extent the afflicted may be physically present yet are left completely unnoticed, unconcerned with, invisible (Weil 2008, 364). In this "extreme and total humiliation" (Weil 2005, 90), they are stranded in silence, muted both externally, since they are ignored, and internally, since they cannot explain and therefore express their state. "As for those who have been struck by one of those blows that leave a being struggling on the ground like a half-crushed worm, they have no words to express what is happening to them" (Weil 1992, 120). Weil describes the afflicted as those who cannot speak: "[a]ffliction is by its nature inarticulate" (Weil 2005, 85). "Language is undone here", as Yun-Sook Cha bluntly writes (Cha 2017, 18).

But something still remains. According to Weil, "[a]t the bottom of the heart of every human being, from earliest infancy until the tomb, there is something that goes on indomitably expecting, in the teeth of all experience of crimes committed, suffered, and witnessed, that good and not evil will be done to him" (Weil 2005, 71). Every human, no matter what one has gone through, regardless of what one does or say, beneath it all, expects the good. Before and after any harm, even a harm so great that one's notion of self is lost, a desire persists: to be done the good and not the bad. Even when all forces are exhausted, physically, mentally, and linguistically, the infantile cry emerges as an avid desire that wants the good to no end.

In Weil's philosophy, the good is not a signification: "[i]t makes no sense to say the good is or the good is not; one can only say: the good" (Weil 1970, 316).<sup>20</sup> The good for which one cries does not designate a predetermined and

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<sup>20</sup> Translation modified.

representable concept, "[t]he good has no property at all, except the fact of being good" (Weil 2004, 545). Since the good one's heart and soul desires is not something external and signifiable that one can identify and name, one does not utter it explicitly as a defined wish. The infantile cry for the good is, therefore, expressed ineffably in a "faint and inept cry" (Weil 2005, 73), a "stammer" (Weil 2005, 73); "cannot express itself" (Weil 2005, 73), it is a "state of dumb and ceaseless lamentation" (Weil 2005, 72). When not even a sound can be made, it is screamed in silence (Weil 2005, 72). The silence of the infantile cry can be heard in the Latin definition of "infans" as *infans* is defined as: speechless, inarticulate, unable to be pronounced.

The infantile cry for the good resembles the infant's desire since it is not a demand for a discernible thing, and because it is not defined by an achievement for something that could ever be grasped or attained. For Weil, "[g]ood is *impossible*" (Weil 2004, 434 emphasis in original): this shouldn't be understood as a strikingly negative statement, however it may seem. The good is not something attainable in and of itself but impossible to obtain, conceptually and physically: it is beyond contemplation, immeasurable, different. Since it is always fleeting (Weil 1988, 64), the good is intimated through the movement of the soul's detached desire (Weil 1988, 71). The soul cries unconditionally for a good that cannot be asked for and found. The cry for the good is a continuous wishing, a detached yearning that has no singular and known fulfillment. Irrespective of a specific result, like an infant who simply wants, wants, wants, the infantile cry for the good disregards any expectation of a future having and is, therefore, always present: "[t]he soul cries for the things it wants like an infant which has not yet learnt to walk... It cries and cries in an unheeding world" (Weil 1970, 222).

The infantile cry that wordlessly desires the good emerges in Weil's essay through affliction, since it is a state where, deprived of any virtue one ever had, one no longer identifies or attempts to realize wishes: one only desires. It does not mean that one *needs* to undergo an extreme case of physical and mental suffering in order to cry for the good. Weil stresses that one should not desire affliction, for it is contranatural and perverse (Weil 2008, 360-361). The hypothetical case of harming the passerby is given as a theoretical question for a reason. It stands to show that the state which affliction brings is of the essence of being: "[t]he infinite that is in man is at the mercy of a little piece of iron; such is the human condition" (Weil 2004, 26). As such, affliction is not a necessity in and of

itself – it reveals the necessity of human life: "[a]ffliction forces us to feel with all our souls the absence of finality", and "[t]he absence of finality is the reign of necessity" (Weil 1992, 176-7). Human life is ruled by a necessity that is beyond reason. Stripping one bare of one's personhood, of the proper names and titles one ever thought one had, diminishing all social, linguistic, psychological, mental and physical attributes, affliction reveals the nakedness and fragility of a human condition completely exposed to external forces and the power of chance, to what is beyond control, while, at the same time, desiring the good.<sup>21</sup> As such, the speechlessness of the infantile cry belongs to the essence of the human, expressing the truth of being, doomed to eternally remain inexpressible, to "stand speechless in our presence" (Weil 2005 88).

Weil describes three facets of Being: body, soul and social personality, which are always exposed to affliction (Weil 2008, 361). Affliction hurts all, yet one part of the soul remains untouched, intact: the part that knows nothing and desires the infinite good (Weil 2008, 361-2).<sup>22</sup> This part, which exists in all human beings, cannot be taken away.<sup>23</sup> It is, according to Weil, what is sacred in the human (Weil 2005, 71). Since the infantile cry expresses a desire that is the true and invincible essence of human life, it exposes that the significance of the human lays outside of language, personhood, and achievements. What is sacred in the human is one's impersonal being, that desires the objectless, the otherworldly (Weil 1970, 136, 315). It is this which prevents Weil from hurting the passerby: not his name, physical features, or social status. It is nothing he would say, but his sacred being, "this man; no more and no less...It is he. The whole of him" (Weil 2005 70), walking down the street, expressing mutely, at once, the truth of human life: being fragile and desiring, with all of one's heart and soul, to not be harmed.

Weil believes that even Christ expressed this cry when he asked "Why hast thou forsaken me?" (Weil 2004, 258)<sup>24</sup>: even he could not hold back from

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<sup>21</sup> One can also come to such realization through spiritual work, an aesthetic experience in art, or through the expression of truth in scientific work. Yet, such paths differ from affliction primarily because they consist of conscious work of letting go, as opposed to having the essence of the human revealed by external violent forces which inflict the annihilation of one's conception of self.

<sup>22</sup> See also Weil 2005, 94.

<sup>23</sup> It is often hidden by language and force.

<sup>24</sup> See also Weil 2005, 72. In a later notebook, Weil assimilates the cry of Christ with Shakespeare's King Lear "Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts? and a

expressing this cry of humanity (Weil 2005, 72). For her, this cry was screamed not only by humanity within him (Weil 1970, 337) but also for the sake of humanity (Weil 1970, 358). The cross is the human state: to be prone to affliction and to still desire the good. Although formulated as a question, the cry of Christ does not await an answer, since it is "the question to which there is essentially no answer" (Weil 1970, 82-3).<sup>25</sup> It is also not a protestation, says Weil, for it does not ask about a cause, but wonders: 'for what end?' (Weil 2008, 372). Affliction reveals human life as devoid of reason, as a condition where one cries "Why?" for hours, days, years, and does not cease in exhaustion (Weil 2008, 372-3). It expresses the human heart and soul's simple, naïve yet blunt and invincible wish, cried endlessly and without words, from birth till death, not as a person asking for itself, but as a heart and soul desiring to not be harmed and abandoned, to be done the infinite good.

According to Weil, the cry was the first thing given to the human, at birth (Weil 1970, 99). I believe that one could claim that crying and birth are interrelated. Crying is a mark of being, and human existence is itself expressed in and as a cry, as a frail life of desire, beyond expression and beyond fulfillment. The cry reveals the ineffable infantile state as that which rests forever in all human beings, in those whose ability to speak remains immaculate (Weil 2005, 72), that is, apparently uncompromised, and in those who lost all words to affliction. Crying an undefined, inexpressible, impersonal, and incomprehensible cry outside of reason, sense, signification, and direction, one is as one who desires the good, and one is insofar as one desires the good.<sup>26</sup>

By distinguishing between the linguistic and non-linguistic, the personal and the impersonal, what one can and cannot have, Simone Weil marks the infantile cry as that which cannot be said but is screamed nevertheless by every human. Outside and before language, symbolization and thought, a cry is not an explicit expression attempting to communicate a meaning: a cry for nothing, for the

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verse by French Baroque poet Théophile de Viau "*Ah! que les cris d'un innocent...*". See Weil 1970, 338.

<sup>25</sup> See also Weil 2008, 372.

<sup>26</sup> In the preparatory essays of *L'Enracinement*, "Profession de Foi" written in the same year in London, Weil writes: "Il est une réalité située hors du monde, c'est-à-dire hors de l'espace et du temps, hors de l'univers mental de l'homme, hors de tout le domaine que les facultés humaines peuvent atteindre. À cette réalité répond au centre du cœur de l'homme cette exigence d'un bien absolu qui y habite toujours et ne trouve jamais aucun objet en ce monde." See Weil 2013, 95, 96 or Weil 2005, 221.



impossible, it intimates human life. What is sacred and essential in the human is this desperate supplication which comes from complete humility, this plea, this begging that just wants (Weil 1970, 143), like a child whose mother forgot to feed, crying with an open heart for the mother and for bread (Weil 1970, 99), not knowing if she or it will ever come (Weil 1970, 143), if it will ever eat (Weil 2008, 365). Unpronounceable and sublinguistic, it is a cry with no resort, stemming from the distress of a coldness that no home can ever warm. The infantile cry echoes a life of hunger for which no food exists. It cries the endless desire of being, for that which in life is unpossessable, unknown, and unknowable, the no thing and every thing. We can call it the moon.

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