

GOD COMES TO HER:
A KANTIAN REFLECTION ON EVIL AND
RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE IN ST. TERESA OF
ÁVILA AND SIMONE WEIL

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Abstract: In this essay, I assess the experiences of divine revelation in St. Teresa of Ávila and Simone Weil by contrasting their underlining models for the realization of the highest good. For St. Teresa, god's manifestation is physically gratifying, which implicitly represents the world as part of a metaphysical order in which god intervenes to reward the good with happiness. For Weil, on the contrary, divine revelation issues from suffering, which she calls "affliction." Against the conventional view that Weil defends a theodicy, I argue that her account of affliction highlights the problem of radical evil and senseless suffering in 20th-century Europe. In line with Kant—an unlikely ally, perhaps—she articulates the moral grounds of religion to sustain moral faith, namely: the challenge of maintaining a good will in the aftermath of senseless suffering and for resisting the natural propensity to radical evil in response.

Keywords: Kant; Simone Weil; Saint Teresa of Avila; Philosophy of Religion; The Problem of Evil; Ethics

INTRODUCTION

"The essential thing is to admire what one can find to admire with one's whole soul."

Simone Weil¹

St. Teresa of Ávila, a Carmelite nun living in medieval Spain, and Simone Weil, a French philosopher born to a secular Jewish family who fled as a refugee the

¹ Weil, Simone. 1971. *The Need for Roots: A Prelude to a Declaration of Duties Toward Mankind*. New York: Harper Colophon Books. p. 231.

Nazi occupation of Paris, possess faith in god and relate their personal acquaintance with the divine. St. Teresa and Weil convey the manner that god manifests in the world and appears to them personally. Although separated by a vast stretch of time that marks off the premodern from the modern world in continental Europe, they each present a phenomenological account of divine revelation that confirms god's being-in-the-world. Both women are mystics attesting to a personal acquaintance with god, but the way god manifests to a medieval Catholic nun strikingly differs from the way he appears to a young Jewish woman and a Catholic convert in the context of the Holocaust.

For St. Teresa, god's appearance assumes a corporeal form, and, as has been vividly depicted by the Baroque sculptor Giovanni Lorenzo Bernini, god's fullness practically assumes the aspect of a real man, a handsome seraph brandishing an arrow. For Bernini, this kind of brazenness of the Holy Spirit affords him artistic license to depict the encounter between the young nun and the seraph as erotic. After all, on St. Teresa's own admission, the seraph repeatedly "pierces" her with his arrow; and "and so excessive was the sweetness caused me by this intense pain that one can never wish to lose it, nor will one's soul be content with anything less than God."² This experience of the brazenness of god is an extension of a secure metaphysical order, where under divine aegis an ordering principle prevails that guarantees that the wicked suffer and the good are rewarded with happiness. Indeed, it seems, god takes the initiative to physically pleasure the good himself and to punish the wicked.

In contrast, for Weil, in war-torn 20th-century Europe, god reveals himself through his universal absence from the world. His absence grows from a machinery designed by human beings to annihilate the innocent and the good as efficiently as possible.³ Having lost causal efficacy, the prevailing sentiment is that god has abandoned and fled from the world, which is instead peopled with suffering whose origin even god does not understand. One no longer experiences god as intervening to make the virtuous happy and the wicked suffer, an ordering

² St. Teresa de Avila. 1988. "The Life of the Holy Mother Saint Teresa of Jesus" in *The Complete Works of St. Teresa of Avila*. Vol 1. New York: Continuum. p. 193.

³ Within hours of a family's arrival on the camp grounds at Auschwitz, they would be gassed, the gold removed from their teeth, and their naked corpses disposed of. Waschmann, Nikolaus. 2015. *KL: The History of the Nazi Concentration Camps*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Chp 6. §2.

principle that makes the ecstasy of St. Teresa possible. On the contrary, in the modern era, especially with respect to the Jewish historical experience in continental Europe in the 20th century, the problem of evil is its *senselessness*: the good suffer and the evil are rewarded. Moreover, evil acquires a *radical* dimension inasmuch as it originates in the contingencies of the human will. And yet, for Weil, it is *on account of* the senseless suffering caused by radical evil that faith is warranted. She makes a novel philosophical claim that both conveys a personal relation to god and identifies god with the transcendental idea of the moral good: god too judges that such suffering makes no sense and instead appears to withdraw from the world, as if waiting for human beings to take responsibility for it.

If the withdrawing of god from the world is identified with the predominance of radical evil, then one must reconceptualize what divine revelation entails in the aftermath of WWII and the Holocaust. While the problem of radical evil is manifest in the history of slavery, colonialism, and the genocide and expropriation of indigenous peoples in the New World, modern European philosophy begins to seriously grapple with the problem of human-made senseless suffering in the 20th century, as continental Europe attempts to rebuild its cities and struggles to understand the origin of the violence that decimated Jewish communities and almost destroyed humankind. The sheer violence of the modern era overthrows a metaphysical system where god can reliably appear, talking through the bushes or piercing would-be saints and prophets with his arrows.

In this paper, I argue that in the aftermath of WWII and the Holocaust becoming reacquainted with divinity requires a certain kind of collective moral action that changes the phenomenological structure of religious experience. To wit, religious revelation is identified with the reintroduction of good will into a broken world, attesting to human beings' capacity for moral action *in spite of* the experience of senseless suffering. In other words, for Weil, by way of calling god "back," human beings must become worthy of grace. Specifically, she identifies god with the "love" for good will in sociohistorical contexts where radical evil

predominates.⁴ The phenomenology of modern religious experience thus reflects changing expectations of what the good believe they are entitled to receive from providence. As previously the virtuous expected the reward of pleasure—and even ecstasy of divine origin—post-WWII one experiences the “presence” of god to be (re)emerging from collective moral judgment and action in a profoundly imperfect world.

In the first section of the paper, I demonstrate the corporeal dimension of divine revelation in St. Teresa’s religious experience. Her ecstasy indicates the highest pleasure possible for human beings in a medieval theology, as god intervenes to couple virtue and happiness, rewarding the good with pleasure. In the second section, I show that Weil’s religious experience also emphasizes the body, but she highlights physical and psychological pain inflicted by a radically evil will, not pleasure. Growing from the suffering of the innocent, god’s absence paradoxically attests to the potential beauty of the world, where human beings – particularly the “afflicted” and those subject to senseless suffering – can find the moral resolution to reestablish the highest good on earth. Finally, I conclude with a Kantian reflection about the relation between radical evil and senseless suffering in modern religious experience. Although Kant is rarely read in an existentialist light, the propensity towards radical evil in the aftermath of moral trials is a major theme in his writings; and his discussion about the moral function of religion offers an instructive interpretative framework for appreciating Teresa’s and Weil’s distinct accounts of divine revelation.

ST. TERESA’S ECSTATIC DIVINITY

The phenomenological structure of St. Teresa’s religious experience is consistent with the central features of a medieval worldview and the metaphysical system it presupposes. According to St. Teresa and her philosophical forerunners, including St. Augustine and St. Thomas, an act of cognition establishes god as a direct object of both knowledge and pleasure.⁵ That is, at his discretion, god offers

⁴ Weil, *The Need for Roots*, p. 237.

⁵ St. Aquinas, Thomas. 1997. *Summa Theologiae: A Concise Translation*. Allen: Christian Classics. pp. 9-33. There is abundant literature on the doctrine of illumination in St. Augustine. See for example, Rist, John. 1994.

human beings the “highest” knowledge and “greatest” pleasure—revelation is the basis for the highest good for human beings.⁶ The medieval metaphysical order maintains that god has the capacity to appear to virtuous human beings through voluntary self-disclosure. Revelation is possible inasmuch as a divine will underlines the universe through natural, social, and moral law. The natural world and the social world are established by divine decree and, together, constitute legitimate domains for divine intervention. In the medieval metaphysical order, theology enjoys supremacy over philosophy as human reason is delimited by god’s will, which is the foundation of human knowledge and happiness. Indeed, the very design of the universe encourages mysticism, for “true” knowledge and “true” happiness issues from a spiritual communion with god.

Bernini’s depiction of St. Teresa’s encounter with her seraph depicts the centrality of the physical body in her experience of ecstatic revelation. His depiction underscores the manner that the social world, including the very bodies of human beings, falls under god’s domain, which can “receive” his being-in-the-world. Revelations allows a particular human being to witness an omnipresent god ordering the natural and the social world into a unified whole—the created universe is, after all, the kingdom of god. Punctuating the centrality of physical embodiment in her experience of ecstasy is the folklore that lingers in the small Spanish village, Alba de Tormes, where Teresa dies. In a museum in Alba de Tormes her mummified heart lies encased in glass. A faint line runs across the shriveled organ at which tour guides point, indicating exactly where a seraph had pierced it with a flaming arrow.⁷

The famous passage from her autobiography, *The Life of Saint Teresa*, relates the encounter:

It pleased the Lord that I should sometimes see the following vision. I would see beside me, on my left hand, an angel in bodily form—a type of vision which I am not in the habit of seeing, except very rarely. Though I often see representations of angels, my visions of them are of the type which I first mentioned. It pleased the Lord that I should see this angel in the following way. He was not tall, but short,

Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press & Nash, Ronald H. 1969. *The Light of the Mind: St. Augustine’s Theory of Knowledge*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky.

⁶ Teresa, *Life*, chp. 37, § 2; *Aquinas, Summa Theologiae*, p. 2.

⁷ Laguardia, Gari, 1980. “Santa Teresa and the Problem of Desire,” *Hispania* 63(3): 530.

and very beautiful [.]

In his hands I saw a long golden spear and at the end of the iron tip I seemed to see a point of fire. With this he seemed to pierce my heart several times so that it penetrated to my entrails. When he drew it out, I thought he was drawing them out with it and he left me completely afire with a great love for God. The pain was so sharp that it made me utter several moans; and so excessive was the sweetness caused me by this intense pain that one can never wish to lose it, nor will one's soul be content with anything less than God. It is not bodily pain, but spiritual, though the body has a share in it—indeed, a great share.⁸

Note the emphasis on the body in her description of the seraph's visit. She observes that she receives her "vision" not just through the "intellect," but "in bodily form," one that appears to plunge to her "entrails." The role of the senses—vision, touch—are pivotal in the structure of her religious experience.

Given the centrality of the corporeal dimension, it is unsurprising that the kind of happiness divine revelation brings includes physical pleasure. The visits by agents from heaven are physically gratifying. In *Interior Castle*, she again emphasizes the physical pleasure that accompanies them:

This joy is not, like earthly happiness, at once felt by the heart; after gradually filling it to the brim, the delight overflows throughout all the mansions and faculties, until at last it reaches the body. Therefore, I say it arises from God and ends in ourselves, for whoever experiences it will find that the whole physical part of our nature shares in this delight and sweetness.⁹

Constance M. Furey contends that in medieval theology the prospect of an encounter with god commonly assumed a sexual connotation. "Steeped in the incarnation, Teresa equates experiencing God with the exhilaration caused by seeing, touching, or being pierced by another. If this should not be 'reduced' to sex, neither does it exclude sex."¹⁰ Many female mystics' encounters with the divine have a similar erotic dimension. Their happiness in finding god "redeems" them of the original wretchedness (or the "sin" or "impurity") of human female embodiment but it also asserts an epistemic authority—based on a personal

⁸ Teresa, *Life*, p. 192-3.

⁹ Saint Teresa de Avila. 1912. *The Interior Castle: Or, the Mansion*. New York and Chicago: Benziger Brothers. p. 71.

¹⁰ Furey, Constance M. 2012. "Sexuality," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*. (Eds.) Amy Hollywood & Patricia Z. Beckman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 335-36.

acquaintance with god—that is seldom enjoyed by women in this period. There is an effective irony here in that female mystics mobilize their bodies—and instrumentalize their sexed bodies—by way of inserting themselves into a moral and epistemic community from which they are otherwise excluded.¹¹ Because of the primacy of faith over reason, even men would have to proceed with caution to argue against women’s claims of divine revelation, if they were to avoid accusations of blasphemy. To be sure, the internal government of the Catholic Church had a complex procedure in place for authenticating such claims, which sometimes resulted in the execution of women who were deemed frauds in league with the devil.¹²

Furrey observes that in the medieval metaphysical order happiness on earth is only possible through divine intervention. Ironically, a secure metaphysical order that accommodates mysticism, delivering ecstatic joy through divine touch, implicitly assumes a deep revulsion with the world and finite physical embodiment. Human beings and any world that we might create together confirm the inability of our practical agency to couple virtue and happiness—that ordinary human beings can make good people happy or bring justice to the afflicted. Teresa patiently waits for god, instead, to do this. A virtuous human being cannot hope to feel at home in the world without divine intervention and if she suffers, then it must be god’s will and thus well deserved. The emphasis on the body as a conduit of divinely-caused pleasure attests to the rather unfortunate fact that the only viable prospect for experiencing happiness on earth is through a spiritual marriage with god. Teresa thus betrays a profound pessimism about the world and people’s rightful place in it. Short of divine intervention and spiritual communion, there is nothing to hope for.

Teresa distinguishes the happiness of religious ecstasy from “earthly happiness,” ranking the former higher than the latter. With the departure of her spiritual groom, she laments the ugliness of the world and her misery in it. She reports her experiences in a “viscerally somatic” language that conveys her

¹¹ Niven, Thomas R. 2013. *The Last Years of Saint Therese: Doubt and Darkness, 1895-97*. New York: Oxford University Press. p. 3.

¹² Weber, Alison. 1990. *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Chp. 1.

increasing solitude and hopes to convince her seraph to stay longer next time.¹³ During the seraph's prolonged absences, she chastises herself for her inherently sinful nature whose moral vision and sense of practical agency is obscured by flesh. She lives in fear of displeasing god and scaring away his celestial agents forever, condemning her to life on earth, alone with ordinary human beings, exclaiming: "What misery to live in this world!"¹⁴

Aquinas, who provides a systematic representation of Teresa's underlining metaphysical commitments, writes: "Ultimate and perfect happiness can only be in the vision of the divine essence. [...] [F]or perfect happiness [...] will be had by its union with god as an object, and only in this does man's happiness consist."¹⁵ God's freely-given grace is the sole means to attain the highest good and the happiness of the virtuous on earth. Under these conditions, the world is rejected as the appropriate setting for the realization of the highest good. It fairs poorly as a potential long-term home for human beings.¹⁶ What is more, autonomous moral life is impossible, if god is personally responsible for coupling virtue and happiness, not human beings. Good deeds are a down payment for divine returns. And if one suffers, then one can infer that that too is divine retribution for a sin that one has not fessed up to. Consequently, virtue has an indulgent character: to please god and wait for him to dispense the rewards of pleasure. It is thus fitting that in this period, the paragon of virtue is a young, naïve bride desperately trying to please her groom; it captures a kind of resignation to the contingencies of a world that human beings cannot change because the world is not in their hands, but in the hands of god.¹⁷

Experiencing incarnation as a condition Teresa must endure, physical embodiment is a vehicle that, on occasion, ecstatically transports her to the

¹³ Furey, "Sexuality," p. 333-34.

¹⁴ Teresa, *Interior Castle*, p. 31.

¹⁵ St. Aquinas, Thomas. 1964. *Treatise on Happiness*. Engelwood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall. p. 39.

¹⁶ This view persisted into the early modern period. Followers of Leibniz insisted that those who perished in the catastrophic Lisbon earthquake were, in fact, sinners who deserved to perish. Their suffering was therefore no contradiction that this world is the best of all possible worlds. For further discussion, see Neiman, Susan. 2004. *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

¹⁷ Ahlgreen, Gillian T.W. 1996. *Teresa of Avila and the Politics of Sanctity*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. p. 35.

celestial sphere, but for the most part, leaves her banished from it. The recurring features of the phenomenological structure of her religious experience is waiting and prayer, a release to either god or death, which is a distinction that in the conclusion of a human life inevitably collapses into the epistemic void of the afterlife. Even a lifetime of waiting and prayer may not win divine favor. For the dispensation of grace is contingent on god's inscrutable will. "God bestows these graces for no other reason than His own choice, into which we have no right to enquire."¹⁸ Such a cosmology will not reward every good person but it might reward *some*, even if those soon-to-be saints cannot know when their hour will strike. However, for those versed in catechism there is no guarantee that they will be the object of grace.¹⁹ Grace retains an ineradicably arbitrary element contingent on god's inscrutable will. Struggling against cosmic contingency, Teresa pushes herself further into isolation, withdrawing from the world that appears increasingly hostile and alien to her will.²⁰ In her search to prolong her ecstasy, she accepts a permanent gap between virtue and happiness on earth. The highest good must be, then, interred in the heavens, like a casket sinking into a freshly dug grave.

SIMONE WEIL: ON MORAL FAITH IN LIGHT OF SENSELESS SUFFERING

For Simone Weil, on the contrary, it is the experience of the suffering of the innocent, which she calls "affliction," that reveals god's presence and positions us to receive grace.²¹ The harbinger of grace is not physical pleasure, but pain. The world is in such a state that god is no longer comfortable to reveal himself in his fullness—to take off his clothes, as it were. In *Gravity and Grace*, Weil describes god as weak, indifferent, and impotent. And yet for all that she claims that his absence demonstrates his benevolence and that religious faith is warranted. God's withdrawal from the world proves that he is not the cause of our suffering. Although she is often accused of defending a theodicy, and there is much in her

¹⁸ Teresa, *Interior Castle*, p. 26.

¹⁹ Jordan, Mark D. 1993. "Theology and Philosophy," *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 234. My emphasis.

²⁰ Teresa, *Interior Castle*, p. 105.

²¹ Weil, Simone. 1997. *Gravity & Grace*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. p. 131.

writings to support the accusation, there is another way to appreciate why she maintains that affliction warrants faith.

In the aftermath of WWII and the Holocaust, one must contend with the difficult question of how to sustain one's moral resolution, having experienced and borne witness to the senseless suffering inflicted upon millions of innocent people.²² Weil writes that, as a group who has experienced affliction, in moving forward, victims must "resist the tendency to spread evil [and] to harm [innocent] others" in response.²³ If one fails to do this, then one "attacks the universe."²⁴ And so, she claims that when she chooses to act for the sake of the good in the light of her personal experience of affliction, she feels that god is with her, even though, paradoxically, she repeatedly claims that he is not there. Although she does not believe that some celestial agent will return to reestablish a secure metaphysical order that dispenses the correct balance of pleasure and pain, in keeping her faith in the rationality of possessing a good will, an act of moral "imagination" fills the void god has left behind in failing to couple virtue with happiness.²⁵ The withdrawal of god from a deeply imperfect world makes moral autonomy—that is, modern moral life—possible because it establishes that it is the moral responsibility of ordinary human beings to confront radical evil and flourish in its aftermath. Because radical evil is a contingent act of *human*—not divine—origin, it paradoxically empowers human beings to found the highest good on earth through our collective moral action. Her defense of religious faith is thus grounded in a transcendental ideal of *moral faith*. To wit, the very idea of morality still makes sense even in the aftermath of atrocity and genocidal violence.

Recalling the Kantian notion of radical evil, Weil locates the origin of evil in the contingency of the human will, rather than in divinely-decreed law. In relieving god (and the natural world) from the responsibility of the violence of the 20th century, she turns squarely to confront its source in the collective action of ordinary human beings who commit atrocities and genocidal violence. Her

²² Although Weil converts to Catholicism, her theological concerns reflect a preoccupation among late 20th century-Jewish philosophers who grapple with the question of how to sustain moral faith in god or in the goodness of ordinary human beings after the Holocaust.

²³ Weil, *Gravity & Grace*, p. 49.

²⁴ Weil, *Gravity & Grace*, p. 49.

²⁵ Weil, *Gravity & Grace*, p. 62-4.

indictment of radical evil is thus a call to action that emphasizes the intersubjective basis of moral community. Her painstakingly detailed phenomenology of suffering, as it unequivocally condemns evil, simultaneously redeems the world as the rightful home for human beings. God's withdrawal from the world and from the lives of afflicted persons makes it possible for human beings to position ourselves as moral agents responsible for reintroducing value and good will into it. God's withdrawal thus restores to the world a potential for beauty that it did not otherwise have, a beauty that is manifest in goodness that confronts the true source of evil: our fellow human beings. The world, then, is not merely a lonely jailhouse to which our flesh confines us, but the very vulnerability of our flesh to being exposed to radical evil establishes the crucial importance of fighting, taking responsibility for and even loving an imperfect world. It establishes the world as something infinitely valuable and worth defending. With typical poetic flourish, Weil writes that "god did not create anything except love itself and the means to love."²⁶ Hidden in the void of human suffering, through god's absence, goodness might reappear on earth because human beings—particularly the innocent who suffer unjustly—can establish the highest good on earth, thereby recoupling virtue and happiness through our own hands.

The upshot of making human beings responsible for evil is that senseless suffering is revealed for what it is: *fundamentally unjustifiable*. Unlike conventional theodicy, for her, evil cannot be rationalized as the will of god.²⁷ Against conventional readings that interpret her view as a theodicy, where suffering is justified by the will of god, she argues that "to explain suffering is to console it; therefore it must not be explained."²⁸ She is adamant about the irreducible contingency of the origin of affliction—she even calls it "ridiculous" because of its senselessness.²⁹ For the innocent, suffering strips them of a human personality and is accompanied by both physical pain and social degradation. She writes that

²⁶ Weil, *Waiting for God*, p. 123.

²⁷ However, I do not deny that there is much in her writing that could support the contrary view. I present an a more charitable view that draws from passages that confront the problem of evil without endorsing theodicy.

²⁸ Weil, *Gravity & Grace*, p. 165.

²⁹ Weil, *Waiting for God*, p. 125.

such suffering cannot be rationalized. The enormity of affliction is precisely its ineradicable contingency that is unmoored from divine will and natural law. To suggest otherwise is to countenance that affliction is merely *apparent* and that what appears to be the senseless suffering of the innocent is actually just deserts, a position she forcefully condemns as morally repugnant. It undermines her very characterization of affliction as gratuitous and “ridiculous.” However, the cost of moral responsibility for the world is high: it requires accepting that due to the widespread moral failures of our fellow human beings affliction is always possible and can always demand of an innocent people their periodic and prolonged endurance of a senseless suffering.

In light of the fact of affliction, Weil is concerned that the actual experience of suffering not lead to despair, such that the prospect of justice in the world is irretrievably lost, which would amount to an “attack” on the universe. Focusing on the moral psychology that inspires faith, cultivating and receiving a certain kind of love—the love of good will—is instrumental in the process of healing that would allow a subject to move forward and restore her sense of moral integrity and human personality after traumatic experiences. The genius of her argument is that she targets an aspect of the human will, when it is at its weakest and most vulnerable, inasmuch as it is most tempted by the desire for revenge and to unleash wanton destruction in return. In order to meet the challenge of cultivating and exercising good will, one must have a convincing picture of how to develop moral courage in a context where radical evil prevails and consistently targets the innocent. To move forward after experiencing affliction without “attacking” the universe necessitates the development of an expressive, community-based practice of love. Hence, the intersubjective basis of moral community is the condition, object, and byproduct of moral faith. But achieving that kind of moral insight is extremely difficult. She argues that a certain kind of divinity dwells in human beings who can love the afflicted and enlists the help of natural religion to preserve the moral grounds of action, renewing ever again our resolve to aim at the highest good. Note that the object of such a community-based practice of “love” is a) an expression of moral agency inasmuch as it distinguishes the afflicted from perpetrators and establishes an intersubjective basis for rebuilding moral community and b) honors the afflicted, not the

affliction nor its perpetrators.³⁰

Short of the freely-given good will of another human being, little else that could come to the aid of the afflicted. Certainly not god. Weil writes, “god causes the universe to exist, but he consents not to command it[.] Instead he leaves two forces to rule in his place. On the one hand, there is the blind necessity attaching to matter, including the psychic matter of the soul, and on the other the *autonomy* essential to thinking persons.”³¹ The “autonomy essential to thinking persons” is the source of good will. Though she ascribes good intentions to god, his silence at the suffering of the innocent is consistent with his goodness. Consider the following claim from *Gravity and Grace*, where she admits that at the trial of the innocent god must remain silent, revealing a phenomenology of religious experience that is centrally focused on the problem of modern evil in the 20th century:

It is when from the innermost depths of our being we need a sound which does mean something, when we cry out for an answer and it is not given to us, it is then that we touch the silence of god. [...] All we get is silence. After having gone through that, some begin to talk to themselves like madmen. [...] The others, and they are not numerous, give their whole heart to the silence.³²

On the metaphysical view Weil’s theology presupposes, there is no convergence between the social/moral and the divine order. What in another epoch might have merited a visit from one of god’s angels, in the modern era yields a knock at the door from the gestapo. In the modern era, all we have is the divine silence and god’s metaphysical impotence: and we must accept it and still be willing to “love” the world for what it could become.

Another significant element in Weil’s view that countervails conventional theodicy is that she maintains the hope that gratuitous suffering will end. Even with the complete absence of goodness in the world, she affirms the presence of it in a moral feeling of transcendence that she identifies with the idea of god. If the moral will of ordinary human beings is brought to a “standstill” by the experience of affliction, god emerges as a transcendental symbol stubbornly

³⁰ My presentation of Weil’s views retains the necessity of just punishment for wrongdoing.

³¹ Weil, *Waiting for God*, p. 158.

³² Weil, *Gravity & Grace*, p. 166.

attesting to the possibility of the reappearance of goodness. “God,” she continues, “is none other than good itself, good which is found nowhere on earth.”³³ Given the silence of god at suffering, tragedy follows with the loss of moral faith in the possibility of realizing a just world. In this circumstance, affliction brings the danger that the absence of goodness from the world can appear “final”:

Affliction makes God appear absent for a time, more absent than a dead man, more absent than light in the utter darkness of a cell. A kind of horror submerges the whole soul. During this absence there is nothing to love. What is terrible is that if, in this darkness where there is nothing to love, the soul ceases to love, and God’s absence becomes final.³⁴

In resisting “utter darkness,” one must resist concluding that the absence of goodness from the world is permanent. For it would amount to abandoning the hope that goodness can ever reappear; it would “freeze” the will to a standstill.

On my reading, to counter affliction and recover one’s human personality in its aftermath, one must advance a vision of goodness on earth. In fact, affliction affects more strongly, and its consequences are more dramatic, for those who have the clearest moral vision. “To say that the world is not worth anything, that this life is of no value, and to give evil as the proof is absurd, for if these things are worthless, what does evil take from us? Thus the better we are able to conceive of the fullness of joy, the purer and more intense will be our suffering in affliction and our compassion for others.”³⁵ Interestingly, for Weil, as for Kant, faith is identified with the redemption of the moral agency of human beings in the aftermath of radical evil, which celebrates human plurality and individuality in all its unexpected contours. Goodness, “real good is always new, marvelous, intoxicating.”³⁶ In the next section, I turn to Kant’s account of radical evil and show that he also vindicates the rationality of moral faith, where god symbolizes the idea of the highest good on earth. Although Weil and Kant are seldom read together, in the next section, I show that they each defend the idea of the highest good, emphasizing both the contingent origins of human suffering in radical evil, i.e., affliction, and the potential “beautiful” redemption of a deeply imperfect

³³ Weil, *Gravity & Grace*, p. 147.

³⁴ Weil, *Waiting for God*, p. 121.

³⁵ Weil, *Gravity & Grace*, p. 120.

³⁶ Weil, *Gravity & Grace*, p. 120.

world in the modern era.

SETTLING ACCOUNTS: KANT ON MODERN RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Kant's formulation of the problem of modern evil captures the disparate structures of Teresa's and Weil's mystical religious experiences. Kant confronts the problem of evil by defending the rationality of moral faith, supported by a belief in a (metaphysically inefficacious) god. He rejects the medieval view that god is an ontological object of theoretical knowledge; nor is he an object that can touch—much less penetrate—the human body. Instead, god is a postulate, or a “need,” of pure practical reason that is rooted in an ineradicable feature of practical moral judgment: that those who are worthy of happiness ought to find it, eventually, in proportion to their virtue.³⁷ The “true” god inspires moral faith that empowers moral agents to exercise autonomous moral judgment in the light of a collective experience of senseless suffering and a natural propensity to evil. In other words, belief in god can function as a transcendental ideal symbolizing that virtue and happiness must eventually converge—that the suffering of the afflicted must end. In this section, building on my discussion of affliction above, I show that Kant's practical philosophy has an often overlooked existential dimension that stresses the senselessness of suffering, but aims to embolden individuals to weather trials and endure in their moral convictions.³⁸

To begin, Kant's conception of radical evil dovetails with Weil's account of affliction; in fact, the idea of affliction sheds light on a critical aspect of Kant's formulation of the problem of evil: how the afflicted can sustain the motivation to strive towards the highest good after the traumatic experience of their trials. Although Weil is often interpreted as a Platonist, by connecting her view of affliction to Kant's account of radical evil, I highlight an important feature of the phenomenological structure of religious experience post-WWII, namely, the ongoing challenging of rebuilding moral community in the aftermath of genocidal violence. If god has forsaken the modern world, by way of calling him back, the afflicted must become worthy of grace through moral action and resist

³⁷ Mariña, Jacqueline. 2014. “Kant's Robust Theory of Grace,” *Con-Textos Kantianos: International Journal of Philosophy* (2017): 302-20.

³⁸ Kant, Immanuel. 1997. *Critique of Practical Reason*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. xxix, 104-5.

falling into despair *or* striking out vindictively against the world. This might *seem* like an impossible and perhaps even cruel demand: How can one expect those who have suffered so much not to abandon their moral faith in the potential goodness of the world and their fellow human beings? The experience of affliction tries one's faith in the practical efficacy of a good will.³⁹ And that is precisely why the sheer violence of the modern era has transformed collective expectations from providence. One no longer expects to receive grace through divine visitation. What is more, one hardly believes the idea of grace is intelligible: What good will come from doing the right thing now that Auschwitz has happened?⁴⁰ And yet, self-consciously cultivating the strength of one's moral resolution is the only way to move forward, rebuild moral community, and regain a sense of practical agency. Because the challenge is so harrowing, some kind of divine aid is appropriate, but its form dramatically differs from premodern conceptions.

In his delineation of the limits of theoretical reason, Kant claims that god cannot be an object of knowledge. Because we do not receive an intellectual intuition of god and god manifests in neither space nor time, theoretical reason cannot provide knowledge of god as an object of falsifiable judgment. Teresa's experience of divine revelation, where god appears as an object of both knowledge and pleasure, is a form of religious experience that is not grounded in a legitimate extension of the powers of theoretical reason. Yet, Kant concedes that belief in god is justified by recasting what it entails.⁴¹ The understanding posits god as a regulative ideal for orienting practical reason, guiding our actions without increasing our theoretical knowledge.⁴² According to Kant, god validates the hope in the eventual convergence between virtue and happiness and, in essence, represents the moral faith that attests to the rationality of hoping for the moral development of the world.⁴³ Moral faith is thus linked to the unconditional

³⁹ Kant, Immanuel. 1998. *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 63.

⁴⁰ Cf. Adorno who famously asserts that writing poetry after Auschwitz is "barbaric."

⁴¹ Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, p. 93.

⁴² Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy*, p. 4-6. Pippin, Robert B. 1997. *Idealism as Modernism: Hegelian Variations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 2-3.

⁴³ Mariña, Jacqueline 2000. "Making Sense of Kant's Highest Good," *Kant-Studien* 91: 329-35.

grounds of practical reason that posit the historical development of moral culture and the perfectibility of the human species. Such faith, Kant contends, is both rational and necessary; and it often takes religious expression in religious community.⁴⁴ Conversely, abandoning moral faith makes moral action—and historical progress—impossible, a point Weil hits upon in warning against a tempting belief in the “finality” of the withdrawal of goodness from the world.

And such a temptation is real and its implications are more severe than Nietzsche’s famous declaration that “God is dead.” For Nietzsche believes that the decline of religious systems can liberate individuals to undertake the transvaluation of all values, whereas the belief that goodness is permanently absent from the world can undermine all practices of valuation that can inspire practical agency. As described in the previous section, it can bring the will to a permanent standstill inasmuch as everything and everyone appears worthless, including one’s own self; significantly, this is a feature of the collective experience of the world after historical trauma *and* a symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder in individuals.

Using Weil to build on Kant’s account of radical evil, one discerns that affliction can exacerbate what Kant calls the “natural propensity” for radical evil.⁴⁵ The experience of radical evil can tempt one to commit radically evil acts in response. Moral trials try one’s moral convictions by exacerbating the frailty of human nature. Kant explains that one of the “grades” of radical evil “origin[ates in] the frailty of human nature in not being strong enough to comply with adopted principles.”⁴⁶ In fact, he asserts that most people’s positive estimation of their moral personalities is more attributable to luck than moral integrity inasmuch as they have not known any moral trials—and the experience of radical evil is one such trial.

Moreover, one can come to appreciate why a transcendental conception of the idea of god is a need of pure practical reason. To wit, an afflicted person can

⁴⁴ Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, pp. 65-66.

⁴⁵ Kant, *Religion*, pp. 53-5.

⁴⁶ Kant, *Religion*, pp. 53, 60. Frailty contrasts to “impurity” and “depravity,” which is not an appropriate characterization of the damage to one’s sense of practical agency that affliction and senseless suffering inflict. However, the experience of affliction risks perverting the moral personality such that it becomes “depraved” and establishes itself as the source of value above the moral law through a retributive feeling of self-love.

‘experience’ god by resisting the temptation to evil. In fact, in the *Religion*, Kant describes the ‘being’ of god in spite of his metaphysical absence as “the ‘deus in nobis’ (22:130), that is, the God in us.”⁴⁷ Although the deus in nobis only amounts to a practical agent’s capacity for good will, it can provide a sense of proximity to the divine that strengthens moral resolution. Deus in nobis is the “subjective ground” of action as a “deed of freedom” (*Willkür*) that captures “the power of choice” of the moral personality.⁴⁸ As Weil puts it, it is the feeling of god’s presence when, in fact, no one is there.

The Kant scholar Susan Neiman highlights the existential dimension of senseless suffering, or “affliction,” and the challenge it poses to moral faith. For Kant, as for Weil, there is no “consolation in affliction” in the aftermath of death camps.⁴⁹ There is no guarantee that senseless suffering will cease, short of the development of others’ moral agency and the flourishing of moral community. As Neiman blithely puts it: “temporal suffering is not an advance payment for eternal bliss.”⁵⁰ God remains *impotent* in restoring the lost moral order of the premodern era. Thus, while he cannot incentivize moral action, the conviction that happiness and virtue should be systematically linked sustains hope that a just world is nonetheless possible.⁵¹ To express such moral faith is to reaffirm the universal rationality of good will that no empirical condition can tarnish or disconfirm. It also reasserts a hope in the good will’s potential—and eventual—causal efficacy, whatever situation we might find ourselves in and whatever past we have inherited.⁵² This hope is an unconditional moral ground of practical agency because “reason needs such belief in order to maintain its commitments: to wake up ever again, through half-success and failure, to continue to struggle

⁴⁷ Mariña, “Kant’s Robust Theory of Grace,” p. 305.

⁴⁸ Kant, *Religion*, 46.

⁴⁹ Weil, *Gravity & Grace*, p. 162.

⁵⁰ Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, p. 68-9.

⁵¹ Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, p. 107.

⁵² Kant elaborates in the *Critique of Practical Reason*: “Hence, though the highest good may be the whole object of a pure practical reason, that is, of a pure will, it is not on that account to be taken as its determining ground, and the moral law alone must be viewed as the ground for making the highest good and its realization or promotion the object.” p. 91-2. See also Williams, Rowan. 1993. “The Necessary Non-Existence of God,” in *Simone Weil’s Philosophy of Culture: Readings Toward a Divine Humanity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 55.

to create another world.”⁵³ With Weil, Kant enjoins us to trust the world and the possibility of the success of our moral ends in it, even though in an imperfect world, moral action always carries the risk of reprisal and disavowal.⁵⁴ As in Weil’s experience of divine revelation, her acquaintance with god is of a void, inasmuch as we are “constituted as human” by our love “for the good as such”—and god agrees without doing or saying anything.⁵⁵

CONCLUSION

St. Teresa of Avila and Simone Weil give distinct accounts of divine revelation that stress a personal acquaintance with god. The structure of their religious experiences presupposes distinct metaphysical systems for the coordination of virtue and happiness. While Teresa describes the corporeal dimension of god’s presence in her life as an object of knowledge and pleasure, Weil maintains her religious conviction *through* his universal absence, which grows from the suffering of the innocent or affliction. In the spirit of Weil’s conception of affliction, Kant’s notion of radical evil emphasizes the distinct existential challenge of building moral community in the modern era: how to keep one’s moral resolution in the aftermath of senseless suffering. By emphasizing how this moral challenge informs modern religious experience, I have shown that Weil’s account of affliction complements Kant’s moralized grounding for the idea of a transcendental god.

The extreme violence of the 20th century in continental Europe raises the question of whether the idea of god can still function as a sound regulative ideal about what it is *reasonable* to hope for. Is it reasonable to hope that such violence will never happen again? And if that is the ultimate end we hope for, what—if anything—does it demand from my moral personality as one of the afflicted?

⁵³ Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, p. 66. See also “Were one to believe that try as one might, the obstacles may just be too great, and failure is inevitable, one might just collapse in despair and give up the fight, for the ultimate goal would seem impossible. Here the hope for divine aid—even when in principle how it works cannot be understood—has a positive function.” Mariña, “Kant’s Robust Theory of Grace,” 309; Chignell, Andrew. 2013. “Rational Hope, Moral Order, and the Revolution of the Will”, in E. Watkins (ed.), *The Divine Order, the Human Order, and the Order of Nature*. New York: Oxford University Press. pp. 197-218.

⁵⁴ Neiman, Susan. 1994. *The Unity of Reason: Rereading Kant*. New York: Oxford University Press. p. 155.

⁵⁵ Williams, “The Necessary Non-Existence of God,” p. 55.

Moral faith need not entail religious faith, but it often does. For the profession of religious faith reveals a moral dilemma of whether human beings, especially those who have experienced senseless suffering, should continue to believe that justice is possible. For Kant and Weil, god assumes a moral function that gives divine aid but the divine aid is non-metaphysical, non-causal, and indirect; although they cannot offer any guarantees, both philosophers affirm that it is reasonable to hope for the eventual coordination of virtue and happiness. God symbolizes an unconditional end that practical reason must uphold: the realization of the highest good, where virtue and happiness are systematically linked, such that those who are worthy of happiness might eventually find it through their interactions with others in a profoundly imperfect world. Weil poetically describes the transcendental dimension of moral faith: “We have to believe in a God who is like the true God in everything, except that he does not exist, for we have not reached the point where God exists.”⁵⁶ Because the idea of god serves a transcendental function in rebuilding moral community, debates about his status as an ontological object do not need a resolution: moral faith *and* the belief in god’s benevolence are legitimate without it.

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⁵⁶ Weil, Simone. 2004. *The Notebooks of Simone Weil*. New York: Routledge. p. 151.

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