

## Simone Weil's Phenomenology of the Body

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### ABSTRACT

*Major thinkers of the twentieth-century (Husserl, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Whitehead) explored the conditions for the possibility of perception, language, and thought, and Merleau-Ponty in particular addressed the physical body as a condition of existing and being situated in the world. Although French philosopher Simone Weil (1909–1943) has not been recognized as belonging in this stream of philosophical history, this article seeks to demonstrate that Weil was a pioneering phenomenologist of the body; for remarkably like Merleau-Ponty—yet more than a decade before him in the early 1930s—Simone Weil's thinking centered on the foundational role of the body in structuring thought and ordering the world. The body is the first and primary orderer of experience for Weil: it grasps relations intuitively, pre-linguistically, and mediates action and thought. Weil's body-thinking reconfigures the basis of thinking itself, positing that bodily movement is the factor sine qua non that enables ordered spatial-temporal perception, a perception on which the most abstract reaches of language and thought depend.*

### Keywords

Simone Weil, phenomenology, body, Merleau-Ponty, Cartesianism

The most fundamental philosophical thinking of the twentieth century explored the conditions for the possibility of perception, language, and thought—an avenue of inquiry that inherently tends in a holistic direction. As part of this task, the past century's major thinkers, including Husserl, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and Whitehead, addressed the physical body as a condition of our existing and being situated in the world. Yet it is arguable that their efforts to think the body

were fragmentary or insufficiently thoroughgoing, and that a truly foundational and sustained examination of the body's centrality in philosophy emerged only at mid-century with the phenomenology of perception of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.<sup>1</sup> To my knowledge, the French philosopher Simone Weil (1909–1943) has never been recognized as belonging within this stream of philosophical history. This is in part because her earliest writings—the ones that most explicitly and systematically develop her body-thinking—are infrequently read relative to her later essays and notebooks. This is also in part because the *foundational* nature of Weil's body-thinking has not been recognized even among Weil scholars, who acknowledge the body as a major theme of her thinking but do not recognize how the body in Weil—as in Merleau-Ponty—reconfigures the very *basis* and *origination* of thinking itself.

The present argument seeks to demonstrate that Weil was a pioneering phenomenologist of the body, for remarkably like Merleau-Ponty—but beginning a decade and a half before him in 1930—Simone Weil's thinking centered on the foundational or axial role of the body in structuring thought and ordering the world. Her early work posits that movement, whether literal bodily movement or imitative movement of the imagination, is the factor *sine qua non* that enables spatial-temporal perception, a perception on which the most abstract reaches of language and thought depend. The body is the first and primary orderer of experience for Weil; it grasps relations intuitively, pre-linguistically, and mediates world-ordering perceptions with mind-ordering conceptions—or action with thought. “The body classifies things in the world before there is any thought... So, when we are on the point of giving birth to thought, it comes to birth in a world that already is ordered” (LP 31, 32).

As we shall see, Weil maintains in Kantian fashion that perception is active construal of sensation by the imagination into articulate order, delineating space, distance, shape, position, and time; for “in nature, order does not exist” (LP 84). But here Weil points to the body as the organ and agent of imagination in a way that Kant only hinted at in a couple of pre-critical essays. Bodily movement provides the master key of our perception, for the relationships we perceive in the world are really “a disposition to act in a certain way” (LP 49). Movement of the body—or movement of the imagination in imitation of bodily movement—is what first constructs an environ accessible to thought, hence all thought is dependent on bodily learning. Our purpose will be to trace key moments of Weil's body-thinking from its first elaboration in her dissertation,

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1. Taylor Carmen convincingly illustrates how much more axial the body becomes in Merleau-Ponty as compared to in Husserl (Carmen 1999).

*Science and Perception in Descartes* of 1930, through her lectures on philosophy of 1933–1934, then her later notebooks and essays.

### Weil's Early Deconstruction of Descartes

The subject-object bifurcation that has tenaciously characterized modern thought has had its primary ground in Descartes' diremption of mind and body, extension and thought. As Whitehead described it, post-Cartesian philosophy has oscillated in a complex manner between three extremes: "There are the dualists, who accept matter and mind as on an equal basis, and the two varieties of monists, those who put mind inside matter, and those who put matter inside mind" (Whitehead 1925, 55). Whitehead himself viewed this state of affairs as a disaster of abstraction, the result of what he calls the fallacy of misplaced concreteness (52, 58).<sup>2</sup> Abstraction per se is not the problem, but the misapplication of it: the naive tendency to ascribe abstractions to the world directly rather than viewing them as simplifications and manipulations of the world as it is modeled by our minds.

It is a bit ironic, then, that Weil's key inspiration in her earliest thinking on the body is Descartes—though to be precise the inspiration is Descartes' method of doubting, for, as she puts it later, "doubt is a virtue of the intelligence" (FLN 207). The purpose of Weil's Cartesian thought-experiment in her 1930 dissertation, *Science and Perception in Descartes*, differs markedly from that of Descartes in his *Meditations* three centuries earlier. Descartes' prime objective in the context of early modern Europe, shaken to its foundations by internecine religious strife, was to secure an indubitable ground for noetic certitude. Weil's aim is naturally different; writing as a 21-year-old syndicalist, hers is an intellectually democratic ambition to illustrate that all ordinary people, however ignorant of scientific thought they may be, already employ the most fundamental and essential principles of science in their ordinary perception and daily work without being aware of it.

Weil's objective is to denude the scientist-expert of mystifying authority—an authority that reigned with quasi-priestly power in 1930s France—by revealing the roots of scientific method in the principles that govern ordinary human perception and action. The principal argument of her dissertation is that, although major modern philosophers have depreciated perception as the lowest form of knowledge, it is in fact "of the same nature as science itself" (FW 53 and *passim*). She believes that if this were widely recognized, both ordinary people and scientific inquiry would benefit from this democratizing awareness.

2. Husserl offers a very similar assessment in his *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* published in 1936; see also Edward S. Casey 1997, 220–221.

To make this case she posits a “fictitious thinker” who proceeds by the Cartesian method of doubting. To be a Cartesian, she posits, is “to doubt everything, and then to examine everything in order, without believing in anything except one’s own thought insofar as it is clear and distinct, and without trusting the authority of anyone” (FW 54). This method allows her to begin phenomenologically with an emptied hypothetical subject, a human *tabula rasa*, who knows nothing about herself or the world, presupposes nothing, and is immediately constituted by sensation alone. Weil begins phenomenologically with the awareness that “I am in the world; that is, I feel that I am subject to some external thing that I feel is more or less subject to me” (FW 55).

Weil’s 1930 experiment already diverges fundamentally from Descartes’ in that she takes sensation, with its mixed coincidence of pleasure and pain, to be more immediate, intimate, and irreducible than Descartes’ theoretical *dubito*, which is a dependent, second-order phenomenon in Weil’s analysis. Whereas Descartes employs pure thinking—divorced from extension and “independent” of it—to doubt the body, sensation, movement, and place as chimeras, Weil maintains that pure sensation, qua immediacy, cannot be doubted.<sup>3</sup> To doubt is to introduce a division and redoubling between immediacy and the questioning of that immediacy, whereas sensation as such is pure immediacy and nothing else; as Hegel characterizes it, it is a *Tiergarten* [zoological-garden] consciousness, a pure immediacy that we can imagine hypothetically but can never consciously attain.<sup>4</sup>

Concerning the irreducibility of sensation, Weil’s later notebooks identify an alternative to Descartes’ theoretical (mind-based) model of doubting in the practical (body-based) one of the Tibetan monk Milarepa, who demonstrates the reality of the sensible world through fasting:

After having destroyed to the utmost the reality of the universe, he finally reached its irreducible point, the point where the very mind which conceives finds itself degraded to being one out of the number of appearances. Food constitutes this point. Food is the irreducible element. Fasting constitutes an experi-

3. Descartes’ thinker declares early in the Second Meditation: “I am supposing, then, that all the things that I see are false. I believe that none of the things that the mendacious memory represents has ever existed. I have no senses at all. Body, figure, extension, movement and place are chimeras.” He goes on to ask: “Am I not so bound to the body and to the senses that I could not be without them?” and proceeds to answer the question decisively, “I am, I exist” as a thinking substance independent from extension (Descartes 1990, 99, 101).
4. Hegel supposes that before human beings become capable of self-conscious judgment, which means a diremption or dividedness of consciousness, they exist in an animal state. Adam and Eve before the fall are the image of this pure immediacy and their “paradise is in fact initially a zoological garden [*Tiergarten*]” (Hegel 1988, 214).

mental knowledge of the irreducible character of food, and hence of the reality of the sensible universe. (N 316)

A brief Weil article of 1941 likewise insists it is a “meaningless problem” to question the existence of objective reality for the reason that, given along with our most immediate sensation is the sensation of being opposed by something outside ourselves, external and foreign: “a reality outside ourselves is given at the same time as our own; it is just as impossible to reject [as our own reality], and we continually experience it” (FW 288).

In the beginning of human experience, Weil proposes, there is the sensorium from whose sensate chaos of mixed pleasure–pain responses all else in human existence arises: consciousness, action, order, language, thought, and eventually the “world” construct. With regard to the latter, though, we do well to keep aware of our assumptions when using the term “world”—as Weil herself does not—for as intellectual historian Rémi Brague has noted, “humanity was able to do without the idea of ‘world’ for half of its history—not to mention the immensity of prehistory” (Brague 2003, 11). Explicitly having a world, Brague argues, was a creation of the Axial Age, and the reflexive notion of living in a world, *kosmos*, developed only gradually within ancient Greek culture; it did not previously exist in the ancient Near East or Far East (11, 17–25). He further asserts that ancient Greek scientists were aware that their use of the term *kosmos* had “essentially constructed the *kosmos* as such” (23).

Questions concerning the nature of *what* one is sensing—whether it is real or illusory, divine or profane, whether it can have a causal explanation, whether it has limits or laws—cannot arise unless the immediacy of sensation is given as the ground and generative matrix of the *dubito*. For the *dubito*, to arise at all, requires something to doubt. The fictitious thinker in Weil’s dissertation continues:

This feeling with its shadings of pleasure and pain, which is the only thing I can experience,...is all that I can say about the world. I cannot say, “This thorn hurts my finger,” or even, “I have hurt my finger,” or even, “I feel pain.” As soon as I give a name to what I feel, I am saying...more than I can know. These things that are so intimately present to me are so only through the presence of this feeling that is inseparable from my very existence, which is revealed to me solely through them. (FW 56)

This sentient “I” is unselfconscious, a creature of the *Tiergarten*; it constitutes itself by thoughtlessly discerning form within sensation as a matter of bodily reflex. It ascribes form automatically in response to pleasure–pain motives that distinguish types of sensation for it:

Appearances are impenetrable insofar as they make present to me the feeling that creates out of them the density, the bittersweetness of my own existence. For this savor is mine, but it is not something I have created. If nothing in me were alien to me, my thinking would be uncontaminated by pleasure and pain. But insofar as this impenetrable thing is clear and defined for me, insofar as it manifests itself to me, it takes its form from me. (FW 57)

The form-ascribing sensorium of Weil's hypothetical subject exists without the reflexive thought that it exists. Ideas occur to it and impose their ways on the sensing subject, ideas that assist in lending form to sensation, and yet the subject is passive to their spontaneous appearance and rule. "What I call the world of ideas is no less chaos than the world of sensations... Nothing that transpires in my consciousness has any reality other than the consciousness that I have of it" (FW 57). Weil's hypothetical subject gains nothing by moving from the sensible plane to the intelligible plane of ideas because both planes are equally bound by chance; that is, by the fact that whatever occurs to it occurs simply as a given, a datum. "I am never conscious of anything except the trappings of chance... There is nothing else" (FW 58).

Or is there something else? The subject's first step as a thinker is to realize: I register whatever occurs to me in the form of thinking, and the things that I think have me in their power; so it happens that the only thing they borrow from me is *belief*, or my credence. Credence is the one thing I can withhold, and this withholding is the only power I have over them. "The power that I exercise over my own belief is not an illusion... And through this power of thinking—which so far is revealed to me only by the power of doubting—I know that I am. I have power, therefore I am [*Je puis, donc je suis*]" (FW 59).

Although the thinker's power over her belief is a negative one, it results in a positive capacity to act, to be active. "My own existence as I feel it is an illusion; but my existence as I know it is not a feeling but my creation... To know is to know what I can do" (FW 59). The act of doubting actually "causes me to exist" (FW 67). Consciousness of my existence, or the certain knowledge that I exist, derives from this negative power, which, when exercised, creates a realm of freedom heterogeneous to the happenstance realms of sensation and random thought. Desires, passions, sensations, and random ideas cannot prove my existence except insofar as I *think* them, taking possession of them in the realm of my freedom. *Je puis* is thus the wellsprings and origin of *je suis*.

As long as I continue to suspend my credence, my sovereignty over myself is absolute, but it disappears as soon as I give myself something positive to think; I am free only as long as I remain disengaged. Because no power is limited by itself, the fact that my freedom can disappear in this way reveals to me that my

power is not absolute and that my existence is not the only existence. In tandem with discovering my negative power, I discover an obstacle which limits it. The self-knowledge that is born of my power to withhold belief (i.e., to doubt) gives rise concomitantly to knowledge of an existence that is not myself. The correlation of my power and the obstacle it meets give me knowledge of self and non-self (or other existence) simultaneously.

Although I cannot create a single one of my thoughts, all of them . . . are, to the extent that they are subject to me, signs of myself; to the extent that they are not subject to me, signs of the other existence [*l'autre existence*]. To know is to read this double meaning in any thought; it is to make the obstacle appear in a thought, while recognizing in that thought my own power. (FW 63)

Weil's thinker thus realizes that becoming knowledgeable and achieving self-mastery are the same thing: I can learn only from the exercise of my power. I am able to know by reading in the feeling of my own existence only the obstacle submitted to and overcome. To learn to know my own power is simply to learn to exercise it. But concomitant with knowing my power is knowing that it is limited. I remain impenetrable to myself insofar as I do not create myself by the act of thinking, that is, to the extent that I remain passively subject to the imprint of my environ. I do not have sovereign power over my thoughts; they present themselves to me as so many obstacles and I am only their arbiter. The one thing that is truly mine is my judgment. Although I have no power to shape the feelings and ideas that take hold of me, *as obstacles* they allow me a kind of grasp of my surround; through them my judgment impinges on all that is "other existence."

Doubting can thus suspend the imperious power of chaotic tumult, but in order to be able to make use of it to learn and gain control, what is necessary is to apply the negative power of judgment to the fortuitous furnishings of imagination and sensation. Rather than suspend the imagination, then, "I must give it free rein so that I may learn from it" (FW 71). Sense impressions, which make me subject to other existence, cannot teach me how to take hold of my power; nor can my understanding instruct itself in how to use this power. I can control it only by actually exercising it vis-à-vis the obstacle; therefore "I will go to this third ambiguous being that is a composite of myself and the world acting on each other," the point of intersection between matter and mind, the bond of action and reaction between the world and my thought (FW 69). Weil names this bond imagination [*imagination*] and distinguishes it from understanding [*entendement*], which thinks in negative freedom from the world, and sensibility [*sensibilité*], which is passively subject to the world. Imagination is the middle third that mediates the latter two; without this mediation, "I would

be always like a spectator at a badly staged play in which the storm, riot, or battle is represented in a ludicrous way” (FW 70). In other words, I would be the dysfunctional embodiment of a pure Cartesian dualism: an absurd marriage of sensibility and understanding in permanent disengagement and disjunction from each other.

This identifies the point at which Cartesian dualism reveals its artificiality. In reality, extraneous sense impressions continually impinge upon and disturb consciousness without relief. I cannot for a moment take myself to be pure mind, pure *dubito*. “The world and my mind are so thoroughly intermingled that, if I think that I conceive one of the two separately, I attribute to it what belongs to the other” (FW 70). The environ has an ineluctable grip on me, for “far from being an understanding to which senses have been added like telephone operators to a staff headquarters, I am first and foremost nothing but imagination” (ibid.). To be imagination first and foremost is to originate as an interfused and indistinguishable chaos of “other existence” and consciousness.

Although Weil continues to employ the categories of a Cartesian-style duality between mind’s activity and sensibility’s passivity, her centering of the subject in imagination prevents that duality of categories from ever being a true dualism between non-identical substances (*extensio* and *cogitatio*) as they are for Descartes. To the contrary, imagination is the mixed chaos from which the distinction between sensation and thought emerges: “The imagination...guided by the mind, opens a passageway into the world for thought” (FW 72–73). All the while, imagination remains the ground of their substantial union and reconciliation. This is a deeply consequential divergence from Descartes, for whose *cogito* the imagination is inessential and dispensable.<sup>5</sup>

But in itself, imagination is not able to reconcile sensation and thought effectively. Imagination constitutes the grasp I have on the surround, the correspondence between a thought of mine and a sensory change outside me. But this correspondence is not itself an act; it is that which can be utilized in order to act. Action alone creates an obstacle, hence there is no possibility of action on the part of the mind as long as it is dominated by the imagination. The one thing that can do this is concerted bodily action, or work (FW 78). The active locus of intersection is therefore the body, my body, which is my “first tool” (FW 81). The body is the instrument that actively engages mind with its obstacle in the form of work:

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5. Descartes’ *cogito* states, “I consider that this power of imagining which is in me, in so far as it differs from the power of understanding, is not required for the essence of me myself, that is, for the essence of my mind. For although the power of imagining were absent from me, I would without doubt remain nonetheless that same one who I am now” (Descartes 1990, 187).

Instead of taking [sense] impressions as signs of fantastic beings, I can take them merely as intermediaries for grasping my own work, or rather the object of my work: the obstacle, extension. This is what perception consists of, as can be seen by the famous example of the blind man's stick. The blind man does not feel the different pressures of the stick on his hand; he touches things directly with his stick, as if it were sensible and formed part of his body . . . For each of us the blind man's stick is simply his own body. The human body is like a pincer for the mind to grasp and handle [*saisir et palper*] the world. (FW 79)

The body, in work, eliminates the random play of imagination and delineates an order in the world by means of action. Weil proposes, moreover, that this order is inherently geometrical. Geometry is imbedded in the perceptual imagination and in the motions of the body alike, such that effective work is always based on methodical recombinations of the simple idea of straight-line movement (the simplest movement of thought that can be traced out by the imagination). The body acts according to the same geometrical order that the imagination employs to perceive and structure the world. This cooperation of passive (imaginative) and active (bodily) movement takes possession of the world by turning it into an obstacle. This is the work of the imaginative body, for Weil finally concedes that body and imagination are one: "It appears that there is no contradiction involved in reducing the imagination to the human body, and in making it the only instrument of knowledge for everything concerning the world" (FW 87).

#### Weil in Context of the 1930s

Weil revisits the relationship between bodily motion and perception in her lectures on philosophy of 1933–1934 given at a girls' lycée at Roanne, providing her body-thinking a fuller grounding. Bearing in mind that these lectures are transcribed from a student's careful notes, and are not Weil's own writing, the lectures nonetheless reaffirm that the senses work only in a passive way. Apart from movement, the senses present us with an infinite variety of sensations that teach us nothing at all about the world (LP 43, 47). Every sensible particle of color, for example, is absolutely different from every other sensible particle of color; there is no red or blue, for these are quantitative classifications constructed by movement along an imagined color continuum. In fact, sensation itself is an abstraction from normal perception: "Far from sensation being the only thing that is immediately given to us, it is, as such, only given to us by an effort of abstraction, and by a great effort at that" (LP 47).

Since we do perceive our world, Weil infers that what is given us in perception is more than simply sensation. Perception is rather construal of sensation by the

imagination. In isolating objects or separate parts of an object, it is not our eyes that make the distinction but the movement of our imagination. Distance does not exist for sight without movement, nor do objects have a shape for sight: “it is impossible to have the idea of shape without the idea of movement; a straight line or a curve is something which one scans” by means of a movement of the eyes, a finger, a pencil, or the imagination (LP 41). This movement does not belong to visual data themselves. Likewise, touch, when it is passive, without movement, provides us with neither distances nor shapes: “space does not exist for touch in so far as it is passive” (LP 43).

A similar analysis applies to the remaining senses: a sound, scent, or taste, inasmuch as it is a pure sense datum, does not belong to the cause of the sound, scent, or taste, but inexplicably registers on the sense organ from nowhere. Only a movement of the imagination associates the sense datum with its cause. “One cannot distinguish a sensation until one has related it to an object” (LP 45). Weil adds that although sense data can have *durée* in Henri Bergson’s technical sense—that is, an experiential continuity—these sensations do not involve time but remain a thing of the present. For sensations to be able to give us the idea of time we have to be able to attach some significance to past sensations, and we do that precisely by relating them to objects. Only when the imagination organizes sensations into a perceptual order are they associated with space or the passage of time. Considered in themselves, “sensations tell us nothing about the world; they contain neither matter, space, time, and they give us nothing outside of themselves” (LP 47).

The body plays a central role in creating this perceptual order because the reflex reactions of the body are what reduce the infinite variety of sensations to a limited number. These bodily reflexes can be either congenital or acquired, consciously or unconsciously conditioned. Stimuli are infinite in number, but our reactions to them are limited; “by means of our reactions we generalize stimuli” (LP 30). Life would be impossible if our bodies did not do this automatically, both by instinct and conditioning, as otherwise every stimulus would call forth a unique, once in a lifetime response, producing a sort of behavioral chaos. In fact, feelings, in Weil’s analysis, are nothing other than complex conjunctions of these bodily responses: “The bodily movements which make up feelings are all in fact either instincts, natural reflexes or conditioned reflexes, or a combination of all these” (LP 40).

Thus it happens that, “from the very fact that we have a body, the world is ordered for it; it is arranged in order in relation to the body’s reactions” (LP 31). Things perceived as a *whole* have an effect on our bodies, not things in the infinitude of their particularity. The body primarily grasps wholes in rela-

tionship to other wholes, rather than atomic details that would distract from those relationships. Exceptional states of consciousness, such as schizophrenia and drug-induced hallucination, may underscore this general rule, since these exceptional states often involve abnormally heightened attention to sensual-perceptual detail at the expense of primary perception of familiar wholes in relationship. Because the body makes generalizations as a matter of instinctive or trained reflex, when we are “on the point of giving birth to thought,” it comes to birth in a world already ordered (LP 32). This order delineated by the body is a *precondition* of thought, not a result of thought, as Peter Winch notes in his introduction (LP 13).

So we see that imagination and body are allied in Weil's thought to the point of explicit identity. Unfortunately, she does not analyze this identity more systematically, and moreover, she often falls back into the habits of Cartesian language, writing of them in turn as though they were distinct, when she herself has clearly argued otherwise. But we should make the most of her bold affirmation that there seems to be “no contradiction involved in reducing the imagination to the human body, and in making it the only instrument of knowledge for everything concerning the world” (FW 87). In light of this radical claim for the foundational role of the body in knowledge, it would seem justifiable for us to concoct a hyphenated term for this identity: the *body-imagination*. Though we cannot proceed to say much more about it without moving beyond Weil's analysis into our own, in any case it is clear that the body-imagination rather than the sensorium per se is what effectively construes all perception of the world:

One is conscious of what one believes one sees, and not of what one sees, of what one believes one touches, and not of what one touches, etc. Sensation only serves as an occasion for becoming conscious of what one believes one feels...  
The source of the identity of objects is in the imagination alone. (LP 48–49)

To illustrate she cites the example of a cubic image drawn on a two dimensional surface. One really “sees” something spatial. What causes this impression of space, which, as long as I remain in the illusion, is not essentially different from real space occupied by a real cube? The cubic space envisioned is the result of my gesture of grasping the object; the space I imagine it to fill is a relationship between the sensations and myself, consisting of my disposition to act in a certain way. All the spatial relations we perceive are similarly dispositions to act in a certain way in response to our sensations, which is why “all spaces, even those over which we do not travel, make us want to do so” (LP 49). Weil proposes that this is the attraction of great architecture and of natural scenery as well: it induces the body-imagination to survey it, desire to travel it, and thus possess it in gesture.

For another example, Weil cites a lamp fixture on the ceiling. We say that it is circular in shape despite the fact that what we see is an ellipse. An ellipse is on our retina, but we do not see it as such. Objects assume what we call their real shape through the movement of our imagination, and that “real” shape is the shape that appears to us when the object occupies the whole of our visual field. In fact the full circular view is not “more real” than the many elliptical views; it is our imagination that prefers the circle as geometrically the simplest and therefore the most essential account of the lamp’s shape. Similarly, “all the lines that form the limits of things, which make up their shapes, are given to us through our reflexes, by our own movement” (LP 51).

Thus we “describe” things with our thought in order to perceive them, much as a geometer “describes” a circle. But our descriptions are not a matter of arbitrary fantasy. What they are, in Weil’s view, is elementary geometry, a geometry governed by necessary relationships of form. Such necessary relationships are reflected in the fact that we cannot look at three points on a surface without seeing a triangle, though the triangle is traced out by our looking, not by the sense data themselves. Similarly, to think of two points is to think of a straight line, and to think of one point is to think of the straight line that connects us to it. The geometry of the body-imagination is at work in all perception: “There is geometry in normal perception. Everything happens as if our bodies already knew the geometrical theorems which our mind does not yet know” (LP 51).

Weil thought that cognizance of the bodily primacy of all order in human life might help to reorient the intellectual culture of her age. She was alarmed by the way the conditions of modern life destroy the mind-body equilibrium in everything, in the spheres of thought and action alike: “In its every aspect, the civilization we live in overwhelms the human *body*. Mind and body have become strangers to one another. Contact has been lost” (FLN 38). In every sphere, she writes—scientific, political, economic, artistic, religious—we seem to have lost “the very elements of intelligence,” which are the ideas of limit, measure, degree, proportion, relation, comparison, contingency, interdependence, interrelation of means and ends. This loss has led to an intellectual culture of “lethal absurdity”: a political universe “peopled exclusively by myths and monsters; all it contains is absolutes and abstract entities”; and a technocratic age in which “the only battles we know how to fight are battles against windmills” (SE 156–57). Having lost contact with the body’s *ratio*, intellect spins its wheels in unimpeded irrationality.

The wager of her 1930 dissertation was that a new understanding of perception would provide the key to reunifying, revitalizing, and democratizing scientific and philosophic knowledge by regrounding these pursuits in the body-

imagination, thus helping to bridge the “loss of contact” between body and mind in the late modern era (cf. N 248). The bodily basis of all order—perceptual and conceptual—is in fact upheld, not abrogated, she thought, in even the most abstruse abstractions of philosophy and science. Indeed, science has as its object “the study and the theoretical reconstruction of the order of the world—the order of the world in relation to the mental, psychic, and bodily structure of man” (WG 169).

Husserl parallels this hope a few years later in his late opus of 1936, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, which profoundly influenced Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception. As summarized by Frederick A. Olafson:

Husserl argued that the modern scientific worldview that had developed since the seventeenth century had, in effect, resulted in a kind of systematic obliviousness to the familiar perceptual world from which, in Husserl's view, the mathematico-physical sciences of nature take their departure and on which they remain dependent for their final interpretation. (Olafson 1967, 280)

Weil proposes that such systematic obliviousness can be overcome by a renewed grounding of science, and of human knowledge generally, in the fact that order is a *condition of existence* for a thinking creature. In other words, an ordered universe is a condition of existence for an ordered body, and an ordered body is a condition of existence for an ordered, effective mind (N 130). “The proper subject for science is the *order of the world*... and the order of the world should be wholly conceived under the category of *condition of existence of a thinking creature*” (N 463; emphasis in original).<sup>6</sup>

The point of this approach would be to acknowledge the ever-present element of human need and desire in science; the fact that need and desire figure in a very technical sense into all scientific theory and research. The human need for order is the motive interest functioning within every science, including that most abstract of theoretical sciences, mathematics. Why, after all, Weil asks, should algebra be looked upon as being any less “human” than color, sound, heat, and so on (N 76)? The humanness of science is attributable to the fact that it satisfies a human need for order, and specifically for an order complex enough that it is adequate to model the infinite complexity of the “obstacle” we seek to grasp: reality. Moreover, insofar as it does not completely overwhelm the grasp of con-

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6. *Condition of existence*, as Weil conceives it, adjusts for habitual illusions of the imagination that are simultaneously seen through and retained; for example: “The state of rest of things is an illusion in this world in perpetual movement; so is the periodical return of phenomena. But this illusion is for us a condition of existence” (N 479).

consciousness, the hyper-complexity of reality is a value: “The waking world, even from the most ordinary angle of perception, is a plurality of systems of possibilities... Consciousness and reality are proportional to the multitude of simultaneously grasped systems by virtue of a single operation of the mind” (N 87).

Neither in the case of ordinary perception nor in that of science does the order we find in nature belong to nature *per se* (LP 84). The order we find is “described” there by the path of encounter traversed by our body-imagination-understanding—that is, by our perception, our logic, our hypotheses, our instruments, our work—and is funded by our desire.<sup>7</sup> An accurate science, for Weil, would be one in which consciousness of human participation would never be interrupted, suppressed, or abstracted away (N 96). To suppress this determinative element is to suppress the mind-body relationship in its fullest implications, for “the human mind always models the universe on the relationship between the soul and the body” (N 6). Most of the crises of modern alienation have derived from suppression of this organic, indivisible relationship between mind and body, subject and object, thought and desire, fact and value. In an early anti-Cartesian statement of 1925, Weil warns: “When we believe in the independence of mind from body, we are slaves of the body. It is when we become conscious of this slavery that we are truly conscious. Then we have the notion of truth” (PEP 298; my translation). Though she does repeatedly employ the categories of Cartesian dualism in her thinking, Weil uses those categories to make a case for the impossibility of dualism. For the early Weil, the only human freedom on earth is forged by the body-imagination taking hold of its obstacle—reality—in the form of work.

### Weil’s Later Body-Thinking

Beginning in 1938, a series of transformative religious experiences shifted Weil’s focus from philosophical to theological ideas throughout the remaining few years of her life. The centrality of the body began to function increasingly with reference to the life of faith and the import of “incarnation” within both Christianity and non-Christian religions. Continuity with her earlier thinking is nevertheless apparent in Weil’s affirmation, in her journal of 1942, that the

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7. In an early exercise for her 1925 class with philosopher Alain (the pseudonym of Émile-Auguste Chartier), Weil posits that we do not have consciousness of things, but of our attitudes in the face of things, which give us information about themselves inasmuch as we are in part constrained by them. “The imagination supplements that which is strongly insufficient for us about the exterior world...and produces a compromise that we call perception.” Without a grounding foundation in reality, imagination plays freely in the void (PEP 298, my translation and paraphrase).

needs and proportions of our body define—we might say “design”—the world in a certain way, inasmuch as they predispose us to certain perceptions and correspondences rather than others:

There is perhaps an order of the world corresponding to each place in the scale of things. The one which we are able to grasp is like a design which one would find on the section of a tree-stump after sawing through it. At any other place one would also have found a design; a different design, but no less a design. Our universe is a section cut out of the universe at a spot corresponding to the dimensions and structure of our body. Consequently the universe can only be known to us subjectively, as is the case with our organism too; but the appropriateness which links the two together is a fact. (N 516)

Implied here is the idea that the body, as it is perceptually and structurally predisposed, “cuts out” a world appropriate to itself. This results in a body–world correspondence, and Weil refers to this explicitly as a macrocosm–microcosm correspondence (N 130). The human body is the “little world” that corresponds to the lineaments of that greater world which the body has apprehended in its own image according to its structure and disposition. “Man—a mind tied [*liée*] to a body—is only able to exist,” Weil muses, “if this same body is an image of the universe, and if the limited portions of matter to which he has access are—some of them—images of the universe” (N 107). Because of our primal need for order, we perceive the universe to be like our body and our body to be like the universe in analogical ways, in ways that manifest appropriate correlations.

What bridges the correlative orders of macrocosm and microcosm in the creature is, for Weil, *amor fati* (N 130), love of the order of the world, which is equivalent in her later thinking to love of the will of God, for it is the will of God that first creates the world according to the rigors of necessity. In creating the world, Weil posits, God turns himself into necessity (N 190). The great and small orders of universe and body are concatenated together within this one inflexible universal order of necessity—which she understands in a complex Spinozistic-Stoic sense (McCullough 2013, chaps. 4 and 6). This order requires that the body submit to a strict discipline in contact with the world. Truly to learn about the world is to undergo it bodily, obediently, and this becomes the whole preoccupation of mind, thoroughly embedded as it is in the body (N 107).

The world is a text containing several meanings, and we pass from one meaning to another by an effort—an effort in which the body always participates, just as when we are learning the alphabet of a foreign language this alphabet has got to enter into our hand by dint of forming the characters. Apart from that, any change in the manner of thinking is illusory. (N 23)

Thought is merely illusory until it applies itself to bodily knowledge of the world, contending with the “obstacle” of sensuous reality and its data. In some cases such data may be grounded in materiality in only the most evanescent way, as when the sensuous imagination responds to music or poetry; but such experiences depend on a material component *sine qua non*, if only the materiality of the instrument, the sound wave, the printed page, the recipient ear or eye. But what the body responds to in music—as contrasted with noise—is not the material data *per se* (the sound waves carrying this or that isolated note), but the pattern of relationships embodied in the succession of notes received aurally and grasped holistically. “Music doesn’t reside in any single note but in a relationship; and yet it makes us weep. Man is made like that. Relationships touch his body [*les rapports touchent son corps*]” (N 486). On the fact that differentials of tone, timbre, and measure can bring tears to the eyes, she remarks: “A relationship that draws tears. Strange.”

Here Weil touches on the mystery of music, the mystery of beauty as embodied in artistic response: it engages and impresses the bodily imagination directly, more palpably than abstract or verbal intellect, instilling a pathos through felt, sensuous relationships that transcend verbal articulation. This is the mystery of incarnation, the creative materialization of spirit and vision. “The mystery of very great art is precisely this,” Weil observes, “that an artist’s doctrine passes into the work of his hands; and it matters little whether he can also express it in words” (SL 126). In such a case, the body of the artist is not so much the medium of creative expression as it is *itself* the creator. The body knows how to grasp and formulate relationships that the mind knows not how to conceive or invent. Weil knew this well, writing: “The spirit in its supreme manifestations imitates in some sort matter; is absent from its own thoughts and works” (N 56). The imagination, directly grounded in bodily experience, apprehends relationships between things alogically through a bodily-mediated grasp. In this connection, Weil points to an analogy between *habit* and *grace*: the physical sense of the word grace is a perfection derived from habit, or practice in technique (N 171). Through bodily familiarity, for example, when the fingers play a song that the mind does not remember note for note, thought has to rehearse the finger movements to retrieve all the notes.

Weil maintains that “the association between the human spirit and the body makes it so that there are necessarily physical effects of grace” (N 225). In other words, inspiration tends to incarnation. An artist of genius places God not in the intention motivating art but in the actual processes of his or her technique (N 602). Art produced by genius is not created *for* God conceived as a sort of supreme heavenly patron, but rather *by* God: by the presence of *caritas* incar-

nating itself in a new metaxic form. Weil writes in a letter to her mathematician brother André Weil that “the soul of genius is *caritas*,” and such genius is distinguishable from talent by its deep regard for the common life of common people (SL 104–105). Genius is the incarnational movement of supernatural inspiration, making a gift of itself in and through the body engaged in its *τέχνη*.

The thinking creature exhibits a need and longing for order both at the macrocosmic level, in the cosmos envisioned as a whole, and at the microcosmic level of the organism involved in complex, multifarious relationships in the world. Relationships emerge from the body and touch the body because our imagination, with its inborn longing for beauty and order, is never abstract but is ever immanently embodied—in a sexual body at that. Indeed, of all forms of love that express a bodily longing for beauty, for order, for palpable and specific incarnation of the good, carnal love is perhaps the most intense and indomitable. Carnal love in all its forms, Weil writes, from true marriage or platonic love down to the worst debauchery, has the beauty of the world as its object, and this longing to love the beauty of the world in a human being is essentially a longing for the incarnation (WG 171).

Carnal love is a quest for the Incarnation. We want to love the beauty of the world in a human being—not the beauty of the world in general, but the specific beauty which the world offers to each man and which corresponds exactly to the state of his body and his soul. (FLN 84)

In the margins of her first notebook (1933), Weil had explored a possible analogy between physical love and physical labor: since to labor is to feel with one's whole self the existence of the world, she speculated, is to engage in physical love a quest to feel with one's whole self the existence of another being? “To be aware of the beloved over his whole perceptible surface, as a swimmer is of the sea. To live within a universe which is he” (FLN 9–10).

The possibility of understanding sexual love as a veneration of incarnate beauty opens the door, for Weil, to a sexuality that would be purified of will—that is, innocent of need, sensual pleasure, grasping desire (N 610). The problem with sexual desire, for Weil as for Augustine, does not reside in the flesh per se but in the will and its inveterate propensity toward willful attachment (FLN 73). “Every attachment is of the same nature as sexuality,” Weil writes (FLN 287); the vital energy of the body-imagination is bound up in attachments to all kinds of things, for “one can project sexuality upon any kind of object: collector's hobby, money, power, group membership, cat, canary, God (but in this case it won't be the true God)” (FLN 287). Given that in Weil's estimation, “man only disposes of one single and unique love” (N 471), a choice of allegiance must be decided. The solution to releasing the bound-up energy of

desire is to “kill sexuality” (as she puts it) in order to effect a transmutation of the energy it contains; this is the process of detachment.

If every attachment is of the same nature as sexuality, then the energy of attachment originates as sexual energy, and sexual energy is simply the kind of energy we have available. Sexual love, and all attachments analogous to the sexual, are vital resources to be converted and transfigured rather than extinguished or squandered. To reproach mystics with loving God by means of the faculty of sexual love, she writes, is as though one were to reproach a painter with making pictures by means of colors composed of material substances: “We haven’t anything else with which to love” (N 472). The physiological ground of the mystic’s love for God is erotic energy, but when the authentic mystic detaches that energy from will and desire, such detachment, according to Weil, effects the emission of the total amount of energy toward God (ibid.). Whatever feats of sublimation are required to achieve this, sexual energy thus transmuted and purified of attachment is pure. At a number of points she defends sublimation and attacks Freudian doctrine for failing to recognize the virtue of this radical purification and redemption of sexual energy (N 84). She complains that the whole of Freudian doctrine is saturated with “the very prejudice which he makes it his mission to combat,” namely, that everything that is sexual is base (N 472); whereas the sexual is base only when turned to base uses, manifesting an attachment of the will, as is most frequently the case.

What purifies attachment is not withdrawal of love from the things of the world but, to the contrary, the expansion of love to the point where it is no longer selective, preferential, but universal in its scope. What love of God does, in Weil’s theology, is detach desire from the preferential bases of love and permit it to circulate freely, detachedly, universally. We do not become detached so much as transfer our attachment to the universe as a whole, and this is an experience of things in their full existence as warranted by the body: “*To restrict one’s love to the pure object* [i.e., the object as God sustains and loves it] *is the same thing as to extend it to the whole universe...* Let all suffering make the universe enter into the body” (N 21; emphasis in original). Continuing in this vein, Weil bids “may the whole universe become for me a second body” (N 60; cf. N 13), and here she cites two senses in which this should be true: first, in the way the blind man’s stick is an extension of his body, giving him indispensable contact with the real; and second, in the way that miserly Harpagon’s treasure-casket becomes an appendage of his body, encapsulating all that he cherishes in a singular image of pure value. If the intensity of desire bound up in miserliness were vastly enlarged to embrace all things universally as its object, this would result in what Weil envisions in her full-fledged thinking of the universal body:

Even though I die, the universe continues. That does not console me if I am anything other than the universe. If, however, the universe is, as it were, another body to my soul, my death ceases to have any more importance for me than that of a stranger. The same is true of my sufferings. (N 19)

If we really love God, we necessarily think of him as being, amongst other things, the Soul of the World; for love is always connected with a body, and God has no other body which is offered to our sense except the universe itself. Then each occurrence, whatever it may be, is like a touch on the part of God. (N 322)

This religious regard for the universe as God's body, which again points to *amor fati* as a fundamental commitment of Weil's thought, connects back to one of Weil's earliest writings as a 17-year-old student of the philosopher Alain, a brief reflection in which soul and universe continually "communicate" with each other via the body as medium: "The soul is united with the whole universe by the intermediary of a determinate body" as its "medium [*moyen*] of perception."<sup>8</sup>

Faith, as the later Weil defines it, expressly encompasses the disposition of the body, for "faith is a disposition of *all* the parts of the soul—and of the body as well—each one assuming with regard to the object of love the attitude suitable to its nature" (N 241). The body functions as a judicial balance central to the life of faith; indeed, nothing is more important to life on earth than the balancing act that the body effects in every human action. Bodily action is what determines the specific outcome when good and evil, nature and grace, are weighed against each other in the pressure of contesting circumstances.

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8. Weil's school exercise from 1926 reads: "The soul is tied to body, and through body to the whole universe... For everything affects everything else in the existent universe, and the body, subject to the action of the whole universe, transmits this action in some way to the soul. The soul is thus united with the whole universe by the intermediary of a determinate body and does not know how to be any other way. Everything that I see—this wall, these books, these papers—is finite in space and yet infinite insofar as the existence of all objects presuppose the existence of an infinite or, better put, an indefinite universe. The universe cannot manifest itself any other way; an indefinite universe per se is an abstraction... It is therefore not completely obvious, so to speak, that the indefinite universe can be perceived, but only as concentrated in an object. But this is not the object perceived; it is the perceiving body, or to speak more correctly, the body as medium [*moyen*] of perception. The soul cannot communicate with the universe as such; it can communicate only through a finite object, which is to the universe what a landscape is to the appearance of that landscape from a determinate point of view. But the nature of this finite object, which is the body, is not indifferent... The human body alone, among all existent objects, has the power to affect [*le pouvoir d'affecter*] a soul" (PEP 92–93, my translation). Emmanuel Gabellieri rightly suggests that, for Weil, the body has the vocation to become a *cosmic body* [*corps cosmique*], capable of being present to the whole universe (Gabellieri 2006, 91–92).

It is the body which is the balance, for each moment it can perform but one action. It is a true balance when the attention is uniform. (N 57)

Since the body at any given moment can have but one single attitude, each one of our acts is a slayer of thoughts, for each act excludes an infinite number of other acts and makes it impossible at that particular moment for the thoughts corresponding to them to reach a state of existence. (N 52)

The body is the appropriate arbiter of the soul's conflicts about action, and this is its eminent dignity: "The body is the indispensable intermediary through which the soul brings real action to bear upon itself" (FLN 288).

Ultimately, for Weil, the value of "spiritual" things can only be verified as an illumination projected onto physical things, and this is because only sensible things have a verifiable existence (FLN 147). Hence, respect and regard for the spiritual destiny of the human being is expressed indirectly (non-spiritually) by way of "the needs of the soul and of the body in this world" (SE 221). This makes matter the "universal test of what is real in thought," and this applies in the entire domain of thought, without exception: "matter is our infallible judge" (FLN 362). It is the "flesh" *in medias res* that not only marries matter and mind, but also nature and grace.

### Concluding Reconsiderations

When Simone Weil enacted her quasi-Cartesian experiment in 1930, she did not purpose to eliminate Cartesian dualism, but this is what her argument achieves—at least in a rudimentary, incompletely developed way. It posits the cogito's constitutive foundation in bodily imagination—the imaginative body—as no philosopher had done as axially before, though significant steps in this direction were made by the early Kant, Bergson, Husserl, Whitehead, and Heidegger.<sup>9</sup> She also did it as no philosopher was to do more fully until Merleau-Ponty published *The Phenomenology of Perception* more than a decade later in 1945. Indeed, the philosophical influences and affinities shared by these two contemporaries—who passed their *agrégation* in philosophy at the École Normale Supérieure one year apart (Merleau-Ponty in 1930, Weil in 1931)—are remarkable, though they worked with no detectable awareness of one another. Taylor Carman confirms that Merleau-Ponty was not personally acquainted with Weil, though they shared acquaintances in common, including Simone de Beauvoir (Carman 2008, 4). The time window in which they might have encountered one another was narrow, given that Weil died in August 1943 at age 34.

9. Edward Casey usefully outlines the approaches of several modern philosophers who seek to integrate the body into their thinking of the perception of space and place in chapter 10 of his *The Fate of Place* entitled "By Way of Body: Kant, Whitehead, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty" (Casey 1997, 202–242).

To my knowledge, no comparative studies of these two philosophers' thinking on the body are available, although their views on the Christian cross and French colonialism in Africa are addressed by Buttarelli (1996) and Bidima (2009), respectively. Weil scholars Emmanuel Gabellieri and Ann Pirruccello note general philosophical parallels between Weil and Merleau-Ponty in passing, but do not elaborate on them (Gabellieri 2003, 30, 78n203, 184n101; Pirruccello 2002, 479–80). From the viewpoint of the present argument, however, Pirruccello's claim is demonstrated to be inaccurate: "At the same time that Weil breaks interesting new ground in the philosophy of the body, her investigation is limited by philosophical assumptions that see the body as separate from, and inferior to, spirit and ideas" (479). That this is a very common reading of Weil—one that has long predominated, in fact—does not make it true. Let the evidence speak for itself, including the evidence reviewed here, and let interpretation of Weil's body-thinking be open to fresh consideration.

Weil's thinking, like Merleau-Ponty's, actually forefends the possibility of Cartesian dualism from the start, for a thinking that issues from the body-imagination in the way that Weil describes it phenomenologically is actually constituted out of the body in a way that thinking remains dependent on it. Thinking cannot then doubt the body, the oil in the lamp, so to speak, without extinguishing the flame, thought itself. Mind can abstract itself from the body-imagination only illicitly, in self-delusion, against its own condition and ground. The body fundamentally constitutes the *res cogitans*: without it, there can be no perception, no thought, no order, no world.

In Weil's thinking, the imaginative body is that actively sentient, perceptively empowered portion of matter that first and continually engages the environ, delineates order, construes and specifies the data of reality, suffers necessity, arbitrates all important decisions pertaining to action, mediates real, existentially necessary relationships for thought to think, and in the process incarnates faith. If thought presupposes the imaginative body as a sort of geometric medium capable of ordering an otherwise shapeless, senseless, chaotic materiality into a world, so likewise does matter employ the body as a medium to convey unto thought its existential task. The Cartesian orders of *extensio* and *cogitatio* coincide wholly in the body, constituting a single undivided world; for the world is constituted by thought "designing" matter, even as matter articulates itself in thought. The body is the unifying ground that ensures that these are not two disengaged processes but one and the same: thought imbuing itself in matter, matter illuminating itself in thought.

Although analytically we may distinguish these as movements in opposite directions, truly to think their relationship is to realize their actual effective unity. Just as two eyes see differentially, each possessing a different isolated image, yet producing one unitary field of vision, so the unitary “field of vision” of the body unifies thought and matter to produce a single environ: our “world.” Thinking *world* by means of *body*, we are wise to bear in mind Rémi Brague’s observation that “world” has never designated a simple description of reality but “has always translated a value judgment, the fruit of a sort of act of faith, either positive or negative” (Brague 2003, 23). Bodily mediation is the means and method by which *world* becomes real to us, and apart from the body’s continuing arbitration it would be effectively “derealized” as a sort of dreamscape or grand illusion. Thought disengaged from material reality lacks its “obstacle” and turns upon itself in pure abstraction, signifying nothing *really* because nothing real is at stake.

More than a single article is needed to draw forth the full significance of Simone Weil’s body-thinking. The purpose at hand has been to adduce evidence in support of a core argument: that Weil’s philosophy of the body belongs in the company of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception, as well as in historical confluence with his predecessors and followers in this “body-conscious” stream of twentieth-century philosophy. My hope is that Simone Weil will come to occupy her due position in the story of how the body finally came to think itself as its most indispensable presupposition.

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