

Reframing Continental Philosophy of Religion

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*For my former philosophy students
and ongoing interlocutors,
Jackie Berg, Madison Berns, Ben Davis, Caleb Faul,
Carlie Hughes, Ekram Kofiah, Nate Lavoie,
and Gary Suchor*

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Introduction

Attending to the Outlaw

A. Rebecca Rozelle-Stone

This is a book that was conceived and developed from a perceptible gap. The gap is conceptual and discursive, but it is also pragmatic and experiential, insofar as discursive omissions reinforce the apparent solidity of established ways of thinking and being, rendering other practices "outlaw." To put it simply, scholarship in the English-speaking world on the philosopher, mystic, and social activist Simone Weil has tended to focus on her evident and well-established influences from the ancient and modern philosophic traditions as well as on her many religious inspirations. However, she is often not included in the discourses or engaged with the theorists of the contemporary continental philosophical tradition, the roots of which were becoming well established in the time and place of her early twentieth-century French life (1909–1943). For this reason, the relative gap¹ in the continental scholarship on/with Weil is strange. As Krista E. Duttenhaver and Coy D. Jones note, in a more limited sense, "In spite of the steady growth in recent decades of scholarly interest in Simone Weil and her philosophy, there remains a surprising lack of investigation into the relevance of her thought to current trends in French philosophy."² At the same time, on a certain level, it is quite easy to understand the neglect. Weil herself was adept at self-exile from fashionable movements, trends, and collectivities of her time, and she apparently was unapologetic about her own distancing from her more existentially and phenomenologically concerned cohort; undoubtedly, "the metaphysical and religious nature of her thought has . . . prevented it from finding its proper place among the largely atheistic, deconstructionist tendencies of the contemporary French Left."³ Yet her self-imposed exile was not so much based on certain philosophical principles and disagreements but rather due to her different ways of *being in the world* and the manner of her attention therein.

Chapter 3

Decreation and the Creative Act

*Simone Weil and Nikolai Berdyaev*¹

Lisa Radakovich Holsberg

Human creativity is not a claim or a right on the part of man, but God's claim on and call to man. God awaits man's creative act, which is the response to the creative act of God. What is true of man's freedom is true also of his creativity: for freedom too is God's summons to man and man's duty towards God.²

—Nikolai Berdyaev

We possess nothing in the world—a mere chance can strip us of everything—except the power to say “I.” That is what we have to give to God—in other words, to destroy. There is absolutely no other free act which it is given us to accomplish—only the destruction of the “I.”³

—Simone Weil

One might well ask what a Russian aristocrat, whose hallmark was the celebration of human freedom as it was expressed in the creative act, and a French activist, whose deepest understanding of freedom involved the consent of the human soul to *de*-create, could possibly have to do with one another. Indeed, the quotations above are claims about human freedom that indicate seemingly oppositional trajectories. Yet, both of these claims originate from spiritual understandings of the human being and what it means theologically for human beings to be made in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26). In exploring each of these claims and the way their two trajectories pull on each other, this chapter will bring into relief particular dimensions of human freedom and spiritual anthropology reflected in the philosophies of these two distinctive intellectuals of the first half of the twentieth century.

Both Nikolai Berdyaev (1874–1948) and Simone Weil (1909–1943) were singular thinkers actively engaged in and affected by the political, social, and spiritual concerns of their time. Their years in Paris overlapped from 1923,

when Berdyaev settled in the city following his 1922 expulsion from Russia, to 1940, when Weil fled Paris from the invading German army. Berdyaev was part of the passionate stream of Russian religious philosophy that in the nineteenth century adopted German Idealism and inflected it with values of ethical and communal life that were deeply rooted in the Russian Orthodox faith.⁴ Weil was educated in the distinguished French philosophical tradition imparted to her through the finest secular institutions of philosophy in France. Their lives spanned the uproar of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia and the devastation of two World Wars. In this pressing and indeed dangerous context, both Berdyaev and Weil contributed prodigiously to the intellectual energies of their age by publishing, organizing, teaching, and trying to make sense of the tumultuous and calamitous world events that threatened to overwhelm their very existence. Although this chapter seeks to establish a conceptual rather than a direct historical relationship between Weil and Berdyaev, it is not, however, the first attempt to intellectually place these two philosophers together. The French scholar Marie-Magdeleine Davy, who knew both Weil and Berdyaev during their lifetimes, cited Weil to illuminate Berdyaev and vice versa in each of her respective books on the two philosophers. Davy noted similarities in their indignation against injustice, commitment to ideological critique, and their prophetic spirits.⁵ Two decades later, David McLellan linked Weil and Berdyaev together in his exposition of Weil's Marxist thought.⁶ Recently, Lesley Chamberlain noted that there was an "interesting overlap" in the thought of Berdyaev and Weil, and urged scholars to criticize and appreciate Russian idealists like Berdyaev "alongside Weil, Buber, and Levinas—religious thinkers who worked on the margins of philosophy."⁷

Although neither of these philosophers regarded themselves as theologians, the religious cast of their reasoning renders the lenses of philosophy and history insufficient in grasping the scope and aim of their thought. In his introduction to *Simone Weil: Late Philosophical Writings*, Eric O. Springsted cautioned against restricting the thought of Simone Weil to philosophy alone, or at least to philosophy as it was understood in the academic sense. He wrote: "To approach her in a strictly philosophical way will often completely miss—often deliberately—a genuine and central theological commitment in Simone Weil the thinker, or will miss it *as* a theological or religious commitment."⁸ Springsted's caution could also be applied to the thought of Nikolai Berdyaev. Although Berdyaev insisted during his expatriation that the West not regard him as an official representative of his Russian Orthodox Christian tradition—a position seconded by many of his fellow Orthodox—the doctrines and spirituality of Berdyaev's faith were nonetheless critical to his thought.⁹ For her part, Weil did not seek baptism, preferring to remain "*en hupomene*" on the steps of the church, neither in nor out of it; yet this did not prevent her later thinking from being permeated with her grasp of Christianity—even if, as Springsted noted, this Christianity appeared "unorthodox"

to some. Both Weil and Berdyaev, then, could be considered outliers in their respective Christian traditions. Their positions on the margins of both religious institutions and secular philosophy offered them the intellectual freedom—imperative to both philosophers—to present critiques of social and historical institutions, including Christianity (which they did). Nonetheless, a theological lens is necessary to understand what Berdyaev meant by *the creative act* and Weil by *decreation*, because both of these ideas were dependent on specific theological concerns: the definition of the human being as made in the image and likeness of God; the human being called to the imitation of God in the act of God's creation; and specific interpretations of the Christian doctrine of creation that reached beyond the orthodox (with a small "o") Christian notion of *creatio ex nihilo*. In this chapter, I will explore Berdyaev's notion of the creative act and Weil's doctrine of decreation, in turn, identifying the distinguishing characteristics of both positions as they relate to spiritual anthropology and human freedom.

THE CREATIVE ACT

Berdyaev had his first intuition of the primacy of freedom and creativity during the writing of his early seminal text, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*. The book was begun during a trip to Italy in 1912 and published in Moscow in 1916.¹⁰ *The Meaning of the Creative Act* was Berdyaev's response to the deep suffering that he endured when, during a period of contemplating human sinfulness, his preoccupation with sin threatened to overwhelm him. In *Dream and Reality*, his autobiography written in 1940 near the end of his life, Berdyaev recalled that in the midst of this paralyzing episode he was seized "by a tumultuous force" that wrenched him away from oppression and flooded him with light. Berdyaev named this spiritual experience "the exalting call to creativity."¹¹ No longer immobilized by his sense of sin, the young philosopher declared that "henceforth I would create out of the freedom of my soul like the great artificer whose image I bear."¹² *The Meaning of the Creative Act* was a witness to this call and sought to explain it. Berdyaev stated in *Dream and Reality* that the earlier book was born

of a great passion . . . in a state of almost feverish intellectual excitement. All the themes to which I devoted my life and work were contained or pre-figured in this book: I spoke there of man's personality, freedom and creativeness, of his greatness and dignity, and of his tragic and afflicted situation, of God's desire for man and of man's desire for God.¹³

Although the book emerged quite early in his career, Berdyaev claimed in *Dream and Reality* that the earlier volume contained in raw form all of his "dominant and formative ideas and insights."¹⁴

In *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, Berdyaev declared that the creative act was not limited to artistic activity but that it was perhaps best expressed by artistic creativeness. With this qualification in mind, I will consider his remarks on art to frame here what he meant by the creative act more generally. For Berdyaev, artistic creativity demonstrated in concrete ways a “victory over the heaviness of ‘the world’” that was “a partial transfiguration of life.”¹⁵ In these ways, the artistic creative act offered in a perceivable manner a glimpse of an eschatological world beyond. However, during Berdyaev’s time, the values of the eschatological realm were typically pursued not through art but rather via traditional religious methods of repentance as well as ascetic acts of renunciation. Berdyaev recognized these traditional approaches as techniques for overcoming “this world,” but believed that they also posed the danger of not bearing fruit.¹⁶ As he realized from his own spiritual experience, a focus on sinfulness could lead to a “thickening of the darkness within oneself.”¹⁷ This darkness could, in fact, encourage what for Berdyaev was the greatest sin: the spiritual suicide of despair. In the event of despair, the purpose of repentance and asceticism—that of a revolutionary breaking-in toward “another world”—was lost. There remained then for Berdyaev only “one way of salvation from spiritual death”: the way of a “creative shaking of the spirit.”¹⁸ Creativity was a spiritual mandate, Berdyaev believed, that was as religiously legitimate as the adoption of traditional ascetic practices. In fact, he wrote, in a “mysterious and wonderful way, repentance is reborn into creative impulse and renews the fainting and fading spirit, [and] frees its constructive powers.”¹⁹ In 1931, Berdyaev further linked artistic creativity and religion in his book on ethics, *The Destiny of Man*. He asserted in this work that the “final depths of all true art are religious. Art is religious in the depths of the very artistic creative act.”²⁰

However, the creative act was not only exalted, but it was also tragic. Here Berdyaev’s emphasis on eschatology cast a distinct light on creativity that was not related to a call to repentance or asceticism but rather offered a particular distinction in understanding the efforts and fruits of the creative act. The perfection of creative intuition, Berdyaev believed, could not be achieved in this finite world. This was its tragic character. The creative act could only be fully realized in an eschatological future. In *Dream and Reality*, Berdyaev explained:

Man’s creative act is doomed to fail within the conditions of this world. . . . Its initial impulse is to bring forth a new life, to transfigure the world and usher in a new heaven and a new earth; but in the conditions of the fallen world the effort turns out to be unavailing: . . . The attempt gives place to the production of aesthetic and cultural objects of a greater or lesser perfection . . . a book, a symphony, a picture, a poem or a social institution; but all these are evidence of the painful disparity between the creative impulse and its partial and fragmentary embodiment in the objective world.²¹

This “painful disparity” referred to the two modalities of creativity that Berdyaev distinguished in *The Destiny of Man*: the inner aspect, which was the “primary creative act in which man stands as it were face to face with God,” and the outer aspect, which was the “secondary creative act in which he faces other men and the world.”²² The first aspect was, in a sense, vertical: the expression of human freedom in imitation of God’s freedom in creation. In this aspect, it may be said that the human being, creating out of unfettered freedom, created “out of nothing.” The second aspect was horizontal: a gift from the human being to humanity. This second aspect was constrained by the power of the world and bound by the laws of “art and technique.”²³ In its constraints, this aspect was a second-order expression of human freedom limited in its realization. For Berdyaev, the freedom expressed in the first aspect of the creative act was “primeval” and “fathomless.” He understood this first aspect as a response to God’s call to an “abyss of freedom”—the source of freedom which was not determined by or proceeding from God.²⁴

To understand this striking notion, one must look to the writings of Jakob Boehme (1575–1624), the mystic Lutheran cobbler whose writings deeply influenced the German Idealism that shaped Russian philosophy. Berdyaev inherited from German Idealism not only its dialectical method but also the Boehmian myth of the *Ungrund*. This myth opened up for Berdyaev the Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* and allowed him to establish not only the theandric nature of humanity but also the existence of evil in the world as outside of God’s responsibility. Drawing on Boehme, dialectical reasoning, and the thrust of German speculative mysticism, Berdyaev wrote the following narrative of creation, effectively positioning the origin of freedom outside of God:

Out of the Divine Nothing, the *Gottheit* or the *Ungrund*, the Holy Trinity, God the Creator is born. The creation of the world by God the Creator is a secondary act. From this point of view it may be said that freedom is not created by God: it is rooted in the Nothing, in the *Ungrund* from all eternity . . . it is part of the nothing out of which God created the world. The opposition between God the Creator and freedom is secondary: in the primeval mystery of the Divine Nothing this opposition is transcended, for both God and freedom are manifested out of the *Ungrund*. God the Creator cannot be held responsible for freedom which gave rise to evil. Man is the child of God and the child of freedom—of nothing, of non-being, *to meon*.²⁵

According to this creation narrative, God the Creator arose together with *meonic* freedom from the Nothing that was the *Ungrund*. This *meonic* freedom was then part of the “nothing” out of which God the Creator created the world and, together with God, it birthed the theandric nature of human beings. The Divine Nothing of the *Ungrund* was the non-being Berdyaev believed was philosophically dialectically necessary in order to posit the dynamic being of God. The French Count Jean de Pange, who was present at the Catholic-Orthodox

seminars Berdyaev hosted in the 1930s at his Parisian suburban home in Clamart, recounted in his journal the impact some of Berdyaev's assertions had on his listeners.²⁶ He remembered Berdyaev pointing out that "the happiest discovery of Hegel had been that one could only move as a result of contradiction." For Berdyaev, this discovery introduced a dynamic in the dialectic approach, and this dynamic dialectic posed a challenge to the dominant scholastic concept of Being. Berdyaev, de Pange wrote, declared that Liberty held primacy over Being. Accordingly, then, the gift of human freedom was not gratuitous but necessary, and, de Pange explained, "prior to the world and to Being, there was not nothingness but rather Freedom." These assertions provoked a strong response among those gathered at Clamart, recalled de Pange, with the French and Russians leaping to their feet, talking together at the same time.²⁷

Berdyaev's interpretation of Boehme, according to historian Antoine Arjakovsky, understood the birth of God as the beginning of Being from "unfathomable freedom, the passionate desire of nothingness to become something."²⁸ The theandric human being created by God shared with God the same *meonic* freedom and desire to become. This shared *meonic* freedom was essential for Berdyaev, for without it he believed that human freedom was a falsehood. What human beings regarded as freedom would merely be an illusion masking a human existence that was actually contained and determined within a closed system of divine omniscience and omnipotence. If human beings participated in the same *meonic* freedom as God, Berdyaev reasoned, then human beings were truly free—and as free beings, they would join God as cocreators in the process of creating and transfiguring the world. The negative side of this was that if they were truly free, human beings could also choose to break the bond of love with God by exercising their freedom in acts of evil. Critically for Berdyaev, however, this evil was not a trap or a test by God. Dialectically, the possibility for both evil and good emerged from the depths of freedom in the *Ungrund*.

Like many Russian thinkers, Berdyaev was haunted by Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov*. Its depiction of the existential anguish of Ivan Karamazov, as well as the smugness of the Grand Inquisitor regarding the evil and suppression of human freedom necessary in order to establish "world harmony," tormented the philosopher. But with Berdyaev's interpretation of Boehme's *Ungrund*, freedom moved out of the *meonic* abyss on its own breeze, releasing God from the responsibility for evil. In *The Destiny of Man*, Berdyaev explained further:

[God] wants [man] to answer the call to enter the fullness of the divine life and participate in God's creative work of conquering non-being. God does not answer His own call: the answer is from freedom which is independent of Him. God the Creator is all-powerful over being, over the created world, but He has no power over non-being, over the uncreated freedom which is impenetrable to Him. In the first act of creation God appears as the Maker of the world. But that

act cannot avert the possibility of evil contained in meonic freedom. The myth of the Fall tells of this powerlessness of the creator to avert the evil resulting from freedom which He has not created.²⁹

Needless to say, Berdyaev's incorporation of Boehme's concept of the *Ungrund* and his own notion of uncreated freedom into the Christian doctrine of creation provoked strong objections from the less speculatively and dialectically minded Roman Catholics of Berdyaev's Parisian circles. By placing freedom "outside" God, Berdyaev challenged not only the scholastic notion of the ontological primacy of Being but also the theological definition of human freedom as simply a choice by the human will of whether or not to sin. Following a 1931 lecture delivered by Berdyaev at his home, Jean de Pange included in the second volume of his journal a few of the responses to Berdyaev's ideas from some of the Catholics gathered at Clamart:

Since St. Augustine, we think of freedom only as the possibility to sin or not sin—but we do not think of it as creative of positive values. . . . Preexistence of freedom in relationship to humanity, this freedom being rooted in some way in the nothingness from which humanity was drawn forth. . . . Gabriel Marcel is afraid of the consequences of Berdyaev's hypothesis. Maritain: The problem of salvation is not so much escaping from sin as becoming God.³⁰

De Pange and Marcel were clearly aware of the positive and negative implications of Berdyaev's interpretation of creation. Arjakovsky reported that Jacques Maritain wrote Berdyaev himself in 1930 to voice his objections to the Russian's notion of the *Ungrund*.³¹

The French Catholics were not the only ones suspicious of Berdyaev's philosophy of creativity. From its first iteration in 1916 in *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, when theologian Sergei Bulgakov decried the philosophy as "demonic", "titanic", "humanistic", and nearly akin to anti-Christ³²—Bulgakov later adjusted his views—to the posthumous condemnation of Berdyaev by church historian Georges Florovsky, who accused the philosopher of non-Orthodox "Western" ideas and of completely neglecting Scripture,³³ Berdyaev's fellow Russian Orthodox numbered among his critics. Berdyaev addressed his detractors in his autobiography by stressing that "human creativity is not a claim or a right on the part of man, but God's claim on and call to man."³⁴ He believed that the way of holiness as understood by the religious consciousness of his day was worn out, petrified, and no longer spiritually useful. Another spiritual way was necessary, and the creative act presented just such a way. Regarding a biblical justification for his philosophy of creativity, Berdyaev replied with this retort:

God does not reveal to man that which it is for man to reveal to God. In Holy Scripture we find no revelation concerning man's creativity—not on account of

its implied denial of human creativity, but because creativity is a matter for man to reveal. God is silent on this matter and expects man to speak.³⁵

The relationship between God and the human being for Berdyaev was such that it extended beyond the revelation of Scripture toward a mutual dialogue of creativity between free cocreators. In its transfiguration of humanity and the world, the creative act foreshadowed a new Heaven and a new Earth which was to be prepared for by both God and humanity—a humanity made in the image and likeness of God and called to share, from the same ground of *meonic* freedom, in God's creative activity.³⁶

One can imagine Simone Weil replying to Berdyaev: all very well and good. But what creative act was possible when the human being was beset by affliction? Of what use was the notion of *meonic* freedom if the human soul could be destroyed? Choosing a religious life of repentance and asceticism or embracing the call to the creative act was precisely that: a choice. But affliction, which Weil had intensely observed in others as well as personally and intimately experienced herself, struck without paying any heed to human choice. Affliction was part of the random chance that characterized the realm of necessity in which human beings lived. Everything the human being called "I," declared Simone Weil, could be wiped away by the encounter with affliction. Her own contact with affliction irrevocably changed her understanding of human freedom and the capacity of the human will, causing her to distill the range of both to the consent to decreation.

DECREATION

Simone Weil wrestled with issues of the human will and human action throughout her short and brilliant life. In her 1930 qualifying dissertation for the *diplôme d'études supérieures* at the Ecole Normale, titled "Science and Perception in Descartes," Weil worked through the method of the founder of modern Western philosophy and reframed his famous cogito from *I think, therefore I am*, to *I can [act], therefore I am*. Her friend and biographer, Simone Pétrement, recalled Weil's words in the dissertation: "To exist, to think, to know are only aspects of a single reality: to be able to act. . . . From the moment that I act, I make myself exist. . . . What I am is defined by what I can do."³⁷ Following her graduation, Weil put her thesis to the test. She grew more involved in the worker's movement with teachers, miners, and factory laborers. The postwar rise of nationalism and fascism in Italy, Germany, and Spain—with strong echoes in France—as well as the increasing news of the suffering endured by the Russian people under communist rule tormented her. As one who had once been nicknamed "The Red Virgin"

(although she never joined the Communist Party), the situation in Russia was crucially disturbing and she did not hesitate to voice her criticism. In 1933, she published a review in *La Critique sociale* asserting that the spirit she thought was evident in Marx was "incompatible with the vulgar materialism of Engels and Lenin."³⁸ She met Trotsky in 1933 and quarreled with him over whether Russia was truly a worker's state—Trotsky insisted that it was, Weil that it was not.³⁹

By 1933–1934, Weil's thought had reached an impasse. She was unable to find adequate solutions for the misery she witnessed around her. Increasingly disillusioned by the current political and social climate, she hoped that actual contact with the life of the worker would provide her with answers that her previous methods could not. She took a sabbatical leave from her teaching duties in 1934 and entered the workforce as a factory pieceworker. This radical move brought Weil into contact with what she named "*le malheur*," or "affliction."

In the factory, Weil experienced the "specific and irreducible kind of suffering" of affliction: a suffering that appropriated the soul and branded it with slavery.⁴⁰ Affliction attacked life in its entirety: socially, psychologically, and physically. It arose from the mechanism of necessity and struck arbitrarily, by chance. It had the capability to reduce its victims to things, to invisibility, and to social and self-contempt, and its victims could not help anyone, least of all themselves. Human beings who were not afflicted had the instinctive tendency to run from affliction—or else attack its victims—and cloak themselves behind a veil of lies and self-protection. If one was afflicted for long enough, Weil observed, one would become complicit with affliction and not seek to change the situation, even deliberately flouting attempts at deliverance from affliction by others. Even if the conditions of affliction were relieved, Weil felt, there remained within the victim something inside that desired the affliction again. Weil believed this took place in those cases when affliction had "pierced irrevocably into the depths of [the] soul." Affliction therefore impacted the agency of the human will and human freedom, acting "like a parasite" with the power to direct the afflicted one away from the "impulses of the soul towards happiness," and toward affliction's own ends.

Weil's own contact with affliction in the factory forced her previous conception of the human will to its limit and found it wanting. Her confidence in the power of the human will and in the human being's capacity to act was forever changed. It was with this new recognition of the power of affliction to restrict and even destroy the possibilities of human freedom that Weil developed her spiritual anthropology emphasizing the notion of decreation. Weil's remarks on decreation are scattered throughout her writings; in the explanation that follows I will draw from several different essays in order to demonstrate the coherence of her doctrine.

In Weil's doctrine of decreation, the human being was called to imitate God in God's act of creation. Already this appears like a contradiction in terms. But Weil understood the divine act of creation in a specific way. According to Weil, God created the world by withdrawing in order for the world to come into being. Decreation then was the spiritual response of the human being to God's activity of withdrawal. Like Berdyaev, Weil looked beyond the orthodoxy of the Christian teaching of *creatio ex nihilo* to craft her doctrine of creation. But unlike the Russian philosopher, she did not turn to the myth of Jakob Boehme. Instead, she directed her gaze to ancient Greece and the myth of creation in Plato's *Timaeus*.

After fleeing the German invasion of Paris, Weil took refuge in Marseille from 1941 to 1942. It was there as well as in Casablanca that she composed her essays on ancient Greek texts that were published posthumously as the collections *Intuitions pré-chrétiennes* (1951) and *La Source grecques* (1953).⁴¹ In one of these essays, "Divine Love in Creation," Weil cited passages of *Timaeus* in her own translation and interpreted them in an explicitly Christian way. In *Timaeus* (29d), Weil wrote, the "composer" God who composed creation was good, and desired the creation to be as much as possible like himself. The world was a "spiritual being . . . engendered as such by the Providence of God" and as a spiritual being, it was a living being that had a soul (30b).⁴² The Soul of the World was referred to as *monogenes*, the Son of God—the same word, noted Weil, used by St. John in the fourth Gospel. In this Gospel, Weil reminded her reader, the evangelist described the glory of the *logos* as that of *monogenes*, or a "father's only son" (John 1:14). In her Christian reading of the *Timaeus*, Weil unhesitatingly equated Plato's Soul of the World with the Son of God who was Christ.⁴³

Weil then developed the following interpretation of creation. In the *Timaeus*, she wrote, the creator placed the Soul of the World in the center of a circle in a circular heaven, "unique, solitary, capable by its own virtue of being its own companion, having need of nothing other than itself, known and loved sufficiently itself by itself. In this manner he begets this happy God: the world" (34b).⁴⁴ The creator God then split this composition in two along its length, crossed the parts over in an X, bent them in a circle and attached them each to the other, and set them in motion turning identically upon the center. It was with this action that Weil believed Plato showed God in voluntary cleavage, torn apart in creation.⁴⁵ She described this cleavage and linked it to another Christian doctrine, that of the eternal and blessed life of the Trinity:

It is this involvement with space and time which constitutes this cleavage, which is already a sort of Passion. St. John also, in the Apocalypse (xiii, 8) speaks of the "Lamb slain from the foundation of the world." The two halves of the Soul of the World are crossed, one upon the other; the cross is oblique, but all the same it is a sort of cross. But opposite to that crossing point the two halves are

joined and welded, and the whole is enveloped by the circular movement, a movement which changes nothing, which curls upon itself; the perfect image of the eternal and blessed act which is the life of the Trinity.⁴⁶

This tearing apart demonstrated for Weil that creation, then, was not an expansion or emanation on the part of God but rather was the trinitarian God's loving, voluntary act of abdication by withdrawal. Moreover, as the following passage demonstrates, the creation of the world had christological dimensions that pointed, on the one hand, to the spiritual nature of the human being and, on the other, recognized the sense of God's powerlessness in a contemporary world fraught with violence and evil. Implicitly drawing on Christ's divine condescension in St. Paul's Letter to the Philippians, Weil elaborated on the Christological aspect of abdication:

Because he is the creator, God is not all-powerful. Creation is abdication. But he is all-powerful in this sense, that his abdication is voluntary. He knows its effects, and wills them. . . . He has abandoned the whole of our being, except for that part of our soul which dwells, like Him, in the heavens. Christ himself did not know this truth until he was on the Cross. The power of God here below, compared to that of the Prince of this world, is something infinitely small. God has abandoned God. God has emptied himself. This means that both the Creation and the Incarnation are included with the Passion.⁴⁷

This was a radically kenotic understanding of creation. God emptied God's self in creation in voluntary abdication, withdrawing except from that "part of our soul" which dwelt with Him—what Weil described elsewhere as the "uncreated" and "infinitesimally small part" of our soul.⁴⁸

Weil regarded the human soul as created matter and, as matter, subject to necessity and the laws of the world which included destruction and death. Necessity presented itself to human beings in two ways: as the goodness of the Providence of God manifested in the beauty of the order of the world, and as the blind and arbitrary forces that caused human beings pain, suffering, and affliction. Necessity was the realm of the finite, created world that stood separate from and in contrast to the supernatural sphere of God. Because of this separation, necessity could be regarded from two points of view: that of the created and that of the supernatural. To understand necessity, one needed to comprehend the nature of perspective. If human beings changed their perspective to regard necessity from the point of view of the supernatural, they would see the face of necessity that was turned to God in obedience.⁴⁹ Weil wrote that "necessity is an enemy for man as long as he thinks in the first person."⁵⁰ She elaborated:

Seen from our present stand-point, and in human perspective . . . [necessity] is quite blind. If, however, we transport our hearts beyond ourselves, beyond the universe, beyond space and time, to where our Father dwells, and if we regard

this mechanism from there, it appears quite different. What seemed to be necessity becomes obedience. Matter is entirely passive and in consequence entirely obedient to God's will. It is a perfect model for us. . . . What is more beautiful than the effect of gravity on sea-waves as they flow in ever-changing folds, or the almost eternal folds of the mountains?⁵¹

Decreation afforded human beings the path to participate in necessity from God's perspective and, in doing so, to fall into accord with obedience to the will of God.

For Weil, decreation was the spiritual process that imitated God's act of abdication in creation. We could only decreate what belonged to us. But most of what we thought of as "us"—our possessions, status, bodies, and even our souls—did not actually belong to us, for they were subject to chance and necessity and thus vulnerable to being destroyed with or without our consent. So what then was left of "us" that we could consent to decreate? Weil wrote that the only thing we truly possessed in this world was the power to say "I"—and that this was what we had to give to God.⁵² Our consent to shed the autonomous "I" of the human personality was decreation. We consented to decreation in our acceptance of ourselves as no more and no less than creatures: "To consent to being a creature and nothing else. It is like consenting to lose one's whole existence."⁵³ One still existed in exterior reality, of course, but one's "I" collapsed to become one with the will of God. The "infinitesimally small" and "uncreated part" of the soul, the part where God came to meet the human being, linked both the created and decreated selves. In decreation, one still remained subject to necessity; yet necessity had changed its meaning. Weil eloquently described this process in view of the possibilities it presented of contact with supernatural love:

In those who love God, even in those who are perfect, the natural part of the soul is always entirely subject to mechanical necessity. But the presence of supernatural love in the soul constitutes a new factor of the mechanism and transforms it. We are like shipwrecked persons clinging to logs upon the sea and tossed in an entirely passive manner by every movement of the waves. From the height of heaven God throws each one a rope. He who seizes the rope and does not let go, despite the pain and the fear, remains as much as the others subject to the buffeting of the waves; only for him these buffets combine with the tension of the cord to form a different mechanical whole. . . . When one conceives the universe as an immense mass of blind obedience sprinkled with points of consent, one conceives also one's own being as a little mass of blind obedience with a point of consent at the centre. The consent is supernatural love, it is the Spirit of God in us.⁵⁴

The consent to decreation allowed the human being to participate in infinite supernatural love and serve as a vehicle for that love to pass, unobstructed,

from God to God. God was love and only God could truly love God. Weil explained this process:

The soul does not love a creature, with created love. The love within it is divine, uncreated, for it is the love of God for God which is passing through it. God alone is capable of loving God. We can only consent to give up our own feelings so as to allow free passage for this love. That is the meaning of denying oneself. We were created solely in order to give this consent.⁵⁵

Weil declared of the consent to decreation that "there is absolutely no other free act which it is given us to accomplish."⁵⁶ To pause for a moment: recall that this is same woman who once declared in her thesis that *I can, therefore I am*. Following her contact with affliction, the agency of the human will—the finite, created human will—and its expression of human freedom were distilled for her into one crucial act: the consent to decreation.

Affliction itself presented the greatest threat to the voluntary, free consent to decreation, for it possessed the capacity to rob the human being of its only true autonomy and freedom. It did not surprise Weil that affliction existed in the world, for she believed we were subject to the "blind play of mechanical necessities" that were indifferent to our desires and welfare.⁵⁷ What did surprise Weil, however, was that "God should have given affliction the power to seize the very souls of the innocent and possess them as sovereign master."⁵⁸ For, in affliction, God was "absent for a time, more absent than a dead man, more absent than light in the utter darkness of a cell."⁵⁹ The great horror and tragedy of affliction was that this experience of the absence of God could lead a soul to stop loving. Weil wrote:

What is terrible is that if, in this darkness where there is nothing to love, the soul ceases to love, God's absence becomes final. The soul has to go on loving in the void, or at least to go on wanting to love, though it may be only with an infinitesimal part of itself.⁶⁰

If the soul ceased to love, or ceased wanting to love, then the infinitesimally small part of the human being that truly belonged to it—the uncreated part of the soul that was able to consent to decreation—could be extinguished. This was why Weil declared that "those who plunge men into affliction before they are prepared to receive it are killers of souls."⁶¹ J. P. Little noted, "Decreation can take place only from the inside, and the greatest crime one can commit against a fellow human being is to destroy his or her autonomy from the outside, so that he or she is no longer in a position to consent to decreation."⁶² There was no greater evil for Weil, Little wrote, than the "conscious or unconscious moral destruction present in throwing others into a state of affliction."⁶³ Decreation was a sacrifice of self but it must be freely consented to and it must not be thrust upon others, for that destroyed the possibility of

their own free consent to decreate. Moreover, the existence of others was not subsidiary in the doctrine of decreation. The great fruit of decreation was the capacity to truly “see” another human being and, if that human being was a victim of affliction, to project one’s being into the being of the afflicted. In doing so, one voluntarily took on the other’s affliction as one’s own.⁶⁴ The only way this could be done was through decreation, so that supernatural love could move through the decreeted human being without hindrance. Only supernatural love, Weil declared, was capable of such a feat. She wrote:

To project one’s being into an afflicted person is to assume for a moment his affliction, it is to choose voluntarily something whose very essence consists in being imposed by constraint upon the unwilling. And that is an impossibility. Only Christ has done it. Only Christ and those men whose whole soul he possesses can do it. What these men give to the afflicted whom they succor, when they project their own being into them, is not really their own being, because they no longer possess one; it is Christ himself.⁶⁵

Therein we see the profound meaning of decreation, revealed in the act of love for one’s fellow human being in the grip of affliction. Decreation allowed human beings to participate in the love of God through the loving of another.

Clearly, Weil’s thoughts on the possibility of a free human “act”—creative or otherwise—are flung on an opposite pole to Berdyaev’s. Yet, there is in Weil’s doctrine of decreation a similarity in structure to the two phases Berdyaev perceived in the creative act. Berdyaev saw the inner aspect of the creative act as the human being “face to face with God,” as it were, consenting to be cocreator with God. The outer, secondary aspect of the creative act, when the human being “faces other men and the world” resulted in the cultural products of creativity—books, paintings, symphonies, institutions, and so on—gifted to humanity. Weil also understood decreation in two phases of activity. The first was the human being’s consent to decreation in the imitation of God’s withdrawal in creation. The second was the fruit of decreation, which was between one human being and another but which entailed God loving God through the decreeted human being in authentic and loving contact with the afflicted other.

TWO SPIRITUAL TRAJECTORIES OF FREEDOM

Nikolai Berdyaev and Simone Weil both began the construction of their spiritual anthropologies with the theological conviction that the human being was made in the image and likeness of God. They stressed the human being’s call to imitate God as they understood God’s activity in creation. For Berdyaev, this imitation

took place through the freedom of the creative act. Although the cultural products of creativity in this world were destined to fall tragically short of their eschatological aspirations, the creative act itself was one with the transcendent creative act of God. Drawing on the Boehmian myth, Berdyaev interpreted both God and freedom as emerging from the *Ungrund*: this absolved God from the responsibility for evil in the world and accounted for the creation of the human being, who shared the same uncreated, *meonic* freedom as that possessed by God. In this way, the human being was truly able to be cocreator with God—and in fact, was divinely mandated to be so: *God awaits from us a creative act.*

For Weil, the imitation of God in creation demanded that human beings follow God’s example of withdrawal by freely consenting to decreation. The myth of creation in Plato’s *Timaeus* gave Weil the structure by which she could explain, in a Christian tenor, the abdication of God in the act of creation. The human being possessed freedom; however, the existence of affliction in the world seriously challenged any claims to authentic expression of that freedom. In the consent to decreation, the human will exercised its one truly free act. Decreation made contact with the supernatural love of God possible, allowing God to love God through the medium of the decreeted human being to another.

Despite the different vocabularies, concepts, and conclusions of Weil and Berdyaev, both of these twentieth-century philosophers articulated their spiritual anthropologies with equally strong commitments to human freedom and to probing the spiritual nature of the human being. To do so, they each took their mythic speculations on the creation of the world wider than the reach of traditional interpretations of the Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*—in original ways that are nonetheless surprisingly similar as philosophical and theological moves. Likewise, they both discerned in the creative and decreative exercise of human freedom two distinct phases: one between the human being and God, and another between the human being and other human beings. Both thinkers took the theological teachings of their Christian traditions seriously and tested them against their contemporary realities of evil, injustice, suffering, and affliction. The spiritual trajectories of human freedom that they offer to us today are rather like the opposing directions and tensile pull of an infinite line. Considered together, Weil and Berdyaev present a spectrum of positions on the relationship of the human being to decreation and the creative act that opens up new possibilities for us in understanding spiritual anthropology and human freedom.

NOTES

1. I would like to thank John Gleim, Christina Gschwandtner, Roger Haight, Celene Lillie, Brenna Moore, Kathryn Reinhard, and Eric O. Springsted for their support and assistance with this project.

2. Nicolas Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality: An Essay in Autobiography*, trans. Katharine Lampert (New York: Collier Books, 1962), 204. The autobiography was composed in 1940, with an epilogue postscript added in 1947, and was published in Russian posthumously in 1949 as Самопознание. Опыт философской автобиографии (Париж: YMCA-Press, 1949). The first English translation was published in 1950.
3. Simone Weil, "The Self," in *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, ed. Siân Miles (New York: Grove Press, 1986), 79.
4. This "inflection" caused Russian thinkers to challenge the primacy of reason in Western philosophy long before the "postmodern turn," as argued by Lesley Chamberlain in *Motherland: A Philosophical History of Russia* (New York: Rookery Press, 2007) and Artur Mrówczyński-Van Allen in *Between the Icon and the Idol: The Human Person and the Modern State in Russian Literature and Thought—Chadayev, Soloviev, Grossman*, trans. Matthew Philipp Whelan (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013).
5. See Marie-Magdeleine Davy, *The Mysticism of Simone Weil*, trans. Cynthia Rowland (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1951), and Nicolas Berdyaev: *Man of the Eighth Day*, trans. Leonora Siepman (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1967).
6. David McLellan, *Simone Weil: Utopian Pessimist* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan Press, 1989), 77.
7. Lesley Chamberlain, *The Philosophy Steamer: Lenin and the Exile of the Intelligentsia* (London: Atlantic Books, 2006), 295.
8. Eric O. Springsted, "Introduction," *Simone Weil: Late Philosophical Writings*, ed. Eric O. Springsted and trans. Eric O. Springsted and Lawrence E. Schmidt (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), 1–2.
9. See Andrew Louth, "Nikolai Berdyaev—Creativity, Freedom and the Person," *Modern Orthodox Thinkers: From the Philokalia to the Present* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 60–76.
10. Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, trans. Donald A. Lowrie (San Rafael, CA: Semantron Press, 2009). Matthew Spinka noted that the Moscow publication of Смысл творчества. Оправдания человека gave 1916 as the publication date, but that "the date on the inside of the front page is given as 1915. Either one of these dates is a typographical error, or the process of publishing lasted from one year to the other. It must be remembered," he added, "that these were the war years." Matthew Spinka, *Nicolas Berdyaev: Captive of Freedom* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1950), 200, footnote 3. Berdyaev's account of the writing of the book is recalled in Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, 205–8.
11. Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, 205.
12. Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, 205–6.
13. Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, 104.
14. Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, 206.
15. Berdyaev, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, 225.
16. Berdyaev, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, 161.
17. Berdyaev, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, 165–66.
18. Berdyaev, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, 166.

19. Berdyaev, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, 166.
20. Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man*, trans. Natalie Duddington (San Rafael, CA: Semantron Press, 2009), 248. Originally published as О назначении человека. Опыт парадоксальной этики (Париж: Современные записки, 1931).
21. Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, 209.
22. Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man*, 128.
23. Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man*, 129.
24. Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man*, 128.
25. Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man*, 25.
26. Cited in Antoine Arjakovsky, *The Way: Religious Thinkers of the Russian Emigration in Paris and their Journal, 1925–1940*, trans. Jerry Ryan (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), 330–31. The following recollections of Count Jean de Pange are from volume 1 of his *Journal* (1927–1930), published in 1964.
27. Cited in Arjakovsky, *The Way*, 331.
28. Arjakovsky, *The Way*, 77.
29. Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man*, 25.
30. Quoted in Arjakovsky, *The Way*, 332. Count Jean de Pange's volume 2 of his *Journal* (1931–1933) was published in Paris in 1967.
31. Cited in Arjakovsky, *The Way*, 331.
32. Recalled by Berdyaev in *Dream and Reality*, 208.
33. Georges Florovsky, "Review of Nicolas Berdyaev: *Captive of Freedom* by Matthew Spinka," *Church History* 19: 305–6 (December 1950).
34. Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, 204.
35. Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, 204.
36. Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, 206.
37. Simone Pétrément, *Simone Weil: A Life*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979), 64.
38. Pétrément, *Simone Weil: A Life*, 184.
39. McLellan, *Simone Weil: Utopian Pessimist*, 65.
40. The following discussion of affliction, unless otherwise noted, is drawn from Simone Weil, "The Love of God and Affliction," *On Science, Necessity, and the Love of God*, trans. Richard Rees (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 170–98.
41. See Marie Cabaud Meaney, *Simone Weil's Apologetic Use of Literature: Her Christological Interpretations of Ancient Greek Texts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 7–10.
42. Simone Weil, "Divine Love in Creation," *Intimations of Christianity among the Ancient Greeks* (London: Routledge, 1957), 89–105 and 91.
43. Weil, "Divine Love in Creation," 89–105 and 92.
44. Weil, "Divine Love in Creation," 89–105 and 93.
45. Weil, "Divine Love in Creation," 89–105 and 93.
46. Weil, "Divine Love in Creation," 89–105 and 93.
47. Simone Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, trans. Richard Rees (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 120.

48. Simone Weil, "Some Reflections on the Love of God," *On Science, Necessity, and the Love of God*, 156.
49. Weil, "The Love of God and Affliction," 186.
50. Simone Weil, "The Pythagorean Doctrine," *Intimations of Christianity among the Ancient Greeks*, 151–201 and 180.
51. Weil, "The Love of God and Affliction," 179.
52. Weil, "The Self," 79.
53. Simone Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, trans. Richard Rees (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 217.
54. Simone Weil, "The Pythagorean Doctrine," *Intimations of Christianity among the Ancient Greeks*, 151–201 and 194–95.
55. Weil, "The Love of God and Affliction," 181.
56. Weil, "The Self," 79.
57. Weil, "The Love of God and Affliction," 172.
58. Weil, "The Love of God and Affliction," 172.
59. Weil, "The Love of God and Affliction," 172.
60. Weil, "The Love of God and Affliction," 172.
61. Weil, "The Love of God and Affliction," 173.
62. J. P. Little, "Decreation," *Simone Weil's Philosophy of Culture*, ed. Richard H. Bell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 25–51 and 39.
63. Little, "Decreation," 25–51 and 39.
64. Weil, "The Love of God and Affliction," 191.
65. Weil, "The Love of God and Affliction," 190.

Chapter 4

Recreating the Creature

Weil, Agamben, Animality, and the Unsaveable

Beatrice Marovich

Simone Weil was biologically curious. The religious impetus of her thought never left her allergic to evolutionary theory, and it appears that she was a rather careful reader of Darwin. Indeed, she even claimed that what had been neglected by other readers of Darwin—in the fervor over his theory of evolution—was that he was a thinker of “the idea of the conditions of existence”:¹ a notion not far removed from the concept of necessity (so central to her own work). Even the “question of evolution,” she posed, should not be seen as a problem (for the religious), as she believed that the theory was ultimately “a matter of the imagination and the passions.” For those who take issue with the theory of evolution, she suggested, “one has only to pay attention and discover in each account relationships which are hidden by images.”² One could excavate these theories, and decode their images of thought, in order to find more in them than what appears—at first—to be there. As a theoretical apparatus, the “problem” of evolution was a flexible matter for Weil.

Despite this interest, Weil’s thought seems absent a celebration of the biological sort of kinship that the evolutionary process throws us into. “Although we may lack the fossils to tell us exactly what our very ancient ancestors looked like, we are in no doubt at all that all living creatures are our cousins, and cousins of each other,” writes the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, in one of his books penned primarily for the edification of children.³ Weil’s writing, on the other hand, is rather absent such wonder-laden familial sentiments for creaturely life. She frequently referenced patron saint of ecology St. Francis of Assisi, but seemed more impressed by his vow of poverty—his ascetic ability to strip himself bare of material possessions—than his love for other animals. To be sure, she saw in his radical poverty a “desire to take a pure delight in creation.”⁴ But Weil appeared more