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GOD'S LOVE AND AFFLICTION[1]

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In the domain of suffering, affliction is a thing apart, specific, and irreducible. It is altogether different than simple suffering. It takes hold of the soul and marks it to its very core with a mark that belongs to it alone, the mark of slavery. Slavery such as was practiced in Ancient Rome is only the extreme form of affliction. The ancients, who were well acquainted with the matter, used to say, "A man loses half his soul the day he becomes a slave." 347

Affliction is inseparable from physical suffering and yet completely distinct from it. With suffering, anything not connected to physical pain or to something analogous is artificial or imaginary, and can be erased by an appropriate shift in one's thinking. Even with the absence or the death of a loved one, the irreducible part of grief is something like a physical pain, a

1 The French title of this essay, "L'amour de Dieu et le malheur", was rendered in a previous translation as "The love of God and affliction". English readers thus often read this to mean "The love of God and *of* affliction", and thus take Weil to be urging the love of affliction, a thought which accords with a widespread, mistaken perception of Weil as having a morbid preoccupation with self-destruction. Weil is clear and emphatic that no one can desire affliction. The title used here also primes the reader for Weil's argument for an interdependence between God's love and affliction. God originated the necessity required for our existence, one of whose consequences is the existence of affliction; affliction in turn can function to move individuals towards the love of God.

DOI: 10.4324/9781003205913-27

difficulty in breathing, a tightening around the heart, or like an unsatisfied need, a hunger, or like an almost biological disorder caused by the sudden release of an energy formerly oriented by an attachment now left undirected. A grief which is not concentrated around such an irreducible core is merely romanticism or literary. Humiliation too is a violent state of the whole corporeal being which wants to erupt under the outrage, but must be held back, constrained by impotence or fear.

By contrast, a purely physical pain is of no account and leaves no trace in the soul. Toothache is an example of this. A few hours of violent pain caused by a decayed tooth, once passed, become nothing.

It is otherwise with a very long or very frequent physical suffering. But such a suffering is often something other than suffering; it is often affliction.

Affliction is an uprooting of life, a varyingly attenuated simulacrum of death, made irresistibly present to the soul by the immediate touch or dread of physical pain. If physical pain is completely absent, there is no affliction
348 for the soul, because thought makes for some other object. Thought flees affliction with as little hesitation or resistance as an animal flees death. Here below there is only physical pain and nothing else that has the capacity to shackle thought; provided that one assimilates to physical pain certain phenomena difficult to describe, yet corporeal, which are strictly equivalent to it. Dread of physical pain, especially, is of this kind.

When thought is compelled by an attack of physical pain, however slight, to recognise the presence of affliction, it results in a state as wrenching as if a condemned man were compelled to look for hours at the guillotine that is going to cut off his head. Human beings can live on for twenty, fifty years in this wrenching state. One comes across them without noticing it. What man is able to recognise them, unless Christ himself looks through his eyes? One only notices that they sometimes have an odd way of behaving, and one reproaches this behaviour.

There is no true affliction unless the circumstances that have seized a life and uprooted it touch it directly or indirectly in all its parts, social, psychological and physical. The social factor is essential. There is no true affliction where there is not some form of fall in social standing or fear of such a fall.

Between affliction and the sorrows which, even if they are very severe, very deep and very lasting, are strictly speaking something other than affliction, there is both continuity and separation at a threshold, as with the boiling point of water. There is a point beyond which there is affliction and not

before it. This point is not purely objective; all sorts of personal factors enter into the matter. The same circumstance can plunge one human being into affliction and not another.

The great enigma of human life is not suffering, it is affliction. It is not surprising that innocents are killed, tortured, driven from their country, reduced to misery or slavery, or held inside camps or prison cells, since there will always be criminals to carry out these actions. It is not surprising either that disease imposes prolonged sufferings that paralyse life and turn it into a picture of death, since nature is subject to a blind play of mechanical necessities. But it is surprising that God should have given to affliction the power 349
to seize the very soul of the innocent and make itself its sovereign master. At best, the one marked by affliction will keep only half his soul.

Those who have been dealt one of those blows after which a being struggles on the ground like a half-crushed worm, they do not have the words to express what is happening to them. Among the people they meet, those who, even having suffered much, have never had contact with affliction properly speaking, have no idea what it is. It is something specific, not reducible to anything else, like sounds, whose idea nothing can convey to a deaf-mute. And those who have themselves been maimed by affliction are in no state to help anyone at all, and almost incapable of even desiring to do so. Thus compassion towards the afflicted is an impossibility. When it truly occurs, it is a miracle more astonishing than walking on water, healing the sick and even resurrecting a dead man.

Affliction compelled Christ to plead to be spared, to seek consolations from men, to believe himself forsaken by his Father. It compelled a righteous man to cry out against God, a righteous man as perfect as merely human nature allows, more so perhaps if Job is less a historical person than a figure of Christ. "He laughs at the affliction of innocents."[2] This is not a blasphemy, it is an authentic cry wrenched out of the pain. The *Book of Job* is, from beginning to end, a pure marvel of truth and authenticity. On the subject of affliction, anything that deviates from this model is more or less defiled with falsehood.

Affliction makes God absent for a time, more absent than a dead man, more absent than light in a completely dark cell. A type of horror engulfs

2 Jb 9:23.

the whole soul. During this absence there is nothing to love. What is terrible is that if, in this darkness where there is nothing to love, the soul ceases to love, the absence of God becomes definitive. It is necessary that the soul continue to love in the void, or at least continue to want to love, even if only with an infinitesimal part of itself. Then one day, God will come to show himself to the soul and reveal to it the beauty of the world, as in the case of Job. But if the soul ceases to love, it at once falls here below into something almost equivalent to hell.

That is why those who plunge into affliction men not prepared to receive
350 it are killing souls. On the other hand, in a time like ours where affliction hangs over everyone, the help provided to souls is not effective unless it goes as far as to really prepare them for affliction. This is no small matter.

Affliction hardens and fills with despair because it impresses into the depths of the soul, as if with a hot iron, that contempt, disgust and even repulsion for oneself, that sensation of culpability and defilement, which crime should logically produce but does not. Evil inhabits the soul of the criminal without being felt there. It is felt in the soul of afflicted innocents. Everything happens as if a state of the soul which was by its nature appropriate to a criminal had been detached from crime and attached to affliction; and that even in proportion to the innocence of the ones afflicted.

If Job cries out his innocence in an accent so despairing, it is because he himself cannot believe in it, it is because in him his soul is taking the side of his friends. He implores the testimony of God himself, because he no longer hears the testimony of his own conscience; for him it is no longer anything but an abstract and dead memory.

Man has his bodily nature in common with animals. Chickens rush to peck at a wounded chicken. It is an occurrence as mechanical as gravity. All the contempt, all the repulsion, all the hate that our reason attaches to crime, our sensibility attaches to affliction. Except for those whose whole soul is filled by Christ, everyone more or less despises the afflicted, though scarcely anyone is conscious of doing so.

This law of our sensibility applies also with regard to ourselves. This contempt, this repulsion, and this hate, in the afflicted one, are turned against himself, penetrate to the centre of the soul, and from there tint the entire universe with their poisoned colours. Supernatural love, if it has survived, can prevent this second effect from taking place, but not the first. The first is the very essence of affliction; there is no affliction where it does not take place.

"He was made accursed for our sake."[3] It is not only the body of Christ, hung on wood, which was made accursed, it is also his whole soul. Likewise every innocent in affliction feels himself cursed. This is so even for those who have been in affliction and have been pulled out of it by a change of fortune, if they were bitten deeply enough.

Another effect of affliction is to make the soul its accomplice, little by little, by injecting it with a poison of inertia. In anyone who has been in affliction long enough, there is a complicity regarding his own affliction. This complicity hinders any effort that he might undertake to improve his lot; it goes as far as preventing him from seeking ways to be delivered, sometimes even to the point of preventing him from wishing for deliverance. He is then settled into affliction and people may believe he is satisfied. Still more, this complicity can push him despite himself to evade or to flee the means of deliverance; it then veils itself behind sometimes ridiculous pretexts. Even in the one who has been pulled out of affliction, if he has been forever bitten to the depths of his soul, something remains that pushes him to plunge back into it, as if the affliction were implanted in him like a parasite and was directing him for its own ends. Sometimes this impulsion overrides all the movements of the soul towards happiness. If the affliction came to an end through an act of kindness, this impulsion can be accompanied with a hatred of the benefactor; that is the cause of certain seemingly inexplicable acts of savage ingratitude. It is sometimes easy to deliver someone afflicted from his present affliction, but it is difficult to liberate him from his past affliction. God alone can do so. And even the very grace of God heals not here below a nature injured irreparably. The glorious body of Christ bore its wounds. 351

One cannot accept the existence of affliction except by considering it as a distance.

God has created through love, for love. God has not created anything other than love itself and the capacity for love. He has created every form of love. He has created beings capable of love at all possible distances. He went himself, because no other could do so, to the maximum distance, the infinite distance. This infinite distance between God and God, this supreme sundering, this pain to which nothing else comes close, this marvel of love, this is the

3 Gal 3:13, which in this context refers to our redemption.

Crucifixion. Nothing can be further from God than that which was made accursed.

This sundering across which supreme love places the join of supreme union resonates perpetually throughout the universe, in the depths of silence, like two notes separate yet fused, like a pure and heartrending harmony. That is the Word of God. The entirety of creation is only the vibration of it. When human music in its greatest purity pierces our soul, it is this that we hear through it. When we have learned to hear silence, this is what we apprehend, most distinctly, through it.

352 Those who persevere in their love hear this note at the very bottom of the ruin into which they have been brought by affliction. From that moment on they can no longer have any doubt.

Men struck by affliction are at the foot of the Cross, almost at the greatest possible distance from God. One must not believe that sin is a greater distance. Sin is not a distance. It is a misorientation of one's gaze.

True, there is a mysterious relation between this distance and an original disobedience. Originally, we are told, humanity has turned its gaze away from God and walked in the wrong direction as far as it could go. That is because it could walk then. We, however, are nailed in place, free only in our gaze, subject to necessity. A blind mechanism, which takes no account of the degree of spiritual perfection, continually buffets men and throws some of them to the very foot of the Cross. It is only for them to keep or not keep their eyes turned towards God through the jolts. It is not that God's Providence is absent. It is by his Providence that God has willed necessity as a blind mechanism.

If the mechanism were not blind, there would be no affliction at all. Affliction is above all anonymous, it strips those it takes of their personhood and makes things of them. It is indifferent, and it is the cold of this indifference, a metallic cold, that freezes to the very depths of the soul all those it touches. They will never again regain warmth. They will never again believe that they are someone.

Affliction would not have this inherent power without the element of chance contained in it. Those who are persecuted for their faith and know this, whatever they might have to suffer, are not afflicted. They fall into affliction only if the suffering or the fear fill the soul to the point of making them forget the cause of the persecution. The martyrs given over to beasts who entered the arena singing were not the afflicted. Christ was

one of the afflicted. He did not die as a martyr. He died as a common criminal, mixed with thieves, only a bit more ridiculous. For affliction is ridiculous.

Only blind necessity can throw men to the furthermost point, right beside the Cross. The human crimes that are the cause of most afflictions are part of blind necessity, for the criminals know not what they are doing.

Friendship has two forms, meeting and separation. They are indissoluble. 353
They enclose the same good, the one good, the friendship. For when two beings who are not friends are near each other, there is no meeting. When they are away from each other, there is no separation. Enclosing the same good, the two forms are equally good.

God occasions himself, knows himself perfectly, as we in our miserable fashion make and know of objects outside ourselves. But before all, God is love. Before all, God loves himself. This love, this friendship in God, is the Trinity. Between the terms united by this relation of divine love, there is more than proximity; there is infinite proximity, there is identity. But through the Creation, the Incarnation and the Passion, there is also an infinite distance. The totality of space and the totality of time, interposing their expanse, sets an infinite distance between God and God.

Lovers or friends have two desires. One is to love each other such that they enter into one another and make but one single being. The other is to love each other such that even having half the globe between them their union suffers no diminution. All that man desires in vain here below is perfect and real in God. All those impossible desires are in us like a sign of our purpose, and they are good for us once we no longer hope to realise them.

The love between God and God, which itself is God, is this bond of a dual power; that bond which unites two beings to the point where they are not distinguishable and really are one, that bond which extends over distance and overcomes an infinite separation. The unity of God in which all plurality disappears, the abandonment in which Christ believes he finds himself without ceasing to love his Father perfectly, these are two forms of the inherent, divine power of the same Love, which is God himself.

God is so essentially love that unity, which is in a sense his very definition, is a simple effect of love. And the infinitely unifying, inherent power of this love is matched by the infinite separation which it overcomes, which is all of creation, spread across the totality of space and time, made of mechanistically brute matter, interposed between Christ and his Father.

For us men, our misery gives us the infinitely precious privilege of having a share in this distance placed between the Son and the Father. But this distance is separation only for those who love. For those who love, the separation, however painful, is a good, because it is love. Even the distress of
354 the abandoned Christ is a good. There cannot be for us here below a good greater than having a share of it. Here below God cannot be perfectly present to us on account of the flesh. But in extreme affliction he can be almost perfectly absent from us. It is for us on earth the sole possibility of perfection. It is why the Cross is our sole hope, "No forest bears such a tree, with this flower, this foliage, and this seed."[4]

This universe where we live, of which we are a particle, is this distance put by divine love between God and God. We are a point in this distance. Space, time, and the mechanism which governs matter are this distance. Everything that we call evil is just this mechanism. God has ensured that his grace, when it penetrates to the very core of a man and from there illuminates all his being, allows him, without violating the laws of nature, to walk on water. But when a man turns away from God he simply gives himself over to gravity. Thereafter he believes that he wills and chooses, but he is only a thing, a stone that falls. If one looks at human souls and societies closely, with a truly attentive gaze, one sees that everywhere where the inherent power of supernatural light is absent, everything obeys mechanical laws as blind and as precise as the laws of falling bodies. This knowledge is beneficial and necessary. Those that we call criminals are only tiles loosened from a roof by the wind and falling by chance. Their only fault is the initial choice which has made them into these tiles.

The mechanism of necessity is transposed at every level while remaining like itself in brute matter, plants, animals, peoples, and souls. Looked at from the point where we are, according to our perspective, it is completely blind. But if we transport our heart outside ourselves, outside space and time, to where our Father is, and if from there we look at this mechanism, it appears quite different. What seemed like necessity becomes obedience. Matter is complete passivity, and hence obedience to the will of God. It is a perfect model for us. There can be no being other than God and that which obeys God. For its perfect obedience matter deserves to be loved by those who love its Master, as a lover looks with tenderness at the needle once used by

4 Part of the first verse of "Crux Fidelis", a component of the hymn *Pange Lingua*.

a beloved woman now dead. We become alerted to that portion of our love that matter deserves through the beauty of the world. In the beauty of the world brute necessity becomes an object of love. Nothing is as beautiful as 355
gravity within the fugitive folds of the sea's undulations or the almost eternal folds of the mountains.

The sea is no less beautiful in our eyes because we know that sometimes ships sink. It is, on the contrary, more beautiful for it. If it altered the movement of its waves to spare a ship, it would be a being endowed with judgement and choice rather than this fluid, that is perfectly obedient to every external pressure. It is this perfect obedience that is its beauty.

All the horrors which happen in this world are like the folds impressed upon the waves by gravity. That is why there is a beauty in them. Sometimes a poem, such as the *Iliad*, renders this beauty perceptible.

Man cannot ever get out of obedience to God. A creature cannot not obey. The only choice offered to man as an intelligent and free creature is to desire obedience or not to desire it. If he does not desire it, he obeys nonetheless, perpetually, as a thing subject to mechanical necessity. If he does desire it, he remains subject to mechanical necessity, but a new necessity is added to it, a necessity constituted by the laws proper to supernatural things. Certain actions become impossible for him, others are done through him, at times almost despite him.

When one has the feeling that on some particular occasion one has disobeyed God, this simply means that for a while one had ceased to desire obedience. Obviously, all things being equal, a man will not do the same actions irrespective of whether or not he consents to obedience; just as a plant, all things being equal, does not grow in the same way irrespective of whether it is in light or in darkness. The plant exercises no control, no choice, in the matter of its own growth. We however, we are like plants which would have the single choice of whether or not to put themselves in the light.

Christ offered us the docility of matter as a model in advising us to look upon the lilies of the field which neither toil nor spin.[5] That is to say, they did not set out to don this or that colour, they did not put their will in motion nor did they have the means to do so, everything they have received was provided to them by natural necessity. If they appear to us infinitely more beautiful than rich textiles, it is not by being richer, but through this

5 Mt 6:28; Lk 12:27–28.

356 docility. Fabric is also docile, but docile to man, not to God. Matter is not beautiful when it obeys man, only when it obeys God. If, in a work of art, matter sometimes appears almost as beautiful as in the sea, mountains or flowers, it is because God's light has filled the artist. To find beautiful the things made by men not illumined by God, one must come to understand with one's whole soul that these men are themselves matter which obeys without knowing it. For the one who is at that point, absolutely everything here below is perfectly beautiful. In everything that exists, in all that happens, he discerns the mechanism of necessity, and in that necessity he savours the infinite sweetness of obedience. This obedience of things is for us, in relation to God, what the transparency of a windowpane is in relation to light. Once we experience this obedience in our entire being, we see God.

When we hold a newspaper upside down, we see the strange shapes of the printed characters. When we put it right side up, we no longer see the characters, we see the words. The passenger of a boat caught in a storm experiences each jolt like an upheaval in his innards. The captain apprehends in it only the complex combination of wind, current, and swell together with the disposition of the boat, its shape, its sail, and its rudder.

Just as one learns to read, or as one learns a trade, so too one learns to experience in all things, above all and almost exclusively, the obedience of the universe to God. It is truly an apprenticeship. Like any apprenticeship, it demands effort and time. For anyone who completes it, there is no longer a difference between things, between events, other than the difference experienced by someone who can read when presented with the same sentence reproduced several times, written in red ink or blue ink, printed with this, that or the other typeface. Someone who cannot read sees only the differences. For anyone who can read, those are all equivalent, since the sentence is the same. For anyone who has completed his apprenticeship, things and events are, everywhere, always, the vibration of the same infinitely sweet divine word. That does not mean that he does not suffer. Pain is the colouring of certain events. Presented with a sentence written in red ink, the one who can read and the one who cannot both see the red; but the red colouring does not have the same importance for each of them.

When an apprentice is injured, or else complains of tiredness, the factory
357 workers and the farmers have this beautiful saying, "It is the trade getting into his body." Each time we suffer pain, we can tell ourselves truthfully that it is the universe, the order of the world, the beauty of the world, the

obedience of creation to God that is entering us through the body. Therefore, how could we not bless with the most tender gratitude the Love which sends us this gift?

Joy and pain are equally precious gifts, which must both be savoured whole, each in its purity, without seeking to mix them. Through joy the beauty of the world penetrates into our soul. Through pain it enters us in the body. With joy alone, we could no more become friends of God than become a ship's captain solely by reading manuals on navigation. The body has a role in every apprenticeship. At the level of physical sensibility, pain alone is a contact with that necessity which constitutes the order of the world; for pleasure does not contain the impression of a necessity. It is a higher part of the sensibility that is capable of experiencing necessity in joy, and that only through the intermediary of the feeling of beauty. For our being to become one day sensitive in its entirety, through and through, to that obedience which is the substance of matter, for there to form in us that new sense that allows hearing the universe as being the vibration of the speech of God, the transformative, inherent power of pain and of joy are each equally indispensable. One must open the very centre of the soul to one and to the other when one or the other comes to us, as one opens the door to the messengers of one's beloved. What can it matter to a lover whether the messenger is polite or abrupt, as long as he hands her a message?

But affliction is not pain. Affliction is something very different than a pedagogical method of God.

The infinity of space and time separates us from God. How should we look for him? How should we go towards him? Even if we walked for centuries on end, we should do nothing other than go round and round the earth. Even in an airplane, we would not be able to do anything else. We are not able to advance vertically. We cannot take one step towards the heavens. God passes across the universe and comes all the way to us.

Over the infinity of space and time, the infinitely more infinite love of God comes to take hold of us. It comes in its own time. We have the power to consent to receive it or to refuse. If we remain deaf, it comes and comes 358
again like a beggar, but also, like a beggar, one day comes no more. If we consent, God places a small seed in us and goes away. From this moment on, God has nothing more to do and neither do we, except to wait. We have only not to regret the consent that we have given, the nuptial 'I do'. This is not as easy as it seems, for the growth of the seed within us is painful. Moreover,

from the very fact that we accept this growth, we cannot help but destroy what would impede it, pull up weeds, or cut back couch grass; and unfortunately this couch grass is part of our very flesh, with the result that caring for this garden is a violent operation. Nonetheless the seed, in the end, grows all by itself. A day comes when the soul belongs to God, when it not only consents to the love, but when it really, truly loves. It must then in its turn pass across the universe to go all the way to God.

The soul does not love with a created love, like a creature. This love within it is divine, uncreated, for it is the love of God for God which passes through the soul. God alone is capable of loving God. We are able only to consent to let go of the feelings that belong to us so as to allow passage to this love in our soul. That is what it means to negate oneself. We are created only for this consent.

Divine love has passed across the infinity of space and time to go from God to us. But how can it repeat the crossing in reverse when it starts from a finite creature? When the seed of divine love deposited within us has grown, has become a tree, how can we, we who are bearing it, bring it back to its origin, make the journey that God has made to us in the reverse direction, passing across the infinite distance?

That seems impossible, but there is a way. We know this way well. We well know the likeness in which this tree was made, this tree that has grown in us, this tree so beautiful where the birds of the sky alight. We know which is the most beautiful of all trees. "No forest bears its equal." Something a little more dreadful still than a gallows, here is the most beautiful of trees. It is this tree whose seed God has placed in us, without our knowing what this seed was. If we had known, we would not have said yes on that first occasion. It is this tree which has grown in us, which has become impossible to uproot. Only a betrayal can uproot it.

When one strikes a nail with a hammer, the shock received by the broad
359 head of the nail passes in its entirety into the tip, without any loss, even though it is only a point. Even if the hammer and the head of the nail were infinitely large, everything would still happen in the same way. The tip of the nail would transmit this infinite shock to the point where it is applied.

Extreme affliction, which is at once physical pain, distress of the soul and social degradation, constitutes this nail. The tip is pressed to the very centre of the soul. The head of the nail is all necessity scattered across the totality of space and time.

Affliction is a marvel of divine craft. It is a simple and ingenious mechanism for bringing into the soul of a finite creature this immensity of blind, brute, and cold force. The infinite distance that separates God from the creature is gathered in its entirety into one point to pierce a soul at its centre.

The man to whom such a thing happens, has no part in this process. He struggles like a butterfly pinned alive in an album. But throughout the horror he can continue to want to love. There is here no impossibility, no obstacle, one might almost say no difficulty. For the greatest pain, as long as it is short of fainting, does not touch that point in the soul that consents to a proper orientation.

It is vital to know that love is an orientation and not a frame of mind. If one is ignorant of this one falls into despair at the first onset of affliction.

He whose soul stays oriented towards God while it is pierced by a nail finds himself nailed to the very centre of the universe. It is the true centre, which is not midway, which is outside space and time, which is God. From a dimension which does not belong to space, which is not time, which is an altogether different dimension, this nail has pierced a hole through creation, through the expanse of the screen that separates the soul from God.

By means of this marvellous dimension, the soul, without leaving the place and the time where the body to which it is bound is situated, can pass across the totality of space and time and reach the very presence of God.

The soul is situated at the intersection of creation and Creator. This point of intersection is the one where the two lengths of the Cross meet.

Saint Paul was thinking perhaps of things of this kind when he said, "Be rooted in love, so as to be able to grasp what are the breadth, the length, the height and the depth, and to know that which passes all knowledge, the love of Christ."[6] 360

To be, in the event of extreme affliction, nailed to the very cross of Christ, one must carry in one's soul, at the time when the affliction strikes, not only the divine seed, but the tree of life already formed.

6 Eph 3:17–19. This quotation also marks the end of the first part of the manuscript of this essay which Weil gave to Father Perrin. It was initially the only part of the essay that was published. Weil continued to revise her draft of the second half of the essay after her departure from Marseilles and sent the completed revision to Father Perrin a few weeks later. The second half was joined to the first in later publications. The version translated here is complete.

Otherwise, one has the choice between the crosses that were to either side of Christ's.

One is like the bad thief when one seeks a consolation in contempt and hatred of fellow sufferers. That is the most common effect of true affliction. It was the case for slavery in Rome. Those who are surprised when they see such a state of mind in the afflicted would almost all fall into it themselves if affliction were to befall them.

To be like the good thief, it is enough to realise that, whatever the degree of affliction into which one is thrust, one has deserved at least that much. For before being reduced to powerlessness by affliction, one has certainly made oneself an accomplice, by cowardice, inertia, indifference or culpable ignorance, to crimes which brought other beings into an affliction at least as great. No doubt one generally could not prevent these crimes, but one could have said one condemned them. One omitted to do so, or even approved of them, or at least let it be said by others that one |*condemned*|[7] them. The affliction that one undergoes is not in strict justice too great a punishment for this complicity; one does not have the right to have compassion for oneself. One knows that at least once a perfectly innocent being suffered a worse affliction; it is better to direct compassion towards him across the centuries.

Everyone can and should say all this to himself, for there are things so heinous within our institutions and our mores that none can legitimately believe himself absolved of this pervasive complicity. Certainly everyone is guilty at least of criminal indifference.

But more than that each man has the right to desire to have a share in the very cross of Christ. We have an unlimited right to ask God for all that is good. It is not in such requests that one should be humble or moderate.

One must not desire affliction; that is against nature; it is a perversion; and
361 above all affliction is by nature that which one undergoes despite oneself. If one is not immersed in it, one can only desire that were it to strike it would constitute a participation in the cross of Christ.

But what is in fact perpetually present, what is therefore always permissible to love, is the possibility of affliction. The three sides of our being are always exposed to it. Our flesh is fragile; any chunk of matter in motion can

7 Weil crossed out this word without replacing it, though a likely replacement, 'approve of', can be inferred from the first clause of the sentence.

pierce it, sever it, smash it, or even damage one of the inner workings for good. Our soul is vulnerable, subject to depressions without cause, pitiably dependent on all sorts of things and beings, themselves fragile and capricious. Our social person, on which all but depends the sense of our existence, is constantly and entirely exposed to every accident. The very centre of our being is tied to these three things by fibres such that it feels even the slightest injuries to them to the point where it is itself bleeding. Above all what diminishes or destroys our social prestige, our right to consideration, seems to alter or abolish our very essence, so much so that we have illusion as our substance.

This nearly infinite fragility is not something one thinks about when everything is going fairly well. But nothing forces one not to think about it. One can continually look at it, and continually thank God for it. Not only give thanks for the fragility itself, but also for that innermost weakness that carries this fragility to the very centre of our being. For it is this weakness that makes possible, in certain circumstances, the operation that will nail us to the very centre of the Cross.

We can think about this fragility with love and gratitude at the time of any kind of suffering, great or small. We can think about it in moments that are fairly indifferent. We can think about it at the time of every joy. One ought not do so if this thought were of a nature to disturb or diminish the joy. But this is not how it is. With it, joy only becomes of a more penetrating and poignant sweetness, just as the fragility of cherry blossoms only increases their beauty.

If one disposes one's thinking in this way, then after some time the Cross of Christ will become the very substance of life. This is no doubt what Christ meant when he was advising his friends to bear their cross each day, and not, as some seem to believe today, mere resignation to small, everyday troubles that in an almost sacrilegious abuse of language is sometimes called the 362
cross. There is but one cross, it is the totality of necessity that fills the infinity of time and space, which can, in certain circumstances, be concentrated upon the atom that each and every one of us is and pulverise it entirely. To bear one's cross is to bear the knowledge that one is entirely subject to this blind necessity, in all parts of one's being, except for one point in the soul so secret that consciousness does not reach it. However cruelly a man suffers, if a part of his being is intact, and if he is not fully aware that it escaped by chance and remains at every moment exposed to the blows of fate, he has

no share in the Cross. This is so especially if the part of his being left intact, or which is at least more or less spared, is the social part. That is why ill health is of no use if the spirit of poverty in its perfection is not joined to it. A perfectly happy man can simultaneously fully enjoy happiness and bear his cross, if he is really, concretely and at every moment aware of the possibility of affliction.

But it is not enough to recognise this possibility, one must love it. One must love tenderly the harshness of this necessity which is like a medallion with two faces, the face turned towards us being domination, the face turned towards God being obedience. We must clasp it in our arms, even if it presents us its barbs and that we in embracing it cause it to enter our flesh. Whoever loves is happy to clutch, in the absence of the beloved, an object belonging to them to the point of its penetrating the flesh. We know that this universe is an object belonging to God. We must thank God from the bottom of our heart for having given us as absolute sovereign necessity, his slave, insensate, blind and perfectly obedient. It leads us with the whip. But being subject here below to its tyranny, it is enough that we choose God for our treasure, that we put our heart in God; and thereafter we will see the other face of this tyranny, the face which is pure obedience. We are the slaves of necessity, but we are also the sons of its Master. Whatever it may command, we must love the sight of its docility, we who are the children of the house. Every time that necessity does not do what we want, that it forces us to undergo what we do not want, it is given to us by love to pass across it and to see the side of obedience that it shows to God. Blessed are those who often have this precious opportunity.

363 Intense and long-lasting physical pain has the unique advantage that our sensibility is made so as to be incapable of accepting it. We can get used to, acquiesce to, or adapt ourselves to anything other than that, and we adapt ourselves so as to have the illusion of power, to believe that we are in control. We play at imagining that we have chosen what is imposed on us. When a human being is in his own eyes transformed into an almost paralysed and utterly repugnant kind of beast, he can no longer have this illusion. It is better still if this transformation is effected by the will of men, as a result of a social disapproval, provided that it be an act of in some sense anonymous oppression rather than an attack on one's honour. The carnal part of our soul is sensitive to necessity only as compulsion, and is sensitive to compulsion only as physical pain. It is the same truth that enters carnal

sensibility through physical pain, intelligence through mathematical proof, and the faculty of love through beauty. Job too, once the veil of flesh is torn off by affliction, sees the naked beauty of the world. The beauty of the world appears when one recognises necessity as the substance of the universe, and obedience to a perfectly wise Love as the substance of necessity. This universe of which we are a fragment has no other being than being obedient.

Sensible joy has an inherent power analogous to that of physical pain when it is so vibrant, so pure, when it so exceeds expectation, that we immediately recognise ourselves incapable of obtaining anything like it for ourselves or of securing our possession of it. Such joys always have beauty as their essence. Pure joy and pure pain are two aspects of the same infinitely precious truth. Fortunately so, for thanks to this one has the right to wish those that one loves joy rather than pain.

The Trinity and the Cross are the two poles of Christianity, the two essential truths, the one perfect joy, the other perfect affliction. The knowledge of the one and of the other and of their mysterious unity is essential, but here below we are placed by the human condition infinitely far from the Trinity, at the very foot of the Cross. The Cross is our homeland.

The knowledge of affliction is the key to Christianity. But this knowledge is impossible. It is impossible to know affliction without having passed through it. For thought is so averse to affliction that it is as incapable of bringing itself voluntarily to conceive of it, as an animal, with few exceptions, is incapable of suicide. Thought knows affliction only through compulsion. It is impossible to believe without being compelled to do so by experience that everything in one's soul, all thoughts, feelings, and attitudes in relation to ideas, men and the universe, and above all the inmost attitude of a being toward himself, that all this is entirely at the mercy of circumstance. Even if one recognises it theoretically, which is already very rare, one does not believe it with one's whole soul. To believe it with one's whole soul, is what Christ called not renouncement or abnegation, as it is usually translated, but negating oneself, and it is the condition making one worthy to be his disciple. But when one is in affliction or one has passed through it, one does not believe this truth more than before, it could almost be said that one believes it even less. For thought can never truly be constrained, it always has a licence to evade through falsehood. Thought placed under the constraints of circumstance facing affliction flees into falsehood with the alacrity with which an animal threatened with death flees into a haven that

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opens up before it. Sometimes, in its terror, thought sinks very deeply into falsehood; thus it often happens that those who are or have been in affliction have become infected with falsehood like a vice, sometimes as far as to have lost in all things the very sense of truth. It is wrong to reproach them for it. Falsehood is so closely tied to affliction that Christ has conquered the world by the sole fact that being the Truth, he remained the Truth all the way to the very depth of extreme affliction. Thought is compelled to flee the countenance of affliction by an instinct for self-preservation infinitely more essential to our being than the one that keeps us from bodily death; it is relatively easy to expose oneself to the latter when, as a result of circumstances or some play of the imagination, it does not present itself with the countenance of affliction. One cannot look affliction in the face and up close with a steady attention unless one accepts the death of the soul out of love for the truth. It is this death of the soul that Plato spoke of when he said, "to philosophise is to learn to die," which was symbolised in the initiation rites of the ancient mysteries and which is represented by baptism.[8] It is not a matter of the soul dying in reality, but simply of recognising the truth that it is something dead, something analogous to matter. It does not have to become water; it is water; what we believe to be our self is a product of external circumstances as fleeting and as automatic as the form of a wave in the sea.

365 One needs only to know this, to know it deep within oneself. But God alone has this knowledge of man and, here below, only those who have been begotten from above. For one cannot accept this death of the soul if one does not have in addition to the illusory life of the soul another life; if one does not have his treasure and his heart outside himself; not only outside his person, but outside all his thoughts, outside all his feelings, beyond all that is knowable, in the hands of our Father who is in secret. Of those who are like this, it can be said that they have been begotten from water and the Spirit. For they are no longer anything but a dual obedience, to mechanical necessity on the one hand in which they are caught by the fact of their terrestrial condition, and to divine inspiration on the other. There is no longer anything in them that could be called their own will, their person, their self. They are no longer anything other than a certain intersection of nature and God. This intersection is the name by which God has

8 Plato, *Phaedo* 67e.

called them for all of eternity, it is their calling. In the ancient baptism, by immersion, the man disappeared under the water; that is to negate oneself, to avow that one is only a fragment of the inert matter of which creation is made. He would only reappear lifted by an ascending movement stronger than gravity, the image of divine love within man. The symbol that baptism embodies is the state of perfection. The promise attached to baptism is that of desiring this state and asking God for it, constantly, tirelessly, for as long as one has not got it, as a hungry child never leaves off asking his father for bread. But what such a promise commits one to cannot be known until one has been in the presence of the terrible face of affliction. Only in this place, face to face with affliction, can the true commitment be made through a contact more secret, more mysterious, and more miraculous even than a sacrament.

The knowledge of affliction being impossible naturally as much for those who have experienced it as for those who have not, it is equally possible for one as for the other by supernatural favour. Otherwise Christ would not have spared from affliction the one he cherished above all, after having promised him that he should drink from his cup.[9] In both cases the knowledge of affliction is a thing much more miraculous than walking on water.

Those whom Christ recognised as having been his benefactors are those whose compassion was based on the knowledge of affliction. The others give capriciously, irregularly, or, on the contrary, too regularly as the result 366
of habits imprinted in education, or conformity with social conventions, or pride, or a visceral pity, or else the desire for a good conscience, in short, from a motive that concerns them themselves. They are haughty, or assume a patronising tone, or express an intrusive pity, or they let the afflicted man feel that for them he is only an example of a certain species of affliction. In any case, their benefaction is an injury. And they have their reward here below, since their left hand is not unaware of what their right hand has given.[10] Their contact with the afflicted can only be made through falsehood, since true knowledge of the afflicted involves knowledge of affliction. Those who have not looked upon the countenance of affliction, or are not prepared to do so, can only approach the afflicted protected by the veil of a lie or an

9 Mt 20:22–23; Mk 10:38–39.
10 Mt 6:3.

illusion. If by chance the countenance of affliction suddenly appears on the face of an afflicted man, they take flight.

The benefactor of Christ, when in the presence of one afflicted, does not feel any distance between the afflicted and himself; he transports his whole being into the other; thereafter the action of giving him food is as instinctive, as immediate, as is eating when he is himself hungry. And it is almost at once forgotten just as the meals of days past are forgotten. Such a man would not think to say that he is looking after the afflicted for the Lord; that would appear to him as absurd as saying that he is eating for the Lord. One eats because one cannot help it. Those whom Christ will thank give as they eat.

They give something very different than food, clothes or care. In transporting their very being into the one they help, they give him for an instant that existence of his own of which he is deprived by affliction. Affliction is essentially a destruction of the personality, a passage into anonymity. Just as Christ emptied himself of his divinity by love, the afflicted is emptied of his humanity by ill fortune. He no longer has any existence other than this ill fortune itself. In the eyes of others and in his own eyes, he is entirely determined by his relation to affliction. Something in him that would very much like to exist is continually thrown back into nothingness, like a drowning man whose head is being struck by repeated blows. He is, as the case may be, a pauper, a refugee, a negro, a madman, a felon, or anything of the sort. The ill treatment and the kindly acts of which he is the object are in like manner
367 directed towards affliction of which he is one example among many others. Thus ill-treatment and kindly acts have the same effect of forcibly keeping him in anonymity and are two forms of the same offence.

He, who in seeing an afflicted man transports his being into him, births in him by love, at least for a moment, an existence independent of affliction. For though affliction may be the occasion of this supernatural operation, it is not its cause. The cause is the sameness of human beings across all the apparent distances put between them by chance and fortune.

To transport one's being into one afflicted, is to assume his affliction for a moment, to take on voluntarily that whose very essence consists in being imposed by compulsion and against one's will. This is an impossibility. Christ alone has done it. Christ alone can do it, and those men whose whole soul is occupied by Christ. These men, in transporting their own being into the afflicted they help, place in him, not really their own being, since they no longer have it, but Christ himself.

Almsgiving thus practiced is a sacrament, a supernatural operation by which a man inhabited by Christ really places Christ into the soul of the afflicted. The bread thus given, if bread is used, is equivalent to the host. Here it is not a symbol or a conjecture, but a literal translation of Christ's own words. For he says, "It is unto me that you have done it."[11] He is therefore in the starving or naked afflicted man. But not as an effect of hunger or nakedness, for affliction by itself does not contain any gift from above. This can only be through the operation of the benefaction. That Christ is in the one who gives in a perfectly pure way is obvious; who then could Christ's benefactor be, if not himself? Besides it is easy to understand that only the presence of Christ within a soul can put true compassion into it. But the Gospel further reveals to us that he who gives through true compassion gives Christ himself. The afflicted who receives this miraculous gift has the choice of consenting to it or not.

An afflicted man, if the affliction is complete, is deprived of any human relationship. For him there are only two types of relation possible with men, those where he figures only as a thing, which are as mechanical as the relation between two adjoining drops of water, and purely supernatural love. The intermediate region is barred to him. There is no place in his life for anything but water and Spirit. Affliction which is consented, accepted, and loved is truly a baptism.

It is because Christ alone is capable of compassion that during his sojourn 368
on earth he did not receive any. Being flesh here below, he did not live within the souls of any of those around him; and so none could have pity for him. Pain compelled him to beg for compassion, and his closest friends refused it to him. They left him to suffer alone. Even John slept. Peter had been able to walk on water, but he was not able to pity his master, fallen into affliction. They took refuge in slumber so as not to see him any longer. When Mercy itself becomes affliction, where would it find succour? It would have needed another Christ to have pity on the afflicted Christ. In the course of the following centuries compassion for the affliction of Christ has been one of the signs of saintliness.

The supernatural operation of almsgiving, unlike for example that of communion, does not require a complete cognisance. For those whom

11 Mt 25:40.

Christ thanks respond, "Lord, when then did we feed you? . . ."[12] They did not know whom they had fed. Generally speaking, nothing at all indicates that they had had any cognisance of Christ. They might or might not have had any. What matters is that they were just. Hence it was the Christ in them that was giving himself in the form of alms. Blessed are the beggars, since there is the possibility that they might receive once or twice in their lives perhaps such alms.

Affliction is truly at the centre of Christianity. The fulfilment of the one and dual commandment, "Love God" and "Love thy neighbour," passes through affliction. For concerning the first, Christ said, "None comes to the Father if not through me."[13] He also said, "As Moses raised high the serpent in the desert, even so must the son of man be raised high, so that whosoever believes in him should possess life eternal."[14] The serpent is that serpent of bronze which one had only to look upon to be saved from the effects of poison. One can therefore only love God by looking upon the Cross. And concerning the neighbour, Christ has said who the neighbour is toward whom love is commanded. It is the naked body, bleeding and unconscious, that one sees lying in the road.[15] It is first and foremost affliction that we are commanded to love, man's affliction, God's affliction.

Christianity is often reproached for a morbid indulgence with regard to suffering and pain. This is a mistake. In Christianity, the question is not that of pain or of suffering, which are sensations or moods in which it is always
369 possible to take perverse delight. The question is about something quite different. The question is that of affliction. Affliction is not a frame of mind. It is a pulverisation of the soul through the mechanical brutality of circumstance. The transmutation of a man, in his own eyes, from the state of being human to the state of a half-crushed worm twitching on the ground is not a process in which even a pervert could delight. A sage, a hero or a saint do not delight in it either. Affliction is that which is imposed on a man altogether in despite of himself. It has as its essence and its very definition this horror, this revolt of the whole being in the one over whom it takes hold. It is that very thing to which one must consent through the inherent power of supernatural love.

12 Allusion to Mt 25:37–39.
13 Jn 14:6.
14 Jn 3:14–15 and Nm 21:4–9.
15 Lk 10:29–37.

To consent to the existence of the universe is our function here below. It is not enough for God to find his creation good. He wants further that it itself find itself good. This is what the souls attached to minuscule fragments of this world are for. That is the goal of affliction, to allow us to think that God's creation is good. For as long as circumstances around us play out so that they leave our being fairly intact, or with only scrapes and bruises, we believe more or less that our will has created the world and governs it. Affliction teaches us all of a sudden, to our very great surprise, that this is not so. If now we praise, it is truly God's creation that we praise. And where is the difficulty? We well know that our affliction does not in any way diminish the divine glory. It does not therefore prevent us in any way from extolling God for his great glory.

Thus affliction is the surest sign that God wants to be loved by us; it is the most precious testimony to his tenderness. It is altogether different than paternal punishment. It would be more fitting to compare it to the tender quarrels by which newly engaged couples assure themselves of the depth of their love. One does not have the courage to look upon the countenance of affliction; otherwise, after a while, one would see that it is the face of love; just as Mary Magdalene realised that the man she had taken for a gardener was someone else.[16]

Christians, seeing the central place of affliction in their faith, ought to suspect that affliction is in one sense the very essence of creation. To be creatures is not necessarily to be afflicted, but it is necessarily to be exposed to affliction. The uncreated alone is indestructible. One asks why does God permit affliction, one could just as well ask why did God create. That, it is true, one can well ask. Why did God create? It seems so obvious that God is greater 370
than God and the creation together. At least this seems obvious if one thinks of God as being. But one should not think of him in that way. As soon as one thinks of God in terms of love one senses this marvel of love that unites the Son and the Father both in the eternal unity of the single God and over the separation of time, space and the Cross.

God is love and nature is necessity, but this necessity is, through obedience, a mirror of love. Likewise, God is joy, and creation is affliction, but it is an affliction resplendent with the light of joy. Affliction holds the truth of our condition. Those who would sooner see the truth and die rather than

16 Jn 20:11–18.

live a long and happy existence under an illusion, will alone see God. One must want to go towards reality; then, expecting to find a corpse, one meets an angel who says, "He is risen."[17]

The only source of clarity perspicuous enough to illuminate affliction is the Cross of Christ. Whatever the era, whatever the country, wherever there is someone afflicted, the Cross of Christ is the truth of it. Any man who loves the truth enough not to run into the depths of falsehood to flee from the countenance of affliction has a share of the Cross of Christ, no matter his creed. If God had been willing to deny Christ to the men of a specific country or era, we would recognise this by one sure sign, that there would be among them no affliction. We know of nothing like this in history. Everywhere where there is affliction, there is the Cross, obscured, but present to anyone who chooses truth rather than falsehood, love rather than hate. Affliction without the Cross is hell, and God did not put hell on earth.

Conversely, the very many Christians who do not have the strength to recognise and worship the blessed Cross in each affliction have no share in Christ. Nothing better shows the weakness of faith than the ease with which, even among Christians, as soon as one speaks of affliction, the problem is sidestepped. Whatever might be said about original sin, the will of God, or Providence and its mysterious plans, which nevertheless one believes one can try to divine, and any kind of future compensations in this world and the next, all this either conceals the reality of affliction or else is of no use. One thing alone allows consenting to true affliction, it is the contemplation of the Cross of Christ. There is nothing else. It is enough.

A mother, a wife, a fiancée who know that the one they love is in distress
371 and can neither help him nor join him would at least want to undergo sufferings equal to his so as to be less separated from him, so as to be relieved of the very heavy burden of powerless compassion. Whoever loves Christ and pictures him on the cross should experience a similar relief in the midst of affliction.

By reason of the essential link between the Cross and affliction, a state does not have the right to detach itself from all religion except on the absurd hypothesis that it had succeeded in eliminating affliction. By still greater reason it has no right to do so when it is itself producing the ones afflicted. Criminal justice cut off from any kind of connection to God has a truly

17 Allusion to Lk 24:1–12.

infernal quality. Not due to verdicts that are wrong or punishments that are excessively harsh, but independently of all that, in itself. It is sullied by contact with defilements of every kind, and having nothing with which to purify them becomes itself so sullied that the worst criminals can yet be debased by it. Contact with it is hateful for anyone who has any integrity and wholesomeness to him; those who are rotten find even in the punishments it imposes a kind of contentment still more horrible. Nothing is pure enough to bring purity into the places reserved for crime and punishment except Christ, he who was a convict under common law.

But since it is only the Cross that is needed by states and not the complications of dogma, it is disastrous that the Cross and dogma should be linked by so strong a link. This link has taken Christ away from his brothers the criminals.

The idea of necessity as the subject common to art, science and every kind of work is the gateway through which Christianity can enter profane life and penetrate it through and through. For the Cross is necessity itself coming into contact with the lowest and the highest parts in ourselves, with bodily sensibility by the evocation of physical suffering, with supernatural love by the presence of God. Consequently all the varieties of contact the intermediate parts of our being can have with necessity are involved in this.

There is not, there cannot be, in whichever domain, any human activity which does not have the Cross of Christ as its supreme and secret truth. No activity can be separated from the Cross of Christ without decaying, or withering like a shoot cut from a vine. We see this happening before our eyes, today, without understanding it, and we wonder wherein our evil lies. Christians understand even less than others because, knowing that these activities 372
date from well before Christ, they are incapable of realising that the Christian faith is their lifeblood.

If we understood that the Christian faith, under veils that let through its illumination, bears flowers and fruits at all times and in all places where there are men who do not hate the light, this difficulty would not stop us.

Never since the dawn of history, except for a certain time during the Roman empire, has Christ been as absent as now. The ancients would have judged as monstrous this separation of religion and social life which even the majority of Christians today find natural.

The lifeblood of Christianity must be made to flow everywhere in social life; but it is nevertheless made above all for the solitary being. The Father is in secret and there is no secrecy more inviolable than affliction.

There is one question which has absolutely no meaning, and of course no answer, that normally we never pose, but which in affliction the soul cannot help from ceaselessly calling out with the monotonous continuity of moaning. This question is: why? Why are things this way? The afflicted naïvely asks it of men, of things, of God, even if he does not believe in him, of no matter what. Why precisely must he have nothing to eat, or be worn out with fatigue and harsh treatment, or should soon be shot, or be sick, or be in prison? If someone explains to him the causes of the situation in which he finds himself, which is in any case rarely possible given the complexity of the mechanisms at work, this will not be an answer for him. For his question, why, does not mean: by what cause, but: to what purpose? And of course one cannot point him to any purposes. Unless one were to fabricate some fictitious ones, but such fabrication is not a good thing.

The strange thing is that affliction in others does not prompt this question, except sometimes, though not always, in those who are very close. At most it is posed at some point without much thought. But the one who falls into affliction, in him this question takes hold and does not ever stop calling out. Why. Why. Why. Christ himself asked it, "Why have you forsaken me?"[18]

The why of the afflicted admits no answer, because we live within necessity and not within purposiveness. If there were purposiveness in this world, the place of the good would not be in the other world. Every time we ask
373 the world for purposiveness, it denies it to us. But to know that it denies it to us, one has to ask for it.

It is only affliction that makes us ask for it, and also beauty, for the beautiful gives us so keenly the feeling of the presence of a good that we look for a purpose without ever finding one. The beautiful also makes us ask: Why? Why is this beautiful? But rare are those who are capable of raising this why in themselves for hours at a time. The why of affliction lasts for hours, days, and years; it ceases only through exhaustion.

He who is capable not only of crying out, but also of listening, hears the answer. The answer is silence. It is that eternal silence for which Vigny bitterly reproached God; but he had no right to say what the just man's response to this silence would be, because he was not a just man. The just man loves. He who is capable not only of listening but also of loving hears this silence as the speech of God.

18 Mk 15:34.

Creatures speak with sounds. The speech of God is silence. God's secret speech of love cannot be anything other than silence. Christ is God's silence.

There is no tree like the Cross, there is also no harmony like the silence of God. The Pythagoreans recognised this harmony in the bottomless silence that eternally surrounds the stars. Necessity here below is the vibration of God's silence.

Our soul is constantly making noise, but there is a point in it which is silence that we never hear. When God's silence enters our soul, pierces it and joins this silence which is secretly present in us, we have from then on our treasure and our heart in God; and space opens before us like a fruit which is split in two, for we are seeing the universe from a point situated outside space.

There are only two routes possible for this operation, to the exclusion of all others. There are only two prongs piercing enough to enter into our soul this way, these are affliction and beauty.

One might be tempted to weep tears of blood when thinking of affliction crushing so many of the afflicted who are unable to make any use it. But considering it coldly, the waste here is no more pitiable than the waste of the beauty of the world. How many times does the light of the stars, the sound of the waves, or the silence of the hour before dawn come offering themselves in vain to the attention of men? Not paying attention to the 374
beauty of the world is perhaps a crime of ingratitude so great that it deserves the punishment of affliction. Admittedly it does not always receive it, but in that case it is punished by the penalty of a mediocre life, and in what way is a mediocre life better than affliction? For that matter, even in the case of great misfortune, the life of such beings is probably always mediocre. Insofar as one can make conjectures about sensibility, it seems that the evil which is within a being might protect him against evil which assails him from without in the form of pain. It must be hoped this is so, and that God has mercifully reduced to very little such useless suffering for the bad thief. It is indeed so, and indeed that is the great temptation contained in affliction, since the afflicted always has the opportunity to suffer less by consenting to become bad.

It is only for the one who has known pure joy, if only for a minute, and thus has known the savour of the world's beauty, for they are the same, it is for that one alone that affliction is something that tears him apart. At the same time it is only that one who has not deserved this punishment. But

also, for him it is not a punishment, it is God himself who takes his hand and squeezes it a bit hard. For if he remains faithful, then in the depths of his own cries he will find the pearl of God's silence.

Oeuvres complètes IV:1

Weil began this essay in Marseilles in April 1942 and finished it in Casablanca in May. It is perhaps the most personal of the essays Weil wrote for her friend, Father Perrin. Its topic is theodicy or the explanation of why an omnibenevolent God appears to permit evil in the world. Rather than an apology, Weil argues for the very necessity of evil so-called, which she calls affliction, as the condition for the possibility of an existence independent from God, which God in his love created for us.