

Notes on Anorexic Intellectuals

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Confession

This is based on Weil’s *La Pesanteur et la Grâce* (2020) and *The Dialogue* (of Siena 1980). I have not read Weil’s other work.

Modal Fusion

In “modal fusion,” modal verbs (or verb moods, in some languages) are loosely identified or confused. If something *is* then it *must be*; one only *wants* what *is*

possible. Closely related: the word-to-action style: one only *wants* what *will be* by one's efforts.

Modal fusion is brazen in Gödel's technical proof of God's existence: he argues that God *is* by modal logic (Gödel 1995, III:403–4)! It is milder in St. Catherine.

- “La nécessité est essentiellement étrangère à l'imaginaire.” (Weil 2020, 58).
- “L'humilité a pour objet d'abolir l'imaginaire,” (Weil 2020) No counterfactuals! “aimer sans imaginer,” (Weil 2020, 59)
- “Ce qui doit être sévèrement interdit, c'est de rêver aux jouissances du sentiment. C'est de la corruption.” (Weil 2020, 72)
- “Même attarder son imagination sur certaines choses comme possible . . . c'est d'éjà s'engager.” (Weil 2020, 82)
- “Accepter qu'elles soient simplement parce qu'elles sont.” (Weil 2020, 85)
- “Ne pas chercher à ne pas souffrir ni à moins souffrir, mais à ne pas être altéré par la souffrance.” (Weil 2020, 86)
- “désirer quelque chose est impossible.” (Weil 2020, 101)
- “Aucune perfection imaginaire ne peut me tirer en haut,” (Weil 2020, 106)
- “Ne pas accepter un événement du monde, c'est désirer que le monde ne soit pas . . . si je le désire, je l'obtiens.” (Weil 2020, 153)
- “Every member does the work given it to do, each one perfect in its own way. . . .” (of Siena 1980, 310) i.e. what ought to be *is*; teleology→existence.
- “knowing the truth, her will is grounded firmly in mine—so firmly and solidly that nothing can cause her to suffer.” (of Siena 1980, 151)
- “if she were anything at all of herself, she would be able to get rid of what she did not want.” (of Siena 1980, 168)
- “She longs for what she possesses and possesses what she longs for. . . .” (of Siena 1980, 58) Conversely, if one does not have, one does not want!
- “I give you whatever you need, for it is I who gave you the very hunger.” (of Siena 1980, 201) Conversely, if one does not possess something, one does not need it!
- The moral bends the world: “When Maurice was commanded in obedience to rescue the disciple who was drowning in the water, the water held him up. He did not think of himself, but by the light of faith was concerned only about fulfilling his superior's command, and he walked over the water as if he were walking on the ground to rescue that disciple.” (of Siena 1980, 358)

Value Fusion

Explicitly “all virtues are bound in one” (of Siena 1980). In the typical anorectic, fusion of dietetic and moral where one’s moral self can be improved by tailoring the diet.

- “La vérité est recherchée non pas en tant que vérité, mais en tant que bien.” (Weil 2020, 125)
- “La non-violence n’est bonne que si elle est efficace.” (Weil 2020, 91)
- “Le beau est le nécessaire, qui, tout en demeurant conforme à sa loi propre obéit au bien.” (Weil 2020, 162)
- “tout ce qu’un homme produit en tout domaine quand l’esprit de justice et de vérité le maîtrise est revêtu de l’éclat de la beauté.”

Proof

Particularly notable in St. Catherine, any virtue that one claims must be proven. One’s being is contingent on proofs.

- “... achieve proven virtue through suffering.” (of Siena 1980, 179)
- “trial is a sign that shows whether the soul’s charity is perfect or imperfect.” (of Siena 1980, 303)
- “Patience is proved in the assaults and weariness,” (of Siena 1980, 303)
- “I thought so little of myself as a writer that summer that I was obscurely ashamed to go to dinner with still another editor, ashamed to sit down and discuss this “work” I was not doing...” (Didion 1992, 16)

Contract-Style Moral Order of the Universe

St. Catherine of Siena believes her salvation and the salvation of her family is assured by her God if she lives in penance and solitude (Bell 1987, 40).

In her own writing, “every good rewarded and every sin punished.” (of Siena 1980, 95). Notably, the three stairs (of Siena 1980, 105) give an explicit program of self-improvement (in fact, the sole path) leading to salvation, union with God.

- “... and by that measure will it be measured out to them.” (of Siena 1980, 83)
- “Just as a mirror reflects a person’s face, just so, the fruit of their labors will be reflected in their bodies.” (of Siena 1980, 86)
- “If you do this, all perfection will be yours.” (of Siena 1980, 192)

- “Since I made him a bridge for you, no one can come to me except through him.” (of Siena 1980, 106)
- “every good is rewarded and every sin punished.” (of Siena 1980, 172)
- “everyone who is virtuous is worthy of love.” (of Siena 1980, 230)
- “I reward everything good and punish every sin.” (of Siena 1980, 233)
- “All my goodness assigns them their places, measuring out to all according to the measure of loving charity” (of Siena 1980, 266)
- “one’s catch will be as perfect as one’s cast,” (of Siena 1980, 310)

There is an optimism to this; others’ sins have meaning and will be punished; the universe is inclined towards justice.

Dirt-Moral Axis

The idea that moral good is absence of contamination [of the self] is explicitly articulated by Simone Weil (Weil 2020, 20): “C’est la pureté, la perfection, la plénitude, l’abîme du mal.” (Weil 2020, 32). Purity is applicable to the moral self: “purification est la séparation du bien et de la convoitise” (Weil 2020, 27).

St. Catherine is more metaphorical: “[selfish love] has poisoned and sickened the mystic body of the holy Church,” (of Siena 1980, 36); “defiled their minds and bodies by such filth,” (of Siena 1980, 51)

- “Tout ce qui est vil ou médiocre en nous se révolte contre la pureté et a besoin, pour sauver sa vie, de souiller cette pureté. Souillier, c’est modifier, c’est toucher.” (Weil 2020, 70)
- “Tout crime est un transfert du mal de celui qui agit sur celui qui subit.” (Weil 2020, 78)
- “Le mal, c’est toujours la destruction des choses sensibles où il y a présence réelle du bien” (Weil 2020, 81)
- “Leur mélange est la plus grande impureté.” (Weil 2020, 91)
- “Dans les états d’âme, on ne cherchait pas l’intensité, mais la pureté.” (Weil 2020, 159)
- “Tout est souillé et atroce,” (Weil 2020, 181)
- “le poison de la notion de progrès” (Weil 2020, 182)
- “les victimes sont souillées par la force...” (Weil 2020, 191)
- “I’ve got to cleanse myself // Of all these lies till I’m good enough for him” (Apple 1996)

- “wretched sin’s filthy leaves . . . the heart that produces them is not sincere but heavily stained with duplicity and weakness.” (of Siena 1980, 173)
- “the stinking blossoms of dishonorable thoughts” (of Siena 1980, 241)
- “This Sun is not defiled by any uncleanness, its light is one.” (of Siena 1980, 206)
- “It [the sacrament] is like the sun which is not contaminated by the filth it shines on.” (of Siena 1980, 209)
- “keep their bodies, as instruments of the soul, in perfect purity.” (of Siena 1980, 213)
- “They are rebels against the blood because they have become irreverent prosecutors, like rotten members cut off from the mystic body of holy Church.” (Weil 2020, 217)
- “they corrected lovingly, with the ointment of kindness along with the harshness of the fire that cauterizes the wound of sin through reproof” (Weil 2020, 223)
- “If they see the members who are their subjects rotting because of the filth of deadly sin and apply only the ointment of soft words without reproof, they will never get well. Rather, they will infect others. . . ” (of Siena 1980, 224)
- “I demand of you and them the greatest purity that is possible. . . ” (of Siena 1980, 237)
- “they do not recognize what miserable filth they are wallowing in. The stench reaches even up to me, supreme Purity.” (of Siena 1980, 237)
- “all contaminated in the mind” (of Siena 1980, 238)
- “give me some respite by showing me where I and your other servants can find refuge so that this leprosy will not be able to harm us or deprive us of our bodily and spiritual purity.” (of Siena 1980, 238)
- “lest your ears be infected with the stench,” (of Siena 1980, 243)
- “three pillars of vice I showed you at another time: impurity, bloated pride, and greed. . . ” (of Siena 1980, 244)
- “look with what miserable impurity they defile both their bodies and spirits” (of Siena 1980, 244)
- “you defile those who are pure: You use your power to hurl them into the dung heap.” (of Siena 1980, 245)
- “I smell nothing but filth coming from your tongue as you swear and perjure yourself” (of Siena 1980, 245)

- “I could tell you of a great many sins, but I do not want to pour any more filth into your ears.” (of Siena 1980, 271)
- “you have given me a bittersweet medicine so that I might rise up . . . from the sickness of foolish indifference.” (of Siena 1980, 274–75)
- “You receive this innocence and grace in holy baptism by the power of the holy blood that washes away the stain of original sin in which you were conceived, which you contracted from your mother and father.” (of Siena 1980, 279)
- “So you see how a person’s disordered will that has opened all its gates responds by means of these organs so that all its gates responds by means of these organs so that all its sounds, that is, its works, are wasted and contaminated.” (of Siena 1980, 299)
- “. . . nor willingly bear the poverty I have given them as medicine for their souls because wealth would have been bad for them.” (of Siena 1980, 314) See Catherine’s idiosyncratic optimism: God makes one poor as benevolence.
- “She wishes she hadn’t read that confession. Silently she cries. She cries until she feels limp. She goes to the sink and splashes her face. . . Braids her hair, pins it up. Scrubs her face with soap, until her skin feels taut, shiny.” (Lispector 2015, 6–7)
- “She drains out from her the pus of carelessness by casting out care for the world and its riches.” (of Siena 1980, 321)
- “She gives the soul hatred and love as servants so that she will clean her dwelling place.” (of Siena 1980, 322)
- “wretched filthiness in the place of innocence.” (of Siena 1980, 327)
- “stinking evil thoughts” (of Siena 1980, 349)
- “see how much evil is born of these two fetid and stinking pillars, impurity and greedy avarice.” (of Siena 1980, 251)
- “You avoid them because your stinking vice cannot stand virtue’s fragrance.” (of Siena 1980, 253)
- “she better appreciates the value of time, and the precious gems of virtue, reproaches herself because it seems to her that she has made poor use of her time.” (of Siena 1980, 264)
- “using their bodies and minds like pigs rolling in the mud, for that is how they roll about in the mud of lust.” (of Siena 1980, 74)
- “she opens the window and vomits out the rottenness in holy confession,” (of Siena 1980, 119)

- “lest her mind be contaminated by the memory of specific ugly sins,” (of Siena 1980, 124)

This comparison makes immorality out to be foreign to the self and by nature external to the body. Catherine’s metaphorical vomiting to rid herself of sin is uncomfortably literal; she did in fact vomit out food when she was forced to eat out of politeness.

Transience

Simone Weil and St. Catherine have a similar attitude towards the transient, it is sublunary and lesser.

- “Les pensées sont changeantes, obéissantes aux passions. . .” (Weil 2020, 65)
- “Nous voudrions que tout ce qui a une valeur fût éternel.” (Weil 2020, 113)
- “Le désir de découvrir du nouveau empêche d’arrêter la pensée sur la signification transcendante.” (Weil 2020, 139)
- “La légitimité, c’est la continuité dans le temps, la permanence” (Weil 2020, 188)
- “See to what they come, what it is they serve: not firm and stable things, but changeable things, so that today they are rich, tomorrow poor.” (of Siena 1980, 317)
- “these things are imperfect and passing.” (of Siena 1980, 100)
- “the transitory things of this world, they all pass away like the wind.” (of Siena 1980, 185)

Salvation

Salvation is the one goal and there is one path to salvation (of Siena 1980, 29). Self-improvement unto salvation is an anorexic archetype. For psychiatric accounts, see Rance, Clarke, and Moller (2017).

- “That roadway cannot be destroyed or stolen from anyone who wants to follow it, because it is solid and immovable and comes from me, the unchangeable one.” (of Siena 1980, 70)
- “When they reach perfection, I relieve them of this lover’s game” (of Siena 1980, 147) Salvation is relief from the penurious self-imposed program, it is the one state.

Psychiatric Context

Self-Improvement

The “New Year’s Resolution” style of thinking noted by Vitousek, Bemis, and Hollon Vitousek and Hollon (1990):

I must just do X so that Y will come to pass — and I shall be a better person for my efforts.

One notes such an attitude towards self-improvement in St. Catherine of Siena: “Then I purify them so their trials will make them produce better and sweeter fruit,” (of Siena 1980, 304).

On Weil’s part: “misères les plus précieuses qui soient données à l’homme comme échelle pour monter.” (Weil 2020, 194)

- “celui qui n’est pas bon ne fait pas le bien.” (Weil 2020, 103) That is, one cannot *do* good unless one *is* good - self-cultivation then is an ethical imperative!
- “I also promised you, and I promise you now, that through the sufferings of my servants I shall reform my bride.” (of Siena 1980, 362) This is optimistic in Catherine’s dour way—sufferings in life are proof of God’s benevolence!

Drive to Symmetry

Drive to symmetry is noted in anorexics (Srinivasagam et al. 1995; Matsunaga et al. 1999); unity is almost a value unto itself in both St. Catherine and Weil.

- “Si I est Dieu, ∞ est le diable.” (Weil 2020, 99)

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