

At the Sources of Simone Weil's Mysticism

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Mysticism – from the individual to the people: impersonal mysticism

Simone Weil, in “Cette guerre est une guerre de religions,”¹ observes that human beings find the opposition between good and evil so intolerable that they seek to transcend it either by denying its reality or by venerating idols (idolatry), adoring the social under various divine names: “The method consists in delimiting a social area into which the pair of contradictories, good and evil, may not enter. In so far as he is contained within this area, man is freed from the two contradictories.... Scientists and artists often make science and art a closed area within which there is no place for virtue or vice; whence they conclude that in their capacity of scientist or artist they are absolved from all moral responsibility ... In general, throughout history this art of delimiting special areas has enabled men who did not appear to be monsters to perpetrate innumerable monstrous crimes.” And yet this method is flawed, because “a scientist is not free from good and evil in his capacity of father, husband or citizen.”²

The third method by which the opposition of good and evil can be transcended is the mystical way: the soul, by uniting itself with the absolute good, passes beyond (transcends) the opposition of good and evil. Absolute good is thus not the opposite of evil, nor is it the correlative of evil. Such a union is a real and effective operation. “Just as a young girl is no longer virgin after she has had a husband or a lover, so the soul which has experienced such a union is changed forever.”³ Weil also affirms that mysticism is the only powerful motive force of humanity.

That essay was written during the Second World War, in 1943, while Simone Weil was in London. It was published posthumously in the volume entitled *Écrits de Londres et dernières lettres*. The collection consists mainly of reports she wrote for the Free French forces addressing the reorganization of France after the war. (Three of these reports were published in the French literary magazine *La Table ronde*, including *La Personne et le sacré* [The person and the sacred], published under the title “La Personnalité humaine, le juste et l’injuste” (no. 36, December 1950), and the aforementioned “Cette guerre est une guerre de religions,” with the title “Retour aux guerres de religions” [A return to the wars of religion] (no. 55, July 1952).

Simone Weil arrived in London on 14 December 1942 as editor in the service of the Interior Directorate of the Free French forces. In the subsequent period she wrote “La Personne et le sacré,” *Théorie des sacrements* (Theory of the sacraments) and the only book that she published herself, *L'Enracinement* (translated into English as *The Need for Roots*). On 15 April 1943, she was admitted to the Middlesex Hospital, and died in a sanatorium in Ashford on 24 August 1943 at the age of 34.

In “Cette guerre est une guerre de religions,” Weil was concerned with the link not only between mysticism and the individual—or to use her term, with “the decremented self”—but also between a people and mysticism: “The very nature of such a transformation makes it impossible to hope for its accomplishment by a whole people. But the whole life of a people may be permeated by a religion entirely oriented towards mysticism. It is only by this

¹ *Écrits de Londres et dernières lettres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), 98-108. The literal translation of this title is “This war is a war of religions”; the essay was published in English with the title “A War of Religions” in *Selected Essays 1934-1943* (hereafter SE), ed. and trans. by Richard Rees (London/New York/Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1962, pp. 211-218).

² SE 212-213.

³ SE 214.

orientation that religion is distinguished from idolatry.”⁴ Yet the masses are not creative when it comes to civilization (a system of limitations on the passions understood in a Cartesian sense) “unless they are inspired by a genuine élite.” What is needed today—she wrote in the midst of war—“is an élite to inspire the virtue of spiritual poverty” and to “be poor not only in spirit but in fact (*de facto*)” so that it may experience, in the spirit and in the flesh, the humiliations of extreme poverty. Nations that have lived without religion can be no more than passive victims of war. Germany lived by an idolatry, as did Russia. The only example she gave of a tradition that had maintained the continuity of a living tradition was England. She continued: “If we are saved only by American money and machines we shall fall back, one way or another, into a new servitude like the one which we now suffer. . . . [Europe] is wasted by an internal malady. She needs to be cured.”⁵

Beyond this social dimension, the works of Simone Weil attest to a profound, Platonically inspired reflection on the phenomenon of mysticism, and at the same time offer descriptions of mystical moments in the form of poetic texts (*Prologue*, “La Porte”, etc.) in which she combines speculative and descriptive mysticism.

The poem entitled “La Porte” records the moment of despair, the closing of the door, followed by its sudden, unexpected reopening, in the second part of the poem, made up of five stanzas, each containing four lines:

(...) La porte est devant nous; que nous sert-il de vouloir?
 Il vaut mieux s’en aller abandonnant l’espérance.
 Nous n’entrerons jamais. Nous sommes las de la voir.
 La porte en s’ouvrant laissa passer tant de silence (...).⁶

[(...) The door is before us; what is the point of wanting?
 It would be better to go off, abandoning hope.
 We will never enter. We are weary of seeing it.
 The door as it opened let through so much silence (...).]

In her doctoral thesis,⁷ Gizella Gutbrod demonstrated that in this description of the mystical experience, Simone Weil used odd numbers of sequences at the beginning of the stanzas (whereas in the first part of the poem, the odd numbers come at the end of the stanzas). Weil’s knowledge of arithmetic and mathematics, in the Pythagorean tradition, served as inspiration in the writing of her poems. She deliberately used even and odd numbers, verse structures that are common in French versification as well as among the Pythagoreans. The latter viewed the opposition between odd and even numbers as an image of the opposition between the supernatural and the natural, given the close affinity between odd numbers and unity.⁸ The enjambment, like a door, appears at the point when a human being abandons every effort,

⁴ SE 215.

⁵ SE 218.

⁶ Simone Weil, *Poèmes, suivis de Venise sauvée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), 36. No full English translation exists, but part of the poem is translated by J.P. Little, “Simone Weil and the limits of language,” in *The Beauty that Saves: Essays on Aesthetics and Language in Simone Weil*, ed. Eric O. Springsted and John M. Dunaway (Macon, GA: Mercer Univ. Press, 1995), p. 51, n. 19.

⁷ Gizella Gutbrod, *Théorie et pratique de la poésie chez Simone Weil*, Budapest, thesis defended in 2007.

⁸ Simone Weil, *Intuitions pré-chrétiennes* (Paris: Fayard, 1985), 160. Translated into English as *Intimations of Christianity among the Ancient Greeks* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957, repr. 1998) (hereafter IC), 95.

whereupon the door opens by itself. Pythagoreanism was the first to see the riddle of philosophy as a constant mediating function.⁹

Weil also saw a profound connection between mathematics and poetry, writing that mathematics is “a sort of mystical poem composed by God himself”, and observing that mathematics is a form of mysticism. Mathematics understood in its broadest sense, covering “all rigorous and pure theoretical study of necessary relationships, constitutes at once the unique knowledge of the material universe wherein we exist and the clearest reflection of divine truths. No miracle, no prophecy is comparable to the marvel of this concordance.”¹⁰

The writings of Simone Weil have exerted a major influence on certain contemporary works of poetry; in *Simone Weil et le poétique*, a collection of studies edited by Jérôme Thélot, Jean-Michel Le Lannou and myself, several essays explore aspects of this influence. To cite but one example, a passage from the journals of János Pilinszky, a twentieth-century Hungarian poet, emphasises a key element of mystical experience – that of the distance of God. The theme is also found both in Weil’s poem “La porte” and in her *Prologue*. Pilinszky wrote: “Weil inspires in me a recognition of my own particular journey ... New lyrical task: by descending ever more deeply into the ‘distance of God’, to approach it ever more closely. This is the most urgent task, the plan of work.”¹¹

The *Prologue*, published at the beginning of her *Connaissance surnaturelle*, is the most enigmatic text by Simone Weil: simultaneously political and existential in nature, it points to an impersonal mystical experience. Impersonal, as indicated also by her use of the masculine form of the adjective ‘baptised’ in the phrase ‘I have not been baptised’ (thus setting aside any autobiographical interpretation in favour of a spiritual one). Jérôme Thélot, in his analysis of the *Prologue*¹², emphasises that in this text, “l’obéissance écoute (c’est le sens étymologique d’ ‘obéissance’, l’un des mots les plus chers à Simone Weil, et parmi les plus décisifs de sa pensée : *obéir* traduit ‘*obaudire*’,¹³ *entendre ce qui est avant*, et ne s’y rendre que pour l’avoir entendu).” [obedience listens (that is the etymological origin of the term ‘obedience’, one of the words dearest to Simone Weil and among the most decisive for her thought: *to obey* is a translation of ‘*obaudire*’, *to hear that which comes before* and to surrender to it only because one has heard it).] She listens in a way that is different from hermeneutics, for obedience is not a hermeneutic, its hearing does not depend on an understanding of meanings, and what she hears is not representational. Obedience is the ‘contact’, the act of lying down with the Master whom she obeys. “Et ce contact permet au disciple d’accéder à une révélation qui n’est pas langagière, (...) une archi-révélation, par laquelle celle des signes est conditionnée *a priori*.”¹⁴ [And this contact enables the disciple to attain a revelation that is not language-based ... an arch-revelation which by definition conditions the one that takes place via signs].

⁹ Emmanuel Gabellieri observes that “Cette compréhension d’un rapport intime, quoiqu’implicite, entre nature et surnaturel, se prolonge dans une convergence encore plus profonde avec Blondel, au plan de la pensée proprement philosophique de la médiation.” (Gabellieri, *Etre et don*, Louvain-Paris: Editions Peeters, 2003, 331.)

¹⁰ IC 193.

¹¹ *Naplók, töredékek* [Journals and fragments], Editions Osiris, Budapest, 1995, p. 79. (French translation by Lorand Gaspar in *Simone Weil et le poétique*, ed. Jérôme Thélot, Jean-Michel Le Lannou and Enikő Sepsi (Paris: Editions Kimé, 2007), 293).

¹² Jérôme Thélot, *L’immémorial. Etudes sur la poésie moderne* (Paris: Encre Marine, 2011), 380. See excerpt from the English translation, by R. Rees, in annex to this article.

¹³ ‘ob’, before, and ‘audire’, to listen (hear), with an obscure diphthong ‘oe’ (*oboedire*) where one would have expected ‘obudire’.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Decreation, necessity and the role of ceremony

The thought of the teacher of her youth, Alain, enriched by that of his own teacher, Jules Lagneau, would serve as the basis in the disciple, Simone Weil, for transcending the limited and personal horizon of the self by introducing the notion of ‘decreation’.¹⁵

The distinctive feature of the state of decreation is a passive activity that Weil calls “non-active action”, the origin of which is to be found in the *Bhagavad Gîtâ*. Non-active action is a kindred concept to those of ‘objectless desire’ and ‘attention in the void’ (“attention à vide”).

Fundamentally, what is needed is a compromise between the moral and metaphysical immobility that is appropriate to the decrelated state, and the movement that is necessary for any physical action. Autonomy, evil and human finitude are, in her thought, deeply attached to the cross of the space and time of existence. By the workings of grace and the consent of the autonomous creature, the ‘I’ can gradually disappear. This self-effacement is the opposite action to that of creation, and is thus a ‘decreation’.¹⁶ Those who live in space and time cannot help finding themselves at the centre of their vision and of their imagination, which, contrary to pure intellect – which has no centre – generates illusions, the chief of which is its own autonomous existence. The intellect enters the domain of necessity, which is structure and represents God as the Power in the universe. “I have power, therefore I am” (*Je puis, donc je suis*), she notes in one of her earliest writings¹⁷. But autonomy prevents such a coincidence of acting and knowing. The personal will must first learn day by day the lesson taught by the intellect, in order that it, too, might become something that effaces itself by the very fact of being exercised. Here we see a recapitulation of the principal themes of Alain, namely those of the will and the imagination, as well as their coming together in human action.

Simone Weil, like Alain, ascribed an important role to ceremony in the process of self-transcendence: Alain considered it to be an achievement of politeness (self-mastery). Weil regarded ceremony as part of the uncreated by virtue of the process of decreation of meaning itself (it effaces itself by being exercised, as is also the case with will and the self). In *Waiting for God*, she explains that “God is present in religious practices when they are pure”, just as He is present in the beauty of the world. “Every religious practice, every rite, all liturgy is a form of the recitation of the name of the Lord, and in principle should have a real virtue”.¹⁸

The decrelated state is marked by an obedience that is analogous to the fidelity of the right-angled triangle to the relationship that forbids it to leave the circle of which its hypotenuse is the diameter. “The same can be said”, she wrote in *Intimations of Christianity*,

when one has perceived mathematical necessity in nature, of the fidelity of floating bodies in rising out of water precisely as much as their density exacts, no more and no less. Heraclitus says ‘The sun shall not go beyond its boundaries; otherwise the Erinyes, servants of justice, would overtake it *in flagrante delicto*’. There is an

¹⁵ On this topic see in greater detail “Décréation et poétique immobile dans une optique comparative (Alain, Mallarmé, Simone Weil et János Pilinszky)”, in *Simone Weil et le poétique*, ed. Jérôme Thélot, Jean-Michel Le Lannou and Enikő Sepsi (Paris: Editions Kimé, 2007), 167-188.

¹⁶ “Decreation: to make something created pass into the uncreated” differs from destruction, which is “moving from the created to nothingness” (Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (hereafter GG) (Paris: Plon, 1947, 1988²), 31. It is impossible to deduce from the fragments of Weil’s writings the exact meaning of the continuity between the uncreated and God. It is “annihilation in God which confers the fulness of being upon the creature so annihilated, a fulness which is denied it so long as it goes on existing”, she wrote in her *Cahiers* (translated into English as *The Notebooks of Simone Weil* by Arthur Wills (London: Routledge, 1956, new ed. 2004), 471.

¹⁷ Simone Weil, *Sur la science* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 54-55. Translated into English as “Weil, “Science and Perception in Descartes,” *Formative Writings, 1929-1941*, ed. Dorothy Tuck McFarland and Wilhelmina van Ness (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), 59.

¹⁸ Simone Weil, *Attente de Dieu* (Paris: Editions du Vieux Colombier/La Colombe, 1951), 138. Translated into English as *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Putnam, 1951; re-ed. New York: HarperCollins, 1973), 117-118.

incorruptible fidelity in things to their place in the order of the world, a fidelity that a human being can approach only after having perfection, after having become identical to his or her own vocation. The contemplation of the fidelity of things, either in the visible world or in their mathematical relationships, or analogies, is a powerful means of achieving that fidelity. The first lesson of this contemplation is not to choose but to consent impartially to the existence of all that exists. This universal consent is the same thing as detachment, even the weakest and most legitimate in appearance, is an obstacle to it. That is why it must never be forgotten that light shines impartially on all beings and things. It is thus the image of the creative will of God, which upholds equally all that exists. It is to this creative will that our consent must adhere.¹⁹

This transparent state of the medium is the condition *sine qua non* for the *imitatio Christi*. The consent to obey is the mediator between blind obedience, which is a feature of matter, and God. The perfect consent is that of Christ.²⁰

... we, in so far as it is granted to us to imitate Christ, have this extraordinary privilege of being, to a certain degree, mediators between God and His own creation.²¹

But the Christ is Mediation itself, and Harmony itself. Philolaus said: 'Things which are neither of the same species nor of the same nature, nor of the same station need to be locked together under key by a harmony capable of maintaining them in a universal order.' Christ is that key which locks together the Creator and creation. Since knowledge is the reflection of being, the Christ is also, is by that same token, the key of knowledge. 'Woe unto you, lawyers!', said he, 'for you have taken away the key of knowledge.' He was that key, He whom earlier centuries had loved in advance, and whom the Pharisees had denied and were going to put to death.²²

Simone Weil follows in the Pythagorean tradition when she notes that mysticism must be the source of all knowledge and all values. "The key is harmony (Philolaus). Christ is the key. All geometry proceeds from the cross."²³ In the texts of the *Intimations of Christianity*, we see Greek philosophy coming together with Christian revelation. Thinking plays the role of mediator between being and spirit, since gnosis—knowledge—symbolises noumenal reality. Thought is analogical, but analogy does not yield complete and absolute knowledge of Being except via the Mediator. The analogy of Being must become real, that is, it must be extended by a Christological analogy. In this world, the unique and the universal are locked in a harmony that is the Incarnation. Christ is the Word, the principle of creation. Here on earth, Being has no reality (truth) without a transcendent Mediation. This conception is the result of the modern union of the Platonic *metaxu* (the middle ground, the mean) and philosophical Christology. Simone Weil uses the term *metaxu* to designate the bridge that mediates between humanity and transcendent reality (Christ, according to Saint Thomas, or the hearth, the homeland, or culture, according to Weil). The *metaxu* is the region of good and evil. "It is the temporal seen as a bridge."²⁴

¹⁹IC, 189-190.

²⁰ IC, 195.

²¹ Matter, being subject to the necessity, is entirely transparent.

²² IC, 195.

²³ Simone Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, trans; Richard Rees (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 98 (French edition in *Oeuvres Complètes* (hereafter OC) VI.4 (Paris: Gallimard, 2006), 125).

²⁴ See GG, 147.

In this image of the Passion that began with creation itself, the crucifixion of Christ almost opened the door, and almost separated the Father and the Son, on the one hand, and the Creator and creation on the other. (Creating having been an abdication by God, who withdrew, enabling one part of being to be something other than God). The door opened slightly. Resurrection closed it again. Those who participate in the cross of Christ go through the door, passing to the side where the very secrets of God are to be found. Love provides the passage (like a Jacob's ladder) between the Creator and creation, where the self, having been decreed, no longer poses any obstacle. Although the supernatural does not descend to the domain of nature, nature is nonetheless changed by the presence of the supernatural, which becomes a new factor in the mechanism of the soul and transforms it.

The immediate experience of the Ineffable

How can we know if these texts by Simone Weil come from an immediate experience of God? Or are they nothing more than one of those allegories whose code is historically constituted? This question would seem to be prior to what knowledge can know, prior to dubious certainties. To examine the intentional object of the religious mind presupposes the journey itself.

Simone Weil provides two descriptions of her direct experiences of God, of which the first, described in *Waiting for God* (the chapter titled 'Spiritual autobiography') took place between Palm Sunday and Easter 1938, when, in spite of constant headaches, she was attending all the liturgical offices. For Weil, the recitation of poetry, as well as the recitation of the name of God in the ceremony mentioned on several occasions, had "the virtue of a prayer" precisely at the moment when her headaches lead to a powerful experience. While spending that period at the Benedictine monastery of Solesmes, Weil was introduced by a young Catholic Englishman to the seventeenth-century English metaphysical poets and in particular to George Herbert's "Love (III)". Weil recited the poem in order to beat the headache and be attentive to God. In *Waiting for God*, she writes, "I used to think I was merely reciting it as a beautiful poem, but without my knowing it the recitation had the virtue of a prayer. It was during one of these recitations that, as I told you, Christ himself came down and took possession of me."²⁵ The recitation functioned as an effective channel for this experience of the transcendent Being incarnated through Weil's attention to the words of the poem. It is no less significant that the poem itself is sacramental in matter, describing the lyric subject's hesitant participation in a Eucharistic meal with Love. ("Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back", Herbert begins, ending finally with that entrance into the church space that structures the volume of poems, *The Temple*, ending with "Love": "You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat: / So I did sit and eat."²⁶ This experience was followed by a second one, during a praying of the *Pater Noster*. She wrote, again in *Waiting for God*: "Sometimes also, during this recitation or at other moments, Christ is present with me in person, but his presence is infinitely more real, more moving, more clear and more filled with love than on that first occasion when he took possession of me."²⁷

²⁵ Simone Weil, *Attente de Dieu* (Paris: La Colombe, Editions du Vieux Colombier, 1950), 37-38. English translation from *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Putnam, 1951; re-ed. New York: HarperCollins, 1973), 68-69.

²⁶As quoted and interpreted by Katy Wright-Bushman, "A Poetics of Consenting Attention: Simone Weil's prayer and the poetry of Denise Levertov", in *Christianity and Literature*, vol. 62, no. 3 (Spring 2013), 376. For "Love (III)", see *George Herbert: The Complete English Works*, ed. Ann Pasternak Slater (New York: Everyman's Library, 1995), 184.

²⁷ Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, ed. cit., 72.

Conclusion

Simone Weil followed the journey of her thought in an assent to faith, in particular after these mystical experiences. Her intellectual, poetic and experiential languages are so closely intertwined that she cannot escape a spiritual language that turns back on itself. “God is not that which is made manifest through words, but that by which words are made manifest.”²⁸ Her work brings us to the point of intersection between philosophy of religion, theology and mysticism.

By way of conclusion, we can affirm that the texts about necessity found in *Intimations of Christianity*, as well as in the two poetico-mystical texts cited above, show the fusion, in her thinking, of Greek philosophy (the mythology, Plato, the Pythagorean tradition) and Christianity. The concept of beauty, in a Neoplatonic understanding, encounters, in a paradoxical manner, the beauty of God entering Creation (in the form of his Son) in the Incarnation: “Beauty is something to be eaten; it is food. If we are going to offer the people Christian beauty purely on account of its beauty, it will have to be as a form of beauty which gives nourishment.”²⁹ Beauty is equated with the necessary relations that are found in creation. The distantiated beauty of *Gravity and Grace* (“distance is the soul of the beautiful”³⁰) becomes a flesh-and-blood reality in *L’Enracinement (The Need for Roots)*, where we receive beauty in the form of the body of Christ in the Eucharist. The beauty of the world is therefore not an allusion to beauty, but Beauty itself has come down, was made incarnate and became our food when God, as Power, separated Himself from the love incarnate in Creation (that past is the continuous present of the Passion which is reproduced ceaselessly as a *praesens perfectum perpetuum*).

²⁸ OC VI.4 (*La connaissance surnaturelle*), 926.

²⁹ Simone Weil, *L’Enracinement* in Id., *Oeuvres*, (Paris: Quarto Gallimard, 1999), 1084. Translated into English as *The Need for Roots*, trans. Arthur Wills (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952), 90.

³⁰ GG, 149. Or again “The attitude of looking and waiting is the attitude which corresponds with the beautiful.” (GG, 206).

PROLOGUE

He entered my room and said: 'Poor creature, you who understand nothing, who know nothing. Come with me and I will teach you things which you do not suspect'. I followed him.

He took me into a church. It was new and ugly. He led me up to the altar and said: 'Kneel down'. I said 'I have not been baptized'. He said 'Fall on your knees before this place, in love, as before the place where lies the truth'. I obeyed.

He brought me out and made me climb up to a garret. Through the open window one could see the whole city spread out, some wooden scaffoldings, and the river on which boats were being unloaded. The garret was empty, except for a table and two chairs. He bade me be seated.

We were alone. He spoke. From time to time someone would enter, mingle in the conversation, then leave again.

Winter had gone; spring had not yet come. The branches of the trees lay bare, without buds, in the cold air full of sunshine.

The light of day would arise, shine forth in splendour, and fade away; then the moon and the stars would enter through the window. And then once more the dawn would come up.

At times he would fall silent, take some bread from a cupboard, and we would share it. This bread really had the taste of bread. I have never found that taste again.

He would pour out some wine for me, and some for himself – wine which tasted of the sun and of the soil upon which this city was built.

At other times we would stretch ourselves out on the floor of the garret, and sweet sleep would enfold me. Then I would wake and drink in the light of the sun.

He had promised to teach me, but he did not teach me anything. We talked about all kinds of things, in a desultory way, as do old friends.

One day he said to me: 'Now go'. I fell down before him, I clasped his knees, I implored him not to drive me away. But he threw me out on the stairs. I went down unconscious of anything, my heart as it were in shreds. I wandered along the streets. Then I realized I had no idea where this house lay.

I have never tried to find it again. I understood that he had come for me by mistake. My place is not in that garret. It can be anywhere – in a prison cell, in one of those middle-class drawing-rooms full of knick-knacks and red plush, in the waiting-room of a station – anywhere, except in that garret.

Sometimes I cannot help trying, fearfully and remorsefully, to repeat to myself a part of what he said to me. *How am I to know if I remember rightly?* [my italics] He is not there to tell me.

I know well that he does not love me. How could he love me? And yet deep down within me something, a particle of myself, cannot help thinking, with fear and trembling, that perhaps, in spite of it all, he loves me.

(Simone Weil, *La connaissance surnaturelle*, Gallimard, 1950, 9-10; English translation in *The Notebooks of Simone Weil*, trans. Arthur Wills (London: Routledge, 1956, re-ed. 2004), 638-639.)