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# **PANENTHEISM IN INDIAN AND WESTERN THOUGHT**

**COSMOPOLITAN INTERVENTIONS**

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# 4 Viśiṣṭādvaitic Panentheism and the Liberating Function of Love in Weil, Murdoch, and Rāmānuja

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## 4.1 Introduction

As we explore panentheism, what can we learn from Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita? Although widely acknowledged as a panentheist, in the contemporary debate on how to characterize panentheism, Rāmānuja barely features. But Rāmānuja's position is worth studying not just because it bears on taxonomical questions. Among its interesting features is a conception on which devotional love, *bhakti*, serves an epistemic function that is also of crucial soteriological relevance. This chapter addresses both these topics. First, Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita is used to cast doubt on a characterization of panentheism recently proposed by Mikael Stenmark. Second, Rāmānuja's conception of *bhakti* is juxtaposed with two conceptions of love that serve an analogous dual function: Weil's conception of supernatural love and Murdoch's conception of love as just attention. Rāmānuja's position, it is argued, is distinct, partly due to his panentheistic commitments, but also shares a number of features with the other two. In closing, it is suggested that for further comparative work on these three, ample room remains.

## 4.2 Rāmānuja – An Atypical Panentheist?

'Panentheism,' arguably first used to label a philosophical position by the German philosopher Karl Christian Friedrich Krause,<sup>1</sup> is notoriously difficult to define. The Greek signals the general idea: everything (*pan*) is in (*en*) God (*theos*). Yet how to spell it out is a contentious issue – so much so that panentheism has been called a position without a paradigm (see Göcke 2022).<sup>2</sup> The problem will surface in this section, too, when, after summarizing Mikael Stenmark's (Stenmark 2019) characterization of panentheism [4.2.1], we confront it with Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita [4.2.2] to show that the characterization fails to convince.

#### 4.2.1 Panentheism According to Stenmark

Stenmark prefaces his characterization of panentheism by stating a commitment he thinks deists, traditional theists, panentheists, and pantheists share. The commitment is to what he dubs *Minimal Personal Theism*, the thesis that God is conscious or mind-like, or personal or person-like, or has properties at least similar to those of a person (see Stenmark 2019: 24).<sup>3</sup> Next, to bring out what he thinks is distinctive of personalist panentheism, Stenmark discusses the following claims:

- 1 **ontological distinction:** God is ontologically distinct from the world.
- 2 **creation:** Since God is its creator, the world depends on him for its origin.
- 3 **asymmetrical ontological dependence:** For God's existence, he depends in no way on the existence of any world.
- 4 **world self-sufficiency:** Once created, the world depends no further on God for its continuing existence.
- 5 **conservation:** The world's continuing existence depends on God's ongoing creative activity.
- 6 **ontological inclusion:** God ontologically includes the world as God's part.
- 7 **symmetrical ontological dependence:** Not only does the world depend on God for its existence, God, too, depends for his existence on the world.
- 8 **ontological identity:** God is fully ontologically identical with the world.
- 9 **impassibility:** God is incapable of emotions and cannot feel sorrow or suffer as a result of his creatures' afflictions.
- 10 **sensibility:** God is capable of emotions and can feel sorrow or suffer as a result of his creatures' afflictions.
- 11 **immense power:** God is at least as powerful as needed to create the world and to sustain its existence.
- 12 **goodness:** God is perfectly good, compassionate, and loving.

Personalist panentheists, Stenmark holds, think that the world is a finite part of an infinite, all-good, and sufficiently powerful God who is affected by what happens in the world, and that the world and God are ontologically interdependent. That is, they reject (1), (3), (4), (8), and (9), and accept (2), (5), (6), (7), and (10)–(12).<sup>4</sup> In virtue of rejecting (1), (3), and (4), Stenmark asserts, panentheists disagree with deists,<sup>5</sup> and by accepting (5), they side with theists. Moreover, accepting (7) separates them from many traditional theists, accepting (10) over (9) from at least some. In virtue of accepting (6) over (8), finally, panentheists are said to disagree with pantheists.<sup>6</sup>

If Stenmark takes (7) to be characteristic of panentheism – “not only no God, no world”; he quips, “but also no world[,] no God” (Stenmark 2019: 27) – then in doing so, he is not alone. In a similar vein, John E. Culp takes to be distinctive of panentheism what he calls a mutual relation of interdependence between God and the world.<sup>7</sup> Through this relation, he holds, the world affects and influences both who God is and what God does (Culp 2022: 155), and God responds to the world by providing direction to God’s creation in a non-controlling way (ibid.: 157).<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, Culp’s account remains vague; he does not say exactly how to construe worldly effects on God and, especially, on God’s essence. Citing Göcke 2017 and Stenmark 2019, he acknowledges that traditional theists, too, can – often will – allow that God’s knowledge and compassion are responsive to changes in the world,<sup>9</sup> but that for them, such responsiveness does not reflect changes in God’s essence. If Culp agrees that traditional theists can allow such effects and if, for him, the mutual relation of interdependence is to be the distinctive feature of panentheism, we should expect him to conceive of it as something different or over and above that which theists can anyway accept. Yet whether Culp would agree with Stenmark’s criterion (7), insist that worldly changes also (somehow) affect God’s essence, or something else, is impossible to tell.<sup>10</sup>

#### 4.2.2 *Rāmānuja’s Viśiṣṭādvaitic Panentheism*

Let us consider how the Viśiṣṭādvaita of the 11th- and 12th-century Indian philosopher Rāmānuja fares with respect to Stenmark’s characterization. That Rāmānuja should be counted as a panentheist is widely accepted (cf. Lott 1976; De Smet 1978; Barua 2010; Clayton 2010; Bartley 2013; Meister 2017).<sup>11</sup> To bring out Viśiṣṭādvaita’s specific nature, it helps to contrast it with another influential Vedāntic tradition: Advaita Vedānta, which, with Śāṅkara as its most influential proponent, is a radically illusionist monism. According to it, there is only one ultimate reality: the undivided and impersonal Brahman, specified as pure consciousness (*cit*); every seeming to the contrary is an illusion (*māyā*), the result of a perspective skewed by ignorance. Consequently, Brahman is ultimately identical also with Ātman, the experiencing self. For Advaita Vedāntins, fully grasping this identity of the Ātman-Brahman is the paradigmatic path to liberation.

Proponents of Rāmānuja’s Viśiṣṭādvaita share the claim that the highest reality (*parabrahman*) is one. But rather than in terms of pure consciousness, they construe it as having three aspects. Its primary constituent and sole substance is Īśvara, a personal godhead – the supreme person (*puṣottama*), specifically, Nārāyaṇa, where ‘Nārāyaṇa’ is an epithet of Viṣṇu.<sup>12</sup> Īśvara is taken to be transcendent with regard to the world, essentially endowed with attributes of perfection, but is also said to reside as immanent ruler (*antaryāmi*) in the many facets or supplements that

eternally qualify him: the conscious and immortal individual souls (*cit*) as well as all non-conscious and perishable material beings (*acit*). All of the latter jointly form God's body that "the Lord gives being to and sustains at every moment of its existence" (Barua 2010: 7–8).

**(1) Minimal Personal Theism (MPT) and Ontological Distinction:** Clearly, Rāmānuja, too, subscribes to *Minimal Personal Theism*. Regarding (1) [ontological distinction], however, things are less straightforward.<sup>13</sup> On the one hand, as a transcendent being that has divine attributes of perfection that accrue to neither the conscious nor the non-conscious facets, Īśvara is explicitly said to be beyond transmutations and ontologically distinct from the world.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, the world is said to be Īśvara's body. And even if one were to interpret this only in a metaphorical sense, then at least *prima facie*, one might be tempted to cash it out in the sense that the world is a spatial part of Īśvara. This temptation, however, must be resisted.

As Chad Meister remarks, on Rāmānuja's specific understanding, a body (*śarīra*), simply put, is "that reality through which the self expresses itself" (Meister 2017: 4). More fully, it is "any substance which a conscious being is capable of completely controlling and supporting for its own purposes" (Barua 2010: 13–4). That these characterizations contain no reference to spatial terms is studied. For instead of taking Brahman to be spatially qualified such that the world would be a spatial part of Brahman, Rāmānuja considers Brahman as the world's ontological ground, as that which controls and supports all beings, and that on which all beings depend for their nature, subsistence, and activity (Barua 2010: 14, referencing Ramanuja 1985, 7.19).<sup>15</sup> In a manner similar to how the soul controls the body (albeit imperfectly), he holds, Brahman (perfectly) controls the world with all its non-conscious and conscious elements. In this way, Brahman is "intimately present in the world not by being spatially extended through it but by sustaining every finite object over which Brahman retains a causal asymmetry and independence in certain crucial respects" (ibid.: 4).

With the spatial presupposition removed, another reason why one could doubt that Rāmānuja accepts (1) is hinted at in Meister 2017 and discussed more fully in Gupta 1958, Lipner 1986, Barua 2010, and Bartley 2013. It rests on the fact that like Śāṅkara, Rāmānuja, too, is a *satkāryavādin* (see, e.g., Gupta 1958), i.e., a proponent of the doctrine that the effect (*kārya*) preexists in and is not really distinct from the cause (*sat*). Here, then, is the doubt concerning Rāmānuja's acceptance of (1): if for Rāmānuja, the world is an effect of Īśvara, and given his acceptance of *satkāryavāda*, must he not maintain that in some sense, the world is identical with Īśvara throughout? How can he hold both that Īśvara is ontologically distinct from the world and also that the latter is created, sustained, and hence caused by Īśvara, especially given the *satkāryavādin's* commitment to the idea that effects preexist in their cause?

The resolution of the apparent tension requires taking note of two facts. First, for Rāmānuja, Brahman functions as the world’s material (or substantial) cause (*upādāna kāraṇa*) and its efficient cause (*nimitta kāraṇa*) both. In this general sense, we can think of Brahman as one absolute substance that assumes different forms as different potentialities already inherent in it become actualized. Indeed, as Anima Sen Gupta explains, we can helpfully construe the relation Rāmānuja takes to obtain between God and the world on the model of the relation that obtains between a substance (*prakārin*) and its attributes (*prakāra*) (see Gupta 1958). As in that relation, what corresponds to the latter, i.e., the conscious and unconscious elements that jointly constitute the world, belongs to what corresponds to the former, Brahman, in a way that makes them forever inseparable (*apṛthaksiddha*) from and thus united with him. “[I]n the production of the world,” Barua affirms, “the Lord, Brahman who is qualified by distinctions, is non-dual with it (*viśiṣṭādvaita*)” (Barua 2010: 16). However, and this is the important second point, these worldly elements, construed on the model of the substance-attribute model, do not form part of God’s *essential* nature. The latter is characterized exclusively by reference to excellent qualities such as omniscience, omnipotence, goodness, and bliss, which the world does not possess.

The resulting picture thus accommodates both the ontological distinctness of Brahman from the world and the fact that, nevertheless, an inseparable unity obtains between them. In the sense that God’s essential nature is taken to be excellent and such as to serve as the ontological ground on which worldly beings that assume different forms (and are afflicted by imperfections) fully depend but that is not itself touched by such imperfections, God is seen as ontologically distinct.<sup>16</sup> In the sense that qua attributes, worldly items are part of the momentary form assumed by the ultimate substance, they are also inseparable and one with it.

In effect, Rāmānuja thus solves the tension by drawing on two conceptions of unity – one narrow, one total: the narrow conception is what he takes to underlie Īśvara’s ontological distinctness and the two entities formed under this conception correspond to the contrast between the identity constituted by Īśvara’s essential properties (Īśvara with respect just to his essential properties) and the identity constituted by Īśvara’s contingent properties (world). The total unity in virtue of which his position counts as a variety of non-dualism rests on the identity constituted by drawing on the single underlying substance (identical with Īśvara) that bears Īśvara’s essential and contingent properties both.

Now, since this configuration provides a distinct way of spelling out the idea that the world is in God, accepting it, I think, should indeed qualify one as panentheist *à la lettre*, quite independently of the fact that it requires countenancing a sense in which God is ontologically distinct. At the very

least, we should put it on record, then, that as far as Stenmark's criterion (1) [ontological distinction] is concerned, Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita entails not its rejection, but its acceptance.

(2) **Creation:** Unsurprisingly, this particular divergence from Stenmark's characterization brings in its wake further divergences with respect to other criteria. Before we turn to the latter, however, let us note that like Stenmark's model panentheist, Rāmānuja also entertains a version of (2) [creation]. As per Stenmark's interpretation, panentheists who accept (2) need not also accept that God created the world *ex nihilo*. Accepting the latter is optional, he holds, which allows him to accommodate the fact that some panentheists (e.g., Philip Clayton in various publications) explicitly endorse *creatio ex nihilo*, whereas others do not. One possible reason for people to reject the idea of *creatio ex nihilo* is that they agree with Fichte, who insisted that such an act is simply unintelligible (see Fichte 1806, also Göcke 2022: 49). Another possible reason is that like Stenmark, they take God to be ontologically dependent on the existence of some world or other. Given God's infinite and eternal nature, the latter thought would naturally lead to the thought that there must always have been some world or other.

With an important *caveat*, the latter is precisely what Rāmānuja thinks. To begin with, like other Vedāntins, he takes the manifest world to partake in a cyclic process of eternally recurring creation, (qualified or great, i.e., total) dissolution (*pralaya*), and subsequent reconstitution. In the *pralaya* stage, i.e., when Brahman is said to be in the so-called causal condition (*kāraṇāvastham brahma*), all worldly beings are "deindividualised and collapsed in Brahman, in potency proximate as it were to individuation" (Lipner 1986). Even so, the world and its elements are still said to really exist, but only "in an extremely subtle condition such that they cannot be designated as different from the Lord Himself" (Barua 2010: 17). Getting out of the state of *pralaya* is a matter of Brahman forming a suitable intention: *bahu syām!* [=May I be many!]. Once this occurs, the world transitions back into a kind of existence that can be distinguished by assigning names and differentiating forms (cf. *ibid.*, citing Rāmānuja's *Śrī Bhāṣya* 1.3.29, version cited: Abhyankar 1914). Since creation cannot be seen as fulfilling any need of an anyway perfect being, it is, as (e.g.) Gupta points out, construed as something done not out of necessity, but out of a sportive motive or play (*līlā*) (see Gupta 1958, referring to Rāmānuja's *Śrī Bhāṣya*, II.i.33, version cited: Ramanuja 1940; also Nicholson 2020: 229–30).<sup>17</sup> However, therein the rub lies. For what makes the reference to sportive motifs or play necessary is Rāmānuja's insistence that Brahman is completely independent of the world.<sup>18</sup> Accordingly, for Rāmānuja, the eternal existence of the world cannot be explained the way we said above would be suggested if one combined Stenmark's conception of ontological dependence with the idea that God is eternal. For Rāmānuja, instead, the eternal existence of

the world will be a contingent matter. Creation, as Sucharita Adluri, too, affirms, will be “not so much a coming into being of something new but simply a change from a causal state (*kāraṇāvasthā*) to the effected state (*kāryāvasthā*) of this complex whole” (Adluri 2015: 25).

In sum, Rāmānuja entertains a notion of Brahman as a creator. On that notion, creation is not *ex nihilo*, but an eternally ongoing process of ontologically sustaining and bringing about the world, along with changes occurring in it, due also to Brahman. As part of this eternal change, the world cyclically undergoes phases of dissolution and reconstitution, where even in its fully dissolved state it remains real as a potential reality, eventually to be actualized again, throughout fully dependent on the creator. Crucially, “even though the relation between the creator and the creation is ‘necessary’ and ontological in nature, it does not, according to Rāmānuja, involve a modification in Brahman’s essence” (Helfer 1964: 44).

(4), (8), (5), (9)–(12), (6), (3) and (7): As our discussion above suggests, Rāmānuja will reject (4) [*world self-sufficiency*] and (8) [*ontological identity*], and accept (5) [*conservation*] along with (11) [*immense power*], and, due to his account of Īśvara’s personhood and his perfect essential nature, both (12) [*goodness*] and, arguably, some version of (10) [*sensibility*] (thus rejecting (9) [*impassibility*]).<sup>19</sup> As for (6) [*ontological inclusion*], drawing on the two notions of unity distinguished earlier, we can assert that Rāmānuja can accept it by saying that the world, construed as the narrow unity constituted by Brahman’s non-essential properties, is included in Īśvara, construed as the total unity constituted by what Brahman is essentially and contingently both.<sup>20</sup>

As for (3) and (7), finally, there is no reason for Rāmānuja to reject the former or accept the latter. We saw above that even though the world is said to be inseparably joined with Īśvara, like an attribute is joined to a substance, the world is not part of Īśvara’s essential nature. And again, since Īśvara’s essential nature is characterized by perfection, there can be nothing Īśvara lacks – including a world. Time and again, we find the insistence that for Rāmānuja, the world utterly depends on Īśvara, whereas the reverse dependence is denied.<sup>21</sup>

**Conclusion:** Rāmānuja is no panentheist in Stenmark’s sense. This is due to Rāmānuja’s acceptance of ontological distinction and his rejection of symmetrical ontological dependence. The latter carries special weight in light of the fact that Stenmark (like Culp) takes some version of symmetrical ontological dependence to be panentheism’s distinctive feature.

Since one person’s *modus ponens* is another person’s *modus tollens*, Stenmark’s characterization could be used to disqualify Rāmānuja as a panentheist or assign him the label of being at best an atypical panentheist. Yet that would seem ill-motivated. For one, Rāmānuja clearly defends a sophisticated panentheist view, so we should simply conclude

that Stenmark's characterization fails to capture panentheism's essence. Moreover, it is not just Rāmānuja who has little use for (7) [*symmetrical ontological dependence*]. Some feminist panentheists, too, reject its implication, i.e., that in a panentheistic conception, God ontologically depends on the world as God's body.<sup>22</sup> So why accept Stenmark's contention that a commitment to (7) is mandatory for panentheists, let alone that it is panentheism's distinctive feature?<sup>23</sup>

Somewhat surprisingly, Stenmark provides no argument for (7), either. He merely claims that (7) is *supported* by (6) [*ontological inclusion*] (see Stenmark 2019: 27), but does not elaborate. However, (7) would only seem to follow from (6) if the world included in God was also assumed to be part of God's essential nature, or such that God's essential nature depended on it in some other way. Yet, as the example of Rāmānuja's position illustrates, some panentheists reject this assumption.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, pending further arguments, I suggest that those invested in the taxonomic debate can point to Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaitic panentheism and insist that for panentheists, commitments to (1) and (7) are optional.

### 4.3 Simone Weil, Iris Murdoch, and Rāmānuja on Love

Confronting part of the contemporary debate on how to characterize panentheism with Rāmānuja's position yielded the following suggestion: rather than revoking his membership in club panentheism, we should adjust the eligibility criteria to keep him in – especially since the statutes that would serve as grounds for excluding him seem poorly motivated. Assuming, then, that Rāmānuja firmly remains in the panentheist fold, we can therefore turn to what is now a legitimate question, viz. how his panentheism affects his conception of the function of love. In closing, I will give at least a partial answer to this question and doing so will, I trust, serve to enrich the sketch of Rāmānuja's position presented so far. However, my primary hope for this second part of the chapter is that my particular way of contextualizing Rāmānuja's view of devotional love (*bhakti*) will open up fruitful lines of communication between Rāmānuja's work and that of two other philosophers – one almost saint-like in her practical, theoretical, and religious pursuits to compassionately share in the suffering of her fellows, the other one non-religious, but deeply committed to thinking about how we can make ourselves better through love.

The main reason why I find it instructive to contrast Rāmānuja's view of love with those of Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch is that even though the respective views and backgrounds of these three philosophers differ significantly, they are, as we shall see presently, united in that each takes love, on their respective conception of it, to have an epistemic function that is at the same time conducive to some kind of liberation. To make this clearer, we

must look at their accounts in some detail. In a somewhat dramatic shift of gears, let us thus emerge from the kind of classificatory debates we have been immersed in so far and turn to Simone Weil's account of love first [4.3.1], to then contrast it with that of Iris Murdoch [4.3.2]. After returning to Rāmānuja [4.3.3], I close by suggesting that at least some features that make Rāmānuja's conception distinctive are due to his panentheist commitments, and that a number of fascinating similarities and differences among the three accounts are well worth exploring [4.3.4].

#### 4.3.1 *Weil on Supernatural Love*

Neither Simone Weil nor Iris Murdoch counts as a panentheist. With respect to Iris Murdoch, it is obvious why. For while she is no doubt both very familiar with and deeply appreciative of various religious traditions, her philosophical work contains no commitment to God's existence.<sup>25</sup> As for Simone Weil, things are less straightforward, not least because much of her writings on the topic are both unsystematic and notoriously difficult to decode. Clearly, throughout her life, she is profoundly empathetic to the suffering of her fellow beings. She seeks to understand it – notably by actively sharing in the plight of factory workers – strives to work against the systematic oppression and for the education of the socially marginalized, and she engages deeply not just with social and political matters, but also with moral and, later in life, religious questions concerning the centrality of Christ, the interpretation of the Trinity, and how God and the world are related to one another. In her letters and especially in her notebooks, her serious and multifaceted engagement with such questions is on full display.

As for her religious affiliation, it is obvious that Weil's main vocabulary is taken from the Christian tradition. In her spiritual autobiography, a letter written to her friend Father Perrin, she admits that she "always adopted the Christian attitude as the only possible one." And further: "I might say that I was born, I grew up, and I always remained within the Christian inspiration" (Weil 1951: 62). However, as David Pollard has put it, "Weil's theology lacks an ecclesiology, that is, it does not situate itself within the self-understanding of the Church, but was developed in a manner open to but not deriving from the Church as a community of believers" (Pollard 2015: 47). In general, attempts to clarify her theological thought are rare. A welcome exception is Rozelle-Stone and Stone's (2013) characterization, as is Kim's recent characterization (in Kim 2022) of Weil's theology as theology of paradox (although the latter, unfortunately, is only available in Korean). It is not easy to systematically characterize her theological thinking, let alone classify it as panentheist (even if at least some of her remarks could be interpreted as friendly toward panentheism).<sup>26</sup>

Moreover, Weil never officially adopted any particular religion. Instead, she preferred to remain with those who, not being baptized, would be considered as beyond saving.<sup>27</sup> As Leslie A. Fiedler puts it in his introduction to Weil (1951), “from Simone Weil’s own point of view her outsidership [i.e., of the Catholic Church] was the very *essence* of her position” – a position at the intersection of Christianity and everything that is not Christianity (see *ibid.*: 5–7). For one, remaining in this position allowed Weil to develop and express her religious thoughts syncretistically by freely drawing on different vocabularies, including mythology, philosophy, and a number of religious traditions.<sup>28</sup> Also, refusing to pledge allegiance to any faith in particular was a way for her to maintain her intellectual honesty as she deemed it improper to add dogma to her religious outlook “without being forced to do so by indisputable evidence” (Weil 1951: 65). Lastly, it allowed her both to be critical vis-à-vis (e.g.) the Church where to her such criticism seemed apt, and at the same time to remain connected in universal solidarity with all human beings – faithful or not – as opposed to being alienated from those who do not subscribe to a particular, exclusive expression of faith.<sup>29</sup>

Such solidarity, for Weil, is, in turn, intimately related to her thought that ideally, what she calls *pure, supernatural love* must be universally extended to all creatures. Such love, as she has it, is devoid of attachment, which for Weil is “nothing else but an insufficiency in the feeling for reality” (Weil 1956: 365). Moreover, for Weil, such love is a result of looking and attending to others, of patiently waiting, without expectations that the other will reveal themselves, and shows itself as the unconditional acceptance of others as they are. Such love is free from all desires except for one: that the respective other may exist. Love in this sense is construed as a form of prayer and for Weil, exercising loving attention is not just a kind of *imitatio* of the unconditional divine love for the creation, but, as she claims, it is in fact the *only* way in which God can love creation: through the eyes of the creature (see *ibid.*: 333). “The real aim,” Weil says, “is not to see God in all things; it is that God through us should see the things that we see” (*ibid.*: 358).

Note, then, that for Weil, supernatural love is not directed at God, but at fellow creatures. As she puts it, “[i]t is not for me to love God. Let God love himself through me as medium” (*ibid.*: 363). A creature who loves purely, in her view, becomes an instrument of God, one that is selfless and thus, as it were, transparent. For Weil thinks that to enable God to see and love creation through the eyes of the creature, the subject or – as she puts it – the *I* must step aside. “I cannot conceive the possibility of God loving me,” Weil admits, “[b]ut I can imagine well enough that he loves that particular perspective of creation which can only be had from the spot where I am. However, I act as a screen,” she writes, and further, “I have got to

withdraw in order that he may be able to see it” (Weil 1956: 364). Since the following passage from the notebooks contains an even fuller expression of her view on this point, allow me to quote it at length:

Our consent is necessary in order that through the medium of ourselves God may be able to perceive his own creation. With our consent he is able to perform this marvel. [...] God can only love in us this consent we show in withdrawing in order to allow him to pass, in the same way as he himself, the Creator, has withdrawn in order to allow us to *be*. There is no other meaning but love attached to this double operation [...]. God, who is nothing else but Love, has not created anything else but love.

Relentless necessity, misery, distress, the crushing burden of poverty and of exhausting labour, cruelty, torture, violent death, constraint, terror, disease – all this is but the divine love. It is God who out of love withdraws from us so that we can love him. For if we were exposed to the direct radiance of love, without the protection of space, of time and of matter, we should be evaporated like water in the sun; there would not be enough ‘I’ in us to make it possible to love, to surrender the ‘I’ for love’s sake. Necessity is the screen placed between God and us so that we can *be*. It is for us to pierce through the screen so that we cease to *be*.

(Weil 1956: 401–02)

As Weil sees it, thus, a crucial aspect of developing supernatural love is to withdraw and subsequently destroy the *I*, to de-create, unself, and offer the *I* to God, thus as it were returning it to its source. At the same time, such an offering is an *imitatio dei* in the sense that the response given to the absence of God in the world, who is Love, is to initiate our own absence and love (see Weil 1956: 404; cf. also Siân Miles in Weil 1986: 33–4). It is also an act of freedom, Weil thinks. For the *I*, she claims, is the only thing we possess. Thus, offering it to God, from whom it has been received, is the only free act open to human beings (*ibid.*: 337). Since she takes it to be the only kind of offering we can make that is not a surreptitious reassertion of the ego, such offering is also a pure act of selfless love. Finally, she thinks that looking selflessly allows one to submit to the necessity inherent in creation and thereby act as one should; by acting in perfect obedience to what through selfless looking reveals itself as that which needs to be done, one becomes a “singular, unique, inimitable and irreplaceable mode of the presence, the knowledge and the working of God in the world” (Weil 1956: 363).<sup>30</sup>

Weil’s demand that the *I* be destroyed<sup>31</sup> dovetails with her insistence that the kind of supernatural love that we are to strive for must be universal, i.e., directed at everyone and everything. For according to her, love that is

partial only to some functions like an armor. Since through loving in ways that are partial and selective we refrain from acknowledging the reality and suffering of those that through our partiality we exclude from our loving attention, to engage in such partial love is to do violence to them.<sup>32</sup>

For Weil, then, selfless and universal love is the means by which we fully acknowledge the existence of and establish unfiltered contact with what is real. And while the destruction of the *I* that accompanies it is “sometimes accompanied by joy, at other times by suffering” (Weil 1956: 378), ideally, all suffering is to be taken as part of the necessary screen that makes the world a place in which we can come to love. If, along with the rest of the screen, suffering can be taken as part of the expression of beauty – that “manifest presence of reality” (see *ibid.* 360–1) – and as a further opportunity for loving the creator (i.e., for being selflessly obedient even in the face of extreme suffering), then joy may be found even in it – for “[b]eauty,” as Weil claims, “is the only source of joy open to us” (*ibid.*: 613).

Here, then, is the sense in which for Weil, pure, supernatural love plays an epistemic role: in being free of the kind of desires and, relatedly, fantasies we may harbor about what others may or should be or do, such love connects us to the world and enables us to know it as it is.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, as will be clear by now, for Weil, developing supernatural love fuels – or rather, *is* – spiritual progress. Engaging in it requires the kind of effacing of the self that terminates in a kind of transparency of the ego, which, in turn, is that which enables God to love himself by way of his creature – a state Weil calls the completion of God’s creative act (see Weil 1956: 333). In exercising such love, the subject is liberated from a limited perspective that through its partiality is inherently violent, that is unfree and delusional in virtue of being associated with selfish desires that are frequently geared toward what is ultimately unreal or impossible to obtain.<sup>34</sup>

Finally, it is worth highlighting that there may be a way to interpret some of Weil’s remarks as satisfying the criterion that Stenmark and Culp consider to be panentheism’s distinctive feature. For suppose, with Weil, that God is essentially love. If so, it could be that to *be* love God has need of creatures who, in turn, can or do freely withdraw from saying *I* so as to enable God to love them (or others through them) as a medium. If so, it can seem that on the view we extracted from Weil, in contrast to Rāmānuja’s, God *does* depend for being what God essentially is on the existence of the world. More specifically, it can seem as if God depends for his existence on the existence of creatures capable of the kind of supernatural love Weil has in mind.<sup>35</sup>

One may demur to this interpretation. For Weil grants that God anyway bears love toward himself and also, somewhat curiously, that God’s love by way of selflessly loving creatures is but an extension of such self-love (Weil 1956: 333). The first half of this thought may signal that for Weil,

God's capacity to engage in self-love does not depend on the existence of creatures. The second half may perhaps be understood in the following sense: since in virtue of loving selflessly, creatures manifest what God is essentially – Love – God's love for himself extends to such creatures in virtue of the love they manifest.<sup>36</sup> Now if, as Weil claims, God bears love toward himself anyway, then whether Weil accepts symmetrical ontological dependence appears to hinge on whether such self-love as God can exhibit without the cooperation of creation is enough for God to be fully God. Put differently, it appears to hinge on how she would answer questions such as whether God can be fully what God is essentially (a) *prior to creation* (assuming such an expression is deemed permissible) and (b) even if (perhaps contingently) there are no selflessly loving creatures in virtue of whom God can love creation. I am not sure how Weil would respond. Regardless, given the discussion conducted in the first half of this chapter, it is an interesting corollary of our examination that, pending further investigations, Weil's position seems *prima facie* amenable to a kind of interpretation in which she satisfies the condition said to be distinctive of panentheism. Now, if there were reasons against labeling her as a panentheist, substantiating said interpretation would provide yet a further reason to reject the kind of characterization of panentheism favored by Stenmark and Culp – at least if they insist (as I have suggested they should not) that symmetrical ontological dependence is indeed panentheism's distinctive feature.

#### 4.3.2 *Murdoch on Love as Just Attention and Realistic Imagination*

As we move on to considering Iris Murdoch's work, we may begin by noting that for Murdoch, love is best characterized in terms of *just attention*, i.e., a kind of attention that is unselfish, attuned to the reality and individuality of others, and that, in virtue of being free from selfish fantasies concerning who one would like others to be or what one would like them to do, does justice to who they are. The similarity with Weil's conception is neither hard to discern nor is it a coincidence. For as Murdoch explicitly highlights, she adopts her notion from Weil.<sup>37</sup>

That said, as we just saw, Weil had articulated her views in a context shaped by a broadly Christian conception of God. Moreover, she considered both friendship and supernatural love as belonging to the order of grace (see Weil 1977, sections on Love and Friendship). For Murdoch, in contrast, neither God nor one's obedience to God lie at the center of morality, so she has no need for the notion of divine grace. Siding with the Platonic tradition, she takes it that the most suitable general object of moral reflection is the idea of Good, which – although transcendent, non-representable, elusive, and hard to discern – forms a magnetic center

toward which, Murdoch claims, love naturally moves (cp. Murdoch 1970: 75, 99f., 102).

Arguably, Murdoch's conception of love can be characterized as a secularized version of Weil's, though the relationship between the two is complex.<sup>38</sup> For present purposes, it will suffice to highlight a few significant parallels and differences. As for the former, an example is Weil's characterization according to which "[b]elief in the existence of other human beings as such is *love*" (Weil 1977: 64). It is not difficult to recognize in it the predecessor of what is arguably one of Murdoch's most-quoted passages, viz. the slogan that "[l]ove is the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real" (Murdoch 1959: 51). And indeed, like for Weil, for Murdoch, too, engaging in love yields epistemic fruit. For her, too, love is the organ that connects us with existence and that, if directed at other persons, allows us to gain an intimate understanding of them. Love, as Murdoch says, "is knowledge of the individual" (Murdoch 1970: 28). Interestingly, gaining such knowledge, she thinks, also requires a realistic imagination of what others, circumstanced as they are, are able to see and what good they are trying to achieve. We connect through others and to the world in a way that is mediated via the notion of the Good.<sup>39</sup>

This latter aspect marks a significant difference between Murdoch's and Weil's respective conceptions. Although for Weil, too, recognizing the existence of others is a result of attending to them selflessly, in her work, such attention appears to be almost free from thinking, certainly divorced from exercises of the imagination. As Weil insists, everything that comes between the subject and the object of its attention – including attempts to imagine what others are like – hampers supernatural love. More specifically, Weil thinks that imagination is inevitably mixed with desires that keep part of the attending subject's attention bound to a non-actual state. Such desires prevent the subject from attending to what is here now and as such militate against the total acceptance of existence that, for Weil, supernatural love requires. In other words, for Weil, exercises of the imagination disturb the prayer that is the exercise of supernatural love in attention, interrupt the process of unselfing, and thus prevent the creation of the kind of void into which, by the workings of divine grace, the spirit could enter.

Unlike Weil, Murdoch does not think that acting truly well requires being perfectly selfless, transparent, and obedient to a reality that is to be accepted unconditionally. For Weil, we can say, attending to others justly is a matter of attending to them as God would: to love and accept them unconditionally requires that the I step aside. Since for Murdoch, morality revolves around the Good as a magnetic center, just attention, too, must be mediated through our idea of the Good. Granting that the Good may be infinitely distant from us and hard to discern, she takes it that we are nevertheless attracted by, and act upon, the images we create of it. Such

images, in turn, will be the better the less they reflect what is good not just for us, but Good, i.e., good for others, too. However, we have no way of directly grasping what (explicit or implicit) conceptions of the Good motivate others, how others evaluatively characterize the options for action that they take to be available to them, and why, accordingly, they act as they do. Therefore, for Murdoch, trying to imagine others realistically, in a way that does justice to who they are and is thus properly responsive to the conception of the Good toward which others are oriented, is a crucial component of attending to them justly and typically part of what increasing our ability to do well by them requires.<sup>40</sup>

For Murdoch, then, moral imagination can be a powerful tool in service of our attempts to act in ways that increasingly approximate what is truly good. However, that is not to say that for her, *all* imagination is good. As she has it, realistic imagination, the good kind, has an epistemically nefarious cousin: selfish fantasy. Whereas the former will support our attempts to understand others and allow us to do well by them, the latter blurs our vision. Its effects make others appear as mere caricatures of themselves, distorted by dint of the fact that what we attend to is not the complex individuals that we do in fact encounter, but only those among their features that we take to be relevant to our selfish goals. So while Murdoch's secular conception affords no room for the demand that the I and its desires be completely decreated, we find, in her view, something in its stead: an ardent opposition against what she considers the biggest enemy in morals – the fat relentless ego (see Murdoch 1970: 52). This ego, if left unchecked, pursues a narrow-minded conception of the Good on which the needs and demands of the egoistic self are pursued at the expense of the equally legitimate needs and demands of others. So while like for Weil, for Murdoch, too, just attention is selfless, it is so in the more circumscribed sense that it is untainted by egoistic desires.<sup>41</sup>

In conclusion, it will be clear that Murdoch, too, takes love to serve an epistemically crucial function: it enables us to connect with the individual reality of others. As for Weil, for Murdoch, too, love involves unselfing, though she construes unselfing in a less radical fashion. And while for both Weil and Murdoch, love leads to the liberation from selfish fantasies and thus to an increase in the ability to see others and do well by them, unlike Weil, Murdoch does not discredit imagination wholesale as being associated with desires that get in the way of appreciating the existence of others. Instead, she distinguishes realistic moral imagination from fantasy and makes the former part of what just attention requires.<sup>42</sup>

#### 4.3.3 *Rāmānuja on Bhakti*

Returning to Rāmānuja, note, first, that unlike Weil and Murdoch, in carving out his philosophical position – both generally and on the topic of

liberation in particular – he was operating under severe constraints; not only was he to preserve the main elements of the theistic religious community to which he belonged, the Śrī Vaiṣṇava *saṃpradāya*, he had to do this so as to establish that the devotional practice of his community was both intelligible within and consonant with what were deemed the sacred and authoritative Vedāntic scriptures, even though the latter, in turn, highlight not the kind of relational structure characteristic of a religious outlook that is shaped by the notion of a personal deity, but instead a fundamental unity between Ātman, the individual self, and Brahman.<sup>43</sup> As Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad has recently argued, we can recognize part of how Rāmānuja sought to bring about the reconciliation of these two different outlooks in the *Vedārthasaṃgraha* (see Ram-Prasad 2022). More specifically, Ram-Prasad focuses on the fact that Rāmānuja characterizes the state of consciousness that marks liberation as both cognitive and affective – the former since it is a cognition of non-dual Brahman, the latter because the proper cognition of Brahman is taken to be a state of incomparable bliss.

On Rāmānuja’s harmonizing interpretation, bringing about this state requires both an awareness of Brahman that is informed by a thorough appreciation of the sacred texts and also appropriate action. To insist on the former is to give proper due to the Vedāntic strand, to insist on the latter is to accommodate the devotional strand. Indeed, for Rāmānuja, supreme devotion (*parābhakti*) is a necessary ingredient on the path that leads to the target state. That this is so can be gathered also from his *Śrī Bhāṣya*, namely when he addresses the question what form of knowledge it is that bringing about the liberated state and removing ignorance (*avidyāvṛtti*) require. As Rāmānuja insists (in Ramanuja 1956, 52, 10–11 and 22–23), the knowledge needed goes beyond that which is specifiable in terms of a proper understanding of the meaning of the Vedāntic sentences. Instead, the knowledge to be brought about (*jñānam... vidhīsitam*) is one characterizable in terms of the words ‘contemplation’ (*dhyāna*) and ‘devout meditation’ (*upāsana*).<sup>44</sup> In Rāmānuja’s view, then, for a subject to reach liberation, it does not suffice that they understand the meaning of the Vedāntic statements. Rather, as Halina Marlewicz points out, such meaning needs “to be interiorized [...]” And such interiorization “is not a hermeneutical act [...], not an interpretation of the sense, but rather its appropriation, i.e.[...] making it one’s own” (Marlewicz 2010: 226). And this appropriation, again, is a matter of devout meditation and contemplation.

Now, on the one hand, devout meditation and contemplation, also dubbed *vedana* (translated by Marlewicz as [inward] cognitive act)<sup>45</sup> or *bhakti*, are identified, in the *Vedārthasaṃgraha*, with love (*prīti*), and love, in turn, is characterized as a kind of knowledge (*jñāna*) or, as Ram-Prasad translates, a distinguishing awareness (see Ram-Prasad 2022: 3).<sup>46</sup>

On the other hand, and interestingly, in Ramanuja 1956, *bhakti* (also *dhyāna* or *upāsana*) is also said to initially have the form of remembrance (*smṛti*), which, if things go well soteriologically, eventually turns into a kind of seeing (*darśana*) and in fact into a direct perception of Brahman (see *ibid.*: 26–7, Ramanuja 1956, 56, 5–15).<sup>47</sup>

As Marcus Schmücker has pointed out (in Schmücker 2006), one cannot remember God unless one has seen God before. Accordingly, the use of the term ‘remembrance’ in this context seems peculiar. And whereas Schmücker likens it to Platonic *anamnesis*, Cartesian *innate ideas*, Leibniz’s *ideas of reason*, and Kantian *synthetic judgments a priori*, Marlewicz finds it unlikely, as Schmücker appears to think, that such remembrance can be entirely independent of any worldly experience. Instead, she surmises that in the beginning of the contemplation, the practitioner may experience a kind of flashback brought about by the sacred texts (Marlewicz 2010: 232). Now, while postulating a special flashback-like experience strikes me as unnecessary, I think that Marlewicz’s suggestion is quite plausible if one takes it as implying that the kind of remembrance involved is one that draws on the entire knowledge of the tradition pertaining to Brahman that is at the subject’s disposal. Such knowledge would incorporate everything the subject has absorbed through the study of suitable Vedāntic texts and through their experience as a devout practitioner and member of the religious community, and remembrance of it would naturally inform the contemplation of the Vedāntic sentences.

More important than disputes over how to best interpret ‘*smṛti*’ in this context is another aspect that Marlewicz emphasizes, namely that the move from remembrance to perception requires two distinct steps: first, the subject must reach a state in which the object of their devoted and loving contemplation fills the mind so completely that the object becomes inwardly as if present, perhaps even in the form of an image. Second, through such intense remembrance, meditative contemplation, and religious imagination, the devotee may prove that they are singularly devoted and show that to them, Brahman is dear beyond words (*atyarthapriya*). If so, then to Brahman, the devotee may likewise become so dear that in an exercise of divine grace and cooperation, Brahman chooses the devotee and reveals himself to them (see Marlewicz 2010: 234). This, in turn, initiates the transition, in the devotee’s contemplative practice, from *smṛti* to *darśana*, leading to the complete destruction of ignorance and, thus, given Viśiṣṭādvaita’s metaphysical commitments, to a complete (and fully interiorized) understanding of the devotee’s identity with Brahman as a supplement of Brahman. It is of course precisely this qualified identity of the self as a supplement of Brahman that leaves room for what Ram-Prasad has called a kind of supplemental intimacy between the self and Brahman (Ram-Prasad 2022: 12), a state brought about by *parābhakti* and sustained as a blissful communion.

#### 4.3.4 *Similarities and Differences*

Let me, in closing, highlight some ways to compare and contrast Rāmānuja's view with those proposed by Weil and Murdoch, delineate some features that strike me as distinctive of Rāmānuja's account, and uncover some interesting and perhaps unexpected ways in which his view and theirs are similar. First a *caveat*: my aim here is modest. The number of points of comparison I highlight is limited, as is the number of results I will present, and some of them are preliminary. To my knowledge, very little (if any) comparative work on these particular three thinkers exists. Personally, I think that more and more detailed such work would be as desirable as it would be fruitful. If the following reflections whet the appetite for more, then to me, this will be a welcome outcome.

To begin with, note that while for each of the three thinkers we considered, the term 'liberation' carries a different connotation, they all take the kind of love conducive to such liberation to require the abandonment of a self-conception that they think stands in liberation's way. When considering this topic in [4.3.2], we saw that for Murdoch, that conception is primarily an egocentric one, which, she thinks, impedes one's ability to see others clearly and act well toward them, thus hampering moral progress, construed as a kind of becoming better at understanding and manifesting in one's actions what is truly good. And while she remains guarded with regard to the topic, Murdoch seems to assume that after the unselfing has been completed, a good kind of self will remain, one that is properly attuned to the world and its place in it – as one *I* among many – and both cognizant of and responsive to the common good and the legitimate demands of others.<sup>48</sup>

As we saw, for Weil, the requisite reconceptualization of the self appears to be of a more radical kind. Surely, she can join Murdoch's feud with the ego, not least because Weil would insist that an egocentric self-conception is inherently violent.<sup>49</sup> But in construing decreation as the destruction of everything (in one) that says *I*, Weil goes further than Murdoch. Her aim, it appears, is to reach a state in which the self, as it were unclaimed by itself, survives merely as a maximally desire-less cog in God's wheelhouse. After all, once what says *I* has stepped aside, the subject is said to turn into a perfectly obedient instrument of God, a mode of God's presence, knowledge, and working in the world. This, in turn, is a matter of being radically open to the suffering of all and may (one hopes) involve partaking in divine joy through being able to acknowledge the beauty that is the (entire) presentation of the manifest world.<sup>50</sup>

Regarding Rāmānuja, it is worth pointing out that for him, the requisite reconceptualization contains at least one element that we find neither in Weil nor in Murdoch. Devotees, Rāmānuja thinks, must drop their

misguided identification of the self with the physical body and with the mind. Clearly, this flows directly from the fact that Rāmānuja is not just a panentheist but also a Vedāntic thinker. For whereas by taking the body and the mind to be real – as opposed to parts of the empirical world, i.e., of what Neil Dalal calls “an objective but less-than-real appearance” (Dalal 2021, section 2.2) – he differs from other Vedāntins, notably Śaṅkara, he firmly agrees with them on other issues, including this one: the self is neither a body nor a mind.<sup>51</sup>

For Rāmānuja, the reconceptualization also requires that the devotee give up the conception of the self as an independent entity. Presumably, this sounded unappealing even to Rāmānuja’s contemporaries, as he felt it necessary to address the objection that other-dependence (*pāratantrya*) is misery (*dukha*). Rāmānuja will grant the objection in principle, but deny that it holds in this particular case. More specifically, as Ram-Prasad argues, Rāmānuja holds that all perception has an affective dimension, which, in turn, varies along with the nature of the perceptual content. This conception, if combined with the scripturally omnipresent association of Brahman with supreme bliss or happiness (*ānanda*),<sup>52</sup> implies that eschewing one’s conception as an independent self yields an unsurpassable reward: awareness of oneself as supplement to Brahman is bound to be a matter of supreme bliss.<sup>53</sup>

In Rāmānuja’s conception, the idea of giving up one’s independence is particularly pronounced. Weil’s conception of the withdrawn self as God’s instrument or mode seems similar. Yet it also appears that for her, success in supernatural love does not, or not just, yield an experience of supreme bliss. Sometimes she suggests that the very idea of such bliss as experienced by a liberated subject is problematic: “Perfect joy excludes the very feeling of joy,” she explains, “for in the soul filled by its object no corner is available for saying ‘I’” (Weil 1956: 179). Elsewhere, she suggests that at least *on the path* to realizing that the necessity governing worldly processes reveals the obedience of all things to God, both joy and suffering are indispensable.<sup>54</sup> But even where she *does* suppose that a liberated self may have experiences, she suspects that such experience may be a mixed one.<sup>55</sup>

Whatever we make of Weil’s position, it is notably at least in part due to Rāmānuja’s panentheist non-dualist commitments that he can entertain the notion that the liberated self experiences bliss. For in the context of the conception of what determines the affective characteristic of perception that Ram-Prasad points to, it is precisely because the highest self is considered to be a supplement of Brahman, itself endowed with supreme bliss, that self-awareness can be awareness of bliss. Moreover, it is arguably because in contrast to Advaita Vedāntins like Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja does not identify the highest self with Brahman *tout court* – who, *nota bene*, is ontologically distinct – that conceptual space opens up for the suggestion that

Weil finds at least occasionally problematic, i.e., that a self-as-supplement can be the subject of experience.

Moving on, note that for both Weil and Rāmānuja, the final transition to liberation requires grace. According to Weil, for God to bestow divine grace is to enter the void created when the self withdraws, to accept the *I* offered, as it were, and even before that, to possibly help the subject complete their offering. In a sense, Rāmānuja, too, takes divine grace to be a matter of God choosing and entering the self. However, since in his panentheistic conception, the self is taken to be part of the divine body already, the way God enters the devotee after having chosen them as *atyarthapriya* is by way of fully revealing himself in the devotee's contemplation – thus shifting, recall, the nature of the devotee's contemplative state from remembrance to immediate perception (*pratyakṣa*).<sup>56</sup>

Given Weil's repeated insistence on God's infinite distance and absence from the world, one might suspect that for her, perceiving God must be impossible, a suspicion that seems to be supported when she insists that we cannot see God face to face without dying (see Weil 1956: 437). Elsewhere, however, she affirms that the perfect obedience characteristic of supernatural love leads to divine vision: "As soon as we feel [...] obedience with our whole being," she says, "we see God" (Weil 1951: 130). As the following passage reveals, she appears to hold that vision of the divine requires merely a certain kind of death:

What is *death for the carnal part of the soul* is to see God face to face. [...] We must not desire to die in order that we may see God face to face, but to live while ceasing to exist in order that *in a self which is no longer one's own self* God and his creation may find themselves face to face—and then later on, one day, to die.

(Weil 1956: 623, *emphases added*)

Against the backdrop of Rāmānuja's conception, these remarks are highly interesting. They suggest that in this regard as well, Weil and Rāmānuja may be closer to one another than one might have expected. Let us, however, also note a marked difference in what for them counts as the kind of candidate state that, in virtue of their love, subjects eligible for divine grace should reach. For Weil, that state is a state of patience, of waiting, of freedom from attachment, and of being completely open to, vulnerable to, and desirous of nothing but what at present is anyway the case. If arriving at such a state is no doubt a demanding task, the same is certainly also true for the kind of state Rāmānuja envisages. However, for him, that state seems to be one of fullness. It is almost as if the subject is to try and drown out everything else by way of filling the mind completely with Brahman, the object of their intense devotion. To be eligible for divine

grace, it seems, the devotee must undertake a supreme effort – that of trying to get the conception and the imagination of Brahman right, as well as their affective stance.

Relatedly, if we can assume that for Rāmānuja, proper contemplation of the divine involves ways of imagining Brahman, or imagining the world perceived to *be* Brahman, then it appears to follow that Rāmānuja does not share Weil’s misgivings regarding the value of the faculty of imagination. For Weil, as we saw, imagination is inescapably tied up with disadvantageous desires and as such epistemically harmful: it severs us from what is. Yet Rāmānuja can attribute to imagination an epistemically beneficial role. Presumably, he, too, agrees that exercises of imagination can be more or less realistic. If so, then the more realistic the devotee’s imagination of Brahman comes to be, the more likely it is that such imagination will help evoke the kind of devotional attitude that, if suitably intensified, makes them *atyarthapriya* so that, if divine grace is bestowed upon them, their imagination turns into perception.

Now, for Murdoch, imagination of the good kind is first and foremost epistemically beneficial as an imagination of other human beings, one that is responsive to who they are and how they are oriented toward the Good. So what counts as a good use of the imagination for her may well differ from what counts as a good use of it for Rāmānuja. That said, I would like to end with a last tentative suggestion – one that, I think, is worth exploring. It starts from the injunction that we should not be misled in our thinking about what for Rāmānuja, exercises of *bhakti* consist in by what we may ordinarily associate with words like ‘contemplation’ or ‘meditation.’ For as Marlewicz emphasizes, the process of remembering “is not[...] a single effort on the part of the practitioner” (Marlewicz 2010: 13). Instead, citing the *Śrī Bhāṣya*, she highlights that this contemplation, i.e.,

[...] the (inward) cognitive act is not only a particular type of meditation, practiced at a particular time, but it is rather a *life-attitude*, which, when sustained and *constantly* followed, gives a particular quality to human existence. The ‘steady remembrance’ [sic!], as it seems now, is not only an incessant meditation-exercising, but also a concrete existential attitude, strengthened and solidified throughout life, till the departure from it. It is an attitude of living life in the presence of God.

(Marlewicz 2010: 239, drawing on Ramanuja 1956b: 53, 29–54, *emphases added*)

As this passage brings out, the kind of contemplation the devotee is to engage in is an ongoing, continuous exercise – a kind of *praxis* that the devotee is to adopt in each and every circumstance. But if so, it becomes very tempting to say that on the assumption that imagination is indeed

part of the kind of contemplative praxis that the devotee is to develop, a counterpart of Murdoch's emphasis on the importance of realistic moral imagination and just attention, itself a quiet and continuously ongoing effort, would be what we may call Rāmānuja's emphasis on religious imagination that, to have a liberating effect, must be properly affectionate, but also both continuous and properly realistic.<sup>57</sup>

#### 4.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued for two separate claims. The first, addressed in 4.2, is that to accommodate Rāmānuja's panentheist Viśiṣṭādvaita, we must reject attempts to characterize panentheism on which panentheists reject God's ontological distinctness and embrace the claim that God and the world are related via the relation of symmetrical ontological dependence. The second, covered in 4.3, turns on the fact that on the conception of devotional love that Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita affords, such love is taken to serve a function that is both epistemologically and soteriologically crucial. The claim is that if we compare it with other accounts on which love serves an analogous dual function – e.g., those of Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch – Rāmānuja's account is not only distinctive, but at least partly so in ways that flow from his specific panentheistic commitments. That said, I also suggested that there are interesting parallels between his account, Weil's, and Murdoch's, worth exploring further, that concern, e.g., the suggested reconceptualization of the self, how to think about the effects of divine grace, whether to allow and how to construe the perception of God, and whether or not to credit the faculty of imagination with a positive epistemological and soteriological function. More generally, I hope to have shown that studying Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita is fruitful not just for those interested in panentheism but also for those who are interested in love and its various functions, and that with regard to the latter, even with respect just to the comparison between the three authors considered in this chapter, there is ample room for further exploration.

#### Notes

- 1 See Krause (1869: 313) (reference in Göcke 2022: n. 2). Patently, Krause had some familiarity with Vedāntic philosophy, reportedly tried to learn Sanskrit, and deemed his panentheism similar to Vedāntic philosophy. As Swami Medhananda has argued, due to flawed translations, Krause both erroneously identified Vedāntic philosophy with Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta and misconstrued the latter, e.g., as a kind of monotheism. For Krause, Medhananda suggests, Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita would have been a better fit (see Medhananda 2022, esp. section 4, also Göcke's article in this collection).

- 2 Some (e.g., Clayton 2008: 169; Culp 2022, section 4) claim that Schelling was the first to use the term in Schelling (2011 [1809]). I am unable to find such a use there. Like, it seems, Benedikt Paul Göcke and Karl Pfeifer (see Göcke 2022, n. 2, Pfeifer 2020: n. 1), I thus find this claim puzzling. That said, Schelling *does* discuss pantheism. Moreover, for him, pantheism does not, as some hold, entail that God and the world are simply the same (see Schelling 2011: 12–13) – a view he also thinks is wrong to attribute to Spinoza. Rather, Schelling accepts as the core idea of pantheism the one associated with panentheism above: everything is in God. That said, he also insists, quite reasonably, that more needs to be said to give the notion a more specific sense: “Denn so möchte wohl nicht zu leugnen sein, daß, wenn Pantheismus weiter nichts als die *Lehre von der Immanenz der Dinge in Gott* bezeichnete, jede Vernunftansicht in irgendeinem Sinn zu dieser Lehre hingezogen werden muß. Aber eben der Sinn macht hier den Unterschied.” [“For the following can hardly be doubted: If pantheism is nothing but *the doctrine of the immanence of all things in God*, any reasonable view [if combined with it] must be combined with it in some specific sense. But it is just that specific sense that makes all the difference here” (Schelling 2011: 11, my translation, *emphasis added*).]
- 3 As this presupposition restricts the target of Stenmark’s characterization to *prosopon-theistic* views that accept personal and reject impersonal conceptions of God (for a terminological discussion, see Meixner 2020), the characterization captures not panentheism in general, but, more narrowly, what we may dub *personalist panentheism*. ‘Personalist,’ note, is used here broadly, not in the sense it assumes in the so-called *personalist tradition*, in which God’s personhood is understood on the model of human personhood and thus as involving temporality, vulnerability, moral struggle, etc. Note also that restricting the scope of Stenmark’s characterization allows one to classify, e.g., Plotinus or Spinoza as non-personalist panentheists, which one may be especially inclined to do if – with Uwe Meixner (see op. cit.) and *pace* Stenmark (see below) – one takes the most reasonable reading of pantheism to entail panentheism.
- 4 Stenmark also discusses (13), the thesis that God’s power is and must always be persuasive, never coercive. Accepting it, he argues, is optional at best.
- 5 Rejecting (1), note, also conflicts with the definition of classical theism adopted by Andrei Buckareff and Yujin Nagasawa, according to whom a classical theist is everyone on whose conception God is an “eternal, omnipotent, omniscient, morally perfect, creator and sustainer of the universe who is ontologically distinct from God’s creation” (see Buckareff and Nagasawa 2019: 1).
- 6 *Pace* Schelling (see n. 2), characterizing pantheists as embracing (8), remains common, also in (e.g.) Culp (2022); Hartshorne (1953: 29–30); Pfeifer (2020: 123).
- 7 Arguably, Charles Hartshorne, too, agrees. For a helpful analysis of the differences between Rāmānuja’s and Hartshorne’s positions see Ganeri (2015, chapter 5).
- 8 The latter concerns what Stenmark calls the optional (and implausible) idea that God’s power cannot be controlling but must always be persuasive (see n. 4).
- 9 See Hartshorne’s argument in Hartshorne (1943) to the effect, roughly, that a caring and compassionate God cannot be unaffected by the suffering of their creatures.
- 10 Culp also remains unclear on whether he takes a kind of event or process ontology, which he favors, as a necessary element of panentheism, or whether he simply takes such an ontology to provide a framework that is particularly hospitable to panentheism (for Stenmark, the panentheist’s commitment to process

ontology is optional and arguments in favor of adopting it weak; see Stenmark 2019: 35–9). What is clear enough is both (a) that Culp agrees with Ryan T. Mullins’ rejection of the idea that the feature distinctive of panentheism is – as Göcke has suggested – the putative fact that panentheists take the existence of the (albeit contingent) world to be necessary, and (b) that he disagrees with Mullins’ own contention, viz. that what makes panentheism distinct is that, if supplemented by an absolute notion of space and time, it affords a way of accommodating the metaphysical claim that the world is *in* God and perhaps even, as Pfeifer insists, as a substantive part (cf. Göcke 2013; Mullins 2016; Pfeifer 2020; Culp 2022).

- 11 As Martin Ganeri reports (see Ganeri 2007), in early Thomist encounters, Rāmānuja’s position was construed and subsequently rejected as pantheist. Ganeri himself, like James S. Helfer (in Helfer 1964), prefers to interpret Rāmānuja as a theist and argues (in Ganeri 2015) that early Thomist inclinations notwithstanding, Rāmānuja is most usefully compared to Aquinas. However, neither Ganeri (in Ganeri 2007) nor Helfer provides a definition of pan(en)theism. Moreover, Ganeri seems to resist labeling Rāmānuja as a panentheist because he assumes that panentheists are committed to a kind of process ontology or a notion of embodiment that he thinks are incompatible with Rāmānuja’s thinking. Yet panentheists can demur, pointing, e.g., to Stenmark, who, as we saw, classifies process ontology as an optional panentheist commitment. If so and pending reasons that panentheists are committed to a notion of divine embodiment that is incompatible with Rāmānuja’s account, Ganeri’s resistance should dissipate. Discussions on classification are frequently hampered by the fact that assumptions associated with crucial terms such as ‘panentheism’ vary, remain implicit, or lack motivation.
- 12 In what follows, ‘Īśvara,’ ‘God,’ and ‘Brahman’ will be used interchangeably.
- 13 I am indebted here to Ankur Barua’s very helpful exposition in Barua (2010).
- 14 See Barua (2010: 13–4). According to what for Rāmānuja is the sole authoritative means of knowledge in extra-sensory matters – scripture (*śruti*) – Īśvara is “a being whose proper form being opposed to everything repugnant is an ocean of unlimited, eminent, unmeasured, noble qualities, comprising omniscience, omnipotence, etc.” (see Rāmānuja’s *Śrī Bhāṣya*, cited in Lipner 1986: 4, translation cited: Abhyankar 1914: 232.13–14; also, Ramanuja 1956b, §82).
- 15 Rāmānuja’s argument against the spatiality of Brahman is that such a conception does not properly accommodate Brahman’s transcendence (see Barua 2010: 14, citing Ramanuja 1956b, §§54–57).
- 16 Here is Barua on the topic: for Rāmānuja, he says, the “Lord Himself is ontologically distinct from both non-conscious and conscious beings since He is free from all saṃsāric afflictions and has attributes such as omniscience which finite beings do not possess” (Barua 2010: 13–4). Saṃsāric afflictions comprise the kinds of suffering brought about by *karma*, which, in turn, keeps the non-liberated self trapped in *samsāra*, the cycle of rebirths.
- 17 As such, the conception differs from what Meister characterizes as a version of panentheism, too, viz. Plotinus’ conception, on which the One – which is anyway not personal – emanates into the many out of necessity (see Meister 2017: 2), but also from conceptions on which creation is rendered as an act of overflowing divine fullness or compassion.
- 18 See Ramanuja (1985: 9.5): *sarveṣāṃ bhūtānāṃ bhartā ahaṃ na ca taiḥ kaścīd api mama upakārah*, a passage making explicit that Brahman has absolutely no need of any being’s support.

- 19 As will become clear in Section 4.3.3, Brahman is at least responsive to *some* of the devotee's affective states, notably their intense devotion, which may make Brahman decide to choose them as beloved beyond words and bestow on them perception of the divine. In a different sense, Brahman is receptive to *all* intentions and desires entertained by humans and other beings in that he is the one who, *qua* controller of everything that happens on the physical plane, gives consent to their intentions and brings about the relevant actions (see n. 43). If this kind of responsiveness is less than the specific kind of responsiveness typically attributed to God in light of human suffering, and if it is the latter that Stenmark thinks pantheism requires, this would indicate (a) that Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaitic pantheism might violate Stenmark's condition, and (b) that Stenmark, to bring this out more clearly, should entertain a more fine-grained distinction than that between impassibility and sensibility. Thanks to Swami Medhananda for pressing me to clarify this point.
- 20 This characterization is of course overly simplistic in that, by essentially treating the world as a subset of God's properties, it abstracts away from other important aspects, such as (e.g.) intentional relations between the relata and relations of ontological grounding, control, etc.
- 21 In the secondary literature, a rare exception is K. S. Nārāyaṇāchārya, who in the introduction to Nārāyaṇāchārya 1991 likens Rāmānuja's position to conceptions of God developed in the context of Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy. However, as Martin Ganeri has shown (in Ganeri 2015, chapter 5), such comparisons rest on merely superficial resemblances. Overemphasizing them, he argues, does not just ignore the simple fact that for Rāmānuja, Brahman does not depend on the world, it also obscures substantial differences between Whitehead's process ontology and Rāmānuja's substance-based ontology.
- 22 See, e.g., Sallie McFague (see McFague 1993: 149, reference in Barua 2010: 5).
- 23 Maybe defenders of process ontology could make a stronger case for (7). But process ontology is a contentious position – for reasons Stenmark himself hints at. Regardless, since Stenmark rejects process ontology and deems the commitment to it optional for pantheists, defending his preference for (7) on such grounds is not open to him.
- 24 When suggesting that the relation characteristic of pantheism is mutual dependence, Culp is aware of the fact that many self-avowed pantheists do not explicitly embrace it. If he seems to be in the business of merely stipulating a characterization as opposed to arguing for one, there is, I take it, little pressure on us to follow him.
- 25 Fittingly, Murdoch occasionally signals her fondness of Buddhism, though she also seems to have felt that despite having reportedly read about it since the 1940s, she did not know enough about it. In a letter to Naomi Lebowitz from August 12, 1991, she writes: "I am rather close to Buddhism, perhaps it is the only religion which can save the world. (Or have I been mistaken all along?)" (Horner 2015: 397). On November 15, a mere three months later, she writes this to Peter Conradi: "I wish I really knew something about something, such as Buddhism. You are really inside. I worry about England which I love. Christianity, said to be always changing itself into something people can believe, is not changing fast enough" (ibid.: 398).
- 26 For example, Weil sometimes identifies God with creation: "God and creation are One" (Weil 1956: 400), but only to add right away that they are also infinitely distant from each other. She also occasionally gestures at the idea that the world is God's body, e.g., in stating that God's word is the soul of the world,

- even that “[a]ll the matter that we touch, see, hear, is its body. Each sensation is like a communion, that of pain included” (ibid.: 394). However, pending a much more involved investigation of her thinking about these matters, which frequently proceeds in an aphoristic, exploratory, and questioning way, claiming Weil as a panentheist seems uncalled for.
- 27 As per Catholic doctrine, there is no salvation for those who – like, arguably, Weil – knowing that the Catholic Church was founded as necessary by God through Christ, would refuse to either enter or remain in it (cf. Catholic Church 2000: §846).
  - 28 Although, again, Weil’s views are firmly rooted in the Ancient Greek and the Christian traditions, in her notebooks she frequently displays familiarity with Sanskrit terms and refers, e.g., to the Upaniṣads, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, and other Hindu and Buddhist texts. Occasionally she even suggests that in essence, some of the traditions she draws on – notably the Greek and the Hindu traditions – are one and the same (see Weil 1956: 502) or that Dionysus and Osiris are, in a certain sense, Christ himself (Weil 1951: 70). For a helpful discussion of Weil’s more strained relationship with Judaism and Islam see Rozelle-Stone and Stone (2013, chapter 2).
  - 29 Criticism against the Catholic Church’s tendency to exclude and denigrate other faiths is a recurring theme in the notebooks. An example: “Let us suppose that I find myself in a room through the window of which I can see the sun, and that there is a communicating door open between this room and another one, where there is somebody else, and which has a window facing the same way. Through the door, I can see a rectangle of light projected onto the wall. I might say: The poor fellow in there! Here am I, able to see the light of the sun, whereas all he sees in the way of light is a faintly lit up little surface on the wall. That is exactly the attitude of Catholics with regard to other religions” (Weil 1956: 345). At times, her tone is harsher: “The Church has been a totalitarian Great Beast. She began the messing-up of the whole of human history for purposes of apologetics” (ibid.: 620).
  - 30 For Weil, through paying selfless and patient attention, it becomes so clear what is to be done that there remains no room for *choice* – “The true relationship to God consists in love when contemplating, in blind obedience when acting” (Weil 1956: 361) – a notion she repeatedly dismisses as contradictory (see, e.g., ibid.: 368).
  - 31 Note that the kind of destruction Weil has in mind here is a voluntary one, one initiated from within. She also entertains a notion of destruction from without, which can be brought about by extreme affliction. With respect to it, Weil asserts, there can be nothing worse (Weil 1956: 337).
  - 32 Gustave Thibon, referring to an image Weil evokes in Weil (2003: 63), puts it this way: “The hero wears armour, the saint is naked. [...] Armour, while keeping off blows, prevents any direct contact with reality and above all makes it impossible to enter the third dimension which is that of supernatural love. If things are really to exist for us they have to penetrate within us. Hence the necessity for being naked: nothing can enter into us while armour protects us both from wounds and from the depths which they open up” (Weil 2003: xxiv).
  - 33 As Weil says elsewhere, to exercise such love is to know everything and everyone as limited, with all one’s soul, and feel an infinite love for them (see Weil 1956: 483).
  - 34 Two comments. First: Weil may think that the renunciation of the I that such love requires is an act of overcoming sin, where sin is construed as acts of identifying

- oneself with what is not God (see Weil 1956: 483). This passage may, however, be a mere report [not an endorsement] of something Weil finds in the work of Madame de Staël. Second: I do not mean to imply that Weil attributes no importance to divine grace. In fact, she suggests that destroying the I completely may well require it (see Weil 1956: 342; also, Weil 1977 and [3.4]).
- 35 More specifically, it seems that for Weil, it is God's presence as Holy Spirit that requires the existence of creatures: "The presence of God must be understood in two ways. For in so far as he is creator he is present everywhere, in every single thing that exists, from the fact that it does exist. *The presence for which God needs the co-operation of the creature* is His presence not in so far as he is Creator, but in so far as he is Spirit. The former presence is that corresponding to creation; the latter one is that corresponding to de-creation" (Weil 1956: 344, *emphasis added*).
  - 36 Are such creatures then *in God* – more so than perhaps otherwise? Are they even, in virtue of the supernatural love they exhibit, *part of God*, who, through grace, is also *in them*? Such are some of the questions that those seeking to classify Weil as a panentheist would need to answer.
  - 37 See Murdoch (1970: 34). As Justin Broackes reports, Murdoch's official engagement with Weil started at least as early as when in 1951, she gave a talk for BBC Third Programme on Weil's *Waiting for God* (i.e., Weil 1951). Then, in 1956, Murdoch wrote what Broackes calls a penetrating and clear review of Arthur Will's English translation of Weil's notebooks for the November issue of the British magazine *The Spectator* (reprinted in Murdoch 1998a: 157–60). As Broackes emphasizes, this was no small feat and, moreover, had a lasting influence on Murdoch – so much so, he thinks, that it may have contributed to Murdoch's decision to turn her back on Oxford philosophy. Oxford, he surmises, was no suitable environment for the kinds of ideas that, in response to her engagement with Weil, Murdoch had begun to develop (see Broackes 2011: 19–21).
  - 38 Not only is the relationship complex, secularizing Weil's conception creates its own distinct problems, e.g., questions regarding the ontological status of the Good. See Burns (1997), Byrne (1998), and Antonaccio (2000) for various attempts to spell it out and Robjant (2011) for critical discussion.
  - 39 Compare this passage: "when we try perfectly to love what is imperfect our love goes to its object via the Good to be thus purified and made unselfish and just. [...]. Love is the general name of the quality of attachment and it is capable of infinite degradation and is the source of our greatest errors; but when it is even partially refined it is the energy and passion of the soul in its search for Good, the force that joins us to Good and joins us to the world through Good" (Murdoch 1970: 103).
  - 40 The word 'typically' is needed since Murdoch occasionally reminds us to leave room for the virtuous peasant (e.g., in Murdoch 1970: 1–2). Pointing to the idea of such a character – presumably a rare and exquisite find – serves to raise the possibility of a naturally humble and selfless person whose vision of others is clear and who acts in accordance with what is in fact good, but who may have no need for reflection or imagination.
  - 41 Note that like Weil, Murdoch, too, thinks that ideally, engaging in just attention eliminates choice and leads directly into action. "True vision occasions right conduct," she thinks (Murdoch 1970: 64; see also Kieran Setiya's related discussion on hyper-internalism in Setiya 2013). For her, not moments of choice, but attention, a quiet, ongoing activity, is the most important locus of moral effort. This is so since the evaluation it inevitably involves serves to

- continuously imbue the world we move in, and thus the options for actions we spot in it, with value. (Put more realistically, attention, if just, may allow us to determine what really *is* valuable.) Accordingly, for Murdoch, in so-called moments of choice, most (if not all) of the morally relevant work is already over, which comes out especially well in Murdoch (1998b).
- 42 Regarding the idea that attention involves work, Niklas Forsberg has recently questioned the standard interpretation of Murdochian attention he finds in Antonaccio (2000, 2012), Lovibond (2018), and Bagnoli (2018). These, he holds, overemphasize the idea that attending well involves deciding between different evaluative characterizations of the situation one finds oneself in and thus overlook that moral reevaluations must be evoked by impulses from the world. Noticing such impulses, he thinks, is harder when engaged in imagination. Accordingly, for Forsberg, Murdoch, too, needs a more Weilian approach to attention, i.e., one characterized in terms of looking and patiently waiting (see Forsberg 2020).
- 43 Another specific problem arising from Rāmānuja’s identification of the individual soul as a part of Brahman’s body, especially if combined with the view that Brahman is the inner controller of the body, is that it appears to imply that individual subjects lack free will. If so, they could not freely decide to initiate steps toward liberation, e.g., that of engaging in certain rites prescribed by the Vaiṣṇava tradition (which would thus seem to be rendered pointless) or that of taking refuge in Viṣṇu. Rāmānuja’s response to the problem is developed in the *Vedārthasamgraha*. Roughly, it is to suggest that Īśvara controls the body, but not the will. Moreover, regardless of how the individual soul wills to act, Īśvara responds by giving a kind of ontological consent, thus allowing the intended movements of the respective soul’s body to occur. Which actions occur within Īśvara’s body, i.e., the world, thus remains under Īśvara’s complete control, while at the same time, the kind of freedom required for the liberation of individual souls to be an achievement (and not a mere part of a divine charade, as it were) is preserved. For discussion, criticism, and a sketch of subsequent responses in the tradition see Freschi (2015; also, Barua 2018).
- 44 *na tāvad vākyaṛthajanyam jñānam... and ato vākyaṛthajñānād anyad eva dhyānopāsanaḍiśabdavācyam jñānam vedāntavākyaṛ vidhitsitam.*
- 45 Drawing on textual evidence provided by Gerhard Oberhammer (Oberhammer 2004: 29), Marlewicz takes it that Rāmānuja takes the conception of *vedana* from Brahmanandin. She thus disagrees with Karl Potter’s tentatively entertained notion that Brahmanandin was an Advaitin (see Marlewicz 2010: 226, nn. 8 & 9; Oberhammer 2004; Potter 1981: 21) and holds that he was a forerunner of Rāmānuja’s school (which, to be fair, Potter, too, concedes is possible).
- 46 The relevant identification – cited here after Ram-Prasad’s own translation that he models on van Buitenen’s translation in Ramanuja (1956b) – happens in the following phrase: *bhaktiśabdaśca prītiviśeṣe vartate | prītiśca jñānaviśeṣa eva* (see *ibid.*: 141).
- 47 Especially: *bhavati ca smṛter bhāvanāprakaraśād darśanarūpatā.*
- 48 Here is a rare passage in which she sketches her notion of the ideal man: “The good (better) man is liberated from selfish fantasy, can see himself as others see him, imagine the needs of other people, love unselfishly, lucidly envisage and desire what is truly valuable. This is the ideal picture” (Murdoch 1993: 331).
- 49 Weil, recall, likens partial and selective love to wearing an armor.
- 50 Weil’s talk of being a mode of God’s presence is interesting. Internally, the notion of God’s (mediated?) presence in the world through the obedient subject

- creates some tension with her oft-repeated insistence that it “is impossible for God to be present in creation except in the form of absence” (Weil 1956: 414). Also, her talk of being a divine mode, combined with the passage (if indeed attributable to Weil) that sin consists in identifying with something that is not God, does not just add to the scattered material panentheists who wish to claim Weil as one of their own could draw on, it also brings her closer to, e.g., Spinoza and, for that matter, Rāmānuja.
- 51 Thanks to Swami Medhananda for reminding me to explicitly include that for Rāmānuja (like for all Vedāntins), the self also cannot be identified with the mind. It is worth noting that in Indian philosophy, there is no simple and straightforward correlate for ‘mind,’ as it distinguishes various mind-like capacities, e.g., *manas*, *buddhi*, and *ahaṃkāra*, roughly associated with a receiving capacity, a discerning capacity, and one that represents the *I* and its ownership of mental events.
- 52 See Ram-Prasad (2022: 7), drawing on Ramanuja (1956b: 142: *ānando brahmety ucyate*).
- 53 In one sense, then, for Rāmānuja, love does not liberate us, but lets us realize our dependence. However, such a realization is of course liberating in a different sense, as it releases the soul from the cycle of rebirths into eternal bliss.
- 54 “In order that our being should one day become wholly sensitive in every part to this obedience that is the substance of matter, in order that a new sense should be formed in us to enable us to hear the universe as the vibration of the word of God, the transforming power of suffering and of joy are equally indispensable” (Weil 1951: 132).
- 55 This is indicated by the following, somewhat sobering passage: “Perhaps, at the moment of death, the saintly soul is filled both with an infinity of divine joy and at the same time an infinity of pure pain which cause it to burst and disappear into the fulness of being; whilst the lost soul sees itself dissolve into nothingness with a mixture of horror and ghastly complacency” (Weil 1956: 507).
- 56 See Ramanuja (1956, 56, 15): *darśanarūpatā ca pratyakṣatāpattiḥ*.
- 57 Note that attributing to Rāmānuja an emphasis on the importance of a continuous realistic imagination of Brahman points to a further potential difference between him and Weil. For it may well be that he would disagree with what we saw her claim earlier, i.e., that “[t]he real aim is not to see God in all things; it is that God through us should see the things that we see” (Weil 1956: 358).

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