



## **Between closure and openness**

The notion of the self in humanist counselling and in Simone Weil, examined against the background of Charles Taylor's analyses of modern culture

Masterthesis by Annelieke Damen

Supervisors:

Prof. Dr. Laurens ten Kate

Dr. Caroline Suransky

Dr. Wander van der Vaart

University of Humanistic Studies

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Frontpage: the travelling artwork 'Nomad' by Jaume Plensa

‘The commotion of our human life, which lets in everything, all the light and all the music, all the mad pranks of thought and all the variations of pain, the fullness of memory and the fullness of expectation, is closed only to *one* thing: unity. [...] The commotion lets me have things and the ideas that go with them, only not unity of world or of I: it is all the same. I, the world, we - no, I the world am what is moved out of reach, what cannot be grasped, what cannot be experienced. I give the bundle a subject and say “I” to it, but the subject is not a unity that is experienced. Name and subject belong to the commotion, and mine is the hand that reaches out - into empty space.’<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Buber, M. (1996). *Ecstatic Confessions. The Heart of Mysticism*, p. 2. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

## FOREWORD

During my internship as a humanist counsellor in a Dutch penitentiary I encountered two clients who told me about their extraordinary experiences before entering prison. The first client had seen his life-review in a circumstance of intense threat. The other client had gone through a near-death experience some years earlier.

I had heard about life-reviews and near-death experiences so these stories didn't surprise me enormously, the question however struck me how I had to position myself towards these experiences as a humanist counsellor. I was trained in a predominantly atheistic and scientific view on life that left little space for the dissolving of our ordinary perception of space and time as had happened in the above mentioned experiences. That is, in the life-review the totality of life had flashed before the client's eyes, seen from not only his own perspective but also from several other angles including that of other human beings. In the near-death experience the client had experienced himself as detached from his seemingly dead body, thereby acquiring the possibility to move freely through time and space.

Because the clients were not affiliated to a specific religion and because their experiences made a profound impact on their lives, I felt that the humanist counsellor should be the right person to work with them and their story. But was there, I wondered, any space in the self-concept of humanist counselling for some sort of transcendence, for a surpassing of our ordinary self-experience? This question formed the starting point of this thesis.

Before turning to the substantive content I would like to thank several people. First of all my parents and sisters who support me unconditionally in everything that I do. Wil, Odulf, Florinde, Djamilia and Isanne, you brought me here. Secondly I want to thank my thesis colleagues Sandra, Marinde, Mira, Dieuwke and Daan, who kept me going in moments of thesis despair. And last but not least, I would like to thank my supervisor Prof. dr. Laurens ten Kate who always pushed my limits to rise above myself.

Annelieke Damen, April 2016

## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** In humanist counselling *the self* takes a central place. Consequently one should expect a clear articulation of what this self entails in the theories of humanist counselling of two important authors in this field: Jan Hein Mooren and Ton Jorna. They thereby have to position their notions of the self in the continuous debate on the relationship of humanism to immanence and transcendence, that is to the question of whether humanism should include or exclude forces or states of being that rise above or surpass the self. To clarify their positions on this matter, three steps will be taken: (a) a thorough investigation of the notions of the self developed in the theories of humanist counselling by Mooren and Jorna, (b) a comparison of these notions with the mystical notion of the self of Weil, and (c) a framing of all three notions with reference to Taylor's buffered and porous self. **Method:** A philosophical analysis of relevant literature. **Analysis:** Mooren, Jorna and Weil draft a notion of the self that has to work on itself to become itself, it is characterized by a paradox between being and becoming. Within these three notions we can see that immanence and transcendence are intrinsically intertwined. Taylor proves with his notion of the buffered and porous self this intertwining to be a typical feature of the modern self. Within different notions of the self however one side is often preferred: Mooren puts emphasis on immanence, whereas Jorna and Weil stress transcendence. **Conclusions:** Immanence and transcendence mustn't be understood as opposites but as constitutive of each other within the modern self. In their dynamic the self becomes manifest. Humanist counselling should therefore value both sides of the debate: immanence as well as transcendence to do justice to the human existential condition.

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# CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Introduction to the context of the debate

Clients who seek guidance from a humanist counsellor often face a personal crisis: the old ways of living one's life are disrupted and new ways are not yet discovered. The client needs to reorient in life, for example after the loss of a loved one, after imprisonment or after being sent to the front line in a war. The causes can be numerous, the request for help however often amounts to the same: how can I relate to the changed circumstances? To find an answer to this question, counsellors invite the client into a process of self-examination. Reorienting in life is defining oneself anew, adjusting one's frame of meaning so that it can meet the present situation. Through self-clarification a new life orientation is given shape (Humanistisch Verbond, 2012).

As the term *self-clarification* indicates, in counselling sessions the 'self' of a client is being clarified. One of the main themes discussed in these sessions is thus the question Who am I? Exactly this focus distinguishes the humanist counsellor from a psychologist or a social worker, that is, a humanist counsellor guides a client in his search for himself on an existential level instead of focusing in first instance on psychological processes or societal issues. Humanist counselling doesn't exist without this question of the self. Consequently one should expect that since the self is a focal point in the counselling sessions, there must be a clear articulation in the theories of humanist counselling about what this self entails. In this thesis I therefore want to take a closer look at the notion of the self in humanist counselling. How is this notion outlined by the two authors who have written the most extensively on the theory of humanist counselling: Jan Hein Mooren and Ton Jorna?

The search for oneself is never a search in a vacuum, it is always a search against the background of certain values. My past, present and future life is interpreted through cultural frameworks, either religious, atheist or anything in between, that form the horizon of my life (Taylor, 1989). In other words, the search for oneself is carried out against the background of a worldview, it is done in relation to a philosophy of life. Particularly nowadays, since the end of the 'grand narratives' (Lyotard, 1979), the search for oneself is more intensively intertwined with the forming of one's worldview than before. Not long ago, several dominant worldviews determined

daily life, provided the content for the worldview of the majority. At present however these standard structures have eroded, one's worldview has become a matter of individual choice within a broad range of possibilities. Everyone *personally* needs to answer the question how one wants to position oneself with respect to the human existential condition (McAdams, 1993). Humanist counsellors orientate themselves towards life, conceivably, on the basis of the humanist worldview. This sounds straightforward, but is more complicated in reality. Humanism has no holy scripture as its foundation and is therefore a worldview that forms its content through the meaning that people attribute to it over the centuries (Derkx, 2009a). Consequently, humanism is a worldview that is constantly under discussion. One of these discussions is the relationship of humanism towards religion or spirituality. In the Netherlands this has been an important area of tension over the last decades since the founding of the Dutch Humanist Association by Jaap van Praag in 1946 (Van IJssel, 2007). The question at stake is how humanism has to position itself with respect to transcendence, that is to forces or states of being that are beyond the ordinary limits of human experience, that surpass or rise above the self. In the debate transcendence is set against immanence, referring to exactly the opposite, namely a state in which the self remains in itself as an enclosed unity without excess of its ordinary experience.

Different positions with regard to this question have been taken over the years. Van Praag was a proponent of including a religious or spiritual worldview in humanism, referred to as *inclusive* humanism by Peter Derkx and Jan Hein Mooren (1996). In inclusive humanism much space is left for transcendence with regard to the notion of the self, for example for a notion of the realization of the divine in man (not necessarily theistic), or the notion of a higher or a supra-personal self next to our small ordinary self (Van IJssel, 2007).

Paul Cliteur on the other hand, chairman of the Dutch Humanist Association in 1993-95, advocated an *exclusive* humanism, a humanism that stressed an anti-religious and areligious approach to life (Van IJssel, 2007). In exclusive humanism the emphasis is put on a self that is autonomous and rationalistic. The sensory world is the only existing world and is understood by man through his ratio. There is little to no space in this notion of the self for experiences that surpass the range of ordinary human experience, the exclusive notion of the self is an immanent notion (Van IJssel, 2007).

Two other terms in relation to transcendence and immanence colour the debate between inclusive and exclusive humanism: heteronomy and autonomy. In the notions of the self of inclusive and exclusive humanism these terms are differently valued. Exclusive oriented humanists underline the importance of autonomy whereas inclusive oriented humanist leave room for heteronomous forces that influence the human being, be it in the form of divine beings, nature or our fellow human beings as ‘the Other’ (Van IJssel, 2007).

Between these two extremes, the Dutch Humanist Association offered, and possibly offers, a home to inter alia liberal Protestant, pantheist, religious-socialist, agnostic and anti-religious or atheist members (Van IJssel, 2007). However, although inclusive and exclusive humanism are both options within the Dutch Humanist Association, Doornenbal mentions a tendency of preference for a rational and atheist humanism (Doornenbal in Van IJssel, 2007, p. 172).

Within the context of the above Mooren and Jorna have to position their humanist notion of the self. In this thesis I will have special attention for this positioning: how do Mooren and Jorna define their notions of the self with regard to immanence and transcendence?

The tension between immanence and transcendence that surrounds the notion of the self has not only been a challenge to humanists but also to many different philosophers. In this thesis we will also have a look at the ideas of two of them, the French philosopher and mystic Simone Weil and the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor.

Simone Weil wrote extensively on the sense of self in her mystical experiences. It is interesting to compare her mystical notion of the self to the notion of Mooren and Jorna since research of Van IJssel (2007) into the role of spirituality in the practice of humanist counselling evinced a strong affinity between counsellors and the mystical tradition. Counsellors reported to have had mystical experiences themselves, but also to have encountered many clients telling about mystical experiences. The latter is according to Jorna perhaps not very surprising because counsellors work with clients in existential crisis or at the end of their lives, moments that are often accompanied by unusual experiences (Jorna in Van IJssel, 2007, p. 171). Counsellors however indicated that they were hesitant to speak about these experiences in an atheist environment, pointing towards the above mentioned ambivalent relationship of humanism towards transcendence (Van IJssel, 2007). Since a mystical notion is by all means a transcendent notion, it deals preeminently with forces or states of being that surpass or rise above the self.

Therefore, this notion can serve as a point of comparison to give us more insight into the space for transcendence in humanist notions of the self. That is, for example, insight into whether humanist counsellors can understand their mystical experiences within the notion of the self in the theories of humanist counselling, and insight into the line of distinction between mystical and humanist notions of the self.

Born in 1909 in Paris, Weil is an interesting focus for this study because she is quite a contemporary mystic (compared to other well-known mystics like Meister Eckhart or John of the Cross) who had to explicate her philosophy within an increasingly secular society. Moreover she was raised in an atheist family and her mystical experiences befell her independently of her worldview (De Lange, 1990). Her struggle to make sense of her transcendent experiences within an immanent meaning frame possibly sheds light on the difference between inclusive and exclusive humanism concerning the notion of the self.

The second author, Charles Taylor, is another useful companion in getting a clearer grip on the notions of the self in humanist counselling as well as the notion of the self of Weil. In his books *Sources of the self* (1989) and *A secular age* (2007), Taylor traces respectively the genesis of the modern day notions of the self and of the modern day secular societies. Both geneses are evaluated against the background of the rise of humanism as the default worldview in Western secular states. His cultural historical analyses show that the notion of the self changes through time, and that this change is connected to the change from a religious society to a secular society. With help of the concept of the buffered and the porous self, Taylor sketches this change and elicits above all the dilemmas that this change raises with regard to the modern notion of the self (Taylor, 2007). These dilemmas concern the tension between immanence and transcendence in which we are interested in this thesis. It therefore seems a fruitful venture to take a look at the notion of the self of Mooren, Jorna and Weil through the perspective of Taylor's concept of the buffered and porous self.

## **1.2 Research question**

Following from the above, this thesis consists of three steps. The first step will be an in depth investigation of the notions of the self in the theories of humanistic counselling of Jan Hein

Mooren and Ton Jorna with special attention to the tension between immanence and transcendence. As a hypothesis I would state that Mooren holds a predominantly immanent notion of the self. Mooren stresses in his theory of humanist counselling the value of autonomy, thereby focusing on a self-contained self instead of a self that is taken beyond itself (Mooren, 1999, 2010, 2012). Jorna's notion on the other hand is a predominantly transcendent notion, following Jorna's statement that his theory of humanist counselling is a spiritual theory, directed towards a decentering of the self (Jorna, 2008, 2012). In researching Mooren's and Jorna's notion of the self later on, we will see if this hypothesis bears some truth.

The second step will be an in depth investigation of the mystical notion of the self of Simone Weil and a comparison of her notion to the humanist notions. In the third step we will take Charles Taylor's notion of the buffered and the porous self into account and see if his cultural historical analyses can give us a better grip on the similarities and differences between the notions of the self of Mooren, Jorna and Weil and the dilemmas that surround their definitions with regard to immanence and transcendence.

The research question consequently reads:

*What notions of the self are developed in the theories of humanist counselling of Jan Hein Mooren and Ton Jorna, how do these notions relate to the mystical notion of the self of Simone Weil and how are these three notions framed if interpreted with reference to Charles Taylor's buffered and porous self?*

The subquestions read:

1. What notions of the self are developed by Mooren and Jorna in their theories of humanist counselling and in which respect do they relate to the distinction between immanence and transcendence?
2. What notion of the self is developed by Simone Weil based on her mystical experiences and in what respect does this notion relate to the distinction between immanence and transcendence?

3. What does the notion of the buffered and porous self of Charles Taylor entail and what insight does this notion give us with respect to the tension between immanence and transcendence surrounding the modern notion of the self?

### **1.3 Key concepts**

#### **1.3.1 Humanist counselling**

Humanist counselling<sup>2</sup> (sometimes also referred to as spiritual counselling (Van Praag, 1982) or humanist chaplaincy (Humanistisch Verbond, 2015) is a form of counselling based on a humanist worldview. Humanist counsellors support people with spiritual needs in individual conversations, group discussions and other forms of assemblies. They work in the fields of care, justice, defense or as self-employed counsellors. Humanist counsellors have a master's degree from the University of Humanistic Studies and a consignment from the Dutch Humanist Association. In this thesis I will focus on two leading authors who wrote about the theory of humanist counselling: Jan Hein Mooren and Ton Jorna. Mooren is the first scholar who developed a substantial methodology for humanist counselling (Mooren, 1999, 2010, 2013). Jorna followed, developing a more spiritual based approach (Jorna, 2008, 2012). These authors are still credited with the most extensive outline of the theory of humanist counselling and will therefore be the main focus of this thesis.

#### **1.3.2 The self**

In 1641 Descartes wrote: 'I know that I exist; the question is, what is this "I" that I know?' . With that, the *self* as a philosophical question really took off (Taylor, 1989; Van der Waerden, 1995). At present different notions of the self roam the domain of science: the embodied self, minimal self, dialogical self, narrative self and social self to name but a few. In this thesis I will focus on the notions of the self developed in the theories of humanist counselling, the notion of the self of Simone Weil and the notion of the self described by Charles Taylor. To be able to give an accurate description of the notions of Mooren, Jorna and Weil, my starting point will not be a predetermined definition of the self since this definition is exactly what I am going to investigate

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<sup>2</sup> Carmen Schuhmann convincingly argues for 'humanist counselling' instead of 'humanistic counselling' in her article *Counselling and the humanist worldview* (2013). I will follow her vocabulary in this thesis.

in the aforementioned sources. However, to be able to compare the different notions afterwards without slipping into vagueness, I'll take up Charles Taylor's defined notion of the buffered and porous self as a point of reference. A detailed description of this notion of the buffered and porous self will be given in chapter IV.

### **1.3.3 Immanence and transcendence**

In this thesis transcendence is defined as forces or states of being that are beyond the ordinary limits of human experience, that surpass or rise above the self. This definition is based on the one hand on the literal meaning of transcendence as 'rising or ascending beyond' from the Latin prefix *trans*, meaning 'beyond', and the verb *scandere* (in contraction *scendere*), meaning 'rising' or 'ascending' (Van Veen & Van der Sijs, 1997) and on the other hand on the definition of transcendence of the Oxford Dictionary as 'beyond or above the range of normal or physical human experience, surpassing the ordinary' (Oxford Dictionaries, 2015). Transcendence is contrasted with immanence, from the Latin prefix *in*, meaning 'into, in, on, upon' and the verb *manere*, meaning 'to dwell' (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2015), referring to exactly the opposite namely of 'existing or operating within' (Oxford Dictionaries, 2015). Immanence refers to a state in which the self dwells in itself, exists within itself. The self is an enclosed self and stays thereby within the limits of ordinary human experience.

### **1.3.4 The 'mystical' notion of Simone Weil**

The notion of the self of Simone Weil is in this thesis defined as a 'mystical' notion by comparing her mystical experiences on which she bases her theory to the well-known definition of mystical experiences by William James with an addition of Douglas Schrader. James distinguishes four characteristics that characterize mystical experiences. The first is the ineffability of the experience. A mystical experience defies expression because it transcends the tangible world on which our words are based. The second characteristic is its noetic quality. People experience mystical experiences as moments of knowing. They speak about getting an insight into the depths of truth, but also about being one with truth. The third characteristic is the transiency of the experience. A mystical experience can not be sustained for long. And the fourth characteristic is its passivity, meaning that one can facilitate the mystical state by preliminary

actions, but once the mystical experience has set in the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance (1902, p. 370).

A recent definition of mystical experiences by Douglas Schrader adds three extra dimensions to the definition of James, completing it thereby, in my opinion, on some crucial areas. The extension includes firstly the unity of opposites, meaning one has a sense of oneness, wholeness or completeness in a mystical experience. Secondly it includes a feeling of timelessness, the mystical experience transcends time. And thirdly it includes the sense that one has somehow encountered 'the true self' that is beyond life and death, beyond difference and duality, and beyond ego and selfishness (Schrader, 2008).

The experiences of Simone Weil are consistent with James' and Schrader's definition.

The ineffability of a mystical experience and the feeling of timelessness are displayed in Weil's account on the effect of saying the Lord's prayer:

'At times the very first words tear my thoughts from my body and transport it to a place outside space where there is neither perspective nor point of view. [...] At the same time, filling every part of this infinity of infinities, there is silence, a silence which is not an absence of sound but which is the object of a positive sensation, more positive than that of sound.' (Weil, 2010, p. 16).

The noetic quality of a mystical experience comes forward in Weil's quote about mystics 'that in them truth should have become life.' (Weil, 2002, p. 243). Passivity or being seized by a higher power speaks from Weil's account of the recitation of George Herbert's poem: '[...] Christ himself came down and took possession of me.' (Weil, 2010, p. 14). In Weil's definition of mysticism the unity of opposites is displayed :

'Mysticism is passing beyond the sphere where good and evil are in opposition, and this is achieved by the union of the soul with the absolute good.' (Weil, 1962, p. 214).

The last dimension, the true self, is described by Weil as the 'tiny part' of the self (Weil, 1970, p. 211). This is the sacred part of the human being, transcending space and time. I will go deeper into this tiny self in chapter III.

## 1.5 Method

This thesis will be a theoretical research based on the philosophical analysis of relevant literature. After a precise documentation of the notions of the self of the chosen authors, a comparison will be made between these notions. This research is therefore a comparative analysis of concepts of the self. It is believed that exactly through juxtaposing different notions, a better understanding of each notion will occur through the different light they shed on each other. By comparing similarities and differences, knowledge will be generated that wouldn't have occurred in solely analyzing one notion.

In chapter II subquestion 1 will be answered. Mooren writes about the theory of humanist counselling in his books *Bakens in de stroom* (1999), *De moed om te zien* (2010) and *Zin* (2013). Jorna writes about the theory of humanist counselling in his books *Echte woorden* (2008) and *Mag een mens eenzaam zijn* (2012). From these books a representation of their notions of the self will be distilled.

In chapter III we will turn to subquestion 2, concentrating on writings of, as well as secondary literature on Simone Weil. In her books *Gravity and grace* (1952), *Selected essays: 1934-1943* (1962), in particular her essay on Human personality, *The first and last notebooks* (1970), *The notebooks of Simone Weil* (1984), *The need for roots* (2002) and *Waiting on God* (2010), Weil writes about her notion of the self.

In chapter IV a comparison will be made between the humanist notions of the self of Mooren and Jorna and the mystical notion of the self of Weil. After answering subquestion 3 we will take a look at this comparison through the lens of Charles Taylor's notion of the buffered and porous self. Taylor's books *Sources of the self* (1989) and *A secular state* (2007) will be used for this purpose as well as relevant secondary literature.

Chapter V forms the conclusion of the comparisons that are made between the notions of the self of Mooren, Jorna and Weil and the interpretation of these notions with reference to the buffered and porous self of Taylor, thereby answering the research question.

## **CHAPTER II: THE SELF IN HUMANIST COUNSELLING**

In answering the first subquestion, What notions of the self are developed by Mooren and Jorna in their theories of humanist counselling and in which respect do they relate to the distinction between immanence and transcendence?, this chapter investigates the notions of the self in the theory of Mooren and Jorna, concluding with a comparison between the two. The chapter starts with an introduction into humanist counselling and the development of its theories.

### **2.1 Humanist counselling and the development of its theory**

In chapter one humanist counselling was briefly introduced. In this paragraph we will take this a step further with special attention to the history of the development of the theories of humanist counselling.

In 1946 the dutch politician Jaap van Praag founded the Dutch Humanist Association (Derckx, 2009b). His concern was the mental resilience of the Dutch population in an increasingly secular society. Churches had given people a spiritual orientation, a philosophy of life that gave direction and meaning to their lives. For many this orientation had crumbled with no substitute available. In fear that people would fall prey to nihilism or fascism or become disoriented, the Humanist Association meant to offer a platform where new views on life could be cultured (Van Praag, 1982; Van IJssel, 2007).

A year later Van Praag developed the concept of humanist counselling to reach out to people in spiritual need. The first conference on humanist counselling took place in 1948 (Van IJssel, 2007), the first seminar in 1953 with the first book by Van Praag on its theory (Van Praag, 1953). Humanist counselling was presented as a non-directive form of counselling focussed on the search for meaning. True attention, the acknowledgement of the value and peculiarity of each individual and equality were set as basic principles. Part of the profession was the clause of confidentiality (Van Praag, 1982).

Humanist counselling continually expanded, and a struggle for equal treatment with other counselling fields resulted in recognition by the state (Van IJssel, 2007). In the early sixties the

Humanist Training Institute<sup>3</sup> was founded to officially educate humanist counsellors. There hadn't been a sequel to Van Praag's methodology, so counsellors drew inspiration from the humanist psychology of Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers (Mooren, 1999).

The Humanist Training Institute was followed in 1991 by the University of Humanistic Studies. Professionalisation entered a new phase with serious theory forming on humanist counselling at an academic level (Van IJssel, 2007). Mooren was the first author who published a comprehensive book on the theory of humanist counselling in 1999, Jorna followed in 2009.

## **2.2 The self in the theory of humanist counselling of Jan Hein Mooren**

In the footsteps of Jaap van Praag, Mooren calls the search for meaning the central element of humanist counselling (1999, 2010, 2013). The humanist counsellor supports the client in his unique search for meaning, a meaning that is based on a very personal choice and provides his existence with a purpose (Van Praag in Mooren, 1999). That the self appears to be a focal point in this process is demonstrated by the many terms containing the word 'self' Mooren uses to describe the content of counselling sessions: self-clarification, self-reflection, self-realization, self-determination, self-acceptance, self-esteem, self-worth, self-consciousness, self-awareness, self-description, self-evaluation, self-examination, sense of self, to become oneself and coming to terms with oneself (1999, 2010, 2013). However, despite the fact that the self forms an important locus of attention, Mooren never provides a definition of the self.

To nevertheless obtain an idea of his notion of the self, different roads will be taken. First, we will take a look at the terms that point towards the self to see if Mooren's notion of the self can be deduced from them. Secondly, we will investigate Mooren's use of Taylor's philosophy concerning the self, followed thirdly by Mooren's concept of authenticity. Finally we will turn to two philosophies of the self Mooren proposes: the existential self and the narrative self.

### **2.2.1 Terms concerning the self**

Mooren names *self-reflection* as the heart of humanist counselling (2010). During counselling sessions the client is invited to exercise introspection, to contemplate himself and how he wants

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<sup>3</sup> Humanistisch Opleidingsinstituut

to shape the course of his life. According to Mooren, insight into oneself is a prerequisite for the ability to arrange life according to one's aspirations, so through self-reflection the client works towards *self-realization* (1999). In taking a closer look, these two words display a couple of qualities about the self. Apparently, the self has the possibility to watch itself. It can step aside and reflect on its own being. The self contains a mystery of twoness, of being one and two at the same time. Next to this the self has the quality of realization, of becoming something that was potentially already there. This also testifies of a twoness, the recent self, containing an inkling of the future self.

Three other core elements that are developed in counselling sessions are *sense of identity*, *self-determination* and *self-acceptance* (2013, p. 36). The first term, sense of identity, Mooren defines as the integration of a person as a unity. During counselling sessions, self-reflection contributes to the awareness that there is a coherence between a person's experiences in life (2013, p. 36). The self structures life as a totality, it brings order in the vicissitudes of the everyday so that life makes sense and is meaningful (1999). Mooren also connects sense of identity to the 'I am' experience of Rollo May (1999). During counselling sessions the client can make the realization: I am the one living, this is my being, revealing the self as our most intimate reality.

The second term, self-determination, is defined as the ability to give life a direction. In following Roy Baumeister's theory about the four conditions necessary for the experience of meaningfulness,<sup>4</sup> Mooren highlights the condition of purpose. The self should be able to find or create a purpose in life in order to experience life as meaningful (1999). Determining one's purpose as a self is therefore an important part of humanist counselling. Mooren argues thereby for non-directiveness from the side of the counsellor, a client should shape his life independently and the counsellor should only function as a facilitator of this process (2013). Human beings should be recognized in their capability to give a personal meaning to life and in their own responsibility to do so (1999).

Mooren underlines in the above statements the autonomy of the individual. However, in taking up Baumeister term *efficacy*, defined as the experience that one has a grip on life, he nuances his

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<sup>4</sup> That is 1. purpose, 2. value and justification, 3. efficacy, 4. self-worth.

position. Baumeister namely names this experience an ‘illusion of control’, meaning that life can’t be controlled as we wish. In spite of the illusion however one should still strive for efficacy, therefore Mooren states that humanist counsellors should work towards an increased experience of efficacy in their counselling sessions because it helps a person to navigate through life (1999, p. 30). So in sum, the self that is depicted here is a self that has the potential of self-government, and is also encouraged herein. The ideal is a free self, an autonomous self, determining its own stance towards the world. There is a limit however to the self’s mastering since life ultimately also takes its own course.

The third term, self-acceptance, is defined as the acknowledgement of oneself with one’s limitations and one’s potential (2013, p. 36). Mooren grounds this idea again on Baumeister who names self-worth as another condition for the experience of meaningfulness (1999). People’s days are filled with self-evaluations that stimulate or interrupt their self-esteem. Part of the counselling sessions are therefore focused on coming to terms with oneself, to reconcile with one’s own being. Mooren sees this reconciliation process as the precondition of the acceptance of the other and the world (2013). Peculiar of the sentences ‘acknowledgement of oneself’ and ‘coming to terms with oneself’ is the fact that they refer to two selves that can identify with each other. There seems to be a self that can work towards integration with another self and this alignment is desired, Mooren calls the result ‘ego-integrity’ (1999). Again, twoness is part of the notion of the self.

### **2.2.2 Taylor: self and ethics**

In following Charles Taylor, Mooren writes that knowing who you are is being able to orientate against a pre-existing moral background (Mooren, 2013). In society common repertoires exist about how things usually go or how they ought to go. These moral frameworks are carried in images, stories, legends et cetera and provide a society with visions of the good (Taylor, 2007). Describing your self is formulating a position in reference to this cultural tradition. Mooren says in short: ‘You are what you stand for’ (2013, p. 37). In this sense the question of the self is always an ethical question: who do I want to be? How do I want to live? What are my norms and values? In counselling sessions the (often unconscious) values and norms are articulated, humanist counsellors encourage clients to clarify their moral position (Mooren, 1999).

In the last subparagraph Mooren's valuation of autonomy was described. The pre-existing moral background however shows that this autonomy of a person must not be interpreted as this person free-floating from his surroundings. The self is encouraged to find its unique answer with respect to life, but does this against the background of a long cultural tradition. The autonomous self is therefore connected to a reality that transcends the individual person. It embodies values that are transpersonal, shared, going beyond the individual's picturing of life. Making this move saves Mooren's theory from the accusation of fostering selfishness, of creating a self that is detached from the world and therefore unaccountable. A self that is rooted in values stays involved in the world and the other (Mooren, 2010).

### **2.2.3 Authenticity**

Already several times the idea of authenticity has come up in this chapter. To become oneself, ego-integrity or self-realization are terms that pervade Mooren's methodology of humanist counselling. He writes that every movement away from ourselves is loss, and every movement towards ourselves is an advance, no matter how hard-won to achieve. The gain pays off in authentic living (2010). In another passage he writes that humanist counsellors should strive for an environment in which clients can feel the space to become themselves (1999). Mooren regards the idea of shaping your life authentically as an essential part of humanist counselling (1999). Authenticity is the guiding norm for the development of the human being (2010). There is, following this way of thinking, a self that is more oneself. A kind of true self next to our present-day self. This self Mooren describes as coming from the depth of one's personality (2010). If one's daily self is aligned with one's deeper self, man is living his unique being (2010). Mooren links this unique self with Taylor's self as ethics. The authentic self is a moral self because it is living its innermost values (2013).

### **2.2.4 Existential self**

In his book *De moed om te zien*, Mooren suddenly takes a slightly different approach towards the self (2010). Mooren investigates here the significance of existentialism for humanist counselling. His conclusion is positive since many existentialist values are in accordance with humanist values, so he takes up the challenge of trying Emmy van Deurzen's theory of existential counselling on the practice of humanist counselling.

Van Deurzen's theory encompasses four levels of experience: the physical world (the body), the social world (the ego), the personal world (the self) and the spiritual world (the soul). Every dimension has its own purpose to be achieved, consisting of a number of values. The body is connected to survival, efficacy, comfort, safety. The ego is connected to recognition, influence, kinship and respect. The self is connected to integrity, freedom, authenticity, certainty and autonomy. The soul to truth, perfection, wisdom and the good (Van Deurzen in Mooren, 2010, p. 169).

It is not clear which levels Mooren would attribute to the self: ego, self and soul? Or should the body be included as well? However, if the four levels of experience can be interpreted as different parts of *self-experience*, there is still something to say about the self. Namely, that the self-experience is composed of experiences that are bounded to the self and experiences that surpass the self. If we take a look at the four levels, the ego and the soul are experienced as confined to our self, as strengthening our self. The body and the soul on the other hand transcend this enclosure. The body as part of the material world, rooting us in this world (Heidegger's being-in-the-world), the soul as part of the spiritual sphere, rooting us in a world that transcends the individual. The self Mooren outlines here is thus at the same time an immanent notion as well as an transcendent notion

### **2.2.5 Narrative self**

The self that Mooren depicts is closely connected to storytelling. The content of self-clarification, self-reflection, self-determination et cetera is all expressed in a story. In formulating who I am and what I stand for I create the storyline of my life. Mooren follows with this notion the narrative approach to the world, taking up the work of the philosopher Paul Ricoeur and the psychologist Donald Polkinghorne (Mooren, 1999). Ricoeur suggests that self-understanding is always mediated by signs, symbols or text, so self-understanding coincides with these mediating terms (Ricoeur, 1991). Polkinghorne adds that as a storyteller the self can be seen as an ever changing process, constantly in the making (Polkinghorne in Mooren, 1999). This means that our understanding of the self is always an interpretation through signs and a constantly renewed construction. Using a term of Anneke Sools, Mooren calls this *narrative competence*, the competence to understand and give form to the self through stories (Mooren,

2013). Mooren hereby adds another interesting dimension to the self investigated in the previous subparagraphs. He seems to point towards a self that is both already existing and created. The authentic self is a self that can be discovered as one's actual self and at the same time one constructs a self through the stories one tells.

In this concept of the narrative self we can again discern a twoness within the self: in telling a story there are always two present, the storyteller and the listener.

### **2.3 The self in the theory of humanist counselling of Ton Jorna**

Ton Jorna develops a theory of humanist counselling with a major role for spirituality. He understands the profession of a humanist counsellor as a spiritual profession, and spirituality as a direction in which humanist counselling can actualize towards the future. Jorna defines spirituality as an 'unconditional attention to reality' (2008, p. 9).

In Jorna's theory of humanist counselling as in Mooren's theory the self takes a central place. Jorna starts with saying that in today's strongly individualized society the *I* forms the focal point of life (2008, p. 32). Since collective, traditional or social structures have become less encompassing of daily life, every human being is invited to personally answer the question how this 'I' wants to give meaning to its own life. In following van Praag, Jorna states that humanist counselling focuses on this search for meaning so consequently the self forms a basic principle in his methodology.

To make his ideas on the self understandable, Jorna makes extensive use of metaphors. A synonym for the self is for example the word 'dieptewezen', meaning 'a being with inner depth'. The leitmotif of Jorna's theory on the self is a metaphor as well. He proposes the idea that in life every human being has the latent gift of going through a development from individual to 'enkeling' (2008), a non-conventional Dutch word that means 'the only one' or 'the single one'. I will translate it here as 'singular'.

#### **2.3.1 From individual to singular**

Jorna's concept of the singular is a very Kierkegaardian concept. Kierkegaard pictures the search for oneself as a vertiginous experience, as a solitary search between 'fear and trembling' for the authentic self (Kierkegaard, 2006). His philosophy is a turn towards the lived experience, in

contrast with the more abstract systemic philosophy of Kant and Hegel. He calls for attention for the daily *existence*, hence his entitlement as the first existentialist philosopher. Jorna follows this turn in his theory of humanist counselling. He owes much to the philosophy of Kierkegaard so in following we will continually discern this influence.

The development from individual to singular starts at a certain moment in life, namely the moment that a person feels he would like to become internally independent. When he abides to this task, ultimately the vocation of every human being, he starts on his quest from individual to singular. This spiritual path is a linear as well as a cyclical process, developing towards something, starting over again. The road leads to a self that acknowledges itself as a being with inner depth, as having an authentic self, and eventually towards the experience of the self as decentered (Jorna, 2008). Following these three steps, I will explain the development from individual to singular Jorna proposes in the next subparagraphs.

A humanist counsellor can play an important role in supporting the development from individual to singular, but more importantly, in being an example of a singular. This paragraph can therefore also be read as the schooling of a humanist counsellor.

### **2.3.2 Acknowledging inner depth**

In childhood man emerges as a self with its own willing and thinking. In the following years he adjusts to or he rebels against his surroundings. As an adult he can live with this appropriate or inappropriate behaviour until one day it no longer suits. He comes to a point where he is moved by an experience that is beyond himself. This can be the death of a loved one or just an ordinary event, in any case an experience that disrupts normal affairs and leaves him with the feeling of incompleteness about the hitherto lived life. Jorna describes this moment as an invitation towards internal independency, the moment that the spiritual path starts.

What follows is the acknowledgement of inner depth. The self appears to be more than the outer world, there is a whole inner life that can be discovered. The ordinary self-centeredness makes room for serious attention to the self. The human being stands on the doorstep of an inward journey that will lead to the disclosure of a connected and authentic self (Jorna, 2008).

### 2.3.3 Authenticity, once more

The authentic self is not given, but has to be acquired. Jorna describes the interim time towards the authentic self as a period of ambiguity. The longing for a more fulfilled life is accompanied by the experience of resistance and pain and by the fear of losing oneself. Egostructures like complacency, the instinct of self-preservation and ideal images of oneself need to breach. Solidified frames must be turned upside down to make place for an attitude in which control is released. The strategic self of daily life must step out of its manipulative behaviour and become a self that is free of itself (Jorna, 2008).

To illustrate this process from another perspective Jorna takes up the concepts of *willfulness* and *willingness* of the psychologist Rollo May. A willful life is a life over which the self is in control, a willing life is a life in which the self is willing to surrender to the here and now. To be able to surrender, the self needs to let loose of his *self-image* in order to become a *true self* (May in Jorna, 2008, p. 42).

This transformation hurts, and the self switches between stepping back in the old and safe behaviour and the wish to become oneself. The process can be utterly solitary, one is completely thrown back on oneself. Jorna however stresses this existential solitude as a catalyst for growth since it offers the opportunity for a profound acquaintance with oneself and the human existential condition (2012). In facing the false separate reality of the self, a breakthrough can occur towards a existence in connectedness.

If the self gradually succeeds in letting go of the old self-centered self he will encounter his true authentic self (Jorna, 2012). Jorna describes this self as irreducible to any concept or theory and therefore not apt for a definition. But throughout his books he gives some insights into how one can imagine the authentic self. The irreducibility indicates a self that is unique, different from anything else. Jorna furthermore makes use of the Sanskrit phrase *Tat twam asi*, 'You are That', pointing towards a primordial self that is identifiable with the Absolute (2008). Jorna also makes a distinction between *self-image* as one's conduct and *true self* as one's essence. This essence is our deepest being, our deep self in contrast to our small self. The deep self is who we really are. This self is precious and the normative orientation from which we live. Finally Jorna associates the authentic self with the ability to structure life in a coherent way and to form a coherent story that is in alignment with oneself (Jorna, 2008).

### **2.3.4 The decentered self**

The result of becoming one with the authentic self is a decentered self. Metaphors that Jorna uses for this state are the feeling of rebirth after dying, the birth of the heart (that is, the start of living from the heart), and the feeling of coming home. The self begins to experience the eternal in the temporal, the invisible in the visible, or as Jorna names it: the 'undercurrent' of life (2008). The upper current, the mainstream, is no longer important, meaning that one starts to live reality as it presents itself instead of living by societal norms. Control makes room for the experience that life carries you (Jorna, 2008).

Starting to live reality as it presents itself is living in the here and now. Thereby not only the prevailing reality is experienced but also a reality that is different and broader than we can imagine. Cracked open the self has become part of a greater whole. Existence is no longer subjective or objective but interpersonal and transpersonal. In following the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, Jorna describes that life starts to take place in the in-between, in the relational sphere between the one and the other. In the encounter the other decentres one's self, opening the possibility to relate to one another in a selfless manner (2008).

Jorna also characterizes the decentered self as a witnessing consciousness. The self experiences the world more as a spectator, as a listener instead of as an actor. The self holds back of being a directing agent as Jorna's remark that things are not existent for man, but man existent for the things reveals (2008).

## **2.4 A comparison between the notions of the self of Jan Hein Mooren and Ton Jorna**

When we compare the notion of the self of Mooren and Jorna with each other, we can see that there are many similarities as well as differences. Let's have a look at them.

In the first place, both authors draw their theories of humanist counselling from different sources. Mooren bases his theory on the work of several psychologists. His notion of the self focuses on psychological well being. It concentrates on psychological processes that are preconditions for the experience of life as meaningful. Jorna on the other hand writes from a philosophical and existentialist perspective (Mooren only makes a little excursion to existentialism in his work on Van Deurzen). It is not psychological research that forms the basis of his notion of the self, but

experiences of human beings described in biographies, novels, or philosophical literature. From these experiences he deduces a notion of the self that entails a spiritual path towards absorption of the self in a greater whole. The different focus of both authors has its influence on their interpretation of the self. Mooren's notion of the self aims at what is needed to feel comfortable in everyday life, whereas Jorna's notion is defined as part of a larger scheme that includes suffering as a means to reach the final destination of a communion with the cosmos.

Mooren and Jorna are in agreement on a self that has to work on itself to become itself.

Authenticity is for Mooren as well as for Jorna the guiding norm in the theory of humanist counselling. The understanding of this authenticity however varies. For Mooren an authentic self is a self that lives from its innermost values. This self has reconciled with its own being, it has reached a state of ego-integrity. Jorna takes this process much further and gives it a spiritual tendency. His authentic self is a decentered self, it is not only in alignment with itself but also in alignment with the cosmos. Authenticity is defined as a regained connection to the undercurrent of life. Where Mooren's self is still focused on itself, Jorna's self experiences itself in the inter- and transpersonal. In sum, in following Jorna's vocabulary, Mooren's notion of the self concentrates on the center whereas Jorna's notion of the self focuses on decentering.

For both authors the authentic self is a deeper self. It is found through a process of introspection, through entering one's inner depth. This deeper self however is not an essential self, a self that is just waiting there to be found. It seems that Mooren's notion of the self leaves space for creativity, the deeper self is a combination of something that is already there and something that is personally constructed, however paradoxical this may sound. Jorna's deeper self is rather a not self, his self has to transform its dominant form into selflessness. It is a self that wants to come off of itself. For him the vocation of every human being is to hand oneself over to the undercurrent of life, let this undercurrent live through the self with the least possible impact of the self as a directing agent. Jorna's self is a surrendered self, whereas Mooren's self is still shaping its own life.

Following from the above, there is a difference in the appreciation of self-direction in both notions of the self. In Mooren's notion self-direction and autonomy take a more central place than in Jorna's notion. Mooren works in his counselling sessions towards a self that is freestanding (but still in connection to the surrounding world). As said, Jorna works towards a

self that is not directing anymore, it has become a witnessing consciousness. It would however be too easy to undo Jorna's notion of any form of autonomy. Jorna namely names the wish to become internally independent as the starting point for the path from individual to singular. It seems that for him self-direction forms the springboard for the decentered self, first one needs to stand on one's own two feet before one can surrender to the deeper self. Moreover, in a witnessing consciousness there is a witness present, that is some independent point that observes. Another crucial difference can be perceived in the way both authors describe the process towards the authentic self. For Mooren this process consists of a process of self-clarification. By reflecting on oneself the client discovers parts of his being that were up till then unconscious. The new information sheds a different light on the hitherto lived life or suggests a direction for the future. Jorna again takes this process a step further. He describes a spiritual process in which the aim is not so much well-being but at a shifted consciousness in which we face reality as it is. For his development from individual to singular self-clarification is not enough. Egostructures of the superficial self must be breached to reach the deeper self. One must go through a phase of complete existential solitude to get a profound acquaintance with oneself and discover one's false separate reality. Jorna uses for this process the metaphor of rebirth after dying. Of course this is not something the humanist counsellor forces his client into doing, he only has an watchful eye for signs that point towards this spiritual path.

A final difference is the approach of Mooren and Jorna towards narrativity. Mooren focuses on the narrative reality, he speaks of a narrative self and focuses in his counselling on the narrated life-story. Jorna on the other hand points with his concept of the undercurrent towards a sphere that is beyond the reality that can be captured in words.

We have seen in the above that Mooren and Jorna are constantly playing with the twoness that seems to be inherent to the self. They are both searching for some kind of dissolution of this twoness. Mooren is looking for union in the reconciliation of oneself with one's being. Jorna bridges the separateness between the self and the world by decentering the self. One could say that Mooren chooses for an immanent solution for the twoness, dissolving its disunity by uniting the person inwardly, whereas Jorna chooses for a transcendent solution, taking the person beyond itself to merge with the surrounding world.

In the introduction the hypothesis was posited that Mooren's self is predominantly an immanent notion of the self. It was expected that Mooren would stress in his theory of humanist counselling the value of autonomy, thereby focusing on a self-contained self instead of a self that is taken beyond itself. After analyzing Mooren's notion of the self this statement must be slightly revised. Mooren does stress autonomy as an important value in humanist counselling, but in doing so, makes the remark that control is an 'illusion of control'. Life is bigger than we are, we can wish to control its events but in the end we have to realize the impossibility of this wish and reconcile with life's unexpected whims. The self has to account for a higher power, for forces that surpass the self. Moreover, by putting a strong emphasis on values following Taylor's argument that values transcend the individual, Mooren removes his notion of the self of the interpretation of an enclosed notion. Mooren's move to Van Deurzen's existential self in which he includes the bodily and the spiritual world in the notion of the self contributes to this understanding. So in conclusion we can't say that Mooren's notion of the self is a purely immanent notion. It is a notion that puts emphasis on a strengthening of the self but leaves space for transcendence by pointing towards certain realities that are beyond the self and influence its being.

However, although Mooren embeds the self in realities that surpass the self, he is not explicitly searching for a state of being that is beyond the ordinary limits of human experience or for forces that rise above the self. Jorna on the other hand is precisely looking for that. In his notion the self develops towards a different state of consciousness than our ordinary consciousness which is realized in the decentered self. Moreover, the self connects to a force that is beyond the limits or ordinary human experience in surrendering to the undercurrent of life. Mooren stresses autonomy whereas Jorna puts emphasis on heteronomy. The hypothesis formulated in the introduction that Jorna's notion of the self is a transcendent notion pointed in the right direction. However, where we spoke about Mooren's notion of the self as an immanent notion with a little space for transcendence, we have to speak about Jorna's notion as a transcendent notion with a little space for immanence. The decentered self experiences itself in the inter- and transpersonal, in the relational sphere between the one and the other or the in-between. If we look at the word 'between', we can see that Jorna speaks about an encounter between two poles, not a unity in which everything fuses. To keep the tension between the two poles, two spots of immanence are

needed out of which there is the possibility of reaching out. Jorna's notion of the self as a witnessing consciousness also points to this spot of immanence, it refers to a standpoint from where the world is witnessed.

## CHAPTER III: THE MYSTICAL NOTION OF THE SELF OF SIMONE WEIL

In answering the second subquestion, What notion of the self is developed by Simone Weil based on her mystical experiences and in which respect does this notion relate to the distinction between immanence and transcendence?, this chapter investigates the notion of the self of Simone Weil. The chapter starts with a short introduction of humanism and mysticism, followed by a thorough investigation of Weil's notion of the self.

### 3.1 Humanism and mysticism

In line with humanism's ambivalent relationship towards religion or spirituality, there is an ambivalent relationship towards mysticism as well. There are humanists who want nothing to do with 'irrational' mysticism, and there are humanists who experience a strong connection to mysticism (Van IJssel, 2007). In the introduction I already mentioned Van IJssel's research into the role of spirituality in the practice of humanist counselling, evincing a strong affinity between humanist counsellors and the mystical tradition (2007).

Since the founding of the Dutch Humanist Association, its members were often broadly classified in two groups: the rational humanists and the religious humanists (Van Praag in Van IJssel, 2007, p. 184). The religious humanists paid more attention to feeling and experience, whereas the rational humanists approached the world from a rational standpoint. According to Van Praag, the religious experience of the vast majority of the religious humanists was rooted in a mystical experience of the world (Van Praag in Van IJssel, 2007, p. 189). Some prominent religious humanists like Piet Schut, Dirk Hendrik Prins and Kwee Swan Liat encouraged the reading of mystical texts as inspiration for humanists for their personal growth (Van IJssel, 2007). More recently, humanist counsellors like Kitty Bouwman and Ton Jorna drew inspiration from mystical authors like Hildegard von Bingen and Etty Hillesum (Bouwman, 2007; Jorna, 2014). Also, if we take a look at the Humanist Canon, we can see that it refers one of humanism's foundational texts, *Oratio de hominis dignitate*, to the mystic Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (Humanistische Canon, 2016).

From a cultural historical perspective Charles Taylor argues that humanism owes much to mysticism. In the Middle Ages mystics were an important stimulant in the movement towards the individuation of religion. In a time of mass religion, mystics like for example Meister Eckhart took the first steps in the development of a highly personal and inward worship of God without the intermediation of a formal institution. An interiority was developed which would become the prerequisite for our present individualism (Taylor, 2007, p. 70). This interiority was later disconnected from a religious practice and became a general feature of our modern self (Taylor, 2007). As we have seen, the theories of humanist counselling of Mooren and Jorna are built around the concept of an interiority: self-reflection, authenticity, the acknowledgement of inner depth are all terms that wouldn't be relevant if there wouldn't be a notion of the innerness of man. Humanistic counselling is in this respect indebted to mysticism. Maybe Van Praag was aware of this link between interiority and mysticism. Van Praag spoke, according to Jorna, about two humanisms that were in tension with each other: an interiorized mystical humanism and an expansive forefront humanism (Van Praag in Jorna, 2006).

So, as we have seen, there are several crossovers between humanism and mysticism. The two can't be easily placed as opposites of one another. But there are also differences. The biggest obstacle for humanists regarding mysticism is the idea of a personal God. Religious humanists tend to an I-it instead of an I-thou relationship with the divine world since many humanists feel an intuitive allergy against imperative provisions, dogma's or revelations from above. Belief in a personal God however is not totally excluded in the Dutch Humanist Association, as long as the autonomy of man is preserved (Van IJssel, 2007).

Following from the above, how would humanists respond to Simone Weil's concept of God? Weil starts her description of God with a contradiction: 'God exists: God does not exist' (Weil, 1952, p. 114). In explaining she points to the fact that everything she is able to conceive when she pronounces the word God, never comes close to the true God. Hence her statement that of two men the one that denies Him, the atheist, can be nearer to God than the believer since the latter's picture of God can prevent him of ever coming to the true one. According to Weil, we have not reached the point in ourselves where God exists, and therefore he doesn't exist (Weil, 1952).

With this concept Weil endorses the long tradition of negative theology in which God is approached through negation, through what God is not (Sölle, 1998; Bulhof & Ten Kate, 2000). Bulhof and Ten Kate define negative theology thusly: as it rejects the anthropomorphism of Greek mythology, it rejects claims to authority of existing religious or political orders, it opposes dogmatism and it rejects the hubris of human reason (2000, p. 5). Silence is the symbol of the divine, since the ultimate reality is not accessible through human thinking. It is only accessible through knowledge derived from experience and through other ways of speaking, for example evocative and poetic ways (Bulhof & Ten Kate, 2000, p. 6). This definition is an accurate description of Weil's understanding of God, with regard to the last point we saw already an example in Weil's foregoing use of the paradox.

Humanists would of course respond very differently to Weil's concept of God, depending on their affinity with religion or spirituality. However, because Weil's concept of God puts emphasis on an unknown God instead of an impersonated God, because it rejects dogmatism and assigns an important role to experience instead of reason as the doorway to knowledge of God, Weil's concept is close to the concept of God or the image of spirituality humanists picture in Van IJssel research (2007).

### **3.2 Decreation: the destruction of the self**

At the heart of mysticism lies a longing for God (Moyaert, 1998; Sölle, 1998). The mystic is attracted to a love for God, although he can't really tell what he is exactly longing for. The mystic only has a premonition that gives him direction, and mystical teachings that show him the way through metaphors (Moyaert, 1998).

The longing for God however is paradoxical. To love God, the mystic needs to give himself away and let go of the desire to achieve something for himself. He has to give up the striving as *his* striving as well as the striving as *striving* (Moyaert, 1998, p. 176). A profound self-detachment needs to take place to make room so that divine love can flow through him. The mystic learns to live without a *why*, without a calculation of his deeds, like the rose blooms because she blooms (Sölle, 1998). In this way mysticism is about a longing that tries to overcome the longing and become solely a medium for God's love (Moyaert, 1998).

Weil expresses the abovementioned in the statement that we must give up everything and not even desire grace. ‘We have to go down to the root of our desires in order to tear the energy from its object’ (Weil, 1952, p. 22). We must give up everything until there is only energy left, an energy that waits without object. In short: we have to destruct our self (Weil, 1952).

In taking up this motive of abnegation, Weil prolongs a comprehensive mystical tradition.

William James writes:

‘Since denial of the finite self and its wants, since asceticism of some sort, is found in religious experience to be the only doorway to the larger and more blessed life, this moral mystery intertwines and combines with the intellectual mystery in all mystical writings.’ (James, 1902, p. 409).

Paradoxically, an abnegation of the self seems the way to a fuller life. Think for example of Meister Eckhart’s concept of *Abgeschiedenheit*, meaning that one should empty oneself of all things, become no-thingness in order to become full of God (Little, 1993). The German theologian Dorothee Sölle speaks about the decentering of the self. She describes the self as a barrier that makes every experience of the ‘not-self’ impossible. In breaking through the closed borders of the self, the centre of the self widens from the individual to an infinite encompassment of all that is (Sölle, 1998).

An overcoming of the usual barriers between the individual and the absolute is the achievement the mystic strives for (James, 1902). ‘[We] have to make this “I” universal’, says Weil (1952, p. 143). The self needs to become nothing in order to become everything. Weil names this process *decreation*, a word negative in appearance through the privative ‘de’, but positive in its outcome as a profoundly liberating experience (Little, 1993). In the following we will try to get some grip on this concept.

According to Weil, the creation of the world encloses a paradox. To allow our existence, God had to give up his omnipotence. He refused to be everything, emptied himself to grant the existence of other creatures (Weil, 1952; Little, 1993). God’s creation is therefore not expansion but abdication. ‘God has abandoned God’ (Weil, 1970, p. 120), has made himself non-being so that we could be. So in Weil’s conclusion *we* are God’s abdication. Our existence is God’s sacrifice because his diminution brought our existence into being. Hence the more a human being exists as an autonomous self-centered individual, the more God abdicates (Weil, 1970).

Consequently, if we want to allow God's full existence once more, we need to reproduce God's initial abdication and refuse to be a self (Little, 1993). The creation of God invites for a counter-reply of decreation from our side. We can follow God's example in becoming non-being, not as a moralistic precept but as a free choice, so that we, according to Weil, are no longer reducing our self to a small space but start to become unlimited (Weil, 1952).

That decreation is directed towards the self and to nothing else is because the self is the only thing that belongs to us:

‘We possess nothing in the world — a mere chance can strip us of everything — except the power to say ‘I’. That is what we have to give to God — in other words, to destroy. There is absolutely no other free act which it is given us to accomplish — only the destruction of the ‘I.’ (Weil, 1952, p. 26).

I have to give up my will as an autonomous being, that is, I must sacrifice the gift of free will itself (Weil, 1952). For the majority of the Western readers of Weil this will sound alarming: giving up our free will is giving up something that is precisely our achievement of the last centuries. For Weil however giving up our free will is becoming aware of a fact, namely that we are essentially not and that this non-existence of our self is our genuine state. We have to see that the ‘I’ is an illusion (Little, 1993). Perceiving our non-existence forms our salvation because it results in a total absorption into the divine, in an annihilation by the plenitude of being (Weil, 1970).

It is important to note that in Weil's concept of decreation immanence is not abandoned for transcendence. It is rather the relationship between the two that alters. Weil's destruction of the self is not a way to escape this world but rather the opposite, a way to bring another world into this world (Spingstedt, 1986). Her goal is to incarnate the sacred into matter, to make the surrounding universe enter the body (Weil, 1952). In destructing the self immanence opens itself for transcendence in order to take part of it (Sölle, 1998).

### **3.3 Stages in the destruction of the self**

As we have seen, the effort of the mystic is to achieve that there is no part in him anymore to say ‘I’ (Weil, 1962). This destruction of the self doesn't mean that consciousness as an individual

ceases to exist, but that the dominant form of the self as enclosed is transformed towards a self encompassing the universe (Weil, 1952; Sölle, 1998). This transformation process knows different stages. Often used metaphors for these stages are the metaphor of death and resurrection<sup>5</sup>, or the metaphor of the passage through the dark night of the soul (John of the Cross in Sölle, 1998). Weil follows in her concept of decreation the traditional western model of the *Via Mystica*, a threefold categorization of the stages of the mystical path in *purgatio*, *illuminatio* and *unio* (Blans, 2000). This categorization was written down by pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, but Weil follows its interpretation by John of the Cross (Little, 1993). In the following we'll turn to the stages one by one. In the mystical path the three stages intermingle, but for a clear explanation I will discuss them separately.

In the stage of *purgatio*, purgation, the mystical path starts with a turn inwards. Mystics closely examine their consciousness and conscience (Moyaert, 1998). Through introspection the aim is to purify the self so that it can mirror the divine (Sölle, 1998). Purgation is seen as a process of dying, namely the mortification of one's selfhood. In this stage the mystic needs to leave hold of everything, even the desire for purgation. Each image the mystic identifies himself with must wither. 'For the true and eternal word of God is spoken only in the desert, when man has left his own self and all things behind, and stands alone, deserted, and solitary' (Johannes Tauler in Sölle, 1998). Weil speaks about this phase as reaching the void. We have to create a void in ourselves, and then endure this state without anchoring points since grace can only enter us when there is an empty space to receive it (Weil, 1952).

Emptying ourselves however doesn't mean, as the philosopher Moyaert points out, that the mystic tries to attenuate his longing for God, but that he depersonalizes his longing, thus making it part of a greater longing that transcends him as individual (Moyaert, 1998). As Weil puts it: '[It] all amounts to the same: to empty desire, finality of all content, to desire in the void, to desire without any wishes' (Weil, 1952, p. 13). Reaching the void is a process of depersonalization, or in Weil's phrasing, a process towards the *impersonal*.

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<sup>5</sup> For example in Matthew 16:25: For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it (King James Bible).

The concept of the impersonal is a key concept in Weil's thinking about the destruction of the I. The impersonal is the realm where good, truth and beauty reside. It is the realm of perfection, the realm of the sacred (Weil, 1962). Purgation, enduring the void, are all directed towards creating a self that is impersonal. To achieve this, Weil indicates a part of the self that can function as a stepping stone since this part is itself impersonal. She distinguishes in the self between two unequal parts: a tiny, in her words 'infinitesimal' part, the impersonal part, and a part that is personal which she calls man's personality (Weil, 1962).

The tiny part is the sacred part in the human being, it is 'himself'. This part is uncreated and has therefore no share in the abduction of God, it is still with God. Since God is the good, the tiny part is one's moral being (Weil, 1970). The bigger part, the personality of man, is of an entirely different order than the tiny part. It is the created part and falls under the laws of necessity. It is the product of contingent social forces, the narrated self that is situated in place and time. It organizes reality, projecting back and forth, whereas the tiny part only has the present moment in which there is nothing (Little, 1993). The personality is the self of language, opinions and intelligence, it is the 'autonomous I' (Weil, 1962). Weil designates this part of the self as the cause of error because it behaves as an imperialistic self, consuming everything around it for its own survival.

An abyss separates the tiny and the bigger part. The personality for example can invent wonderful things in the field of philosophy, art et cetera, but can never achieve the highest things since perfection is essentially anonymous and therefore only reachable through the impersonal tiny part. The same applies to truth because individual desires and projections can never be concordant with absolute truth (Weil, 1970). Weil resultantly states: 'To say 'I' is to lie' (Weil, 1970, p. 132).

The distinction between two parts of the self nuances Weil's note on the destruction of the self. It is not the complete self that must be destructed, decreed, but a specific part of the self, namely the personal part. According to Weil, God asked us if we want to be created and we answered 'yes', and kept continually repeating this 'yes'. The tiny part however cries 'no'. Decreation consists in maintaining this 'no' until the tiny part grows and invades the whole self (Weil, 1970, Little, 1993).

The tiny part of the self must not be confused with an essential self, a principle that Weil clearly rejects in her arguments against Jaques Maritain's Personalism. Maritain speaks of a metaphysical centre that is the bearer of inalienable rights, a view that is nonsense for Weil because of her belief that the self is part of its historical and social surroundings. She refuses to make the self an abstract notion that is beyond place and time and can therefore never be wrecked. Her personal experiences in the factories brought her to the conclusion that the self can be ruined until there is nobody left inside (see also the following description of affliction). She argues that placing the self in a metaphysical core to protect human dignity, exactly achieves the opposite since it places the self beyond the contingent, beyond the realm of the personal and thereby beyond the realm of human relations (Weil, 1962; Springstedt, 1993; Hamilton, 2005). If it's not an essential self, what then is the sacred part of the human being? It is, according to Weil, our inchoate striving for the good. We do not respect others because of what they have or are, but because of their 'profound and childlike and unchanging expectation of good in the heart', an expectation that (silently) cries when harm is being done (Weil, 1962, p. 53). This primitive human hope attempts to unify life, and we should respect people for whatever keeps them whole as a total person (Springstedt, 1993).

The destruction of the self takes place from within. It is a free act, in fact the only free act we can perform as human beings following Weil's quote in the previous subparagraph (Weil, 1952)<sup>6</sup>. It is tremendously important that the act is performed out of free will, since it must be destroyed from within by love. Nothing can take this free act away except for one thing: extreme affliction. This can destroy the I from outside, leaving a 'naked, vegetative egoism. An egoism without an 'I'' (Weil, 1952, p. 27). According to Weil, this is the worst because the I cannot destroy itself anymore and will be annihilated by an atheistic or materialistic conception (Weil, 1952).

Affliction however, if it's not in its most extreme form, can be a helpful companion on the way of reaching the void. To destruct the self, one needs to go through a phase of total affliction in which the self becomes pulverized. Weil speaks of a state of total humiliation in which the self

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<sup>6</sup> 'We possess nothing in the world — a mere chance can strip us of everything — except the power to say 'I'. That is what we have to give to God — in other words, to destroy. There is absolutely no other free act which it is given us to accomplish — only the destruction of the 'I'.' (Weil, 1952, p. 26).

positions itself naked and without defense with respect to every life event (Weil, 1962). The self is mutilated by the corrosive force of affliction, it feels its moral death (Weil, 1952). It learns to consent to everything that is, has been or will be independent of personal desires (Little, 1993). It learns to say to oneself that one can lose at any moment everything that one possesses, even the things that are so intimately mine that I consider them as myself (Weil, 1962). In sum, affliction teaches the self how to continuously consent to die.

In mystical texts, affliction or suffering is a recurrent theme (James, 1902). It is part of the process towards union with God (Sölle, 1998). Some mystical texts describe this phase with gentle words, Weil is rather a fierce writer: ‘the naked spectacle of affliction makes the soul shudder as the flesh shudders at the proximity of death’ (Weil, 1962, p. 71). The balm for the afflicted self is grace, only through this supernatural force can the self pass through its own annihilation. This working of grace Weil calls intense, disinterested, gratuitous and generous. It is the working of love (Weil, 1962).

When grace starts to settle in, the mystic has reached the second stage of the *illuminatio*, the enlightenment. In this stage the mystic allows himself to be led by the divine power. Because decreation is directed towards loss of self, the enlightenment has to be dependent on something other than the self:

‘I must necessarily turn to something other than myself since it is a question of being delivered from self. Any attempt to gain this deliverance by means of my own energy would be like the efforts of a cow which pulls at its hobble and so falls onto its knees’ (Weil, 1952, p. 3).

Grace fulfils this role, and the self of the mystic is taken over after its own consent. In this stage *attention* takes a central place. Attention namely has the quality of a disappearance of the self through a full focus on the intentional object. Watchful and expectant attention, silent and passive, empties the self and creates an openness to God’s grace. This attention can be directed towards God, truth or beauty, but can also take the form of love of one’s neighbor. For Weil, giving attention to the most unfortunate human beings is a rarity in this world, and therefore almost a miracle when it happens (Weil, 2010). The emptied self receives through its full attention the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth (Weil, 1952). The cleaner the mirror of the self has become in the stage of purgation, the brighter its enlightenment will be. It

can reflect its surroundings more accurately and therefore has a greater aptitude for grasping truths which otherwise would forever remain hidden to it (Weil, 2003; Nava, 2001).

The third stage, *unio* or unification, is the culmination of the takeover by grace. In this stage it is not the mystic anymore who acts, but God who acts through him. The spirit bathes in a spirit of selflessness (Moyaert, 1998). Weil writes: 'I am all. But this particular "I" is God. And it is not an "I"' (1984, p. 126). The stage of unification is not continuous, it comes and goes. Weil describes a few moments in which God came down and took possession of her. She recounts these moments as moments of an unspeakable happiness in which she dwells in the presence of love (Weil, 2010). Since God is beyond words, the moments of unification are not described in detail by Weil but only hinted at. They are moments in which the decreation of the self has led to a unification with the universe as it is God who is the universe, to a completeness of being and a fusion with the good that exists unconditionally (Weil, 1952). The transcendent and the immanent reality partake in each other at these moments in a double movement: the transcendent incarnates in the body and lifts the self thereby beyond itself. God gives the human being a new self, a divine self. The self no longer thinks it doesn't need anything from the outside to be itself, it experiences that through God it is given to itself.

## **CHAPTER IV: FROM MOOREN, JORNA AND WEIL TOWARDS TAYLOR, A CONCLUDING ANALYSIS**

In answering the second part of the research question, this chapter firstly turns to a comparison between the humanist notion of the self of Mooren and Jorna and the mystical notion of Weil. This is followed by a little excursion to current thinking on the self within the theories of humanist counselling. Then, in answering the last part of the research question, the notions of the self of Mooren, Jorna and Weil are examined against the background of Taylor's buffered and porous self to get a clearer understanding of the similarities and differences between these notions and their dilemmas. The chapter concludes with a radical interpretation of Taylor's conclusion on the basis of Martin Buber's quote in the opening of this thesis.

### **4.1 A comparison between Mooren's and Jorna's humanist notions and Weil's mystical notion of the self**

In chapter II we researched Mooren's and Jorna's humanist notions and in chapter III Weil's mystical notion of the self of Weil. Let's turn to a comparison between these notions to see where they are similar and where they differentiate from each other.

Mooren, Jorna and Weil all speak of two selves: the present self and the self one can become, respectively the authentic self or the decremented self.<sup>7</sup> They define this desired self as a moral self, it is closely connected to ethics. Mooren roots his authentic self in values, Jorna in a connection to the undercurrent of life and Weil roots her decremented self in the tiny self, the inchoate striving for the good that coincides with God. Mooren takes in his definition a narrative approach to the good, you are what you stand for in your life story, whilst Jorna and Weil define the undercurrent and God as a reality beyond words.

In the development towards the moral self the three authors search for an abolition of the twoness of the present self, they attribute to the moral self a unifying quality. Mooren focuses on union in a self that is reconciled with itself, Jorna and Weil in a self that is reconciled with the

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<sup>7</sup> Mooren and Jorna built their future self around the concept of authenticity, Weil doesn't speak of authenticity but comes close to this concept in her notion of the tiny self as the true self.

universe. All three define the moral self as the instance that keeps a person whole and his life-story unitary and meaningful.

From the present self to the moral self the three authors delineate a developmental path in which they share the first step of introspection, they however diverge in the subsequent steps. Mooren focuses in the developmental path on the self itself as keywords in his theory like 'sense of identity', 'self-direction' or 'self-acceptance' reveal. He is interested in a strengthening of the self and concentrates thereby on the person and the personal. Jorna and Weil on the other hand focus on exactly the opposite, namely on an absorption into a greater whole by an abnegation of the self. They want to distance themselves from the human being as the center. Jorna defines his authentic self as inter- and transpersonal and Weil connects the decreeted self to the impersonal as the highest state of being. Their search for the desired self makes a paradoxical gesture: by moving away from the self, by letting oneself be taken over by the undercurrent or by God, one becomes the moral self.

Jorna uses for this final stadium the term 'decentering' whereas Weil speaks of 'decreation'. In the difference between these two words we can see that Weil takes the abnegation of the self a step further than Jorna. In the decreeted self the self disappears altogether so that God can dwell within whereas in the decentered self the self keeps existing but everts its center. The difference is also shown in Weil's remark that God takes possession of her, whereas Jorna speaks of the self as a witnessing consciousness.

Mooren's focus on a strengthening of the self is also revealed in his emphasis on autonomy. The self is encouraged to become a directing agent that determines for itself how it wants to relate to life's events. Weil and Jorna on the contrary advocate a surrendered self. Weil's space for a free choice is confined to the consent of the destruction of the self, even to the destruction of free will itself. Jorna proposes the self as a spectator of life that refrains as much as possible from any form of agency. For both authors it seems that autonomy is a necessary stepping stone to reach the moral self. For Weil free choice forms this tilting point, for Jorna the start of the development from individual to singular as the invitation to become internally independent. They stress a self that surrenders voluntarily, autonomy is required before a letting go of the self is made possible. Another similarity between Jorna and Weil is the importance of suffering for the development of the self. Jorna speaks about letting go of the old manipulative and controlling behaviour, a

wounding and sometimes utterly solitary process. Weil is again more extreme, she speaks of total affliction in which the self becomes pulverized. In both cases the purpose is an emptying of the self, a letting go of one's self-containing manner of conducting oneself. The outcome of this emptied self is inter alia a becoming present in the here and now and an unconditional attention to reality. The latter is for Jorna and Weil an important quality in their search for a true love of others. It is also the goal of Jorna's theory of humanist counselling as his definition of spirituality as unconditional attention to reality reveals. For Weil a 'renunciation of the will and ego is necessary for allowing the Other to manifest itself' (Nava, 2001, p. 67). Only through the death of our self we are able to see an undistorted view of the suffering of others since the self normally manoeuvres to conceal the human fragility. Jorna and Weil agree that an abnegation of the self is needed to become truly present for the other human being, Jorna therefore highlights the schooling of a humanist counsellor in this direction.

In the previous chapter we defined Mooren's notion of the self as predominantly (but not exclusively) immanent and Jorna's notion as predominantly transcendent. Weil's notion closely matches Jorna's notion in her focus on transcendence, they both purposely search for a self that rises beyond the self. There is however a different interpretation of transcendence between the two. For Jorna, transcendence occurs in the encounter between two poles, in the in-between. The self moves away from its center to meet the surrounding world in the trans- and interpersonal. For Weil immanence opens itself for transcendence so that the transcendent reality can descend into immanent existence. The removal of the self through decreation opens a space in which God takes over, the divine is drawn into the human being and the earthly existence. The self is in this case radically altered into a divine self instead of only decentered.

In sum we have seen in the above comparison that Jorna and Weil share many similarities in their notions of the self. Both authors want to get away from the I-perspective since this perspective prevents the self from a real encounter with the surrounding world. Jorna's notion comes thereby close to a mystical notion of the self, but then a secularized and moderate version. The spiritual path he pictures leads, as in the three stages of the Via Mystica, through introspection, suffering and thereby an emptying of the self to a communion with the transcendent. Where Weil describes her notion of the self explicitly from a transcendent perspective and addresses this reality as God, Jorna stays more close to the mundane and

formulates his theory in neutral terms as for example ‘the undercurrent’. What this term precisely entails is not defined so it leaves room for a broad understanding, meaning that many experiences that are beyond the ordinary human experience can be interpreted as being part of it. Mooren takes a completely different direction than Jorna and Weil in his emphasis on a strengthening of the self. His notion follows the mystical path of the turn inwards but diverges from there on. There is little space for experiences that are beyond the ordinary experiencing, Mooren stresses immanence before transcendence.

#### **4.2 Excursion: current thoughts on the self within the theories of humanist counselling**

After this comparison it will be interesting to take a short look at how the theories of humanist counselling have evolved after the legacy of Mooren and Jorna. Their successors at the University of Humanistic Studies haven't published a comprehensive theory on humanist counselling (yet), but are educating the present class of humanist counsellors so their notions of the self will influence the future practice of humanist counselling. I turned to Christa Anbeek and Carmen Schuhmann for a short interview.

Schuhmann starts with the remark that the ideas we develop concerning the self are constructs with which we try to label something that will always stay intangible. The self is enormously complex and can't be captured in words. Still it is very important to think about the self, to see what kind of power a certain notion of the self exerts and how this power mutilates other versions of the self. The self is a moral term and must be constantly deconstructed. However, during the interview she admits that the relational self of Judith Butler, Kenneth Gergen and Luce Irigaray appeals to her.

Anbeek also endorses the line of thought of the relational self. She pleads for a radical relationality: before there is a self, there is relation. It is not clear where I end and the other starts, we are deeply intertwined with each other and essentially connected to all that is. For Anbeek the ego is no true being so we should move away from the present overestimation of the I.

Autonomy is an illusion, although Anbeek stresses that some sense of autonomy is required to attain a feeling of well-being. Schuhmann underlines the importance of autonomy in certain situations.

Schuhmann and Anbeek both emphasize the uniqueness of every human being. Schuhmann follows herein Hannah Arendt, the self of the other is never transparent, there is always something that is still not known, not even to myself. Anbeek points to the uniqueness of every human body. They both however indicate that they are not attracted to the concept of authenticity, this is not their guiding norm in their counselling sessions. Schuhmann doesn't want to fix herself to a concept that contains a normative orientation towards a true self. She would describe her style as counsellor as opening space for whatever wants to happen. Anbeek wonders when somebody would be authentic. She rather focuses in her counselling sessions on the client's relational embeddedness as the point of departure to work towards a meaningful life. In these two recent notions of the self we can see a shift happening towards a focus on relation, on that which precedes the individual. Both authors understand the self as part of a greater whole and relation as the self's essence. Transcendence is given a greater emphasis than immanence, that which is beyond the self is stressed before autonomy. This is displayed in Anbeek's remark that the self is an illusion since we are ultimately connected to all that is and Schuhmann's vision of the fundamental intangibility of the self. Autonomy is however not completely effaced, for Anbeek it forms a necessary although illusionary instrument, in Schuhmann's view it is important to take an engaged and a disengaged standpoint, to identify with a certain interpretation of the self but also to step aside to reflect on its limitations. A focus on relationality within the counselling sessions has taken over the focus on authenticity. The latter is not the sole interest of Anbeek and Schuhmann. They however still underline the uniqueness of every human being, not as a deeper self that must be excavated but as a value that awakens respect for every human being. What the effect of this shift in focus entails for the counselling sessions is not easily answered, it is however interesting to see this clear change of direction. It points towards a moral self that concentrates on the interpersonal instead of the deeper layers of the self itself. There is rather a strong attention for the relation between the existing and the effect of this relation than for the unknown depths of the human self.

### 4.3 Taylor's buffered and porous self

Let's turn to the third part of the research question. Charles Taylor has written extensively on the self and its relation to immanence and transcendence, his work can therefore not be neglected. The result of his cultural historical analyses on this matter is his concept of the buffered and porous self. To get a clearer understanding of the tension between immanence and transcendence in the notions of the self of Mooren, Jorna and Weil, especially with regard to their differences, it can be helpful to frame their notions with Taylor's concept. So in the following the three notions will be examined through a Taylorian magnifying glass. To be able to do that however, we will start with a short rendition of Taylor's line of thought.

As said in the introduction, Taylor traces in his books *Sources of the self* and *A secular age* respectively the origins of the modern day conceptualisations of the self and the origins of our modern day secular society (1989; 2007). He puts forward that both don't come out of nowhere but have (often unexpected) roots going back for centuries.<sup>8</sup> Our present day conceptualisation of the self is a continuation of former conceptualisations of the self as well as an unprecedented idea, arising as a reaction or answer to dilemmas in previous conceptualisations of the self. The same applies to the design of our secular society.

To outline the change of the self through time, Taylor introduces the concept of the buffered and porous self. In his analysis of the history of the self he namely observes a substantial difference between the sense of self roughly speaking before the 16th century and the sense of self in modern times. The former he names the porous self, the modern sense the buffered self (Taylor, 2007, p. 27; see also Taylor, 1989).

Taylor argues, in taking up Weber's concept of enchantment, that the world before the 16th century was an enchanted world. The self felt surrounded by a world of spirits and powers that had a strong influence on its being. The line between personal agency and external forces was fuzzy, the contrast between the inner and the outer world was not as self-evident as in modern times. Think for example of the fear of possession of the self by evil spirits, or the wish to be

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<sup>8</sup> Taylor for example argues that the modern secular self is not a new invention, but a development that can be traced back to inter alia the roman Christian emperor Augustine (Taylor, 1989). This discovery powers his argument that since the secular self arises out of Christianity, secularism is a development *within* Western Christianity. He thereby refutes the default presumption that secularism is a counter reaction against Christianity (Taylor, 2007).

entered by God or the Holy Spirit. The self was porous to external powers, hence Taylor's designation of this self as a porous self. It sensed a vulnerability towards forces of the cosmos and was a space that through them could be taken beyond itself.

From the 16th century onwards to our present time, Taylor sees a development in the sense of self that can best be characterized by a drawing of boundaries. A boundary or a buffer is created between inner and outer, between mind and nature and between mind and body. The self develops an inner space, an interiority that has the possibility of disengaging from everything outside the mind. The disengagement allows the human being to become a spectator, to take an freestanding stance to watch and reflect on inner and outer occurrences. The disengagement also diminishes the feeling of vulnerability towards the cosmos, the self closes for external powers and makes itself thereby free and independent of them. Along with this process, self-control, self-direction and self-reliance become an essential part of the vocabulary of modern identity. The outcome is a buffered self that has become the master of meanings, giving its autonomous order to life.

The change from the porous to the buffered self runs parallel with Taylor's analysis of the change from a religious to a secular society. As said, during the time of the porous self, the world was enchanted, radiated by divine presence. Through a number of developments, for example the replacement of a cosmos of spirits and forces by a mechanistic universe, the narrowing of our concept of time to linear clock time, the distancing of God in Deism, and the rise of the rational and disciplined buffered self, the world became disenchant<sup>9</sup>. For the first time in history a purely self-sufficient humanism became an option of choice next to a religious worldview. This exclusive humanism<sup>10</sup> didn't account for any external higher power, it was atheistic, placing the human being at the center of the world. In time, exclusive humanism became the new outlook of the world, the default option for the majority of people, thereby opening the possibility of a secular state.

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<sup>9</sup> There is no space in this thesis for a complete rendition of Taylor's argument, the interested reader I therefore have to refer to the book *A secular age* itself.

<sup>10</sup> What Taylor defines as exclusive humanism and the exclusive humanism of the Dutch Humanist Association are very similar and can consequently be understood as overlapping.

Exclusive humanism and the buffered self assign the autonomous power of reason as the crowning glory of our being. However, although a rational mind and self-direction are highly appreciated in our time, there is an unease felt about this positioning nowadays because it flattens our experience through a delimitation of the world outside our mind. Since it is precisely in the interpersonal space where our feelings flow, with our body as an important locus for intimacy, the disengaged stance of the buffered self distances us from each other, and, according to Taylor, prepares ourselves to surpass relationships altogether. The porous self was living socially, the buffered self is an individual self. Taylor allocates the lack of a strong purpose in life and the lack of meaning many people experience nowadays as a result of this relative invulnerability to anything beyond the rational human mind.

Consequently, there are reactions to the buffered self. People search for new experiences of what Taylor calls 'fullness'. Moments of richness in which life is fuller and deeper, more worthwhile and inspiring. Moments that deeply move us, that give us the feeling of peace and wholeness and that allow us to act on a generous and self-forgetful level. But also moments that are unsettling, that break through our ordinary sense of being in the world and bring us in a different state of consciousness (2007, p. 5). In short, people search for moments that breach the buffer of the buffered self and free them thereby from their enclosed existence.

In the former religious societies the concept of fullness was linked to the divine world. However, in the wake of exclusive humanism, many people nowadays don't accept final goals beyond human flourishing, no heaven after life or union with a divine being, so people search for new forms of fullness that are placed within this world in for example nature, art or in the deeper self.<sup>11</sup> Especially the latter option gained a lot of popularity in recent decades. At present we are encouraged to search for our authentic self, that is, our individual, unique way of expressing ourselves. Taylor calls this time the Age of Authenticity, illustrating his argument with sentences that do not sound unfamiliar to our ears: 'find yourself, realize yourself, release your true self, and so on' (Taylor, 2007, p. 475). 'Become who you are' is the core message in self help books, therapies and lifestyle magazines. Through finding our authentic self we restore the connection

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<sup>11</sup> The concept of 'horizontal transcendence' of Luce Irigaray that Harry Kunneman, Annemie Halsema and Tonja Van der Ende propose within Dutch humanism fits into this line of thought, as well as the work of Hans Alma on transcendence and art.

to our feelings, body and the surrounding world. In this sense authenticity combines both heteronomy and autonomy because we have to look for our unique self as opposed to following a model imposed from outside.

We can see in the above that the porous self is not simply followed by the buffered self as the better variant of a self but that there is a longing for qualities of the porous self that have been lost in the buffered self. The buffered self is cross-pressured. It feels unease with the flattened world and has the intuition that there is maybe more than it would credit for. To put it in other words: the buffered self is drawn between a vision of the self as immanent, as remaining within itself as the master of meanings, and a search for transcendence, for experiences that are beyond oneself as a rational and controlling agent. Taylor pleads for respect for these two pressures, we can't go back to the porous state and we cannot stay solely within the buffered self. He calls for a 'maximal demand' (2007, p. 640), meaning that we don't mutilate what is essential to our humanity but learn to appreciate the dialectical interplay between the buffered and the porous self, between our immanent and transcendent experiences.

In line with this plea, Taylor sketches the secular state as a context in which many options are possible, belief and unbelief, not as rival theories but as the palette we can choose from to understand our life in a certain way. In this pluralism on the spiritual plane we learn to take an engaged and a disengaged standpoint, namely the standpoint of our personal understanding of fullness and the standpoint of knowing that our understanding is one option among many.

#### **4.4 The notion of the self of Mooren, Jorna and Weil framed with reference to the buffered and porous self**

In the introduction to this thesis the question of the self was set in the debate between inclusive and exclusive humanism. Inclusive humanism, in including a religious or spiritual approach to life, opted for a self that had space for transcendence, a self that could be taken beyond itself. Exclusive humanism on the other hand stressed an anti-religious and a-religious approach to life, underlining an immanent self with a major role for autonomy and rationalism. Both worldviews are represented in the Dutch Humanist Association, however tilted to a preference for exclusive humanism.

If we compare this history of the Dutch Humanist Association to Taylor's analysis of the present modern situation, we can discern some noticeable parallels. The process of disenchantment in the Netherlands with in its wake the decline of institutionalized religion, opened the possibility of the founding of the Dutch Humanist Association. Humanism became an option of choice next to a religious worldview. In the beginning founder Van Praag as a proponent of inclusive humanism kept the door open to a wider cosmos,<sup>12</sup> through time however the emphasis shifted to exclusive humanism, to a self-sufficient humanism in which the human being was placed at the center of the world. The self as a rational agent that valued self-control, self-direction and self-reliance took the foreground, a buffered self that considered itself the master of meanings. However, in line with the widespread unease felt with the buffered self, this anthropocentrism of the Dutch Humanist Association has strongly been criticized in the last decade.<sup>13</sup> In different degrees, as I will outline below, the theories of humanist counselling of Mooren and Jorna can also be added to this criticism.

Mooren, Jorna and Weil develop their notions of the self on the basis of the modern situation as outlined by Taylor. They work with the givenness of the buffered self as their theories on introspection, self-realization, authenticity et cetera demonstrate. Their premise is a self that has an interiority, delimited from the outer world, allowing the possibility of autonomy and self-reflection. There is however a tension discernible between the goals of humanist counselling and the buffered self. In the second chapter we saw that Mooren and Jorna (and also Van Praag) delineated the support of a client's search for meaning as a basic principle in humanist counselling. Taylor allocates the lack of meaning many people experience nowadays as a result of the buffer of the buffered self, inducing an invulnerability that prevents the self from being touched by the surrounding world. This invulnerability leaves human life with emptiness, with nothing worthwhile to dedicate ourselves to or that can inspire us. In his concept of fullness Taylor points to the fact that some sort of transcendence, some sort of breaking through the buffer, is needed for the experience of meaningfulness. Humanists counsellors can therefore

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<sup>12</sup> See the first statement of principles of the Dutch Humanist Association that speaks of 'the human being as a unique part of the cosmic whole'. In 1973 this reference to the cosmos has been deleted (Van IJssel, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> See for example Suransky and Manschot in 'From a human-centered to a life-centered humanism' (2014), Ten Kate in 'Heiligheid, over de complexe relatie tussen humanisme en christendom' (2005) and Schuhmann in 'Counselling in a complex world: advancing relational well being' (2015).

never support a radical version of the buffered self, they always need a pinch of porosity to attain their goal. Possibly referencing to this is Van IJssel's observation that in the history of the Dutch Humanist Association, humanist counsellors have always kept a bit aloof from the development towards exclusive humanism, they inclined towards inclusive humanism in for example the mentioned affiliation to mysticism (Van IJssel, 2007).

So in the notions of the self Mooren and Jorna we can also discern an overcoming of the limitations of the buffered self. They make way for some sort of transcendence, although there is a clear difference between the degree of porosity between the two notions. Mooren's notion of the self is more close to the buffered self. He concentrates on the self itself, on a strengthening of the self and its autonomy. In his move however towards authenticity we can see an attempt to break through a too tight enclosure of the self. He characterizes authenticity as living of our innermost values, the latter defined in following Taylor as transcending the individual. We have to admit that this is a pale rendition of fullness compared to the fullness Taylor describes, namely moments that we are deeply moved, that are unsettling and break through our ordinary sense of being in the world. Mooren stays close to a buffered interpretation of the self, shifting slightly (although, if one compares his earlier to his later works, the shift becomes bigger) towards an interpretation that leaves room for transcendence.

Jorna on the other hand develops a notion that is almost tangent to mysticism in a self that wants to get off of itself. His notion is a transcendent notion, we should however be careful with equating it with the former porous self since there is a tremendous difference in the experience of the porous self before the 16th century and the current experience of transcendence. As said, Jorna assumes the buffered self and the qualities it offers, but he uses these qualities like for example self-reflection and autonomy to breach through the buffer of the buffered self and develop a modern porous self.

The notion of the self of Weil shows a similar gesture as Jorna but in a more extreme manner. She breaks completely with the goals of flourishing in her own case (people that know her biography will remember the complete negligence of her body, leading eventually to her death) to reach the point of extinction of the self. According to Taylor, this is a typical understanding of fullness of believers as coming to them, as something they receive. In order to receive it however, they have to transform their enclosed selves towards an open self, bring their self 'out

of self' (Taylor, 2007, p. 8). Weil gives her self completely out of hand so that God can take its place. Qualities of the porous self are drawn into the reality of the buffered self, causing a (temporary) abolition of the latter. Weil thereby searches for almost the opposite of the buffered self in her extensive destruction of rationality and autonomy.

In Mooren, Jorna as well as Weil we see an overcoming of the enclosure of the buffered self through an entering of inner depths. Fullness is sought by means of introspection. Mooren and Jorna follow thereby the widespread secular articulation of fullness as a search for authenticity. Their conceptualisation of fullness makes no reference to a divine power, although Jorna's moves in the direction of a higher power in his conceptualisation of the undercurrent of life that carries the human being. For Weil, fullness is sought through a unification with the divine. The true self is reached when God lives in the human being.

In the above we can see that Mooren, Jorna and Weil are constantly moving in between the tension field of immanence and transcendence. They experience the buffered self as falling short and are longing for qualities of the porous self. We concluded the previous paragraph with this characterisation of the modern self as fundamentally drawn between these two movements. A tension that has become pressing in our individualized society with the loss of the greater whole. We are not automatically accommodated anymore in grand narratives that frame our lives but have to personally formulate answers to the happening world. The secular age is distinguished by a self-affirming self, but at the same time the experience of the unsustainability of this immanent answer that is felt in a loss of vulnerability, of being seized by the greatness of life, of moments in which the self is freed from itself. The buffered self endangers us with egoism, with a negligence of relationships, and therefore points towards the importance of taking the transcendence again into account. So the modern self searches or should search for an engagement of these two forces of immanence and transcendence in a fundamental manner. If we transfer this line of thought to the practice of humanist counselling, we come to the conclusion that Mooren and Jorna concentrate on two different experiences of the modern self. Both theories represent namely its cross-pressure whereby Mooren skews to immanence and Jorna towards transcendence. But in following only one line of thought a part of the modern self's existential condition is neglected. So humanist counselling should allow both theories to exist alongside each other and benefit from the tension between the two. We should respect the

achievements of the buffered self, our independent self-reflective self, and surpass its limitations by surrendering to life that transcends the self. The modern situation asks for a constant movement between the two, between disengagement and engagement, between closure and openness.

#### **4.5 The commotion of our human life: immanence as transcendence**

In this paragraph I would like to take Taylor's conclusion of the modern self drawn between immanence and transcendence a step further by applying it to the notions of the self of Mooren, Jorna and Weil from another angle. In the analysis of these notions we have repeatedly observed a twoness: all three notions for example displayed a disunity and a longing for unity, a present self and a desired self, the possibility of becoming more oneself or of losing oneself, a narrator and a listener. In self-reflection or self-clarification the self stepped aside of itself, and in the words *I* and *me* this twoness was also revealed. If we look at these examples we can see that there are continually two poles created, one of immanence and one of transcendence. There is a self identified with and at the same time a self that is beyond this positioning. The desired self for example transcends the self of the present moment and in self-reflection we look at ourselves as another. The self is, paradoxically, our most intimate being and thereby close and within reach, but at the same time also elusive and the most unknown. If I say *I*, I imply simultaneously an *other*, or differently said: if I say *I*, I become at the same time an *other* for myself.

A radical interpretation of this movement between immanence and transcendence is demonstrated in a quote by Martin Buber (1996, p. 2) given in the opening of this thesis. The complete quote is as follows:

‘The commotion of our human life, which lets in everything, all the light and all the music, all the mad pranks of thought and all the variations of pain, the fullness of memory and the fullness of expectation, is closed only to *one* thing: unity. Every gaze is secretly crowded with a thousand blinking glances that do not want to be its siblings; every pure, beautiful astonishment is confused by a thousand memories; and even the quietest suffering is mixed with the hissing of a thousand questions. This commotion is sumptuous and stingy, it heaps up abundance and refuses encompassment; it builds a vortex of objects and a vortex of feelings, from whirl-whall to whirl-wall, things flying at

each other and over each other, and let us pass through, all the length of this way of ours, without unity. The commotion lets me have things and the ideas that go with them, only not unity of world or of I: it is all the same. I, the world, we - no, I the world am what is moved out of reach, what cannot be grasped, what cannot be experienced. I give the bundle a subject and say "I" to it, but the subject is not a unity that is experienced. Name and subject belong to the commotion, and mine is the hand that reaches out - into empty space.'

Buber describes our very existence as a constant multiplicity. Life is a space of commotion, a continual moving together, alongside, against each other. As an *I* we are part of this movement, annihilated in its differentiation. Within the whirl-wall we try to bring unity to the commotion. We try to grab its movements and for moments it lets me have things and ideas that go with them. We try to grab ourselves and for moments it lets me have myself. But then everything is moved out of reach again. Our self is a timely clang and our hand reaches into empty space. We try to enclose the world to one thing, to settled systems, and we try to enclose ourselves to unified subjects, but our attempts are unceasingly disrupted.

The self is a constant reaching, a constant longing. Within the twoness, there is always the other to which we turn. The astonishing fact however is that exactly in this stretch life is experienced. Precisely by virtue of the difference, of the tension between the several poles, a space opens up in which the self becomes conscious of itself. In the movement between actualisation and potentiation, between being and becoming, the self becomes manifest. We could notice that in the notions of the self of Mooren, Jorna and Weil in their understanding that by introspection, by creating a span between *I* and *me*, our self becomes transparent. Not the unity but the dynamic movement is the core of the self. Not in static positioning but in 'relating to' the self becomes present. In this sense the self is not a noun but a verb.

So in sum, exactly in the space that is opened between immanence and transcendence the self comes forward. We become consciousness of who we are in humanist counselling and beyond through the intertwining of these two. The self experiences itself in relation, in the constant movement between immanence as transcendence.

## CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSIONS: A BRIEF SUMMARY

This chapter forms the answer to the research question ‘What notions of the self are developed in the theories of humanist counselling of Jan Hein Mooren and Ton Jorna, how do these notions relate to the mystical notion of the self of Simone Weil and how are these three notions framed if interpreted with reference to Charles Taylor’s buffered and porous self?’. The chapter concludes with recommendations for further research.

### 5.1 Conclusion

The main concern of this thesis was to understand the humanist notion of the self of Jan Hein Mooren and Ton Jorna and position this notion in the continuous debate on the relationship of humanism to immanence and transcendence. To reach this goal, the transcendent mystical notion of the self of Simone Weil was taken as a point of comparison. Furthermore, to get a deeper understanding of the tension between immanence and transcendence with regard to the self, the three notions were framed through Charles Taylor’s concept of the buffered and porous self. In responding to the first part of the research question, Mooren and Jorna present their notions of the self as:

- a self that has to work on itself to become itself, it strives for authenticity
- authenticity is for Mooren a self that lives from its innermost values
- authenticity is for Jorna a self that is decentered, leading towards an alignment with the cosmos
- the process towards authenticity is characterized by introspection, this means for Mooren an inquiry of one's values, for Jorna a letting go of the I-perspective
- Mooren focuses on a strengthening of the self, self-direction and autonomy are important qualities to attain, his notion is thereby predominantly immanent
- Jorna focuses on an abnegation of the self, he works towards an inter- and transpersonal state of being, his notion is thereby predominantly transcendent

In answering the second part of the research question, the mystical notion of Simone Weil is related to the notion of the self of Mooren and Jorna as follows:

- the three notions share the focus on a self that has to work on itself to become itself
- they also share the process towards this end as introspection
- Weil works towards an abnegation of the self so the divine can take over, the transcendent reality descends into the immanent existence
- Jorna's transcendent notion comes close to Weil's transcendent notion, Mooren's immanent notion is very different
- we could describe Jorna's notion as a secularized mystical notion since the major difference between the two is Weil's Christian vocabulary

In answering the third part of the research question, the notions of the self of Mooren, Jorna and Weil are framed in the following manner if interpreted with reference to Taylor's buffered and porous self:

- Taylor argues that our current self is a buffered self, it is characterized by a disengaged stance towards the world that allows us to be rational and autonomous but also makes us invulnerable to our surroundings. The buffered self is an immanent self
- to escape the shallow experiencing of the buffered self, people search for moments of fullness in which the buffer is breached. A porosity is aspired in which the transcendent is taken into account. Exactly a surpassing of the self's enclosed existence proves to grant an experience of meaningfulness
- the tension between immanence and transcendence is therefore a typical feature of the modern self, the modern self strives for an engagement of immanence and transcendence in a fundamental manner
- Mooren's immanent notion of the self comes close to the buffered self
- Jorna's and Weil's transcendent notions of the self come close to the porous self
- we should respect the three different notions of the self instead of choosing one since they present two crucial experiences of the modern self's situation

A more radical interpretation of Taylor's conclusion of the engagement of immanence and transcendence, applied to processes within the notions of the self of Mooren, Jorna and Weil, reveals:

- that we can discern a constant interplay between immanence and transcendence, between a dwelling in and a surpassing of the self within their notions of the self
- if we say *I*, we also immediately imply an *other* that is differentiated from us, that transcends us, within ourselves as *myself*, and beyond ourselves as the surrounding world. Immanence and transcendence appear to be intrinsically intertwined, the one cannot exist without the other
- not in immanence or in transcendence the self must be sought, but in the dynamic movement between immanence and transcendence the self reveals itself, precisely in their interplay the self becomes transparent
- the self is thus not an entity, a static position or a unity, but a dynamic movement that is longing and relating. We must speak of transcendence *as* immanence, of the self between closure and openness

## **5.2 Recommendations for further research**

Within the scope of this thesis there was time for getting a grip on the humanist notions of the self and their positioning towards immanence and transcendence. There was however no space for a practical elaboration of this thesis' conclusion for the practice of humanist counselling. Further research could therefore concentrate on how the approach to the self as dynamic affects the current method of humanist counsellors, it could zoom in on the interplay between immanence and transcendence or study what theory of humanist counselling would originate from this approach. We could already see that the successors of Mooren and Jorna, Christa Anbeek and Carmen Schuhmann, already came a step closer to the conclusion of this thesis in their shift to the relational self. An addition of this thesis' conclusion to their notions would however be that the self comes forward in the dynamic of the relation. Anbeek and Schuhmann define the self still as an entity that is either an illusion or a construct instead of the understanding that exactly *within* the movement of the illusion or construct the self reveals itself.

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