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Eric O. Springsted, "Simone Weil for the Twenty-First Century"

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Eric O. Springsted, *Simone Weil for the Twenty-First Century*. University of Notre Dame Press 2021. 288 pp. \$100.00 (Hardback ISBN 9780268200213); \$35.00 (Paperback ISBN: 9780268200220)

Eric O. Springsted's book *Simone Weil for the Twenty-First Century* is a thematically connected collection of essays divided into two parts: one focusing on Weil's philosophical and theological thought and the other on her social and political thought. Weil's notion of attention is a continuing and uniting theme throughout the book, and especially in Part 1. For Weil, attention involves love, and Springsted builds an understanding of this through the chapters.

Simone Weil was a philosopher, activist, and mystic who lived in the early half of the twentieth century. However, *Simone Weil for the Twenty-First Century*, as its author makes clear, is not an introduction to her thought or life. Instead, Springsted presents Weil as, 'something like a polestar to help orient our thinking in a time when the spiritual, moral, and intellectual world has become, in Charles Taylor's word, 'flattened' (vii). Flatness, for Springsted, means that life is without intellectual depth and spiritual dimension, and he thinks this is characteristic of modern life. He elaborates: 'There is no mystery that challenges us to think deeper.... Thinking is overly literal; there is not the fine sense of analogy that Weil had. There is no soul.... There is an obsession with the self, but no inner life and no attempt by philosophy to see philosophy as a matter of working on oneself' (ix). Springsted thinks Weil challenges all this and, in doing so, is of great help to us now.

Chapter 1 focuses on what it means to live a thoughtful life with depth and the role of attention in this. Springsted notes that in Weil's earlier thought philosophy involved employing will and discipline to remake oneself closer to an ideal. Nonetheless, in her last years, attention is emphasized over will, and the idea is to work on oneself and be remade through attention. Springsted states that attention here 'is a way of being formed that depends on being revealed to' (10). In the following chapter, Springsted adds that Weil was led to this view after a mystical experience. This experience convinced her that 'there is at the centre of the world, in a very positive sense, a mystery' (17). A genuine mystery, as opposed to a problem that could be solved but currently is not, cannot be resolved through intellect, but it can be given attention. Moreover, as noted above, attention for Weil involves love. Attention directed at genuine mystery, for Springsted and Weil, enables an encounter with reality that leads to depth. The importance of mystery and how attention to mystery offers depth to life is a key theme and one of the most interesting aspects of this collection.

In Chapter 3, Springsted supports a Christian theological view: 'What above all marks the divine for the human, as Weil presents it, is that the divine does not ceaselessly expand and dominate. It does not give life that way. Rather it allows another to come into being by withdrawing. But this withdrawal is not a matter of avoidance; it is a suffering of the existence of the other' (47). Interestingly, this is also what attention to another person involves for Weil: a suspension of one's concerns, and, in that sense, a withdrawal from oneself so that one can more fully attend to another person. In this way, attention is loving, and because it involves withdrawing self-centred concern, it is ethical, too. Springsted affirms: 'Attention has the flavour of altruism to it, or, better put, a sense of self-sacrifice, of kenosis, the self-emptying that allows another sufficient room in which to exist.



This moral sense is crucial to it' (56). In the subsequent section, Springsted distinguishes intellect and love. He notes that, for Weil, intelligence must be free to question and doubt. He rightly asserts: 'One can only assent within the limits of what one conceives' (64). Furthermore, for this, the intellect must be free to investigate.

Next, Springsted speaks to the influence of Plato and Augustine on Weil's thinking. The issue is the love of wisdom, notes Springsted (78). In apparent agreement with Weil, he says that this involves not constructing a system of thought but reorienting one's attention towards the good, which is a matter of cultivating attention. For Weil, says Springsted, attention is 'the core of Plato's mystical thought' (78). Springsted continues the discussion of this 'inward turn' of attention in the following chapter. He states that an inner life is not a 'dreamy inward gazing, nor passivity, nor even the search for a hidden true self. It is a life of transformation. To ascend from the cave is to be educated, and to be educated means more than just learning things. It is an education of desire that reorients human lives' (86). Weil calls this education an 'apprenticeship.'

Part 2 of the book focuses on Weil's social and political thought and her late writing *The Need for Roots*. To start, Springsted discusses Weil's critique of the 'personalism of Jacques Maritain ... one of the preeminent Christian thinkers of the twentieth century' (122-3). Maritain upheld that rights are more fundamental and significant than moral obligations. However, for Weil, this is deeply wrong. She argues that obligations precede rights, which, she thinks, emphasize oneself compared to obligations that emphasize our duties towards others. Springsted elaborates: 'rights, which are linked to the concept of a person, are always asserted in a tone of contention, and even inhibit movements of genuine charity' (130).

Chapter 9 continues the theme of how values are flattened in contemporary society. This is explored in connection with the American philosopher Michael Sandel and the idea that values are often reduced to a common denominator of price in modern economics and society. Taking all values similarly and as akin to price flattens values. What is needed to unflatten values, Springsted affirms, is to use words such as 'God, truth, and justice' differently. Springsted explains: 'as Weil suggests, these are words that are matters of intimacy and need the language of the nuptial chamber. But what does that mean? It means that in using them we recognize the deep, inescapably personal involvement we have with what we are talking about when we do use them.... This is the language of conscience and the language of love and commitment' (142).

In Chapter 12, Springsted observes that the past, for Weil, is a 'storehouse of all our spiritual treasure' (183). Furthermore, this 'spiritual treasure' is a revelation that can manifest through specific cultures. Springsted states that this idea, while asserted by Weil, is not fully developed and in this chapter, he aims to explain it further. He notes that, for Weil, this should lead to a further appreciation of other cultures, the history of our own cultures and what is hidden and yet available within them. As with other parts of the book, the focus is on elucidation rather than critique of Weil. Indeed, critique is directed more so to modern culture. For instance, in this chapter, Springsted describes distraction as the 'central enemy' of attention and that our ability to pay attention is deteriorating in contemporary society with its 'incessant watching of computer and phone screens' (191).

In the final chapter, Springsted discusses moral clarity in war. Weil lived in times of war, and

this chapter examines her thinking about war, violence, and force in her influential essay ‘The *Iliad*: Poem of Force.’ Springsted states that the issue here, for Weil, is about maintaining clear reflection and a moral centre through the forces and effects of war. Weil turns to Homer’s *Iliad* for insight. Homer, in the *Iliad*, according to Weil, shows no favouritism and, importantly, a moral clarity and compassion that offers a way of keeping one’s soul in times of war.

In the book’s conclusion, Springsted returns to the notion of flatness and how, for Weil, ‘... the values by which we live our lives are not all on a level’ (225). There are what he calls ‘base values,’ such as egotism and pleasure; values of a ‘middle realm,’ such as democracy and rights, which involve restricting our base desires; and higher values, such as ‘*God, truth, justice, love and good*’ (226). The latter are to be objects of attentive love. According to Springsted and Weil, doing so is necessary to reorient desire and live a life of worth and depth. The essays in Part 1 are a more closely fitted sequence than those in Part 2. Nonetheless, there is a balance between the two parts in how they approach Weil’s thought. Springsted perceptively elaborates upon Weil’s notion of attention and how this is integral to cultivating oneself, seeing depth in life, and living well. All in all, this is a striking and insightful collection.

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