

Eric O. Springsted, ed. *Simone Weil: Late Philosophical Writings*. Trans. Eric O. Springsted and Lawrence E. Schmidt. University of Notre Dame Press 2015. 216 pp. \$20.00 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780268041502).

This is an excellent collection of ten philosophical writings from Simone Weil's last years, compiled by the distinguished Weil scholar Eric O. Springsted. All but one of the essays date from 1940-42 while she was in Marseille. 'What is Sacred in Every Human Being,' or 'Human Personality' in its earlier English translation, dates from 1943 when she resided in London and was attempting to return to France to better serve the war effort there.

Springsted's Introduction focusses on Weil's view of philosophy. This is quite helpful, in part because this is a subject matter of some of the essays, but also because this clarifies the view that guides her approach in these writings. Springsted also provides brief but elucidating introductions to each essay.

Weil distinguishes two general approaches to philosophy. She states, in the third essay, that one deals 'with an idea in mind, not in asking if it is true or false, but what it means, [and that this] is the same as Socrates' method' (42). Additionally, Weil thinks that when we press our thoughts towards questions of truth or reality, we ultimately encounter paradoxes or contradictions. The proper approach is to contemplate these. She elaborates: 'The proper method of philosophy consists in clearly conceiving the insoluble problems in all their insolubility and then in simply contemplating them, fixedly and tirelessly, year after year, without any hope, patiently waiting' (4). The improper method of philosophy, in contrast, involves constructing systems in order to dispel contradictions and determine answers to everything. Springsted provides a reason why, for Weil, philosophy cannot find ultimate answers or 'smooth away difficulties': 'insofar as she has an eye on the transcendent, and on the search for God, it is clear that she thinks that doing philosophy like that is inadequate to its object' (4).

In the first essay she attempts to define a concept which, she says, 'has not yet found a suitable name, but for which the name "reading" may be the best one' (21). Sensations can seize us, she notes, such as upon being punched in the stomach or burned. But meanings, such as drawn from marks on paper, can seize us 'in the same way as the stronger sensations' (22). Such can happen upon reading fateful news in a letter. Meanings are not just read in letters though; for Weil, we read meanings in the world around us. These meanings, 'arise from every corner around me, taking possession of my soul and shaping it from one moment to the next' (25). Affecting someone, she continues, involves 'transforming meanings... War, politics, eloquence, art, teaching, all action on others essentially consists in changing what they read' (26).

In the second essay, 'Some Reflections on the Concept of Value,' she further describes philosophy: 'All reflection bearing on the notion of value and on the hierarchy of values is philosophical; all efforts of thought bearing on anything other than value are, if one examines them closely, foreign to philosophy' (30). For Weil, a concern for value is a concern for what is good, and thus, philosophy involves reflection on the good. The good, or value, is ultimately unknowable, she thinks, but also unavoidable: 'We always live life in a directed way, which is the playing out of value'. Thus, she observes, 'at the center of human life is a contradiction' (12). Furthermore, she contends that

philosophical reflection, and its inquiry into values, require a detachment from values. This detached reflection should lead to 'establishing an order in the hierarchy of values, thus gaining a new orientation of the soul' (33). Detachment thus makes a practice of philosophy that can transform the soul.

The fourth reading, 'God in Plato,' is the longest and was not intended as an essay. It has, Springsted notes, 'a fragmentary aspect and does not seem to have been written continuously' (45). It is largely a series of translated passages from Plato with commentary, together with comments on Greek thinking more generally. As such, it is better read as a series of thematically connected comments without expectations of a closely-knit structure. Key themes include the good, or equivalently God for Weil, as well as what she calls the 'great beast,' the force of social morality that steers us away from the good and thus from God. In Weil's reading, the 'ideal city' in the *Republic* is not intended as an ideal social structure. Society is not a means to the realization of the good, but a hazard, and in this regard it is held to be 'essentially evil, and that the reform or transformation of society cannot have any other reasonable object than making it as little evil as possible' (57). In her view, Plato understood this and intended the ideal city to be 'purely symbolic' of the order of the soul, and that this is 'frequently misunderstood' (57).

The sixth reading, 'What is Sacred in Every Human Being?,' raises a question which she answers thus: 'There is at the bottom of every human heart something that goes on expecting, from infancy to the grave, that good and not evil will be done to us, despite the experience of crimes committed, suffered, and observed. This above all else is what is sacred in every human being' (105). What is sacred is not personality, or a substance or soul in this sense, but an expectation or desire for good. She connects this to a discussion of rights versus obligations. The assertion of rights, she says, does not come from a place that is sacred: 'The little boy who jealously watches to see if his brother has a piece of cake slightly bigger than his gives into a motive that comes from a much more superficial part of the soul' (105). The assertion of rights is an assertion of ego, or personality, which is not sacred. The cry for justice or goodness, in contrast, is an expression of the desire for good, and is sacred. It is deep-seated, often silent, and comes from an impersonal part of the soul. Thus, for Weil, each human being is made up of the personal, which is ego or personality, and the impersonal, which alone is sacred.

Also in this essay, Weil notes that we lack a concept for certain words we use. We thus use such words to express the inconceivable: 'God and truth are such words. So, too, are justice, love, and the good' (127). She certainly does not avoid speaking of God, or love, etc., in these essays. But here she conveys that she does not have a clear conception of what these words mean. Philosophy involves the contemplation of the realities betokened by these terms but, in her view, does not involve coming to a clear understanding of them. This is a temptation and test, says Weil: 'It is dangerous to use such words. Their usage is a trial' (127).

In the seventh essay, 'The First Condition for the Work of a Free Person,' she notes that human nature desires a finality or good that is more than just its own continued existence. Thus, if a worker is only able to sustain himself and no more, then this natural desire will be unfilled and deep discouragement will result. Weil makes a further case that beauty, and specifically poetry, can help meet this natural desire. In this respect it can be said that the worker needs poetry just as he needs bread. This kind of sustaining poetry is religion, she says, and its source is God.

The eighth and ninth essays discuss literature and its responsibilities. In the eighth, she notes that fiction can distract us from what is real and lead us to what is unreal, and in doing so it ‘steals all value from the good.’ But there are writers of genius, who ‘Under the form of fiction ... give us something in writing that is equivalent to the depth of reality’ (147). This kind of writing redeems fiction, and can place us in a closer relationship to reality. Thus, she determines that writers of fiction must be geniuses. In the ninth essay, she notes that writers in the first part of twentieth century, most specifically surrealists, expressed an absence of value in the world, or indifference to any real value. This is to abandon the good and, for Weil, this is wrong. Writers are supposed to give expression to human life, she says, and nothing is as essential to it as the orientation towards the good. ‘When literature becomes deliberately indifferent to the opposition of good and evil, it betrays its function and has no pretense to excellence’ (154). Therefore, writing must express value and not abandon it.

The last essay is long, somewhat laborious, unfinished, and to all appearances, less connected to the concerns and themes of the other essays. It contains a critique of modern science, specifically quantum theory that to a scientist may lack in sophistication; as Springsted notes, it ‘would not disturb physicists’ (155). But the burden of the essay is to relate modern science ‘to Greek thought, which was of paramount importance to her’ (155), and thereby provide a context from which to appraise developments in science. Overall, this collection has significant value. It is a wonderful presentation of Weil’s incisive, challenging, and heartfelt writing and contributions to philosophy from her last years.

Cyrus Panjvani, MacEwan University