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- Between the Human and the Divine: The Political Thought of Simone Weil by Mary G. Dietz
- Simone Weil: "The Just Balance." by Peter Winch
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soaring to the top of the human/philosophical proscenium where one views dancing through the long-range lens of world history and world consciousness.

This review cannot convey the kind of experience that may be had in reading *Off the Ground*. Its richness of information and reflection can only be suggested here. The book is certainly intended to engage specialists in dance, the arts, and aesthetics, but its potential audience is non-exclusive, including all excepting perhaps those who have never danced either in body or in spirit.

GERALD E. MYERS

Queen College and Graduate Center,
The City University of New York


In different ways, these two fine books make clear the relevance of Simone Weil to the concerns of philosophy in the English-speaking world. They are among the finest of the few books in English devoted to an analysis of Weil's thought as distinct from her extraordinary life. No doubt one factor in this absence of serious academic concern is the daunting range of concerns on which Weil wrote—politics, ethics, ancient civilizations, science and mathematics, religion. Another factor is certainly Weil's very non-academic mode of life.

Peter Winch's book is a welcome product of years of deep reflection on Weil's work. Winch is particularly forthcoming about the kind of philosophic treatment he is giving Weil, and what he sees as the philosophic importance of her work. He deals with some issues in Weil which connect with familiar concerns of Anglo-American philosophy—concept formation, the nature of desire and its relation to the good, justice. He finds parallels between Weil and Wittgenstein. For example, Winch points to the way that Weil's discussion of many important notions is rooted in what she takes to be very basic features of human life and experience. Winch sees this approach as akin to Wittgenstein's characterization of his own procedure as offering "remarks on the natural history of mankind." An example Winch discusses is the primitive reaction of hesitation in the face of another human being—hesitation to pursue some project which would harm or impinge on this person. Weil, Winch argues, sees this hesitation as fundamental to our understanding of certain concepts related to human beings, such as that of "respect". If we were not capable of that hesitation we would not be able to understand the concept of respecting another human being.

More generally, Winch sees Weil as concerned with how our thought and concepts grow out of our nature as active beings. He usefully traces connections between this concern and Weil's model of freedom as activity in accordance with individual judgment, which lies at the heart of her political views in her early important essay, "Reflections on the Causes of Liberty and Oppression." At the same time Winch is critical of Weil's too-exclusive focus on the individual in the face of nature (leaving out the realm of the social) in this essay as well as in her earlier writings on epistemology.

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Winch has interesting and often deep things to say about many issues in Weil's thought—justice (where Weil's Greek/Christian notion is contrasted with Rawls'), beauty, the contradiction in Weil's early work between her concern for dignity (especially of the manual worker) and her lack of any developed conception of the "social", science (its necessary rootedness in human interests and life), power and force, necessity and the good, geometry, and treating persons as things.

Winch recognizes some degree of perversity in his determination (until the final chapter) to find as much secular insight as he can in Weil, even where her thoughts are expressed in deeply religious terms. This determination stems from Winch's desire to treat Weil very much as a philosopher and (as he understands it) thus to make her thought as accessible and perhaps acceptable to those who find the specifically religious dimension of her thought unsupportable or even repugnant. At the same time Winch gives an interesting reading of Weil's sense of the supernatural in his last chapter, in its involving a way of looking at earthly things. In general Winch resists the strong dualistic streak in Weil's writings, as seen, for example, in the idea that everything in nature (including humans' nature) is subject to a single all-embracing necessity (counterposed to a purely divine goodness).

Mary Dietz's book is strikingly different from Winch's. Seldom in Winch's book does one get an overall sense of what a particular piece of Weil's writing is actually about. The strength of Dietz's book by contrast, is that it provides one with a comprehensive overview of Weil's social and political thought, from her early writings through The Need for Roots. The book is organized primarily around specific writings, and Dietz's discussion of these writings is invariably intelligent, clarifying, and insightful. It is a major accomplishment to have synthesized such a wide range of writings (even though there are many topics in Weil which are outside Dietz's purview) and brought them together as clearly as Dietz has done.

Dietz sees two threads running through Weil's writings. One is the tension between individual autonomy and communal or collective belonging. Weil is pulled in both directions at the same time, though (as Winch also notes) the early "Reflections" leans much more strongly toward an individualistically-defined conception of autonomy, while in her last work, The Need for Roots, the value of belonging or rootedness in a collectivity with a rich tradition is highlighted.

The second tension Dietz explores is between worldliness and otherworldliness. Dietz rightly sees Weil (especially in her later writings) as struggling to integrate the political and the spiritual. This perspective is an antidote to a formerly common view of Weil's as having forsaken politics for religion or spirituality in the late 1930's. Dietz argues convincingly that political interests broadly construed inform even the most otherworldly of Weil's later writings. In general, Dietz, like Winch, sees a greater continuity in Weil's writings from the pre-religious to the religious period than is commonly supposed.

While the framework of the two tensions in Weil's thought gives structure to Dietz's account, she does not artificially constrain her discussions of particular works to fit into that framework. Her discussions of "attention" and of patriotism are particularly fine. She places the former in the context of contemporary debate about the roles of reason and emotion in moral understanding. She finds that attention is neither of these, that it is a receptive state which must be unselfconscious, yet is very difficult to attain. But it is the only true way of knowing a reality outside of ourselves, such as the reality of another individual person. The discussion of
patriotism in Weil’s *Need for Roots* is especially rich, and brings Weil’s account into connection with contemporary issues of communitarianism.

LAWRENCE BLUM
*University of Massachusetts, Boston*