In time, great but edgy thinkers can be absorbed into the mainstream. Their thinking becomes familiar, read no longer as a whole or as intimate and challenging as it once was, but in representative ideas. It appears that the challenging and difficult Simone Weil has come to this point eighty years after her death. Robert Zaretsky has now given us Simone Weil in five ideas. Whether they are subversive of the way we think, or Weil has been subverted into the way we think, is the question.

As far as representative ideas go, Zaretsky has chosen well. The five ideas or concepts he treats have surfaced as Weil’s most representative and important. Ultimately, Zaretsky thinks that they all point to a key ideal for Weil, namely, that we have an obligation to other human beings, and that this is a crucial idea for our time. He goes through each of these ideas in a disjunctive style that moves from biographical anecdotes, to other historical figures, to a light examination of her actual writing. While he does, in the final chapter, examine her religious thinking, in treating each of the other four ideas he generally avoids it and deals with them as secular ethical and social issues.

The first idea is affliction (malheur), which Weil discovered in the year that she did piece work in three Paris factories. It is something other than simple suffering, even extreme suffering, for in it all reason for life disappears. The afflicted are walking and breathing shells, with no one home inside any more. This is what force can do to us, Weil discovered, and she knew that her times were particularly good at creating the condition. Zaretsky voices concerns over what seems to be her obsession with it, and thinks that it truly becomes puzzling when God is introduced. For Weil, though, it defeated meaning only when there was no thought of God. Thus Zaretsky turns her suggestion that affliction has a use on its head. Weil claims we naturally recoil from affliction and cannot think it; it is only outside nature that it can have a use. Zaretsky, though, thinks it can teach us wisdom, although Weil says it is not a divine educational method.

Second, Zaretsky takes on Weil’s notion of attention, which has borne much fruit in social and ethical philosophy. Attention is more than concentration. It is a voiding of the self so that another can fully occupy one’s mind. It is, therefore, given our striving for survival and control, a sort of miracle for her. While Zaretsky does observe the patient waiting on another that constitutes attention, in the end he drifts and treats it as a matter of willed empathy, and finally, in a lengthy discussion of the folks who occupy our busiest intersections with signs and their hands out, it becomes simply noticing. Which is a good idea, and we need to do more of that. But it is not Weil’s attention.

The third item is neither an idea nor a concept, but a principle of life for Weil. She was engaged, and she resisted. This is a largely biographical
chapter, detailing her early involvement in workers’ movements, her involvement in the Spanish Civil War, and her activities in the Resistance and the Free French in the Second World War. This is offset with looks at other thinkers who also resisted, such as George Orwell and Albert Camus. Fourth, Zaretsky deals with Weil’s last work, The Need for Roots. He begins by unpacking the notion of rootedness with her trenchant critiques of colonialism. A people cut off from their history and tradition and forcibly made to absorb another become uprooted. But that is not the only way this happens, and it was not what happened in the case of France, whose lack of roots made the nation fall so easily in 1940. A people need to be rooted, she argued, sometimes paradoxically given her lifelong resistance to the state. In this Zaretsky sees a newfound patriotism and insistence on a stable society that recalls Burke and Herder. There may be some of this in Weil, but what Zaretsky fails to grasp in her notion of rootedness is that for her, being rooted has far less to do with a place and its soil, and more with having roots in a tradition allowing us to take nourishment from the eternal, an original revelation. Place is not all that important; where we ultimately get our nourishment from is the sun, which is the same everywhere—thus, her insistence that eternal obligations to all human beings precede rights. In this way, not in conservatism, she rejects liberalism as a way towards a flourishing society. Yet, what Zaretsky gives us here is do-gooding liberalism; he does not see that she was trying to establish a society that was religious but without ecclesiastical dominance.

On the whole, Zaretsky tends to round most of the edges off Weil. In part, this is a matter of reinforcing a liberal sense of the good and using her to be a shining example of that. Philosophically, it is the result of trying to skate around the hard edges of her religious thinking. For Zaretsky, attention is not supernatural; the divine is not the place we are forced to find purpose when confronting affliction; societies can be made up of nice committed people without higher callings. All this is reinforced in the final chapter where Zaretsky does take on Weil’s religion. He lays out the religious experiences that led to her conversion, making that conversion largely a matter of belief, ignoring the personal sense of Christ that she experienced. It was this personal sense of unconquerable love in a person that caused her to find a use for affliction; it was Christ’s own crucifixion that lay at the center of her understanding of attention, for attention is a self-emptying to give life to another. Zaretsky does note with concern that there is a kenotic quality to Weil’s religion and then quickly shifts the conversation to the soft Platonism of Iris Murdoch, who indeed owed much to Weil. But in the end, what this religious factor amounts to for him is chiefly “do-gooding,” without the mordancy of Weil’s uncompromising transcendence and mysticism. Whether one can build a politics or ethics on such transcendence and mysticism is debatable. But to have the debate, you have to articulate the ideas rightly and clearly.
So, in the end, it seems to be that it is Weil who is being subverted here. I wish I could say it was done deeply. But the problem is that the book just does not engage in any kind of in-depth examination of Weil’s thinking as she expressed it. It is paraphrase, it is rounding. It is within the author’s own experience (there is no bibliography, for example). Love Weil or hate Weil—there are plenty of people that go each way—a reader will be better off with something more substantial.

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The first two decades of the twenty-first century witnessed a surge of scholarship reevaluating the normative implications of honor for modern politics and morality. This scholarship includes Sharon Krause’s *Liberalism with Honor* (Harvard University Press, 2003), Robert Faulkner’s *The Case for Greatness* (Yale University Press, 2007), Alexander Welsh’s *What Is Honor?* (Yale University Press, 2008), Kwame Anthony Appiah’s *The Honor Code* (W.W. Norton, 2010), Stephen Darwall’s *Honor, History, and Relationship* (Oxford University Press, 2013), Peter Olsthoorn’s *Honor in Political and Moral Philosophy* (SUNY Press, 2015), and Tammler Sommers’s *Why Honor Matters* (Basic Books, 2019)—just to name the most notable few.

This growing interest in honor among political theorists and moral philosophers is both surprising and expected: surprising, as the quest for honor may seem to be unavoidably quixotic, if not entirely toxic, in the modern Western world; expected, as the Western world has yet to transcend its own tradition of honor, which may be traced to ancient Greece. According to Haig Patapan, the modern uneasiness with honor can be attributed to honor’s “two faces” (ix): while the desire for honor often instigates the pursuit of immoral ambitions and tyranny, good leadership can hardly do without this desire, which has motivated generations of political leaders to sacrifice their narrow self-interest for the common good. The conflict intrinsic to honor has led to constant attempts to reinterpret the meaning of honor in hope of attaining a reconciliation between its two faces. But how have changing interpretations of this “dangerous passion” shaped our changing perception of political leadership? This is “the question of honor” explored in Patapan’s intriguing book *A Dangerous Passion: Leadership and the Question of Honor*—a question to which