YVES R. SIMON AS A MORAL PHILOSOPHER

The work of Yves R. Simon fascinates in many ways. There is first of all an encounter with a powerful mind, but it is ever the mind of a thinker whose feet are planted solidly on the ground. And this thinker thinks, not *ab ovo*, but within a tradition. Simon is a Thomist, and this in several ways. We find in his writings exegetical passages in which he turns his close attention to the text of Thomas and seeks to display its meaning. In this quest, he unself-consciously makes use of the great commentators. References to Cajetan and John of St. Thomas stud his work. In this he is like Jacques Maritain, and the similarity is by no means accidental. Simon is a grateful student who on crucial occasions rises to the defense of Maritain. First, then, Simon is a Thomist working in a tradition of interpretation that culminates in Maritain. But, second, he is all the more a Thomist in that, having assimilated that tradition, he carries it forward into hitherto uncharted territory.

The Jacques Maritain Center at the University of Notre Dame is the custodian of the papers of Yves Simon. The gift came in 144 folders that represented the topics or categories of the great encyclopedic task in which Simon was engaged when his life came to an end. We retained his categories as we transferred the papers to acid-free archival boxes, separating the

pages with preserving sheets of paper. The material is now catalogued, computerized, and available for perusal.

I mention this in order to explain the diffidence I feel before the task I have been given here. Any student of Simon will be aware of the published books, including, of course, the growing list of posthumously published material. Impressive as the published output is, quantitatively it fades to insignificance in comparison with the unpublished material. Conscious of that, I am struck by the impertinence of discussing Simon as a moral philosopher in an introduction to his debut book. Our understanding of Simon has deepened with the subsequent works and will deepen further as scholars make greater use of the papers. I don't foresee any radical alteration in the interpretation of his thought but rather an enrichment of understanding. Even so, I think that too ambitious a summary statement is at present premature.

In what follows, I shall give a hint of what the reader can expect from Simon's discussion of degrees of practical knowledge and the notion of practical truth. I shall try to be both informative and inchoate, giving the reader a flavor of what awaits him, without abusing his palate.

Yves Simon's *Critique de la connaissance morale* was first published in 1934 and is thus celebrating its sixty-eighth birthday. And how better celebrate than by appearing at last in English? An English version of this book has long been wanted, and here finally it is. This work not only puts us at the dawn of Simon's career, but also is a fundamental contribution to moral philosophy. It starts at the beginning and goes

on from there; and if it does not attempt to reach the end, we are struck by the clarity and order of the discussion. An understanding of this little book is essential for an orientation in Simon's work in moral and political philosophy.

Practical Knowledge

How to lay before his reader the notion of practical knowledge? Simon's discussion in his opening chapter is chiefly based on two texts, one from Aristotle, the other from Thomas Aquinas. Practical knowledge is distinguished from theoretical knowledge by Simon in the way set forth in the *locus classicus* in the *De anima* of Aristotle, III.10.433a13–18.

> Both of these then are capable of originating local movement, mind and appetite: (1) mind, that is, which calculates means to an end, i.e. mind practical (it differs from mind speculative in the character of its end); while (2) appetite is in every form of it relative to an end: for that which is the object of appetite is the stimulant of mind practical; and that which is last in the process of thinking is the beginning of the action.[1]

Every act of thinking is for the sake of an end, but when that end is simply truth, the thinking is called speculative. Practical thinking bears on an end which is *extra genus notitiae*, beyond thought; its end is not the perfecting of thinking as such, something brought

[1] *On the Soul* III.10.433a (*De Anima*, trans. J. A. Smith, in *The Works of Aristotle* III, ed. W. D. Ross [Oxford: Clarendon, 1931]).

about when truth is had, but the bringing into being of the thing thought. In the strong sense of speculative thinking, the objects are such that gaining the truth about them is the only possible end in view: they are not makable or doable by us. To think about coming downstairs or descending in an elevator, to say nothing of shaping an image of your mother-in-law with Play-Doh, is to think about what may be done or made. Yet there you are, supine in your Barcalounger, the picture of contemplation, thinking such thoughts. You might just as well be pondering the parallel postulate. Obviously, more distinctions are required.

Simon finds them in the *Summa theologiae*, *Ia*, q. 14, a. 16, where Thomas asks whether God has speculative knowledge of creatures. Thinking can be simply speculative or simply practical, or partly speculative and partly practical. In short, there are degrees of practical thinking. This is possible because there are several criteria in play—something Simon saw rising out of the text of Aristotle with which he began. Thomas gives three criteria:

> a science can be speculative in three ways. *First*, with respect to the things known, which are not subject to the knower's making or doing: the knowledge man has of natural and divine things is speculative in this way. *Second*, with respect to the way of knowing, as, for example, if a builder considers a house by defining it, distinguishing its kinds, and enumerating the universal traits any house must have. This is to consider something the knower could make but in a speculative manner, that is, not insofar as it is makable. It is makable when a form is applied to matter, not when it is analyzed into its universal formal prin-

> ciples. *Third,* with respect to the end. [Here Thomas cites the *De anima* text quoted above.] Practical intellect is ordered to the end of operation, whereas the end of the speculative intellect is to consider the truth. So, if a builder should consider how a house might come into being but orders this knowledge not to the end of operation, but to knowing alone, his knowledge will be speculative with respect to its end, even though it deals with a makable thing.

In discussing the text in his first chapter, Simon relies on Cardinal Cajetan's commentary. That there are degrees of practical knowing is the clear meaning of the text. Completely practical knowledge is had when the thing known (or object), the way of knowing, and the end of the knower are all practical. But one can think about an operable object, and in a practical way—that is, think of the steps to be taken if the artifact is to be produced—yet not be engaged in the producing of it. And, of course, one can think of an operable object but in the same way one thinks about natural things, defining it, citing subtypes of it, etc.

The analysis of this passage from the *Summa* functions as the fundamental text to be explained and developed in the chapters that follow. But Simon turns in his second chapter to the discussion of prudence, whose act will provide an instance of completely practical knowledge. But he begins with an interesting remark: ''Whatever the sense, or senses, of the phrase 'practical science' that we come to recognize, one thing is certain from the outset: it is not in practical science that the idea of practical knowledge is realized in all its purity'' (no. 4).

Moral science will not exemplify what is meant by

completely practical knowledge. To define virtue and the species of virtues is to be thinking of things we can bring about or acquire by action, but this way of thinking of them is quite remote from such actions. Such knowledge can be called practical in only the minimal sense—its object is operable, but its mode and end are speculative. That kind of minimally practical knowledge shows up in moral science, but it is not perhaps characteristic of it. To think of operable objects in a manner that takes into account how they are brought about by our acts has been called virtually practical knowledge. Thinking of how justice might be served in certain circumstances is not as such an instance of the kind of just action being thought about by the moral philosopher.

Jacques Maritain, as is known, suggested four, not simply three, degrees of practical knowledge, and in chapter 7 Simon defends the proposed addition of *practically practical knowledge*.

Practical Truth

Completely practical knowledge is exemplified in singular actions. A singular act of prudence, or practical wisdom, counts as completely practical knowledge. In his discussion of prudence and its act, Simon is, of course, guided by Aristotle. Art and prudence are virtues of the practical intellect, the former being ''identical with a state of capacity to make, involving a true course of reasoning'' (NE VI.4.1140a20), the latter, ''a reasoned and true state of capacity to act with regard to human goods'' (1140b20). As a habit of intellect, prudence's truth might seem to present

no difficulty. Isn't any thinking true when it puts together what is together in reality, and separates what is separate in reality? But that would make practical thinking indistinguishable from theoretical. Simon seeks further light from Aristotle.

> What affirmation and negation are in thinking, pursuit and avoidance are in desire; so that since moral virtue is a state of character concerned with choice, and choice is deliberate desire, therefore both the reasoning must be true and the desire right, if the choice is to be good, and the latter must pursue just what the former asserts. Now this kind of intellect and of truth is practical; of the intellect which is contemplative, not practical nor productive, the good and the bad state are truth and falsity respectively (for this is the work of everything intellectual); while of the part which is practical and intellectual the good state is truth in agreement with right desire [1139a21–22].[2]

Prudence, as a *virtue* of practical intellect, must ensure unfailing rectitude in the singular judgment of what I ought to do and sure guidance as director of appetite. But actions are singular, contingent occurrences in contingent settings. A virtuous habit of intellect must govern the attainment of the proper aim of intellectual judgment, that is, the true. But this, in turn, suggests necessity, not contingency. Simon works up this conflict, so that when he cites the text from the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which comes earlier than the definition of prudence he quoted, the Aris-

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[2] The preceding three quotations from Aristotle are taken from *The Nichomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross, rev. J. L. Ackrill and J. O. Urmson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1925), pp. 142, 143, and 138–39, respectively.

totelian text seems to provide the answer. But what kind of an answer is it?

To wheel in a new kind of truth might seem an *ad hoc* device to hurry past the difficulty. The demands of truth in the usual sense can obviously not be met. The mind's conformity with the contingent must be as fleeting as the corresponding fact. It is not that we cannot form and utter judgments about singular occurrences. ''I am seated.'' ''You are seated.'' ''They are seated.'' ''It's snowing outside.'' ''The frost is on the pumpkin.'' ''The needle reads 80.'' We do it all the time. There is a problem for two reasons. First, we are talking about a virtue that would ensure that the mind always makes true judgments, and, second, practical reason is not dedicated simply to the amassing of more or less accurate assessments of fleeting facts.

From the point of view of action, we seem advised to remain at a level of generality if we want certitude; such knowledge stands a chance of being unaffected by the kaleidoscope of contingency. Thus, natural law principles are distinguished from those less general guides and rules that express what by and large, *ut in pluribus*, is the way to act. Already at the level of generality, there is a falling away from certitude and necessity and a growing reflection of the contingency of the order of action that practical reason would direct. It seems to follow that, when the mind is engaged with the singular and contingent as such, truth must be so attenuated that it makes little sense to speak here of certainty and unerring direction on the part of reason. But that is just what prudence is taken to provide. The question becomes: Is this assurance had simply by changing the meaning of the key

terms, so that what might seem to be reassuring is actually a linguistic shell game? ''Of course, the judgment of prudence is certainly true! By 'true' and 'certain', however, I mean what elsewhere would be called false and unsure.'' Is that what is going on?

Simon cites St. Thomas's expression of the proposed distinction between speculative truth and practical truth.

> It should be said that the truth of practical intellect differs from that of speculative intellect, as is said in *Ethics* 6.2. The truth of speculative intellect consists of the intellect's conformity with reality. But since the intellect cannot be infallibly conformed with things in contingent matters, but only in necessary matters, no speculative habit of contingent things is an intellectual virtue, but only of necessary things. The truth of practical intellect consists in conformity with right appetite, a conformity which has no place in necessary matters which do not come about by the human will, but only in the contingent things that can come to be by us, whether internal doable things or external makable things. That is why the virtue of practical intellect is solely about contingent matters, art in the case of the makable, prudence in the case of the doable.[3]

Simon likes Cajetan's statement of the difficulty: ''On the one hand, if prudence is an intellectual virtue, it must always express the true; but then it cannot have the contingent for its object, for contingency is the source of multiple errors. On the other hand, if prudence has the contingent for its object, it cannot

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[3] *Summa theologiae*, *IaIIae*, q. 57, a. 5, ad 3; *Thomas Aquinas: Selected Writings*, ed. Ralph McInerny (Harmondsworth and New York: Penguin, 1998), p. 679.

always express the true, and then it is not an intellectual virtue'' (no. 6). Clearly, if prudence is to be a sure deliverer of truth, a different conception of truth is required.

Speculative truth is had when the mind's judgment is in conformity with the way things are. Practical truth is had when the mind's judgment is in conformity with right appetite. The prudent man is sure that he is doing the right thing when he acts; his practical guiding judgment of the contingent circumstances in which he finds himself directs him unerringly to the good. Now, this sounds alarmingly like saying that our particular practical judgments are true if they serve our appetites. Simon takes up two questions at this point. The first has to do with what might be called the virtuous circle; the second, and more pressing, with the way false judgments about contingent facts are compatible with practical truth.

The practical judgment is said to be true when it is in conformity with *rectified* appetite, with a good will, not simply when it is at the service of any desire whatsoever. The latter would void 'true' of any meaning whatsoever, since then no practical judgment could fail to be true. If the practical judgment of prudence cannot fail to be true, this is because it is in conformity with *right* appetite. Aristotle suggested that pursuit and avoidance are appetitive analogues to affirmation and denial.

The Circle—Will is an intellectual appetite whose movement is informed by mind. Only the known good moves the will. Thus, if the will is rectified, this must be due to mind. If now we say that the mind's judgment is true when it is in conformity with rectified appetite, we seem to be moving in a circle. The

mind's direction rectifies will's orientation, and the mind's judgment is rendered true because it is in conformity with rectified appetite. ''To escape this apparent circle, it is sufficient to observe that the good direction of the will is understood with relation to the ends of the will, and that the prudential judgment concerns means'' (no. 7). Prudence presupposes that will is ordered to the true good, that is, to the true end; its judgments bear on the way to achieve that end here and now, and its judgments will be true thanks to appetite's firm fix on the true good. Judgments about what that real good is are not subject to the same contingency as are those bearing on the here-and-now demands of the good in contingent circumstances.

Truth and Error—The arguments advanced against prudence's being a virtue capable of delivering certain and true judgments in the contingent order are meant to be answered by the concept of practical truth. But what generated those objections is not thereby altered.

Imagine a man who enters a building, finds lying on the floor an envelope addressed to another occupant, and slips it under the other's door. Alas, it is a letter bomb, and when the building rocks with the explosion, the good deed has had fatal results. In this little episode, we have by stipulation an agent whose character is such that he is inclined to do helpful things for others. Delivering the letter to the right address he judges to fall under the telos that guides his actions in such matters. He slips the envelope under the door, with disastrous results.

Such examples, which can easily be multiplied, are usually employed to illustrate involuntary action, as

indeed they do. But let's look at it now from the angle of the problem Simon is discussing. Has the helpful tenant performed a good action? It was certainly no intention of his to blow up X, and one would have to be paranoid indeed to suspect every instance of the mail as being explosive. Implicit in his deed is the judgment that this envelope, addressed to X, contains some communication or other—a bill, a billet-doux, another breathtaking offer to purchase a platinum credit card—and so he acts. That is not the only judgment about the circumstances, but it is certainly one, and, in the event, a highly relevant one. And it is a false judgment. Does this vitiate his action?

If we took it to be the promise of prudence that we would never mistake our circumstances in this way, we would, of course, be sorely disappointed. But then of two things one. Either this is not the kind of judgment that is said always to be rendered true by its conformity with right will, or prudence sometimes fails, and then it is not a virtue.

Characteristically, Simon looks to the great commentators, and this time he cites John of St. Thomas—or Jean Poinsot, as John Deely would have us call him, which I shall be happy to do if he agrees to call St. Bonaventure Giovanni Fidanza.

> Take, for example, writes John of St. Thomas, a man in possession of wealth who doubts his entitlement to it. He does everything he can to ascertain the truth, without quelling his doubts. Very well, even though doubt persists concerning the truth of the matter, there is one point that is not doubtful: namely, that he has done what he could and should do. *There is certitude that the will is good*, and the judgment that regulates action in conformity with this good will is

> infallible in its pure function of direction, not in its function of knowledge [no. 6].

This is still a fairly benign example. If such a man, having made the inquiries suggested and having acted on them, eventually finds that his claim is not grounded, what is the status of the acts he has performed up to this time?

They were based on what he now knows to be a false judgment of the validity of his claim. What we want to know is not simply whether a practical judgment may be made on the basis of fallible assessments of the facts, the deficiency being made up by the will's adherence to the true good, but whether false judgments of the facts vitiate the judgment of prudence.

Here I will suspend my discussion, in the hope of having whetted your desire to plunge into Yves Simon's enormously interesting interpretation of practical knowledge. To read Yves Simon is to be spurred on to undertaking the same questions and, while assimilating what he has said, push the inquiry along. That is what he did. That is what he invites us to do.

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A Critique of Moral Knowledge