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Freedom and Practical Rationality in The Thought of Yves R. Simon

Yves R. Simon (1903–1961) was one of the greatest modern students of the ancient virtue of practical wisdom, called *phronesis* by Aristotle, and *prudentia* by Aristotle's great Christian commentators in the Middle Ages, such as Saint Thomas Aquinas. Simon's interest in this issue was both theoretical and practical. He was concerned with the role of practical wisdom in resolving major modern moral problems, particularly in social and political philosophy, such as the problem of freedom and authority in a democracy. But he was also concerned with the profound foundational problems underlying the virtue of practical wisdom, particularly those in moral epistemology. In addition, he was uncommonly aware of the specific historical vicissitudes that led to the decline of practical wisdom as a central feature of modern moral philosophy. The revolution in epistemology we associate with figures like Descartes had momentous repercussions, not only in the foundations of mathematics and natural science and in basic metaphysical issues, but also in moral and political philosophy, and in the psychology of the human act. Modern ideals of a unified science, the triumph of the deductive method, and the mechanical interpretation of nature were involved in this revolution. They constitute some of the elements in a rich concept of "modernity." At least one utterly new chapter came to be written in the history of Western civilization, entitled "The Social Sciences."

Two texts, largely unknown these days, show some of these developments. Both date from the mid-seventeenth century. Both support the generalization that the Age of Descartes is a critical one in the history of

practical wisdom. In 1653,¹ a book appeared by the Spanish Jesuit Baldesar Gracian that was soon to become something of a minor classic. It was entitled *Oraculo Manual y Arte de Prudencia*. Literally rendered, the title is *The Oracle, Handbook and Art of Prudence*. The book went into innumerable editions and translations, some of which are instructive. One of the first English translations remains quite close to the original title: *The Art of Prudence; or a Companion for a Man of Sense* (1702). The first Latin translation goes in part: . . . *De prudentia civili et maxime aulica* (1731). Schopenhauer's translation was (again in part) . . . *Kunst der Weltklugheit* (1861). The modern English version (1892) is close to Schopenhauer: "The Art of Worldly Wisdom."

No book about prudence so vividly exemplifies its crisis as this one. Part of the tradition of courtly literature stretching into the Renaissance, it is clearly a proto-Dale Carnegie manual, designed to assist the early modern yuppie in the techniques needed to get on at the court. It is egoistic, amoral, and this-worldly. Perhaps most importantly, it is a book of maxims, easily remembered techniques for survival in a world of political intrigue and ambition. And, of course, it is at the antipodes of the concept of practical wisdom championed by Aristotle and Aquinas. For them, practical wisdom is sharply distinguished from all forms of technique. For them, although there is a monastic form of such wisdom, it is primarily social and political in nature, having the common good for its end and not primarily the private good. A title such as *The Art of Prudence* would seem almost a contradiction in terms.

An equally fascinating text survives from no less a figure than the illustrious Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. Not usually taken as a moral philosopher, Leibniz in fact considered himself chiefly a moralist and wrote much on ethics throughout his life. Some scholars have taken the *Monadology* as a kind of foundation for an aristocratic ethics. In a relatively obscure text early in his career, Leibniz has an interesting analysis of Aristotle's theory of intellectual virtue. When he comes to the doctrine of practical wisdom, he finds Aristotle troubling. How can there be a virtue that is both moral and intellectual, both perfective of the understanding in its practical employment and of the concrete actions performed by flesh

¹For these bibliographical details, see the appendix to Joseph Jacob's introduction to his translation, *The Art of Worldly Wisdom* (New York: Macmillan, 1943), l–liv.

and blood people acting in the world? The Cartesian revolution of mind and matter is powerfully operative in Leibniz's notes. I quote a brief excerpt: "Prudence is nothing other than the habit of seeing in each case what is useful. Art indeed [is the habit of] doing [in each case what is useful]: the former is an impression in the cognitive parts; the latter an habituation in the active [parts]. The former is found in knowledge of precepts, the latter is the exercise itself. . ."² In other words, practical wisdom is a kind of science, and art the habit of acting in accordance with that science. A wisdom that is neither science on the one hand, nor art on the other, seems to elude the Sage of Hannover.

It did not elude Yves R. Simon, and part of my motivation in introducing my paper with these two somewhat antiquated texts is to show that Simon's recovery of practical wisdom is a profound challenge to some key elements in modern ethical theory. Practical wisdom is not science, it is not art, it is not self-centered. All three of these elements enter into the modern concept of "prudence." Practical wisdom, then, is not "prudence," and its intelligibility offers special problems to modern consciousness. Simon saw these problems more clearly, I think, than any recent commentator.

It will be impossible to do justice in a short paper to the manifold dimensions of the topic I have chosen. What I can begin to accomplish here is an account of the way in which Simon integrates the practical understanding and the will into the final moral action, subsequent on all deliberation and internal choice. This in itself is a vast task, and I shall limit myself to two texts, the recently reprinted *Freedom of Choice* and the unpublished *Practical Knowledge* recently edited by me, after an important start by Ralph Nelson and Ernest Briones.³ My paper, then, will be a kind of preview of some of the last things Simon wrote about practical wisdom and its relationship to other moral psychological issues, especially those connected with the will.

The first chapter of the unpublished *Practical Knowledge* consists of the famous article Simon published in 1961 in *The New Scholasticism*, entitled "Introduction to the Study of Practical Wisdom."⁴ This article was intended by Simon himself to be the first chapter of his projected book on

²Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, "Notae ad Jacobum Thomasium," *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*, Academy Edition, VI, 1, 60.

³*Practical Knowledge*, unpublished at the time of this paper, has been accepted for publication by Fordham University Press.

⁴Yves R. Simon, "Introduction to the Study of Practical Wisdom," *The New Scholasticism* XXXV (1961): 1-40 (hereafter referred to as "Introduction").

practical knowledge. It is a masterful study of one of the most difficult aspects of the classic virtue of practical wisdom, the element of "command," "imperium." No feature of the Thomistic or Aristotelian theory of practical wisdom is as difficult to accommodate to modern dualistic theories of thought and action as this one, in spite of its clear conformity with common sense. As Alasdair MacIntyre has observed, the "following" in "following orders" should be no more mysterious than the "following" in "following premises." If in the one case an action "follows," and in the other a propositional conclusion "follows," the relationship can still be described in quasi-inferential terms.⁵ Simon saw this as clearly as anyone in our time, and pursued its depths more thoroughly.

I do not mean to deny that the theory has difficulties. It is one thing to say that an action "follows" upon deliberation and that a "command" follows upon an exhaustive analysis of the rules and circumstances of a specific moral action. But the concept of command involves a metaphysical dimension that is still challenging and paradoxical. Command, we are told, is the "form" of action; that is to say, it is the specific ideal component of it. It is "as practical as action itself."⁶ This formal identity of a command and the action directed by it holds great problems for Cartesian and post-Cartesian metaphysics. Again, if indeed we are to avail ourselves of Aristotelian terminology at all, the temptation is to claim that command may be the form of some internal choice, but surely not of the external action performed. In this case, it seems that we ought to employ some theory of technique or of art as the specifying formality of action. This is how I take the reasoning of Leibniz in the text cited earlier, articulated under the enormous weight of Descartes' new philosophy.

One way to overcome this difficulty is to use the analogy of analyzing one and the same action teleologically as well as efficiently. If I open the door to let the cat out, I can explain the sequence of events both mechanically and intentionally. If both explanations are true and complementary, then why may I not understand each moment of that decision as involving complementary specifying forms? The door remains a door, turning on its hinges, in conformity with relevant laws of nature. But it is equally an instrument of my choice, conforming to analogous laws in the domain of choice and decision. Overlapping explanations may offend some principle

⁵See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd edition (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 161–62; also, MacIntyre's *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 138–40.

⁶Simon, "Introduction," 4.

of parsimony, but they are not incompatible.

The concept of command invites us to analyze a given human action in terms of all four causes. Command provides the formal and final dimensions of this etiology. Although we primarily associate the concept of form with non-ethical explanation, no definitional necessity requires this custom. Formal explanation is also appropriate in the realm of practice, not merely at a remove from action, but at the moment of action itself, as Simon says: "... when the distance between thought and action is nil, when thought has come down into the complex of human action to constitute its form, it is described as practical in an absolutely appropriate sense."⁷ The conclusion of the practical syllogism, then, the action itself, is a conclusion of a deliberative process in which the primary element, the command, is not anterior to the action performed, but an integral metaphysical component, on the model of form in a natural or artificial object.

Having said all this, we ought still to be somewhat troubled. There is a persistent tendency to telescope the quasi-syllogistic account of action found in Aristotle into the inferential structure of the theoretical syllogism. This is one way of defining "intellectualism." But the scientific and moral syllogisms are throughout radically different. Aristotle's sharp distinction between *sophia* and *phronesis* is his challenge to this intellectualism. Unlike the theoretical syllogism, the practical syllogism is marked by change and contingency. The rule might be otherwise, the means to the end might be otherwise, and the action performed might be otherwise. Human action is necessarily conditioned by the particularities of time and space, embedded in the situational circumstances of human life, in the "mystery" of matter, one might say. There are huge constraints upon the intelligibility of moral decision and of moral action. The ever-present necessity to act can obscure these constraints. Deliberation of itself can proceed ad infinitum, since the conditions in which action takes place are necessarily infinitely complex. This aspect of deliberation can produce in the agent an anxiety that can frustrate resolve and block action altogether. One might argue that only the external and non-rational circumstances of time and place can terminate deliberation, a dimension of situationalism that lends that theory peculiar force. Thomas Aquinas himself seems unusually sensitive to the temporal dimension of practical wisdom and stresses the knowledge of things past, present, and future as properly involved in the virtue of

⁷*Ibid.*, 5.

prudence.⁸

Neither Thomas Aquinas nor Yves R. Simon takes the situationalist route, of course. Simon, to return to him, instead invokes the second great challenge to intellectualism, after Aristotle's distinction between wisdom and prudence. He takes a step outside the realm of cognition, and into the realm of will. However much we may wish to argue that there is a doctrine of will in ancient Western philosophy, it is clear that the major impetus for such a theory comes from another tradition entirely, that of Jewish and Christian myth. The stories of fall and redemption, of divine law, of personal responsibility and choice, all determined a different mode of moral psychological explanation in Western philosophy. Augustine is of course the great figure in this account. But the full range of Augustine's theory of will winds up in Aquinas too. In fact, if we can make anything of statistics, it looks as though will for Aquinas is at least as important as understanding, possibly twice so. In his taxonomy of the human act there is at least one act of will for every act of understanding, and perhaps two.⁹

Yves R. Simon is as much heir to the Augustinian and medieval theory of will as he is to Aristotle's theory of practical cognition. Both his *Freedom of Choice* (rather obviously) and *Practical Knowledge* contain a number of passages relevant to the role of will in action. Again, we concentrate on the role of will in its relation to the element of command, focusing therefore on the moment of action itself, rather than on the deliberative antecedents. Commenting on the natural tendency to dichotomize will and understanding, Simon, in *Freedom of Choice*, lays stress upon their intimate union. "The practical judgment," he writes, "causes the act of the will not only by proposing an end for it but also by constituting its form" (FC 98). It is an act of knowledge that makes a given choice a choice of such and such a kind. It *specifies* it. Nowhere is this relationship more significant than in the act of command, since it is command that provides the formal principles in the ultimate act of choice, the actual deed performed.

At the same time, one must not grant efficacy to acts of knowledge as such, except in some derivative way. The formal cause moves nothing, although it renders what is moved intelligible. It is the will that finally moves toward some good. The will "brings it about that a certain practical judgment terminates the deliberation and constitutes the decision" (FC 148). Simon's answer, then, to what ultimately determines the natural anarchy (if that is not too strong a word) of the deliberative process, is that

⁸Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, 47, 1.

⁹*Ibid.*, I-II, 8-17.

the will terminates it.

This is hardly a transparently clear thesis. Part of it can be elucidated by reference to the concept of "use." The differences between art and practical wisdom are many. One of them lies in the fact that the artisan, craftsman, or technician can turn his art to any use he pleases, for good or for ill. But practical judgment is so bound up with action itself that, where the judgment is sound, the use must be humanly good. A practically wise person cannot make poor use of wisdom, and the action conformable to practically wise deliberation must itself be of good use. In scholastic language, "use," an act of will in the conclusion of the practical syllogism, must be good when the ultimate practical judgment is made truly.¹⁰

Another way of elucidating the relation of will to understanding is by reference to the nature of practical truth itself. The problem of truth claims in matters of practical reason is a highly controverted one. There is first the sifting of factual claims from evaluative ones. Conformity with states of affairs can suffice in determining factual claims, even in practical deliberation. This is a relatively straightforward view, and perhaps involves the concept of truth in a primary and unqualified way. But there is another kind of truth, "practical truth," the truth "... of direction, of a truth which does not consist in conformity to a real state of affairs but in conformity to the demands of an honest will, in conformity to the inclination of a right desire."¹¹ This "truth of direction" supplies certainty in practical decisions. It makes a "command" "true."

This notion of "practical truth," a truth neither deductive nor statistical, but dependent upon the condition of the appetite itself, brings us to a third, and I think conclusive, elucidation of the relation between will and understanding. The appetites (including the will) are perfected by moral virtue. The person of virtue, then, can safely and surely terminate the deliberative process, simply by the habitual exercise of moral virtue itself. Deliberation establishes only probabilities in conduct. There is no possibility of reaching a deliberative conclusion with the apodictic necessity of a deductive argument. And yet there is the need to act under this degree of uncertainty. But the presence of virtue in the will can provide this degree of "affective knowledge" or "knowledge by inclination," by which a real and trustworthy (a "certain") conclusion may be made in practical reasoning.¹² It is because the agent is a person of good will that the natural

¹⁰Simon, "Introduction," 10ff.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 15.

¹²*Ibid.*, 20ff.

vicissitudes of practical reason are of no ultimate destructiveness in practical life. Simon develops this point interestingly. So, for instance, the limits on intelligibility in moral action are no scandal, since the important thing is to act well, whatever degree of understanding we may have for acting well. What counts is the fulfillment of our moral obligations, not necessarily their intelligibility. I take it that this position has particular relevance to a theory of political wisdom. This is not to say that blind obedience is preferable to explanation. The explanatory dimension is uniquely human, "animated by an aspiration towards the most rational modalities of fulfillment."¹³

But the need for the moral virtues is established nonetheless, not in some artificially compartmentalized account of a "bag of virtues," but in a densely intricate theory of their interconnection. It is the person of moral virtue whose practical judgments we can trust, because such a person knows when, where, and how to act. This concatenation of virtues, by the way, includes theological as well as natural virtues. Simon has some excellent pages on the virtue of poverty, discussion of which must be deferred.¹⁴

In summary, Yves Simon's analysis of modernity rests upon his perception of the role of practical wisdom in the catalogue of virtues. Practical wisdom simply cannot be rendered by the term "prudence" in modern languages, given the reducibility of knowledge to a single methodology, and given the self-interest occasioned, if not engendered, by the powerful individualism of Descartes. There is a new intellectualism in early modern thought, a new identification of knowledge and virtue, such that science can be employed in the resolution of all human problems, societal as well as individual. Simon, by a thorough reconsideration of Aristotle and of Thomas Aquinas, brings us once again the two major elements of a critique of this new intellectualism. First, he recovers the essential irreducibility of practical knowledge to theory and art, especially at the moment of action. And, secondly, he insists that moral virtue, and therefore the will, are internally necessary to the deliberative process. Without the habitual excellence of a person of good will, deliberation will never terminate successfully. The conclusion of deliberation lies in command, but command is found in action itself, and action is good only if the will chooses well. The conclusion of deliberation, then, lies in an inseparable unity of moral and intellectual virtue.

¹³*Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁴Yves R. Simon, "Christian Humanism: A Way to World Order," in *From Disorder to World Order* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1956), 208.