

On Yves R. Simon as a Moral Philosopher

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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 on the text of Thomas and seeks to display its meaning. In this quest he un-self-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 rose to the defense of Maritain. First, then, Simon is a Thomist working in a tradition of interpretation that culminates in Maritain. But, secondly, 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 R. 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, including tapes, is now catalogued, computerized, and available for perusal and study.

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 Impressive as the published output is, quantitatively it fades to insignificance in comparison with the unpublished material. As I think of all that, I am struck by the impertinence of discussing Simon as a moral philosopher in a paper the length of this one. Our understanding of Simon will deepen as scholars make greater use of his papers. I do not 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 would be at present premature.

Ergo, I propose to go back to his famous little book *Critique de la Connaissance Morale*,¹ published in 1934 and thus just shy of its 60th birthday. It is hoped that an English version will be published by the University of Notre Dame Press, perhaps in the year of the book's sixtieth anniversary. Not only does this work put us at the dawn of Simon's career, it is a fundamental work. It starts at the beginning and goes on from there, and if it does not attempt to reach the end—something possible only in Wonderland anyway—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.²

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 and the other from Thomas. Practical knowledge

¹Cf. Yves R. Simon, *Critique de la connaissance morale* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1934) Pp. 167. The first nine chapters of this volume appeared preliminarily in the *Revue de Philosophie* (Paris) N.S. Tome III, 1932, pp. 449–473 and 531–555; chapter ten appeared in *La Vie Intellectuelle* (Paris) N.S. 5e année, Tome XXV, No. 1, 1933, pp. 55–65.

²Here are the chapter headings of this little book of some 160 pages.

1. The Concept of Practical Knowledge
2. Prudence
3. Intelligence the Disciple of Love
4. The First Principles of the Practical Order
5. The Movement of Practical Thought
6. Moral Philosophy
7. Practically Practical Science
8. Christian Ethics
9. Moral Philosophy and the Science of Moral Facts
10. Political Science: A Proposal

is distinguished from theoretical knowledge in the way set forth in the *locus classicus* in the *De anima* of Aristotle.

Both of these are capable of originating local movement, thought and appetite: thought, that is, which calculates means to an end, i.e., practical thought (it differs from speculative thought in the character of its end); while appetite is in every form of it relative to an end; for that which is the object of appetite is the stimulant of practical thought; and that which is last in the process of thinking is the beginning of the action (III. 10, 433a13–18).

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 *extra genus notitiae*, beyond thought; it does not seek the perfecting of thinking as such, truth, but the bringing into being of the thing thought. In the strong sense of speculative thinking, the objects are such that truth about them is the only possible end in view: they are not make-able or do-able by us. Thinking about coming down stairs or descending in an elevator, to say nothing of shaping an image of your mother-in-law with Play-Dough, 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:

Knowledge may be speculative study only, or practical only, or in one respect speculative, in another practical. This will be evident if we observe that knowledge may be called speculative on three accounts: (i) from the nature of things known, when they are not producible by the knower, e.g., man's knowledge of natural things or of divine things; (ii) with respect to the mode of knowing, e.g., if an architect defines, analyses and examines the qualities proper to *house* in general. This is to consider producible things but in a speculative way not *qua* producible. A thing is producible by way of application of the form to the matter, not by way of the resolution of the composite into its formal principles considered

universally. (iii) Knowledge can be speculative with regard to the end or purpose: *the practical intellect differs from the speculative in the end it looks to* as we read in *On the Soul*. The aim of the practical intellect is production, that of the speculative intellect the consideration of truth. Thus if a builder considers how some house could be built, not with a view to building it but merely for the sake of knowing, his consideration, so far as concerns the end he looks to, will be speculative, though still about what could be produced (*ST. I. 14, 16*).

In discussing this passage (pp. 17–19), Simon relies on Cajetan. That there are degrees of practical knowing is the clear meaning of the text. *Completely practical knowledge* is had when the thing known (or the 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 one can think of the steps to be taken if the artifact is to be realized—and yet one need not actually be engaged in producing it. And, of course, one can think of an operable object 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. He begins with this interesting remark:

Whatever the sense, or senses, of the term “practical science” that we shall arrive at, one thing is certain from the start: it is not in practical *science* that the idea of practical knowledge is realized in all its purity.³

Moral science will not exemplify what is meant by completely practical knowledge. To define virtue and 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 particular 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

³Yves R. Simon, *Critique de la connaissance morale* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1934) p. 21.

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 and not simply three degrees of practical knowledge,⁴ and Simon defends the proposed addition, *la science pratiquement pratique*, in chapter VII of his *Critique*.

Practical Truth

Completely practical knowledge is exemplified in singular actions. A singular act of prudence, of 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 practical intellect, the former being “identical with a state or 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. Is not 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 thought. 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, not productive, the good and the bad state are truth and falsity respectively (for this is the work of everything intellectual); while the part which is practical and intellectual the good state is truth in agreement with right desire. (1139a21–31)

⁴Jacques Maritain, *Distinguer pour unir: ou Les Degrés du savoir*, 4th edition (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1946) pp. 647–649; see now *Jacques et Raïssa Maritain: Oeuvres Complètes*, Volume IV (Paris: Editions Saint-Paul, 1983), pp. 847–850. See also the excellent English translation *Distinguish to Unite or The Degrees of Knowledge* trans. Gerald B. Phelan (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1959).

Prudence, as a *virtue* of practical intellect, must assure 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 true. But this, in turn, suggests necessity, not contingency.⁵ 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 Aristotelian 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"; and "the needle reads '80' ". We do it all the time. There is a problem for two reasons. First, we are talking about a virtue which would ensure that the mind always makes true judgments; secondly, 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, knowledge that stands a chance of being unaffected by the kaleidoscope of contingency. Thus, natural law principles are distinguished from those general guides and rules which 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 which practical reason would direct. It would seem to follow that, when mind is engaged with the singular and contingent as such, truth must be attenuated indeed, and that it makes little sense to speak here of certainty and unerring direction on the part of reason. But

⁵Cf. Aquinas, *ST.*, I-II, 57, 5, obj. 3. "Moreover, thanks to intellectual virtue one is able always to say what is true and never what is false. But this seems not to be the case with prudence: it is not given to humans never to err in taking counsel about things to be done, since what humans do are contingent matters which can be otherwise. Thus we read in Wisdom 9,14: 'The thoughts of mortals are apprehensive and uncertain is our foresight'. It seems then that prudence ought not be numbered among the intellectual virtues".

that is just what prudence is taken to provide. The question follows: is this assurance made 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.

Truth is not quite the same for the practical and for the speculative intellect. The speculative intellect is true when it conforms to objective reality. Since it cannot unerringly conform to things in contingent matters, but only in necessary matters, no theoretical habit of mind about contingent things is an intellectual virtue, but only such as is engaged with necessary things. On the other hand, the practical intellect is true when it conforms to a right appetite. This conformity has no place in regard to necessary matters, which are not dependent upon the human will, but only in contingent matters which can be effected by us, whether they are internal activities or external works. Hence it is only about contingent matters that intellectual virtues are appointed for the practical intellect, namely, art as regards products, and prudence as regards deeds (*ST.*, I–II, 57, 5, ad 3).

Simon likes Cajetan’s statement of the difficulty. “Si la prudence est une vertu intellectuelle, elle dit toujours le vrai, mais dès lors il semble qu’elle ne puisse avoir pour objet le contingent, car la contingence est mère de multiples erreurs . . . elle ne dit pas toujours le vrai, mais alors ce n’est pas une vertu intellectuelle.”⁶ We translate: “If prudence is an intellectual virtue and always tells the truth it cannot have the contingent for its object; but if it does not always tell the truth, it cannot be an intellectual virtue.” Clearly, if prudence is to be a sure deliverer of truth, this requires a different conception of truth. 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 when he acts; his practical guiding judgment of his contingent circumstances directs him unerringly to the good. Now this sounds alarmingly like saying that our particular practical judgments are true if they serve

⁶Yves R. Simon, *Critique de la connaissance morale* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1934), p. 29.

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, 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—i.e., with a good will—and not simply when it is at the service of any desire whatsoever. The latter possibility 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. “Pour sortir de ce cercle apparent, il suffit d’observer que la bonne direction de la volonté s’entend par rapport aux fins de celle-ci, et que le jugement prudentiel concerne les moyens” (p. 35). Prudence presupposes that will is ordered to the true good, the true end; its judgments bear on the means, on the way to achieve that end here and now, and its judgments will be true thanks to the appetite’s firm fix on the true good. Judgments about that real good are not subject to the same variability as are those bearing on the here and now demands of the good in contingent circumstances.

Truth and Error. The arguments advanced against prudence 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. Let us take an example from *Aquinas on Human Action*.

Valence Quirk enters the building in which he lives and sees at his feet an envelope on which is printed in large letters: For Patricia Parlous. Valence picks it up, glances at the unmarked mail boxes in the lobby, then decides to slip the envelope under the door of Patricia’s apartment as it has apparently been slipped under the entry door. He knocks on her door, hears the sound of a shower within, and does indeed complete the delivery, slipping the envelope under the door. He ascends whistling the whistle of

the righteous to the floor above. Five minutes later a tremendous explosion rocks the building. Subsequent investigation discloses that Patricia Parlous, the *nom de guerre* of an IRA agent, was killed when a letter bomb slipped under her door went off. A horrified Valence Quirk thinks, “My God, I did that.”

In what sense can Valence Quirk be said to have brought about the death of Patricia Parlous? That he did in some sense is clear enough. If he had not done what he did the letter bomb would have gone off in the lobby and whatever destruction it did or did not do would not have led him to say, “I did that.” Our question is: does what Valence did count as a human act?

That Valence was engaged in a plurality of human acts in the little scenario is clear enough. He delivers to Patricia Parlous an envelope addressed to her and clearly intended for her. He means to do a good deed, to do a favor, to perform an act of kindness. That is the act he thinks he is performing. To that degree we are describing a human act. But in so doing, Valence delivers the bomb that ends the life of Patricia Parlous. That is a true statement. Is it a statement of a human act? It does not seem to describe an act of man.

It is clear enough that we must know how to identify the human act here in order to find out what Valence is answerable for and whether his action is morally good or not. The example is of someone who brought about what he did not intend but which would not have happened if he had not intentionally done what he did.⁷

In this little episode we have by definition an agent whose character is such that he is inclined to do helpful things for others. The act of delivering the letter to the right address is one he judges to fall under what 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 Patricia and one would have to be paranoid indeed, or a resident of Belfast, to suspect every letter in the mail. Implicit in his

⁷Ralph McInerny, *Aquinas on Human Action : A Theory of Practice* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1992), pp. 14–15.

deed is the judgment that this envelope, addressed to Patricia Parlous, 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 he makes about the circumstances, but it is certainly one, and, in the event, a highly relevant one. And yet, 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 whenever Deely agrees to call St. Bonaventure “Giovanni Fidanza”).

John of St. Thomas illustrates this point as follows. A man suspects his title to a fortune. He does everything he can to ascertain the facts but does not succeed in eliminating all doubt. 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 all that he could and should have done. *There is certitude that the will is good*, and the judgement which regulates action in conformity with this good will is infallible in its pure function of direction, even if possibly not with regard to the facts of the case.⁸

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 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.

It all depends. The example Simon takes from John of St. Thomas makes it clear that there are two sorts of judgment made by prudence

⁸Yves R. Simon, *Critique de la connaissance morale* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1934), pp. 32–33.

that are relevant here. Actually, Thomas speaks of other virtues joined to prudence—*eubulia*, *synesis*, and *gnome*, which together signify taking counsel and judging. There are three acts of reason *circa agibilia*—taking counsel, judging, and commanding. The first two, Thomas says (*Ia IIae*, q. 57, a. 6, c.) are analogous to acts of speculative intellect, but the third, *praecipere* (to command) is proper to practical intellect.

The judgment of the circumstances is fallible as bearing on the singular and contingent. The directing and commanding act of prudence can be *true* and *certain*, if it is in conformity with rectified appetite. This is not to say that the assessment of the circumstances is expressive of more than opinion. Simon owes this distinction between the two judgments to Cajetan and John of St. Thomas (cf. p. 33, n. 1). He cites as well *Ia IIae*, q. 47, a. 3, ad 2: *Utrum prudentia sit cognoscitiva singularium?* Our knowledge of singulars never surpasses *ut in pluribus* knowledge. Cajetan, commenting on this article, writes:

Note that the certitude of prudence is twofold, *one consisting of knowledge alone*, and this taken universally is the same as the certitude of moral science, whose universals are true for the most part. Taken particularly however it does not exceed the certitude of *opinion*, since it deals with future and absent things. *And this is not proper to prudence*. The other is the certitude of practical truth, which consists in conformity with rectified appetite (*quae consistit in confesse se habere appetitui recto*). This is proper to prudence, which does not consist in reason alone.⁹

And if after careful consideration of the circumstances one judges falsely and acts on false factual judgments, the judgment of prudence is nonetheless true because it is in conformity with right will.

I apologize for dwelling at such length on such elementary matters. My excuse is a desire to underscore the patient attention Yves R. Simon accorded such matters. A good beginning is half the journey.

As we all know, Simon and Maritain saw the connection between what Thomas says of the prudential judgment and the *judicium per modum connaturalitatis*, of which Thomas speaks in the very first question of the *Summa Theologiae* when he asks whether *sacra doctrina* is wisdom. He distinguishes two kinds of judgments, one *per modum cognitionis*, the other *per modum connaturalitatis*, and he

⁹*Ibid.*, 33, note 1.

illustrates them by contrasting the judgment of moral science with the judgment of a good man on the subject of chastity.

Both Kierkegaard and Newman seem to echo Aquinas's view. When confronting the objection that faith is based on insufficient evidence, they suggest the analogue of moral judgment. "The reason we have forgotten what it is to be a Christian is that we have forgotten what it is to be a man." Søren Kierkegaard lampooned the suggestion that Euclidean certitude is needed at all times. (See the unfinished novel, *Johannes Climacus, or De omnibus dubitandum est.*) No one could ever act, if such a requirement had to be met; for that matter, no one could *not* act either. The tenth and eleventh *Sermons Preached Before the University* deal with faith and reason. Both were given in January, 1839, when Newman was still an Anglican. Like Kierkegaard, Newman suggests that the complaint against faith would have to be turned against any moral decision. We simply do not have time to arrive at an exhaustive appraisal of our circumstances and, if we took the time, the circumstances would change even as we inquire. If, as the rationalist said, it is immoral to accept anything as true on insufficient evidence, then it would always be immoral to act and all acts would be immoral.

Kierkegaard and Newman invoke Aristotle on the matter. Both suggest an analogy between moral action and religious belief. It is interesting to note that Thomas Aquinas draws exactly the same analogy when he considered Augustine's *Nemo credit nisi volens*. In *Q. D. de virtutibus in communi*, a. 7, Thomas likens faith to prudence: both depend on right will in order to function. It is the will, moved by grace, that prompts the mind to assent to truths beyond its comprehension.

My moral is simple. The great Thomists teach us two things: first, that we must immerse ourselves in the texts of Thomas, of Aristotle, and of the great commentators; and secondly, that we must ever put the assimilated doctrine to new uses. In this dual sense, we should make Maritain's motto our own: "Woe to me if I do not Thomisticize."