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Democracy and Philosophy: On Yves R. Simon and Mortimer J. Adler

"Then, as the saying goes, 'let a man stand by his brother.' "

—Socrates

I

It is only natural to praise Mortimer J. Adler and Yves R. Simon for that lifelong dedication to truth and the common good evident in their work.

Anyone privileged to work personally with them, and to learn from them, could not help but notice close at hand the traits that help account for the quality of their work. One could see native intelligence, a determination to learn and to teach, and intellectual integrity, all of a high order.

I consider myself fortunate to have been able to study with Mr. Simon, as a graduate student in the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago, and with Mr. Adler, as an associate in the ambitious Paideia program he has developed for secondary education in this country.

II

It is reassuring that these two admirable men should have been able, during their long association, to acknowledge each other's merits.

Whatever differences they had as students of philosophy, the things they agreed upon separated them widely from most of their contemporaries in departments of philosophy and political science in this country and abroad.

Both Mr. Simon and Mr. Adler, in their political works, celebrate the democratic faith. They are very much moderns in this as in other respects. In speaking about them together on this occasion, I may not always speak precisely about either of them. Those who know their work will know as

well what needs to be said to modify, in applying to each of them, the things I say further on in these remarks about the type of contemporary theorist of democratic thought that each of them somewhat represents.

III

Both Mr. Simon and Mr. Adler are Thomists. As such, they are respectful of Aristotle. Also, both go beyond Thomism when they praise democracy as the best form of government, at least for the modern world.

We need do little more than mention on this occasion certain critical differences between these two men, on the one hand, and most of their contemporaries, on the other—contemporaries who confidently proclaim that we now know that there are no absolutes and contemporaries who consider it fashionable to insist that one man's vulgarity may be another man's lyric. The most popular alternative approaches, at least in academic circles, to the Adler-Simon approach seem now to be intellectually bankrupt: positivism, relativism, perhaps also historicism. Most participants in this Symposium are apt to regard the Adler-Simon natural-right or natural-law approach as more attractive than the more popular approaches of our day.

An intriguing feature, at least for me, of the Adler-Simon approach, which is so respectful of both Thomas and the ancients, is the massive difference developed by this approach from the greatest of the ancients with respect to political things, a difference which Mr. Simon and Mr. Adler recognize. I presume to suggest that this difference, to which I will turn directly, may depend upon the modern failure to appreciate the depth and subtlety of the ancients. In particular, there may be a failure today to recognize that the ancients did see for what it was worth the good to be found in democracy. Thus, the refusal of the ancients to regard democracy as the very best form of government may not be due, as the contemporary democrat tends to believe, to the limited and limiting circumstances of the ancients. History may be far less important here than the contemporary democrat believes it to be.

IV

A critical problem is implicit in what has already been noticed about the obvious dedication of Mr. Adler and Mr. Simon to both truth and the common good. We can put aside as not decisive here the Scriptural assurance that "you shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free." How that assurance is to be taken depends on what kind of truth is referred to and on what being set free means.

Of course, truth and the common good do go together, but not all the time or all the way. One must wonder whether the contemporary

democratic theorist is equipped, intellectually and, even more, temperamentally, to deal with the significant divergences sometimes encountered between truth and the common good. On the other hand, another modern, Thomas Hobbes, recognized that even true philosophy, which he himself espoused, can pose a threat to the common good, and when it does its public expression may properly be curtailed by the ruler who knows what he is doing.

A reminder of the occasional divergence possible between truth and the common good calls to mind the Platonic recourse to the noble lie. Democrats, however, are reluctant to think through the implications of the philosopher's rhetoric, such rhetoric as is obviously employed by Socrates, Plato, and Xenophon, less obviously but nevertheless employed also by Aristotle and Cicero. This reluctance can leave decent democrats prey to those among us who manipulate "communications"—to those, that is, who take readily to deception and hence are not adverse to using ignoble lies.

Among the things that the ancient philosophers believed to be true was the proposition that the many are "constitutionally" unable to grasp all truths that the thoughtful can. That inability contributes to the hostility that the many can be expected to show from time to time toward those who dare to speak certain truths. That inability also contributes to the ability of the unscrupulous to exploit the innocent and to destroy the good. (All this, I should at once add, is aside from, although not unrelated to, the problems derived from the tension between reason and revelation.)

The most thoughtful minds—that is, the true philosophers—depend upon a firm and reliable grasp of nature. It is in large part because of natural differences among men, the ancients argued, that not all can profit in the same way from the truth.

Nature is much more complicated here than the modern democrat believes. For one thing, nature points to a critical difference between superior and inferior. One implication of that difference is the possibility of the existence of the natural slave, an implication which can so arouse the hostility of moderns that they are tempted to repudiate the very recognition of natural differences that that possibility reflects.

Of course, a recognition of natural slavery does not legitimate—indeed, it can even undermine the case for—conventional slavery, which is what almost all slavery has always been. But the proper abhorrence of conventional, or institutionalized, slavery helps turn democrats away from anything that acknowledges natural differences among human beings. The intelligent democrat must concede that some differences may become significant, but they are explained away as due to nurture, not nature. It should be appreciated that although nurture may well account for many

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differences among people over the centuries, that may not be the whole story.

V

I return now more specifically to Mr. Adler and Mr. Simon in my effort to consider further the modern democrat.

A key element in Mr. Simon's account of politics is *conscience*; a key element for Mr. Adler is the *common sense* of politics. I have the impression that they are looking at the same "phenomena" or are depending upon the same premises in their respective invocations of conscience and common sense. Although Mr. Adler rarely uses the term "conscience," he does work with "common sense" somewhat the way Mr. Simon does with "conscience" in making judgments about the good life and the good society.

It is instructive to notice that one does not find in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* any term that should properly be translated as *conscience*. Perhaps *thumos* had in it some of the compulsion that we associate with *conscience*. But that which we call conscience seems to have waited upon the emergence of Christianity for its decisive manifestation. In Aristotle's *Politics* that which we call *common sense* is somewhat limited, influenced as it is by the not altogether reliable opinions of the people at large. Political philosophy, as a reasoned account of the nature of political things and the right social order, goes beyond what common sense offers. It seems to be more, or at least something other, than the refinement of common sense that Mr. Adler speaks of. He observes that "everybody through common sense is knowledgeable about what good all men should pursue." But what is the status for common sense of that radical pursuit of truth for its own sake that philosophy, and hence political philosophy, depends upon?

Whatever the difference in terms used by Mr. Adler and Mr. Simon, they seem to agree that the more decent moderns have an improved awareness of what justice calls for in social relations. But, it can be wondered, is the general awareness itself improved or is it merely that conditions are now better for applying standards of justice that thoughtful men have always been aware of?

Mr. Adler and Mr. Simon seem also to agree that it can be useful to refine the natural openness of the human being to justice. Instruction is called for and it is that which they have supplied again and again in an effort to help democrats secure more thoroughly that which they really want.

The differences in the terms used by Mr. Simon and Mr. Adler reflect their distinctive points of departure. One, firmly grounded in his religious heritage, makes much of *conscience*; the other, moved by intense intellec-

tual interests since his youth, makes much of *common sense*. Both are persuaded that moderns are more sensitive to certain moral and social issues, and particularly that the moderns can appreciate, to an extent or in a way that the ancients could not, the natural equality of all men.

One consequence of this heightened respect for the equality of all men is to undermine the legitimacy of measuring one person by another—and this in turn leads to making much of, or at least putting up more with, what each person happens to be. That is, individuality becomes critical, something evident in the list of things that Mr. Simon extols in the closing lines of his *Philosophy of Democratic Government*: “communion with universal nature, the conquest of time through everlasting faithfulness, temperance, dignity in poverty, holy leisure, contemplation.” It is the individual who is very much in view at the end of this treatise on politics, not the citizen. Similarly, Mr. Adler concludes his treatise, *The Common Sense of Politics*, by holding out hope of “progress toward fulfilling the capacities for understanding and wisdom, for friendship and love, that are the distinctive powers of the human mind and spirit.”

Aristotle's *Politics*, on the other hand, concludes with an extended discussion of the music appropriate in the training of citizens. Thus, the perspective of the political is retained to the end, whatever the moral purposes (as indicated at the end of the *Ethics*) for turning to the *Politics* in the first place. Modernity is characterized, in part, by the tendency to assign to the public life of a community the finest expectations of private life. This is in large part what the Enlightenment means.

VI

Is the ascendancy of the Enlightenment related to the decline of philosophy? The Enlightenment does seem to have contributed to the depreciation of the significance of natural differences among human beings—and hence to the depreciation of that very *nature* upon which philosophy depends.

A vigorous, even ruthless, exploitation of nature may be seen in modern technology, with its conquest of nature. It may be hard to take seriously as a guide that which is to be systematically conquered and exploited. Besides, technology has served to conceal significant natural differences among human beings, making much more instead of the many things that all human beings do have in common. One recalls the frontier pistol known as “the Old Equalizer.”

The democratization of philosophy, which the Enlightenment depends upon and encourages, may be seen in the titles of the two books I have drawn upon from Mr. Adler and Mr. Simon. To emphasize, as Mr. Adler does, the common sense of politics, however much that common sense

may be occasionally and temporarily refined by philosophy, is to take a democratic approach. It may be usefully compared to such observations as that by Socrates in the *Crito* where he assumes that the opinions of the many are as apt to be wrong as right. Even so, does not common sense instinctively respect the difference between the natural rulers and the natural ruled, however mistaken people may be at any particular time in identifying one or the other? This is not to deny that the fashionable doctrines of a regime can subvert this instinctive respect for the superior.

The democratization of philosophy is even more dramatic in the title of Mr. Simon's book. No one in antiquity, I dare say, would have spoken of any "philosophy of democratic government." Aristotle in his *Politics* spells out the opinions that democrats hold, opinions which seem to be as much in need of correction as those held by oligarchs. Neither set of opinions is considered by him to be philosophical.

The Adler-Simon approach reflects, then, a democratization of the very study of politics—a democratization, perhaps, of political philosophy itself. Such democratization can keep scholars not as gifted as Mr. Simon and Mr. Adler from becoming aware of how perceptive true philosophy can be and how rare the true philosopher is. And this, I have suggested, contributes to the contemporary failure to recognize how much the ancients anticipated the implications of democratic theory, not needing to see them spelled out in action as conditions changed.

VII

Various questions raised by our inquiry remain for further consideration, including whether both the Enlightenment and technology can be safely exploited in the decades ahead. It may be that both have to be risked, considering the size and the complexity we have permitted modern societies to assume. But does not this also mean that the Enlightenment and Technology make truly independent communities on a human scale virtually impossible in the modern world? If so, have we not had to settle for inferior forms of government? Unfortunately, the modern democrat is not likely to be equipped, either by training or by temperament, to take this question and its implications seriously.

The steadily increasing recourse to individuality and privacy in this century may be an instinctive, however self-defeating, response to the growing awareness that the modern form of social organization is not well suited to the natural capacities of human beings. I say "self-defeating" because intermittent despotisms, benevolent or otherwise, lie along the path upon which we are stumbling. Only if we are properly aware of our limitations can we hope to make the best of our situation.

Be all this as it may, we can see in the humane careers of Yves R. Simon

and Mortimer Adler the blessings that modernity, with its democratization of everyday life, *can* offer. That is, we see what can happen in those times and places that permit natural talents, no matter how modest their social origins, to develop and flourish. We are all beneficiaries of this development, especially those of us privileged to take advantage of the conscientious work of these two scholars.