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Metaphysical Foundations of Freedom In the Social and Political Thought Of Yves R. Simon

What is freedom? This is a perennial question in the history of philosophical thought. Any attempt to give it a clear-cut answer always results in the kind of perplexity that St. Augustine discovered when asked, "What is time?"¹ We often use the word "freedom" in our daily discourse and endeavors, yet when asked what we mean by it, we find it hard to explain. Common usage of the notion of freedom shows this ambiguity. For example, nations have gone to war claiming to defend freedom, and what to others appears as aggression has been justified as support for "freedom fighters." Children have absconded from families in search of freedom, and marriages have broken up on account of denials of or demands for freedom. The feminist movement has been described as a phenomenon reflecting a search for freedom by women. People have served time in prison for defending freedom. In the face of these confusing attitudes regarding freedom, one is lead to wonder not only what is "freedom," but also whether freedom is possible at all, and what the conditions are of its possibility.

In response to these metaphysically grounded questions, scholars in the behavioral sciences (like Herbert Spencer, Sigmund Freud, and B.F. Skinner), who, in the wake of the modern reaction against metaphysical

¹St. Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, trans. and ed. John K. Ryan, 2 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1960), 2: 287.

and non-empirical knowledge, attempted to apply the strict deterministic laws of the physical sciences to human studies, have argued that there is no such thing as freedom, since all human actions must necessarily have causes. For them, talking about freedom is talking about an illusion. But, as Antonio Moreno points out, even their theory, i.e., interpretation of physical realities, is nothing but an exercise in freedom of choice among several possible hypotheses.² Einstein, too, admitted that the fundamental principles of physics "cannot be extracted from experience but must be freely invented."³ These assertions by physical scientists point to the fact that even with scientific determinism there is still a way of acting that supports our sense of freedom.

Among those who defend the reality of freedom in human society, we find thinkers like P.J. Proudhon, J. Rousseau, K. Marx, R.P. Wolf, and others, who, because they want absolute freedom for the individual, call for a society without political authority. But others, like Jacques Maritain, Yves R. Simon, Mortimer Adler, Robert Neville, and R.T. DeGeorge, take a more moderate view of the relation between the individual and society and defend freedom within social bounds.⁴

Yves R. Simon's special contribution consists in his formulation of the basic metaphysical assumptions in which the notion of freedom is grounded. As he sees it, freedom is not opposed to authority and determination, for these actually provide the framework for its authentication. In this paper, I propose to examine Simon's explanation of this complex relationship between freedom and authority. My approach will be more of an interpretive exercise than a critical review.

Yves R. Simon first made public his ideas about freedom in his Aquinas lecture at Marquette University in 1940, in which he argued emphatically that "social happiness depends on the felicitous combination of authority and freedom" (NF 1). In all his works after then, he consistently maintained that freedom is an essential element in human sociability and that, far from opposing each other, in their essential relation authority and freedom are complementary.

²Antonio Moreno, "The Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle and Free Will," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 1 (1976): 14.

³Albert Einstein, *Essays in Science*, trans. A. Harris (New York: Philosophical Library, 1934), 17.

⁴For philosophical discussions on the nature, structure, and scope of freedom in this tradition, see George McLean, ed., *Freedom: Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* (1976).

In the 1940 Aquinas lecture, Simon defined freedom as the power to choose among the means to a proper end. He argued that freedom takes place in deliberate actions rather than by chance, that freedom is experienced when we feel we dominate a situation. Thus, for Simon, freedom is mastery—the mastery that is attained when the will is infallibly directed toward man's ultimate end. Contained in this notion of mastery are the intrinsic elements of freedom that Simon describes as *superdetermination, autonomy, and free choice* (FC 158).

I. Superdetermination

Freedom as superdetermination is characterized by a unidirectional choice. To understand what this means, we must take note of the two types of freedom that Simon distinguishes, namely, initial freedom and terminal freedom. Initial freedom is the capacity of choosing either the good or the bad, while terminal freedom is the disposition that enables one to choose the good only. This means that while initial freedom, which is sometimes called free choice, contains the possibility of error, terminal freedom, which is the true *freedom of choice*, excludes the possibility of error. It is this terminal freedom that Simon says is metaphysically inseparable from autonomy. Commenting on Simon's notion of terminal freedom, Clarke Cochran notes that for Simon freedom consists in the superdetermination that enables man to choose the proper means to his end from the variety available to him. It depends on the possession of virtue and strength of character, which allow him to keep what is good and good for him clearly in view.⁵

As a supreme example of a superdetermined freedom, Simon points to the absolute freedom of God, which proceeds from the absolute necessity of the divine perfection, the absolute necessary achievement of the divine Being. Something like this is also true of human endeavors, for every accomplished virtue guarantees its own performance. For example, to have prudence means not only to know what is right, but actually doing the right thing. In other words, chosen and guided by prudence, our actions are superdetermined. The freedom of choosing is not taken away. On the contrary, when there is no longer any possibility of making a wrong choice, freedom is exalted.

The crucial point to bear in mind here is that the end as such is not the object of choice. Choice, *electio*, is concerned with means. Since freedom is

⁵Clarke E. Cochran, "Authority and Freedom: The Democratic Philosophy of Yves R. Simon," *Interpretation* 6:2 (1977): 111.

manifested in the power of choosing the means within the limits defined by the end, any condition that puts the end itself at risk is profoundly in conflict with the very essence of freedom and being. This is why Simon says that “the most serious imperfection of human freedom lies in its ability to choose evil” (FAC 41). Anything, therefore, that removes the possibility of a wrong choice and enhances firm adherence to the end—*bonum in communi*—represents an unqualified improvement of the will and the freedom of the individual. For example, in submitting to legitimate authority, the predominant inclination of the will no longer conflicts but spontaneously agrees with the precepts of law, and the law becomes interior to the will. In such a case, as Maritain has argued, terminal freedom becomes both freedom of choice and autonomy (FMW chap. 1).

Simon holds that freedom is promoted by any social environment that gives the individual “more firmness, more cool-headedness, more self-control, more clear-sightedness, a more lucid insight into his own aspirations and the end he has to pursue” (FAC 41). And just as the personal freedom of choice is exalted by the removal of the indifference of potentiality, so the freedom of the group is exalted by the suppression of the disorderly forces that tend to impair a resolute course in common action. Thus, the interiorization of the law is as valuable to the social body as it is to the individual. Simon writes:

Just as an individual person, through virtue, protects himself against the risk of making wrong choices, so a group, a society or a political body may effectively strengthen its loyalty to the common good by incorporating into its legal structure, its customs, uses, and collective beliefs, tendencies spontaneously agreeing with the common good (FAC 46).

In other words, the common good as the end of common action and of law becomes the superdetermined source of freedom for the community as well as the individual.

The questions that are likely to be raised here are, “But does not such superdetermination represent actually an infringement on freedom? How can internal direction of an autonomous person be compatible with direction by an external authority?” Simon solves this dilemma by arguing that an autonomous person, because he accepts the precedence of the common good over his particular good, interiorizes both the law and the authority that aim at the common good. Thus, the traffic regulations or tax laws, rather than being external commands or sanctions, represent for such a person but the normal embodiments of a moral obligation to support the common good. In the case of a political society, it is this commitment to the common good that makes the citizens freely accept the authority of the government at the same time as that government safeguards the

autonomy and freedom of the citizens. For it is only when the citizens are free that they can become creative, innovative, and better disposed to serve the community effectively. An ultimate commitment to the common good and the human end is thus revealed as a superdetermined source of human freedom, and we come to understand that without a fundamental commitment to the common good and human vocation, there is no true freedom.

II. Autonomy

In the context of our discussion, autonomy may be defined as the climax of a process of interiorization of the law of being (*FAC* 15; *CF* 30). While similar to the Kantian notion,⁶ this understanding of autonomy is by no means the same as Kant's. The big difference is that in Kant the autonomous law is of the self exclusively, whereas Simon allows for the possibility of an external law being recognized and interiorized by the self. This interiorization takes place when a human being, in the exercise of his rationality, wills and chooses the proper means that lead to his or her rational end as a human being. When this happens, the person is said to be self-governed or exercising autonomy.

Metaphysically speaking, a person is radically composed of two elements, namely, the subsistent individual and his or her rational soul. These two elements have led to two interpretations of autonomy. One is characterized by an emphasis on the individuality of the person and inevitably leads to the spirit of arbitrariness. The other is characterized by an emphasis on the rationality of human nature and leads firmly to the appreciation of its laws. For example, what is called natural law is divine law as revealed by reason, and man-made laws, if they are to be just, must reflect that natural law. A person, then, is said to exercise autonomy in his or her free choice of a proper means to a rational end. In a further explanation, Simon distinguishes between absolute autonomy and relative autonomy. An absolute autonomy is attained when an agent is said to be identical with its law. This is the kind of autonomy that Kant advocates. But this, Simon says, applies only to God. In the case of relative autonomy, which is proper to human persons, an agent is autonomous when its law, without being identical with its being, dwells in it and governs it from within, so that the spontaneous inclinations of the agent coincide with the exigencies of the law (*FAC* 18). This is the kind of autonomy attainable by created ra-

⁶Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Lewis W. Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1980), 30.

tional beings. It has the character of a vocation, a conquest, or a terminal accomplishment. In other words, when a person has, through rational endeavors, achieved a state of choosing only means that would lead to true human good, he is said to be self-dependent, self-governed, and autonomous. When the choice is made in accordance with human vocation, autonomy is perfected.

III. Freedom of Choice

The expression "freedom of choice" has at least two meanings. In one sense, it implies that the choice is free from impediments or coercion and is made between alternatives. But, for Simon, this type of choice has only the character of an initial and rather illusory freedom. For this sense of freedom of choice contains the possibility of making a wrong as well as a right choice with regard to the means to our desired end. Simon writes:

Freedom is the power to make a choice between the means offered to our activity. Now, there are authentic means, those which lead to the end, and illusory means, those which lead us away from our end. Freedom to choose illusory means is itself only an illusion of freedom, for a means which does not lead to the end is not a means (*FAC* 4).

A bad means leads us away from our supreme end and is thus not a means in the true sense of the word, since it does not lead to the proper end. To remove the possibility of a bad choice, therefore, is, for Simon, "to liberate free will from a deceitful appearance and to restore to it its genuine object—the veritable means, the means which leads to the end" (*FC* 106). The possibility of a choice that excludes the choice of a wrong means is thus the second and more profound meaning of freedom of choice.

This second sense of freedom of choice, which precludes the possibility of error or falsehood, Simon calls "terminal freedom." It is a free choice properly so called, because the volition of the end contains the choice of the means. Here, the predominant inclinations of the will no longer conflict, but spontaneously agree with the precepts of the law that has become interior to the will. The choice in this instance, Simon says,

proceeds not from any weakness, any imperfection, any feature of potentiality on the part of the agent but, on the contrary, from a plenitude of being and an abundance of determination, from an ability to achieve mastery over diverse possibilities and from a strength of constitution which makes it possible to attain one's end in a variety of ways (*FC* 153).

For Simon, then, it is the adherence to the true means that perfects freedom of choice precisely as free choice. This is the point that he insists must be understood, if we are to understand the metaphysics of his theory of freedom. Thus based on the distinction between illusory freedom and

authentic freedom, false means and true means, initial freedom and terminal freedom, his ontological framework persuasively accommodates individual autonomy with political authority in the service of the community.

Within this structure, authority is seen both as an independent act and as a means to freedom, while freedom is understood as necessarily calling for the exercise of authority. And what may have at first appeared as enigmatic assertions now make perfect sense: "The more definitely a community is directed toward its common good and protected from disunity in its common action, the more perfect and the more free it is" (*PDG* 141). And so Simon is able to conclude that "what we find at the core of the most essential function of authority is that autonomy renders authority necessary and authority renders autonomy possible" (*PDG* 71). In other words, authority and freedom, rather than being opposed to each other, are connected by complementary and constitutive relations. At the ontological level, there is no question of the priority of one over the other, because they are mutually constitutive. This constitutive character is found already in individual autonomy. For only an autonomous and free person is capable of exercising authority. If there is no freedom, there can be no authority; and if there were no authority, freedom would not be known to exist.

This interpretation cannot but have a salutary effect in the modern world, where the notion of freedom has been for the most part grossly misconstrued. Our freedom and autonomy are grounded ontologically in our individuality. But Simon correctly reminds us that our freedom and autonomy as rational persons are authenticated and perfected only through interiorization of just laws: divine, natural, or human. This is the kind of understanding that should make everyone realize the value of being free citizens. For it is only the truly free individual who can be both creative and law abiding. Thus, constitutional governments that guarantee freedom for their citizens will not only be respected; they will also prosper. Moreover, freedom and authority so understood will reveal forms of governments and institutions as instruments and mediating structures for self-government, freedom, and autonomy for lesser communities as well as individuals. And such enhanced shared responsibility and respectability among citizens belonging to different groups could even spill over into relations among nations. And then the whole world would come to understand that freedom as well as authority is a necessary condition of human development and progress.