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Yves Simon's Understanding of Aristotle
Some comments

ABSTRACT: *Yves Simon was among the prominent Catholic political philosophers who worked for many years at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana. In many of his writings, the most important references point to the teaching of Jacques Maritain; however, Aristotle's political philosophy plays a significant role in Simon's view of democracy as well. In my paper I offer an overview of the Aristotelian elements in Simon's works and attempt to identify the kind of scholarly reading of Aristotle Simon consistently applied.*

KEYWORDS: *Yves Simon, Jacques Maritain, Aristotle, democracy, Catholic political philosophy, Natural Law*

1. SIMON AND MARITAIN ON ARISTOTLE

Yves Simon belongs to those important scholars who contributed to the emergence of the University of Notre Dame as a leading Catholic University in the US. Although Simon's activity as a professor of Notre Dame ended in 1948 when he moved to the University of Chicago, his connections to Notre Dame remained alive. He lived in South Bend during the subsequent years and, as Anthony O. Simon told me in one of our personal conversations some years ago, he travelled by train to Chicago once a week for two or three days. Simon continued to co-operate with Notre Dame professors and, among other activities, contributed to *The Review of Politics* until his passing away in 1961.

As James A. McAdams summarily writes of Simon's oeuvre,

> Although he was reluctant to allow his personal faith to intermingle with his political writings, Simon became recognized internationally for his adaptation of the teachings of leading Catholic thinkers, such as Aquinas, to contemporary concerns such as opposing fascism and promoting democracy. He was a strong believer that democratic citizenship requires education in basic values. While an interest in practical issues ran through all of his scholarship, he also displayed an ability to

> comment on a dazzling array of philosophical issues, including the nature of free choice, the limits of reason, the pursuit of happiness, and mind-body problems. (McAdams 2007. 394)

One of the "leading Catholic thinkers" referred to in the above quotation was Simon's mentor Jacques Maritain, his professor at the Institut Catholique in Paris during the 1920's. Maritain's dynamic Thomism determined that of Simon's in many ways although not in every aspect, for example, their approaches to Aristotle differ. It is a notable lacuna of Maritain's works that he rarely deals with Aristotle in his own right; rather, he offers Thomistic interpretations of Aristotle from time to time. To have a balanced view of Maritain's reading of Aristotle, we need to analyse carefully his works, such as the *Introduction to Philosophy*, in which Aristotle is often mentioned and an entire chapter is dedicated to his thought.

In a general sense, we may say that Maritain lets the reader see Aristotle in a double frame of reference: on the one hand, Aristotle is the most outstanding ancient philosopher by virtue of his genius and works; after Plato's contributions, he is the real founder of genuine philosophy. On the other hand, Aristotle's thought was thoroughly transformed by an even more eminent genius, Thomas Aquinas, into the most perfect philosophy ever to be attained by the human mind. Due to this outlook, Maritain does not attempt to give a detailed account of Aristotelian thought in the context of the Stagirite's age and culture, but considers him in the perspective of Thomas Aquinas, and especially in the perspective of the Thomistic revival of his age.[1]

In a general sense, Yves Simon also follows the Scholastic, and especially the Neo-Thomistic interpretation of Aristotle along the lines he found in the works of Maritain. Nevertheless, Simon is not just a faithful follower of Maritain. He exemplifies a different type of thinker, a careful, perhaps less systematic, yet a very accurate kind of researcher who is never satisfied with an abstract view of a philosopher or a period. It is a consequence of Simon's different character as a philosopher that he shows more caution in interpreting Aristotle in conformity with Neo-Thomism. Simon attempts to look behind the interpretations, so he explores Aristotle's original texts and the scholarly work on the thought of Aristotle. Thus he does not only use the original Greek texts in understanding Aristotle's points, but criticises such scholars as for instance W. D. Ross.

It is therefore an interesting task to see Simon's relationship to Aristotle's thought. Just as other Thomists, Simon ubiquitously uses Aristotelian notions in his works. But there are some important junctures where Simon carefully

[1] As Maritain writes in the introduction, "My chief aim in composing an *Elements of Philosophy* series, to which this book may serve as an introduction, is to give a faithful presentation of the system of Aristotle and St. Thomas…" (Maritain 1947. 8).

reflects on Aristotle's thought on the basis of the original works and develops an interpretation instrumental to his own understanding of philosophical matters. In what follows, I shall investigate three such fields in Simon's work natural law, government, and moral philosophy.

2. ARISTOTLE IN SIMON'S THEORY OF NATURAL LAW

Simon's understanding of natural law reveals the approach of a scholar at home in more than one philosophical culture. In a long passage of *The Tradition of Natural Law*, his masterpiece on the subject (Simon 1992), Simon demonstrates a historical and linguistic sensitivity so important in mapping out philosophical issues. Simon specifies two important points: On the one hand, he refers to the epoch-making change in the meaning of the expression "right" during the 17–18th centuries, when the meaning of right in the objective sense (right is what satisfies a prescription or a rule) assumed the meaning of right as that which gives sufficient ground to claim something, for instance some material or intellectual good (Simon 1992. 120). On the other hand, Simon realises that what we call "law" in English, such as in "natural law," is expressed by a different word in other languages, such as *Recht*, *droit*, or *diritto*. In Latin, we distinguish between *ius* and *lex*, in Greek between *dikaion* and *nomos*. In English *ius* is uniformly translated as "law." As he observes, "This famous particularity of the English legal language has probably exercised considerable influence on the Anglo-Saxon way of thinking about juridical (or legal) matters." (Simon 1992. 119). Simon does not explore the full scale of the difficulties inherent in this particularity, but he certainly demonstrates a unique sensitivity to how deeply philosophical issues are entangled with linguistic-conceptual developments.[2]

Thus it comes as no surprise that Simon shows a strong interest in the original meaning of some important Greek terms within the tradition of natural law. One characteristic paragraph dealing with the problem of natural law is proposed by Aristotle. Simon quotes the famous passage from the *Rhetoric* where Aristotle refers to "natural justice and injustice," a law "binding on all men," by citing Antigone' words: "Not of to-day or yesterday it is, But lives eternal: none can date its birth." (Quoted by Simon 1992. 131). Simon gives particular attention to a clause in Aristotle which appears in the sentence mentioned above: "For there is, as every one to some extent divines, a natural justice and injustice that is binding on all men […]" *(ibid*, 131). Simon goes back to the Greek text

[2] As a non-native American, here Simon was able to recognise an important feature of the Anglo-American mind, the readiness to view the world as a compound of particulars which can be known by observing and disentangling all the individual issues and their compositions. The negative side of this attitude is a general skepticism about wholes and syntheses.

and points out that Aristotle uses the expression ὃ μαντεύονται πάντες in the above quotation where the verb μαντεύονται is translated as "divines." Suggesting that the verb has a more concrete sense than "to perceive through sympathy or intuition" *(ibid*, 132), Simon makes the meaning more precise, and concludes that "No doubt, Aristotle in this passage maintains that natural law is known by inclination." *(ibid*, 132) Whether we agree with Simon's interpretation of μαντεύονται or not, so much is evident that Simon strives to reach an understanding of Aristotle based on a careful reading of the original text. Μαντεύονται may not factually mean "intuition by inclination," but may refer to a phenomenon we call conscience today. For Simon, however, the use of the term and the strength of the point raised by Aristotle serve as a springboard to argue for the naturalness of natural law in human beings.

We find a similar procedure with respect to such important terms as God, nature, or free choice. It is especially notable that Simon insists on the teaching of the plurality of natures by Aristotle; in interpreting Aristotle's notion of nature, he does not only investigate some original loci, but gives a short historical overview of the notion of nature from antiquity to modernity (Simon 1992. 45–46). He points out the tremendous importance of the Aristotelian concept of the plurality of natures since, without viewing things in this way, it would not be possible to speak of natural law as a hierarchy or dynamism with beginnings and ends, with intentions and with distinctions in value *(ibid*, 51–52). Natural law in Simon's understanding is dynamic, that is to say, progressive, and allows us to build up an ever more appropriate understanding of its functioning by means of the development of science, technology, morality, and philosophy. This is an Aristotelian conclusion, according to Simon, which is made possible by the inherent teleology of things, a natural advancement.

3. ARISTOTLE IN SIMON'S PHILOSOPHY OF DEMOCRACY

The second example of Simon's keen understanding and use of Aristotle is given in his works on political philosophy. Interestingly, his main work on the subject, *Philosophy of Democratic Government* (Simon 1993) contains only a few, even though substantial, references to Aristotle. His other works, such as *A General Theory of Authority* (Simon 1980), mention Aristotle's thought more frequently. Simon's political philosophy attempts to reach a synthesis between authority and democracy, between a traditional conception of politics based on the notion of order and the modern understanding of politics based on the notion of individual freedom.

Here we face a common feature of Simon's terminology: he uses important terms, which go back to Aristotle, in the sense given to these terms throughout the history of ideas. Such a term is for instance "prudence" or practical wisdom which Simon analyses insightfully. In the *Philosophy of Democratic Government* as well as

in *A General Theory of Authority*, Simon distinguishes individual prudence from prudence in leadership of a community and he points out the latter's connection to the problem of the unity of political action (Simon 1980. 37 sq; Simon 1993. 28 sq.). On the theoretical level, however, Simon offers a perceptive analysis of the peculiar nature of practical knowledge as described by Aristotle. As he opines,

> The problem with which we are now concerned is whether what holds for scientific propositions holds also for those practical propositions which rule the action of a multitude […] If the certainty of science demands that the scientific object should possess the kind and degree of necessity that is found in universal essences alone, it seems that practical knowledge admits of no certainty, for human practice takes place in the universe of the things that can be otherwise than they are. (Simon 1993. 21)

Here Simon refers to the classical passages in Chapter 6 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* which defines practical truth as truth in agreement with right desire. However, this does not give the key to the "mystery of prudence," as Simon calls it, for in the case of an individual the practical decision is dependent on various factors which are difficult to identify. In the case of a community, however, it is "the common good" which should govern political action.

The notion of "the common good" is again of Aristotelian origin (as so often, with Plato in the background). In *A General Theory of Authority* – a book we published in Hungarian a few years ago (Simon 2004) – Simon refers to the *Nicomachean Ethics* and quotes the famous sentence: "The common good is greater and more divine than the private good." (Simon 1980. 28–29, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094b; "ἀγαπητὸν μὲν γὰρ καὶ ἑνὶ μόνῳ, κάλλιον δὲ καὶ θειότερον ἔθνει καὶ πόλεσιν").[3] Simon goes on to comment on the meaning of θειότερον and suggests that it refers to the participation in the privilege of imperishability; human communities are the highest attainments of nature and are virtually immortal (Simon 1980. 29).

Simon uses an important passage from the *Politics*, too, where Aristotle repeats his thesis to the effect that human beings are political animals and they form a body politic with respect to their share of the common good they can thereby achieve (Simon 1993. 74; *Politics* 1278b: μέρος ἑκάστῳ τοῦ ζῆν καλῶς). This common good is the "good life" which belongs to the essence of the body politic. Now Simon analyses the notion of the common good in a rather formal fashion, that is to say, he does not describe the content of the common good but emphasises some of its structural features, such as, most importantly, its shared character:

[3] Simon uses the translation by W. D. Ross; in other translations, however, the text is more complicated.

> In order that a good be common, it does not suffice that it should concern […] several persons; it is necessary that it be of such nature as to cause, among those who pursue it and insofar as they pursue it, a common life of desire and action. (Simon 1993. 49)

The other feature Simon picks out is that the pursuing of the common good renders authority necessary. Simon's all examples, such as a football game, a team of workers, and the operations of an army, possess characteristic goods in common, even one common good which defines their common action. Yet in all cases the presence of a certain authority is required, just as in the case of contracts the validity of which calls for a higher authority than the contracting partners. That is to say, as Simon suggests in a Kantian fashion, certain states of affairs in human situations logically and practically *presuppose* the existence of authority as the key function of these states of affairs. Even two-party or multi-party liberal democracies require the existence of authority in a number of forms, such as laws, constitution, political bodies checking and balancing the power of the representatives of the political majority in decision making. It is not my aim here to develop Simon's notion of authority in more detail and argue for a notion of authority higher than its function in a community; suffice it to say that Simon's notion of authority points to an Aristotelian origin again.

In order that a society realises the common good, political unity is required. Unity is needed in action towards the common good (in the order of means), and it is also needed as the most important element of the common good itself (in the order of ends). The unity of the common good, according to Aristotle, cannot be realised by many governing principles; Aristotle quotes the famous line from Homer, and Simon gives a special emphasis to this quotation: "The world, however, refuses to be governed badly. »The rule of the many is not good; one ruler let there be.«" (Simon 1993. 35; *Metaphysics*, 1076 a: "οὐκ ἀγαθὸν πολυκοιρανίη: εἷς κοίρανος ἔστω").[4] However, this is not the Aristotelian view which Simon wants to put forward in a book on the philosophy of democracy; rather, Simon offers us Aristotle's anti-Platonic view of the best government which should be a *combination* of several political forms, such as monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. Still, authority is an important functional element of all forms of government. In various aspects of contemporary democratic societies, we need political forms recalling the content of these ancient expressions; and thus Simon agrees with Aristotle's lines in the *Politics*: "Some indeed say that the best constitution is a combination of all existing forms […]" (Simon 1993. 107; *Politics* 1265b).

The last example of Simon's use of Aristotle leads us to political ethics. According to Simon, Aristotle's ethics is political and his politics is ethical; and this

[4] This sentence served as one of the most important references in pre-Christian and Christian arguments for the importance of a political and ecclesiastical monarchy, as Erik Peterson pointed out in his essay about monotheism as a political problem (Peterson 1935).

proposition enjoys Simon's full consent (Simon 1980. 139–140). He even adds that "The best way to perceive the ethical character of politics is to realize fully the political character of ethics." (Simon 1980. 141). Most importantly, he understands authority as the guarantee and, at the same time, the accomplishment of the unity of ethics and politics.

4. ARISTOTLE IN SIMON'S MORAL THOUGHT

Thus if we want to say some words on Simon's understanding of Aristotle in matters of morality, the unity of ethics and politics is an excellent beginning. As I mentioned, Simon's dealing with Aristotle is far from being uncritical; when he wants to understand Aristotle's meaning, he usually goes back to the original Greek texts and offers not only a genuine reading but also a criticism of some translations, such as the received editions of W. D. Ross.

A good example is Simon's correction of Ross's translation of *hexis*, ἕξις as a "state of character." In the *Philosophy of Democratic Government*, Simon points out that the Greek word ἕξις was unintelligibly translated by W. D. Ross as "state of character." Simon proposes "habitus" as the right translation and even the Latin *habitus* should be rendered as habitus, and not as "habit" as A. C. Pegis has it in his influential translations of Thomas Aquinas's works (Pegis 1996). It may be worth mentioning here that the debate between Pagis and Simon, as the latter remarks, became less and less polite on this issue, until both sides decided to keep their own version.

On the other hand, Simon accepts W. D. Ross's translation of Aristotle's φρόνησις as "practical wisdom" in *The Definition of Moral Virtue* (Simon 1986. 96). Practical wisdom is an intellectual virtue in Aristotle's understanding since its duty is to utter judgment. On the other hand, φρόνησις is also a moral virtue since it directs human action. Simon's interpretation of φρόνησις is indeed insightful. As he explains, φρόνησις is an "absolute virtue," for it is a virtue of non-virtue: it is a virtue that contains no general pattern of insight and action, for it is characterised by uniqueness and contingency. Φρόνησις is the capacity to act in a unique situation in accordance with our best insights with the intention to reach a certain good in a way which is not predetermined or prescribed in any sense. No book, no information, no advice or example can help us to make the right decision in a situation when we need to act according to φρόνησις, "prudence."

Here Simon criticises Ross's translation of some sentences of Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Ross, after determining prudence as "a reasoned and true state of capacity to act with regard to human goods," goes on to translate Aristotle as follows: "But further, while there is such a thing as excellence in art, there is no such thing as excellence in wisdom." (Simon 1986. 98). Simon is right in pointing out that the clause "there is no such thing as excellence in wisdom" is

embarrassing. Simon censures the translation of ἀρετή as "excellence;" his reason is not that ἀρετή does not have the wider meaning of excellence but a more cogent one which underlines the translation's incapacity to render the original meaning of Aristotle. According to Simon,

> Aristotle's meaning is this: When you have art, you still need virtue to make a good human use of it; but if you need prudence, you do not need an extra virtue to make good use of it, because prudence, being a moral as well as an intellectual virtue, supplies this good use of itself. (Simon 1986. 98)

Moral virtue is not "a state of character," as Ross suggests, "concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i. e. the mean relative to us…" Rather, according to F. H. Peters's translation, which Simon prefers, "Virtue is a trained faculty of choice, the characteristic of which lies in moderation or observance of the mean relative to the persons concerned […]" (Simon 1986. 118).

These passages clearly show how original Simon's approach to Aristotle was. Indeed, he did not only follow Maritain in important overall questions, he did not only apply Thomas Aquinas's teachings on a variety of contemporary problems but was able to go back to the original texts and develop his own understanding of the original authors. This latter point is clearly shown by his *The Definition of Moral Virtue*, a book published 25 years after his passing away by Vukan Kuic. This work demonstrates that Simon was not only an excellent thinker upon the problems of democracy and authority, tradition and modernity; he was an eminent moral thinker as well who, by his original explorations of Aristotle, contributed to the renaissance of virtue ethics in the halls of the University of Notre Dame.

Simon's understanding of the main virtues – prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance –influenced the revival of virtue ethics in Anglo-American philosophy. It is especially remarkable that Simon was able to synthesise the position of an accurate classical scholar with his attachment to Thomism. For instance, as opposed to the later position taken by Alasdair MacIntyre, Simon not only emphasises the unity of virtues in Aristotle – focused on the virtue of prudence – but asserts the plurality and interdependence of virtues at the same time. Criticising Etienne Gilson's view, Simon see some positions of Aristotle as determining historical Aristotelianism throughout the centuries, beginning with the ancient authors through Aquinas and later Scholasticism to Franz Brentano, whom Simon considers an influential representative of important Aristotelian notions. No doubt, Simon saw himself as an Aristotelian too, for he criticises the Stoic conception of an absolute unity of virtues and proposes the Aristotelian notion of plurality and interdependence. Moreover, Simon was aware of the fact that it is not a turning back to the ancient idea of virtues that may help contemporary human beings to live a better life but rather the realisation of progress

in moral philosophy: a progress without which we are unable to find the right interpretation of moral life, natural law, or democratic government.

As James V. Schall formulated it some years ago,

> Simon remains an education in himself as well as someone who critically transmits us Aristotle and St. Thomas in the light of the various ways that they have been received, understood, or too often misunderstood during the past hundred years. (Schall 1998. 1)

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