

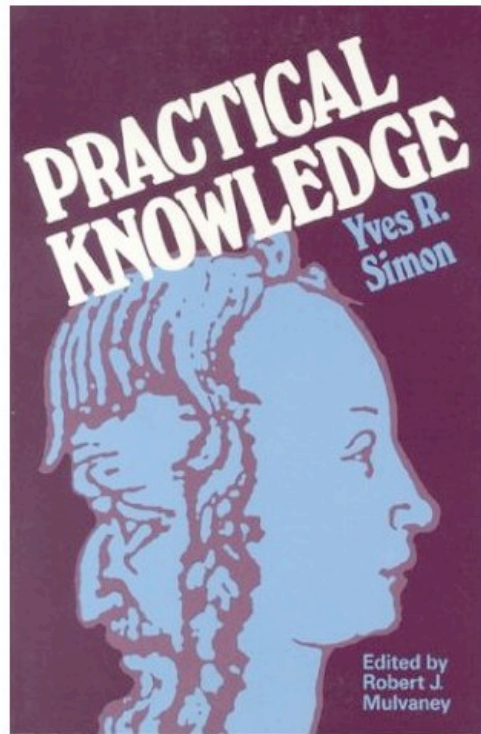
THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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EDITOR'S NOTE

The recent heartbreaking events on Mt. Hood, Oregon, called to mind Yves Simon's treatise on practical judgment—regarding risk taking—using mountain climbing as an exemplar.



THE ULTIMATE PRACTICAL JUDGMENT

Yves R. Simon

Our inquiry will be centered on an example, and the chosen example will be complex enough to exclude the illusions that simplicity might produce. Here is a true story: two geographers, who were also men of wisdom, had just heard of an accident in which several mountain climbers had died. Having no professional

interest in the exploration of mountains, I somewhat shyly remarked that it was perhaps unlawful to expose one's life to such dangers for no other purposes than those served by the climbing of a peak. To my surprise the geographers blamed as plainly unethical the recklessness of mountain climbers.

Let us imagine a dialogue on this moral issue, and follow the track of practical thought all the way down to action itself. One character in the dialogue says that the immorality of extreme risk is particularly obvious when a man is in charge of a family. This occasions the remark that even a bachelor is not master and possessor of his own life. At this point someone declares that, after all, every human action or abstention involves risks; the important thing is that the seriousness of the risk should never be out of proportion to the worthiness of the cause. Then the conversation turns to the purposes of mountain climbing.

To accept danger in the service of science is better than lawful, especially if the benefit expected for theoretical and applied knowledge is great. Thus, mountain climbers, before they decide to go on an expedition, have a duty to weigh the probability of gathering valuable information. Here it is pointed out that many times, in the history of science, discoveries resulted from investigations that looked unpromising; thus it would be good and desirable to climb mountains even without any definite expectation. But someone holds that the balance of wisdom is being disrupted, and says, with a bit of indignation, that you cannot endanger your life unless there is a strong indication that significant results are at hand. Tired of such insistence on the service of science, another person shrugs his shoulders: mountain climbers care little for the improvement of knowledge but enjoy the thrill of danger and the intoxication of accomplishment. An austere moralist stresses that such is the case indeed, and, in an impassioned tone, censures the lightheartedness that drives people to early death for the sake of what is no more than vainglory.

However, is there not something to be said in favor of the attraction that dangerous life often exerts on generous natures? For the service of society, it is all important that many persons, especially among the young, should face the supreme sacrifice with cheerful readiness. Dangers that look absurd, like those incurred by jockeys and car racers, by mountain climbers and circus performers, are socially beneficial inasmuch as they keep alive, in young people especially, a readiness to die without which society would suffer every day from softness and cowardice, and be exposed to betrayal in times of crisis. But it is replied that great

inconvenience attaches to any practice suggesting that human life is little valued. Bullfights have a bad reputation in this respect; they are said to foster disregard for man as well as cruelty toward animals.

The dialogue may go on for a long time without ceasing to be reasonable. Idle talk is not yet in sight. All that has been said so far is true, and much more truth can be relevantly voiced on the ethical problem raised by the dangers of mountain climbing. The statements made conflict with one another, yet this does not mean that any of them is false. They express contrasting aspects of the issue: precisely, a wise deliberation gives keen attention to contrasts, and the most important task of wisdom often is to preserve a multiplicity of goods in spite of their opposition.

So far, all the rules brought in are general in character and lie at a great distance from action. But consider the problem of a sportsman who has just been invited to join a team determined to ascend a challenging peak. For his deliberation to be faultless, all the propositions of the preceding dialogue must play a role though, perhaps, in merely virtual and implicit fashion. And many more particular questions are of essential relevance: granted that it is lawful to take some risk for the service of science and the glory of sportsmanship, what about the particularities of this individual case? Is the moment properly chosen? Whether we are or are not in the season of avalanches makes all the difference between foolishness and reasonableness. What about the guide? Is he experienced, serious-minded, temperate? How was his reputation established? By reliable witness or by hearsay? A conclusion is reached when and only when full assent is given to a judgment which, whether by affirmation or negation, immediately touches action. Let us suppose that this judgment is affirmative. The sportsman is equipped, walks toward his companions, and says, "Everything looks fine, fellows, I'll go with you." And off they go.

We were already definitely within the system of practical thought when we were pondering, at a rather high level of abstraction, such general duties as those concerning the preservation of one's life and the necessary readiness to accept death for a worthy cause. But the practical character of thought has obviously increased with the transition to more concrete subjects and to questions closer to the final decision. The ultimate degree of practicality is attained by the judgment which, except in the case of interference by some external force, cannot not be followed by action. Such is the command that a sportsman gives himself when he walks toward his companions and declares that he is ready to go. It is by the study of

the ultimate and ultimately practical judgment that we propose to establish the fundamentals of the theory of practical wisdom.

PRACTICAL JUDGMENT AS THE FORM OF ACTION

This judgment, metaphorically described as touching action immediately, is, in a direct, proper, and unqualified sense, the *form of action*. Therefore it is as practical as action itself.

The notion of form, though primarily relative to the explanation of physical change, retains here all its signification. Within a complex reality, the form is the component by reason of which the complex is what it is rather than anything else, by reason of which it belongs to a genus and a species rather than to any other genus and species. The act of determinately willing to do this—e.g., of willing to go on a mountain climbing expedition, not hypothetically, but factually and here and now—is what it is, is constituted in its identity, is distinguished from whatever it is not, by the ultimate practical judgment. A practical judgment is ultimate inasmuch as, all hypothetical considerations being transcended, it has the character of a command. Action and the judgment that commands it are no more external to each other than the marble statue and the shape by reason of which it is a statue of Hercules rather than one of Apollo. Action—I speak not of any action elicited by a human being, but of those distinctly human acts which proceed from rational apprehension, deliberation, and choice—includes the ultimate judgment by which it is determined, just as a physical thing includes the form that, by being present within it, causes it to be what it is.

There is such a significant contrast between thought and action that the notion of practical thought may seem to bear the character of a compromise; it looks like a lump made of principles that qualify each other and hold each other in check. Indeed, at a distance from the concrete, as in the case of a universal rule considered as universal, thought falls short of total practicality. But 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. To sum up, let it be said that the expression “the practical order” designates both action itself and practical thought. All practical judgments belong to the order of practical thought, but the ultimate one, and it alone among judgments, belongs also, intrinsically and necessarily, to the order of action. The ultimate practical judgment is the form of action and the final expression of thought in its practical function. Through it principles come to exist in the world of action.

The principle that deposits ought to be returned exists in my action through the command that I give myself as I write a check in the name of my creditor. Through the efficacy of the last practical judgment, practical principles come to possess in act the character of forms of action which, by their very constitution as practical principles, they tend to assume.

THE SYNTHESIS OF PRACTICAL JUDGMENT

The ultimate practical judgment involves a unique synthesis, namely, the putting together of a certain “that” and the act of existing. Indeed, a theoretical judgment may express, in a diversity of ways, the synthesis of essence and “to be”; it may express it as fictitious, as possible, as actual, and as present in actual experience. What is unique in the synthesis that the last practical judgment involves is its decisive weight, the actuality of the tendency that it conveys, the drive by which it carries a “that” toward the action of existing, in short, the unconditional fashion in which it unites the formal cause and the final cause, the object of cognition and the object of appetite. Let this synthesis be called the synthesis of realization, and let us remark that it determines, all the way down from the highest principles of the practical order, a synthetic behavior in sharp contrast with the ways of theoretical thought.

In order to understand what is meant by the traditional proposition that theoretical knowledge proceeds analytically and practical knowledge synthetically, we must go back to what is fundamental in the notion of analysis and in the characteristic features of theoretical thought. “Analysis” is often understood as a synonym of “decomposition” and often connotes the picture of things disjoined and scattered which offer to the mind only the dead parts of what used to be a splendid and living reality. It is analysis so understood that is scoffed at in the famous lines of Mephistopheles to the student:

Whoever wants to know and to describe
a living thing,

First endeavors to drive the spirit
out of it,

Then he has the parts in his hand,

But unfortunately the spiritual link
is missing.

These lines are an adequate motto for the many schools and trends of thought which, in the last three generations, have been reacting against the tendency toward universal resolution into elements: holism, vitalism, the Gestalt theory, intuitionism of various descriptions, pragmatism, *Charakterkunde*, the stream of consciousness of William James, the deep self of Bergson, the action of Blondel, the existentialism of Sartre, etc. Such indefatigable, never-ending reactions bear witness to the lasting foundation of that which is reacted against. Holistic philosophies are up against a power that will never acknowledge defeat, for, in spite of all shortcomings, it certainly holds its own in vast areas of research. It is of the greatest significance to determine whether the tendency toward universal decomposition into parts, which threatens to kill the unity of things, is an essential feature of theoretical science. That it characterizes demonstrative knowledge, science in the traditional and customary sense of the term, is a major tenet of Bergsonism; according to this philosophy, whose profound intention is not pragmatic but contemplative, real and living totalities are not apprehended, the spiritual link of things is irretrievably broken, and utilitarian bias remains in control of our approaches, as long as conceptual delineations, decompositions, distinctions, and abstractions are not transcended in intuitive insights akin and adequate to the primordial elan by which things come into being and are kept in motion.

Yet inasmuch as it characterizes theoretical science, analysis is primarily concerned, not with the relation of whole to part, but with the relation of effect to cause and of consequence to principle. To analyze, or to resolve, is to render a situation intelligible by tracing an effect to its cause or a consequence to its principle. But there are two reasons why analysis is often associated with a process of decomposition into parts. The first is that experience generally presents us with contingent aggregates that must be divided into their components in order to find the processes of essential causality which alone are explanatory. It commonly happens that these processes are not initially free from contingent associations and have to be isolated by our industry, both rational and experimental. Divisions, subdivisions, distinctions often subtle are so many operations preparatory to the analysis that is characteristic of theoretical thought.

When explanation follows the line of material causality, a new relation may appear between analysis and decomposition, for the parts are the material cause of the whole. The analysis of a thing into its material causes may coincide with its decomposition into

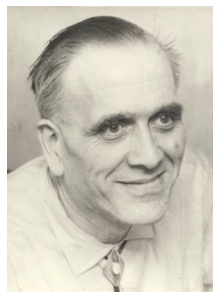
its parts. The notion of analysis will be more steadily associated with that of decomposition when material causes supply the prevalent method of explanation. Such was the case of Western culture at the time when biological, psychological, moral, and social sciences took it for granted that the best they could do was to follow, as exactly as possible, the pattern set by the physical and chemical sciences. Here the materialistic method assumes the form of mechanism, and arrangements, movements, and rearrangements of particles are expected to account for all structures and processes. The criticism that gave birth to the holistic trends predominant in contemporary psychology was particularly aimed at theories designed to explain mental life by primary components patterned after the elements, atoms, and molecules of the chemists.

When the cause to which an effect is traced has the character of a whole, when a situation is rendered intelligible by the properties of the whole rather than by the nature and arrangement of the parts, the method is just as certainly analytical as in the case of analysis into parts. In both cases what calls for explanation is treated by being resolved, or analyzed, into that which has the power of explanation. Contemporary epistemology is crowded with remarks concerning the many operations of synthetic and constructive nature that are constantly performed by theoretical science. These remarks, or most of them, certainly hold, but they do not invalidate the proposition that theoretical science is characterized by an analytical procedure, for, whether it sets things apart or puts them together, theoretical thought remains primarily concerned with explanatory knowledge, i.e., with the analysis of effects and consequences into causes and principles.

Even when it stays at a great distance from action, practical thought is governed by a law of completeness that is derived from the metaphysical nature of the good. The act to be posited in existence, whatever it may be, is driven into existence by a desire. It is an end or a means to an end; in either case it has the character of a good and cannot be what it is supposed to be save by the proper operation of all its causes. By the law of Dionysius, "The good is brought about by a cause possessed of integrality, whereas a multitude of defects, though relative to parts, issues in evil." In the example just described, it is clear that the act of joining a team of mountain climbers is not good, that the judgment that commands such an act is not what it is supposed to be, unless a multiplicity of conditions is put together so as to give the cause at work this character of completeness and integrality. The wise decision, in this example, puts together, synthesizes, the worthy purpose and the not excessive danger, moderation concerning such

aims as the glory of achievement and the thrill of danger (which can so easily impair the soundness of judgment), the appropriate season and the adequate state of health, the skill of the guide and his moral dependability, the family responsibilities that weigh against readiness to face danger, etc. Anything lacking in this combination of conditions suffices to render the judgment imprudent. A slightly upset stomach by causing dizziness, or a sprained ankle, may entail disaster for an entire team of mountain climbers. No wonder that men dedicated to theoretical studies are reputed to be at a disadvantage when they have to be practical: their habits of thought are such that they have a tendency to leave out a few of the data or factors whose combination is indispensable for successful action. They are used to an order of things where what matters is the working of essential causes and their relations to their essential effects. It takes a great deal of versatility to be excellent both at the methods of abstraction, distinction, isolation, and consideration in solitude which serve explanation, and at the methods of synthesis, composition, and complex consideration, oblivious of nothing, aware of the significance of the most minute accidents, which are the ways of wisdom in the life of action. The synthesis of command and realization is characterized by decisiveness and completeness: decisiveness concerns the relations of the that to the act of existing; completeness, the constitution of the that. In phases antecedent to command, the practical synthesis is both indecisive and incomplete. 📖

The first part of Chapter I from his book, *Practical Knowledge*, Fordham University Press, 1991.



Yves R. Simon (1903–1961) was born in Cherbourg, France, and educated at the Sorbonne and the Institut Catholique de Paris. He taught for many years in Paris and Lille. Then with the fall of France in 1940, when he was a visiting professor at the University of Notre Dame, he found himself exiled in the United States. He had been an established figure in Paris but it was while he was at Notre Dame that his reputation as a great teacher and thinker became legendary in America, Mexico, and Canada. In 1948 he was appointed by Chancellor Robert M. Hutchins to the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago where he remained for thirteen years.

Since his death in 1961, a steady stream of posthumous publications, books, translations, and reprints have been received with appreciation. Readers from a wide variety of disciplines especially those interested in democracy, justice, virtue, freedom of choice,

natural law, community, and the relationship between authority and freedom have found these materials invaluable.

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