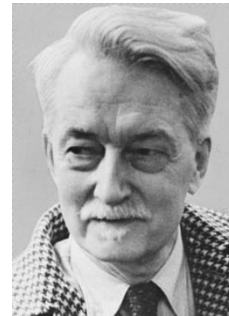


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Recollections of Three Thinkers: Adler, Simon, and Maritain

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Part 2 of 3

II. Yves R. Simon

Yves Simon I regarded as a respected senior colleague and cherished friend. It is not an easy task to speak of him in brief. Here I wish to present recollections of and observations about his lectures, his writings, and the books that influenced me, and reflections about his significance as a Christian philosopher, particularly for the period of the 1940s and 1950s.

Vivid in my recollection is the very first lecture I heard Simon deliver, the annual Aquinas Lecture at Marquette University on March 3, 1940. It was entitled *Nature and Functions of Authority*. Vivid in my recollection is the voice of Simon intoning bell-like, “Freedom is the splendor of being.”

In subsequent years, I heard him lecture on a number of occasions at Marquette University and at various professional meetings and gatherings and at the University of Chicago, where he taught in the Committee on Social Thought from 1948 to 1961. The most memorable and profitable occasion for me was 1946, at which time Simon gave a summer graduate course, “The Critique of Scientific Knowledge,” at Marquette University. (From 1938 to 1948 he was Professor of Philosophy at the University of Notre Dame.) I recall that in the 1950s I arranged a reception for and a lecture by him on his recently published book, *Philosophy of Democratic Government* at the Cardijn Center for Catholic Action in Milwaukee.

In his lecturing and writing, Simon displayed an excellent command of the English language, one he learned not in his youthful but in more mature years. I

recall reflecting at the time that his prose was not particolored, as it often is even in expository writing in our tongue, but rather argentiferous. When he spoke, there was a slight French accentuation to his tone, but he spoke English fluently and idiomatically. Sometimes he would even politely correct native English speakers on subtle points of grammar.

On the visits he would make to Milwaukee from time to time (usually for lectures), our acquaintanceship developed in to friendship. On occasion, he would stay at our home, and I recall his saying that the apartment we lived in near the university reminded him of one in which he and his family had lived in Lille. A correspondence between us developed as time went on; his letters to me are brief but pithy, full of interest in my activities and full of thoughtfulness.

Vivid in my recollection above other recollections is my last visit to Yves at his home in South Bend, Indiana, not long before he passed away. He never spoke to me about his illness, but we knew without speaking that this was most probably the last time we would see each other. I knew from my friend, Father Leo Ward, C.S.C., of the University of Notre Dame, as well as from other friends, about the religious spirit and the courage with which Yves accepted his suffering. Despite a certain somberness, the visit was, as sometimes such occasions are, a companionable and pleasant one. His sister Therese from his native city of Cherbourg was there, and I can still hear in my memory's eye (or ear!) her beautiful French ringing out like the chimes of a bell.

I turn now to the influence the books, studies, and lectures of Simon had upon me in the 1940s and 1950s. As I have said, I am not providing an evaluation here, but confine myself to expressing how much I benefitted and derived from these works.

It is somewhat difficult to characterize the difference between the influence of Simon upon my thought and that of Adler, already mentioned. When I began reading Simon I was older (by a few but important years!) and more mature, so his work was perhaps not as influential a force as was Adler's. I was pondering and assimilating the great classics of ancient and medieval philosophy, above all the works of Saint Thomas Aquinas, and here was a Thomistic philosopher who provided me with the key to many a complicated question. (In philosophy, as I put it, questions verge on mystery, and Simon respected that mystery while shedding much light upon the matters in question.) At the same time, he was philosophizing about the same things that I was in my own way, and he taught me much of great value for my own intellectual development and for use in my courses. I delved deeply into the books of Simon, from his early works in French, *Ontologie du connaître* and *Critique de la connaissance morale* to his later works that appeared in English and French, such as *The March to Liberation*, *The Community of the Free*, *Prevoir et savoir*, and *Philosophy of Democratic Government*. Studies, sometimes not as well-known as they should be, were original and thought-laden in my eyes, such as his "Essay on Sensation." I had done some thinking on this topic myself and this study afforded me invaluable leads and assistance. Above all, vivid in my recollection is the course referred to above, "The Critique of Scientific Knowledge," at Marquette University in the summer of 1946. I admired Simon's "depth of insight, clarity, ease in expounding intricate questions and firm grasp of principles," as I wrote at the time. The course, compressed though it was in a few weeks, was indelibly impressed on my memory and of lasting value to me. In a note I jotted down in the 1940s for a *Notebook on Readings*, I say upon reading Simon's

Prevoir et savoir and his *Pardela l'experience du desespoir*, "I am profoundly moved and stirred. To read these books means so much more after contact with the living author."

In another note I have at hand, from an introduction I gave to one of his lectures, I write: "Personally, I have so much admiration for and owe so much to the philosophical work of Professor Simon that I could not begin to express how much all his thought and the inspiration of his philosophical life mean to me. Let me confess I stayed up until the wee hours the other morning reading *Philosophy of Democratic Government*. Once again, I marvelled at the author's firm grasp of principles coupled with a grip on the concrete facts of experience, and above all, his burning belief in freedom and democracy and his faith that the philosopher can and should assist in their preservation. It is better, doubtless, to thirst and struggle for justice and freedom than merely to be able to define them. Here is a man who does both."

I continue, "He has a rare understanding and love for American life and democracy" and is proud of his American citizenship. I spoke of his work as a significant contribution to philosophy, something precious from the pen of one who will be reckoned as one of the most original thinkers Catholic culture in our country claims, one it cherishes even if it did not produce him.

Father Gerard Smith, S.J., of Marquette University, a master in philosophy himself and my mentor, who tended to become impatient with lecturers treading familiar ground, once remarked following Simon's lecture at a philosophical gathering in Chicago, to this effect: some men you congratulate upon a fine performance; with Simon, even if he is going over familiar territory, you learn something new every time. This was the way many of us in those days felt about the efforts of Simon. He was the philosopher's philosopher, able to teach even those competent in their chosen field (yet remain a colleague and attentive to the thoughts of others).

The title of one of Maritain's greatest books, if not indeed the greatest, is *Distinguer pour unir ou les degres du savoir*. Concerning the principle *distinguir pour unir* (distinguish in order to unite, or, as I would amplify it, let us analyze and clarify the components of a question so that we are able to work out a synthesis), Yves Simon more than once remarked to me that "Maritain stresses the unity and I stress the distinguishing." This pithy statement contains a truth that calls for elaboration. Of course, it goes without saying that each scholar performed both functions well, but it is unquestionable that each gave a certain priority in his actual work to either uniting or distinguishing. It is for this reason that I have called Yves Simon the Distinguisher as well as the Expositor.

Simon's expository style and analytic bent of mind were due in part to the formation he received, as he told me, in his student days at the *Lycee* in Paris. At that time, and no doubt still at present, the student received his real intellectual formation at that level. Among other things, students had to break down or analyze and then put back together in their own words the sermons of Bourdaloue, Fenelon, Bossuet, and other masters. Perhaps of greater importance, at least for Simon's task in philosophy, for his approach to and handling of difficult questions, was the influence of the Dominican theologian, philosopher, and commentator John of Saint Thomas (1589-1644). Maritain also acknowledged his debt to this great master. John's life span closely parallels that of Descartes (1596-1650); yet he seems to have worked in his environment free of concern for the powerful tides

surging on the shores of philosophy. At the same time, he is unquestionably one of the great Thomistic masters. Here, too, the question was one of learning, clarity, analysis, and patient exposition.

Simon's characteristic way of handling problems, his analytic trend, was sometimes misunderstood. I recall a noted scholar, noted for his wisdom in the *philosophical* history of philosophy, remarking that Simon tended to drag things out and even to belabor the obvious, that is, what everybody in the field already knew. I think that what was overlooked here (and I realize I am referring to a scholar's remark in a brief conversation) was the intent of Simon. That which a number of those in our tradition knew and of which they stood in no need of full-blown expositions, he considered was precisely what needed to be expounded, clarified and demonstrated, so that nobody could mistake what was at stake or claim that important matters were being taken for granted.

Things people (or some of them) already knew or accepted required *demonstration*, as Simon saw it, that is, demonstration according to his exacting conviction about it. These things also demanded clear exposition, which some eminent scholars did not always provide, and of this procedure Simon was an ardent and able follower. Furthermore, while remaining close to the Scholastic tradition and to some extent even to its terminology, Simon excelled in presenting his thought in clear-cut contemporary language. The philosophical character of Yves Simon's work is rendered distinctive by this habit of philosophizing cogently and demonstratively. It is this quality that confers permanent value upon his work.

The religious and the philosophical are not intertwined in Simon's work as they are in that of Maritain. (It is true that Maritain carefully distinguishes the two realms.) *Simon is preeminently the philosopher adhering closely to philosophical argument.* At the same time, his is truly a Christian philosophy, though he rarely uses the term. What Simon himself says of Maritain's thought may be applied appropriately to his own. In a tribute to Jacques Maritain given at the Sheil School of Social Studies in November, Simon refers to Maritain's illuminating the *disinterestedness*, even, if will, the *uselessness* of philosophy. In Maritain, he says, charity is paramount. The Christian philosopher should be ever ready to set philosophy aside and rush to succor his neighbor. He is referring in his tribute to his master, but I refer this thinking to his own attitude to philosophy and to life.

I would like to add that Simon's views may be put, in my opinion, precisely if we adapt Maritain's language to the matter at hand. The philosopher steeped in the speculative (theoretical) order should be ready to set it aside and devote himself to the speculatively-practical order (e.g., the moral and even the political) and treat the burning questions of the day (e.g., racism and totalitarianism), and then, as an individual, along with other Christians and religious-minded persons, rush to the aid of his neighbors. The question is not merely one of helping your immediate neighbor, the neighbor, so to speak, in your neighborhood. The question is whether one should surrender philosophy and similar pursuits and succor those in need wherever they might be. The question was debated in the Catholic Worker movement and in other lay apostolates in the days when I was actively involved in them. Some held that everyone was bound to give up "higher pursuits" and directly help the poor and the suffering. Maritain, from a somewhat personal perspective, held that the philosopher is of best service when he does not adhere to any party (save as a "private citizen," as it were) and remains the philosopher, concerning himself with the social, political, and cultural problems of the day.

This does not mean that Maritain did not rush to help a neighbor immediately if needed. (We know that he did.) Nor does it belie Yves Simon's emphasis upon charity to the neighbor. The apparent digression is intended to show that behind the plain and undeniable exhortation to dutiful service to the neighbor next door there lurk delicate questions that have been debated ever since apostolic times.

Let me return to the principal theme occupying us here, the place of Yves Simon in philosophy in the period I recall well. I do not hesitate to say that he should be appropriately called Christian philosopher and not simply the Expositor and Argumentator.



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