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## Freedom and Determination: An Examination of Yves R. Simon's Ontology of Freedom

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Simon reacts sharply against the popular conception of freedom as indeterminacy. Such a notion suggests that true freedom must be outside the realm of causal influences, undetermined by any material or accidental cause. Freedom of this nature would be characterized by an absolute unpredictability, similar to the atomic swerve of Epicurus. This understanding of freedom received support when Heisenberg's principle of the indeterminacy of atomic particles became widely known (*FC* 13–15).<sup>1</sup> In the absence of complete determination of ultimate particles, a theory of personal freedom based on radical indeterminacy seemed more plausible. For Simon, freedom of choice is not simply the ability to choose between right and wrong, but is more a perfection which frees us from the ignorance and vice that restrict our ability to choose.

In his discussion of freedom, Simon often uses the notion of the atomic swerve of Epicurus as a foil, because it represents the antithesis of his own understanding of freedom, which is in fact superdetermination within the realm of final causality (*FC* 11, n. 10). As Simon notes, so long as one's understanding of freedom is in terms of material causality and at the level of ultimate particles, the notions of indeterminacy, formlessness, irrationality, etc. are a necessary consequence (*FC* 14–15). Only by looking for causes within the realm of final causality and in relation to fully organized beings can one understand freedom in a way that is consistent with our rational experience of it.

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<sup>1</sup>Here, Simon notes that the search for freedom was largely centered around the question of freedom of ultimate particles, rather than questioning the possibility of freedom as a function of an organizing unit.

The problem, then, is to understand the difference between the determination that the materialists want to avoid and the determination that Simon wants to acknowledge. For Simon, the matter rests with the kind of causality operating here. Simply put, the nature of the end that is pursued by all creatures is such that, in those creatures where rationality is present, the infinity of the end points up the necessary finitude of any particular object that an agent could desire. The agent, insofar as he is acting rationally, must choose to act in a way that pursues one or another imperfect object.

Any particular object desired is incapable of satisfying the desire for good in terms of either its extent of goodness, or in terms of its duration. This insatiability of desire results from the nature of the final object desired, and forces choices about the relative merit of any particular good pursued. It is this superdetermination by the good that we all desire, and which no particular act can come close to satisfying, that provides the ground for freedom of choice. We will examine here the nature of free choice in relation to the good which is its end. In order to do this, we must look first at the nature of habit. Habit is a necessary basis for freedom and may also be a deterrent to free choice. Understanding the causal nature of habits will help us understand the difference between the two kinds of determinacy that interests us here. Next we will look at the nature of the final cause, that is, the comprehensive good, and the problem of indifference that is necessary to freedom of choice. Finally, we will examine the characteristics of free choice in order to show more clearly how determinacy and freedom inhere in the same act.

## I

The issue of habit provides a good example of the problem of formal and material causality in freedom of choice. It is particularly interesting because for Simon, as for Aristotle and Thomas, *habitus* provides a necessary ground for virtue; it is the genus for virtue.

Simon clarifies a distinction between habit, which by its nature does not allow free choice, and *habitus*, which Simon suggests is what Aristotle and Thomas have in mind when speaking of habit as the genus for moral virtue. Simon suggests that the Latin term *habitus* and the Greek term *hexis* have no adequate corollary in English. To translate *habitus* into "habit" as was frequently the case prior to the 1950s, is to imply an automaticity and a lack of rationality that are not strictly true of either Aristotle's or Thomas' understanding of the issue. It seems clear that, in the case of true habit, there is an absolute determination of the act such that choice is precluded. The cigarette smoker who lights a cigarette only to notice that there is one already burning in the ashtray provides an excellent example of the auto-

maticity of habit. In fact, in virtue, this is precisely why habit is helpful. Habit allows us to act immediately, even unconsciously, to do what we know ahead of time we would choose to do in a given situation.

While habits may support freedom, acts that result from pure habit are not themselves free. In order to make this more clear, we will look at the characteristics of habits in relation to *habitus*. The most important difference is that of voluntariness. Acts grounded in *habitus* are voluntary and therefore conducive to creative or vital thinking, whereas habits lead to acts that are involuntary and even “thoughtless.” Voluntary acts are characterized by, first, a knowledge of the particular circumstances, next, a relation to an end, and finally, freedom from constraint (FC 19–23).<sup>2</sup> For Simon, the most important issue here is that voluntary acts are directed toward an end. This end is objective, it is conducive to human happiness, and it constitutes the terminus toward which all actions serve as means. The agent must be aware of the specific circumstances of the act *as relative to this final end*. The agent must be cognizant of the specifics of the particular situation and that this act is a means to a greater good. This relation to a determining end provides the crux of human freedom. Freedom from constraint, while important, is less of an issue. Like Aristotle, Simon recognizes that even in cases where constraints are in effect, for example in threats of violence, the agent nevertheless often makes a choice, which, with knowledge of the circumstances, gives the choice some character of the free.

Habits may be developed with an end in mind, as would be the case with defensive driving skills, and to the extent that these habits are truly automatic, they better support the virtue that is their cause. Nevertheless, they are not themselves essentially relative to this end, but rather provide the disposition to act in specific circumstances to carry out the means to the end. Thus, habits are primarily relative to the means rather than to the end. For example, a nurse who gives medications to patients has in mind the end of providing safe, accurate care. The nurse develops the habits of meticulously checking labels and dosages, calling the patient by name and explaining the name and effect of the medicine to the patient prior to administering a drug. Further, the nurse develops the habit of stopping to investigate anything that seems out of the ordinary. The end is safe, accurate care. Habit provides the disposition to carry out consistently a multiplicity

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<sup>2</sup>Here, Simon uses an example of two drivers, who both end up in the hospital after turning their cars into a ravine to avoid hitting an object in the road, to draw out the essential characteristics of voluntariness.

of specific actions conducive to that end, but it does not bring that end into focus.

*Habitus*, on the other hand, is precisely that way of being related to the end such that the end is always kept in mind. The nurse, even when very busy with critical patients, remains alert to the final end, rather than becoming lost in the proximate ends that may not be conducive to safe, accurate care. *Habitus* keeps one's mind on the final goal in the midst of difficult and often conflicting particular circumstances. Simon suggests that it is this relationship of habits and *habitus* that allows the creativity and plenitude of virtue. It is the positive relation to the end that induces one to develop good habits. After developing these habits, one has more time and energy to concentrate on the end itself and to be alert to other creative ways to achieve it.

Finally, the necessity of habit is subjective rather than objective. This is best understood in terms of the character of human acts. The nature of human action is such that every act carried out changes the subjective nature of the agent. The character of the will and the intellect and their relation to each other and to their final end are altered with each human act. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss at length Simon's understanding of the nature of practical wisdom.<sup>3</sup>

The necessity of *habitus*, on the other hand, is objective. In *habitus*, the agent consciously pursues a particular objective or end, which then deter-

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<sup>3</sup>Simon's ontology of practical wisdom was examined by this author in a Master's thesis entitled "The Nature of Moral Action: An Examination of Yves Simon's Metaphysics of Morals" (Catholic University of America, 1987). But it is important to note that, in human action, the intellect with its judgment provides the formal determination that this act is good for me. The will, as the efficient cause, first moves the intellect to search more or less vigorously for truth, then moves the particular judgment into action. The nature of both the will and the intellect are changed toward or away from the good by the acts that they specify and enact. They become the matter in a matter-form relation with the good. It is important to recall that Simon insists that will and intellect are active together in the one agent who acts, whose character is changed. This ontological change in the agent is the basis for habit. Each act thus disposes us to act again similarly.

mines specific acts that can truly achieve that end. As one becomes more clear about the true nature of the end desired, one also becomes more clear about what particular acts are truly conducive to that end. Habits determine our actions, then, in the mode of formal and material causality. In the mode of formal causality, they dispose or form the will to act in accordance with their determining factor, i.e., picking up a cigarette. In the mode of material causation, actions carried out in accord with habit change the nature or the matter of the agent such that the form of future actions is limited by this changed nature. The essential characteristics of habit, then, include involuntariness, subjectivity, relation to means rather than ends, and determination in the realm of formal and material causality. *Habitus*, on the other hand, is supremely voluntary, is relative to the objective end, and determines action in the order of final causality. Acts resulting from *habitus* are explicitly rational and thoughtful, since they are explicitly related to the end they support. Simon suggests that, in human action, habits are something akin to a mathematical limit: approachable yet never completely realizable.<sup>4</sup> I would suggest that *habitus* provides a similar limit on the opposite pole. Actions resulting purely from habit would be unconscious; those resulting from *habitus* would be completely conscious of both the nature of the end and the means it determines.

## II

Having distinguished the essential differences between habit and *habitus*, we now turn our attention to the final end itself. Simon grounds the understanding of free choice in the nature of the comprehensive good and the relationship between the comprehensive good and the human agent. The comprehensive good determines all actions of man in the manner of a final cause.<sup>5</sup> All creatures act for an end, an end that perfects their nature and that completely determines their acts. For non-rational beings, the relationship to the end is expressed spontaneously through their physical nature. In animals, this determination by the end is known as instinct; in elements, it is known as chemistry. For rational beings, this

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<sup>4</sup>Simon does not think that in human action pure habits account for very much of the causal relation: "I think that even in actions which we perform out of habit, there is always something else, distinct from, irreducible to and perhaps even opposed in character to what we call habit. Thus purely mechanical habit is a kind of 'limit,' something that can be approached without any definite restrictions, but which can never be attained" (MV 48).

<sup>5</sup>Yves R. Simon, "To Be and To Know," in *Chicago Review* 14 (Spring, 1961): 89.

relationship to the end is also expressed spontaneously through all the actions of the will. But this relationship has the further possibility of being expressed voluntarily when the agent is aware of the fact that particular acts are conducive to his happiness. Finally, this relationship can be expressly chosen when the agent chooses to pursue the good not simply as good for him, but as good in itself. The good that determines human action must be understood in terms of its possible relations to man. The comprehensive good is such that it can be realized in all the possible goods any agent might desire. Every act an agent carries out is a means to this end, but, because of the finite nature of human acts, each act fails to realize the infinity of the end. The comprehensive good itself is neither finite, as are particular human goods, nor infinite, as is the infinite good. But the comprehensive good is infinite in its capacity to include the infinity of possible goods in which it can be realized. The comprehensive good might best be understood as the totality of all goods possible to the entire community of man: all human perfection for all time. Each individual person, then, strives for the perfection of his unique character within the context of this possible perfection for all of mankind.

No matter how good any particular action is, if it is pursued to the exclusion of all other particular goods, it necessarily destroys the agent. We are reminded of the allegory of the cave in Plato's *Republic*, where, after going out of the cave, the philosopher finally is able to see the sun, the highest good. But he cannot simply stay in the world of mathematical objects and ideal forms to contemplate the good. Still a mortal, he must attend to the activities of daily life as well. The nature of his finite relation to the infinite good forces him to choose between the lesser of two evils, death by starvation, or return to the cave and the land of the *polis*. The comprehensive good, though, is not Plato's ideal form of the good. What we find here is that, rather than choosing between two evils, the truly free agent chooses among a variety of goods.

When we recognize that any particular act, while satisfying some aspect of our desire, is nevertheless unable to satisfy us completely, we are forced to choose whether we wish to act on it or perhaps to pursue some other good that is more complete. This choice is the necessary condition for freedom. But how can a choice be both determined and free? To make a choice is to decide in favor of one thing rather than another. If the choice is free, what determines that one pole of the choice be excluded and one accepted? Simon suggests that this issue often confuses the problem of freedom (FC 120–21). The agent is determined by the comprehensive good to act in ways that pursue some aspect of the good. Using his intellect to evaluate the truth of the good he desires, the agent recognizes the necessary partiality of each particular good. He is not determined to pursue this

or that particular good, but he is determined to act in some fashion that has an aspect of the good. This provides an indifference of the judgment: he recognizes that either act has aspects of good and limitations.

Simon suggests that passive indifference, of the sort, "I don't know quite what I want," is commonly confused with freedom. He correlates this with the doubt found in theoretical judgments. The person recognizes that he lacks important data, and is unsure of the correct solution. This indifference results from a lack of knowledge and determination, a lack of perfection, and leads to relative inaction. The more severe the indetermination, the more difficult it becomes to act. This passive indifference is contrasted with active indifference, in which the agent recognizes that, while both actions are lacking in perfection, one may have more of the character of the good and thus be more worthy, or perhaps that both are equally good and limited. In either case, his determination by the good provides enough surplus actuality to endow one pole of the choice with enough good to move it into action. The nature of the comprehensive good is such that, by desiring it, the agent is endowed with actuality, with a real ability to act. The agent is able to say of any object desired that this object is one that is good for him and he will now move to achieve it.<sup>6</sup>

This determination to act in accordance with goods desired provides the agent with both the ability and the necessity of making choices. In practical judgments, the intellect evaluates the aspects of goodness of any object desired and presents a suggested action to the will.<sup>7</sup> The suggested

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<sup>6</sup>"In stopping the deliberation, in bringing it about that such a judgment is last, the will acts according to the actuality which its adherence to the universal essence of the good confers upon it. . . . Because of its natural determination it possesses enough actuality to add to the least of particular goods all the surplus of goodness which it needs in order to be found constituted of absolutely desirable good" (FC 150).

<sup>7</sup>It is important to note that in order to understand Simon's conception of practical judgments, it is necessary always to keep in mind that the distinction between will and intellect is a purely formal one. In all cases, it is a unified agent who acts. The rational agent is a complex but nevertheless unified being. To become too enamored of the will or intellect as separate entities is to miss the most important aspect of the practical judgment, that is, the necessary interrelation of the faculties to make a whole.



action takes into account the necessary limitations of the good it can achieve. The will, depending on its objective relation to the good as true, is more or less disposed to act immediately in accordance with the judgment presented by the intellect.<sup>8</sup> The will, then, is determined by the good in two ways. In all rational beings, the comprehensive good determines the agent to act in accordance with some form of the good. In persons who have more often exercised their rationality in choosing one good over another, the good as true or that which is good in itself will be more apparent, and they will be more disposed to act in accord with it.

Here, it might be worthwhile to look at the determination of habit versus that of the good. As we saw earlier, habit disposes us to act in a specific way, automatically, and without much rational consideration, perhaps with none at all. Habits can be developed to dispose us to act in accordance with the good as true, or they may develop in such a way that they dispose us to act in accordance with our appetites. The good determines us to act first of all in accord with it, regardless of what form that might take. The good further determines us to acknowledge that there exists a discrepancy between the relative plenitude of the particular good we desire and the comprehensive good as such. It determines us to make a choice between this good and another, both bearing some aspect of good and some greater aspect of privation. Habit determines us to act in a specific way; the good determines us to choose between particular acts.

### III

We have seen the nature of man's finite relation to the comprehensive good and the indifferent judgment that necessarily results from that radically unequal relationship. We are now ready to turn to the problem of freedom itself. Both voluntariness and choice are necessary for freedom of choice. As we saw earlier, voluntary actions are identified by their relation to a specific end, their lack of constraint, and their being enacted with knowledge of the particular circumstances that prevail. Choice, while found in the realm of voluntary acts, is not necessarily coextensive with that realm (*FC* 28). Choice is of a means rather than an end and regards an act that is within the capabilities of the agent, an act that is really possible. As we saw earlier, voluntary acts are toward an end rather than a means.

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<sup>8</sup>It must be remembered here that the objective relation of the will to the intellect is the initial determining factor that inclines the intellect to search more or less vigorously for truth. Thus, the subjective character of the will, of the agent really, is the most important issue in practical wisdom.

Choices require rationality, while voluntary acts require at least recognition of the particular circumstances and that they are conducive to some other good.

The relationship between the agent and the comprehensive good, then, is that the agent wills the end and chooses specific means toward this end. Earlier, we saw that for Simon the end determines all acts of rational and nonrational agents. How, then, can we say that we will the end? This can be understood in two ways. First, there are proximate ends that are not specifically determined by the final end as comprehensive. These proximate ends have the character of means to the final end, in which sense they may be chosen, and also have the character of being ends in themselves, in which sense they may be voluntary or willed. The other way we can understand the voluntariness of our actions toward the comprehensive good is in willing it as true, as good in itself. The particular acts in which the comprehensive good is realized are not necessarily moral or good as such, but may be simply good for the agent at the time. The consciously rational agent recognizes that there exists a correlation between actions that are good in themselves and the extent and duration of the enjoyment he experiences as a result. The agent, then, is inclined to choose acts that have more of the character of the good as such. Thus, the end determines us to pursue good, but our specific relationship to this end is both willed and chosen by us. It is chosen in the sense that specific acts we choose change our attitude toward the end. If we choose actions that are directed toward the good as true, our position *vis á vis* the good is altered and becomes more accurate. Pursuit of the good is voluntary in the sense that we then will the end as true. It is important to remember that this change in the agent that results from actions is a metaphysical rather than a psychological change. Thus, while the good as comprehensive may not itself have moral specification, all actions change the relation of the agent to the good as true and in fact do change the moral character of the agent in question. Thus, no actions seem to be morally neutral.

Simon discusses two different levels of freedom. Initial freedom is that found in all rational creatures and results from the very fact that they are rational and are determined by the comprehensive good. They are thus forced to make choices about the means for reaching this end. Freedom, then, is intrinsic, resulting from our rational and appetitive nature, and in a sense cannot be destroyed by extrinsic forces. Those who choose to exercise their rationality more fully in pursuit of truth and wisdom become free in a higher sense. Simon speaks often of the plenitude found in true freedom. This plenitude results from the nature of the good for which we strive. For the person who is free in the immature sense, the choice is often between exercising rationality in evaluating this good or simply following

sensuous desire. The choice, then, is necessarily limited. For those who choose to exercise their rationality to the greatest extent possible, the number of real options becomes almost infinite, because the comprehensive good is such that it can be truly realized in infinitely many particular acts. The rational agent thus can choose among a variety of acts, all of which are truly good. Real freedom, then, is directly proportional to the exercise of rationality. The difference between this and Plato's ideal good is that, for Plato, the exercise of rationality occurs most perfectly only in the realm of theoretical contemplation, not in the practical realm. Thus, to be forced to make practical choices has a necessary aspect of evil: one is forced to turn away from the good. For Plato, the ideal good demands spontaneous theoretical assent. Such assent is necessary as soon as one sees the good; it is not voluntary, it is not chosen, and it is not free. We see here, however, that the exercise of free choice is necessarily experienced only in the practical realm. To exercise one's freedom is to make choices that lead toward the good, not away from it. For us, the comprehensive good demands practical choices, freedom.

The terminus of freedom for Simon is found in the agent who is both free and autonomous, that is, in the agent who has made the good internal. He has consistently pursued truth and acted in accord with it to the extent that his nature has taken on the character of the good as true. Terminal freedom ends up bearing a striking resemblance to what Simon speaks of as the good intuitively and intelligently grasped: "Adherence to the comprehensive good intuitively and intelligently grasped is the most voluntary, the least constrained, the least coerced, the most spontaneous of all actions. Yet this supremely voluntary action involves no choice and accordingly no freedom" (FC 27).

In examining the issue of the comprehensive good intuitively and intelligently grasped, Simon is trying to make clear that there exists at least one possible instance in which voluntary action is not at the same time free. In this case, the action of willing the end meets all the criteria of voluntariness, i.e., relation to the end, lack of constraint, and intellectual understanding of the specific circumstances prevailing. It is also completely spontaneous in the sense that this adherence to the true good follows naturally from the intuitive grasp of it. The comprehensive good determines all action toward it. The intuitive, intelligent grasp of the good would be a case in which theoretical and practical knowledge coalesce, such that, when the truth of the good is grasped, the act of willing it is then determined by the nature of the comprehensive good. Voluntariness results from the good willed as true; complete determination results from the nature of the good willed as comprehensive.

The question then is whether this can be called freedom. Here, there is

no longer any choice. The agent is fully determined by the nature of the object and by his recognition of it as true. As we saw earlier, choices are strictly relative to means rather than ends. Insofar as the agent is capable of acting or of making choices, he would be free in the highest sense. He would only be choosing among specific means that truly characterize the good. He would not be free to will another end. Recall that it is strictly proper to speak of freedom only in terms of the means to the final end, and not in relation to the end itself. Given the necessarily finite nature of human creatures, it seems unlikely that terminal freedom as such could be found among men. Nevertheless, the continuum between initial freedom and terminal freedom constitutes an endless range of human possibilities as regards the perfection of this uniquely human capacity.

Freedom of choice, then, is a function of rationality and is perfected in correlation with the perfection of practical wisdom. Freedom cannot be separated from virtue. Virtue is the *habitus* necessary for true freedom. Freedom is a necessarily intrinsic quality and, as such, cannot be destroyed by incarceration or other external elements. While habits support the development of freedom, they do not allow for freedom, to the extent that they are strictly automatic. Thus, the determination by habits is of the sort that denies free choice. On the other hand, determination by the comprehensive good, in relation to man's rational being, is the necessary and sufficient ground for freedom.