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Yves R. Simon's Contribution to A Structural Political Pluralism

This essay presupposes an acquaintance with Yves R. Simon's political theory and, more particularly, with his general theory of authority as set forth in *Nature and Functions of Authority*, *Philosophy of Democratic Government*, *A General Theory of Authority* and *Freedom and Community*. I shall here argue that within this theory is to be found the basis for what might be termed a *structural political pluralism*. A structural political pluralism differs fundamentally from the two dominant western political theories of individualism and collectivism. While individualism reduces society to an aggregate of constituent individuals and collectivism views individuals and smaller communities as components of an all-embracing human community, a structural political pluralism recognizes the distinct ontological status of a plurality of human communities and sees a place for them apart from the arbitrary will of individuals or the dictates of the state.

Historically, this pluralism is associated with the principle of subsidiarity, articulated in the works of Leo XIII,¹ Maritain,² and Simon.³

¹See his encyclicals *Immortale Dei* (1885), *Rerum Novarum* (1891), and *Graves de Communi* (1901).

²For example, see his *Scholasticism and Politics*, *Integral Humanism*, and *The Person and the Common Good* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968).

³A similar tradition of pluralism is to be found within the Calvinist tradition as it has developed particularly in the Netherlands during the last two centuries. Known in these circles as "sovereignty in its own sphere" (*souvereiniteit in eigen kring*), this pluralism has been developed in the writings of G. Groen van Prinsterer (*Unbelief and Revolution*, 1847), Abraham Kuyper (*Souvereiniteit in eigen kring*, 1880), and Herman Dooyeweerd (*A New Critique of Theoretical Thought* [Presbyterian and Reformed, 1953–58]).

Simon perhaps develops this principle most systematically. He provides a theoretical foundation for subsidiarity (1) by distinguishing among the different functions (and implicitly, the different types) of authority, (2) by distinguishing between the two varieties of particularity in relation to the common good, (3) by differentiating between political and democratic regimes, and (4) by developing the two principles of authority and autonomy. In so doing, Simon has affirmed the legitimate status of both private (or particular) goods and the common good.

I. Pluralism and the Functions of Authority

In establishing that authority has different functions, Simon shows that the need for authority in human society rests on the positive aspects of human nature and not entirely on human deficiency. To counter the familiar argument that authority would not be needed in a society of perfectly good human beings, Simon distinguishes between *substitutional* and *essential* functions of authority. So-called deficiency theorists believe that all authority *substitutes* for a deficiency on the part of the ruled. If the ruled were able entirely to conquer this deficiency, then authority itself would disappear. But, according to Simon, those who argue in this way have failed to distinguish between those functions of authority that are essential (i.e., are required by the *esse* of human nature) and those that can indeed be dispensed with in the society free from human deficiency.

The major distinction within Simon's theory of authority is between those functions that are substitutional and those that are essential. A third major category is the *perfective* function, which betters those who are already good.⁴ Within these major categories, Simon further develops six specific functions of authority, four of which he articulates in some detail in *Democratic Government* and the remaining two in *General Theory*. I shall not list all of these functions here and refer the interested reader to the complete list in the long footnote on page 61 of *Democratic Government*. For now, it is only necessary to point out that the greater perfection of a community causes authority's substitutional functions to diminish, while the essential functions remain and even increase authority's role in society.

For example, paternal (or perhaps *parental*, to be more inclusive) authority is necessitated by a deficiency on the part of the subject, namely, immaturity. But, as the subject gradually grows to maturity and is able to take charge of his own affairs, the need for parental authority diminishes

⁴Simon discusses the perfective function in chapter 4 of *General Theory* (133–56).

(or at least ought to) accordingly. If, however, there is a variety of means to a given end; if all of the means are equally good; and if the entire society must settle upon only one means; then authority must determine which means will be taken. This is true even in the society of perfectly good persons, since there is no foundation for spontaneous unanimity among such persons. In this case, authority's function is essential. Insofar as authority determines the common good in any sense more than a formal one, its function is *most essential* and will not diminish as the community achieves greater perfection. To the contrary, as a society becomes larger and more complex and the range of alternative goods expands, authority becomes even more necessary than it was in the smaller and more primitive society.

Simon's theory of authority's functions is primarily intended to combat deficiency theories of authority. But there is a secondary significance to his theory as well, which is more immediately relevant to the argument of this essay. In discerning among these functions, Simon has also laid the groundwork for a pluralistic view of society that recognizes different *kinds* of authority and a variety of authoritative persons and institutions. For example, theoretical authority, or what he has labelled "authority in the realm of theoretical truth" (GT 81ff.), is only indirectly the concern of the state. For the most part, this type of authority is exercised by educational institutions and by ordinary persons in the course of their daily activities. Parental authority, whose function is substitutional, is frequently exercised by the state in a variety of situations (e.g., by a federal government over sparsely settled territories or by penitentiaries over prisoners), yet it is most appropriately exercised by parents over their children within the context of the family. The most essential function of authority in determining the substantive requirements of the common good is best exercised by the state, which is uniquely responsible for the care of the body politic.

The fact that there are different kinds of authority and different institutions exercising authority militates against a potentially totalitarian conception that sees all authority as derivative from a single source in society. In the truly pluralistic society, there are multiple sources of authority, each of which checks the "imperialistic tendency" of centralized authority.

II. Particularity and the Common Good

According to Simon, there is a legitimate diversity of goods pursued within human society. In setting forth a most essential function of authority, Simon has attempted to establish the goodness of ends that are not directly pursued by the community as a whole. In so doing, he is by no means legitimizing self-seeking in an egoistic sense. Rather, he is affirming the Aristotelian dictum that everything aims at a good which constitutes the end of that thing. Although the common good is indeed the most com-

prehensive good, the goodness of those ends that are less comprehensive is not thereby diminished.

For example, by demonstrating the legitimate status of the marriage and family communities, Simon undoubtedly wishes to prevent the charge of egoism from being levelled against those seeking goods narrower than the common good. No one, after all, would fault a woman for loving her husband, even if he is a criminal who has violated the common good. Nor is a man considered selfish whose principal concern is with the care of his own children. These are areas in which a person is expected to focus more narrowly. To attempt to care for all children equally means that one's own children will suffer from neglect.⁵ This would hardly serve the common good. In Simon's words, "That particular goods be properly defended by particular persons matters greatly for the common good itself" (PDG 41).

Having established that particularity is not incompatible with the common good, Simon's analysis identifies two ways wherein something can be particular. On the one hand, there is the *particularity of function* and, on the other, there is what Simon has referred to as both *particularity of subject* (GT 60ff) and *particularity of the homestead* (PDG 56).

Particularity of function rests on the notion of specialization within the pursuit of the common good. In seeking the common good, a community requires certain institutions that specialize in a *part* of the common good. These are directly subordinate to the community and possess no initiative of their own. They relate directly to the common good, both formally and materially, but only to a small aspect thereof. The diversity of these institutions is merely a functional diversity and is rooted in the need for a division of labor and not in a diversity of autonomous goods that they might seek. The relationship between the larger community and these institutions can be understood almost entirely in terms of a whole and its parts (GT 60ff). The military, for example, is directly accountable to the political authority of a civilian government and does not pursue a private good materially distinct from the common good of the state as a whole. Rather, it pursues a specialized task within the common good.

Particularity of subject, on the other hand, involves a genuine autonomy of self-ruling agents each of whom pursues a private good. A multiplicity of private goods is compatible with the common good, yet they are not directly related to the latter. In *Democratic Government*, Simon refers to this type of particularity as that of the homestead. This illustrates

⁵See Aristotle, *Politics* II, 1262a.

the fact that it is rooted in a genuine ontological private good rather than in a mere specialization within the overall pursuit of the common good. Particularity of subject calls for an initiative that mere specialization does not permit. Particularity of function "removes confusion" (GT 62) in that it clearly delineates areas of responsibility of which the various subunits of the body politic are in charge. Particularity of subject may also remove confusion, but this is not the principal reason for its existence. Particularity of subject has its own status, which is rooted in human freedom and cannot be reduced to the need for specialization.

Simon takes note of a continuing tradition in political theory, whose origin he traces to Plato's *Republic*, which attempts to account for all particularity in a society in terms of specialization. In more recent times, various forms of rationalism have tried to suppress the particularity of subject and exalt in its place "the clarity of function" (GT 65). Since function has the advantage of appearing more neat and systematic, it is far more congenial to the rational mind than the seemingly chaotic plurality of autonomous subjects.

But Simon sees such a functional ordering of society as flat and lifeless. The heirs of Plato have not understood that particularity of subject is itself good and contributes significantly to the common good, even though its relation to the latter is indirect. It is quite in accordance with virtue and the common good that persons should seek goods which are narrower than that of the community as a whole and, furthermore, which are materially different from the latter. It is right and proper that families seek the good of families, marriages that of marriages, and the larger community that of the larger community. It is not desirable that private goods be absorbed into the common good, nor is the opposite to be desired.

The fact that common and private goods are ontologically distinct and may come into conflict materially even within the virtuous society demonstrates for Simon the need for authority in its most essential function. This authority is most essential in that it meets the need for an agent to will and intend the common good both formally and materially. The legitimate plurality of goods in a society precludes the eventual disappearance of authority in its most essential function. For present purposes, the significance of Simon's argument relates not so much to the need for an overall authority per se, but to his recognition that a society can and ought to be organized in such a way as to protect the legitimate pursuit of a variety of goods by both individuals and smaller communities.

III. The Distinction Between Political and Democratic Regimes

In addition to distinguishing among the functions of authority and between common and particular goods, Simon also provides a foundation

for pluralism by distinguishing between the political and the democratic regimes. The term "political" is one used by Simon in a special sense to describe a regime that may or may not be democratic. Though the two concepts may be said to overlap, they may be better described as different measuring standards that run perpendicular to each other. Both of these criteria Simon adapts from Aristotle.

The word "political" ought properly to be contrasted to "despotic," and each term can be applied to differing regimes or types of rule. In Aristotle's usage, the rule of freemen in a city is different from that of a master over slaves. The former involves a genuine common good, whereas the latter involves rule primarily for the benefit of the master.⁶ A city governed despotically, i.e., in the fashion of a master over slaves, is not a genuine state or city. But citizens are "free" and autonomous, and this is what constitutes the political character of the regime. In Simon's words, a political system is that "which gives the governed a legal power of resistance" (PDG 74). In this respect, a political regime may be said to be necessarily pluralistic, insofar as it calls for some authority to be retained by the people and for a certain autonomous sphere to be held onto against what Simon refers to as the "imperialistic tendency of authority" (FAC 86).

A political regime is one wherein it is recognized that the state is not absolute and that other institutions possess legitimate authority of their own. Such authority can even be used against the state, should the latter overstep its proper limits. But this in no way implies that democracy is present. As Simon emphasizes, "a political regime may be thoroughly non-democratic" (PDG 75). To demonstrate this he points to the structure of premodern feudal regimes, wherein "aristocracies possessed such powers of resistance that the authority of the king often became merely nominal" (PDG 75). In such regimes, the monarch was to a great extent dependent on the nobility, which possessed a real power that served to check the potentially expansive ambitions of the monarch. The feudal regime was political without being democratic.

However, the political regime does contain within itself at least the potential for democracy. The direct power to elect and turn out office-bearers can be a potent means of limiting the abusive power of government and may be said to grow out of the logic of the political regime. Yet democracy itself may turn the tables and spawn a non-political despotic regime. Although Simon is certainly a partisan of democracy, he neverthe-

⁶See Aristotle's *Politics* III, 6, 1278 b30 ff; cf. III, 1, 1275a, and also Simon, *Freedom and Community*, 52.

less recognizes that democratic checks do not in themselves protect non-state communities and individual persons from the expansive power of the state, which explains why the written constitutions of most democracies include a charter of rights. Moreover, some modern ideologies even demand, in the name of democracy, the expansion of the state at the expense of non-state institutions. The freedoms of the church and press are often the first to suffer from this variety of democracy, according to Simon (*PDG* 137). Since neither the church nor the press, it is argued, is directly accountable to the people, the progress of democracy (and thus of its agent, the state) means that the former must be eliminated or at least subordinated to the democratic will of the people. In this way, democracy and the political regime can come to oppose each other.

This type of democracy is the heritage of the Jacobin tradition, of which Rousseau, the French Revolution, and ultimately Marx are representative (*PDG* 127–43; *FAC* 60–62). This tradition has no fear of overgovernment, in contrast, for example, to the Lockean tradition. Within the former, lie the seeds of modern totalitarianism. Given Simon's French birth and upbringing, it is perhaps not surprising that he should react so strongly to this Jacobin notion of democracy. Because of the abuses historically associated with manifestations of this notion (e.g., the Reign of Terror, suppression of the church and of religious orders), Simon is at pains to emphasize the value of nondemocratic elements within a constitution. Such institutions as an hereditary or appointive head of state (i.e., monarch or state president) and/or upper house (e.g., the British House of Lords or the Canadian Senate), act at once to check and preserve democracy.

Any regime, in order to work well or merely to survive, needs or may need the operation of principles distinct from, and opposed to, its own idea (*PDG* 106).

This is the insight embodied in the classical "mixed" regime of Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, and many others, who have sought to bring together in a single polity monarchical, aristocratic, and democratic elements in the service of the common good.

Institutional checks on democracy from within the government are of great value. Yet the maintenance of private spheres, in which individual persons and groups are autonomous, is also beneficial to democracy. The democratic principle cannot be extended indefinitely without effectively drying up its own source. Where the people have yielded up the whole of their autonomy to the governing authority, they risk extinguishing their own initiative, including their ability freely to participate in determining the direction and personnel of government. In short, excessive democracy endangers democracy itself.

IV. The Complementary Principles of Authority and Autonomy

In Simon's judgment, authority and autonomy must be seen as complementary. For one cannot exist without the other and both are essential to a healthy and well-ordered society. Only where authority's function is substitutional ought the two to be seen as polarities in tension with each other. But, where authority exercises an essential function, the two are polar only insofar as one falls at the top and the other at the base of a hierarchy. Otherwise, the two presuppose each other and belong together.

Simon defines autonomy as the interiorization of law, that is, the incorporation of the law's precepts into one's own heart and mind (*FAC* 96). A person possesses greater autonomy to the extent that he willingly conforms in his being and actions to the law. That is, insofar as a person becomes what his nature calls him to be, the less necessary it is for a heteronomous authority to impose this from without. This is the foundation for genuine freedom in a society. And if such is the case for individual persons, it also applies to communities of persons. For where a given community acts in accordance with its own nature and seeks a common end appropriate to that nature, the less need there is for it to be instructed or compelled in this direction by another institution or person (*FAC* 46).

It is on this basis that Simon posits a "principle of autonomy" to regulate the relations between the state and subordinate communities. In the preceding discussion, we have seen that he is concerned to demonstrate that there is a place for temporal communities that ought neither to be reduced to individual contract nor to be absorbed altogether into the broader political community. The status of these communities can best be accounted for and protected by recognizing two principles on which society rests. The first of these is the "principle of authority":

Wherever the welfare of a community requires a common action, the unity of that common action must be assured by the higher organs of that community.

Complementing this is the "principle of autonomy":

Wherever a task can be satisfactorily achieved by the initiative of the individual or that of small social units, the fulfillment of that task must be left to the initiative of the individual or to that of small social units (*NF* 45).

To hold these two principles in balance results in a hierarchical order in which the authority of the higher institution does not overstep its bounds but, rather, respects the autonomy of the subordinate institutions insofar as they have attained to it.

The vitality of a society is an important consideration here. Vitality requires that the various parts of a society possess an initiative of their own

and that they act so as not to require direction from the top. There is a lack of such vitality in a society where the whole alone possesses initiative. Here, subordinate institutions and individual persons are merely lifeless instruments acting on command from above. But a healthy society is suffused with vitality throughout all of its institutions and communities (PDG 30). Vitality and autonomy are thus clearly connected, in Simon's view.

V. Concluding Comments

As I observed at the outset, the principle of subsidiarity has been an important theme within Roman Catholic social and political thought since the time of Leo XIII over a century ago. Subsidiarity has historically been part of a larger effort to offer, in a way fundamentally different from individualistic and collectivistic theories, a pluralistic account of the distinct status of a variety of communities within society, or a structural political pluralism. Along with his revered teacher, Jacques Maritain, Yves R. Simon has been part of this effort and, in his writings on the four themes set forth above, has articulated a political theory supportive of such a pluralism.