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Modernization of the Law of The *Prise de Conscience*

Maritain's and Simon's notions of the maturation of man's moral conscience provides us with a balanced and fertile view of human progress: a view of human history that enabled Maritain and Simon to avoid the prevailing ideological distortions common to many popular theories of modernization. Their penetrating insights into the forces at work in human history enabled them to develop a rich notional framework for engaging in an interdisciplinary dialogue on the nature of modernization and man's moral development: a dialogue between philosophers and those psychosocial theorists in sociology, psychology, and cultural anthropology who give primary significance to the role of symbolic actions in the evolution of man's moral perspective and man's identification of the good. These psychosocial interaction theorists give one a reason to be hopeful that the deterministic view of human action may be waning in the above-cited disciplines.¹

For Maritain, the law of the *prise de conscience* is the law of man's growth in awareness of good as a sign of human progress (PH 69). For

¹In 1986, an interdisciplinary group met in Seville, Spain, and issued the "Seville Statement," endorsed and published by the American Psychology Association and the American Anthropological Association for an early study. Cf. H.D. Duncan, *Interaction Structures and Strategy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) and H.D. Duncan *Symbols and Social Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969).

Simon, in the evolution of moral conscience, we observe the evolution of the knowledge of good and evil, so that morality has risen to a higher state in the persons of its most perfect representatives (*FAC* 183). I would describe the process as the maturation of man's deliberative moral knowledge and a perfection of his deliberative will through history: a process in which man, as a trans-objective subject (*DK* 93ff), develops a more precise understanding of the natural moral law.

However, for Maritain and Simon there is a built-in ambiguity in certain notions, such as moral progress, which involves the inherent danger of making serious misjudgments (*MS* 1). The risk of misjudgments arises because a notion such as "progress in human affairs" involves one in thinking in terms of very influential and ambiguous common notions of history; such notions appear to involve one in a commitment to either an optimistic or a pessimistic view of human nature, history, and the future. Simon described the situation well when he described optimism and pessimism as confused effective ideas, having an enduring influence in human events precisely because they are confused. Since optimism and pessimism are ambiguous ideas, they find easy entrance into the obscure half-rational sphere of the human mind, where systematic thought mingles with images and emotions. This is "the nursery of general attitudes, states of mind, ideas relative to the future and to the meaning of history" (*MS* 146). Such concepts are loaded with emotional judgments that determine how men view politics, political parties, and the actions of world leaders.

Both Maritain and Simon realized that, for man to understand his nature and his vocation as a moral agent, he must raise to a level of philosophical understanding such common notions that have arisen from the contingent needs of human history. The balanced perspective that Maritain and Simon had of history enabled them to recognize that it was the false optimism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that had led to the nihilistic revolt and debilitating pessimism of the twentieth century. This was the case because the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were committed to the notion of necessary progress, one called for not only by reason of human exigencies and man's vocation to be virtuous in the use of his freedom, but also because human history manifested deducible necessary laws, intellectual as well as economic, which would insure *de facto* as well as *de jure* progress. All that one had to do was let the process of modernization of thought and economics take their natural course and the future and improvement of man's lot was guaranteed (*MS* 148). All the evil of repressive governments and social injustices would disappear, if only

man did not interfere with the predetermined forces at work in historical processes. This was true whether one identified modernization with capitalization, as do libertarians, or collectivization, as do the Marxists. They both preach a secular gospel founded on myths they share in common. They both rob man of his awareness of his creative freedom and his vocation as a moral agent.

The result of the above is that philosophy becomes replaced by ideologies, ones with a secular eschatology of an economic utopia that modernization is supposed to realize. I define an ideology as a secular religion having the following characteristics: (1) a body of doctrine producing a systematic body of beliefs and a value system; (2) a secular priesthood or organized elites who claim to be the ultimate interpreters of human events; (3) an absolute adherence to the absolute truth of the believed doctrines, regardless of actual events (the ideologue thereby seeking to impose upon the doctrines the character of divinely revealed truth); and (4) the absolute conclusion that there is only one simple means available to procure the common good (when, in fact, there are several means or a mixture of a multiplicity available). The ideologue removes all genuine notions of prudence, civic friendship, and final causality from human affairs and the life of man. Autocephalic notions of freedom and the good (or good action) replace any notion of moral development as the interiorization of an objectively true moral law. The good in this context must become only an individualistic, ephemeral phenomenon. Polytheism is thus resurrected in the name of progress; this is true for both the individualists and the collectivists.

The ideologues, who claim that absolute adherence to their doctrines is necessary for the realization of modernization, require the suppression of whatever does not conform to their ideology. Therefore, ideologies in their successive generations become implicitly, and then explicitly, totalitarian. Liberalism and relativism appear, at first sight, artfully to avoid this dilemma, but their common denial of the possibility of attaining truth forces them, in the end, to become a most oppressive form of totalitarianism. Relativism must lead to the conclusion that only through coercion can a consensus be maintained, since a common attainment of the truth is excluded in principle.

When one confronts the ideologue with historical facts that do not support his ideology, the universal response is that one is either paying too much attention to facts or one is paying attention to the wrong facts. The ideologue argues that this is the case on the ground that the pure system he believes in has never been permitted to operate. The libertarian argues that the absolute right to free association and the unlimited right to the appropriation of property have never, in their pure forms, been permitted to

have full reign.² The collectivist argues the same for pure socialism, whether Marxist or some other variation;³ both argue that salvation is to be found through the absolutizing of an economic system, and that progress is to be assured through man's becoming freed from his freedom.⁴

Out of ideologies of debilitating pessimism and relativism, there arose the ideology of positivistic methodology: a new variation on an old theme, where one tries to set the limits of human understanding, as did the rationalist and the empiricist. This ideology limits the study of history, by definition, to exclude all judgments related to progress or retrogression. These are judged to be unscientific, because all such judgments involve an evaluation of historical facts. This ideology proposes that the historian be an accountant of facts, one who makes no value judgments: an accountant who is incapable of drawing up a profit and loss statement or a balance sheet. This assumed value-free or ethically neutral view of history and human action (one devoid of any notion of final causality) obliterates any hope of developing an intelligible understanding of man's nature and his relationship to others. In this context, the only possible rationale for human rights is human conventions and legislative law.

Nihilism is the only possible consequence of the above viewpoint. It results in a kind of historical nominalism, in which history is viewed as displaying successive, discrete, and encapsulated epochs of time that are not intrinsically related to one another. No analogies, similes, or lessons can be drawn from one period to another. We cannot, therefore, learn anything applicable to the present from history. We are not only condemned to relive the mistakes of the past, but we could never recognize it as a reliving

²Cf. T.R. Machan, ed., *The Libertarian Reader* (Totowa, NJ: Rowan and Littlefield, 1982) and John L. Wriglesworth, *Libertarian Conflict in Social Choice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

³Cf. D. McLellan, ed., *Marx, The First Hundred Years* (London: Francis Pinter, 1983) and Peter Wosley, *Marx and Marxism* (London and New York: Tavistock Publications, 1982).

⁴The libertarian cites examples of Horatio Alger stories, where free, enterprising individuals succeed. The universalizing of such stories presents us with a very selective history indeed, and fails to mention all those instances where enterprising individuals, through no fault of their own, suffer the greatest degradation and even death. Likewise, the collectivist will bring forward examples of economic enterprises, etc., that succeed in supporting his perspective, but will fail to take note of the degradation that has resulted from a blind belief in his ideology.

of the past. Modernization has produced such a transformation of human beings, as well as their world, that all historical periods in time must be studied as if they were different solar systems, energized by different suns and having different bases for their existence. This is not essentially different from viewing historical periods as producing human beings that are alien to one another, like those who are described in science fiction, where our oxygen-based life encounters intelligent life based on some other principle.

This last view, which appears to be the fashionable one today, is the most problematic. This ideology of positivistic methodology claims to be optimistic about what a methodology can produce in and of itself. However this ideology, in the end, is just as pessimistic as the others, since it narrows man's knowledge and vision to the minuscule. This has led either to a determinist or situationist view of human actions. The former obliterates human freedom; the other denies what Maritain and Simon both sustained, namely that true freedom comes from the mastering of our liberty.

A common error characteristic of all ideologies is that they produce a false optimism, for they foster the belief that there are easy answers to fundamental questions about human development. In fact, the simplest of the questions requires generations of hard work to answer. Every genuine inquiry begins with what appears to be a simple question. Yet a genuine answer usually requires that one answer a multitude of more difficult and complex questions, ones that arise out of attempts to answer the original question asked. For example, look at the questions that have arisen out of Mendel's asking why some peas were wrinkled and others were smooth, or what eventuated out of Heisenberg's inquiry into why water wets. Only the dull of mind believe that there are easy answers to fundamental questions. Such questions are easy to ask, but difficult genuinely to answer.

The ideologue, who is easily made into an optimist, is as easily made into a nihilist when he experiences the bitter disillusionment that follows upon his realization that his easy answers solve none of his easily asked questions. With the death of a blind belief in necessary progress comes the nihilistic belief in necessary decadence (*FAC* 173). Having eclipsed human freedom completely, the ideologue cannot identify or distinguish good or evil in human action, for to do so would refute absolutely the ideologue's principle of necessary progress.

Maritain and Simon both understood the creative and annihilating capacity of human acts in light of the reality of human freedom. It was precisely because they recognized this dual capacity that Maritain and Simon were able to give credence to the reality of both the goodness and the malice in the record of human acts in history. Thus, to understand the

law of the *prise de conscience* or the evolution of moral conscience, one must also recognize that good and evil are not divided in human history. Good and evil grow together in human history as two internal movements that advance in time. There is an intrinsic ambivalence in historical developments that does not allow any period of history to be either absolutely condemned or absolutely approved.

For Maritain, the above reflects the law of the fructification of good and evil, which deals with the development of the relationship between ethics and politics in the process of history (*PH* 59). The above law states that, if we consider history over a long enough period of time, then we can see that justice and rectitude tend in themselves to the preservation of human societies, while injustice and evil tend in themselves to the destruction of human societies. If virtue increased in proportion to power, then only good would increase as a result of the increase of power that modernization has placed in the hands of men. However, the facts are that any increase of power is equally susceptible to misuse, as well as proper use, depending on the goodness or malice of men (*PDG* 267ff). Also, any intrinsically evil or unjust situation that demands correction can lead to a change that improves the situation or merely exchanges evils. Revolutions that exchange one set of destitution for another, and where the oppressed become the oppressors, are not progressive but decadent. History provides us with many examples of revolutions producing constitutions that express *de jure* progress guaranteeing human rights, but an ideological perspective that denies *de facto* implementation. This is clearly the case in the Soviet Revolution and others patterned after it; even totalitarian regimes give *de jure* lip service to democratic principles and justice.

If we cease to identify progress as a kind of necessary *de jure* or *de facto* process involving the whole of humanity (*PDG* 179), then we can understand Maritain's and Simon's guarded optimism (or genuine pessimism), and the veracity of the notion of the maturation of man's moral conscience that follows from their guarded moral optimism.

A further difficulty progress confronts is that, once a new moral insight is attained, it must still propagate itself in the human community at large (*PDG* 189). A deepening of man's moral awareness has to overcome a unique set of psychological and sociological barriers for its general acceptance. It is very difficult for an authentically new insight to overcome the inertia inhibiting moral awareness that arises out of collective habits of judging human action from the moral point of view. The tendency towards the acceptance of familiar ways of evaluating human actions is a difficult barrier for men to overcome. Men of the best intentions have often enough led themselves and others astray because of such an inertia.

Recognizing the realities of the human condition and the creativeness

of human freedom, we can also recognize that, when moral maturation occurs, it can be mixed with error and evil. For example, the women's rights movement, which properly recognized that women should not be viewed either as property or as never attaining to adulthood, has gone astray by identifying the recognition of women's rights with the appropriation of absolute power over the life of the unborn child. Thus, one observes that there is progress in moral insight mixed with a distortion of the original insight.

While we have appeared to move beyond the ideological belief that economic success depends upon a necessary connection between labor and destitution (i.e., that only the threat of destitution will cause people to work) (*PDG* 185), we have not as yet moved beyond the economic ideologies of work to bring about social justice. The dawn of the belief that war is not to be looked upon as an acceptable means of executing foreign policy will challenge the realist and globalist theories of international relations.

What enables the human person to overcome the barriers to moral maturation is the union of the fact that man is a trans-objective subject with man's capacity to perform originaive acts of freedom (*RR* 68–69). The person is a trans-objective subject, who, because of his or her dianoetic and ananoetic vision of reality, is able to perform originaive acts of freedom: acts that make a person capable of transcending the models of reality we construct and the ideologies they produce; acts through which one turns away from evil and towards the good; acts that transcend the whole world of empirical convenience, the mother of ideologies (*RR* 68–69). Man's originaive freedom is a unifying activity of his cognitive and appetitive powers, ones that enable him to grasp the "is"—from which the ought reasonably follows. The burden of proof to the contrary falls upon the subjectivizers of human knowledge, whose theories of truth must presuppose the realist notion of truth.

It is in this context that the economic knowledge we have obtained and the technological proficiency we have gained can become united to and a part of the mastering of our liberty. They can be united to the kind of grasp of the human reality that produced a Gandhi, yet also to the distortion of the human reality that produced a Hitler.

Man does move in these two orders of good and evil, the orders of symbolic action: one of hope and creative use of his freedom and one of nihilistic negation of the human realities. A genuinely good symbolic act, an act that purifies the means we employ to attain our ends, is one that hurls a rock at an impervious, idol-filled world and shatters it with a single blow.

The charge can be made that Maritain's and Simon's notions of the natural law and the common good are too vague. This, in reality, is a

misinterpretation of their thought, since the common good is discovered concretely through the historical maturation of human moral consciousness. The natural law and the common good are not capable of detailed *a priori* exposition. The perennial principles, once discovered, require the virtue of prudence and the originative acts of freedom rooted in man's vision as a trans-objective subject to make more precise our understanding of the natural moral law and our precise concrete realization of the common good.

The growth in our awareness of the moral law leads the way to the mastering of our liberty. The growth in our awareness of the moral law is what moves us to seek the purification of the means we use to attain our ends (*FMW* 139ff). Many prize modernization, yet the destruction of our environment by imprudence—in the way we industrialized and employ energy systems—clearly shows that ideologies, rather than originative acts of freedom, have led the way. The risk to the whole planet caused by the senseless destruction of the Brazilian rain forest, and the concomitant loss of one of the main sources of drugs to cure everything from leukemia and heart disease to skin rashes, is irrational and violent in an immeasurable degree. The fact that our taxes paved the road that made such a disaster possible is even more incredible. The irrational destruction of one of the most fundamental parts of the world's ecological system is clearly an ideology of modernization gone mad. The destruction of the rain forest will cause droughts in our farm belt that will threaten our food supply, and the melting of the ice caps will produce the flooding of our coastal shores, and the salinization of many water supplies.⁵ The imprudent destruction of the rain forest in the name of modernization is more likely to destroy human life than a nuclear war. Negotiations with the Brazilians to purify their means of development is an international necessity for the national security of every nation.

Another disturbing fact, involving the security of every nation, is the number of nuclear reactors, whose cores are deteriorating at an ever-increasing rate.⁶ We have no means, even theoretically conceivable, by which these reactors can be safely decommissioned and dismantled. Unfortunately, the prevailing view is that, if we throw enough money at the

⁵See *World Resources 1986 Report*, by the World Resources Institute and the International Institute for Environment and Development (New York: Basic Books, 1987).

⁶J. Edmonds and J.M. Reilly, *Global Energy Assessing the Future* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

problem, we can buy a solution; but the question remains whether the solution we buy will be the one that we can tolerate environmentally. The decision to build reactors the way that we did can be compared to building the most elaborate car conceivable, but not designing brakes into the system: a situation that resulted from another kind of ideology, the ideology of a technocratic culture.

The philosophies of men like Maritain and Simon are brilliant, in that their guarded moral optimism or authentic pessimism never caused them to lose sight of the necessity of a constant vigilance against the temptation to fall into despair when confronted with the failure of men to remember what is genuine progress in human affairs. Maritain and Simon were men who knew with certainty the necessity of men of every age to strive towards the concretization of the unity of liberty, truth, and justice in man's shared world. Such a unity is never complete in this wounded world, where man can easily lose sight of the fundamental realities of human existence. What has been won by blood and sweat can easily be lost, because men can always leisurely withdraw from the realities of life and their moral vocation: a withdrawal that is a negation of the final cause of man's liberty, a withdrawal that can cause many to replace the hard-earned awareness of the realities of life with mythologies of their age and the illusion that they can live in comfort without a constant concern for the above. Thus, they fail to see that there is no safety in human affairs, nor are there any guarantees provided by human history. Every generation, as it were, must fight to preserve what little gains have been made by those who have gone before and struggle to get a little closer to where we ought to be: that is, to seek to concretize the requirements of a unity of liberty, justice, and truth. We must be guided by an awareness of intergenerational justice.

The philosophies of Maritain and Simon are singled out by the fact that they are imbued with a unified philosophy of history. Their view of history is cautiously hopeful in regard to the future of the human race and causes us to remember our future will be won or lost by our capacity to recognize the realities of our freedom and to exercise our freedom in a way that purifies the means we employ to attain our ends. We must do the above in terms of a richer and more precise notion of justice; only when we choose to modernize in terms of a proper vision of the common good will genuine human progress be realized.