

Aquinas on Prudence

ST II-II, 47.1-6, 52.1-2

The initial consideration of prudence in the *Summa Theologiae* comes in question 57 of the *prima secundae*, where St. Thomas treats the intellectual virtues in general; the key affirmations at that point concern the necessity of prudence, and its differentiation from art. Explicit and extended analysis is made in questions 47 through 56 of the *secunda secundae*, where Thomas delineates not only the nature of the virtue in itself, but also its integral and subjective parts as well as its relation to the gift of counsel. Clarification by contrast is offered in an analysis of vices opposed to prudence.

The essential definition of the virtue is taken from Aristotle: "Prudence is right reason applied to action."¹ By definition, then, it is an *intellectual* virtue in that it pertains to the cognitive, not appetitive, faculty;² it is essentially a matter of knowledge. Nevertheless, its value lies in the application of this knowledge to action, and, therefore, it belongs to *practical*, not speculative, reason. As practical, prudence involves not only a knowledge of universal principles but also of the highly concrete and utterly unique situations in which one must act; thus, the prudent person must take cognizance of singulars, for "actions are in singular matters."³

The meaning of this virtue, as defined, is clarified by a three-fold differentiation from other virtues.⁴ First, in that prudence regards concrete *contingent* things, its objects are materially distinct from those of wisdom, knowledge and understanding which regard necessary things. Secondly, while art is also in the practical reason and also regards contingent things, it too is materially distinct from prudence; the difference is that whereas art regards things that are made, prudence regards things that are *done*. Thirdly, while prudence resembles the moral virtues⁵ in that its value lies in application to action, it is formally distinct from them in that it is essentially rooted in the *cognitive* faculty whereas the moral virtues are rooted in the appetitive.

A further differentiation is made⁶ of true from false or imperfect prudence. Later referred to as "prudence of the flesh,"⁷ false prudence characterizes a person who acts very craftily in pursuit of an evil end. Imperfect prudence regards devising fitting ways to obtain particular ends; for example, a 'prudent sailor' is one who has devised fitting ways to sail a ship. In contrast, true prudence applies right reason to action *in respect of the good end of the person's entire life*; it involves rational apprehension and affirmation of the concrete means by which a person, in his or her highly unique situation, can achieve the final end of human existence. Herein lies the relationship and yet distinction between prudence and the moral virtues: the end of the moral virtues is the human good;⁸ prudence regards regulation of the *means* to that end. Precisely for this reason, Thomas insists that prudence is

¹ ST II-II, q. 47, a. 2, *Sed Contra*. *Nichomachean Ethics* 6.5.

² ST II-II, q. 47, a. 1, *Responsio*.

³ ST II-II, q. 47, a. 3, *Responsio*.

⁴ ST II-II, q. 47, a. 5.

⁵ ST II-II, q. 47, a. 4.

⁶ ST II-II, q. 47, a. 13.

⁷ ST II-II, q. 55, a. 1, *Responsio*.

⁸ ST II-II, q. 47, a. 6.

not in us “by nature;” rather, it is in us “by teaching and experience.”⁹ There can be a natural inclination toward the ultimate ends of human existence because “the right ends of human life are fixed.” The means to such ends in human concerns, however, far from being fixed, are of manifold variety “according to the variety of persons and affairs.”¹⁰ There is a keen recognition here of the inescapable significance of knowing oneself as concretely unique, and of knowing the concrete contours of one’s situation. The ultimate end of human existence is common; the means to that end are highly personal.

Herein lies a difficulty. Prudence involves attaining some knowledge of the future, by comparison to one’s knowledge of the past and present.¹¹ But any person’s knowledge of all the contingent singulars which constitute that person and his or her situation is inevitably limited. In order to be prudent, we need a knowledge that we cannot attain on our own resources. This is Thomas’s point of entry into consideration of the gift of *counsel*. Because human reason “is unable to grasp the singular and contingent things which may occur. . . [a human person] requires to be directed by God who comprehends all things.”¹² And since God moves or directs everything according to its own nature, the rational creature is directed “through the research of reason to perform any particular action.”¹³ The gift of counsel is that disposition “whereby the soul is rendered amenable” to such direction;¹⁴ it functions, therefore, to “help and perfect the virtue of prudence.”¹⁵

Two aspects of this ‘help’ are specifically highlighted by Thomas. First, in our natural situation great personal distress can result from the fact that we never know all that we need to know to guide our living, and this distress itself can further cloud our ability to understand and choose; the gift of counsel “soothes this anxiety of doubt.”¹⁶ Secondly, an intimate connection is posited between counsel and the beatitude of mercy. Counsel opens us to the realization that showing mercy is a central means to the final end of our existence; this realization comes to us as a supernatural gift of the Spirit.

But this gift requires human cooperation, and Thomas specifies three levels of consciousness at which this cooperation must occur in authentically prudent living.¹⁷ There must first be *inquiry*, the act of taking counsel which yields insight. But from this flows further reflection leading to the *judgment* of what one has discovered; beyond the occurrence of insight, there is needed a personal affirmation of what has been discovered. But even beyond this, there is the act of *command*, “applying to action the things counseled and judged.”¹⁸ At each level there is a progressive intensity of existential engagement: judgment is more self-involving than discovery, and the intellect’s command which flows into the act of will¹⁹ is yet more self-involving than judgment. True prudence involves the engagement of consciousness at each of the three levels, but also admits of breakdowns at each level. Thus, there is an

⁹ ST II-II, q. 47, a. 15, *Sed Contra*.

¹⁰ ST II-II, q. 47, a. 15, *Responsio*.

¹¹ ST II-II, q. 47, a. 1, *Responsio*.

¹² ST II-II, q. 52, a. 1, *ad 1*.

¹³ ST II-II, q. 52, a. 1, *ad 2*.

¹⁴ ST II-II, q. 52, a. 1, *ad 3*.

¹⁵ ST II-II, q. 52, a. 2, *Responsio*.

¹⁶ ST II-II, q. 52, a. 3, *Responsio*.

¹⁷ ST II-II, q. 47, a. 8.

¹⁸ ST II-II, q. 47, a. 8, *Responsio*.

¹⁹ ST I-II, q. 17, a. 1.

imperfect prudence²⁰ which discovers and affirms means to the human good, but “fails to make an effective command.”²¹ There is also rash “precipitation” in which a person “rushes into action under the impulse of passion.”²² But the gift of counsel is a help toward authentic prudence throughout the movement of consciousness from inquiry to judgment to command.

Finally, I sense that some of the existential significance of this discussion can be glimpsed by returning to the differentiation of prudence from art.

Art is the right reason of things to be made; whereas prudence is the right reason of things to be done. Now making and doing differ. . . in that making is an action passing into outward matter, e.g., to build, to saw, and so forth; whereas doing is an action abiding in the agent, e.g., to see, to will, and the like.²³

Prudence, in other words, involves the recognition that beyond the practical impact of my actions in ‘making the world,’ there is the existential impact of those actions in ‘making my-self;’ besides action that passes into outward matter, there is action that abides in my-self.

A final insight into the eminent ‘practicality’ of spirituality seems clear. To be *prudently spiritual* involves very concrete knowledge of oneself and one’s situation; it involves keen discernment of the available means that can be reasonably chosen in the radically practical process of making one’s life a work of art before God.

There is consistent concern throughout for the contingent, not the necessary, for knowledge of singulars, not universals. Works of art are unique, and the dramatic artistry of our living is a matter of creating such a work of art precisely from the concrete, singular givens of our existence. Our destiny is common, but our roads are diverse. Arriving at the end together requires successful traversing of the curves unique to each of our ways there.

²⁰ ST II-II, q. 47, a. 13.

²¹ ST II-II, q. 47, a. 13, *Responsio*

²² ST II-II, q. 53, a. 3, *Responsio*.

²³ ST I-II, q. 57, a. 4, *Responsio*.