PRUDENCE AND MORALITY

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PRUDENCE to the modern mind suggests caution. The prudent man is the man who takes no risks. He is a conservative who will neither raise his head above the crowd nor stand out from it. If such prudence is associated with morality at all, it is with a kind of moral mediocrity. The prudent man never does anything very bad; neither does he do anything very good. Prudence of this stamp hinders rather than promotes perfection. If everybody practiced it, there would be no heroes because there would be no such thing as heroic virtue. In fact, a premium would be put on inactivity. The less a person did or said, the fewer mistakes he would make, and hence the more prudent he would be considered.

To some the word may suggest something more positive, but at most it connotes nothing more than a kind of secular virtue. It is the virtue of the "children of this world." The prudent man is the worldly-wise man. He knows how to make his way around this world; he is the successful business man. At its best, such prudence is indifferent to morality; at its worst, it is directly opposed to it.[1]

Moral theologians themselves may have unwittingly cooperated in this secularization of the virtue of prudence. A glance through modern manuals of moral theology leaves the impression that it has little moral significance. If it is treated at all, it is dealt with only in passing, or at most as a kind of isolated virtue. Since the time of St. Alphonsus moral theology has been built around the commandments rather than around the virtues, and while this is a more convenient approach in a subject of interest chiefly to confessors, it is concerned more with vice than with virtue. Justice and temperance, it is true, have survived this approach in moral text books, but prudence has lost the key position which it held in Scholastic moral treatises.[2] Moral theologians may

[1] Funk and Wagnalls, *College Standard Dictionary*, define "prudent" as "habitually careful to avoid errors and in following the most profitable and politic course; cautious; worldly-wise."

[2] The virtue of fortitude is also neglected in modern moral manuals. One wonders if a re-examination of this virtue might not reveal a very effective prophylactic against, as

justify their neglect of prudence on the ground that it has to do with moral life rather than moral theology, but unless one is to deal with moral theology as a purely speculative science he cannot neglect this link between moral theology and moral living. It will not be out of place, then, to re-examine this link with a view to restoring it to the position which it should have, if not in moral manuals, at least in moral living.

St. Thomas classifies prudence as a virtue, an operative habit for good which helps bridge the gap between an indetermined faculty and its act.[3] The virtue gives the faculty permanent and stable direction, but without complete determination. According to St. Thomas, virtues are rooted in the intellect (speculative and practical) and in both the sensitive and rational appetites. They are not found in the senses of apprehension, since their function is to furnish data to the rational faculties rather than be moved by them.

But the term "virtue" is not applied in the same sense to these various habits of the soul. To understand the real significance of prudence as a virtue, it will be necessary to take a preliminary look at St. Thomas' use of the term. It is applied only in a restricted sense to the habits of the speculative intellect, i.e., the knowledge of first principles, wisdom, and science.[4] These habits may be called virtues since they turn the intellect in the direction of truth, the good of the intellect, and hence can be said to be truly operative of good. But in no way do they affect the will. Therefore, although they guarantee against error, they are no protection at all against deliberate falsification. A man may be well grounded in the science of mathematics and still deliberately falsify

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well as therapeutic for, the various types of anxiety neurosis which today are impairing moral as well as psychic health. At least it might stimulate a more positive morality to replace the less healthy defensive approach which results from a preoccupation with sin. A great deal of study has been given to the psychological solution of moral problems. But the possibility of a moral solution to psychological problems has not been adequately considered by psychologists. In fact, morality has been regarded by many psychologists as a kind of psychological strait jacket, creating rather than preventing such problems. A somewhat defensive morality may have given rise to this misconception. It is easy to misinterpret a fear of sin as an inhibition of personality. (And one may readily admit that a fear of sin can often degenerate into a morbid state of anxiety.) On the other hand, the courageous pursuit of virtue is easily recognizable as an essential factor in the development of personality, contributing to psychic as well as to moral health.

[3] I–II, q. 55, a. 1–3.

[4] I–II, q. 56, a. 3; also q. 57, a. 1.

formulae. Also, the possession of these virtues does not make man good in the fullest sense of the term but only in some limited capacity. One might be an excellent mathematician and still not be a good man. In brief, according to St. Thomas, the virtues of the speculative intellect are in no sense productive of moral goodness. Thus, by distinguishing clearly between the *bonum physicum* and the *bonum morale*, he lines himself up against the Socratic philosophers, who confused knowledge with morality.[5]

The term "virtue" is also applied only in a restricted sense to the habit of the practical intellect known as art.[6] Art is the virtue which equips one with an aesthetic or technical know-how (*savoir-faire*). St. Thomas defines it as the *recta ratio factibilium*. It differs from the virtues of the speculative intellect in the sense that its goal is not pure knowledge but operative knowledge. But, like the speculative virtues, it in no way affects the appetite. Although it guarantees against mistakes, therefore, it affords no protection at all against deliberate violations of its precepts. The highly skilled surgeon will always be able to perform a technically perfect operation, but he may also deliberately bungle one. Moreover, although it looks to action, art is concerned with the goodness of that action in a limited sense only. A man can be a good carpenter, a good sculptor, a good architect, without being a good man. A surgeon may perform an abortion with the greatest of skill, thus displaying at one and the same time the high quality of his technique and the low grade of his morality. Virtue, then, as it is applied to the speculative habits and to art, is productive of good, but the good which it produces is a physical, not a moral, good.

Virtue in its fullest sense is productive of moral good.[7] It is in this sense that the term is used almost exclusively today. Such virtue not only provides the capacity for its proper act, but actually insures it, that is, in so far as a free act can be insured. It also makes men good in the fullest sense of the term. Obviously it must be in some way connected with the appetite. Only a virtue which influences the will can give any guarantee of its act, and only such a virtue can contribute to moral goodness, since it is ultimately the will which is responsible for conduct, good or bad. Thus the virtue of justice insures against deliberate acts of injustice; the virtue of temperance gives protection against

[5] I–II, q. 58, a. 2. [6] I–II, q. 57, a. 3. [7] I–II, q. 56, a. 3; also q. 57, a. 1.

deliberate excess in food or drink. And the man who is just and temperate is good as a man. Deliberate injustices will argue against the presence of this moral virtue. Injustices due to error will argue against the intellectual virtue (the knowledge of justice) but not against the moral virtue. The doctor who deliberately performs an abortion, not the one who does so by accident, offends against the moral virtue. Accidental abortion argues against the surgeon's technique rather than against his moral virtue.

In what sense, then, is prudence a virtue? St. Thomas defines prudence as the *recta ratio agibilium*.[8] One might call it the know-how of virtue. A good intention is not sufficient for the practice of virtue. One must know how to realize that intention in the individual act. It is not enough, e.g., for one who wants to practice almsgiving to stand at a busy intersection and distribute money indiscriminately. One must determine beforehand to whom to give, what to give, how and when to give it. Otherwise he will have no assurance that he is actually relieving genuine need. It is the virtue of prudence which performs this function. It measures individual acts in relation to virtuous goals and selects those acts which best realize the goals. Since it has to do with measuring, St. Thomas places prudence in the intellect.[9] Also, since it measures acts rather than ideas, he places it in the practical intellect along with art.[10]

Since it is an intellectual virtue and has to do with knowledge, one might conclude that prudence would not be a virtue in the fullest sense of the term. But prudence is not concerned with knowledge for its own sake nor even with knowledge for the sake of art. The knowledge of prudence is put at the service of virtue. It is the link between the virtuous goal and the virtuous act. Since it equips one with the know-how of virtue, it supposes a will aimed not merely at some aesthetic or technical goal, but at moral virtue, i.e., the goal of life itself. The act which issues from the virtue of prudence will always be a morally good act. It is not surprising, then, that St. Thomas lists it with the other cardinal virtues and considers it a virtue in the fullest sense of the term.[11] Prudence will play a part in every virtuous act. Clearly, then, it is intimately associated with morality in the Thomistic system.

[8] I–II, q. 57, a. 4.
[9] II–II, q. 47, a. 1.
[10] II–II, q. 47, a. 2.
[11] II–II, q. 47, a. 4; also I–II q. 56 a. 3

There is, of course, a certain prudence which pertains to secular goals.[12] A certain prudence is required, e.g., in the world of commerce and business. The man who can reduce business risk to a minimum, who can turn in a profit when his competitors are showing losses, is said to be a prudent business man. But this is only a very imperfect kind of prudence. It is not the virtue of prudence. A type of prudence may even be found in the world of sin. The difference between the virtue of prudence and these other prudences is in the will rather than in the intellect. In the virtue of prudence the will is aimed at a moral goal. In the other prudences the will is aimed at some secular goal or even at vice. Obviously such prudences have nothing to do with virtue.

How does the virtue of prudence function? The pursuit of virtuous goals is not a matter of intuition. One does not intuit virtuous acts as one intuits first principles. For example, the decision to enter the religious life is not arrived at intuitively. Neither is it the conclusion of a purely speculative syllogism. Were this the case, everybody would enter the religious life, since it is objectively the best road to perfection. The prudential decision is not the result of a purely objective estimate of the religious life in comparison with other ways to perfection. It is not the answer to the speculative question: What is the best way to perfection? It is the answer to the practical question: What is the best way *for me* to perfection? Reason plays a triple role in arriving at such decisions.[13] If the acts resulting are to be virtuous acts, prudence must guide reason in each step of this process.

The first step is the inquiry or investigation. The choice of a religious vocation, for example, requires an investigation into the nature and demands of such a life, plus an estimate of one's own capacity and desire for that way of life. One who would act precipitously and enter the religious life on the impulse of the moment would not be acting prudently.[14] Neither would it be prudent to prolong the investigation without reason. The scrupulous person, looking for a security unattainable in practical judgments, would pursue the investigation beyond all limits. To insure a prudential act the virtue of prudence must guide reason in this, its first act. Actually St. Thomas assigns this task of guidance, which he calls counsel, to a distinct though subordinate

[12] II–II, q. 47, a. 13; also I–II, q. 57, a. 4, ad 3m.
[13] I–II, q. 57, a. 6.
[14] II–II, q. 53, a. 3.

virtue (*eubulia*),[15] although he also refers to it at times as an act of the virtue of prudence.[16] The amount of inquiry needed will depend, of course, on the nature of the individual case. It may at times be wholly dispensed with. There is no need to preface frequently repeated acts with an artificial inquiry. For instance, one does not need to take counsel every time he is faced with the obligation of attending Sunday Mass. There may be occasions when such an inquiry will be necessary (e.g., when one has a heavy cold), but ordinarily it would be superfluous. It will be the function of prudence to adjust the inquiry to the needs of the individual case.

But the inquiry is only the beginning of action. It may be long or short, depending on the demands of the case, but if it is to be fruitful it must ultimately terminate in a judgment either prescribing or forbidding the action under consideration. There are many who have great facility for inquiry but are unable to bring their inquiry to fruition by making a judgment. There are others who will make an imprudent judgment even after a careful investigation. This will be due to a failure to consider certain facts brought out in the inquiry, a failure which St. Thomas calls inconsideration.[17] In all probability this inconsideration will be the result of a disordered appetite which will divert the attention of the intellect from certain facts brought out in the inquiry that would interfere with its own satisfaction. To insure correct judgment the virtue of prudence must function at this stage of the process also. This will be its second act, but again it is an act which St. Thomas assigns to a subordinate virtue. In ordinary cases the virtue known as *synesis* will guide the judgment.[18] In more delicate cases, e.g., cases of equity, one will have to call on a higher virtue entitled *gnome*.[19]

This judgment is the conclusion of what is sometimes called the prudential syllogism. The major of this syllogism is supplied by synderesis or some principle of moral science, e.g., one must not lie. Prudence has nothing to do with the major of the syllogism. Its first function is to provide the correct minor of the syllogism. It must inquire into the nature of the intended act to determine whether or not it is a lie. Ul-

[15] II–II, q. 51, a. 2. [16] II–II, q. 47, a. 8. [17] II–II, q. 53, a. 4.
[18] II–II, q. 51, a. 3 and 4; also, *In VI Ethic.*, lect. 9, n. 1243.
[19] II–II, q. 49, a. 2, ad 1m.

timately it will decide either that it is a lie or that it is a legitimate mental reservation, and conclude to the liceity or illiceity of the act.

The last and final act of the reason is the precept. This is the act which dictates the realization of the goal, the *fac hoc*.[20] Here again reason can falter and it is here frequently that the sinner is separated from the saint. There are many who know what they should do in a particular situation but fail to carry out their convictions. St. Thomas lays this indecision to a vice called inconstancy.[21] To insure action, the virtue of prudence must enter into this phase of realization, and this last act of the virtue, the precept, is also its principal act. In fact, it is the only act which St. Thomas assigns directly to prudence itself. He argues that it is the principal act of the virtue because it is closest to the action itself. Moreover, one would not call a person prudent who knew what he was supposed to do but failed to do it. This would rather be the height of imprudence. If the first two acts of the virtue are not to remain sterile they must culminate in the precept. A man equipped merely with good counsel and good judgment would be a good casuist but not a good man.[22] The damned in hell may well be able to make correct judgments regarding the morality of individual acts; they will lack only the precept.

Prudence, then, has the difficult assignment of directing individual acts toward virtuous goals. The perfect functioning of the virtue will require the effective use of several integrating factors.[23] What is needed,

[20] II–II, q. 47, a. 8. Most authors identify the *praecipere* with the *imperium* of the human act (I–II, q. 17). Every virtuous *imperium* will spring from the virtue of prudence. Lottin, however, raises the objection that St. Thomas himself never refers to the *imperium* when speaking of the prudential precept, but rather refers the latter to the election, which is antecedent to the *imperium*. But he does not feel that his objections are strong enough to allow him to take another stand, so he follows the common opinion (*Principes de morale*, I, 254, note 2).

[21] II–II, q. 53, a. 5.

[22] But it would be a mistake to conclude from this that the precept is the only act of the practical intellect, and that counsel and judgment are acts of the speculative intellect. One might find support for such a conclusion in II–II, q. 47, a. 8., but this text is to be interpreted in the light of other clearer texts (*In VI Ethic.*, lect. 9, n. 1239; II–II, q. 47, a. 2) where St. Thomas ascribes them to the practical intellect. Commentators understand the text in q. 47, a. 8, to mean merely that acts similar to counsel and judgment are found in the speculative intellect, and not that these acts themselves belong to it (*La prudence* [Editions des Jeunes], H. D. Noble, 1st ed., p. 253; Th. Deman, 2nd ed., p. 273).

[23] II–II, q. 49, a. 1–8.

first of all, is intellectual knowledge of the act under consideration. One must know this act not simply as an isolated act but in its relation to universal moral principles. Although the contingent nature of the individual act will often make this difficult, there is a pattern even in contingent acts with which one can become acquainted through either experience or education.[24] For example, the young curate, with more charity than experience, is a ready victim for even an inexperienced panhandler at the rectory door. A few sad experiences, however, will enable him to make a prudential judgment in almsgiving. A well-stocked memory, then, is a second requisite of the virtue of prudence.[25]

But the inexperienced is not necessarily doomed to error, or even to uncertainty. One can become familiar with the pattern in individual acts through education. Had the young assistant gone to his pastor, the latter might well have advised him against giving money to strangers at the rectory door. Although he lacked the experience, the young curate might still have been able to make a prudential judgment, if he had the virtue of docility. Docility will be important for all who want to practice prudence, but it will be particularly necessary in the young whose lack of experience will make them dependent on their elders for counsel.

But what if one is faced with an entirely new situation which he must meet without delay? Under these circumstances he will have to rely on a certain sagacity or inventiveness. Such occasions, however, will not be frequent, and Cajetan warns against a tendency to use this inventiveness as a short cut to a prudential judgment.[26] It should be used as a last resort. For the most part, experience and education will provide a pattern into which the present situation can be fitted, and they are to be relied upon whenever possible.

The importance of clear reasoning in a virtue which deals with contingent acts is quite evident. Moreover, in order that reason may dictate correctly, there is need of foresight. No one act is so like the previous act that memory will suffice to give a completely accurate picture of it. One must be able to look ahead to see just how this particular

[24] II–II, q. 47, a. 3, ad 2m.

[25] It might be well to note here that, although St. Thomas would want prudence to direct almsgiving, he would not approve of a specious prudence serving as a mask for selfishness. See below.

[26] *Comm. in II–II*, q. 49, a. 4.

act will work out in practice, and he must be able to see it not only in the abstract but in the concrete circumstances in which it will be placed. Prudence, then, needs both foresight and circumspection. Finally, in dictating action, reason must guard against obstacles that would interfere with realization. This caution is the final integrating factor of the virtue of prudence. It should not be confused, however, with the caution popularly associated, or perhaps identified, with prudence. The caution which is an integrating factor of the virtue of prudence insures rather than discourages action.

It is clear that prudence will vary according to individuals, but it may never be completely lacking. In the Thomistic system prudence can never be considered a luxury reserved to the few. It is a virtue absolutely necessary for a moral life.[27] To lead such a life it is not enough merely to aim at moral goals; one must know how to realize those goals in individual acts. The moral life must be reasonable not only in the goals it pursues but even in the means it uses to pursue them. Prudence guarantees that the means will be reasonable. St. Thomas makes the need for prudence clear when he takes up the question of the dependence of the moral virtues on the intellectual virtues.[28] Here he maintains that, although wisdom and science are not necessary for the practice of the moral virtues, knowledge of first principles and prudence are essential. Knowledge of first principles is necessary to give one the proper moral goals. Prudence is necessary to give one the counsel, judgment, and precept by which he arrives at these goals. One might be inclined to think that, given the principles, the other moral virtues would be sufficient to provide for virtuous acts; but this is not the case. In fact, the more deeply rooted these virtues are in the soul, the greater the need for prudence. The faster a blind horse runs, the greater the danger of injury—even if he is running in the right direction. The horse needs a rider to guide him. And this is precisely the function which prudence serves in relation to the other virtues. In fact, the Fathers refer to it as *auriga virtutum*.[29] Clearly, then, while in the Thomistic system knowledge is not virtue, there can be no divorce

[27] I–II, q. 57, a. 5.

[28] I–II, q. 58, a. 4; also, *In VI Ethic.*, lect. 11, n. 1278–79.

[29] It is precisely for this reason that St. Thomas considers it the greatest of the moral virtues: "prudentia est maxima quia est moderatrix aliarum [virtutum]" (*Q. d. de virt. card.*, II, a. 3).

between the two. Thomistic morality is essentially rational not only in the goals it pursues but also in their realization.

But if the moral virtues need the guidance of prudence, it is also true that prudence cannot function in a soul devoid of the other virtues. Prudence demands the presence of other virtues both in the intellect and in the appetites. The relationship between prudence and the virtues of the intellect (knowledge and moral science) has already been indicated. One need not be a trained moral theologian to lead a moral life, but one does have to be in possession of certain moral principles.[30] Without the principles prudence could measure individual acts only on their own merit, and the result would be a relative morality. If one is to have a consistent morality, the virtue of prudence must work from general principles, and hence supposes at least a practical knowledge of them.

Mere intellectual orientation in the direction of true moral goals, however, is certainly not sufficient for the functioning of prudence. There must be an appetitive orientation as well. Prudence can function only in a soul fortified by the other moral virtues. The virtue of prudence must apply principles to individual acts; it must also apply the person himself to the act. Passion can enter in and interfere with both these applications.[31] How it can interfere with the application of the person to the act, i.e., with the precept, is clear enough. It can easily prevent a person from living up to recognized obligations. But it can penetrate even deeper and interfere with the judgment itself in such a way that the individual actually rationalizes his desires. When this happens, the moral principles themselves remain intact but the judgment of the particular act is perverted by an uncontrolled appetite.[32]

[30] When St. Thomas says (q. 58, a. 4) that science is not necessary for the practice of the moral virtues, he is speaking of speculative science. He does not wish to exclude the practical science of moral theology, as is clear from q. 58, a. 5.

[31] I–II, q. 58, a. 5, c, and ad 3m.

[32] It is only later that the universal principles themselves succumb to the attack of uncontrolled passion. First principles, of course, can never be obscured by emotion, but the clarity of more remote moral conclusions will eventually give way before a steady attack on the part of the emotions. As G. Leclercq says: "Aussi, quand la vie se dérègle, les erreurs se produisent d'abord au niveau de la conscience et ensuite seulement au niveau de la loi. Les principes résistent plus longtemps; on commence par vivre autrement, tout en conservant les mêmes idées; on continue de juger dans l'abstrait comme par le passé, on se contente de faire une exception en faveur de soi-même. Plus tard seulement les con-

To insure action, then, and to insure correct action, the passions must be under control. The prudential syllogism needs the *tactus virtutis* to guarantee the accuracy of its conclusion.

In demanding the moral virtues St. Thomas does not intend to deny that there are in individuals certain inclinations toward moral goals.[33] Some people are naturally humble; others are naturally temperate. But in the Thomistic system these inclinations are not sufficient. In fact, it is not even enough to be in possession of that virtue from which the act is elicited. In the Thomistic system the moral life is a unity: one cannot practice one virtue perfectly unless he is in possession of all of them.[34] And herein lies the difference between the moral virtues and the virtues of the intellect. In the intellectual virtues specialization is possible.[35] One can be a first-class physician without knowing anything about painting. But one cannot specialize in the moral virtues. One cannot be perfectly just unless he is in possession of the virtue of charity, etc. The alcoholic or drug addict will not long confine his waywardness to violations of the virtue of temperance. This does not mean, of course, that one may not have to emphasize at times some virtue in which he is deficient. What it means is that one cannot hope to practice any one virtue perfectly unless he has all of them. Hence the beauty of the Thomistic concept of the moral life; hence the beauty of the virtue of prudence which is the unifying force in that life. The prudent man is in the moral order what the cultured man is in the intellectual order: he is a completely integrated man whose moral faculties are perfectly coordinated.

St. Thomas, then, does not envision the ideal moral life as a life of conflict between opposing forces, a struggle between reason and the passions. It is not the triumph of duty over the strong and sometimes violent opposition of desire. Theoretically speaking, a deep sense of duty might suffice for the fulfillment of the moral law. But there would be little security and less peace in such a moral life. It would consist of a series of consecutive crises and lead inevitably to a moral or even psychological breakdown. When speaking of continence, St. Thomas

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victions cèdent." Then he cites the concluding sentence to Bourget's *Le démon de midi*: "Il faut vivre comme on pense, sinon, tôt ou tard, on finit par penser comme on a vécu" (*La conscience du chrêtien*, p. 206 and note).

[33] I–II, q. 63, a. 1. [34] I–II, q. 65, a. 1. [35] *Ibid.*, ad 3m.

will not even concede it the dignity of being a virtue in the fullest sense.[36] Although it strengthens the reasoning faculty against the passions, it does not control the passions themselves or guarantee against violent opposition between passion and reason. Virtue in the fullest sense directs the passions and eliminates the opposition between passion and reason. It coordinates desire with duty. According to St. Thomas, only virtue in its fullest sense will make for the ideal moral life, a life in which all of man's faculties are coordinated and aimed in the same direction. And this is the reason why he demands that prudence work from the moral virtues.

It was mentioned above that St. Thomas places prudence in the practical reason. One might wonder why a virtue which is empirical in nature should be rooted in a faculty which is primarily philosophical. The reasoning faculty has to do with universal principles. Prudence, however, deals with individual acts, i.e., with the singular. It would seem that St. Thomas, in anchoring prudence to a faculty of absolutes, is, as it were, bending over backwards to avoid the quicksands of relativism in morality. Aristotle placed prudence in the cogitative power. Although St. Thomas will admit that in a certain sense prudence can be said to be in the cogitative power, he will not allow it to be confined to a faculty restricted to the singular.[37] Prudence, it is true, must know the singular, but it is not enough that it know it merely as an isolated act. It must know the singular in its relation to universal moral principles, a knowledge which it can have only if it is rooted in the faculty of universals. It is for this reason that St. Thomas places prudence in the intellect itself, where it can be closely associated with synderesis. Nor does he feel that prudence is in any way handicapped in dealing with the singular because it is placed in a faculty of universals. Although the intellect has the universal as its first and principal object, it is by no means imprisoned in a world of universals.[38] By reflection it can reach out to the singular also. Thomistic prudence, then, will not be isolated from the world of the singular because of its position in the intellect, but it will be preserved from the relativism of a purely empirical virtue. To St. Thomas prudence is both empirical and philosophical, but it is primarily philosophical.

[36] II–II, q. 155, a. 1; also I–II, q. 58, a. 3, ad 2m.
[37] II–II, q. 47, a. 3, ad 3m.
[38] *Ibid.*, ad 1m.

Another curious aspect of Thomistic prudence is the fact that, although it is a virtue of the intellect, its chief act is the precept. Actually the other two acts of counseling and judging, more clearly intellectual in nature, issue from subordinate virtues, so that the precept is really the only specific act which issues from prudence itself. One might be tempted to conclude that prudence would more properly be considered a virtue of the will. St. Thomas is conscious of the difficulty. He admits that the concept of the precept involves motion but he insists that it is directed motion.[39] While admitting the influence of the will, therefore, he focuses his attention on the intellectual content of the precept. It would seem that according to St. Thomas the precept issues from the combined intellect and will, deriving its motion from the will, its direction from the intellect. But, since the direction is more important, he ascribes the precept to the intellectual virtue. In the Thomistic system the command, whether aimed at another or directed at oneself, is essentially intellectual in nature.

But perhaps a more serious problem arising from a doctrine which maintains that prudence is an intellectual virtue is the problem of truth. A virtue of the intellect must guarantee truth.[40] But how can a virtue which deals with contingent things guarantee truth? The problem does not present itself in connection with the speculative virtues, which deal with necessary truths. Mathematics, for instance, can guarantee the truth of its propositions. The sum of the angles of a triangle will always equal two right angles; the straight line will always be the shortest distance between two points, etc. But one can have no such guarantee in dealing with contingent things. With all the prudence in the world one may still make mistakes in practical judgments. A priest who absolves a penitent whom he judges to be rightly disposed is certainly acting prudently. Yet it is always possible that the penitent may have concealed some sin and is consequently unworthy of absolution. Here is an act which is dictated by prudence but might well contain error. How can prudence be called an intellectual virtue when it cannot exclude error? St. Thomas solves the dilemma by distinguishing practical from speculative truth.[41] In speculative truth there must always

[39] II–II, q. 47, a. 8, ad 3m. [40] I–II, q. 57, a. 5, obj. 3.

[41] "Dicendum quod verum intellectus practici aliter accipitur quam verum intellectus speculativi. Nam verum intellectus speculativi accipitur per conformitatem intellectus ad

be conformity with reality. Speculative truth must always tell you exactly *that which is*. But in practical truth conformity with reality is not necessary. The purpose of practical truth is not to tell you *that which is* but rather *that which is to be done*. To serve that purpose it is sufficient that there be conformity with a well-ordered appetite. The thing to be done here and now is that which a well-ordered appetite, i.e., an appetite aimed at virtue, dictates. If there is this correspondence between act and appetite, the act will contain practical truth.

But St. Thomas does not at all intend to say that a good intention suffices for practical truth. It is only the virtue of prudence which guarantees practical truth. Besides being well-intentioned, then, the act must also be prudent. Nor is a good intention a guarantee of prudence. For instance, a person may have the best of intentions in entering the religious life, but his act may be very imprudent simply because he has failed to consider his aptitude for that way of life. Such an act would not be dictated by the virtue of prudence and so would not contain even practical truth. It is obvious, of course, that if the intention is not a good one, there is no possibility of practical truth. One who would enter the religious life merely to please a parent would certainly not be doing the right thing. On the other hand, a person may have a good intention and may have considered his vocation carefully, so that both the judgment and consequent step in entering the religious life could be considered prudent. Yet, because of the contingent nature of such a step, he might have made a mistake. St. Thomas would say that the step was a prudential act and so contained practical truth, even though the judgment, "I have a vocation," was not in conformity with reality, and so not speculatively true.

St. Thomas judged this criterion for practical truth so important that he maintained it should be followed in practical judgments even though it might conflict with speculative truth. For instance, it is according to a well-ordered appetite to judge another favorably even

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rem. Et quia intellectus non potest infallibiliter conformari rebus in contingentibus sed solum in necessariis, ideo nullus habitus speculativus contingentium est intellectualis virtus, sed solum est circa necessaria. Verum autem intellectus practici accipitur per conformitatem ad appetitum rectum. Quae quidem conformitas in necessariis locum non habet, quae humana voluntate non fiunt; sed solum in contingentibus. . ." (q. 57, a. 5, ad 3m).

where there may be doubt.[42] St. Thomas insists that this should be done even though one will more often be deceived entertaining a good opinion of a bad man than entertaining a bad opinion of a good man. Virtue is more important than speculative truth, so that, if one cannot be sure of both, virtue is to be preferred.[43] St. Thomas was clever enough to see how passion could use a false devotion to speculative truth as a pretext to achieve its own satisfaction, and he properly diagnosed such a course of action as a departure from virtue rather than an approach to truth.

Is this a subjective morality? By no means. A well-ordered appetite is one which is directed toward an objective goal, i.e., a goal furnished by synderesis or some principle of moral science. The goal aimed at will always be in conformity with reality. There will be speculative truth in the goal. For example, the principle that lying is wrong contains speculative truth. A well-ordered appetite, then, which wants to avoid lying, is aimed at an objective goal. But the contingent nature of the individual act will make it difficult at times to make an accurate judgment of some particular statement. One may judge some statement to be a lie which actually contains a legitimate mental reservation, or vice versa, and conclude falsely that it is licit or illicit. But even the false judgment, if it is to contain practical truth, is and must be linked with objective reality through the medium of a well-ordered appetite. Such a doctrine is obviously far from being purely subjective. A purely subjective morality would not accept any dependence on objective goals. St. Thomas maintains objective goals but admits that in the individual act perfect conformity with the goal is not always attainable. The virtue of prudence will reduce error to a minimum, but it cannot eliminate it entirely. Making allowance, then, for the inevitable error, St. Thomas admits that the prudent man will not

[42] II–II, q. 60, a. 4, ad 1m.

[43] "Entre la justice infailliblement observée et les chances plus grandes de vérité objective du jugement, il opte pour la justice. Une vérité meilleure est alors sauvegardée, qui s'apprécie par la rapport à la disposition bienveillante de celui qui juge" (*La prudence*, ed. Th. Deman, O. P., Appendix II, p. 466). This principle frequently finds application in seeming conflicts between obedience and truth. Since obedience has to do with contingent things, there may be a gap between speculative and practical truth. But obedience will always contain practical truth, and hence obedience is to be preferred even though the weight of speculative truth may seem to be on the other side.

always do the right thing. But his act will always be linked to objective reality through the medium of a well-ordered appetite. It will always coincide with speculative truth or be the closest approximation to it possible in circumstances.

To some this concept of practical truth might seem to involve a kind of compromise with truth. We can readily admit that practical truth does not have the stature of speculative truth. Conformity with a well-ordered appetite will not always be conformity with reality. But while practical truth may at times fall short of speculative truth, it is also true that only the well-ordered appetite can give any abiding guarantee of speculative truth in moral acts. An intellect at the mercy of passion is not a very secure guide in judging the morality of individual acts. And here again the importance of the moral virtues is brought out. It is virtue that orders the appetite, and hence it is virtue that guarantees truth in individual acts. Universal moral principles reach down to individual acts through the moral virtues. It is the virtues that guide the intellect toward objective reality. Thus, only the charitable man can be sure that he is doing the right thing in making a fraternal correction. The selfish man may never recognize such an obligation; the man motivated by hatred or envy may see an obligation where there is none. The same is true of the other virtues. Only the chaste man can be secure about his judgments of the morality of individual acts referring to this virtue. Only a temperate man can make an accurate estimate of his capacity for drink. As St. Thomas, quoting Aristotle, says: "Qualis unusquisque est, talis finis videtur ei."[44] No amount of intellectual acumen will make up for a lack of virtue in guaranteeing true moral judgments of individual acts. On this level the simple but virtuous peasant can come closer to truth than the pagan philosopher.

The decisive role that passion plays in making moral judgments is evident to confessors and directors of souls in the difference which one often finds between the *conscientia antecedens* and the *conscientia consequens* in the same person. The *conscientia consequens* will see as

[44] I–II, q. 58, a. 5. St. Thomas, of course, would not contend that accurate judgment is impossible without virtue. There are times when the lack of virtue will interfere only with the precept. The case may be so clear morally that the truth simply cannot escape conscience.

clearly sinful a past act which the *conscientia antecedens* judged legitimate. The difference in the two judgments is accounted for only by the fact that passion played a role in forming the one judgment, whereas it had no influence on the other. Once the act was performed, the appetite was satisfied. It exerted no influence, therefore, on the *conscientia consequens*, which then saw clearly the malice of the act. The case is not one of simple error but of lack of virtue.

The important influence which virtue has on moral judgments of individual acts can hardly be overestimated for moral living. It is virtue that guarantees truth in individual acts. It follows, then, that as one grows in virtue his prudential judgments will penetrate deeper and deeper into truth. Imperfections that might have been unrecognized at one stage of spiritual growth will gradually be diagnosed as such as one grows in virtue. Perfect judgment, of course, will only be found where there is perfection itself. It is only in Christ Himself, where all the virtues are found in their perfection, that one will also find truth in its perfection. In the rest of mankind passion will always exert some influence on judgment. But as one grows in virtue that influence will gradually be diminished. One sees this work out in practice in the lives of the saints. They are able to discern faults which wholly escape the rest of humanity. In fact, it is even difficult for those of ordinary virtue to understand the conscience of a saint. The saints always consider themselves great sinners. Nor can this always be explained away as a species of false humility. Their greater virtue has given them clearer vision, which enables them in turn to see defects that escape the notice of others completely. Many of the so-called exaggerations of the saints may well be a prudence which a lack of virtue makes unintelligible to the rest of mankind.

But if growth in virtue brings greater security in regard to the truth of prudential judgments, it is also a fact that any decline in virtue will be accompanied by an increasing inability to make accurate moral judgments of individual acts. Each time one gives in to passion he makes it more difficult not only to withstand sin but even to recognize it. It is clear, then, that the problem of a lax conscience is fundamentally a problem of lack of virtue. Its erroneous judgments are traceable not to a defect in the reasoning faculty but to a disordered appetite. The person with a lax conscience who asks himself, "Can I do this with-

out committing sin?", will very likely emerge with the wrong answer. The appetite which dictates this approach to the question will go on to influence the answer. Real security in regard to moral judgment is possible only where the question is dictated by virtue and a desire to practice virtue. The question, "How would one practice virtue in this particular situation?", is the only secure approach to a moral judgment for the person with a lax conscience. The problem of the lax conscience, then, will be solved only by growth in virtue. Rules of thumb set down in moral books to correct moral judgments arising from a lax conscience will be effective only in so far as the conscience is restored to virtue.

This is an all-important truth to keep in mind in the direction of souls. False judgments in regard to the morality of individual acts are frequently due not to a defect in the reasoning faculty but to a lack of virtue. The person who is not interested in chastity, and perhaps even more the person who has ambivalent desires, who wants the pleasure without the sin, cannot hope to make correct moral judgments of individual acts. What is needed in such cases is not instruction but inspiration. No amount of instruction will guarantee future correct judgments, since instruction cannot possibly cover all contingencies. There is indeed a pattern in individual acts, but no one act is so like a previous act as to leave no opening for a disordered appetite. There will always be the one circumstance that will make it different, and so legitimize it in the eyes of a disordered appetite. The girl who is about to make an emotional decision to enter into a mixed marriage will not be at all impressed by statistics on the failure of such marriages. This one will always be different. Unless such a person can be inspired to lean in the direction of virtue, there is little hope that the judgment of individual acts will ever be corrected.

Granted that conformity with a well-ordered appetite is sufficient for practical truth in individual acts, what of the case where speculative truth is actually on the other side? The fact that practical truth is present will excuse from all culpability before God; in fact, such acts may under the proper conditions be meritorious. But it is true that such acts will not be good in the fullest sense of the term. If the error concerns an act prescribed by purely positive law, little or no damage will be done. The man who eats meat on Friday through error will not

suffer any moral damage. But if the error concerns some precept of the natural law, or even some counsel, damage may well be done. The young boy who indulges in solitary acts because of ignorance will not be guilty before God but will certainly suffer moral damage. One cannot be complacent, then, about speculative error, or be smug in the possession of practical truth. It will be the function of prudence to grow. Both individual and social experience must contribute to the growth of the virtue so that the gap between speculative truth and practical truth may be consistently narrowed down.

Nor will the function of prudence cease with the individual act. The cumulative experience of a generation will contribute to moral science itself. While it is true that prudence must work from the general principles of moral science, and hence supposes them, it is also true that prudence must play an important part in formulating the more remote conclusions of the moral law. Such conclusions, it is true, are virtually contained in the principles themselves and might, at least in theory, be deduced from them. But in practice metaphysical relations are often obscure. They are brought to the surface often enough only as the result of experience. The prudential judgment of an individual in one generation may well become established as a moral conclusion in the next. Thus, prudence has a function not only in regard to individual acts, but also, though more remotely, in regard to moral science itself. It will never, of course, play the constitutive part it has in regard to positive law. In moral science its function will be merely to bring to the surface the relations between moral principles and the more remote conclusions which are frequently hidden from the speculative intellect.

The key position, then, which prudence plays in Thomistic morality, and which it should play in moral living, can hardly be questioned. Without prudence moral life would be well-intentioned but chaotic. Prudence puts the order of reason into virtue. In so doing, it integrates man's moral life and gives it direction toward man's ultimate goal. The more one grows in prudence, the more he is assured that his actions are objectively virtuous. Prudence and the other moral virtues will work together to produce the morally good man.