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THE PREEMINENT NECESSITY OF PRUDENCE

“It seems that prudence is not a virtue necessary to living a good life,”¹ says an objection in the *prima secundae* of St. Thomas’ *Summa Theologiae*. After a cursory look at what is required for moral virtue—which is that whereby humans live good lives—it seems that prudence is indeed superfluous. If the lower powers do not distort apprehension of the particular good, if one has understanding of the first principles of the moral life from a natural habit of understanding (*synderesis*),² if the acts of counsel and judgment pertain to the speculative intellect,³ and if

¹ *ST* Ia–IIae, q. 57, a. 5, arg. 1.

² *ST* Ia, q. 79, a. 12.

³ *ST* Ia–IIae, q. 57, a. 6, c.: “Circa agibilium autem humana tres actus rationis inveniuntur, quorum primus est consiliari, secundus iudicare, tertius est praecipere. Primi autem duo respondent actibus intellectus speculativi qui sunt inquirere et iudicare, nam consilium inquisitio quaedam est.” IIa–IIae, q. 47, a. 8, c.: “Unde oportet quod ille sit praecipuus actus prudentiae qui est praecipuus actus rationis agibilium. Cuius quidem sunt tres actus. Quorum primus est consiliari, quod pertinet ad inventionem, nam consiliari est quaerere, ut supra habitum est. Secundus actus est iudicare de inventis, et hic sistit speculativa ratio.” Daniel Westberg, *Right Practical Reason: Aristotle, Action, and Prudence in Aquinas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 195, n. 18, has pointed to this latter text (as well as to *De virtutibus*, q. 5, a. 1), which the Leonine correctly renders as “hic sistit” as opposed to “hoc facit” as demonstrating that Thomas is merely making a comparison between the *consilium* and *iudicium* of the practical to the similar operations of the *ratio speculativa*. As we will show below (n. 9), this seems to be a weak argument to us.

it belongs to the will to move—then what point is there in positing a practical intellect and a habit whereby it is perfected? We would have to answer that there is no point whatsoever, were we inclined to take a fragmentary view of human action; a view which we believe to be gravely mistaken, for it is essential to the good life that any rational agent of moral activity not only know the universal good through some intellectual excellence and be rightly disposed in appetitive habits to recognize it in the particular, but that these two activities be integrated through acts of practical reasoning. Without prudence, without a virtue whereby a practical intellect is made perfect, there would be no means whereby one’s higher and lower or apprehensive and appetitive powers would attain the integration which befits human nature. Human understanding and desire would be as two wholly distinct and merely juxtaposed parts, one knowing the truth and the other seeking the good, but without any means whereby that which is truly good could be discerned, or that which is recognized as good could be pursued—it would be incongruous to the substantial unity of a human being were his perfection realized through a conjunction of parts, as though the moral good of humankind were merely so many gears which simply needed to be put in the right order. As such, we believe that Thomas not only concurs that prudence, the virtue of right practical reasoning, is necessary for living well, but emphatically asserts that it “is the virtue **most** necessary to human life”⁴ (emphasis added). The force of Thomas’ assertion should not be understood as simply contradicting the objections with vigor, but rather, as we intend to show, that although all the moral virtues are necessary for the good life, there is a superior importance to

⁴ *ST* Ia–IIae, q. 57, a. 5, c.: “[P]rudentia est virtus maxime necessaria ad vitam humanam.” The Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Anton C. Pegis, and John Oesterle all translate this line as “prudence is a virtue” (my emphasis). While the superlative *maxime* does not of itself indicate a singular supremacy, I have chosen to translate using the definite article in light of Thomas’ claim that the end which is specifically regarded or intended by prudence is the good of a whole or complete human life, as stated in IIa–IIae, q. 47, a. 2, ad. 1: “In genere autem humanorum actuum causa altissima est finis communis toti vitae humanae. Et hunc finem intendit prudentia.”

the need for prudence, as that whereby the parts of virtuous living are not merely stacked up like building blocks of moral righteousness, but coalesced into a complete whole. To make clear the reasons for this preeminent necessity, we shall first consider the parts and constitution of prudence itself, its relationship to the other virtues, and conclude with its principal act, *praeceptum*.

The Constitution of Prudence Itself

Prudence, the Angelic Doctor tells us in the first of ten questions dedicated to the virtue, is a perfection of the practical and not the speculative reason.⁵ One could interpret this assertion to mean that prudence has nothing to do with speculative reason, and that the virtue pertains to a wholly different order of reasoning, a practical order of reasoning. Such an interpretation, we believe, would not only be opposed to Thomas, but more importantly to the truth regarding man's intellect. If the orders of speculative and practical reasoning are entirely distinct, if they begin and end without any intrinsic relation of one to the other, beginning and concluding in entirely different ends, then it would seem strange to assert that they are differentiated only as two acts of the same power, and not as two entirely distinct powers. And so, for the sake of understanding what prudence is, we should begin by asking: what is it that distinguishes speculative from practical reasoning, and how does this distinction come about?

Three operations are ascribed regularly to prudence: *consiliari*, *iudicare*, and *praecipere*.⁶ The first, *consiliari*, is a kind of *inquisitio*, a discovery or discursive reasoning whereby things are apprehended.⁷ As Thomas says, whether or not a thing apprehended by the reason is or-

⁵ *ST* IIa-IIae, q. 47, a. 1-3.

⁶ *ST* IIa-IIae, q. 47, a. 8.

⁷ *ST* Ia-IIae, q. 14, a. 1.

dered to work is accidental to the thing itself,⁸ and something accidental to the nature of the object of a power does not diversify that one power into many.⁹ Thus, speculative and practical reasoning, which are distinguished by whether or not the thing apprehended is ordered to work, cannot be two different powers. Moreover, while some things apprehended cannot be ordered to work (for instance, man's knowledge about the Divine or the essence of some natural thing is not knowledge by which that which is understood can be ordered to work), anything operable, anything which may be put to work, is something about which there can be speculation. In my apprehension of a shovel, I may consider its fittingness to dig a hole, and the result of that consideration can be either simply that it is a good shovel for digging a hole, or that in addition to understanding its fittingness, I actually use this shovel in order to dig a hole. Moreover, if I am acting on some sort of already ascertained knowledge of a thing's fittingness for some task, I need not consider it again, or at all if it is immediately obvious; I know that there is a good hole-digging shovel in my shed, and so I do not ponder again whether or not it will be a suitable means to that end. I may also, by some intuitive grasp, know the usefulness of a shovel for defending myself from an attacker without ever attaining a speculative understanding of the shovel's usefulness for that rather different task.¹⁰

Consequently, it ought to be said that what distinguishes practical reasoning from speculative, at least insofar as their acts of inquiring go, is not whether the thing considered is something inherently operable,

⁸ *Ibid.*: "Accidit autem alicui apprehenso per intellectum, quod ordinetur ad opus, vel non ordinetur."

⁹ *ST* Ia, q. 79, a. 11, c.: "[I]d quod accidentaliter se habet ad obiecti rationem quam respicit aliqua potentia, non diversificat potentiam, accidit enim colorato quod sit homo, aut magnum aut parvum."

¹⁰ *ST* Ia, q. 14, a. 16. I believe that this lattermost is what Thomas means by saying that there is a sort of knowledge which is "only practical." What does or does not belong to the thing itself is not understood intellectually, but some aspect of it is immediately recognized as useful, and is immediately put to use; it is knowledge simply applied to some action, and the thing itself is not considered insofar as it is known.

but whether or not that knowledge of the thing is actually being ordered or applied (i.e., given an actuality of involvement) to some work.¹¹ In other words, the actually intelligible character of a thing is a knowledge shared by both practical and speculative intellects,¹² but whereas the conclusion of speculative reasoning is knowing some further truth as a true correlation to the known, the conclusion of practical reasoning consists in the application of the intelligible character to some work or action, something chosen to be made or to be done. There must be some intention for that chosen action to occur in order for it to become knowledge under the auspices of practical reasoning, rather than to persist as the sort of knowledge which may be either practical or speculative.¹³

¹¹ *ST* IIa-IIae, q. 47, a. 8, c.: “Sed practica ratio, quae ordinatur ad opus, procedit ulterius et est tertius actus eius praecipere, qui quidem actus consistit in applicatione consiliorum et iudicatorum ad operandum.” A human is always engaged with practical reasoning—one is always seeking the means to some end, whether fully conscious of it or not. Moreover, as a part of seeking that end, one is frequently seeking out the truth of things, their natures, what they are in themselves, and turning that knowledge into action, ordering it to some work, some activity. We constantly cycle between speculative and practical reasoning, and while they should not be collapsed into one activity, neither should they be pulled apart completely. As we mentioned in n. 3, above, the *hic sistit* of IIa-IIae, q. 47, a. 8, should not be interpreted as meaning that because the speculative reason consists only in operations of inquiry and judgment, that because judgment stops or terminates the process of speculative reasoning, the existence of similar operations in the practical reason should be considered as belonging exclusively to the latter, as though wholly different operations. Neither should the use of “sicut etiam” in *De virt.*, q. 5, a. 1 (see Westberg, *Right Practical Reason*, 196), lead us to think that there are radical and intrinsic differences between the inquiries and judgments of speculative and practical reasoning; and as will be shown below, judgment is itself two different acts.

¹² *De ver.* q. 3, a. 3, c.: “Si ergo loquamur de idea secundum propriam nominis rationem, sic non se extendit nisi ad illam scientiam secundum quam aliquid formari potest; et haec est cognitio actu practica, vel virtute tantum, quae etiam quodammodo speculativa est. Sed tamen si ideam communiter appellemus similitudinem vel rationem, sic idea etiam ad speculativam cognitionem pure pertinere potest. Vel magis proprie dicamus, quod idea respicit cognitionem practicam actu vel virtute; similitudo autem et ratio tam practicam quam speculativam.”

¹³ *Ibid.*: “Dicendum, quod, sicut dicitur in III de anima, intellectus practicus differt a speculativo fine; finis enim speculativi est veritas absolute, sed practici est operatio ut

It would appear then that there is a difference between practical knowledge (*scientia*) and practical reasoning; for we may discern that practical and speculative **knowledge** (*scientia*), insofar as both designate the intelligible content of the understood, are fundamentally the same, and differ only according to the relationships each has to other acts within their respective acts of **reasoning**. Thus, practical and speculative reasoning, according as each is a process whereby conclusions are reached, differ according to the natures of their conclusions, in that the former intends and consequently acts for its conclusion,¹⁴ whereas the latter in its conclusion simply asserts the truth. One might develop a great aptitude for moral knowledge of a speculative sort—to deliberate well and to judge aright as to what actions ought to be taken, but never achieve the full perfection of the practical intellect as one never commands those actions of which one has discerned the fittingness and moral rectitude. The perfection of practical reasoning, as opposed to practical knowledge, consists not merely in any one of these three actions—deliberating well, judging rightly, or commanding—but in all three proceeding harmoniously from the first to the last.

Thus prudence is not related to the good of the particular *secundum quid*; rather, by and through prudence these particulars are regarded and acted upon in relation to the whole of human life.¹⁵ The first step

dicitur in II Metaphys. Aliqua ergo cognitio, practica dicitur ex ordine ad opus: quod contingit dupliciter. Quandoque enim ad opus actu ordinatur, sicut artifex praeconcepta forma proponit illam in materiam inducere; et tunc est actu practica cognitio, et cognitionis forma. Quandoque vero est quidem ordinabilis cognitio ad actum, non tamen actu ordinatur; sicut cum artifex excogitat formam artificii, et scit modum operandi, non tamen operari intendit; et tunc est practica habitu vel virtute, non actu.” This practical knowledge “in habit or virtue,” as cited in n. 9 above, is no different in its intelligible content from speculative knowledge, but only when extended to making or, as we infer, doing. Cf. John E. Naus, *The Nature of the Practical Intellect According to Saint Thomas Aquinas* (Rome: Analecta Gregoriana, 1959), 50–53.

¹⁴ *ST* Ia–IIae, q. 13, a. 1, ad. 2; a. 3, c.

¹⁵ Following Aristotle, Thomas proclaims the relation of prudence to the good of a whole or complete human life in a number of places. See, for instance, IIa–IIae, q. 47, a. 2, ad. 1; *ibid.*, a. 13, c.; *In Ethica*, lib. 6, lec. 4, n. 2; lec. 8, n. 17; *Super Rom.*, cap. 8,

of this perfection of practical reason is not only to deliberate well, as *consiliari* has often been translated, but in so doing to discern the true good of the means to some end; to take counsel in practical reasoning is not merely to deliberate about options already discovered and known, nor a mere inquiry as to what things are in themselves, but an unearthing or discovery of the possible means to some end, a discernment of things in themselves as related to something else.¹⁶ The object of the practical intellect, what is discovered by this taking of counsel, is as aforementioned identical in intelligible content to what is discovered by the inquiry of the speculative intellect; but is immediately differentiated from the speculative because the intention proceeding and prompting it is not for the simple truth of the things inquired about, but rather for an end to which such truth serves as a means. What follows from this initiation by an act of intention is that the practical intellect first discerns (*consiliari*) and secondly judges (*iudicare*) under the aspect or *ratio* of truth those things' goodness for that work, as ordered to that work.¹⁷ That is to say, it is not merely because they are understood as operable that they are incorporated within a chain of practical reasoning, but that by the intention they are in some respect actually involved in the ordering to the work. But is this also to say that these acts of *consiliari* and *iudicare* are specifically practical? Must we divide the particular acts of

1.2. It should not be thought, however, that Thomas considers prudence perfective of man absolutely, but rather only with regard to that perfection of his moral life which he may attain by his natural powers.

¹⁶ *ST* Ia-IIae, q. 14, a. 1.

¹⁷ *De ver.*, q. 22, a. 10, ad. 4: "Obiectum intellectus practici non est bonum sed verum relatum ad opus;" *ST* Ia, q. 79, a. 11, ad. 2: "Ad secundum dicendum quod verum et bonum se invicem includunt, nam verum est quoddam bonum, alioquin non esset appetibile; et bonum est quoddam verum, alioquin non esset intelligibile. Sicut igitur obiectum appetitus potest esse verum, inquantum habet rationem boni, sicut cum aliquis appetit veritatem cognoscere; ita obiectum intellectus practici est bonum ordinabile ad opus, sub ratione veri. Intellectus enim practicus veritatem cognoscit, sicut et speculativus; sed veritatem cognitam ordinat ad opus." Cf. Charles O'Neil, "Prudence, the Incommunicable Wisdom," in *Essays in Thomism*, ed. Brennan (New York: Sheed & Ward, Inc, 1942), 191.

the speculative and practical as though species of a genus? We do not believe so. Rather, it appears that the results of these acts are the same in both speculative and practical reasoning, with one difference; namely, that in speculative matters, judgment consists of one action, but in practical it consists of two: the *iudicium conscientiae* and the *iudicium electionis*.¹⁸ By the former is an action judged truly good; by the latter, judged as that means which is to be intended for the sake of the end. It is by this latter, which does not appear to have a place in the *iudicium* of the speculative reason, coupled with its appetitive act of *electio*, that the acts of *consilium* and *iudicium* are fully incorporated into practical reasoning—that virtual practical knowledge is turned into actual practical knowledge, and that what is possessed as an inert knowledge capable of being directed to work is actually directed to work.

In order that this turn from virtual into actual practical knowledge occurs, many parts of human action must come together. Accordingly, not only are memory, reasoning (specifically its application of universals to particulars),¹⁹ understanding (which is not the intellectual power, but a certain excellence seemingly of the *vis cogita-*

¹⁸ *De ver.*, q. 17, a. 1, ad. 4: “Ad quartum dicendum, quod iudicium conscientiae et liberi arbitrii quantum ad aliquid differunt, et quantum ad aliquid conveniunt. Conveniunt quidem quantum ad hoc quod utrumque est de hoc particulari actu; competit autem iudicium conscientiae in via qua est examinans; et in hoc differt iudicium utriusque a iudicio synderesis. Differt autem iudicium conscientiae et liberi arbitrii, quia iudicium conscientiae consistit in pura cognitione, iudicium autem liberi arbitrii in applicatione cognitionis ad affectionem: quod quidem iudicium est iudicium electionis. Et ideo contingit quandoque quod iudicium liberi arbitrii pervertitur, non autem iudicium conscientiae; sicut cum aliquis examinat aliquid quod imminet faciendum, et iudicat, quasi adhuc speculando per principia, hoc esse malum, utpote fornicari cum hac muliere; sed quando incipit applicare ad agendum, occurrunt undique multae circumstantiae circa ipsum actum, ut puta fornicationis delectatio, ex cuius concupiscentia ligatur ratio, ne eius dictamen in electionem prorumpat. Et sic aliquis errat in eligendo, et non in conscientia; sed contra conscientiam facit: et dicitur hoc mala conscientia facere, in quantum factum iudicio scientiae non concordat. Et sic patet quod non oportet conscientiam esse idem quod liberum arbitrium.”

¹⁹ *ST IIa-IIae*, q. 49, a. 5, ad. 2.

tiva),²⁰ docility, and shrewdness, but also foresight, circumspection, and caution numbered among the parts of prudence,²¹ but it is furthermore requisite in order that one be prudent that one possesses excellence in *consilium* and *iudicium* through virtues annexed to prudence.²² Thomas differentiates these two groups, calling the former “quasi-integral parts” and the latter virtues “potential parts.” The quasi-integral parts enable a person to integrate previously attained knowledge with consideration of one’s past, present, future, circumstances, and obstacles which pertain to one’s action, as well as to command appropriately in light of these.²³ The first five he designates as belonging to prudence as parts of its cognitive operations, and the latter three as parts of its preceptive operation.²⁴ Thomas explains their integration with prudence through a metaphor, saying that they are like the integral parts of a house, such as a floor, walls, and a roof; indeed, without these parts concurring, neither the perfect act of virtue (the whole or complete act of prudence) nor a house, could be what we signify by their respective names.²⁵ Take a wall away from a house and it is still a shelter, but no longer a house; take away memory or circumspection and the act may still be relatively

²⁰ *ST* IIa–IIae, q. 49, a. 2, c.: “[I]ntellectus non sumitur hic pro potentia intellectiva, sed prout importat quandam rectam aestimationem alicuius extremi principii quod accipitur ut per se notum, sicut et prima demonstrationum principia intelligere dicimur.” Cf. *ibid.*, ad. 3: “Non autem hoc est intelligendum de sensu particulari quo cognoscimus propria sensibilia, sed de sensu interiori quo de particulari iudicamus.”

²¹ *ST* Ia–IIae, q. 57, a. 6, ad. 3; IIa–IIae, q. 49 *in passim* and especially a. 1 and a. 6.

²² *ST* Ia–IIae, q. 57, a. 6, c.: “Et ideo virtuti quae est bene praeceptiva, scilicet prudentiae, tanquam principaliori, adiunguntur tanquam secundariae, eubulia, quae est bene consiliativa, et synesis et gnome, quae sunt partes iudicativae.”

²³ *ST* IIa–IIae, q. 48, a. 1, c.

²⁴ *Ibid.*: “Quorum octo quinque pertinent ad prudentiam secundum id quod est cognitiva, scilicet memoria, ratio, intellectus, docilitas et solertia, tria vero alia pertinent ad eam secundum quod est praeceptiva, applicando cognitionem ad opus, scilicet providentia, circumspectio et cautio.”

²⁵ *ST* Ia–IIae, q. 57, a. 6, ad. 3: “[M]emoria, intelligentia et providentia, similiter cautio et docilitas, et alia huiusmodi, non sunt virtutes diversae a prudentia, sed quoddammodo comparantur ad ipsam sicut partes integrales, in quantum omnia ista requiruntur ad perfectionem prudentiae.”

good, but not perfectly good. Conversely, each of the parts is separable and is something capable of standing on its own. They are “parts of prudence not according to their union, but insofar as they are related to those things which pertain to prudence.”²⁶ Thus, although each is requisite for the perfection of prudence, the union of the parts and thus the perfection to which they contribute cannot be explained by anything intrinsic to the parts themselves.²⁷ Much like the parts of the house, they are as matter to the form, without which the walls and roof would not constitute a house, nor would reasoning, foresight, and so on, constitute the virtue of prudence.

The potential parts, in one sense, likewise have a proper existence apart from the complete act of prudence. The first of these, *eubulia*, is the ability to inquire well as to those means which are suitable to the end, and is thus a *consiliari*, an act of taking counsel. In many ways, the ability to deliberate well could be considered the root of prudence; for in those situations where the means are not immediately evident, the discovery of the fittingness of each is a *sine qua non* for both good judgment and right command. If one is not capable of discovering the truth of means’ rectitude for the sake of some end, how could one ever judge them aright, let alone enact them except by accident? We should moreover keep in mind that although it belongs to prudence to deliberate about *quae sunt ad finem*, the means, it does also pertain to prudence to consider particular ends—that is, insofar as they themselves are means to a further and ultimately a final end. Indeed, were one not to consider the relationship of particular ends inasmuch as they are means to the final end, the highest good, one could not be considered prudent, for one would not be taking into consideration the good of a whole human life. The second two potential parts, *synesis* and *gnome*,

²⁶ *ST* IIa-IIae, q. 48, a. 1, ad. 3: “[O]mnia illa ponuntur partes prudentiae non secundum suam communitatem; sed secundum quod se habent ad ea quae pertinent ad prudentiam.”

²⁷ While every act of prudence requires the concurrence of at least most and if not all the quasi-integral parts, the parts themselves can function independently of prudence.

respectively denote excellence in judging of these means' fittingness according to common, ordinary situations and to unusual, extraordinary situations in which a higher insight is necessary. Just as a man would be remiss in the use of his practical intellect were he not to make an inquiry into and consider those means pertaining to the good of his whole life, so too would he be morally deficient could he not decide rightly which of those means to pursue.

There are, however, two mistakes which we ought to avoid in considering the three potential parts: the first is to mistake the importance of one as constituting the whole of the virtue of prudence, such as we see Thomas admonishing against with respect to *eubulia*, or that one is a principal virtue in and of itself, as considered and rejected for *synesis*.²⁸ The second is to consider these acts only with regard to their proper, specific operation. For certainly, to take counsel or inquire well concerning particulars, the operation of *eubulia*, is essential to deciding upon any practical matter, and is an act which considers the means. Likewise, without judgment, there would be no act of choice.²⁹ Yet of themselves, these two operations (taking counsel and judging), no matter how excellent in themselves, would not fully be practical were they not initiated by an act of intention and followed by an act of command; for *consiliari* and *iudicare*, if they were independent of the chain of practical reasoning, would be acts of the speculative intellect.³⁰

²⁸ *ST* IIa-IIae, q. 51, a. 2: “[U]trum [eubulia] sit specialis virtus a prudentia distincta,” and Ia-IIae, q. 57, a. 6, arg. 2 & ad. 2.

²⁹ *ST* Ia-IIae, q. 13, a. 1, ad. 2: “[C]onclusio etiam syllogismi qui fit in operabilibus, ad rationem pertinet; et dicitur sententia vel iudicium, quam sequitur electio.”

³⁰ This is indeed a disputable matter; for certainly the acts of *consiliari* and *iudicium* are within a framework of practical reasoning; as soon as one intends some act, one begins practically reasoning about that end. Indeed, as a whole, the act comprising *apprehendere* and *intendere*, *consiliari* and *consensus*, *iudicium* and *eligere*, *imperium* and *usus*, is one which should be considered practical, for the end is something to be done; however, we do not believe that this precludes the individual parts of the act from being genuinely speculative and not simply similar to the speculative. It is important to remember that the speculative and practical intellects are **not** two separate powers, but operations of the same power differentiated in respect of their end, and not their object;

Indeed, even being initiated by an act of intention does not suffice to complete the incorporation of such activities into the process of the practical intellect. Neither will necessarily terminate in an operation by which the intended end is achieved, even when they are concerned with things to be done and even if they be initiated by an act of intention. In other words, unless one is moved to intend the means decided upon by the process of *consilium* and *iudicium*, those means would not be involved in the process of practical reasoning initiated by the original intention for the end to which the means are ordered.³¹ One may take counsel about the means forever, and not act; a judgment can be made, and a choice can follow, and yet no action ever issued towards attempting to attain the end intended ever occur. Imagine a woman who has decided that she ought to improve her physical condition. She considers all the ways in which she can do this: she can stop eating junk food, start exercising, hire a personal trainer, and so on. She consents to all three, but judges that, having a busy schedule and not enough money to join a gym or hire a trainer, changing her diet would be the best way; she has resolve, determination, commitment, and she goes into her kitchen and proceeds to eat three donuts. Unless these cognitive acts be

it is, as such, completely reasonable that in one complex act of practical reasoning, parts of that act, parts which consider something **other** than the end intended, be speculative in themselves and practical *per extensionem* through their conclusions being applied to the operation. As earlier mentioned, *iudicium* is itself twofold. It is by the *iudicium electionis* that the means become themselves something intended. It is, moreover, by the final act of practical reasoning, the command of the means' execution, that the conclusion of the practical syllogism, the intending of the means, is enacted and actually applied to work. *ST* IIa-IIae, q. 47, a. 8, c.: "Sed practica ratio, quae ordinatur ad opus, procedit ulterius et est tertius actus eius praecipere, **qui quidem actus consistit in applicatione consiliorum et iudicatorum ad operandum.**" (Emphasis mine).

³¹ See above, n. 10 and 11. The intending of the means, by which they are made an end, after a fashion, may or may not begin another act of *consilium* and subsequent *iudicium*, if there needs to be another means discovered by which that end is attained. For example, if I intend to take a vacation, and decide upon flying as a means, finding a flight becomes an end, and I must subsequently deliberate upon things such as airline, time of departure, and cost, having determined that flying is the means I will chose and intending it as an intermediate end.

linked by a real command and operative acts—throwing out the junk food she has, buying healthy food in its stead—there is no realized relation between the discerned and elected good, the good of the means as known and approved, and the good being actually done. It is in respect of this potency to involvement in actual operation that we believe these parts are denominated “potential” rather than integral or quasi-integral, as being in potency to that which is genuinely prudent. We would also propose that the Greek names *eubulia*, *synesis*, and *gnome* are retained so as to differentiate virtuous moral inquiry and judgment, in a complete act of good practical reasoning, from merely excellent moral inquiry and judgment, which may be either incomplete—that is, merely speculative or producing a sort of virtual practical knowledge—or not wholly good insofar as they are within practical reasoning.³² Everyone

³² The results of these acts of *consilium* and *iudicare*, though considered in themselves speculative, when their conclusions are applied to acts that attempt attainment of the end intended are, as parts of a practical whole, considered principally as practical and secondarily as speculative; *In III Sent.*, d. 23, q. 2, a. 3, qc. 2, co.: “[I]ntellectus speculativus et practicus in hoc differunt quod intellectus speculativus considerat verum absolute, practicus autem considerat verum in ordine ad opus. Contingit autem quandoque quod verum ipsum quod in se considerabatur, non potest considerari ut regula operis, sicut accidit in mathematicis, et in his quae a motu separata sunt; unde hujusmodi veri consideratio est tantum in intellectu speculativo. Quandoque autem verum quod in re consideratur, potest ut regula operis considerari: et tunc intellectus speculativus fit practicus per extensionem ad opus. Hoc autem contingit dupliciter. Quia aliquando illud verum quod utroque modo potest considerari, non habet magnam utilitatem, nisi inquantum ordinatur ad opus: quia cum sit contingens, non habet fixam veritatem: sicut est consideratio de operibus virtutum; et tunc talis consideratio, quamvis possit esse et speculativi et practici intellectus, tamen principaliter est practici intellectus.” It is our opinion that until some action which follows the intention occurs, that the considerations of *consilium* and *iudicare* are not fully ordered to the work, and thus remain merely speculative, inasmuch as they are not yet **completely** ordered to some work by their conclusions being themselves intended. I do not wish to imply that the whole act of practical reasoning is or ought to be hypostatically divided into standalone stages; rather, I wish to draw attention to the necessity of a practical conclusion being reached in order for the syllogism and its contents to be actually practical. This seems to me to be the meaning of the Aristotelian-Thomistic adage that the speculative intellect is *per extensionem* made practical. Thus, in my estimation, *eubulia*, *synesis*, and *gnome* signify not merely excellence regarding their particular intellectual operations, but excellence within the process of practical reasoning, excellence within a

who acts is faced with situations wherein they must deliberate and in all cases one must make judgments—but not everyone deliberates or judges well, and not all who deliberate or judge well subsequently act well.

Yet, in order that prudence achieve good deliberation and judgment, it is necessary that the person be well-disposed to good ends; and as such, prudence must have a symbiotic relationship with the moral virtues.

The Unity of the Moral Virtues in Prudence

The preeminence of prudence's necessity for living the good life is confined neither to the comprisal of its parts nor to the extension of the virtually practical results of *consiliari* and *iudicare* to the actually practical. As aforementioned, understanding, considered with respect to a particular act, is a quasi-integral part. Additionally, there is a particular habit of understanding the first principles of the moral life, namely *synderesis*, which is had independently of the prudential act. It is from *synderesis*, and not from prudence, that the moral virtues have their end appointed.³³ And yet, just as correct reasoning about the means is insufficient to produce morally virtuous action, even less is the direction towards the end provided by *synderesis*, which is even further removed from the particular means, sufficient to attain to that end, to rectify *his quae sunt ad finem*. This is fairly clear; but what about the moral virtues themselves? Thomas devotes articles 4 and 5 of *prima secundae* q. 58, to the relationship between moral and intellectual virtue. The latter virtues are in q. 57 divided into those concerned with things necessary and certain (wisdom, science, and understanding) and those concerned

process that terminates not in knowledge, but in application of knowledge to action. For this reason they are termed "secondary virtues" (*ST* Ia–IIae, q. 57) which are ordered to prudence (*Ibid.*, ad. 4), the principal virtue without which they would not really be virtues themselves.

³³ *ST* IIa–IIae, q. 47, a. 6, ad. 1: "Ad primum ergo dicendum quod virtutibus moralibus praestituit finem ratio naturalis quae dicitur synderesis, ut in primo habitum est, non autem prudentia, ratione iam dicta."

with things particular and contingent (prudence and art). The concerns of the latter pair are further divided into those concerned with *recta ratio factibilium*, right reason concerning things to be made (art), and *recta ratio agibilium*, right reason concerning things to be done (prudence). In q. 58, a. 4, Thomas asserts that moral virtue can be without wisdom, science, or art, but not without prudence or understanding; contrariwise, in a. 5, he claims that, while the other intellectual virtues can, prudence cannot be without moral virtue. This mutual dependence seems absurd—how can it be that one cannot have prudence unless one has the moral virtues and yet one cannot have the moral virtues without prudence?

To answer, let us begin by examining the dependence of prudence upon moral virtue. Thomas states in q. 58, a. 5 that prudence, since it concerns particular things to be done, “needs not only universal, but also particular principles.”³⁴ The universal principle is that which is supplied either by *synderesis* or by some knowledge had through science,³⁵ and pertains to a course of action which ought to be taken in all cases—such as that murder or fornication is always wrong. The particular principle, on the other hand, is dependent upon the aspect under which the goodness of some object is apprehended, that is, the way in which a thing is judged to be done or pursued.³⁶ Thus, although prudence is an intellectual virtue, and the particular principle is provided by an act of apprehension, there must be some perfection of the appetitive faculties; for unless one has desire for the proper particular good, it will not appear as good for that individual. For instance, if the appetite of the concupiscible be disposed so as to overwhelmingly desire some good aspect of an object not completely good or irreconcilable with the

³⁴ *ST* Ia–IIae, q. 58, a. 5, c.: “Oportet autem rationem circa particularia procedere non solum ex principiis universalibus, sed etiam ex principiis particularibus.”

³⁵ *Ibid.*, c.: “[U]niversal principium cognitum per intellectum vel scientiam.”

³⁶ *Ibid.*: “[I]ta ad hoc quod recte se habeat circa principia particularia agibilium, quae sunt fines, oportet quod perficiatur per aliquos habitus secundum quos fiat quodammodo homini connaturale recte iudicare de fine.”

whole good of human life, such as the pleasurable taste of an unhealthy food, then the proper particular principle for the morally virtuous action will not be supplied to the practical reason. As Thomas writes, “appetite for the end precedes the reason’s reasoning about the choice of the means, which pertain to prudence.”³⁷ If the appetite does not operate in accord with right reason, i.e., as enabling it to discern the true good of the object, as compatible with the whole good of human life, then whatever act is commanded will not be in accord with *recta ratio*; there is no virtue in doing all the right things as regards the means only to attain an end that is in itself contrary to virtue. Just as we may consider the quasi-integral parts as antecedent to and requisite for the perfection of the prudential act, so too is a perfection of the moral virtues required, in order that the both the apprehension which accompanies intention, and the discovery and intending of the means achieved respectively by *consilium* and *iudicium electionis* be in accord with right reason and not be overthrown by inordinate desires.

Contrariwise, the moral virtues cannot be without prudence; for virtue is that whereby a man’s operation is perfected simply speaking. Right reason concerning the end—desiring and intending those things which are themselves properly in accord with man’s good—fails to result in virtue if there is not right reason concerning those things by which that end is attained. Moreover, it belongs to prudence to, as aforementioned, discern not only the means to particular ends, but also to consider those ends insofar as they are themselves means to some ultimate end. Nor is it or could it ever be the case that if someone makes a choice without the full use of reason—that is, without the goodness of the particular being fully rectified with the universal—that

³⁷ *Ibid.*, ad.1: “[A]ppetitus finis praecedit rationem ratiocinantem ad eligendum ea quae sunt ad finem, quod pertinet ad prudentiam.” This should not be taken to mean that the appetite influences reason only with respect to the means, but also insofar as the means are themselves ends in respect to higher goods. Cf. q. 58, a. 4, c.: “Primo, ut sit debita intentio finis, et hoc fit per virtutem moralem, quae vim appetitivam inclinat ad bonum conveniens rationi, quod est finis debitus.”

such a person acts with perfect virtue. If one does not incorporate into moral action, despite being well-disposed insofar as his appetite is concerned, the quasi-integral and potential parts of prudence, one's action will not be virtuous simply speaking, for the action will either omit some necessary consideration and thus lack in some goodness or it will be fully good only incidentally, and not on account of the excellence of the acting individual.³⁸ Nevertheless, one may have virtues "absolutely imperfect, which exist without prudence, not attaining right reason,"³⁹ which are more like inclinations towards virtue than true virtues. The moral virtues can be had **imperfectly** without prudence, but **only** imperfectly.⁴⁰ Contrariwise, any imperfection in the moral virtues likewise denies a perfection of prudence—for even if one rightly takes counsel, judges, and even commands, one may not do so happily or with expedience, both of which are conditions for the perfection of virtue.⁴¹

Thus we can see that the relationship between prudence and the moral virtues is like a relationship of parts to the whole or a relationship of matter to form. In order that the whole be a whole, each part is required; without a roof, walls, or a floor, a house is not really a house. Yet each of the parts is for the sake of the whole. Likewise, the form is the term of generation, to which matter accrues; without the matter, the form (of a material being) would not be, but the matter is for the sake of

³⁸ Cf. *ibid.*: "Huiusmodi autem inclinationes non simul insunt omnibus, sed quidam habent inclinationem ad unum, quidam ad aliud. Hae autem inclinationes non habent rationem virtutis, quia virtute nullus male utitur, secundum Augustinum; huiusmodi autem inclinationibus potest aliquis male uti et nocive, si sine discretione utatur; sicut equus, si visu careret, tanto fortius impingeret, quanto fortius curreret." We understand *discretione* here to refer in a general way to the perfective quality bestowed upon the prudent act by the quasi-integral and potential parts.

³⁹ *De virtutibus*, q. 5, a. 2, c.: "Sunt enim quaedam virtutes omnino imperfectae, quae sine prudentia existunt, non attingentes rationem rectam, sicut sunt inclinationes quas aliqui habent ad aliqua virtutum opera etiam ab ipsa nativitate."

⁴⁰ It should be noted that in *De virt.*, q. 5, a. 2, Thomas distinguishes two levels of perfect virtue—the first being that in which the cardinal virtues are united by the possession of prudence, and the second being that in which all the virtues are united through infusion of charity.

⁴¹ *De virt.*, q. 1, a. 1, ad. 13; a. 9, ad. 14; a. 12, ad. 12.

the form, and strives for it as its perfection. Thus, just as the form of the house does not exist in itself until the house is complete and the matter is but imperfectly fulfilling its end until the house is complete, so too the moral virtues are had imperfectly until fully in accord with the right reason, the prudence by which they are held in unity and integrated not merely one with another as right dispositions of the appetite, but also with the intellect. But as for how this unifying and integrating is accomplished, we must turn back to prudence and consider its principal act.

Praeceptum, the Principal Act of Prudence

In the virtue of prudence the ring of the active life is rounded out and closed, is completed and perfected; for man, drawing on his experience of reality, acts in and upon reality, thus realizing himself in decision and in act. The profundity of this concept is expressed in the strange statement of Thomas Aquinas that in prudence, the commanding virtue of the “conduct of life,” the happiness of the active life is essentially comprised.⁴²

It is notable that one failing no society or culture, even the most reprehensible, ever forgives or endorses is that of hypocrisy. Political and religious persuasions are indifferent when those who preach one thing—oftentimes with eloquence or passion, apparent conviction and alacrity—and yet deceptively and deliberately do the opposite are exposed for their duplicity; they are denounced universally by all those who acknowledge the truth of the falsehood. The more perturbing is the revelation of such hypocrisy when the hypocrite is more respected and the more profound and intimate his knowledge of that which one exhorted in word but not in deed. It is as such that while such humans might, through a broad and somewhat abusive use of the term, be called

⁴² Josef Pieper, *Prudence*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Pantheon Books, Inc., 1959), 43.

practical, only the greatly confused would call them truly prudent.⁴³ Even in societies which have all but eschewed the virtues propounded by St. Thomas and Aristotle, there is nevertheless an upholding of prudence as something admirable, as a quality which improves one's life.

What we may glean from this universal approbation of the hypocrite is a similarly universal recognition, albeit not so clearly recognized, that prudence is something virtuous not because it pertains to having good knowledge of practical matters, but because it extends itself to their accomplishment, or at the very least their attempt. The hypocrite is denounced because he knows the good and proposes it to others, but chooses against what he knows.⁴⁴ He has a moral science, a virtual practical knowledge of the good, but no virtue of practical reasoning. He elects what he knows to be a lesser good over what is known to be a higher; his is a failing both of intention of means and of execution—that is, of *iudicium electionis* and *electio, praecipere* and *usus*.

On the other hand, we also find fault—though less universally and less severely, perhaps, than in generations past—with those who falter not through hypocrisy, but through some moral weakness. Where the hypocrite sins through a vice of deceitfulness, the weak man falters through a lack of resolve; not through deceiving others, but through deceiving himself.⁴⁵ This lack of resolve,⁴⁶ Thomas says, arises from a failing in command:

⁴³ I.e., not prudence as pertaining to a particular matter, as in business, but as pertaining to the whole of human life. Cf. Naus, *The Nature of the Practical Intellect According to Saint Thomas Aquinas*, 60–64.

⁴⁴ In *ST* IIa–IIae, q. 55, a. 5, Thomas calls fraud a sort of craftiness (*astutiam*), one of two sins opposed to prudence which bears a resemblance to the virtue inasmuch as it uses reason, but improperly.

⁴⁵ *ST* IIa–IIae, q. 53, a. 5, c.: “Sed iste recessus non consummatur nisi per defectum rationis, quae fallitur in hoc quod repudiat id quod recte acceptaverat.” This is what we mean today by “rationalizing” our actions.

⁴⁶ My translation for *inconstantia*.

Just as hastiness is from a defect concerning the act of taking counsel, and thoughtlessness concerning the act of judging, likewise a lack of resolve concerns the act of command, for one is said to be lacking in resolve because his reason fails in commanding those things which have been counseled and judged.⁴⁷

This text suggests strongly that the principal act of prudence, *praeceptum*, is to be identified with *imperium*, rather than with *iudicium electionis*, an issue which has been debated among Thomists in the past hundred years.⁴⁸ It is clearly stated that the weak man does not suffer from defects in his ability to take counsel or to judge, but from his inability to carry out that which he knows is right through some act consequent to all judgments.⁴⁹ The failure is not in intending, discerning, or deciding, but in executing.

What do we mean, however, by saying that this execution is or involves an act of command—and why is this act of command considered an act of the reason, rather than of the will? This last question is the first which Thomas takes up in article 1 of *prima secundae* q. 17. Command (*imperium*), he states, is an act of the reason, an instillation or promulgation, which presupposes an act of the will,⁵⁰ namely *elec-*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*: “Et sicut praecipitatio est ex defectu circa actum consilii, et inconsideratio circa actum iudicii, ita inconstantia circa actum praecepti, ex hoc enim dicitur aliquis esse inconstans quod ratio deficit in praecipiendo ea quae sunt consiliata et iudicata.”

⁴⁸ I do not have here the time to take up this debate. I will simply say that, per my interpretation of the *iudicium electionis* and *electio* being that whereby the means are made fully practical as becoming themselves ends of a sort, intended by the reason militates against the notion that *praeceptum* and *iudicium electionis* are identical. It is my opinion that *ST Ia–IIae*, q. 16, a. 4, concerning the relation of *usus* to *electio*, reinforces this interpretation. Daniel De Haan has treated this issue at length in an unpublished paper, “Aquinas and the Principal Act of Prudence: *Iudicium Electionis* or *Imperium*?” which provides many clarifications and for which I am grateful.

⁴⁹ This vice consequently is opposed to fortitude as well as to prudence, since it belongs to fortitude to overcome difficulties or challenges impeding one’s pursuit of the true good. Cf. *ibid.*, ad. 1: “[B]onum prudentiae participatur in omnibus virtutibus moralibus, et secundum hoc persistere in bono pertinet ad omnes virtutes morales. Praecipue tamen ad fortitudinem, quae patitur maiorem impulsum ad contrarium.”

⁵⁰ *ST Ia–IIae*, q. 17, a. 1, c.: “[I]mperare est actus rationis, praesupposito tamen actu voluntatis . . . Imperare autem est quidem essentialiter actus rationis, imperans enim

tio.⁵¹ This instillation or promulgation of the reason happens in one of two ways: either through an indicative statement, as “this is what you ought to do,” or through a movement which is expressed by an imperative statement, as “do this.”⁵² The first kind of command would seem to pertain to moral science, as promulgating what would be the right sort of action without actually moving anyone to it; the second would pertain to moral reasoning, as that which instills the reason into action, puts reason into motion, and thereby puts order into motion.⁵³ While the *iudicium electionis* may be that whereby the means are incorporated into an order of practical reasoning and become part of one act of practical reasoning,⁵⁴ it is by *praeceptum* that they are, so to speak, put into *praxis* and become not just actually practical knowledge, but actually in practice. While there is a certain amount of praise or blame that is to be given to someone for intending both ends and means, it is by the action commanded that merit and punishment are cemented. As Thomas states, although command and the action commanded are distinct as parts they nevertheless constitute one human act.⁵⁵ It is within and by repetition of this one human act, this complexus of command and use (i.e., the action commanded), that both the intellectual virtue of right practical reason and the moral virtues whereby particulars are rightly

ordinat eum cui imperat, ad aliquid agendum, intimando vel denuntiando; sic autem ordinare per modum cuiusdam intimationis, est rationis.” I have paraphrased *intimando* and *denuntiando* as “instillation” and “promulgation,” respectively, based upon their entries in the *Blaise Medieval Lexicon*.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, a. 3, ad. 1: “[N]on omnis actus voluntatis praecedit hunc actum rationis qui est imperium, sed aliquis praecedit, scilicet electio.”

⁵² *Ibid.*, a. 1, c.

⁵³ *ST* IIa–IIae, q. 47, a. 8, ad. 3: “Sed praecipere importat motionem cum quadam ordinatione.”

⁵⁴ Cf. *ST* Ia–IIae, q. 17, a. 4, ad. 1: “[S]i essent potentiae diversae ad invicem non ordinatae, actus earum essent simpliciter diversi. Sed quando una potentia est movens alteram, tunc actus earum sunt quodammodo unus, nam idem est actus moventis et moti, ut dicitur in III Physic.”

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*: “Unde patet quod imperium et actus imperatus sunt unus actus humanus, sicut quoddam totum est unum, sed est secundum partes multa.”

regarded are developed and thus are brought into the unity that characterizes them as virtues.⁵⁶

In contrast to art, in which the perfection is found chiefly in the thing made and is thus a transitive activity, prudence is said to deal with things to be done, and therefore the perfection resides in the doing—which is to say, a sort of immanence of human activity.⁵⁷ This does not mean a sort of activity which can be reduced to an either/or, but rather something that admits of degrees of perfection. Just as we say that “living” is had more perfectly in an animal than a plant, and “understanding” in an angel than in man,⁵⁸ so too do we say that one man may act better than another, not because he produces something better, but because he excels in the very doing of the act. But unlike the immanent activities of mere existing or understanding, the immanence found in the activities of prudence results necessarily in a sort of emanation, a spilling over into interactions with the world, a growth of the individual in his virtue which manifests itself in his external actions.⁵⁹

It is thus that command is the principal act of prudence, and thus that prudence is the most necessary virtue for the whole good of human life. Without command, nothing would come to be; as we quoted Pieper above, one would not realize oneself “in decision and in act.” While good dispositions to temperance, fortitude, and justice are needed for righteous intention, while aptitude for deliberation and swiftness in

⁵⁶ Cf. *De virt.*, q. 1, a. 9, c. *in passim* but especially: “Unde, si recte consideretur, virtus appetitivae partis nihil est aliud quam quaedam dispositio, sive forma, sigillata et impressa in vi appetitiva a ratione. Et propter hoc, quantumcumque sit fortis dispositio in vi appetitiva ad aliud, non potest habere rationem virtutis, nisi sit ibi id quod est rationis. Unde et in definitione virtutis ponitur ratio: dicit enim philosophus, II Ethicorum, quod virtus est habitus electivus in mente consistens determinata specie, prout sapiens determinabit.”

⁵⁷ Cf. James F. Keenan, “The Virtue of Prudence,” in *The Ethics of Aquinas*, ed. Stephen J. Pope (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 265.

⁵⁸ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Super de Causis*, lec. 18–20.

⁵⁹ For a detailed analysis of immanent and transitive activity, I have looked to Yves Simon’s *Introduction to Metaphysics of Knowledge*, trans. Vukan Kuic and Richard J. Thompson (Fordham University Press, New York: 1990), 39–84.

correct judgment are requisite for the perfected operation of practical reasoning, it is only by and through acts of command that these would-be virtues are made into actual perfections of the human person. Moreover does it belong to prudence, as comprising deliberation, decision, and execution, to consider not only the means to any particular end, but all of them with regard to some ultimate end of life. Its virtuosity consists not in the attainment of any myopically-envisioned goal, but that in its excellence it directs one to the highest of goals, by finding for the person the right means to its attainment.

THE PREEMINENT NECESSITY OF PRUDENCE

SUMMARY

Thomas Aquinas holds not only that prudence, the virtue of right practical reasoning, is necessary for living well, but emphatically asserts that it “is the virtue *most* necessary to human life.” This essay argues that the force of Thomas’ assertion should not be understood as simply contradicting the objection—that “it seems that prudence is not a virtue necessary to living a good life”—with vigor, but rather, as we intend to show, that although all the moral virtues are necessary for the good life, there is a superior importance to the need for prudence, as that whereby the parts of virtuous living are not merely stacked up like building blocks of moral righteousness, but coalesced into a complete whole. To make clear the reasons for this preeminent necessity, we shall first consider the parts and constitution of prudence itself, its relationship to the other virtues, and conclude with its principal act, *praeceptum*.

KEYWORDS

prudence, counsel, deliberation, virtue, practical reasoning, practical judgment, Thomas Aquinas.

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