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University of Ottawa

Prudence in St. Thomas Aquinas
by Joseph F. McCabe
055 928

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
of the degree Master of Arts (Philosophy)
at the University of Ottawa
May 14, 1993



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Abstract of Thesis

What distinguishes the human person from the rest of the material universe is his intellectual soul. This soul is at once both his substantial form and the principle of all his powers and operations. It is by virtue of his intellectual soul that the human person is both intelligent and free. The human person and only the human person, among all the existents of the material world, can think and freely choose. On the basis of this fact, St. Thomas Aquinas founds his conception of the virtue of prudence.

In those existents below the human person on the so-called 'great chain of being,' there resides a certain natural inclination, or 'natural appetite,' which guides them to their end. This end is at the same time their good and consists essentially in the fulfillment of the demands of their respective natures. Minerals, plants, and brute animals attain their end unconsciously, as it were, and necessarily because their natures do not possess the rational faculties of intellect and will. They cannot reason and they cannot freely choose. They operate, at their highest - in the brute animals - on the level of the sensible appetites.

Now, the human person stands in no such stead. Endowed as he is, as a consequence of his rational nature, with the faculties of reason and free will, the human person can both know his end as end and freely choose the means required for its attainment. And for this reason, he needs the virtue of prudence. Indeed, the virtue of prudence is an exigency of man's rational nature.

Given both that man necessarily desires his last end, happiness, and that this end is attained by means of certain acts, it follows that man, who is free in his choice of actions - in what he will do or not do - is in need of a good habit which will direct his intellect in the right choice of particular actions. Man is in need of a good habit which will aid his intellect to make right judgments about which actions are good (i.e. in accord with right

reason) and to be pursued, and which are evil (i.e. not in accord with right reason) and to be shunned. Prudence, "right reason about things to be done," is just such a good habit, or 'virtue.' And so we concur with St. Thomas, indeed, when he states that "prudence is a virtue most necessary for human life."

In the present thesis, therefore, we attempt to explicate St. Thomas's understanding of this all-important virtue. In the introduction, we demonstrate how prudence is an exigency of man's rational nature, showing that without it man is incapable of acting according to reason and attaining his end. In the first section, we attempt to sketch the context in which St. Thomas himself wrote. This context is composed, essentially, of two traditions: the Christian tradition of 'discretio' and the Aristotelian tradition of 'phronesis.' Within our analysis, we identify the major influences on St. Thomas's conception of prudence, in descending order of importance, as: Aristotle, St. Albert the Great, Philip the Chancellor, and William of Auxerre and provide a commentary on the specific contribution of each of these authors.

In the second section, we attempt to summarize the contemporary context of the debate on prudence. We state that although there is not a lot written in recent years on St. Thomas's conception of prudence in particular, there is a lively debate currently on the question of whether an 'ethics of virtue' can and should replace other present-day ethical theories, such as Emotivism and Consequentialism. In this regard, we look briefly at the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, Josef Pieper, and Gilbert Meilaender. As well, we point out that with the recent publication of Daniel Nelson's book, The Priority of Prudence, new life has been injected into the present debate on St. Thomas's understanding of the relation between prudence and the natural law.

In the third and final section, we outline in detail St. Thomas's actual conception of the nature and exercise of the virtue of prudence. In this regard, we show that St. Thomas considers

prudence a good operative habit of the practical intellect. We remark how St. Thomas views the three principal acts of prudence as: deliberation, practical judgment, and command, with this last being the proper act of the virtue. As well, we detail the eight 'integral parts' of prudence: memory, insight, docility, perspicacity, reasoned judgment, foresight, circumspection, and caution, with foresight acting as the principal of these parts.

Finally, in our concluding paragraphs, we return to the issues raised by the Nelson book mentioned above and propose our thesis in this regard. This is, simply, that although Nelson is perhaps wrong to portray the 'natural law tradition' surrounding Aquinas as so rigidly deductivist, he is right to emphasize that St. Thomas's ethical theory is fundamentally virtue and prudence-based and not natural law-based.

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Introduction

The Virtue of Prudence: an Exigency of Man's Rational Nature

What distinguishes the human person from the rest of the material universe is his intellectual soul.¹ This soul is at once both his substantial form² and the principle of all his powers and operations.³ It is by virtue of his intellectual soul that the human person is both intelligent and free. The human person and only the human person, among all the existents of the material world, can think and freely choose. On the basis of this fact, St. Thomas Aquinas founds his conception of the virtue of prudence.

In those existents below the human person on the so-called 'great chain of being,'⁴ there resides a certain natural inclination, or 'natural appetite,'⁵ which guides them to their end. This 'end' is at the same time their good and consists essentially in the fulfilment of the demands of their respective natures. Minerals, plants, and brute animals attain their end unconsciously, as it were, and necessarily because their natures do not possess the rational faculties of intellect and will. They cannot reason and they cannot freely choose. They operate, at

¹Summa Theologica Ia, q.78, a.1, c.

²Ibid. Ia, q.76, a.4, sed c.

³Ibid. Ia, q.77, a.5, ad 1: "Omnes potentiae dicuntur esse animae, non sicut subiecti, sed sicut principii: quia per animam coniunctum habet quod tales operationes operari possit."

⁴Summa Contra Gentiles Lib. IV, cap. 11.

⁵S.T. Ia, q.80, a.1, c: "Hanc igitur formam naturalem sequitur naturalis inclinatio, quae appetitus naturalis vocatur."

their highest, in animals, on the level of the sensible appetites.⁶

Now, the human person stands in no such stead. Endowed as he is, as a consequence of his rational nature, with the faculties of reason and free will,⁷ the human person can both know his end as end and freely choose the means required for its attainment. And for this reason he needs the virtue of prudence. Indeed, the virtue of prudence is an exigency man's rational nature. We have said that rationality belongs to the very essence of man.⁸ And we have further stipulated that to be rational means, essentially, to be intelligent and free. While it is decidedly not our intention here to give an exhaustive account of St. Thomas's theory of intellect and will, our task remains to demonstrate how these twin faculties⁹ make necessary the virtue of prudence. They do so in the following ways.

First, man is capable of thought; he has the faculties necessary to perform the act of intellection. Because man is

⁶S.C.G. Lib. IV, cap. 11.

⁷S.T. Ia, q.83, a.1, c: "Et pro tanto necesse est quod homo sit liberi arbitrii, ex hoc ipso quod rationalis est."

⁸Ibid. Ia, q.25, a.6, c: "sicut esse rationale est de essentia hominis."

⁹Ibid. Ia, q.79, a.10: St. Thomas affirms that intelligence is the act of the intellect and not a power separate from it: "Ergo intelligentia non est alia potentia praeter intellectum" and "hoc nomen intelligentia proprie significat ipsum actum intellectus." And, of course, Aquinas does not hesitate to identify the will with free choice: "liberum arbitrium nihil aliud est quam voluntas."

composed of body and soul,¹⁰ his knowledge is partly sensible and partly intelligible.¹¹ In fact, St. Thomas maintains, through its reception of the species of both sensible things and intelligible things, the soul of man is, in a certain sense, "all things by sense and intellect."¹² With Aristotle, St. Thomas affirms that all of man's knowledge begins in his senses.¹³ Things exist: trees, rocks, animals, etc., and man, through his five senses, perceives these things. He apprehends that they exist and, by abstracting from them their substantial form, he is able to distinguish between them. He looks at a tree and looks at a horse and forms the judgments: 'this thing is a tree,' and 'that thing is a horse;' and by the principle of identity he affirms that the tree is not the horse, and vice-versa. And what is important in all this is that his knowledge is not merely sense knowledge. He has formed 'concepts' of the things; his knowledge is intellectual.¹⁴

We have said that existents below man attain their end 'unconsciously' by merely following their 'natural appetite.' One

¹⁰S.T. Ia, q.75, a.1, c: "Manifestum est quod homo non est anima tantum, sed est aliquid compositum ex anima et corpore."

¹¹Ibid. Ia, q.84, a.6, c.

¹²Ibid. Ia, q.80, a.1, c: "sicut sensus recipit species omnium sensibilium, et intellectus omnium intelligibilium, ut sic anima hominis sit omnia quodammodo secundum sensum et intellectum."

¹³Ibid. Ia, q.84, a.6, sed c: "Philosophus probat, I Metaphys et in fine Poster quod principium nostrae cognitionis est a sensu."

¹⁴Ibid. Ia, q.84, a.1.

reason for this is that these things, by virtue of their non-rational soul, do not have the intellective faculties necessary to abstract from things their substantial form. Their 'knowledge,' for those of them which have any 'knowledge' at all, is purely sensible and not intellectual. And this is the sense in which we say that minerals, plants, and brute animals cannot 'think.'

That said, however, we must be quick to affirm of man, on the other hand, that although he is capable of intellectual knowledge, he too is moved to his proper good, his end as a rational being, by a 'natural appetite.' That is, to say that man is capable of intellectual knowledge (and therefore of knowledge of his end as end) is not at all to say that he is not at the same time moved to his end, his good, by his 'natural form' ('forma naturalis').¹⁵ For St. Thomas, as for Aristotle, all existents have a natural form which directs them to their good; and man is no exception. The salient point in this, however, is not that existents below man cannot think or that man too is moved to his end by a natural appetite. It is, rather, that man, in addition to the 'knowledge' he has of his end through his natural appetite, is capable, through his intellectual knowledge, of proposing to himself ends other than those supplied to him by this appetite.¹⁶ This, as we shall see shortly, is the fundamental reason why prudence is an exigency of

¹⁵S.T. Ia, q.80, a.1, c.

¹⁶Ibid: "per quam animal appetere potest ea quae apprehendit non solum ea ad quae inclinatur ex forma naturali."

man's rational nature.¹⁷

St. Thomas points out that the will, man's intellectual appetite,¹⁸ 'follows' the intellect.¹⁹ We shall argue below that one important difference between the ethical theory of St. Thomas and that of Aristotle is that St. Thomas, through his profound knowledge of the Christian tradition which preceeded him, has a far richer understanding of the faculty of 'will.' And, as we shall see, one of the central concerns of the modern debate on prudence and an 'ethics of virtue,' is just this question of the relation between will and intellect. Indeed, we shall conclude with St. Thomas himself that the will itself moves the intellect.²⁰ But, if this is so, how is it that the will follows the intellect?

The will follows the intellect in the sense that the object of the will is the 'good' and the will is moved by what is apprehended

¹⁷St. Thomas himself devotes an article of the Summa to a related question: S.T. Ia IIae, q.57, a.5: "Utrum Prudentia Sit Virtus Necessaria Homini."

¹⁸S.T. Ia, q.83, a.3, c: "appetitus intellectivus."

¹⁹S.T. Ia IIae, q.9, a.1, c: "Sed obiectum movet determinando actum ad modum principii formalis, a quo in rebus naturalibus actio specificatur, sicut calefactio a calore. Primum autem principium formale est ens et verum universale, quod est obiectum intellectus. Et ideo isto modo motionis intellectus movet voluntatem, sicut praesentans ei obiectum suum. Also: S.T. Ia IIae, q.5, a.8, ad 2: "Voluntas sequatur apprehensionem intellectus seu rationis."

²⁰S.T. Ia, q.82, a.4.

as good.²¹ Therefore, if the intellect presents something as good to the will, the will necessarily begins to desire this thing. For example, for many reasons a man may apprehend work as something good. He can reason within himself that if he works he can earn the money he needs to feed his children, send them to school, etc. He perceives the care of his children as something good and so he perceives work itself, the means to this good, also as something good. Now, because the will desires what is presented to it as good, when the intellect of this man presents to his will the idea of work (and all that this idea implies for him), his will should desire work. Of course, due to the influence of either his passions or an error in practical judgment, he may fail to apprehend work as a good; that is, whether he ever actually decides to work is another question, involving many other variables, one of which, in fact, is the virtue of prudence. But what we want to stress here is simply that if his intellect apprehends something as good, his will necessarily desires the thing. And it is in this sense that the will follows the intellect.

Now, what we have just described is one aspect of the general relation between the intellect and the will, man's rational faculties. And we have seen in what sense we can speak of the intellect as moving the will. However, the example we chose to illustrate this relation is one in which there is no contradiction

²¹S.T. Ia, q.82, a.3, ad 2: "Et hoc modo intellectus est prior voluntate...bonum enim intellectum movet voluntatem."

between man's apprehended good and his actual good. It is hard even to imagine a scenario in which the most basic care of one's offspring would not be considered a good thing; i.e. as something in keeping with man's end as a rational being.

But the situation changes quite a bit if these two ends are in contradiction. Let us take for example the case of a man who, for various reasons, has come to apprehend theft as a good thing. The situation is not very difficult at all to imagine. A bank vice-president is commanded by his boss on pain of his job to devise a safe way periodically to steal a small percentage off the top of the ten largest accounts at the bank. This vice-president, who on his own would never have conceived such a plan, thinks of his large family, of his wife, his children, etc. And, finally, not wishing to lose his job and be unable to support his family, he gives in to the pressure of his boss and begins systematically to steal large sums of money from these ten accounts. His plan works very well indeed and is also quite safe. He even justifies the theft to himself saying that these people are so rich that they do not even notice the money missing.

Now, what has happened in this instance is that something which is objectively evil; that is, not in keeping with man's end as a rational being (as, presumably, theft arguably is), and known to be evil, has, for various reasons, been apprehended as good. When the man finally performs the action of stealing the money, he

does so not under its aspect as a morally reprehensible action, but under its aspect as an action which permits him to keep his job and support his family. His intellect perceives that the care of his family is a good thing and it is in function of this good, and not of the 'known' evil, that he acts. Now, obviously, it could fairly be argued that it is not his intellect which moves him to perceive the action as good, but his will; that he wants so badly not to lose his job that his will coerces his intellect into accepting something which, on its own, it would reject. And, in fact, this is precisely the argument we ourselves will use below in our discussion of the connection between prudence and the moral virtues (We get here a glimpse of the richness of St. Thomas's conception of the relation between intellect and will). Our point here is simply that the will cannot desire anything under the aspect of evil. And, since what is not known cannot be desired at all, it must needs be that the intellect both apprehends the object and presents it to the will as something good. The case of the bank vice-president teaches us that man can furnish himself with ends other than those supplied to him by his natural appetite; that man has the ability to treat as his end things which are not truly his end,²² a temptation unknown to non-rational beings. But, if this is the case, if man - owing to his passions and errors in judgment - can be mistaken in his apprehension of what is good for him, of what are appropriate means to his ultimate end (the fulfilment of the demands of his rational nature), then is he not in need of a

²²S.T. Ia IIae, q.2.

quality which will perfect his intellect in the right choice of means to his end? To answer this question, we must go to the roots of Aquinas's teaching on prudence.

First, St. Thomas adopts Aristotle's doctrine on the categories of reality: substance and the nine accidents. He follows Aristotle in his teaching that one of the accidents which perfects substance intrinsically and absolutely is the accident, 'quality,' and that operative habits are a species of the quality, 'disposition.' He further agrees with Aristotle in calling good operative habits, 'virtues,'²³ and in distinguishing two types of virtues (according to the faculty they perfect): intellectual virtues and moral virtues.²⁴ Finally, St. Thomas accepts Aristotle's division of the intellectual virtues into those which perfect the speculative and those which perfect the practical intellect, listing prudence with the latter.²⁵

However, St. Thomas has much more to say on the end of human life than his great Greek mentor. He agrees with Aristotle that man's last end is happiness²⁶ and that all men necessarily desire this end. But, whereas Aristotle is quite vague on whether men

²³S.T. Ia IIae, q.55, a.3.

²⁴Ibid. Ia IIae, q.58, a.3.

²⁵Ibid. Ia IIae, q.57.

²⁶Ibid. Ia IIae, q.1, a.7, sed c: "omnes homines conveniunt in appetendo ultimum finem, qui est beatitudo."

will enjoy personal immortality, St. Thomas - who treats the question at great length - decidedly affirms man's personal immortality. Moreover, this assertion of personal immortality suggests a last end far higher than that proposed by Aristotle. Indeed, for St. Thomas, man's last end, his perfect happiness, consists in knowing and loving God; that is, in the vision of the Divine Essence.²⁷ St. Thomas calls 'good' those actions which are in accord with right reason and directed to a due end and 'evil' those which are not.²⁸ Ultimately, human actions can be judged good or evil depending on whether or not they are in keeping with man's exalted last end.

Now, given that man necessarily²⁹ desires this end and that happiness ("activity in accord with perfect virtue"³⁰) is attained by means of certain acts, it follows that man, who is free in his choice of actions - in what he will do or not do - is in need of a

²⁷S.T. Ia IIae, q.3, a.8, c: "Ultima et perfecta beatitudo non potest esse nisi in visione divinae essentiae."

²⁸Ibid. Ia IIae, q.18, a.9, c: "Cum enim rationis sit ordinare, actus a ratione deliberativa procedens, si non sit ad debitum finem ordinatus, ex hoc ipso repugnat ratione, ut habet rationem mali. Si vero ordinetur ad debitum finem, convenit cum ordine rationis, unde habet rationem boni."

²⁹Ibid. Ia IIae, q.5, a.8, c: "Et sic necesse est quod omnis homo beatitudinem velit."

³⁰Ibid. Ia IIae, q.3, a.2, sed c: "felicitas est operatio secundum virtutem perfectam."

good habit³¹ which will direct his intellect in the right choice of particular actions. Man is in need of a good habit which will aid his intellect to make right judgments about which actions are good (i.e. in accord with right reason) and to be performed, and which are evil (i.e. not in accord with reason) and to be shunned.

Prudence, "right reason about things to be done,"³² is just such a good habit, or 'virtue.' And so we concur with St. Thomas, indeed, when he states that "prudence is a virtue most necessary for human life."³³ In the present thesis, therefore, we attempt to explicate St. Thomas's conception of this important virtue.³⁴

First, we analyze at length the contexts of the present essay; that is, the context in which St. Thomas himself wrote, as well as the context of the present debate on prudence. In this regard, we look at, respectively, the contributions of Aristotle, William of Auxerre, Philip the Chancellor, and St. Albert the Great, as well as those of Daniel Nelson, Alasdair MacIntyre, Josef Pieper, and Gilbert Meilaender. Finally, we look briefly at the nature and exercise of prudence, characterizing it, with St. Thomas, as a

³¹Ibid. q.49, a.1, c: "habitus dicitur dispositio secundum quam bene vel male disponitur dispositum et aut secundum se aut ad aliud;" (loca parallela: Aristoteles, Metaph. Lib. V).

³²S.T. Ia IIae, q.57, a.4, c: "Prudentia vero est recta ratio agibilium."

³³Ibid. Ia IIae, a.5, c: "Prudentia est virtus maxime necessaria ad vitam humanam."

³⁴Especially his teaching in the Secunda Pars.

natural virtue: a good operative habit of the practical intellect. We show the relation prudence has with its brother intellectual virtue, 'art,' and its relation to the moral virtues. We conclude by discussing in detail the three principle acts of the virtue and the eight 'integral parts' of which it is composed.

I. St. Thomas's Context

There are two histories that could be written of the treatise on the virtue of prudence. The first would begin in ancient Greece and most especially with the work of Aristotle. It would center around the term, 'phronesis,'³⁵ Aristotle's term for prudence properly so-called; i.e. the prudence of an individual in what concerns his life generally. This history would suffer a near total eclipse from soon after Aristotle's day, through the early Christian era and the early Middle Ages, until the middle of the thirteenth century. After this long eclipse, this history would begin again with the work of the Franciscan, Robert Grosseteste (1170-1253), to whom is generally attributed the first complete Greco-Latin translation of the Nichomachean Ethics, most probably in the year 1246 or 1247.³⁶ St. Albert the Great, well after his work in the De Bono, would profit from Grosseteste's translation to further elaborate on the meaning of this virtue, 'phronesis,' especially in his lectures and written commentaries on the sixth and seventh books of Aristotle's Ethics. With St. Albert's work done, the stage was set, so to speak, for the masterful work of synthesis and definition of St. Thomas himself. We will chronicle closely below the influence of St. Albert and others on the work of

³⁵In Ethicorum Lib. VI, lect. 4: "Et dicit quod quia prudentia est circa bona vel mala agibilia, inde est quod temperantia vocatur in graeco 'sophrosyne,' qua salvans mentem, a qua etiam prudentia dicitur 'phronesis.'"

³⁶Pierre J. Payer, "Prudence and the Principles of Natural Law: A Medieval Development," Speculum 54 (1979) 55, note #2.

St. Thomas, as well as give, obviously, a detailed account of St. Thomas's conception of prudence. But let us return briefly to the 'second history' alluded to above.

This 'second history,' profiting from the absence of Aristotle's works in the early Middle Ages, would begin with the Christian usage of the term 'discretio.' The early medievals identified 'prudence' with 'discretio' which, in turn, was considered by them merely as a form of knowledge. In fact, "almost every definition available to medieval authors prior to Aristotle's [definition] characterized prudence as a kind of knowledge." And "since knowledge of itself has no moral character and is possessed by good men and evil men," they did not consider prudence a virtue.³⁷ Abelard even went so far as explicitly to deny the virtuous character of prudence. St. Bernard did not explicitly deny that prudence was a virtue, but in his treatment prudence is always relegated to the task merely of directing the other virtues ('auriga virtutum') and is not necessarily perceived as a virtue itself. In fact, it is not until towards the end of the twelfth century that prudence emerges as the central cardinal virtue.³⁸ So, this second history would take into account the rich Christian tradition which preceded the high Middle Ages.

Now, these two histories combine in the brilliant synthesis of

³⁷Ibid. p.57.

³⁸Ibid. p.56.

St. Thomas Aquinas. We will see in detail below how St. Thomas was influenced by Aristotle, St. Albert, and the others. Let it suffice here simply to sketch the broad lines of development in the treatment of prudence up to and including the work of St. Thomas. And what is important in this regard is that there are clearly two distinct stages in this development.

The first stage is that of the period before the introduction of Aristotle's Ethics into the Latin west and it includes the work done by St. John Damascene (the greatest of the eastern Fathers), St. Bernard, William of Auxerre, Philip the Chancellor, St. Albert the Great (up to and including his work in the De Bono), and several other minor figures. This first stage represents what is called the 'discretio' tradition.

The second stage is that of the period after the introduction of Aristotle's Ethics into the Latin west and it is composed primarily of the work of SS. Albert and Thomas, the two great Dominicans. This second stage opens with Aristotle's definition of 'phronesis' and concludes with Aquinas's elaborate conception of the virtue of prudence, the object of the present study.

Before moving to our detailed treatment of the individual influences on St. Thomas and his conception of prudence, let us note that in the broadest terms the development of the treatise on prudence centers around the question of whether prudence is

primarily an intellectual or a moral quality and, if intellectual, how it is a virtue. In the 'discretio' tradition, the act of prudence is considered as an essentially intellectual operation, as merely a judgment on whether or not a given action is good or bad. What was needed in order to characterize prudence as a virtue properly so-called was some way to link this primarily intellectual act with the operations of man's highest appetite, the will. Aristotle's understanding of 'phronesis' as essentially an act of command ('imperium')³⁹ provided St. Thomas with just this link. And it is to Aristotle that we turn our attention now.

1. Aristotle

Among all the influences on the ethical theory of St. Thomas, including his teachings on the virtue of prudence, Aristotle is by far the greatest. Even to make a statement like this seems somewhat odd, given their near identity on so many fundamental points. Indeed, it is the usual error of persons with little real understanding of the writings of St. Thomas to assume that his theories are mere copies of those of Aristotle. While they are profoundly similar in many respects, they are by no means identical and to claim so would reveal a genuine ignorance of both writers.

³⁹In Ethicorum Lib. VI, lect. 9: "Non autem stat hic ratio practica, sed ulterius procedit ad agendum. Et ideo necessarium est tertium opus quasi finale et completivum, scilicet praecipere quod procedatur ad actum: et hoc proprie pertinet ad prudentiam."

That said, however, because their ethical systems in general and their conceptions of prudence in particular, are more similar than dissimilar, it may prove worthwhile, after having briefly seen those areas in which St. Thomas is indebted to Aristotle, to focus on those areas in which they differ. In fact, unlike with the authors which we will see in the upcoming sections of this study, we can afford to pass more generally here over Aristotle's influence precisely because in almost all general aspects and in the majority of particular aspects it is in large measure Aristotle's conception of prudence that we will sketch below in those sections dealing with the nature and exercise of the virtue. And to say this so openly is not, I think, to betray a dependence on Aristotle that Aquinas himself would wish to deny. St. Thomas was always the first person to admit his debt to his predecessors, the Philosopher in first place. So, then, in what respects is Aquinas's conception of prudence indebted to that of Aristotle?

First, St. Thomas, as a fundamentally 'realist' philosopher,⁴⁰ adopted entirely Aristotle's understanding of the

⁴⁰It will be objected that Aquinas was not a philosopher and that even he referred to himself as a theologian. The objection, while well-taken, is in need of clarification. Yes, Aquinas referred to himself as a theologian and yes, much of his mature 'philosophy,' so called, appears in explicitly theological treatises. But Aquinas himself goes to great pains to demarcate clearly the respective boundaries of philosophy and theology and in his writings he is meticulous in respecting these boundaries. That he is doing theology at one instance he does not deny; but that his philosophy is truly philosophy (an account of reality based on natural reason and not faith) and not some kind unnatural mixture, some kind of 'theosophy,' he insists. And he is right to

'categories' of reality: substance and the nine accidents. Second, he accepted also in large measure Aristotle's account of human psychology. Let us examine more closely the significance of these two claims.

That Aquinas accepted Aristotle's conception of the 'categories'⁴¹ is very important because it allows us to classify precisely what he means by the term, 'prudence.' Aquinas maintains, with Aristotle, the most basic distinction that a 'substance' is that which exists 'of itself' and an 'accident' is that which exists 'in another.' He accepts, as well, that accidents are modifications of substance and that some accidents modify substance intrinsically and others only extrinsically. Of those accidents which modify substance intrinsically, some do so absolutely and others only relatively. The accident, 'quality,' is one of those accidents which modify substance intrinsically and absolutely and its first species is that of 'disposition and habit,' which latter is defined as: "a disposition whereby that which is disposed is disposed well or ill, and this either in

insist. St. Thomas was first and foremost a theologian. But this did not prevent him from engaging, even frequently, in speculation and analysis which was thoroughly philosophical. It is in this respect that we refer to him as a 'philosopher.' Much more could be said on this topic, obviously, but this is sufficient for our purposes.

⁴¹Aristotle Categoriae cap. 4, 1b25-2a10.

regard to itself or in regard to another."⁴² And 'habit' is the genus to which the virtue of prudence belongs. Aristotle and Aquinas both hold that there are two types of habits: entitative and operative. Entitative habits are those habits which affect how a thing is, and, for example, health is an entitative habit. Operative habits, on the other hand, affect how a thing acts, and the most important kind of operative habit, for our purposes, is, precisely, the virtue. A 'virtue,' St. Thomas explains, is simply a 'good operative habit,' or an operative habit which facilitates the performance of acts which are in keeping with man's end as a rational being.⁴³ A vice, on the other hand, is a 'bad operative habit.'

Now, among the virtues, among these good operative habits, there are some which perfect man's intellect and some which perfect his will. The former are called 'intellectual virtues' and the latter are called 'moral virtues.' The chief moral virtues, properly so-called, are: justice, temperance, and fortitude. The intellectual virtues, depending on whether they perfect the intellect in its treatment of necessary matters or of contingent

⁴²S.T. Ia IIae, q.49, a.1, c: "habitus dicitur dispositio secundum quam bene vel male disponitur dispositum, et aut secundum se aut ad aliud..."

⁴³St. Thomas explains that good habits are those which are in keeping with the nature of a thing, while bad habits are not in keeping. S.T. Ia IIae, q.54, a.3, c: "nam habitus bonus dicitur qui disponit ad actum convenientem naturae agentis; habitus autem malus dicitur qui disponit ad actum non convenientem naturae."

matters, are called, respectively, the speculative and the practical intellectual virtues. The former are three: understanding ('intellectus'), science ('scientia'), and wisdom ('sapientia');⁴⁴ while the latter are two: art ('ars' - right reason about things to be made) and prudence ('prudentia' - right reason about things to be done). So, it is Aquinas's adoption of Aristotle's 'categories' which gives us the basis for our understanding of just what he means by the term 'prudence.' Just what this meaning is we will make more specific in the section below on the nature of prudence.

Now, we said above that St. Thomas adopted not only Aristotle's conception of the categories, but also his understanding of human psychology. Why is this significant? It is so because the method of exposition of the habits and virtues chosen by St. Thomas himself in the Summa (Ia IIae) presupposes a distinctly Aristotelian psychology. After treating of man's last end and the nature of human acts, St. Thomas spends twenty seven questions discussing the nature and effects of all the passions. This done, he passes on to a lengthy consideration (21 questions) of some of the intrinsic principles of human acts. So, first he considers human acts and passions. Then he states that he wants to consider the principles, both intrinsic and extrinsic, of human acts. The extrinsic principles of human acts are, simply, laws (this treatment he leaves til the very end of the Prima Secundae).

⁴⁴S.T. Ia IIae, q.57, a.2.

The intrinsic principles are divided into two groups: man's rational faculties (intellect, will, memory, imagination, etc.) and the habits which perfect these faculties, foremost among which are the virtues, both intellectual and moral. Our point here is simply that one can see very clearly the influence of Aristotle on the thinking of St. Thomas in what concerns the habits and virtues in that the whole structure in which they are defined and treated presupposes Aristotle's psychology. The whole language of souls which possess faculties, which, in turn, are modified by habits, some of which are good and are called virtues, and some of which are bad and are called vices, etc, etc, etc, is entirely Aristotelian. And so we see that in addition to the most general categories, St. Thomas also borrows from Aristotle his theory of the human soul and how it is intrinsically modified.

Although many of the terms mentioned above find clearer definition in other works of Aristotle, it is the Ethics which most directly influenced St. Thomas's conception of prudence, not to mention, of course, his conception of ethics generally. The most important notion garnered by St. Thomas from Aristotle's Ethics is the notion of teleology. 'Teleology,' as we can decipher from its Greek root, 'telos,' denoting 'end,' means simply that, as the classical phrase has it: "all agents act for an end."⁴⁵ This is as true for inanimate agents as for animate ones and as true for

⁴⁵Ibid. Ia IIae, q.1, a.2, c: "omnia agentia necesse est agere propter finem" (loca parallela: Aristoteles Ethic. I, 1094a).

non-rational agents as for rational. Men, being rational; being, that is, as we saw above, intelligent and free, can know that they have an end, as well as act for this end. Existents below man are 'unconscious' of their end, and, therefore, cannot freely seek it as men do, but they do, nonetheless, have an end and act for it. This idea we have covered in detail in the introduction to the present essay, so we can leave it for now. The point here is simply that this notion of teleology, which underlies so much of St. Thomas's ethics, including specifically his conception of the virtue of prudence, is borrowed from Aristotle.

Before we go on to look at the ways in which St. Thomas's ethical system in general differs from that of Aristotle, let us remark one last way in which their conceptions of prudence in particular are similar. This is the idea that prudence sets the mean at which the moral virtues are to aim.⁴⁶ We will see below that in fact St. Thomas, owing to his more fully-developed understanding of the human will, is much more detailed than Aristotle in his analysis of the relation between prudence and the moral virtues. That said, however, it is in fact from Aristotle that St. Thomas borrows this fundamental aspect of his teaching on prudence.⁴⁷

⁴⁶Ibid. Ia IIae, q.64, a.2.

⁴⁷As we will see below in our section on St. Albert the Great, St. Thomas in fact borrows this idea from Aristotle through the medium of the detailed Commentaries of St. Albert on the newly translated Nichomachean Ethics; and so he is equally indebted to the two.

The moral virtues are concerned with action in accord with right reason."⁴⁸ The temperate man is he who controls his concupiscible appetites in such a way as to make them conform to the 'order of reason.' And the man possessed of fortitude likewise controls his irascible appetites. Now, because these virtues concern themselves with action, what they perfect (as their name implies) is the human will, and not the intellect as such. But the will itself is not a directing principle. This is the function of the intellect, precisely. The will moves a man to act, but it is the intellect which directs this action. But, if this is so, then the intellect itself is in need of a virtue to perfect it in its activity as the director of human action. This virtue, precisely, is prudence, and prudence directs the moral virtues, as we said above, by setting for them the mean at which they are to aim.⁴⁹

St. Thomas teaches, with Aristotle, that virtue itself is a kind of mean between two extremes.⁵⁰ The classical example used to demonstrate this teaching is the virtue of fortitude. Fortitude

⁴⁸S.T. Ia IIae, q.64, a.2, c: "virtus moralis dicitur consistere in medio, per conformitatem ad rationem rectam."

⁴⁹We have said above that St. Bernard and the early writers of the 'discretio' tradition also considered prudence the director of the moral virtues ('auriga virtutem'). The difference between these writers and St. Thomas, of course, is that for the latter prudence is definitely a virtue, while for the former this was not so clear.

⁵⁰Ibid. Ia IIae, q.64 a.1, c: "Manifestum est autem quod inter excessum et defectum medium est aequalitas sive conformitas. Unde manifeste apparet quod virtus moralis in medio consistit" (loca parallela: Aristoteles, Ethic II, 6 (1106b 36)).

is a kind of 'mean' between the two extremes of cowardliness and temerity. The brave man neither flees danger unnecessarily out of too much fear, nor recklessly throws himself into it out of too little fear. He fears the right things, at the right time, and in the right degree. His action derives its virtuous character precisely out of the fact that it occupies this middle ground between too much and too little fear. And, for our purposes, what is pertinent to note is that St. Thomas follows Aristotle again here in ascribing to prudence the role of setting for each of the moral virtues just in what this mean consists.

We have seen, then, that St. Thomas's teaching on the virtue of prudence in particular and his system of ethics in general owe a great deal to the teachings of Aristotle. However, by no means all of Aquinas's views on ethics or prudence are borrowed from the Stagirite. In fact, as we will see now, St. Thomas adds at least three fundamental ideas to Aristotle in regard to these subjects.

First, Aquinas adds to Aristotle's ethics the whole notion of an afterlife. Aristotle's ethics are concerned only with earthly life. Indeed, as we saw above, it is highly questionable whether Aristotle ever held that human beings enjoy personal immortality at all. St. Thomas's belief in personal immortality and an afterlife add an entirely new perspective to the purely natural ethics of Aristotle. One consequence of this belief is that the 'happiness' outlined by Aristotle is seen by St. Thomas as grossly inferior to

the 'perfect happiness' to be enjoyed in the next life.⁵¹ St. Thomas does not hold that men cannot be happy in this life, if the term 'happy' is properly understood. Men can be happy with the relative happiness of earthly existence (the happiness which comes from living a life in accord with virtue and divine 'grace'), but not perfectly happy. Even Aristotle recognizes that man's happiness on earth is not perfect, but he does not qualify it in function of some future life, but simply in function of the vicissitudes of the present life.

A second idea that St. Thomas adds to Aristotle's ethical scheme is the notion of moral sanction. For Aristotle, it is 'irrational' (i.e. 'not in accord with reason') to lack virtue, to live a disordered life. But it is not 'sinful.' The term, 'sinful,' implies clearly a notion of moral fault, personal guilt, which is absent from Aristotle's analysis. For him, the person who allows himself to be led by his passions is making a mistake, is being 'unreasonable,' and foolish, but not 'sinful,' as this term is normally understood. As a result, to be intemperate, for example, according to Aquinas, is certainly to act 'against reason;' but, depending on the degree of intemperance and the circumstances, it may also be sinful, i.e. morally blameworthy. And this leads us to the third idea that St. Thomas adds to Aristotle's ethics. This is the notion that the will is more fundamental than, is 'prior to' and can move the intellect. And

⁵¹Ibid. Ia IIae, q.5, a.4.

this notion is by far the most important of the three we have seen. Indeed, it is one of the very most fundamental 'additions' Aquinas makes to Aristotle. It is, as well, a crucial factor in the contemporary debate on the nature and role of the virtue of prudence.

St. Thomas, drawing on his profound knowledge of the rich Christian tradition which preceeded him, holds that there is a sense in which the will is more fundamental than the intellect. Now, we said above, contrariwise, that the will can be said to follow the intellect in the sense that the will cannot desire something unless the thing is first known by the intellect and apprehended as a good. The intellect 'moves' the will by presenting it with those objects which it has apprehended as good. But, in a manner which is deeper still and more mysterious, as we intimated in our above analysis of the bank vice-president, the will, it would seem, has the ability to 'coerce' the intellect even into apprehending as good something which in fact is evil. And here we are close to the very heart of the present study. This notion of 'will as primary' links, negatively, St. Thomas to Aristotle, as we have just seen. But it also links, this time positively, St. Thomas to the present-day debate on prudence and an ethics of virtue. We will see below, in the section on the contemporary context of the debate on prudence, that one question which pushes the debate is just this notion of the role of the will in the perception of reality. Josef Pieper and Gilbert Meilaender

present some provocative views in this regard.

Let us remark how different is St. Thomas's view from the views of Socrates, Plato, and even Aristotle on this question of the primacy of the will over the intellect.⁵² Recall that for Socrates and Plato virtue was practically equivalent to knowledge. If someone performed an action that was not in keeping with reason, such as theft or lying, they considered that the reason for his wrongful behavior was rather a lack of knowledge than a lack of 'good will.' And, so, their conception of virtue was rather intellectual: if someone knows the good, he will do it, and, therefore, if he does not do it, it is because he does not know it. Really, for Socrates and Plato, the concept of 'bad will' (someone knowing the good and not doing it) was unthinkable. It did not fit with their conception of 'the good.'

Now, St. Thomas's understanding of the will, as we said, is informed by the Christian tradition. If the Greeks equated virtue with knowledge and therefore could not properly conceive of 'bad will,' in the Christian tradition the notion of 'bad will' is central. The very purpose of the 'evangelio' is to convince people precisely that they are sinners, persons who not only have, but act on their bad will. The whole Christian notion of 'repentance' is

⁵²We should be clear that St. Thomas does maintain that the intellect, because it has a more noble object, "the very notion of the appetible good," is 'higher' than the will absolutely.

precisely a call to renounce the bad will that each of us experiences personally. In the Christian faith, it is believed that persons will be judged and eternally rewarded or punished on the basis of how they behave; i.e. on the condition of their will, and not properly on what they affirm or deny with their intellect. It is true that Christians hold that certain doctrines must be believed in order to be saved, but this 'belief' is false, "dead," if it is not accompanied by good works. St. Thomas uses his faith as an 'extrinsic norm'⁵³ to guide his philosophical thinking. That is, it is not on the basis of the divine inspiration of sacred scripture that the will is proven to be more fundamental than the intellect. Rather, St. Thomas's faith instructed him that this was so and then he set about to demonstrate philosophically how this might be the case. So, one last way in which St. Thomas enriches the teachings of Aristotle is to add to them this whole notion of the Christian understanding of the will as primary. We will see below how important this understanding is for Aquinas's conception of the virtue of prudence and its relation to the moral virtues.

2. William of Auxerre and Philip the Chancellor

We have seen above that the 'treatise' on the virtue of prudence begins in earnest with the work of William of Auxerre and

⁵³Frederick Copleston, A History of Philosophy Book I. (New York: Image Books, 1985) 429/30.

Philip the Chancellor at the beginning of the thirteenth century. These two, in fact, are the first to organize systematic treatises on the virtue. Moreover, before the thirteenth century, prudence was considered merely an intellectual act and not a moral act as such. As a result, as we saw above, it was often not considered a virtue at all, but merely an intellectual judgment. The thinking was that genuine virtue had to affect directly the way in which a person behaved and not just the way he thought. St. Thomas preserves the essence of this teaching by distinguishing between those virtues which merely 'confer an aptness for doing good' and those which confer both this aptness and the "right use" of it.⁵⁴ The moral virtues, especially justice, temperance, and fortitude, confer both this 'aptness' and its 'right use.' They are virtues in the full sense of the term because they affect directly the appetitive part of the soul. Intellectual habits, on the other hand, excluding prudence,⁵⁵ are called 'virtues' only in the sense that they confer this 'aptness' for the right use of our appetitive power. The difference, in this regard, between the teaching characteristic of the late twelfth and early thirteenth century and that of St. Thomas, therefore, is that St. Thomas, with Aristotle, did not hesitate to call prudence and the other intellectual habits 'virtues.' William of Auxerre and Philip the Chancellor are

⁵⁴S.T. Ia IIae, q.57, a.4, c: "Dictum est autem supra quod aliquis habitus habet rationem virtutis ex hoc solum quod facit facultatem boni operis: aliquis autem ex hoc quod facit non solum facultatem boni operis, sed etiam usum."

⁵⁵Ibid: "Prudentia autem non solum facit boni operis facultatem, sed etiam usum."

important, among other reasons, because it is in their writings that prudence is first considered a virtue properly so-called and not merely an intellectual judgment.⁵⁶

The work of William and Philip can be aptly summarized as an attempt to answer the following two questions.⁵⁷ First, what is the proper act of the virtue of prudence? And, second, what is the influence of this virtue on the moral life in general? To this latter question, neither ever came to a satisfactory answer, but on the first both made important contributions. It is in this sense that they represent the beginnings of the treatise on prudence that finds its culmination in the work of St. Thomas Aquinas.

William of Auxerre provides a most rudimentary⁵⁸ treatment of the virtue of prudence. His most important contribution to the treatise on prudence is that he distinguishes two of the essential acts of the virtue and also shows in what way specifically we can speak of prudence as a virtue. According to him, there are two judgments in the act of prudence. The first, he clarifies, is the

⁵⁶Their work also has historical significance because it represents the development of the treatise on prudence before the introduction of the sixth book of Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics into the Latin west.

⁵⁷These two questions and much of our upcoming commentary we borrow directly from Odon Lottin's Psychologie et Morale aux XIIe et XIIIe Siècles (Gembloux, Belgique: J. Duculot, 1954) especially his chapter entitled "Les Débuts du Traité de la Prudence au Moyen Age," tome III., pp. 255-280.

⁵⁸Lottin, III. p.257.

'iudicium discretivum,' and it is by virtue of this judgment that the person knows whether a given action is good or bad. It is not this judgment which renders prudence a virtue. The second judgment, the 'iudicium diffinitivum,' is the proper act of prudence and is what renders it a virtue. This judgment issues in a command ('imperat'). This command affects directly the action that the person either will perform or not perform. As such, it has a moral aspect and can, therefore, easily be characterized as virtuous. There is much more that could be said about William's particular role in the development of the treatise on prudence, but one observation is perhaps especially pertinent. Whereas St. Thomas, profiting from his acquaintance with the works of Aristotle, will not hesitate to make a strong link between prudence and the moral virtues, William explicitly denies such a link,⁵⁹ insisting that there is no necessary connection between the two.

Philip the Chancellor plays a significantly larger role than his predecessor William in the development of the treatise on prudence. His treatment of the virtue is far more extensive because he wished to link somehow the judgment of prudence with the whole moral life of man. He too is concerned with how best to define the proper act of prudence and, consequently, goes to great lengths to specify the different stages in the prudential judgment as such. These stages can be summarized as follows. There is,

⁵⁹Ibid. III. p.259.

first, the stage of inquiry⁶⁰ as to just what precisely is to be done. There is, second, the stage of deliberation⁶¹ as to whether the proposed action is good or bad; i.e. directed to a due end or not. This stage of 'deliberation' Philip also refers to as the stage of 'discernment.' It is in this stage that the good aspects of the action are weighed against its bad aspects to determine whether, on the whole, the action is good or evil. Third, there is the stage of decision, in which the person knows not only whether the action is good or bad generally, but also whether, given its moral status and the circumstances, he will or will not actually perform the action. Finally, there is the stage of the choice of whether actually to perform the action or not. For Philip, this choice ('electio') is the proper act of the virtue of prudence. He is at pains to show that it is precisely this choice of the good (which itself cannot fail to be morally good)⁶² which demonstrates the virtuous character of prudence.

On the question of the relation between prudence and the moral virtues, Philip is less categorical than William of Auxerre before him and less precise than St. Albert the Great after him. He does not deny explicitly that prudence has a particular connection to the moral virtues, but the only relation he allows is that prudence

⁶⁰Ibid. III. p.261.

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Ibid.

should be the external 'director' of these virtues.⁶³ In fact, his treatment here parallels exactly that of St. Bernard and the other 'discretio' writers who, as we saw above, thought of prudence as the 'charioteer' of the other virtues ('auriga virtutum'). Philip considers prudence the form of all the other virtues ('forma aliarum virtutum'). It is not for him, however, an 'intrinsic form,' but only an 'extrinsic' one. In his understanding, all the virtues keep their proper formality, but are, at the same time, directed as from the outside by prudence.

We see, then, that in many respects Philip the Chancellor provides an apt summary of the tradition which precedes him. In his teachings on the various stages of the prudential judgment, however, and his emphasis on choice as the proper act of prudence, he provides, as well, an important prelude to the work which was to be carried out by the next great influence on St. Thomas; namely, St. Albert the Great. And it is to him that we turn now.

3. St. Albert the Great

After Aristotle, there is no doubt that the greatest influence on St. Thomas's conception of the virtue of prudence comes from St.

⁶³Ibid. III. pp.264/5: "Et ainsi la prudence est à la fois vertu speciale et l'auriga des autres vertus."

Albert the Great. He has been described in general as 'St. Thomas's Socrates;'⁶⁴ but on this question of prudence, his influence is all the more evident. To place Albert in his own context, we should recall the general lines of development outlined above. We said that there are two stages to the history of the treatise on prudence: one before and one after the introduction of Aristotle's Ethics into the Latin west. St. Albert is all the more interesting a figure in this development because he plays the unique role of having participated actively in each stage. His work in the De Bono comes before the circulation of the complete text of Grosseteste's translation of the Ethics, while his Commentary,⁶⁵ obviously, comes after. St. Albert is a central figure in the history of the treatise on prudence.

St. Albert was greatly influenced himself by the work of Philip the Chancellor, whose own Summa Albert used extensively in composing his Summa De Bono.⁶⁶ It is difficult to measure exactly, but it is clear that Philip is one of the most important influences on Albert before the introduction of the Ethics. As we intimated above, St. Albert is firmer and more precise than Philip in his treatment of the definitions of prudence and its acts. He clearly

⁶⁴Copleston, p.303: "The main fact is that St. Albert was St. Thomas's Socrates."

⁶⁵Payer (p.62) points out that Albert was perhaps the very first medieval author to write a commentary on the Ethics.

⁶⁶Lottin, III. p.265: "En rédigeant sa Summa de Bono, Saint Albert a sous les yeux la Somme du chancelier Philippe."

defines the proper act of prudence as command ('imperium') and does not hesitate to equate prudence with the practical reason itself. Albert agrees with Philip that the definitive act in the prudential judgment is this act of choice, but he is more precise as to what this choice implies and distinguishes between 'electio' and 'imperium,' a distinction that neither William nor Philip had made.⁶⁷ In Albert, as well, there is an emphasis on the role of the will in moral action which is absent from the writings of either Philip or William of Auxerre.

St. Albert maintains that prudence plays the same role for the other virtues as reason plays for the other faculties:⁶⁸ it directs them. In fact, although Albert does not go so far as to suggest that there is a mutual connection between the moral virtues and prudence, he does hold that no moral virtue can be a virtue without the presence of the virtue of prudence.⁶⁹

Another innovation that St. Albert the Great makes prior to the introduction of the Ethics is to distinguish three 'parts' of the virtue of prudence.⁷⁰ These are: understanding (equivalent to what St. Thomas will later call the 'habit of first principles' or

⁶⁷Ibid. III. p.267.

⁶⁸Ibid. III. p.269.

⁶⁹Ibid: "Et c'est de la sorte qu'aucune vertu n'est vertu sans la prudence."

⁷⁰Payer, p.64, note #30.

'synderesis') memory, and foresight. Albert perceived a close relation between prudence and the principles of natural law⁷¹ and considered that this relation is aptly characterized as a kind of syllogism. This syllogism, which presumably describes how a person goes about making a prudential judgment, takes the following form. "The good is to be done;" "This action before me is good;" "Therefore, this action before me is to be done."⁷² The syllogism, which Albert uses extensively in his treatment of prudence, demonstrates how the most general principles of the moral law (which, so the theory goes, are 'inscribed' on the heart of man and evident to anyone who honestly seeks them) are applied in the most particular of situations. This is certainly the challenge for an ethics founded on the so-called 'principles of natural law': how is it that these general principles come to be applied to particular moral choices such as one meets in daily life? St. Albert proposes the moral syllogism as a possible solution. More to our purpose, Albert insists that the virtue of prudence derives its moral force from these principles of natural law, which are in every person and cannot be forgotten.⁷³

⁷¹Ibid. Also: Whether and to what degree St. Albert passes this perception on to St. Thomas is a matter of present debate, as we will see below with Daniel Nelson.

⁷²Taken directly from Payer (p.63), who quotes the Latin: "Omne bonum faciendum. Hoc est bonum. Ergo hoc est faciendum."

⁷³In Ethicorum Lib. VI, lect.4: "prudentia autem non datur oblivioni per dissuetudinem." Also: Payer, p.66.

With the introduction of Aristotle's Ethics into the Latin west, the treatise on prudence changes dramatically. All the previous definitions and descriptions of prudence had now to be reviewed and changed (or even dropped altogether) in light of the wisdom of the Philosopher. St. Albert was in Cologne for the years 1248-52 and it is at this time that he wrote his Commentary on the complete text of the Nichomachean Ethics, which had been recently translated by Robert Grosseteste, as we have seen. In an attempt to define the proper act of the virtue of prudence, Albert follows Aristotle in distinguishing it from 'eubulia' and 'synesis.' According to Albert, the proper act of prudence is command ('imperium'), as we noted above. But by 'imperium' Albert means simply: that firm decision to perform a certain action. And, interestingly, he places this command before what Aristotle had determined were the other acts of prudence; namely, counsel and right judgement. In this respect, Albert's conception differs from that of St. Thomas, who places 'command' after counsel and right judgment.⁷⁴ Albert's distinguishing between these virtues annexed to prudence helps in the specification of just what is the proper act of the virtue; it is not in deliberation or judgment, but in the command to perform a particular action.

Now, the most important change brought about in Albert's conception of prudence with the introduction of the Ethics has to do with the relation between prudence and the moral virtues.

⁷⁴Lottin, III. p.278.

Albert asks himself, with Aristotle: "Is it possible to conceive of the moral virtues without the virtue of prudence?"⁷⁵ The answer is an emphatic "no" for the following reasons. The moral virtues define themselves according to the 'virtuous mean' and this mean is the 'end' of each virtue. The virtuous mean in regard to sensible pleasures, for example, is precisely temperance, the mean between a kind of non-human insensibleness and a sub-human hedonism. But this mean, having the nature of a directive principle, an end, must result from an act of the reason, which directs, and not the will. But, if this is the case, then prudence, which is the virtue which guides the reason in directing the moral virtues to a given mean, is linked to the very constitution of these virtues and is, therefore, indispensable.

Other links that St. Albert, commenting on Aristotle, notes between prudence and the moral virtues are the following. First, since these virtues, if they are to fulfill their function, need to take circumstances into account, they need the virtue of prudence, one of whose acts is precisely that of discernment. And, second, prudence, which is concerned with the right choice of means to an end, is required by the virtues if they would attain⁷⁶ their proper ends. For example, the just man needs prudence to know what, given the particular circumstances which surround an act, is 'due' to another. A person may, in justice, owe three hundred dollars to a

⁷⁵Ibid. III. p.273.

⁷⁶Not necessarily know, but attain.

friend. But does this obligation require that he give this friend the first three hundred dollars that come to him? Not necessarily. He may need a part of this money to buy food for his children - one of his other obligations of justice. Prudence, which deliberates, judges, and commands, will direct the man in his effort to find suitable means (perhaps agreeing to pay half of the debt right away and using the other half to feed his children, etc) to the just end of rendering to each person his due.

St. Albert holds that prudence is the form of all the virtues ('dat formam omnibus virtutibus').⁷⁷ And, given the example just cited, it is not difficult to see why. In order for the moral virtues to attain their respective ends at all, they are in need of the guidance of prudence. It is in this sense that St. Albert maintains, as well, that prudence assures the moral merit to each of the virtues. Albert's views here anticipate those of St. Thomas who likewise held that it is prudence itself which 'allows' the other virtues to be virtues at all. St. Thomas will state categorically that without prudence there is no moral virtue,⁷⁸ just as theologically without charity, the form of all virtues

⁷⁷See Lottin, p.276: "La prudence est la forme de toutes les autres vertus, 'dat formam...'" It is useful to recall that by 'all the virtues' is intended all the natural virtues and not what Albert and Thomas call either the 'theological' virtues or the 'infused natural' virtues.

⁷⁸In Ethicorum Lib. VI, lect. 11: "Sicut igitur manifestum est ex dictis, quod non est possibile aliquem hominem esse bonum principaliter, id est secundum virtutem moralem, sine prudentia..."

(including prudence), there is no true virtue at all.

Finally, although St. Albert generally agrees with Aristotle's analysis of prudence, there are points on which he goes much further than Aristotle. For example, Albert holds that the supreme happiness of man consists in the virtue of prudence.⁷⁹ This he arrives at in the following manner. If the happiness of man consists in an act of a specific power, the intellect; and if happiness, which is perfect in itself, cannot consist in the act of the intellect merely knowing its proper object, truth; then it is reasonable to conclude that happiness consists, rather, in that act by which the intellect directs the other faculties. But this act is none other than the virtue of prudence ('recta ratio agibilium'), which directs the life of man generally.⁸⁰ Therefore, man's supreme happiness formally consists in prudence.⁸¹

Before we go on to examine the contemporary context of the debate on the virtue of prudence, let us first briefly place St. Thomas in his immediate context: that of St. Albert the Great, under whose tutelage St. Thomas may have been introduced for the first time to the Ethics of Aristotle,⁸² which play such a major

⁷⁹Lottin, III. p.276: "Il fait consister dans la prudence le bonheur suprême de l'homme."

⁸⁰S.T. Ia IIae, q.57, a.4, ad 3: "ad totam vitam hominis."

⁸¹Lottin, III. p.276.

⁸²Payer, p.68; see Payer's article generally for a more detailed treatment of St. Thomas's relation to St. Albert.

role in the development of St. Thomas's conception of prudence.

First, although St. Thomas agrees with Albert that the proper act of prudence is command, he conceives of command as rather identified with the act of choice and not a separate act as Albert held.⁸³ In addition, again in contrast to Albert, as we noted above, St. Thomas places the act of command at the end of the prudential act as a whole, after the acts of deliberation and judgment. Second, St. Thomas, in part profiting from St. Albert's Commentary,⁸⁴ redefines the relation of prudence to the moral virtues. He specifies that the moral virtues reside in the appetitive part of the soul and are, therefore, a 'tendency toward the rational good.' There are three distinct steps in the functioning of the moral virtues, according to Aquinas.⁸⁵ First, the end is fixed. This step is carried out directly by prudence; it is prudence, as we have seen, which sets the end of the moral virtues. Second, there is a movement of the will towards this end. This second step does not directly involve prudence. The third and final step is when the means are set to arrive at the fixed end;

⁸³Lottin, III. p.278/9.

⁸⁴R. A. Gauthier maintains that St. Thomas was greatly dependent on the Commentary of St. Albert and also on Albert's lectures, which he would have attended while he was in Cologne as Albert's student from 1248-52. In fact, according to Gauthier, there is no doubt that St. Thomas had direct recourse to Albert's Commentary on the Ethics when preparing his own Commentary, which, Gauthier contends, was composed between 1271 & 1272.

⁸⁵See Lottin, p.278, for this treatment of the three steps.

and this, obviously, involves prudence as it implies the choice of means to an end: a command, the proper act of prudence. We will see all of this in detail below. What we want to stress here is simply the fact that St. Thomas, following Aristotle and St. Albert, insists that there can be no moral virtue without the virtue of prudence.

Third, St. Thomas agrees with Aristotle that all men have some degree of 'prudence' simply by their nature as men. But here we use the term 'prudence' most broadly. This kind of 'natural prudence' is merely the ability to calculate consequences and select proper means to given ends. It may be used for good or evil, as the classical example of the 'prudent thief' teaches us. If it is used for evil purposes, however, it is not prudence at all, but is what St. Thomas calls 'false prudence' or a 'vice resembling prudence,' because a virtue, by its very nature, is ordained only to the good.⁶⁶

Finally, as a way of linking St. Thomas's immediate context with our own, let us remark briefly the relation St. Thomas establishes between prudence and the principles of natural law. Pierre J. Payer, in his above-mentioned article, "Prudence and the Principles of Natural Law," maintains flatly that "In establishing a relation between prudence and the principles of natural law,

⁶⁶Virtue is, as St. Thomas says, "that of which no one makes bad use." (S.T. Ia IIae q.55, a.4, c: "qua nullus male utitur").

Aquinas is departing from Aristotle on prudence."⁸⁷ And, in fact, this conclusion, if its premises are true, is indisputable because certainly Aristotle sets up no such relation. The difficulty for Payer's claim is rather with the premise that St. Thomas himself so links these two concepts.

Payer claims that the 'applicatio' doctrine (the doctrine the essence of which we outlined above when speaking of St. Albert's use of the moral syllogism: that the act of prudence involves a certain 'application' of the principles of natural law to particular situations), which is usually attributed to St. Thomas, actually is found in the writings of St. Albert long before Aquinas makes use of it.⁸⁸ Now, the difficulties which arise from this claim by Payer are twofold. The first is whether St. Thomas does in fact owe this doctrine to St. Albert; and on this point the present author sees little difficulty in accepting Payer's claim. Whether St. Thomas borrowed this doctrine from St. Albert has a certain historical significance, but little more.

The second difficulty is much more interesting for our purposes, as it involves the interpretation of one of Aquinas's central philosophical claims regarding the virtue of prudence. It is: whether Aquinas even holds the 'applicatio' doctrine as Payer (and many others with him) assumes. On one level, this objection

⁸⁷Payer, p.68.

⁸⁸Ibid.

is completely absurd because Aquinas certainly holds this doctrine in a certain manner. The real question, raised quite forcefully by Daniel Nelson in his book, The Priority of Prudence, is, rather, whether this 'applicatio' doctrine serves as the basis for St. Thomas's conception of the virtue of prudence and his ethics generally. That this is the case is not at all evident, at least according to Nelson. These questions on the relation of prudence and the principles of natural law provide us with an appropriate prelude to our study of the contemporary context of the debate on prudence.

II. The Contemporary Context

Having given the context in which St. Thomas himself wrote, let us now examine more closely the context in which we ourselves are writing. In fact, this context is much more highly focussed than that which surrounded Aquinas. In St. Thomas's day, the virtue of prudence was still being defined; there was not as yet a consensus even as to what was meant by the term. We saw this in the parallel traditions which took root long before the thirteenth century: that of 'discretio' and that of 'phronesis.' The modern debate on prudence is far more focussed than the medieval debate because, for the most part, the denotation of the term, 'prudence,' was settled precisely in Aquinas's day as a result of both the introduction of Aristotle's Ethics into the west and the subsequent work of definition and synthesis of St. Thomas himself. We need only to think of St. Thomas's detailed "Treatise on Prudence" (S.T. IIa IIae, 47-56) to understand why contemporary writers, in general, do not need to spend their time defining the term. In this treatise, St. Thomas, synthesizing the views of the medievals and Aristotle, is very precise as to the essence of prudence, as well as to its proper exercise. His account, a detailed analysis of each aspect of the virtue, benefiting from the extensive tradition which preceeded him, is typically lucid.

Another reason for the highly-focussed nature of the modern debate, however, is, quite frankly, the relative lack of interest

in the subject matter. There are simply fewer persons writing on the subject, and so the questions addressed tend to be much sharper in scope. In fact, to say that there is a 'modern debate' at all on St. Thomas's conception of prudence is somewhat misleading. The research carried out for the present study reveals that up until 1950-55 there was a sizable interest in the thought of St. Thomas in general (owing most probably to the late-nineteenth century encyclical by Pope Leo XIII, "Aeterni Patris," and the subsequent 'rebirth' of Thomism). But since 1950-55, as is known, Thomism in general has suffered another eclipse. This eclipse has been by no means total and, in fact, there are several clear indications that it too may soon pass; Thomism is by no means extinct in our day. But, in general, as we said, interest in St. Thomas suffered a decline after 1950.

Now, owing to this decline in interest, there is a relative paucity of published materials on St. Thomas in general, not to mention his conception of prudence in particular. Moreover, books and articles published over the past forty years or so on St. Thomas's conception of prudence tend to focus on some fairly specific aspect of prudence and not on St. Thomas's conception generally. As a result, to speak of a 'modern debate' on Aquinas's account of prudence, as we said, is a little misleading. What we have found for St. Thomas's view in general is, essentially, less than a handful of doctoral dissertations, more or less useful, published, for the most part, thirty to forty years ago.

That said, however, to say that there is not a lot written is not at all to say that there is nothing at all written. In fact, if we take into account the wealth of texts published in recent years on the 'ethics of virtue' question, we find several important contributions to a deeper understanding of St. Thomas's conception of prudence. Many of these books and articles, while not themselves focussed precisely on Aquinas's view of prudence, do include St. Thomas in their analysis of an ethics of virtue, sometimes in a central way. In this regard, we shall discuss below the contributions of Gilbert Meilaender, Alasdair MacIntyre, Josef Pieper, and others.

These general works on an 'ethics of virtue' (versus its typical modern counterparts: Emotivism, Cognitive Development Theory, Consequentialism, etc) are not, however, the most interesting aspect of the modern debate on St. Thomas's conception of the virtue of prudence. For this we need to examine the recent work done by Mr. Daniel Nelson, working out of Princeton University in the United States. We shall leave the details of our analysis of Nelson's work to the section below dedicated exclusively to it. Here let us simply remark that with the publication of Nelson's 1992 monograph, The Priority of Prudence: Virtue and Natural Law in Thomas Aquinas and the Implications for Modern Ethics (Pennsylvania State University Press), a genuine debate has been begun. Nelson's book, is, in a word, important. It challenges in fundamental ways the traditional reading of St. Thomas's ethics in general and his

conception of prudence in particular and it is bound to make a powerful impact both within and without Thomism.

1. Daniel Nelson

As was just mentioned, less than a year ago Daniel Nelson published his controversial book, The Priority of Prudence. This work, the most recent on St. Thomas's understanding of prudence, is essentially a rewriting of Nelson's Ph.D. dissertation of the same title submitted to Princeton University in 1986. It is very well written, very well documented and, as we say, quite provocative. Nelson's fundamental claim is that, through what he calls the "standard natural law reading" of Aquinas, we have inherited a false conception of St. Thomas's ethical theory.⁹⁰ According to Nelson, this 'standard account' of St. Thomas's ethics claims that from the self-evident principles of the natural law we can deduce the moral guidelines we need in order to be able to direct our conduct. Nelson maintains, contrariwise, that St. Thomas never considered the principles of natural law concrete or specific enough to fulfill this function.⁹⁰ Nelson repeatedly portrays

⁹⁰Daniel Nelson The Priority of Prudence (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992) 8.

⁹⁰Nelson, pp.100, 101, & 104. On page 104, Nelson (significantly) quotes St. Thomas (S.T. Ia IIae, q.58, a.5): "Recta autem ratio praeexigit principia ex quibus ratio procedit. Oportet autem rationem circa particularia procedere non solum ex principiis universalibus sed etiam ex principiis particularibus...Sed hoc non sufficit ad recte ratiocinandum

these principles as 'far too abstract and general' to be of any practical use in our day-to-day moral decisions.

Recall for a moment our discussion above of St. Albert the Great's use of the 'applicatio' doctrine. We said that this doctrine is simply the belief that the way individuals set about making moral choices is to employ a kind of 'moral syllogism' in an attempt to apply the general principles of the natural law to particular situations. The most basic principle of the natural law is that one should: 'do good and avoid evil.'⁹¹ This principle, which is known by the individual through "synderesis,"⁹² plays for the practical intellect a role analogous to that played by the first principles of human knowing for the speculative intellect. The individual faced with a moral choice presumably says to himself or herself, however unconsciously: "I should not do what is evil" (major premise); "This act of [slander] is evidently evil" (minor premise); "Therefore, I should not perform this act of [slander]" (conclusion). This is what we called the 'moral syllogism' and St. Albert refers to it frequently in his writings.

Now, Nelson maintains that a close reading of the relevant texts will demonstrate that while St. Thomas himself certainly employs the language of 'natural law' and the 'applicatio,' the

circa particularia."

⁹¹Nelson, p. xiii.

⁹²S.T. Ia, q.79, a.12.

thrust of his teaching lays far more emphasis on other aspects of the moral life."³ These 'other aspects,' Nelson is quick and insistent to point out, are, precisely, the virtues in general and most especially the virtue of prudence. It is clear that there is not in St. Thomas's writings the exaltation of prudence to the degree that we find in St. Albert, for example. But, if we take Nelson at his word (and his word is, as we said, quite ably documented textually), we will want to place prudence, and not the natural law, at the very center of the moral life generally. In its essence, this is Nelson's basic claim: that St. Thomas's ethical theory is far more virtue and prudence-based than natural law-based. And, if this is the case and we can prove it to be the case, Nelson insists, then several important consequences follow inevitably for Aquinas's role in the modern ethical debate.

The first of these consequences is that St. Thomas would no longer be so closely associated with the presumably now-defunct theory of 'natural law.' This could only benefit St. Thomas's position in the modern moral debate because, as Nelson states quite peremptorily, natural law theory's "force as a coherent and identifiable moral and political doctrine has long been spent. Its claim as a compelling philosophical theory is understood, at least

³Nelson, p.96: "In short, the presence of natural law language does not in itself count against the interpretive stress on prudence and the virtues unless it cannot be satisfactorily explained."

by most professional philosophers, to have been refuted."⁹⁴ We should point out that although Nelson certainly desires to re-enter St. Thomas into the modern debate, and that he, therefore, likewise desires to distance him from this defunct theory of natural law, one does not have the impression reading the book that Nelson is attempting to force his arguments. His method is a frank presentation of the relevant texts in an attempt to show from them how St. Thomas's ethics relies much more on his theory of the virtues, and prudence especially, than on a theory of natural law. One has the distinct impression that for Nelson what matters is that we interpret St. Thomas correctly; and the fact that this will effectively distance him from natural law theory is seen very much as being of secondary importance.

The second consequence which follows if Nelson is right in his interpretation of Aquinas, derives immediately from the first. It is that: St. Thomas can make a substantial contribution to the present-day debate on an 'ethics of virtue.' Nelson reasons that Aquinas's ethics, once it is recognized for the virtue-based, prudence-based theory that it is, having once successfully disassociated itself from the debunked theory of natural law, can begin, as it ought, to play a major role in the development of modern virtue ethics. And this is certainly Nelson's hope in explicating what he understands to be the foundation of this ethical system: the intellectual virtue of prudence.

⁹⁴Ibid. p.8.

Nelson begins his treatment by making a long methodological point. He suggests that the best way to understand an author (and perhaps especially one so logical as St. Thomas) is, in our analysis, to follow his own order of presentation and not one of our own choosing.⁹⁵ The great temptation to be avoided here is that of reading selections out of context. The 'natural lawyers,' as Nelson calls them, tend to 'begin with the end' (with, that is, the one question St. Thomas devotes to the natural law found near the very end of the Prima Secundae⁹⁶) and almost entirely ignore the important preceeding material. This, according to him, is a serious, though common, mistake.

Nelson, himself, 'begins at the beginning,' with the first question of the Prima Secundae, the beginning of the so-called 'Treatise on Happiness.' From there, he plods patiently through the text, through the 'Treatise on Habits' and the 'Treatise on Virtues,' and, finally, through the (much misread) 'Treatise on Law,' demonstrating how St. Thomas's ethics is much more thoroughly prudential and virtue-based than natural law-based. Nelson's point in so doing, precisely, is to show that the voluminous and detailed material leading up to the 'Treatise on Law' so qualifies St. Thomas's ethical theory as to make the sole question he devotes to the natural law appear almost as an afterthought. Why take one

⁹⁵Ibid. p.29: "...by following the sequence of Thomas's own presentation..."

⁹⁶S.T. Ia IIae, q.94.

question, or even one treatise, Nelson asks, as the definitive statement of Aquinas's ethical theory? For a proper understanding of such, we need to look first at the Summa Theologica taken as a whole and then examine each of its questions in context, making the necessary judgments of relative importance, etc., based on the text itself, as well as its position and significance in St. Thomas's chosen order of presentation. If we do this, Nelson reiterates, we will see that for St. Thomas the virtues, especially the virtue of prudence, and not the natural law, serve as the basis of ethics.

More particularly, since the natural law is too 'abstract and general' to guide us in the specific moral choices of our daily life, we need the virtue of prudence, which is "right reason about things to be done." Prudence, a good operative habit perfecting our practical intellect, guides us in the right choice of means to an end. But our end, Nelson points out, is precisely happiness. Therefore prudence ought to help us choose the means that will lead us to happiness. These 'means,' so to speak, turn out to be the virtues themselves because happiness is, for St. Thomas, as for Aristotle, "activity in accord with perfect virtue."⁹⁷

Nelson underlines the central role played by prudence in the moral life by reminding us that for St. Thomas there is a certain sense in which prudence is concerned not only with means, but also

⁹⁷Ibid. Ia IIae, q.3, a.2, sed c.

with ends.⁹⁸ This is because the particular choices that we make throughout our life can all be seen as a means to our final end, the virtuous life (to speak naturally) or union with God in heaven (to speak supernaturally). How is this? Normally we speak of prudence as the virtue concerned with finding the right means to a given end. And this is correct, so far as it goes. If I want to purchase an automobile, I need the virtue of prudence to tell me, first, to get a job; second, to save some money; and, third, to put myself in contact with someone who sells automobiles. This is quite straightforward. But, now, can I not abstract myself from this situation one degree more and consider the automobile (formerly my 'end') as a means to some further end - driving my children to school, for example? St. Thomas's answer is a straightforward 'yes.' But, if this is the case, then prudence, in a certain sense, is concerned not only with means, but also with ends. The end of each of our individual choices can be considered, in the larger picture, merely as a means to our final end.

Before going on to consider some of the other figures in the contemporary debate on St. Thomas's conception of the virtue of prudence, let us lastly remark how Nelson sees the implications of his own work. In his final chapter, he is at pains to show the implications for modern ethics of St. Thomas's 'virtue ethics' and the 'priority of prudence.' According to him, these implications

⁹⁸Nelson, p.50.

are quite far-reaching.⁹⁹ Briefly, he claims that an ethics of virtue based on St. Thomas's conception of prudence can participate in the modern ethical debate precisely because it can fulfill the two primary requirements of a sound theory of ethics. These two requirements are that: 1. it allows us to make absolute moral statements (what he claims is the attraction of theories like that of Kant¹⁰⁰), and 2. it allows us to take circumstances into account in our application of moral principles (what he sees as the attraction of the other major trend in modern moral theory: Consequentialism¹⁰¹). Aquinas's ethical theory certainly can fulfill these two demands.

Having outlined in general terms Nelson's main arguments, let us now offer a brief critique of them. Nelson contends throughout his book that St. Thomas considers the moral virtues and the judgments of prudence the foundation of morality. He claims that the traditional 'natural law reading' of Aquinas is mistaken because it equates moral decision-making with a kind of deduction (recall the syllogism) of particular commands from the most general principles of the natural law. He then goes on to point out how little like a deduction are most of our real moral choices (a claim probably that few of us would contest) and concludes that we need to return to the writings of St. Thomas to determine whether this

⁹⁹Ibid. p.130.

¹⁰⁰Ibid. p.131.

¹⁰¹Ibid. p.132.

deductive model of morality comes from St. Thomas himself or from our misinterpretation of him. And, of course, according to Nelson, this latter is the case: we have read into Aquinas's conception of morality an interpretation that the texts themselves do not bear.

However, a similar charge can, it would seem, be levelled against Nelson himself in regard to his treatment of the natural law tradition. The charge, in effect, would be that Nelson has set up a 'straw man' to knock down. What Nelson is contesting is the 'general understanding,' the 'standard natural law account' of St. Thomas's ethics, and not the interpretation of one philosopher in particular. It is, therefore, difficult to verify whether his misgivings correspond to genuine defects in the tradition or are of his own making.¹⁰² Nelson's 'straw man' is the strictly deductive interpretation of Aquinas's ethics, to which, admittedly, some philosophers in the tradition subscribe.

The critique we would make of Nelson's analysis is itself somewhat difficult to verify given the non-quantifiable quality of the terms. It is that Nelson (efforts to the contrary and disavowals notwithstanding) mistakes one extreme interpretation within the tradition for the tradition itself. He claims to portray the 'general' natural law reading - one that applies to no

¹⁰² In fairness to Nelson, he readily acknowledges this difficulty in his analysis, saying that in order to portray the 'tradition' as a whole, he has had to leave to the side treatment of individual philosophers within the tradition.

one in particular, but to everyone in general. But, in fact, when the moment arrives for him to reject the 'tradition,' he does so presupposing the characteristics of the extreme interpretation. Frederick Copleston himself, whom Nelson admits represents a "middle of the road" natural law position¹⁰³, is particularly lucid on the question of deduction. He states:

As regards deduction, Aquinas did not think that we can deduce the proposition that to have sexual intercourse with someone else's wife is wrong from the precept that good is to be pursued and evil avoided simply by contemplating, as it were, this latter precept. We can no more do this than we can deduce from the principle of non-contradiction the proposition that a thing which is white all over cannot at the same time be red all over. We obtain our ideas of whiteness and redness from other sources than an analysis of the principle of non-contradiction. At the same time, we reject the proposition that a thing can be simultaneously white all over and red all over precisely because it involves a contradiction. Similarly, we do not obtain our ideas of other people and of wives and of sexual intercourse simply by analysing the precept that good is to be pursued and evil avoided. But once we have obtained those ideas we reject, if we do reject, the proposition that it is right to have sexual intercourse with someone else's wife because we apprehend actions of this sort as being evil. The word deduction, therefore, can be very misleading; and what Aquinas actually says is that other precepts of the natural law are 'founded on' or 'based on' the precept that good is to be done and evil avoided. The concrete good for man can be known only by reflection on human nature as known in experience (emphasis added).¹⁰⁴

This rather long quotation indicates, coming as it does from such a renowned representative of the tradition which Nelson rejects, that perhaps 'the tradition' itself is not in favor of such a

¹⁰³Nelson, p.14.

¹⁰⁴Frederick Copleston Aquinas (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1955) 231/2.

strictly deductive interpretation of St. Thomas's ethics. At the very least, it throws into question Nelson's portrayal of the standard natural law account.

Now, Nelson might reply that Copleston himself, in as much as he would defend the views expressed above, is, ipso facto, not part of the natural law tradition whose interpretation has been called into question. That is, Nelson might simply welcome Copleston to his camp and not push the question any further. At that point, however, we might rightfully question the usefulness of his critique. It would seem that 'the tradition' which he rejects is in fact less deductive, less extreme, than he assumed. Does this mean that his efforts to improve our interpretation of St. Thomas's ethics are in vain? Not at all. His mistake, if we are correct in our critique of him, is not in his interpretation of St. Thomas's ethics, but merely in his misrepresentation of the standard natural law tradition. In fact, if Nelson has indeed misread this tradition, as we suggest, then the differences between his account and that of the tradition may be quite minor indeed. Ironically, Nelson, who perceives himself very much as an iconoclast, may in fact be just one more figure in the long tradition which he himself claims to reject.

2. Alasdair MacIntyre

In his most recent work, Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry (Notre Dame, 1990), Alasdair MacIntyre maintains that one of the most salient features of modern ethical debate is its inability to resolve conflicts between rival conceptions of ethics. He concludes, rather sourly, that: "The most that one can hope for is to render our disagreements more constructive."¹⁰⁵ This is an echo one of the conclusions of his previous work, After Virtue (Notre Dame, 1981), which was that: "In the domain of fact, there are procedures for eliminating disagreement; in that of morals, the ultimacy of disagreement is dignified by the title, 'pluralism.'" ¹⁰⁶

MacIntyre, one of the foremost moral philosophers in the world today, can make an important contribution to the present study. The bulk of this contribution concerns not St. Thomas's conception of prudence in particular, but the context of the modern ethical debate in general. One aspect of this contribution derives from the fifth chapter of After Virtue, which is entitled: "Why the Enlightenment Project of Justifying Morality Had to Fail." In this chapter, MacIntyre explains that the particular morality the Enlightenment philosophers wanted to justify had for its basis the idea that there is such a thing as a human nature: an essence of

¹⁰⁵Alasdair MacIntyre Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990) 8.

¹⁰⁶MacIntyre After Virtue (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981) 30.

man.¹⁰⁷ Ethics, or 'morality,' was seen as the instrument, MacIntyre explains, the means, for helping individuals pass from their present state ('human beings as they happen to be') to their completed or perfected state ('human beings as they can be if they realize their 'telos,' their end').¹⁰⁸

MacIntyre demonstrates that the Enlightenment project to justify morality had to fail because one of the constitutive elements of this morality had long since been rejected by society at large.¹⁰⁹ According to MacIntyre, there are three essential elements to the morality which the Enlightenment philosophers wished to justify.¹¹⁰ The first of these is the claim that there is such a thing as 'untutored human nature;' that is, simply, 'man as he is.' No one even thought to challenge this claim as it is completely non-controversial. In effect, it amounts to making the absurd sociological claim that 'men exist and tend generally to behave in certain ways.' The second element, however, which would prove far more problematical, is the claim that there is such a

¹⁰⁷We should recall here our introductory comments on the necessity of the virtue of prudence given man's nature as a rational being. Any rejection of the notion that man has a definite nature, an essence, would inevitably undermine our contention (in fact St. Thomas's contention) that "prudence is a virtue most necessary for human life."

¹⁰⁸ Gilbert Meilaender, we will see below, makes a similar distinction when speaking of the moral virtues; they help us, he says, 'realize the furthest potentialities of our nature.'

¹⁰⁹MacIntyre (1981), p.55.

¹¹⁰Ibid. p.52.

thing as 'perfected human nature,' or 'man as he could be if he realized his telos.' The third element consists of the moral precepts which, presumably, enable man to pass from the one state to the other. This ethical framework, we might add, is perfectly consistent with those espoused by both Aristotle and Aquinas. It says, essentially, that man finds himself endowed with certain nascent abilities, such as the ability to control his passions, the ability to develop his intellect, the ability to treat others fairly, etc., which, if he simply follows his likes and dislikes and refuses to discipline himself, will most probably remain quite dormant. This would be the condition, 'man as he is.' But, because man is free, he may also choose to develop these higher abilities. He may choose, that is, to pattern his life according to the dictates of his reason instead of according to the dictates of his passions. This would be the condition, 'man as he can be if he realizes his end as a rational being.' And this 'patterning' of one's life according to the dictates of reason, is, precisely, what we call, 'ethics.'

The point MacIntyre wishes to make is that the second element mentioned above, 'man as he can be,' at a certain point in time, was rejected as a possibility by the intellectual community. MacIntyre maintains, moreover, that this rejection of the traditional understanding of the nature of man had its roots in the rejection of religious and philosophical authorities in general. He states in After Virtue: "But the joint effect of the secular

rejection of both Protestant and Catholic theology and the scientific and philosophical rejection of Aristotelianism was to eliminate any notion of 'man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-telos.'¹¹¹ And, once this conception of the nature of man was rejected, the whole project of justifying morality became somewhat ludicrous. If there is no 'end' to be reached, if there is no 'completed human nature' towards which to strive, then the whole notion of disciplining oneself, patterning one's life according to the dictates of reason in order to fulfill one's potentialities, becomes completely meaningless. The Enlightenment project to justify morality had to fail because morality itself had lost its very purpose, its end.

MacIntyre goes on to recount how, in his opinion, this lack of a consistent moral system, itself caused by the lack of a consistent anthropology, led ultimately to the introduction of that anti-intellectual moral relativism that goes by the name, 'Emotivism.' We have here neither the space nor the need to explain in detail what is emotivism. Let MacIntyre's own description suffice: "Emotivism is the doctrine that all evaluative judgments and, more specifically, all moral judgments are nothing but expressions of preference, expressions of attitudes or feelings, insofar as they are moral or evaluative in character."¹¹² And the fact that this doctrine is and has been

¹¹¹Ibid. p.54/5.

¹¹²MacIntyre (1981), p.11.

for many years the reigning orthodoxy in moral philosophy hardly needs repeating.

This, then, is one aspect of the contemporary context surrounding the debate on an ethics of virtue in general and the virtue of prudence in particular. MacIntyre paints an admittedly bleak picture of this contemporary context. His reasoning, as we have seen, is that the last great attempt at justifying morality, what he calls the 'Enlightenment Project,' failed and had to fail because the intellectual community had previously rejected the notion that there is such a thing as a 'perfected human nature.' The failure of this attempt to justify morality has, in turn, spawned a variety of evils, not the least of which is the 'Emotivist' doctrine, which is, fundamentally, a doctrine of complete moral relativism.

MacIntyre is not entirely pessimistic, however, in his appraisal of the contemporary moral landscape. Towards the end of After Virtue, he surmises that one possible alternative to emotivism and the other relativist doctrines of our day is, precisely, the 'virtue ethics' elaborated with such intellectual rigor and conviction by both Aristotle and Aquinas, the chief representatives of what he calls simply, 'the tradition.' Let us turn now to two other figures in contemporary moral philosophy who also propose this return to an ethics of virtue according to Aristotle and St. Thomas: Josef Pieper and Gilbert Meilaender.

3. Josef Pieper and Gilbert Meilaender

We can state from the outset that Pieper and Meilaender deserve to be studied together because, in addition to their both supporting a return to virtue ethics, they propose similar explanations for the seeming insolubility of modern ethical disputes to which we made reference at the beginning of the previous section. Pieper is, obviously, the more interesting and important of the two, as his international renown will easily attest. He has published a short work precisely on St. Thomas's conception of prudence (Prudence, Pantheon Books, 1959) which was later shortened and included in his now classic work, The Four Cardinal Virtues (Notre Dame, 1965). We include a short analysis of Meilaender for two reasons. First, he is somewhat more representative than Pieper of the present day debate on virtue ethics. Leaving aside the difficulties posed by Pieper's quite advanced age, there is also the fact that Pieper is, in some ways, more what we would call a 'thinker' than a professional philosopher. Meilaender himself, it must be noted, would probably shun this latter title, but in fact he is an active participant in the present-day 'ethics of virtue' debate. Second, Meilaender has an important contribution to make to our understanding of both the unity of all the virtues and the relation between prudence and the moral virtues. Because Meilaender himself comments extensively on the opinions of Pieper, we shall review briefly the latter's views and move after this to our comparison of the two authors.

Pieper's fundamental claim in regard to St. Thomas's understanding of the virtue of prudence is simply that prudence presupposes moral rectitude. He points out, first, that although "prudence is the standard of volition and action...the standard of prudence [itself]...is the objective reality of being."¹¹³ He states that St. Thomas's 'whole doctrine of prudence' is summed up in the fundamental principle that: "Reason perfected in the cognition of truth shall inwardly shape and imprint [man's] volition and action."¹¹⁴ The reason for this, Pieper explains, is that prudence, which is concerned with decisions about events which are concrete, contingent, and future,¹¹⁵ presupposes what he calls a "fundamental openness to reality."¹¹⁶ That is, given the fact that being, the existence of real things, shapes our mind, and not vice-versa, we will be incapable of prudent decisions to the degree that our perception of reality is warped by our own lack of moral virtue.¹¹⁷

We have said that prudence is concerned with decisions to be taken about future events. For example, a person who needs,

¹¹³Josef Pieper The Four Cardinal Virtues (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1965) 9.

¹¹⁴Ibid. p.8.

¹¹⁵Ibid. p.18.

¹¹⁶Ibid. pp.8 & 9.

¹¹⁷We get here a glimpse of the sublimity of both St. Thomas's doctrine on prudence and Pieper's analysis of it. This aspect of prudence -its dependence on moral virtue- is truly subtle and we will have to tread delicately if we wish to comprehend it.

because he has diabetes, to maintain a certain blood-sugar level, should take the decision to carry with him at all times a source of sugar: cookies, or something of the sort. It is prudent for the diabetic to carry around with him a source of sugar, as it could very well save his life. And, conversely, it would be imprudent for him not to do so. But let us observe, briefly, the necessary prerequisites for him to take such a decision. These are, essentially, two. First, that he be instructed (usually by a physician) about how diabetics can die if they do not maintain a certain blood-sugar level. And, second, that, owing to the rapidity with which a diabetic can go into shock and die if this blood-sugar level is not maintained, it is usual that diabetics carry with them at all times a source of sugar. With these two pieces of information, the diabetic in question has the essential knowledge he needs to make a prudent decision in the matter.

Pieper's first point, then, as the above example illustrates, is that in order for an individual to act prudently; i.e. to make prudent decisions, he must be correctly informed as to his situation. It is clear, surely, that a diabetic who was ignorant of the circumstances mentioned above would, by that very fact, be incapable of taking a prudent decision concerning his blood-sugar level. His situation would, we recognize, be quite precarious indeed. This 'being correctly informed about one's situation' is analogous to what Pieper refers to as a 'fundamental openness to reality' when he speaks of the prerequisites of prudence in

general. To be 'open to reality' is to accept, to 'receive,' reality as it is, and not as we imagine it. And without this openness to reality (what would be equivalent to the diabetic's refusing to believe his doctor about his blood-sugar level), it is impossible to make truly prudent decisions. One might, it is true, accidentally arrive at decisions which mirror those taken by the prudent man, but this is not the virtue of prudence; it is closer to what both Aristotle and St. Thomas would call 'good fortune.'

Pieper's second point is that this 'fundamental openness to reality' is itself directly dependent on one's rectitude of will. By this he means that if our will is not upright; i.e. if our intention is evil (impure), then our very perception of reality will be skewed, erroneous. A sinful life leads inevitably to a certain 'spiritual blindness.' The unjust man, driven by his inordinate self-love, to the degree that he is unjust, is incapable of perceiving reality objectively. This is what St. Paul meant, Pieper comments, when he uttered that enigmatic phrase: "Truth is held captive in the fetters of injustice."¹¹⁸ And it is in this sense that Pieper maintains that the root of all imprudence is covetousness:¹¹⁹ essentially, 'bad will': seeking either bad ends or seeking good ends in an inordinate manner.

We can begin, then, to see the logic in Pieper's initial

¹¹⁸Pieper, p.35.

¹¹⁹Ibid. p. 20/1.

assertion that the virtue of prudence presupposes moral rectitude. Just how one's will influences one's perception of reality is still somewhat mysterious; the connection between the two is not obvious at all; it is quite subtle. But, at the very least, Pieper's reasoning is consistent: to be prudent requires that one be fundamentally open to reality; but to be fundamentally open to reality requires moral rectitude, an upright will; therefore, prudence presupposes moral rectitude. And it is precisely on this question that Gilbert Meilaender focusses his attention.

Meilaender, an active participant, as we said, in the modern 'ethics of virtue' debate, insists on the importance of an emphasis on character in moral formation. The opening chapters of his most recent work, The Theory and Practice of Virtue (Notre Dame, 1984), are a careful analysis of St. Thomas's understanding of the relation between the moral virtues and prudence. His fundamental claim is that, as he says:

The moral virtues - those excellences which help us attain the furthest potentialities of our nature - are, then, not simply dispositions to act in certain ways. They are more like skills which suit us for life generally - and still more like traits of character which not only suit us for life, but shape our vision of life, helping to determine not only who we are, but what world we see (emphasis added).¹²⁰

And we recognize right away the affinity of Meilaender's views with those of Pieper. Meilaender is concerned to show that what is (or

¹²⁰Gilbert Meilaender The Theory and Practice of Virtue (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984) 11.

should be) primary in moral formation is the notion of character.¹²¹ He believes that how we see the world is largely determined by the kind of person we are. This is important, in turn, because how we see the world is, typically, the impetus behind our actions. As he puts it: "Action follows vision and vision depends on character."¹²²

The point Meilaender makes in the first chapter of The Theory and Practice of Virtue, then, is that our character modifies our vision of reality. He states, with Pieper, that we can consider virtues those "excellences which enable a human being to attain the furthest potentialities of his nature."¹²³ We saw above that he considers a virtue at once 'a disposition to act in a certain way,' a 'skill,' and a 'trait of character.'¹²⁴ It is most especially this last. In chapter two, Meilaender explicates with great respect Josef Pieper's understanding of virtue and the moral life. Pieper's own understanding, of course, is largely the same as that of St. Thomas himself. He states: "The virtues picture for us what a person would be if his or her nature were fully realized;"¹²⁵ and "...to seek virtue is to set out on an endless quest requiring not just certain character traits, but a transformation of the

¹²¹Ibid. p.10.

¹²²Ibid. p.93.

¹²³Ibid. p.6.

¹²⁴Ibid. pp. 8 & 9.

¹²⁵Ibid. p.19.

self."¹²⁶

Meilaender underlines the fact that this transformation presupposes the essential unity of the virtues, and most especially the unity which exists between the virtue of prudence and the other 'cardinal virtues' of 'justice,' 'temperance,' and 'fortitude.' His analysis is a reformulation of Pieper's idea that prudence requires a certain 'openness to reality.' He makes the further claim that the moral virtues shape our character, and in so doing perform an essential task because, as he says: "the very ability to see our world rightly and understand what is required of us depends upon our character."¹²⁷ Meilaender quotes Pieper in poetic summary of this doctrine that the rectitude of our will plays an essential role in our perception of reality:

"...we have lost the awareness of the close bond that links the knowing of the truth to the condition of purity. Thomas says that unchastity's first-born daughter is blindness of the spirit. Only he who wants nothing for himself, who is not subjectively 'interested,' can know the truth. On the other hand, an impure, selfishly corrupted will-to-pleasure destroys both resoluteness of the spirit and the ability of the psyche to listen in silent attention to the language of reality."¹²⁸

And Meilaender adds: "The suggestion is that in order to know the truth, one must be a person of a certain sort."¹²⁹

¹²⁶Ibid. p.22.

¹²⁷Ibid. p.26.

¹²⁸Ibid. p.23.

¹²⁹Ibid.

Meilaender contends as well that the virtues were never intended by St. Thomas to "stand in isolation" from each other. He states this in response to the question: 'Is it not selfish and self-centered to 'seek after' virtues and to try to 'perfect' oneself?' At the risk of overkill, let us quote Meilaender at length on this point, as he is particularly insightful.

First, we note that temperance is not meant to stand in isolation from the other three cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, and fortitude. In particular, prudence looks to the truth of things (to the whole of reality) and justice towards the needs and claims of fellow human beings. Only prudence and justice 'do the good;' courage and temperance create the basis for the realization of the good. Hence, it is correct to say that temperance turns in and focusses upon the self. "The purpose and goal of 'temperantia' is man's inner order." But this turn inward, is only one part of the agent's being and doing, and it should not be considered in isolation. The point and purpose of temperance is that it helps us to do the good - to act prudently and justly. The self-concern that temperance seeks is not finally in service of the self. It is in service of virtuous treatment of others (emphasis added).¹³⁰

With these remarks Meilaender summarizes brilliantly St Thomas's teaching on the essential unity of all the virtues.

Finally, Meilaender, linking St. Thomas closely to both Plato and Aristotle, asks himself two questions. First, can virtue be taught, and, if so, how? And, second, is morality a subject about which we can have not just opinion but knowledge? His response to the first question is that virtue can be taught, if we understand properly what it means 'to teach.' He says that the very best way of 'teaching' virtue is by inculcating in very young children a

¹³⁰Meilaender, pp.39 & 40.

love for the good. This can be done, Meilaender suggests, by placing before the young 'worthy exemplars' of virtue. As he says, "We must be habituated to virtuous behavior through imitating the behavior of worthy exemplars."¹³¹ In this regard, the author suggests that we should avoid the error of being too rationalistic, neglecting the affective aspect of our nature; we need to be trained to practice virtue.

In response to the second question, Meilaender maintains, with Plato, that some people are capable of moral knowledge, while others are not. And the determining factor is not something "in" the person naturally, but their character, the ensemble of all their virtues. Persons with a 'good' character; i.e. persons who are "open to the truth of things," and capacitated (through habits of moral virtue) to do the good, are more likely to know the truth about morality. If we are good, Meilaender seems to suggest, we will be more likely to judge rightly about that in which goodness itself consists. As he says: "Moral knowledge is a kind of vision available only to those of good character."¹³² In this, of course, he follows St. Thomas and Aristotle very closely. For these two (as well as for Plato) just as there are 'experts' in other areas of human life, there are experts also in the ethical realm; these are the morally good. Just as we go to an experienced and skilled carpenter when we need built a good chair, so we should

¹³¹Ibid. p.70.

¹³²Ibid. p.62.

go to the morally good person when we seek knowledge about moral goodness; he is the one whose dispositions are such that he can 'see' the truth in moral matters.

We see, then, that Pieper and Meilaender shed light on a possible explanation for what MacIntyre characterizes as the modern world's inability to resolve moral conflicts. MacIntyre himself alludes to this possible explanation when he underlines the fact that: "For Aquinas, 'prudentia,' 'phronesis,' that virtue of practical intelligence and judgment, itself cannot be possessed unless the moral virtues are possessed."¹³³ But what is this possible explanation? Why today do ethical debates frequently end unresolved? Why is it that in ethical debates we often cannot arrive at solutions agreeable to all the parties involved? The explanation is certainly not that the truth is somehow 'relative,' or that in some sense 'both sides are right.' Or at least this is not the explanation propounded by either Aquinas, Pieper, MacIntyre, or Meilaender.

The would-be explanation is that, although there is a right answer, although one of the contending parties is right and the other wrong, objectively speaking, often for lack of moral virtue; i.e. for lack of good will, the party in the wrong is blind to his or her error. And so, naturally, and in all 'sincerity,' this person continues to maintain his or her position and the debate

¹³³MacIntyre (1990), p.130.

finishes unresolved. Not a very popular proposition probably.

All of this bears directly on the virtue of prudence because, as we have said, prudence presupposes a 'fundamental openness to reality.' Pieper goes so far as to define prudence as "the perfected ability to make decisions in accord with reality."¹³⁴ But, if prudence depends on an openness to things as they are, and this openness is vitiated by a lack of moral virtue, then perhaps Aquinas was right to suggest that "without the moral virtues there is no prudence,"¹³⁵ and perhaps MacIntyre's unresolved debates have fundamentally moral and not intellectual roots.

¹³⁴Pieper (1965), p.31.

¹³⁵S.T. Ia IIae, q.58, a.5, sed c: "Non ergo prudentia potest esse sine virtute morali."

III. The Nature and Exercise of Prudence

Having given both the necessary historical background to St. Thomas's conception of prudence, as well as a brief overview of the contemporary context in which the virtue is considered, we are ready now to examine in detail St. Thomas's specific doctrine on the virtue of prudence. Our analysis will derive essentially from four texts of St. Thomas: his Commentary on the Nichomachean Ethics, especially Book Six, his treatise, On the Virtues in General, his 'Treatise on Habits' (S.T. Ia IIae QQ.49-89), and, of course, the 'Treatise on Prudence' itself (S.T. IIa IIae QQ.47-56).

Our first task, then, is to locate prudence in St. Thomas's overall scheme of the virtues. We mentioned briefly in our discussion of Aristotle above how St. Thomas characterizes prudence most generally as an accident of quality, a good operative habit, a natural virtue, and an intellectual virtue of the practical intellect. Let us examine in more detail what St. Thomas intends by each of these terms.

First, prudence, as a habit, is a species of the accident quality.¹³⁶ St. Thomas follows Aristotle in his general division of reality into those modes of being which exist 'of themselves,' and those which exist 'in another.' The first are called,

¹³⁶Ibid. Ia IIae, q.49, a.1. The reference here is directly to habits, but indirectly to prudence, a species of habit.

'substances,' and the second, 'accidents.' As prudence, most fundamentally, is something which exists not 'of itself,' but 'in another,' it is first and foremost an accident. 'Accidents' are those modes of being which determine, or modify substance. Prudence resides, as we have seen, only in rational beings; it 'modifies' the substance 'rational animal,' or, simply, 'man.'

Now, St. Thomas maintains that there are some accidents which determine substance intrinsically and others which do so only extrinsically. Among the nine accidents, those which determine substance intrinsically are three: quantity, quality, and relation; and those which do so only extrinsically are four: place, position, possession, and time.¹³⁷ Moreover, among those accidents which determine substance intrinsically, or, 'in itself,' some do so absolutely and others only relatively.¹³⁸ The accident, 'quality,' with which we are here concerned, belongs to that group of accidents which modify substance both intrinsically and absolutely.

St. Thomas adopts Aristotle's enumeration of four kinds of

¹³⁷The last two accidents, 'action' and 'passion,' determine substance both intrinsically and extrinsically. As well, the accident, 'relation,' has an 'extrinsic' aspect to it.

¹³⁸What St. Thomas intends by this last distinction is simply that some accidents determine substance in all of its acts, and others do so only in certain of its acts. The former are said to modify substance absolutely, while the latter only relatively.

quality:¹³⁹ habit and disposition, operative powers, sense qualities, and figure and shape. 'Figure' and 'shape' are self-explanatory. 'Sense qualities' are, simply, modifications of substance (other than figure or shape) which are sense-perceptible, such as: texture, color, odor, taste, etc. 'Operative powers' are the various faculties of the soul, such as intellect, will, memory, etc. And, finally, 'habits,' as St. Thomas defines them, are: "dispositions whereby that which is disposed is disposed well or ill, and this, either in regard to itself or in regard to another."¹⁴⁰ Prudence is an accident, a quality, and a habit.

Now, habits, according to St. Thomas, can be of two kinds: entitative and operative.¹⁴¹ Entitative habits, as their name implies, modify a substance in its being; i.e. in how it is. Thus health is one kind of entitative habit. Operative habits, on the other hand, modify a substance in its operations; i.e. in how it acts. Good operative habits; i.e. habits which facilitate the performance of acts which are in keeping with man's rational nature and, therefore, in keeping with his end,¹⁴² are called virtues.

¹³⁹Aristoteles, Categoriae cap 8; 8b25-11a35.

¹⁴⁰See note #41 above.

¹⁴¹S.T. Ia IIae, q.51, aa.1 & 2.

¹⁴²In general, St. Thomas defines human acts, as we will see below, as those acts which are freely performed. He makes the general distinction that 'good' acts are those which lead a person to the attainment of his end: the fulfillment of his nature as a rational being; and 'bad' acts are those which lead a person to the non-attainment of this end.

And bad operative habits; i.e. those habits which facilitate the performance of acts which are not in keeping with man's rational nature or his end, are called vices. In this way, prudence is a good operative habit, or a virtue.

St. Thomas classifies virtues in two ways: according to their origin and according to the faculty which they perfect. According to their origin, St. Thomas distinguishes, first, those virtues which are infused into the soul by God.¹⁴³ And, thus, there are the theological virtues: faith, hope, and charity, which have God himself as their object; and the infused moral virtues. Second, there are those virtues which are not infused, but acquired through the repetition of acts. These are called the natural virtues (as opposed, precisely, to the 'supernatural' virtues we have just seen) and they are categorized according to the faculty which they perfect. Those natural virtues which perfect man's appetitive faculties are called moral virtues.¹⁴⁴ And, thus, there are principally three: justice (which perfects man's will, his 'intellectual appetite'), temperance (which perfects man's concupiscible appetite), and fortitude (which perfects his irascible appetite). Those natural virtues which perfect man's intellective faculty are called, precisely, intellectual virtues; and these are further categorized according to whether they perfect

¹⁴³S.T. Ia IIae, q.51, a.4.

¹⁴⁴Ibid. Ia IIae, q.58, a.3, c: "Si autem sit perfectiva appetitivae partis, erit virtus moralis."

man's intellect in its speculative or its practical function.¹⁴⁵ The virtues of the so-called 'speculative intellect,' or the intellect as it is concerned with necessary truths, are three: understanding ('intellectus'), or the knowledge of first principles, science ('scientia'), or the knowledge of things according to their proximate causes, and wisdom ('sapientia'), or the knowledge of things according to their ultimate causes.¹⁴⁶ The virtues of the so-called 'practical intellect,' or the intellect as it is concerned with contingent truths, are two: art ('ars'), right reason about things to be made, and prudence ('prudentia'), right reason about things to be done.¹⁴⁷ And with this last distinction we have located in St. Thomas's categorization the virtue of prudence itself. Prudence is an accident of quality, a good operative habit, and an intellectual virtue of the practical intellect.

We have examined above just how prudence is related to the moral virtues. We said that although they are essentially distinct - the one perfecting man's intellective faculty and the others perfecting his appetitive faculties - they are at the same time very closely linked. Prudence, which pertains to man's intellect, is directive of the moral virtues insofar as it sets for each of them the 'mean' at which they are to aim. It is in this sense that

¹⁴⁵Ibid.

¹⁴⁶Ibid. Ia IIae, q.57, a.2.

¹⁴⁷Ibid. Ia IIae, q.57, a.4.

'there is no moral virtue without prudence.' The moral virtues, on the other hand, insofar as they are rightly ordained to their proper good, provide prudence - a virtue concerned properly with means - with its ends.¹⁴⁸ As St. Thomas explains it, prudence is 'right reason about things to be done;' and reason requires principles from which to argue. But reason, when it argues about particular cases, needs not only universal principles (such as are provided, for example, by synderesis), but also particular principles, or 'ends.' The universal principles are not sufficient in order that man may reason rightly about particular cases.¹⁴⁹ Now, these 'particular principles' of action are known to man: when, through habits of moral virtue, he is rightly disposed towards them. And it is in this sense that Aquinas maintains that 'without the moral virtues there is no prudence.' Our discussion of Pieper and Meilaender also treats at length of the relation between prudence and the moral virtues. However, among the intellectual virtues, we need still to elaborate on the relation between prudence and the virtues of the speculative intellect and between prudence and the virtue of 'art.'

The fundamental difference between prudence and the virtues of the speculative intellect is that while these latter virtues are

¹⁴⁸In Ethicorum Lib. VI, lect. 4: "principia prudentiae sunt fines, circa quos conservatur rectitudo iudicii per virtutes morales."

¹⁴⁹S.T. Ia IIae q.58, a.5, c. We are reminded here, of course, of Nelson's claims regarding the inadequacy of the principles of natural law for moral decision-making in the concrete.

concerned with knowledge for its own sake, prudence is concerned with knowledge for the sake of action, whence its designation as 'practical.' This distinction itself derives from the fact that the speculative virtues concern themselves, as we have said, with knowledge of truths both universal and necessary, while the practical virtues concern themselves with truths particular and contingent. Prudence is the virtue concerned with directing human action:¹⁵⁰ choosing the right means to attain an end. Consequently, it presupposes a certain freedom which is absent from the acts of the speculative intellect. The human intellect is not free to reject the proposition that 'a thing cannot be and not be at the same time and in the same respect.' It has no choice in the matter because the principle of non-contradiction is a necessary truth.¹⁵¹ It may, however, reject the proposition, for example, that 'it is better for children to be sent to school than not.' It has a choice in this latter instance because the proposition that 'children should be sent to school' is not a necessary, but a contingent truth and can therefore at least be disputed.

Within the practical intellect, St. Thomas distinguishes in

¹⁵⁰In Ethicorum Lib. VI, lect. 3.

¹⁵¹To say this, of course, is not at all to suggest that there are not individuals who do in fact deny the principle of non-contradiction. It is simply to say that the intellect qua intellect is necessitated by its proper object, truth. These individuals can deny this principle by having recourse to a faculty which is prior to and can coerce the intellect; namely, the will. This would certainly be St. Thomas's explanation of such irrational behavior; a denial of evident truth almost always implies bad will.

two ways between the virtues of 'art' and 'prudence.'¹⁵² First, he refers to the generic difference between activity which is transient and that which is immanent. Art, because it terminates in something 'made,' something outside the agent, is an essentially transient action. Prudence, on the other hand, because its action remains within the agent, is an essentially immanent action. Second, and more important, he refers to the difference between virtues which are so 'in the full sense of the term' ('simpliciter') and those which are so only 'relatively.' Prudence is a virtue 'simpliciter' because it confers not only the ability to act well, but also what St. Thomas calls the 'use' of this ability. That is, by virtue of its proper act, to command, prudence effects that which it provides the person with the power to do. Prudence, as we shall see below, is concerned not only to deliberate well and make a right judgment about the means to be employed to reach an end. It is concerned as well to command that these means be chosen, and is, therefore, linked, in a certain manner, with the will and with the actual doing of good. It is, consequently, a 'virtue' in the full sense of the term; i.e. in the sense that it 'makes its possessor good.'¹⁵³ Art, contrariwise, is a virtue only 'relatively' because it provides only an 'aptitude' for a good work and not the good work itself.

¹⁵²S.T. Ia IIae, q.57, a.4.

¹⁵³Ibid. Ia IIae, q.55, a.3, sed c: "Virtus est quae bonum facit habentem et opus eius bonum reddit."

This brief discussion of the difference between art and prudence provides us with an apt introduction to our treatment of the components and principal acts of prudence. St. Thomas, in the reply to an objection to the question: "Whether Prudence is a Distinct Virtue from Art,"¹⁵⁴ makes the very important point that:

Prudence is of good counsel about matters regarding man's entire life, and the end of human life. But in some arts there is counsel about matters concerning the ends proper to those arts. Hence some men, insofar as they are good counsellors in matters of warfare, or seamanship, are said to be prudent officers or pilots, but not simply prudent: only those are simply prudent who give good counsel about all the concerns of life.¹⁵⁵

This point is particularly important because it underscores unequivocally the very wide scope of prudence, which scope is precisely the reason for its relative preeminence among the natural virtues. We say 'relative preeminence,' of course, because although St. Thomas ranks prudence higher than the moral virtues, he is very clear as to the absolute preeminence of wisdom among the natural virtues in general.¹⁵⁶

Now, there is one fundamental reason why prudence enjoys such a wide scope of influence. It is that man is not a 'finished' being. According to St. Thomas, man is created by God with a certain nature, but he is not born with this nature already

¹⁵⁴See note #149 above.

¹⁵⁵S.T. Ia IIae, Q.57, a.4, ad 3.

¹⁵⁶St. Thomas refers to prudence as the 'servant' of wisdom, comparing the latter to a king and the former to 'the gatekeeper who prepares the king's way.' See S.T. Ia IIae, q.66, a.5. See also: Aristotle, Eth. VI, 7.

perfected. His 'nature' as it exists in the mind of God (as a kind of exemplar) is itself 'perfect' in the sense that it 'lacks nothing;' it is identical to God's idea of it. But man in the concrete is not perfect; he lacks many things. And it is this very lack, this genuine need, which pushes him to act. Human persons act, most fundamentally, because they are imperfect beings seeking perfection.¹⁵⁷ Man 'completes' himself through his actions.

St. Thomas maintains both that 'every agent acts for an end' and that 'the perfection of a creature lies in its fulfilling its end.' These truths apply, of course, to all agents, all creatures, animate or inanimate, rational or not. The classic example is that of a knife. The 'end' of a knife is to cut and a good knife is one that is sharp and cuts well. A knife is 'perfect,' therefore, precisely to the degree that it fulfills its end of being sharp and cutting well. The same principle applies to man, although to a much higher degree. Man has a particular nature - rational animal - and his 'perfection' lies precisely in the fulfillment of this nature. Because man is composed of both a soul and a body, his (complete) perfection has both a spiritual and a corporeal aspect.

¹⁵⁷It is perhaps instructive here to underline again exactly the sense in which we intend the term 'perfect;' namely, in the sense of being complete, lacking nothing due. To say that human persons always 'seek perfection' when they act is obviously an absurd claim if the terms are understood colloquially. Understood technically, however, we can see their utility in describing human action. Man is born lacking many abilities - he cannot walk, speak, reason, etc. - but through his actions he can gradually acquire these abilities and thereby 'perfect' or 'complete' himself as a person.

However, what distinguishes man from the rest of the material universe, as we saw in the introduction to the present study, is his intellectual soul; and his particular perfection, therefore, must reside in an act of this soul and not of the body. And, in fact, this is precisely what St. Thomas teaches: man's essential perfection consists in the acts of his intellectual faculties, reason and will, and not in the acts of his vegetative or sensitive faculties. Since man enjoys freedom as well as intelligence, moreover, his perfection requires not only the right use of his intellect, but also of his will. It is not enough for man to know the good, he must also do it. And it is in this sense that St. Thomas speaks of virtue as activity in accord with reason, and of happiness, man's last end, as 'activity in accord with perfect virtue.' Thus, a 'perfect knife' is one that is sharp; which is to say, one that cuts well; and a 'perfect man' is one who is virtuous; which is to say, one who reasons and behaves well. And the virtue of prudence, of course, is intimately linked to both intellect and will, to reason and action. It is precisely, as we have seen, "right reason acting."

Finally, we said above that man 'completes himself' through his actions. With each act that he performs, man is either perfecting himself (if the act is virtuous) or harming himself (if the act is vicious). But the distinctive characteristic of all of these actions is the fact that they are controlled; i.e. that they originate in a deliberate will. It is, in fact, this feature of

deliberateness which characterizes an act as human at all. The essential element of human acts, as opposed to mere 'acts of man,' is the fact that they are performed willingly. Man, as a rational creature, is conscious of what he does; he can think and freely choose. As a consequence, his acts, insofar as they are 'human acts' at all, are ordered, controlled. The difficulty is that, according to Aquinas, man's acts in the concrete are never morally indifferent;¹⁵⁸ they are always either good or evil. And this is quite significant because, although human acts are, by definition, always deliberate, they are not necessarily always virtuous; i.e. in accord with right reason. In order for them to be so, they must be determined by an intellectual virtue directive of action; and this is prudence.

1. The Three Principle Acts of Prudence

St. Thomas distinguishes twelve separate and subordinate moments within the human act as such. Six of these acts are acts of the intellect and six are acts of the will. Three distinct 'moments' can be remarked in the unfolding of a human act: the first corresponds to the order of intention, the second to the order of election, and the third to the order of execution. Within each of these moments, there are two acts of the intellect and two

¹⁵⁸S.T. Ia IIae, q.18, a.9, sed c: "Nullus ergo individualis actus est indifferens."

acts of the will. First, in the order of intention, once presented with the phantasm of a particular end (whether it be an appetible good, such as nourishment, or an intellectual good, such as the knowledge of a natural science), the intellect immediately forms the judgment: "This end is good" and the will immediately begins to desire the thing (this first desire is as yet non-efficacious). Next, the intellect forms the judgment: "This end can and ought to be attained" and the will responds by forming an efficacious desire for the thing. Second, in the order of election, the intellect takes counsel as to the means that could be employed to attain the end and the will consents in a general way to these means. Next, the intellect makes the practical judgment that one means is preferable to all the others and the will responds by making a choice of these means. Third, in the order of execution, the intellect issues a command directing the execution of the means chosen and the will moves the other faculties in the execution of these means (usus activus). And, finally, the intellect directs its attention to these other faculties in their execution of the means (usus passivus) and the will concludes by experiencing joy in possession of the end.¹⁵⁹

Now, three of the above-mentioned twelve acts pertain to the

¹⁵⁹This scheme of the twelve subordinate acts of the human act I have borrowed in its entirety from the doctoral dissertation of Sr. M. Rose E. Brennan: "The Intellectual Virtues According to the Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas" (Catholic University of America, 1941) p.69. Brennan, in turn, is quoting Garrigou-LaGrange in an article, "La Prudence dans L'Organisme des Vertus" (Revue Thomiste vol. XXXI, 1926) p.414.

virtue of prudence. These acts (which constitute the three principle acts of prudence) are: counsel, practical judgment, and command; and all three are acts of the intellect. The first two, counsel and practical judgment, are essentially speculative, but the third, command, is oriented directly towards action and is, therefore, essentially practical. This last is also, as we have seen, the proper act of prudence.

Counsel, then, which is also called 'deliberation,' is the act by which the intellect considers the means which might be employed to attain a given end.¹⁶⁰ This act, as we saw above, presupposes the initial acts of the intellect and the will judging that the end is good and efficaciously desiring it. If we take as an example the decisions of the father of a family, the importance of counsel for prudence and life generally becomes quickly evident. The father of a family, if he is properly to raise his children, must look after both their intellectual and moral formation. Their intellectual formation he can perhaps leave largely in the hands of the schools to which he sends them. Even here, however, he will have to take counsel as to which school will serve as the best means, given his end: the proper education of his children. Their moral formation, however, will require of him many more prudent decisions, and, therefore, many more acts of deliberation. Given

¹⁶⁰In Ethicorum Lib. VI, lect. 10: "Aliud autem est quod homo bene se habeat circa ea quae sunt ad finem: et hoc facit prudentia quae est bene consiliativa et iudicativa et praeceptiva eorum quae sunt ad finem."

that he wants his children to grow up to be self-disciplined, hard-working, successful individuals, what means will best lead to this end? He must deliberate on what means he will use to discipline the children, on what incentives he will give them to behave well, on how he will react to their successes and failures, etc, etc. The father of a family must take counsel about many aspects of his childrens' formation, these general decisions as well as almost an infinitude of particular decisions. St. Thomas maintains, as well, that this act of counsel is perfected by another virtue, itself called 'good counsel' ('eubulia'¹⁶¹), which is 'annexed' to prudence and one of the so-called 'potential parts' of the virtue.

Practical judgment is simply the act by which the intellect decides which means is most likely to attain the end sought. Following the above example, the father, at a certain moment, will have to decide, for instance, whether to punish his children corporally or not. And, if corporally, in which specific manner. He might decide, for example, that corporal punishment is neither morally right nor necessary and devise some other way to punish his children when they misbehave. On the other hand, he might decide that not only is there nothing morally wrong with certain forms of corporal punishment, but that corporal punishment, in one form or another, is essential to the proper moral education of his children. In this case, he must make the further judgment as to

¹⁶¹S.T. IIa IIae, q.51, a.1.

which forms of corporal punishment are both ethical and effective. He might judge, for example, that a well-timed 'spanking' is an ethical and effective way of teaching his children the difference between acceptable and unacceptable behavior, while at the same time deploring as unethical and counter-productive severe beatings.

While the act of deliberation is perfected by the annexed virtue of 'eubulia,' the act of practical judgment is perfected by two of these 'annexed virtues': 'synesis' and 'gnome.'¹⁶² 'Synesis' is the virtue which perfects the act of practical judgment in regard to normal circumstances. Thus, all of the decisions we have seen above concerning the ordinary affairs of raising a family are judgments perfected, if they are, by synesis. 'Gnome,' on the other hand, is the virtue which perfects the act of practical judgment in regard to exceptional circumstances. Thus, the father might decide, in general, to punish his children corporally when they misbehave, but in a particular instance decide that this is not the best course. For example, one of his children may misbehave and get spanked frequently and he might decide that in order not to crush the spirit of this child that it is better given the circumstances not to spank him. This would be a practical judgment perfected by the virtue of gnome.¹⁶³

¹⁶²Ibid. IIa IIae, aa. 3 & 4.

¹⁶³St. Thomas does himself remark, interestingly, that gnome is, in a certain manner, linked to the virtue of mercy. See S.T. IIa IIae, Q.52, a.4.

Command, finally, is that act by which the intellect directs the execution of the means chosen.¹⁶⁴ It issues, as its name tells us, in an order to be carried out. If the acts of deliberation and practical judgment remain purely speculative in nature, the act of command certainly does not. It is intimately linked to the actual carrying out of the means chosen. What it 'commands' to carry out these means is the will. This is why it is essentially practical and why it is the proper act of prudence. In our above example, once the father has deliberated on and made a practical judgment on the means to be employed in the moral formation of his children, he will have to 'command himself' to carry out these decisions. And this is what it means, precisely, to 'act reasonably,' to fashion our conduct according to the dictates of right reason. In effect, this is just what it means to act prudently. If the father has taken the necessary time to deliberate well and if he has been careful to form a right judgment as to the best means, then a command to carry out these means will, most probably, result in the successful moral formation of his children.¹⁶⁵ And, since this was his goal, it is reasonable to expect that he would be pleased by such an outcome. This is the joy referred to above in our description of the human act as such

¹⁶⁴In Ethicorum Lib. VI, lect. 9.

¹⁶⁵We say 'most probably' because, as both Aristotle and St. Thomas insist, prudence is neither a science nor an art. The prudent individual makes his judgment of a situation based on the information which is reasonably available to him. But, given the unpredictability which arises from human freedom and the effects of 'fortune,' there is no guarantee that the end sought after will in fact be attained.

and it justifies, in a certain way, Aristotle's claim that happiness is 'activity in accord with perfect virtue.' The prudent man, the virtuous man, will, ex hypothesi, fulfill more of his goals than the imprudent man; and will, therefore, be happier. For a practical demonstration of this fact, one has simply to compare the life of a prudent father with that of an imprudent one. The former happily watches his children grow up, as he would have wished, to lead upright, normal, happy lives, while the latter typically watches his brood slouch from one dishonor to the next. Whence, again, the importance of the virtue of prudence, whose integral parts we will now enumerate.

2. The 'Integral Parts' of Prudence

In the so-called 'Treatise on Prudence' (S.T. IIa IIae QQ.47-56), St. Thomas states that there are three kinds of 'parts' in general: 'integral' parts, 'subjective' parts, and 'potential' parts.¹⁶⁶ Integral parts are, as he describes them, the structure of a thing: its foundation, walls, etc. Subjective parts are the species of a thing¹⁶⁷: its various types. And potential parts are qualities necessary for the perfection of the thing, but which are not properly part of its essence. This threefold division of parts, St. Thomas continues, applies as well to the virtues in

¹⁶⁶S.T. IIa IIae, q.48, c.

¹⁶⁷Ibid. IIa IIae, q.50.

general and to the virtue of prudence in particular; there are three 'parts' to every virtue, and therefore three parts to prudence. For present purposes, we are interested to describe simply the first of these parts; i.e. the 'integral parts' of prudence and not its subjective or potential parts.¹⁶⁸

Aquinas distinguishes eight integral parts, or 'components,' of the virtue of prudence.¹⁶⁹ Five of these refer to the cognitive aspect of the virtue and three to its preceptive aspect. The five parts pertaining to the cognitive aspect of prudence perfect the intellect in its acts of deliberating and forming a practical judgment and are categorized, according to their relation to knowledge, as follows. As to the very act of knowing, there are integral parts of prudence corresponding to the knowledge of past things and to the knowledge of present things. The former is the component, memory ('memoria') and the latter the component insight ('intellectus'¹⁷⁰). As to the acquisition of knowledge, there are integral parts of prudence corresponding, on the one hand, to

¹⁶⁸In fact, in the previous section we have seen briefly the role of the 'potential parts' of prudence: eubulia, synesis, and gnome, the virtues annexed to prudence which perfect its acts of deliberation and practical judgment. The 'subjective parts' of prudence, its species, are: personal prudence, domestic prudence, and political prudence.

¹⁶⁹S.T. IIa IIae, q.49.

¹⁷⁰This integral part of prudence, a virtue of the practical intellect, should not be confused with the virtue of the speculative intellect of the same name. The latter concerns itself with the knowledge of first principles for their own sake, while the former is concerned with knowledge for the sake of action.

knowledge which is acquired from another: docility ('docilitas'), and, on the other hand, to knowledge which is acquired from oneself: perspicacity ('solertia'). Finally, as to the use of this knowledge, there corresponds the part, reasoned judgment ('ratio').

The three parts pertaining to the preceptive aspect of prudence perfect the intellect in its acts of command. The first of these is foresight ('providentia'), whose function it is to order things properly to the end. 'Providence,' St. Thomas points out, is the most important, the chief,¹⁷¹ component of the virtue of prudence (in fact, the term, 'prudence,' itself derives directly from 'providentia'). Second, there is the component circumspection ('circumspectio'), by which are studied the circumstances of an act. And, third, there is the component caution ('cautio'), whose task it is to aid in the avoidance of obstacles. Each of these eight 'integral parts' of prudence plays an essential role in every act of the virtue. Let us examine each one in more detail, taking into account, again, the circumstances of the father of a family.

First, then, there is the component memory. St. Thomas maintains that the reason memory is important for prudence is because prudence concerns itself with human acts, and human acts, being free, are contingent. This, in turn, is significant for two reasons. First, because in the realm of contingent doings one

¹⁷¹S.T. IIa IIae, q.49, a.6, ad 1: "Et secundum hoc providentia est principalior inter omnes partes prudentiae."

cannot simply follow rules which are necessarily true; one must appreciate also what happens 'in the majority of cases.'¹⁷² And, second, because in order to be able to take into account such empirical findings, one must have a 'storehouse' of such data at hand. And this, precisely, is 'memory.' The father of a family needs to remember which punishments were effective and which were not if he would properly discipline his children.

Second, there is the component insight or intelligence. St. Thomas remarks that prudential reasoning rests on two types of understanding. The first is an understanding of general principles of action such as 'do good and avoid evil,' and this understanding is supplied, as we have seen, by the habit 'synderesis.' The second, however, is an understanding of the individual end to be attained by a given action. It is one thing for a father to have in mind the principle that he ought to care for his children; it is quite another for him to understand that today is not an opportune moment to correct his son's tendency not to study. Prudence requires an understanding of ends both general and particular.

Third, there is the component docility, or 'teachableness.' Aquinas states that what is characteristic of docility is the capacity to be taught, to be receptive of teaching. This is an essential part of prudence because prudence is concerned with

¹⁷²S.T. IIa IIae, q.49, a.1, c: "In his autem non potest homo dirigi per ea quae sunt simpliciter et ex necessitate vera, sed ex his quae ut in pluribus accidunt."

particular actions to be performed and, since these are practically infinite, one person cannot possibly consider them all sufficiently. And this would seem to make perfect sense. We said above that prudence takes into account what occurs 'in the majority of cases.' But, since one person cannot possibly experience for himself all of these situations, it is necessary for him to learn from the experience of others. This truth also is witnessed to in the family situation. Any intelligent father knows that although families are very different from one to the next, they are also quite similar in many respects. He will, therefore, not refrain from asking the advice of more experienced fathers among his friends and relatives.

Fourth, there is the component perspicacity.¹⁷³ Perspicacity is the ability to appreciate correctly what needs to be done in a particular situation. If docility is the capacity to make correct estimations based on the experience of others, then perspicacity is the ability to do so by one's own wit. This is why Aquinas equates perspicacity with 'shrewdness,' the ability to decipher the right course in situations which rise up suddenly. The father of a family does not always have the time to consult with someone about what is the right thing to do in a given situation. To make a prudent decision 'on the spot,' he needs perspicacity.

The fifth and last of the parts of prudence pertaining to the

¹⁷³Ibid. IIa IIae, q.49, a.4.

virtue's cognitive aspect is reasoned judgment. This, as its name tells us, is the ability to reason from principles, both general and particular, to specific judgments. Man, as we have seen, is a rational being. But to be rational is not the same as to be purely intellectual. The latter, which is the case for God and the angels, according to St. Thomas, is the ability to see directly into the truth of things without the need of inquiry. The former is precisely this kind of inquiry or movement from truths known to truths unknown. 'Reasoned judgment' pertains to the use of the knowledge acquired by memory, insight, docility, and perspicacity. The father of a family will need to reason from his principles as how best to apply them in the concrete situation.

The first of the integral parts of prudence pertaining to the virtue's preceptive aspect, then, is that of foresight, or simply, 'providence.' St. Thomas explains that prudence concerns itself with actions which we perform for the sake of an end; its function, precisely, is to find which actions, which 'means,' will lead to this end. Foresight, the chief component of the virtue of prudence, is the ability to look to the end sought to decide how this end ought to determine our present actions.¹⁷⁴ The prudent man is especially he who 'looks to the future,' so to speak, and directs his present action accordingly. The father of a family must foresee what he wishes in future to accomplish by punishing

¹⁷⁴Ibid. IIa IIae, q.49, a.6, c: "importat enim providentia respectem quendam alicujis distantis, ad quod ea quae in praesenti occurrunt ordinanda sunt."

his children if he is to discipline them prudently here and now.

The seventh component of prudence is circumspection, the ability to take proper account of the circumstances of an action. Since prudence is concerned essentially with ordering things well for a given end or purpose, it must needs take into account the circumstances of actions because what is appropriate in the abstract might be quite inappropriate in the concrete. The prudent father will take into account the particular circumstances of each act of disobedience before punishing his child. For example, if it is a repeated offense and the child shows little remorse for his action, the punishment might be more severe and the contrary if it is the first time and he demonstrates that he regrets his action. Circumspection allows the prudent individual to apply justly the principles he has settled on.

Finally, the eighth component of prudence is caution. Caution is closely linked to the component 'foresight,' as its principal function is to help the individual avoid obstacles.¹⁷⁵ Foresight, as we have said, is a certain 'looking to the future.' And one of the benefits of so doing is that one is forewarned of possible difficulties which may arise. Again, prudence is concerned with contingent ends, and since there are some occurrences which assist in the accomplishment of these ends and some which positively work

¹⁷⁵Ibid. IIa IIae, q.49, a.8, c: "Et ideo necessaria est cautio ad prudentiam, ut sic accipiantur bona quod vitentur mal."

against their accomplishment, part of being prudent is being cautious enough to avoid these latter occurrences. If a father wishes to care for the moral education of his children, he must avoid appearing tyrannical. To this end, he might take the caution of always explaining to his children why they are being punished. Caution is essential to prudence because it removes those obstacles which work against the end sought by the individual.

These, then, are the eight 'integral parts' of the virtue of prudence. As they are all truly integral to the good-functioning of the virtue, to the extent that one of them is absent, one is more likely to commit faults against prudence. The truly prudent individual is he who possesses eminently all of these components.

Conclusion

Ivan, one of the central characters in Dostoyevsky's classic novel, The Brothers Karamazov, exclaims defiantly to Christ through the voice of the 'Grand Inquisitor':

And what do you think? Shall we be right or shall we be lying? They will themselves be convinced that we are right, for they will remember the horrors of slavery and confusion to which your freedom brought them. Freedom, a free mind and science, will lead them into such a jungle and bring them face to face with such marvels and insoluble mysteries, that some of them, the recalcitrant and the fierce, will destroy themselves; others, recalcitrant but weak, will destroy one another; and the rest, weak and unhappy, will come crawling to our feet and cry aloud: 'Yes, you were right, you alone possessed his mystery, and we come back to you - save us from ourselves!'¹⁷⁶

Ivan appreciates the fearful grandeur of human freedom. He realizes, that is, that a great deal depends on how we choose to exercise our freedom. Indeed, one is tempted to say that in human affairs everything depends on how individuals use their freedom; because freedom, if it is genuine, has, as a necessary corollary, that we are free to choose wrongly. And the baneful effects of such so-called 'wrong choices' are well known to us all. A father foolishly chooses not to discipline his children and regrets it the rest of his life as he watches them pitifully slouch from one disgrace to the next. A high school student foolishly chooses not to study and regrets it when she is expelled from school for having failed three subjects. A young man foolishly chooses to try to

¹⁷⁶Fyodor Dostoyevsky, The Brothers Karamazov trans. David Magarshack (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1958) 303.

impress his friends by driving recklessly and regrets it when he hears from his hospital bed that he will never walk again. In one way or another, we have all experienced the consequences of wrong choices - whether our own or those of other people. And, of course, the three examples just cited are quite tame in comparison to the many more sadistic ones we might have chosen (for these, see the chapter entitled 'Rebellion' in Dostoyevsky's novel).

Man, therefore, is free and his freedom is at once both a sign of his nobility and a grave responsibility. The fact that he can make free choices at all is indeed testimony to his preeminence among the existents of the material universe. But, if man is to rise to the dignity which is his as a rational creature, he must use his freedom wisely and not foolishly. Any brute animal can pass through life eating, sleeping, reproducing, and growing. Man, on the other hand, while he is an animal and therefore subject to material needs just as any other animal, is presumably capable of rising above his vegetative and sensitive functions and operating on the level of his intellect. Man is a rational animal and he is unique in the material universe in his ability to direct his actions according to reason. The 'wrong choices' mentioned above are examples of men living without thinking, which is to say, living without allowing their actions to be influenced by reason. In order to conform his actions to the dictates of reason, however, man is in absolute need of the virtue of prudence, 'right reason acting.' Indeed, perhaps the best definition of the prudent man

is: 'he who thinks before he acts.'¹⁷⁷

In the present thesis, therefore, we have attempted to outline the most coherent account of prudence ever constructed, that of St. Thomas Aquinas. In the introduction, we have tried to demonstrate how prudence is an exigency of man's rational nature, showing that without it man is incapable of acting according to reason and attaining his end. In the first section, we have attempted to sketch the context in which St. Thomas himself wrote. This context is composed, essentially, of two traditions: the Christian tradition of 'discretio' and the Aristotelian tradition of

¹⁷⁷To so define 'the prudent man,' however, may be somewhat misleading. The danger is that by so doing we over-intellectualize man's moral activity. This is not our intention, nor is it the doctrine of Aquinas. As we have suggested at various points throughout the present text, one of the most important differences between the ethical theory of St. Thomas and that of Aristotle is precisely the emphasis the former places on the role of the will in moral decision-making. St. Thomas, duly influenced by the Semitic and Christian understanding of 'sin' - the willful consent to do what we know to be morally evil - rejects the ancient Greek notion that unethical behavior is caused by mere ignorance of what should be done and what should not be done. For Plato, and in large measure for Aristotle, virtue is equivalent to knowledge of the good and vice equivalent to ignorance of same. They had little understanding of the notion of 'bad will': the idea that persons can at one and the same time know clearly that a given action is evil and yet go ahead and perform it anyway. St. Thomas spends, in fact, the majority of the Prima Secundae discussing human acts and the passions and habits which modify these acts. In short, he affirms unequivocally the fundamental freedom of the human will and maintains that owing to his passions (e.g. fear, anger, desire, etc.) and to simple errors in judgment, man may perform evil actions unwittingly (i.e. unintentionally) and - what is more striking - he may at times perform these same actions knowing them to be evil. And, in fact, this is what the Christian tradition to which St. Thomas belongs refers to as the 'mystery of evil.'

'phronesis.' Within our analysis, we have identified the major influences on St. Thomas's conception of prudence, in descending order of importance, as: Aristotle, St. Albert the Great, Philip the Chancellor, and William of Auxerre.

In the second section, we have attempted to summarize the contemporary context of the debate on prudence. We have said that, although there is not a lot written in recent years on St. Thomas's conception of prudence in particular, there is a lively debate currently on the question of whether an 'ethics of virtue' can and should replace other present-day ethical theories, such as Emotivism and Consequentialism. In this regard, we looked briefly at the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, Josef Pieper, and Gilbert Meilaender. As well, we pointed out that with the recent publication of Daniel Nelson's book, The Priority of Prudence, new life has been injected into the present debate on St. Thomas's understanding of the relation between prudence and the natural law.

Finally, in the third and last section, we have tried to outline in detail St. Thomas's actual conception of the nature and exercise of the virtue of prudence. In this regard, we have seen that St. Thomas considers prudence a good operative habit of the practical intellect. We have shown how St. Thomas views the three principal acts of prudence as: deliberation, practical judgment, and command, with this last being the proper act of the virtue. As well, we have detailed the eight 'integral parts' of prudence:

memory, insight, docility, perspicacity, reasoned judgment, foresight, circumspection, and caution.

By way of conclusion, therefore, let us return briefly to what is in fact the present debate surrounding St. Thomas's conception of the virtue of prudence; namely, the issues raised by Daniel Nelson in his book, The Priority of Prudence, and give our thesis in this regard. We have said that Nelson's fundamental claim is the following. Through a misreading of St. Thomas's understanding of the role of the natural law in moral decision-making, we have inherited a false conception of St. Thomas's ethical theory. This misreading, what Nelson refers to as the 'standard natural law account' of St. Thomas's ethics, is founded on the mistaken belief, Nelson claims, that St. Thomas considered the first principles of the natural law to be the rule of moral action. This reading would have individuals deducing specific moral decisions from the most general principles of the natural law.

Now, while Nelson is wrong, in our opinion, to portray the natural law tradition in such deductivist terms, we believe that he has made a significant contribution to the proper understanding of St. Thomas's ethics as a whole. In the section above devoted to Nelson, we implied that he has perhaps created a false problem in accusing the 'natural lawyers' of misinterpreting St. Thomas. We showed how the tradition is perhaps less deductive than Nelson is willing to admit. He condemns the 'standard account' on the

grounds that St. Thomas never considered the first principles of the natural law concrete or specific enough to be the rule of moral decision-making. But if the tradition itself refrains from ever making such a claim, then Nelson's point loses a good deal of its interest.

Where Nelson is strong - and unequivocally so - is in his careful analysis of the actual texts of Aquinas in an attempt, successful in our opinion, to show how St. Thomas's ethics is far more virtue and prudence-based than natural law-based. And this is the import of the study of St. Thomas's conception of the virtue of prudence. If we can understand St. Thomas's conception of prudence, then we will have a better understanding of his ethics generally. But this ethics is an 'ethics of virtue,' so called. And, thus, St. Thomas has, as Nelson himself maintains, far more than mere historical interest to the modern ethical debate.

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