

# PRUDENCE

---

---

*If thy eye is single, the whole  
of thy body will be lit up.*  
MATTHEW 6, 22

---

---

## 1. *The First of the Cardinal Virtues*

NO DICITUM in traditional Christian doctrine strikes such a note of strangeness to the ears of contemporaries, even contemporary Christians, as this one: that the virtue of prudence is the mold and "mother"<sup>1</sup> of all the other cardinal virtues, of justice, fortitude, and temperance. In other words, none but the prudent man can be just, brave, and temperate, and the good man is good in so far as he is prudent.

Our uneasiness and alienation would be only the greater if we were to take the proposition as seriously as it is meant. But we have grown accustomed to disregarding such hierarchic rankings among spiritual and ethical qualities. This is especially true for the "virtues." We assume that they are allegories, and that there is really no need to assign them an order of rank. We tend to think that it does not matter at all which of the four cardinal virtues may have drawn first prize in the lottery arranged by "scholastic" theologians.

Yet the fact is that nothing less than the whole ordered structure of the Occidental Christian view of man rests upon the pre-eminence of prudence over the other virtues. The structural framework of Occidental Christian metaphysics as a whole stands revealed, perhaps more plainly than in any other single ethical dictum, in the proposition that prudence is the

foremost of the virtues. That structure is built thus: that Being precedes Truth, and that Truth precedes the Good.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the living fire at the heart of the dictum is the central mystery of Christian theology: that the Father begets the Eternal Word, and that the Holy Spirit proceeds out of the Father and the Word.

Since this is so, there is a larger significance in the fact that people today can respond to this assertion of the pre-eminence of prudence only with incomprehension and uneasiness. That they feel it as strange may well reveal a deeper-seated and more total estrangement. It may mean that they no longer feel the binding force of the Christian Occidental view of man. It may denote the beginning of an incomprehension of the fundamentals of Christian teaching in regard to the nature of reality.

To the contemporary mind, prudence seems less a prerequisite to goodness than an evasion of it. The statement that it is prudence which makes an action good strikes us as well-nigh ridiculous. Should we hear it said, we tend to misunderstand the phrase, and take it as a tribute to undisguised utilitarianism. For we think of prudence as far more akin to the idea of mere utility, the *bonum utile*, than to the ideal of nobility, the *bonum honestum*. In colloquial use, prudence always carries the connotation of timorous, small-minded self-preservation, of a rather selfish concern about oneself. Neither of these traits is compatible with nobility; both are unworthy of the noble man.

It is therefore difficult for us to understand that the second cardinal virtue, justice, and all that is included in the word, can be said to derive from prudence. Certainly the common mind regards prudence and fortitude as virtually contradictory ideas. A "prudent" man is thought to be one who avoids the embarrassing situation of having to be brave. The "prudent" man is the "clever tactician" who contrives to escape personal

### The First of the Cardinal Virtues

commitment. Those who shun danger are wont to account for their attitude by appealing to the necessity for "prudence."

To the modern way of thinking, there seems to be a more obvious connection between prudence and the fourth cardinal virtue, that of temperance. But here too we will discover, if we dig deeper, that both these virtues are being beheld in quite a different light from the original great conception of them. For temperance, the disciplining of the instinctive craving for pleasure, was never meant to be exercised to induce a quietistic, philistine dullness. Yet this is what is implied in common phrases about "prudent moderation." That implication comes to the surface when people sneer at the noble daring of a celibate life, or the rigors of real fasting. They will speak scornfully of such practices as "imprudent exaggerations." In similar wise, they will condemn the forthright wrath of fortitude as aggressiveness.

To the contemporary mind, then, the concept of the good rather excludes than includes prudence. Modern man cannot conceive of a good act which might not be imprudent, nor of a bad act which might not be prudent. He will often call lies and cowardice prudent, truthfulness and courageous sacrifice imprudent.

Classical Christian ethics, on the contrary, maintains that man can be prudent and good only simultaneously; that prudence is part and parcel of the definition of goodness;<sup>3</sup> that there is no sort of justice and fortitude which runs counter to the virtue of prudence; and that the unjust man has been imprudent before and is imprudent at the moment he is unjust. *Omnis virtus moralis debet esse prudens*—All virtue is necessarily prudent.<sup>4</sup>

The general ethical attitudes of our era, as revealed in the conventions of everyday language, are shared by systematic

## PRUDENCE

moral theology—it is difficult to say which takes the lead, which is the follower. Perhaps both express a deeper process of spiritual change. At any rate, there is no doubt about the result: modern religious teachings have little or nothing to say about the place of prudence in life or in the hierarchy of virtues. Even the modern moral theologian who claims, or aspires, to be a follower of classical theology who claims, or same uneasiness about prudence. One of the foremost contemporary theologians actually suggests that latter-day moral theologians have practiced a kind of suppression of the tract on prudence (*quasi-suppression du traité de la prudence*).<sup>5</sup> When an occasional contemporary treatise on moral theology does attempt to deal resolutely with Thomas Aquinas's doctrine of the virtues, the author, significantly enough, must spend much labor on a polemic justifying this "regression."<sup>6</sup>

Classical theology has been forced to resort to an immense variety of concepts and images in order to systematize the place of prudence and define its meaning with some degree of clarity. The very laboriousness of the definitions indicates that the classical theologians were here dealing with an essential problem of meaning and hierarchy, that the ordering of the virtues was not accidental.

Prudence is the *cause* of the other virtues' being virtues at all.<sup>7</sup> For example, there may be a kind of instinctive governance of instinctual cravings; but only prudence transforms this instinctive governance into the "virtue" of temperance.<sup>8</sup> Virtue is a "perfected ability" of man as a spiritual person, and justice, fortitude, and temperance, as "abilities" of the whole man, achieve their "perfection" only when they are founded upon prudence, that is to say upon the perfected ability to make right decisions. Only by means of this perfected ability to make good choices are instinctive inclinations toward goodness exalted into the spiritual core of man's decisions, from which

## The First of the Cardinal Virtues

truly human acts arise. Prudence is needed if man is to carry through his impulses and instincts for right acting, if he is to purify his naturally good predispositions and make them into real virtue, that is, into the truly human mode of "perfected ability."<sup>9</sup>

Prudence is the "*mesure*" of justice, of fortitude, of temperance.<sup>10</sup> This means simply the following: as in the creative cognition of God all created things are pre-imagined and pre-formed; as, therefore, the immanent essences of all reality dwell in God as "ideas," as "preceding images" (to use the term of Meister Eckhart); and as man's perception of reality is a receptive transcript of the objective world of being; and as the artist's works are transcripts of a living prototype already within his creative cognition—so the decree of prudence is the prototype and the pre-existing form of which all ethically good action is the transcript. The precept of prudence is the "permanently exterior prototype" by which the good deed is what it is; a good action becomes just, brave, temperate only as the consequence of the prototypical decree of prudence. Creation is what it is by its correspondence with the "standard" of God's creative knowledge; human cognition is true by its correspondence with the "standard" of objective reality. The work of art is true and real by its correspondence with the pattern of its prototype in the mind of the artist. In similar fashion, the free activity of man is good by its correspondence with the pattern of prudence. What is prudent and what is good are substantially one and the same; they differ only in their place in the logical succession of realization. For whatever is good must first have been prudent.<sup>12</sup>

Prudence "*informs*" the other virtues; it confers upon them the form of their inner essence. This dictum expresses the same idea in different manner. The "immanent essential form" of goodness, however, is in its very essence formed after that prototype, patterned after that pre-form. And so prudence imprints the inward seal of goodness upon all free activity of

## PRUDENCE

man. Ethical virtue is the print and seal placed by prudence upon volition and action.<sup>13</sup> Prudence works in all the virtues,<sup>14</sup> and all virtue participates in prudence.<sup>15</sup>

All Ten Commandments of God pertain to the *executio prudentiae*,<sup>16</sup> the realization in practice of prudence. Here is a statement that has become virtually incomprehensible to people of today. And every sin is opposed to prudence. Injustice, cowardice, intemperance are in direct opposition to the virtues of justice, fortitude, and temperance; ultimately, however, through all these virtues, they run counter to prudence. Every one who sins is imprudent.<sup>17</sup>

Thus prudence is cause, root, mother, measure, precept, guide, and prototype of all ethical virtues; it acts in all of them, perfecting them to their true nature, all participate in it, and by virtue of this participation they are virtues.

The intrinsic goodness of man—and that is the same as saying his true humanness—consists in this, that “reason perfected in the cognition of truth” shall inwardly shape and imprint his volition and action.<sup>19</sup> In this fundamental principle of Thomas Aquinas is summed up the whole doctrine of prudence; in it the joint significance of all the ideas and figures of speech put forward heretofore becomes apparent, figures by which Thomas sets forth, step by step, the precedence of prudence.

The same idea is expressed in the liturgy of the Church in the following manner, in the words of prayer: *Deus, qui errantibus, ut in viam possint redire iustitiae, veritatis tuae lumen ostendis*—God, Thou showest the erring the light of Thy truth, that they may return to the way of justice.<sup>20</sup> Truth, then, is the prerequisite of justice. Whoever rejects truth, whether natural or supernatural, is really “wicked” and beyond conversion. And from the realm of “natural” philosophizing, the realm which the supernatural “presupposes and perfects,” we

## The First of the Cardinal Virtues

may call to mind Goethe's saying: “All laws and rules of conduct may ultimately be reduced to a single one: to truth.”<sup>21</sup>

We incline all too quickly to misunderstand Thomas Aquinas's words about “reason perfected in the cognition of truth.” “Reason” means to him nothing other than “regard for and openness to reality,” and “acceptance of reality.” And “truth” is to him nothing other than the unveiling and revelation of reality, of both natural and supernatural reality. Reason “perfected in the cognition of truth” is therefore the receptivity of the human spirit, to which the revelation of reality, both natural and supernatural reality, has given substance.

Certainly prudence is the standard of volition and action; but the standard of prudence, on the other hand, is the *ipsa res*,<sup>22</sup> the “thing itself,” the objective reality of being. And therefore the pre-eminence of prudence signifies first of all the direction of volition and action toward truth; but finally it signifies the directing of volition and action toward objective reality. The good is prudent beforehand; but that is prudent which is in keeping with reality.

## 2. Knowledge of Reality and the Realization of the Good

THE PRE-EMINENCE of prudence means that realization of the good presupposes knowledge of reality. He alone can do good who knows what things are like and what their situation is. The pre-eminence of prudence means that so-called "good intention" and so-called "meaning well" by no means suffice.<sup>1</sup> Realization of the good presupposes that our actions are appropriate to the real situation, that is to the concrete realities which form the "environment" of a concrete human action; and that we therefore take this concrete reality seriously, with clear-eyed objectivity.

The prudent decisions, which, when realized, shape our free action, are fed from two sources: "It is necessary for the prudent man to know both the universal principles of reason and the singulars with which ethical action is concerned."<sup>2</sup>

The universal principles of practical intellect are given man through *synderesis*.<sup>\*</sup> Thus these principles permeate all concrete decisions just as the highest principles of speculative reason permeate all specific judgments. In the dictates of natural conscience the most generalized cognition of the essence of the

\* That part of conscience which concerns the most general and fundamental naturally apprehended principles of ethical conduct, and which therefore may be designated as innate conscience, or natural conscience, or primary conscience.

### *Knowledge of Reality and the Realization of the Good*

good becomes an imperative. "That the good must be loved and made reality"—this sentence (with what follows directly from it) is the message given us by natural conscience. It expresses the common goals of all human action.<sup>3</sup>—The "infused" prudence of the Christian presupposes, moreover, the three theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity.<sup>4</sup> In these three the Christian becomes aware that participation in the life of the Trinitarian God is the supernal goal of Christian existence.

Prudence, however, is not concerned directly with the ultimate—natural and supernatural—ends of human life, but with the means to these ends.<sup>5</sup> The special nature of prudence is not the presence in the mind of "universal principles" (although it is necessary for those principles to be present if one is to make prudent decisions: *synderesis movet prudentiam*,<sup>6</sup> and although the theological virtues are an indispensable foundation to Christian prudence). The special nature of prudence is its concern with the realm of "ways and means" and down-to-earth realities.

The living unity, incidentally, of *synderesis* and prudence is nothing less than the thing we commonly call "conscience."

Prudence, or rather perfected practical reason which has developed into prudence, is distinct from "*synderesis*" in that it applies to specific situations. We may, if we will, call it the "situation conscience." Just as the understanding of principles is necessary to specific knowledge, so natural conscience is the prerequisite and the soil for the concrete decisions of the "situation conscience,"<sup>7</sup> and in these decisions natural conscience first comes to a definite realization.

It is well, therefore, to remember, as we consider the foregoing and the following comments, that the word "conscience" is intimately related to and well-nigh interchangeable with the word "prudence."<sup>8</sup>

As the "right disposition" of practical reason, prudence looks two ways, just as does practical reason itself. It is cogni-

tive and deciding. Perceptively it is turned toward reality, "imperatively" toward volition and action. But the cognitive aspect is prior and sets a standard; decision, which in its turn sets a standard for volition and action, receives, as something secondary and subordinate, its own standard from cognition. The decree of prudence is, as Thomas says, a "directing cognition"; prudent decision rests upon the revaluation of preceding true cognitions. (This primary and fundamental cognitive aspect of prudence is, incidentally, confirmed by the direct meaning of the Latin *conscientia*, which includes knowledge [scientia]; and as we have said, conscience and prudence mean, in a certain sense, the same thing.)

Prudence, however, is not only cognition, not only knowing what is what. The prime thing is that this knowledge of reality must be transformed into the prudent decision which takes effect directly in its execution. Prudence is immediately directed toward concrete realization; hence the difference between knowledge as viewed by moral science, including "casuistic" moral science, and knowledge as viewed by prudence. It is important not to mistake these two forms of ethical knowledge for one another. We shall return to this subject later.

The formal "mechanism" of that transformation of true knowledge into prudent decisions is a matter I have dealt with elsewhere.<sup>10</sup> The stages of the transformation are: deliberation, judgment, decision. In the receptive-perceptive attitude of deliberation and judgment is represented the cognitive character of prudence (*prudencia secundum quod est cognoscitiva*), while the last stage represents the imperative character (*secundum quod est praeceptiva*).<sup>11</sup>

The various modes of imperfection in that transformation of true cognitions into prudent decisions represent various types of imprudence.

### *Knowledge of Reality and the Realization of the Good*

For example, the person who plunges head over heels into decision and action, without proper consideration and without well-founded judgment, is being imprudent in the mode of thoughtlessness.<sup>12</sup> The phrase that comes to our minds in this connection is that of "energetic promptness," and we are not inclined to feel it as blameworthy. It is therefore well to remember that there are two ways of being "swift" and "slow": in deliberation and in action. Thomas says, as did the Greeks before him: In deliberation we may hesitate; but a considered act must be performed swiftly.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, Thomas considers the capacity for instantly grasping an unexpected situation, and deciding with extreme quick-wittedness, to be one of the components of perfect prudence. *Solertia*, clear-sighted objectivity in the face of the unexpected, is expressly listed in the *Summa Theologica* as one of the prerequisites without which prudence remains imperfect.<sup>15</sup>

A second mode of imprudence is irresoluteness.<sup>16</sup> It violates and ruptures at another, at the truly decisive point, the path of transformation of true knowledge into the "imperative" of prudence. It leads to deliberation and judgment tumbling uselessly into futility instead of pouring usefully into the finality of a decision. But the true "praise" of prudence lies in decision which is directed straight toward application in action.<sup>17</sup>

Co-ordinate with the two aspects of prudence (the one directed toward objective reality and the other toward realization of the good) is the double set of prerequisites to which the perfection of prudence is bound. We must now speak of these prerequisites, and shall turn first to those concerning "prudence as cognition."

"Prudence as cognition," as cognition of the concrete situation of concrete action, includes above all the ability to be still in order to attain objective perception of reality. There is in addition the patient effort of experience (*experimentum*),<sup>18</sup> which cannot be evaded or replaced by any arbitrary, short-

## PRUDENCE

circuiting resort to "faith"—let alone by the "philosophical" point of view which confines itself to seeing the general rather than the particular.

It is true that every Christian receives in baptism, along with the new life of friendship with God, a supernatural "infused" prudence. But, says Thomas, this prudence granted to every Christian is limited solely to what is necessary for his eternal salvation; there is, however, a different, "fuller" prudence, not immediately granted in baptism, which enables a man "to make provision for himself and for others, not only in matters necessary for salvation, but also in all relating to human life."<sup>19</sup> This is that prudence in which supernatural grace has united with the "prerequisite" of a naturally perfected ability. There is, in the *Summa Theologiae*, a sentence which is, incidentally, extremely comforting: "Those who need to be guided by the counsel of others, are able, if they have grace, to take counsel for themselves in this point at least, that they require the counsel of others and can distinguish good from evil counsel."<sup>20</sup> This is a statement which gives its due to the higher eminence of that "fuller" prudence. We must, however, guard against the misunderstanding that Thomas is speaking here of a pre-eminence of natural and "acquired" prudence over supernatural and "infused" prudence; rather, he means the pre-eminence of that "fuller" prudence in which the natural *and* the supernatural, the acquired *and* the given, are combined in a felicitous, in a literally "graced" unity.

The attitude of "silent" contemplation of reality: this is the key prerequisite for the perfection of prudence as cognition, which perfection in turn involves three elements, namely: *memoria, docilitas, solertia*.

*Memoria*—memory—here means more than the capacity for recollection which we have, so to speak, by nature. Nor has it anything to do with any "memo-technical" capacity nor to

## *Knowledge of Reality and the Realization of the Good*

forget. The good memory which enters into the perfection of prudence means nothing less than "true-to-being" memory.

For the virtue of prudence resides in this: that the objective cognition of reality shall determine action; that the truth of real things shall become determinative. This truth of real things, however, is contained in the true-to-being memory. The true-to-being character of memory means simply that it "contains" in itself real things and events as they really are and were. The falsification of recollection by the assent or negation of the will is memory's worst foe; for it most directly frustrates its primary function: to be a "container" of the truth of real things. (In terms of this meaning of memory St. Augustine's often misunderstood *analogia trinitatis* becomes a good deal plainer; to him memory is the spiritual proto-reality from which thought and volition take their origin; and thus it seems to him an image of God the Father, from whom the Word and the Holy Spirit proceed.)

Thomas adduces true-to-being memory as the first prerequisite for the perfection of prudence;<sup>21</sup> and indeed this factor is the most imperiled of all. Nowhere else is the danger so great as here, at the deepest root of the spiritual-ethical process, the danger that the truth of real things will be falsified by the assent or negation of the will. The peril is the greater for its being so imperceptible. There is no more insidious way for error to establish itself than by this falsification of the memory through slight retouches, displacements, discolorations, omissions, shifts of accent. Nor can such falsification be quickly detected by the probing conscience, even when it applies itself to this task. The honesty of the memory can be ensured only by a rectitude of the whole human being which purifies the most hidden roots of volition. Here it becomes apparent how greatly prudence, upon which all virtue depends, is in its turn dependent at its very fundamentals on the totality of the other virtues, and above all on the virtue of justice. We shall return



to the subject of this reciprocal dependence, for each side of the equation deserves analysis.

We see, then, that more is at stake here than "psychology"; it is, rather, the metaphysics of the ethical person that is involved.

It therefore becomes apparent that the classically Christian concept of the "virtue of prudence" is a far cry from the ordinary idea of it as knowledge of what to do in a given situation, a knowledge acquired without any great difficulty. The virtue of prudence, too, is a *bonum arduum*, a "steep good."

"No man is altogether self-sufficient in matters of prudence";<sup>23</sup> without *docilitas* there is no perfect prudence. *Docilitas*, however, is of course not the "docility" and the simple-minded zealotness of the "good pupil." Rather, what is meant is the kind of open-mindedness which recognizes the true variety of things and situations to be experienced and does not cage itself in any presumption of deceptive knowledge. What is meant is the ability to take advice, sprung not from any vague "modesty," but simply from the desire for real understanding (which, however, necessarily includes genuine humility). A closed mind and know-it-allness are fundamentally forms of resistance to the truth of real things; both reveal the incapacity of the subject to practice that silence which is the absolute prerequisite to all perception of reality.

*Solertia* is a "perfected ability," by virtue of which man, when confronted with a sudden event, does not close his eyes by reflex and then blindly, though perhaps boisterously, take random action. Rather, with the aid of *solertia* he can swiftly, but with open eyes and clear-sighted vision, decide for the good, avoiding the pitfalls of injustice, cowardice, and intemperance. Without this virtue of "objectivity in unexpected situations," perfect prudence is not possible.

### *Knowledge of Reality and the Realization of the Good*

In saying this, more is predicated than may be immediately apparent. Whoever has some understanding of the physico-spiritual structure of man knows to what extent physical and psychical health is necessary for the perfected ability of *solertia*, especially in that realm which is the site of neurosis, where it both originates and can be overcome. (And that realm—here we have one of the strange ambiguities of the human soul—in its depths, so removed from consciousness, is shaped and permeated by properly ethical decisions, that is, by freedom.) Here again, then, as in so many other things, we see the high and austere demands which the classical Christian doctrine of prudence makes upon physical alertness and health, and upon "trained" physico-spiritual energies.<sup>24</sup>

One marginal note: The "numbleness" in response to new situations, which is included in *solertia*, is in no way akin to fecklessness; not unless we were to regard a closed mind and resistance to the truth of real things, all of which are of ever-changing form, as tokens of high-mindedness. In saying this, however, we assume that this numbleness serves the *finis totius vitae*,<sup>25</sup> the genuine and immutable end of human life, and that these ever-changing forms are compatible with the truth of real things.<sup>26</sup>

Trueness-to-being of memory, open-mindedness, clear-sighted objectivity in unexpected circumstances: these are qualities of mind of the prudent man.

All three are focused upon what is "already" real, upon things past and present, things and situations which are "just so and no different," and which in their actuality bear the seal of a certain necessity.

The prudent man who issues imperatives, makes resolutions and decisions, however, fixes his attention precisely upon what has "not yet" been realized, what is still to be realized. The first prerequisite for the perfection of "prudence as imperative" is, therefore, *providentia*, foresight.<sup>27</sup> By this is

## PRUDENCE

meant the capacity to estimate, with a sure instinct for the future, whether a particular action will lead to the realization of the goal.

At this point the element of uncertainty and risk in every moral decision comes to light. In the decisions of prudence, which by the very nature of prudence are concerned with things concrete, contingent, and future (*singularia, contingencia, futura*), there cannot be that certainty which is possible in a theoretical conclusion. This is what the casuists fail to understand. But since prudence is after all an "intellectual virtue," shall we not also ascribe to its decisions "the certitude of truth" (*certitudo veritatis*)? To this suggestion Thomas Aquinas responds: "*non potest certitudo prudentiae tanta esse quod omnino sollicitudo tollatur*"—the certitude of prudence cannot be so great as completely to remove all anxiety.<sup>28</sup> A profound statement, this! Man, then, when he comes to a decision, cannot ever be sufficiently prescient nor can he wait until logic affords him absolute certainty. If he waited for that, he would never come to a decision; he would remain in a state of inconclusiveness, unless he chose to make shift with a deceptive certitude. The prudent man does not expect certainty where it cannot exist, nor on the other hand does he deceive himself by false certainties.<sup>29</sup>

The decisions of prudence and the "intuitions" of *providentia* (which, incidentally, Thomas considers to be the most important component of perfect prudence—he points out in fact that the name, *providentia*, stems from *providentia*)<sup>30</sup> nevertheless receive "practical" assurance and reinforcement from several sources: from the experience of life as it has been lived; from the alertness and healthiness of the instinctive capacity for evaluation; from the daring and humble hope that the paths to man's genuine goals cannot be closed to him; from rectitude of volition and of ultimate "intention"; from the grace of direct and mediated divine guidance.

## Knowledge of Reality and the Realization of the Good

There are two manners in which man can fail to meet the demands included in the virtue of prudence.

First of all, by an actual failure and lagging behind, by the nonfulfillment of the active prerequisites of prudence. Thoughtlessness and indecisiveness, of which we have already spoken, thus come under the heading of imprudence; so also do negligence and blindness to the concrete realities which surround our actions; likewise remissness in decision. There is one thing which is common to all these forms of prudence: something is "lacking." There is a *defectus*, an *absence* of a needed quality. There is a "lack" of proper consideration, of well-founded judgment, of vigorous final decisiveness. We are astonished, and yet to some extent we understand, when Thomas Aquinas discovers that these imprudences of "omission" have their origin in uncharity;<sup>31</sup> in that surrender to the goods of the sensual world which splits the power of decision in two.<sup>32</sup>

It is, on the other hand, astonishing, surprising as a flash of lightning, but also as illuminating, to observe the manner in which Thomas traces the second group of imprudences to a common origin. But let us first discuss this other mode of imprudence. It differs from that "lack" which is the common element of thoughtlessness, indecisiveness, and negligence in the way that a dishonest affirmation differs from negation, that an apparent similarity differs from simple oppositeness. It is the difference between faulty prudence and, so to speak, "plain" imprudence. In the *quaestio* in which he treats of the false prudences<sup>33</sup> Thomas speaks first of the "prudence of the flesh." Instead of serving the true end of all of human life,<sup>34</sup> this prudence is directed solely toward the goods of the body and is, according to the Epistle to the Romans (8, 6f.), "death" and "the enemy of God." But then he devotes several articles<sup>35</sup> to discussing "cunning."

Cunning (*astutia*) is the most characteristic form of false prudence. What is meant by this is the insidious and unobjec-

tive temperament of the intriguer who has regard only for "tactics," who can neither face things squarely nor act straightforwardly. In the letters of the Apostle Paul this idea of *astutia* occurs several times in a contrast which helps to clarify it, for it is opposed to "making the truth publicly known" (*manifestatio veritatis*, II Cor. 4, 2) and to the purity of unclouded "innocence" (*simplicitas*, II Cor. 11, 3). The same concept of *simplicitas* recurs in the legend of this book: "If thy eye is single, the whole of thy body will be lit up" (Matt. 6, 22).

There can be false and crooked ways leading even to right goals. The meaning of the virtue of prudence, however, is primarily this: that not only the end of human action but also the means for its realization shall be in keeping with the truth of real things. This in turn necessitates that the egocentric "interests" of man be silenced in order that he may perceive the truth of real things, and so that reality itself may guide him to the proper means for realizing his goal. On the other hand, the meaning, or rather the folly, of cunning consists in this: that the loquacious and therefore unhearing bias of the "tactician" (only he who is silent can hear) obstructs the path of realization, blocks it off from the truth of real things. "Nor should a good end be pursued by means that are false and counterfeit but by such as are true," says Thomas.<sup>36</sup> Here there comes to light the affinity of prudence and of the clear-eyed virtue of magnanimity. Insidiousness, guile, craft, and concupiscentia are the refuge of small-minded and small-souled persons. Of magnanimity, however, Thomas declares in the *Summa Theologiae*<sup>37</sup> and Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*<sup>38</sup> that it prefers in all things to act openly.

Astonishing, as we have said, and of a profundity scarcely to be plumbed, is the statement of Thomas Aquinas that all these false prudences and superprudences arise from covetousness and are by nature akin to it.<sup>39</sup>

### *Knowledge of Reality and the Realization of the Good*

This statement once again casts a dazzling new light upon the virtue of prudence itself and the fundamental human attitude operating within that virtue. It includes the unspoken axiom that prudence is specially opposed to covetousness. As though an explosive charge had opened a new path, there is suddenly revealed a connection between various trains of ideas which previously seemed to have no connection.

"Covetousness" here means more than the disorderly love of money and property. Covetousness here means (as Thomas says in a phrase of Gregory the Great's)<sup>40</sup> immoderate straining for all the possessions which man thinks are needed to assure his own importance and status (*ambitio, sublimitas*). Covetousness means an anxious senility,<sup>41</sup> desperate self-preservation, overriding concern for confirmation and security. Need we say how utterly contrary such an attitude is to the fundamental bent of prudence: how impossible the informed and receptive silence of the subject before the truth of real things, how impossible just estimate and decision is, without a youthful spirit of brave trust and, as it were, a reckless tossing away of anxious self-preservation, a relinquishment of all egoistic bias toward mere confirmation of the self; how utterly, therefore, the virtue of prudence is dependent upon the constant readiness to ignore the self, the limberness of real humility and objectivity?

Now at last we see how closely and directly prudence and justice are linked. "Now among all the moral virtues it is justice wherein the use of right reason"—that is, of prudence—appears chiefly. . . . Hence the undue use of reason appears chiefly in the vices opposed to justice, the chief of which is covetousness."<sup>42</sup> Whoever looks only at himself and therefore does not permit the truth of real things to have its way can be neither just nor brave nor temperate—but above all he cannot be just. For the foremost requirement for the realization of

## PRUDENCE

justice is that man turn his eyes away from himself. It is not by chance that in everyday talk the ideas of partiality and injustice come to almost the same thing.<sup>43</sup>

Prudence, then, is the mold and mother of all virtues, the circumspect and resolute shaping power of our minds which transforms knowledge of reality into realization of the good. It holds within itself the humility of silent, that is to say, of unbiased perception; the truthness-to-being of memory; the art of receiving counsel; alert, composed readiness for the unexpected. Prudence means the stridled seriousness and, as it were, the filter of deliberation, and at the same time the brave boldness to make final decisions. It means purity, straightforwardness, candor, and simplicity of character; it means standing superior to the utilitarian complexities of mere "tactics."

Prudence is, as Paul Claudel says,<sup>44</sup> the "intelligent prow" of our nature which steers through the multiplicity of the finite world toward perfection.

In the virtue of prudence the ring of the active life is rounded out and closed, is completed and perfected; for man, drawing on his experience of reality, acts in and upon reality, thus realizing himself in decision and in act. The profundity of this concept is expressed in the strange statement of Thomas Aquinas that in prudence, the commanding virtue of the "conductor" of life, the happiness of active life is essentially comprised.<sup>45</sup>

Prudence is that illumination of moral existence which, according to one of the wisest books of the East, is a thing denied to every man who "looks at himself."<sup>46</sup>

There is a gloomy type of resoluteness, and a bright type. Prudence is the brightness of the resoluteness of that man who "acts truth" (John 3, 21).

### 3. *Delimitations and Contrasts*

THE CLASSICAL Christian doctrine of the meaning and the rank of prudence is clearly opposed to all varieties of irrationalism and voluntarism. We need scarcely waste a word on this matter.

Man's free and responsible actions derive their form, if they are "right" and good, not from the darkness but from the light. "The first thing that is demanded of an active man is that he know."<sup>1</sup> But knowing implies that reality stands, bright and clear, in the human mind. "The good presupposes the true."<sup>2</sup> And truth is the contrary of all obscuring darkness; it means "to be manifest."<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, we read elsewhere: "The first act of the will is not due to the direction of reason, but to the instigation of nature or of a higher cause."<sup>4</sup> The bright realm of free human action, dominated by knowledge, is bordered on all sides by darkness, by the darkness of nature's part within ourselves and by the deeper, impenetrable darkness of the immediate divine governance of our volition and our actions. These two realms are dark only to us; in reality they are irradiated by the infinite brightness of divine knowledge and providence. Of this brightness the Holy Scriptures say that it is an "unapproachable light" (I Tim. 6, 15). And Aristotle declares that our reason compares to it "as the eye of night birds to the light of the day."<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, the truth is the good of our knowing mind,<sup>6</sup> upon which the mind fixes itself by nature;<sup>7</sup> it is not granted to the

mind to choose or not to choose that good (truth) on the basis, again, of knowledge. The finite mind does not comprehend itself so profoundly, and does not have such power over itself, that it follows only its own light. Nor does it stand in a superior manner above real things, like a general holding inspection. Rather, it is by nature driven and compelled to know the truth of real things. This drive, which it is beyond the power of reason to oppose, proceeds along a path encompassed by that dark light which always guides and hems the bright outline of our autonomous freedom.

Nevertheless, for this area of free activity the principle remains that: *Bonum hominis est "secundum rationem esse"*—The good of man consists in being in accord with reason.<sup>8</sup> Once more we must add what cannot be said too often: that here the word "reason" comprises all modes of perceiving reality, and that above all the "reason" of Christians perceives also the realities of faith.

There is a type of moral preaching closely akin to voluntarism, but held by many to be particularly "Christian," which interprets man's moral activity as the sum of isolated usages, practices of virtue and omissions. This misinterpretation has as its unfortunate result the separation of moral action from its roots in the cognition of reality and from the living existences of living human beings. The preachers of such "moralism" do not know or do not want to know—but more especially they keep others from knowing—that the good, which alone is in accord with the nature of man and of reality, shines forth only in prudence. Prudence alone, that is, accords with reality. Hence, we do not achieve the good by slavishly and literally following certain prescriptions which have been blindly and arbitrarily set forth. Such moralists would be utterly baffled by the following sentence of Thomas Aquinas: "If there were temperance in the sensual appetite and there were not prudence in the reason, then the temperance would not be a

virtue";<sup>9</sup> or the similar assertion of Gregory the Great: "If the other virtues did not accomplish their ends with prudence, they can in no wise be virtues."<sup>10</sup> Now prudence means, as we have already stated many times, nothing less than the directing cognition of reality. Out of this cognition good acts are "born";<sup>11</sup> otherwise they are not born at all. The decisions of prudence embody the duties enforced on us by things as they are; in these decisions true cognition of reality is perfected for the purpose of realizing the good.

Man's good actions take place in confrontation with reality. The goodness of concrete human action rests upon the transformation of the truth of real things; of the truth which must be won and perceived by regarding the *ipsa res*,<sup>12</sup> reality itself.

Now, the realities which surround man's concrete activity are of an almost infinite variety, *quasi infinitae diversitatis*.<sup>13</sup> And above all man himself—in this distinguishing himself from animals—is "a being of manifold and diverse activities; precisely by virtue of its rank in the order of being is the soul of man directed toward infinite variety."<sup>14</sup>

Since this is so, "the good of man changes in multifold fashion, according to the various conditions of men and the times and places, and similar factors."<sup>15</sup> However, the goals of human action do not change, nor do man's basic directions. For every "condition" of man, at all times and places, he is under obligation to be just and brave and temperate.

Yet the specific ways of accomplishing this unchanging obligation may take a thousand different forms. Of justice, of fortitude, and of temperance this is true: "Each of these is accomplished in various ways, and not in the same way for all."<sup>16</sup> In the *Summa Theologica* we read: "But the means to the end, in human concerns, far from being fixed, are of manifold variety according to the variety of persons and affairs."<sup>17</sup>

It must, however, be noted that Thomas, speaking of the performance of man's proper duties to be just (in which category

falls his obedience to the laws of Church and State), remarks that these in particular are most independent of changes in situations and are therefore most likely to be fixed once and for all.<sup>18</sup>

Out of the very human desire to secure and comprehend, to determine, limit, and fix precisely, there arose almost of necessity man's efforts to "order" the limitless variety of modes for achieving the good, to render it surveyable by the longitudes and latitudes of abstract rational measurement. One result of this effort is casuistry, which is the branch—and often the main trunk—of ethics which has as its aim the construction, analysis, and evaluation of individual "cases."

It is all too easy to favor a certain vagueness and recklessness in concrete ethical decisions and to smile in one's sleeve at casuistry—especially if one has never been confronted with the necessity of judging the concrete ethical actions of actual human beings from a judgment seat, as it were. (It is no accident that casuistry derives from the practice of law, nor that it was originally meant as an aid for confessors.)

Nevertheless, casuistry presents its own kind of peril, owing to that persistent human desire to achieve security. The difficulty is not that no ultimate fulfillment can bless this earthly state of ours, since it is a state of being-on-the-way. It is rather that the striving for certainty and security can gravitate, by virtue of its own direction and its natural inclination, into the degenerate, anti-natural state of nonhuman rigidity. Indeed, this danger is all the greater the more powerfully the desire for certainty is concerned with the decision-making center of the spiritual person.

Casuistry falls into this trap the very moment it claims to be more than a (probably indispensable) makeshift, an aid for sharpening judgment, a technique for temporary approximation, and more than the manipulation of a lifeless model. Any-

### *Delimitations and Contrasts*

one who mistook the artificial coloring of this model for the flesh and blood of reality itself would deceive himself far more, and far more dangerously, than would a young doctor, say, who thought the models and mechanisms of his classroom represented absolute standards for the diagnosis and treatment of real diseases.

Casuistry, then, must be regarded as no more than a highly useful, and probably necessary, aid; certainly not as an absolute standard for making ethical judgments and performing concrete ethical actions. To confound model and reality, to put too great a valuation on casuistry, is equivalent to misunderstanding the meaning and rank of the virtue of prudence. It is again no coincidence that casuistry has usurped a greater and greater place in moral theology the more that the classical Christian doctrine of prudence has been thrust into the background and has fallen into oblivion. The complexion of a number of popular textbooks on moral theology, written during the (very slowly vanishing) nineteenth century, makes the state of affairs abundantly clear: that along with the doctrine of the virtues in general, comprehension of the nature and supremacy of the first cardinal virtue had been lost. Yet this very understanding was central to the ethics of Thomas Aquinas, and kept it free of that embarrassing, excitable, omniscient, and all-intruding pedantry, that constant proliferation of warnings and interdictions. The doctrine of the pre-eminence of prudence lays the ground for the manly and noble attitude of restraint, freedom, and affirmation which marks the moral theology of the "universal teacher" of the Church.

The immediate criterion for concrete ethical action is solely the imperative of prudence in the person who has the decision to make. This standard cannot be abstractly construed or even calculated in advance; abstractly here means: outside the particular situation. The imperative of prudence is always and in essence a decision regarding an action to be performed in the

"here and now." By their very nature such decisions can be made only by the person confronted with decision. No one can be deputized to make them. No one else can make them in his stead. Similarly, no one can be deputized to take the responsibility which is the inseparable companion of decision. No one else can assume this burden. The strict specificity of ethical action is perceptible only to the living experience of the person required to decide. He alone has access to the totality of *singularia circa quae sunt operationes*,<sup>20</sup> that is to say, to the totality of concrete realities which surround the concrete action, to the "state" of the person himself and the condition of the here and the now.<sup>21</sup>

The statements of moral theology, including those of casuistry, necessarily remain general. They can never take hold of a real and whole "here and now" for the reason that only the person really engaged in decision experiences (or at least *can* experience) the concrete situation with its need for concrete action. He alone. This is not to deny that casuistic reasoning can more or less approach the real situation in which decision is called for. It will come all the closer, the more it deals with the attainment of *justice*. Nevertheless, real concreteness remains accessible only to immediate, the most immediate, experience. Thus all the knowledge of casuists, and the knowledge of moral theology in general, by no means suffice to guarantee the goodness of a concrete action. No matter how much moral theology "goes into details," such wisdom alone does not make a man "prudent" in the sense of the first cardinal virtue. And any moral theology becomes truer and more genuine, and above all more capable of dealing with life, the more it expressly renounces such a claim. The guarantee of the goodness of concrete human action is given solely by the virtue of prudence. It is exclusively the business of prudence "to form a right judgment concerning individual acts, exactly as they are to be done here and now."<sup>22</sup>

### *Delimitations and Contrasts*

There is no way of grasping the concreteness of a man's ethical decisions from outside. But no, there is a certain way, a single way: that is through the love of friendship. A friend, and a *prudent* friend, can help to shape a friend's decision. He does so by virtue of that love which makes the friend's problem his own, the friend's ego his own (so that after all it is not entirely "from outside"). For by virtue of that oneness which love can establish he is able to visualize the concrete situation calling for decision, visualize it from, as it were, the actual center of responsibility. Therefore it is possible for a friend—only for a friend and only for a *prudent* friend—to help with counsel and direction to shape a friend's decision or, somewhat in the manner of a judge, help to reshape it.

Such genuine and prudent loving friendship (*amor amicitiae*)—which has nothing in common with sentimental intimacy, and indeed is rather imperiled by such intimacy—is the *sine qua non* for genuine spiritual guidance. For only this empowers another to offer the kind of direction which—almost—conforms to the concrete situation in which the decision must be made.

Human activity has two basic forms: doing (*agere*) and making (*facere*). Artifacts, technical and artistic, are the "works" of making. We ourselves are the "works" of doing.

And prudence is the perfection of the ability to do, whereas "art" (in St. Thomas's sense)<sup>23</sup> is perfection of the ability to make. "Art" is the "right reason" of making (*recta ratio fabricatum*); prudence is the "right reason" of doing (*recto ratio agibilem*).

The exaggerated importance given to casuistry stems in large part from disregard of this distinction between prudence and the technique of "art," the distinction between doing and making, between deeds and works.

The ethical deeds of man are not more or less fixed manual techniques, whose end is the shaping of some work, but steps

toward self-realization. The human self, which grows toward perfection by accomplishing the good, is a "work" that surpasses all preconceived blueprints based upon man's own calculations. Ethical growth takes place in the course of our replies, appropriate to each given case, to the reality outside us which is not made by ourselves. The essence of that reality is the ever-changing diversity of growth and decay, not permanent being (only God is who He is). This reply appropriate to each given case can be given only by the virtue of prudence. There is no "technique" of the good, no "technique" of perfection. "Casuistry, on the contrary, carried to excess, substitutes techniques and prescriptions for the infinite suppleness which the virtue of prudence must retain in the face of the complexities of the ethical life,"<sup>24</sup> as we read in a French commentary to the *Summa Theologica*.

The man who does good follows the lines of an architectural plan which has not been conceived by himself and which he does not understand as a whole, nor in all of its parts. This architectural plan is revealed to man from moment to moment. In each case he sees only a tiny segment of it, as through a narrow crack. Never, so long as he is in the state of "being-on-the-way," will the concrete architectural plan of his own self become visible to him in its rounded and final shape.

Paul Claudel defines conscience—which, as we have said, is in a certain sense equivalent to prudence itself—as "the patient beacon which does not delineate the future, but only the immediate."<sup>25</sup>

A moral theology which relies too much upon casuistry necessarily becomes a "science of sins" instead of a doctrine of virtues, or a theory of the Christian idea of man.<sup>26</sup> It soon becomes reduced to an endless determining of the boundary beyond which sins are "mortal" and this side of which sins are "venial." If such a casuistic doctrine of sin is combined with the moralism of isolated "observances" and "abstentions"—and

### *Definitions and Contrasts*

it is indeed akin to this moralism—there arises that phenomenon (which was, after all, not completely invented by Nietzsche) of a rather vindictive and insubstantial nay-saying which serves at best to prey upon the consciences of the immature, but is of no use as a standard for real life.

A merely casuistic moral theology assumes the immaturity of human beings. Moreover, it intensifies and perpetuates this immaturity. "Once we have arrived at casuistry, the next consequence is that decisions in questions of conscience are lifted from the conscience of the individual and transferred to the authority of the experts" (Linsenmann).<sup>27</sup>

The virtue of prudence, on the contrary—being the perfected ability to make decisions in accordance with reality—is the quintessence of ethical maturity (of which, of course, reachability is a great component). And the pre-eminence of prudence over justice, fortitude, and temperance means simply that without maturity truly moral life and action is not possible.

If, then, prudence is truly the mold and mother of all moral virtue, then it is likewise true that it is impossible to educate a person to justice, fortitude, and temperance without first and simultaneously educating him to prudence. And education to prudence means: to objective estimation of the concrete situation of concrete activity, and to the ability to transform this cognition of reality into concrete decision.

The classical Christian doctrine of the pre-eminence of the virtue of prudence is essentially opposed to all falsifying, moralistic, or casuistic regimentation of the person who is called upon to make decisions.

The first of the cardinal virtues is not only the quintessence of ethical maturity, but in so being is also the quintessence of moral freedom.



roads to that goal and the suitable outlet in the here and now for those fundamental inclinations.

To know the ultimate goals of one's own life is not and cannot be the fruit of an ability still to be acquired and perfected in this very "life." The goals are present. No one is ignorant of the fact that he must love the good and accomplish it. Everyone knows—expressly or not—that the good most characteristic of the nature of man is "to be according to reason"<sup>3</sup>—that is, to be according to the reality which man himself is and which surrounds him. And there is no one who needs to be told that he ought to be just and brave and temperate. This is self-evident, and calls for no deliberation. The reflections and the conclusions of prudence are directed solely toward the actual realization of justice, fortitude, and temperance.

This concrete realization, however, could not do justice to reality, and above all could not be satisfactorily consummated, if conscious affirmation of the goal of man did not precede the efforts of prudence. That is to say, there must precede the affirmation of justice, fortitude, and temperance as the fundamental inclinations of man toward the accomplishment of the "good characteristic of his nature," of "being according to reason." Without desire for the good in general, all efforts to discover what is prudent and good here and now remain empty bustle and self-deception. The virtue of prudence presumes real seeking of the goal of man, the *intentio finis*.<sup>4</sup> It therefore not only presupposes the voice of the natural conscience ("synderesis"), as we have said several times, but also the response of the will to this imperative pronouncement: primal affirmation of the good as the aim of all of one's actions. This primal affirmation, however, is nothing less than the fundamental attitude of the just, brave, and temperate man—that is to say, of the good man.<sup>5</sup>

Moral virtue, in so far as it signifies that basic attitude of voluntary affirmation of the good, is the fundamental and pre-

---

#### 4. Prudence and Charity

---

"NO MORAL VIRTUE is possible without prudence."<sup>1</sup> But in contrast to this we read: "Without the moral virtues there is no prudence."<sup>2</sup> Both these sentences are to be found in Thomas Aquinas's treatises on prudence. Only the prudent man, then, can be just, brave, and temperate; yet he who is not already just, brave, and temperate cannot be prudent.

How can the first sentence be compatible with the second, which seems to run counter to it?

A vague reply that both are simultaneously possible is not uncommon, but is no more satisfactory than the other explanation we hear frequently: that these sentences are meant to convey the idea that the ethical life is "organic" and constitutes a closed circulatory system. Such exegesis wrongs the clarity of outline and the precision which is peculiar to the thinking of the "universal teacher." Either prudence gives rise to the moral virtues, or these virtues engender prudence; both statements cannot be true and real in one and the same sense. When the snake curls itself into a ring, it is always the head that bites the tail, not vice versa. Thus the "both are simultaneously possible" and the "closed circulatory system" are fundamentally non-sense, mere subterfuges for thinking that lacks decisiveness and exactitude.

It is not the purpose or the business of the virtue of prudence to discover the goals, or rather the goal, of life, and to determine the fundamental inclinations of the human being. Rather, the purpose of prudence is to determine the proper

## PRUDENCE

condition of prudence. But prudence in turn is the prerequisite for the appropriate realization in the here and now of that same basic attitude; the prerequisite for its effectuality. Only one who previously and simultaneously *loves* and *wants* the good can be prudent; but only one who is previously prudent can *do* good. Since, however, love of the good in its turn grows by doing good, the foundations of prudence are sunk deeper and firmer to the extent that prudence bears fruit in action.

(The original desire for the good takes its energy from the ever-pulsating momentum of that Origin in which man, answering the creative call of God, flew across the abyss which parts nothingness from existence. It is the moment with which the possible bursts with a roar into the radiant dawn of its first realization: the swift current of a stream that originating in the bright darkness of mere Nature and steadily fed by its source, crosses by the dictates of innate conscience into the realm of freedom.)

In concrete moral action cognition and will are interwoven into oneness. Both strands have their beginnings far beyond the narrow realm of self-understanding. And the "pattern" as well as the rule which governs their weaving into a fabric very soon passes beyond the range of man's vision.<sup>6</sup> Yet this may be said: that the contribution which cognition and decision bring to the concrete moral act is quite different in nature from the contribution of the will. The realization of the good presumes both voluntary affirmation of the good and the decisions of prudence; but both have an entirely different relationship to the concrete good activity of man. Prudent decision is the "measure" of a concrete moral act. That is to say, the act receives from prudent decision its content, its nature, its essence, its inner truth and rightness. On the other hand, man's concrete moral actions receive their existence, their being,

## Prudence and Charity

their real goodness, from the will's power of realization. "Making existent" is the special and the only function of volition.

This again casts light on the statement that prudence is dependent upon volitional affirmation of the good as man's goal. This is not to say that the *content* of a prudent decision is directly determined or determinable by volition and derives its substance from the will. The content of prudent decision is, rather, determined by the *ipsa res*, by reality, which is the "measure" of all cognition and decision. Desiring the good does not make a decision prudent; but real understanding and proper evaluation of the concrete situation of the concrete act does. Not voluntary affirmation of the goal, not the *intention finis*, is the "measure" of a prudent decision. But, on the other hand, the volitional affirmation of the good "makes existent" the prudent decision, so that this decision, effectively, may obtain its contentual rightness from true cognition of reality. The will can never determine, never produce, the contentual truth of cognition and decision, and therefore can never determine or produce the quality of good action. (And on the other hand, no cognition, no matter how true, and no decision, no matter how prudent, will by itself suffice for the actual achievement of the good.)<sup>7</sup> But the authenticity of the desire for the goal clears the way for truth, so that truth can imprint upon will and action the seal of justness to the nature of things. An unjust will, on the other hand, prevents the truth of real things from determining the actions of man. There are depths of meaning not easily grasped in the sentence in the Epistle to the Romans that truth is held captive in the fetters of injustice (Rom. 1, 18).<sup>8</sup>

"Human acts are good in that they correspond to the right standard of human action. Now there is a right standard proper to the human species and peculiar to man's nature, namely right reason; and there is another, supreme and surpass-

## PRUDENCE

ing standard, which is God. Man attains right reason in prudence, which is right reason in the realm of action. But man attains God in charity."<sup>9</sup>

"Prudence is called the form of all the moral virtues. But the act of virtue thus established in the mean is, as it were, material in regard to the ordination to the last end. This order is conferred upon the act of virtue by the command of charity. In this sense charity is said to be the form of all the other virtues."<sup>10</sup>

It is, alas, only too easy for the superficial reader to float along on the unruffled surface of these statements of Thomas Aquinas, which seem transparent to the very bottom, and take no account of the depths over which their serene clarity lies.

Very often the proposition about nature presupposed and perfected by grace is cited as a self-evident "explanation." But the fact is that this expresses an almost impenetrable mystery. Moreover, the dictum primarily concerns the domain of generalities and essences, not that of immediate and concrete existence. More exactly, the accord of the natural order with the new life of friendship with God must not be construed in the sense that it is immediately "given" or realizable in smooth and "harmonious" development. We do, to be sure, incline to think in terms of such harmonies from long habit. But the writings of the great friends of God make plain, on almost every page, that the actual life of the Christian is ruled by a different kind of structural law; that life on earth, which has "not yet" attained the peace of concord, the concrete combination of the natural and the supernatural, is subjected to all sorts of liabilities to contradiction and disharmony.

Yet it is not true that the greatest liabilities of such a discord lie in the *lowest* realm of the natural life—in, say, the resistance of the sensual natural will to supernatural duty. Rather, the peril is most present in the confrontation of the *highest*

## Prudence and Charity

natural virtue and the highest theological virtue, that is to say, in the connection of natural prudence and supernatural charity. It is not the "sinners" but the "prudent ones" who are most liable to close themselves off from the new life which has been given by grace, and to oppose it. Typically, natural prudence courts this danger by tending to restrict the realm of determinative factors of our actions to naturally experienceable realities. Christian prudence, however, means precisely the throwing open of this realm and (in faith informed by love) the inclusion of new and invisible realities within the determinants of our decisions.

It need scarcely be said that, on the other hand, the highest and most fruitful achievements of Christian life depend upon the felicitous collaboration of prudence and charity.

This collaboration is linked to the pre-eminence of charity over prudence: Prudence is the mold of the moral virtues; but charity molds even prudence itself.<sup>11</sup> How this molding of prudence by charity takes place in practice can scarcely be stated, for charity, being participation by grace in the life of the Trinitarian God, is in essence a gift ultimately beyond the power of man's will or reason to bestow. It is an event un-fathomable in any natural way, which takes place when the three theological virtues are "infused" into our being. This, however, is certain: that all our works and being are elevated by charity to a plane which is otherwise unattainable and utterly inaccessible. For that reason, too, supernatural divine love which molds the decisions of the Christian indubitably means something far more than and far different from a mere additional "higher motivation" in the psychological sense. The divine love conferred by grace shapes from the ground up and throughout the innermost core of the most commonplace moral action of a Christian, even though that action may be "outwardly" without special distinguishing characteristics. It

does so, however, in a manner that lies outside the range of ordinary psychological experience-possibilities.

In proportion to the growth of the theological virtue of love there unfolds in the man who has received grace the sevenfold gift of the Holy Spirit; in the same proportion human prudence receives, more tangibly and more audibly, the aid of the "gift of counsel," *donum consilii*. "The gift of counsel corresponds to prudence, helping and perfecting it."<sup>12</sup> "The human mind, from the very fact that it is directed by the Holy Spirit, is enabled to direct itself and others."<sup>13</sup>

But: "In the gift of the Holy Spirit, the position of the human mind is of one moved rather than of a mover."<sup>14</sup> And therefore here, too, there can be no question of how and how much. It would, after all, be absurd arrogance to attempt to discover the "rules" by which the Holy Spirit of God permeates man's reflections and decisions. We can at most say that the quasi-infinite variety of choices which operate in the realm of natural prudence and make any general and abstract predetermination possible, must be multiplied by an utterly new infinity in the supernatural order. This emerges clearly when we recall how incomparable and unique the life of every single saint is. Here, then, is the truest applicability of the dictum of Augustine: "Have love, and do what you will."

In the *Summa Theologiae* we learn that upon a higher plane of perfection, that is the plane of charity, there is also a higher and extraordinary prudence which holds as nought all the things of this world.<sup>15</sup>

Does this not run completely counter to all that the "universal teacher" has said elsewhere about the nature of the first cardinal virtue? Is holding created things as nought not the exact opposite of that reverent objectivity which in the concrete situation of concrete action must attempt to recognize the "measure" of that action?

Things are nought only before God, who created them and in whose hand they are as clay in the hand of the potter. By the superhuman force of grace-given love, however, man may become one with God to such an extent that he receives, so to speak, the capacity and the right to see created things from God's point of view and to "relativize" them and see them as nought from God's point of view, *without* at the same time repudiating them or doing injustice to their nature. Growth in love is the legitimate avenue and the one and only justification for "contempt for the world."

Unlike this contempt which arises out of growth in love, all contempt for the world which springs from man's own judgment and opinions, not from the supernatural love of God, is simple arrogance, hostile to the nature of being; it is a form of pride in that it refuses to recognize the ordinary obligations which are made visible to man in created things. Only that closer union with the being of God which is nourished by love raises the blessed man beyond immediate involvement in created things.

At this point in our argument we approach a limit. Beyond that limit only the experience of the saints can offer any valid knowledge, any valid comment. We would only remind our readers how intensely the great saints loved the ordinary and commonplace, and how anxious they were lest they might have been deceived into regarding their own hidden craving for the "extraordinary" as a "counsel" of the Holy Spirit of God.

But even in that higher and extraordinary form of prudence which holds the world in contempt, there reigns unrestrictedly the same fundamental attitude upon which ordinary prudence entirely depends: the fundamental attitude of justice toward the being of things and correspondence to reality.

The eye of perfected friendship with God is aware of deeper dimensions of reality, to which the eyes of the average

## PRUDENCE

man and the average Christian are not yet opened. To those who have this greater love of God the truth of real things is revealed more plainly and more brilliantly; above all the supernatural reality of the Trinitarian God is made known to them more movingly and overwhelmingly.

Even supreme supernatural prudence, however, can have only the following aim: to make the more deeply felt truth of the reality of God and world the measure for will and action. Man can have no other standard and signpost than things as they are and the truth which makes manifest things as they are; and there can be no higher standard than the God who is and His truth.

And of the man who "acts truth" the Holy Scriptures (John 3, 21) tell us that he "comes to the light."

---

## JUSTICE

---

*"Justice is destroyed in twofold fashion:  
by the false prudence of the sage and by the  
violent act of the man who possesses power."*  
ST. THOMAS, *On the Book of Job* [8, 1].

# *The Four Cardinal Virtues*

PRUDENCE

JUSTICE

FORTITUDE

TEMPERANCE

---

---

**JOSEF PLEPPER**

*Edition with Notes*

UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME PRESS