

An Investigation into Thomas Aquinas' Theory of Practical Wisdom (*prudentia*)¹

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In Thomas Aquinas' theory of virtue, which makes the main body of his moral theory, "*prudentia*", the intellectual virtue that perfects our reasoning about action, has a very important role.

First, this is not just because it is a perfection of the intellectual nature of man, but because of its practical character that the other intellectual virtues do not share. It does not mean only that "*prudentia*" considers our action. The character of reasoning differs very much. According to Thomas, it is not the main act of the practical reasoning to deliberate and to judge what should be done, but to bring the judgment into action.

Second, when "*prudentia*" chooses an act to attain some end that is desired, it does not only consider or determine by what means the end is attained. It is not just motivated by desire and finds out what satisfies the desire. It rather ordains or regulates our desire by choosing what truly satisfies the desire. Thus it is the cause of all the other moral virtues concerning our desire or affection and the most necessary virtue for us to be good and to do good.

How do we act right? What do we need for that purpose? Does something in us prompt us to do so? Thomas Aquinas gives an answer: namely, "*prudentia*"² is the most necessary virtue for us to lead a good life.³ *Prudentia* is one of the cardinal virtues of Greek origin (the others are temperance, courage and justice), the only intellectual virtue among them, which perfects our reasoning about action. It means to Thomas more: it is "the cause"⁴ of all the other virtues. His theory of virtue, which

makes the main body of the moral part of *Summa Theologiae*,⁵ is so centered on *prudentia* that one might perceive it as a sign of so-called intellectualism. The point is, however, not whether a kind of intellectual virtue is given a leading role in human life, but what kind it is that takes the role, or how it fulfills this role. In this rather limited investigation, I want to show that Thomas' account of *prudentia* is not in the least an intellectualist one, but even to the contrary.

1. The Uniqueness of *prudentia* as an Intellectual Virtue

Medieval thinkers, in accordance with the Greeks, see knowledge as something in us that enables us to recognize truth, rather than the thing that is known. Then Thomas, following Aristotle in his general argument on virtues, admits that knowledge is also a virtue in a sense, since a virtue is, in his definition, a good "*habitus*", i.e., a disposition of a faculty of the human soul that renders our activity good (a vice is that which renders it bad), and as far as recognition of truth is a good act of our intellect.

However, Thomas goes on, knowledge is not a virtue in its full sense. The point is that knowledge only *enables* us to recognize truth, but does not necessarily *actuate* us to do so. Knowledge is no more than a condition of the possibility of recognition of truth considered as a kind of "*actus*" (*energeia*), that is, an actualization of human intellectual faculty, but it is not the sufficient cause of its actuality. Now a virtue must be, he insists, something that brings forth good activity, which means, actually ("in actu"), since by "good" we mean something actually good ("bonum in actu") and by a good person someone actually good.⁶

Moral virtues ("*virtutes morales*") are complete virtues in this sense. Justice, for example, when considered as our inner disposition, is not just our being able or prompt to behave in the proper way, but a infallible cause for us to act: a just person always behaves according to justice and never does something unjust. On the other hand, grammatical knowledge, for example, provides us with the ability to make correct

use of language, but, unlike justice, it does not necessarily lead to its actual use, since someone with this knowledge *can* intentionally make incorrect usage, as when a teacher or an actor uses some barbarism for educational or theatrical purposes.

This distinction that Thomas draws between the two types of virtue is similar to Aristotle's distinction between technē (art, skill) and virtue.⁷ However, he refuses more radically to identify knowledge with virtue, by attributing the character that Aristotle gives to technē to every theoretical kind of knowledge (scientia, intellectus and sapientia) and denies all of them the full character of virtue: they are imperfect virtues. Still, he claims that prudentia is, though intellectual, no less complete a virtue than moral ones, and this calls for the highest attention.

One may miss such a distinction when one takes up recognition of truth as such, and asks for the conditions of its possibility, as those with epistemological interest would do. Then they would ignore the difference between knowledge, i.e., the condition of possibility of recognition, and actual recognition, as if they assumed (in most cases they do, unaware of it or expressly) that something possible is actually done without difficulty. This is why Thomas' example of someone with grammatical knowledge making incorrect usage sounds strange to modern ears. They would consider intentional mistakes as irrelevant to the knowledge itself taken absolutely and, therefore, never put it into consideration. Such an assumed irrelevance does, however, matter to Thomas' eye.

One may insist, appealing to some passages of his text, that Thomas perceives intellectual virtues as superior to moral ones, and that "sapientia" (theoretical wisdom) excels prudentia.⁸ In the first case, however, his concern is rather limited to the consideration of virtues from some fundamental, say ontological, viewpoint, in which virtues are measured by their objects, and which does not make the chief perspective of the moral consideration as Thomas takes it. When considered from the moral point of view, that is, with respect to how they contribute to our life, moral virtues are superior in so far as they are fully causative of good

acts that constitute our human life.

Similarly, we should discount the supremacy of *sapientia*, characterized as participation of the eternal vision of God (“*visio Dei*”), the very happiness in heaven. This is because the activity coming from the virtue, i.e., contemplation of the highest truth, is similar to the beatific vision, in that it has no other aim than itself, while the practical reasoning of *prudentia* has another end than itself, that is, to act. As a way to the ultimate end of eternal happiness, however, *prudentia* is said to be closer to happiness. Thomas admits that *sapientia* has something similar to happiness, but he denies that *sapientia* directly leads to it. It is worth noting that he thinks highly of *prudentia*, when he denies that the course of the perfection of our life is purely intellectual.

We can so far conclude that Thomas does not characterize *prudentia* as a complete virtue because of something it shares with other intellectual virtues, but of something unique, which the others do not have. Then what is it that distinguishes it from the others? Briefly speaking, it is the strong practical character it has, which it obtains from practical reason.

What Thomas thinks as the practical character of reason is not only that what it considers, the object, is “*contingentia agibilia*”, something accidental that can be done. He insists that practical reason does not only consider such objects and then form judgments, but also employs these judgments to evoke action (“*imperare*”, “*praecipere*”: to command), and this is the chief act of practical reason. Here, to command is more than to judge what should be done. In arguing about command,⁹ Thomas distinguishes judgment on something to be done from command, which brings it into action.¹⁰ What enables practical reason to perform this act is the power that it inherits from the will, which is the first principle of realization of human action. Then it would be proper to define *prudentia*, which perfects practical reasoning, as something that prompts us to command well, rather than something that perfects judgment.

A merit of Thomas’ account of practical reasoning or knowledge is,

thus, that he singles out command from the act of practical reason or prudentia, as something more than deliberation and judgment. His fundamental concern is to see how an action is actually brought about, and from this viewpoint practical reasoning is perceived as provided with a strong inclination to action.

As a result, Thomas parts with the Aristotelian view on practical knowledge, or at least changes its emphasis, and pays more attention to the question how a practical judgment is employed and an act is brought about, than to how the judgment is made by way of deliberation.

Therefore, if one takes too rigidly the analogy between practical and theoretical judgment which Thomas has taken over from Aristotle, and concludes that he does not admit any other difference in the two types of judgment than that of the kinds of their objects, then one will miss the point of his argument (This is clear, in my opinion, though it might be disputable in the case of Aristotle.¹¹). Not only is prudentia, like other intellectual virtues, a principle of true judgment, but also it employs the judgment to act, and this gives it the full quality of a virtue.

Here, we may speak of the uniqueness of Thomas' view on practical knowledge. From his standpoint, in the scope of the theory of virtue, knowledge is examined by its contribution to our actual life, to our action. It is also from this perspective that he chooses and divides prudentia from the other intellectual virtues and characterizes as a complete virtue, even to count it among moral virtues.¹² It is because prudentia alone, among intellectual virtues, can do an indispensable part in our life, and not simply because it is an intellectual perfection of human beings. One cannot rightly call this kind of viewpoint an intellectualist one. It rather puts out the range of moral consideration merely theoretical or speculative knowledge, say knowledge unrelated to our life, and shows up the kind of knowledge that can be the full ground of our action. Then, how it can be so will be the next question.

2. The Role of prudentia in Human Life

Before examining how prudentia works in our life, I shall shortly summarize the argument of Thomas about human life. What he takes as his starting point is that human beings are not only to live, but “to live well”, which means to live in the right way and to live happily at the same time, as most ancient philosophers think. The main idea is that to do well (“bene agere”), in which it consists to live well, is not the same as to do good (“bonum facere”). To live well is more than to do what is good in itself, whether naturally or socially. Vital is not only what is done (“quod facit”), but also how it is done (“quomodo facit”), that is, from what kind of principle the action comes about.¹³ For, unless something good in itself really comes from some inner disposition of the one who does it, it does not have any relation to *his* or *her* living well.

Then, the condition of someone doing well is the same as the condition of an act that is rightly said to originate in the one who does it. Aristotle determines this condition as being done by choice (proairesis), and Thomas follows him in this point. Someone is said to do well only when he does good by a good choice, not by passion or irrational instinct.

Virtue, which is the principle of good action, must be something that makes us to choose well. To choose well, we need to have some proper end and to choose something proper to attain that end. Thomas understands this structure of choice, i.e., “choice is to choose something for something,” which Aristotle has clarified in his ethics, as showing the mechanism of human action: namely, in a particular situation where a particular end (we would say, “motive”) turns up, we choose an act as something that achieves that end. Also here, as in the case of the command of practical reason, we must distinguish choice from purely cognitive judgment of reason. Here I cannot go into the details of Thomas’ argument on choice, but, in brief, his point is that choice consists essentially not in the ordination (“ordinatio”) of reason, but in the movement of the will according to the ordination.¹⁴

The particular end turns up to a particular person in a concrete situation according to the person's appetitive or affective condition at that moment, and also to his personal character. Even appetite for food, for example, which seems to be a purely physical desire, depends not only on physical condition but also on personal taste. Therefore, to conceive a proper end, we need moral virtues, which are dispositions of our appetitive state regulated by reason, and to gain a proper way leading to the end, we need prudentia. This is what Thomas calls "connection of virtues." In that, moral virtues and prudentia are mutually dependent and cannot produce good action without each other. Moral virtues cannot be virtue without prudentia, and vice versa.¹⁵

At this stage, if one understand an end to stand for a certain value presupposed by choice and what is chosen for the end is some, say technical, means to achieve that end, it seems that moral virtues, which give us a proper end, are more important than prudentia, which finds the means.

I think, however, that this is a rather misleading formulation. What the dependence of moral virtues on prudentia means is more than that they need prudentia to achieve their goal through the means it offers. Prudentia is something essential to their being: it is the cause of those virtues. In Thomas' words, it establishes "the end" of those virtues.¹⁶

The end of virtue is not one of those particular ends that appear to each person according to his personal character, but something common that is sought after through the particular ends. An act of justice, for example, is, in one case, to return what one has borrowed, and in another, to impose a punishment for a crime, but the virtue of justice is not determined to any of those particular acts, but to some common end, that is, to achieve equality in one's relation to others. To follow what Thomas says, though such ends of virtues are "naturally" determined — for him, "nature" has a much broader sense than for us, including, e.g., the sociality of human beings, since "Man is naturally social" — and also naturally known, yet they are known only as some self-evident principles lying beneath the pursuit of each particular end in a rather

universal form, as is seen in the precepts of natural law.¹⁷ It is left for practical reason to understand what those universal formulae mean in each particular and concrete situation, such as here, now, for this person, etc.¹⁸

Then, what practical reason, motivated by a particular end, grasps, namely something leading to the end (“*quae sunt ad finem*”) is not always technical means that are factually determined. Practical reason may consider technical means, but its role consists mainly in choosing something here and now as a concrete embodiment of some universal value that the particular end sets in our sight. Thus, in choosing, it also reconsiders the end itself that has motivated reason, and examines whether and to what extent it embodies in that particular situation the value that it is thought to have in social or natural context. It is by this examination that the propriety of ends mentioned above is made fully clear.

Here we should not think that the so called *technē*-analogy, which Aristotle uses (and Thomas follows) to show the difference between practical reasoning and other types of reasoning,¹⁹ shows that the process of practical reasoning that starts from an end and the process of technical reasoning to achieve a goal are totally of the same type.²⁰ This would lead to a caricature of practical recognition, since moral values would be then detached from the scope of practical reasoning and decision on the values would be ascribed to free will or desire. On the contrary, Thomas thinks that practical reason tries to grasp how we can here and now reach or realize some universal value.

Prudentia completes such kind of reasoning, and thus it is the *raison d'être* of moral virtues. This is why Thomas says that any disposition in us which prompts us to do good, may it be a natural one or an acquired habit, is not in itself a perfect virtue. Only when the inclination is provided by prudentia, which grasps in a universal context of value what the inclination strives for, it is properly called a virtue, namely a kind of excellence of a human being.²¹ For it is proper to our human nature to understand a particular end in its finality, that is, as having

some universal value.²² In this way, prudentia is “the most necessary virtue for human life.”²³

Thomas does not give prudentia a leading role simply because he pays attention to the intellectual nature of human beings, but because he considers the role of knowledge in our life in the light of his insight that we cannot attain our end, our perfection, from the beginning, but have to reach it through a series of acts. Human beings do not just live in a particular situation, but live with some understanding of a universal value found there, and it is here that knowledge has its place. This does not mean, however, that we have to part with our particular situation, or have to abstract universal values, in order, so to say, just to contemplate them, but that we live to realize the values in this particular situation.

Yet this is not an easy task, since the particular situation in which we live is contingent and variable. It is difficult for us to consider the manifold conditions that are necessary to grasp some certain moral recognition in a situation, and the natural limitation of our reason allows us only to see some common good in general, which cannot yet be the ultimate end of our life. This is why, according to Thomas, we need law to make up for our individual limitation, and grace to make up for our human limitation,²⁴ and prudentia must have some relation to them, but its investigation would need a new starting point and course of argument.

NOTES

- 1 This is a translation, with minor revisions, of my Japanese essay in *Studies in Medieval Thought* XXXIV, The Japanese Society of Medieval Study, Tokyo 1992.
- 2 I think that “prudentia” according to Thomas cannot be rightly rendered into “prudence” in its present sense, and leave the original Latin word in this essay. It would be proper to characterize it as some sort of “wisdom”,

- since Thomas calls it “sapientia in rebus humanis” (wisdom in the things concerning to human beings: *ST* IIaIIae, q.47, a.2, c.)
- 3 <prudencia est virtus maxime necessaria ad vitam humanam> *ST* IaIIae, q.57, a.5, c.
 - 4 <prudencia est causa omnium virtutum appetitivae partis, quae dicuntur morales in quantum sunt virtutes> *De Virtutibus in communi*, a.6, c.
 - 5 I have great sympathy with D. M. Nelson in perceiving the moral theory of Thomas as an ethics of virtue rather than a natural-law ethics (see Nelson, D.M., *The Priority of prudence*, Pennsylvania 1992), though an “ethics” might be a misleading characterization of the moral consideration in the theological treatise. I think Thomas didn’t have (at least in his *Summa*) an ethics in today’s sense of the term nor in its Aristotelian sense.
 - 6 *ST* IaIIae, q.56, a.3; *De Virtutibus in communi*, a.7.
 - 7 *Ethica Nicomachea* VI,5, 1140b21ff.
 - 8 For the first case, see: *ST* IaIIae, q.66, a.3; for the second, see: *ST* IaIIae, q.66, a.5, ad 1; ad 2; *De Veritate*, q.17, a.1.
 - 9 *ST* IaIIae, q.17, a.1.
 - 10 At this point, we can distinguish the practical reasoning of prudentia from “conscientia”, whose judgment remains purely cognitive and does not necessarily lead to action. See: Elders, Leo. J., “St. Thomas Aquinas’ Doctrine of Conscience.” in: *Lex et Libertas, Freedom and Law according to St. Thomas Aquinas*, ed. by L. J. Elders and K. Hedwig, Vatican 1987, 125-134.
 - 11 A fine example of a critical consideration is: Anscombe, G. E. M., “Thought and Action in Aristotle, what is ‘Practical Truth’,” in: *New Essays on Plato and Aristotle*, ed. by R. Bambrough, London 1965.
 - 12 *ST* IaIIae, q.61, a.1, c.; IIaIIae, q.47, a.4, c.
 - 13 *ST* IaIIae, q.57, a.5, c.
 - 14 *ST* IaIIae, q.13, a.1. I argue about this passage in: “Utrum electio sit actus voluntatis, vel rationis’ — An Interpretation of Thomas Aquinas’ Theory of Choice,” *Philosophical Studies* IX, The University of Tokyo, 1990 (in Japanese). My point is that the scope of his theory can be thought

to be larger than that of Aristotle's argument about proairesis to which he owes much: namely Thomas thinks of a case in which the will follows a higher ordination than is given by natural reason, that is, an ordination by charity ("caritas"). It is only within this scope that his conclusion that choice is "actus" of the will can be understood in its full sense.

15 *ST IaIIae*, q.58, a.4; a.5; q.65, a.1.

16 *ST IaIIae*, q.66, a.3, ad 3.

17 Thomas understands natural law as basic ethical formulae naturally recognized by practical reason. See: my "The Natural Basis of Practical Knowledge —An Interpretation of Thomas Aquinas' Natural Law Theory," *TETSUGAKU-ZASHHI* [Journal for Philosophy] vol. CV, no.777.

18 *ST IIaIIae*, q.47, a.7, c.; *De Virtutibus in communi*, a.6, c.

19 *Ethica Nicomachea* III, 3, 1112b11ff.

20 As seen above, Thomas clearly distinguishes skill from prudentia.

21 *ST IaIIae*, q.65, a.1, c.; q.66, a.2, c.

22 *ST IaIIae*, q.6, a.2, c.

23 <prudentia est virtus necessaria ad bene vivendum>*ST IaIIae*, q.57, a.5, c.

24 These two are what Thomas calls exterior principles of human action, in contrast to the interior ones, namely power ("potentia") and moral disposition called "habitus" such as virtue, vice, etc. One could fully understand his moral theory only when they give due consideration to them.

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