

RE-ORIENTATION FOR MORAL UPRIGHT SOCIETY: AQUINAS EXAMPLE

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ABSTRACT

Living moral and upright life in a contemporary society seems to be a difficult task, these days. This is premised on different factors that plague man himself. But Thomas Aquinas presents us with a possible solution. The problem of moral upright living he asserts would be addressed by virtuous living hinged on prudence. Right reason with respect to human action involves good counsel, good judgment and command. The argument is that Aquinas virtue of prudence is a fundamental need in managing immoral behavior in an individual. Hence, the promotion of the re-orientation of the individuals within the society. Prudence seeks the good as realized in the very act of reasoning that perfects the practical activity of reason.

KEYWORDS: Aquinas, Prudence, Society, Habitus, Living & Reason

INTRODUCTION

In virtuous living, the morality of actions is not only in action, but on the moral quality of a person in addition as propagated by proponents of virtue ethics. This fundamental is aimed at the character traits that make someone a good person. Thomas Aquinas in *Summa Theologica* sees human goodness as very much dependent on performing acts that are in conformity with our human nature.

An action is rational, if and only if it is done with proper reasoning. Reason, according to Aquinas, has two powers. These are cognitive and appetitive powers. The cognitive power is also known as the intellect. Reason, as intellect is the seat of knowledge and understanding. This enables one to apprehend the goodness associated with a thing. The appetitive power is the will. In his understanding, the will is the native desire for the understood good. This is to say, it is the will that is the response to the intellect's estimations or understandings of what is good or choice worthy. The intellect must supply the will with the object to which the will inclines to. Good here is seen to be equal to happiness.

In the same vein, Aquinas sees human action as those over which one has voluntary control. This is to say, human actions are products of our own free judgment. The exercise of this judgment is a function of the intellect and the will. The performance of acts that are morally good points to virtuous living. This virtue impresses upon the higher part of a being a lasting bent that makes one act well in almost all the circumstances of life. Virtuous living is the result of conduct in the past and the source of similar conduct in the future. This virtuous living manifests itself in the following as projected by Aquinas; prudence, justice, fortitude or courage and temperance.

Prudence is at the base of moral life, as suggested by Thomas Aquinas. It is prudence, which determines what act should be done in any particular circumstances. There are certain primary and very simple judgments which are present in every mind. One of such judgments is the necessity for one to live in a society. These judgments originate a tendency or inclination to act. Then comes a series of practical judgments that takes into consideration all the circumstances or counsel that determine our choices. It is this that they will decide to follow. A prudent person is one who by the frequency of such

judgments, sees and decides quickly and without hesitation what is to be done in a particular case.

Prudence Explained

In *Summa Theologica* written by Thomas Aquinas, prudence is understood in two ways: as wisdom concerning human affairs (S. Th. II-II, q.47, a 2 ad 1) or right reason with respect to action (*rectratio agibilium*) (S. Th. II-II, q. 47, a 4). Prudence, as asserted by our author is mostly concerned with action. It seeks the good as realized in the very act of reasoning. It is the knowledge of how to act, how to conduct one's life rightly. It produces not only the ability to act well but also presumes the desire. Prudence is associated with doing. One develops habits through doing. Any moral significant deed proceeds from the will's orientation to the good. Right reasoning about doing requires that a person be well disposed to ends. This depends on right will.

A person is an individual capable of eliciting conscious and autonomous human acts and so he/she is responsible for conscious and sovereign acts of decision. Man as a person is actualized in both internal (the self-awareness of I) and in external experiences (in the experience of my actions). Among free actions as seen by some anthropologists, these characterize man as a person: the ability to know the truth. All cultures, including technology show man as a master of nature; the ability to love, the ability to go outside of himself toward other persons, the ability to sacrifice himself for others, to exist "for the other"; the ability to perform sovereign acts of decision; the ability to perform religious acts.

Man deliberates well about matters pertaining to human life via prudence. Only the man who deliberates well is called prudent without qualification (S Th. I-II, q. 47, a. 13). The notion of virtue is associated with doing something well. Doing something well involves making good choices. Virtues are durable (or lasting long) habits directed towards action according to Aquinas (S. Th. I-II, q. 55, a.1). Virtue is a good habit (*habitus*) in terms of a special ability to act in an intelligent manner. Thomas Aquinas offered us many understandings of virtue in relation to moral decision and action:

- Good (qualities) of mind whereby we live righteously (S. Th. I-II, q.55, a 4).
- The good use of free choice (S. Th. I-II, q. 55, a. 1).
- That which makes a thing's work be done well (S. Th. I-II, q. 53, a. 2).
- Operation in conformity with right reason (S. Th. I-II, q.55, a. 2).

Overall, virtues are associated with habits. Habit or *Habitus* its Latin equivalent has to do with character. The habits makes man to do things right. Right reasoning about doing requires that a person be well disposed with regards to ends. When we deliberate well about things concerning the whole of human life, we are virtuous. Deliberation is always aimed at doing or acting. Human activity is doing in the light of alternatives. Human actions are human choices or decisions. Choices, decisions reflect the character of the person involved. A prudent person deliberates in a measured, careful way. Such a person judges circumstances accurately by attending to all relevant features. Equally, he consistently resists the undue influence of the passions in the pursuit of the good. Finally, he completes deliberation and judgment by commanding the performance of an appropriate action.

Overall, prudence addresses the deeper sense of the human person and focuses on what kind of person one must become in order to live the good life. Fundamentally, the virtue of prudence that Aquinas projects, describes the formation of character, the development of lasting habits that can help a person live a good life. Prudence is the *habitus* that wisely assesses the means necessary to accomplish the end at which you are aiming. It invites us to consider those means that

have the capacity to make wise judgments in complex situations. Prudence is a responsibility principle. This is to say, the person who has prudence feels a responsibility to act and feels that one's character is strengthened by expressing virtue in action. For the ethical life to be consistent it requires action, it requires engagement, it demands commitment and thus the need for prudence to be a guide.

Acts of Prudence

Counsel, judgment and command are the chief acts of prudence (S. Th. II-II, q. 47, a. 10). In other words, prudence is a perfected habit of inquiring about an action through good counsel or deliberation, about making judgment about the result of an inquiry, and especially of commanding appropriate action on the basis of one's counsel and judgment. We choose what to do, according to Aquinas on the basis of what have been counseled and a prudent person is one who is good at taking counsel or deliberating (S. Th. II-II, q. 47, a. 1).

Counsel is the research into various means to the end and circumstances. Our actions always express our desires or our will and are voluntary. Choice or decision is very essential to human action. Human action is a doing in the light of alternatives. In other words, human actions are human choices or decisions and to describe them is to state how we have chosen or decided.

Judgement involves two forms, namely *sickness* and *genome*, according to Aquinas. Synesis is a cognitive faculty of good judgment (S. Th. I-II, q. 57, a. 6). *c* is good common sense in making judgments about what to do and what not to do in ordinary matters. *Gnome* refers to the ability to judge what is right in terms of equity where the ordinary rules and guidelines do not apply or appear to be in conflict (S. Th. II-II, q. 51, a. 4; S. Th. I-II, q. 57, a. 6). It has to do with the ability to discern and apply higher laws to matters that fall outside the scope of the more common or lower rules that guide human action.

Command is the direct application of good counsel and judgment. It consists of applying right reason to human action. You cannot be a prudent man when you take good counsel and judge well but fails to act. You are prudent when you take good counsel, judge well and command the act to be done. Thus prudence is a perfected habitus of inquiring about an action through good counsel or deliberation, of making a judgment about the results of the inquiry and especially of commanding appropriate action on the basis of one's counsel and judgment.

Prudence and Human Nature

Virtuous living is a good *habitus* or habit. A *habitus* is a permanent and lasting disposition of the soul. A disposition is good or bad depending on the ability to merely fulfil or fails to fulfil a thing in question. Whether a quality makes an individual good or bad depends on its nature. Prudence is a good permanent and lasting disposition that enables one fulfil his ends. Prudence as a virtuous living in Aquinas' account is hinged on nature. Fergus Kerr confirms this when he recalls that a continuous thread in Aquinas' work is return to nature (Kerr 2000, 119-120). For Aquinas, nature is the essence of a thing when it is the principle of a thing's act (1947, S. Th. I-II, q. 58, a. 1, ad 3). Within the medieval period, a human person is an individual substance of a rational nature (see S. Th. I, q. 29, a. 1). Nature determines which acts are consistent with the end of a thing and which are not. If an existence is like a rational man, its nature requires that it increases in knowledge as time passes.

Rational existent or person performs acts either in keeping with his nature or not. When an act is done in keeping with human nature, it is called the good. When not in keeping with human nature, it is bad. Good is that to which desire tends. Aquinas defines goodness as what all things desire. The word desire is not used here as synonymous with lust or yearning. Desire, according to Aquinas means something which we have an unconscious tendency toward. In other words, things that desire goodness are naturally drawn to perfection. Man is not a self-sufficient individual. He is made to be receptive. This receptive is a desire to which one feels compelled to respond in order to be happy. In other words, it is a means to achieve self-fulfillment, integrity and wholeness. The medieval philosopher sees desire as a basic drive. This fundamental desire is for the good. For him, to be human is to be needy and therefore to desire something to fill this neediness. Desire is an expression of a universal longing (Patricia Lawoureur & Paul J. Wadell, 2011).

Mckay elsewhere avers that for Aquinas, there is an ideal type of man, an ideal of human development and integration. However, this notion had been flatly rejected by existentialists (Mckay 2004,1). According to Mckay, through virtues man is perfected in accordance with his created nature (Mckay 8). On the relationship between nature and virtue, Aristotle in *Physics* points to things that exist by nature. Those that exist by nature contain something intrinsic to themselves which cause them to be what they are. It is this that drives things toward their final completion. Thus for Aristotle, things that exist by nature, change originate from within the thing. J. Barnes in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, said that nature according to Aristotle is a source or cause of being moved and of being at rest in that to which it belongs primarily (see Mckay 2004, 10).

Mckay on another note says “to understand the nature of a frog is to understand that there are certain activities which capture what it means to be a frog. Even our understanding of tadpole is informed by our understanding of frog, for to understand what it is to be a tadpole is to understand it as something that is on the way to becoming a frog, something that does the sorts of things that frog typically do (Mckay, 11). Therefore, a thing’s nature is its end, or *telos* as Aristotle would say: the nature is the end or that for the sake of which a thing is. This in understanding of Mckay is “to see that the nature of the frog is already present in the tadpole as a principle driving it towards its completion” (Mckay, 11). The tadpole is already in some sense a frog, for it is on the way toward becoming one and that it is due to its nature. Nature provides both the source of motion towards the end and the end itself. Consequently, nature is present in every aspect of a thing’s development.

Habitus or dispositions stand as midway between the principles that direct man to his end and the end itself. According to Aquinas, nature is the rule or measure of *habitus* (see S. Th. I-II, q.54, a.3). Equally, *habitus* comes from man’s nature. This is because *habitus* builds on something already present in man. Thus far, nature is seen in terms of a thing’s end and in terms of a nature’s ability to direct things towards its ends. For a thing to attain its end, it must do the sort of activity that characterizes the things well. In case of man in achieving his end he must appropriate right reason in his actions. The rule of created nature for man is reason, as such soul’s power is ordered rightly if he exercises the dictate of right reason. This happens under the name of virtue of prudence.

Virtuous living points to excellences of character. It promotes happiness and the good of a person. Prudence as a virtue requires a great deal of experience. Prudence has to do with formed character. Hence, the promotion of the good of a persons. In the words of Aristotle according to D. Ross, the virtue of a man will be the state of character which makes a man good and which makes him do his own work well. Thus, to achieve high moral standard, one must perform the right action, with the right person, to the right extent, at the right time and in the right way.

Stanley Hauerwas observes that for Aquinas, character is the focus of virtue of prudence: the condition that is necessary for each virtue to be absolute is that it be formed through prudence, for it is prudence alone that not only confers the aptness for good work but also its use ... at least seems to have some similarities to what we mean by character, for the good of prudence is the good of the agent himself (Hauerwas 1975, 79)

Again in the same understanding, Daniel Mark Nelson asserts that our culture obviously contains communities of people who share common backgrounds, interests, activities, beliefs and practices. What is significant about such groups is that they have a sufficient sense of common to recognize and approve traits of character that not only further those purposes but when exercised are seen as good in themselves (Nelson 1992, 150). Individuals do not learn this virtue in isolation but are dependent on the practice of communities that produce and preserve them. According to P. Gardiner in *Journal of Medical Ethics*, individuals who develop virtuous characteristics by habitual practice will become embodiment of the values that encourage human flourishing (Gardiner 2003, 301).

Character is fostered through practice and the development of consistent habits. It is who we are on the core of our being. It is the moral shape of our true selves. We are not born with it. But character is developed through all of our daily choices. They must be modelled and learned before they become ingrained habits or disposition. Cultivating a life of positive moral character enables and empowers us to become fully human. Supporting this, Richard M. Gula in Curran remarks that character emerged from habits we form. Habits reflect the beliefs, ideals and images of life that we internalize as a result of the communities in which we live. The power of example is the most formative influence on shaping character. We become persons of good character by acting in the same spirit that person of good character act (Curran2004, 56).

Character Education and Inculcating Prudence

Prudence is hinged on reasoning, focusing intently on sensitizing the moral agent to ethical salience. Towing this line of thought, Gilbert Mailaender said that any advanced instruction in ethics depends on a prior inculcation of basic moral attitudes. Acquiring moral principles is coming to feel in certain ways and being characterized by certain habits of behavior (Mailaender 1984, 81-82). Character education has to start at a young age, as foundations for prudence to be established early in life. Education in character development should start with an inquiry into moral perception. The moral perception of a practiced and hopefully virtuous, moral agent will improve perceptual sensitivity and moral awareness. Early education in prudence involves a sharpening and sensitizing a person's ability to perceive situations correctly. Cultivating prudence embodies the quality of being able to discern the particulars and at the same time never losing sight of the ultimate end of one's actions. The refinement of ethical sensitivity and moral perception form the building blocks for any virtue education. Inculcating prudence strongly depends on practicing the correct perception of particular situations. This in turn is founded upon proper guidance and experience.

It is taken for granted that schools ought to inculcate the virtue of prudence. Inculcating prudence is needed for effective flourishing and for the fulfillment of the individual. Human acts are the expressions of human decision-making and these in turn are the manifestations of a commitment to particular values. Moral decision-making that is oriented

towards the good and the right make human beings to be fulfilled as persons. Thus the need for human beings to be taught the moral values of their communities. The values that human persons absorb and come to hold will be those to which they are exposed and have come to be habituated. And finally, to these they have come to be committed.

Equally, educating on the virtue of prudence is an integral part of raising public awareness with a view to promoting virtuous persons who will withstand evil and corrupt tendencies. Prudence is the product of *habitus* formed early in the family, class and neighborhood. As an intellectual virtue, it may be developed and improved through systematic instruction that require time. Thus it may be taught through instruction in philosophy, literature, history and related disciplines.

The decay of family living worked by modern affluence and modern mobility has diminished the impact of virtue. In most household, parent's opinion and tastes are shaped by incessant watching of television. And as such children learn the value of nothing. Also, young persons have exemplar in form of rock stars, fancied personalities of the heroes and heroines of soap operas. Thus, if the family continues to decay in its functions, so will virtue of prudence be a mirage in our society.

The church as molders of virtuous character cannot fill the vacuum created by the disappearance of family exemplar or mentor. In our societies whether present or past, individuals are very religious and bear witnesses to religion in every aspect of their lives. According to Izu Onyeocha, everything is religious, even the way we walk and the way we eat (1997, 129). In time past, members of our societies experienced religion in their hearts and minds. It came forth and took shape in the process of humans trying to find answers to question affecting their existence and happiness in the world in which they lived.

Thus far, religious institutions imparted on their members basic virtues with which they lived on. The individuals benefited wholesomely, thereby generating less tension and friction among their members. On this, Onyeocha asserted that the Church fosters and encourages its members to develop the virtue of prudence. Prudence enables us "to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it" (Onyeocha 1997, 133). In other words, prudence shapes and informs our ability to deliberate over available alternatives, to determine what is most fitting to a specific context and to act decisively. Exercising this virtue often requires the courage to act in defense of moral principles when making decisions.

Re-Orientating of Persons in Society

The moral character of individual members of the society needs to be awakened. As a result, there is need for the cultivation of the virtue of prudence through moral education. Prudence will surely lead to changes in moral beliefs, behavior and attitudes of the society members. Hence, the issue of re-orientation of persons in the society. Re-orientation is a turnaround in morals. Morals have to do with values and norms that guide the conduct of persons. It also concerns people's beliefs about right and wrong conduct and good and bad character. This is to say it involves behavior, attitude or orientation. It involves adoption of a new attitudinal paradigm via virtue of prudence. Examples of problems of moral life is the problem of knowing the right thing and yet doing the wrong thing or of acting against our better judgment. Accepting or giving bribe when we know it is wrong, the problem of failing to bring ourselves to do something we know or strongly believe to be right are cases in point.

This observable fact of conflict in moral decision taking as it involves moral knowledge and action is provided by Thomas Aquinas. According to him, reason is a necessary and sufficient condition for attaining the virtue of prudence and hence for doing right or good deeds. Right reasoning is the antidote against wrong doing. The intellect and will are relevant antecedents of action and useful in explaining failure to act. The position of the will is crucial in the enterprise of translating our moral convictions, intentions and decision into actions. According to Aquinas, prudence is right reason acting (*recta ratio agilibrium*). This he borrowed from Aristotle. Prudence as such guided individuals in their choices regarding the right choice of means of virtuous character. A person's character has a definite and pronounced effect on that person's moral behavior or lack thereof. A good character is prerequisite to fighting immoral acts. A bad or morally vicious character is conducive to enhancing corrupt or evil tendencies. Living virtuously is the most proactive thing a person can do. And subsequently is a soothing balm against evil or immoral acts.

Our behavior that comes from character are functions of our decisions not our conditions. Character form action needs a virtue to perfect it in its decision making. Acting person needs a virtue to perfect him in his conduct (S. Th., II-II, q. 51, a.2). The acts with which Aquinas is concerned follow "upon a perfect knowledge of the end; for. After grasping the end, a man, by deliberating about the end and means to it, can be moved to attain the end or not" (1963, S. Th., I-II, q. 6, a.2). In other words, the way in which we judge and strive for ends is exactly what acting virtuously is about and it is precisely the cardinal virtues of justice, temperance and fortitude under the direction of prudence that makes our acts accord with virtue.

Our will is necessarily ordered to the good in general, its inclination to specific good is not determinate, but rather indeterminate and a matter of individual responsibility. Evil and corrupt tendencies arise as a result of a depraved or enslaved will as opposed to upright will found in the person embracing the virtue of prudence. Evil tendency is a movement contrary to human rational nature and therefore violent or compelled. Aquinas says thus:

What they will tends to win though evil and contrary to a rational
Nature is nevertheless apprehended as good and suitable for
Nature insofar as it is suitable to man by reason of some pleasurable
Sensation or some bad habits (1963, S. Th., I-II, q. 6, a. 4, aa3).

Evil and corruption are contrary to rational nature, because they are contrary to reason which is to say it is opposed to prudence and therefore opposed to proper good and happiness as rational creature. For Aquinas, evil ends are mistakenly apprehended as good because of a defect in a character corrupted by bad habits or vices.

In the same vein, virtuous and good ends are correctly apprehended as good because of the perfection of character by the virtue of prudence. According to Daniel Nelson, it is a matter of one's character, one's good or bad habits one's virtue or vice, whether one's apprehension of a good is correct. We are not automatically ordered to what is authentically good, but only to what (rightly or wrongly) seem good (Nelson 1992, 40). It therefore follows that the rightness of our act and willing is hinged on the reasoned control of the virtues. Generally for Aquinas, the will tends towards the good, only apprehended as good, not a true good. This is the work of practical intellect as opposed to speculating intellects. The apprehension of particular ends as good depends on the disposition of the character of the person perceiving it. If one's character is evil, bad things appear good and good things seem bad. One's character is corrupt, when passions are not

ordered by the virtues. According to Ralph McInerny:

Good action is the product of character and character is formed
By repeated acts of a given kind until our hearts are inclined to
good action. Given good character, moral virtue, a person is
enabled to do the right deeds for the right reason and enjoy doing it
(McInerny 1987, 33).

Prudence for Aquinas is a virtue that belongs to the rational power, but it is rooted in the will and a proper orientation of the will is ultimately more essential to prudence than any degree of intellectual acumen. That this is the case is evident not only from the fact that prudence is both an intellectual and a moral virtue but also the fact that the chief act of prudence is command: an imperative issued by the intellect which follows upon the will's act of choice.

CONCLUSIONS

Aquinas' ethics is hinged on rationality. And in order to act well one need to make good judgments about how one should behave. This precisely is the sort of habit associated with prudence. Prudence according to Aquinas is seen as right reason with respect to action. This is to say, it is the right reasoning about what is to be done. According to Aquinas, prudence is obtained and perfected through practice in deliberation and action. Prudence in human action does three things. First, it perfects our practical acts, judgment and intellectual activity in relation to action. Second, it perfects right reasons in doing things. And thirdly, it perfects the intellect in commanding the kind of action suited to reach an end.

In doing these, it performs three principal acts. One good counsel in which one inquire about available means of achieving the end. Second, good judgment in which one determine the proper means for achieving the end. Third, command which is direct application of good counsel and judgment with reference to commonly accepted norms of behavior. Critically, this work agrees with Aquinas in that ethics needed to be centered on reason. Also, that prudence is rectifying in nature. Thirdly, prudence is properly right reasoning in human action. The work discovers that even as immoral activities can be eliminated from human, inculcating prudence will produce individuals that are immorally free. This as had been seen is possible through moral re-orientation of individuals via education and enlightenments.

Consequently, characters of individuals will be built up through educational curricula inculcating virtue of prudence. Virtue teaching should be mandatory to all committed to education. Equally, enlightenment of the people through seminars and workshops should be created. Aquinas' virtue of prudence if properly inculcated would reduce the rate of immorality in society. It provides us with the right reasoning in all our human action and also provides a strong foundation for virtue ethics. A life well-lived is one in which reason governs every level of human functioning so that it makes its proper contribution to the overall human good.

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