SOBRE O PAPEL DA PRUDÊNCIA NA ÉTICA DAS VIRTUDES DE TOMÁS DE AQUINO

ON THE ROLE OF PRUDENCE IN THE VIRTUE ETHICS OF THOMAS AQUINAS

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RESUMO
O artigo trata da ética de Tomás de Aquino, focando especialmente no conceito de Prudência, uma das quatro virtudes cardeais segundo o pensamento cristão. O estudo considera a dívida do filósofo medieval com a filosofia antiga (especialmente Aristóteles) e as autoridades precedentes da tradição intelectual cristã, reconstruindo a concepção de Aquino sobre a Prudência.
Palavras-chave: Ética das Virtudes; Tomismo; Pensamento Cristão; História da Filosofia.

ABSTRACT
The paper is about the ethics of Thomas Aquinas, and focuses especially on the concept of Prudence, one of the four cardinal virtues according to Christian thought. The study considers the debt of the medieval philosopher to ancient philosophy (especially Aristotle) and the previous authorities of the Christian intellectual tradition, reconstructing Aquinas' conception of Prudence.
Keywords: Virtue Ethics; Thomism; Christian Thought; History of Philosophy.

Introduction

In the Middle Ages, the Scholastics shaped their moral ideals through a synthesis of Christian beliefs, teachings of the Church Fathers, and philosophical doctrines of ancient thinkers such as Plato and Aristotle, as well as other intellectual traditions. This diversity of influences should not be overlooked to understand the evolution of Christian ethics over the centuries. Such a constellation of ideas is reflected in the moral thought of one of the foremost systematizers of Christian ethics and Christian theology: Thomas Aquinas (1225 or 1226–1274). The present study is focused on Thomistic virtue ethics – more especially, on Aquinas' interpretation of Prudence, intended as a practical principle that governs human acts by aligning them with right reason in pursuit of a good end

(*recta ratio agibilium*). The significance of Thomistic moral thought within Christian culture is undeniable, and Prudence emerges as a key concept in Aquinas' oeuvre. This article approaches this theme with the aim of providing a clear and accessible reconstruction. To keep the focus on primary sources, references to secondary literature are intentionally avoided in the body of the article. Readers are left free to consult the contributions of renowned scholars such as Étienne Gilson, Eberhard Schockenhoff, Josef Pieper, Romanus Cessario, and Tobias Hoffmann, who dedicated entire monographs to the moral teachings of Scholasticism, frequently referring to Thomistic ethics. Although indebted to their scholarship, this study highlights a more specific aspect. With the awareness that Aquinas' discourses on Prudence emerge in many of his works, including the *Summa contra gentiles*, the commentary on the *Nichomachean Ethics*, and the *Quaestiones disputatae de virtutibus*, the analysis is focused on the *Summa Theologica*, commonly regarded as the pinnacle of the Thomistic production. The following pages also offer examples of ancient and medieval sources to provide a reconstruction situated within the broader context of the history of ideas, aiming to highlight the cultural background of Thomistic ethics and to trace the conceptual evolution of the concept of prudence across the centuries. Aquinas is one of the key figures in the rediscovery of Aristotelian philosophy in the thirteenth century: he interpreted and integrated the theories of the Stagirite into his own works, employing reason and demonstrative methods to justify theological doctrines and strengthen Christian beliefs. The relevance of Aquinas as authority of the Scholastic tradition is related to his systematic approach to theology. Although unfinished, his compendium of theology covers a broad range of topics, including moral issues. As a man of faith and a member of the Order of Preachers, Aquinas had a pedagogical aim in mind, that is showing how believers can lead a spiritual life in plain accordance with the ideals of Christianity.

Following in the footsteps of the Church Fathers and other influent authorities, Aquinas emphasized the importance of virtues as direct counterparts to vices. He distinguished between two groups of moral principles. The first consists of three virtues rooted into the inner and spiritual dimension of the human being: Faith (*Fides*), Hope (*Spes*), and Charity (*Caritas*), known as the theological virtues, infused into every person by God; according to religious teachings, their efficacy entirely depends on divine grace, which guides believers toward salvation and eternal beatitude. On the other hand, the second group of principles is connected to human conscience and reason, and it consists of four

dispositions of the soul, known as cardinal virtues: namely, Prudence (*Prudentia*), Fortitude (*Fortitudo*), Justice (*Iustitia*) and Temperance (*Temperantia*). The etymology of the attribute "cardinal" is significant: it derives from the Latin word *cardo*, meaning "hinge". This etymology suggests a direct relationship between Prudence and the other cardinal virtues. In a sense, Prudence functions as the hinge of all practical principles: it is the virtue of sound deliberation and is involved in every moral act. Aquinas addressed this issue to emphasize the relevance of ethical discourses and their relationship with theological questions. He presented the four cardinal virtues as dynamic principles, which guide human actions from time to time. In Aquinas's perspective, cardinal virtues can be acquired through practice, transitioning them from potentiality to actuality. In other words, one becomes virtuous through repeated and intentional action directed toward a specific *telos* – a purposeful end rooted in reason and the pursuit of the good. This idea, inspired by Aristotelian ethics, emerges in various parts of Aquinas' production. To make an example, some insights into this perspective are outlined in the following passage:

> Moral virtue may be considered either as perfect or as imperfect. An imperfect moral virtue, Temperance for instance, or Fortitude, is nothing but an inclination in us to do some kind of good deed, whether such inclination be in us by nature or by habituation (Aquinas, I-II, Q. 65, a. 1).

The concept of habituation (Gr. *hexis*, Lat. *habitus*,) plays a central role in Aristotelian ethics: it refers to a stable the disposition of an agent, acquired by repeating specific actions to gain experience, enabling one to act consistently and appropriately in given circumstances. According to Aquinas, every person should bring his *habitus* under control to become virtuous and to attain independence from the disturbances of the soul: namely, passion, will, desire, and appetite. Such a self-control is a pre-condition for good deliberation, a concept known in Greek as *euboulia*, addressed in the *Summa Theologica* (cf. Aquinas, II-II, Q. 51, a. 1). According to the author, cardinal virtues are dispositions of the soul, which can be cultivated only through practice and diligence. While the previous citation referred specifically to Fortitude and Temperance, it's clear that Aquinas also had the virtue of Prudence in mind. In fact, in another passage of his work, he distinguishes between three forms of Prudence, which correspond to progressively higher levels of moral excellence: he refers to them as "false", "true", and "true and perfect" Prudence (cf. Aquinas, II-II, Q. 47, a. 13). The perfected form of this principle, which resides in the

rational soul, requires the proper use of reason. The rational interpretation of past experiences enhances one's capacity to deliberate wisely in future circumstances:

> Wherefore it is manifest that prudence belongs directly to the cognitive, and not to the sensitive faculty, because by the latter we know nothing but what is within reach and offers itself to the senses: while to obtain knowledge of the future from knowledge of the present or past, which pertains to prudence, belongs properly to the reason, because this is done by a process of comparison. It follows therefore that Prudence, properly speaking, is in the reason (Aquinas, II-II, Q. 47, a. 1).

It is worth noting that Aquinas regarded Prudence not merely as a cardinal virtue, but also as an intellectual virtue deeply rooted in the rational soul. This classification related to his conception of philosophy as the "handmaid of theology": in fact, according to Aquinas, philosophical speculation serves to justify revelation and render it accessible and comprehensible to human understanding, within its natural limits. This opinion emerges in the following statement, which underlines the correlation of the divine revelation and the human speculation: "It was necessary for man's salvation that there should be a knowledge revealed by God besides philosophical science built up by human reason" (Aquinas, I, Q. 1, a. 1). Doctor Angelicus shared the idea that reason forms the foundation for wisdom and wise action; therefore, right deliberation requires both knowledge and rationality to reach its end. In light of this aspect, the relation between Prudence and the intellective faculty of the soul becomes even more evident. This association was not originally developed by Aquinas, though, as it was already present in ancient philosophy. Of course, the meaning of Prudence changed through the centuries, and its historical evolution should not be overlooked to understand the role of this principle in the moral philosophy of the Scholastics.

From *phronesis* to *prudentia*

As anticipated, Aquinas offered more than a single definition of Prudence. He frequently drew upon Aristotelian ideas – and surely not by chance. There is a continuity between ancient thought and medieval philosophy, which also reflects the evolution of ethics. The Latin word *prudentia* is a loan translation of the Greek *phronesis*, a term employed before the time of Aristotle. It is worth providing a brief analysis of its use

among ancient thinkers, starting from the pre-Socratic era. One of the earliest references to *phronesis* in Greek thought was left by Heraclitus of Ephesus (6th-5th B.C.) in one of his fragments: "Though the *logos* is common, the many live as if they had a wisdom of their own" (DK B2). "Wisdom" translates the word *phronesis*, here used as synonym of *nous*, suggesting an epistemological – not moral – meaning of the word. Heraclitus hinted at a private understanding or a capacity to think individually, enabling the individuals to comprehend the basis of reality. A similar relation between *phronesis* and theoretical wisdom appears in the *Philebus* of Plato: in this dialogue, the literary figures of Socrates and Philebus debate whether the good consists in pleasure or in *phronesis* understood as intelligence or capacity to reflect; *phronesis* is again associated with the metaphysical meaning of *nous*. By contrast, in the *Symposium*, the term *phronesis* takes on a meaning tied to moral discourses, which reflects Plato's original development of the concept in question. When discussing the different kinds of love, the figure of Socrates recalls a teaching of his mentor, Diotima of Mantinea, asserting that *phronesis* is the offspring of the human soul. Unlike people who get children as a result of physical love, wise men dedicate themselves to interiority and the pursuit of truth; virtues are a result of their love for wisdom, which stands out as the very core of philosophy:

> "Now those who are teeming in body betake them rather to women, and are amorous on this wise: by getting children they acquire an immortality, a memorial, and a state of bliss, which in their imagining they 'for all succeeding time procure.' But pregnancy of soul – for there are persons,' she declared, 'who in their souls still more than in their bodies conceive those things which are proper for soul to conceive and bring forth; and what are those things? Prudence, and virtue in general; and of these the begetters are all the poets and those craftsmen who are styled 'inventors.' Now by far the highest and fairest part of prudence is that which concerns the regulation of cities and habitations; it is called sobriety and justice" (208e-209b).

Socrates's view in this Platonic dialogue anticipates the medieval (also Thomistic) idea of Prudence as a practical principle rooted in the human soul, which guides actions to a good end, and they are therefore necessary for the regulation of society. Moreover, speaking through the character of Socrates, Plato emphasized the tight connection between *phronesis* and the broader concept of "virtue". This relation is not made explicit in the *Symposium*, but further clues can be found within the

sociopolitical discourse of the *Republic*. The following passage of that Platonic dialogue does not mention virtues directly, but it still refers to *phronesis* and related concepts through a list of attributes, each of which define the model of society corresponding to Plato's ideal philosophical vision:

> But now the city was thought to be just because three natural kinds existing in it performed each its own function, and again it was sober, brave, and wise because of certain other affections and habits of these three kinds (427e).

In this passage, the adjectives "just", "sober", and "brave" correspond to the virtues of Justice, Temperance, and Fortitude, respectively, while the attribute "wise" is associated with Prudence, understood as wise deliberation. This is an early reference to the cardinal virtues intended as a unified set of practical principles guiding human actions. From this point of view, Plato anticipates reflections of the Scholastics regarding the conditions of virtuosity.

The correspondence of *phronesis* with the moral discourse is made even more explicit in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, which considers the Platonic remarks on this aspect. The Stagirite puts the emphasis on right deliberation as a disposition of the prudent man (*phronimos*), who:

> Virtue then is a settled disposition of the mind determining the choice of actions and emotions, consisting essentially in the observance of the mean relative to us, this being determined by principle, that is, as the prudent man would determine it (Aristotle, II, 6, 16).

As explained in other parts of the *Ethics* (III, 2, 17), deliberation is based on a choice which involves reason and a process of thought *before* actions take place. This idea, as well as other ancient interpretations of Prudence and related aspects of virtue ethics, influenced later thinkers, particularly through the transmission of Greek culture into the Roman world. For instance, intellectuals such as Marcus Tullius Cicero and his commentator Ambrosius Theodosius Macrobius were familiar with the conceptions of *phronesis* found in ancient sources. Their reception also explains the importance attributed to the ethical concepts of Justice, Prudence, Fortitude, and Temperance in early Christian philosophy. Ambrose of Milan (339-397) recalled those ethical principles in his commentary on the Gospel of Luke, referring to them specifically as "cardinal virtues". He described them as four divine blessings. In the following passage, the bishop introduces the cardinal virtues as the

opposites of vices, such as greed (*avaritia*) and pride (*superbia*), which mislead human acts:

> Now we tell how Saint Luke's eight blessings can be synthesized in four blessings. In fact, we know that there are four cardinal virtues: Temperance, Justice, Prudence and Fortitude. The one who's poor of spirit, is not greedy. The one who cries isn't superb, but calm and still. The one who grieves is humiliated. The one who's right does not steal what is shared by everyone. The one who's compassionate freely gives of what is his own. The one who offers himself does not ask for other things, nor does he hurt his neighbor (Ambrosius, V, 62, my translation).

In this passage, Ambrose underlines the practical purpose of cardinal virtues and their correlation with Christian ethics. In the same period, Augustine of Hippo (354-430), who notoriously regarded Ambrose as an inspirational figure and a master, expressed similar opinions concerning Christian ethics. According to him, Prudence, Justice, Fortitude and Temperance are a united set of values. In *On the Morals of the Catholic Church* Augustine provided a definition of all cardinal virtues, including Prudence. He describes it as the love of God, rightly oriented with regard to its end:

> For these four virtues (…), I should have no hesitation in defining them: (…) Prudence is love distinguishing with sagacity between what hinders it and what helps it. The object of this love is not anything, but only God, the chief good, the highest wisdom, the perfect harmony (Augustine, XV).

Augustine's idea of the interconnection between cardinal virtues (*connexio virtutum*) was later adopted by other Christian thinkers. For instance, Albert the Great depicted Prudence allegorically, referring to it as "charioteer of virtues" (*auriga virtutum*). This vivid allegory represents Prudence as a principle guiding every human act, and the other three cardinal virtues as its "leading horses" tied to its chariot (cf. Albertus Magnus, 1993, IV, Q. 1, a. 6). Furthermore, Albert has shown his familiarity with the dual meaning of *phronesis*, as it emerges in ancient thought:

> (…) Socrates claimed that virtues are knowledge and wisdom, but – having assumed that Prudence is the science of good acts – he did not distinguish wisdom and prudence sufficiently. Furthermore, he said that wisdom is a virtue, because it is the highest and most divine thing, just as virtue

is the highest and most divine good in all things (Albertus Magnus 1891, I, 7, 3, 109b, our translation).

For Albert, Prudence is not simply identified with "wisdom"; it is a practical principle, whose implications extend beyond the domain of epistemology. Aquinas, who studied under Albert during his time in Cologne, developed similar views and interests. Like his teacher, he commented on *Nichomachean Ethics* and drew on from this source to formulate his own theory of cardinal virtues.

Thomas Aquinas on Prudence

Aquinas dedicated specific sections of his *Summa Theologica* (in particular, II-II, q. 47-56) to Prudence, explaining its role as a guiding principle in the process of deliberation. In his context, he asks himself whether Prudence is a virtue or rather a form of knowledge (*scientia*). The rhetorical question serves to better define that moral concept. To this end, Aquinas compares his perspective with the views of earlier Christian authors. In the following passage, for example, he examines with a critical eye the definition of Prudence found in Augustine's treatise *On Free Choice of the Will Freewill*:

> It would seem that Prudence is not a virtue. For Augustine says that "Prudence is the science of what to desire and what to avoid" [*On Free Choice*, I, 13]. Now science is condivided with virtue, as appears in the *Predicaments* [VI] (Aquinas, II-II, Q. 47, a. 4)

Aquinas observed that this concise definition of Prudence was inaccurate. The association between *phronesis* and wisdom – already present in some Platonic dialogues – could lead to the assumption that Prudence is not a virtue. To avoid this ambiguity, Aquinas reinterpreted Augustine's definition: "Augustine there takes science in the broad sense for any kind of right reason" (Aquinas, II-II, Q. 47, a. 4). While speculative knowledge is indeed required to act rightly – since every virtuous agent must first know the good in order to pursue it – Aquinas accepts Augustine's definition of Prudence as a science only within this restricted framework. Nevertheless, he differentiates the virtue from theoretical wisdom and underscores its fundamentally practical role in guiding moral action, as "'Wisdom', 'knowledge' and 'understanding' are about necessary things, whereas 'art' and 'Prudence' are about contingent things" (Aquinas, II-II, Q. 47, a. 5). Speculative reason leads to the knowledge of universal concepts. Prudence, however, depends on practical reason: in fact, it

operates in variable situations, guiding action through a process of deliberation aimed at the good; in this precise sense, Prudence is "about contingent things", as stated in the passage quoted above. This virtue is required in specific situations to act for good on the basis of a calculative process. This Thomistic interpretation of Prudence draws on Aristotelian thought:

> According to the Philosopher 'a prudent man is one who is capable of taking good counsel' [*Nichomachean Ethics*, VI, 5]. Now counsel is about things that we have to do in relation to some end: and the reason that deals with things to be done for an end is the practical reason. Hence it is evident that Prudence resides only in the practical reason (Aquinas, II-II, Q. 47, a. 2).

According to Aristotle, Prudence is not a science but a practical principle, which involves rationality and self-control for good deliberation. Aquinas shared this conception, emphasizing that the virtue of Prudence restrains the influences of human passions and impulses, thereby bringing balance to the soul and directing actions toward the good end:

> Prudence is a virtue most necessary for human life. For a good life consists in good deeds. Now in order to do good deeds, it matters not only what a man does, but also how he does it; to wit, that he do it from right choice and not merely from impulse or passion. And, since choice is about things in reference to the end, rectitude of choice requires two things: namely, the due end, and something suitably ordained to that due end (Aquinas, II-II, Q. 47, a. 5).

Here Prudence is regarded as the principle of good deliberation, or rectitude of choice: in Aquinas' view, virtuous acts are ordained to the supreme good and they are independent from the passions of the soul. Reason plays a key role in the deliberative process and, not by chance, Aquinas claims that Prudence resides in the rational part of the soul. Furthermore, he explains that Prudence involves an internal cognitive capacity, related to memory and experience, which allows to refine deliberative skills by reflecting on past situations of life. However, the effects of Prudence are not limited to internal mental acts; rather, they manifest themselves in external actions. This further implies that, for Aquinas, a prudent man applies reason in an appropriate way to diverse circumstances.

In the Thomistic perspective, the efficacy of Prudence as a practical principle largely depends on the correct application of reason to the

situations of life; however, in order to fully comprehend the role of this principle, it must also be considered in its relation to the other cardinal virtues. Aquinas' idea of the connection between the cardinal virtues (*connexio virtutum*) is based on ethical discourses of other thinkers of the Christian tradition. For instance, the following passage of the *Summa Theologica* quotes the words of pope Gregory the Great concerning this matter:

> Now no man can be virtuous without Prudence, for Gregory says [*Morals in the Book of Job*, II, 46] that "the other virtues cannot be virtues at all unless they effect prudently what they desire to accomplish" (Aquinas, II-II, Q. 47, a. 14).

To reinforce the idea of a connection of the cardinal virtues, Aquinas engages with the views of other renowned Christian authorities, such as Augustine and Albert, deepening their reflections and offering a thoughtful explanation for the interdependence of the cardinal virtues: as Aquinas points out, Justice, Fortitude, and Temperance require Prudence as a principle of reason and good deliberation, because this specific virtue – unlike the others – makes it possible to discern the due end of acts and identify the most suitable means to reach it.

Further aspects of Aquinas's reflection on Prudence emerge in questions 48, 49, and 50 of the *Secunda secundae*. In these sections, the Scholastic outlines what he refers to as the "parts" of Prudence and identifies three distinct types of them: "integral", "subjective", and "potential parts". This categorization serves to define Prudence as a practical principle and justify its applicability to diverse situations. It is worth summarizing this topic, starting with the main integral parts of Prudence, which are three. The first one is memory, since "experience is the result of many memories as stated in *Metaph*. I, 1, and therefore Prudence requires the memory of many things" (Aquinas, II-II, Q. 49, a. 1). The understanding is also an integral part: "since Prudence is right reason applied to action, the whole process of Prudence must needs have its source in understanding" (Aquinas, II-II, Q. 49, a. 2). The third one is foresight, another form of understanding which, however, "implies the notion of something distant, to which that which occurs in the present has to be directed" (Aquinas, II-II, Q. 49, a. 6).

Unlike the integral parts of Prudence, its subjective parts are all related to broad idea of "government", and they have implications in political thought: "prudence in its special and most perfect sense, belongs to a king who is charged with the government of a city or kingdom: for which reason a species of prudence is reckoned to be regnative" (Aquinas,

II-II, Q. 50, a. 1). Aquinas develops ideas found in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (VI, 8) concerning the qualities of politicians and governors. For this specific reason, he emphasizes the importance of regnative, political, domestic and military Prudence.

The Doctor Angelicus then discusses about the potential parts of Prudence: *euboulia* is the ability to deliberate well about means to achieve good ends, ensuring that acts are preceded by sound reasoning; *synesis* "signifies a right judgment, not indeed about speculative matters, but about particular practical matters" (Aquinas, II-II, Q. 51, a. 3); *gnome*, instead, is the capacity of discernment that becomes valuable in exceptional situations, when "it is necessary to judge of such matters according to higher principles than the common laws" (Aquinas, II-II, Q. 51, a. 4).

Conclusions

The Thomistic interpretation of prudence is the result of a very complex and layered engagement with various disciplines, including religious sciences, ethics, epistemology, and psychology. It draws upon a remarkably broad range of philosophical sources, both classical and Christian, reflecting Aquinas' methodical effort to integrate diverse intellectual traditions. His references to earlier philosophers – especially Aristotle, Augustine, and the Church Fathers – are evident in the *Summa Theologica*, a systematic work with pedagogical aims, grounded in the comparative methodology characteristic of the commentarial tradition of Scholasticism. The Doctor Angelicus not only cites authorities but also critically examines their positions, often juxtaposing conflicting views in order to refine and articulate his own.

This study addresses only a limited portion of Aquinas' literary production and ideal library, intentionally leaving the philological reconstruction of his sources to philological scholarship. In any case, the selection of passages presented in these pages should have clarified Aquinas' interpretation of prudence as a practical principle – one deeply inspired by the ancient notion of *phronesis* and rearticulated within the framework of Christian virtue ethics. The Thomistic idea of Prudence is expressed not only through technical definitions but also through captivating allegories (e.g., the image of the "charioteer") and a terminology that, though preserved across the centuries, has not remained immune to semantic shifts and reinterpretations. Aquinas was acutely aware of the ambiguity and potential vagueness in earlier definitions of prudence — such as that provided by Augustine, discussed in the *Summa Theologica* (II-II, Q. 47, a. 4) — and thus sought to provide greater

conceptual clarity through detailed categorization. He distinguishes, for instance, between integral parts, subjective parts, and potential parts of prudence, offering a nuanced account that reflects both philosophical rigor and theological sensitivity.

Ultimately, Aquinas' ethical thought represents a paradigmatic synthesis of ancient philosophy – particularly Aristotelian ethics – and Christian doctrine. His great emphasis on the virtue of Prudence underscores the central role of free will and deliberation in achieving the "perfect life" – understood as a life oriented toward the ultimate good in accordance with Christian teachings. In this way, Prudence emerges not merely as a functional virtue for practical decision-making, but as a cornerstone of moral life in the Thomistic vision of human inner development.

Notes

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