

St. Thomas on Prudence and the Moral Virtues

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My assigned topic is St. Thomas on prudence and the moral virtues. I want to begin by setting this topic within the wider context of a broadly classical — mainly Aristotelian — understanding of the relation between cognition and affection in human action. Then I will make some brief remarks about the formal structure of prudence and its relation to the moral virtues of justice, fortitude, and temperance — a topic on which Aristotle and St. Thomas by and large agree. Now this agreement about form might tempt one to claim that they also by and large agree on what the best sort of human life, guided by the virtue of prudence, will look like. But such a claim would be mistaken. This is the topic I will take up in the last part of my presentation.

For the web version, I have also added a pair of appendices, inspired by two twentieth-century spiritual giants, on topics that are broached at least implicitly by my presentation. The first appendix, which draws its inspiration from St. Josemaría Escrivá, is on the relation between natural (or acquired) moral virtue and infused moral virtue. The second, which draws its inspiration from Romano Guardini, is on the role, if any, that desire for a reward should play in the life of someone pursuing the call to holiness.

1. *Aristotle and his competitors*. To understand the centrality of prudence within a Thomistic-Aristotelian philosophical anthropology, we need to paint in very broad strokes some competing philosophical accounts of the relation between cognition and affection in voluntary action.

Aristotle, following Plato, believes that we all begin with a single fundamental desire — a desire for our good, i.e., a desire for our own deep happiness or flourishing as human beings. This desire motivates at bottom all of our voluntary actions. Unfortunately, our starting point as human beings is such that the particular goods we begin by desiring as paths to that flourishing, and the way in which we desire them, cannot in the end provide us with anything close to genuine human flourishing or deep happiness, even by gentile standards. The main reason for this is that our affections, despite some weaker inclinations to the contrary, are deeply disordered from the start. More specifically, we begin with a narrow and perverted self-love — a self-centered desire for ‘private’ (or ‘autonomous’ on one understanding) well-being. According to Aristotle and Plato, this perverted self-love needs to be, and can be, transformed into rightly-ordered self-love, which includes the desire to will the good for others and to commit oneself to higher and more noble goods that transcend one’s own private good, narrowly conceived. In the end our goal is (or should be) to become individuals who are fit for genuine friendship (a political as well as a personal good) and self-transcending commitments that entail making sacrifices for transcendent common goods. In ‘going out’ of ourselves, as it were, in this way, we at least approach our own true fulfillment as individuals.

The transformation from perverted self-love to rightly ordered self-love essentially involves an extensive program of formation, carried out by those who take part in our upbringing and aimed in part at habituating our affections in the right way. The conviction is that we can appropriately moderate our affections, including our concupiscible and irascible passions along with our will, so as to liberate ourselves from the slavery of perverted self-love. Prudence becomes the central virtue on this scheme, because it is precisely the proper use of practical reason that sets the parameters for the escape from disordered passion and malice of will. In particular, the sentient appetite, seat of the passions of the soul, can in its own right become the subject of virtuous habits, but only insofar as it participates in reason,

i.e., only insofar as it is amenable to being moderated in a manner dictated by upright practical reasoning of the sort characteristic of the virtue of prudence.

To be sure, in the *Republic* Plato had put into the mouths of Glaucon and Adeimantus a powerful argument for what we might call the Hobbesian alternative. On this latter view our basic affective inclination toward the good inalterably issues in what Plato and Aristotle think of as perverted self-love. Our passions are both unruly and uneducable, and any concession we make to the norms of what we ordinarily call justice is made reluctantly and only in order to salvage as much as we can, in less than ideal circumstances, of what we want for ourselves. But if, as individuals, we could get away with attaining what we want without compromise, then it would be stupid and irrational to compromise in the name of some allegedly noble alternative. Narrow self-interest, *aka* perverted self-love, is inevitably and inalterably the way in which the basic desire for happiness manifests itself, and so it is just a fixed fact about human life that perverted self-love, driven by passion, has to be accepted by any moral theory as the basic and inalterable motive for all human action. Reason merely helps us arrange our lives and our passions in the most efficient way to attain, in our particular circumstances, the best possible configuration of the objects of our self-centered affection. If we end up suppressing this or that passion in a given instance, it is only in order that others might have their way. On this view, reason merely serves the passions without the possibility of elevating them, as it were.

John Duns Scotus accepted the idea of the deep unalterability of our sentient affections. (St. Paul, after all, saint though he was, seemed to complain about his own unmoderated passions.) So our inclination toward the comfortable and pleasurable good as proposed by sentience, the *affectio commodi*, does indeed issue in perverted self-love when allowed to dominate. But fortunately for us, says Scotus, we have a second basic inclination, the *affectio iustitiae*, which is independent of the passions: as rational beings we desire to make our wills good by conforming them and our actions to God's will as expressed in divine precepts — even when doing so does not serve our self-centered desires. (Kant, adopting a similar view, would later appeal instead to the precepts that an ideally rational being would autonomously (in *Kant's* sense) issue to himself.) Hence, on this view self-love cannot be the motive of morally upright action, and our passions are morally irrelevant in the sense that an action does not derive any positive moral worth from their character, one way or the other. Here the role of upright practical reason is reduced to demanding more will-power in the service of duty as defined by divine precepts and, if need be, in opposition to recalcitrant passions. For the will alone, among our appetites, is subject to habituation. In the less Christian modern versions of this view, virtue becomes its own reward; in fact, it is demeaning to human dignity to desire an external reward for virtuous behavior. (See Appendix 2 below for more on this point.)

This is a big divide in the history of moral theory. There are two relevant questions: (a) Is our basic desire for our own good inalterably self-centered and 'perverted'? (b) If so, is there another morally relevant basic desire? Plato and Aristotle answer NO to both questions. Scotus and Kant answer YES to both questions. Hobbes answers YES to (a) and NO to (b). The differences among these positions have a profound effect on how we think about moral formation and about the possibility and importance of shaping affection and sentiment.

Hume is an interesting outlier here. Like the others who answer NO to question (b), he believes that our 'ordinary' affections supply us with our basic motivation; unlike the others who answer NO to question (b), he is an optimist who thinks of our affections in their natural state as predominantly benevolent rather than predominantly selfish and self-serving. Thus, Hume believes that it is a bad idea to try to re-shape our passions; this, he thinks, leads to moral and religious fanaticism. Rather, we have to

proceed with care around the edges, as it were, in order to allow our basic benevolence to shine forth. (Not surprisingly, Hume had little contact with young children.)

More ominously, in this whole discussion we have the Nietzsche of works such as *Beyond Good and Evil* lurking in the background. But, sad to say, we can't go there today.

2. *The formal structure of prudence and its relation to affection and the moral virtues.* St. Thomas, of course, sides with Aristotle in this dispute. And despite the sort of usage that associates the English term 'prudent' with individuals who are excessively cautious or circumspect, the fact is that *phronesis* or *prudentia*, i.e., the habitually upright use of practical reason in the guidance and execution of one's voluntary acts, both interior and exterior, is critically important for a philosophical anthropology according to which (a) reason is the distinctively human element among the animals, (b) the best human lives are lived by being guided by reason, and (c) the affections of the human animal are amenable to being shaped and formed by reason, i.e., amenable to 'participating in' reason, within the general moral project of turning affectively disordered human beings into persons fit for genuine friendship. Of course, this process does not happen automatically and typically requires that children and young adults live for many years in community under the tutelage of people (parents, grandparents and other relatives, clergy, teachers, coaches, etc.) who care deeply about them and have some high degree of practical wisdom themselves. But what is right and wrong for children to think, to feel, and to do is taken to be consonant with their own deep desire to attain the highest degree possible of a standard of perfection (or flourishing or happiness) built into them by their nature. This is sufficient for them to understand — at least, eventually — the internal connection between their own welfare as individuals and the various precepts that help define and safeguard at least the lower limits of acceptable action. (This is, of course, an idealization, but it is worth noting that an Aristotelian conception of prudence even includes a type of judgment (*gnome*) for cases that put a strain on the applicability of ordinary precepts. I especially recommend the British detective series *Foyle's War* for many examples of *gnome* in action.)

St. Thomas agrees almost completely with Aristotle on the *formal* structure of prudence, with its *potential* parts of deliberating, judging, and (the principal act of) commanding, and with its *integral* parts, viz., memory, understanding, docility, shrewdness, good reasoning, foresight (or providence), circumspection, and caution, and with its *subjective* parts, the main divide here being the distinction between the prudence by which individuals govern themselves on the one hand and the prudence by which those in charge govern multitudes such as families, military units, parishes, cities, universities, small and large businesses, etc. As usual, St. Thomas adds to Aristotle by drawing clearer distinctions in some cases and by incorporating into his discussion of the parts of prudence insights contributed by Cicero, Seneca, Macrobius, Ambrose, Augustine, and other Christian and non-Christian post-Aristotelian authors.

According to St. Thomas, the ideal is for the well-ordered among our initial affective inclinations to set the ends we strive for, and the role of prudence is to bring those ends to fulfillment in accord with reason and in opposition to strong inborn counter-inclinations. In the case of the natural virtues, prudence guides the virtues to their mean relative to the temperament of each person in the case of fortitude and temperance. For instance, some of us are not at all tempted to eat cheese puffs, whereas others cannot eat one cheese puff without eating the whole bag, and so we must at first limit ourselves to, say, one bag a week. (That seems reasonable enough to me!) Again, some of us begin with a high degree of innate physical courage, so to speak, whereas others must overcome strong fear in order to undertake any new physical adventure. In the case of justice, the mean, if we may call it that, is a reasonable balance in which each individual receives his due. In this way, the virtues grow together and, as they do, it becomes more difficult for disordered passion or malice of will to distort one's deliberations, judgments and commands.

At least by retrospective reconstruction, we can see that our *deliberations* consist in the formulation of practical chains of reasoning, based on (a) our understanding of basic moral principles; (b) our memories or, better, our experiences as we remember them; (c) our aptitude for sizing up a situation and devising alternative chains of practical reasoning issuing in different actions or patterns of action, and (d) our ability to reason to conclusions in the circumstances, exercising due caution to avoid bad incidental consequences that might accompany our chosen actions. Notice that each of these so-called ‘integral’ parts of practical reasoning is susceptible to affective influence. For instance, the more virtuous I am, the greater the array of good actions that will come to mind in any given situation, and the less the danger of having disordered affections leading me to neglect what I ought to be taking into account. In some cases, our deliberation is flawed by *precipitateness* (*praecipitatio*), which St. Thomas lists as the first basic sin against prudence and which may proceed either from an excessive desire for pleasure or comfort (precipitateness proper) or from a prideful contempt for the rule of reason (*temeritas*). In either case the use of right reason is bypassed completely and disordered affections rule the day.

Similar considerations apply to the next step, which is to *judge* which of the alternative chains of reasoning are acceptable (giving rise to acts of consenting), and which of the alternatives, if any, is the most worthy of choice (giving rise to acts of choosing). When we make bad judgments, leading either to bad acts of consenting or bad acts of choosing, this is an instance of another of the basic sins against prudence, viz., *inconsideratio* — the failure to take account of what we ought to have taken account of, and this is often due to a disordered passion, say, anger, envy, fear or sadness of one sort or another, etc.

St. Thomas insists, though, that the principal act of prudence is *command*, i.e., the act of reason by which we determine that *this* act, which has previously been judged best and chosen, is to be carried out *here* and *now*. The gap here is familiar to us. Choices made earlier are oftentimes not carried out. When we fail to carry out good choices, it is because of either *inconstancy* (*inconstantia*) or *negligence* (*negligentia*), which St. Thomas lists as the third and fourth of the basic sins against prudence and which, once again, often arise from disordered passions such as an excessive desire for pleasure or an excessive fear.

By contrast to these sins, the virtue of prudence is the intellectual habit by which we do well as a matter of course in our deliberating, judging, and commanding. If we are talking about complete or perfect virtues, rather than just about virtuous inclinations that are somewhat easily overridden, then St. Thomas, again agreeing with Aristotle, claims that prudence and the moral virtues are connected. That is, you cannot use practical reason in an habitually good way unless you also have the rectitude of affection effected by justice, fortitude, and temperance. But since every virtuous act essentially involves the good use of practical reason in deliberating, judging, and (especially) commanding, the moral virtues cannot exist in a perfected state unless one has the virtue of prudence as well to discern and help execute the mean in a given circumstance.

St. Thomas clarifies this relation near the beginning of the treatise on justice. The question is whether judging is the main act of justice. (Hint: the answer is yes.) But, claims the first objection, judging has to do with cognition, and it is prudence that perfects the cognitive power, whereas justice is a virtue of the will. St. Thomas replies as follows:

The name ‘judgment’, which in accord with its primary imposition signifies the correct determination of what is just, is extended to signify correct determination in all subject matters whatsoever, both speculative and practical. However, in all these subject matters two things are required for correct judgment:

(a) One of them is the *power itself* that produces the judgment

(*ipsa virtus proferens iudicium*). And in this sense judgment is an act of reason, since it belongs to reason to fix or determine something.

(b) The other is the *disposition of the one who judges*, because of which he is fit to judge correctly. And, in this sense, in those matters that pertain to justice the judgment proceeds from justice, just as in those matters that pertain to fortitude the judgment proceeds from fortitude.

So, then, a judgment is an act of *justice* insofar as justice is inclining one to judge correctly, whereas it is an act of *prudence* insofar as prudence produces the judgment. This is why, as was explained above (q. 51, a. 3), *synesis*, which belongs to prudence, is called good judging. (*ST* 2-2, q. 60, a. 1, *ad* 1)

3. *Way beyond (and even contrary to) Aristotle*. Given all this agreement between Aristotle and St. Thomas, one can be tricked, as it were, into thinking that Aristotle and St. Thomas agree completely when it comes to the virtue of prudence, with St. Thomas tacking on a few details having to do with the afterlife as Christians conceive of it. But as I will now argue, this would be a mistake. For when we repeat the platitude that St. Thomas ‘baptized’ Aristotle, we have to remember that St. Thomas had a very high-church understanding, so to speak, of baptism and its effects. The result is that if we were to stop here, we would not be anywhere close to St. Thomas’s understanding of the significance of the virtue of prudence, at least *materially* speaking.

As a prelude, I want to note that this section of my presentation represents my own feeble attempt to capture some striking insights I have found in three sources: (a) Chapter 1, entitled “On Two Friars,” of G.K. Chesterton’s *St. Thomas Aquinas: The Dumb Ox*, (b) Chapter 1, entitled “The Problem of St. Francis,” of Chesterton’s *Saint Francis of Assisi*, and (c) “Prudence and Charity,” which constitutes the last section of Josef Pieper’s magisterial essay on prudence found in English translation in *The Four Cardinal Virtues*.

It’s remarkable that one of the most widely used twentieth-century translations of St. Thomas’s treatise on virtue, originally published by Prentice-Hall in 1966, actually omits the last three questions of that treatise, viz., the questions on the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the beatitudes, and the fruits of the Holy Spirit. Yet if you do not appreciate the absolutely central role St. Thomas attributes to the gifts of the Holy Spirit in the living out of the best sort of life possible for a human being, then you have completely missed the Thomistic boat as far as the virtues — and especially prudence — are concerned.

The whole Second Part of the *Summa Theologiae*, supplemented by sections of the Third Part, is aimed at describing in a systematic and philosophically sophisticated manner the elements that need to be in place for one to live a Christian life successfully, supplemented by an exhaustive survey of possible pitfalls. And upon close examination, that life looks very different from the life of Aristotle’s paradigmatically good human being. In fact, there is good reason to believe that it is precisely a virtuous gentile of the sort that Aristotle takes to be approaching the moral ideal who would be the most reluctant to undertake what *Lumen Gentium* famously termed “the call to holiness” — which is, of course, the ideal that St. Thomas has in mind. Pieper puts the problem this way:

It is not true that the greatest susceptibility for discord [between the natural and the supernatural] lies 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 between the *highest* natural virtue and the

highest supernatural virtue, that is to say, in the relation between natural prudence and supernatural charity. It is not the ‘sinners’ but the ‘prudent ones’ who are the 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.

To begin with, recall St. Paul’s abortive visit to Athens, the center of Greek intellectual culture, where his message was greeted with skepticism by some and hesitation by others: “Hey, let’s talk more some time; perhaps we can arrange one of our famous Athenian summer philosophy conferences.” And, of course, the New Testament contains no letter to the Athenians, whereas there are two letters to the somewhat troublesome bunch of new Christians living in “sin city,” — i.e., Corinth, not known, to put it mildly, for its love of serious philosophical discussion.

Now, I admit, this is not a particularly strong hook to hang my hat on. But ask yourself the question, “What if Aristotle had been there? How would he have reacted to St. Paul’s preaching? What would prudence have dictated according to him?” Of course, we never know for sure how the Holy Spirit might act in such a situation; Paul himself is a reminder on that score. But the question really is: “Would Aristotle’s living according to his own well-developed conception of the virtues, especially prudence, and of the best sort of human life, have made him more receptive than others to Paul’s preaching?”

Perhaps we already have an answer to this question. At least some of those who rejected Jesus among the Scribes and the Pharisees seem to have been genuinely decent men who, unlike others among their colleagues, were sincere seekers after the truth and not moved to reject Jesus by envy or anger or a lust for power. However, the best example for us to light upon is undoubtedly the rich young man of the synoptic Gospels, who seems, on the surface, like a perfect Jewish counterpart to Aristotle’s just man. He approaches Jesus, undoubtedly moved by Jesus’ reputation as a teacher, prophet, and miracle worker — someone who looks to be wise and worthy of trust. The young man clearly has a sense that there may be something more to life that he’s missing out on, despite the fact that he is already morally upright and has enough material resources to be, or to become, a shining example of Aristotelian magnanimity and magnificence. St. Mark tells us that Jesus looks upon him with love. Yet when Jesus tells him that he needs to make a radical change — “Sell everything ... and follow me” — he balks and walks away in sadness.

It would be wrong, I think, to conclude that the young man is avaricious and thus not morally upright after all by Aristotle’s standards. Instead, he has the sort of attachment to his wealth that at one and the same time seems ‘reasonable’ and yet makes him fearful and unreceptive to what is clearly a prompting of the Holy Spirit to leave his comfort zone out of love for and trust in Jesus. He wants to be self-sufficient and autonomous in a way that cannot quite accommodate the radical change suggested by Jesus. From a Christian perspective, the young man acts imprudently at least in part because he is afraid to expand his *understanding* beyond what Pieper calls “naturally experienceable realities,” and for this reason he is not *docile* enough to accept the advice given to him in friendship by our Lord. This is not so much a failure to live up to a lofty but impersonal standard of perfection of the sort outlined by Aristotle as it is a failure to trust a person whom he himself has sought out as a guide — in short, a failure of love. The rich young man is unwilling to do what Peter and Andrew and James and John and (especially) Matthew had done before him when Jesus had looked upon *them* with love, viz., give up everything to follow Jesus. I am reminded of Chesterton’s comment that many of the apparently crazy (*aka*

‘imprudent’) things done by St. Francis that strike moderns who are otherwise attracted to him as dark and even sinister — his long hours of prayer, his severe fasts and bodily mortifications, his utter humility, his magnificent but unselfconscious interventions, his kissing of lepers, his ardent desire for the stigmata — make perfectly good sense if thought of as the actions of one madly in love.

According to St. Thomas, whereas perfect prudence guides the moral virtues of justice, fortitude, and temperance, it itself is governed and guided by charity, the supernatural love of God and of neighbor for the sake of God. The focus of the Christian way of life is a Trinity of Persons to be loved and not an impersonal standard of flourishing to be aimed at. There is a big difference between, say, wanting to make myself into the sort of basketball player who hits 90% of his free throws and wanting to become the best free-throw shooter I can become out of love for and gratitude to God.

This relationship of love changes everything, especially when it is embedded within the entire Christian story of the history of salvation and the understanding that even now we participate in everlasting life — more specifically, in the very inner life of God. It changes how we think about human nature in general (human nature is subject to the effects of original sin, and this explains our disordered starting point). It changes how we think of our failures (we atone for them and rejoice in being forgiven and do not despair out of a deceptive desire for self-sufficiency). It changes how we think about suffering and death (they become a necessary part of the story as we join them to Christ’s suffering and death). It changes how we think about the ordinary events of every day and our ordinary interactions with family, friends, and acquaintances (they are possible occasions of grace).

The list could go on. But it doesn’t have to for present purposes, because the main point I want to make is pretty much the point Pieper is making in the passage cited above, viz., that what is going on inside someone who is perfectly prudent on St. Thomas’s account is very different from what is going on inside someone who is perfectly prudent on Aristotle’s account. In short, a Christian striving for holiness undertakes an adventure in love, fraught with all the exciting possibilities that lie therein, along with all the dangers and possible pitfalls. This will affect acts of deliberating, judging, and commanding, and it will affect what we might call the tenor of the integral parts of prudence — our basic understanding of our world, our selves and our goals; our criteria for choosing teachers and advisers; our conception of what counts as reasonable caution or circumspection, etc. In addition, those who follow Christ closely will have the constant expectation of being prodded out of their latest comfort zone. (Interestingly, there’s an echo here of Nietzsche’s idea that the free spirit is constantly making radical re-evaluations of himself and of the *status quo*, except that in the case of the Christian the movement is always ideally in the same direction, that of progress in self-giving love of God and self-giving love of neighbor for the sake of God.) In short, charity sets our ultimate end and thus guides our deliberating, our judging, and our commanding. St. Thomas himself puts it this way:

It was explained above (q. 58, aa. 4-5) that the other moral virtues cannot exist without prudence, and that prudence cannot exist without the moral virtues, since the moral virtues bring it about that one is related in the right way to certain ends from which prudence’s reasoning proceeds. But the right reason that belongs to prudence requires much more that a man be related in the right way to his ultimate end — a relation that is effected by charity — than that he be related in the right way to other ends — a relation that is effected by the moral virtues — just as right reason in speculative matters especially requires the first indemonstrable principle, viz., that contradictories are not simultaneously true. Hence, it is clear that infused prudence cannot exist without charity and, as a result, neither can the other moral virtues, which cannot exist without prudence.

Thus, it is clear from what has been said that only the infused virtues are perfect virtues, and only the infused virtues should be called virtues absolutely speaking, since they order a man in the right way, absolutely speaking, toward his ultimate end. The other virtues, i.e., the acquired virtues, are virtues in a certain respect and not virtues absolutely speaking, since they order a man in the right way with respect to the ultimate end in a certain genus, but not with respect to the ultimate end absolutely speaking. Hence, Augustine's Gloss on Romans 14:23 ("All that is not of faith is sin") says, "Where cognition of the truth is lacking, there is false virtue even in good behavior." (*ST* 1-2, q. 65, a. 2)

This is why the gifts of the Holy Spirit are so crucial. Again, St. Thomas:

It is clear that the human virtues perfect a man insofar as the man is apt to be moved by *reason* in the things he does interiorly and exteriorly. Therefore, there must exist in a man higher perfections in accord with which he is disposed toward being moved by *God*. And these perfections are called gifts, not only because they are infused by God, but also because through them a man is disposed toward becoming promptly movable by God's inspiration — this according to Isaiah 50:5 ("The Lord has opened my ears, and I do not resist Him; I have not turned back"). Likewise, in the chapter on good fortune, the Philosopher says that for those who are moved by divine instinct it does not help to take counsel according to human reason; rather, they should follow their interior inclination, since they are being moved by a principle that is better than human reason. And some put it this way: The gifts perfect a man with respect to acts that are higher than the acts of the virtues. (*ST* 1-2, q. 68, a. 1)

As St. Thomas (and Catholic doctrine) sees it, baptism effects an enhancement of the very essence of the human soul, so that by it we become images of the Image of God by divine adoption and share by experience, even now, in the inner life of the Holy Trinity. What flows from this so-called habitual grace are the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity, the infused moral virtues, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit — in other words, a complete overhaul of the individual's natural cognitive and affective powers, a "new creation," as it were. (See Appendix 1 for more on this.)

Meanwhile Dante, inspired by St. Thomas, puts Aristotle in the First Circle of the *Inferno* with Socrates and Plato and other morally decent non-Christian philosophers. The reason, opines Dorothy Sayers, is that these morally upright philosophers are getting exactly what they had seen fit to hope for. Like the rich young man, they had set their sights, and their hopes, too low, undoubtedly believing this to be the path dictated by prudence. In light of this, we could perhaps re-describe the project of the *Summa Contra Gentiles* as an attempt to put philosophically sophisticated and morally upright gentile philosophers in a better position, naturally speaking, to respond positively to the message of the Gospel, and this by enhancing their understanding and preparing the way for them to be more docile when Christ looks upon them with love.

Appendix 1: *Natural (acquired) and supernatural (infused) moral virtue.* In this presentation I have broached an issue that I have been thinking about for a long time and that is presently the subject of some controversy, viz., the relation between the natural (or acquired) moral virtues and their eponymous supernatural (or infused) counterparts. I have come to believe that this is a nearly insoluble problem if one looks at it as a synchronic problem of trying to put together a bunch of pieces that don't sit well with one another in their pure states. My suggestion is that we instead have to think of their relation to one another diachronically — more specifically, as embedded within an ongoing human life in which the call to holiness is progressively taken more and more seriously. (This is not, of course, to deny the possibility of sudden conversions, but even in the aftermath of such conversions there can and should be progress in the interior life of the convert.)

The first thing to notice is that hardly any of us ever has *perfect* or *complete* natural moral virtues in St. Thomas's sense. We are works in progress even within the natural order, and this because we are unable to overcome the effects of original sin on our own, even with the occasional help of God's so-called 'actual' graces. This point is not essential to the position I will lay out in a moment, but it underscores the fact that real human lives are fluid and ordinarily move back and forth, morally speaking.

So let us consider two scenarios. In the first we have someone like the rich young man discussed above. He has the natural virtues or, at least, many strong virtuous tendencies. Then he meets Jesus, and unlike the rich young man of the Gospels, he is moved to sell everything and to follow Jesus. Thereafter he centers his life around his relationship with Jesus, whom he strives to emulate and to serve.

As we saw above, this changes everything. For instance, the young man's previous and morally upright resolve to do the best he can at his job (say, investment banking) now becomes a resolve to do the best he can at his job out of love of God and of neighbor for the sake of God. Technically speaking, he is now acting more and more from infused charity, infused prudence, and the infused moral virtues, whereas previously he was acting solely out of a generic desire for human fulfillment and perfection and whatever habits he had built up to this end. And as he progresses in holiness, i.e., as he progresses in becoming a better image of the Image of God, more and more of his virtuous actions will be motivated at bottom by charity. For the essence of growing in holiness or sanctity is precisely to grow in self-giving love of God and of neighbor for the sake of God. So the young man's good actions, which were previously motivated solely by natural ends, are more and more motivated by charity and exercised through the infused virtues. Likewise, many other good natural habits having to do, say, with order, time management, work strategies, ways of dealing with others in daily life, etc., can now, given intense prayer, be incorporated into the infused moral virtues.

Something similar holds for those who are baptized in infancy and who at some later point put their vocation to holiness at the very center of their lives. Even though all along they have had habitual grace, the theological virtues, the infused virtues, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit, they have at first lived their lives largely oblivious to these gifts and have made at best sporadic use of them. That is to say, they have acted mainly for the sake of merely human ends and most often have not responded to the inspirations and promptings of the Holy Spirit. However, once they begin to take their vocation to holiness seriously and pray more intensely, avail themselves of the sacraments — especially the Holy Eucharist and Confession — more frequently, read Sacred Scripture, and learn more about the doctrines of the Faith, etc., they slowly begin to act more and more out of love of God and neighbor for the sake of God. In other words, they begin to exercise the theological virtues and the infused moral virtues more and more. As St. Josemaría Escrivá puts it in one of his aphoristic books:

You are writing to me in the kitchen, by the stove. It is early afternoon. It is cold. By your side, your younger sister — the last one to discover the divine

folly of living her Christian vocation to the full — is peeling potatoes. To all appearances — you think — her work is the same as before. And yet, what a difference there is!

— It is true: before she only peeled potatoes, now, she is sanctifying herself peeling potatoes. (*Furrow*, 498)

What *is* the difference, exactly? Well, if she is carrying on an intense prayer life, she will find herself offering the work itself to God, along with its concomitant difficulties, and this on behalf of those whom she has promised to pray for, or in reparation for her sins and the sins of others, or on behalf of apostolic initiatives she has heard about or participated in, or on behalf of the physical and spiritual welfare of her family and friends and acquaintances, or on behalf of the souls in Purgatory, etc. (The doctrine of the communion of saints opens up a myriad of opportunities in this regard, since we come to realize that we are not alone, but can count on the whole Church — on earth, in purgatory, and in heaven — to come to our assistance. And we must do the same for others members of the Church in need.)

It is important to emphasize that normally this change does not happen either automatically or quickly. Once again, one can have the infused moral virtues and never act from them; one can have them and lose them through serious sin. Furthermore, a conversion, i.e., a turning to God, must be accompanied by constant and intense prayer, by the sacraments, etc. — so that gradually one comes to live “in the presence of God,” as several of the Psalms put it. Also, acting in order to love God and neighbor does not rule out having other, more ‘natural’, proximate ends as well. It just means that all these other ends are subordinated to and, as it were, absorbed into the true ultimate end. One who comes closer and closer to sanctity also comes closer and closer to living a fully unified life, and the unifying factor is the growing desire to order one’s whole life toward loving God. When one does this, ‘strange’ things can happen, as in the life of St. Francis. But, as Chesterton said, this is the adventurous life of someone who is madly in love.

Here I am assuming that St. Thomas is correct in claiming that the mean established by the infused virtues will differ — sometimes in noticeable ways — from the mean established by the corresponding natural virtues; see *ST* 1-2, q. 63, aa. 3-4. In fact, this is inevitable, since, as I noted above, the Holy Spirit is always urging us forward, beyond what we think (and know) we are capable of on our own. The whole point is that we are *not* on our own and that we must be humble enough to realize this and welcome it.

So, then, one way to describe one’s “living her Christian vocation to the full” is that her life is one that is more and more lived from infused virtue, with the limit being a life whose every act proceeds from infused virtue, i.e., from the supernatural love of God and neighbor. And while such a life will be viewed from the inside very differently from the way in which one would view from the inside even the life of natural virtue, not to mention a life dominated by self-centered actions and sinful habits, it will not always appear all that different from other lives on the outside.

Again St. Josemaría:

Go about your professional duties for Love's sake. Do everything for the sake of Love and (precisely because you are in love, even though you may taste the bitterness of misunderstanding, of injustice, of ingratitude and even of failure in men's eyes) you will see the result in the wonders that your work produces — rich, abundant fruit, the promise of eternity! (*Friends of God*, 68)

To achieve this goal, we must act like souls urged on by Love and never as people under punishment or a curse. ‘Whatever you do, in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.’ Thus we shall complete our tasks perfectly, using our time to the full, for we shall be instruments who are in love with God. We shall be conscious of all the responsibility and trust that God has placed on our shoulders in spite of our own weaknesses. In every one of your actions, because you are relying on God’s strength, you must behave as one motivated solely by Love. (*Friends of God*, 71)

Appendix 2: *Virtuous living and reward*

Is virtue its own reward? Is it an insult to human dignity to suggest that a virtuous person should look forward, at least at the beginning, to compensation for virtuous living?

I bring this topic up because, interestingly, in the wake of the departure of the rich young man, St. Peter, perhaps jolted into realizing that he and the other apostles have already done precisely what the rich young man has just refused to do, expresses the need to be reassured by Jesus that what he and the others have done is worthwhile doing:

Peter began to say to him, “We have given up everything and followed you. What will there be for us?” Jesus said to them, “Amen, I say to you that you who have followed me, in the new age, when the Son of Man is seated on his throne of glory, will yourselves sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has given up houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands for the sake of my name will receive a hundred times more, and will inherit eternal life. (Matthew 19:27-29)

Notice, first of all, that Jesus does not rebuke Peter for asking about a reward. Peter has, after all, followed Jesus because of the promise of eternal life. Yet this eternal life is related *intrinsically* — and *not extrinsically* — to what Peter has already done and will continue to do in following Jesus. That is to say, in following Jesus Peter is becoming the sort of person who desires more and more intensely the sort of intimate union with God that eternal life consists in. In short, following Jesus with seriousness effects an inner transformation that profoundly alters Peter’s desires and perceived needs.

Consider this contrast. When I promise my granddaughter Lucy that I will give her ice cream if she puts the toys away before leaving my house, I am not doing anything that makes her the sort of person who likes ice cream. Lucy already likes ice cream as much as she ever will. The reward in this case is related *extrinsically* to the action by which she earns it. Lucy does something that is somewhat unpleasant, viz., cleaning up, in order to be rewarded with something that is very pleasant, viz., eating ice cream. This seems to be the way in which many people, both Christians and non-Christians alike, understand the Christian promise of heaven. Basically, you live a life that is somewhat unpleasant compared to the flashy alternatives in order to be rewarded with something that is very, very pleasant, viz., heaven, or at least in order to avoid something that is very, very unpleasant, viz., hell. In either case, the reward is related *extrinsically* to what you did to earn it. But, I submit, this is a wildly mistaken understanding of the conception of eternal life that one finds in the Gospels.

So the first thing to understand is that Peter's question is not inappropriate from Jesus' perspective. But there is more, since dangers are lurking in the neighboring bushes. Commenting on Jesus's teaching, Romano Guardini says:

Give unperceived. He who gives in order to be seen and praised already has his reward. Then his works are not displayed in order that people might praise God as revealed in him, but that they praise his own personal excellence. Indeed, it is not enough that no third person witness one's generosity, the giver's own right hand should not see what the left does! Not even before oneself should an act of charity be paraded or revelled in. Send that inner, applauding spectator away and let the act, observed only by God, stand on its own. It is a question here of virtue's intrinsic modesty, of that delicacy essential to the purity from which alone God can radiate. (*The Lord*, Part II, chap. 2, "Sincerity in Virtue")

Ironically, one impediment to undertaking Christian discipleship in a serious way in the first place is the fear that one's individuality will be swallowed up by an intense submission to the will of God. This fear quickly dissipates in the realization that one's life as an individual is enhanced by the empowerment that comes with God's generously bestowed grace. But then an opposite fear emerges — the fear that one is not transparent enough, and that the glory that belongs to God alone is being sought for oneself. As the Psalmist puts it, "*Non nobis, Domine, non nobis, sed nomini tuo da gloriam*" ("Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to Your name give the glory.") It is this latter danger that Guardini is addressing in the passage just quoted.

But, to return to the main topic of this Appendix, Guardini then notes that some modern moral philosophers have a problem with Jesus' accepting Peter's question as appropriate:

In these teachings of Christ one often repeated word gives us pause: reward. Contemporary ethics have declared: The motive of recompense belongs to a lower moral plane than that to which we have progressed. The superior modern has no use for it ... When I do something good, that good bears its own sense within it; it needs no further justification. Indeed, any additional motive would only lessen its intrinsic worth. The purity of the act is threatened by thought of "reward." I do not want to do a thing for reward; I prefer to do it for its own sake, which for me is sufficient. We cannot but agree. Yet Jesus speaks of reward -- repeatedly and at decisive moments.

Guardini goes on to argue that there is a "monstrous pride" lurking behind this modern attitude, a pride that usurps the divine prerogative of desiring "good for its own intrinsic dignity, and so purely that the pleasure of goodness is the sole and entirely satisfying motive behind our virtue." This belies our status as creatures, and fallen creatures at that. Guardini continues:

Jesus' idea of a reward is a warning-call to humanity. He says: You man — with all your possibilities of perceiving and desiring good — you are nevertheless creature! With all your possibilities of free choice, you remain creature! Anselm of Canterbury wrote of this moral danger. The almost illimitable possibilities of free choice tempt man to omnipotence without God, to feel himself God's equal. It can be overcome by reminding ourselves that even in the practice of virtue we are subject to God's judgment. The fruit of the good deed (or the moral decision and the effort spent on performing it) does not follow autonomously, but is God-given as "reward."

But we must go still deeper. The idea of reward can be undignified, but only when coupled with a false conception of God. The God of whom Jesus speaks is he who urges me to love him by enabling me to love with his divine power. It is from him that I receive both the love necessary for my act and its “reward”: his esteem, itself love. As genuine love grows it begins to say: I love God because he is God. I love him because he is worthy to be who he is ... And suddenly all thought of reward has vanished. No, it is still present in the humility of the beginning, but vanished as a direct motive, and that to which autonomous virtue aspired but could not attain unaided is accomplished: pure good for its own holy sake. Never has purity of intent been more exalted than in the bearing of the saints, who completely overlooked themselves in their burning desire to be possessed by God for God's sake. Only by not aspiring to that purity which is his alone, were they able to avoid running amuck in delusion and pride.

In other words, it is only someone who has now become a saint after much struggle who can say something like the following without a tinge of pride:

So much do I love your will, my God, that heaven itself, without your will — if such an absurdity could be — I would not accept. (Josemaría Escrivá, *The Way*, 765).

In the meantime, it is perfectly alright to emulate Peter:

Do everything unselfishly, for pure Love, as if there were neither reward nor punishment. But in your heart foster the glorious hope of heaven. (*The Way*, 68)