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On Restoring the Centrality of *Prudentia* (*Phronēsis*) for Living Well: Pathways and Contemporary Relevance

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Abstract: The aftermath of the Second World War saw some radical rethinking in both theology and philosophy on what it is to live well as a human being. In philosophy two of the key thinkers were Elizabeth Anscombe and Philippa Foot. In theology two key thinkers were Thomas Deman, a French Dominican, and somewhat later an English Dominican, Herbert McCabe. A key feature in all four thinkers was a recovery of the work of Aristotle and Aquinas, in particular the concept of *phronēsis* (*prudentia*). The paper's close analysis of the virtue of *prudentia* demonstrates the insufficiency of modern moral philosophies that are committed to portraying morality as a moral code. A correlative argument is made within theology: the virtue of *prudentia* fortified by the gift of counsel is central for good Christian living.

Keywords: *prudentia*; virtue; Aquinas; right practical action; intelligent decision-making



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1. Introduction

It was significant that when I came back to Oxford in 1945, that was the time when the news of the concentration camps was coming out. This news was shattering in a fashion that no one now can easily understand. We had thought that something like this could not happen.¹

The Second World War caused tremendous devastation, not only were cities destroyed but also our understanding of what it is to be human was shattered. As the philosopher Philippa Foot said, 'we had thought that something like this could not happen'. This reality, in the aftermath of the Second World War, gave birth to some radical rethinking of inherited theories of moral science, in the light of horrific accounts of what humans had done. People asked afresh the perennial questions what is it to be a good human being? How can we live well in a complex world? That is to say, how do we enact good decision-making for our own lives and for our society? In this paper the theme of good decision-making in a complex world will be addressed through the lens of the virtue of *prudentia*.

The paper first explores a philosophical pathway toward the recovery of *prudentia* (*phronēsis*) in the work of Elizabeth Anscombe (1919–2001) and Philippa Foot (1920–2010). In theology, a similar pathway was being followed in post-World War II Europe by the Dominican, Thomas Deman (1899–1954). Anscombe, Foot and Deman were all deeply impacted by the events of the Second World War. Reflection on this experience caused them to think deeply about 'living well' as humans. Where Anscombe rejects the philosophical systems she had inherited, Deman is profoundly critical of current moral systems annexed to treatments of 'conscience' in the Catholic theological tradition which he had inherited. As well as their experience of the Second World War all three were influenced by their reading of Aristotle and of Thomas Aquinas; while Anscombe and Foot focused largely on Aristotle, Deman's chief concern is to establish a correct reading of Thomas Aquinas, in particular on the virtue of *prudentia*. Somewhat later another Dominican, Herbert McCabe (1926–2001), continued this work on *prudentia* in Aquinas. The work of both Deman and McCabe significantly advanced insight into the importance of Aquinas' *prudentia*, (akin to Aristotle's *phronēsis*), for human living.

Having demonstrated the importance and richness of a return to an accurate reading of the work of Thomas Aquinas on the virtue of *prudentia*, the paper will argue that this virtue is particularly relevant in the code-objectification of life in modern civilisation. That modern moral philosophies, committed to portraying morality as a moral code, are insufficient can be seen more clearly when we look closely at the virtue of *prudentia*.

2. Elizabeth Anscombe and Mr Truman's Degree: Non Placet

Elizabeth Anscombe clearly saw what she identified as flaws, indeed errors, in the dominant moral theories prevailing in postwar Oxford philosophy. The paper will focus on three works from the 1950s. It shall be demonstrated that Anscombe pioneered a new way of thinking of what it is to be a good human being, of how to live well and how to enact good decision-making. Her recall of the need for virtuous human living opened a door to a way of thinking of decision-making in which the centrality of Aristotle's *phronēsis* could emerge.

Anscombe's concern was with defective moral philosophy wherein defective, indeed wrong moral decision-making, took place. Her experience at Oxford influenced her thinking in this regard.

In Spring 1956, Anscombe, while a Research Fellow in philosophy at Somerville College, Oxford, heard of a proposal to award former US president Harry Truman an honorary Oxford degree. On 1 May 1956 in Oxford's deliberative body, Congregation, Anscombe together with some others, voted against the awarding of the degree—'*non placet*' (it does not please). She articulated the reasons for her opposition in a speech delivered to the Oxford University Senate. This was later published in a pamphlet entitled *Mr. Truman's Degree*.²

The thinking presented in the pamphlet is complex.³ Many issues are addressed—pacifism, just war, the death penalty, the distinction between murder and killing. The pamphlet also presents an exploration of decision-making, both that of Truman to drop atomic bombs, and that of the University to give Truman an honorary degree, as well as Anscombe's own decision to protest the decision of the University, and this is our focus.

On Truman's decision to drop the atomic bomb Anscombe was adamant. Truman's decision-making was clearly unjust. His decision, she argued, had resulted in the murder of large numbers of innocent persons—civilians—in order to get the Japanese to surrender. While she conceded that the bombs may have saved a significant number of lives, doing evil that good may come can never be the action of a good person, she argued. It is not permissible, it cannot be the act of a good person, to decide to kill innocents for the sake of some greater good.⁴

For men to choose to kill the innocent as a means to their ends is always murder, and murder is one of the worst of human actions. . . . with Hiroshima and Nagasaki we are not confronted with a borderline case. In the bombing of these cities it was certainly decided to kill the innocent as a means to an end. (Anscombe 1956, pp. 2, 3)

Anscombe's assertion was that the decision-making process of the University was flawed, thus the decision taken wrong. Her argument was that the decision to award an honorary degree to Truman was wrong and that by this decision the University had become complicit in the action of bombing innocent people: 'one can share in the guilt of a bad action by praise and flattery, as also by defending it' (Anscombe 1956, p. 7). She feared the consequences of this flawed process of decision-making. Addressing her colleagues from the floor at the University Convocation Anscombe asked: 'If you do give this honour what Nero, what Genghis Khan, what Hitler or what Stalin will not be honoured in the future'.⁵

Anscombe could only vote '*non placet*'. Three others voted with her—Philippa Foot, Margaret Hubbard and the historian M.R.D. Foot. (Teichman 2002)⁶ Anscombe wondered why there was so little objection, how so many Oxford people could be complicit in this flawed decision-making process and thus vote '*placet*'. She reflects:

I get some small light on the subject when I consider the productions of Oxford moral philosophy since the first world war . . . Up to the second world war the prevailing moral philosophy in Oxford taught that an action can be ‘morally good’ no matter how objectionable the thing done may be. (Anscombe 1956, p. 7)

2.1. Anscombe’s Recovery of Virtue

Published in 1958, *Modern Moral Philosophy* is a classic in the history of the retrieval of virtue in the English speaking world.⁷ Her experience and consideration of flawed decision-making resulting in wrong decision-taking influenced her work calling for a recovery of virtue, and to her critique of the moral philosophy prevalent at Oxford at this time. In its place she argues for a recovery of virtue. Anscombe writes ‘[E]ventually it might be possible to advance to considering the concept “virtue”; with which, I suppose, we should be beginning some sort of a study of ethics’ (Anscombe 1958, p. 15).

Modern Moral Philosophy offers a scathing critique of moral philosophy since the Enlightenment. Anscombe’s ‘complaint’ is that the ethical theories popular amongst English ethicists led to errors in decision-making and were being used to justify wicked and unjust human action. Her argument is not that these theories are flawed in the sense that a remedy for the flaws can be sought. The argument is that these theories, this way of thinking, of what it is to be human and to act well are just plain wrong. As we have seen this was exemplified in the decision to award Truman an honorary degree. The conclusion in *Modern Moral Philosophy* is that modern English moral philosophers, from Butler to Mill, have faults as ethical thinkers ‘which make it impossible to hope for any direct light on it from them’ (Anscombe 1958, p. 2). A new term, consequentialism, was invented to describe moral philosophers from Sidgwick onwards (Anscombe 1958, p. 10). When it comes to decision-making, she argues that consequentialists forge moral principles which permit someone to decide that in such and such a circumstance, with such and such an end in mind, it may be, for example, that the judicial condemnation of an innocent person be deemed permissible. Consequences are being used to justify the morality of decision-making embodied in action. In this system of ethical argumentation unthinkable evil may be countenanced. She concludes:

It is left to modern moral philosophy—the moral philosophy of all the well-known English ethicists since Sidgwick—to construct systems according to which the man who says ‘We need such-and-such, and will only get it this way’ *may* be a virtuous character: that is to say, it is left open to debate whether such a procedure as the judicial punishment of the innocent may not in some circumstances be the ‘right’ one to adopt; and though the present Oxford moral philosophers would accord a man *permission* to ‘make it his principle’ not to do such a thing, they teach a philosophy according to which the particular consequences of such an action could ‘morally’ be taken into account by a man who was debating what to do; and if they were such as to conflict with his ‘ends’, it might be a step in his moral education to frame a moral principle under which he ‘managed’ (to use Mr. Nowell-Smith’s phrase [Ethics, p. 308] to bring the action; or it might be a new ‘decision of principle’, making which was an advance in the formation of his moral thinking (to adopt Mr. Hare’s conception), to decide: in such-and-such circumstances one ought to procure the judicial condemnation of the innocent. And that is my complaint. (Anscombe 1958, p. 19)

Anscombe’s complaint is that systems of thinking have been constructed such that in particular circumstances decisions can be made to, for example, procure the judicial condemnation of an innocent person, and that this would be ‘right’. It is the lack of a sound philosophy of human psychology and of human nature that has resulted in this crisis. She states that philosophers of her time lack an account of human nature, of good human decision-making, of what a good human action is, or is not.

At the core of Anscombe’s argument is her assertion that modern moral philosophers no longer understand what type of characteristic a virtue is, nor do they have a conception

of human flourishing. Their understanding of what it is to be human is diminished. These considerations led Anscombe to the startling view that it was not profitable to do moral philosophy at that time in Oxford due to the lack of an adequate philosophy of the psychology of human action. She wrote ‘it can be seen that philosophically there is a huge gap, at present unfillable as far as we are concerned, which needs to be filled by an account of human nature, human action, the type of characteristic a virtue is, and, above all of human ‘flourishing’. And it is the last concept that appears the most doubtful’.⁸

Anscombe had unearthed what she identified as a deep error in the moral philosophy of her time. She contended that it was unable to give an account of human flourishing, of human virtue. This had implications leading to misguided decision-making, followed by misguided justification. In Anscombe’s words we should ask, not ‘what is the morally right thing to do’, rather ask, ‘what would a virtuous person do faced with this situation’. She notes that there are many situations, in the complexity of human living, where there is no way of accounting for the right action except by giving examples, and ‘that is where the canon is ‘what’s reasonable’: which of course is *not* a canon’ (Anscombe 1958, p. 16). In some circumstances, boundary areas, a decision must be determined ‘according to what’s reasonable’. However we are still left with the problem of knowing ‘what is reasonable’, what is the right practical action when we encounter boundary areas, how to exercise good decision-making in borderline cases.⁹

In turning her back on the moral philosophy of her time Anscombe opened a pathway to an account of human flourishing and of human virtue influenced by Aristotle. Within the trajectory of the recovery of virtuous living in the Aristotelean sense it becomes possible to recognise the centrality of Aristotle’s *phronēsis* in virtuous living. This is the virtue that, among other things, enables a person ‘to stretch a point on the circumference’ in decision-making when faced with borderline cases, conflict situations, dilemmas.¹⁰

2.2. Intention: Knowledge and Goodness

It was the experience of the Truman controversy at Oxford University which as her daughter Dr Mary Geach notes ‘made her give the course of lectures which became the book *Intention*’.¹¹ In this book Anscombe asks if modern philosophy has misunderstood what ‘ancient and medieval philosophers meant by *practical knowledge?*’ (Anscombe 1957). Anscombe’s argument is that an understanding of ‘practical reasoning’ is foundational to an understanding of ‘practical knowledge’. This insight she terms ‘one of Aristotle’s best discoveries’ (Anscombe 1957, p. 58, n.33). That it had been forgotten, she argues, has left modern philosophy in utter darkness.

Taking up this point Jennifer Frey’s article entitled ‘Anscombe on Practical Knowledge and the Good’ presents a reading of *Intention* pertinent to the argument of this paper. Anscombe proposes, Frey notes, that there is both a knowledge requirement and a goodness requirement to action theory, and that these two requirements ‘stand or fall together’ (Frey 2019). Knowledge of the good is internal to knowledge of action. Knowledge of the end, knowledge of the ‘for sake’ of which I am acting is important. ‘Intentional action is a kind of *self-constitution*: in acting for a reason, a person knowingly constitutes herself and her movements through reason and will’ (Frey 2019, p. 1135).

Frey’s core argument is that while Anscombe’s *Intention* (1957) is a landmark text in twentieth century action theory, and *Modern Moral Philosophy* (1958) is equally influential when it comes to twentieth century ethics, ‘the properly philosophical concern raised by both of these texts is how action theory relates to ethics’ (Frey 2019, p. 1121). As we have seen in *Modern Moral Philosophy* Anscombe argues that ethics must be banished from our minds until we have a ‘sound philosophy of psychology’ (Anscombe 1958, p. 4). In *Intention*, Frey argues, ‘Anscombe seeks to present an account of the intentionality of action . . . Anscombe wants to show how we exercise a certain rational authority over our actions and therefore bear a certain responsibility for them’ (Frey 2019, p. 1145). To satisfy both

the knowledge requirement and the good requirement when it comes to intentional action, that is to say acting for a reason, ‘an agent needs to have some general conception of how to live—some general conception of what is useful, fitting, or pleasant within her own life on the whole—in order for her to intend to pursue some end in a way that is rationally intelligible at all’ (Frey 2019, p. 1145). This we can term ‘living well’. It is the idea of living well, a desire to live well, that will structure an agent’s deliberation: ‘where human beings have come to deliberation and choice, there will be a true answer to the question what they are up to in their lives’.¹²

Living well is complex. Exercise of the practical syllogism alone is not ethical proof of the goodness of an action, for the practical syllogism is a logical form of reasoning shared by Hitler and Saint Francis. This leads to a return to Anscombe’s positing of the necessity of both a knowledge requirement and a goodness requirement to action theory. Knowledge of the good is internal to knowledge of action when the concern is virtuous living. In Anscombe’s account there is an ‘essential connection between practical reason, will, and action’ in the human project of ‘living well’.¹³ The intrinsic aim of practical reasoning is that humans live well. Frey concludes:

Anscombe was correct to argue that we must do action theory first, since it would have been difficult to arrive at this formulation had we not agreed to follow Anscombe’s advice in “*Modern Moral Philosophy*”, which was to “banish ethics totally from our minds” and put talk of the moral “ought” on the index (2005b: 188). The difficulty arises because talk of ‘moral’ in the modern sense prevents us from hearing it in the proper register: as ‘living well’. (Frey 2019, p. 1148)

Stimulated to think deeply about good human living in the wake of the Second World War, and challenged by her colleagues decision to award Mr Truman an honorary degree, Anscombe, in these three writings, has effectively argued for the demolition of contemporary ways of thinking of the ‘morality’ of human acts. Her identification for the need of both a knowledge component and a goodness component in human decision-making orientated toward living well opened the pathway to a transition to an alternative way of considering what it is to be human. The advice proffered is that we should reconsider human action in a framework that is broadly Aristotelian, also influenced by Aquinas: for while ‘Anscombe does not often refer to Aquinas in her work, we should not infer that she was not greatly influenced by him’ (Doyle 2018, p. 220).

3. Philippa Foot: The Rationality of Doing What Virtue Demands

As noted, among Anscombe’s ‘complaints’ in *Modern Moral Philosophy* was that the prevailing moral philosophy in Oxford was leading to faulty decision-making which justified evil acts, and therefore was to be rejected. Reason is important in decision-making, but exercise of the practical syllogism is insufficient for good human decision-making, and to living well, living humanly. Philippa Foot, friend and colleague of Anscombe, continued this exploration of a transition to an alternative way of thinking of what it is to be human, and within this context, of what it is to make good human decisions.

While Foot explored questions of virtue, vice and good human living throughout her career it was with the publication in 2001 of *Natural Goodness* that a significant development in her thinking is articulated (Foot 2001). She explores further the relationship between the rational component and the goodness component in human action, in human decision-making. In *Natural Goodness* she raises the question ‘why’ human beings, as rational creatures, have reason to act virtuously: ‘the question is not whether we have reason to aim at being good human beings, but rather whether we have reason to aim at those things at which a good human being must aim, as for instance good rather than harm to others, or keeping faith. The problem is about the rationality of doing what virtue demands’ (Foot 2001, p. 53).

She gives focused attention to this question in the chapter entitled ‘Practical Rationality’.¹⁴ Her colleague Warren Quinn, in a paper entitled ‘Rationality and the Human Good’, had pointed out that if practical reason would only concern the relation of means to ends it

could be indifferent to an agent's nefarious purposes.¹⁵ If practical rationality concerned *only* the relationship of means to ends, a full account of the objectivity of good human action does not result. This led Quinn to ask '*what then would be so important about practical rationality?*' (Foot 2001, p. 62). Following from Quinn, Foot argues, that if this is the case there must be an independent concept of practical rationality 'with which the requirements of moral goodness must somehow be shown to be consonant. I see Quinn as struggling to watch us all tie a horse to the back of a cart, and suggesting "Try it the other way around"' (Foot 2001, pp. 62, 63).

Foot contrasts the way animals and humans engage with the good, 'animals go for the good (thing) *that they see*, human beings go for *what they see as good*' (Foot 2001, p. 56). The good for the human is intellectually perceived as the good. Foot follows Quinn's advice, and changes direction, 'seeing goodness as setting a necessary condition of practical rationality and therefore as at least a part-determinant of the thing itself' (Foot 2001, p. 63). Human practical rationality has its provenance in the human orientation to act for a good end. Her argument is that there is an intrinsic link between human goodness and reasons for action. In this way of thinking to act badly is to act against reason. For Foot the concept of practical rationality is to be understood in terms of a prior notion of good. In an interview following publication of *Natural Goodness* Foot commented:

Practical rationality is being as one should be, being a non-defective human being in respect of those things done for reasons . . . I'm saying that practical rationality is goodness in respect of reason for action, just as speculative rationality, is goodness in respect of beliefs on conclusions drawn from premises and so on. . . . Practical rationality is essential to the life of human beings. (Lewis 2001)

It is pertinent to note that Foot also, following Anscombe's advice, read Thomas Aquinas.¹⁶ She notes: 'I got interested in the second part of the *Summa Theologica*, which is about particular virtues and vices'.¹⁷ This 'Aquinas thread' is an important component of the larger argument of this paper. In her 1977 essay 'Virtues and Vices' Foot draws attention to the fact that when one goes back to Aristotle and Aquinas there is not an identical coincidence 'between their terminology and our own'.¹⁸ Foot speaks of practical wisdom which she tells us was 'counted by Aristotle among the intellectual virtues, and while our *wisdom* is not quite the same as *phronēsis* or *prudentia* it too might seem to belong to the intellect rather than the will' (Foot 2002, p. 5). That there is not an identical coincidence 'between their terminology and our own' is an important observation that shall be returned to.

Thus far we have explored one pathway, a philosophical pathway toward the recovery of good decision-making as central to an understanding of what it is to live well in the work of Elizabeth Anscombe and Philippa Foot. In theology, a similar pathway was being followed in post-World War II Europe. The paper will now turn to the work of two Dominicans, Thomas Deman and Herbert McCabe, whose work has significantly advanced insight into the importance of Aquinas' *prudentia*, closely aligned with Aristotle's *phronēsis*, for human living.

4. Thomas Deman: 'La Prudence de la *Somme Théologique*'

In 1947, the French Dominican Thomas Deman op (1899–1954)¹⁹ in the foreword to his commentary on the *Secunda secundae* (qq. 47–56) argued for the 'restoration of the treatise on *prudentia*'.²⁰ In his use of the phrase the 'restoration of the treatise on *prudentia*' he is clearly implying that the centrality of this virtue had been lost from view. He argued that 'famous moral systems' annexed to treatments of conscience had replaced 'la prudence de la *Somme théologique*'²¹ with devastating consequences for human living, '*en réalité, on en changea l'esprit*'.²²

Deman shows how Thomas Aquinas gives attention to the virtue of *prudentia* in many places in his writings, most notably in the *Prima secundae* of the *Summa theologiae*, where he addresses virtue in general, and again in the *Secunda secundae* where questions 47–56 are

specifically dedicated to discussion of this virtue.²³ Aquinas first discusses the virtue itself, (ST II-II qq. 47–51), then the associated gift of the Holy Spirit, counsel (ST II-II q. 52, *donum consilii*), and the vices attendant to *prudentia* (ST II-II qq. 53–55). This follows his usual method: first the virtue itself, then the gift, finally the vices. In addition, for this virtue, Aquinas includes a question on the precepts (commandments; *de praeceptis*) pertaining to *prudentia* (ST II-II q. 56).

Deman points out that the groundwork has been laid in the *Prima secundae: prudentia est virtus maxime necessaria ad vitam humanam. Bene enim vivere consistit in bene operari.*

Prudentia 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 person does, but also how they do it; to wit, that they 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. Now a person is suitably directed to their due end by a virtue which perfects the soul in the appetitive part, the object of which is the good and the end. And to that which is suitably ordained to the due end a person needs to be rightly disposed by a habit in their reason, because counsel and choice, which are about things ordained to the end, are acts of the reason. Consequently an intellectual virtue is needed in the reason, to perfect the reason, and make it suitably affected towards things ordained to the end; and this virtue is *prudentia*. Consequently *prudentia* is a virtue necessary to lead a good life.²⁴

It is precisely on these grounds that Thomas Deman advocates the restoration of *prudentia*, and speaks of the centrality of *prudentia* in the living of a good life. *Prudentia* means acting well, acting well is living well: *Bene enim vivere consistit in bene operari.*

Prudentia, for Deman, following Aquinas ‘is the sign of one’s soul’, that is to say it is a sign of a human being fully alive.²⁵ To be a person of *prudentia* is of great significance. One can be a great mathematician or a great artist, or a great sportsperson, but this does not necessarily imply that one is a ‘great’ human being. For Deman, this is precisely what *prudentia* gives: the beauty of human flourishing, the beauty that pertains to a person harmoniously and universally developed. The virtue of *prudentia* co-ordinates, guides and enables a person to live well as a human being. One becomes a good person, *simpliciter*.²⁶ This is the goal of life, to become virtuous without reserve.²⁷

In his call for the restoration of the centrality of this virtue Deman identified a problem with the term, the word, itself. Far from meaning timidity or caution, the way in which the term *la prudence* is often understood in French, Deman argues that in the Greek and Latin sense, inherited by Aquinas, an orientation to intelligent action is always included in any understanding of *prudentia*.²⁸ As a virtue of the practical intellect its primary function is to lead us into intelligent decision-making. This is foundational to Aquinas’ theological anthropology: for Aquinas a certain intellectual quality is essential for the happy fulfilment of the moral life and of human flourishing.²⁹

As such, it is for us a teaching of the greatest importance. Because perhaps nothing has become of less importance to us, than this thought, primordial and uncontested for St Thomas, according to which, to be good and virtuous, we must take care of our intelligence.³⁰

We must take care of our intelligence, ‘nous avons à prendre soin de notre intelligence’ if we wish to become good, virtuous, human beings. *Prudentia*, an intellectual virtue, not only enables one to reason toward a good act, it is itself the art of skilful living.³¹

Prudentia and the Moral Virtues

Prudentia, is a virtue in the practical intellect. *Prudentia’s* concern is doing things rightly, acting well: *prudentia vero est recta ratio agibilium.* (ST I-II q. 57 a.4 c)³² To *prudentia*

belongs the application to action—*applicatio ad opus*. This is the end of practical reason.³³ Deman highlights that this is a key teaching of Aquinas in regard to *prudentia*. *Prudentia*'s prime concern is not theory but '*applicatio*'. The word '*applicatio*' appears here in ST II-II q. 47 a.3 c for the first time. *Prudentia* is *recta ratio agibilium*—right thinking about things to be done, it is right practical action. Deman argues that this article is instigated by Aquinas to enable him to distinguish between the thought of two philosophers, Plato and Aristotle. Deman's argument is that Plato's contemplation does not bring about change in the world, in contrast Aristotle's focus on action can result in the introduction of something new into the world. It can make a difference. This is the tradition that Aquinas follows.³⁴

Thus formally *prudentia* is a virtue of the practical intellect, a facility in making intelligent decisions in human activity; materially it is connected with the moral virtues. In the exercise of *prudentia* one is always engaged in matters such as acting justly, courageously, moderately: 'for the qualities of *prudentia* overflow on to the other virtues in so far as they are directed by *prudentia*'.³⁵ This is where we see the centrality of *prudentia*.

Deman draws attention to an important distinguishing point between Aquinas and Aristotle: in Aristotle *prudentia* (*phronēsis*) is never the subject of error.³⁶ This is not so for Aquinas. Deman points out for Aquinas there is inevitably a certain instability in matters of good human decision-making. Circumstances can render inapplicable principles one had believed to be universally valid. The work of *prudentia* consists in the application of universal principles to particular circumstances. In ST II-II q. 47 a.3 ad 2 Aquinas cites from the Book of Wisdom (Wisdom 9:14), 'our counsels are uncertain' [*sunt incertae providentiae nostrae, ut dicitur Sap. IX*]. This citation is from a section in the Book of Wisdom which speaks of the weakness and limitations of human reasoning when it comes to the unfathomable thoughts of God. While Aquinas attaches great importance to universal principles as rules of action, the spirit of scripture allows him to admit the fragility of human reason.

Thus, *prudentia* is fallible (ST II-II q.47 a.3 ad 2), and yet it ranks among the virtues of the practical intellect, as an intellectual virtue of the contingent. It is on this understanding of the fallibility of *prudentia*, that Aquinas finds his profound appreciation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, in particular the gift of counsel—without such help, it appears we would be in peril, at risk of becoming victims of our errors.³⁷ It is the gift of counsel which directs a person to be responsive to 'the guidance of God who knows all things'.³⁸ This leads Aquinas to speak of an infused virtue of *prudentia*, which Deman notes highlights the originality of Aquinas' treatment of this virtue.³⁹

The same emphasis on the centrality of *prudentia* is found in the writings of Marie-Dominique Chenu (1895–1990) a contemporary of Deman. Chenu's study of Aquinas highlights the tight link between human virtue and human reason.⁴⁰ He noted

Prudence (*prudentia*) does not constitute an additive to reason and will from outside in the way that a duty is imposed upon freedom to constrain its expression. Prudence (*prudentia*) is reason itself rendered perfect in its judgement and its choices. (Chenu 2002, p. 110)

For Chenu *prudentia* is the endowment through which human reason, true to itself, governs the vast changeableness of human behaviour and refracts 'into my most difficult actions the eternal divine attributes of Truth, Justice, and authentic fulfilment' (Chenu 2002, p. 110).

Emphasising this same point French Dominican Jean-Pierre Torrell (1927–) refers to the architectonic role of *prudentia* in the context of moral virtues, 'since without prudence (*prudentia*) there is no true virtue' (Torrell 2003, p. 358). He notes, 'in contemporary language, prudence suggests a timorous and even negative attitude toward action. In Thomas' perspective, on the contrary, prudence (*prudentia*) is the virtue of choice and decision, of personal responsibility, of risk consciously taken. It closes the deliberative processes by daring to prescribe action in a specific situation, singular each time, that will never repeat itself' (Torrell 2003, p. 270).

5. Herbert McCabe: The Virtue of ‘Good Sense’

‘We still have a long way to go, however, in rehabilitating virtue and thus *prudentia* as the centre of moral thinking’, wrote the Dominican theologian Herbert McCabe in the 1990s in Oxford (McCabe 2008). In his writings McCabe acknowledges that he is building on the work of a long line of thinkers. He recognises his indebtedness to the French Dominicans,⁴¹ and to the English Dominicans working in the Oxford studium—Gerald Vann, Thomas Gilby and, above all, Victor White who ‘rediscovered the authentic doctrine of Thomas, in which what was central was not *rules* or *natural law* but the virtue of *prudentia*—and not just the human virtue of *prudentia*, but a sharing in divine *providentia* by which we are guided in the life of *caritas* (sharing in divine love)’.⁴² (McCabe 2008) McCabe also acknowledges the contribution of Anscombe and Foot in Oxford during the 1950s (both of whom he knew, and engaged with), and the great impetus given to the retrieval of Aristotle and Aquinas by Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue*.⁴³

McCabe’s engagement with this project of the restoration of *prudentia* is significant. In 1968 he wrote a study of ethics, entitled *Law, Love and Language* (McCabe 1978). In three subsequent essays, later collected in *God Still Matters*, he returns to this theme with a concentration on the virtue of *prudentia*. The titles of the essays are ‘Aquinas on Good Sense’,⁴⁴ ‘Teaching Morals’ and ‘The Role of Tradition’ (McCabe 2002).⁴⁵ A few years before he died McCabe gave a series of lectures on Aquinas in Oxford, which included an extended treatment of the virtue of *prudentia*. The text of these lectures was edited and published posthumously in *On Aquinas* (McCabe 2008). In another posthumously published work entitled *The Good Life. Ethics and the Pursuit of Happiness* McCabe offers an exposition of virtue ethics, highlighting the central role of *prudentia* (McCabe 2005). There is another brief treatment of the centrality of *prudentia* in an essay entitled ‘A Very Short Introduction to Aquinas’, again published posthumously (McCabe 2007). These are the principal locations in which McCabe gives an account of Aquinas on *prudentia*.⁴⁶ Clearly McCabe regarded *prudentia*—‘that most interesting and important of the virtues that can be acquired by education’—as of the utmost importance in leading a good life.⁴⁷ He returned over and over again to the work of the retrieval of the centrality of *prudentia*, and how this virtue is pivotal to good human living.

On several occasions he presents his thinking against a background of what he terms a ‘voluntarist’ view of the moral life. He argues that particularly since the sixteenth century moralists have seen the characteristic human act ‘as one flowing from the free will, viewed as a separate faculty from intelligence. For Aristotle and Aquinas, the characteristic human act is one done for a reason, the product of practical intelligence’.⁴⁸ McCabe is particularly concerned that the voluntarist view is deeply imbedded in Catholic moral handbooks.⁴⁹ This concern gives specific cogency to his insistence on the retrieval of *prudentia* as a virtue of the utmost necessity for human living.

In ‘Aquinas on Good Sense’ McCabe begins by noting the problem of translating *prudentia* into English, in a manner reminiscent of Deman’s approach to the French ‘la prudence’. It is important to recall the Latin term that Aquinas uses—*prudentia*—is a rendering of the Greek term used by Aristotle, *phronēsis*. In the English language the word prudence is often understood as a habit of being canny and circumspect, determined to avoid risk taking at all costs. In contrast for Aquinas *prudentia* is a settled disposition to take the right practical action whatever the circumstances, and, indeed, whatever the risks. It means having good judgement, having the ability ‘of grasping the salient features of a situation, relying on long experience of resourceful and responsive decision-making—we might say practical insight, even common sense’ (Kerr 2009).

McCabe suggests *prudentia* could be well translated into English as ‘good sense’, borrowing the phrase from the celebrated English novelist, Jane Austen. Austen’s characters, such as Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* and Emma in *Emma*, are shown as growing in good sense in contrast to the silliness and worldly wisdom of others. Good sense, *prudentia*, is the virtue which disposes us to think well about what to do, to use good sense in action,

and this is what Austen's central characters express: good sense in practical thinking in decision-making.

5.1. An Interweaving of Intellect and Will

Of key importance in understanding *prudentia* is a correct grasp of how intellect (reason) and will (desire) are interwoven in our decision-making. McCabe observes,

by the time Aquinas came to write this part of the *Summa* he had just written his commentary on Aristotle's *De anima* and come to see the whole matter much more clearly than he had done when, for example, writing his early *Commentary on the Sentences*. And what he had come to see was that when we come to the field of human action there is no operation of the reason which is not also an operation of the will, and vice versa. There is an interweaving of understanding and being attracted that cannot be unravelled in practice.⁵⁰

This interrelation of intellect and will is present at every stage of human action.⁵¹ There is no act of *prudentia*, right practical reason, which is not also an act of will. In the words of Aquinas 'it belongs to *prudentia*, as stated above (a.1, ad 3; a.3) to apply right reason to action, and this is not done without a right appetite'—*Ad prudentiam autem pertinet, sicut dictum est, applicatio rectae rationis ad opus, quod non fit sine appetitu recto* (ST II-II q.47 a.4 c). This is the interplay between reason and will woven into Aquinas' account of good decision-making. *Prudentia*, an intellectual virtue, is at play in all our human decision-making; it is the will that prompts the intellect's engagement, setting it on the appropriate path. McCabe comments '[w]e are first called upon, it seems, to be intelligent'.⁵² As Deman noted, we need to take care of our intelligence.

This line of thinking rejects a decision-making in which intellect (reason) and will (desire) are deemed to be separate faculties, in the sense of faculties that operate independently of one another. For Aquinas it is not the case that our reason figures out the right course of action, and that this information is then handed over to the will. The will then, of its own volition, decides on the action to take. It is this style of thinking that McCabe styles 'voluntarist'.⁵³

In short, for McCabe, following Aquinas, it is a requirement of good decision-making that it be intelligent decision-making. It is a requirement of good human activity that it be intelligent human activity. This applies across the whole range of human behaviour. 'Moral acts and human acts are one and the same'.⁵⁴ This is why *prudentia* is the central virtue in good human living.

5.2. The Contribution of Sensory Knowledge

McCabe draws attention to another significant point: in considering good decision-making the contribution of the sensual interpretation of our realities is an intrinsic part of Aquinas' account of intelligent decision-making.⁵⁵ Sensual interpretation of the world begins with external senses. McCabe notes that within the five exterior senses Aquinas identifies the basic one as the skin, touch.⁵⁶ All senses are founded upon touch, it is 'the root and ground, as it were, of the other senses'. (*Commentary on De Anima*, 3,3 no.602)⁵⁷ McCabe reminds us that, in Aquinas' view, there must be a co-ordination of the input from these five senses, so that there is a unitary and active sensual interpretation of the world. It is not just that we receive sense data through our external sense organs, it is that our sensory faculties are an interpretative engagement with our realities. It is this that led McCabe in *On Aquinas* to follow the chapter on *prudentia* with two chapters on the senses. His particular focus is on, what he terms, the interior senses. These are the *sensus communis*, whose role is to co-ordinate sensory information, the *sensus aestimativus* whose role is to grasp and evaluate the sensual significance of experience and the *imaginatio*, which retain a sense memory of significant experiences.⁵⁸ All this sensory activity is active within intelligent decision-making leading to right practical action.

Prudentia has to deal with concrete human situations, hence the importance of our sensory knowledge in decision-making. Human powers of sensibility must be engaged alongside human intellectual powers. Decisions have to be made, actions to be taken, in the course of everyday human living, with all its practical details. Purely intellectual skills cannot do this on their own. To engage with individual human actions *prudentia* 'has to be not only a disposition of the intellect but also of our sensibility'.⁵⁹ McCabe concludes

Good sense, then, for St Thomas, as the disposition to do our practical reasoning well, involves a sensitive awareness of a multitude of factors which may be relevant to our decision. It involves, he says, bringing into play not merely our purely intellectual (symbol-using) powers but our sensuous apprehension of the concrete individual circumstances of our action. (McCabe 1986, pp. 152–65, 163)

5.3. Formation into Prudentia

We are not just human beings but human 'becomings', McCabe argues, and the basic and essential genre of our human becoming is 'narrative history of a particular kind'.⁶⁰ We are the narrators, at least in part. As narrators we help shape the story by our decisions, by our actions. McCabe speaks of good sense in practical thinking as a skill, or better still a disposition or a virtue. It is learnt over time. Parents, and parental figures, are our first guide. Good guides help us, and we learn by practice. One grows into the skills of good decision-making, *prudentia*, in company, alongside others. Virtues, dispositions, make it easier for us to make good practical decisions, thereby helping to shape the narrative of a good human life.⁶¹

A significant stage in development is when we ourselves, and not just our guides, come to actually want these goods. Here we see the interaction of reason and will. The virtue of *prudentia* is growing deeper, on the way to becoming a settled disposition. In this way one is growing into becoming a good human being, a person who makes wise decisions: 'virtue is a quality making its possessor good and rendering good what they do'.⁶²

It is because one has developed good dispositions, a good character, that one actually wants to do good. This is living well. It is worth noting, at this point, that it would be hard to get further away from Kant's position. For Kant, morality is about dutiful obedience to the moral law. McCabe's position is that Kant, (arguably),

would regard acting out of inclination as diminishing the value of an act which ought to be done from an uncontaminated sense of duty. We ought, of course, to be clear that acting from the inclination arising from virtue does not mean taking the easiest or least painful path. It means taking the one that conforms to and springs from who you are and what you treat as ultimately satisfactory.⁶³

McCabe, like Aquinas, writes as both theologian and philosopher.⁶⁴ For Aquinas, the theologian, the real depth of human living is to live within *caritas*, the divine friendship, graciously gifted to us. Thus for Aquinas *caritas* is the 'form', meaning the life or soul of every virtue.⁶⁵ McCabe writes, 'having been given to share in the divine life, we then live it out in our human way and exercise not only our strictly and exclusively *divine* virtues of faith, hope and charity but also our now divinised human virtues, and of these the central one is *prudentia*'.⁶⁶

5.4. Prudentia and the Gift of Counsel

At this stage, following the prompt of Deman and McCabe, a return to the text of Aquinas where the gift of the Holy Spirit, termed 'the gift of Counsel' is set in correspondence with the virtue *prudentia* (ST II-II q 52), will further enrich the teaching on *prudentia*, and also mark an important distinction from Aristotle's *phronēsis*.

In the *Summa Theologiae* Aquinas' concern is to show how the journey of life, the journey towards human fulfilment, what we have termed 'living well', is taken up within the larger journey towards entering God's life, God's goodness, God's bliss. Each account

of a particular virtue in the *Secunda secundae* is linked with an account of a specific gift of the Holy Spirit.⁶⁷

The gifts of the Holy Spirit are precisely ‘gifts’; they are not human achievements. In their ambit we are more moved than moving. God moves everything respecting the modality of that which is moved.⁶⁸ The rational creature is moved to do something by way of enquiry, ‘moved through the research of reason’.⁶⁹ This research, this enquiry is called counsel. This is the proper modality of the human way of being. The Holy Spirit moves human beings, rational creatures, *per modum consillii*, by way of advice, of counsel (ST II-II q. 52 a.1 c).⁷⁰ *Prudentia* is perfected and helped in its proper work by the Holy Spirit’s gift of counsel (ST II-II q. 52 a.2 c). The Holy Spirit ‘does not work by blind impulses but by moving people in an advisory manner’.⁷¹ Aquinas argues that ‘*prudentia*, which implies rectitude of the intellect, is greatly perfected and aided when directed and moved by the Holy Spirit . . . the gift of counsel responds to and aids *prudentia*’.⁷²

This gift assisting *prudentia* is of importance as while God’s knowledge is comprehensive, human knowledge is not. In the life situations where we must ‘act well in order to live well’ we rarely if ever have a full command of all singularities and all contingencies in the total situation which we confront. In regard to this we receive God’s help, God’s advice as it were, through the gift of counsel, and through the modality in which that gift is given and received by us. When the horizon of the further journey into God’s way of life, of goodness and bliss is taken into account, as the crucial horizon within which Christians must act and live, the necessity of the enhancement of *prudentia* by the gift of the Holy Spirit becomes evident.

In question 68 of the *Prima secundae* Aquinas discusses the relationship between the gifts and the virtues. The gifts are at the service of the virtues, enabling them to be practiced perfectly. They are dispositions that make a person *prompte mobilis ab inspiratione divina*, open and amenable to Divine inspiration (ST I-II q. 68 a.1 c).⁷³

6. *Prudentia* in a ‘Secular Age’

In the final question of his treatment of *prudentia* in the *Secunda secundae* Aquinas discusses the precepts of the decalogue (ST II-II q. 56).⁷⁴ Given Aquinas’ emphasis on this virtue for good human living, it was right for people to wonder why *prudentia* is not referred to in the decalogue, in any of the commandments. Aquinas’ consideration led him to conclude that while no precept relates directly to *prudentia*, ‘all the precepts of the decalogue are related to *prudentia*, in so far as it directs all virtuous acts’.⁷⁵ In like manner *prudentia* is deemed essential, core, to living the teaching of the Gospel. (ST II-II q. 56 a.1 ad 2) While *prudentia* is of central importance for all human living, it has particular ramifications for Christian living.

Law, rules, codes are important, but in Aquinas’ time as in ours, it is not possible ‘to act well so as to live well’ if humans steer only by codes and rule-based precepts. Towards the conclusion of his long study of modernity in *The Secular Age* Charles Taylor draws attention to the distinctive interpretation of the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10: 29–37) in the work of the Catholic philosopher and social critic Ivan Illich. Jesus tells this parable in response to the question ‘who is my neighbour?’ A travelling Jew is left by the roadside, beaten, robbed, wounded. Among all who pass by, pious Jews, Levites, priests, it is a Samaritan, a despised outsider, who attends to him, finds a nearby inn and supplies funds for the Jew’s recuperation. The standard modern interpretation, as Taylor deems it, is that this parable prompts in us moderns the insight that our neighbour is not just a fellow member of our group; all human beings are to be regarded as ‘our neighbour’—and this is what the Samaritan has demonstrated. Another reading is that it is the law-observant people—priest, Levite, pious Jew—who by obeying the letter of the law do not aid the despised outsider. It is the Samaritan who ‘did’ the law, thus inheriting eternal life (Brown et al. 1993). Ivan Illich offers a further interesting interpretation. In the story, as he reads it, the Samaritan is set free into a new kind of community, a new kind of being. Precisely in his acting well he creates community with this wounded man. This is the communion of

agape, ‘which comes from God . . . and which becomes possible because God became flesh’ (Taylor 2007, p. 739). It is this enfleshment of God, extending outwards, which gave rise to the network called Church.

Illich’s identification of the Church as such a network is, for Taylor, key. It is when the network, human relations, the Church, is institutionalised and rules are established to ensure the hungry are fed, and the homeless housed, that there is a danger that we lose ‘some of the communion, the “*conspiratio*”, which is at the heart of the Eucharist. The spirit is strangled’ (Taylor 2007, p. 739). Rationality and rules prescribe treatments for categories of people. We fit into categories; our rights and entitlements depend on these.⁷⁶

This leads Taylor to ponder what Illich is telling us—to do away with our code-driven, objectified world? As we have seen some codes are essential, legal ones for the rule of law, and some moral codes that we pass from one generation to the next. Taylor’s argument is that it is important to remain aware that that is not all there is. The ‘nomocratic-judicialized-objectified world’ can be dehumanizing, alienating generating

dilemmas that it cannot see . . . Codes even the best codes, can become idolatrous traps, which tempt us to complicity in violence. Illich can remind us not to become totally invested in the code, even the best code of a peace-loving, egalitarian, liberalism. We should find the centre of our spiritual lives beyond the code, in networks of living concern, which are not to be sacrificed to the code, which must even from time to time subvert it. (Taylor 2007, p. 743)

Taylor concludes: ‘This message comes out of a certain theology, but it could be heard with profit by everybody’ (Taylor 2007, p. 743).

With Illich, Taylor is warning of the dangers of living by code-objectification. His warning is not only to a code and rule driven Church but it seems clear it is no less directed to those who live by the codes constitutive of modern liberal societies with protestations of egalitarian, peace-loving liberalism. If these warnings are not specious, then the argument for a renewed emphasis on the centrality of *prudentia* within the account of what it is to ‘act well and live well’ in society are strengthened. Within Christianity, the argument for a renewed emphasis on the centrality of *prudentia* and its corresponding gift of counsel seems imperative.

But this is not easy. It is notable that several of the thinkers whose work was examined in this paper struggled to find an equivalence in contemporary language for the key concept of Aquinas’ *prudentia*. Working against the grain of contemporary idiom, they noted the difficulty of finding equivalent contemporary expressions. This is a grave finding. It certainly makes the challenge of restoring the centrality of *prudentia*, be it in ecclesial or societal culture more broadly, extraordinarily difficult. Philosophical and theological specialists can do their work and achieve vital clarifications by using specialised terms such as Aquinas’ *prudentia* or Aristotle’s *phronēsis*. This option, this resource, is not available when working within a broader public. New and creative means must be sought.

7. Concluding Reflections

Since the publication of Anscombe’s *Intention and Modern Moral Philosophy*, and Deman’s ‘Pour une Restauration de la Vertu de Prudence’⁷⁷) much has been written in moral philosophy on decision-making for good human living, and in moral theology on the virtue of *prudentia*. However, with McCabe it remains the argument of this paper that there is still a long way to go in rehabilitating *prudentia* as the centre of human living. Much modern moral philosophy remains committed to portraying morality as a moral code.

The validity of this claim is evident in the response to the Covid pandemic. Few in Europe will forget the sight of coffins piled high at Bergamo, and other places in Italy, in the early months of 2020. The response from governments was swift: lockdown, and the implementation of laws to enforce same. However, dilemmas arose when even these arguably necessary codes became, it could be argued, ‘idolatrous traps’ tempting us to complicity in violence. The dilemma between getting things done, keeping people safe, maintaining functioning health-care systems on the one hand, and on the other hand,

showing proper regard for the uniqueness of persons, their judgements, their decisions on about what is best for them in these circumstances quickly arose. Governments decided to legally enforce closure of restaurants, bars, hotels, shops, even places of worship, and to severely restrict travel limits to safeguard their citizens. Democratic governments have authority to act in the interests of citizens and it is an exercise of *prudentia* to recognise this. This encroachment on civil liberty was, by most, accepted in the early days when fear dominated. However, in this context the danger of the concept of *prudentia* morphing into the contemporary concept of prudence became clear. It could be argued that it was prudence that dictated that adult children were to defer from visiting elderly parents in their homes to care for them. The word prudence was heard repeatedly on the media, generally the reference was to caution, indeed oft times ‘an abundance of caution’. This abundance of caution is starkly illustrated in care homes assuming total authority for what is best for the family whose member is in their care: no visits, solitary confinement in rooms, graduating to window visits and limited room visits. Violence was done to people; many of us are complicit. This instinctive reach for codes rather than *prudentia* brings to mind Torrell’s description of *prudentia* as the virtue of risk consciously taken.

On another front, the question of vaccination likewise brings to the fore the practice of *prudentia* as a communal virtue. The decision to take the vaccine or to opt not to do so, when offered, is not simply a subjective issue. While ‘I’ may be correct, in ‘my’ given circumstances not to take it, ‘my’ decision has communal ramifications and so *prudentia* is important in the decision-making.

From a different perspective, but still in regard to vaccination, the World Health Organisation advises that while it is indeed important for a country to vaccinate as many citizens as possible, there is a call for governments, in their informed decision-making, to find a balance between self-care for ‘us’ and ‘our’ flourishing and ‘vaccine equality’ at a time of global pandemic. *Prudentia*, an intellectual virtue, must guide people in just decision-making.

The argument in this paper is that *prudentia* is a *pivotal* virtue in the virtuous life: *bene enim vivere consistit in bene operari*—to live well consists in acting well (ST I-II q. 58 a.5 c). There can be no ‘acting well’ without informed, intelligent, courageous decision-making. This practiced skill of wise decision-making is learnt with others in society. It takes time, knowledge and experience. People need to be educated into this virtue.

Aquinas gives attention to the education of a person into the virtue of *prudentia* in the last two articles of question 47 and continues in ST II-II q. 49 where article 3 focuses on *docilitas*, a quasi-integral part of *prudentia*. *Docilitas*, teachableness, is important for every virtue, but it is especially vital for *prudentia*—‘in matters of *prudentia* people stand in very great need of being taught by others, especially by old folk who have acquired a sane understanding of the ends in practical matters’.⁷⁸ In what is probably countercultural today Aquinas’ advice is to listen to older, wiser people, those experienced in living life. They are particularly competent guides for human living. Their experience gives them insight. (ST II-II q. 49 a.3 c)⁷⁹ When it comes to law, Deman advises that a certain agility of mind (*souplesse*) helps prudence to reconcile with law, for in dealing with contingent matters exactitude is not always necessary.⁸⁰

A lot of these skills of *prudentia* are acquired through living in community and sharing life with people. Seeking the right type of companionship, of culture, of society, which foster such development is important. This is where communities of education and family, and for Christians ecclesial community, all have a role to play in formation into *prudentia*.

Human flourishing, learning how to live well, is a life-long task. For Christians Mark Jordan’s advice is ‘to read the parts of the *Summa* backwards’ (Jordan 2017). While obviously to read the *Summa* is not essential for Christians, the pedagogy suggested is helpful: begin formation into Christian human flourishing with the story of Christ and the practice of the sacraments, whereby one is introduced to the ecclesial community. Moral formation is thus placed firmly in its correct theological context: the *Secunda pars* placed firmly between the *Prima pars* and the *Tertia pars*. One learns not only that one should act

in such and such a way but why—God. For Christians living well is a theological journey. For Christians and non-Christians alike formation into *prudentia* is a lifelong journey:

prudentia belongs to an advanced state of moral formation . . . This is also why a moral life, deprived of *prudentia*, is a sure sign of elementary moral development and implies an underdeveloped humanity.⁸¹

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Notes

- 1 (Voorhoeve 2003). Foot continues ‘This is what got me interested in moral philosophy in particular. . . . in the fact of the news of the concentration camps, I thought “it just can’t be the way Stevenson, Ayer, and Hare say it is, that morality in the end is just the expression of an attitude”, and the subject haunted me’.
- 2 The pamphlet *Mr Truman’s Degree* was self-published in Oxford (Oxonian Press, Oxford Street). Reprinted in (Anscombe 1981). There is a lack of clarity regarding the date of publication. The *Collected Papers* gives the date as 1957. The Honorary Degree was conferred on 20 June 1956 and the Bodleian stamp on the pamphlet is the 11 July 1956 implying publication in 1956. Available online: http://dadun.unav.edu/bitstream/10171/15575/2/G.E.M._Anscombe_Bibliography.pdf (accessed on 7 September 2021), note 4.
- 3 The paper is criticised for being ‘emotional’ and inaccurate in some of its historical claims. See (Newman 1995, 123ff).
- 4 Anscombe defines the term innocent as meaning ‘not harming’. (Anscombe 1956, p. 5).
- 5 John Schwenkler, ‘Untempted by the Consequences G.E.M. Anscombe’s Life of ‘Doing the Truth’ in *Commonweal* 2 December 2019. <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/untempted-consequences> (accessed on 19 December 2019).
- 6 The vote was overwhelmingly in favour of the awarding of the degree. While *The Times* and the *Manchester Guardian* report that no one supported Anscombe, M.R.D. Foot wrote to the papers correcting this noting that Anscombe’s ‘*non placet*’ was supported by ‘some’ in the house.
- 7 (Anscombe 1958). ‘Everyone interested in virtue ethics should reread ‘*Modern Moral Philosophy*’ at least once every 5 years’. (Hursthouse 2008). There have been various readings of Anscombe’s overall purpose in this essay. A thorough discussion is found in (Doyle 2018).
- 8 (Anscombe 1958, p. 18). While Immanuel Kant would agree with Anscombe that morality entails that there are some actions that you just ought not to do, regardless of the consequences, there is a fundamental difference. For Kant morality is not fundamentally about living well at all—it is about dutiful obedience to the moral law. For Anscombe an account of human flourishing is foundational. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer of this paper for drawing attention to this.
- 9 In a discussion with students at an Oxford University philosophy summer school, Anscombe cited an example of a borderline case. ‘An old woman in Austria under Nazi rule had given shelter to some Jews in her attic, and one evening, there was the dreaded knock on the door and a young SS officer saying: ‘We believe you have some Jews here?’ ‘Clearly’, said Anscombe, ‘she must not lie’. And there was a long embarrassed silence because we all thought that obviously she must—that this was the ‘morally right’ thing to do—but did not dare to say so. And she let the pause continue, and then said ‘Of course, she mustn’t tell the truth either’, and we were all greatly relieved, but also puzzled. She went on to describe what the woman had in fact done; she had turned on a brilliant performance of pretending to believe that the young officer was her sister’s son, whom she had not seen since he was a boy. ‘Gustav!’ she cried, ‘how wonderful, come in, come in. How is dear Lotte, I haven’t heard from her in so long, I never knew you had become an officer, how tall you have grown . . . !’ And she kissed him and babbled on (never once telling a lie) and insisted he have coffee and cakes and, being young and well-mannered, he was too embarrassed to tell her she had made a mistake and press his official question. So he partook of the coffee and cakes and escaped as soon as he could’. (Hursthouse 2008, pp. 142, 143).
- 10 ‘Now if you are either an Aristotelian, or a believer in divine law, you will deal with a borderline case by considering whether doing such-and-such in such-and-such circumstances is, say, murder, or is an act of injustice; and according as you decide it is or it isn’t, you judge it to be a thing to do or not. This would not be the method of casuistry: and while it may lead you to stretch a point on the circumference, it will not permit you to destroy the centre’. (Anscombe 1958, p. 12).
- 11 Mary Geach, Introduction, xiv in (Geach and Gormally 2005).
- 12 Anscombe, ‘Good and Bad Human Action’ in (Geach and Gormally 2005, p. 205).
- 13 (Frey 2019, p. 1148). This ‘essential connection’ will be further explored in the work of Herbert McCabe later in this paper.
- 14 Gavin Lawrence, a colleague in the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), noted that Foot’s approach to practical rationality developed over the years. (Hursthouse et al. 1995).
- 15 (Hursthouse et al. 1995). Cited in (Foot 2001, p. 62). Warren Quinn was a colleague at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), where Foot took up a position in 1974. Quinn’s work on rationality influenced Foot’s thinking with regard to how

morality provides reasons for action. His influence guided her to see that practical rationality has the status of a kind of master-virtue always to be found when things like goodness and evil are involved.

- 16 Fergus Kerr notes that ‘in the work of Anscombe (§IV) and Foot (§V), we have very fine philosophers who challenge the dominant utilitarian/emotivist ethics, appealing to Aristotle but clearly with Aquinas in the background’. See (Kerr 2004).
- 17 (Voorhoeve 2003). The second part of the *Summa (Secunda pars)*, has two sections, the *Prima secundae* and the *Secunda secundae*. The second section *Secunda secundae* ‘is about particular virtues and vices’. The first section, *Prima secundae*, gives Aquinas’ account of human action, and includes a summary discussion of the virtues.
- 18 (Foot 2002). In this paper the Latin term *prudentia* as used by Aquinas is the preferred term.
- 19 Thomas Deman (1899–1954) was of the generation of French Dominicans which included Marie-Dominique Chenu and Yves Congar. His death at a relatively young age accounts to some extent for the fact that his writings have not continued to have the impact they initially had. For a brief overview of his life and work see Jean-Pierre Torrell, Préface, in (Deman 1957). It is of note that prior to this commentary, in 1939 Deman had written *Construction de la Paix*, followed in 1943 by *Le Mal et Dieu* and by *Pourquoi nous croyons à la Providence in 1945*. Torrell remarks that these works without doubt owe something to the terrible ordeals through which European countries were passing.
- 20 ‘A l’encontre de ce mouvement, rien n’est plus souhaitable qu’une restauration du traité de la prudentia’. Deman, ‘Avant-propos’ in (Deman 1957, p. 13). In the notes and appendices to his translation Deman traces the history of the study of *prudentia* which Aquinas had inherited. Deman draws attention to some new foci, some novel teachings, developed by Aquinas.
- 21 See Deman, Appendice II, ‘Prudence et conscience’, (Deman 1957, pp. 478–523; also Gilby op 2006, pp. 180–81).
- 22 ‘On voulut de cette manière “faciliter” la vie moral; en réalité, on en changea l’esprit’. Deman, ‘Avant-propos’, (Deman 1957, p. 13).
- 23 Aquinas treats of *prudentia* for the first time in his *Commentary on the Sentences* (Paris, 1254–56), amidst his study of the virtues in Book 3. Deman tells us that there is no notable difference in doctrinal teaching between the treatment of the virtue here and in the *Summa theologiae*. In the *Summa* however the organisation is more satisfactory, and the thinking more mature. Aquinas also gives attention to *prudentia* in his *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics* (Paris 1269) and in two of the Disputed Questions *De virtutibus in communi* and *De virtutibus cardinalibus*. Deman says ‘saint Thomas a l’occasion de mentionner la prudence en maints endroits de son oeuvre’, for example also in his commentaries on scripture. Deman, ‘Avant-propos’, (Deman 1957, p. 8).
- 24 *Respondeo dicendum quod prudentia est virtus maxime necessaria ad vitam humanam. Bene enim vivere consistit in bene operari. Ad hoc autem quod aliquis bene operetur, non solum requiritur quid faciat, sed etiam quomodo faciat; ut scilicet secundum electionem rectam operetur, non solum ex impetu aut passione. Cum autem electio sit eorum quae sunt ad finem, rectitudo electionis duo requirit, scilicet debitum finem; et id quod convenienter ordinatur ad debitum finem. Ad debitum autem finem homo convenienter disponitur per virtutem quae perficit partem animae appetitivam, cuius obiectum est bonum et finis. Ad id autem quod convenienter in finem debitum ordinatur, oportet quod homo directe disponatur per habitum rationis, quia consilium et eligere, quae sunt eorum quae sunt ad finem, sunt actus rationis. Et ideo necesse est in ratione esse aliquam virtutem intellectualem, per quam perficiatur ratio ad hoc quod convenienter se habeat ad ea quae sunt ad finem. Et haec virtus est prudentia. Unde prudentia est virtus necessaria ad bene vivendum.* (ST I-II q. 57 a.5 c) (Aquinas 1882). The English translation used is that of the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Second and Revised Edition, 1920. Available online: <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/> (accessed on 7 September 2021).
- 25 ‘Elle est le signe d’une âme’, Deman, ‘Les Connexions de la Prudence’, (Deman 1957, p. 422).
- 26 ‘La prudentia à ses yeux est une pièce nécessaire de la vie chrétienne’. Deman, ‘Avant-propos’, (Deman 1957, p. 12).
- 27 Deman, ‘Les Connexions de la Prudence’, (Deman 1957, p. 424).
- 28 Deman demonstrates that for both Cicero and Aristotle this intellectual dimension was to the forefront. Both influenced Aquinas’ work: ‘dans les deux cas la prudentia est une phronesis et elle est chargée de signification intellectuelle’. See Deman, ‘Le Mot de Prudentia’, (Deman 1957, pp. 375–78).
- 29 ‘La prudentia en réalité signale le concours nécessaire d’une certaine qualité intellectuelle pour l’heureuse réalisation de la vie morale’. Deman, ‘Avant-propos’, (Deman 1957, p. 9).
- 30 ‘A ce titre, elle constitue pour nous un enseignement de la plus grande importance. Car rien peut-être ne nous est devenu moins familier que cette pensée, primordial et incontestée chez un saint Thomas, selon laquelle, pour être bons et vertueux, nous avons à prendre soin de notre intelligence’. Deman, Avant-propos, (Deman 1957, pp. 9, 10).
- 31 As has been noted, it is different to other skills, one can be a great mathematician or a great artist, but not necessarily a great human being. *Prudentia* renders one ‘great’ at human living.
- 32 *Intellectus vero practicus est subiectum prudentiae. Cum enim prudentia sit recta ratio agibilium, requiritur ad prudentiam quod homo se bene habeat ad principia huius rationis agendorum, quae sunt fines; ad quos bene se habet homo per rectitudinem voluntatis, sicut ad principia speculabilium per naturale lumen intellectus agentis. Et ideo sicut subiectum scientiae, quae est ratio recta speculabilium, est intellectus speculativus in ordine ad intellectum agentem; ita subiectum prudentiae est intellectus practicus in ordine ad voluntatem rectam.* (ST I-II q. 56 a. 3 c) Deman notes that in choosing the term *recta ratio agibilium*, Aquinas is assuming a major Aristotelean treatise (Aristotle (VI Ethic.) giving the broad meaning of what Aristotle is saying, not a literal translation.

- 33 Ad prudentiam pertinet non solum consideratio rationis, sed etiam applicatio ad opus, quae est finis practicae rationi. (ST II-II q. 47 a. 3 c)
- 34 'Aristote a vivement éprouvé la différence du contempler, par quoi rien n'est change à ce qui est, et de agir, par quoi quelque chose de nouveau est introduit dans le monde'. (Demam 1957, p. 254, n.17).
- 35 Ad primum ergo dicendum quod Gregorius loquitur de praedictis quatuor virtutibus secundum primam acceptionem. Vel potest dici quod istae quatuor virtutes denominantur ab invicem per redundantiam quandam. Id enim quod est prudentiae, redundat in alias virtutes, inquantum a prudentia diriguntur. (ST I-II q.61 a.4 ad 1)
- 36 'On ne voit pas chez Aristote que la prudence soit sujette à l'erreur'. Deman, 'L'Oeuvre Propre et la Qualité Vertueuse de la Prudence', (Demam 1957, p. 459).
- 37 'Faute d'un tel secours, il apparaît que nous serions peril'. Deman, 'L'Oeuvre Propre et la Qualité Vertueuse de la Prudence', (Demam 1957, p. 472).
- 38 Et ideo indiget homo in inquisitione consilii dirigi a Deo, qui omnia comprehendit. (ST II-II q. 52 a.2 ad1) See also ST I-II q. 100 a.2 c where Aquinas, within a larger discussion on law, speaks of matters which pertain to the well-being of perfect virtue as coming under the admonition of counsel (cadunt sub admonitione consilii).
- 39 'Nous découvrons progressivement l'originalité de la prudence thomiste par rapport à celle d'Aristote'. Deman, 'L'Oeuvre Propre et la Qualité Vertueuse de la Prudence', (Demam 1957, p. 459).
- 40 'Human acts are virtuous to the degree that they are saturated with reason'. (Chenu 2002).
- 41 An overview of the French Dominicans on *prudentia* in Aquinas is given by Jean-Pierre Torrell, o.p. in his Préface to Thomas Deman, o.p. Deman (1957), pp. I–V.
- 42 McCabe, 'Prudentia', p. 103.
- 43 'The modern campaign in favour of virtue-based ethics, although it began in the 1950s, in Oxford, with the work of a tiny minority of people like Philippa Foot and Elizabeth Anscombe, was given its greatest international boost by Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue*'. McCabe, 'Prudentia', p. 103.
- 44 In 1986, some years after Foot's article 'Virtues and Vices' and twenty-eight years after Anscombe's seminal work, McCabe wrote an article for *New Blackfriars* entitled (McCabe 1986). Republished in (McCabe 2002).
- 45 Herbert McCabe, 'Teaching Morals', pp. 187–98; 'The Role of Tradition', p. 199–211 in *God Still Matters*.
- 46 There is an insightful deployment of his thinking on the virtue of *prudentia* in the section entitled 'Good Sense' pp. 248–53 in (McCabe 2000).
- 47 McCabe, 'The Role of Tradition', pp. 199–211, 202.
- 48 McCabe, 'Teaching Morals', pp. 187–98, 196.
- 49 Studies of some of these handbooks are found in (Gallagher 2002). There is a discussion of neo-Thomist association of *prudentia* with conscience in (Westburg 1994). See also (McDonagh 1964).
- 50 'Action, Deliberation, and Decision' in (McCabe 2008, pp. 79–86).
- 51 See ST I-II q. 56 a.3 c. Cited in McCabe, 'Prudentia', pp. 101–14, 108, 109.
- 52 McCabe, 'Prudentia', pp. 101–14, 106.
- 53 'The consequence of the sixteenth century of the voluntarist view of the moral life was that the work of the intelligence was seen as something that could be detached from the actual moments of decision. You could think of a solution to moral problems in the abstract, and in the quiet of your study, and you could write your conclusions in books—thus we got the handbooks of so called moral theology giving you the solution to each problem'. McCabe, 'Teaching Morals', pp. 187–98, 197.
- 54 Nam idem sunt actus morales et actus humani. ST I-II q. 1 a.3.
- 55 McCabe's reflection stems from Aquinas' text in the *Summa Theologiae* II-II q. 47. a.3 ad 3: 'Aristotle says that *prudentia* does not lie in our external senses whereby we perceive their proper empirical objects, but in an internal sense seasoned by memory and experience and so ready to meet the particular facts encountered. Not that an internal sense is the main seat of *prudentia*, for *prudentia* is mainly in the reason, but that *prudentia* by a certain application reaches to internal sensation'.
- 56 The human being is 'the most touch perceptive of all animals and amongst humans those most sensitive to touch are the most intelligent. For sensitivity of skin goes with mental insight'. ST I q. 76 a.5. Cited in McCabe, 'Interior Senses I', (McCabe 2008, p. 124).
- 57 Cited in McCabe 'Interior Senses I', p. 125.
- 58 McCabe, 'Interior Senses I', p. 117. McCabe develops this theme further in this chapter and the following one, 'Interior Senses II', pp. 129–41.
- 59 McCabe, 'Interior Senses I', p. 116.
- 60 McCabe, 'Narratives and Living Together', pp. 51–58.
- 61 McCabe, 'Narratives and Living Together', pp. 51–58.
- 62 Virtus est quae bonum facit habentem et opus eius bonum reddit. (ST II-II q. 47 4c)

- 63 'Virtue and Truth' in (McCabe 2005, p. 90).
- 64 The broadly Aristotelian account and the living tradition it narrates is re-set within the Christian tradition of being human. In similar vein Deman draws attention to the abundant use of citations from scripture in Aquinas' text. In his argument toward establishing the 'Christian credentials' of *prudentia* Deman argues that some of the words of Christ in the Gospels, while not using the word *prudentia*, are instructing Christians toward right practical action. Deman, Appendice II, 'La Sainte Écriture et les auteurs chrétiens', (Deman 1957, pp. 389–413).
- 65 See ST II-II q. 23 a. 8; also ST I-II q. 62 a. 4.
- 66 McCabe, 'Prudentia', pp. 105, 106.
- 67 For a comprehensive account of the interconnection between virtues, gifts, beatitudes and fruits in the *Summa Theologiae* see (Ten Klooster 2018).
- 68 Deus autem movet unumquodque secundum modum eius quod movetur. (ST II-II q. 52 a.1 c)
- 69 Est autem proprium rationali creaturae quod per inquisitionem rationis moveatur ad aliquid agendum, quae quidem inquisitio consilium dicitur. (ST II-II q. 52 a.1 c)
- 70 The Holy Spirit is the mover, by means of this gift termed counsel, which signifies 'the moving of a mind receiving counsel by another giving counsel' ... per quod potest significari motio mentis consiliatae ab alio consiliante. (ST II-II q. 52 a.2 ad 1)
- 71 (Mahoney 2021). It is to be noted that while this text has a chapter entitled 'Moral Decision-Making in the Spirit', Mahoney's Index lacks mention of *prudentia*. He does, however, refer to 'practical wisdom' as a translation of *prudentia*, in preference to the much maligned 'prudence'. He rejects this 'dysfunctional and quite unnecessary usage' which turns 'prudence into a species of wisdom' (pp. 93, 94). While he may be correct to reject 'practical wisdom' as a rendering of *prudentia*, the understanding of *prudentia* as a virtue both acquired and infused, and its close link with the Holy Spirit's gift of counsel, is in need of deeper exploration, as indicated in this paper.
- 72 *Et ideo prudentia, quae importat rectitudinem rationis, maxime perficitur et iuvatur secundum quod regulatur et movetur a spiritu sancto. Quod pertinet ad donum consilii, ut dictum est. Unde donum consilii respondet prudentiae, sicut ipsam adiuvans et perficiens.* (ST II-II q. 52 a.2 c)
- 73 Yves Congar notes 'Prudence is clearly perfected by the gift of counsel and the beatitude of the merciful corresponds to this (ST IIa IIae, q. 52)'. (Congar 1983). For further discussion see Deman, Appendice I n.197, pp. 199–201, 205. See also (Ten Klooster 2018, pp. 115–19, 154–81).
- 74 It is notable that in regard to this question that Labourdette opts not to comment: 'Deux articles, qui n'appellent pas de commentaires'. (Labourdette 2016).
- 75 *Omnia praecepta Decalogi pertinent secundum quod ipsa est directiva omnium virtuosorum actuum.* (ST II-II q. 56 a.1 c).
- 76 For Illich 'corrupted Christianity gives rise to the modern'. (Taylor 2007, p. 740).
- 77 (Deman 1948). This was written before his later commentary on *prudentia* in the *Summa Theologiae*.
- 78 *Unde in his quae ad prudentiam pertinent maxime indiget homo ab alio erudiri, et praecipue ex senibus, qui sanum intellectum adepti sunt circa fines operabilium. . . . Et ideo convenienter ponitur docilitas pars prudentiae.* (ST II-II q. 49 a.3 ad 1)
- 79 Ad secundum dicendum quod prudentia magis est in senibus non solum propter naturalem dispositionem, quietatis motibus passionum sensibilium, sed etiam propter experientiam longi temporis. Prudence is rather in the old, not only because their natural disposition calms the movement of the sensitive passions, but also because of their long experience. (ST II-II q. 47 a. 15 ad 2)
- 80 '... car tous ne prennent pas des lois la même intelligence et la science morale est entre eux inégalement partagée'. Deman, 'Les Connexions de la Prudence', (Deman 1957, pp. 421–48).
- 81 Il apparaît en même temps que la prudence appartient à un stade avancé de la formation morale; elle n'est le fait ni des enfants ni des cultures primitives. C'est bien aussi pourquoi une vie morale dépourvue de prudence se signale infailliblement comme une vie morale élémentaire et dénonce un état inachevé du développement humain. (Deman 1957, p. 267, n.373).

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