

Chapter 3: Prudence Or: Smart Living

Alright, let's review: we want to be happy, and we want to pursue goods in a way that will make us happy. This means we have to learn how to act well, which in turn involves an acquisition of virtue. If that sounds complicated, let me put it more simply: virtue is about doing the right things, and if we do the right things, we will become happy. But what is the first thing we need if we want to *do* the right thing? Well obviously, we need to *know* what the right thing to do is. This is where prudence comes into the picture.

Prudence is the first of the cardinal virtues because it is *the ability to look at a concrete situation and know what ought to be done*. It is the ability to make right judgments. Prudence gives us the knowledge of what must be done, when it must be done, and how it must be done.

There is often a great misunderstanding about the real nature of prudence, so let's begin by saying what prudence is *not*. Prudence is not timidity, an avoidance of all danger, cowardice, lack of initiative, self-preservation, never spending any money, or an excessive focus on manners (e.g., the term "prude"). On the contrary, sometimes true prudence could lead one to dive on a grenade, fight courageously, say things which are very awkward or politically incorrect, make a huge investment venture, or be open to having a fifth, maybe even a tenth child.

How Prudence Works

Prudence is the art of taking moral principles and applying them to concrete situations. Let's take some examples. We all know the maxim: "Love your neighbor as yourself." This is a general moral principle. But even after we learn this principle, the question still remains, "How do I love this neighbor, here and now?" We still have to take the general moral principle and make it concrete in particular situations. To take a second case, the Church teaches that drunkenness is a grave sin, which we should avoid. But how do I avoid drunkenness, here and now? Prudence tells me when I should stop drinking; what beer or glass of wine should be my last. Or what about the principle that sexual activity must be reserved for marriage? Practically speaking, how do I protect my sexuality from misuse? Well, prudence tells me that I probably shouldn't be alone with my girlfriend in her bedroom, as it may lead to serious sin.

Prudence therefore demands two aspects: *firstly, knowing the principles*, that is, knowing what the goods of human nature are, and that we must work towards them and never against them. Consequently, it is never prudent, regardless of the situation, to act against the moral principles. There is no such thing as a prudent abortion, because it always violates the good of innocent human life. There is no such thing as prudent contraception, because it always goes against the good of human life and against the good of the marital relationship. There is no such thing as prudent pornography, because it goes against the good of human relationships.

Secondly, knowing how to apply the principles to the concrete situation. The first part is knowing the goals; the second part is knowing how to choose the means for obtaining the goal. In the words of St. Thomas Aquinas: "The prudent man considers things afar off, insofar as they tend to be a help or a hindrance to that which has to be

done at the present time. Hence it is clear that those things which prudence considers stand in relation to the end.” With prudence, we look at every decision in light of the ultimate goal, that is, goodness and happiness.

Prudence is a lot like going on a vacation. The first thing you have to do before going on a vacation is figuring out a destination. Where do you want to go? Well, we discussed our intended destination in the first chapter when we talked about the basic goods, and how they bestow happiness. Those goods are our destination. But then you have to figure out the best way to reach the destination. After all, how you pack and prepare for the trip depends on where you’re going. As we make all our individual decisions, we need to keep our ultimate goal in mind. That’s prudence: selecting the right means for bringing us towards happiness.

Conscience

Related to prudence is the notion of conscience. “Conscience” is a brutally misunderstood term in most circles. People will often use the phrase “Follow your conscience,” without any clear idea of what it really means. Usually they think conscience is some vague feeling, or a quiet inner voice, or perhaps a small cricket who tells Pinocchio what to do.

Actually, the meaning of “Follow your conscience” is much more precise than that. It just means “Do what you think is right.” That’s it! Maybe that sounds so obvious we shouldn’t even have to say it, but the fact is that many people never even think about what is right. They just do what *feels* right. Conscience isn’t about feeling, it’s about thinking that something is right. Another translation of “Follow your conscience” is “Follow what prudence tells you,” or “Apply moral principles to concrete situations, and then act accordingly.”

Three Parts of a Prudential Act

Let’s look at how to make a prudent decision. There are several steps we must all take if we want to practice prudence in our choices.

Step one: *Deliberation*. This is the stage where we gather all the relevant information, starting with a consideration of moral principles. This includes an awareness and acceptance of the authoritative teaching of the Church’s Magisterium; since the Church’s teaching gives us true principles, it’s important to see if they teach anything definitively about the issue at hand. For example, if the Church says that a certain act is immoral, then you don’t need to deliberate about that act any more; you know not to do it.

While deliberating, we must also give a careful examination of the concrete situation, to be sure that we have understood it as fully as possible. It is also sometimes advisable to take counsel with those who are themselves experienced, prudent, and knowledgeable about the matter at hand. With this step it is absolutely critical that we be completely honest. Prudence is about truth, the truth of what is and what must be done. It is the truth that sets us free; remember, we have to know what is true before we are free to do what is good. *So we can’t let our own feelings or preferences get in the way of a true understanding of the facts.* Today, married couples, government officials, and even moral theorists never seem to be able to agree about the right thing to do in any situation. This is because they base their decisions on feelings and preferences, not on truth.

One of the major crises of the modern world is that we go on feelings instead of truth. This is the error that we have to overcome in our own lives; we *must* base our decisions on a careful and conscious examination of the truth. So often we don't deliberate honestly, but rather focus on the aspects of the situation that we want to see. Prudence demands openness to the whole truth of the situation.

Failure to deliberate is called *rashness* or *thoughtlessness*. This is when someone just rushes headlong into everything, without ever taking a moment to think it over. It is very dangerous to "act without thinking," to not consider carefully enough before action. It may work in a Star Wars universe (don't think; just trust your feelings, Luke!), but in the real world it's deadly. If you don't reflect on your decisions beforehand, you will make really stupid decisions. Look at the options, seek advice, pray to God for His guidance, reflect, and take a reasonable amount of time before you act.

Step two: *Judgment*. After deliberating, we must weigh all the evidence fairly, and then figure out the best course of action. Judgment separates the relevant information from the irrelevant information, and then applies it to the problem at hand. You can't just think about something forever; you have to come to some sort of conclusion.

Failure to make a judgment is called *indecision*. Procrastination, beating about the bush, fiddling around, are all ways of expressing this common vice. Thinking about some issue without actually arriving at a practical result does no one any good.

Step three: *Execution*. Once we judge the right thing to do, we have got to act! If you figure out the proper action, but then fail to perform it, what's the benefit? You do not have the virtue of prudence until you actually do what you have judged to be right.

Failure to carry out what you believe to be the proper decision is called *irresoluteness*. Plenty of people make hoards of decisions, and never manage to keep any of them. They can't be faithful to a resolution. One day they've decided to do this major in college, then they change their minds and decide to do that major. The same happens in the case of jobs, or vocations. Such people suffer from the vice of *inconstancy*.

A helpful exercise might be to analyze these three stages and see where it is that you most often fail in your own life. Are you thoughtless? Indecisive? Inconstant and undependable? Once you identify your weakness, you can make the conscious decision to work on that area of prudence, and so hopefully improve in this fundamental virtue

Some Further Practical Guidelines for Prudence

One very helpful technique for strengthening prudence is the following rule: Take your time in consideration, but once you have reached a judgment, act quickly and decisively. *It is unwise to rethink an act when you're in the process of carrying it out.* Think about it before you begin it, and then just do it.

Also, don't wait until you have absolute certainty before making a practical decision. As Josef Pieper states, "The prudent man... does not deceive himself with false certainties."¹ Remember that practical matters don't have the same logical exactness or

¹ *The Four Cardinal Virtues*, 18.

clarity as mathematical equations, so if you wait until you've perfectly proven the right thing to do, you'll never do anything. All you can do is to try and understand the situation *as best you can*, given the information and time available. Then make a decision and carry it out faithfully.

We have to realize that every practical decision entails risk; there is no security that our decision will not result in difficult consequences. But we must be able to make decisions and act with abandonment and trust to divine providence. After we go through the necessary steps of prudence (deliberation, judgment, and execution), we've done our part, and we leave the rest to God. At that point we need faith in Him, faith that He'll use even our imperfect human choices in bringing about His plan. Even if we don't see externally discernable results or successes coming from our attempts at prudential decision-making, God may be doing great things with our efforts. Many holy people died in apparent failure (Isaac Jogues, Louis Marie DeMontfort, even Our Lord Himself), but God used their work to bring about wonderful changes in the Church and the world.

Lastly, there are certain times when it is prudent to avoid decision-making. We have to be very careful that our judgments and actions are the result of an honest examination of reality, and in certain situations, it is very difficult for us to keep a proper perspective. It is important that our judgments and actions are not reactions to strong emotions like:

Anger. A prudent person will, whenever possible, avoid making a decision while he is angry. He will sleep on it, postpone it or put it aside until he can weigh things calmly and coolly.

Lust. Lust can be a very powerful feeling, with the potential to negatively influence our ability to think clearly. In fact, there is nothing like desire to interfere with the proper working of our reason. St. Thomas Aquinas goes so far as to say that imprudence is caused chiefly by lust.² The prudent person will step back and give himself space and time before allowing himself to be ruled by lust.

Discouragement. When we are close to despair, our view on reality will be skewed. We will be overly pessimistic, and so the decisions we make will be based on error. Having suffered a failure, or fallen in sin, or having made a stupid move; all these things discourage us, and so we should avoid decisions at such times.

Remember, prudence is about allowing the truth, not feelings, to determine our choices.

Summary

Prudence is about smart living. It's not just about being smart in school, or being a smart tennis player, or being smart in business. It's about being smart in life, and just like all the other virtues, this takes practice. Experience, too, is a great aid to prudence, not just your own, but also the experience of others. Seeking counsel of wise persons can be very valuable. Most importantly, you want to seek out the counsel of the wisest persons: The Blessed Trinity, Our Lady, the saints and angels. Go to them in prayer, and ask for their wisdom and guidance in making the right decisions in your life. Read the Scriptures, or the Lives of the Saints, for insights on how to make prudent choices.

² *ST*, II-II, 56, 6.