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Prudence: A Biblical, Philosophical and Theological Inquiry

Thomas Karimundackal, SJ
Papal Seminary, Pune 411014

Abstract: This articles explores the virtue of prudence from biblical, theological and philosophical perspectives. For Aristotle and Aquinas, the virtue of prudence is of central importance. They hold that only the prudent person is fully virtuous, and “full virtue cannot be acquired without prudence.” For them prudence is an intellectual virtue of the practical application of right reason. Although prudence is based on a naturally virtuous character, full virtue only develops when the person reasons for himself/herself that he/she will be temperate, courageous, just, etc. Prudence, then, is a form of wisdom about practical matters and actions, rather than a more general wisdom. A prudent person knows the right thing to do in each situation and acts upon that knowledge. True and perfect prudence guides us to attain, at least to understand the eternal truth.

Keywords: Prudence, Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Bible and prudence

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Introduction

Very often we hear people saying, "Be prudent"! And often, I get baffled with this sort of advice, and I ask myself, what makes me prudent? This short paper is an exploration into the biblical, philosophical and theological understanding of the term 'prudence' as it is revealed in the Bible, and understood and explained by Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas.

Prudence is perceived as a virtue of all the times. People who are considered prudent are thought of as careful and cautious, circumspect and discreet. They are regarded as having an idea for the future and an aversion to risk. Josef Pieper describes a prudent man like this: "A 'prudent' man is thought to be one who avoids the embarrassing situation of having to be brave. The 'prudent' man is the 'clever tactician' who contrives to escape personal commitment" (Pieper, *Prudence*, 11).

While teaching his pupils wisdom for living, the sage of Proverbs says: "My Child, be attentive to my wisdom; incline your ear to my understanding, so that you may hold on to prudence, and your lips may guard knowledge (Prov 5:1-2)." Human beings by nature are instilled with the quest for divine wisdom, and as we see it in Prov 5:1-2, wisdom and prudence go hand in hand. Both originate from the Divine, and only a wise person can be prudent in the hubbub of real life.

The contemporary understanding of prudence would strike Aristotle's and Thomas Aquinas' understanding of prudence. For them, prudence is the virtue of thought concerned with action in the world of contingency, i.e., the world as unpredictable and variable. According to Aristotle and Aquinas, "the person who is prudent is the only one who can be truly just, courageous and temperate, and the good person is truly good only if he is prudent" (Roche, 2020: 3). Aristotle considers prudence as practical wisdom, and he defines it as "a state grasping the truth, involving reason, concerned with action about things that are good or bad for a human being"

(Schwartz and Sharpe, 2020). St. Thomas Aquinas, following Aristotle very closely, teaches that "prudence is a virtue of the practical intellect that is related in a particularly close way to the moral virtues" (Roche, 2020: ix).

Biblical Understanding of Prudence

What does the word “prudence” mean when used in the context of Scripture? Though the term prudence is used in different books of the Bible, the book of Proverbs gives a clear biblical understanding to the virtue of prudence. According to the book of Proverbs, prudence is wisdom applied to practical matters: First of all, a wise person is also a prudent person as prudence and wisdom are intrinsically related (1:1-6; 8:12). Prudence will watch over a wise person (2:11). A prudent person is the one who heeds to the voices of correction (15:5), one who guards his/her mouth and keeps his/her tongue from the evil things (21:23). Prudence functions as a source of discretion and knowledge (8:12; 1:1-6; 14:8), foresight and caution (22:3; 23:1-3). The prudent is crowned with knowledge (14:18), acts with knowledge (13:16), acquires knowledge (Prov 18:15) and conceals knowledge (12:23). The prudent keeps his/her tongue out of trouble (21:23), ignores an insult (12:16). The prudent is observant and diligent (14:15) and foresees evil (22:3). The prudent restrains his speech (10:19). The path of life leads upward for the prudent, that he/she may turn away from Sheol beneath (15:24). The wisdom of the prudent is “to discern his way” (14:8a). The prudent sees danger and hides him/herself, but the simple goes on and suffer for it (27:12). The simple believes everything, but the prudent gives thought to his steps (Prov 14:15). The prudent will act with discretion: “He who gathers in summer is a prudent son, but he who sleeps in harvest is a son who brings shame” (10:5). The prudent wife, a gift of God is a descriptive of prudence itself: “House and wealth are inherited from fathers, but a prudent wife is from the Lord” (19:14). In short, the book of Proverbs gives a multifaceted picture of prudence, a practical virtue intrinsically related to wisdom.

Prudence is given by God's grace (Eph 1:8), and it is a spiritual insight (Hos 14:9). The prudent are those who understand the ways of God (Hos 14:9), and keep silence in the evil time (Am 5:13). Prudence of the wicked will be defeated by God (Isa 29:14; 1Cor 1:19), and will be denounced (Isa 5:21; 29:15). Prudence is to be practised in day-to-day life situations (Mt 25:3.9).

Jesus acts with prudence on many occasions (Mt 9:30; 16:20; 21:24-27; 22:15-21; Mk 3:12; 5:43; 7:6; 8:30; 9:9; Jn 7:10). Jesus shows prudence by avoiding confrontations with the chief priests and the Pharisees (Mt 12:14-16; Mk 3:7; Jn 11:47-54), by avoiding in walking "no longer openly" (Jn 11:54; 12:36). Disciples of Jesus are encouraged to exercise prudence, especially in their interactions with unbelievers (Mt 10:6; Col 4:5; Eph 5:15).

There are people exemplified by practicing prudence in the Hebrew Bible: Jacob (Gen 32:3-23; 34:5.9), Jethro (Exod 18:19-23), Saul in not killing the Jabesh-Gileadites (1 Sam 11:13). David (1 Sam 16:18; 18:5-30; 2 Sam 15:33-37) Joseph (Gen 41:39; 41:33-57), Abigail (1 Sam 25:18-31), Aged counsellors of Rehoboam (1 Kings 12:7), Gideon (Judges 8:1-3), certain elders of Israel (Jer 26:17-23), Jehoram (2 Kgs 7:12-13), Elijah in his escape from Jezebel (1 Kgs 19:3-4), Daniel (Dan 1:8-14) etc.

There are also characters exemplified by showing prudence in the New Testament: Joseph (Mt 1:19), the wise builder and king (Lk 14:28-32), the scribe (Mk 12:32-34), Gamaliel (Acts 5:34-39), the town clerk of Ephesus in averting a riot (Acts 19:29-41), Paul (Acts 23:6), Peter in escaping from Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12:17), Paul and Silas in escaping from Berea (Acts 17:10-15), Paul and Barnabas in escaping persecution (Acts 14:6), Paul in circumcising timothy (Acts 16:3), Paul in performing temple rites (Acts 21:20-26), Sergius paulus (Acts 13:7) etc.

We also see prudence in dealing with other people: Abimelech makes a treaty with Isaac (Gen 26:26-31), Jacob prepares to meet Esau (Gen 32:3-21), Nehemiah petitions Artaxerxes (Neh 2:1-6),

Daniel's diplomacy in avoiding Nebuchanezzar's food (Dan 1:8-14), Daniel's wisdom and tact in the face of death (Dan 2:10-16) etc.

In short, the biblical understanding of prudence is a careful, wise discernment; the avoidance of rash behaviour or speech; the good management of talents and resources and the showing of discretion and wisdom in relationships with other people.

Aristotle on Prudence

In the eighth section of the sixth book of *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle deals with prudence, and he defines it as practical wisdom. According to him, prudence is “concerned with down-to-earth, human things, and things that it makes sense to deliberate about — that is, things that have a purpose that human action can influence” (Sniggle, 2020). It “concerns things of “common sense”-knowledge that is gained via intuition but cannot be justified via logical deduction from other facts” (Sniggle, 2020).

Aristotle defines a prudent person as “the one who is truly just, courageous and temperate, and the good person is truly good only if he is prudent” (Roche, 2020: ix). According to Aristotle, a distinction between universals and particulars would help to dwell the meaning of prudence. It can be illustrated by the analogy of becoming a savant by learning something scientifically and systematically. For example, while it is possible for a person to be a savant by learning mathematics scientifically, prudence must be acquired through long experience. Aristotle thinks this is because “expertise in mathematics largely requires an intellectual understanding of abstract universals, while practical wisdom requires actual encounters with real-life particulars” (Roche, 2020: ix). Above all, according to Aristotle, there is a fundamental connection between prudence and moral virtue.

Following assertions by Aristotle may help us to understand the concept of prudence in a better way:¹

- Virtues of character need the guidance of prudence to avoid the extremes of excess and deficiency, and to ensure that feelings and actions occur at the right time, concerning the right things, in respect of the right people, for the right reason, and in the right way (1106b16-24).
- Prudence is impossible without excellence of character (1144a29ff.).
- The prudent person (*phronimos*) needs the virtues of character, ‘for vice perverts us and produces false views about the principles of actions’ (1144b34-35).
- A prudent person must also at the same time be excellent in character (1152a10).
- ... the correct reason is the reason in accord with prudence; it would seem, then, that they all in a way intuitively believe that the state in accord with prudence is virtue (1144b23-26).
- One has all the virtues if and only if one has prudence, which is a single state (1145a2).
- Full character virtue is acquired only by repeated decisions made ‘in accord with the correct reason. Now the correct reason is the reason in accord with prudence’ (1144b23-25).
- Prudence is a state grasping the truth, involving reason, concerned with action about things that are good or bad for a human being (1140b7).
- Someone is not prudent simply by knowing; he must also act on his knowledge’ (1152a8-9).

¹ Following citations are taken from, Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terrence Irwin, 2nd edn (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.. References to this edition of the *Nicomachean Ethics* are given after quotations in the text following Bekker’s page and line system.

- Prudence is prescriptive, since its end is, what action we must or must not do, whereas comprehension only judges (1143a8-10).

In short, for Aristotle, “prudence is a virtue of thought that is practical rather than theoretical and deliberative rather than intuitive. It is the intellectual virtue that perfects reasoning in regard to decision making in the realm of human action” (Roche, 2020: ix). For Aristotle, prudence is always about something that the one faces personally. He/she deliberates about and decides on something that he/she will actually do or not do. His/her prudential decision commands him/her to act or not to act. Aristotle’s prudent person is good at making decisions partly because he/she is able to perceive the salient features of any situation.

Aquinas on Prudence

Aquinas follows Aristotle very closely to explain the nature of prudence especially in his Commentary on Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, although more than 1,500 years of history separate Thomas Aquinas from Aristotle. Aquinas argues that “prudence is a virtue of the practical intellect that is related very closely to the moral virtues. In order to be morally good, a person needs the moral virtues, and these in turn need the judgement of prudence” (Roche, 2020: ix). Aquinas’s interpretations of Aristotle’s notion of prudence are vividly dealt with in his *Summa Theologiae*, II/ II, Question 47.² My attempt here is just to highlight a few pertinent arguments of Aquinas to understand the term prudence.

According to Aquinas, “prudence is wisdom about human affairs: but not wisdom absolutely,” (Q. 47, art.2, reply to obj.1) and therefore it is “wisdom for man” (Q. 47, art.2, reply to obj.1). It is “only the application of right reason in matters of counsel, which

² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II/ II, Question 47. Prudence, Considered in Itself, <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/> (accessed October 15, 2020). As it is customary, for the references from this work following pattern will be followed: Question no, article no, objection no, or reply to the objection no or answer to the article.

are those wherein there is no fixed way of obtaining the end,” (Q. 47, art.2, reply to obj.3) and it is also “applied [application] to action, which is the end of the practical reason.” (Q. 47, art.2, reply to obj.3)

Aquinas argues that there are three acts applying reason to prudence. “The first is to take counsel which belongs to discovery, for counsel is an act of inquiry. ... The second act is to judge of what one has discovered,” and this is an act of the speculative reason. ... and its third act is to command, which act consists in applying to action the things counselled and judged.” (Q. 47, art.8, answer)

He explains that since prudence is “right reason applied to action,” “all actions are directed to prudence as their end. Therefore, prudence appoints the end to all moral virtues” (Q. 47, art.6, obj. 2). Therefore, “it is evident that prudence is a special virtue, distinct from all other virtues,” (Q. 47, art.5, obj.3) but it “helps all the virtues, and works in all of them” (Q. 47, art.5, reply to obj.2).

According to Aquinas prudence is threefold: false prudence, true prudence, and perfect prudence (Q. 47, art.5, answer). False prudence “takes its name from its likeness to true prudence,” (Q. 47, art.5, answer) but never attains a good end. True prudence “devises fitting ways of obtaining a good end; and yet it is imperfect because the good which it takes for an end, is not the common end of all human life, but of some particular affair” (Q. 47, art.5, answer). Perfect prudence is “both true and perfect, for it takes counsel, judges and commands aright in respect of the good end of man’s whole life” (Q. 47, art.5, answer).

Aquinas also makes a distinction between civic prudence, domestic prudence and personal prudence (Q. 47, art. 11, answer). He defines personal prudence as “the right plan of things to be done in the light of what is good or bad for [...] oneself” (Q. 47, art 11, answer). He claims that “personal prudence and civic prudence are substantially the same habit’ (Q. 47, art 11, reply to obj. 1). According to him civic prudence concerns things that are good or bad for the entire

civic community. Its relation to personal prudence is like that between legal justice and virtue. Aquinas sees domestic prudence as occupying a middle position between that regulating the individual and the state. “Because the whole is more important than the part, and consequently the city than the household and the household than one man, civic prudence must be more important than domestic and the latter more important than personal prudence” (Q. 47, art 11, reply to obj. 3).

Aquinas in his reply to the objection raised by Augustine’s definition of prudence, “Prudence is love choosing wisely between the things that help and those that hinder” (Q. 47, art 1, obj.1) says that, “prudence is said to be love, not indeed essentially, but in so far as love moves to the act of prudence.” (Q. 47, art 1, reply to obj. 1). In his objection to the argument that “prudence is to choose wisely,” (Q. 47, art 1, Obj. 2) Aquinas says, “The prudent man considers things afar off, in so far as they tend to be a help or a hindrance to that which has to be done at the present time.” (Q. 47, art 1, reply to Obj. 2).

In his reply to the objection raised by Augustine’s argument that “Prudence is the knowledge of what to seek and what to avoid” (Q. 47, art 1, Obj. 3), Aquinas says that “The worth of prudence consists not in thought merely, but in its application to action, which is the end of the practical reason. Wherefore if any defect occur in this, it is most contrary to prudence, since, the end being of most import in everything, it follows that a defect which touches the end is the worst of all” (Q. 47, art 1, reply to obj. 3).

Aquinas argues that it is not possible for a person to be good ‘according to moral virtue, without prudence, nor even to be prudent without moral virtue’ (Q. 47, art 4, answer). It is with regard to the moral virtues – and not the natural virtues – that a person is called good without qualification. This is because the moral virtues cannot exist without prudence, nor can prudence exist without the moral virtues. ‘When there is prudence, which is a single virtue, all the

virtues will be simultaneous with it, and none of them will be present if prudence is not there' (Q. 47, art 4, answer). He explains that without prudence, the natural habits and inclinations do not become full virtues. As he himself states, 'natural inclinations fail to have the complete character of virtue if prudence is lacking' (Q. 47, art 4, answer).

Aquinas compares prudence with scientific knowledge. Whereas scientific knowledge is concerned with universals, prudence has to do with 'a singular ultimate, viz., the particular, since it is of the nature of the practicable to be particular' (Q. 47, art 5, answer). Thus there is a clear distinction between prudence and scientific knowledge. According to Aquinas, there are three stages in every action: deliberation, judgement and the command of the will. Prudence requires excellence in deliberation, 'which is associated with the inquiry of reason [...] (and) takes time (Q. 47, art 8, answer).

The following assertions by Aquinas may help us to understand the concept of prudence in a better way:

- Prudence is wisdom about human affairs: but not wisdom absolutely, because it is not about the absolutely highest cause, for it is about human good, and this is not the best thing of all. And so it is stated significantly that "prudence is wisdom for man," but not wisdom absolutely (Q. 47, art 2, reply to obj. 1).
- Prudence belongs not only the consideration of the reason, but also the application to action, which is the end of the practical reason. But no man can conveniently apply one thing to another, unless he knows both the thing to be applied, and the thing to which it has to be applied (Q. 47, art 3, answer).
- Prudence is a special virtue, distinct from all other virtues (Q. 47, art 3, answer).
- Prudence helps all the virtues, and works in all of them (Q. 47, art 5, reply to obj. 2).
- Prudence keeps most careful watch and ward, lest by degrees we be deceived unawares by evil counsel (Q. 47, art 9, answer).

- Prudence regards not only the private good of the individual, but also the common good of the multitude (Q. 47, art 9, answer).
- Prudence is in the reason. Now ruling and governing belong properly to the reason; and therefore it is proper to a man to reason and be prudent in so far as he has a share in ruling and governing (Q. 47, art 12, answer).
- Without the moral virtues there is no prudence (Q. 47, art 13, reply to obj. 2).
- Prudence, by its very nature, is more opposed to sin, which arises from a disorder of the appetite (Q. 47, art 13, reply to obj. 2).
- Since then prudence is not about the ends, but about the means, as stated above (Article 6; I-II:57:5), it follows that prudence is not from nature (Q. 47, art 15, answer).
- 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 (Q. 47, art 15, reply to obj. 2).

As we have seen, for Aquinas, prudence is wisdom about human affairs, and the application of right reason in matters of counsel. It is the reason applied to action, which is the end of the practical reason. Since prudence is right reason applied to action, all actions are directed to prudence as their end. It is a special virtue, distinct from all other virtues, but it helps all the virtues, and works in all of them. There is no prudence without the moral virtues. Prudence is said to be love, not indeed essentially, but so far as love moves to the act of prudence. Prudence regards not only the private good of the individual, but also the common good of the multitude. What is desired is to have the third kind of prudence which is both true and perfect. In short, for Aquinas, prudence is right reason applied to action, and therefore, prudence resides only in the practical reason.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the biblical understanding of prudence is a wise careful discernment; the ability to govern and discipline oneself by the use of reason; the avoidance of rash behaviour or speech; the

good management of talents; skill and good judgement in the use of resources; showing discretion and wisdom in relationships with other people, and caution or circumspection as to danger or risk.

For both Aristotle and Aquinas, the virtue of prudence is of central importance. They hold that only the prudent person is fully virtuous, and “full virtue cannot be acquired without prudence.” For them prudence is an intellectual virtue arising from the practical application of right reason. Although prudence is based on a naturally virtuous character, full virtue only develops when the person reasons for himself/herself that he/she will be temperate, courageous, just, etc. Prudence, then, is a form of wisdom about practical matters and actions, rather than a more general wisdom. A prudent person knows the right thing to do in each situation and acts upon that knowledge. True and perfect prudence guides us to attain, at least to understand the eternal truth.

We know that there is no package to achieve prudence. Since prudence is practical wisdom, we can achieve this only through experience by applying right reason to our actions. In short, the virtue of prudence functions as a catalyst, to master the art of wisdom.

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Thomas Karimundackal, SJ is a Jesuit belonging to Kerala Province and resident of Papal Seminary. He is HoD, Scripture, Jnana Deepa, Institute of Philosophy and Theology. 0000-0001-7566-4504
 Email: thomas.karimundackal@jdv.edu.in

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