

PRUDENCE

*If thy eye is single, the whole
of thy body will be lit up.*
MATTHEW 6, 22

1. *The First of the Cardinal Virtues*

NO DICITUM in traditional Christian doctrine strikes such a note of strangeness to the ears of contemporaries, even contemporary Christians, as this one: that the virtue of prudence is the mold and "mother"¹ of all the other cardinal virtues, of justice, fortitude, and temperance. In other words, none but the prudent man can be just, brave, and temperate, and the good man is good in so far as he is prudent.

Our uneasiness and alienation would be only the greater if we were to take the proposition as seriously as it is meant. But we have grown accustomed to disregarding such hierarchic rankings among spiritual and ethical qualities. This is especially true for the "virtues." We assume that they are allegories, and that there is really no need to assign them an order of rank. We tend to think that it does not matter at all which of the four cardinal virtues may have drawn first prize in the lottery arranged by "scholastic" theologians.

Yet the fact is that nothing less than the whole ordered structure of the Occidental Christian view of man rests upon the pre-eminence of prudence over the other virtues. The structural framework of Occidental Christian metaphysics as a whole stands revealed, perhaps more plainly than in any other single ethical dictum, in the proposition that prudence is the

PRUDENCE

foremost of the virtues. That structure is built thus: that Being precedes Truth, and that Truth precedes the Good.² Indeed, the living fire at the heart of the dictum is the central mystery of Christian theology: that the Father begets the Eternal Word, and that the Holy Spirit proceeds out of the Father and the Word.

Since this is so, there is a larger significance in the fact that people today can respond to this assertion of the pre-eminence of prudence only with incomprehension and uneasiness. That they feel it as strange may well reveal a deeper-seated and more total estrangement. It may mean that they no longer feel the binding force of the Christian Occidental view of man. It may denote the beginning of an incomprehension of the fundamentals of Christian teaching in regard to the nature of reality.

To the contemporary mind, prudence seems less a prerequisite to goodness than an evasion of it. The statement that it is prudence which makes an action good strikes us as well-nigh ridiculous. Should we hear it said, we tend to misunderstand the phrase, and take it as a tribute to undisguised utilitarianism. For we think of prudence as far more akin to the idea of mere utility, the *bonum utile*, than to the ideal of nobility, the *bonum honestum*. In colloquial use, prudence always carries the connotation of timorous, small-minded self-preservation, of a rather selfish concern about oneself. Neither of these traits is compatible with nobility; both are unworthy of the noble man.

It is therefore difficult for us to understand that the second cardinal virtue, justice, and all that is included in the word, can be said to derive from prudence. Certainly the common mind regards prudence and fortitude as virtually contradictory ideas. 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

The First of the Cardinal Virtues

commitment. Those who shun danger are wont to account for their attitude by appealing to the necessity for "prudence."

To the modern way of thinking, there seems to be a more obvious connection between prudence and the fourth cardinal virtue, that of temperance. But here too we will discover, if we dig deeper, that both these virtues are being beheld in quite a different light from the original great conception of them. For temperance, the disciplining of the instinctive craving for pleasure, was never meant to be exercised to induce a quietistic, philistine dullness. Yet this is what is implied in common phrases about "prudent moderation." That implication comes to the surface when people sneer at the noble daring of a celibate life, or the rigors of real fasting. They will speak scornfully of such practices as "imprudent exaggerations." In similar wise, they will condemn the forthright wrath of fortitude as aggressiveness.

To the contemporary mind, then, the concept of the good rather excludes than includes prudence. Modern man cannot conceive of a good act which might not be imprudent, nor of a bad act which might not be prudent. He will often call lies and cowardice prudent, truthfulness and courageous sacrifice imprudent.

Classical Christian ethics, on the contrary, maintains that man can be prudent and good only simultaneously; that prudence is part and parcel of the definition of goodness;³ that there is no sort of justice and fortitude which runs counter to the virtue of prudence; and that the unjust man has been imprudent before and is imprudent at the moment he is unjust. *Omnis virtus moralis debet esse prudens*—All virtue is necessarily prudent.⁴

The general ethical attitudes of our era, as revealed in the conventions of everyday language, are shared by systematic

PRUDENCE

moral theology—it is difficult to say which takes the lead, which is the follower. Perhaps both express a deeper process of spiritual change. At any rate, there is no doubt about the result: modern religious teachings have little or nothing to say about the place of prudence in life or in the hierarchy of virtues. Even the modern moral theologian who claims, or aspires, to be a follower of classical theology who claims, or same uneasiness about prudence. One of the foremost contemporary theologians actually suggests that latter-day moral theologians have practiced a kind of suppression of the tract on prudence (*quasi-suppression du traité de la prudence*).⁵ When an occasional contemporary treatise on moral theology does attempt to deal resolutely with Thomas Aquinas's doctrine of the virtues, the author, significantly enough, must spend much labor on a polemic justifying this "regression."⁶

Classical theology has been forced to resort to an immense variety of concepts and images in order to systematize the place of prudence and define its meaning with some degree of clarity. The very laboriousness of the definitions indicates of the classical theologians were here dealing with an essential problem of meaning and hierarchy, that the ordering of the virtues was not accidental.

Prudence is the *cause* of the other virtues' being virtues at all.⁷ For example, there may be a kind of instinctive governance of instinctual cravings; but only prudence transforms this instinctive governance into the "virtue" of temperance.⁸ Virtue is a "perfected ability" of man as a spiritual person, and justice, fortitude, and temperance, as "abilities" of the whole man, achieve their "perfection" only when they are founded upon prudence, that is to say upon the perfected ability to make right decisions. Only by means of this perfected ability to make good choices are instinctive inclinations toward goodness exalted into the spiritual core of man's decisions, from which

6

The First of the Cardinal Virtues

truly human acts arise. Prudence is needed if man is to carry through his impulses and instincts for right acting, if he is to purify his naturally good predispositions and make them into real virtue, that is, into the truly human mode of "perfected ability."⁹

Prudence is the "*mesure*" of justice, of fortitude, of temperance.¹⁰ This means simply the following: as in the creative cognition of God all created things are pre-imagined and pre-formed; as, therefore, the immanent essences of all reality dwell in God as "ideas," as "preceding images" (to use the term of Meister Eckhart); and as man's perception of reality is a receptive transcript of the objective world of being; and as the artist's works are transcripts of a living prototype already within his creative cognition—so the decree of prudence is the prototype and the pre-existing form of which all ethically good action is the transcript. The "precept of prudence is the "permanently exterior prototype," by which the good deed is what it is; a good action becomes just, brave, temperate only as the consequence of the prototypical decree of prudence. Creation is what it is by its correspondence with the "standard" of God's creative knowledge; human cognition is true by its correspondence with the "standard" of objective reality. The work of art is true and real by its correspondence with the pattern of its prototype in the mind of the artist. In similar fashion, the free activity of man is good by its correspondence with the pattern of prudence. What is prudent and what is good are substantially one and the same; they differ only in their place in the logical succession of realization. For whatever is good must first have been prudent.¹²

Prudence "*informs*" the other virtues; it confers upon them the form of their inner essence. This dictum expresses the same idea in different manner. The "immanent essential form" of goodness, however, is in its very essence formed after that prototype, patterned after that pre-form. And so prudence imprints the inward seal of goodness upon all free activity of

7

