

The End of Ethics: A Thomistic Investigation

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Abstract

Capitalizing on the diversity of ways in which the phrase “the end of ethics” can be interpreted, this article explores how, from a Thomistic perspective, the virtue of prudence might be considered the “end” of ethics. After bringing to light certain problematic aspects of the relationship between ethics and prudence, it is argued that Aquinas’ understanding of the intellectual virtues allows for a clear line to be drawn between the two. In this way, it is possible to say where ethics “ends” and prudence begins. This answer, however, seems to raise a further difficulty which, upon resolution, reveals a sense in which prudence is also the “end” of ethics when “end” is taken to mean its goal.

Keywords

ethics, prudence, Thomism, *scientia*, virtue

The word “end” is one rich with connotation. This has the effect of rendering the phrase “the end of ethics” open to a variety of interpretations. In one sense, “end” can be taken to mean a limit, boundary, or border. In this way, the phrase will mean something like, “the place where ethics stops and something else starts.” In a second sense, the word “end” can mean a goal, purpose, or destination. On this interpretation, the phrase will mean “the thing that ethics aims at.” The present article will explore whether, and how, the virtue of prudence can be called “the end of ethics” in either of these ways. The argument will proceed in three main sections: first, some of the difficulties surrounding the relationship between ethics and prudence will be exposed; second, the line will be drawn between ethics and prudence, establishing where the former ends and the latter begins; finally, it will be argued that there is some truth to the claim that ethics is ordered toward prudence. Throughout the whole of this investigation, St. Thomas Aquinas will serve as companion and guide.

I

We begin, then, with the problematic relationship between ethics and prudence. Why, it might be asked, should this relationship appear problematic at all? Doesn't it seem obvious that a prudent man need not be an ethicist, nor an ethicist particularly prudent? Isn't it a somewhat odd claim to suggest that prudence might "border" ethics, let alone that it might be considered a "goal" of ethics? To answer such questions – and thus establish the problematic that will call for the twofold consideration discussed above – three observations will be of assistance.

The first is this: *both ethics and prudence are intellectual.*

To say that they are both "intellectual" is to say that they are both "seated" in the intellect, i.e., that both have the intellect as their subject. In his prologue to the *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*, St. Thomas offers an architect's sketch of a systematic account of human knowledge, within which he situate ethics. After stating that "to know the order of one thing to another is exclusively the work of intellect or reason,"¹ he goes on to characterize ethics as the third of four fundamental ways in which reason can be related to order. He says, specifically, that it is the intellect's relation to "the order that reason in deliberating establishes in the operations of the will."² Thus, if ethics pertains to a certain kind of order (that of human operations), and only the intellect knows order, it is clear that ethics is in the intellect.

That prudence is in the intellect is also clear. The first article in the "Treatise on Prudence" of the *Secunda Secundae* explicitly asks this question. St. Thomas answers, "to obtain knowledge of the future from knowledge of the present or past, which pertains to prudence, belongs properly to the reason, because this is done by a process of comparison. It follows therefore that prudence, properly speaking, is in the reason."³ In both cases, then, the argument is the same: ethics and prudence each involve a comparative process that can only be accomplished by the intellect. Thus, each must reside in the intellect.

The second observation to be made presses the similarity between the two even further: *both ethics and prudence are virtues.*

To say that ethics and prudence are both "virtues" is to say that they are both perfections of the power in which they are seated.⁴

¹ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. C. J. Lizinger, O.P. (Notre Dame: Dumb Ox Books, 1993), prologue, n.1.

² Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, prologue, n. 1.

³ *ST II-II.47.1*. English translation from *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 3, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Bros., 1948).

⁴ Cf. *ST I-II.54.4, 55.3, 57.2 ad 3*; the former two discuss the perfective nature of habits/virtues in general, while the latter addresses the specific manner in which virtues perfect the intellect.

Two brief quotations from St. Thomas will suffice on this point. First, when discussing the proper mode of procedure in ethics, he says that, “reason has this peculiar characteristic: that it grasps the truth gradually, and as a consequence man properly perfects himself in knowledge little by little.”⁵ This is the reason why ethics begins with a general “sketch,” the details of which are to be filled in as the study proceeds. Progress in ethics is a progressive perfection of the intellect. That means that ethics is an intellectual virtue.

That the same can be said of prudence is clear from the *Summa Theologiae*, this time in the *Prima Secundae*. There, St. Thomas clearly states that “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 prudence.”⁶ Thus, the two share not only the same subject in which they are found, but also the *ratio* of a virtue, for both are dispositional perfections of a power (indeed, of the same power).

A final observation will muddy the waters even further: *both ethics and prudence are practical*.

The place that St. Thomas gives to ethics within the schema of human knowledge provides good reason for saying that ethics is “practical.” As we have already seen, St. Thomas characterizes ethics as the intellectual virtue whereby reason establishes order in man’s voluntary operations. This characteristic of “establishing” or “bestowing” order is something that ethics has in common with two of the other four ways in which reason can be related to order, for St. Thomas describes art as bestowing order in external things⁷ and logic as bestowing order in reasoning itself. These three are thus distinguished from what he there calls “natural philosophy,”⁸ which he describes as that by which reason “beholds” order rather than bestows it.⁹ This distinction maps perfectly onto the distinction that St. Thomas makes between the theoretical/speculative intellect and the operative/practical intellect. He says, “the theoretical or speculative intellect is properly distinguished from the operative or practical intellect by the fact that the speculative intellect has for its end the truth that it contemplates, while the practical intellect directs the

⁵ Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, bk. 1, lect. 11, n. 132.

⁶ *ST* I-II.57.5.

⁷ This is the foundation for the pivotal Thomistic distinction between *actio* and *factio*. While *factio* is an operation that finds its terminus in an external work, *actio* is an immanent operation done for its own sake. Both ethics and prudence pertain primarily to *actio*, although there is a highly qualified sense in which one can talk about a prudence of art (or *factio*). Cf. *ST* II-II.47.4 ad 1.

⁸ St. Thomas is here taking natural philosophy as a broad category, under which Physics, Mathematics, and Metaphysics all fall.

⁹ Cf. Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, prologue, n. 1.

truth under consideration to activity as to an end.”¹⁰ If, then, the speculative intellect “beholds,” or contemplates, the truth, while the practical intellect “directs” the truth towards (or, bestows order in) some activity, and ethics clearly falls under the latter, it follows that ethics must be a virtue of the *practical* intellect.

The same is true of prudence. In fact, this is the first point that St. Thomas makes in the *Summa Theologiae* after establishing that prudence is in the intellect. His terse response to the question “whether prudence belongs to the practical reason alone, or also to the speculative reason?” cuts to the heart of the matter: practical reason deals with things done for an end; counsel is taken about things done for an end; and the prudent man is one who takes good counsel. “Hence it is evident that prudence is in the practical reason only.”¹¹ Thus, ethics and prudence both appear to be practical intellectual virtues.

II

Hopefully, the preceding considerations have succeeded in making the relationship between ethics and prudence sufficiently problematic. While we began with the common sense intuition that there is no problem in affirming that an ethicist need not be prudent, nor a prudent man an ethicist, it is clear now that the two share much in common. So much, in fact, that it can be hard to tell the difference between ethics and prudence. Both are intellectual, both are virtues, and both are practical. If all of this is true, the question now becomes, “how do we draw the line between them?” or, “where does ethics end and prudence begin?”

To answer this question, we will need to explore the different kinds of intellectual virtues and the different objects by which they are specified; the answer provided will complicate the claim, previously made, that both ethics and prudence are “practical,” and this will, in turn, launch us into the final part of our investigation, namely, how prudence might be thought of as the “end” of ethics when this word is taken to mean its “goal.”

We begin, then, by recalling a fundamental Thomistic axiom regarding the order of specification: a substance is specified by its power, a power by its act, an act by its object, and an object by its end. Thus, habits and virtues, since they are modifications of a power, will be specified by the acts to which they are ordered and,

¹⁰ This is the beginning of the *corpus* of Question V, article 1 of Aquinas’s *Commentary on the De Trinitate* of Boethius. The English translation is taken from St. Thomas Aquinas, *The Method and Division of the Sciences*, trans. Armand Maurer (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1986), p. 12.

¹¹ *ST* II-II.47.2

in turn, by the objects that specify those acts.¹² As such, it will be impossible for there to be two virtues having the same (formal) object. And yet, at face-value, this impossibility appears to be precisely what we have in the case of ethics and prudence, for prudence is right reason applied to action, or *recta ratio agibilium*, while ethics is, as we have seen, that whereby reason establishes order in human action. Are these not the same?

This apparent conflation can only be resolved if we consider more closely the different intellectual virtues identified by St. Thomas. Following Aristotle, he gives a list of five. Three of these are virtues of the speculative intellect, while the remaining two are virtues of the practical intellect. In order, they are wisdom, understanding, *scientia*, prudence, and art.¹³

St. Thomas's claim that ethics is a *scientia* – a point glaringly omitted in the account given above – is significant, for it indicates that ethics is a virtue of the speculative intellect.¹⁴ This, in turn, will provide the solution to the seeming identity of the formal objects of ethics and prudence. The formal object of ethics will be necessary and universal, for *scientia* is of what is necessary and universal, not of what is contingent and concrete.¹⁵ Prudence, on the other hand, is of what is contingent and concrete, since it takes cognizance of singulars. Indeed, according to St. Thomas, “actions are in singular matters: and so it is necessary for the prudent man to know both universal principles of reason, and the singulars about which actions are concerned.”¹⁶ It is this difference in object (the necessary/universal vs. the contingent/singular) that renders ethics and prudence distinct intellectual virtues. The former perfects the intellect insofar as it is speculative while the latter perfects the intellect insofar as it is practical.

But an objection might be raised to this explanation. If ethics is a *scientia*, and so is of the necessary and universal, how can it be of human action, which is contingent and singular?

¹² Cf. *ST* I-II.54.1 and 2; note also that in 54.2. ad 1 St. Thomas clarifies that it is the formal, not material, aspect of the object that specifies a habit.

¹³ See *ST* I-II.57 (all six articles) and Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, bk. 6, lect. 3, n. 1143. I have chosen to leave *scientia* in the Latin, as opposed to adopting the standard translation of “science” on account of the significant difference between the Aristotelian-Thomistic notion of science and the colloquial connotations that the term now possesses.

¹⁴ Cf. *ST* I-II.57.2.

¹⁵ For more on why this is the case, see St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Posterior Analytics*, trans. Richard Berquist (Notre Dame: Dumb Ox Books, 2007), pp. 17–18, and Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, bk. 6, lect. 3, n. 1145. The former offers a logical consideration of *scientia* in its relation to necessary demonstrations, while the latter considers *scientia* as a virtue of the intellect.

¹⁶ *ST* II-II.47.3. See also, Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, bk. 6, lect. 3, n. 1150.

St. Thomas provides a clear response to this objection in the first lecture of his commentary on book six of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. He says,

contingent things can be understood in two ways: in one way according to their universal concepts (*rationes*), in another way as they are in the concrete. Accordingly, the universal concepts of contingent things are immutable. In this way demonstrations are given about contingent things, and the knowledge of them belongs to the demonstrative sciences.¹⁷

Thus, ethics can be the *scientia* of human action precisely because it considers that action, which is singular in itself, according to what is necessary and universal therein. Prudence, on the other hand, considers human action in the concrete of the here and now. This is why St. Thomas is able to say, “prudence consists chiefly, not in the knowledge of universals, but in applying them to action,”¹⁸ and again,

since then prudence is reason concerning an action, the prudent person must have knowledge of both kinds, viz., universals and particulars. But if it is possible for him to have one kind, he ought rather to have the latter, i.e., the knowledge of particulars that are closer to operation.¹⁹

Here, then, we have the answer to where ethics ends and prudence begins. Materially speaking, the objects of ethics and prudence are the same, for both concern human action. Formally, however, they are diverse, for ethics treats of the universal, necessary aspect of human action, while prudence deals primarily with the contingent singularity of human action. Since the formal objects differ, the habits differ. It is for this reason that ethics is an intellectual virtue perfecting the speculative intellect while prudence is an intellectual virtue perfecting the practical intellect. Prudence is indeed the “end” of ethics, for it lies just on the other side of the speculative/practical border. The stream of human action is the source of water for both, but the two live on opposite banks.

III

At this point, however, another objection arises. Identifying ethics as a *scientia* may solve the problem of differentiating the objects of ethics and prudence, but doesn't it also yield a new contradiction?

¹⁷ Aquinas, Commentary on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, bk. 6, lect. 1, n. 1123.

¹⁸ *ST* II-II.47.16 ad 3.

¹⁹ Aquinas, Commentary on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, bk. 6, lect. 6, n. 1194.

The claim was made above that ethics, like prudence, is practical, and yet now it is asserted that ethics is a virtue of the speculative intellect. How is this possible? The answer to this question will provide us with a new way to see prudence as the “end” of ethics, namely, as its goal.

Up until now, we have been operating on the assumption that there is a binary relationship between the speculative and the practical. Either something is speculative, or it is practical, but it can't be both. In point of fact, however, St. Thomas has a much more nuanced view on the matter. His words bear quoting at length,

Some knowledge is speculative only; some is practical only; and some is partly speculative and partly practical. In proof whereof it must be observed that knowledge can be called speculative in three ways: first, on the part of the things known, which are not operable by the knower; such is the knowledge of man about natural or divine thing[s]. Secondly, as regards the manner of knowing, as, for instance, if a builder consider a house by defining and dividing, and considering what belongs to it in general: for this is to consider operable things in a speculative manner, and not as practically operable; for operable means the application of a form to matter, and not the resolution of the composite into its universal formal principles. Thirdly, as regards the end; *for the practical intellect differs in its end from the speculative*, as the Philosopher says (*De Anima* iii). For the practical intellect is ordered to the end of the operation; whereas the end of the speculative intellect is the consideration of truth. Hence, if a builder should consider how a house can be made, not ordering this to the end of operation, but only to know (how to do it), this would be only a speculative consideration as regards the end, although it concerns an operable thing.²⁰

We have, then, three categories according to which something might be judged speculative or practical, theoretical or operative, namely, the *object*, the *mode*, and the *intent*.²¹ Knowledge will be speculative, full stop, if the object is non-operable. Angels (object) cannot be made, so we cannot know how to make angels (mode), nor can we order our knowledge for the purpose of making angels (intent). But if the object is something that can be made or done, this knowledge can be more or less practical based on the mode and intent of the knower. This is why St. Thomas says elsewhere that, “a practical man – a carpenter – studies a line insofar as it is useful for his work, in sawing wood or in doing anything else of this nature. But the geometrician investigates what a line is – its qualities and its nature by considering the properties and potentialities. He is interested only

²⁰ *ST* I.14.16.

²¹ This terminology is taken from Ralph McInerny, *Ethica Thomistica: The Moral Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, D.C.: CUA Press, 1997), pp. 38–40.

in the study of the truth.”²² The one “practical” object, a line, is studied in a speculative way by the geometer and in a practical way by the carpenter. Moreover, the carpenter’s knowledge will be either speculative or practical in intent based on whether he is at the head of a class teaching students about how to make a line or actually preparing to cut a piece of wood. In the latter case, we will have practical knowledge, full stop.²³

What happens when we apply this kind of analysis to ethics and prudence? Since human action is the object of both, it is clear that both are practical according to object. When it comes to mode, however, the picture begins to change, for the ethicist, since he is concerned with the universal and necessary aspects of this operable object, must know both how to define virtue and how to find the virtuous mean (in the abstract). The former is speculative, the latter is practical, and there is no reason to demand the former of the prudent man. In fact, as we have seen, the prudent man’s practical mode of knowledge is chiefly as applied to particular actions. This leads to a complete break between the two when we arrive at the question of intention. Since actions are only in singular matters,²⁴ it is impossible to intend the end of operation without also considering the particular *qua* particular – something *scientia* can never do. Therefore, ethics can never be practical in intent, while prudence always is.

Ethics, then, is partially speculative and partially practical. It is practical in its object, practical and speculative in its mode, and speculative in its intent. The fact that *scientia* admits of such diversity provides the ground for distinguishing between “speculative” or “theoretical” *scientiae* on the one hand and “practical” or “operative” *scientiae* on the other, as we have seen Aquinas do both in his prologue to the *Ethics* commentary and in his commentary on Boethius’ *De Trinitate*.²⁵

Unlike ethics, prudence is absolutely practical, in object, mode, and intent.²⁶ Even when prudence considers universal rules, it does

²² Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, bk. 1, lect. 11, n. 136.

²³ For a more detailed account of all of the varied possibilities and degrees of speculative and practical knowledge, see S. Edmund Dolan, F.S.C., “Resolution and Composition in Speculative and Practical Discourse,” *Laval Theologique et Philosophique* 6 (1950), pp. 14–20.

²⁴ Recall *ST* II-II.47.3.

²⁵ None of the objects of the “speculative sciences,” namely, natural things, the mathematical, and the metaphysicals, are “operable” objects, since they cannot be made by art nor accomplished in action.

²⁶ It is only in the light of this graded understanding of speculative and practical reasoning that the question raised in II-II.47.2 makes sense. When St. Thomas asks “whether prudence belongs to the practical reason *alone*, or *also to the speculative reason*?” [emphasis added], he is asking about where prudence falls on the spectrum. His answer is that it is entirely practical.

so only by applying these rules to particular actions.²⁷ This is why prudence (and, similarly, art) is a virtue of the practical intellect. Just as, in the ontological order, the end specifies the object, specifying the act, specifying the power, so too in the practical order it is the end – the intention to operate – that ultimately renders a virtue fully practical. It is this order to operation, this immediate orientation to concrete *actio* in the here and now, that makes prudence absolute in the practical order.²⁸

This distinction also provides the key for understanding why prudence has more of the *ratio* of a virtue than *scientia*. After discussing the various species of prudence – which parallel perfectly the various species of ethics – St. Thomas makes a fascinating comment. He says, “everything mentioned here is a species of prudence, to the extent that it does not reside in the reason alone but has ramifications in the appetitive faculty. Inasmuch as they are exclusively in the reason they are called certain kinds of practical science, viz., domestic ethics and political science.”²⁹ These “ramifications” of reason in the appetitive faculty are the necessary result of the fact that prudence is entirely practical. St. Thomas says, “it belongs to prudence . . . to apply right reason to action, and this is not done without a right appetite. Hence prudence has the nature of a virtue not only as the other intellectual virtues have it, but also as the moral virtues have it,”³⁰ for the moral virtues order the appetites. Because ethics (or *scientia* in general) cannot intend operation, it never has immediate ramifications on the appetites. As such, it is locked into and focused on the intellect in a way that prudence is not. This is why, despite its practical object and sometimes practical mode of knowing, it is a virtue of the speculative intellect that can only confer *aptness* in doing good. Because prudence intends operation, it overflows into action by means of rectified appetite and confers not only aptness, but also right use.³¹ This is why it is both fully practical and fully a virtue.

It is worth saying just a few more words on this last point. While the intellect has truth as its object, the appetites (whether rational, irascible, or concupiscible) all aim at the good. Thus, when it is said that prudence has ramifications in the appetites so as to rectify them and confer right use, this means that prudence orders man to his true good. Unlike sheer knowledge of “how to,” prudence cannot be

²⁷ *ST* II-II.47.3, corpus and ad 1; II-II.47.4.

²⁸ In fact, since prudence aims at the common good, which is the highest cause in the genus of human *actio*, St. Thomas says that prudence is wisdom in the practical order. See *ST* II-II.47.2 ad 1.

²⁹ Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, bk. 6, lect. 7, n. 1200.

³⁰ *ST* II-II.47.4.

³¹ Cf. *ST* I-II.57.1 and 3.

used well or ill, but only well. Prudence does not just involve the perfection of the intellect, but of the *whole man*. Thus, it has the *ratio* of a virtue in *both* the intellectual and moral orders.

As we draw this investigation to a close, it is finally possible to answer the question of whether there is a sense in which prudence is the end of ethics, when “end” is taken to mean the goal. Strictly speaking, the answer must be “no,” for ethics is ultimately specified as a virtue of the speculative intellect on account of its necessarily speculative intent. The aim of *scientia* is knowledge of the truth, even when that truth happens to be some bit of practical how-to. Ethics may border prudence, but it never crosses the line that separates them.

But in a looser sense prudence *can* be called the end of ethics, for we have already seen that ethics is partly speculative and partly practical. Now since the very *ratio* of the practical is an order towards operation, it follows that *insofar as ethics can be said to be practical* (namely, always in object and often in mode), it is oriented towards an activity that, of itself, it can never directly intend. Thus, if ethical knowledge is ever to be put to use – which is its completion insofar as it is practical knowledge – ethics demands something beyond itself. As we have seen, this something is prudence: the *recta ratio agibilium* that applies such universal knowledge to concrete, singular circumstances by means of rightly ordered appetites, thereby ordering man to his end and truly making him good. And at the end of the day, isn’t that why we bother to study ethics?

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