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THE PARTS OF PRUDENCE AND SCIENTIFIC SOLUTIONS FOR WEAKNESS OF WILL

– Christopher Kaczor –

Abstract. This essay outlines a view of practical wisdom drawing on the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas. In it, I discuss the presuppositions of practical wisdom, namely the ordering to the end of true human happiness. Next, the focus shifts to the “parts” or elements of practical wisdom in order to highlight the intellectual aspects of practical wisdom as a cognitive perfection. Finally, the essay addresses prudence as practical, the actual carrying out of the right deed, at the right time and in the right way. Here, the conclusion of the essay considers the findings of contemporary science in the search for remedies for weakness of will.

Keywords: practical wisdom, Thomas Aquinas, happiness, cognitive perfection, weakness of will.

I take as my guide to investigating practical wisdom the work of St. Thomas Aquinas, a medieval Dominican who before his death in 1274 sought to show the compatibility of faith and reason. Thomas is a particularly apt guide for us today in the context of globalization because of the powerful synthesizing features of his work. Aquinas sought wisdom wherever it was to be found in ancient Greek sources like Aristotle, in Roman sources like Cicero, in Hebrew sources like Moses Maimonides, in Islamic sources like Averroes, in Platonic sources like Pseudo-Dionysius, in Christian sources like Augustine, in religious sources like the Old and New Testaments. Unfortunately, the wisdom of the East (for example, Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, and Confucianism) was unknown to Thomas, but had it been available he doubtless would have drawn from such writers as well. Although the Aristotelian understanding of science and the contemporary empirical understanding of science are far from identical, Thomas also sought to be as scientifically up-to-date as possible. So, in my discussion today, I take Thomas as a guide and inspiration. Given the time constraints, I will not attempt to argumentatively justify his vision here, but will try to simply depict his vision of practical wisdom and how contemporary science supplements his views in important ways. I will present the eight component parts of practical wisdom and the contemporary scientific advances that make easier the practice of practical wisdom.

Practical wisdom is by definition linked to wise practice, practice that enables us to achieve our end. For Thomas, the person of practical wisdom has the right end in mind and chooses the right means, at the right time, and in the right way for achieving that end. Not simply any end will do for Thomas. The practically wise person is not simply the person who is a good artisan, someone who is able to make a good pair of shoes or is able to master the latest computer technology. These ends are important, but the importance of these ends derives from goals of even greater importance. In order to have true practical wisdom, Thomas believes we need to have in mind the true end of human life, the best goal for a human being to strive after, namely happiness.

Although many people can agree that happiness is a worthwhile goal to pursue, the agreement often evaporates when the discussion turns to what exactly will bring happiness. It is a practical question faced by all human beings, what will make us happy? Thomas investigates several possibilities. The goal could be bodily pleasure, to feel good through food, drink, and sex.¹ Thomas rejects this as the ultimate end for human beings because it is not something that is distinctive of human beings. Dogs, cats, and rats can and do seek bodily pleasure, but *human* happiness must involve what makes us distinctively human. Contemporary psychologists point out that although pursuit of bodily pleasure often promises satisfaction (because of the drive of the hormone dopamine) in fact it often fails to make good on that promise of satisfaction.² Many people believe that money will make us happy and, to a degree, they are correct. Other things being equal, someone who lacks basic necessities, who is starving to death and has no where to sleep, is certainly going to be less happy than someone who has what they need to survive. However, money—even great money—is not enough for human happiness. Likewise, Thomas rejects power, fame, glory, and honor as the ultimate end for human beings. What is the ultimate end for Thomas? Love. Love of God and love of neighbor are, for Thomas, the purpose of human life and the source of authentic happiness. I think there are good reasons for thinking he is right, but we won't have time to explore them now. Rather, let us now turn to practical wisdom more directly.

Let us first distinguish practical wisdom from cunning (*prudentia carnis*).³ Both have to do with choosing means that will enable the achievement of the desired end. But cunning (which is sometimes translated 'prudence of the flesh') is

¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae. Prima Secundae*, q. 2, a. 6.

² Kelly McGonigal, *The Willpower Instinct: How Self-Control Works, Why It Matters, and What You Can Do To Get More of It*, Avery, New York 2011, p. 1261–1327.

³ Thomas Aquinas, *op. cit.*, q. 55, a. 2.

directed towards any end whatsoever in preference to the true final end. There is nothing whatsoever wrong with using human intelligence for achieving merely temporal ends, such as increasing money, power, or pleasure.⁴ The problem comes when an agent chooses means to these lesser ends so as to exclude an order to the *summum bonum*, the greatest good. So, the corrupt businessperson who gets away with using insider information to produce gigantic profits is cunning, but he is not a person of practical wisdom insofar as his unjust acts cannot be ordered to the ultimate happiness that constituted by love of God and love of neighbor.

So, assuming we have the right end, practical wisdom concerns choosing the appropriate means to the end. The exercise of prudence involves *knowing* and *choosing* the right means, at the right time, in the right way in order to serve the ultimate end of love of God and love of neighbor. In terms of knowledge, practical wisdom involves eight components, which Aquinas calls ‘integral parts.’

The first component of practical side is memory. Without remembering past experiences and teachings learned, a person cannot consistently choose suitable means for achieving their ultimate end.

Secondly, understanding (*intellectus*) of “practical universal principles” such as “good is to be done and evil avoided” are needed for prudence which is the application of such universal principles in the particular case.

Third, docility or teachableness is an aspect of practical wisdom. This is an openness to the learning from teachers of truth wherever they originate, East or West, ancient or contemporary, secular or religious.

Fourth, shrewdness is an aspect of practical wisdom. Docility is the aptitude for learning from others, shrewdness is aptitude for gaining the insight oneself. An apt reasoner can rightly apply universals to particulars, even in the case of uncertainty. Understanding provides the universal; reason enables one to link the universal to the concrete situation.

Fifth, foresight enables the person of practical wisdom to look ahead to the likely consequences of a proposed action. Here contemporary fields of science can be very helpful. For example, sociology can tell us the likely consequences of certain choices (e.g. cohabitation, dropping out of school).

Sixth, what Thomas calls circumspection, “is about singular matters of action, which contain many combinations of circumstances, it happens that a thing is good in itself and suitable to the end, and nevertheless becomes evil or unsuitable to the end, by reason of some combination of circumstances. Thus to show signs of love to someone seems, considered in itself, to be a fitting way to arouse love in

⁴ *Ibidem*, q. 55, a. 6.

his heart, yet if pride or suspicion of flattery arise in his heart, it will no longer be a means suitable to the end. Hence the need of circumspection in prudence, viz. of comparing the means with the circumstances.”

Finally, caution involves distinguishing choices which appear to be good but actually are evil from choices which are actually good even if they appear to be evil. Sometimes good and evil are intermingled which again call for caution.

The elements discussed thus far emphasize on the *cognitive* aspect of practical wisdom. But practical wisdom is not merely a matter of what we *know*, but is also a matter of what we actually *do*. We can know the right thing and do the wrong thing. St. Paul experienced this conflict and wrote, “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.”⁵ The incontinent person knows the right thing but fails to do the right thing. He may be a professor of ethics, but he is not a possessor of practical wisdom.

Philosophers from Plato to the present have wrestled with this topic of *akrasia*, *incontinentia*, weakness of will. Socrates, in his championing of the power of reason, thought that if an agent really knew what evil choices did to the agent who chooses them then such an agent would never choose evil.⁶ Aristotle disagreed with Socrates (or at least the version of Socrates offered by Plato) and offered a more sophisticated account in which weakness of the will is explained by competing practical syllogisms.

While not resolving the theoretical questions wrestled with by Plato, Aristotle and successive generations of philosophers addressing such questions, contemporary science has gone a long way towards practical remedies for weakness of will. The best resource for a compilation of the recent empirical work on willpower is Kelly McGonigal, *The Willpower Instinct: How Self-Control Works, Why It Matters, and What You Can Do To Get More of It*.⁷ The following section summarizes some of her main points. My remarks will be divided into three parts: remote preparation for success in moments of temptation, rationalizations for ‘giving in’ and remedies for the rationalization, and how to handle moments of temptation.

Remote preparation includes self knowledge. The inscription over the door of the Oracle of Delphi read, “Know Thyself.” We can learn about how to avoid will power failures by studying them, learning what leads up to them, learning how we feel before, during, and after them. When we better understand how and

⁵ Romans 7:15.

⁶ Plato, *Protagoras*, 358d: “No one goes willingly toward the bad.”

⁷ Kelly McGonigal, op. cit. I am also drawing on, to a more limited degree, the work of Roy F. Baumeister and John Tierney, *Willpower: Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength*, Penguin Press, New York 2011).

why we fail, we can better prepare for success. Remote preparation for exercising practical wisdom includes self-care. Researchers found that self-care is crucial for self-control. When we are hungry, bored, burned out, lonely, angry, anxious, afraid, stressed, or tired, we are more likely to have willpower failures. One of the most effective remedies comes from the East. Studies found that meditation and mindfulness substantially curb weakness of will and lead to greater self-control by both enhancing self-awareness and helping to handle negative emotions. Exercise, religious activity, socializing, and reading are also effective means to self-care to strengthen the will in part by decreasing that great enemy of willpower, stress.

Let me now say a word about rationalizations leading to weakness of will and the remedies correcting these rationalizations. Before a willpower breakdown, people say to themselves certain things that make it seem justified to give into temptation. For example, people often say, “I know I shouldn’t do this, but I’ll just do it this once, and then tomorrow I will act better.” Of course, “tomorrow” is always tomorrow and so the opportunity to do good in the present never arrives. The remedy is to recall that today is yesterday’s tomorrow. One can ask, “Wouldn’t I rather do this tomorrow than today?” But it is better to ask, “Do I really want the bad consequences that come with always putting this off?” Another example of rationalization is that people who have given into temptation, often say to themselves, “What the hell, I’ve already [broken my diet, had one drink too many, fill in the blank of wrongdoing] so I might as well just totally go for it.” The remedy for the “what the hell” rationalization, authorizing us to give in even more is self-forgiveness and self-compassion. We need to be kind to ourselves as we would to a good friend who had failed. Aristotle said that the virtuous person is like a friend to himself.⁸ If we are to be friends of virtue with others, we need to imitate the *phronimos*, the person of practical wisdom. We need to be kind, patient, generous, understanding, and compassionate to ourselves as we would towards a good friend who suffered and struggled with weakness of will.

Let me say a final word about moments of temptation to doing the worse thing. If possible, create a distance between yourself and the temptation. “The good news is, temptation has a narrow window of opportunity. To really overwhelm your prefrontal cortex [the part of the brain that helps us to the harder thing], the reward must be available now, and – for maximum effect – you need to see it. As soon as there is any distance between you and the temptation, the power balance shifts back to the brain’s system of control.”⁹ The story is told of the ex-

⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1166a10–38.

⁹ Kelly McGonigal, *op. cit.*, p. 160.

plorer Hernando Cortez who in arrived in Mexico and feared that, should adversity arise, his men would return to the ships and flee back to Europe. So, when he arrived, he ordered that fire be set to the ships so that the route of escape would be cut off. Similarly, the person struggling with weakness of will needs to “burn their ships” and as much as possible put up obstacles to giving into temptation.

Kelly McGonigal recommends the power of acceptance in practicing practical wisdom in the face of temptation.

1. Notice you are thinking about your temptation or feeling a craving
2. Accept the thought or feeling without trying to immediately distract yourself or argue with it. Remind yourself of the white-bear rebound effect
3. Step back by realizing that thoughts and feelings aren't always under your control, but you can choose whether to act on them.
4. Remember your goal. Remind yourself of whatever your commitment is. All feelings and thoughts (good, bad, indifferent) eventually move off the stage of our minds.¹⁰

McGonigal notes that many people today become addicted (in some sense) to their electronic devices. One young medical student found that checking Facebook was cutting into the time she needed for study. So, when she felt the urge to go on Facebook, she called to mind a simple question, “Is going on facebook right now worth not becoming a doctor?” When she brought her long term goals to mind, she found the willpower to continue her study.

A last word about Aquinas. Thomas sought truth wherever it could be found, from whatever source available: Greek, Roman, Hebrew, Islamic, Christian, Platonic, and Aristotelian. In this lecture, I've sought to present some of Thomas's insights on practical wisdom but also to imitate his spirit by building and expanding on his insights making use of research in psychology. What is true is true whatever its source, and this openness truth in whatever form and from whatever place is a firm foundation for virtuous practice around the globe.

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¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 226.