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### Critical Summary

St. Thomas says, in *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 48 a. 1, c., that the potential parts of prudence are those which are “adjunct virtues, ordered to secondary matters or acts and not having the whole power of the principle virtue.”<sup>1</sup> He enumerates three such virtues, namely, *eubulia*, which is about good counsel, *synesis*, which is about good judgment in ordinary matters, and *gnome*, which is about good judgment in matters which are the exception to the ordinary.<sup>2</sup> These virtues, St. Thomas holds, are distinct from prudence and secondary to it, insofar as theory is secondary to application in practical matters. He writes, quoting Aristotle, “Prudence is not only a rational habit, as art, since it includes application to action which is an act of the will.”<sup>3</sup> Since neither deliberation nor judgment, strictly speaking, involve this “application to the will,” neither is essential to the principal act of prudence which is to command.

Prudence, as a virtue perfecting practical reason, consists in the *application* of what has been deliberated (*eubulia*) and judged correctly (*synesis*).<sup>4</sup> Thus, *eubulia* and *synesis* are virtues which perfect cognitive matters which are secondary in practical reasoning and, further, may be had without having the perfect act of prudence concurrently, which actually commands right action. In this summary, I will focus upon *synesis* as particularly connected to the cognitive power, and thus, secondary to the act of prudence in practical action.

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<sup>1</sup> Translations are my own, however, I have consulted St. Thomas Aquinas, O. P. *Summa theologiae*, vol. 36: Prudence (2a2ae. 47–56), trans. Thomas Gilby O.P. (Washington: Catholic University Press, 1974) as well as *The Summa Theologica*, trans. English Province Dominicans (New York: Benzinger Bros., 1947).

<sup>2</sup> I will not discuss *gnome* in detail since it can be considered as analogous to *synesis* such that whatever is said of *synesis* can be said of *gnome* except insofar as the latter deals with judgments regarding exceptional matters (ST II-II, q. 51, a. 4 c., ad. 1). Both are presupposed by good deliberation (*eubulia*), which I will also be unable to discuss here (ST I-II, q. 27, ad. 3, and II-II, q. 51, a. 4, ad. 4).

<sup>3</sup> ST II-II, q. 47, a. 1, c.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, q. 47, a. 8, c.

My guiding question in this summary is “Why is *synesis* not considered to be an integral part?” It would seem that good judgment is certainly an essential *condition* of the imperative act of prudence. Such was the opinion of Geraldus Odonis and John Buridan as Risto Saarinen points out.<sup>5</sup> The contrary opinion of Odonis and Buridan with that of Aquinas is due to an equivocal use of the word *judgment*. Unlike Odonis and Buridan, St. Thomas does not posit *synesis* as “organically belonging to the prerequisites of prudence, which together provide the judicative rationale for its actual command.”<sup>6</sup> This is because St. Thomas understands the role of *synesis* as a *perceptive judgment* of a particular state of affairs, the way things are, and *not* “as an elaborate partial virtue which controls the formation of the practical syllogism.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, *synesis* is not the “judicative rationale,” which reasons from the universal to particular in judging *what is the right to be done*. This is precisely the *practical judgment* that the virtue of prudence itself makes as one of its three acts.<sup>8</sup> The *perceptive judgment* of *synesis*, though ordered to prudence’s judgment, does not directly or primarily condition the latter.

In other words, St. Thomas does not posit *synesis* as an integral part, a condition of prudence, but rather as a potential part, ordered to a secondary, though related matter, namely, correct judgment of perception. The role of *synesis* is to prepare the mind to see correctly the particular state of affairs so that prudence might render right practical judgment. St. Thomas notes that certain people are not good at practical judgment due to “a defect in the intellect arising chiefly from a defective disposition of the common sense which fails to judge rightly.”<sup>9</sup> Those with good perceptive judgments, perfected by *synesis*, have well-disposed intellects for

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<sup>5</sup> Saarinen, Risto, “The Parts of Prudence: Buridan, Odonis, Aquinas,” *The Canadian Philosophical Review* 42 (2003): 750-66.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 759.

<sup>7</sup> The latter description was Odonis and Buridan’s understanding of *synesis*, according to Saarinen (759).

<sup>8</sup> ST II-II, q. 47, a. 8, c.

<sup>9</sup> ST II-II, q. 51, a. 3, c.

making good practical judgments, perfected by prudence. Further, St. Thomas explains, “Right judgment consists in the cognitive power apprehending a thing just as it is in reality, and this is due to the right disposition of the apprehensive power.”<sup>10</sup> The “right judgment” that belongs to prudence presupposes a correct judgment of particulars in order to apply the universal moral norm, and thus generates a righteous action. But this grasp of things, just as they are in reality, requires the apprehensive power to be well disposed, as a mirror must be well disposed to reflect bodily forms as they are. This is the role of *synesis*. St. Thomas continues that proper disposition of the apprehensive power, though imperfectly had by man’s given nature, is perfected in practice in two ways: “First directly, on the part of the cognitive power itself, for instance, because it is imbued, not with distorted, but with true and correct ideas.”<sup>11</sup> This imbuing of the cognitive power is the result of, presumably, many sound judgments made by *synesis* about the way things truly are, in the majority of cases.

Saarinen further remarks that St. Thomas’ treatment of *synesis* in the *Commentary on the Ethics* describes it as virtue concerning sense (*sensus*).<sup>12</sup> St. Thomas explains that *synesis* pertains to those who “can judge well about things to be done,” and such men are called “sensible.”<sup>13</sup> The judgment of prudence, however, is preceptive (ordered to command) “inasmuch as the work of the end is to determine what must be done.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, the judgment of *synesis* is ordered to the command of prudence as its end. For this reason, though *synesis* perfects practical reason by its grasp of things as they are, it is not integral for the act of

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<sup>10</sup> ST II-II, q. 51, a. 3, ad. 1.

<sup>11</sup> The second, though indirect, way of perfecting the apprehensive power through perfection of the appetitive power which desires what is truly good through having the moral virtues.

<sup>12</sup> Saarinen, 758-9.

<sup>13</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, OP. *Commentary on Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. C. I. Litzinger, OP (Notre Dame: Dumb Ox Books, 1993), p. 391-2, 1239.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 392, 1240.

prudence, which brings about greater perfection in practical reason by its practical judgment and consequent command.

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