

The Christological Prudence of the Natural Slave

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Abstract

The account of prudence found in Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* and the *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics* is bound up with his endorsement of Aristotle's notion of the Natural Slave in his Commentary on Aristotle's Politics. This connection not only hobbles his account of the virtue of prudence, but also weakens other areas of his theology, including his account of providence. A creative rereading of Aquinas's biblical commentaries, however, affords Aquinas the opportunity to correct himself. Aquinas's commentaries on Paul, especially the *Commentary on Philippians*, provide ample resources for doing so. The Christ hymn of Philippians 2:5-11 forms the cornerstone of a thoroughly Christological, even Apocalyptic, account of prudence, which overcomes the tensions in Aquinas's account of prudence resulting from his endorsement of natural slavery. This scriptural reformulation of prudence heightens the stress on exemplification even further and in so doing makes its exercise more conducive to peaceableness. Due to the political dimensions of prudence, these shifts have an ecclesiological dimension that reveals Aquinas's affinity with Giorgio Agamben's philosophical account of mendicant life.

Keywords

Thomas Aquinas, prudence, virtue ethics, biblical moral theology, commentary on Philippians, Giorgio Agamben, natural slavery

I. Introduction

Thomas Aquinas's account of prudence in *Summa Theologiae* draws heavily on Aristotle's discussion of prudence in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.¹ Most notably, Aquinas endorses Aristotle's idea that only

¹ I am grateful to Gene Rogers for his insightful comments on this paper and for encouraging me to publish it.

those who rule, and more specifically only those who legislate, truly possess prudence. For Aristotle neither slaves nor women could be rulers. They could not fully cultivate the virtue of prudence, but rather could only possess the virtue to the extent that their reason guided them in dutiful obedience to the commands of their law-givers. His account of prudence is inextricable from his acceptance of Aristotle's concept of the natural slave. I contend, however, that this is not the only account of Prudence in Aquinas's oeuvre. In this paper, I will read Aquinas's *Commentary on Philippians* against both the *Summa Theologiae* and his commentaries on the *Nicomachean Ethics* and Aristotle's *Politics*. Aquinas's exegesis will provide an alternative, thoroughly Christological account of Prudence. I will conclude by sketching how this constructive rereading reorders Aquinas's relationship to several modern virtue ethicists and political theorists.

II. The Political Dimension of Prudence

Aquinas's *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics* contains a detailed treatment of how the virtuous person exercises prudence that compliments the account given in *Summa Theologiae*. The prudent person is one who can, 'by the power of habit, give good advice about proper and useful goods, not only in some particular matter . . . but also about things good and useful for the benefit of the total life of the person' (*Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. VI, Lecture 4.1162).² Note that prudence is fully manifest when the prudent person is able to give advice to or command others. Prudence is an inherently social virtue, but more specifically it is a social virtue related to directing and being directed by others. As Thomas makes clear in the *Summa*, the true exercise of prudence always terminates in a command (II-II.47.8). Aristotle defines prudence as a 'genuine habit concerned with action under the guidance of reason, dealing with things good and bad for the person' (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1140b4-6).³ Aquinas notes that this definition distinguishes prudence from a science, since it does not deal with necessary things, and from an art, since it is not (directly) concerned with production.

Whence does one receive the good habits that will enable one to give the requisite good advice? Who gives this advice? Aquinas gives

² Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. C. I. Litzinger, OP (Notre Dame, IN: Dumb Ox Books, 1993). All further citations will be in the body of the text. See also *Summa Theologiae* II-II.47.2.

³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926). All other citations will be in the body of the text.

a very specific answer to these related questions in his commentary: Pericles. He states:

[S]ince Prudence is concerned with things good and bad for the human person, therefore Pericles and others like him are thought to be prudent because they can consider what are the good things not only for themselves but also for others. Likewise, we think of stewards or dispensers of goods and of statesmen or governors of cities as people of this kind, viz., who can reckon good things for themselves and others. (Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics, Bk. VI, Lecture 4.1168)

Pericles is an exemplar of prudential moral reasoning and legislation. Hence, one gets the advice that one will give to others from those who are themselves good at giving advice. In other words, a virtuous person does not derive the premises for his or her practical syllogisms from abstracted principles, but by drawing on the moral resources and experiences of their community, especially as embodied in those among them who live exemplary lives like that of Pericles. Highlighting the significance of this particular example underscores just how important exemplary figures are for Aquinas's account of prudence. Furthermore, Aquinas himself does not think that Aristotle's choice of Pericles as his exemplar is insignificant. Pericles was an exemplary leader and an effective authority figure who represents the kind of person in whom prudence should dwell: stewards, managers of resources, statesmen, etc. These persons have cultivated within themselves the combination of 'estimative or conjectural reason' and 'the rectitude of the appetitive faculty,' which allows them to direct the desires of others (*Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. VI, Lecture 4.1174).

Prudence is therefore an inherently political virtue both for Aristotle and for Aquinas. Aristotle distinguishes between several kinds of Prudence that are all ultimately different modes of exercising the virtue. First, there is architectonic prudence, which is 'legislative' in its exercise (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1141b25). Second, there is civic prudence, which is 'concerned with individual practicables;' it is 'operative and deliberative, for a decree has to do with the practicable as a singular ultimate' (ibid., 1141b26-27). The third form of prudence is that whereby the agent is concerned with him or herself and is considered prudence in a special sense. It retains the general name prudence because it concerns reason's training of the appetitive faculty (*Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. VI, Lecture 7.1200). Aquinas emphasizes that these three modes of Prudence are ranked in importance:

We must consider that, because the whole is more important than the part, and consequently the city than the household and the household than the one person, Civic Prudence must be more important than Domestic Prudence and the latter more important than Personal

Prudence. Moreover, Legislative Prudence has greater importance among the parts of Civic Prudence, and without qualification is absolutely principal [sic] about actions that a person must perform. (*Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. VI, Lecture 7.1201.)

This rank ordering fits with Aquinas's foregrounding of the reference to Pericles. A prudential leader can dispense rules by which the community order its life, often by the example of his or her own life.

Since the individual's prudence participates in and is reliant upon domestic and legislative prudence, it follows that to know the things good for oneself, which belongs to the prudence of the individual person, requires that the law-giver him or herself be prudent. Aquinas addresses this issue when responding to an objection that those who seem prudent are often those who know and intelligently cultivate only having to do with themselves, while political leaders 'do not seem to be prudent but rather *polipragmones*, i.e. busy with a variety of affairs pertaining to the multitude' (*Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. VI, Lecture 7.1203). Following Aristotle, he argues in response that the particular good of each person cannot be attained without domestic and legislative prudence. Thus, by attending to public affairs the truly prudent person is attending to his or her own good. Yet civic and domestic prudence are insufficient without personal prudence, because it must be exercised to determine the individual's own good within the contingent circumstances within which the individual finds him or herself. Here the virtuous circle revolves back to its starting point, however, since these contingent circumstances are very much structured by the Civic and Domestic Prudence of the Law-giver, who is him or herself acting so as to ensure that he or she can continue to exercise Personal Prudence well. For Aristotle himself this is very much the case. The Legislative Prudence of which he speaks was, in his context, explicitly tied to the founder of the city, known in Ancient Greece as a law-giver.⁴ Thus, the character of the law-giver, and of those in a given community akin to Pericles, is truly decisive.

The account of prudence that Aquinas gives in the *Summa Theologiae* dovetails with his exegesis of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. He asserts that prudence chiefly concerns means since the virtuous person exercises it when assessing how to attain certain ends (II-II.47.6). Thus, prudence is 'right reason applied to action' (II-II.47.2). If that is the case, however, then that which is the chief act of reason with respect to action must be the characteristic exercise of prudence. Reason takes counsel and judges accordingly, but practical reasoning must issue in a command, since its end is an action (II-II.47.8).

⁴ For this point, see Rackham's note *d* on *Nicomachean Ethics* VI.viii.2.

Aquinas's treatment of prudence in the *Summa Theologiae* also re-emphasizes the centrality of the figure of the law-giver. He maintains that prudence does not naturally reside in human beings. Since prudence is an intellectual virtue, which is 'both originated and fostered by teaching,' it 'demands experience and time' (II-47.15, *sed contra*). The exercise of this virtue requires both knowledge of universals and knowledge of particulars (II-II.47.6). The context of the community in which one is raised, with whose particular circumstances one must become intimately familiar, largely determines the degree of prudence possibly cultivatable. These circumstances, however, will be deeply indebted to the law-giver's prudence. Aquinas maintains that:

'the regnative is the most perfect species of prudence, wherefore the prudence of subjects, which falls short of regnative prudence, retains the common name of political prudence, even as in logic a convertible term that does not denote the essence of thing retains the name of "proper"' (II-II.50.2.ad1).

III. Who Is Truly Prudent? Who Can Never Be Prudent?

If the Law-giver is deeply important for the possibility of an individual exercising his or her own personal prudence, and thereby capable of attaining the goods necessary for flourishing, then we must ask who can be law-givers and who cannot. Who are Thomas's own exemplars in the texts that we have been discussing? The character of his preferred polity depends on it. In II-II.47.12 Aquinas argues that prudence does not reside, strictly speaking, in the subject as subject because prudence is in the reason with respect to ruling and governing. On Aquinas's account, slaves and subjects (a category that would include women) cannot have the virtue of prudence in any developed sense because they have no autonomy. Only insofar as slaves and subjects are rational creatures can they have prudence, which will manifest itself in the form of their disciplining the lower powers of their souls (II-II.47.12.a3). For the most part, however, they possess prudence in the form of a 'handicraft,' being shaped by the ruler, who possesses prudence in the manner of a 'master craftsman' (II-II.47.12). According to Aquinas, natural slaves are akin to irrational animals. Like irrational animals, they are not masters over their own actions. Aquinas explicitly states that 'a slave is moved by his master . . . as irrational and inanimate beings are set in motion by their movers' (II-II.50.2). Thus, they have no will of their own. Put most bluntly, slaves are prudent insofar as they obey the will of their masters.

What Aquinas says here parallels his endorsement of Aristotle's concept of natural slavery in his *Commentary on Aristotle's Politics*.

There he affirms that the relationship between the master and the slave is ‘fittingly despotic, for the master has absolute authority over the slave’ (*Commentary on the Politics*, Bk. 1, Lecture 2.2).⁵ He offers two analogies to explain the role that slaves play in the household to which they belong. First, slaves occupy a status in propertied households analogous to the status of oxen in poor households. Second, just as certain craftsmen have living instruments to guide them in their craft, such as the pilot of a ship having a lookout, so too does the prudent household manager have living assistants in the form of slaves. They are ‘living instruments supporting the life of the household’ (*Commentary on the Politics*, Bk. 1, Lecture 2.7). Furthermore, slaves are specifically instruments to the exercise of prudence on the part of the household manager. Aquinas stipulates that the slave ‘is an assistant and instrument of things that belong to activity, not things that belong to production’ (*Commentary on the Politics*, Bk. 1, Lecture 2.10). These contentions parallel prudence’s dealing explicitly with action and not production (*Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. VI, Lecture 4.1167). Following Aristotle, Aquinas is very clear that such slavery is indeed natural. His argument for natural slavery is rooted in a comparison of certain kinds of persons to inanimate objects and parts of the body. Natural slaves have no agency in and of themselves, but only insofar as they are ruled by their masters. For Aquinas this is analogous to the hand, which has no agency in and of itself but only insofar as it is moved by the will, and the body, which has no agency except insofar as it is moved by the soul (*Commentary on the Politics*, Bk. 1, Lecture 3.6). More specifically, he singles out those suited to manual labor as the chief example of natural slaves. On his account, human custom implicitly accepts the truth of natural slavery, since those who are captured in war are acknowledged to be slaves to the victors (*Commentary on the Politics*, Bk. 1, Lecture 4.1-5).

Aquinas’s account of domestic prudence is thus deeply tied to Aristotle’s account of natural slavery. This connection also entails that his account of legislative prudence is deeply tied to Aristotle’s concept of natural slavery. When discussing the prudence of the ruler later in his commentary on Aristotle’s *Politics*, he explicitly compares the rule of the master over those naturally fit to be slaves to the rule of the prince over those naturally fit to be subjects (*Commentary on the Politics*, Bk. III, Lecture 5.5-6). The exposition and defense of natural slavery given in the *Politics* also clearly plays a role in his account of prudence given in the *Summa*, since he cites that work in his questions on prudence (II-II.47.12.ad3; II-II.50.1). Therefore,

⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle’s Politics*, trans. Richard J. Regan, SJ, (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2007), 21. All other citations will be in the body of the text.

if we are to ask who possesses legislative prudence in Aquinas's preferred polity, then the answer must slaveholders. Indeed, his chief example, Pericles, was a slaveholder who encouraged that practice.

This problem extends further than Thomas's political thought. In the *Summa Theologiae*, regarding the question of whether there is an eternal law, he asserts that 'a law is nothing else but the ruler who governs a perfect community' and 'that the whole community of the universe is governed by Divine Reason' (*ST I-II.91.1*). Thus, the LORD establishes the eternal law in the manner of one of Aristotle's legislatively prudent founders. This connection raises the stakes significantly. Aquinas's flawed account of prudence and its relation to Aristotle's concept of natural slavery problematizes not only his account of a single virtue but also a crucial component of his account of God's relationship with the world.

IV. Jesus Christ the Natural Slave

Among Thomists a common response to lines of thought like the one that I have just outlined has been to wash one's hands of these aspects of Thomas's thought. Alasdair MacIntyre, for example, takes this approach in several works. In his most recent book he specifically cites Aquinas's acceptance of natural slavery specifically as an instance in which this move was necessary.⁶ Those who hold this position say that we must simply go elsewhere for guidance on these matters. If his political thinking is structurally interwoven with his broader theological system, then this approach is insufficient. I propose, then, that if we turn to his biblical commentaries we might afford Aquinas the chance to correct himself on this matter, and offer us a startlingly different conception of prudence while doing so. Making use of Aquinas's scriptural commentaries will also illustrate another point: Thomism's *philosophical* problems are often best resolved *theologically*.

My model for this internal critique is Gene Rogers's use of Aquinas's scriptural commentaries. Rogers describes his method as the combination of *de re* and *de dicto* exegesis. The latter mode prioritizes what the writer said and focuses on the writer's cultural context. The former mode of exegesis 'aims to say what follows from (some of) the writer's commitments when they are placed in the setting of the interpreter's ancillary commitments and cultural context.'⁷ In what follows I plan to constructively develop a *de re*

⁶ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity: An Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning, and Narrative*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 88.

⁷ Eugene F. Rogers, Jr., *Aquinas and the Supreme Court: Race, Gender, and the Failure of Natural Law in Aquinas's Biblical Commentaries*, (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 11.

exegesis of Aquinas's scriptural exegesis. What I say is thoroughly rooted in Aquinas's own exegesis of scripture; the task that remains beyond merely repeating Aquinas's exegesis is to connect the threads running through it critically and constructively.

Why, though, should we think that Aquinas's biblical commentaries helpful in this regard? The simple answer is that the scriptural framework structures his thinking in such a way as to resolve and/or to overcome latent problems with his appropriation of pagan ethics. Before turning to his exegesis of Philippians I offer as evidence the preface to his *Commentary on Philemon*, which is worth quoting in full:

'If you have a faithful servant, let him be to you as your own soul' (Sirach 33:31). The wise man shows three things concerning master and slave, namely, what is required on the side of the servant; what ought to be the feeling of the master towards the servant; and what is the use of the servant. From the servant fidelity is asked, for in this he is a good servant, because what he is and all that he has he ought to give to the master. Matthew 24–45: 'Who, do you think, is the faithful and prudent servant . . .' And he says, 'if he is faithful', because fidelity is found in few. Proverbs 20:6: 'But who shall find a faithful man?' The master ought to feel towards his servant as a friend, hence it is said, 'as his own soul'. For this is proper to friends, that they are of one mind in what they will and what they do not will. Acts 4.32: 'Now the multitude of the believers were of one heart and one soul.' By which we are given to understand that there is a consensus of master and servant, when the faithful servant becomes a friend. As for his use, he should be treated like a brother, for he is a brother, both with respect to generation of nature, because they have the same author —Job 31.13: 'If I have despised to abide judgement with my man-servant'; Malachi 2:10: 'Have we not all one father? Did not one God created us?' —and with respect to the generation of grace, which is the same for both. Galatians 3:27: 'For all you who have been baptized into Christ, have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor freeman; there is neither male nor female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus.' Matthew 23:8: 'And all you are brothers.' . . . [A]s it was shown above how spiritual prelates should relate to their subjects, so here he shows how temporal masters should relate to their temporal servants, and how the faithful servant to his master.⁸

Treating one's subjects as friends and brothers would be unthinkable for an Aristotle's natural rulers. Recall that Aquinas endorses Aristotle's characterization of the master-slave relationship as despotic. Thus, although here Aquinas only paints in broad strokes, a different kind of ruler must here then be on offer. If this is the case then

⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentaries on St. Paul's Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, trans. Chrysostom Baer, O.Praemon., (Notre Dame, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2004). 'Commentary on Philemon,' Preface.

another kind of prudential legislator, displaying a different kind of prudence, must also be present. Looking to another of Thomas's commentaries on Paul, specifically Philippians, will furnish us with just such an account of prudence.

Prudence moves like a red thread through Aquinas's exegesis of Philippians, producing an alternative account structured around Philippians 2:5-11 but fleshed out by his exegesis in the rest of the epistle. In Philippians 1:25-30 Paul tells his congregation:

I know that I shall remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again. Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you stand firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear omen to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict which you saw and now hear to be mine. (RSV)

Aquinas interprets Paul's desire to remain with the entire congregation as his attempt to ensure they may attain the goods of the life of faith (*Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, Lecture 1-4).⁹ He argues that Paul's injunction to 'let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ' is the Apostle stipulating the ' requisite means: unity, constancy, and cooperation' (ibid.). According to Aquinas, the necessary kind of unity is that whereby the community acts 'with one mind, having one will and soul' (ibid.). He offers as an example the unity of the Jerusalem church in Acts 4. This notion of unity might initially seem banal, but will become crucial when the phrase reappears below in Aquinas's exegesis of what it means to 'have the mind of Christ.' Aquinas shifts this exhortation into a politico-ecclesial tone when he details the kind of cooperation necessary. He stipulates that this consists of 'striving side by side for the faith of the gospel,' but then offers as an image of this all Israel assembling together to obey Samuel's word and Proverbs 18:19, which speaks of mutual aid fostering a strong city. Heeding Paul's words will give the community the 'means to attain the fruit of endurance in the midst of persecutions' (ibid.).

⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on St. Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians and Letter to the Philippians*, trans. F. R. Larcher and Michael Duffy, (Albany, NY: Magi Books, 1969). All other citations will be in the body of the text.

In Philippians 2:1-2 Paul enjoins his audience ‘So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any incentive of love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy being in the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.’ Aquinas focuses on the fact that Paul is holding Christ up for the Philippians as an exemplar, and says that for Paul Christ serves as ‘the means by which he leads them . . . to grant his request: *complete my joy*’ (*Commentary on Philippians*, Lecture 2-1). One of the means for fulfilling his request is their ‘societas’ (ibid.). *Societas* names a virtue by which the goods of communal life were rightly ordered.¹⁰ Another means by they might fulfill the Apostle’s joy is through a specific kind of mutual charity. Through this charity they will, once again, ‘be of one mind;’ they will be of one mind precisely because they have learned a kind of ‘wisdom . . . and because it pertains to this wisdom to judge’ so that they may begin ‘acting in full accord’ (ibid.). Finally, Aquinas stresses that Paul exhorts his audience to humility. Cultivating humility is necessary to ensure continued cooperation, which is impossible if persons are setting themselves up as superior over others. Aquinas then asserts that:

Just as it pertains to pride that a person extols him or herself above him or herself, so to humility it pertains that he or she restrain him or herself according to his or her limitations. But how can a superior person do this? For he or she either does not know that he or she is superior and virtuous, and then he is not virtuous, because he is not *prudent*; or he does know, and then he cannot consider others as superior to him or herself. (*Commentary on Philippians*, Lecture 2-1, emphasis added)

Aquinas has now made the implicit theme of the lectures explicit. He believes that Paul has been instructing the Philippians about how to cultivate prudence. He continually believes that Paul is showing them the *means* by which some good or set of goods may be attained, precisely the point of exercising prudence. These means are also explicitly directed to facilitating the common life of the community, thereby embodying the political dimension of prudence outlined above. Moreover, the three-step process that Paul enjoins, whereby the Philippians will learn wisdom, employ that wisdom in judging, and then act in unity, parallels the three-part process of prudential practical reasoning, consisting of taking counsel, judging, and then acting in II-II.47.8. Noticeably, however, the end of this three-part process is obedient collective action, not the command of reason. Thus, the stress on action is thereby heightened. Despite prudence being a theme in both lectures, however, Aquinas never speaks of Paul or Christ as a law-giver. Instead, Aquinas connects the display

¹⁰ This virtue, of Stoic origins, enters the Christian tradition via Ambrose’s *De Officiis*.

of Prudence with humility. With this connection in mind we can turn to the Christ Hymn.

Aquinas opens his first exegetical lecture on the Christ Hymn by noting that the Philippian community is encouraged to have the same mind as Christ, namely, ‘one of humility’ (*Commentary on Philippians* 2-2). Considering the recurrence of the theme of taking on a new mind in the earlier lectures that dealt with prudential reasoning, we should already see that this lecture is part of that same line of thought; prudence is still in view. He then lectures at length about Philippians 2:7-8, where Christ is said to take the ‘form of a slave’. There he says that ‘by reason of his/her creation the human person is a servant, and human nature is in the form of a servant’ (*Commentary on Philippians* 2, Lecture 2). Here “slave” simply denotes the mode of the Son’s hypostasis after having assumed human nature. Yet Aquinas argues that it was this form, that of the slave, which the Son filled with grace and truth, thereby connecting 2:7-8 to John 1:14 (*ibid.*).

When he comments on 2:8’s language about Christ ‘emptying himself,’ he frames the matter in terms of obedience. He offers the following comments:

The manner and sign of his humility is obedience, whereas it is characteristic of the proud to follow their own will, for a proud person seeks greatness. But it pertains to a great thing that it not be ruled by something else, but that it rule other things. Therefore, obedience is contrary to pride. Hence, to show the greatness of Christ’s humility and passion, he says that he became obedient. (*Commentary on Philippians* 2, Lecture 2)

Later, when discussing 2:9, Aquinas notes that the LORD exulted Christ specifically because of his obedience (*Commentary on Philippians* 2, Lecture 3). He is given the authority to rule precisely because he was obedient. Moreover, the name given to Christ because of this humbling is not a new name given after the humbling, but the making known to creation a name that Christ had from all eternity. This name is in fact a manifestation of who the Second Person of the Trinity is most fundamentally. In an earlier discussion about what ‘form of the slave’ and ‘form of God’ meant, Aquinas explicitly collapsed the distinction between God and God’s form. Here he is simply being consistent with the position that he takes in *Summa Theologiae* I.3.1. Yet he then speaks of how, even in the assumption of the servile human nature with all limitations, the Son inscribed his nature on ours ‘as upon a slate’ (*Commentary on Philippians* 2-2). Thus, the obedience and humility inherent in our servile human form was not something at odds with the divinity. Christ himself was naturally obedient and humble. Thus, the form of the slave and the form of God, at least as revealed in Christ, are in startlingly close alignment.

In the *Summa*, Aquinas argued that prudence is fundamentally something that commands (II-II.47.8), and that only those with the special ‘legislative prudence’ (II-II.47.12) can have the fully developed virtue. With his exegesis of Philippians in mind, however, it should first be noted that if the form of the slave is the basic form of human nature as creature, then no human being can ever be a ruler in the Aristotelian sense that Aquinas has inherited. There are no natural rulers. Rather, all of us are natural slaves. Furthermore, if the true exemplar for human nature, who also alone possesses the divine legislative authority, is the one who embraced the conditions of the Aristotelian natural slave, refusing the impulse to rule, then true prudence consists in refusing to exercise legislative prudence. Christ’s refusal to rule, which stems from his simultaneously divine and human humility, stands in stark contrast to the way in which those naturally fit to rule distinguished themselves from the natural slave according to the *Politics*. Those to whom the capabilities for ruling had been given were to appropriate that authority with confidence (*Politics* III.5).

This reading of Aquinas’s biblical exegesis also controverts other aspects of his exegesis of Aristotle’s account of prudence. Specifically, it wrecks his and Aristotle’s attempt to distinguish prudence from the sciences. In his *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*, Aquinas expounded and endorsed Aristotle’s views on the position of ‘prudence or political science’ with respect to the other sciences (*Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. VI, Lecture 6, 1186). He maintained that prudence/political science could not be the most desirable science, ‘unless human beings were the most excellent of all things in the world, for one science is better and more honorable than another because it deals with better and more honorable subjects’ (ibid.). In fact, prudence could not even be a science, since it dealt with contingent, not necessary, matters (*Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. VI, Lecture 4.1167). According to the Aquinas of the *Commentary on Philippians*, at least one particular human being is a more honorable subject of inquiry than the subjects of the speculative sciences. If the Form of the Slave revealed in the Christ is coextensive with the Son’s Form of God, to such an extent that his human obedience is that which reveals his eternal name, then the most excellent thing in the world just is Jesus of Nazareth. If this is the case, then political science does indeed become the highest of the sciences. In other words, the ordering of the goods in the community founded by the New Law of Christ has become most fundamental. Furthermore, Jesus’s status as both human and divine destabilizes the distinction between the necessary and contingent. He is simultaneously the deeply contingent first-century Jewish rabbi and the eternally necessary creator of the world. Consequently, the distinction between Aristotelian science and Aristotelian virtue cannot

remain as neat and tidy as it has previously. The prudence of Christ the natural slave is thereby apocalyptic in the technical sense of that word. It unveils God's activity in history and scrambles human categories.

Aquinas's comments on the later sections of *Philippians* further develop this Christological prudence. In his concluding remarks on the Christ-hymn from *Philippians* 2, Aquinas asserts that 'every virtue is included under obedience, for a human is just inasmuch as he keeps God's commandments' (*Commentary on Philippians* 2, Lecture 3). This point obviously flows from our needing to have the mind of Christ, who was perfectly obedient. He develops the point further, however, arguing that obedience is 'the greatest of the virtues,' but only if what one offers in obedience 'is something from your soul and your will' (*Commentary on Philippians* 2, Lecture 3). Obedience in the soul and will trumps obedience in the form of offering external things and even in offering one's body. The only form of Prudence that slaves could exercise according to Aquinas was that which resided in them due to their possessing rational souls. Moreover, this kind of prudence was for slaves manifested primarily in obedience to their master. Thus, if Christ's obedience offers the true form of prudence, then slaves are not precluded from possessing it or even exemplifying it. Slaves are in fact on Aquinas's mind as he develops this account of the virtue of obedience. He uses Romans 6:16, in which Paul exhorts his audience to become slaves to righteousness, to exemplify the kind of obedience about which the apostle speaks in *Philippians* 2:12-13 (*ibid.*). If Aquinas's Paul is here teaching his audience how to prudent, then he is teaching them how to be prudent slaves.

Aquinas proceeds to depict Paul as exemplifying the kind of Christ-formed mind enjoined upon his readers in chapter two. Paul's Christ-formed mind in turn exemplifies true prudence. Paul's obedience is central to Aquinas's exegesis of the chapter. He obeys Christ, who 'sees all things perfectly;' and in turn the Apostle 'foresees' many things (*Commentary on Philippians* 2, Lecture 4). His obedience to Christ allows him both to foresee where he must go next on his divinely appointed mission and to foresee where he needs to send which of his fellow workers, Luke and Epaphroditus. Emphasizing the sight one gains by obeying the LORD evokes Aquinas initial discussion of Prudence in II-II.47.1. There he says that 'a prudent man is one who sees as it were from afar, for his sight is keen, and he foresees the event of uncertainties' (II-II.47.1). Furthermore, Aquinas interprets the sending of Epaphroditus to the *Philippians* as something that Paul has done so as to build up the 'city of saints' that is Christian community in that city (*Commentary on Philippians*, Lecture 2-4). He even refers back to Proverbs 19:18 and Acts 4, which he quoted in an earlier lecture on the forging of common ties

in the ecclesial *polis* (*Commentary on Philippians*, Lectures 1–4; 2–4). Thus, obeying Christ gives Paul true prudence in the exercise of his practical reason. It even restores to him the power to legislate, but only insofar as he is a fellow-worker, not the ruler over slaves or subjects. If Paul legislates as a laborer, however, then he cannot legislate in the Aristotelian sense. The founder and rulers of the Aristotelian *polis* could not come from those who performed manual labor (*Commentary on Aristotle's Politics*, Bk. III, Lecture 5.6). Yet Aquinas calls Paul's missionary work 'labor,' and even highlights his tent-making activities (*Commentary on Philippians*, Lecture 2–4). Thus, Paul is numbered among those whom Aristotle, and Aquinas in his more regrettable Aristotelian moments, would exclude from those who could fully exercise political prudence, yet Aquinas sees him as an ideal ecclesiastical leader all the same.

While expounding on Philippians 3 Aquinas picks up on another theme from his discussion of prudence in the II-II.47.1. In that article he further defined the prudent person one who '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' (II-II.47.1.ad2). Perhaps more importantly, in another scriptural commentary, on Colossians, which was composed at approximately the same time as the commentary on Philippians, Aquinas foregrounded this aspect of Prudence. Commenting on Colossians 3:5, in which Paul exhorts the Colossians to put to death their 'earthly members,' Aquinas asserts that the apostle is giving instruction in how to be prudent. Specifically, 'prudence is like the eye, which directs a person' in the removal of hindrances, so that they might be 'more alive with grace.'¹¹ Thus, Aquinas's biblical account of prudence places particular emphasis on this facet of the virtue. His more specifically scriptural account of prudence sees the function of prudence as removing hindrances to effective attainment of particular goods.

When we return to Thomas's discussion of how the apostle functions in an exemplary fashion in this matter, that is what we see exemplified in detail. Paul laid aside all the trappings of the Law precisely because they were, for him, 'hindrances' in ministering to the Gentiles (*Commentary on Philippians*, Lecture 3-1). The spiritual circumcision of which he spoke in 3:4 is a process by which 'the Holy Spirit cuts away superfluous concupiscences' (ibid.). He even speaks of this circumcision as the 'means' by which he is renewed to undertake a new mission (ibid.). Hence, this Christ-formed mind allows one to see that which will hinder one from receiving and acting on the promptings of the Spirit and let it be removed.

¹¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Colossians*, trans. Fabian Larcher, O.P., (Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia Press, 2009), Lecture 3-1.145. All other citations will be in the body of the text.

In other words it gives one a particular kind of prudence. Aquinas's discussion here still has relevance for the kind of prudence proper to slaves. Paul's particular biography becomes important. All those things that he needed to forsake to minister to the Gentiles were not simply his Jewish observances, but rather those observances that gave him 'prestige' (*Commentary on Philippians*, Lecture 3-2). Aquinas links his Benjaminite heritage directly to the tribe's involvement with the religious politics of the Southern Kingdom and the building of the temple. Furthermore, Paul must forsake both the prestige and the authority that came from his membership in the Pharisees. Thus, 'the prestige of the Pharisees he counted as loss' (*ibid.*). In forsaking this exalted position to gain Christological prudence, he is forsaking the position of the Aristotelian legislator. The only kind of prudence left for him is the prudence of the slave, and yet that is precisely the prudence that frees him to act on Christ's behalf.

Aquinas's comments on Philippians 3:9b-11 also provide fruitful material for this alternative account of prudence. He takes Paul's statement 'not having a righteousness of my own, based on law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God depends on faith' as the opportunity for an excursus on justice. Bear in mind that on Aquinas's more Aristotelian account of prudence legal justice was achieved in the community through prudential reasoning. At the outset of his excursus, Aquinas notes two possible ways to construe the virtue of justice. On the one hand, justice names 'the special virtue through which a man fulfills what is right in matters pertaining to life in society, in the sense that it directs a person in this matter' (*Commentary on Philippians*, Lecture 3-2). On the other hand, 'Justice is a virtue inasmuch as a man observes the law for the common good' (*ibid.*). Aquinas believes that Paul has raised this issue 'to show which justice he abandoned [and] to show which one he now seeks' (*ibid.*). It is the latter notion of justice that Paul has abandoned; the justice that the Apostle now seeks just is Jesus Christ. He is the 'means by which it is obtained, its author, and its fruit' (*ibid.*). This new form of justice Paul seeks not simply to know propositionally, but also so that he might be bodily conformed to it 'by being conformed to the death of Christ in his body' (*ibid.*). What one sees in this redefinition of justice is a reconfiguration of the role of the prudential law-giver. On a more Aristotelian account of legislative prudence, the ruler exercised his political prudence to provide laws framing the life of the community. For Aristotle these laws might in large measure rest on those who lived prudent lives, but Aquinas has here gone further. Christ is law-giver but he gives no law; instead, he gives only his own life as a way to go on in the world. In so doing, justice effectively collapses into prudence. This deep shift in the political dimension of prudence and in the nature of the Christian polity can be seen in Aquinas's comments on Paul's

assertion that the Christian commonwealth is in heaven (Philippians 3:20). Strikingly, Aquinas speaks of the Christian commonwealth as simply being the bodies of Christ and the saints. In them can be found the entire principle and law of the community (*Commentary on Philippians*, Lecture 4-1).

Excising the concepts of natural slavery and slaves' prudence from Aquinas's broader account of prudence has altered more than might have been initially expected. Prudence has retained some of its Aristotelian elements. For example, the political dimension of prudence remains, as does the emphasis on prudence being the evaluation of circumstances, exercising foresight, and removing hindrances. Nevertheless, changing the character of the law-giver reorders a great deal of Aquinas's account. Noticeably, political and legislative prudence have lost their hierarchical structure. Christological prudence is no longer characterized by the act of commanding but by the act of obedience. The non-violent act of exemplification has done away with the slaveholder's violence embedded in Aristotelian prudence. Thus, Christological prudence can be defined as the removal of hindrances to the establishment of Christ's peaceable kingdom; it is characterized by dynamic movement and the collective action of the people of God. This is the difference that Christ makes.

V. Conclusions and Connections

I will close by mentioning some possible dialogue partners. First, this reformulation of the virtue of prudence has put Aquinas more deeply at odds with a pre-eminent modern virtue thinker. In a discussion of the character necessary for political leadership, Bernard Williams argues that it is wrong to ask politicians not to command something be done that they themselves were not willing to do. This would lead to one being 'unable to be a vegetarian unless one would be prepared to work in an abattoir.'¹² If, however, Christ's political prudence is simply him showing the way forward, then he does indeed command nothing that he himself would not do, and therefore neither should his followers. This divergence is to be expected, however, for Williams was a liberal and a pessimist, as he famously said, and Aquinas was neither of those things.

¹² Bernard Williams, 'Politics and Moral Character' in *Public and Private Morality*, ed. Stuart Hampshire, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 73.

This reformulated version of Prudence resonates well with Giorgio Agamben's analysis of the Spiritual Franciscans.¹³ Agamben argues that they represent an attempt to embody a form-of-life (in a quasi-Wittgensteinian sense) so completely that the gap between norms by which an agent lives and the agent's actual lived life disappears. He traces the roots of this attempt to the blurred lines between taking the monastic habit upon entering the monastery and taking on a new *habitus*, noting that many monastic writers saw the new garments as coextensive with the cultivation of monastic *habitus*. The Franciscans, through their complete renunciation of property took this one step further, endeavoring to live completely outside Civil and Canon Law, totally conformed to Christ. They were in fact willing to become legal non-persons to accomplish this goal. If Christ has, in Aquinas's *Commentary on Philippians*, taken on the form of the natural slave and yet established his own polity, one in which there is no law save his own conduct, then he has in fact established a form of life in which he is outside the law and in which there is no gap between norm and life, in which his life, in its ceaseless non-identical repetitions, just is the communal norm, full stop.

The intersection of truly Christological prudence with Agamben's reading of the Spiritual Franciscans also helpfully illuminates the ultimate theological significance of this scriptural reformulation of Aquinas's account of prudence. Agamben interprets the monastic, and later mendicant, project as a ceaseless attempt at effecting a life of truly seamless activity. For monks, this was done through the 'total liturgicization of life and vivification of the liturgy,' while mendicants like the Franciscans sought to achieve this through perfect, evangelical poverty in complete imitation of Christ.¹⁴ Modern recovery of the classical ontology reveals how being, and most especially divine being, must be understood in terms of activity. Reality, imitating the divine, is intrinsically ordered to the streamlined actualization of intentional activities.¹⁵ Thomas's alternative account of Christological prudence, as I have developed it, foregrounds prudence's role in removing hindrances to ceaseless imitation of Christ. Thus, the legislative prudence that God shows in decreeing the natural law is the LORD structuring creation so that it might seamlessly and ceaselessly imitate him. Christological prudence, as distilled from Thomas's *Commentary on Philippians*, moves towards this same goal within the church, seeking to remove hindrances to

¹³ Giorgio Agamben, *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life*, trans. Adam Kostko, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).

¹⁴ Agamben, *Highest Poverty*, 82.

¹⁵ David B. Burrell, CSC, *Aquinas: God and Action*, (Scranton: Scranton University Press, 2008), 136-162.

the church's continual task of seamlessly acting in such a way to bear witness to God's own seamless activity.

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