

‘The Relevance of Prudence to Environmental Ethics: A Study on Thomas Aquinas’ *Secunda Secundae*
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**THE RELEVANCE OF PRUDENCE TO
ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS**
A study on Thomas Aquinas' *secunda secundae*

Giuseppe Ferrari

Introduction: perplexity about virtue. Prudence and environmental ethics.

A certain suspicion surrounds the word “virtue” in our time - except when it is used ironically or in historical contexts. It is no longer obvious that virtue should offer guidance and be the unifying factor of human life. Virtue theoreticians like Alasdair MacIntyre develop their arguments from a realistic acknowledgement of the crisis of virtue in modern culture:¹ since the role and the worth of virtue (in the traditional sense) is no longer obvious, a work of interpretation is necessary to give it a renewed significance within the ethical discourse.

However, just the classic concept of virtue shows affinities with some of the core values of contemporary culture (at least in western societies), like self-fulfilment, (authentic) freedom, good life. In fact, what virtue - in both Aristotle's and Thomas' version- is ultimately about, is human self-fulfilment: virtue ethics is an ethic of perfection, i.e. focused on the achievement of a certain τέλος or goal of human maturity. Such a τέλος has been thought of chiefly in individual terms (virtue as the way to the single person's perfection), although already in ancient times, as is the case in Aristotle's ethic, it was also inseparably connected to the political dimension and to political happiness. But since in our time environmental quality and, more extensively, the relation to the environment is increasingly considered an essential component of good life (the εὖ ζῆν of Aristotle), virtue ethics has become a promising path in contemporary environmental ethics. Recently, Pope Francis' encyclical letter *Laudato si'* (2015) has drawn

¹ MacIntyre, *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory*, Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981.

attention to the relevance of virtues and lifestyles to promote the “care for our common home”. In paragraph 88 of the encyclical, he also explicitly refers, within this perspective, to “ecological virtues” which need to be cultivated.² In several subsequent paragraphs he also deals with some of these “attitudes” like gratitude and gratuitousness (220), sobriety and humility (222-223), inner peace (225), and love (225-232).³ The bishop of Rome points out the consequences of widespread disregard or even contempt of certain virtues:

Sobriety and humility were not favourably regarded in the last century. And yet, when there is a general breakdown in the exercise of a certain virtue in personal and social life, it ends up causing a number of imbalances, including environmental ones. That is why it is no longer enough to speak only of the integrity of ecosystems. We have to dare to speak of the integrity of human life, of the need to promote and unify all the great values. Once we lose our humility, and become enthralled with the possibility of limitless mastery over everything, we inevitably end up harming society and the environment. It is not easy to promote this kind of healthy humility or happy sobriety when we consider ourselves autonomous, when we exclude God from our lives or replace him with our own ego, and think that our subjective feelings can define what is right and what is wrong. (224)

² The Pope is referring precisely to a book edited by the National Conference of the Bishops of Brazil in 1992, on the eve of the Rio Conference: *A Igreja e a Questão Ecológica*, n. 61.

³ The term “virtues” applies to these attitudes only in a broad sense. Within Thomas’ theoretical framework, depending on the case they should be termed more precisely “virtues” (in the strict sense), “parts of virtues” or “fruits of virtues”.

Accepting somehow Pope Francis' appeal "for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet",⁴ this essay analyses in a philosophical perspective the potentialities for environmental ethics of the first and most crucial among cardinal virtues, prudence, following Thomas Aquinas' treatise in the *Summa theologiae*.⁵ But, more generally, what kind of mutual enrichment is possible between virtue approach and environmental ethics? We may tentatively and sketchily distinguish a double advantage: for virtue ethics itself, and for environmental philosophy. Virtue ethics is substantially enriched and broadened in its scope by being applied to environmental issues. A classic charge against virtue in modern times revolves around the supposed narrowness and self-centredness of its scope, as if virtue should promote a moral egotism, caring for nothing but to keep a "beautiful soul" immaculate from the miseries of the world. By extending virtue ethics to environmental issues, we make clear that the perfection which is at the core of virtue is no longer limited to the individual's "spiritual" fulfilment, but involves somehow the bodily and material dimension, the social dimension, and implies a correct relationship to non-human nature as well. An unsuspected richness of virtue ethics is brought to light; new developments reveal the fruitfulness of the original approach, as has already been the case, to mention an analogous development, for Thomas' political thinking.⁶

In turn, introducing a virtue perspective into the study of environmental issues may bring to light their ethical and existential relevance, which is far from obvious, particularly when they are dealt with in merely technocratic terms or as boundary conditions

⁴ *Laudato si'*, 14.

⁵ *STh* II-II, q. 47-56.

⁶ A significant twentieth century line of research has been investigating Thomas' thought in order to provide a foundation for human rights or democracy, perspectives which fell *historically* outside the range of Thomas' political philosophy. Participants in such developments were convinced, rather than to stretch Thomas' original intention, to uncover the latent richness of his thought. See the classic Jacques Maritain, *La personne et le bien commun*, Paris: Desclée de Brouwer et C^{ie}, 1947.

for *survival*, which is of course much less than *good life*. On the contrary, reference to virtue shows that our “soul” itself is at play in environmental issues, i.e. the meaning of life or our authentic human self-fulfilment.

Since, as said, the understanding of virtue in general has suffered a process of impoverishment, before asking whether the old virtue of prudence may help us cope with our complex environmental issues, we should verify the adequateness of the concept of prudence from which we start, and beware of reductive versions. Thomas’ prudence corresponds, as we shall see, to the Aristotelian φρόνησις (wisdom) to a large extent, but in the course of the modern age the term has taken often a quite reductive meaning. Let us paradigmatically consider Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* of 1759 (which, significantly, never refers to Thomas):

Security, therefore, is the first and the principal object of prudence. It is averse to expose our health, our fortune, our rank, or reputation, to any sort of hazard. It is rather cautious than enterprising, and more anxious to preserve the advantages which we already possess, than forward to prompt us to the acquisition of still greater advantages. The methods of improving our fortune, which it principally recommends to us, are those which expose to no loss or hazard; real knowledge and skill in our trade or profession, assiduity and industry in the exercise of it, frugality, and even some degree of parsimony, in all our expenses.⁷

Although Smith’s reflection on prudence maintains and in many aspect develops the classic tradition of this virtue in an original way⁸, we cannot help noticing here a certain shift in meaning toward the sense of “cautiousness” and “circumspection” aimed at reducing the risks concerning “our fortune”. In this essay I will try to recover the original richness of meaning of φρόνησις / *prudentia*,

⁷ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), London: Penguin, 2010, part VI, section I, 6.

⁸ See in particular part VI, section I; part VII, section II, 1 and section III,3; 15-21.

as it was understood by Thomas Aquinas, enlightening the resources it offers to environmental thought.⁹

1. The character of prudence in Thomas

Before investigating the potentialities of Thomas' treatise on prudence for environmental ethics, let us first point out its main features, necessarily in broad strokes. According to Thomas (and Aristotle), moral *choice* is not concerned with particular ends, nor with the ultimate end of human life. In fact, such an end is *given* to human nature itself, as Thomas makes clear in the first *quaestiones* of the *prima secundae*. Here he proves that *there is just one* end of human life,¹⁰ and that "man must, of necessity, desire all, whatsoever he desires, for the last end".¹¹ Humans being's ultimate end is complete happiness;¹² but the object or the cause of such a happiness is God himself, since "by God alone is man made happy, if we speak of perfect Happiness".¹³ Therefore "it is impossible to have true Happiness in this life";¹⁴ such a happiness cannot consist in anything less than the vision of God, which is the cause of perfect and eternal happiness, the beatitude (*beatitudo*).¹⁵

According to Thomas, human beings are endowed with a natural habit (*synderesis*) by which they are inclined to pursue good and to reject evil;¹⁶ this makes them capable in principle, if we do not consider the consequences of sin, of observing the natural law¹⁷ and

⁹ As an earlier application of Thomas' virtue ethics to environmental issues, see Giuseppe Ferrari, "Temperance as an Environmental Virtue. An Interpretation of Thomas Aquinas in a 'Green Personalism' Perspective", *Archives Internationales d'Histoire des Sciences* 2014, Vol. 64, Issue 172-173, 159-163.

¹⁰ *STh* I-II, q. 1, aa. 4-5.

¹¹ *STh* I-II, q. 1, a. 6.

¹² *STh* I-II, qq. 2-5.

¹³ *STh* I-II, q. 5, a. 6.

¹⁴ *STh* I-II, q. 5 a. 3.

¹⁵ *STh* I-II, q. 12 a. 11.

¹⁶ *STh* I, q. 79 a. 12.

¹⁷ *STh* I-II, q. 94.

act morally, although this remains insufficient¹⁸ to attain human life's last end. What is more, *synderesis* is only concerned with the first principles of moral action, whereas natural law, seen in its generality, does not point to all single virtuous acts required to live in conformity with reason's dictates.¹⁹ To do this, we need rather an adaptable and flexible *habit* to orient ourselves within the varying circumstances of moral life. This is prudence (*prudentia*²⁰), which corresponds to a large extent to Aristotle's φρόνησις ("practical wisdom"), dealt with in book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

Prudence has a mixed nature, since it belongs to both the theoretical and the practical dimension. It is theoretical, because it is rooted in the cognitive faculty (*in vi cognitiva* or *in ratione*²¹) and implies *knowledge* of the last end of human life. It may therefore be considered a kind of wisdom: "prudence is wisdom about human affairs: but not wisdom absolutely, because it is not about the absolutely highest cause, for it is about human good, and this is not the best thing of all".²² «Prudence is wisdom for man», but not

¹⁸ Participation in God's eternal life is an end which *exceeds* human nature, and therefore can be attained only by means of God's grace. Ancient philosophers and wise men in principle (regardless of God's extraordinary intervention) could only practice a *natural* moral righteousness, which however remained insufficient to assure the enjoyment of eternal life.

¹⁹ "All acts of virtue are prescribed by the natural law: since each one's reason naturally dictates to him to act virtuously. But if we speak of virtuous acts, considered in themselves, i.e. in their proper species, thus not all virtuous acts are prescribed by the natural law: for many things are done virtuously, to which nature does not incline at first; but which, through the inquiry of reason, have been found by men to be conducive to well-living" (*Sth* I-II, q. 94, a. 3).

²⁰ Prudence comes from the Latin term *prudentia*, a contraction of *providentia* ("foresight").

²¹ *Sth* II-II, q. 47, a. 1.

²² The English version weakens in part the anti-anthropocentric statement of the original text: "homo autem non est optimum eorum quae sunt".

wisdom absolutely”.²³ However, universal knowledge of the *causa altissima*, which pertains to prudence, is not sufficient to direct human life in all circumstances.

To prudence belongs not only the consideration of the reason, but also the application to action, which is the end of the practical reason. But no man can conveniently apply one thing to another, unless he knows both the thing to be applied, and the thing to which it has to be applied. Now actions are in singular matters: and so it is necessary for the prudent man to know both the universal principles of reason, and the singulars about which actions are concerned.²⁴

For this reason, knowledge of particular circumstances also pertains to prudence.

Yet prudence is concerned not only with knowledge, but with appetite (*appetitus*) and will (*voluntas*) as well, since its object is “good under the aspect of good” (*bonum sub ratione boni*) and good is the aim of everyone’s desire; as a consequence, prudence plays a crucial role among the *moral virtues* “among which... it is enumerated”.²⁵ The definition of prudence reflects its mixed nature; it may be described as “right reason applied to action” or “the norm of actions to be performed” (*recta ratio agibilium*).²⁶ As said, prudence does not set up *ends*, but is concerned with the means (*ea quae sunt ad finem*) to achieve them: “About these²⁷ is prudence, which applies universal principles to the particular conclusions of practical matters. Consequently it does not belong to prudence to appoint the end to moral virtues, but only to regulate the means”.²⁸

²³ *STh* II-II, q. 47, a. 2.

²⁴ *STh* II-II, q. 47, a. 3.

²⁵ *STh* II-II, q. 47, a. 4.

²⁶ *STh* II-II, q. 47, a. 2.

²⁷ Thomas is referring to “certain things [that] are in the practical reason by way of conclusions, and such are the means which we gather from the ends themselves”.

²⁸ *STh* II-II, q. 47, a. 6.

The leading role of prudence among virtues is elsewhere expressed with a famous definition: *Prudentia est auriga virtutum* (“the charioteer of the virtues”).²⁹ All moral virtues, indeed, consist of finding the “golden mean” between (vicious) extremes; to achieve this goal they are lead (“commanded”) by prudence: “it belongs to the ruling of prudence to decide in what manner and by what means man shall obtain the mean of reason in his deeds”.³⁰

2. Prudence as an intellectual virtue; analogy with art.

Looking into Thomas’ treatise on prudence in search of *contents* relevant to our environmental preoccupations is likely to prove a difficult and scarcely fruitful path to follow. A more promising approach consists perhaps in focusing on the very *nature* of prudence. Does it offer any elements that could meet our theoretical concerns?

Let us consider the *intellectual character* of prudence. As said, Thomas understands prudence not only, like all moral virtues, as an act of practical reason (*ratio practica*)³¹ but specifically as an *intellectual* virtue, in which knowledge plays a key role. Such a characterisation of prudence seems at first to be at odds with contemporary ecological awareness. In fact, after Jean Jacques Rousseau we notice a growing tendency to identify “natural” with “instinctive”, “spontaneous”, and “emotional”. Already the nineteenth century’s environmental culture, with its roots in the Romantic movement, had been reacting both to the one-sidedness of the Enlightenment’s intellectualism and its analytical, reductive vision of nature, and to the instrumental, technical rationality of the Industrial Revolution, held responsible for large-scale nature devastation. Many schools of environmental thought³² since then

²⁹ *II Sent.*, d. 41, q. 1, a. 1, ob. 3.

³⁰ *STh* II-II, q. 47, a. 7.

³¹ *STh* I-II, q. 57, a. 5.

³² As a classic example of this widespread assumption, let us as consider Carolyn Merchant’s ecofeminist critique to Scientific Revolution as a turning point toward an objectifying way of

have been praising instinctiveness and the emotional sphere as dimensions best suited to connect us with nature, while expressing scepticism toward (scientific) rationality as a barrier separating us from nature.

As far as prudence is concerned, we have good reasons to question this ideological rejection of intellectual knowledge and rationality. A first, obvious remark is that even the most fervent critics of the supposedly anti-ecological Western *lóγoc* cannot avoid resorting to prudential *reasoning* to manage complex environmental issues adequately: and this implies both scientific knowledge of natural systems and political rationality, which enables us to act wisely and effectively within environmental conflicts.

Secondly, at a deeper level, we should consider the implications of characterising prudence as an *intellectual* virtue. For both Aristotle and Aquinas knowledge of the *animal rationale* (ζῷον λόγον ἔχων), unlike divine, immediate knowledge, finds its first source in the experience and develops further as a discursive, demonstrative knowledge. Only the first principles, in intellectual as well as in moral knowledge, are the direct object of intuitive knowledge.

Human intellectual knowledge is marked by gradualness and dependence on experience of the physical word: in one word, finiteness. Human *lóγoc* (from the Greek verb λέγειν, which also means to choose and to collect) is by no means that creative power which philosophical idealists have dreamed of, but first of all a *potentia oboedientialis* (*oboedientia* comes from *ob-audio*, to listen), a faculty through which humans are *open* to existing reality (*natura*) in all its network of relationships. Therefore, the discursiveness or rationality of prudence, far from distancing humans from nature, is as it were the proof of their condition of natural beings or, to speak in theological terms, *creatures* that have not made themselves and structurally depend on their *received* being. Rationality is structurally connected with limitedness, as Nietzsche himself honestly acknowledges, putting his *Übermensch*

considering nature (*The Death of Nature*, New York: HarperCollins, 1980).

above all rational knowledge. Further, with Heidegger, we may maintain that thought is a mark of human finiteness.³³

However, the relationship of prudence, as an intellectual virtue and a *potentia oboedientialis*, to external reality, is far from being passive. It seems rather to be a combination of dependence and creativity, analogous to art. Art's creativity, far from being hindered by restrictions, internal as well as external, is just made possible by them: in fact, art depends on a certain matter; has to obey its specific rules, and serves ultimately to a fixed end (e.g. an utilitarian aim or beauty itself, as is the case for fine arts).³⁴ Similarly, the "art" of prudence enjoys its creativity not only in spite of, but thanks to several restrictions: it *finds* its matter in human life itself, to which we get acquainted through experience; its rules are given by (practical) reason; its end consist in human life's end. Similarly to arts, prudence is based on *knowledge* of its proper object and of the means to achieve it; but to humans, as said, knowledge is accessible through experience and reason.

3. Prudence, virtues and human limits

Prudence is concerned with finding out the means best suited to act morally and, ultimately, to achieve the ultimate end of human life. Is such a characterisation of prudence somehow relevant to the challenges of the ecological crisis? The necessity itself of something like prudence implies that *not all* means are adequate to achieve human life's very end. A moral choice is not an arbitrary act; its goodness depends *also* on objective qualities, both physical and moral, of an "external" reality (like acts and behaviours). The prudent person, as said, differs radically from a Nietzschean *Übermensch* that imposes or dictates his/her interpretations, ultimately his will to power, on external reality (to speak properly, he *creates his* reality); neither is he endowed with a Sartrean limitless freedom. On the contrary, the idea of prudence itself

³³ M. Heidegger, *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, Bonn: F. Cohen, 1929.

³⁴ Jacques Maritain, *The Responsibility of the Artist*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960.

implies the admission of human *finiteness*, both physical and moral: ends themselves are *given* to humans with their nature, what would make no sense to an infinite, (fully) self-determining being. But *human* finiteness is inseparable from corporeality, the existence in and as a vulnerable body, depending on a no less vulnerable and fragile natural environment. Therefore prudence may and also should be recognised as an ecological virtue, since it implies the acknowledgement of finiteness, opposite to hubris and every dream of self-sufficiency.

Furthermore, prudence is not merely a specific virtue, but a necessary prerequisite to all virtues. And all virtues indeed, somehow paradoxically, imply the acceptance of human vulnerability. *Virtus* is derived etymologically from *vir* (man)³⁵ and originally connected to all “manly” moral habits traditionally associated with manhood. Virtue understood in such a primitive meaning seems to be diametrically opposed to every acceptance of vulnerability, since it conveys an idea of strength and self-sufficiency. A. MacIntyre (1999) reflects on this supposedly “virtuous” refusal of dependence and vulnerability, referring in particular to the Aristotelian moral character called *megalòpsychos* (magnanimous man):³⁶ according to MacIntyre, this is rather a *vicious* character, incapable of admitting any dependence on other people and to feel and express gratitude.

However, although virtue has been understood often in the anti-ecological perspective of hubris and self-sufficiency, it is just by starting from this element of *strength*, from which virtue takes its name and its character, that we may discover an implicit reference to human vulnerability. First, the praiseworthiness of virtue depends on the fact that it is *difficult* to achieve, since it requires a

³⁵ Not differently in Old Greek, where ἀρετή (virtue) is connected both to ἄρρην (male) and to Ἄρης (the god of war). Nietzsche’s attempt has been somehow to restore this original, merely vitalistic idea of virtue. For a sharp criticism to this kind ethic, see Simone Weil, “The Iliad or the Poem of Force” (1939), people.virginia.edu/~jdc3t/WeilTheIliad.pdf.

³⁶ A. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals. Why Human Beings Need The Virtues*, London: Duckworth, 1999, p. 127.

fight and an ultimate victory on inclinations that arise from the human condition, inasmuch as it is characterised by corporeality, finiteness and weakness. This appears quite evident in the case of cardinal virtues,³⁷ starting with prudence. *Temperance* makes sense as a virtue only to finite beings who are by nature inclined to bodily pleasures and who only with difficulty find a balance in their use; *spiritual strength (fortitudo)* in the face of dangers is a virtue to mortal beings who may be hurt as far as to suffer bodily death; *justice* is a virtuous habit to needy beings naturally seeking self-conservation and therefore always tempted to claim a bigger share in resources and opportunities. Theological virtues³⁸ themselves, although their origin and object is the eternal God, ultimately imply the finiteness and corporeality of the human subject: *faith*, an “infused” knowledge in Thomas’ terms, is a virtue for a creature whose understanding is limited and structurally short-sighted because it necessarily starts by sensory knowledge; *hope* is virtue of a being who is *presently* endangered and threatened by physical and moral risks; and *love* as *caritas*, an infused virtue whose source and object is God himself, in so far it remains *human* love as well, necessarily requires a certain self-sacrifice to serve fellow human beings in the vulnerability and neediness that they share with the loving subject himself. To sum up, corporeality and vulnerability enter the definition of virtue itself as their constitutive elements. Virtue can make sense only to a *finite*, fragile, bodily being, which as such structurally depends on an external natural environment: therefore, how much the concept of virtue may convey ideas of self-sufficiency and impassibility, actual virtue is only possible on the background of human vulnerability and necessary dependence on or resistance to external, *sensu lato* environmental conditions. Alasdair MacIntyre has introduced the dialectic of virtues of independent reasoning and of acknowledged dependence.³⁹ On this path, a closer consideration of the first set of virtues leads us to the awareness that even “independent” and mature reasoning, as can be

³⁷ Cardinal virtues are dealt with in questions 47-170 of the *secunda secundae*.

³⁸ *STh* II-II, qq. 1-46.

³⁹ A. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, 119-128

identified in prudence, is marked by human finiteness and dependence. We could therefore go, with MacIntyre, beyond MacIntyre, by recognising that not only the virtue of “acknowledging dependence”, but also virtues as such, including that of “independent reasoning” witness the finiteness of the human condition and the necessity of its acceptance.⁴⁰

But just the idea of limit, opposite to hubris, is a crucial matter of concern to environmental thinking. Prudence, we should remember again before entering any of its specific contents, is no virtue for a Promethean, self-sufficient hero, but rather for a subject humbly aware of the network of relationships that connect him/her, firstly through their own body, to their physical environment and ultimately to the Earth.

As M. Nussbaum puts it, there is a “fragility of goodness”,⁴¹ and specifically also a fragility of virtue, which already appears in the fact that virtuous habits require a slow and painful apprenticeship to be achieved, and no guarantee that they will be able to resist future assaults. Only “gods” cannot be, properly speaking, virtuous, and human godlike hubris or dreams of omnipotence are incompatible with virtues. We can recognise an “ecological” element in *all* virtues (and in prudence, which directs them, in particular) in so far as they require a certain *humility* (from *humus*, earth), as knowledge of our finiteness and vulnerability, i.e. a realistic acceptance of the human condition.

4. The subjective parts of prudence. Economic and political prudence

Prudence, according to Thomas, is not merely an individual’s virtue, but concerns the societal dimension as well, as Thomas argues in a *respondeo* which is worth quoting in full:

⁴⁰ A. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, 81-98.

⁴¹ M. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, Cambridge, U.K. New York: Cambridge University Press (second ed.), 2001.

According to the Philosopher⁴² some have held that prudence does not extend to the common good, but only to the good of the individual, and this because they thought that man is not bound to seek other than his own good. But this opinion is opposed to charity, which “seeketh not her own” (1 Corinthians 13:5): wherefore the Apostle says of himself (1 Corinthians 10:33): “Not seeking that which is profitable to myself, but to many, that they may be saved.” Moreover it is contrary to right reason, which judges the common good to be better than the good of the individual. Accordingly, since it belongs to prudence rightly to counsel, judge, and command concerning the means of obtaining a due end, it is evident that prudence regards not only the private good of the individual, but also the common good of the multitude.⁴³

To characterise the essence of prudence, Thomas draws both on the New Testament and on philosophical analysis (following Aristotle) of its nature: these two *auctoritates* agree in connoting prudence, like justice, as an eminently *political* virtue, which has to be the guide of the individual as well as of the community.

Reducing prudence to mere *cautiousness* – a shift in meaning I have already referred to with regard to A. Smith – in order to avoid risks and troubles, is essentially misunderstanding it. The prevalence of such an interpretation of prudence in the modern age indicates the distance between Thomas and a vast tradition in ethics (paradigmatically represented by Hellenistic philosophies, like Epicureanism and, to a certain extent, Stoicism itself), which has understood prudence or wisdom as the prerogative of the “wise man”, enabling him to stay aloof from the assaults of external and mainly societal troubles. In order to reject this narrow, individualistic understanding of prudence, Thomas harmonizes the Aristotelian interpretation of φρόνησις as a political virtue with the precept of charity as the core of the Gospel. Prudence indeed, in its perfect or complete form, is a political virtue, concerned not only

⁴² *Nicomachean Ethic* VI, 8.

⁴³ *STh* II-II, q. 47, a. 10.

with the perfection of the single person, but with the perfection of the community as well, seen not as juxtaposed, but rather as intimately connected dimensions. Thomas formulates this relationship in this way:

He that seeks the good of the many, seeks in consequence *his own good*, for two reasons. First, because *the individual good is impossible without the common good* of the family, state, or kingdom. Hence Valerius Maximus says⁴⁴ of the ancient Romans that “they would rather be poor in a rich empire than rich in a poor empire.” Secondly, because, since man is a part of the home and state, he must needs consider what is good for him by being prudent about the good of the many. For the *good disposition of parts depends on their relation to the whole*; thus Augustine says⁴⁵ that “any part which does not harmonize with its whole, is offensive.”⁴⁶

“Individual” and “political” prudence cannot be separated from each other completely for the same reason why individual and common good cannot be separated, but imply rather each other. A really prudent individual knows that his/her own self-fulfilment is not possible in isolation, but needs a community in many different ways. In fact, not only the existence, but also the well-being of the individual depends on resources (both material and immaterial) *provided* by the community; in turn, without the individual’s active contribution, the community cannot maintain and improve itself. Consequently, true individual prudence cannot consist in the mere pursuit of private interests, but implies taking care of the social dimension as well, as a means which makes authentic self-realization possible. Mere egoistic behaviour is short-sighted rather than prudent, since it implies a wrong understanding of the individual himself/herself, deprived of the network of relationships which permits him/her to flourish. Inversely, true political prudence

⁴⁴ *Facta et dicta memorabilia*, IV, 6

⁴⁵ *Confessiones*, III, 8

⁴⁶ *STh* II-II, q. 47, a. 10 (italics added).

cannot neglect or deny needs and rights of the individual (as is the case in totalitarian regimes) since the community itself cannot flourish properly without aiming at the perfection of every single person. Such a mutual implication of individual and social dimension of prudence, that we also could term the “political structure” of prudence, is of course of the highest importance in the perspective of environmental challenges. Failures in successfully dealing with them have often been caused by the prevalence of a short-sighted, reductive idea of (merely individual) “prudence”. Thomas distinguishes three kinds (*species*) of prudence, according to their respective ends:

Wherefore there must needs be different species of prudence corresponding to these different ends, so that one is “prudence” simply so called, which is directed to one’s own good; another, “domestic (*oeconomica*) prudence” which is directed to the common good of the home; and a third, “political prudence,” which is directed to the common good of the state or kingdom.⁴⁷

These are the so-called “subjective parts” (*partes subjectivae*) of prudence. Such an expression refers to the fact that a certain essence dwells in a subject, i.e. is realised or exemplified in it, “as ox and lion are parts of animal”: in our case, the essence of “prudence” de facto always manifests itself in one of these parts. The prudence of the individual comes first in the list; intermediate is the prudence necessary to the family (*oikos*) or to the economic life; the last mentioned is political prudence, which however has priority in terms of inclusiveness. Referring to these parts of prudence, Thomas writes:

The parts of prudence, if we take them properly, are the prudence whereby a man rules himself, and the prudence whereby a man governs a multitude, which differ specifically as stated above (Q. 47, a. 11). Again, the prudence whereby a multitude is governed, is divided into

⁴⁷ *STh* II-II, q. 47, a. 11.

various species according to the various kinds of multitude. There is the multitude which is united together for some particular purpose; thus an army is gathered together to fight, and the prudence that governs this is called “military.” There is also the multitude that is united together for the whole of life; such is the multitude of a home or family, and this is ruled by “domestic prudence”: and such again is the multitude of a city or kingdom, the ruling principle of which is “regnative prudence” in the ruler, and “political prudence,” simply so called, in the subjects.⁴⁸

Having acknowledged the fundamental role of individual prudence, let us concentrate more in detail on its social forms.

Economic prudence is an intermediate dimension between individual prudence and political prudence since “it is evident that a household is a mean between the individual and the city or kingdom”.⁴⁹ In Thomas, like in Aristotle, *oeconomica* is the administration of an οἶκος (home, household). “House”, understood in these terms, not only includes more members (relatives and servants) than the modern nuclear family, but is based rather on economic, productive activities and interests than on mere emotional bonds. Referring to such aims characteristic of an οἶκος, Thomas raises the following objection:

It would seem that domestic (*oeconomica*) should not be reckoned a part of prudence. For, according to the Philosopher (*Nicomachean Ethics*, VI, 5) “prudence is directed to a good life in general (*ad bene vivere totum*)”: whereas domestic prudence is directed to a particular end, viz. wealth, according to Ethic I, 1. Therefore a species of prudence is not domestic.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ *STh* II-II, q. 48, a. 1.

⁴⁹ *STh* II-II, q. 50, a. 3.

⁵⁰ *STh* II-II, q. 50, a. 3.

A similar argument can also be found in the second objection of the same article: “prudence is only in good people. But domestic prudence may be also in wicked people, since many sinners are provident in governing their household”. With these objections, Thomas points to the limitedness of the scope of domestic or economic prudence, which may go together with a distorted ethical orientation of the family as whole. Interestingly, these objections remind us of the famous Augustinian definition of a State devoid of any justice:

If it does not do justice, what is the government but a great criminal enterprise? For what are gangs of criminals but petty little governments? The pack is a group which follows the orders of its leader according to a social compact of sorts, sharing the spoils along the rules upon which they agree.⁵¹

This analogy warns us that “economy” (the legitimately autonomous sphere of material interests) as well can be understood and practised in a way that can result in a betrayal of its authentic vocation. However, Thomas answers both his objections by replying that true prudence, including its economic version, cannot be restricted to narrow utilitarian ends. Economy as such should not be reduced to the compulsive tendency to accumulate riches, an endless yearning in which the ultimate end of human life cannot consist.⁵² Thomas broadens and deepens the definition and the scope of economy instead:

Riches are compared to domestic prudence, not as its last end, but as its instrument, as stated in *Politics* I, 3. On the other end, the end of economic prudence is “a good life in general” (*totum bene vivere*) as regards the conduct of the

⁵¹ Augustine of Hippo, *De civitate dei contra paganos/ The City of God* (lib. IV), Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, vol. 2 of the Loeb Classical Library Edition, pp. 12, 16.

⁵² See *STh* I-II, q. 2, a. 1: “Utrum beatitudo hominis consistat in divitiis”

household". On Ethic. I, 1 the Philosopher speaks of riches as the end of economic prudence, by way of example and in accordance with the opinion of many (*secundum studium plurimorum*).⁵³

This is to say that a clear distinction thus should be made between the *current*, reductive way of thinking about economy, or the economic goals de facto most people are used to "yearn for" (what Thomas calls *studium plurimorum*⁵⁴), and the actual essence of *oconomica*. Thomas makes clear that "the end of economic prudence is *totum bene vivere*": according to him economy remains below its true standard and vocation, when it limits itself to the narrow perspective of the so-called "rational" economic decision-maker. The perfect egoist (*homo oeconomicus*) falls ultimately short of rationality, since good life and even durable economic prosperity cannot be achieved by accumulating riches, which are a means to obtain different goods and not an end in themselves, as Thomas points out in the beginning of the *prima secundae*⁵⁵. If *totum bene vivere* is the ultimate end, economic goals themselves should be pursued within a holistic, systemic, and not narrowly individualistic perspective.

Within our environmental perspective, we may add that the individual's enlightened self-interest (that we could call the formal object of economy), in terms of survival as well as well-being, implies the awareness of one's dependence on environmental conditions. Therefore the common root οἶκος of both ecology and economy is much more than a fortuitous coincidence. It makes rather clear how the latter, in order to guarantee *totum bene vivere*, should look after the preservation of a network of fragile ecological relationships, on which economy itself depends as a source of "ecosystemic services". Thomas' perspective of "good life in general" applied to economy also makes an encounter possible with recent developments of ecological thinking. The growth of

⁵³ *STh* II-II, q. 50, a. 3.

⁵⁴ The quoted translation "the opinion of many" loses somehow the valency of "passionate research" conveyed by the term *studium*.

⁵⁵ See *STh* I-II, q. 2, a. 1.

“ecological economics”⁵⁶ has learnt to look at environment-damaging side-effects of economic activities not merely in terms of “externalities”. With this term we refer to costs or damages that fall outside the scope of a certain economic actor and as such remain unseen or hidden, although they are mostly believed to be minimized and compensated for within the general benefit for the economic system. This is actually not the case, since the costs of environment-exploiting activities fall ultimately onto the shoulders of “powerless” subjects like future generations or environment, powerless, since they are not in a position to assert their rights or interests. The *integrity* of good life is thus put at risk at different levels, from the individual to the community, in a synchronic as well as in a diachronic perspective. And Thomas’ integral approach to economy is ultimately coherent with our day’s idea of an all-encompassing “economy of *nature*”⁵⁷ that has to be taken into account if *human* economy is to develop in a sustainable way. Such a broader context seems to be forgotten when the exclusive private interest of the idealized economic actor is taken as the paradigm of rational behaviour: such an attitude should rather be considered short-sighted and imprudent, as it is based on a misunderstanding and an impoverishment of economy’s original vocation, which should prudently look after the sustainable connection of mankind to nature, as the ultimate source of economic wealth and human welfare itself. In this way, (economic) prudence becomes a guide to a wise, sustainable use of natural resources and, much more, to the acknowledgement and appreciation of nature’s inherent worth.

Political prudence, which differs specifically from individual prudence,⁵⁸ belongs properly to those who are in power

⁵⁶ M. Common and S. Stagl, *Ecological Economics: An Introduction*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005; H. Daly, *Economics, Ecology, Ethics: Essays Toward a Steady-State Economy*, San Francisco: W.H. Freeman and Company, 1980.

⁵⁷ D. Worster, *Nature’s Economy: A History of Ecological Idea*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

⁵⁸ *STh* II-II, q. 48, a. 11.

(*principes*),⁵⁹ so that it is called regnative (*regnativa*),⁶⁰ namely the virtue characteristic of the *regnum* (kingdom), the most perfect form of the State, according to Aristotle's classification.

Referring to Aristotle, Thomas maintains that prudence belongs in a particular way to those who have the mission to rule the community, since "ruling and governing belong properly to the reason", and "prudence is in the reason". To common citizens, Thomas actually acknowledges a kind of "passive" political prudence, necessary to obey the laws and disposals of the legislator:

Since, however, every man, for as much as he is rational, has a share in ruling according to the judgment of reason, he is proportionately competent to have prudence. Wherefore it is manifest that prudence is in the ruler "after the manner of a mastercraft" (*ad modum artis architectonicae*),⁶¹ but in the subjects, "after the manner of a handicraft."⁶²

Indeed, only in statesmen, according to Thomas, may political prudence be found in a proper sense, as Aristotle put it: "The Philosopher says (*Nicomachean Ethics*, VI, 8) that «of the prudence which is concerned with the state one kind is a master-prudence and is called legislative (*architectonica prudentia legispositiva*); another kind bears the common name political, and deals with individuals»."⁶³ What does Thomas say to us with this distinction? Prudence manifests itself in its true nature and completeness, as the virtue whose object is the *common* good, only in those who are able not only to guide themselves, but also other people within the political community. Thomas, following Aristotle and in conformity with his time's societal structure, excludes serfs from the exercise of this kind of prudence, though with an important restriction:

⁵⁹ *STh* II-II, q. 48, a. 12.

⁶⁰ *STh* II-II, q. 50, a. 1.

⁶¹ *Nicomachean Ethics*, VI, 8.

⁶² *STh* II-II, q. 47, a. 12.

⁶³ *STh* II-II, q. 50, a. 2.

On the other hand, men who are slaves or subjects in any sense, are moved by the commands of others in such a way that they move themselves by their free-will; wherefore some kind of rectitude of government is required in them, so that they may direct themselves in obeying their superiors; and to this belongs that species of prudence which is called political.⁶⁴

A fortiori animals do not participate in this kind of prudence, since

Irrational and inanimate beings are moved only by others and do not put themselves in motion, since they have no free-will whereby to be masters of their own actions, wherefore the rectitude of their government is not in their power but in the power of their movers.⁶⁵

Thomas developed his reflection on political power against the backdrop of a feudal, highly hierarchical societal structure. In our days, this sharp opposition between rulers and ruled has been surpassed, at least in principle, since the democratic ideal considers *every* citizen as responsible for common good, though such an ideal may be contradicted *de facto* by the emergence of new features of inequality. Therefore we should go beyond Thomas' distinction between the two forms of political prudence, and consider governmental prudence somehow as a prerogative of *every* responsible, participating citizen, particularly inasmuch as it is concerned with the defence and promotion of environmental goods. In spite of the historical conditioning of Thomas' treatise, we should focus on his central idea that fully developed prudence, far from being identified with individualistic and short-sighted cautiousness, is a mature capacity for caring and taking responsibility. Only the politician - actually the true statesperson - who, being endowed with a vision, is able to plan the future for his/her community is really prudent in this sense. The structural

⁶⁴ *STh* II-II, q. 50, a. 2.

⁶⁵ *STh* II-II, q. 50, a. 2.

relationship of prudence to common good manifests itself in a particularly clear way with regard to a core issue of the contemporary environmental debate: the problematic situation of the “commons”, particularly in a profit-oriented, individualistic private economy.⁶⁶ This term refers to resources like air, water, raw materials, and, in our time, biodiversity and climate, all that which, at the beginning of the industrial era, appeared to be virtually unlimited and not to belong to any private “owner” but was, in principle, accessible to all: due to this lack of jurisdiction, the commons have undergone a process of irresponsible damage and depletion, since no one saw his immediate interest questioned by such exploitative practices. If there is any “root” of the ecological crisis⁶⁷, perhaps it is to be identified in this wrong understanding of the Earth as *terra nullius*. Nature, indeed, does not belong to any *particular* owner: but natural resources are part of the *common* good, in so far as they are not only necessary for survival, but also contribute to life’s quality: for this reason, the mission of a really prudent statesman/ stateswoman (or politically responsible citizen) is to safeguard them and to improve their quality at the service of the common good.

5. Precautionary approach in the light of prudence: a short note

A key principle at the crossroads between politics, economy, and applied science, is the so-called precautionary principle.⁶⁸ Around it a vast literature has grown, concerning both environmental issues and other topics like food or drugs security. It is of course beyond the scope of this essay to analyse in detail either the principle itself

⁶⁶ Garret Hardin, “The Tragedy of the Commons”, *Science*, 13 Dec 1968: Vol. 162, Issue 3859, 1243-1248.

⁶⁷ See well-known L. White’s article, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis”, *Science*, 10 March 1967: Vol. 155, Issue 3767, 1203-1207.

⁶⁸ Speaking instead of precautionary *approach* is sometimes more than a mere lexical variation. In the following I shall try to explain why such an expression seems to be preferable from the perspective of prudence.

or its numerous applications. Let us consider, albeit sketchily, the possible relationship between virtue ethics (and prudence in particular) and the principle. In the *Rio Declaration* (1992) the precautionary principle is formulated as follows:

In order to protect the environment, the precautionary approach shall be widely applied by States according to their capabilities. Where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty shall not be used as a reason for postponing cost-effective measures to prevent environmental degradation.⁶⁹

In Thomas' understanding, the task of prudence is to find adequate *means* to given (morally good) ends; the precautionary principle is also concerned with means of human action, particularly with large-impact human activities such as industries or invasive technologies, from the point of view of their potential *risks* to the environment (or human health). The principle invites us to act prudently, by considering the possible consequences of certain actions. Technical feasibility or "lack of full scientific certainty" are no argument to act thoughtlessly, "where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage" to the environment.

The precautionary principle has often been attacked as an expression of an anti-technological, rigidly preservationist mentality. However, we should be aware of the somehow privileged role played just by *negative* maxims in affirming the non-negotiable value of *every* authentic moral value. For instance, the commandment "Thou shalt not kill" defines an insurmountable line designed to protect the non-negotiable value of life. Similarly, the negative formulation of the precautionary principle reminds us of the real seriousness of the issue at stake and of the irreplaceable value of the goods to be preserved. But this does not imply by any means that *only* negative precepts or merely conservative attitudes should be well-suited and sufficient in order to manage environmental problems, just like the *promotion* of the value "life" goes far beyond negative norms aiming at protecting threatened

⁶⁹ *Rio Declaration on Environment and Development*, principle 15.

human life. The *cautiousness* suggested by the principle should therefore not be understood merely in prohibitive terms, but as an appeal to act prudently, i.e. in a properly human way, avoiding absolutization of *partial* goods such as economic benefits or the intellectual or practical value of new scientific discoveries and technical devices. For this reason, the expression precautionary *approach*, rather than “principle”, seems to me best suited to express its dynamic and prudential dimension. Prohibitive, negative principles are necessary to protect the border, but do not describe the territory in its wealth of potentialities. In order to do this, we need to go beyond the rigid application of rules, to cultivate a *moral character* inspired by those same values that negative norms are designed to protect. The precautionary principle, understood in the light of prudence, should not be isolated or treated in a dogmatic way. Prudence itself, like the Aristotelian φρόνησις and any other virtue, by definition cannot consist in the mere application of a rigid rule of cautiousness, but implies rather a constitutive reference to the prudent *person*. The constructive, positive task connected to the precautionary approach is to cultivate morally mature (and environmentally sensible) individuals (in line with the the Aristotelian φρόνιμος) and communities who may be able to judge, among other issues, *when* “there are threats of serious or irreversible damage”.⁷⁰

In the light of prudence, we could therefore look at the precautionary principle differently, as a dynamic element or a hermeneutic criterion which stimulates us to compare every action,

⁷⁰ To avert the risk of weakening the principle in its binding force, by exposing it to subjective, arbitrary interpretations, we should consider that Thomas distinguishes what is *per essentiam* (essential, expressing a thing’s very nature) and what is *per accidens* (incidental). *Per essentiam*, not only the precautionary principle, but *every* moral principle necessarily is rooted in the moral experience of living individuals and communities: principles do not exist in a kind of Platonic *hyperouranios*, apart from moral *agents*. The fact that *all* moral principles are exposed, *per accidens*, to forced, softening interpretation, does not justify in any way legalism, which disregards the true nature of principles *at the service* of living *persons*.

beyond short-term or merely economic benefits, with broader goals including environmental quality as a requirement of authentic human self-fulfilment.

6. The vices opposed to prudence and the ecological crisis

In article 13 of question 47 Thomas interestingly discusses the problem whether prudence can be in sinners. Under consideration are those impoverished or even distorted forms of “prudence” which merely keep the formal structure of the virtue of prudence, i.e. the adequacy of means to the ends.

A prudent man is one who disposes well of the things that have to be done for a good end, whoever disposes well of such things as are fitting for an evil end, has false prudence, in far as that which he takes for an end, is good, not in truth but in appearance. Thus man is called “a good robber,” and in this way may speak of “a prudent robber,” by way of similarity, because he devises fitting ways of committing robbery.⁷¹

The “good of reason” that prudence has to safeguard can be better understood and appreciated by contrasting it with habits in which *absence* or *wrong understanding* of prudence result in spiritual deprivation. In questions 53 to 55 Thomas analyses imprudence (53), negligence (54) and “vices opposed to prudence by way of resemblance” (55). Within these questions, from our perspective some articles deserve more attention.

a) *Praecipitatio*

In art. 3 of q. 53, Thomas asks whether precipitation is a sin included in imprudence. Why is acting hastily and inconsiderately (*praecipitatio*) a *vicious* habit? This question sounds a bit provoking to our ears, since we live in a society where precisely *speed* and promptness in deciding as well as in acting are usually magnified as virtues or, in a more current vocabulary, human

⁷¹ *STh* II-II, q. 47, a. 12.

capital's necessary skills for the functioning of modern economic and societal life. In his *respondeo*, Thomas argues in this way:

Precipitation is ascribed metaphorically to acts of the soul, by way of similitude to bodily movement. Now a thing is said to be precipitated as regards bodily movement, when it is brought down from above by the impulse either of its own movement or of another's, and not in orderly fashion by degrees. Now the summit of the soul is the reason, and the base is reached in the action performed by the body; while the steps that intervene by which one ought to descend in orderly fashion are "memory" of the past, "intelligence" of the present, "shrewdness" in considering the future outcome, "reasoning" which compares one thing with another, "docility" in accepting the opinions of others. He that takes counsel descends by these steps in due order, whereas if a man is rushed into action by the impulse of his will or of a passion, without taking these steps, it will be a case of precipitation. Since then inordinate counsel pertains to imprudence, it is evident that the vice of precipitation is contained under imprudence.⁷²

The term *praecipitatio* is analysed by Thomas on the basis of a physical metaphor, describing dangerously ruinous motion due to loss of control over one's body. A motion falls under *praecipitatio* when it takes place ruinously, i.e. when it happens *non ordinate incedendo per gradus* ("not in orderly fashion by degrees"), but "by the impulse either of its own movement or of another's". What makes *praecipitatio* vicious is not speed itself, but disorder and lack of control.

Transferring the image to the moral dimension, since *summum...animae est ipsa ratio* ("the summit of the soul is the reason"), a similar control should be exercised by the soul's highest faculties, enlisted by Thomas alongside with their function: "memory" of the past, "intelligence" of the present, "shrewdness" in considering the future outcome, "reasoning" which compares

⁷² *STh* II-II, q. 53, a. 3.

one thing with another, “docility” in accepting the opinions of others”. We may thus speak of *praecipitatio* when an action is taken inconsiderately, out of mere instinctiveness. In this case, the person does not act in an integrated way, involving his/her own whole personality and *story*. The “narrative unity” of human life⁷³ is broken. *Praecipitatio* neglects the relational character of the person, both inward (with respect to oneself) and outward (with respect to other people): consequently, the rushed action fails in integrating the various dimensions of one’s personality, including past experiences and expectations about the future. Other people are excluded as well, since they are not listened to and somehow involved as partners in a decision-making process. To apply the topic to our issue, a specific kind of “otherness” that an action characterised by *praecipitatio* fails to consider, is natural environment itself, on which we structurally depend, and on which every action always has an impact. Prudent conduct is complex and relational; imprudent conduct, on the contrary, shows a structural lack of “connectedness” - a key word to environmental thinkers- at different levels. A prudent action can be called “ecological” inasmuch as it is relational and tries to take into account all implications of a given alternative, particularly with respect to the natural environment, the largest and most inclusive context in which human life is situated. Social and economic life show plenty of decisions and actions characterised by such kinds of precipitation and hasty oversimplification of reality: in short, by a lack of “systemic wisdom”,⁷⁴ by a lack of φρόνησις/ prudence and by forgetfulness of our actual dependence on natural systems.

Neoliberal economics in particular seems often to encourage and praise similar procedures of quick decision-making, based on the oblivion of the limits of resources and of the ecosystems’ carrying capacity. Quite differently, Thomas’ analysis of *praecipitatio* highlights the value of thoughtfulness, which requires a calm and deep-going consideration of *all* involved factors. A similar attitude

⁷³ A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*.

⁷⁴ Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology*. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1972.

is closer to nature's biological rhythms themselves and better suited to take them into account.⁷⁵ On the contrary, an economic and consumer's ideology governed by short-sighted, scarcely integrated subjective wishes, runs the risk of ignoring the systemic consequences of our action, what may result in a growing unbalance in our relationship with nature. In this line of thought, much more could be said regarding the wider cultural consequences and the *educational* implications of the opposition between the impulsiveness encouraged by the current economic system and the new/old virtues of "slowness" and thoughtfulness,⁷⁶ considered in their impact on environmental issues.

b) *Luxuria* and imprudent behaviour

In article 6 of the same question, Thomas asks "whether the aforesaid vices [precipitation, inconstancy, thoughtlessness] arise from lust (*luxuria*)". The answer is affirmative, in agreement with an old tradition that could be traced back to the church fathers.⁷⁷ Thomas tries actually to account for this in anthropological terms. In the *respondeo*, approvingly referring to Aristotle, he argues:

As the Philosopher states (*Nicomachean Ethics* VI, 5) "pleasure above all corrupts the estimate of prudence," and chiefly sexual pleasure which absorbs the mind, and draws it to sensible delight. Now the perfection of prudence and of every intellectual virtue consists in abstraction from sensible objects. Wherefore, since the aforesaid vices involve a defect of prudence and of the practical reason, as stated above,⁷⁸ it follows that they arise chiefly from lust.⁷⁹

Aristotle's (and Thomas') relative mistrust toward sexual pleasure is based on its strength of mental absorption, which is believed to hinder the exercise of the superior faculties of the mind, since "the

⁷⁵ Enzo Tiezzi, *Tempi storici, tempi biologici*, Milano: Garzanti, 1984.

⁷⁶ Carl Honoré, *In Praise of Slowness: Challenging the Cult of Speed*, New York: HarperOne, 2004.

⁷⁷ Gregor the Great, *Moralia in Job* XXXI, quoted in the *sed contra*.

⁷⁸ Articles 2 and 5.

⁷⁹ *STh* II-II, q. 53, a. 6.

perfection of prudence and of every intellectual virtue consists in abstraction from sensible objects". As said, Thomas' assumptions on this point clash with some crucial aspirations of many environmental theorists of our time, such as their effort to retrieve the emotional, "animal" dimension in us, which is supposed to be "closer to nature", as well as all manifestations of spontaneity and instinctiveness.

Such an opposition cannot be denied, although we should go more in depth to do justice to Thomas' intention. Thomas does not condemn sexuality and sensual pleasure as such, but their distorted use which is the essence of the vice of luxury or lust (*luxuria*). If we concentrate on the *structure* of Thomas' argument on this point, we notice that, for him, it is not bodily pleasure itself that is a sin, but the yielding, for the sake of immediate pleasure, to acts and behaviours which are ultimately conducive not to truly human self-fulfilment, but to spiritual impoverishment and alienation. Lust, indeed, is a *greedy, voracious* style in experiencing our bodily dimension. Such a connection seems to me not arbitrary, since Thomas himself further on⁸⁰ asks whether other vices⁸¹ contrary to prudence arise from covetousness (*avaritia*).

Although doubts might be raised about the specific role of *luxuria* as the *source* of those vices, we may appreciate the connection which Thomas points to between a greedy and sensual frame of mind and corruption of prudence. Bodily creation - that we experience in our own body, as well as in physical nature as our "extended body" - offers us many occasions for delectation, since nature satisfies our natural needs, and pleasure necessarily follows their satisfaction. This happens according to the common nature of all animals,⁸² not only humans; therefore pursuit of pleasure and

⁸⁰ *STh* II-II, q. 55 a. 8.

⁸¹ As we shall see below, these are craftiness (*astutia*), guile (*dolus*), and fraud (*fraus*), dealt with in art. 3, 4, and 5 respectively.

⁸² "Now there is this difference between animals and other natural things, that when these latter are established in the state becoming their nature, they do not perceive it, whereas animals do. And from this perception there arises a certain movement of the soul in the sensitive appetite; which movement is called delight". (*STh* I-II, q. 31, a. 1)

happiness as such is perfectly natural (*secundum naturam*) to us. However, humans may disregard to follow their *specific* nature, rationality, and act *only* greedily and sensually; but acting out of mere instinctiveness is *below* human nature, and therefore an *imprudent* behaviour as is every conduct lacking rational guidance. Consequent hedonism⁸³ is indeed self-destructive as well as, in the form of today's mass-hedonism and consumerism, nature-destructive. A correct attitude to natural environment requires empathy and sensibility as well as a certain *distance*, necessary to foster and safeguard *respect* for the *otherness* of nature.⁸⁴ When nature is considered *merely* as a resource or opportunity to maximize subjective delight (even with environment-friendly intentions), such an otherness is neglected and the door is opened for exploitive practices, just as sex-consumerism (a contemporary feature of Thomas' *luxuria*) can undermine gratuitousness inside human relationships. This point should not be misunderstood as if nature were a person, or even a super-person or a deity, as some environmental theorists maintain: I am only pointing to the inadequateness of the Cartesian view of nature as mere matter (*res extensa*), to be used (*uti* and often *abuti*) recklessly for our own purposes.

c) Intermezzo: *falsa similitudo virtutis*

As said, prudence in the classic sense is virtually unknown or misunderstood in modern culture. This virtue has suffered a process of impoverishment and fragmentation, so that we can only recognise broken pieces or elements of it, as is the case in "rational choice" (mostly economic) theories. If compared with Aristotle's

⁸³ Philosophically, I do not think either to ancient Epicurean hedonism or modern utilitarian eudaimonism -both actually driven by reason - but rather to nihilistic 17th century's libertinism, culminating in Sade's "necrophiliac" sensualism.

⁸⁴ On the necessity to preserve nature's otherness, see Peter Reed, "Man Apart: An Alternative to Self-Realization Approach", in *Environmental Ethics*, vol. 11 (Spring 1989), 53-69, drawing on Martin Buber. See also Giuseppe Ferrari, "Dire tu alla natura. Una lettura di Martin Buber", in *La Persona nella filosofia dell'ambiente*, Milano: Limina mentis, 2012, 171-198.

φρόνησις or Thomas' prudence, rational decision-making procedures, characterised by a narrower *idea of rationality*, could be considered as forms of prudence *secundum quid*: they share with authentic prudence their concern with the choice of means, though without aiming at self-fulfilment of human life as a whole, but merely to partial ends (such as, for instance, the maximization of financial incomes). This limited and partial "prudence" can sometimes be distinguished only with difficulty from a step further away from the virtue of prudence, represented by "the vices *opposed* to prudence by way of resemblance", dealt with by Thomas in q. 55. In this case, the name prudence is appropriated illegitimately and what we are actually dealing with is only a *falsa similitudo virtutis*.⁸⁵

In many impoverished forms of prudence ultimate ends (when they are not excluded from the beginning) are left *outside* the rational discussion as an object of merely individual, unquestionable choice. Rational planning culture is often combined with an actual value anarchism.⁸⁶ Philosophical *emotivism* could be understood as a consequence as well as a rationalisation of this widespread attitude:

⁸⁵ *STh* II-II, q. 23, a. 7.

⁸⁶ This is a very short description of some *mainstream* tendencies in moral thinking. The thesis of the radical subjectiveness and the unquestionability of moral values could be traced back to F. Nietzsche or to M. Weber's *Polytheismus der Werte* (polytheism of values) at the beginning of the twentieth century, and culminates perhaps in Engelhardt 's (1996) definition of human subjects as "moral strangers". Needless to say, universalist counter-trends are well represented on the field of moral theories, from J. Habermas to Neo-Aristotelian thinkers such as A. MacIntyre or M. Nussbaum. For references, see H. T. Engelhardt, *The Foundations of Bioethics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996; J. Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981; A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory*, Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame University Press, 1981; M. Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities. The Human Development Approach*, Cambridge (Mass.) - London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011.

ethical choices are interpreted as nothing more than the expression of individual, arbitrary and unquestionable *feelings*.⁸⁷

Very interesting in this perspective is Thomas' analysis of the "vices opposed to prudence by way of resemblance" in q. 55. Indeed, humans can behave imprudently not only by neglecting prudence, as is the case in previous questions (53-54), but also by practising a distorted and impoverished version of "prudence". Among the vices opposed to prudence, they are those "*quae habent similitudinem cum ipsa*", like in a caricature. In the first article of q. 55 Thomas asks "whether prudence of the flesh (*prudencia carnis*) is a sin" and in a. 2 whether it is *mortal* sin. The *respondeo* points out to the core of the issue, the right definition of authentic prudence:

As stated above⁸⁸, prudence regards things which are directed to the end of life as a whole. Hence prudence of the flesh signifies properly the prudence of a man who looks upon carnal goods as the last end of his life. Now it is evident that this is a sin, because it involves a disorder in man with respect to his last end, which does not consist in the goods of the body, as stated above.⁸⁹ Therefore prudence of the flesh is a sin.

As we already pointed out, true prudence and false or apparent prudence differ in the first place with regard to their respective ends. Authentic prudence encompasses the *whole* human life, whereas false prudence is limited to *partial* ends. However, the limitedness of the scope is not enough to characterise prudence as apparent: there must also be a certain *distortion* consisting in the absolutisation of goals that, as such, are not necessarily morally evil. In fact, false prudence is *false*, and not merely limited or pre-moral (as it happens in the correct exercise of technical tasks), when

⁸⁷ Such a meta-ethical theory can be traced as far back as to A. J. Ayer's 1936 book *Language, Truth, and Logic*, (New York: Dover Publications, 1952).

⁸⁸ *STh* II-II, q. 47 a. 13.

⁸⁹ *STh* I-II, q. 2, a. 5.

it hinders the achievement of human life's last end. This can happen not only when means are evil in themselves, but also when means, though good or morally neutral or indifferent as such, are considered as an absolute, and become *de facto* ends in themselves. Let us consider some manifestations of false prudence according to Thomas: not surprisingly within our perspective, we will find a whole set of environment-destroying attitudes which play a major role particularly in today's economic life: craftiness (*astutia*), guile (*dolus*), and fraud (*fraus*), dealt with in art. 3,4, and 5 respectively. d) *Astutia* and *avaritia*

Let us concentrate on *astutia*. In the *respondeo* it is explained analogically with reference to theoretical topics:

Prudence is "right reason applied to action," just as science is "right reason applied to knowledge." On speculative matters one may sin against rectitude of knowledge in two ways: in one way when the reason is led to a false conclusion that appears to be true; in another way when the reason proceeds from false premises, that appear to be true, either to a true or to a false conclusion. Even so a sin may be against prudence, through having some resemblance thereto, in two ways. First, when the purpose of the reason is directed to an end which is good not in truth but in appearance, and this pertains to prudence of the flesh; secondly, when, in order to obtain a certain end, whether good or evil, a man uses means that are not true but fictitious and counterfeit (*simulatis et apparentibus*), and this belongs to the sin of craftiness. This is consequently a sin opposed to prudence, and distinct from prudence of the flesh.⁹⁰

Astutia consists thus in a wrong choice of the means, which *seem* to be adequate, but are actually wrong and apparent. The subject falls somehow prey to a self-deceiving illusion, by taking a kind of "shortcut" to a given end: not necessarily a morally wrong end, as is the case for people pursuing quality of life, or welfare. However,

⁹⁰ *STh* II-II, q. 55, a. 3.

it may happen that individuals and societies, tending towards these ends, resort to wrong means like reckless environmental depletion or excessive land use. In such cases *astutia* is no longer an *actual* cleverness, but rather a self-deceiving or apparent craftiness, because, while guaranteeing limited individual or short-term advantages, it destroys the foundation itself of an *authentic* human welfare in the long term.

Thomas remarks that these vices, contrary to prudence by way of resemblance, arise specifically from covetousness (*avaritia*). The reason is that, differently from those vices which find their source in sensual disorders (*luxuria*), these ones are rooted in reason itself, although practised in a distorted way:

“On account of the vehemence of pleasure and of concupiscence, lust entirely suppresses the reason from exercising its act: *whereas in the aforesaid vices there is some use of reason, albeit inordinate*”.⁹¹

Applying this concept to the environmental question, we may conclude that a merely “sensual” and hedonistic way of considering nature (a narcissistic *Lustprinzip*) may seriously hamper the possibility to recognise nature’s otherness and lead to nature’s abuse; however, reason itself, when practised in a *superficial* and merely instrumental way, may lead ultimately to an irresponsible and imprudent way of dealing with nature. This happens when reason is reduced to a tool to maximize a narrowly understood anthropocentric benefit, with insufficient awareness of our dependence on and solidarity with the natural environment. A merely calculating, instrumental reason does nothing but equip and strengthen with “rational” means an ultimately irrational, dehumanizing conduct. Yet, such a short-sighted prudence is actually no prudence at all, but rather self-deceiving *astutia*. Therefore, Thomas does not invite us generically to act rationally, but warns us about the *quality*, i.e. the depth of our practical reason with its core virtue of prudence.

e) *Sollicitudo*

⁹¹ *STh* II-II, q. 55, a. 8 (italics added).

In articles 6 and 7 of the same question 55 Thomas considers, among the vices opposite to prudence, solicitude (*sollicitudo*). Thomas' analysis brings out the ambiguity of this state of mind, characterised by concern, preoccupation or even anxiety. Both the object and the measure of solicitude are questioned. Some aspects of Thomas' argument seem to be particularly relevant to our topic:

Accordingly solicitude about temporal things may be unlawful in three ways.⁹² First on the part of the object of solicitude; that is, if we seek temporal things as an end. Hence Augustine says:⁹³ "When Our Lord said: 'Be not solicitous,' etc. . . . He intended to forbid them either to make such things their end, or for the sake of these things to do whatever they were commanded to do in preaching the Gospel." Secondly, solicitude about temporal things may be unlawful, through too much earnestness in endeavoring to obtain temporal things, the result being that a man is drawn away from spiritual things which ought to be the chief object of his search, wherefore it is written (Matthew 13:[22]) that "the care of this world . . . chokes up the word."⁹⁴

The viciousness of solicitude is not obvious to Thomas at first sight: prudence as such requires an attitude of alertness and care, contrary to negligence and carelessness. In particular, just in our time we should be (virtuously) solicitous about threats to nature's fragile ecological balance. Therefore, Thomas specifically asks "Whether it is lawful to be solicitous *about temporal matters*" (*Utrum licitum sit sollicitudinem habere de temporalibus rebus*).⁹⁵

⁹² We shall consider only the first two, as especially relevant to our topic; the third may be originated "through over much fear (*ex parte timoris superflui*), when, to wit, a man fears to lack necessary things if he do what he ought to do".

⁹³ *De operibus monachorum*, XXVI.

⁹⁴ *STh* II-II, q. 55, a. 6.

⁹⁵ My emphasis.

Solicitude is deemed morally wrong by Thomas when the acting person is, as it were, absorbed by “temporal things” considered as his/her ultimate end. Terms like “earthly” or “temporal” should not be exclusively identified with material or bodily; this ontological meaning combines often in Thomas with a moral and theological (eschatological) one: in this sense, it refers rather to egoistic and individualistic tendencies dependent on humans’ weak and bodily nature. The tendency to self-conservation as such is natural, but it turns out to be vicious when it becomes so dominant as to be the strongest or even unique motivation of one’s behaviour.

Solicitude in such cases limits itself to the service of our narrow ego and is forgetful of the wider network of relationships (including the natural environment) in which the individual himself/herself remains rooted. Not solicitude itself is wrong, but rather the limitedness of its object. Those who are solicitous about such things lose their energies in caring for a very narrow object and do not take into account the relational context of the individual’s self-realization. Their anxiety for such limited ends make them blind toward greater ends; people “are drawn away from spiritual things”. Once again, we should remember that in Thomas’ perspective “spiritual” does not mean only and chiefly “incorporeal”, but rather (in the *moral* sense) encompassing the *wholeness* of human self-fulfilment: a dimension uncovered to those who, under the guidance of prudence, experience authentic, not merely instrumental relationships to God, to other people, and also to God’s creation.

7. A tentative conclusion

At the beginning of this essay I have referred to Pope Francis’ urgent invitation to “acknowledge the appeal, immensity and urgency of the challenge we face”⁹⁶. Rethinking our philosophical and theological heritage in the light of the environmental crisis is a significant part of this challenge, seen the impact of ideas on behaviour, lifestyle, and practices. In this essay I have tried to investigate, although tentatively and fragmentarily, the potentialities of Thomas Aquinas’ virtue ethics, particularly in his

⁹⁶ *Laudato si’*, 15.

treatise of the cardinal virtue of prudence. *Direct* ecologization or “greening” of Thomas’ philosophy and theology seems to me a risky, incorrect, and ultimately impossible enterprise. But developing the hidden potentialities of Thomas’ rich ethical reflection in the context of our ecological crisis is a very important task for the time ahead, the task of “a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”⁹⁷

SUMMARY

In his essay Giuseppe Ferrari, answering Pope Francis’ call for a renewed attention to the “ecological virtues”, investigates the potentialities of Thomas’ ethical thought for environmental ethics by analysing Thomas’ treatise on prudence in the *secunda secundae* (*STh* II-II, qq. 47-56). The author does not try to improperly “ecologize” Thomas’ ethics, but follows rather a methodological approach, trying to highlight the fruitfulness of Thomas’ insights when applied to contemporary environmental issues. Within this perspective, he analyses “economic and political prudence” and several implications of prudence (and of virtue in general): the acknowledgement of human limits, the so-called precautionary principle, and eventually the negative impact on environmental behaviour of some “vices opposed to prudence”.

⁹⁷ Matthew 13, 52.