

**RESPONSE TO STEVE CORTRIGHT/ERNEST PIERUCCI  
AND FR. DERMOT TREDGET**  
**Practical Wisdom: Aristotelian-Thomistic Reflection  
Meets with St. Benedict's Rule**

Simona Beretta,  
Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan, Italy

I would like to offer some thoughts referring to two papers, one by Prof. Dr. Steve Cortright, St. Mary's College of California and Mr. Ernest Pierucci, Attorney at Law, San Francisco, California, *Practical Knowledge and the Arts of Enterprise*; the other by Fr. Dermot Tredget, OSB, UK, *Practical Wisdom and Discernment in the Rule of Benedict*: two papers where prudence and managerial practice in the Aristotelian-Thomistic reflection meet with practical wisdom in St. Benedict's rule.

Most of my thoughts reflect, on the one side, the intuition that much is going on between the lines of these two very rich papers (I apologize for not getting their full wealth); on the other side, they reflect the resounding of *Caritas in veritate* in my mind.

Practical wisdom is defined the perfect ability for directive judgement (Cortright-Pierucci, p.11); practical wisdom, prudence, discernment and discretion can be taken as synonymous, as Fr. Tredget does in his paper, interestingly revisiting the literal wording of St. Benedict's rule and its various translations. Cortright-Pierucci's paper maintains that prudence as a virtue (excellence for action) requires the complete system of virtues (Cortright-Pierucci, p.10); this also makes an interesting connection with Fr. Tredget's quote which refers to discretion as "mother of all virtues" (Tredget, p.7).

In the Benedictine tradition, discretion is "the eye and the light of the body", as opposed to "the dark of night" and the "deep shadows" (Tredget, p.9); "...no virtue can either be perfectly attained or endure without the grace of discretion... True discretion is not obtained except by true humility" (Tredget, p.10).

Fr. Tredget effectively underlines, in his first conclusion, that practical wisdom "is a gift and a grace" (p.11) I totally agree; he also asks where knowledge and experience fit into the picture. I would like to elaborate on this. Discretion is indeed a gift we receive as a vocation, as a dimension of the larger vocation to integral human development in charity and truth. "*Man does not develop through his own powers, nor can development simply be handed to him*" (CV, 11) "*Precisely because God gives a resounding "yes" to man, man cannot fail to open himself to the divine vocation to pursue his own development*" (CV, 18). These general statements can easily be rephrased with reference to our developing practical wisdom and discretion.

Hence, according to my understanding, human experience greatly contributes to practical wisdom; not so much in the limited "horizontal" sense that we necessarily learn from each others or from our own errors; rather, we learn from experience when we freely accept the vocation to verify, in the concreteness of our time, space and relations, the "light" and "grace" of prudence we receive from above: and this is "vertical" vertigo! In his conclusion, Fr. Tredget adds: "Prayer also, is an integral part of practical wisdom and discernment. It is our response to that gift." (p.11). It sure is; but I find it curious that Fr. Tredget mentions prayers and not work, while revisiting St. Benedict's rule, summarized by *ora et labora*. Human labour is response to the same vocation to full, integral human development, in a "*dynamic faithfulness to a light received*" (CV, 12)

The expression I just quoted is used, in the Encyclical, to define coherence. Hence, coherence does not seem to coincide with adherence to a rule, even a “wise” rule. This seems to me a good start for discussing Cortright-Pierucci’s paper: they reappraise the idea by Gordley (2002) that “like the good ruler, the good manager must first be a good, a virtuous, human being all round” (p. 2). Apologizing in advance for my oversimplification, they revisit the Aristotelian notion of use (use follows on choice and moves the powers that allow execution; that is, use is an act of will, p.6); they criticize Gordley’s normative rule of human *virtue* (empirically rare!) and underline the normative rule of human *use*.

One basic point in Cortright-Pierucci’s paper concerns the distinction between particular *versus* human use, with excellence in particular use deciding no question of human use. Art, technique, technology pertain to excellence in making particular use of things and of different kinds of powers; but excellence in practical judgement (being “practically wise”) pertains to good life as a whole (Cortright-Pierucci, p.6-7).

In their discussion of what is “true” (excellent, sound) practical judgement, they stress the importance of being “true to” a proper end (Cortright-Pierucci, p. 7): after all, we all live in the face of uncertainty and we all are very familiar with making errors. “For a judgement which is unqualifiedly practical, the proper way to be true is to be a sound rule of action... in conformity with a genuine intention, one relative to the proper end. ... (T)he judgement is then *given* as a *true rule* of action. It is true *as* a rule of action; it possesses truth as direction, with absolute certainty ...” (Cortright-Pierucci, p.8)

I would like to underline two reasons why this approach sounds very relevant to me (I am neither philosopher nor manager, so I am just checking what I read with the elementary experience of being a teacher/researcher). First, “true to” is a relational expression; it signals the importance of relating to a proper end. In particular, being “true to truth” is the plausible proper end for academic research, both theoretical and empirical. Second, the “sound rule of action”, consisting in a relation we must be true to, implies an inexhaustible tension. I like the expression “tension”: it is dynamic in itself. Truth cannot be pinned down once for all; the Truth is also the Way; we may say: the soundest rule of action is never to accept being physically separated from He who is the Truth, and the Way.

A second expression which deeply resounds in my elementary experience relates to “affective knowledge” (Cortright-Pierucci, p.9). Again, this is an exquisitely relational notion; and it goes in two directions. The first is obvious: love for the subject is an important condition for successful enquiry. But there are signs of affection, or benevolence, we experience in knowledge and, even more evidently, in our intuitions (as in the quote from Yves Simon, *Practical knowledge*, p.19: “... you can smell things you cannot see”). In other terms, to love fosters knowledge; but knowledge is also a sign of the Love we gratuitously receive. Quoting Pope Benedict’s words: *All our knowledge, even the most simple, is always a minor miracle, since it can never be fully explained by the material instruments that we apply to it. In every truth there is something more than we would have expected, in the love that we receive there is always an element that surprises us. ... In all knowledge and in every act of love the human soul experiences something “over and above”, which seems very much like a gift that we receive, or a height to which we are raised. (CV, n.77)*

Let me elaborate on the previous two points and formulate a different path to a conclusion which seems to me quite close to Cortright-Pierucci’s.

Suppose pursuing economic efficiency (wealth or profit maximization) to be the reference rule; would such rule be expected to make other people better off, provided human virtues are practiced? Before answering, another question deserves answering. Can economic efficiency be “known” *per se*, or is there a role of “affective knowledge” even in understanding efficiency?

*Knowledge is never purely the work of the intellect. It can certainly be reduced to calculation and experiment, but if it aspires to be wisdom capable of directing man in the light of his first beginnings and his final ends, it must be “seasoned” with the “salt” of charity. Deeds without knowledge are blind, and knowledge without love is sterile. (CV, n.30)*

If affective knowledge is required, I definitely see no use for reference rules that look like shortcuts.

I surely see no *human* use in such rules, but I also do not see any *particular* use for them!

In other words: the price of prudence is high indeed (Cortright-Pierucci, p. 10). Nothing suffices, short of remaining in the uncomfortable (but attractive) position of perpetual tension, searching for ... *caritas in veritate*: the Love and Truth which took the initiative for us and for our salvation.