

ON HUMAN USE AND MANAGEMENT

ARISTOTELIAN-THOMISTIC REFLECTIONS ON PRUDENCE AND MANAGERIAL PRACTICE

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To rule and to command belong to prudence, and therefore where a specific sort of rule and directive judgment is encountered among human actions, there a specific sort of prudence is also encountered. (*Summa theologiae* IIa IIae q. 50 a.1, resp.)¹

Introduction: **Prudent Managers, Managerial Prudence**

At a predecessor of the present seminar, now a decade gone, James Gordley presented what he described as “an Aristotelian or Thomistic model of corporate responsibility” under the title “Virtue and the Ethics of Profit Seeking.”² In the event, Gordley’s argument justified his description. For one thing, it accorded to prudential judgment a genuinely Aristotelian or Thomistic primacy over technique (for the argument’s purposes, the notion of an economic model stood in token for technique generally). On the argument’s showing, common sense and universally acknowledged market phenomena alike testify that “even on the descriptive level, economic models work only to the extent people actually exercise the [*sc.* prudential] judgmental ability that Thomas called *pecuniativa*.”³ For another, Gordley’s argument resolutely upheld the traditional

¹ [*A*]d prudentiam pertinet regere et praecipere, et ideo ubi invenitur specialis ratio regiminis et praecepti in humanis actionibus, ibi etiam invenitur specialis ratio prudentiae (the above and subsequent translations are mine unless otherwise noted—SAC).

² James Gordley, “Virtue and the Ethics of Profit Seeking” in S. A. Cortright and Michael J. Naughton, eds., *Rethinking the Purpose of Business: Interdisciplinary Essays from the Catholic Social Tradition* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), 78.

³ *Ibid.*, 68: Where actions instrumental to well-being and well-doing—the undertakings economists treat under the rubrics of preference satisfaction and profit seeking—are in view, Gordley suggests, Aristotle and Thomas distinguish correspondent exercises of prudential judgment. The first, *prudentia aeconomica*, “prudent economic judgment” or “good household management,” may be taken (broadly) as practical wisdom in spending (house holding offering the paradigm case of wealth management for private advantage). The second, characterized as χρηματιστική by Aristotle and translated precisely by Moerbecke for St. Thomas as *pecuniativa*, may be rendered “money-making” or (interpolating slightly) “profit-making”; it signifies good judgment in acquiring and husbanding spendable resources. The *locus classicus* is *Politics* A, 1256a1–1259a35, and the lack of a complete translation of St. Thomas’ commentary has recently been remedied by *Aquinas: Commentary on Aristotle’s Politics*, trans. Richard J. Regan (Indianapolis, Indiana and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Co., 2007). One should note, however: (1) Aristotle does not refer to a “profit-making practical wisdom” [ἡ φρόνησις ἡ χρηματιστική], since creditable (or, rather, unobjectionable) profit-making is subservient or ancillary—ὑπηρετική—to economic prudence, and (2) the text of *Politics* regularly uses the adjective χρηματιστική substantively, leaving ambiguous whether its substantive aspect belongs to πράξις, human action, or to τέχνη, art (*cf.* *Politics* A, 1258a19–35); for his part, Thomas argues for τέχνη: “[I]t does not belong to the household manager (cont.)

principle that prudence is inseparable from the strictly moral virtues of justice, courage, and temperance. So far as management entails directive judgment, precept, or *dirigisme*, Gordley's good manager is a parallel to Aristotle's good ruler. Like the good ruler, the good manager must first be a good, a virtuous, human being all round.⁴ Like Aristotle's good ruler, Gordley's good manager is not made by the acquisition of some special technique (although, like the good ruler, the good manager often deploys special techniques). Rather, like the good ruler, the good manager brings a stable—a (literally and emphatically) *characteristic*—good judgment to bear on questions of right action affecting the human flourishing of many; he manages with personal prudence.

The parallel between the good manager and Aristotle's good ruler suggests a path of argument down which Gordley's proximate aim did not lie. The path in question points toward a notion of properly managerial virtue. Such a virtue would amount to managerial prudence, an excellence comparable to the Aristotelian-Thomistic notions of nomothetic/regnative prudence and military prudence in that each—the nomothetic/legislative, military, or managerial—would constitute commanding judgment in pursuit of a proper, specifying human good to be attained by many, in partnership.⁵

Gordley's proximate aim was to answer the question: When—under what conditions—should a firm's managers pursue maximization of the firm's profits; when does profit seeking have normative value? The answer, "As long as they [firms' managers] and other people actually practice the virtues . . . their [managers'] pursuit of profit will make other people normatively better off,"⁶ presented (one) managerial practice as an instance of the general rule that the bulk of the argument had been at pains to establish. According to that rule, the aims conventionally subsumed under the ideal of economic efficiency—maximal satisfaction of consumers' preferences, wealth- and profit-maximization—are (in Gordley's formulation) "normatively valuable only on the assumption that people are actually practicing the virtues that Aristotle and Thomas describe."⁷ If the rule holds, any good managerial practice must prove to be inseparable

(n. 3, cont.) [*non pertinet ad æconomicum*] to consider whence and how money can be acquired . . . [but] to a subordinate skill [*ad artem subservientem* → 'η τέχνη 'η 'υπηρετική], namely, moneymaking [*artem pecuniativam* → 'η τέχνη 'η χρηματιστική] (trans. Regan, *Commentary on Politics*, I. 8, 7 [p. 59]; cp. *Summa theologiae* IIaIIae q. 50, a. 3, ad 1.).

⁴ Cf. Gordley, "Virtue and . . . Profit Seeking," 75–79, Aristotle, *Politics* Γ ii, 1277a14–33; xviii, 1288a33f.

⁵ Aristotle, as St. Thomas notes, "names [what St. Thomas calls] regnative prudence from the principal act of a king [*a principali actu regis*], which is to enact laws [*qui est leges ponere*]" (*Summa theologiae* IIa IIae q. 50, a. 1, ad 3; cp. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* Z viii, 1141b23–1142a12, and especially 1141b25–26: "Of practical wisdom concerned with the city, the one sort, as being architectonic [is called] 'nomothetic' [or 'legislative': τῆς δὲ περὶ πόλιν 'η μὲν 'ως ἀρχιτεκτονική νομοθετική]").

⁶ Gordley, "Virtue and . . . Profit Seeking," 75.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 66. By "the virtues Aristotle and Thomas describe" Gordley designates the cardinal or "hinge" excellences upon which a fulfilled human life has, traditionally, been thought to turn: prudence or practical wisdom, justice (simple equity in private transactions; proportional equity in the distribution of goods among the members of a polity), courage, temperance. Living such a life, a life of "being well and doing well in being well" (MacIntyre's graceful rendering of εὐδαιμονία) is, traditionally, identified with the (natural) human good. The first of the virtues, prudence or (as Gordley, in deference to contemporary English idiom, prefers) good judgment, "recognizes what actions are appropriate for living such a life." Gordley's usage recalls Aristotle's description of practical wisdom as the capacity "to see [discern] good things for oneself and for one's fellowman" [τὰ αὐτοῖς ἀγαθὰ καὶ τοῖς ἀνθρώποις θεωρεῖν: *Nicomachean Ethics* Z v, 1140b9–10], but it does not highlight the essence of prudence: viz., as perfected practical (cont.)

from moral *virtus in commune*, or excellence in people’s activity just so far as it comprises purposeful seeking of their own and others’ comprehensive well-being. That excellence (in St. Thomas’ pithiest formula) “is an act of prudence by which a person rules himself and others.”⁸

As to the path Gordley had not taken, ordinary usage draws parallels, *prima facie*, between managerial practice and the traditional subjective parts (species) of prudence: œconomic, regnative (legislative), political, military.⁹ Such notions as “corporate governance,” “business strategy” or “workplace equity” might be adduced to help frame an argument to the effect that the good manager’s personal virtue is harnessed, like the ruler’s, for discernment and pursuit of a specifying human object and good; that management, like legislation or house-holding, constitutes an excellence by which to conduct oneself and others to properly human fulfillment.¹⁰ Such an argument would entail that managers, unlike technicians or professionals, are called to be prudent—are called, that is, to be preceptors of human fulfillment—not only personally but *qua* managers. It could lend new dignity to the notion of a managerial vocation by adding new gravity to the notion of the “community of work,”¹¹ namely, the gravity that would follow upon recognition that some mode of properly human fulfillment is only attained, or is best attained, by participation in a well-managed firm or work-organization.

Gordley’s argument, then, juxtaposes management to the traditional, Aristotelian-Thomistic teaching on prudence in two distinct connections. **I.** It raises the question, can there be a good manager who is not a good—a morally serious (σπουδαίος), virtuous—person? As we shall see, in Aristotelian-Thomistic discourse, this question is inseparable from the question: whether management is best understood as an art or a practice, a matter of particular or of fully human use? **II.** If the answer to I. indicates that management demands specifically human excellence, it also opens up the possibility that management stands to personal human excellence as stand political or military leadership, or householding (even, perhaps, teaching). That is, it opens up the question whether the fullest human flourishing is promoted by the specification of personal excellence through pursuit of a human good and object that is uniquely the attainment of

(n. 7, cont.) knowledge prudence is “commanding” or “directive” [ἡ μὲν γὰρ φρόνησις ἐπιτακτικὴ ἐστίν] or in St. Thomas’ language, prudence is *praeceptiva* and a prudential judgment is a *praeceptio* or “commanding cognition” (cp. *Nicomachean Ethics* Z x, 1143a8–10; *Summa theologiae* IIa IIae q. 47, a. 8, resp.; St. Thomas, *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*, vol. II, trans. C. I. Litzinger, OP [Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1964], VI, L. IV, CC. 1166, 1171).

⁸ *Quaestiones Disputatae, De virtutibus in commune* (Paris, 1883), Q. 1, a. 5, ad 8: *felicitas autem activa est actus prudentiae, quo homo et se et alios gubernat.*

⁹ The *locus classicus* belongs, again, to Aristotle: *Nicomachean Ethics* Z viii, 1141b23–1142a12; the definitive treatment is St. Thomas, *Summa theologiae* IIa IIae q. 50.

¹⁰ Aristotle formulates the original insight (*loc. cit.*): practical wisdom, φρόνησις, is one as a ‘ἐξίς or active condition of character; it is differentiated specifically according to the objective, human goods to which it is directed—e.g., to singular human fulfillment, “to live fulfilled according to domestic conversance” [*totum bene vivere secundum domesticam conversationem*, in St. Thomas’ lovely formula (*Summa theologiae* IIa IIae q. 50, a. 3, ad 1)], or to that “higher and more divine object, the good of a people or city” (*Nicomachean Ethics* A ii, 1094b11–12).

¹¹ Cf. John Paul II, *Centesimus annus* §32.2 and *Laborem exercens* §§ 20.3, 13.2 both in J. Michael Miller, CSB, ed., *The Encyclicals of John Paul II* (Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing, 1996).

managerial practice. In an Aristotelian-Thomistic context, this question is inseparable from the question: whether there is, in the emphatic sense, a human community of work?

I. A Criticism and a Caveat

The arguments Gordley adduced for the rule that economic objectives acquire normative value only when those who pursue them actually practice the cardinal virtues; that is, only when those who pursue them do so prudently, and so also with requisite courage, temperance, and justice: those arguments are, in effect, applications of the principle that art resolves no question of human use.¹² (Nor, as St. Thomas observes, does science.¹³) But questions of human use can be resolved, albeit often badly, by practical judgments that fall short of the excellence that is prudence, or are executed less than admirably. These flawed or inferior judgments have normative value: they are more or less blameworthy or more or less praiseworthy. Their normative value derives (as Gordley would agree) from their ostensible object, *human* advantage or flourishing or well-being. But it does not depend (as, apparently, Gordley would not agree) on whether the judgments intend the true object and action attains it in the right way. Normative value does not depend on the virtue of prudence, which discerns, commands, and realizes *good* human use. It depends on a merely practical judgment, one that discerns and commands a *human* use.

Recursion to the normative rule of human use, as distinct from the normative rule of human virtue, would remove a whiff of inconsistency from Gordley's argumentation. He employs the *reductio ad sensum commune* stingingly (and very entertainingly) against some economists' wonted, normative treatment of maximizing behaviors: Satisfying a preference is, as some economists would maintain, *eo ipso* good? "Not even Jean-Paul Sartre would say a thing like that."¹⁴ Or again:

Imagine a society in which people regarded the rules of contract and tort as mere instruments to enable them to satisfy their preferences, and broke these rules whenever they could get by with it. To use the economists' terminology, imagine that everyone played by the rules to just the extent that the marginal benefit of doing so exactly equaled the marginal cost. If the supply of some commodity increased, a board of directors might lower prices, but only after seriously discussing whether to dynamite a competitor's plant instead. If supply decreased, consumers might pay higher prices, but only after deciding it was inadvisable to loot the stores. It would take a bold economist to predict the effect of changes in supply or demand. He might as well try to predict which wolf pack will end up with the last scrap of meat in a severe winter.¹⁵

¹² This formulation of the principle is owing to Yves Simon (*cf. The Tradition of Natural Law, A Philosopher's Reflections*, ed. Vukan Kuic [New York: Fordham University Press, 1992], 94, and *Practical Knowledge*, ed. Robert J. Mulvaney [New York: Fordham University Press, 1991], 9–11).

¹³ *Cf. Summa theologiae* Ia IIae q. 57, a. 1, resp. and a. 3, resp.

¹⁴ Gordley, "Virtue and . . . Profit Seeking," 70.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 74–75.

Of course, by way of common sense people regard the rules of contract and tort as binding irrespective of one's interest or preference; and by way of common sense, disinterested respect for rights goes to justice just as weighing preferences against what is preferable goes to prudence. But if efficiency or wealth maximization are things to strive for "only if we assume not only that there is such a thing as prudence or good judgment, but that people are actually exercising it";¹⁶ and if "people are actually exercising" entails "people ordinarily are" or "many are" or "most are," common sense is apt to object. The virtues Aristotle and Thomas describe—the virtue of prudence, above all—are, as Aristotle and Thomas describe them, decidedly *extraordinary*. They are rare; they belong to much human action only by aspiration. Again, if "people are actually exercising [prudence or good judgment]" means something like "somewhere, someone is," common sense is apt to object that one ought not to erect a rule on rarities. But it is the case (as common sense agrees) that very often and perhaps ordinarily, when people make judgments about getting and spending, they take the kinds of pains and strike the kinds of agreement with their inclinations that (taken altogether) stand to the virtue of prudence as steady self-control stands to the virtue of temperance. Then we might say that efficiency or wealth maximization are things to strive for only if we assume not only that there is such a thing as prudence or good judgment, but that some (probably few) are actually exercising it, while many (perhaps most) judge and act in ways that approximate it and emulate the actions of a few.

Gordley's case for the proposition that prudence—right reason concerning human action; right reason inseparable from, because necessary to, the strictly moral virtues—is the normative rule of economic or managerial judgment cannot, in our view, be made. We have briefly shown that the case founders on the (traditional) distinction between practical judgments as precepts of human use and practically wise judgments—expressions of the virtue of prudence—as precepts of good human use. It might be as well, then, to revisit the notion of use and to consider in what senses the practical judgments of managers may pertain to human use or to its formal opposite, particular use.

On Use, Human and Particular

The *locus classicus* of the distinction between human and particular use is *Nicomachean Ethics* Z v, 1140a25f., where Aristotle argues that the honorific "practically wise" (φρόνιμος) belongs to one who deliberates nobly or beautifully (καλῶς), not over things that minister to the human good or advantage as to its parts or by way of particular considerations (περὶ τὰ . . . ἀγαθὰ καὶ συμφέροντα, οὐ κατὰ μέρος), but to one who deliberates over what pertains to the good life as a whole, or by way of whole-ness (πρὸς τὸ εὖ ζῆν ὅλως). The advantages that can be secured by artful deliberation, or that are the wages of expertise, must be wielded by a kind of deliberation that looks to the wholeness of the good life.

The concept of use begins its career by name among the will-acts St. Thomas distinguishes in his analysis of the human act *in toto*. He takes it from the famous pair, *uti* and *frui*, of St. Augustine (who supplies the *sed contra* to three of the articles in *Summa theologiae* Ia IIae q. 16). We use something when we apply it to some operation:

¹⁶ Gordley, "Virtue and . . . Profit Seeking," 67.

*usus rei alicuius importat applicationem rei illius ad aliquam operationem.*¹⁷ Since, among the constitutive or partial acts of the reason and will that yield the proper or fully human act, use follows on and responds to choice, use refers to the will's moving the powers by which the human act is executed. Use belongs, according to the term of art, to the order of execution. As a result, application or use permeates that whole order, since (as Thomas observes) "An act is properly attributed not to the instrument, but to the originating agent, as a building to the builder, but not to [his] instruments. Hence, it is manifest that to use is properly the act of the will."¹⁸ Accordingly, use comes to be employed of the will as moving any other power, so that even cognitive acts that are brought about by willing are taken as instances of use. Finally, the will's rousing any activity of any faculty can be called the use of that faculty, so that in this most extended sense use is understood whenever there is activity of any faculty that falls under human dominion.¹⁹

In its extended sense, the notion of use or application finds plenty of employment in moral philosophy, and especially in connection with practical knowledge. Since practical knowledge concerns reason extended to the direction of activities other than reasoning itself—that is, since it concerns applied reason—and since this direction involves activities' ordination to the common good, in the practical order use is, so to speak, everything.

Aristotelian-Thomistic moral philosophy and theology understand human use as the application of things (including human powers) to the ends of life, to being well and doing well in being well (in MacIntyre's graceful rendering of εὐδαιμονία).²⁰ "She made good use of her talents" is a way of saying that she applied them as means to her fulfillment as a free and rational agent; she lent her talents to human ends as such. As a judgment concerning human use, "She squandered her talents"—she made bad human use of them; she did not make them redound to her personal or human fulfillment—may be the companion truth to "She wrote a string of best-sellers." If so, implied is that she deployed her talents so as to realize a particular end amply; judged in relation to that end, she made good use—good particular use—of them. Use, then (to paraphrase Yves Simon), may be relative to the human agent taken in his integrity; it may bear immediately upon who and what the agent *is*. Alternatively, use may be relative to the agent in part, *i.e.*, it may be applicable to a power or expertness that a human agent *has*. In the latter case, good or bad use may refer to the fulfillment or perfection, not of the agent, but of the power or expertness in question.²¹

As we argued summarily above, art, technique, technology—*viz.*, excellence in making particular use of things (again, including natural human powers)—can decide no question

¹⁷ *Summa theologiae* Ia IIae q. 16 a. 1., resp.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*: *Actio autem proprie non attribuitur instrumento, sed principali agenti, sicut aedificatio aedificatori, non autem instrumentis. Unde manifestum est quod uti proprie est actus voluntatis.*

¹⁹ Cf. Ralph M. McInerny, *Aquinas on Human Action: A Theory of Practice* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1992), 67.

²⁰ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 148.

²¹ Cf. *e.g.*, Yves R. Simon, *Practical Knowledge*, ed. Robert J. Mulvaney (New York: Fordham University Press, 1991), 9–11.

of human use.²² For, artistic or technical excellence is undetermined to the good in two-fold ways: (1) of any art, technique, or technology it is possible to make a humanly good use, a humanly bad use or no use at all; (2) of any art, technique, or technology it is possible to make a use that is good or bad from the artistic or technical point of view. The same art—the same perfected capacity for right, directive judgment—that makes my physician just the person to heal me makes him just the one to do away with me quietly. His true, artful judgment that I can be healed by surgery does not, and cannot determine that surgery shall (or should) be performed. Action on the matter can be forestalled by the physician’s injustice or by my cowardice; it can be forestalled by the vitiation of human use that is an effect of vice. Action is secured by my courage and the physician’s due—that is to say, just—loyalty to his Hippocratic Oath. *Moral virtue alone mobilizes diverse capacities for right action—including technically right action or particular use—inseparably from the inclinations to put those same capacities to good human use.* Art guarantees, and can guarantee, neither that its exercise will subserve doing well and being well in doing well, nor that its exercise will prove artful in its (the art’s) terms. Sometimes the highest artistry consists in violating the ordinary standards of one’s art.

Human Use and Prudence

Let us now consider, in light of the distinctions between human and particular use and in light of St. Augustine’s principle that a virtue is “a quality . . . of which no one makes a wrong use”²³ some of the implications that must accompany the affirmation that good managers must be prudent persons.²⁴

(1) The virtue of prudence is excellence—soundness or truth—in practical judgment. Any given practical judgment admits of being true in two senses: it may true in the primary, theoretical, unqualified sense of conforming to the real state of affairs. In this primary sense, because it is concerned with particular contingency, that is, with the being of changeable things in view of their changeability, the practical judgment can never attain certainty. And as prudence, again, is excellence in practical judgment, prudence means coming to decision in the face of uncertainty. As Thomas puts it, “the certitude of prudence can never be so great as to completely remove all anxiety.”²⁵ Prudence involves—and in great or urgent matters palpably involves—a certain boldness

²²Again, as St. Thomas has it:

One’s having the habit of a speculative science does not incline him to use it, but he becomes capable of thinking truly concerning the objects of his science. But that he should use the science (cont.) (n. 22, cont.) thus possessed is due to the movement of the will. Therefore, a virtue which perfects the will, like charity or justice, causes the good use of speculative habits of this kind (*Summa theologiae* Ia IIae q. 57 a. 1, resp.).

As to art (which is like science in that it is concerned above all with its knowable object, but like moral virtue in that it is concerned with the realization of things contingent on human action):

[S]ome habits fulfill the meaning of virtue [as] merely conferring the capability of doing something well, while others do not only this but ensure that it is performed well. Art gives merely the ability, since it does not involve appetite . . . (*Summa theologiae* Ia IIae q. 57 a. 3, resp.).

²³ *On Free Choice*, II 19, quoted in Simon, *Practical Knowledge*, 10.

²⁴ This section and the sequel are especially indebted to the first chapter of Yves Simon’s *Practical Knowledge*, indebted at a level of fundamental orientation and conviction that is merely suggested by citation and is here gratefully acknowledged.

²⁵ *Summa theologiae* IIa IIae q. 47 a. 9 ad 2; cf. Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues*, 18.

completely at odds with the false notion that the prudent man is concerned above all with the elimination of risk (it is the falsely prudent, astute man who is thus preoccupied²⁶).

In the second sense, practical judgment admits of being true by way of “true to.” This way of practical truth involves conformity by way of affirmation (or denial) to the demands of an honest will, of rectified desire. It is a conformity that consists in surrender to the *amor*—of justice, courage, temperance—which (as John of St. Thomas beautifully says) *transit in conditionem objecti* (takes over the role of object).²⁷ For a judgment that is unqualifiedly practical, the proper way to be true is to be a sound rule of action, and a genuine—a “true to”—rule of action is in conformity with a genuine intention, one relative to the proper end. Given the intention of the proper end and given, in relation to the means, a judgment in unqualified agreement with the genuine intention, the judgment 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—no matter how doubtful it may remain in view of its objective relation to the possible states of affairs. This is not to say that rightness of desire is compatible with indifference to the real state of affairs: right desire is desire that the end be realized through the elected means; the real state of affairs is absolutely determinative thereof, and so it is of urgent moment to practical reason in every phase of deliberation and right through the execution of the design. (How many projects have been aborted owing to the emergence of new information?)

(2) Of perhaps greater moment to the security or certainty of prudential judgment: right desire is compatible with a variety of factors that may lie in the agent himself and are capable, by vitiating the objective truth of practical judgment, of exposing the agent to failure. First and best known: involuntary ignorance, of which the agent may or may not be aware. But even if aware that he lacks essential information, a decision maker may not be in a position to find a remedy, to delay decision, or to confer decision on another. Worse, involuntary ignorance may not be a matter of information properly speaking: it may result from non-moral, personal deficiencies of the sort we often call “constitutional.” Consider a decision-maker who is thrust, say, into urgent, prickly negotiations: his cool temperament recommended him for the assignment, but that same cool temperament also makes him constitutionally liable to miss warnings or suggestions that can be captured only by emotional intuition. Again, consider the role irrational inclinations or aversions may play in the reception and evaluation of information, or the role—in the right circumstances—an otherwise useful, compensating habit might play.

The sovereign defense (one is likely to argue) against every infra-moral deficiency that could threaten sound practical judgment is moral excellence: a good will and a right desire. Yves Simon offers a caution. The defense can be truly effective only if the rightness . . . should pertain not only to desire but also to all the conditions and instruments involved in its operation. . . . [A] violin player may be a great artist and yet give a poor performance because of defects in the material conditions and in the instrument of his art . . . because he has been tired . . . or the only available violin is a relatively poor thing, or because the physical circumstances of the auditorium adversely affect the

²⁶ Cf. Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues*, 18–20.

²⁷ *Cursus theologicus* I-II, d. 18, a. 4, quoted and translated in Simon, *Practical Knowledge*, 17–18.

working of his instrument. . . . In fact, it is much easier to keep a virtuoso in shape and a violin in tune than to keep a man of excellent will free from deceitful emotions, and free from the blind spots that may result from a lack of emotions.²⁸

(3) Of all possible examples, any practical judgment will furnish the most familiar, the most certain, and the clearest case of affective knowledge. Industry, docility, ambition, love for the subject—affective *interests* of all kinds—are important conditions for the success of inquiry. We may agree with Richard Weaver, “We do not undertake to reason about anything until we have been drawn to it by an affective interest.”²⁹ Nevertheless, all such interests remain extrinsic to knowing. If Weaver is correct, something like love of beauty must propel the abstract algebraist through the crystal abstractions of his subject; but let Weaver be correct: love determines not one of the algebraist’s conclusions. In the contrary case of practical knowledge, as between affirmation and denial, inclination decides: affirmation follows the positive inclination; denial follows aversion.

Once again, Yves Simon provides an exceedingly luminous illustration:

An honest businessman is visited by a fellow who obviously masters the rules of his game. His proposals seems financially safe as well as profitable and, in spite of the suspicions generally attaching to financial plans that look so good, perfectly honest. So, when the honest and experienced businessman is asked why he rejected the proposal without further inquiry, his way of rational argumentation will not silence his critics. Yet his “no” is resolute and definitive. It seems he did not even hesitate to dismiss the proposal and the would-be partner. Instead of explanations, he uses metaphors expressing aversion. “Yes, it is not easy to see what is wrong with his plan but sometimes you can smell things you cannot see.”³⁰

Not everyday does one escape the fate of Madoff’s victims by dint of a sensitivity for which one has only an emblem and no adequate terms of expression, but it *is* every day that, for each of us, our settled character settles questions of conduct.

The question of prudence is the question whether our character can be settled in such a way that an objective demand for assent—*This is the just alternative*—can be expressed as a positive inclination, or an objective demand for denial—*That’s just self-indulgent*—can be expressed as a felt aversion. This is the connection in which prudence—the “mould and mother of the [moral] virtues”—proves to be, in a further sense, dependent on the moral virtues.³¹

²⁸ Simon, *Practical Knowledge*, 15–16.

²⁹ Richard M. Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 19.

³⁰ Simon, *Practical Knowledge*, 19.

³¹ Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues*, 3; cf. *ibid.*, 32–34.

Prudence: Excellence *for* Action

Let us retrace (after Yves Simon) three considerations that belong to prudence as a virtue, *i.e.*, as excellence *for* action.³² (1) Because it is a quality of the *practical* understanding, prudence presupposes a system of virtuous inclinations: these alone can steadily cause a judgment possessed of practical truth, or agreement of the mind and with rectified appetite (the good will). Moral virtues, therefore, procure the good quality of the practical judgment. (2) Since the practical judgment determines the agent's actual use of his free choice, the *habitus* or 'ἐξίς—the second nature amounting to a *character*—that makes for its steady excellence must cause the right exercise of the judgment as well as its truth. As we have seen, one's artistry is not impaired by one's failure to use it or to use it appropriately (a physician's capacity to diagnose does not evaporate if he withholds his services for some untoward reason, nor does it evaporate if he fakes his findings). But to fail to come to practical judgment when judgment is called for is itself imprudent and a weakening of the right inclination. Again, it is possible to make a wrong *particular* use (and that may be a right *human* use) of art, but it is impossible *per definitionem* to make a wrong use of prudence: just as it impossible to be imprudently just, it is impossible to unjustly prudent, *etc.* (3) The system of right inclinations required for the steadiness of prudent judgment is a complete one: nothing short of virtue properly so-called can assure the needed, unwavering rightness of desire. Good dispositions short of active character will not do. Again, nothing short of all the moral virtues—all the cardinals and their principal allies—will do. To suppose that in order to judge prudently in a cause involving justice it would be enough to be just is false. Imagine that you have a motive to sway someone's judgment in a cause involving conflicting claims of right, and imagine that you know your man: even if he has a clear view of the rights in point, you will ask yourself, "Can pressure be brought by appeal to his desire to be admired? by his fear of criticism? by playing on sympathies or antipathies?"

The moral virtues are interconnected in prudence because each of them is an act whose form is the practical judgment which "targets" and commands the particular good-in-view. Like a sound pattern in a weak medium, the judgment itself is impaired by any significant defect in the inclination in and through which it is realized. Each of the moral virtues requires modes of action or inaction procured by others: to resist temptation toward personal injustice often requires courage or reserves of moderation. These reflections stand to show (in Simon's sober formula): "[T]he price of prudence is frightfully high."³³ For a reason so much ingenuity is spent on schemes for supplanting practical judgment with something teachable (and so infinitely more accessible); there is "good reason"—rather, strong motivation—to pursue the "illusion of technique."³⁴

³² Simon, *Practical Knowledge*, 21.

³³ *Ibid.*, 22; but (as Simon at his wisest reminds us) all this is said without prejudice to good dispositions that do not rise to virtue; for the modes of deliberate self-control come in infinite degrees, and are therefore serviceable in many ways and under most circumstances (*ibid.*, 22–23). Nevertheless, and for obvious reasons, leadership will want prudence.

³⁴ The allusion is to William Barrett, *The Illusion of Technique* (New York: Doubleday, 1978); the reference is to all attempts to substitute technique where human uses, and therefore practical wisdom, are at stake.

Human Use of Managerial Art

Deliberated, true-to-life recognition of the action appropriate, here and now, to human well-being, issuing in the commandment of what is recognized, is practical judgment. The perfected ability for such directive judgment (or commanding cognition: *praeceptio*) is practical wisdom.³⁵ The common, or unqualifiedly human, capacities for directive judgment must inform the activity of managers, since managers do not merely offer hypothetical advice, but render decisions (issue directive judgments). So far forth, managers' debts to practical knowledge do not distinguish managers from accountants or day laborers. Every human act—for St. Thomas as for Aristotle, every purposeful act without exception—is a moral act.³⁶ That is to say, every human act is of some human use (good or bad), whatever particular use may be discerned in light of its proximate end. Every human agent is called to be personally prudent; everyone is called to perfect the capacity for directive judgment as self-possession and self-rule in everything touching human action, including everything touching getting and spending. Nothing purposeful in the accountant's audits or the day laborer's toil entirely escapes human use; hence, nothing therein is void of moral weight and interest. Nevertheless, it is art that makes the accountant and it is art (as everyone knows who has ever performed day labor) that makes the day laborer. Personal virtue makes the prudent accountant and the practically wise day laborer, and by perfecting their human use it also enhances the art of each *for all human purposes*.

Because particular use extends to actions that stand as means to other actions, references to the ethical problems of managers, as to the ethical problems of day laborers or accountants, are often a way of saying, "Here is a thorny question of the right human use to make of certain (financial, manual, managerial . . .) arts." This way of grasping managers' debt to prudence suggests that the manager, like the accountant or the physician, professes an art (or arts) that personal prudence must deploy, if they are to be deployed to *human* as opposed to *particular* advantage. A good manager is a virtuous person in command of a useful art or of some useful arts; that is, a good manager is one personally equipped to make proper human use of the arts he commands as a manager: art makes the manager and personal virtue the good—the prudent—manager. And this way of grasping the good manager's debt to prudence entails that, like Yves Simon's canny businessman, the good manager's prudence will elude explanation; it will be unteachable and irrepeatable—a matter of personal signature—although by way of something like a managerial biography or narrative, it might inspire and, so far, inform; it will appear as the fruit of a whole career, marked (in all probability) especially by long experience, wide learning and technical expertise; finally, it is likely to prove remarkably "transferable" among and between technically diverse working environments.

³⁵ By way of *locus classicus*, *Nicomachean Ethics* Z v, 1140b7 – 8, 20 – 21; cf. St. Thomas, *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*, vol. II, trans. C. I. Litzinger, O.P. (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1964), VI, L. IV, C. 1166, 1171 (pp. 560, 561); cp. *Summa theologiae* IIa IIae q. 48, a. 8, resp.

³⁶ Cf. *Summa theologiae* Ia IIae q. 1, a. 2, resp., and, famously, *ibid.*, a. 3, resp.: *idem sunt actus morales et actus humani*.

II. Managerial Prudence?

That a manager should characteristically make noble use of technical expertise, and should do so with personal constancy and manifest respect for others' rights, is a state of affairs no better described as good managerial practice than as the personal practice of a morally upright manager. Perhaps in this, as in many human connections, the desiderated thing must be inferred from the shape of things marred by its absence. Gordley called attention to "ethical problems" that arise for managers of firms in default of consistently good judgment on the managers' parts or on the parts of employees, contractors, customers or others. Let us leave aside straightforward personal lapses or outright vice on managers' parts. Let us attend to a specimen of what Gordley characterized as "trickier" problems: those arising from inveterately poor judgments of human use on the part of those whose relations to the firm managers, *as* managers, manage. Imagine that for a variety of understandable (though not endorsable) reasons, certain employees whose skills are both rare and in temporarily high demand imprudently prefer immediate cash salary to longer term, less tangible benefits. Imagine that they are, in addition, transparently ready to bolt to eager competitors should managers resist, even to the extent of questioning, their expressed preference. Prudent managers will recognize in these employees a strong propensity to accept contracts that, because they are imprudent—because they are practically unwise undertakings for the employees—are also undertakings that would be *eo ipso* commutatively unjust for the managers to conclude. Moreover, were such contracts concluded, to benefit from them would be intemperate; and in any case, to blink the considerations counting against them would be cowardly. Here, Gordley observes, "is an underlying ethical problem that defies easy solution."³⁷ Indeed, a "solution" cannot be anticipated at the level of descriptive narration: resolution would appear (if it were to appear) *in concreto*, in the particulars of real exchanges among real negotiators. But prior to any negotiation, one may argue, managers' successful resistance to the employees' imprudent preferences could make them preceptors of human fulfillment. Were a prudent solution to shape organizational practice, its managerial authors could be said to have so far exercised "a specific sort of rule and directive judgment . . . among human actions." For they would, arguably, have given certain particular uses over to right human use, under a participated common good.

Among the misinterpretations of the common good, and consequent deformation of the very notion of human partnership—κοινωνία, *communitas*, community—Yves Simon has described the most frequent and far-reaching as "*the myth of a common good external to man.*"³⁸ The term "external" refers to Aristotle's way of drawing the distinction between the human act, which remains in the human agent, and the act of making, which terminates in the artifact. In the case of makings, perfection or fulfillment rests in the thing—is realized externally to the maker—whose well- or ill-faring is entirely irrelevant

³⁷ Gordley, "Virtue . . . and Profit Seeking," 76.

³⁸ Yves R. Simon, *The Tradition of Natural Law, A Philosopher's Reflections*, ed. Vukan Kuic (New York: Fordham University Press, 1992), 92.

to the good realized through the making.³⁹ With his usual pungency, Simon drives the point home:

If a work of art is the accomplice of evil, so that whoever enjoys it is inclined to such human evils as disorderly passions or self-destruction, it may mean that the work of art ought to be kept away from men, but it does not mean that it is not a good work of art.

Simon's concern is for the political community, but wherever the noblest of potential *materiae artis*—human beings—is at hand in abundance and disposed to good purpose, and whenever authority may be exercised over purpose and material, the intense joy of a truly “masterly [even a despotic] creativeness” beckons.⁴⁰ If there is a managerial prudence, a judgment of human use by which managers conduct themselves and others toward human fulfillment in the *community* of work, its influence should be marked by eclipse of such notions as “organization building” and “human resource management.”

³⁹ Cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* Z v, 1140b5–6; cp. St. Thomas, *Commentary* v. II, ed. Litzinger, 1167 (p. 560).

⁴⁰ Simon, *Tradition of Natural Law*, *loc. cit.*.