

by Thomas Deman, O.P.

In the course of his article 'The Encyclical Abstraction' last month, Fr Thomas Gilby, O.P., touched on the distinction between the notions of conscience and 'prudence'. He suggested that we should conduct our discussions of the moral issues raised by Humanae Vitae with greater precision and usefulness if we resorted to the suppler and ampler notion of 'prudence' rather than to that of conscience. 'Prudence' is something of a misnomer, carrying with it unfortunate associations for us today. Yet in much of our present discussion we seem to want to make 'conscience' do a great deal of the work that was formerly done by the finely analysed and thereby quasi-technical notion of 'prudence'. It seems sensible, therefore, to take another look at this classical conception, and we do so by publishing here a translation of an extract from the extended Appendix to the French edition of the Summa of St Thomas Aquinas, dealing with Prudence.¹ This piece thus takes its place as one of a series of contributions to a deeper consideration of the encyclical. We intend to publish further reflections in coming months from Mr Michael Dummett, Fellow of All Souls, and from Frs Timothy McDermott and Cornelius Ernst, O.P.

The important place occupied by 'prudence', in doctrine as in moral life, in the teaching of Aquinas can be seen clearly enough in his treatise on 'Prudence' in the *Summa Theologica*, 2a 2ae, 47-56. It is only too evident, however, that it has not subsequently kept pride of place in theology, for reasons which are not far to seek. Privileged attention came to be given to the will as a moral faculty, with a corresponding depreciation, in common opinion as much as in philosophy, of the role of the intelligence in moral matters, and theological reflection inevitably suffered the effect of the resulting climate of opinion. Secondly, as one can see from a glance at any modern primer of moral theology, the treatise on 'prudence' has shrunk as that on conscience has grown: it is as if two rival notions were competing for attention. Once we have regained a sense of the importance of prudence, then, we shall have to go on to consider the notion of conscience and the use made of it by theologians. We ought in consequence to be able to judge the shift of emphasis suffered by moral theology in the course of the centuries since Aquinas, and restore the virtue of prudence to its true place in the teaching of theology and in the lives of Christians. . . .

¹2a 2ae, 47-56: *Somme Théologique*, Saint Thomas d'Aquin, Editions de la Revue des Jeunes, I. Prudence, deuxième édition, 1949, Traduction française par Th. Deman, O.P. We publish the extract with the permission of the Editions du Cerf, Paris.

[The original here has two sub-sections on the philosophical origins of the notion of conscience and on conscience in Christian thought, then continues as follows:]

The co-ordination of conscience and prudence

From the texts of Aquinas himself one can see that a variety of acts were attributed to conscience by the authors of the period. Its role is to bear witness, *testificari*, to excuse, *excusare*, to accuse, *accusare*, to gnaw and to reprimand, *remordere*, *reprehendere*—words describing a person's reflection on actions already performed: one simply realizes that one has acted in a certain way, and conscience witnesses to one's act, or one judges oneself to have acted well or ill, and conscience excuses or accuses, gnaws, reprimands. We find the same moral reality in these words as that described by the authors of antiquity (Democritus was the first to give it the name conscience). An action once performed, man becomes his own judge: he is satisfied if he has done well and condemns himself if he has acted badly—a striking phenomenon in which one sees the ineluctable moral vocation of man. Following St Paul and the Christian writers of the first centuries, the medieval theologians in their turn repeated this thesis; it enjoys the status of a universal and incontrovertible teaching, and Aquinas gives it no new development. He briefly recalls in his treatise on sin that every sin entails as one of its punishments the remorse of the conscience, *remorsus conscientiae* (1a 2ae, 87, 1). In considering the good action he does not, on the other hand, refer to the interior reward, which in any case was only hinted at in the expression *excusare*—possibly because in Christian theology every good action is a cause of merit in the eyes of God, just as every bad action is a demerit (1a 2ae, 21, 4), and this divine sanction amply supplies the place of the praise or blame which in a less religious way of thinking would be attached for preference to the conscience alone. Here we may note that in the working of conscience after the event we have no need to look for a link with prudence, since this (obviously enough) has to do only with the way a person prepares for a (morally significant) action.

In contrast, the working of the conscience *prior* to the performance of an action does have to do with prudence, and it is important to see how. In addition to the functions already mentioned, Aquinas attributes to the conscience the power of binding, *ligare*, and of prompting to action, *instigare*, functions which obviously have to do with the preparation for action: and by means of conscience as he thus understands it, we judge whether we ought or ought not to do a thing: *judicamus aliquid esse faciendum vel non faciendum* (1a, 79, 13). We have already seen how it is in the writing of St Paul that the origin of this function of conscience can be located with certainty. When Aquinas came to take note of it in his turn, he naturally used the term 'application', since conscience is here clearly focused

on a particular action, and its special role is to bring into play our general understanding of human behaviour: *haec omnia*, he says speaking of the different acts attributed to conscience, *consequuntur applicationem alicuius nostrae cognitionis vel scientiae ad ea quae agimus (ibid.)*. Conscience, then, is geared to the various *habitus* of moral knowledge, and in particular to *synderesis* [the habitual grasp of first moral principles], which is the first and most fundamental of them. . . . But is this not precisely what we have already heard about prudence? We insisted on the use made by Aquinas, in this treatise, of the term ‘application’, and we noted the formal connection made by him between it and *synderesis*: *synderesis movet prudentiam sicut intellectus principiorum scientiam* (2a 2ae, 47, 6 ad 3).

Since it consists in the application of general knowledge to particular cases, conscience (and here it differs from *synderesis*) is subject to error, for the reasoning process involved may lead to the wrong conclusion. In the practical syllogism of which conscience is the conclusion, false propositions may be assumed, for example that the taking of oaths is forbidden by divine law, or that a contract of the kind unacceptable to society is in fact legitimate. Or the propositions may be true but the reasoning false—one fails to apply one’s general principles in a particular case: the particular and the contingent do in fact present the reason with difficulties which not everyone manages to overcome (*De veritate*, XVII, 2). The conscience can also be mistaken because of the strength of a disordered desire; there are cases in which a person is determined on an evil course and nevertheless sees clearly what he ought to do, to such a point that he is torn between the dictates of conscience and his lawless impulse. He fornicates, for example, whilst at the same time knowing and telling himself that fornication is a sin. In such a case the integrity of the conscience is at war with the lawlessness of the desire. We should, however, show ourselves insensitive to the close connexion between reason and desire if we failed to realize that a corrupt desire can also, as it were, find for itself the reasons it needs: not only does the sinner cease to be troubled by the veto of conscience, he even convinces himself that he is acting rightly and that it would be wrong for him to do otherwise. Everyone who sins from established habit has withdrawn himself from the warning of conscience . . . ; when sin presents itself in complicated and subtle circumstances, the sinner never has much trouble in finding reasons to make it seem justifiable in his own eyes. . . .

Now the striking fact here is that a false conscience—no matter why it is false—always obliges: to act against one’s conscience is never allowable, no matter how false and blameworthy its dictates may be. This is the thesis which Aquinas sets out with great persuasive power, and he is well aware of its dramatic consequences—other theologians more hesitant than he had introduced distinctions to tone down the binding character of a false conscience. Aquinas

considers such ingenuity futile: one has to hold that conscience—that is, every judgment by which a man counts himself obliged or forbidden to undertake an action—is always binding, and proves his thesis in a few words: *quia objectum voluntatis est id quod proponitur a ratione*, because the object of the will is that which is set before it by the reason (1a 2ae, 19, 5). That is to say, it is the nature of the will to be conditioned and ruled, not by a thing as it is in itself, but by the judgment passed upon it by the reason. In other words the will is never allowed to act contrary to the judgment of the reason; and it is does so, it is always wrong, even when it is bent on something perfectly good in itself. Supposing, for example, that a man takes it into his head that it is wrong to believe in Christ, and that he believes in him against the dictates of conscience, yet believes in him none the less: this man sins in consenting to do what he thinks is evil—a bold example, but one which Aquinas uses to effect to make his point.

The working of the conscience prior to action, then, shows that the moral law is always *inwardly binding*—in the last resort a person is responsible to his own judgment, is never justified in acting contrary to what he himself judges is right or wrong for him to do. It is this inwardly-binding character of the moral law, clear enough in the case of conscience as it works *after* an action has been performed, that is also capital for the working of conscience *prior* to the commission of an act. In Christian theology, in which the rule of reason is seen as a derivation of divine law, the power of conscience to oblige in this way is seen as no less than the expression of the will of God. . . . As Aquinas says elsewhere (*De veritate*, XVII, 5) the personal conscience is more binding than the commands of religious authority.

Conscience before the act, then, is both absolutely binding and subject to error: and this being so, we need to take care to form our conscience rightly. A false conscience does not of itself excuse the bad action it inspires—Aquinas is careful to say that we sin in *not* following our consciences: the use of the negative here leaves him free to add that we may still sin in following it. He says, to return to his example, that the man who sins in believing in Christ against the dictates of conscience would be equally a sinner were he *not* so to believe; for his conscience is a false one, and it depended on him not to fall into error. So the man with a false conscience will sin whatever he does. His only way out is to give up (*deponere*) his false conscience. . . . One's duty is to form one's conscience rightly—a duty entailed by the very notion itself. How, then, is one to reform an errant conscience? What is the way to overcome error, to choose as often as one may the right decision? It is precisely here that *prudence* fits in: prudence was conceived and defined as the virtue which assures all the qualities permitting a person to act responsibly and with the greatest chance of success—that is, with a blameless conscience.

The only way offered if we are not to fall victim to false conscience is to become *in this sense* 'prudent men'.

Once this is grasped, Aquinas's explanation is simplicity itself. The point about the prudent man is that in him, firstly, *intellectual* causes of error are eliminated: prudence is a virtue of the practical reason, and it is to be understood as giving effect to the various *habitus* of moral knowledge mentioned above—that is, to that body of general moral principles which a man must know in order to decide in particular cases. This is a matter not of theory but of a whole programme of moral education: what is being said here is simply that a person is obliged to school himself in general moral principles, to acquire them as a matter of *habitus*, if he is to make the right decisions in particular instances; if he takes care to do so he will not, to return to our examples, assume that oath-taking is contrary to divine law, or find himself at sea over the binding nature of contracts. Prudence acts on the basis of intellectual *habitus* of this sort, and consists in the skill and in the competence of the reason to apply these general principles to particular cases. Aquinas in his treatise on 'Prudence' enumerates the diverse but complementary qualities which go to make up this competence—again, this is not simply a theoretical discussion, but also a programme of moral education.

Secondly, prudence does away with all errors springing from wayward *desire*. As we have seen already, the acquisition of the true virtue of prudence goes hand in hand with the schooling of the desires to their specific virtues, the moral virtues properly so-called, to the point where counsel and judgment do in fact issue in precept, i.e. in the effective accomplishment of good acts. Because the fulness of prudence extends to commanding, a man can no longer be torn between conscience and his lawless desires: knowing, for example, that fornication is forbidden, the 'prudent' man abstains from it, and his life presents the picture of unity—the reality of conscience is in fact less in evidence in him than it is in the man torn between lawless desires and the moral law. Conscience only makes itself felt when it has to protest against immoral actions. This 'strong' conscience of the sinner is in actual fact powerless; it fails to impose its law. Prudence, on the other hand, taking over the judgment in which conscience is expressed, carries it on to its conclusion, which is the corresponding right action. In this sense prudence may be called *right conscience accomplished*, whilst the 'right conscience' of a sinner acting against his better judgment has only a mutilated sort of rightness. It sometimes happens, as we pointed out earlier on, that conscience falls silent as a result of contrary action and conforms to a man's disordered desire: this perversion is spared the 'prudent' man. For him, the moral virtues present in his desire provide the practical reason with the starting points or direction in accordance with which he can judge good and evil as they really are. *These* virtues protect him against the formidable deforming power of his

desires: he does not fall prey to the seductions of vice established within the soul. The integrity of his desire is for him a guarantee of objectivity in all moral matters.

In such conditions we can speak of the conscience as being, as far as is humanly possible, true: by educating his reason *and* his desire, such a man is in a position to know what he should or should not do. To escape the pitfalls of false conscience which we indicated, all a man needs to do is to become 'prudent'—and this interior way is indeed the only one in which the conscience, dependent as it is upon man's interior dispositions, can be formed. Not that the prudent man is infallible—the virtue remains always subject to error—but when he fails, he fails because contingent facts are never wholly unambiguous, not because his moral education is lacking. It follows that the errors of the prudent man are always excusable: he is always right in following his judgment, even when his judgment fails to grasp the objective truth of the thing, for his intention is entirely virtuous. Only the error of the prudent man bears this saving mark.

We are now in a position to compare the notions of conscience and prudence. And we find that the first concerns human action seen in abstraction, whilst the second ensures the integral rightness of the action in the concrete. The notion of conscience expresses the fact that human behaviour has need of rules: it brings out the necessity of those rules and witnesses to their inward presence; but it has nothing to say of the other elements which go to make up human action, and so does not concern the realization of this action. Here a man needs to possess the virtue of prudence, and it will be thanks to prudence that he acts rightly. Supposing for a moment that we were possessed only of conscience: we would have no guarantee of acting rightly—we would know only that we passed judgment on what we should or should not do. As to whether our judgment is correct, or carried into effect, only prudence includes both. The notion of conscience, then, has the particular usefulness of enabling us to distinguish within the human act its character as an act subject to interior moral rules, and to show that these rules exercise an interior moral authority; but it carries with it no ability to ensure that we will in fact act rightly. We have, then, to return conscience to its rightful place within the real development of the human act—to site it, so to speak, within the exercise of the virtue of prudence. Conscience and prudence relate to each other in the way that Aquinas describes, speaking here of the judgment of conscience on the one hand, and of what he calls the judgment of free choice or election on the other: 'In one respect', he says, 'they differ, but in another they are alike. They are alike in that they both have to do with this or that particular action . . . in this respect they differ from the judgment of *synderesis*. On the other hand they are unlike: the judgment of conscience consists purely in knowing, the judgment of

free choice in the application of this knowing to the desire in question' (*De veritate*, XVII, 1 ad 4). Conscience, therefore, has nothing to do with putting one's judgment into effect; and just as the judgment of prudence consists in making the right choice in the field of concrete particular actions, so also the judgment of conscience passes into the practical order only when it becomes an act of prudence.

We should now be able to understand what separates the 'prudent' man from the man who is simply conscientious. The latter is a person who takes care to define what he ought to do, who sets out to make his actions conform to the dictates of his conscience, and this is praiseworthy enough: but he may in all conscience be mistaken in his decision about what he ought to do. The name of conscience can cloak all sorts of errant behaviour; a degree of anxiety about one's moral stance is an insufficient guarantee of doing good. There are people in whom conscientiousness becomes obstinacy and pig-headedness, they lack suppleness and discretion: one comes to wish that they had a little less conscience. It can also happen that in a conscientious person the dictates of conscience can only prevail if the person is at the same time given up to a ceaseless struggle against natural desires: the promptitude and ease of self-mastery are lacking, the person only half-converted to good. A man is less obviously conscientious as he becomes more profoundly virtuous—if he does his duty without apparent effort, he is thought to follow the inclinations of his nature. In the really 'prudent' man these struggles are not to be found; won as he is both to the 'moral' as to the intellectual virtues, he decides what he should do and he does it, without hesitation and almost, shall we say, with elegance, with the confidence of the completely moral man. The ideal of the conscientious man fades by comparison. In this sense of the word, then, we can never say that it is dangerous to be too prudent.

ANY book of interest to CATHOLICS can be obtained from:
BURNS OATES RETAIL LTD, 129 Victoria Street, S.W.1
Prompt service given to postal orders