

particular and individuating circumstances. This ability to choose well can be acquired only by experience and constant effort. Here we have the mystery of prudence's incommunicability.

Thus the prudential judgment is even more relative than conscience. Both partake of the complexities of temperament, habit, experience and appetitive inclinations. But prudence completes the judgment of conscience by applying its precept to action, or by determining the choice among the various morally good means under these particular conditions. Thus the prudential judgment makes the judgment of conscience effective. Although we have distinguished the two we should not divorce them. Just as prudence depends on conscience, so conscience on prudence. First insofar as prudence includes counsel and judgment through its subordinate virtues it regulates conscience. Further, insofar as any act is voluntary it falls under the direction of prudence. Thus a man must be prudent in forming his conscience so that he can make further prudential judgments in accord with right reason. That is, the judgment of conscience presupposes a prior prudent judgment, although it precedes the formation of the judgment of choice and the command perfected by prudences here and now. Thus prudence gives us the ability for the ultimate rational direction of voluntary activity.⁶⁰

Both remain relative, for only the human individual can form his conscience and determine its application through the formation of the judgment of election and the command. Thus man can by judging and commanding prudently attain to the good life, which is the reasonable life. Hence the difficulties of prudence are compensated by its glory. Rightly it is the queen of the virtues.

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Problem (c): Practical Knowledge and Relativity

It is impossible to read St. Thomas' writings on moral philosophy without becoming immediately convinced that in moral matters he is essentially a relativist—not, indeed, in an absolute and unqualified sense, yet very definitely a relativist. And he is a relativist simply because he is an existentialist, because for him the entire moral order is essentially an existential order in which even the most abstract and universal moral problems get their whole meaning from their complete orientation to concrete and singular existence, which in creatures, and especially in human creatures, is a realm of contingency and variability.

Throughout his commentary on the *Nicomachian Ethics*, Aquinas insists upon the relativity of moral knowledge. In the prooemium we find him writing:

⁶⁰ The place of will in the formation of the judgment of election has not been stressed, not because this causal influence is not important, but because this problem is beyond the scope of the present paper.

... the same kind of certitude cannot be found, nor is it to be expected, in all discussions. . . . The matter with which moral science deals is such that perfect certitude does not belong to it. And he (Aristotle) brings this out by means of the two classes of things which seem to pertain to the matter of moral science. First and principally, virtuous works pertain to the matter of morals. . . . There is no certain opinion among men about these; on the contrary, there is a vast difference in the way men judge of them. And in this a good many errors occur. For some things which are considered to be just and licit by some people, are judged to be unjust and illicit by other, according to differences in times, places, and persons. A thing looked upon as evil one time or in one locality, is not considered evil at another time, or in another locality. And because of this difference it happens that some think that nothing is just or virtuous by nature but only by law.

Secondly, external goods which man uses as means to an end pertain to the matter of morals. And with regard to these goods the same error is found, for they do not remain the same in all circumstances. Certain persons are helped by them while others find them a hindrance. For many men have perished because of their wealth, as those for example who have been killed by robbers. Others have come to ruin because of their bodily strength, when their trust in it led them to expose themselves imprudently to dangers. And so it is clear that the matter of morals is variable and undetermined, and without perfect certitude.¹

Later, in the second book, St. Thomas returns to the same theme:

... every discussion which deals with things to be done, as does the present discussion, must be carried on in a figurative way, that is to say, by means of examples and similitudes, and not with certitude. . . . We see that the things involved in moral operations, and other things useful for this purpose, namely exterior goods, do not have in themselves anything that perdures in a necessary way, but all of them are contingent and variable. . . . And since a discourse on morals even in its universal considerations is uncertain and variable, it is even more uncertain when one attempts to descend to a special consideration of singulars. This consideration does not fall within the scope of any art, nor is it susceptible of exact discussion, because the causes of singular things to be done vary in an infinite diversity of ways. Hence judgement of singulars is left to the prudence of each individual. And that is why those who are acting must by their prudence consider the actions it is befitting to perform at the given moment, after due attention has been paid to all the particular circumstances. . . . But though the present discourse is of such a nature, i.e., uncertain in its universal considerations and ineffable with regard to particulars, we must nevertheless attempt to give whatever help we can in this matter so that men will be guided in their actions.²

These texts of St. Thomas are typical, and could be multiplied endlessly. They are a far cry from the writings of many of his modern followers whose absolutism in moral matters leaves little room to suspect that in the practical order genuine Thomism is thoroughly existentialistic.³ If modern non-scholastics have to a large extent been guilty of extreme relativism, not a few modern scholastics have been led to extreme absolutism. They

¹ *In I Eth.*, Lect. 3, Nos. 32-34.

² *In II Eth.*, Lect. 2, Nos. 258-259.

³ Not, of course, in the same sense as current Existentialism.

have been led to it, not only because of a reaction to the opposite excess, but also because, by becoming victims of the modern homogenization of knowledge, they have lost sight of the radical difference between speculative and practical knowledge and have attempted to proceed in the practical order in the analytical way that is proper to the speculative order. That is why there is no better way of getting at the root of the problem of the absolute and the relative in moral matters than by considering it in relation to the nature of practical knowledge.

Speculative knowledge and practical knowledge differ by their ends.⁴ The end of speculative knowledge is truth; the end of practical knowledge is an operation, a work to be done or made.⁵ The *opus* which constitutes the end of practical knowledge must be something outside the limits of the intellect. Both logic and mathematics construct, and are consequently arts; but they are purely speculative arts and not in any true sense practical knowledge, since the *opus* formed by their construction is completely within the limits of the intellect. It is this going beyond the limits of the intellect, as we shall see in just a moment, that leaves practical knowledge wide open to relativity.

In order to have practical knowledge it is not sufficient that the object considered be in itself an *operabile*, that is, something capable of being done or made. It must be considered precisely *in ordine ad operationem*, or *per modum operandi*.⁶ In other words, practical knowledge must be in itself intrinsically destined to issue into operation. Moral knowledge does not consist in knowing how man acts, but in knowing how he should act. This distinction is important for an exact determination of the relative character of moral knowledge.

But as St. Thomas points out in the *De Veritate*,⁷ there are two ways in which an object may be considered *per modum operandi*. The first consists in knowing how an operation should be carried on without actually carrying it on. The knowledge is essentially orientated towards the end, but there is no actual pursuit of the end. This has sometimes been called formally practical knowledge, and in the realm of morals it constitutes moral science. Complete and perfect practical knowledge, on the other hand, implies the actual pursuit of the end. This is the realm of prudence.

⁴ Cf. *III De Anima*, c. 10, 433 a 10.

⁵ Cf. *II Met.*, c. 1, 993 b 20; *In Boeth. de Trin.*, V, 1, c.

⁶ Cf. I, 14, 16.

⁷ "Sicut dicitur in *III De Anima* (com. 49), intellectus practicus differt a speculativo fine; finis enim speculativi est veritas absolute, sed practici est operatio ut dicitur in *II Metaphys.* (com. 3). Aliqua vero cognitio practica dicitur ex ordine ad opus: quod contingit dupliciter. Quandoque in actu; quando scilicet ad aliquod opus actu ordinatur, sicut artifex praeconcepta forma proponit illam in materiam inducere; et tunc est actu practica cognitio, et cognitionis forma. Quandoque vero est quidem ordinabilis cognitio ad actum, non tamen actu ordinatur; sicut cum artifex excogitat formam artificii, et scit per modum operandi, non tamen operari intendit; et certum est quod est practica habitu vel virtute, non actu. Quando vero nullo modo est ad actum ordinabilis cognitio, tunc est semper speculativa."—Q. III, a. 3.

Though both of these types of knowledge are essentially practical, the difference between them is so profound that the very notion of truth undergoes an essential change when we pass from one to the other. In completely practical knowledge truth means the conformity of the mind, not with objective reality, but with a rectified appetite.⁸ In formally practical knowledge, on the other hand, truth signifies conformity with objective norms; in other words, the truth of formally practical knowledge is not practical but speculative. This reveals the essentially paradoxical character of moral science. Though it is specifically practical knowledge because of its intrinsic orientation to action, its truth is specifically speculative.⁹ Let us try to see what all this implies for the problem of the absolute and the relative in the moral order.

We have seen that in order for knowledge to be practical it must reach out to something beyond the limits of the intellect. As Aristotle points out in the third book of the *De Anima*, the object of practical knowledge involves another faculty besides the intellect; it involves an appetite.¹⁰ The practical order consists essentially in a union of knowledge and love. This means that the object of the practical order is not simply the true, but the good,¹¹ and not the good as true (for that falls within the object

⁸ Cf. I-II, 57, 5, ad 3: "Verum intellectus practici aliter accipitur quam verum intellectus speculativi, ut dicitur (Ethic., Lib. VI, cap. 2). Nam verum intellectus speculativi accipitur per conformitatem intellectus ad rem. Et quia intellectus non potest infallibiliter conformari in rebus contingentibus, sed solum in necessariis; ideo nullus habitus speculativus contingentium est intellectualis virtus, sed solum est circa necessaria. Verum autem intellectus practici accipitur per conformitatem ad appetitum rectum; quae quidem conformitas in necessariis locum non habet, quae voluntate humana non fiunt; sed solum in contingentibus, quae possunt a nobis fieri, sive sint agibilia interiora, sive factibilia exteriora. Et ideo circa sola contingentia ponitur virtus intellectus practici; circa factibilia quidem ars, circa agibilia vero prudentia."

⁹ This paradox seems to have misled John of St. Thomas who held that in so far as Ethics is distinct from prudence it is essentially a speculative science, and a part of the philosophy of nature. "Scientia autem moralis si sumatur practice, est idem quod prudentia, et sic non pertinet ad habitus speculativos, sed practicos, de quibus non agimus in praesenti. Si vero sumatur speculative pro scientia ethica, quae tractat de natura virtutum, sic pertinet ad Philosophiam (i.e., naturalem) et est pars illius, quia cum agat de anima intellectiva, consequenter de moralibus actibus eius debet tractare."—*Curs. Phil.*, I, pars II, q. 27, a. 1. Cf. *ibid.*, q. 1, a. 4.

¹⁰ "Both of these then are capable of originating local motion, mind and appetite: mind, that is, which calculates means to an end, i.e., the practical mind (it differs from the speculative in the character of its end); while appetite is in every form of it relative to an end: for that which is the object of appetite is the stimulant of the practical mind; and that which is last in the process of thinking is the beginning of the action. It follows that there is a justification for regarding these two as the sources of movement, i.e., appetite and practical thought; for the object of appetite starts a movement and as a result of that thought gives rise to movement, the object of the appetite being to it a source of stimulation."—*De Anima*, III, c. 10, 433 a 10.

¹¹ Cf. *In II Eth.*, Lect. 9, No. 351.

of the speculative order) but the good as good.¹² St. Thomas insists upon the fact that the good which is the object of the practical order is not the good in its universal and necessary aspect, but the concrete good which is essentially variable. "Not every good is appetible and moving, but only the good to be done (*bonum agibile*), which means the good applied to operation; and this is variable, like everything which falls within the realm of our action."¹³ In contrast with the indivisible and absolute character of the true, the concrete good has an essential subjective and relative aspect, and when in the practical order the true becomes intrinsically orientated to the good as good, the indivisibility of the one becomes conditioned by the relativity of the other. The following lines of John of St. Thomas are relevant here:

Truth consists in something indivisible, though falsity, since it consists in a withdrawal from the terminus of truth, admits of some latitude. . . . Truth touches an indivisible terminus, namely being or non being—and not in becoming, but in complete act, for it touches being or non being as they are in reality. Falsity, on the other hand, consists in a withdrawal from being and in a tendency to the opposite, and there can be a greater or less degree in this tendency, as for example in sin. The same, however, cannot be said for moral goodness, since it does not consist in a commensuration with an indivisible rule or with something in complete act, but with a conformity of reason which is the mean of prudence. It admits of some latitude since it is not, like art, bound down to determined rules, but is determined arbitrarily according to the circumstances. Hence speculative truth is regulated according to the being or non being of the thing itself, while practical truth is regulated according to a conformity or lack of conformity with reason and prudence.¹⁴

If in practical knowledge the intellect enters into an intimate union with the will to seek the good as good it is because practical knowledge is essentially ordained to putting something into existence. "Practical principles," writes John of St. Thomas, "do not resolve nor illuminate the truth with respect to its formal principles by abstracting, as it were, the quiddity from existence; on the contrary they apply and ordain it to be put into existence, and as a consequence they proceed in a compositive mode."¹⁵ This

¹² This does not mean, of course, that practical knowledge in so far as it is knowledge is specified by the good as good. The object of the intellect is always the true, but in practical knowledge it is always the true with an essential relation to the good as good. Cf. *De Veritate*, XXII, 10, ad 4: "Obiectum intellectus practici non est bonum sed verum relate ad opus." *Sum. Theol.*, I, q. 79, a. 11, ad 2: "Obiectum intellectus practici est bonum ordinabile ad opus sub ratione veri: intellectus enim practicus veritatem cognoscit, sicut speculativus; sed veritatem cognitam ordinat ad opus."

¹³ *In III De Anima*, Lect. 15, No. 827.

¹⁴ *Ars Logica*, Pars II, q. 25, a. 1, Reiser Edition, p. 777, a 1-25. Cf. St. Thomas, *In VI Eth.*, Lect. 2, No. 1130: "Bonae et malae mentis, idest intellectus vel rationis, quae est speculativa, et non practica, consistit simpliciter in vero et falso; ita scilicet quod verum absolutum est bonum eius et falsum absolutum est malum ipsius. Dicere enim verum et falsum est opus pertinens ad quemlibet intellectum. Sed bonum practici intellectus non est veritas absoluta sed veritas 'confesse se habens', idest concorditer ad appetitum rectum."

¹⁵ *Ars Logica*, Pars II, q. 1, a. 4, Reiser ed., 270 b 27. Cf. also *ibid.*, 269 a 28.

means that the practical order is essentially an existential order. And this applies not only to completely practical knowledge, but also to formally practical knowledge. The latter is indeed abstract, but it would be a mistake to believe that moral science abstracts from the concrete, existential order in the same way as speculative science. Thomistic speculative knowledge, even metaphysics, its most abstract science, is existential in the sense that the formal abstraction which it employs does not consist in burning bridges behind one,¹⁶ and in the sense that it deals with the real and not merely the conceptual order. But the abstraction found in moral science leaves that science in a much more intimate contact with concrete existence since this type of knowledge is ordained essentially to putting something into existence. That is why John of St. Thomas in the *Cursus Theologicus*, after pointing out that practical knowledge considers its object *ut stat sub exercitio existendi*, whereas speculative knowledge does not, concludes that the type of abstraction employed must be different.¹⁷

All this has important corollaries for the problem of the relativity of moral knowledge. For the existential order is essentially a variable and relative order, and as a consequence this variability and relativity reaches up even into the abstractions of formally practical knowledge. The student of moral science must ever remain in vital touch with concrete existence. That is why Aristotle and St. Thomas insist that a young person cannot be a good student of this science because of lack of experience: *juvenis non est conveniens auditor*.¹⁸ The good moral scientist will always view his abstractions in direct relation to concrete, singular existence. He will be extremely cautious about *a priori* generalizations and extremely circumspect about absolute, hard and fast judgments.¹⁹

¹⁶ Cf. *De Veritate*, XII, 3, ad 2: "Sed quia primum principium nostrae cognitionis est sensus oportet ad sensum quodammodo resolvere omnia de quibus judicamus; unde Philosophus dicit in *III Caeli et Mundi* quod complementum artis et naturae est res sensibilis visibilis ex qua debemus de aliis judicare; et similiter dicit in *VI Ethicorum* (cap. VIII in fin.) quod sensus sunt extremi sicut intellectus principiorum; extrema appellans illa in quae fit resolutio judicantis."

¹⁷ In I, q. 1, disp. 2, a. 10, Solesmes ed., pp. 395-396.

¹⁸ In *I Eth.*, Lect. 3, No. 38: "Juvenis autem est inexpertus operationum humanae vitae propter temporis breviteratem, et tamen rationes moralis scientiae procedunt ex his quae pertinent ad actus humanae vitae, et etiam sunt de his. Sicut si dicatur: quod liberalis minor sibi reservat, et majora aliis tribuit, hoc juvenis propter inexperiencem forte non judicabit verum esse: et idem est in aliis civilibus."

¹⁹ Cf. Yves Simon, *Critique de la Connaissance Morale*, Paris, Desclee de Brouwer, 1934, p. 76: "Le vrai philosophe moraliste sera un personnage extrêmement rare. Il lui faut joindre l'intelligence abstractive qui est le fait du savant et l'intelligence concrétive qui ne se trouve parfaitement à l'aise que dans le singulier contingent, et doser leur fonctionnement selon une norme ineffable." Cf. also p. 95: "Une philosophie morale qui a compris que son rôle n'est pas seulement de définir des essences et des finalités, mais encore de mouvoir des volontés, aura toujours en vue, comme le terme vers lequel elle se dirige, encore qu'il ne lui appartienne pas d'y accéder, l'acte concret à exécuter *hic et nunc*, et dès lors elle s'interdira cet apriorisme et ces généralisations que les hommes d'action abhorrent à bon

To say that practical knowledge is concerned with bringing something into existence is to say that its object is something essentially contingent. Speculative knowledge may have contingent things as its object, but it considers them not in so far as they are contingent, but in so far as they have some aspect of necessity about them. Practical knowledge, on the contrary, considers contingent things precisely in so far as they are contingent.

But this immediately gives rise to a difficulty. If contingent things are considered in their very contingency, how is it possible to have a *habitus* in practical knowledge, since steadiness is an essential property of every *habitus*. The solution is twofold.²⁰ In completely practical knowledge steadiness derives from the fact that in the prudential act an essential role is played by the will which has a steady rectification and proper disposition towards the right end. This steadiness of the appetite in its relation to the good is communicated to the knowledge in the sense that the truth of this judgment consists in a conformity of the intellect with the steady will.

In formally practical knowledge the steadiness is achieved in a different way. Here we find a problem that is in many respects similar to a question which was extremely acute for the ancient Greeks. The question was: how is it possible to have a scientific *habitus* in the study of nature which is concerned with mobile being and therefore with being that is essentially contingent. The predecessors of Aristotle felt that such a scientific *habitus* was impossible. For them the study of nature could achieve at best only *doxa*, opinion, and not *episteme*, science in the strict sense. Aristotle showed how the mind could to some extent at least escape the concrete flux of nature by retreating into the higher levels of generality.²¹ In these higher levels *episteme* is possible, but as soon as the mind begins to close in upon its object in the concrete, the *episteme* peters out into mere *doxa*. Something similar to this is found in formally practical knowledge. By retreating into the upper levels of generality the mind is able to save itself in some measure from the flux and variability characteristic of the order of human actions. There is in moral science, however, a profound difference which must not be lost sight of. The upper levels of moral philosophy retain a much closer contact with the concrete existential order than do the upper levels of natural science. Unlike the speculative knowledge of the latter, the practical knowledge of the former, no matter how high its degree of generality, still deals with the contingent precisely as contingent,

droit; elle saura conserver à la plupart de ses maximes leur juste caractère de lois de fréquences, et les entourer de réserves, restrictions et exceptions, enfin de marges d'indétermination qu'il ne lui appartient pas de combler."

²⁰ Cf. Cajetan, *In II-II*, 47, 3, ad 2: "Adverte quod certitudo prudentiae est duplex, quaedam in sola cognitione consistens. Et haec in universali quidem est eadem cum certitudine scientiae moralis, cuius universale est verum ut in pluribus. In particulari autem non excedit certitudinem opinionis, cum de futuris concludit aut absentibus. Et haec non est propria prudentiae. Quaedam autem est certitudo practicae veritatis, quae consistit in confesse se habere appetitui recto. Et haec est propria prudentiae, quae non in sola ratione consistit."

²¹ Cf. *In VI Eth.*, Lect. 1, No. 1123; *In Anal. Post.*, Lect. 16; I, 86, 3, etc.

because it is essentially orientated towards bringing something into existence. This means that in the study of morals, science peters out into opinion more easily and more quickly than in the study of nature. On more than one occasion Aristotle and St. Thomas point out the incertitude that is characteristic of the study of mobile being. But they insist upon it far less than they do upon the incertitude and variability of the study of morals. It is interesting to compare the *Physics* and the *Ethics* in this regard. Moreover, while all practical knowledge deals with contingency, the realm of art, for reasons which we shall explain a little later, enjoys a far higher degree of certitude than the realm of morals. The repeated cautioning found in the *Ethics* about relativity and variability is not found in the *Poetics*.

All this helps us to understand why St. Thomas can say in the *De Trinitate* that while the term *rationalis* is characteristic of the study of nature in the sense that this study proceeds in a way that is especially proper to reason, as opposed to intellect, the same term is characteristic of the study of morals in the sense in which it means a dialectical process of reasoning which never arrives at certitude but only at probability, never at science in the strict sense, but only at opinion.²² This text and the one from the *Ethics* cited at the beginning of this discussion in which he says that moral knowledge is uncertain even when it deals with universals might seem to suggest that for Aquinas no real certitude is possible in moral science. That would be an illegitimate conclusion. For elsewhere in the *Ethics* he makes it very clear just how the absolute and the relative enter into moral philosophy. In the fifth book²³ he rejects the opinion of the followers of Aristippus who held that in morals whatever is said to be just is so merely by convention, that there is no absolute basis which would determine things to be just independently of man-made law. He founds his rejection upon a comparison between morals and nature. Just as in human life there are somethings that are determined by nature (e.g., that man should have two feet) and others that are determined by man himself (e.g., the type of clothing he wears) so likewise in the realm of morals. Moreover, even among the things determined by nature a distinction must be made. Though nature is a realm of mutability, the fundamental reasons of mutable things are not themselves mutable. For example, that man is an animal is something absolute and immutable. In the things which follow closely upon these basic immutable truths there is a determination by nature, but the determination is not absolute and there are occasional exceptions. So also in the realm of morals. Some things are determined by nature, others by convention. The former are absolute, the latter relative. But even among the former a distinction must be made. The most basic principles of the whole moral order are immutable and perfectly absolute. In the natural truths which follow upon these basic principles occasional exceptions are possible, and here the absolute character is conditioned by a certain relativity.

²² *De Trinitate*, VI, 1.

²³ Lect. 12, Nos. 1025-1030.

A further elaboration of this comparison between the study of nature and the study of morals will serve to bring out more clearly the question of the absolute and the relative in the moral order. Because the human intellect moves from potentiality to actuality, it must in the study of nature begin with generalities and move on gradually towards ever increasing specific determination and concretion.²⁴ Because the first generalities are the most abstract according to total abstraction they are the most knowable for the human mind, and as a consequence perfect certitude can be obtained in them. But as the mind moves towards fuller concretion this certitude dwindles. After the basic generalities come propositions which are based upon regularities but which admit of exceptions. Later on it becomes difficult even to seize upon the regularities. In this way science gradually issues into dialectics. As the determinations of nature become less discernible, it becomes increasingly necessary to have recourse to conventions in the form of hypotheses which may be suggested by nature but which actually derive from man.

There is a parallel to all this in the moral order.²⁵ For the same reasons as those just given, the student must begin moral science with the basic generalities which are most knowable to the human mind.²⁶ Following upon them come propositions based on regularities but admitting of exceptions. At this stage moral science is beginning to lose its absolute character and is becoming relative. This relativity increases until the determinations of nature are no longer sufficient and recourse must be had to the man-made conventions of laws which are extremely relative, but not completely so, because they are based upon determinations deriving from nature.²⁷

²⁴Cf. the prooemium to the *Physics* and the prooemia to all the natural treatises.

²⁵ Cf. *In I Eth.*, Lect. 3, No. 35: "Et quia secundum artem demonstrativae scientiae, oportet principia esse conformia conclusionibus, amabile et optabile, de talibus, idest tam variabilibus, tractatum facientes, et ex similibus procedentes ostendere veritatem, primo quidem grosse idest applicando universalia principia et simplicia ad singularia et composita, in quibus est actus. Necessarium est enim in qualibet operativa scientia, ut procedatur modo composito. E converso autem in scientia speculativa necesse est ut procedatur modo resolutorio, resolvendo composita in principia simplicia. Deinde oportet ostendere veritatem figuraliter, idest verisimiliter; et hoc est procedere ex propriis principiis huius scientiae. Nam scientia moralis est de actibus voluntariis: voluntatis autem motivum est, non solum bonum, sed apparens bonum. Tertio oportet ut cum dicturi simus de his quae ut frequentius accidunt, idest de actibus voluntariis, quos voluntas non ex necessitate producit, sed forte inclinat magis ad unum quam ad aliud, ut etiam ex talibus procedamus, ut principia sint conclusionibus conformia."

²⁶ These basic generalities do not refer to the principles borrowed from speculative science which are usually laid down at the beginning of treatises on moral science. Moral science does not really begin until the propositions cease to be purely speculative and become practical.

²⁷ Cf. St. Thomas, *In V Eth.*, Lect. 12, No. 1030: "Ita etiam iusta quae naturalia non sunt sed per homines posita, non sunt eadem ubique, sicut non ubique eadem poena imponitur furi. Et huius ratio est, quia non est eadem ubique urbanitas sive politia. Omnes enim leges ponuntur secundum

In the following passage, St. Thomas brings out with great clarity the way in which moral science becomes increasingly relative as it pursues its natural course from generality to fuller specific determination:

As we have stated above, to the natural law belong those things to which a man is inclined naturally; and among these it is proper to man to be inclined to act according to reason. Now it belongs to the reason to proceed from what is common to what is proper, as is stated in *Physics I*. The speculative reason, however, is differently situated in this matter from the practical reason. For, since the speculative reason is concerned chiefly with necessary things, which cannot be otherwise than they are, its proper conclusions, like the universal principles, contain the truth without fail. The practical reason, on the other hand, is concerned with contingent matters, which is the domain of human actions; and, consequently, although there is necessity in the common principles, the more we descend towards the particular, the more frequently we encounter defects. Accordingly, then, in speculative matters truth is the same in all men, both as to principles and as to conclusions; although the truth is not known to all as regards the conclusions, but only as regards the principles which are called common notions. But in matters of action, truth or practical rectitude is not the same for all as to what is particular, but only as to the common principles, and where there is the same rectitude in relation to particulars, it is not equally known to all. It is therefore evident that, as regards the common principles whether of speculative or of practical reason, truth or rectitude is the same for all, and is equally known by all. But as to the proper conclusions of the speculative reason, the truth is the same for all, but it is not equally known to all. Thus, it is true that the three angles of a triangle are together equal to two right angles, although it is not known to all. But as to the proper conclusions of the practical reason, neither is the truth or rectitude the same for all, nor, where it is the same, is it equally known by all. Thus, it is right and true for all to act according to reason, and from this principle it follows as a proper conclusion that goods entrusted to another should be restored to their owner. Now this is true for the majority of cases. But it may happen in a particular case that it would be injurious, and therefore unreasonable, to restore goods held in trust; for instance, if they are claimed for the purpose of fighting against one's country. And this principle will be found to fail the more, according as we descend further towards the particular, e.g., if one were to say that goods held in trust should be restored with such and such a guarantee, or in such and such a way; because the greater the number of conditions added, the greater the number of ways in which the principle may fail, so that it be not right to restore or not to restore.

Consequently, we must say that the natural law, as to the first common principles is the same for all, both as to rectitude and as to knowledge. But as to certain more particular aspects, which are conclusions, as it were, of these common principles, it is the same for all in the majority of cases, both as to rectitude and as to knowledge; and yet in some few cases it may fail, both as to rectitude, by reason of certain obstacles (just as natures subject to generation and corruption fail in some few cases because of some obstacle), and as to knowledge, since in some the reason is perverted by passion or evil habit, or an evil disposition of nature. Thus at one time theft, although it is expressly contrary to the natural law, was not considered wrong among the Germans, as Julius Caesar relates.²⁸

quod congruit fini politicae; sed tamen sola una est optima politia secundum naturam ubicumque sit." Cf. *ibid.*, Lect. 26, Nos. 1084-1085; I-II, q. 94, a. 4; q. 91, a. 1; q. 104, a. 3, ad 1.

²⁸ I-II, 94, 4. (Pegis edition.)

The dialectical limit of this descent of moral science towards the realm of the particular is completely practical knowledge. The former may approach the latter indefinitely but will never be able to reach it because in the latter a new factor is present which makes it unattainable through a purely scientific approach, namely the actual exercise of the will. The appetite is, of course, always engaged in the practical order, even in formally practical knowledge, in the sense that this order deals with the good as good, which is the specifying object of the will. For that reason the part played by the will through the whole of moral science must always be reckoned with. Aristotle insists that "anyone who is to listen intelligently to lectures about what is noble and just and generally about the subjects of political science must have been brought up in good habits."²⁹ And St. Thomas points out that it is useless for a *sectator passionum*, one who is living an immoral life, to study moral science, because he will not realize the end of this science, which is right action.³⁰ Moreover, as we have just seen in the passage from the *Summa*, unregulated appetites make it difficult for the intellect to see and accept the truths of moral science, particularly in that part of it which is somewhat advanced in the direction of concretion. Nevertheless, because in moral science the actual activity of the will is not involved, the truth of this science is speculative, and therefore essentially independent of the concrete and fluctuating dispositions of the appetites. The conclusions of moral science are practical, but the assent to them is speculative. Truth consists in a conformity of the mind with objective norms and that means that there is a very definite absolute aspect to moral science. It would be a mistake, however, to think that the truth of moral science is saved from all relativity by the very fact that it is speculative and not practical. For though the norms be objective, they may in their very objectivity be conditioned and determined by all the variable factors which constitute the existential order. The fact remains, nevertheless, that, however these norms may be determined, there is something objective to which the mind must conform. In completely practical knowledge the situation is essentially different. For here the actual exercise of the will is involved and truth consists in conformity with this will. Paradoxically, it is this actual exercise of the will that accounts for both the relativity and the absolute character of prudential knowledge. Let us try to see why this is so.

In the prudential judgment the mind comes directly and immediately to grips with the concrete and particular contingencies of the existential order. That is why the relativity of moral knowledge reaches its highest degree in this judgment.³¹ This relativity derives from both an objective and a subjective source. Objectively, the concrete factors which go to make up individual cases are so innumerable and so variable that no two cases are ever exactly the same. But even if they were the same, it wouldn't necessarily follow that the actions would have to be the same.

²⁹ *Ethics*, I, c. 3, 1095 b 4.

³⁰ *In I Eth.*, Lect. 3, Nos. 39-40.

³¹ Cf. II-II, 47, 3, ad 2; II-II, 49, 1, c; I-II, 57, 4, ad 2, etc.

In fact, the same objective factors could admit of an indefinite variety of actions, all perfectly prudential. And that for two reasons. In the first place a given set of concrete circumstances does not necessarily make only one line of action morally good even from an objective point of view. But even if it did, there would still be another source of relativity in the prudential judgment. For by the very fact that the truth of completely practical knowledge is not determined by objective conditions but by the right disposition of the will, the good which specifies the prudential judgment is not the true good, (i.e., that which is determined to be such by objective factors) but apparent good.³² There are scarcely any limits to what may *appear* to be good to different individuals.

In this connection it is interesting to note the profound difference between the relativity of angelic prudence and the relativity of human prudence.³³ The activity of the will enters intrinsically into the completely practical knowledge of the angel as it does into that of man, but the prudence of the former is, nevertheless, far more intellectual than that of the latter. In angelic knowledge, which is not abstractive, it is possible for the same habitus to be speculative and practical at the same time; the angel can, in and through the universal, attain perfectly to the singular thing to be done. The completely practical knowledge of the angel, unlike that of man, cannot go directly counter to the objective norms of formally practical knowledge and still be prudential. There is, indeed, in the angel a real distinction between these two types of practical knowledge, but in the natural order there can be no opposition between them, because there can be no apparent good which does not coincide with real good. The good represented is always the true good, and the rectitude of the appetite which follows this knowledge is assured in advance.

Because human art is also far more intellectual than human prudence there is, likewise, a profound difference in the relativity of these two types of completely practical knowledge. In prudence there is a far greater gap between objective conditions and the achievement of the goal than in art. If a person uses for food material which he has prudent reasons to believe is wholesome but which in reality is not, his death may result, but the goal of prudence is achieved and the good of the agent is preserved. But if an artist uses material which he considers to be suitable for his work, but which in reality is not, the end of art is not achieved.

Another reason for the vast relativity of prudential knowledge and for the difference between it and the relativity of art is suggested by a closer examination of the nature of practical knowledge. Practical knowledge is intrinsically destined to issue into an *opus*; its purpose is to bring something into existence. Consequently, while the principles of speculative knowledge are in the thing known, the principles of practical knowledge are in the knower. "The practical intellect," says St. Thomas, "has to do

³² Cf. John of St. Thomas: *Curs. Theol.*, In I-II, q. 21. Ed. Vives, t. VI, disp. 11, a. 2, no. 34, p. 25.

³³ Cf. Henri Pichette: "Considérations sur quelques principes fondamentaux de la doctrine du spéculatif et du pratique", in *Laval Théologique et Philosophique*, Vol. I, No. 1, pp. 67-70.

with things whose principles are in us—not in any way whatsoever, but in so far as they are capable of being produced by us.”³⁴ This means that while in speculative knowledge reality is the measure of the mind, in practical knowledge the mind is the measure of reality. This point has been brought out by Aquinas in the *De Veritate*:

A thing stands in relation to the practical intellect and to the speculative intellect in different ways. For the practical intellect causes things, and as a consequence it is the measure of the things which are brought into being by it. But the speculative intellect, because it receives from things, is in a certain sense moved by the things themselves, and thus they measure it.³⁵

One of the most basic reasons why there is so much subjectivity and relativity in the moral order is to be found in this truth that in practical knowledge the mind is the measure of reality. But while this truth applies to all practical knowledge it does not apply to art and to prudence in the same way. John of St. Thomas has brought out the difference in the following passage:

Two things are required for art. First it is necessary that the matter which is to be directed and formed be not completely determined, but that it have a certain degree of indifference—otherwise it will not be susceptible of regulation and art, just as the acts of seeing and hearing are not capable of being directed by art. Secondly on the part of the form which serves as the directing rule, it is necessary that the regulation be done according to certain and determined ways, for if they are not certain and determined means, but contingent, they are not subject to the direction of art, but of prudence which directs by means of counsel and not by means of art because it does not have rules which are certain and determined but rather arbitrary and prudential according to the given circumstances, as St. Thomas teaches in II-II, q. 47, a. 2, ad 3.³⁶

In other words, in all practical knowledge the mind is the measure of reality because it imposes a form upon plastic and determinable matter. But whereas in art the form is something determined and only the matter is indeterminate, in prudence the form is also in a sense indeterminate. This difference is usually expressed by the phrase “art proceeds *per vias determinatas*, while prudence proceeds *per vias determinandas*.”³⁷ The reason for this is that though the fact that in practical knowledge the mind is the measure of reality gives a degree of freedom to the knowing subject, the way in which this freedom is exercised is not the same in art and in prudence. The practical order is made up of ends and means. But whereas art finds its liberty in the ends, prudence finds its liberty in the means. The artist is free to choose his end because the end of art is the good of the work, and this is a limited good, a particular good. But once he has chosen the end there are certain determined means he must use in order to achieve it. He may have to search in order to find this determined

³⁴ *De Veritate*, III, 3, ad 4.

³⁵ *De Veritate*, I, 2, c.

³⁶ *Ars Logica*, Pars II, q. 1, a. 2; Reiser ed., p. 257, a 30-b 5.

³⁷ Cf. II-II, 47, 2, ad 3.

way, as original manuscripts of Beethoven and Newman, for example, show that they had to search in order to find the right way to achieve the musical and literary ends they had chosen. But the way in itself is determined. Was it not D'Annunzio who once said that every beautiful verse is preformed in the womb of the language? The prudent man, on the contrary, is not free to choose his end because the end of prudence is not, like that of art, a particular, isolated good without any necessary relation to the universal good. But though the end is determined for him, the way to it is not. He is the one who must determine it. No amount of casuistry will ever enable him to discover the way determined for him as it is determined for the artist.

All this emphasizes the profound relativity characteristic of prudence. But this relativity is far from being absolute. Though the prudent man is free to choose one of an indefinite variety of ways which lead to his end, this freedom is limited by the fact that the one he chooses must lead to that end. In other words, though the end of prudence does not, like that of art, completely determine the way, on the other hand, it does not leave it completely undetermined. In practical knowledge man is, indeed, the measure of reality. But he is not the absolute measure. He in turn is measured by something beyond himself. The artist is free with regard to the end, but he is not absolutely free—whatever the surrealists may think. He may choose to produce an ugly work without destroying his artistic habitus, and in this sense St. Thomas is correct in saying that art, as opposed to prudence, has to do with contraries. But that does not mean that in so doing he achieves the end of art. A surgeon may choose to kill rather than to cure without destroying his medical habitus, but that does not mean that in so doing he achieves the end proper to medical art. There is something similar to this in the moral order. The prudent man is the measure of reality because he freely determines the ways which lead to his end. But the relativity which this implies is bound down on all sides by certain absolute determinations. Let us, in bringing this discussion to a close, try to see briefly why this is so.

When John of St. Thomas tells us in the texts cited above that moral goodness is determined *arbitrarily*, he is far from espousing the doctrine of some of our contemporary existentialists who hold that the individual person should be able to determine for himself in a purely arbitrary fashion what is good and what is evil. These existentialists would define the truth of completely practical knowledge as a conformity of the intellect with the will. As we have seen, St. Thomas also defines it as a conformity of the intellect with the will, and this shows in what a profound sense he is an existentialist, for if it were defined in any other way, practical knowledge could not possibly come directly to grips with the concrete existential order. But St. Thomas does not leave the phrase unqualified. He makes it clear that the conformity must not be simply with the will, but with the rectified will, or with the rightly disposed will. In other words, it is not correct to say that in completely practical knowledge the will is free to determine its action in a purely relative way. Only the good will has this freedom. As St. Augustine has remarked, those who love God are free●

to do anything they want. Their actions enjoy this freedom and the relativity consequent upon it only because this freedom and relativity are conditioned and guided by the absolute determination of the love of God. Their actions may vary, but their love cannot. And though this love may not prevent them from choosing an apparent good rather than a real good, the relativity is still limited by the fact that the object *must* appear to be good according to other norms than those of their own choosing. Moreover, love tends to narrow down and even destroy this possible gap between the apparent good and the real good. By establishing an affective connaturality between the lover and the object, it tends to unite the lover with true objective determinations. St. Thomas' teaching on how the chaste man judges unerringly in things that pertain to chastity is well known.³⁸ It was this establishment of direct contact with absolute objective norms that John of St. Thomas had in mind when he wrote: "Amor transit in conditionem objecti."³⁹ Through love one is assimilated to the condition of the object.

The basic reason why the relativity of completely practical knowledge is not complete is that even though in it the intellect achieves truth by conforming to the rightly disposed will, this will must in turn conform to right reason. St. Thomas shows that this is not a vicious circle by pointing out that the rectification of the will has to do with the end, while right reason has to do with the means.⁴⁰ An analysis of the dependence of the will upon right reason shows that the relativity of this type of knowledge is bound down to something absolute because it always retains a vital connection with four distinct types of speculative judgment. First, underlying all the decisions in completely practical knowledge there are certain basic formally speculative truths without which the moral order would have no meaning. "The will orientated towards the right end," says St. Thomas, "presupposes the speculative intellect; hence the speculative intellect is the cause and principle of things to be done."⁴¹ Secondly, these decisions are also based upon the general principles of formally practical knowledge, which are speculatively certain and objective. Thirdly, even though the truth of completely practical knowledge is practical and not speculative, and even though, as a consequence, there can arise a discrepancy between apparent good and real good, the agent is bound to use all the prudent means within his power according to the circumstances to approach as closely as possible to objective truth. He cannot prescind

³⁸ Cf. I, 1, 6, ad 3; I-II, 65, 1 and 2; I-II, 95, 2, ad 4; II-II, 45, 2.

³⁹ *Curs. Theol.*, I-II, disp. 18, a. 4; Vives, VI, p. 638.

⁴⁰ *In VI Eth.*, Lect. 2, No. 1131.

⁴¹ *In V Pol.*, Lect. 5. Cf. John of St. Thomas: *Curs. Theol.*, t. I, disp. 2, a. 10: "Intellectus practicus supponit speculativum juxta illud quod dicit Aristoteles quod 'intellectus speculativus extensione fit practicus'; nam regulatio alicuius non potest fieri nisi cognita natura eius quod ordinandum est: alioquin fiet ordinatio et regulatio imperfecte, et ex subordinatione ad alterum a quo dirigatur: et tunc in illo supponet cognitionem speculativam eius quod dirigendum est. Si ergo practicum supponit speculativum tamquam dirigens et praecedens se, ergo debet supponere speculativum perfecte et sine errore cognoscens, ut ex illo oriatur practicum."

completely from a speculative judgment about objective conditions. He cannot remain indifferent to these conditions, nor can he judge them in any way he pleases. Finally, by the very fact that it is immoral to act while there is a prudent doubt about the morality of the action, the prudential judgment cannot be practically true unless there accompanies it a certain, objective, speculative judgment about the presence in the subject of sufficient evidence to dispel all prudent doubt.

All of these considerations show how closely guarded the relativity of moral knowledge always remains. But the relativity is there, and it must never be lost sight of by the philosopher who wishes to be a true existentialist.

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Problem (a): Primordial Particles and Hylemorphism

I

One problem which confronts all Scholastics, and which should be of some concern to all philosophers no matter what their school or system, is the one indicated by the title of our present discussion. It is an aspect of the broader perennial problem of the relation between the special sciences and philosophy, and of course it is a phase of the question concerning the relation between the absolute and the relative which is the general theme of our present meeting.

(a) HYLEMORPHISM

Hylemorphism is the Aristotelian theory that all bodies or material things are ultimately constituted of two components called prime-matter and substantial form, two incomplete substances forming one complete substance. Ordinary or second matter is contrasted with spirit and is related to its own accidents as the prime-matter is related to the substantial form within it, *viz.*, as potency to act. The prime-matter is a generic, homogeneous, inert, static and passive factor while the substantial form is a specific, kinetic, dynamic or active ingredient. The prime-matter is, of itself, undetermined but determinable. Being pure potency, it belongs at the bottom of the scale of reality, at the nadir of perfection, while God Himself as Pure Act represents the acme or zenith of the same scale. This prime-matter is not nothingness or intrinsic impossibility and it is not mere logical being (*ens rationis*). It is even more than mere possibility or abstract essence. On the other hand it is less than actuality but it is still real, that is, it is not a mere thought whether the object of that thought be another thought or even a thing.