

QUESTION 56

The Precepts that Pertain to Prudence

Next we have to consider the precepts that pertain to prudence. And on this topic there are two questions: first, about the precepts pertaining to prudence; second, about the precepts pertaining to the vices opposed to prudence.

Article 1

Should there have been precepts about prudence among the precepts of the Decalogue?

It seems that there should have been precepts about prudence among the precepts of the Decalogue:

Objection 1: The more important precepts should be given about the more important virtues. But the most important precepts of the Law are the precepts of the Decalogue. Therefore, since prudence is the most important of the moral virtues, it seems that there should have been precepts about prudence among the precepts of the Decalogue.

Objection 2: The teachings of the Gospel contain a Law especially with respect to the precepts of the Decalogue. But as is clear from Matthew 10:16 (“Be prudent as serpents”), in the teachings of the Gospel there is a precept about prudence. Therefore, among the precepts of the Decalogue the act of prudence should have been commanded.

Objection 3: The other books of the Old Testament are ordered toward the precepts of the Decalogue; hence, Malachi 4:4 says, “Remember the Law of my servant Moses ... that I commanded him at Horeb.” But in the other books of the Old Testament there are precepts concerning prudence—for instance, Proverbs 3:5, “Do not rely upon your own prudence,” and later in 4:25, “Let your eyelids precede your steps.” Therefore, there should have been precepts about prudence in the Law, and especially among the precepts of the Decalogue.

But the contrary to this is clear to one who enumerates the precepts of the Decalogue.

I respond: As was explained above when we were talking about precepts (*ST* 1-2, q. 100, a. 3), just as the precepts of the Decalogue were given to the whole people, so, too, they also fall into everyone’s thinking in the sense that they belong to natural reason.

Now what are mainly of concern in the dictates of natural reason are the ends of human life, which, as is clear from what was said above (q. 47, a. 6), are related to matters of action in the way that naturally known principles are related to speculative matters. On the other hand, as is likewise clear from what was said above (q. 47, a. 6), prudence has to do not with the end but with the means to the end. And this is why it was not appropriate for any precept pertaining directly to prudence to be posited among the precepts of the Decalogue.

Still, all the precepts of the law do indeed pertain to prudence insofar as prudence directs all virtuous acts.

Reply to objection 1: Even though prudence is, absolutely speaking, more important than the other moral virtues, nonetheless, justice deals in a more important way with the nature of what is owed—which, as was explained above (q. 44, a. 1), is what is needed for a precept. And this is why the main precepts of the law, viz., the precepts of the Decalogue, had to pertain to justice rather than to prudence.

Reply to objection 2: The teaching of the Gospel is a doctrine of perfection, and so it was necessary for a man to be instructed perfectly in that doctrine concerning all the things that pertain to uprightness of life, whether they be ends or means to ends. This is why it was necessary for there to be precepts about prudence, too, in the teaching of the Gospel.

Reply to objection 3: Just as the other teachings of the Old Testament are ordered toward the precepts of the Decalogue as their end, so, too, it was appropriate that in the subsequent books of the Old

Testament men should be instructed about the act of prudence, which has to do with the means to that end.

Article 2

Were prohibitive precepts about the vices opposed to prudence proposed in the Old Law in an appropriate way?

It seems that prohibitive precepts about the vices opposed to prudence were not proposed in the Old Law in an appropriate way:

Objection 1: The vices that have a direct opposition to prudence, such as imprudence and its parts, are no less opposed to prudence than are the vices that have a similarity to prudence, such as craftiness and the vices that belong to it. But these latter vices are prohibited in the Law; for instance, Leviticus 19:13 says, “You shall not commit calumny against your neighbor,” and Deuteronomy 25:13 says, “You shall not have in your bag two different weights, a large and a small.” Therefore, some prohibitive precepts should also have been given about the vices that are directly opposed to prudence.

Objection 2: Fraud can be perpetrated in many matters other than buying and selling. Therefore, it was inappropriate for the Law to forbid fraud only in cases of buying and selling.

Objection 3: The reason for commanding an act of a given virtue is the same as the reason for prohibiting an act of an opposed vice. But acts of prudence are not commanded in the Law. Therefore, neither should any of the opposed vices have been prohibited in the Law.

But the contrary to this is clear from the precepts of the Law that have been cited.

I respond: As was explained above (a. 1), justice has to do especially with the nature of what is owed, which is what is required for a precept, since, as will be explained below (q. 58, a. 2), justice is the rendering of what is owed to another. Now as has been explained (q. 55, a. 8), craftiness, as regards its execution, is committed especially in matters that justice has to do with. And so it was appropriate that prohibitive precepts be given in the Law about the execution of craftiness insofar as it pertains to injustice—as, for instance, when by guile or fraud one individual commits calumny against another or steals his goods.

Reply to objection 1: The vices that are directly opposed to prudence with a manifest contrariety do not pertain to injustice in the way that the execution of craftiness does. And so they are not prohibited in the Law in the way that fraud and guile, which pertain to injustice, are.

Reply to objection 2: Every instance of fraud or guile that is committed in matters pertaining to justice can be understood as prohibited in the prohibition of calumny in Leviticus 19:13.

However, fraud and guile are usually exercised mainly in buying and selling—this according to Ecclesiasticus 26:28 (“A huckster shall not be innocent from the sins of his lips”). Because of this, a specific prohibitive precept is given in the Law about fraud committed in cases of buying and selling.

Reply to objection 3: All the precepts about acts of justice that are given in the Law pertain to the execution of prudence, just as the prohibitive precepts about theft, calumny, and fraudulent selling pertain to the execution of craftiness.