



JOSEF PIEPER ON PRUDENCE: THE MOTHER OF VIRTUES

Posted on August 1, 2021 by Brother André Marie



German Catholic philosopher, Josef Pieper, had very much to say about the theological and moral virtues in a number of his writings. Of interest here are chapters in his 1964 collection of previously written studies, *The Four Cardinal Virtues*, wherein he organizes his material according to the schema of Saint Thomas Aquinas, viz., prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance, assuring his readers that this order is not arbitrary, but logical — metaphysical, even.

That the first of the cardinal virtues is prudence is no accident, for it is the “mold” and “mother” of the other cardinal virtues, without which they would not be virtues.

This neglected and much undervalued virtue — Pieper considered it so even in 1959 (!), when he wrote the study on prudence — deserves to be thrust into our spiritual spotlight for at least two reasons: (1) aside from its own excellence and its necessity as a prerequisite to the other cardinal virtues, (2) it can assist us in assessing and countering the perverse and pervasive surrealism that we confront on a daily basis. But that surrealism itself, which obscures reality and is therefore a sort of “heresy against being,” must first be seen for what it is: an obstacle to prudence that must be removed so that we may become truly virtuous.

Regarding the historical artistic [movement of surrealism](#), the source of my analogy, I will say only a few words. First, regarding the name itself:

"Its aim was, according to leader André Breton, to "resolve the previously contradictory conditions of dream and reality into an absolute reality, a super-reality", or surreality."

Here is [Wikipedia's general description](#) of surrealism, giving also the revolutionary aims of its ideological partisans:

"Works of Surrealism feature the element of surprise, unexpected juxtapositions and non sequitur. However, many Surrealist artists and writers regard their work as an expression of the philosophical movement first and foremost (for instance, of the "pure psychic automatism" Breton speaks of in the first Surrealist Manifesto), with the works themselves being secondary, i.e. artifacts of surrealist experimentation. Leader Breton was explicit in his assertion that Surrealism was, above all, a revolutionary movement. At the time, the movement was associated with political causes such as communism and anarchism."

André Breton was a communist who eventually became an anarchist — an ideologue of revolution. Here is his description of the “pure psychic automatism” mentioned above:

“Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express — verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner — the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern” — [First Manifesto of Surrealism](#) (1924).

This is “thinking” bereft of Logos, art bereft of aesthetics, expression bereft of morals. Simply put, it is revolutionary irrationalism which necessarily leads to immorality. Numerous of Breton's surrealist fellows were explicitly and monstrosly anti-Catholic. I have no intention here to issue a blanket condemnation of all artists who incorporated some surrealist elements in their work (though it is mighty tempting!). It is the irrational and revolutionary character of surrealism as a movement that interests me, deliberately juxtaposing as it does the real with the non-real in order to make a “super-reality.”

The oligarchs who are bringing us the current Dystopian Fantasy PSYOP (and so much more) are anti-Logos revolutionaries, too, and they are, in the name of an Orwellian New World Order, presenting us with an ugly and deceptive juxtaposition of the real and the non-real worthy of Salvador Dalí at his strangest. Here, though, the craft of our current surrealist practitioners is neither art nor letters nor cinema, but a careful and atmospheric perception management which has its hapless consumers convinced that it is indeed reality. Say what you will about Dalí, none of his connoisseurs mistook his melting watches for real time pieces.

Before citing some illuminating excerpts from Josef Pieper, let me “cut to the chase” and present my readers with the simple thesis of this Ad Rem: Because the perception of reality as it is (or “true-to-being” as Pieper has it) is required for prudence, and because prudence is required for the other moral virtues, the embrace of pervasive surrealist narratives (e.g., among many others, “follow the [pseudo-] science,” “gender [actually, sex] is a social construct and can be changed”) renders prudence impossible. In so doing, it also renders justice, fortitude, and temperance impossible. It follows that the failure of so many of our ecclesiastical and temporal leaders to see reality as it is, to decide and judge based upon a “true-to-being” memory, explains so much of what is currently wrong with the world.

In light of this, the moral imperative for the Church and for all souls of good will is to strive to see reality as it is and to practice true prudence so that we can be genuinely just, brave, and temperate, not only in

a natural mode, but, as Christians, in a supernatural mode, aided by grace and the Gifts of the Holy Ghost.

In the first chapter of *The Four Cardinal Virtues*, "The First of the Cardinal Virtues," Dr. Pieper notes that contemporary ears (in 1959) will find it strange "that the virtue of prudence is the mold and 'mother' of all the other cardinal virtues, of justice, fortitude, and temperance. In other words, none but the prudent man can be just, brave, and temperate, and the good man is good in so far as he is prudent" (p. 3). "Yet the fact is," he insists, "that nothing less than the whole ordered structure of the Occidental Christian view of man rests upon the pre-eminence of prudence over the other virtues" (p. 3).

And what is this "ordered structure of the Occidental Christian view of man"? It is Trinitarian:

"That structure is built thus: that Being precedes Truth, and that Truth precedes the Good. Indeed, the living fire at the heart of the dictum is the central mystery of Christian theology: that the Father begets the Eternal Word, and that the Holy Spirit proceeds out of the Father and the Word."

By contrast, the modern conception of prudence strips it of its true nobility:

"To the contemporary mind, prudence seems less a prerequisite to goodness than an evasion of it. The statement that it is prudence which makes an action good strikes us as well-nigh ridiculous. ... In colloquial use, prudence always carries the connotation of timorous, small-minded self-preservation, of a rather selfish concern about oneself. Neither of these traits is compatible with nobility; both are unworthy of the noble man."

And because of this, "A 'prudent' man is thought to be one who avoids the embarrassing situation of having to be brave". Worse, "To the contemporary mind, then, the concept of the good rather excludes than includes prudence."

Dr. Pieper even laments the degradation suffered by Catholic moral theology on the subject (yes, in 1959): "At any rate, there is no doubt about the result: modern religious teachings have little or nothing to say about the place of prudence in the life or in the hierarchy of virtues." Later, he has much to say in opposition to the exaggerated casuistry (a "science of sin") that coincided with the eclipse of the authentic doctrine of prudence.

The great Occidental Christian view of man stands in stark contrast with these modern defects and excesses:

"Classical Christian ethics, on the contrary, maintains that man can be prudent and good only simultaneously; that prudence is part and parcel of the definition of goodness; that there is no sort of justice and fortitude which runs counter to the virtue of prudence; and that the unjust man has been imprudent before and is imprudent at the moment he is unjust. Omnis virtus moralis debet esse prudens — All virtue is necessarily prudent."

In fact,

"Prudence is the cause of the other virtues' being virtues at all. For example, there may be a kind of instinctive governance of instinctual cravings; but only prudence transforms this instinctive governance into the 'virtue' of temperance. Virtue is a 'perfected ability' of man as a spiritual person; and justice, fortitude, and temperance, as 'abilities' of the whole man, achieve their perfection only when they are founded upon prudence, that is to say upon the perfected ability to make right decisions. Only by means of this perfected ability to make good choices are instinctive inclinations toward goodness exalted into the spiritual core of man's decisions, from which truly human acts arise."

Moral goodness is radically dependent upon prudence, for, "What is prudent and what is good are substantially one and the same; they differ only in their place in the logical succession of realization. For whatever is good must first have been prudent" (p. 7). And this radical dependence implies that there is a sort of mutual interpenetration of prudence and the other virtues: "Ethical virtue is the print and seal placed by prudence upon volition and action. Prudence works in all the virtues; and all virtue participates in prudence" (p. 8). "Thus," Pieper continues,

"...prudence is cause, root, mother, measure, precept, guide, and prototype of all ethical virtues; it acts in all of them, perfecting them to their true nature; all participate in it, and by virtue of this participation they are virtues."

"Truth" is, as Saint Hilary of Poitiers said, "declarative being." When we men accept the truths of the natural or supernatural order, we unite our minds with the divine Mind who is Being itself. Among the truths that declare their being to us are moral imperatives, the "thou shalts" and the "thou shalt nots,"

which are not arbitrary, but are accommodated to man's reason. (I am here reminded that the Natural Law is, to Saint Thomas, "nothing else than the rational creature's participation in the eternal law" [ST I-II, Q. 91, A. 2], which is itself the product of the divine Mind.) Basing himself on Saint Thomas, Pieper declares that,

"All ten commandments of God pertain to the executio prudentiae, the realization in practice of prudence. Here is a statement that has become virtually incomprehensible to people of today. And every sin is opposed to prudence. Injustice, cowardice, intemperance are in direct opposition to the virtues of justice, fortitude, and temperance; ultimately, however, through all these virtues, they run counter to prudence. Everyone who sins is imprudent."

Pieper goes so far as to say that *"the whole doctrine of prudence"* is summed up in this *"fundamental principle of Thomas Aquinas,"* namely, *"that 'reason perfected in the cognition of truth' shall inwardly shape and imprint [man's] volition and action."* He hastens to add that the "reason" which is *"perfected in the cognition of truth"* is not exclusively unaided natural human reason, still less the unchristian pseudo-reason of the so-called Enlightenment, but a *"regard for and openness to reality,"* and an *"acceptance of reality"* — *"both natural and supernatural reality."*

Therefore, truth, which we know to be the conformity of the mind to reality — to what is — is a necessary precondition for prudence and consequently for all virtue: *"Certainly prudence is the standard of volition and action [that is, of willing and doing]; but the standard of prudence, on the other hand, is the ipsa res, the 'thing itself,' the objective reality of being."*

The passages from *The Four Cardinal Virtues* that I have cited so far all come from the book's first chapter. I have not even gotten to Chapter Two, "Knowledge of Reality and the Realization of the Good."

But this will not be our last adventure in prudence with Dr. Pieper as our guide. Already, though, we have enough material to support our thesis and show that the atmospheric and revolutionary "false narratives" which make for what I have here called a "perverse and pervasive surrealism" are all contraceptive of prudence and therefore of true virtue. Anything arising from such a defective grasp of reality is doomed to be more-or-less imprudent and therefore not virtuous in the true sense of any of the moral virtues.

Is it any wonder that things in Church and State are such as they are?

Brother André Marie is Prior of St. Benedict Center, an apostolate of the Slaves of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Richmond New Hampshire. He does a weekly Internet Radio show, [Reconquest](#), which airs on the [Veritas Radio Network's Crusade Channel](#).

The [featured image](#) shows "Prudence," by Piero del Pollaiuolo, ca. 1469-1472.

