

# *Scientia moralis* and *prudentia*. The Medieval Roots of a Contemporary Problem

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While Latin-Christian reflections on ethics are very much indebted to the Ancient Greek tradition, there are some salient features which clearly distinguish the medieval approach. One such feature is the insistence of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century philosophers and theologians on the scientific character of ethics. Thus, ethics is no longer conceived of as a particular form of practical knowledge, but as a science in the strict sense.

In an article published in 2008 concerning the epistemological foundation of Thomas Aquinas's moral philosophy, Matthias Lutz-Bachmann described a development with significant systematic implications which had taken place in the transition from Antiquity to the Middle Ages.<sup>1</sup> Aristotle had conceived of ethics primarily as a kind of practical knowledge which one might designate, as he did, knowledge of a *typos* or an outline. Unlike Aristotle, however, numerous medieval philosophers considered this kind of knowledge a *scientia moralis*, that is, a science.

Lutz-Bachmann elaborated: "There is an important systematic difference between the ancient epistemological distinction between practical knowledge as artistic knowledge on the one hand and theoretical knowledge as scientific knowledge on the other hand, and the medieval philosophers' way of speaking of ethics as a practical science. We can identify such a choice of terminology among authors of the thirteenth century who had detailed knowledge of the relevant statements of Aristotle concerning the theory of the sciences and the theory of practical knowledge. Since these authors hardly distinguish themselves by an imprecise language it only makes sense to assume that the idea of ethics as a practical science was created deliberately

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<sup>1</sup> LUTZ-BACHMANN M. (2008), "Praktisches Wissen und 'Praktische Wissenschaft'. Zur Epistemologie der Moralphilosophie bei Thomas von Aquin," in LUTZ-BACHMANN M. and FIDORA A. (eds.), *Handlung und Wissenschaft. Die Epistemologie der praktischen Wissenschaften im 13. und 14. Jahrhundert / Action and Science. The Epistemology of the Practical Sciences in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Centuries*, (Wissenskultur und gesellschaftlicher Wandel, 29) Akademie Verlag, Berlin, p. 89-96.

and that we are dealing here with an independent notion of medieval philosophy which was not directly derived from Aristotle's epistemology."<sup>2</sup>

This transformation of the epistemological foundation of ethics had implications for the form of its theory as well as for its contents. In particular, these repercussions concern *phronêsis* or *prudentia*, a key concept of moral philosophy. While in Aristotle's notion of ethics as a kind of practical knowledge, *phronêsis* appears as a well integrated and constitutive element in reflecting on human actions, its role in ethics becomes doubtful if ethics is no longer thought of as a kind of practical knowledge, but rather as a practical science.

My aim in the following discussion is to use select authors in order to reconstruct how the debate about the systematic position of *prudentia* unfolded from the thirteenth to the seventeenth century against the backdrop of the development of moral philosophy as a science. In doing so, I will point out the significance of this debate for the question of the proper relationship between ethics and prudence even in the present day.

## THE STARTING POINT: THOMAS AQUINAS

The development of ethics as a science is primarily associated with the name of Thomas Aquinas. In his *Summa theologiae* as well as in other texts, Thomas goes well beyond his Aristotelian source and refers repeatedly to ethics as *scientia moralis*.

The resulting tension concerning the position of *prudentia* first appears in *Quaestio 47* of the *Secunda secundae* of the *Summa theologiae*; in article III Thomas defines the object of prudence as being things singular, which, according to Aristotle, cannot be subject to science.

The problem becomes more explicit in the *Prooemium* to *Quaestio 48*, where Thomas elaborates on the different parts of *prudentia*. One of the relevant questions in this context is whether politics and economy should be considered parts of *prudentia*. According to Thomas, one might present to this assumption, which is ultimately rooted in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* VI 8, the following objection:

*Prudentia* is specifically distinct (*dividitur*) from science (*scientia*). But politics, economics [etc.] are sciences. Therefore they are not parts of *prudentia*.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> LUTZ-BACHMANN, "Praktisches Wissen und 'Praktische Wissenschaft'," p. 92.

<sup>3</sup> THOMAS AQUINAS (1895), *Opera omnia iussu impensaue*, ed. LEONIS XIII P. M., t. VIII: *Secunda secundae Summae theologiae a quaestione 1 ad quaestionem LVI*, Ex Typographia Polyglotta, Rome, II-II, q. 48, a. unic., arg. 2, p. 365: "*Praeterea, prudentia dividitur contra scientiam. Sed politica, oeconomica [etc.] sunt quaedam scientiae. Non ergo sunt partes prudentiae.*"

This argument makes the tension between practical science and *prudentia* obvious. If one considers politics and economics as sciences, but *prudentia* as a dianoetic virtue which, according to Aristotle *NE VI 9*, is strictly distinct from the habit of *epistêmê* or *scientia*, it only remains that politics and economics cannot be regarded parts of *prudentia*.

In his *corpus articuli*, however, Thomas endorses the Aristotelian view of politics and economics as parts of *prudentia*. Thus, he emphasizes that ethics, politics and economics, if understood correctly, are parts of *prudentia*. According to Thomas, there is a form of *prudentia*

whereby a man rules himself, and the *prudentia* whereby a man governs a multitude [...]. Again, the *prudentia* whereby a multitude is governed, is divided into various species according to the various kinds of multitude. There is the multitude which is united together for some particular purpose; thus an army is gathered together to fight, and the *prudentia* that governs this is called “military”. There is also the multitude that is united together for the whole of life; such is the multitude of a home or family, and this is ruled by “domestic *prudentia*”; and such again is the multitude of a city or kingdom, the ruling principle of which is “regnative *prudentia*” in the ruler, and “political *prudentia*”, simply so called, in the subjects.<sup>4</sup>

However, this explanation, which presents a list rather than an argument, does not solve the problem of the objection which has been mentioned above. Likewise, the response to the objection contents itself with a terminological distinction:

[...] It must be noted that economics and politics are not to be taken as sciences here, but as kinds of *prudentia*.<sup>5</sup>

The *Summa theologiae* remains silent on the foundation of this terminological distinction; instead it goes on saying that “science and knowledge of the principles concern what is necessary, whereas art and prudence deal with what is contingent”.<sup>6</sup> However, we can gather some explanation of this distinction from a passage in Thomas’s commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics* which is of great importance

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<sup>4</sup> THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, co.: “*Et hoc modo partes prudentiae, secundum quod proprie sumuntur, sunt prudentia per quam aliquis regit seipsum, et prudentia per quam aliquis regit multitudinem, quae differunt specie [...], et iterum prudentia quae est multitudinis regitiva dividitur in diversas species secundum diversas species multitudinis. Est autem quaedam multitudo adunata ad aliquod speciale negotium, sicut exercitus congregatur ad pugnandum, cuius regitiva est prudentia militaris. Quaedam vero multitudo est adunata ad totam vitam, sicut multitudo unius domus vel familiae, cuius regitiva est prudentia oeconomica; et multitudo unius civitatis vel regni, cuius quidem directiva est in principe regnativa, in subditis autem politica simpliciter dicta.*”

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, ad 2: “*Ad secundum dicendum, quod oeconomica et politica non accipiuntur hic secundum quod sunt scientiae; sed secundum quod sunt prudentiae quaedam.*”

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, q. 47, a. 5, co.: “*Scientia et intellectus sunt circa necessaria; ars autem et prudentia circa contingentia.*”

for his view of *prudentia* in general. Here, he addresses the relationship between *prudentia* and *appetitus*:

We must consider that *prudentia* is not only in the reason but has a function likewise in the appetitive faculty. Therefore, everything mentioned here (i.e., ethics, economics and politics) is a species of *prudentia*, to the extent that it does not reside in the reason alone but has ramifications in the appetitive faculty. Inasmuch as they are exclusively in the reason they are called certain kinds of practical science (*scientiae practicae*), viz., ethics, economics and politics.<sup>7</sup>

Much more clearly than his contemporaries, Thomas had recognized the exceptional position of *prudentia* which mediates between reason and appetite.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, ethics, economics and politics fall into two categories: insofar as they concern rational knowledge only, they should be referred to as “scientific”; but insofar as they coexist with *prudentia* in the appetite, they are “prudential”.

Ultimately, this insight determines the entire architecture of the *Summa theologiae*. The division of the *Secunda pars* into two books, namely *Ia-IIae* and *IIa-IIae*, can be explained in such a manner. Concerning the general disposition of the *Secunda pars*, Thomas wrote:

But because operations and acts are concerned with particular things, consequently all knowledge concerned with action (*operativa scientia*) is only complete (*perficitur*) if it takes account of particular things (*in particulari consideratione*). The study of ethics, therefore, since it treats of human acts, should consider first the general principles; and secondly particular matters.<sup>9</sup>

Thomas thus determines the *Prima secundae* as the proper place for ethics as a science. Still, this decision did not lead him to make a sharp division between the *Secunda secundae*, including *prudentia*, on the one hand, and ethics as a science on the other hand. Thomas rather explicitly identifies the subject of the *Secunda secundae* as the completion of the science of ethics: “*operativa scientia in particulari consideratione perficitur*”.

<sup>7</sup> THOMAS AQUINAS (1969), *Opera omnia iussu impensaue*, ed. LEONIS XIII P. M., t. XLVII/2: *Sententia libri Ethicorum*, Ad Sanctae Sabinae, Rome, lib. VI, lec. 7, p. 357: “*Est autem considerandum, quod sicut supra dictum est, prudentia non est in ratione solum, sed habet aliquid in appetitu. Omnia ergo de quibus hic fit mentio, in tantum sunt species prudentiae, inquantum non in ratione sola consistunt, sed habent aliquid in appetitu. Inquantum enim sunt in sola ratione, dicuntur quaedam scientiae practicae, scilicet ethica, oeconomica et politica.*”

<sup>8</sup> Concerning this issue see, for example, WIELAND G. (1981), *Ethica – Scientia practica. Die Anfänge der philosophischen Ethik im 13. Jahrhundert*, (Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie und Theologie des Mittelalters, n.F., 21) Aschendorff, Münster, p. 118.

<sup>9</sup> THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 6, *prooemium*: “*Sed quia operationes et actus circa singularia sunt, ideo omnis operativa scientia in particulari consideratione perficitur. Moralis igitur consideratio quia est humanorum actuum, primo quidem tradenda est in universali, secundo vero in particulari.*”

To conclude this section, one can say that, although Thomas recognized the tension between ethics as a science and *prudentia*, he did not wish to abandon the central role of *prudentia* within ethics. He rather endeavoured to establish a balance between ethics as a science and *prudentia* in which the two coexist as being directed at the same aim.

## THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY: JOHN BURIDAN

What appears in Thomas Aquinas's meta-ethical discussion in form of a side remark became the subject of separate debates in the fourteenth century.

Particular mention in this context deserves John Buridan, who dedicated a specific *Quaestio* in his commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics* to the relationship between *prudentia* and *scientia moralis*: "*Utrum prudentia sit idem habitus cum scientia morali tradita libro ethicorum, politicorum et oeconomicorum*" (lib. VI, q. 17).

Buridan presents two arguments against the claim that *prudentia* is identical with the *scientia moralis* which Aristotle describes in his books on practical philosophy. The first argument runs as follows:

Aristotle distinguishes (*distingit*) in Book VI [of the *Nicomachean Ethics*] *prudentia* from *scientia*. Therefore, there is no science which is identical with *prudentia*.<sup>10</sup>

Buridan adds further arguments to this point, which had already been crucial for Thomas. By and large, these additional arguments are derived from the contemporary debate about the *connexio virtutum*, which concerned the relationship and intrinsic connection between the virtues that Aristotle had established with the help of *phronêsis*:

*Prudentia* is one and the same for all actions: Aristotle thus demonstrates that all virtues are connected with each other [...]. The sciences, however, which are transmitted in these [i.e. Aristotle's] books, are many and distinct from one another. Therefore, they are not the same habit as *prudentia*.<sup>11</sup>

This explanation as well as other, related arguments may offer an indication regarding the discussion to which the seventeenth *Quaestio* presented a critical contribution, namely with respect to Buridan's predecessor, Ockham. The latter had

<sup>10</sup> JOHANNES BURIDANUS (1513), *Super decem libros Ethicorum Aristotelis ad Nicomachum*, Ponceto Le Preux, Paris, [reprint Frankfurt a. M., 1968], fol. 132va: "*Sexto huius distingit Aristoteles prudentiam contra scientiam. Ergo nulla scientia est eadem cum prudentia.*"

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., fol. 132va: "*Prudentia est una tantum omnium agibilium, per hoc enim Aristoteles probat virtutes morales invicem esse connexas [...], sed scientiae in dictis libris traditae sunt plures et ab invicem distinctae. Ergo non sunt idem habitus cum prudentia.*"

indeed explored the relationship between *prudentia* and *scientia moralis* in his treatise *De connexione virtutum*<sup>12</sup>.

In his reply, Buridan offers a complex argument. Thus, in a first step one should decide whether the habit of Aristotle's *Ethics* is identical with the habit of science or rather with that of *prudentia*. In order for this decision to be made, one has to determine the specific difference between *scientia* on the one hand and *ars* and *prudentia* on the other hand. Buridan surveys several potential solutions to this problem. The first attempt to define the specific difference focuses on the distinction between "universalis" and "singularis": *scientia* is always concerned with the universal, whereas *ars* and *prudentia* deal with the singular. Whenever the latter employ universal propositions, they function as phenomena subordinate to *scientia*. Since ethics is concerned with general statements, it corresponds to the habit of science rather than to *prudentia*.<sup>13</sup> The second position is analogous to the first one: the explanation for the specific difference between *scientia* on the one hand and *ars* and *prudentia* on the other hand is that the former is concerned with necessary principles whereas the latter deal with contingent actions. A large part of ethics, however, concerns things which are necessarily the way they are. Hence, ethics is a habit of science and does not correspond to the habit of *prudentia*.<sup>14</sup>

Buridan's own point of view assumes a model of ethical understanding over several stages:

It is sufficient to know those things which are beyond our control with general reasons. Therefore, no *ars* or *prudentia* is concerned with them, but only science. Such an understanding, however, is not sufficient for those things which we can control. In these cases one has to descend to the particular knowledge (*notitia singularis*). This is because we do not only want to know these things, but rather do them and realize them in an active way. Therefore, there has to be a habit for the singular which we refer to as *ars* or *prudentia*.<sup>15</sup>

Along similar lines as Thomas, also Buridan understands *prudentia* and the habit of science to be complementary aspects of ethics as it is presented in Aristotle's

<sup>12</sup> See WILLIAM OF OCKHAM (2008), *Über die Verknüpfung der Tugenden*, tr. LEPPIN V., (Herders Bibliothek der Philosophie des Mittelalters, 16) Herder, Freiburg, p. 34: "[...] *prudentia proprie dicta secundum intentionem Philosophi, prout distinguitur a scientia morali.*"

<sup>13</sup> See JOHANNES BURIDANUS, *Super decem libros Ethicorum*, fol. 132vb.

<sup>14</sup> See *ibid.*, fol. 132vb-133ra.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, fol. 133ra: "*Sufficit cognoscere secundum universales rationes ea, quae sub opere nostro non cadunt; propter quod de illis nec erit ars nec prudentia, sed tantum scientia. Sic autem cognoscere non sufficit ea, quae subsunt operi nostro, sed oportet ad eorum singularem notitiam descendere, propter hoc quod ea volumus non solum scire, sed facere vel agere. [...] Oportet alium de ipsis habere habitum in singulari, quem vocamus artem vel prudentiam.*"

writings. According to Buridan, ethics combines both habits: it is science, but it is also *prudentia*:

If *prudentia* is complete, it contains the habit of ethics or a habit similar to it as a part of itself. For *prudentia* is not a distinct habit from the habit which allows us to know what to do and how to do it with respect to the aim of living a good and happy life [...]. The above-mentioned books [of Aristotle] do not teach any lesson different from this.<sup>16</sup>

Sure enough, Buridan thus quite deliberately modifies the nature of the problem. Here he presents an answer to the question whether *prudentia* includes the habit which derives from Aristotle's ethical writings. To this question, his answer is clearly affirmative.

However, it becomes obvious that the problem which constituted the starting point has, in fact, not been solved, when Buridan tries to respond to the objection mentioned at the beginning, which draws on Aristotle's sharp distinction between *prudentia* and *scientia*. Here, the only possible solution for Buridan is to refer to a linguistic difference:

Concerning the first objection, one can say that no *scientia* is identical with *prudentia*, if these terms are understood in a strict manner. If we use them, however, in a common sense, they are synonymous.<sup>17</sup>

If one does not want to reduce Buridan's explanation to the following contradiction: the nature of ethics is *scientia*, the nature of ethics is *prudentia*, but the nature of *prudentia* is not *scientia*, the only possible conclusion which allows to resolve the apparent tension<sup>18</sup> runs as follows: apparently, Buridan's understanding of the project of a philosophical ethics was broader than that of an ethics as science, but also broader than that of ethics as *prudentia*. According to him, philosophical ethics is an enterprise which relies in equal measure on both parts.

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<sup>16</sup> JOHANNES BURIDANUS, *Super decem libros Ethicorum*, fol. 133va: "Ita quod prudentia, si sit perfecta, continet in se habitum illum vel consimilem tamquam partem quandam ipsius, quoniam prudentia non est alius habitus quam secundum quem scimus, quid et quomodo sit agendus ad bene vivendum et feliciter [...]. sed illi libri nihil aliud docent."

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., fol. 133va: "Ad primam dicendum est, quod nulla scientia est prudentia, quando proprie utimur istis nominibus, sed quando communiter utimur illis, sunt nomina synonyma."

<sup>18</sup> I believe that this tension remains unresolved in Gerhard Krieger's very detailed interpretation. See KRIEGER G. (1986), *Der Begriff der praktischen Vernunft nach Johannes Buridanus*, (Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie und Theologie des Mittelalters, n.F., 21) Aschendorff, Münster, p. 252-257.

## ON THE THRESHOLD TO MODERNITY: FRANCISCO DE VITORIA

While medieval philosophers debated the relationship between *prudentia* and *scientia moralis* by making an effort to overcome the immanent difficulties and to establish a balance which integrates the two elements, the problem was addressed in a more radical manner at the beginning of the early modern period.

The philosopher and theologian Francisco de Vitoria from Salamanca deserves particular mention in this context, especially his commentary on the *Summa theologiae*. In article V of *Quaestio* 47 concerning the *Secunda secundae*, he explores the relationship between *prudentia* and *scientia moralis*. In the original text, Thomas discusses in this article whether *prudentia* is a special virtue (*virtus specialis*). In his response to this question, Thomas explains that *prudentia* is different both from the other dianoetic virtues, among them *scientia*, and from the ethical virtues.

Vitoria takes on these distinctions in his commentary on Aquinas. He remarks, however, that Thomas's analysis remained incomplete since

it appears that Thomas does not distinguish between *prudentia* and *synderesis* [...] nor with regard to the *scientia moralis*, which we study in the books of the *Ethics*.<sup>19</sup>

In the following argument, Vitoria discusses these two issues in further detail. He asserts that even though *synderesis*, like *prudentia*, is concerned with action, its object is something necessary (i.e., self-evident principles), whereas *prudentia* is only concerned with what is contingent. Vitoria continues to argue that *prudentia* is different from *scientia moralis* for the same reason since

*scientia moralis* is concerned with what is necessary even though its objects are not in the same manner necessary as the objects of mathematics are necessary. They are rather necessary like the objects of physics where those things are considered necessary that occur usually in a certain way.<sup>20</sup>

Vitoria illustrates the necessary character of the *scientia moralis* with the help of examples such as the following sentence: No innocent person should be killed. It is in this sense that the *scientia moralis* is concerned with what is necessary, whereas *prudentia* is concerned with what is contingent, conducing to "*opiniones, quae*

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<sup>19</sup> FRANCISCO DE VITORIA (1932), *Comentarios a la Secunda secundae de Santo Tomás. Vol. II: De caritate et prudentia* (qq. 23-56), ed. BELTRÁN DE HEREDIA V., San Esteban, Salamanca, p. 360: "Videtur quod Doctor non ponit distinctionem inter prudentiam et synderesim [...], nec a scientia morali quam studemus in Ethicis."

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.: "Quia scientia moralis est de necessariis, licet non sint illa eo modo necessaria quo scientiae mathematicae, sed eo modo quo scientiae physicae, in quibus dicitur illud necessarium, quod ut in plurimum contingit."



*contingenter sunt*”,<sup>21</sup> i.e., to contingent views, and not to *scientia*. Ergo, “*a scientia morali [...] distinguitur prudentia*”.<sup>22</sup>

It is noteworthy that in order to underscore his interpretation, of all authorities, Vitoria refers to Thomas Aquinas, specifically the above-quoted passage from *Quaestio* 48, and to Buridan and his *Quaestio* 17 which has just been discussed. Yet, although Vitoria appears to align himself into an existing tradition, one cannot ignore that he remodels the explanations of these two authors in order to support his own position, whether he did that deliberately or not. For while these two distinguish themselves by harmonizing the ambition of ethics as a science with the significance of *prudentia*, the scholar from Salamanca resolutely decides to exclude prudence from ethics.

Josef Pieper still expressed his surprise “that the Spaniard Francisco de Vitoria, who laid a new foundation for the study of Saint Thomas in the second quarter of the sixteenth century, pays disproportionately little attention to the discussion of prudence in his great commentary on the *Secunda secundae* of the *Summa theologicae*”.<sup>23</sup> Taking my analysis above into consideration, however, it should not surprise at all that *prudentia* receives so little attention in Vitoria’s work as well as from other representatives of Spanish Scholasticism. The conflict which had arisen in the Middle Ages, when practical knowledge was transformed into a practical science, led to a definite degradation of *prudentia* in the sixteenth century, clearly distinguishing it from the kind of knowledge which was identified with Aristotle’s ethics. One of the reasons which may account for this development could be the new and radicalized concept of contingency which was put forward by John Duns Scotus.<sup>24</sup>

## ETHICS AS A THEORETICAL SCIENCE: JOHN OF SAINT THOMAS

This development constitutes the backdrop against which John of Saint Thomas presented an argument that bears its own problems. Concerning our topic, the seventeenth-century Portuguese author, who is considered one of Thomas’s most significant commentators, wrote in his *Cursus Philosophicus Thomisticus*:

<sup>21</sup> FRANCISCO DE VITORIA, *Comentarios a la Secunda secundae de Santo Tomás*, p. 360.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> See PIEPER J. (1947), *Über die Klugheit*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Summa Verlag, Olten, p. 92-93.

<sup>24</sup> I owe this observation to Ludger Honnefelder. See his article: HONNEFELDER L. (2008), “Universale Norm und kontingente Lebensform: Die mittelalterlichen Deutungen des von Natur aus Rechten,” in *id.* (ed.), *Woher kommen wir? Ursprünge der Moderne im Denken des Mittelalters*, Berlin University Press, Berlin, p. 272-304, esp. p. 271.

There are two ways of understanding the *scientia moralis*. On the one hand it can be understood as including *prudentia*, on the other hand it can be understood as excluding it and that it concerns the knowledge of virtues only in a theoretical manner (*speculando*). In the former case, *prudentia* grants it a practical character and it realizes the principle “Good deeds are to be done” in a practical manner. [...] If, however, the *scientia moralis* excludes *prudentia* and is concerned with the object of virtues through definitions and distinctions only, it is theoretical (*speculativa*) [...] as one can see in the *Ethics* and in the entire *Prima secundae*. It is therefore perfectly possible that someone be an excellent philosophical ethicist and theologian, yet at the same time an imprudent sinner.<sup>25</sup>

This position, which had a significant impact on Jacques Maritain, takes on the conclusion Vitoria had drawn by excluding *prudentia* from ethics.<sup>26</sup> This holds at least for the ethics of the *Nicomachean Ethics* as well as that described in the *Prima secundae*. It seems that the *Secunda secundae* is not taken into account. Johannes may respond here to the distinction which Thomas himself had made concerning the two parts of the *Secunda pars*. As a result of this exclusion, ethics is defined as a speculative or theoretical science.

A second passage which appears slightly later in the *Cursus Philosophicus Thomisticus* in the section “De unitate et distinctione scientiarum”, contains an even more poignant argument:

Insofar as the *scientia moralis* is understood in a practical manner, it is identical with *prudentia* and does thus not belong to the theoretical habits, which are discussed here. If, however, it is understood in a theoretical sense as an ethical science which is concerned with the nature of [the] virtues, it belongs to philosophy and forms part of it. For insofar as the latter deals with the soul, it also has to address moral actions.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> JOHN OF SAINT THOMAS (1930), *Cursus Philosophicus Thomisticus. Logica*, ed. REISER B., Marietti, Turin, Secunda pars, q. 1, a. 4, vol. I, p. 276: “*Scientia moralis potest dupliciter considerari: Uno modo, ut includit prudentiam, alio modo, ut eam excludit et solum versatur circa cognitionem virtutum speculando. Primo modo habet rationem practici ex parte prudentiae, quam includit, et utitur illo principio practico: ‘Bonum est faciendum’ modo practico. [...] Si vero scientia moralis secludat prudentiam et solum tractet de materia virtutum definiendo, dividendo etc., est speculativa [...], ut in Ethics et in tota Prima secundae videri potest. Et ita bene potest aliquis esse insignis philosophus ethicus et theologus et imprudens peccator.*”

<sup>26</sup> See MARITAIN J. (1946), *Distinguer pour unir ou les degrés du savoir*, Desclée de Brouwer, Paris, p. 879-896 (Annex VII).

<sup>27</sup> JOHN OF SAINT THOMAS, *Cursus Philosophicus Thomisticus. Logica*, Secunda pars, q. 27, a. 1, vol. I, p. 826-827: “*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 et est pars illius, quia cum agat de anima intellectiva, consequenter de moralibus actibus eius debet tractare.*”

Here the author distinguishes ethics, which includes *prudentia*, not only from theoretical philosophy, but from philosophy as a whole.<sup>28</sup> As a residuum of the prudential form of ethics there remains only the *Secunda secundae*, and John does not explore it in further detail in his *Cursus Philosophicus Thomisticus*.

Although Wolfgang Kluxen and others have described John's position as marginal and somehow beside the point,<sup>29</sup> it can hardly be considered an exceptional idiosyncrasy, as has become obvious here. Rather, it reflects the final conclusion of a development that is intrinsically connected with the transformation of ethics into a science in the Middle Ages.

## CONCLUSION

The authors of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries ultimately confirm that from the perspective of an Aristotelian theory of knowledge and science it is difficult to speak of a "practical science" or of a "science of action".<sup>30</sup> However, instead of challenging the status of ethics as a *scientia* these early modern authors decided to relinquish *prudentia* and with it the practical dimension of the science of ethics, thus paving the way for a form of ethics which understands itself as a purely theoretical science.

Although this endeavour is contentious, it has undoubtedly maintained its relevance in contemporary debates. One might think here first of all of the controversy between the representatives of two meta-ethical models which Otfried Höffe has aptly labeled the theoretical and moral models of ethics.<sup>31</sup> Since the dispute between Julius Walter and Gustav Teichmüller at the end of the nineteenth century, the relationship between ethics and *prudentia* has been at the heart of this debate.<sup>32</sup> Walter and others<sup>33</sup> followed along the lines established by Vitoria and John of Saint Thomas

<sup>28</sup> Jacques Maritain tried to avoid this consequence in his reading of John of Saint Thomas. See MARITAIN, *Distinguer pour unir ou les degrés du savoir*, p. 881. However, his interpretation on this point has been unanimously dismissed; see the discussion in PALACIOS E.L. (1944), "Juan de Santo Tomás y la ciencia moral," *Revista de estudios políticos* 18, p. 557-570.

<sup>29</sup> See KLUXEN W. (1998), *Philosophische Ethik bei Thomas von Aquin*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Felix Meiner Verlag, Hamburg, p. 43: "Johannes steht mit dieser Auffassung ziemlich allein."

<sup>30</sup> LUTZ-BACHMANN, "Praktisches Wissen und 'Praktische Wissenschaft'," p. 91.

<sup>31</sup> See HÖFFE O. (1996), *Praktische Philosophie. Das Modell des Aristoteles*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Akademie Verlag, Berlin, p. 24-28.

<sup>32</sup> See WALTER J. (1874), *Die Lehre von der praktischen Vernunft in der griechischen Philosophie*, Mauke, Jena, as well as Gustav Teichmüller's reply: TEICHMÜLLER G. (1879), *Neue Studien zur Geschichte der Begriffe*. Vol. III: *Die praktische Vernunft bei Aristoteles*, Perthes, Gotha.

<sup>33</sup> For example FRANK E. (1940), "The Fundamental Opposition of Plato and Aristotle," *American Journal of Philology* 60, p. 34-53 and 166-185, in particular the concluding remark p. 183.

and strictly separated ethics and *prudentia*, thus ultimately constructing ethics as a theoretical discipline, whereas Teichmüller and later René A. Gauthier<sup>34</sup> agreed with the medieval authors surveyed here on an integrated concept of ethics and prudence, with the latter granting the practical character of ethical knowledge.

Although it is impossible to analyze the controversy here in every detail, the historical survey of the problem presented above allows at least the following conclusion: for an appropriate understanding of *prudentia* as part of ethical reflection, in particular with the possible aim of rehabilitating it for contemporary practical philosophy, we have to review critically the epistemological foundation of practical philosophy and its status as a science. As the previous analysis has shown, it is the epistemological status of ethics as a science which led to an increasingly marginal position of *prudentia*. *Prudentia* is removed whenever authors exaggerate the scientific character of ethics, thereby risking to lose its genuinely practical nature.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> GAUTHIER R.A. and JOLIF J.-Y. (1970), *L'Éthique à Nicomaque*, Intro., tr. et commentaire, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 2 vol., Publications Universitaires – Béatrice-Nauwelaerts, Louvain/ Paris, vol. II.1, p. 24-25.

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