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# Prudential Gnome, Right Judgments And Diagnostic Tests

by

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P. J. Baggot's succinct article, *When is Amniocentesis Morally Licit?*<sup>1</sup> outlines the basic criteria for prenatal diagnostic procedures. I concur with Dr. Baggot that, of the procedures outlined, amniocentesis is the preferred option, provided that there is no eugenic motive.

If such a procedure is warranted, however, the crux of the issue concerns when it should be done. According to Magisterial teaching the procedure must not involve disproportionate risks for the child (cf. *Evangelium Vitae*, no. 63). Hence, the later the better policy should be adopted. In Baggot's words: "Delaying amniocentesis until 32 weeks would make fetal risks very low." (p. 356). Yet some risks still do remain. And Dr. Baggot continues: "Where the fetus is gravely ill, more aggressive diagnosis and treatment may be in order." The complexity of these situations should not be underestimated" (*ibid.*).

What a quagmire for the average couple! Imagine the moral crisis some parents must endure when there are problematic indications via ultrasounds or other tests. Since the situation should not be underestimated let us estimate how we can resolve the moral crisis. The parents need to make a decision, a correct judgment. Yet how can one be sure that he or she is making the right decision? This article attempts to discuss the decision making capacity required to resolve such complex situations.

## Prudence is Right Judgment

In short, provided the couple are prudent all will be fine. Prudence is the mother of all virtues and it enables us to judge accurately what is the morally good thing to do under particular circumstances – in complex

situations. Such a claim, nevertheless, seems strange to us today. "To the contemporary mind," states Josef Pieper, "prudence seems less a prerequisite to goodness than an evasion of it. Often we think of prudence as far more akin to the idea of what is useful, *bonum utile* than that of nobility, the *bonum honestum*."<sup>2</sup> Notwithstanding this common misunderstanding, prudence remains the key to virtue: *omnis virtus moralis debet esse prudens*. Moreover, prudence is required if right judgment is to be maintained against the various impulses and caprices inherent in our fallen nature, if the person is to make the right decision.

The Greek term for prudence is *phronèsis*. In his *Phaedrus* Plato likened it to the wisdom (*phronoia*) of the charioteer who directs the unruly nature of horses.<sup>3</sup> Plato's disciple Aristotle afterwards sought to transform this social counsel of prudence into a more intellectual and practical virtue in his *Nicomachean Ethics*.

Saint Thomas regards prudence as a virtue of practical reasoning rather than practical knowledge. As a virtue it does not seek a particular end itself, but the *means* to that end, and thus, perfects both knowledge through counsel and appetite through choice. Moral action is therefore the proper outcome of prudence and *command* is the proper act of prudence: *principalis actus esse praecipere*.<sup>4</sup>

The *finis* of prudence concerns three specific operations directed toward an action: deliberation, judgment and command. Now these three parts, or stages, correspond to the cognitive stages of a human act described by Saint Thomas in his *Summa* (cf. I-II, qq. 13-17), that is, *consilium, iudicium et imperium*. It is only in this contextual arrangement that one can grasp the pivotal role of prudence in moral action and its vital function in the practical intellect. As each stage demands much effort there exists a corresponding virtue to assist the process, called the secondary virtues of prudence: *eubulia, synesis* and *gnome*.

Deliberation is assisted by the virtue called *eubulia*. It facilitates the deliberative process blending docility with experience - both extraneous and personal - without undue delay and choosing only what is pertinent. Surely it would be easier for a couple if they employed these elements in their deliberative process concerning diagnostic tests. But lest we stray let's move on to the next stage, the prudential judgment.

The judgmental phase of the practical intellect also requires a special virtue to ensure its proper function: *synesis* and *gnome*. This judgment concerns the suitable means for moral action. What type of diagnostic procedure should we adopt? When would it be most beneficial? The right choice makes all the difference. Many people can deliberate well, even seek appropriate counsel, but then they may fail to judge well when the time comes. Hence the need for special virtues to govern and perfect this

judgment of the means that must be elected, Saint Thomas put it this way: "Hence there is need, besides *euboulia*, for another virtue, which judges well, and this is called *synesis* - judging well according to common law."<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, some matters depart from common law, such as amniocentesis, and require another special virtue called *gnome*. "It is necessary to have a higher virtue of judgment, which is called *gnome*, and which denotes a certain acuteness in judgment."<sup>6</sup> In complex medical issues *gnome* ensures an acuteness that disposes us towards the right choice. What is the origin of *gnome*?

The word *gnome* is derived from the verb *gignoskein* meaning recognition or awareness. Of all the virtues linked to prudence, *gnome* was perhaps the least noted or understood in medieval times. But this was not always the case. In antiquity, *gnome* was commonly employed for a variety of meanings. Hippocrates, for example, employed it well over thirty times and often in reference to *personal* knowledge or judgment. "But now it is not so, for as in all other arts, those [doctors] who practise them differ much from one to another in dexterity and knowledge (*gnome*)."<sup>7</sup>

### Gnome is a Special Judgment

It perfects the judgement of a thing's proper principles and yet "bases its judgment on the natural law, in those cases where the common law fails to apply."

Hence it is necessary to judge of such matters according to higher principles than the common laws, according to which *synesis* judges: and corresponding to such higher principles it is necessary to have a higher virtue of judgment, which is called *gnome*, and which denotes a certain discrimination in judgment.<sup>8</sup>

Yet, often sensible people can make unsound judgments. Aristotle in his *De Anima* and the *Nicomachean Ethics* claims that somebody can know what is right and yet do what is wrong. What is the cause of such moral disarray? What is the cause of imprudence? According to Saint Thomas defective passions can prevent people from exhibiting a correct judgment.

In each case faulty reasoning has its roots in the relationship of the emotions to intellect and will. As a consequence, a person may reason incorrectly due to rashness, or act injudiciously because of a sudden impulse of the will or passion – *ex impetu voluntatis vel passionis*. Indeed, all versions of imprudence have a common flaw – one that is based on an *inadequate* relationship of the particular reason to the will and emotions.

The solution lies in virtues such as *synesis* or *gnome* as they provide a certain *inclination* to judge in a connatural manner. This *inclinatio*

presupposes the repetition of acts which gradually inculcates a potency towards the formal object to which the *virtus* tends. Eventually one is *predisposed to act* in a *rooted* manner, in a connatural manner. Gnome provides that predisposition, especially in delicate medical procedures, and thus ensures greater harmony in arriving at a sound moral judgment.

In conclusion, apart from medical information, experiential data and sage counsel, couples also need the prudential virtues to assist them in complex medical and moral situations so that they can resolve issues and arrive at the right choice.

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### References

1. Paddy Jim Baggot, "When is Amniocentesis Morally Licit?" in *The Linacre Quarterly*, November 2004, 71/4, 355-357.
2. Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues*, (University of Notre Dame, Indiana 1966 [Eng. trans. of *Traktat über die Klugheit* by R & C Wilson]), p. 4
3. Cf. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 254e
4. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae (S.Th.)*, I-II, q. 57, art. 6; II-II, q. 47, art. 8. In explaining the command of the prudential process, Saint Thomas employs two terms, *imperium* (as the executive stage of the human act, cf. I-II, q. 17) and *praeceptum*
5. *S.Th.*, II-II, q. 51, art. 3: "Et ideo oportet praeter eubuliam esse aliam virtutem quae est bene iudicativa. Et haec dicitur synesis."
6. *S.Th.*, II-II, q. 51, art. 4: "Et secundum illa altiora principia exigitur altior virtus iudicativa, quae vocatur gnome, quae importat quandam perspicacitatem iudicii."
7. Hippocrates, *On Ancient Medicine*, I, Great Books, [English trans. by Francis Adams], vol. 9, p. 1.
8. *S.Th.*, II-II, q. 51, art. 4: "Et ideo oportet de huiusmodi iudicare secundum aliqua altiora principia quam sint regulae communes, secundum quas iudicat synesis. Et secundum illa altiora principia exigitur altior virtus iudicativa, quae vocatur gnome, quae importat quandam perspicacitatem iudicii."