



# **The Priority of Prudence: Virtue and Natural Law in Thomas Aquinas and the Implications for Modern Ethics**

*Daniel Mark Nelson*

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In *The Priority of Prudence*, Daniel Mark Nelson proposes a reappropriation of a moral perspective that focuses on the cardinal virtues of courage, temperance, justice, and prudence. The study aims to recover and rehabilitate the virtue of prudence as a way of resuming a moral conversation that has been stalemated for too long. Nelson's main source for reviving the virtue of prudence is St. Thomas Aquinas's account of the cardinal virtues in the *Summa Theologica*. A primary problem with using Aquinas as a source for reviving an ethics of virtue centered on prudence is that he is commonly perceived as the most prominent figure in the conflicting natural-law tradition. According to Nelson's reinterpretation, however, Aquinas teaches that moral understanding depends first and foremost on prudence working in accord with other cardinal virtues and that natural law functions to explain moral reasoning rather than to guide it. This study serves to advance the debate about the contemporary relevance of an ethics of virtue by way of its significantly more detailed explication of prudence. Nelson makes important connections between influential reinterpretations of the ethical theory of Aquinas that have been published during the last thirty years and widespread interest in an ethics of virtue that has been expressed by Alasdair MacIntyre, Stanley Hauerwas, William Sullivan, Robert Bellah, and others. *The Priority of Prudence* represents a significant contribution to the scholarly literature both in the study of Aquinas and in the debate on the ethics of virtue.

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