302 Prudence (*Prudencia*)

According to the Philosopher, book 6, *Ethica*,[[1]](#endnote-1)prudence is the right reason of the practical. Therefore, according to what Solomon says in Prov. 9[:10]: “The knowledge of the holy is prudence.” For knowledge is ordained more to action than to thinking. Therefore, it is said in Prov. 2[:11-12]: “Prudence shall preserve you, that you may be delivered from the evil way.” And although wisdom is a nobler virtue, however prudence is more necessary to the journey, because it is the director of this road. Therefore Christ, Matt. 10[:16], said to his disciples, “Be therefore wise as serpents.” And 1 Pet. 4[:7]: “Be prudent therefore and watch in prayers.” And Prov. 15[:21]: “The wise man makes straight his steps.” But how this happens Seneca teaches in his little book, etc.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Just as below in the chapter [332] Wisdom (*Sapientia*) towards the end.

But this prudence ought not to be too much, as Seneca teaches, where above,[[3]](#endnote-3) prudence immoderately intense makes an enemy, an interpreter of faults, and evil man is called by one name by all, but perfect prudence has nothing dull, nothing cunning.

¶ However,[[4]](#endnote-4) here it is to be noted that the prudence of a serpent is triple in a good way which it is fitting that we emulate and imitate.

First, it is according to Jerome,[[5]](#endnote-5) that the serpent exposes his whole body to save his head in which body he wraps his head.

¶ In this way for Christ our head we also should expose our bodies, so that because of the honor of God to sustain injuries both in common as in things.

¶ Second,[[6]](#endnote-6) the prudence of the serpent is that it blocks its ears lest it hear incantations, because it blocks one ear applied to a rock and the other with its tail. So morally brothers, it is fitting for us, the enchanters are demons and corrupt evil men drawing us under the species of friendship to vices of the world or the flesh by evil suggestions and exterior perversions. We however against such join the ear of reason to Christ the rock, 1 Cor. 4, we protect our soul with our tail, that is, by the thought of death which is the end of our life.

¶ Third,[[7]](#endnote-7) the prudence of the serpent is that it sloughs off its old skin, when namely it grows old and burdened. It goes through a narrow aperture of a rock where it sloughs off the old skin and thus it is renewed. The apertures of the rock are wounds of Christ in remembrance of this we should leave off our corrupt association, Exod. 33[:22]: “I will set you in a hole of the rock and protect you with my right hand.” And Can. 2[:13-14]: “Arise … in the clefts of the rock.” Therefore, significantly he says, Be biting or pouring out your venom.

¶ There is not in the world such an evil or harmful creature that does not in some way teach living, Eph. 4[:22]: “To put off, according to former conversation, the old man, who is corrupted.” But note that two are required for this that the serpent slough off its skin in the cleft, namely, the narrowness of the cleft and the stability. Otherwise the serpent will carry away either its skin or the cleft with it. So, we ought with a stable proposal transit through the narrow way of penance. For nothing is so contrary to prudence as instability and mutability. Wherefore says Seneca,[[8]](#endnote-8) if you embrace prudence where you will be the same and as variety of the matter or time is required, so you accommodate yourself because neither in this will you change yourself, but rather you will adapt. To this Augustine says, *De verbis Domini* on John, sermon 44,[[9]](#endnote-9) if they are called prudent, who act in all ways, to put off death, and live a few days, how ignorant they are, who so live, in order that they lose the eternal day.

¶ The aforesaid conditions of the serpent seem enough, it is said, to these who live according to prudence, and when those things are prohibited by the Apostle, Rom. 12[:16] saying, “Be not wise in your own conceits.” And render there reason why prudence of the flesh is death, but the prudence of the serpent puts man toward life, Psal. [118:98]: “Through your commandment, you have made me wiser, for it is ever with me.” But just as it is said in Luke 16[:8]: “The children of this world are wiser in their generation than the children of light.” Just as some animals see better in the dark than in the light, as dogs and owls,[[10]](#endnote-10) and fish see better in the water than in the air, so secular men in these matters which are of the world judge better.

1. Aristotle, *Nichomachean Etics* 6.2 1139a32-1139b4 (Barnes 2:1798-1799): The origin of action-its efficient, not its final cause-is choice, and that of choice is desire and reasoning with a view to an end. This is why choice cannot exist either without reason and intellect or without a moral state; for good action and its opposite cannot exist without a combination of intellect and character. Intellect itself, however, moves nothing, but only the intellect which aims at an end and is practical; for this rules the productive intellect, as well, since every one who makes makes for an end, and that which is made is not an end in the unqualified sense (but only an end in a particular relation, and the end of a particular operation)-only that which is done is that; for good action is an end, and desire aims at this. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Seneca, cf. Martin of Braga, *Formula vitae honestae* 5 (PL 72:24): Si prudens esse cupis, in futurum, prospectum intende; et quae possunt contingere, animo tuo cuncta propone. Nihil tibi subitum sit, sed per otium ante conspicies. Nam qui prudens est, non dicit: Non putavi quidem hoc fieri; quia non dubitat, sed exspectat; nec suspicatur, sed cavet. Cujuscunque facti causam require: cum initia inveneris, exitus cogitabis. Scito te in quibusdam debere perseverare, quia coepisti: quaedam vero nec incipere, in quibus perseverare sit noxium. Prudens **[Col.0024B]**fallere non vult, falli non potest. Boni est viri, etiam in morte neminem fallere. Opiniones tuae judicia sint. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Seneca, cf. Martin of Braga, *Formula vitae honestae* 5 (PL 72:27): Nam prudentia si terminos suos excedat, callidus et pavendi acuminis eris, investigator latentium et scrutator qualiumcumque noxarum ostenderis. Notaberis minutus, suspiciosus, attentus, semper aliquid timens, semper aliquid quaerens, semper aliquid convincens, et qui subtilissimas suspiciones tuas ad deprehensionem alicuius impingas admissi. Monstraberis digito astu plenus, versipellis et simplicitatis inimicus, commentatorque culparum, et postremo uno nomine a cunctis malus homo vocaberis. In has ergo maculas prudentia immensurata perducet. Quicumque in illa mediocri lance persistit, nec obtusum in se habet aliquid nec versutum.

Cf. Robert Holcott, *In librum Sapientiae* cap. 6 (1586, p. 263): Seneca quod non debet esse inanis sicut aliqui desderant prudentes videri, et sint astuti. Prudentia (inquit) immoderata callidum facit inimicum attentum, semper aliquid timentem, aliquid requirentem, astutia plenum, versi pellem; simplicitas inimicum, commendatorem culparum, et ut postremo a cunctis uno nomine malus homo uocetur. Prudentia perfeca nec obtusum habet in se aliquid, nec versutum. Haec Seneca. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Cf. William de Lancea, *Diaetae salutis* 5.5 (8:301a): Prudentia tertio comparatur astutiæ serpentis. Et nota, quod quinque astutiis utitur serpens, quas vir prudens imitatur. Prima astutia sapientis, est custodia capitis: nam caput summe custodit, pro quo servando, totum corpus exponit; sic sancti Christum, qui est caput nostrum, summe custodiunt, et pro ipso omnia alia exponunt, sicut Apostolus, qui dicebat: *Quae* *mihi fuerunt lucra, hæc arbitratus sum propter Christum detrimenta.*  [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Jerome, cf. William Perraldus, *Sermones eximii, praestantesque super epistolas dominicales totius anni*, In die sancto Pentecostes, (f. 82v): Estote prudentes sicut serpentes. Serpens pro capite totum corpus exponit, et ad deponendum veterum pellem in arcto se ponit: et ne audiat vocem incantatoris vnam aurem cauda, aliam terra obturat. In primo docemur vt caput nostrum Christum, scilicet plusquam vitam propriam corporis amemus, ad Roman. 8 Qus nos separabit a charitate quae est in Christo Jesu, etc. <https://books.google.com/books?id=DrKVT00oU9EC&pg=PA82-IA1&lpg=PA82-IA1&dq=totum+corpus+exponit+pro+capite&source=bl&ots=AJkKIE2Pnm&sig=fiXKVrIJDzV5w16E_YoJ9flq_mM&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjV063jwJ3eAhUqSN8KHdKfCvoQ6AEwBXoECAQQAQ#v=onepage&q=totum%20corpus%20exponit%20pro%20capite&f=false> [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Cf. William de Lancea, *Diaetae salutis* 5.5 (8:301a): Tertia astutia serpentis, est delusio incantatoris: deludit enim incantatorem, obturando unam aurem cum terra, et aliam cum cauda, ut dicitur: *Sicut aspidis surdæ, et obturantis aures suas*: sic viri sancti et prudentes deludunt incantatorem, id est, tentationem diaboli, quia unam aurem obturant cauda, id est, memoria mortis, juxta illud: *Memorare novissima tua, et in æternum non peccabis*; et aliam obturant terra, id est, consideratione propriæ fragilitatis, quia dicitur: *Pulvis es, et in pulverem reverteris*. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Cf. William de Lancea, *Diaetae salutis* 5.5 (8:301a): Secunda astutia serpentis est depositio pellis; ponit enim se in arcto foramine, ubi renovatur, deposita veteri pelle: sic sancti in arcto pænitentiæ seipsos incarcerant, ut veterem conversationem deponant, sicut monet Apostolus: *Deponite vos secundum pristinam conversationem veterem hominem, qui corrumpitur secundum desideria erroris*. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Seneca, cf. Martin of Braga, *Formula Vitae Honestae* 1 (PL 72:23): Si prudentiam amplecteris, ubique idem eris et prout rerum varietas exigit, ita te accomodes tempori nec te in aliquibus mutes sed potius aptes,

Cf. William Peraldus, *Summae Virtutum ac Vitiorum* *De Prudentia,* cap. 3 (Paris: Joannem Fouet, 1629, p. 193b): Seneca in libro de quatuor virtutibus, cap. de Prudentia: Si prudentiam amplecteris, vbique idem eris, et prout rerum aut temporis varietas exigit, ita te accommodes tempori, nec te in aliquibus mut4es, sed potius aptes, sicut manus que eadem est, et quum in palmam extenditur, et quum in pugnam constringitur. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Augustine, *Sermo De scripturis*, 127.2 (PL 38:707): Et si prudentes dicuntur, qui omnibus modis agunt, ut differant mortem, et vivant paucos dies, ne perdant paucos dies, quam stulti sunt, qui sic vivunt, ut perdant aeternum diem? [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Cf. Isidore, *Etymologiae* 12.7.40-41 (PL 82:464): Noctua dicitur, pro eo quod nocte circumvolat, et per diem non possit videre. Nam exorto splendore solis visus illius habetatur. ... Nycticorax, ipsa est noctua, quia noctem [Col.0465A] amat; est enim avis lucifuga, et solem videre non patitur. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)