

CHAPTER ONE

Prudence

THE HISTORY OF TOM JONES, A FOUNDLING

by Henry Fielding

I, wisdom, dwell together with prudence;
I possess knowledge and discretion.

—Proverbs 8:12

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We do like our rules. Some rules are strict, some unspoken, some apply to everyone, some to only a few. Some of us like rigid moral rules. Some of us like unwritten rules of political correctness. No matter what, adhering to rules is much easier than exercising wisdom.

A society couldn't exist without the rule of law, of course. And a civilization wouldn't be civil without its informal expectations. The Christian faith is built on laws that Jesus came not to abolish but to fulfill. Yet, because no number of rules or laws could cover every moral or ethical choice we face, virtue picks up where rules leave off. And where rules abound, virtue, like an underused muscle, atrophies.

Virtue requires judgment, and judgment requires prudence. Prudence is wisdom in practice. It is the habit of discerning the "true good in every circumstance" and "the right means of achieving it." In other words, it is "applied morality."² A person possesses the virtue of prudence when "the disposition to reason well about what courses of action and emotion will best bring about our own and others' well-being" becomes an acquired habit.³ Perhaps Cicero puts it most clearly and succinctly in saying, "Prudence is the knowledge of things to be sought, and those to be shunned."⁴

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those to be shunned."

Prudence is considered the mother of the other three cardinal virtues,⁵ while temperance, fortitude, and justice are moral virtues, virtues related to doing, prudence is an intellectual virtue, a virtue related to knowing. Prudence is "at the heart of the moral character, for it shapes and directs the whole of our moral lives, and is indispensable to our becoming morally excellent human persons."⁶ Prudence measures the other virtues' and

determines what "makes an action good."⁸ It is described as the "charioteer of the virtues," the basis and the measure of all other virtues, helping us to apply general principles to particular situations in ways that avoid evil and accomplish good.⁹

IS VIRTUE ITS OWN REWARD?

While we hardly even talk about virtue today, in eighteenth-century England, virtue was the center of the biggest literary feud of the age. This debate, carried out on the pages of great books, grappled with the question: Do we practice virtue in hopes of achieving some personal gain, or is virtue, as the saying goes, its own reward?

The furor began in 1740 when an obscure printer's apprentice named Samuel Richardson published a fictitious series of letters titled *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded*. Written from the perspective of a young servant girl, the letters convey, moment by moment, the girl's severe trials as her wealthy, debauched master attempts to wrest her "virtue" (or virginity) from her by, at turns, guile and force. Ultimately, Pamela wins him to marriage—an unbelievable turn of events at the time because of their vast difference in social class when rigid class divisions were rarely breached, but also an (almost) unbelievable turn of events to readers today because of how hard it is to imagine a woman falling in love with so vile a suitor.

As unrealistic as the novel seems in some respects, however, *Pamela* offered to readers of its day a dramatic turn toward realism in a novel, a departure from the more typical fictional tales that had been popular for centuries. By using a realistic form (letters) and employing realistic language (the vernacular of a common servant girl), Richardson composed a story far more believable than the epics and romances of old. But even more pioneering was his combining of this new kind of realism with a powerful moral message about virtue.

Richardson's literary accomplishment was so significant that he is now called the father of the English novel. *Pamela* was a huge sensation.

Entire villages read it together, and one even rang the church bell upon reading of Pamela's marriage. Preachers extolled the book from the pulpit. An industry of paraphernalia arose, including *Pamela*-themed fans, prints, paintings, cards, and waxworks. And long before *fan fiction* was a term, *Pamela* inspired volumes of spin-offs, sequels, and parodies.

Two of the best of these parodies were penned by Henry Fielding. Parodying the moral philosophy of *Pamela*, Fielding's *Shamela* roundly satirizes what he saw in the novel as a crude commodification of virtue for the sake of worldly gain. In a longer parody, *Joseph Andrews*, Fielding comically reverses the sex roles with a hilarious depiction of a poor, virtuous young man being pursued by an older wealthy woman. He then turned to a work that would counter Richardson's not merely with mockery but with a competing moral and literary aesthetic. *The History of Tom Jones, A Foundling* is Fielding's masterpiece.

The literary battle between Fielding and Richardson changed the course of literature. Their skirmish reflected—and shaped—not only differences in literary form but also the ongoing cultural transition from the classical virtues to modern individualistic morality. The debate reflects a modern cultural shift whereby, as Alasdair MacIntyre explains in *After Virtue*, morality was severed from theology, replacing it with the modern notion of autonomy.¹⁰ *Pamela*, drawing on an earlier tradition of conduct books, promotes individual morality based on what MacIntyre calls “rules of conduct,”¹¹ while *Tom Jones* is built on what was even then a crumbling theological foundation for virtue.¹² The dispute between the two novelists mirrors the Enlightenment-era debate that has ultimately led to our current state of moral discourse. MacIntyre describes this state as the replacement of a transcendent basis for shared moral principles with mere individualistic emotivism.¹³ Paralleling this philosophical development, contemporary Christian practice, particularly as expressed in American evangelicalism, has largely experienced the replacement of orthodox doctrine with what sociologist Christian Smith terms “moralistic therapeutic deism.”¹⁴

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A SCHOOL OF VIRTUE ETHICS: *TOM JONES*

While *Pamela* reflects much about modernity and the rise of the individual, *Tom Jones* is a textbook example (literally: I use it as a textbook) of neoclassicism. It is also a veritable school of virtue ethics. Its opening dedication explains that its purpose is to advance “the cause of religion and virtue” by “displaying that beauty of virtue which may attract the admiration of mankind.” While philosophers rightly hold that virtue is developed through actual practice—by which habits become tendencies, which become instincts, which then become essential nature—literature provides a vicarious practice of virtue. After all, as Fielding explains further into his dedication, “an example is a kind of picture, in which virtue becomes as it were an object of sight,” one that “strikes us with an idea of that loveliness, which Plato asserts there is in her naked charms.”¹⁵

Fielding’s high moral purpose for his novel is reflected in many ways throughout the story that unfolds, but most striking is his narrative technique. A highly involved narrator opens each major section of the novel and interjects throughout to offer explicit commentary (as well as humorous asides). One scholar explains that this intrusive narrator is much more than a clever narrative device in that the narrator embodies Fielding’s theology concerning the character of a God who intervenes and is active in the affairs of humankind—in other words, God’s providence.¹⁶

In fact, the word *prudence* comes from the word *providence*, which means, literally, the ability to foresee.¹⁷ Cicero, a classical orator held in high regard by the neoclassical Fielding, said that what instinct is for animals, prudence is for human beings; and what prudence is for human beings, providence is for the gods.¹⁸ Because it means foreseeing, *providence* has come to refer to the actions of God based on his all-seeing and all-knowing power. The word *prudence* developed an analogous meaning within the human realm, referring to the actions of human beings based on foreseeing the consequences of a course of action and choosing accordingly. Prudence is in human affairs what God’s sovereignty is over all

of creation. In *Tom Jones*, prudence becomes the human, finite picture of God's infinite omniscience.¹⁹ Aptly, *Tom Jones* is a book full of surprises and multiple colorful (sometimes bawdy) threads woven together by a masterful author-narrator whose highly visible presence reflects a worldview founded on belief in the active presence of an Author-God in the world of human affairs.

It is fitting that a novel whose theme is the acquisition of prudence is epic in length, taking its hero, along with a rich array of major and minor characters, on an arduous, twisting, adventure-filled sojourn from country to urban setting and back again.

Tom's story begins when the noble Squire Allworthy (noble in both his social class and his moral character) discovers a foundling (the term used at that time for an infant abandoned, then found) and decides to raise him like a son. Allworthy's mercy is remarkable in a time when illegitimate children were not treated kindly. Given the name Tom Jones, the boy develops into a high-spirited young man, full of passion but eminently good-natured. As Tom grows, Allworthy's generosity to the child raises the jealousy of other members of the household, however, and they don't let pass any opportunity to shed a bad light on the boy. The imprudent Tom provides many chances for them to succeed. When Tom finally loses favor with Allworthy through a combination of his own bad behavior and the exaggeration of this by his enemies, his benefactor expels him from the estate—aptly named Paradise Hall—after admonishing Tom that he must learn prudence.

Prudence is a form of wisdom. The ancients distinguished between two kinds of wisdom: speculative wisdom (*sophia*), related to the world of abstract ideas, and practical wisdom (*prudentia*), related to the concrete world of particular actions. As Tom pursues the story's heroine, his beloved Sophia (wisdom), he must also pursue and acquire prudence, or applied wisdom.

Wisdom is so rare today that distinguishing between speculative and practical wisdom seems overly nuanced. But we've all heard advice or a principle that seems right—yet is impossible to apply to a particular situation. One notices this often with pundits and commentators who are

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On the other hand that so easily distill to an end,²⁰ it is a justifying the means recasts the cardinal. Fielding viewed it. Consider the connotations which usage suggests a note (Being of a certain kind Dana Carvey once saying, "Wouldn't

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wont to spout platitudes that sound wise in theory yet prove disastrous when applied to an actual situation.

I think, for example, of a man I know who, after his wife divorced him to be with another man, was fired from his job assisting a ministry leader. The ministry leader thought it wise not to sully his family-centered ministry's reputation by working so closely with a man whose life didn't live up to the ministry's values. Years later, however, when divorce hit closer to home within the leader's family, his understanding of divorce tempered, and he realized that his views, although seemingly wise in theory, couldn't stand the test of application in the real world. By then it was too late. The

man he had fired, who had done no wrong, was embittered and hurt beyond easy repair. Another example is the rule among some male leaders not to meet alone with a woman, which sounds moral and wise but generally becomes impossible to practice without falling into other errors such as disrespect or discrimination. Yet many today assume its prudence and adopt the rule without examination. Prudence is wisdom at work on the ground, doing good and avoiding evil in real-life situations.

On the other hand, the practical nature of prudence is the very thing that so easily distorts it. Because prudence is concerned with the means to an end,²⁰ it is easily confused with pragmatism, easily corrupted by justifying the means with the end. Misguided backlash against prudence recasts the cardinal virtue as crass *quid pro quo* (which is exactly how Fielding viewed Richardson's portrayal of "virtue rewarded" in *Pamela*). Consider the contempt for the related word *prude*, which has no positive connotations whatsoever. *Prudery*, *prudence*, *prudent*: each in today's usage suggests a narrow-minded, slim-souled, hand-wringing Pollyanna. (Being of a certain age, I can't hear any of these words without remembering Dana Carvey on *Saturday Night Live* imitating George H. W. Bush saying, "Wouldn't be prudent!")

Even as far back as 1749, the year *Tom Jones* was published, prudence was viewed cynically. Its ambiguous status is shown in the way Fielding

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treats it both seriously and humorously in the novel, demonstrating the transition when moral language began being used pragmatically and manipulatively, obscuring the arbitrary and autonomous basis of moral choices by cloaking personal preference in the language of virtue.²¹

One way the diminishing power of virtue in general can be seen is in the narrowing of its definition such that it was often used synonymously with virginity, as in *Pamela*, a conflation that grounded a significant part of Fielding's objection to Richardson's moral vision. (This is an interesting etymological development given that the Latin root for *virtue* literally means "man" or "manliness.") When *virtue* is used as a euphemism for *virginity*, it's inevitable that the concept of virtue is depleted, its practice diminished, and the virginity for which it stands commodified and fetishized.

This points to a problem in the purity culture popular today in some strains of Christianity. The movement's well-intentioned attempt to encourage believers to remain virgins until marriage unfortunately misses the mark by inadvertently making sexual purity a means to an end (such as alluring a fine marriage partner or being rewarded with a great sex life once married) rather than being a virtue in itself. Furthermore, apart from a more holistic sense of virtue, and in particular the virtue of chastity (the topic of chapter 8), virginity itself means little—as evidenced by the creative ways people maintain their virginity while remaining anything but sexually pure and by a former US president who claimed he'd not committed adultery because he'd engaged in all but intercourse with his mistress, and as further evidenced by situations in which virginity (not chastity) is lost through sexual assault.

Accordingly, in Fielding's view, Richardson's message in *Pamela* is that virtue is not a good in and of itself but is proven in being rewarded—by marriage, wealth, advancement, or praise (or in the case of *Pamela*, all four). *Pamela* offers a more complicated picture than Fielding gives it credit for, but his reading of the novel effectively demonstrates how easily morality slips into moralism, how finely drawn the line is between the law and legalism, and how readily the promise of blessings is mistaken as a contract for material prosperity.

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SATIRE AND VIRTUE

Such slippage is ripe fodder for satire, and *Tom Jones* is, along with being epic and comic, satirical. Satire is the ridicule of vice or folly for the purpose of correction. It is a harsh way to communicate truth, but pointing to truth—by first pointing to error—is its goal. Satire mocks—but it does so with a moral aim. And that's a problem in an age with few agreed-upon manners or rules. Unlike a lampoon or a parody or other forms of low comedy, satire relies on both a shared moral standard and a shared desire to attain that standard. This makes satire tricky for two reasons: first, agreement on moral standards varies from age to age, and second, some simply don't believe that it's anyone's job to "correct" anyone else's behavior. We live today in times that are hard for satire for both of these reasons. Vice and even folly are more and more seen as being "in the eyes of the beholder." Absent agreement on these, satire just seems mean. On the surface, ridicule doesn't seem kind, of course. But to ridicule what is wicked or foolish in hopes of preventing more of the same is much kinder than letting wickedness or folly continue along their merry, destructive way. Moreover, the sharp bite of satire leads some to think satire must be pessimistic, misanthropic even. Yet the truth is that the satirist, someone who tries so hard to improve the world, must, I think, love people very much. Even God's inspired Word contains plenty of irony and satire, such as when Job mocks the worldly-wise friends who've taunted his faith, saying, "Doubtless you are the only people who matter, and wisdom will die with you!" (Job 12:2). The satirist loves in the way of God, who chastens those whom he loves. There is only one thing worse than being chastened: that is, not being chastened.

As with all satire, *Tom Jones* requires readers to distinguish between the narrator's ironic voice and the true one. Sometimes the novel presents

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an ironic picture of prudence and other times a true one. False prudence is, like irony, a form of misdirection—in this case, directing knowledge toward unjust ends. The burden is on the reader to distinguish between the sincere and the ironic in order to discern what true virtue consists of. (Fielding offers the reader considerable help with his highly obtrusive, and funny, narrator.) Think of this misdirection as a precursor to *Seinfeld*, modern satire at its finest. *Seinfeld* doesn't affirm the shallow, egotistical, trivial characters of Jerry, George, Elaine, and Kramer—it satirizes them. Humor is closely connected to prudence because “morality is not sufficient for virtue; virtue also requires intelligence and lucidity. It is something that humor reminds us of and that prudence prescribes. It is imprudent to heed morality alone, and it is immoral to be imprudent.”²² By forcing us to test our understanding and application of prudence, satire paradoxically deepens our understanding of prudence.

IN PURSUIT OF PRUDENCE

The word *prudence* appears dozens of times throughout *Tom Jones*, and the reader must prudently discern the tone with each use, for the narrator can rarely be taken at face value. Most often, the word is used satirically in order to correct various forms of false prudence. Fielding believed that “it is much easier to make good men wise than to make bad men good.”²³ Teasing out what true prudence consists of advances Fielding's hope “to make good men wise.”

One early example in the story demonstrates the irony that runs throughout, forcing the careful reader to pause and consider whether true or false prudence is being portrayed. While lecturing her niece on matrimonial affairs, Sophia's aunt tells her that women of the polite world “consider matrimony, as men do offices of public trust, only as the means of making their fortunes, and of advancing themselves in the world.”²⁴ Clearly, this is not virtuous prudence but the vice formed from its excess: cunningness, shrewdness, or conceit. Its opposite vice—negligence,

or rashness—is formed from the deficiency of prudence.²⁵ Prudence, like all virtues, is the moderation between the excess and deficiency of that virtue.

Two of the most comical characters in the novel embody these vices: the household tutors, Thwackum and Square. Thwackum is (as his name hints) a pious legalist who spots sin and corruption everywhere he looks—all of which turns out, not surprisingly, to be a projection of his own vice (cunning) onto everyone else. The negligent Square, on the other hand, ends up being caught, rather imprudently, with his pants down (literally) in the bedroom of Tom's first lover.

Part of prudence is "the ability to govern and discipline oneself by the use of reason."²⁶ Obviously, self-governance is a positive quality. It requires a kind of knowledge of both oneself and the world, which is what prudence essentially refers to. But when such knowledge is used toward unjust or evil ends, it transforms from the virtue of prudence into the vice of cunning. The word *cunning* is etymologically connected, not coincidentally, to the word *knowledge*. The just use of knowledge that constitutes prudence devolves into mere cunning when that knowledge is used for unjust ends.

The excess prudence of cunning and conceit is embodied in the character of Tom's foil, Squire Allworthy's nephew and presumed heir, Blifil. Blifil,

whose personality is as limp and lisping as his name, contrasts in every way with the robust, vivacious, and generous Tom. When the novel describes Blifil as "prudent," this is clearly meant in the bad—ironic—way. Sophia, over whom Tom and Blifil vie, observes that Blifil is "prudent," but merely as concerns "the interest only of one single person; and who that single person was the reader will be able to divine without any assistance of ours."²⁷ While virtuous prudence is characterized by "purity, straightforwardness, candor, and simplicity of character," false prudence relies on the appearance of these as a tactic toward some other end.²⁸ In this, Blifil excels.

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While some of his motive for marrying Sophia is to expand the family estate, Blifil's cunning should not be confused with the vice of covetousness. Covetousness is "immoderate straining for all the possessions which man thinks are needed to assure his own importance and status."²⁹ Blifil, however, is so dispassionate and lacking in ambition that his selfish ends—his tutors' approval, Allworthy's favor, and the affection of the

novel's heroine, the lovely Sophia—seem almost accidental.

Vice is just as likely to be accidental as intentional. In this way, virtue opposes vice not only in its moral content but in its acquisition as well. Vice is natural to human beings in their fallen state. But virtue must be practiced, become a habit, and be inhabited by a person in order to attain excellence.

This fact points to an interesting quality of vice: it is just as likely to be accidental as intentional. In this way, virtue opposes vice not only in its moral content but in its acquisition as well. Vice is natural to human beings in their fallen state. But virtue must be practiced, become a habit, and be inhabited by a person in order to attain excellence.

In contrast to Blifil's, Tom's deficient vices are rashness and negligence. While he does possess an abundance of charity and generosity, his negligence and rashness, despite his good intentions, nullify his virtuous qualities. Such imprudence

leads him to engage in poaching, fornication, and selling gifts Allworthy has given him (albeit in order to help a needy neighbor). Furthermore, Tom's robust sexual appetite leads him into extremely imprudent liaisons. His intemperate spirits lead him to drunkenness and other excesses. His lack of prudence renders his good intentions either ineffectual or even harmful, both to others and to himself. In contrast to Tom, the prudent person makes "intelligent judgements regarding the overall trajectory of a flourishing life as well as accurate judgements about how to achieve it."³⁰

Despite his vices, Tom demonstrates that prudence is formed by charity, or love.³¹ "Prudence is love that chooses with sagacity between

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that which hinders it and that which helps it."³² Developing prudence requires Tom to moderate all his passions, including his charitableness, since even love of others must be in proper proportion in order to be just, as Augustine explains in *On Christian Teaching*.³³ Loving oneself in proper proportion is necessary to loving others well. As Allworthy explains to Tom, prudence is "the duty which we owe ourselves. . . . If we will be so much our own enemies as to neglect it, we are not to wonder if the world is deficient in discharging their duty to us; for when a man lays the foundation of his own ruin, others will, I am afraid, be too apt to build upon it."³⁴ Tom's lack of prudence proves Sophia's observation that Tom is "nobody's enemy but his own."³⁵

As "the perfected ability to make decisions in accordance with reality,"³⁶ prudence requires some knowledge of the world. In classical art, the goddess Prudentia is often depicted with a mirror (to represent self-knowledge or conscience) and a serpent (an ancient symbol of wisdom). The image conveys the understanding that prudence requires knowledge of both universal principles and the particulars of a given situation, along with the idea that, as Aquinas says, a prudent person is one who sees from afar.³⁷ Prudence concerns the "realities of a life lived within a specific and communal history, wisdom which proceeds to act."³⁸ It is exercised "within the mix of specific relations and goods that give the moral life of any person its texture. . . . Hence prudence responds specifically to the concrete particularities of one's life."³⁹ In other words, applying wisdom requires the ability to discern truth and then to act rightly based on truth. This is why John Milton, as we noted in the introduction to this book, distinguishes between virtue and mere innocence. Josef Pieper explains the connection of prudence to reality this way: "There can be false and crooked ways leading even to right goals. The meaning of the virtue of prudence, however, is primarily this: that not only the end of human action but also the means for its realization shall be in keeping with the truth of real things. This in turn necessitates that the egocentric 'interests' of man be silenced in order that he may perceive the truth of real things, and so that reality itself may guide him to the proper means for realizing his goal."⁴⁰

Thus Tom's cultivation of prudence parallels his growth in knowledge of the world as he leaves the rural setting of his birth, travels on the road, and experiences urban life, encountering complex situations and deceptive people along the way. The pickles he gets himself into demonstrate how prudence is an intellectual virtue based in the rational ability, first, to distinguish between competing goods (for Tom, too often, these competing goods are women); then to foresee the consequences of possible actions; and finally, to take the best course of action accordingly. Reading his story allows us to learn about the world along with Tom. Prudence "transforms knowledge of reality into realization of the good."⁴¹ But in the real world, what is good is what is practical, even if it falls short of ideal.⁴² In other words, as the saying goes, the enemy of the good is the best. If only the ideal will do, the good will likely never be realized. Perfectionism is the foil of prudence.

One way Tom learns prudence, just as we do in real life, is by observing its lack in others. By observing reality, Tom learns that "folly is self-inflicted, due chiefly to our willingly directing our attention to secondary goods, or evils . . . that oppose the divine concerns."⁴³

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When Tom's companion Mr. Nightingale impregnates his lover and then refuses to marry her because of her loss of reputation (never mind that she lost it to him!), Tom exhorts Nightingale to do the right thing, admonishing him that "when you promised to marry her she became your wife; and she hath sinned more against prudence than

virtue."⁴⁴ Tom comes by this advice honestly, having found himself in similar straits earlier in the story when, believing he had impregnated a woman, he is humble and responsible enough to do right by the young woman (until fate reveals other surprises). Prudence, in fact, has affinity with the open nature of magnanimity. In contrast to magnanimity, "insidiousness, guile, craft, and concupiscence are the refuge of small-minded and small-souled persons."⁴⁵ Tom is an open book, even to a fault, initially.

The pages are open, but the cover needs repair. Tom must learn that his natural inward state of goodness should be reflected outwardly by mores and morals. Appearances and reputation are not unnecessary adornments but are prudent in making one's outward behavior and morality conform to one's inward state. As the helpful narrator of the story tells us,

Prudence and circumspection are necessary even to the best of men. They are indeed as it were a guard to virtue, without which she can never be safe. It is not enough that your designs, nay that your actions are intrinsically good, [but] you must take care they shall appear so. If your inside be never so beautiful, you must preserve a fair outside also. This must be constantly looked to, or malice and envy will take care to blacken it so, that the sagacity and goodness of an Allworthy will not be able to see through it, and to discern the beauties within. Let this, my young readers, be your constant maxim, that no man can be good enough to enable him to neglect the rules of prudence; nor will virtue herself look beautiful, unless she be bedecked with the outward ornaments of decency and decorum.⁴⁶

A NOVEL OF DEVELOPMENT

Tom Jones is a traditional bildungsroman, a novel of development. Thus, as Tom's love for Sophia (wisdom) grows, so too does his prudence. Because "the virtue of prudence is dependent upon the constant readiness to ignore the self,"⁴⁷ the more Tom puts Sophia's interests ahead of his own, the more he is able to cultivate prudence (such as by learning to decline the wealthy and worldly women who offer themselves to him). Tom eventually applies wisdom by pursuing all its components—seeking counsel, deliberation, judgment, coming to resolution, and action.⁴⁸

The novel paints a vivid picture of Fielding's own belief that a good-natured soul is capable of great good once virtue is cultivated. This question of human nature—whether it is essentially good or corrupt—is

a strong undercurrent in the larger debate between Fielding and Richardson and among their contemporaries. Fielding's more liberal theology emerges in *Tom Jones* in his emphasis on Tom's essential good nature, which triumphs over his moral failures. In contrast to Fielding's high-church Anglicanism, Richardson's theological view of human nature was influenced by the Methodism of John Wesley and George Whitefield and thus reflects the doctrine of human depravity. The question of whether human nature is essentially good or bad was a pressing one among Enlightenment philosophers and, not surprisingly, made its way into the most influential literature of the day. This philosophical, and essentially theological, debate played a significant role not only in shaping these novels (e.g., the differences between each side's literary style and overall message) but also in the development of the emerging genre of the novel as a whole. Because of such underlying questions, the novel is, in many ways, the genre best representative of the modern condition.

This debate over the essential goodness or depravity of human nature has continued into the present day and is commonly cited as the fundamental division between conservative and liberal theology and politics. However, a question even more significant than whether human nature is essentially good or bad has emerged, and that is the question of whether such a thing as an essential human nature exists at all. If not, then there can be no *telos* or true end toward which human existence and excellence should be directed. And if there is no purpose for human existence, then there can be no unified, transcendent basis for morality or virtue. This, MacIntyre argues, is what places contemporary humanity in the position of being "after virtue."⁴⁹

But Tom Jones lives in a world in which the foundation of virtue still stands, though crumbling. The story reaches its happy conclusion for Tom (it is a comedy, after all) only when he has recognized and confessed the errors of his ways. In response, Squire Allworthy joyfully tells him, "You now see, Tom, to what dangers imprudence alone may subject virtue (for virtue, I am now convinced, you love in a great degree)."⁵⁰ The all-knowing narrator informs us that Tom, "by reflection on his past

follies, acquired a discretion and prudence very uncommon in one of his lively parts.⁵¹

Thus the novel demonstrates that the virtue of prudence is indeed "right reason directed to the excellent human life,"⁵² a virtue as uncommon as it is essential to the admirable goal of retaining our lively parts."