

9.13 | Prudence

Whereas courage and temperance, as virtues, are traits of character, the virtue of prudence is a quality of mind. That is why it is sometimes called an “intellectual virtue,” along with science, art, and wisdom. But it also differs from these other intellectual virtues in that it is not concerned with knowledge, or understanding, or even with know-how or skill in making things, but with action. Another name for prudence, the reader will find in the quotations below, is “practical wisdom”—wisdom in the choice of means to achieve the goals of life. Hence of all the intellectual virtues, prudence or practical wisdom is the one most integrally related to the moral virtues of courage, temperance, and justice. The reader will find the treatment of speculative or philosophical wisdom in Section 9.15 on WISDOM AND FOLLY.

As certain quotations below expressly indicate, the crucial question is whether it is possible to be wise (i.e., practically wise or prudent) without being good (i.e., morally virtuous), or good without being wise. If the

answer to that question affirms the inseparability of prudence and moral virtue, then, as another quotation points out, cleverness in the choice of means to achieve morally reprehensible ends—for example, the cunning of the thief—is not genuine prudence, but a counterfeit of it.

The prudent man, we are told, is one who has the habitual disposition to take counsel or advice and then to weigh the advantages and disadvantages in a process of deliberation before coming to a decision about what ought to be done in the particular case under consideration. The prudent man is a man of sound judgment, not about things in general, nor about the principles or rules of morality, but about the circumstances of particular cases in which decisions have to be made for or against particular courses of action. Lack of prudence manifests itself in the making of rash or impetuous decisions, on the one hand, or in prolonged indecision, on the other.

1 Themistocles was a man who exhibited the most indubitable signs of genius; indeed, in this particular he has a claim on our admiration quite extraordinary and unparalleled. By his own native capacity, alike unformed and unsupplemented by study, he was at once the best judge in those sudden crises which admit of little or of no deliberation, and the best prophet of the future, even to its most distant possibilities. An able theoretical expositor of all that came within the sphere of his practice, he was not without the power of passing an adequate judgment in matters in which he had no experience. He could also excellently divine the good and evil which lay hid in the unseen future. In fine, whether we consider the extent of his natural powers, or the slightness of his application, this extraordinary man must be allowed to have surpassed all others in the faculty of intuitively meeting an emergency.

tively meeting an emergency.

Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, I, 138

2 *Socrates*. Let us consider the goods of the soul: they are temperance, justice, courage, quickness of apprehension, memory, magnanimity, and the like?

Meno. Surely.

Soc. And such of these as are not knowledge, but of another sort, are sometimes profitable and sometimes hurtful; as, for example, courage wanting prudence, which is only a sort of confidence? When a man has no sense he is harmed by courage, but when he has sense he is profited?

Men. True.

Soc. And the same may be said of temperance and quickness of apprehension; whatever things are learned or done with sense are profitable, but when done without sense they are hurtful?

Men. Very true.

Soc. And in general, all that the soul attempts or endures, when under the guidance of wisdom, ends in happiness; but when she is under the guidance of folly, in the opposite?

Men. That appears to be true.

Soc. If then virtue is a quality of the soul, and is admitted to be profitable, it must be wisdom or prudence, since none of the things of the soul are either profitable or hurtful in themselves, but they are all made profitable or hurtful by the addition of wisdom or of folly; and therefore if virtue is profitable, virtue must be a sort of wisdom or prudence?

Men. I quite agree.

Soc. And the other goods, such as wealth and the like, of which we were just now saying that they are sometimes good and sometimes evil, do not they also become profitable or hurtful, accordingly as the soul guides and uses them rightly or wrongly; just as the things of the soul herself are benefited when under the guidance of wisdom and harmed by folly?

Men. True.

Soc. And the wise soul guides them rightly, and the foolish soul wrongly.

Men. Yes.

Soc. And is not this universally true of human nature? All other things hang upon the soul, and the things of the soul herself hang upon wisdom, if they are to be good; and so wisdom is inferred to be that which profits—and virtue, as we say, is profitable?

Men. Certainly.

Soc. And thus we arrive at the conclusion that virtue is either wholly or partly wisdom?

Men. I think that what you are saying, Socrates, is very true.

Plato, *Meno*, 88A

- 3 Regarding *practical wisdom* we shall get at the truth by considering who are the persons we credit with it. Now it is thought to be the mark of a man of practical wisdom to be able to deliberate well about what is good and expedient for himself, not in some particular respect . . . but about what sorts of thing conduce to the good life in general. This is shown by the fact that we credit men with practical wisdom in some particular respect when they have calculated well with a view to some good end which is one of those that are not the object of any art. It follows that in the general sense also the man who is capable of deliberating has practical wisdom. Now no one deliberates about things that are invariable, nor about things that it is impossible for him to do. Therefore, since scientific knowledge involves demonstration, but there is no demonstration of things whose first principles are variable (for all such things might actually be otherwise), and since it is impossible to deliberate about things that are of necessity, prac-

tical wisdom cannot be scientific knowledge nor art; not science because that which can be done is capable of being otherwise, not art because action and making are different kinds of thing. The remaining alternative, then, is that it is a true and reasoned state of capacity to act with regard to the things that are good or bad for man. For while making has an end other than itself, action cannot; for good action itself is its end. It is for this reason that we think Pericles and men like him have practical wisdom, viz. because they can see what is good for themselves and what is good for men in general; we consider that those can do this who are good at managing households or states. (This is why we call temperance by this name; we imply that it preserves one's practical wisdom. Now what it preserves is a judgement of the kind we have described. For it is not any and every judgment that pleasant and painful objects destroy and pervert, e.g. the judgement that the triangle has or has not its angles equal to two right angles, but only judgements about what is to be done. For the originating causes of the things that are done consist in the end at which they are aimed; but the man who has been ruined by pleasure or pain forthwith fails to see any such originating cause—to see that for the sake of this or because of this he ought to choose and do whatever he chooses and does; for vice is destructive of the originating cause of action.) Practical wisdom, then, must be a reasoned and true state of capacity to act with regard to human goods. But further, while there is such a thing as excellence in art, there is no such thing as excellence in practical wisdom; and in art he who errs willingly is preferable, but in practical wisdom, as in the virtues, he is the reverse. Plainly, then, practical wisdom is a virtue and not an art. There being two parts of the soul that can follow a course of reasoning, it must be the virtue of one of the two, i.e. of that part which forms opinions; for opinion is about the variable and so is practical wisdom. But yet it is not only a reasoned state; this is shown by the fact that a state of that sort may be forgotten but practical wisdom cannot.

Aristotle, *Ethics*, 1140^a24

- 4 Practical wisdom . . . is concerned with things human and things about which it is possible to deliberate; for we say this is above all the work of the man of practical wisdom, to deliberate well, but no one deliberates about things invariable, nor about things which have not an end, and that a good that can be brought about by action. The man who is without qualification good at deliberating is the man who is capable of aiming in accordance with calculation at the best for man of things attainable by action. Nor is practical wisdom concerned with universals only—it must also recognize the particulars; for it is practical, and practice is concerned with particulars. This is why

some who do not know, and especially those who have experience, are more practical than others who know,

Aristotle, *Ethics*, 1141^{b7}

5 Understanding, also, and goodness of understanding, in virtue of which men are said to be men of understanding or of good understanding, are neither entirely the same as opinion or scientific knowledge (for at that rate all men would have been men of understanding), nor are they one of the particular sciences, such as medicine, the science of things connected with health, or geometry, the science of spatial magnitudes. For understanding is neither about things that are always and are unchangeable, nor about any and every one of the things that come into being, but about things which may become subjects of questioning and deliberation. Hence it is about the same objects as practical wisdom; but understanding and practical wisdom are not the same. For practical wisdom issues commands, since its end is what ought to be done or not to be done; but understanding only judges. (Understanding is identical with goodness of understanding, men of understanding with men of good understanding.) Now understanding is neither the having nor the acquiring of practical wisdom; but as learning is called understanding when it means the exercise of the faculty of knowledge, so 'understanding' is applicable to the exercise of the faculty of opinion for the purpose of judging of what some one else says about matters with which practical wisdom is concerned—and of judging soundly; for 'well' and 'soundly' are the same thing. And from this has come the use of the name 'understanding' in virtue of which men are said to be 'of good understanding', viz. from the application of the word to the grasping of scientific truth; for we often call such grasping understanding.

What is called judgement, in virtue of which men are said to 'be sympathetic judges' and to 'have judgement', is the right discrimination of the equitable. This is shown by the fact that we say the equitable man is above all others a man of sympathetic judgement, and identify equity with sympathetic judgement about certain facts. And sympathetic judgement is judgement which discriminates what is equitable and does so correctly; and correct judgement is that which judges what is true.

Now all the states we have considered converge, as might be expected, to the same point; for when we speak of judgement and understanding and practical wisdom and intuitive reason we credit the same people with possessing judgement and having reached years of reason and with having practical wisdom and understanding. For all these faculties deal with ultimates, i.e. with particulars; and being a man of understanding and of good or sympathetic judgement consists in being able to

judge about the things with which practical wisdom is concerned; for the equities are common to all good men in relation to other men.

Aristotle, *Ethics*, 1142^{b34}

6 As in the part of us which forms opinions there are two types, cleverness and practical wisdom, so too in the moral part there are two types, natural virtue and virtue in the strict sense, and of these the latter involves practical wisdom. This is why some say that all the virtues are forms of practical wisdom, and why Socrates in one respect was on the right track while in another he went astray; in thinking that all the virtues were forms of practical wisdom he was wrong, but in saying they implied practical wisdom he was right. This is confirmed by the fact that even now all men, when they define virtue, after naming the state of character and its objects add 'that (state) which is in accordance with the right rule'; now the right rule is that which is in accordance with practical wisdom. All men, then, seem somehow to divine that this kind of state is virtue, viz. that which is in accordance with practical wisdom. But we must go a little further. For it is not merely the state in accordance with the right rule, but the state that implies the *presence* of the right rule, that is virtue; and practical wisdom is a right rule about such matters. Socrates, then, thought the virtues were rules or rational principles (for he thought they were, all of them, forms of scientific knowledge), while we think they *involve* a rational principle.

It is clear, then, from what has been said, that it is not possible to be good in the strict sense without practical wisdom, nor practically wise without moral virtue. But in this way we may also refute the dialectical argument whereby it might be contended that the virtues exist in separation from each other; the same man, it might be said, is not best equipped by nature for all the virtues, so that he will have already acquired one when he has not yet acquired another. This is possible in respect of the natural virtues, but not in respect of those in respect of which a man is called without qualification good; for with the presence of the one quality, practical wisdom, will be given all the virtues. And it is plain that, even if it were of no practical value, we should have needed it because it is the virtue of the part of us in question; plain too that the choice will not be right without practical wisdom any more than without virtue; for the one determines the end and the other makes us do the things that lead to the end.

Aristotle, *Ethics*, 1144^{b14}

7 The beginning and the greatest good is prudence. Wherefore prudence is a more precious thing even than philosophy; for from prudence are sprung all the other virtues, and it teaches us that it is not possible to live pleasantly without living prudently and honourably and justly, nor, again, to live a

life of prudence, honour, and justice without living pleasantly. For the virtues are by nature bound up with the pleasant life, and the pleasant life is inseparable from them.

Epicurus, *Letter to Menoecus*

8 Then the father [Phoebus] rubbed his son's [Phaethon's] face with a divine ointment, to enable him to endure the searing flames. On his head he placed his own rays, and, sighing deeply from his troubled heart—for he foresaw the grief that was in store for him—he said: 'At least obey your father's instructions, my son, if you can. Use the goad sparingly, and hold in the reins with all your strength. The horses set a fast pace of their own accord: the difficulty is to check their keenness. And do not try to drive straight across the five zones of heaven—there is a track that slants in a broad curve, confined within the boundaries of three zones, which avoids the Southern Pole, and also the North with its chilling winds. Travel by this road, where you will see clear marks of wheels. To allow earth and heaven to share equally in your warmth, do not go too low, nor yet force your way into the upper air: if you drive too high, you will set the dome of heaven on fire, and if you are too low you will scorch the earth. The middle way is safest. Nor must you swerve to the right, towards the coiling Serpent, nor to the left, where the low-lying Altar shines. Hold your course between them both.'

Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, II

9 What shall I say of that virtue which is called prudence? Is not all its vigilance spent in the discernment of good from evil things, so that no mistake may be admitted about what we should desire and what avoid? And thus it is itself a proof that we are in the midst of evils, or that evils are in us; for it teaches us that it is an evil to consent to sin, and a good to refuse this consent.

Augustine, *City of God*, XIX, 4

10 It is requisite for prudence, which is right reason about things to be done, that man be well disposed with regard to the ends, and this depends on the rectitude of his appetite. Therefore, for prudence there is need of a moral virtue, which rectifies the appetite. On the other hand, the good of things made by art is not the good of man's appetite, but the good of those artificial things themselves, and therefore art does not presuppose rectitude of the appetite. The consequence is that more praise is given to a craftsman who is at fault willingly, than to one who is unwillingly; but it is more contrary to prudence to sin willingly than unwillingly, since rectitude of the will is essential to prudence, but not to art. Accordingly it is evident that prudence is a virtue distinct from art.

Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, 57, 4

11 Prudence is of good counsel about matters regard-

ing man's entire life, and the end of human life. But in some arts there is counsel about matters concerning the ends proper to those arts. Hence some men, in so far as they are good counsellors in matters of warfare, or government, are said to be prudent officers or rulers, but not prudent absolutely; only those are prudent absolutely who give good counsel about all the concerns of life.

Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, 57, 4

12 Prudence is the principal of all the virtues absolutely.

Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, 61, 2

13 No moral virtue can be without prudence, for the reason that it is proper to moral virtue to make a right choice, since it is an elective habit. Now right choice requires not only the inclination to a due end, which inclination is the direct outcome of moral virtue, but also the right choice of means, which choice is made by prudence, that counsels, judges, and commands in those things that are directed to the end. In like manner one cannot have prudence unless one has the moral virtues, since prudence is right reason about things to be done, and the starting-point of reason is the end of the thing to be done, to which end man is rightly disposed by moral virtue. Hence, just as we cannot have speculative science unless we have the understanding of the principles, so neither can we have prudence without the moral virtues.

Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, 65, 1

14 Prudence has no business with supreme matters which are the object of wisdom, but its command covers things ordered to wisdom, namely, how men are to obtain wisdom. Therefore prudence, or political science, is, in this way, the servant of wisdom, for it leads to wisdom, preparing the way for her, as the porter for the king.

Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, 66, 5

15 Prudence considers the means of acquiring happiness, but wisdom considers the very object of happiness.

Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, 66, 5

16 Prudence is threefold. There is a false prudence, which takes its name from its likeness to true prudence. For since a prudent man is one who disposes well of the things that have to be done for a good end, whoever disposes well of such things as are fitting for an evil end, has false prudence, in so far as that which he takes for an end, is good, not in truth but in appearance. Thus a man is called a *good robber*, and in this way we may speak of a *prudent robber*, by way of similarity, because he devises fitting ways of committing robbery. This is the prudence of which the Apostle says: *The prudence of the flesh is death*, because, to wit, it places its ultimate end in the pleasures of the flesh.

The second prudence is indeed true prudence,

because it devises fitting ways of obtaining a good end; and yet it is imperfect, from a twofold source. First, because the good which it takes for an end, is not the common end of all human life, but of some particular affair; thus when a man devises fitting ways of conducting business or of sailing a ship, he is called a prudent business-man, or a prudent sailor:—secondly, because he fails in the chief act of prudence, as when a man takes counsel aright, and forms a good judgment, even about things concerning life as a whole, but fails to make an effective command.

The third prudence is both true and perfect, for it takes counsel, judges and commands aright in respect of the good end of man's whole life: and this alone is prudence simply so-called, and cannot be in sinners, whereas the first prudence is in sinners alone, while imperfect prudence is common to good and wicked men, especially that which is imperfect through being directed to a particular end, since that which is imperfect on account of a failing in the chief act, is only in the wicked.

Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, 47, 13

- 17 For any man who hath a house to found,
Runs not at once the labor to begin
With reckless hand, but first will look around,
And send his heart's line outward from within,
To see how best of all his end to win.
Chaucer, *Troilus and Cressida*, I, 153
- 18 The virtue assigned to the affairs of the world is a virtue with many bends, angles, and elbows, so as to join and adapt itself to human weakness; mixed and artificial, not straight, clean, constant, or purely innocent. . . . He who walks in the crowd must step aside, keep his elbows in, step back or advance, even leave the straight way, according to what he encounters. He must live not so much according to himself as according to others, not according to what he proposes to himself but according to what others propose to him, according to the time, according to the men, according to the business.
Montaigne, *Essays*, III, 9, Of Vanity
- 19 Fool. Mark it, nuncle:
"Have more than thou showest,
Speak less than thou knowest,
Lend less than thou owest,
Ride more than thou goest,
Learn more than thou trowest,
Set less than thou throwest,
Leave thy drink and thy whore,
And keep in-a-door,
And thou shalt have more
Than two tens to a score."
Kent. This is nothing, fool.
Shakespeare, *Lear*, I, iv, 130

- 20 *Apemantus*. Immortal gods, I crave no pelf;
I pray for no man but myself.
Grant I may never prove so fond,
To trust man on his oath or bond;
Or a harlot, for her weeping;
Or a dog, that seems a-sleeping;
Or a keeper with my freedom;
Or my friends, if I should need 'em.
Amen.

Shakespeare, *Timon of Athens*, I, ii, 63

- 21 There is no great concurrence between learning and wisdom. For of the three wisdoms which we have set down to pertain to civil life, for wisdom of behaviour, it is by learned men for the most part despised, as an inferior to virtue and an enemy to meditation; for wisdom of government, they acquit themselves well when they are called to it, but that happeneth to few; but for the wisdom of business, wherein man's life is most conversant, there be no books of it, except some few scattered advertisements, that have no proportion to the magnitude of this subject. For if books were written of this as the other, I doubt not but learned men with mean experience, would far excel men of long experience without learning, and outshoot them in their own bow.
Bacon, *Advancement of Learning*,
Bk. II, XXIII, 4
- 22 Prudence is a *presumption* of the future, contracted from the experience of time past: so there is a presumption of things past taken from other things, not future, but past also. For he that hath seen by what courses and degrees a flourishing state hath first come into civil war, and then to ruin; upon the sight of the ruins of any other state will guess the like war and the like courses have been there also. But this conjecture has the same uncertainty almost with the conjecture of the future, both being grounded only upon experience.
Hobbes, *Leviathan*, I, 3
- 23 When the thoughts of a man that has a design in hand, running over a multitude of things, observes how they conduce to that design, or what design they may conduce unto; if his observations be such as are not easy, or usual, this wit of his is called *prudence*, and dependeth on much experience, and memory of the like things and their consequences heretofore.
Hobbes, *Leviathan*, I, 8
- 24 A man that doth his business by the help of many and prudent counsellors, with every one consulting apart in his proper element, does it best; as he that useth able seconds at tennis play, placed in their proper stations. He does next best that useth his own judgement only; as he that has no second at all. But he that is carried up and down to his business in a framed counsel, which cannot move

but by the plurality of consenting opinions, the execution whereof is commonly, out of envy or interest, retarded by the part dissenting, does it worst of all, and like one that is carried to the ball, though by good players, yet in a wheelbarrow, or other frame, heavy of itself, and retarded also by the inconcurrent judgements and endeavours of them that drive it; and so much the more, as they be more that set their hands to it; and most of all, when there is one or more amongst them that desire to have him lose. And though it be true that many eyes see more than one, yet it is not to be understood of many counsellors, but then only when the final resolution is in one man.

Hobbes, *Leviathan*, II, 25

- 25 Nothing more unqualifies a Man to act with Prudence, than a Misfortune that is attended with Shame and Guilt.

Swift, *Thoughts on Various Subjects*

- 26 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; you must take care they shall appear so. If your inside be never so beautiful, you must preserve a fair outside also.

Fielding, *Tom Jones*, III, 7

- 27 Where prudence is made too much of, not enough is made of fortune; opportunity is let slip, and deliberation results in the loss of its object.

Rousseau, *Social Contract*, III, 2

- 28 Prudence! Prudence which is ever bidding us look forward into the future, a future which in many cases we shall never reach; here is the real source of all our troubles! How mad it is for so short-lived a creature as man to look forward into a future to which he rarely attains, while he neglects the present which is his? this madness is all the more

fatal since it increases with years, and the old, always timid, prudent, and miserly, prefer to do without necessities to-day that they may have luxuries at a hundred.

Rousseau, *Emile*, II

- 29 If we could always be prudent, we should rarely need to be virtuous.

Rousseau, *Confessions*, II

- 30 The principle of *private happiness* . . . is . . . most objectionable, not merely because it is false, and experience contradicts the supposition that prosperity is always proportioned to good conduct, nor yet merely because it contributes nothing to the establishment of morality—since it is quite a different thing to make a prosperous man and a good man, or to make one prudent and sharp-sighted for his own interests and to make him virtuous—but because the springs it provides for morality are such as rather undermine it and destroy its sublimity, since they put the motives to virtue and to vice in the same class and only teach us to make a better calculation, the specific difference between virtue and vice being entirely extinguished.

Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals*, II

- 31 Prudence reproaches; conscience accuses. If a man has acted unwisely and reproaches himself for his imprudence no longer than is necessary for him to learn his lesson, he is observing a rule of prudence and it must be accounted to him for honour, for it is a sign of strength of character. But the accusation of conscience cannot be so readily dismissed, neither should it be.

Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, Conscience

- 32 Prudence is a rich, ugly old maid courted by Incapacity.

Blake, *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, 7