

Prudence

INTRODUCTION

OF the qualities or virtues attributed to the intellect, prudence seems to be least concerned with knowledge and most concerned with action. When we call a man a scientist or an artist, or praise the clarity of his understanding, we imply only that he has a certain kind of knowledge. We admire his mind, but we do not necessarily admire him as a man. We may not even know what kind of man he is or what kind of life he leads. It is significant that our language does not contain a noun like "scientist" or "artist" to describe the man who possesses prudence. We must use the adjective and speak of a prudent man, which seems to suggest that prudence belongs to the whole man, rather than just to his mind.

Prudence seems to be almost as much a moral as an intellectual quality. We would hardly call a man prudent without knowing his manner of life. Whether he behaved temperately would probably be much more relevant to our judgment of his prudence than whether he had a cultivated mind. The extent of his education or the depth of his learning might not affect our judgment at all, but we probably would consider whether he was old enough to have learned anything from experience and whether he had actually profited from experience to become wise.

These observations not only express the ordinary sense of the word "prudence," but also give a summary indication of the idea for which that word stands in the great books. Like other fundamental traits of mind or character, prudence is considered by the poets and historians in terms of precept and example. For the definition of the term or for an analysis of its relation to other fundamental ideas, such as virtue and happiness, desire and duty,

one must go to the great works of moral and political theory or of theology.

Even there, however, the conception of prudence is used more frequently than it is expounded. Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Hobbes, and Kant seem to be the exceptions, and of these only Aristotle and Aquinas offer an extended analysis—Aristotle in his book on intellectual virtue in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aquinas in certain questions of his *Treatise on Habits* in the *Summa Theologica*, but more extensively in his *Treatise on Prudence* (see the questions from the *Summa Theologica* cited in the list of Additional Readings).

THAT PRUDENCE IS NOT knowledge in the ordinary sense of the term—that it is a product of experience and possession of reason which, unlike science or art, cannot be expressed in propositions—seems to be clearly implied by Hobbes. "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 to; if his observations are such as are not easy or usual; this wit of his is called Prudence, and depends on much experience and memory of the like things, and their consequences heretofore."

Whereas science can achieve some certainty, the judgments of prudence are, according to Hobbes, all uncertain, "because to observe by experience and remember all circumstances that may alter the success, is impossible." It is the opposition between experience and science which seems to lead Hobbes to distinguish prudence from wisdom. "As much experience is prudence, so is much science sapience. For though we usually have one

name of wisdom for them both, yet the Latins did always distinguish between *prudentia* and *sapientia*, ascribing the former to experience, the latter to science."

The Greeks also had two words—*phronesis* and *sophia*—both of which are sometimes translated in English by "wisdom." But Aristotle, like Hobbes, insists upon the distinction between the wisdom which is the ultimate fruit of the speculative sciences or philosophy and the wisdom which belongs to the sphere of moral and political action. Wishing to preserve Aristotle's sense that *phronesis* and *sophia* have something in common which deserves the eulogistic connotation of "wisdom," his translators usually render these words in English by the phrases "practical wisdom" or "political wisdom" (for *phronesis*), and "speculative wisdom" or "philosophical wisdom" (for *sophia*). The English rendering of Aquinas, on the other hand, usually translates his *prudentia* by "prudence," and his *sapientia* by "wisdom."

Whether it is permissible to use "prudence" and "practical wisdom" as synonyms may be more than a question of verbal equivalence; for there is a fundamental issue in theory concerning the unity of wisdom, on which Plato differs from both Aristotle and Aquinas. The question about the relation of knowledge and virtue may be differently answered according to the view of wisdom which denies its division into speculative and practical, and according to the view which conceives the possibility that a man may be wise in one way without being wise in the other. In the language of Aquinas, a man may have acquired wisdom through science and understanding without having the moral character of a prudent man.

"That practical wisdom is not scientific knowledge is evident," Aristotle declares. This is confirmed, he adds, "by the fact that while young men become geometers and mathematicians and wise in matters like these, it is thought that a young man of practical wisdom cannot be found. The reason is that such wisdom is concerned not only with universals but with particulars, which become familiar from experience, but a young man has no

experience, for it is length of time that gives experience."

Hobbes and Aristotle seem to agree that experience is important for the development of prudence or practical wisdom precisely because "it is practical and practice is concerned with particulars." But though both also agree that this explains the distinction between prudence and scientific knowledge—which is concerned not with action but with the nature of things—Aristotle alone raises a further question about the distinction between practical wisdom and art.

In making something, the artist also deals with particulars. In this sense, art is also practical. But, according to Aristotle, the word "productive" should be used in the distinction from "practical" to signify the difference between making and doing—two kinds of human activity which, though alike as compared with scientific knowing, represent knowledge differently applied. The knowledge which the artist possesses can, furthermore, be formulated in a set of rules. An individual can acquire the skill of an art by practicing according to its rules. What a man knows when he is prudent seems to be much less capable of being communicated by precept or rule. What he knows is how to deliberate or calculate well about things to be done.

This, in Aristotle's view, marks prudence off from all other virtues. That prudence is a quality of mind seems to follow from the fact that it involves deliberation, a kind of thinking about variable and contingent particulars of the same sort which belong to the realm of opinion. That prudence is also a moral quality, an aspect of character, seems to follow no less from Aristotle's statement that prudence is not deliberation about the means to any sort of end, but only about those "which conduce to the good life in general."

PRUDENCE IS NOT ALWAYS described as skill of mind in deliberating about alternative courses of action, nor is it always regarded as entirely praiseworthy or admirable—inseparable from virtue and the good life.

It is, for example, sometimes identified with foresight or even conjecturing about the fu-

ture. So conceived, prudence does not seem to require rational power so much as memory and imagination, in order to project past experience into the future. In this sense, Aristotle admits it may be said that "even some of the lower animals have practical wisdom, *viz.*, those which are found to have a power of foresight with regard to their own life."

Identifying prudence with foresight, Hobbes conceives perfect prudence as belonging only to God. When the event answers expectations, the prediction is attributed to prudence, yet human foresight being fallible, "it is but presumption. For the foresight of things to come, which is Providence, belongs only to him by whose will they are to come." Aquinas gives a quite different reason for saying that "prudence or providence may suitably be attributed to God." It is that the ordering of things toward their ultimate end is "the chief part of prudence, to which two other parts are directed—namely, remembrance of the past, and understanding of the present; inasmuch from the remembrance of what is past and the understanding of what is present, we gather how to provide for the future."

Prudence is sometimes described, not as a virtue of the mind, or even as the power of foresight, but as a temperamental trait, an emotional disposition. It is associated with timidity or caution in those who are fearful of risks or unwilling to take chances. It is in this sense that Francis Bacon seems to oppose hopefulness to prudence, "which is different upon principle and in all human matters augurs the worst." The cautiousness of the overdeliberate man may involve thought as well as fear. Hamlet thinks too much and on too many sides of every action. His action being "sicklied o'er by the pale cast of thought," he is irresolute. He laments his misuse of reason. "Whether it be bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple of thinking too precisely on the event—a thought, which quartered, hath but one part wisdom and ever three parts coward—I do not know why yet I live to say 'this thing's to do,' since I have cause, and will, and strength, and means to do it."

When prudence is conceived as excessive caution, its opposite is usually described as

rashness, precipitateness, or impetuosity. Thucydides portrays these opposites in the persons of Nicias and Alcibiades. Their speeches to the Athenian assembly on the question of the Sicilian expedition do not merely present an opposition of reasons for and against the undertaking, but also represent an opposition of types of human character. Both come to grief: Nicias, the overcautious leader of the expedition, who earns a not inevitable defeat by his ever-delaying tactics, and Alcibiades, who does not stop at treachery or treason when the moment seems ripe for action which, if quickly taken, may succeed.

Aristotle and Aquinas would use such facts to argue against what, in their views, is the misconception of the prudent man as the opposite of the impetuous. The prudent man, in their opinion, does not stand at the other extreme of undue caution. In their theory of the virtues as means between extremes of excess and defect, prudence, like courage or temperance, represents a mean consisting in neither too much nor too little. As cowardice and foolhardiness are the opposite vices of too much and too little fear—and as both are opposed to the mean of courage which involves a moderation of fear—so excessive caution and impetuosity are the vices opposed to prudence as well as to each other.

Nor are prudence and imprudence simply matters of temperament. Men may differ in their temperamental dispositions; but, according to Aristotle and Aquinas, these are not to be confused with virtues and vices. One man may be by nature more fearful or fearless than another, but regardless of these differences in emotional endowment, either may become courageous, by forming the habit of controlling fear for the right reasons. So, too, one man may be naturally more impulsive or more circumspect than another, but either can acquire prudence through learning to take sufficient counsel and to deliberate enough before action, while also forming the habit of resolving thought into action by reaching decisions and commanding their execution. Failing to satisfy these conditions of prudence, either may develop the vices of imprudence, becoming, like Hamlet or Nicias, irresolute; or, like Alcibi-

ades, impatient of counsel or ill advised, lacking care in deliberation and soundness in judgment.

THE CONCEPTION OF prudence as itself the extreme of caution, whether temperamental or habitual, is not the only challenge to the Aristotelian theory of prudence as a virtue. Other moralists, especially those who take a different view of virtue generally, do not seem to look upon prudence as wholly admirable. Even when they do not condemn prudence as an indisposition to act promptly or decisively enough, they seem to give prudent deliberation the invidious connotation of cold and selfish calculation.

A suggestion of this appears in J. S. Mill's contrast between duties to ourselves and duties to others, wherein he remarks that "the term duty to oneself, when it means anything more than prudence, means self-respect and self-development." It would seem to be implied that prudence means something less—something more selfish—than a proper and justifiable self-interest, the violation of which involves "a breach of duty to others, for whose sake the individual is bound to have care for himself."

Kant, more explicitly than Mill, associates prudence with expediency and self-seeking, and separates it from action in accordance with duty under the categorical imperative of the moral law. Prudence has meaning only in relation to a hypothetical imperative "which expresses the practical necessity of an action as a means to the advancement of happiness." Granted that a man seeks his individual happiness, then "skill in the choice of means to his own greatest well-being may be called *prudence*." Consequently, "the imperative which refers to the choice of means to one's happiness, *i.e.*, the precept of prudence, is still always hypothetical; the action is not commanded absolutely, but only as a means to another purpose," or, as Kant says elsewhere, "the maxim of self-love (prudence) only *advises*; the law of morality *commands*." Furthermore, he holds that "what *duty* is, is plain of itself to everyone; but what it is to bring true durable advantage, such as will extend to the whole of one's existence, is always veiled

in impenetrable obscurity, and much prudence is required to adapt the practical rule founded on it to the ends of life, even tolerably, by making exceptions."

In terms of Kant's division of the imperatives of conduct into the pragmatic and the moral, according as they refer to welfare and happiness or duty and law, prudence is merely pragmatic. It does not belong to morality. The pragmatic imperative of prudence is more like the technical imperative of art, which is also conditional and concerned with determining means to an end—in this case, the thing to be produced by skill. "If it were only equally easy to give a definite conception of happiness, the imperatives of prudence would correspond exactly with those of skill."

As Kant sees it, "the sole business of reason in the moral philosophy of prudence is to bring about a union of all the ends, which are aimed at by our inclinations, into one ultimate end—that of *happiness*, and to show the agreement which should exist among the means of attaining that end. In this sphere, accordingly, reason cannot present to us any more than *pragmatical* laws of free action, for our guidance towards the aims set up by the senses, and is incompetent to give us the laws which are pure and determined completely *a priori*." Hence the precepts of prudence "are used by reason only as counsels, and by way of counterpoise against seductions to an opposite course."

The issue between Kant and Aristotle (or Aquinas) with respect to prudence thus appears to be part of the larger issue between them on the fundamental principles of morality, discussed in the chapters on DUTY and HAPPINESS. In Kant's view, Aristotle and Aquinas, no less than Mill, are pragmatists rather than moralists. They are all utilitarians in the sense that they regard happiness as the first principle of human conduct and concern themselves with the ordering of means to this end. Since the consideration of means necessarily involves the weighing of alternatives as more or less expedient, prudence becomes indispensable to the pursuit of happiness. The choice of the best means is second in importance only to the election of the right end.

Kant admits that those who live for happiness require a great deal of prudence, in order to adapt practical rules to variable circumstances and to make proper exceptions in applying them. None is required by those who live according to the moral law. "The moral law commands the most punctual obedience from everyone; it must, therefore, not be so difficult to judge what it requires to be done, that the commonest unpracticed understanding, even without worldly prudence, should fail to apply it rightly." That "the principle of *private* happiness" is "the direct opposite of the principle of morality" Kant seems to think is evident from the questionable worth of prudence; "for a man must have a different criterion when he is compelled to say to himself: I am a *worthless* fellow, though I have filled my purse; and when he approves himself, and says: I am a *prudent* man, for I have enriched my treasure."

Kant does not limit his criticism of prudence as pragmatic—or practical rather than moral—to the fact that it serves what he calls "private happiness." It may serve the public welfare. "A history is composed pragmatically," he writes, "when it teaches *prudence*, *i.e.*, instructs the world how it can provide for its interests better." But he also distinguishes between worldly and private prudence. "The former is a man's ability to influence others so as to use them for his own purposes. The latter is the sagacity to combine all these purposes for his own lasting benefit." Nevertheless, the prudence which aims at individual happiness is primary, for "when a man is prudent in the former sense, but not in the latter, we might better say of him that he is clever and cunning, but, on the whole, imprudent."

THOSE WHO TAKE THE view that happiness is the first principle of morality would still agree with Kant that the man who is skillful in exercising an influence over other men so as to *use* them for his own purposes, is clever or cunning rather than prudent. Hobbes, for example, says that if you permit to prudence "the use of unjust or dishonest means . . . you have that Crooked Wisdom, which is called Craft." Aristotle goes even further in his in-

sistence that "it is impossible to be practically wise without being good," or, as the same point is made in the language of Aquinas, "one cannot have prudence unless one has the moral virtues; since prudence is right reason about things to be done, to which end man is rightly disposed by moral virtue."

"To be able to do things that tend towards the mark we have set before ourselves" is, according to Aristotle, to be clever. "If the mark be noble, the cleverness is laudable, but if the mark be bad, the cleverness is mere smartness." Hence the man of prudence has a certain cleverness, but the clever man who is merely smart cannot be called practically wise. By this criterion the clever thief who plans and executes a successful robbery, the shrewd businessman who, without regard to justice, calculates well how to maximize his profits, or Machiavelli's prince who exercises cunning to get or keep his power, exhibits, not prudence, but its counterfeits. In some cases, the cleverness or shrewdness may simulate prudence without involving the knavery of craft or cunning. Some men have what Aquinas conceives as artistic (or technical) rather than moral prudence. Those who are "good counsellors in matters of warfare or seamanship are said to be prudent officers or pilots, but not simply prudent. Only those are simply prudent who give good counsel about all the concerns of life."

Aristotle and Aquinas make the relation between prudence and moral virtue reciprocal. The moral virtues depend, for their formation and endurance, as much upon prudence as prudence depends upon them. "Virtue makes us aim at the right end," Aristotle writes, "and practical wisdom makes us take the right means." The rightness of the means requires not merely that they be adapted to an end, but that the end itself be right. The right end cannot be achieved unless the means to it be rightly chosen. Hence no skill of mind in deliberating about and choosing means is truly the intellectual virtue of prudence unless the man who habitually calculates well is also habitually inclined by the moral virtues to choose things for the right end, whether that be happiness or the common good of society.

Conversely, the moral virtues depend upon prudence because, in Aristotle's view, they are formed by the making of right choices. His definition of moral virtue names prudence as an indispensable cause. Since the mean between extremes, in which the virtues consist, is in most cases subjective or relative to the individual, it cannot be determined by objective measurements. Reason must determine it by a prudent consideration of the relevant circumstances.

The independence of prudence and the moral virtues seems to be the basis, for Aristotle, of the insight that it is impossible to have one moral virtue without having all. On this basis, Aristotle says, we can "refute the dialectical argument . . . that the virtues exist in separation from one another." As no moral virtue can exist apart from practical wisdom, so with it, all must be present.

Aquinas mentions another intellectual virtue as indispensable to the moral virtues, namely, the virtue of understanding which consists in knowing the first principles in practical as well as speculative matters. The first principles of the practical reason (*i.e.*, the precepts of the natural law) underlie prudence as well as the moral virtues. Just as sound reasoning in speculative matters "proceeds from naturally known principles . . . so also does prudence which is right reason about things to be done." Nevertheless, though prudence and the moral virtues depend upon it, Aquinas does not include understanding—as he does not include art, science, and wisdom—in his enumeration of the four cardinal virtues, cardinal in the sense of being the virtues indispensable to a good human life.

THESE MATTERS, especially the interconnection of the virtues and the theory of the cardinal virtues, are discussed in the chapter on VIRTUE AND VICE. The problem of the relative worth of the moral and the intellectual virtues is also considered there and in the chapter on WISDOM, where the contributions to happiness of prudence and wisdom—or of practical and speculative wisdom—are specifically compared.

Here there remains to be considered the

Socratic conception of the relation between knowledge and virtue, for there seems to be an issue between his theory of this matter and the foregoing view of the relation between prudence and the moral virtues.

In the *Meno*, Socrates argues that whatever a man desires or chooses he either knows or deems to be good. The man who chooses something evil for himself does not do so knowingly, but only through the mistake of deeming that which is in fact evil to be advantageous or good. Except for such mistakes, "no man," says Socrates, "wills or chooses anything evil." Apart from error or ignorance, evil is never voluntarily chosen. Hence, if virtue consists "in willing or desiring things which are good, and in having the power to gain them," it would seem to follow that knowledge of the good is closely related to its practice.

Subsequently, Socrates suggests that "if there be any sort of good which is distinct from knowledge, virtue may be that good; but if knowledge embraces all good, then we shall be right in thinking that virtue is knowledge." To test these hypotheses, he proceeds to consider the various things which—whether or not they are the same as virtue—are like virtue in being advantageous to men. None of these things, such as courage or temperance, seems to profit men unless accompanied by what, in English translations, is sometimes called "wisdom" and sometimes "prudence."

Socrates points out that "everything the soul attempts, when under the guidance of wisdom"—or prudence—"ends in happiness; but in the opposite when under the guidance of folly"—or imprudence. "If then," he says, "virtue is a quality of the soul, and if it be of necessity always advantageous, then virtue must be wisdom or prudence, since none of the things of the soul are either advantageous or hurtful in themselves, but they are all made advantageous or hurtful by the addition to them of prudence or imprudence"—wisdom or folly. From this, says Socrates, we can conclude that "prudence is virtue, either the whole of virtue or some part of it at least"—or, as this is sometimes translated, "virtue is either wholly or partly wisdom."

In the light of his own view that all the moral virtues depend on practical wisdom, Aristotle criticizes the Socratic position. "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 that they implied practical wisdom he was right . . . Socrates thought the virtues were rules or rational principles . . . while we think they involve a rational principle." Similarly, in considering the question whether there can be moral without intellectual virtue, Aquinas writes: "Although virtue be not right reason, as Socrates held, yet not only is it *according to right reason*, insofar as it inclines a man to do that which is in accord with right reason as the Platonists maintained; but it also needs to be *joined with right reason*, as Aristotle declares."

Aquinas furthermore interprets the opinion that "every virtue is a kind of prudence," which he attributes to Socrates, as meaning that when "a man is in possession of knowledge, he cannot sin, and that everyone who sins does so through ignorance." This, he says, "is based on a false supposition, because the appetitive faculty obeys the reason, not blindly, but with a certain power of opposition." Nevertheless, "there is some truth in the saying of Socrates that so long as a man is in possession of knowledge he does not sin; provided that this knowledge involves the use of reason in the individual act of choice."

Whether those who criticize the position of Socrates accurately perceive his intention and state the issue fairly are problems of interpretation as difficult as the question of where in this matter the truth lies. If Socrates is saying that a man will do good if he knows the good, what sort of knowledge is implied—knowledge of the good in general or knowledge of what is good in a particular case? Do both types of knowledge of the good lead as readily or surely to good or virtuous action?

Whether or not, in addition to knowledge, a good will or right desire is essential, it may be held that prudence is required to apply moral principles—aiming at the good in general—to particular cases. "There exists no moral system," writes Mill, "under which there do not

arise unequivocal cases of conflicting obligation. These are the real difficulties, the knotty points, both in the theory of ethics and in the conscientious guidance of personal conduct. They are overcome practically, with great or less success, according to the intellect and virtue of the individual." Mill seems to imply that both prudence and virtue are essential to good action on the level of particulars, and that without them the kind of knowledge which is expressed in moral principles does not necessarily lead a man to act well.

Nietzsche writes about prudence in a contrary vein. "All these moralities which address themselves to the individual person, for the promotion of his 'happiness' as they say" are nothing but "prescriptions for behaviour in relation to the degree of *perilousness* in which the individual person lives with himself" and are merely "recipes to counter his passions." These include the "artifices and acts of prudence to which there clings the nook-and-cranny odour of ancient household remedies and old-woman wisdom . . . all this is, from an intellectual point of view, of little value and far from constituting 'science,' not to speak of 'wisdom,' but rather, to say it again and to say it thrice, prudence, prudence, prudence, mingled with stupidity, stupidity, stupidity."

ONE OTHER PROBLEM OF interpretation must be mentioned. It occurs with respect to Aristotle's statement concerning diverse modes of prudence.

"Political wisdom and practical wisdom are the same state of mind," he writes, "but their essence is not the same. Of the wisdom concerned with the city, the practical wisdom which plays a controlling part is legislative wisdom, while that which is related to this as particulars to their universal is known by the general name of 'political wisdom' . . . Practical wisdom also is identified especially with that form of it which is concerned with the individual man, and this is known by the general name 'practical wisdom.' Of the other kinds, one is called domestic, another legislative, a third political; and of this last, one part is called deliberative and the other judicial."

Does this mean that skill of mind in deter-

mining the best means to an end is different according to differences in the end—whether the happiness of an individual or the common good of a society? Does it mean, furthermore, that the prudence involved in managing a household is different from the prudence concerned with political affairs; and that, in the state, the prudence of the ruler (prince or statesman) is different from the prudence of the ruled (subject or citizen), because the one moves on the level of general laws, the other on the level of particular acts in compliance with law? Within the sphere of jurisprudence, or the prudence of laws, is the prudence of the legislator or lawmaker different from the prudence of the judge who applies the law?

In his *Treatise on Prudence*, Aquinas answers these questions affirmatively. He distinguishes between private, domestic, and political prudence, and within the political sphere places special emphasis upon what he calls “reignative prudence,” the sort of prudence Dante calls “a kingly prudence,” which sets the prince apart from ordinary men. Hobbes, on the other hand, asserts that “to govern well a family and a kingdom, are not different degrees of prudence, but different sorts of busi-

ness; no more than to draw a picture in little, or as great, or greater than life, are different degrees of art.”

This issue is intimately connected with the problem of the forms of government. If only a few men are fitted by nature to acquire the special mode of prudence which is reignative or legislative, would not government by the few or by the one seem to be naturally best? If, however, in a republic, those who are citizens rule and are ruled in turn, should not each citizen have the prudence requisite for both tasks, whether it be the same or different? Finally, if the democratic theory is that all men are capable of being citizens—though not all, perhaps, are equally eligible for the highest public offices—must not political prudence be conceived as attainable by all men?

The question remains open whether those who deserve the highest magistracies have a special mode of reignative prudence; or merely a higher degree of the same prudence by which they govern their private lives and their domestic establishments; or, as Hobbes suggests, have other abilities whereby they can apply the same prudence to a different kind of business.