

Prudence

"Be as cunning as serpents, but inoffensive as doves." Matt. 10:16.

excerpted from André Comte-Sponville, (trans. Catherine Temerson), *A Short Treatise on the Great Virtues: The Uses of Philosophy in Everyday Life*, (London: William Heinemann, 2001)

Prudence is one of the four cardinal virtues of antiquity and the Middle Ages.¹ . . . Prudence seems too advantageous to be moral, just as duty is too absolute to be called prudent.

We no longer believe sufficiently in the absolute to be willing to sacrifice our lives, our friends, or our fellowman to an ideal. Indeed, I suspect we would find such an ethic of conviction (*Gesinnungsethik*), as Max Weber calls it, rather frightening. What is the value of having absolute principles, if it is to the detriment of simple humanity, good sense, gentleness, and compassion? We have learned to be wary even of morality, and the more absolute it claims to be, the more suspicious we are of it. Preferable, for us, to an ethic of conviction is what Max Weber calls an ethic of responsibility (*Verantwortungsethik*), which, without disregarding principles (how could it?), concerns itself as well with foreseeable consequences of action. Good intentions can lead to catastrophe, and purity of motivation has never been able by itself to prevent the worst. Good motives aren't enough, and it would be wrong to act as though they were: hence an ethic of responsibility requires that we answer not just for our intentions or principles but also for the consequences of our acts, to the extent that they can be foreseen. It is an ethic of prudence, and the only valid ethic. *Better* to lie to the Gestapo than to turn in a Jew or a Resistance fighter. But in the name of what? In the name of prudence, which is the apt determination (for man and by man) what *better* means.

We know that the Romans translated the Greek *phronesis* as *prudentia*, particularly in their translations of Aristotle and the Stoics. What does the term describe? An intellectual virtue, and reason; prudence is the disposition that makes it possible to deliberate correctly on what is good or bad for man (not in itself but in the world as it is, and not in general but in specific situations) and through such deliberation to act appropriately. It could be called good sense, but in the service of good will. Or intelligence, but of the virtuous kind. It is in this respect that prudence is the precondition for all the other virtues; without it, we cannot know what use to make of the other virtues or how to attain the goal (the good) they put before us. . . . Merely loving justice does not make us just, nor does loving peace make us peaceable by itself: deliberation, decision, and action are also required. Prudence determines which of them are apt, as courage provides for their being carried out.

The Stoics considered prudence a science ("the science of what to do and what not to do," they said). Aristotle legitimately rejected their opinion since science has to do with certainties whereas prudence deals strictly with contingencies. Prudence presupposes uncertainty, risk, chance, and the unknown. A god would have no need of it, but how could a man do without it? Prudence is not a science; rather it replaces science where science is lacking. One deliberates only when one has a choice to make, in other words, when no proof is possible or adequate – that's when one must want not just good ends but also good means, in order to achieve them. To be a good father, it is not enough to love one's children, nor is it enough to wish them well for that wish to come true. Love does not excuse a lack of intelligence. The Greeks knew this, perhaps better than we. *Phronesis* is like practical wisdom: wisdom of action, for action, in action. Yet it doesn't take the place of wisdom (real wisdom *sophia*), for it is also not enough to act well in order to live well, or to

¹ The others are courage, temperance and justice.

be virtuous in order to be happy. In this Aristotle was right, and almost all the other ancients were wrong: **virtue is not the only prerequisite for happiness. Prudence, however, is a prerequisite for both, and even wisdom cannot do without it. For wisdom without prudence would be unsound wisdom, and therefore wouldn't be wisdom at all.**

Epicurus may have made the essential point: prudence, because it chose [or chooses?] (by "measuring . . . and by looking at the conveniences and inconveniences") which desires should be satisfied and by what means, "is a more precious thing even than philosophy". What good is the truth if we don't know how to live? What good is justice, and why would we want it, if we're incapable of acting justly? Prudence, one might say, is a true *savoir-vivre*. . . . Prudence foresees or calculates pleasure. A temporal virtue, always, and sometimes temporizing. For prudence takes the future into account, recognizing all the while that who we confront it [with?] depends on us (in which regard prudence relates not to expectation but to will). The prudent man is attentive not just to what is happening, but also to what can happen; he is both attentive and careful. *Prudentia*, Cicero notes, comes from *providere*, which means to *foresee* as well as to *provide*. Reality imposes its laws, its obstacles, its detours. Prudence is the art of taking them into account; it is lucid and reasonable desire. Not instant gratification. Romantics, who prefer their dreams, will sniff at it. Men of action, on the other hand, know that there is no other path, even when the goal is improbable or exceptional. Prudence is what differentiates action from impulse and heroes from hotheads. Basically it's what Freud calls the reality principle, or at least it's the virtue that corresponds to it. It's about enjoying as much and suffering as little as possible. Hence **prudence is for human beings what instinct is for animals.**

The ancient concept of prudence (*phronesis*, *prudentia*) goes far beyond the mere avoidance of danger, which is more or less what it has come to mean for us. There are some risks we must know how to take and dangers we must know how to confront – whence prudence in the ancient sense of the word, as the "virtue of risk and decisions." Prudence is not the same as fear or cowardice – as the modern meaning sometimes seems to suggest. It assumes courage: without courage prudence amounts to pusillanimity, just as without prudence courage amounts to recklessness or folly. First of all, do no [avoidable] harm; first of all protect. Such is the essence of prudence, and without it the virtues themselves would be powerless or even harmful.

Prudence does not preclude risk taking, nor does it always mean avoiding danger. What risks to take? What dangers to face? How far can I push my limits and toward what goal?

"Prudence," says Augustine, "is love that chooses with sagacity." Not the object to be attained – desire takes care of that – but the means for attaining or safeguarding it. The sagacity of mothers, or lovers. To protect or win the love of those they love, they do what they have to do or (since intellectual virtues always entail the risk of error) at least what they think they must do, and out of their concern humanity – theirs and ours – originates. Love guides them; prudence enlightens them. May it also enlighten humanity itself! If prudence, as I have said, takes the future into account, it is because it would be dangerous and immoral to forget that future. Prudence is that paradoxical memory of the future, or better yet (since memory as such is not a virtue), that paradoxical and necessary fidelity to the future. Parents wanting to safeguard the future of their children know this . . . More power means more responsibilities. . . . We deceive ourselves if we think that prudence is a thing of the past; it is the most modern of our virtues, or rather the virtue that modern times has made most necessary. . . . How many horrors have been committed in the name of the Good? How many crimes in the name of virtue? Almost always out of violations of prudence. We must be wary of those who are blinded by the Good. They are too attached to their principles to consider individuals, too sure of their intentions to bother with the consequences.

Morality without prudence is either futile or dangerous. "Cautē," says Spinoza: "Take care." In short, **morality is not sufficient for virtue; virtue also requires intelligence and lucidity.** It is imprudent to heed morality alone, and it is immoral to be imprudent.