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Why Character Matters: Aristotle on Prudence, Charioteer of the Virtues

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Citizens of liberal democracies are often preoccupied with the moral character of their political leaders. Alongside a leader's experience and "vision" for the future of the polity, character traits (and flaws) are among the most prominent considerations for good leadership. In a 2019 survey asking Americans to identify the biggest problems facing the country, 67 percent of respondents considered ethics in government a "very big problem."[1] According to Gallup, 66 percent of Americans in 2018 believed that it is "very important" for the president to provide "moral leadership" for the country.[2] Some argue that this concern for character is part of a long, *growing* trend that places greater attention on the ethical makeup of presidential candidates.[3] The enduring American maxim that a candidate unsuited to share a beer with is unsuited for office inheres a common intuition that personal character matters for the practice of political leadership.

On this point, the average American concurs with a long-standing tradition of liberal political thought espousing the importance of character and virtue for the practice of political leadership. Locke, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Kant, Smith, and Tocqueville—to name just a few liberal thinkers—understand certain character traits as necessary for governing a liberal, democratic order.[4] In Federalist 57, James Madison endorses a call for virtuous leadership that

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shared widespread support among American founders: "The aim of every political constitution is, or ought to be, first to obtain for rulers men who possess most wisdom to discern, and most virtue to pursue, the common good of the society; and in the next place, to take the most effectual precautions for keeping them virtuous whilst they continue to hold their public trust."[5] The search for virtuous political leaders is, in short, a long-standing tradition of enduring relevance for the practice of politics.

Despite the rich tradition of thought proclaiming the need for virtuous leaders, and the continued, widespread yearning for character in those who hold political office, scholars and citizens alike remain relatively puzzled concerning the precise relationship of character to political leadership. This is true even of the US presidency, perhaps the most studied institution of political leadership in the modern era. As one scholar notes, "In American politics the problem is that although everyone avers that character is crucial in the presidency, there is not consensus about what constitutes good character."[6] This uncertainty has led many scholars to disavow the importance of individual character in the study of political leadership altogether.[7] This dismissal occurs, in large part, on account of the cloudy relationship between character and the practice of political leadership.

The difficulty facing students of leadership, then, is not so much doubt concerning the importance of character for political leaders. Instead, we lack clear guidelines by which to understand the significance of character for the practice of political leadership. More specifically, three questions require robust answers:

1. What virtues or character traits are appropriate to the tasks of political leadership?
2. Why is character relevant to the exercise of political leadership?
3. How can ideals of character and virtue become practical realities for political leadership?

These questions, of course, are nothing new. Despite the relative inattention to character and political leadership in mainstream

political science, thinkers dating back to Plato have enumerated the central virtues of political leadership and suggested programs for their cultivation.[8] The widespread and largely influential "mirror for princes" genre advised actual leaders and, in particular, sought to cultivate character traits for right rule.[9] Recent scholarship has also mined the liberal tradition for guidelines concerning virtuous leadership.[10] These central questions, in other words, have been answered before.

However, in a vast majority of reflections on character and political leadership—both historical and contemporary—the keystone to a complete understanding is missing. This keystone is the virtue of prudence, which Aristotle deems "the only virtue peculiar to the ruler."[11] For Aristotle, prudence and political leadership are inseparably linked. We cannot understand one without the other. If Aristotle is correct and prudence is the defining attribute of good political leaders, we will not fully grasp the relationship of character to political leadership until we understand the nature and function of prudence.

The purpose of this article is to argue that prudence is the most important virtue for political leaders and that we cannot fully understand the relationship between character and political leadership until we know what prudence is. To make this argument I draw heavily from Aristotle, prudence's foremost authority. While several classical thinkers—Plato, Xenophon, and Cicero, for example—prominently feature prudence in their treatments of political leadership, Aristotle's account of this virtue is the most robust and exhibits greater influence in the history of political thought.[12] In fact, Aristotle's conception of prudence and its location at the heart of political leadership was the prevailing understanding of Western political thought throughout the centuries preceding the Enlightenment.[13]

The yearning for universal and categorical moral principles that characterized Enlightenment thought, however, effected a substantial demotion for the practical, particularized virtue of prudence.[14] For several modern thinkers, prudence either was renounced as a virtue altogether[15] or connoted the pursuit of

self-interest rather than justice or the common weal. As Josef Pieper notes, moderns "think of prudence as far more akin to the idea of mere utility, the *bonum utile*, than to the ideal of nobility, the *bonum honestum*. . . . To the contemporary mind, then, the concept of the good rather excludes than includes prudence."[16] While not all liberal thinkers joined in this demotion of prudence, its position as the central wellspring of political leadership has substantially weakened. Thus, Locke,[17] Montesquieu,[18] Smith,[19] Tocqueville,[20] and others presuppose a certain capacity for prudence in those who govern without offering a comprehensive account of the virtue.

This background explains why it is necessary to turn to Aristotle to address even contemporary questions concerning prudence. By and large, liberal political thinkers either demote the virtue or assume its classical rendering.[21] Returning to Aristotle, then, places us in direct conversation with the principles that shaped centuries of understanding concerning the relationship between character and political leadership. While some may be wary of invoking a classical thinker for contemporary application, this article argues that Aristotle's thought provides helpful guidelines and conceptual principles for understanding the relationship between character and political leadership. These principles do not necessitate the acceptance of Aristotelian ideas at odds with liberal political thought.[22] As I hope to demonstrate, Aristotle's account of prudence provides a rigorous and practical framework for addressing the three questions mentioned above. Recall that these questions concern the *what* (the individual virtues), the *why* (virtues are relevant), and the *how* (virtuous ideals be made practical) that explain character's importance for political leadership. Aristotelian prudence, I argue, provides a clear and enduring foundation from which to address each of these questions.

This paper proceeds in four sections. The first rehearses a few principles of Aristotle's ethics that are particularly relevant to understanding the situation of prudence within his ethical system. The next section presents a definition of prudence and highlights the central principles of its operation. Building on this background,

the third section presents prudence as the chief virtue of political leadership, arguing that a particular species of prudence is the virtue demanded of all who lead. The fourth section addresses the relationship between character and the practice of political leadership by dividing prudence into its three "sub-virtues." Each sub-virtue of prudence, I argue, demonstrates a different dimension along which the character of political leaders is relevant to their conduct. The conclusion offers insights into *how* the virtuous ideal of Aristotle can be made a feasible reality for political practice.

The Conceptual Foundations of Aristotelian Virtue

To understand Aristotle's definition of prudence we must rehearse a few principles of the ethical system that fortify the commanding position of this virtue. According to Aristotle, the goal of human life, happiness (*eudaimonia*), is best understood, pursued, and achieved by living virtuously.[23] The importance of the virtues resides in their capacity to direct human conduct to accord with reason—the ultimate standard of human conduct.[24] Each virtue, Aristotle writes, "brings that of which it is a virtue into a good condition and causes the work belonging to that thing to be done well" (*EN* 1106a16–17). For example, the virtue of courage pertains to the passions of fear and confidence. One who is courageous, therefore, exhibits fear and confidence toward the right things, at the right times, and in the right manner (fulfilling the "good condition" characteristic of virtue). In addition, courage causes the individual to act (action is the "work" of virtue) in accord with reason, even when fear is experienced, such as in the throes of battle (*EN* 1115a33–1115b15).

The virtues Aristotle enumerates are divided into two broad categories: the moral and the intellectual virtues. Each set of virtues pertain to a different part of the soul: the moral virtues discipline and perfect our nonrational passions to accord with reason; the intellectual virtues dispose the various capacities of our intellect to achieve rational excellence. This division between the moral and intellectual virtues is important because the two types of virtue operate differently. Recall that the purpose of virtue is to

ensure our conduct accords with reason. Although our passions are nonrational—their source is not in the intellect—they are capable of "sharing in reason in a way" (*EN* 1106b13). Aristotle explains, for example, that the moderate person "is obedient to the commands of reason" insofar as his passions have been disciplined to heed the dictates of reason that curb them (*EN* 1102b12–19). Thus, the virtue of moderation perfects our ability to discipline our nonrational passions to accord with what is reasonable—to abstain from pleasure in the correct way and at the appropriate time, for example. The overarching purpose of all moral virtues, therefore, is to rectify the passions to desire the proper ends—the best "that for the sake of which"—in our actions. However, a fully flourishing life requires more than just desiring the correct ends; we must think and act rationally to achieve them.

The intellectual virtues help fulfill this task. Contemporary characterizations of intellectual virtue usually amount to a single, monolithic trait: we call someone "smart" or "intelligent" and deem this an appropriate rendering of the individual's entire intellectual capacity. For Aristotle, however, there are numerous capacities of the intellect, each with an intellectual virtue assigned to its perfection. For example, consider the difference between a world-renowned physicist and an award-winning blacksmith. While the use of the intellect animates their respective tasks—discerning physical laws and crafting strong, shapely products—the nature of their work requires different capacities. The former exhibits a mastery of empirical investigation and deduction, a virtue Aristotle terms "science" (*episteme*). The latter discerns the best method for turning a particular metal into the desired product, which Aristotle calls "craft" (*techne*). Both demonstrate the excellence of a particular use of the intellect, yet the excellences are different and they are unlikely to excel at the other's task. Just as each moral virtue pertains to different passion (e.g., courage to fear and confidence, moderation to pleasure), the various spheres of rational excellence necessitate different intellectual virtues.

According to Aristotle, the general task of the intellect is "correct reason. But speaking in this way is, though truthful, not at

all clear . . . what correct reason is must also be defined, that is, what its defining boundary is" (*EN* 1138b24–35). Obviously, the task of the intellect is to reason properly, but identifying proper reasoning is a more complicated matter. Much of Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is devoted to demonstrating how each of the five intellectual virtues—science (*episteme*), craft (*techne*), prudence (*phronesis*), understanding (*nous*), and wisdom (*sophia*)—exhibits correct reason with regard to different objects of consideration.[25] Although correct reason is manifest across different intellectual virtues, they all are animated by the ultimate object of reason: truth. Of all the parts of the intellect, Aristotle writes, "the work (*to ergon*) is truth. The characteristics, then, by which each part [of the intellect] will to the greatest degree attain the truth are the [intellectual] virtues" (*EN* 1139b12–14).

Despite the existence of several moral and intellectual virtues, each category of virtue shares a common goal: acting in accord with reason.[26] This task highlights the central place of voluntary choice in Aristotle's ethical system. As he puts it, "Of action, then, choice is the origin . . . of choice the origin is in one's longing and the reasoning that indicates what it is for the sake of which one acts" (*EN* 1139a31–34). Both moral and intellectual virtues are involved in choice. Moral virtues ensure we desire the proper ends for our actions and intellectual virtues ascertain the truth of reality—the ultimate goal of correct reason. Together, these two types of virtue facilitate human flourishing by conforming human conduct to true principles of reason. Our moral virtues dispose our desires to accord with the truth revealed by the intellectual virtues. The culmination of human virtue is the choice to act well. And for Aristotle, it is the (intellectual) virtue of prudence that allows us to choose well.

Aristotelian Prudence

Prudence is one of the five intellectual virtues that Aristotle defines in Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Of the thirteen chapters describing the intellectual virtues, eight of them are devoted to considerations of prudence (*phronesis*).[27] It is no coincidence,

then, that Aquinas's commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics* deems prudence "the principal virtue in human affairs."[28] This extensive treatment of prudence, however, is not merely a consequence of its significance within Aristotle's ethical system; it is also a testament to the supreme difficulty of defining the virtue. On this matter, we would do well to recall Aristotle's warning at the beginning of the *Ethics*:

> One must not seek out precision in all matters alike but rather in each thing in turn as accords with the subject matter in question and insofar as it is appropriate to the inquiry. For both carpenter and geometer seek out the right angle but in different ways: the former seeks it insofar as it is useful to his work; the latter seeks out what it is or what sort of a thing it is, for he is one who contemplates the truth. (*EN* 1098a26–32)

The task of ethics is more akin to that of the carpenter than the geometer. Aristotle conducted his study of ethics "not so that we may know what virtue is, but so that we may become good" (*EN* 1103b27–28). His task is not so much to delineate the nature of prudence precisely as it is to make it conceptually comprehensible for the practical improvement of lives of his readers.

Another challenge to defining prudence is articulated by one of the leading twentieth-century philosophers of prudence, Josef Pieper. According to Pieper, the standards of prudence "cannot be abstractly constructed or even calculated in advance" because prudence, in essence, concerns "decision regarding an action to be performed in the 'here and now.' By the very nature such decisions can be made only by the person confronted with decision. . . . The strict specificity of ethical action is perceptible only to the living experience of the person required to decide."[29] As Pieper intimates, the subject matter of prudence concerns uncertain, contingent realities. To offer a precise definition of the concept, then, is to misconstrue the nature of prudence itself. Such a definition would be akin to defining "the perfect athlete." While there are some

general principles appropriate to athleticism and its perfection, the realization of this excellence is inherently bound with particulars—for example, Tom Brady's inner sense that a receiver is open or Serena William's last-second decision to hit a drop shot. There are multitudinous manifestations of athleticism and prudence, rendering their definitions difficult to construct. A virtue concerning particulars, in other words, cannot be exhaustively demonstrated in abstraction.

It is no coincidence, then, that Aristotle begins his treatment of prudence with an example instead of an abstract definition. "As for what concerns prudence," he writes, "we might grasp it by contemplating whom we say to be prudent. It seems to belong to a prudent person to be able to deliberate nobly about things good and advantageous for himself (*agatha kai sumpheronta*), not in a partial way—for example, the sorts of things conducive to health or to strength—but about the sorts of things conducive to living well in general" (*EN* 1140a24–28). A few elements of this definition are worth noting. First, prudence is exhibited by noble deliberation and, as will be discussed later, "it is not possible to deliberate about the things that exist of necessity" (*EN* 1140a36–1140b1). Thus, prudence concerns discerning the truth—the task of all intellectual virtues—amid contingent, practical circumstances. Second, prudence concerns the good (*agathos*) *and* the advantageous (*sumpheron*). On account of its consideration of the good, prudence is not to be confused with strict utilitarianism or self-service, as it is often construed today.[30] On account of its consideration of the advantageous, however, prudence is much more than an embrace of good intentions; it is the best possible realization of those intentions amid particular circumstances.[31]

A final element of prudence arises in this initial definition. Prudence concerns noble deliberation not just regarding a certain arena of life or actions, but about "living well in general." The concern of prudence, therefore, is comprehensive. Every decision pertaining to the good and advantageous—that is to say, *all* our decisions—resides in the jurisdiction of prudence. While the complete perfection of prudence is rare, we often commend

individuals for exhibiting prudence in a certain area of life (*EN* 1140a29–30). In this way, we recognize what may be called *partial* prudence—a capacity to discern the good and advantageous within a certain domain of life. Examples of this include a successful military general or orchestrator of a department picnic; each exhibits prudence within a specific sphere of life and, consequently, demonstrates partial prudence. However, just because these individuals are prudent in one domain does not guarantee prudence in all domains. The military general may squander his honor and the department administrator, while prudent with others' money, may mismanage her own. The true virtue of prudence, however, is holistic. It is the capacity to discern, judge, and command the best actions in all domains of life.[32]

After reflecting upon people who exemplify prudence, Aristotle offers his first general definition of the concept: "[P]rudence is a true characteristic that is bound up with action, accompanied by reason, and concerned with things good and bad for a human being" (*EN* 1140b5–7). Prudence is an intellectual virtue because it concerns rational examination—the discernment of truth—amid contingent circumstances. It is for this reason that prudence concerns "action, accompanied by reason." Irrational or thoughtless acts often do not exhibit deliberate calculation or an awareness of surrounding circumstances. Moreover, because prudence guides choices to conform with what is "good for a human being," it inheres a noble end to every act. The noble end of our actions, we should recall, is supplied by moral virtue—courage, for example, solidifies our desire to stand against the fear of violence. But noble action requires more than just desiring a good end. It also must include appropriate means—the selection of certain military formations in battle, for example. This selection of the means to obtain noble ends is the task of prudence.

The evidence for prudence's concern with *means* over ends arises in Aristotle's insistence that prudence inheres deliberation. According to Aristotle, we do not deliberate "about things that cannot be otherwise, or about so many things as are without some end, an end, moreover that is a good attainable through action.

He who is a good deliberator simply is skilled in aiming, in accord with calculation, at what is best for a human being in the things attainable through action" (*EN* 1141b11–14). Moral virtue, in other words, sets the target for our actions while prudence calibrates and calculates the best method to strike it.

This element of prudence—concern with means, not ends—explains a claim that Aristotle includes as a transitional statement between his treatment of moral and intellectual virtues. At this juncture, he writes that moral virtues identify "a certain target that he who possesses reason looks to and so tightens or loosens" (*EN* 1138b22). A few pages later, Aristotle similarly describes this relationship of moral virtue to prudence: "For [moral] virtue makes the target correct, prudence the things conducive to that target" (*EN*, 1144a8–9). Whereas the task of moral virtue is to incline our desires to good ends, it is the task of prudence to identify how those ends are best achieved. The courage of the Spartan 300 solidified their resolve to fight the Persians; their prudence selected the narrow pass at Thermopylae and the phalanx as the best means to realize this end. This division of labor explains the fullness of Aristotelian voluntary choice: "[O]f choice, the origin is in one's longing and the reasoning that indicates what it is for the sake of which one acts. Hence there cannot be choice either in the absence of intellect and thinking or in the absence of a moral characteristic, for there cannot be acting well or its contrary in action in the absence of thinking and character" (*EN* 1139a33–34). A complete ethical choice requires both the proper end (supplied by moral character) and the intellectual effort of discerning the best means to realize that end (supplied by prudence). Only when these two virtues are present is Aristotelian voluntary action perfected.

These contours of prudence lead to several important conclusions concerning the virtue's full realization. The first is that prudence is not possible without the moral virtues; we cannot decide how best to hit the target if we are not sure where to shoot.[33] This is why moral "virtue makes [the target] correct; but as for doing all that is naturally done for the sake of that choice, this belongs" to prudence (*EN* 1144a20–22). Moral virtue is, in other

words, a necessary precondition for prudence's operation. "For corruption distorts and causes one to be mistaken about the principles bound up with action. As a result, it is manifest that *it is impossible for someone who is not good to be prudent*" (*EN* 1144a35–37, emphasis added). In short, only when our passions are appropriately ordered to desire good ends are we able to realize them prudentially.

One may object, however, that such a position neglects the multitudes of actions and individuals who choose conducive means even when their ends are not noble. Such is the case with the "good thief" or the "wily Machiavellian." If prudence pertains to identifying only successful means, why are the thief and Machiavellian excluded from prudence on account of their dubious ends? Does prudence exclude all acts on behalf of bad ends, even if they are carried out with tactful precision?[34] Aristotle has a response ready for this quandary of prudence. He is well aware that a certain excellence is evident even in the conduct of tactful individuals with malicious ends. This excellence is often mistaken for prudence, but in Aristotle's account it is not prudence and indeed is contrary to its very nature.[35]

To grasp Aristotelian prudence fully, it is essential to distinguish between these two excellences. Of tactful individuals, Aristotle writes, "There is indeed a capacity that people call 'cleverness'(*deinotîta*), and this is of such a character as to be capable of doing what is conducive to the target posited and so of hitting it. If, then, the target is a noble one, the cleverness is praiseworthy; but if base, it is mere cunning (*panourgia*)" (*EN* 1144a24–27). Here Aristotle introduces two important concepts to delineate prudence further: cleverness (*deinotîs*) and cunning (*panourgia*). The former pertains to those capable of "doing what is conducive to the target posited." Clever individuals effectively realize their ends, no matter what they are. If the means *and* end of the clever act are noble, such an act is prudent; if either or both are base, it is a cunning act. Prudence, therefore, requires nobility of both means and ends. While cleverness is an essential element of prudence, cunning—which involves base ends or means—is distinct. Cunning,

then, is directly opposed to prudence even though its efficacy may give it a similar appearance.

Aristotle is well aware that these closely associated terms are often confused. On account of the outward similarity of these concepts, "we assert that even the prudent are terribly clever and cunning" (*EN* 1144a27–29). However, "prudence is not the capacity in question, though it does not exist without this capacity, and this 'eye of the soul' does not acquire the characteristic (of prudence) in the absence of virtue, as was said and is clear" (*EN* 1144a27–32). In other words, prudence cannot exist without the moral virtues that direct our passions to appropriate ends. Moreover, insofar as prudence inheres the capacity to hit the target that moral virtue provides, it cannot "exist without" cleverness—the skill of realizing our ends effectively.[36] The prudent person, by definition, is clever. But by the same Aristotelian definition, the prudent person—insofar as he is practicing the virtue—cannot be cunning.

So far, we have observed two conclusions that follow from Aristotle's definition of prudence: (1) prudence is impossible without moral virtue fixing its ends, and (2) prudence inheres cleverness but is distinct from cunning 潗. This leads to a third, and perhaps startling, conclusion: it is not possible to have moral virtues without prudence. To prove this point, it is necessary to highlight a distinction Aristotle makes between natural and authoritative moral virtue. The "natural" moral virtues are the inherent proclivities some have to act well with regard to a particular passion. Some individuals, for example, have a knack for overcoming fear, others are not strongly tempted by pleasure (*EN* 1144b4–7). Just as some horses may be gifted with the capacity to resist being startled, so too certain children seem immune to fear. These are instances of natural moral virtue.

Aristotle notes, however, that these natural virtues may be harmful without intellectual guidance. A rash horse without the command of a rider may break a leg; the overconfident child is likely to injure himself without supervision. It is only with the supervision and command of the intellect that moral virtues may be directed to true excellence; the daring steed and the self-assured

child require training and discipline. This direction by the intellect is nothing other than the commands of prudence, which assist the moral virtues to best achieve their ends. Thus, "just as there are two forms of that which is concerned with the formation of opinion, namely cleverness and prudence, so also there are two of that which is concerned with moral character, namely natural virtue and virtue in the authoritative sense; and of these, virtue in the authoritative sense does not arise in the absence of prudence" (*EN* 1144b13–18). It is under the guise of prudence, in other words, that moral virtue matures from its natural state to its authoritative excellence. This leads Aristotle to conclude that prudence is necessary to exercise perfect moral virtue (*EN* 1145a2–3).

The distinction between natural and authoritative moral virtue demonstrates a conclusion that follows from the aforementioned principles: the unity of the virtues. Since prudence requires moral virtue and authoritative moral virtue requires prudence, genuine human excellence will exhibit the perfection of all man's capacities—even those we may be naturally inclined to struggle with. For just as some people have a natural capacity for some virtues (e.g., the large man's courage), there are also those for whom certain virtues are particularly difficult—the inheritance of immoderation regarding alcohol, for example. Aristotle affirms this fundamental diversity in natural capacities for virtue; there are diverse and multitudinous distributions of inherently "easier" and "more difficult" virtues (*EN* 1144b34–36). The fully virtuous individual, nonetheless, will be capable of exercising virtue even in areas with higher obstacles for perfection. In short, the fully virtuous individual will be prudent, and prudence provides the intellectual supervision and command necessary to transform our moral virtues into authoritative excellences. If we are truly prudent, we develop the capacity—albeit gradually, and with many mistakes—to overcome even the most challenging moral difficulties. Thus, "all the virtues will be present when the one virtue, prudence, is present."[37] Prudence, in short, inheres the unity of human virtues.

In sum, when we understand prudence as a "true characteristic that is bound up with action, accompanied by reason, and

concerned with things good and bad for a human being," we also discover four conclusions that emerge from this definition. First, prudence requires moral virtue for its operation. Second, prudence inheres cleverness but excludes cunning. Third, moral virtues require the discipline of prudence to achieve authoritative excellence. And finally, insofar as prudence supervises all of our conduct and commands all elements of our soul to act reasonably, the fully prudent individual will also enjoy the unity of all moral virtues. Each of these conclusions, I hope to have demonstrated, is a natural consequence of Aristotle's definition of prudence.

This leads to one further point worth stating before moving to the species of prudence appropriate to political leadership. The final conclusion mentioned in the foregoing suggests that the prudent individual, properly speaking, *is* the good person. For Aristotle, to be prudent is to be good. Moreover, the attentive reader will notice that a certain tautology has emerged. Prudence requires the moral virtues, and the moral virtues require prudence. "It is clear, then," Aristotle writes, "on the basis of what has been said, that it is not possible to be good in the authoritative sense in the absence of prudence, nor is it possible to be prudent in the absence of moral virtue" (*EN* 1144b30–32). This appears tautological indeed. Aristotle's response, Aristotle's reponse to this quandary arises in an educational system that is designed to cultivate virtue through instruction and habituation of students. This topic will be taken up in the conclusion when we consider how to cultivate the virtue of prudence.

The Species of Prudence

Immediately after defining prudence in VI.5 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle turns to political life as the arena in which prudence is most perceptible. On account of this definition, he writes, "we suppose Pericles and those of that sort to be prudent—because they are able to observe the good things for themselves and those for human beings" (*EN* 1140b8–9). Political leaders, Aristotle suggests, present prominent and exemplary models—lived manifestations—of the principles of prudence. The synonymous relationship of prudence and political leadership hinted at

here is made explicit in a subsequent chapter: "[I]n fact *the political art (politike) and prudence are the same characteristic*, though their being is not the same" (*EN* 1141b24–25, emphasis added). Here Aristotle makes explicit the thesis enumerated above—namely, that prudence is not simply the most important virtue of political leadership, it *is* political leadership. The task of this section is to grasp what exactly Aristotle means by this symmetry of prudence and the "political art."

It is first important to highlight that in the quotation concerning Pericles and other political figures, Aristotle notes that they are accounted prudent because of their capacity to "observe the good things for themselves *and* those for human beings." Political prudence—observing and acting upon what is good for a community—he suggests, is fundamentally related to personal prudence—observing and acting upon what is good for oneself. It is perhaps most helpful to understand personal and political prudence as two species of the same genus.[38] Thus, the principles examined in the previous section remain relevant for the practice of political prudence. Through its adherence to the same principles, in other words, political prudence bears a familial resemblance to personal prudence.[39]

Despite this close affinity, however, we must recognize that personal and political prudence are distinct. The former entails "knowing about what concerns oneself, but this differs very much (from political prudence)" (*EN* 1141b33–34). Prudence concerning oneself, in other words, does not guarantee the capacity to govern others properly. A few lines later, Aristotle provides an important reason for this difference: "[A] young person does not seem to be prudent. The cause is that prudence is also of particulars, which come to be known as a result of experience, but a young person is inexperienced" (*EN* 1142a13–16). The wellspring of prudence is experience. Young people are unlikely to be fully prudent because they lack the mature self-understanding that arises from the trial and error of acting well. Even so, the experience that cultivates self-awareness does not necessarily result in the knowledge necessary to govern others. This requires a different

kind of experience—an apprenticeship in governance that allows us to witness and appreciate the nuance of leading others. The difference between personal and political prudence, therefore, is not just the experience appropriate to their cultivation but also their scope of concern (for oneself versus for others).

The proposition that there are distinct species of prudence united by the same principles makes sense of the aforementioned statement that "the political art and prudence are the same characteristic, though their being is not the same." In other words, political leadership—or "the political art"—is identical with *one* species of prudence, but not prudence as such. The lines following this distinction reinforce the proposition that several species of prudence correspond to various responsibilities in community life. Aristotle enumerates,

> The prudence that pertains to oneself—that is, the individual—is held to be prudence especially, and it is this that bears the common name "prudence." Of the other kinds of prudence, one part is household management (*oikonomia*), another legislation (*nomothesi*), another the political art (*politike*); and of this last, one part is deliberative (*bouleutikei*), the other judicial (*dikastikei*). (*EN* 1141b29–35)

Thus, prudence has several species that differ on account of our position and the people we make decisions for—the individual, the family, a particular political community, or the regime itself.

Of particular note for my purposes here are the two species of prudence that pertain to the political community: legislative and political prudence. Whereas the former "is an architectonic prudence" that concerns decisions and actions that are foundational to the common life of the community (e.g., the constitution, customs, and laws), the latter is "concerned with particulars," and "bears the name that is common to them, 'the political art,' and is bound up with action and deliberation" (*EN* 1141a26–28). For the first of these species of prudence concerning legislating (*nomothesi*), Aristotle seems to have in mind both a legislator and a

founding lawgiver. The latter species of prudence is the virtue appropriate to what we now call executive leaders, although Aristotle does not use this term.[40] These leaders are responsible for working within the existing constitution and laws to discern the best courses of action for their execution and preservation. Political prudence, in other words, is the virtue appropriate to the everyday leaders of a political community whose task is to discern the best course of action for the preservation and flourishing of the already existing community. This justifies the association between political prudence and the task of the executive—to *execute* existing laws.

Why does Aristotle refer to prudence as "the only virtue peculiar to the ruler"? (*Pol.* 1277b26). Recall that prudence ultimately concerns choosing the best course of action to achieve our ends. For most political leaders (aside from founders and revolutionaries) the ends of action are fixed. For example, in the United States most political leaders are assumed to pursue the values of freedom, equality, and constitutional democracy. Even the intermediary steps aimed at fulfilling these ultimate ends (e.g., criminal justice reform, health care, or national security) are often determined for political leaders either by the forces of fortune or by citizens' demands. The primary task of political leaders is to realize these ends within a particular context and jurisdiction of authority. In times of war, this may require courage. In times of partisanship, it will require magnanimity and toleration. In good times, it will require moderation and humility. While some virtues are more important in particular contexts, in all times political leaders must be capable of choosing the best means to realize their goals. The call to leadership, in short, is a call to prudential action.

Another reason for prudence's place as the keystone of political leadership is its importance for practicing other virtues. The previous section argued that moral virtues cannot flourish without prudence. This point is evident in evaluating the conduct of political leaders. It may appear courageous for a president to lead the nation into war against a perceived threat, but true courage is exhibited by one "who endures and fears what he ought and for the sake of what he ought, and in the way he ought and when, and who

is similarly confident as well" (*EN* 1115b18–20). It may take courage to lead others to war, but it takes prudence to decide whether warfare is the best means to our ends (instead of diplomacy, for example). Insofar as courage must be guided by other considerations, it cannot exist independently. Thus, courage, like moderation, magnanimity, toleration, and any other virtues cannot be the primary virtues of political leadership unless they are guided by prudence. It is for this reason that prudence has been called the "charioteer of the virtues."[41]

As a final note, just as the moral virtues cannot flourish without prudence, prudence cannot flourish without moral virtue. It is of little import for political leaders to arrive at a prudent decision if they do not have the courage to carry it out. In other words, by suggesting prudence as the primary virtue of political leadership, Aristotle asserts the centrality of ethical character (evident across many virtues) for the practice of political leadership. To act well and to discern the most noble and advantageous course of action is no easy task. A disciplined and rationally grounded character provides the surest foundation for striking such a target.

The Three Stages of Prudence

Having identified prudence as the central virtue of political leadership, the second question from the introduction can now be addressed: why is character relevant for the practice of political leadership? While most people recognize a connection between character and political leadership, to specify why and how this connection matters is difficult. There are many reasons for this difficulty. First, it is difficult to make generalizations concerning prudential action. Moreover, the importance of character in political leadership is not always consistent; it matters much more in some contexts than others. Finally, we are not always clear about what it means to say that character *matters.* Matters for what? Or to whom?

While there is insufficient space to address each of these challenges, Aristotle's account of prudence provides helpful guidelines for understanding the relationship between character and political

leadership. In short, moral character is relevant to the practice of political leadership insofar as it affects one's capacity to act prudently. More specifically, sound character equips political leaders to deliberate, judge, and make decisions in a manner that most nobly and advantageously secures one's ends amid the particularities of any situation. In his account of prudence Aristotle enumerates these three tasks—deliberation, judgment, and decision—as the essential operations of the virtue. In other words, when one fails to act prudently it is on account of poor deliberation, poor judgment, or poor decision (or some combination thereof). This section outlines these stages of prudence and demonstrate how they exemplify the importance of character for political leadership.

In VI.9–11 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle outlines three intellectual capacities not included in the five intellectual virtues enumerated at the outset of the book.[42] The addition of these three virtues—good deliberation (*euboulia*), comprehension (*sunesis*), and decision (*gnome*)—puzzles inattentive readers into thinking that Aristotle is revising his original proposal to include eight, not five, intellectual virtues. However, in the chapters devoted to these characteristics, Aristotle gives an account of how each relates to the virtue of prudence.[43] It is for this reason that a long history of interpretation posits these three characteristics as "sub-virtues" or "stages" of prudence.[44] If this interpretation is correct, grasping each stage of prudence is necessary to understand how prudence actually operates for the political leader.

Recall that prudence is the intellectual virtue tasked with discerning the truth of contingent, particular circumstances in order to select the noblest and most advantageous course of action. The first step to make a prudent decision, then, is to take stock of the particulars relevant to the act at hand. This step is the task of the first sub-virtue of prudence: good deliberation (*euboulia*). It is important to note that deliberation concerns not the end of the action itself but rather the best *means* to acquire the end. "Good deliberation," Aristotle writes, "is that which guides us correctly toward the end simply . . . good deliberation would be a correctness that accords with what is advantageous in relation to

the end, about which end prudence is a true conviction" (*EN* 1142b30–35). Deliberation, like prudence, begins from the end; it takes as given the ultimate intention of the act and discerns the relevant factors for realizing this intention. The task of deliberation is to identify and to scrutinize—vocally with others or internally with oneself—the relevant circumstances to grasp how an act might best realize its end.

The next stage of prudence is comprehension (*sunesis*). Once the relevant circumstances have been identified and scrutinized, we must understand their true character. The task of comprehension is to evaluate the information that deliberation identifies "to render a decision about what someone says, regarding the matters that prudence is concerned with—and rendering such a decision nobly" (*EN* 1143a15–16). Whereas deliberation is the gathering of the relevant information, comprehension is making a judgment regarding its true nature. For example, when a commander is deciding how to launch a counterattack, deliberation includes the reports, discussion, and scrutiny the intelligence officers offer for the commander's consideration. This intelligence, however, will be uncertain and perhaps even contradictory. At some point, the commander has to make a judgment concerning the imperfect information: what is most reliable and relevant to the decision at hand? This act of judging the relevant intelligence is what Aristotle means by comprehension.[45]

These first two stages of prudence exhibit why character is relevant to the practice of political leadership. While we often deliberate and comprehend alone, political leaders must regularly consult the input and expertise of others. It is evident to anyone who has participated in heated political discussion how character pertains to successful deliberation and comprehension. To facilitate such processes, political leaders must be aware of their own shortcomings, exhibit humility to receive constructive criticism, have patience to understand others, and embrace a host of other capacities relevant to political discussion. In fact, as several scholars have noted, Aristotle enumerates five social virtues especially relevant for political discussions and interactions with others.[46]

Outlining these first two stages of prudence reveals two practical means by which moral character pertains to political leadership. Those with character traits that facilitate good deliberation and comprehension—as an individual or with others—will exhibit greater success in gathering and assessing the information relevant to their decisions. These processes require certain dispositions and habits to regularly practice well. Similarly, those with habitual character deficiencies—such as pride, rashness, or immoderation—will make decisions based on faulty or incomplete information. The first two stages of prudence, in other words, provide two prominent channels by which character inflects the practice of political leadership.

After deliberation and comprehension have concluded, the final stage of prudence is making a decision regarding which course of action to take. The arrival at this resolution is the result of the third and final sub-virtue of prudence: decision (*gnome*).[47] To return to the example of the commander: a decision has not yet been made after the process of deliberation and comprehension are finished. The general may have comprehended which information is sound and most relevant, but he has not yet arrived at a course of action. This final stage necessitates decision—a firm conclusion and course of action that arises on the heels of deliberation and comprehension: "we attack tomorrow at daybreak from the left flank." As with deliberation, decision may not have the certainty of a scientific conclusion. Nonetheless, insofar as a political leader has deliberated and comprehended well, decision involves commanding the best course of action amid the present uncertainties.

Given this, it is apparent how the character of political leaders bears immediate significance to their capacity to be decisive. The most obvious virtue for successfully carrying out our decisions is courage. Once we have decided what to do, courage comes to our aid to ensure we are not overcome by fears in execution. Other, more gentle capacities are also important to good decisions. We must make sure our decisions are not motivated by spite, anger, or hatred. We must also ensure that we decide what is best for all parties, not

just ourselves. Characteristics like compassion, moderation, and even self-sacrifice may significantly inflect our decision-making. Thus, the third manner in which character pertains to political leadership relates to making difficult decisions and the capacity to execute these decisions successfully.

The three stages of the prudential process—deliberation, comprehension, and decision—may occur in a matter of seconds. Prudential decisions are not often made after hours of debate and scrutiny in the situation room. Aristotle recognizes that these sub-virtues of prudence are often conflated or confused with the virtue itself:

> It is only reasonable that all the characteristics tend toward the same thing, for in attributing judgment, comprehension, prudence, and intellect to the same people, we mean that they have judgment and intellect already and are prudent and comprehending. For all these capacities are concerned with things ultimate and particular—and someone's being comprehending and of good or sympathetic judgment consist in his being skilled in deciding matters with which the prudent person is concerned. (*EN* 1143a25–30)

Despite the routine conflation and confusion surrounding these terms, there are several reasons for distinguishing them. First, the aforementioned difficulty in understanding how one becomes prudent is clearer once the master virtue of prudence is divided into subunits. While it is not easy to understand how to become prudent, it is much easier to grasp concrete steps we can take to improve our capacity for deliberation, comprehension, and decision.

Moreover, identifying the three stages of prudence also highlights where the virtue may break down. In other words, a decision that does not identify the best means of attaining the good and advantageous has committed a fault of either deliberation, comprehension, or decision. If the decision did not consider all the relevant particulars—for example, neglecting that the adversary has antiaircraft weaponry—the fault resides in the intelligence-gathering of deliberation. If we misjudge the nature of the facts—the

antiaircraft weapons can reach altitudes of only 20,000 feet—we commit an error of comprehension that may compromise the plan. Finally, uncertainty, or a wavering will, does not exhibit the decisiveness that political prudence demands. By outlining the stages of prudence, we are able to understand the three processes wherein the character of political leaders is most important. As I have argued, moral character often inflects our capacity to deliberate, to comprehend, and to make decisions.

A final consequence of this tripartite division of prudence also relates to political leadership. It is perhaps no coincidence that the three stages of prudence—deliberation, comprehension, and decision—mirror the three standard types of political office—legislator, judge, and executive. Aristotle does not explicitly recognize this correspondence between prudence and the fundamental divisions of political authority. However, this parallel does offer further evidence for the close association between prudence and the leadership appropriate to a political community. Each type of political office, it might be said, elevates and embodies a different stage in the prudential process. The executive, for example, ought to embody decision to the greatest degree possible. In order for an entire political community to operate prudentially, one may conclude, its political offices ought to approximate and facilitate the three distinct stages of prudence. Thus, whether operating at the level of the individual or in command of a political community, prudence is the excellence of reasoned decision-making concerning the best means to realize our ends.

Conclusion

This article opened with a quandary that puzzles both citizens and scholars. While many of us intuitively recognize the importance of character for political leadership, we struggle to understand or articulate this relationship. More specifically, we often lack guiding principles concerning *what* characteristics are most important to political leadership, *why* these characteristics matter, and *how* they might be made practicable. I have argued that the account of prudence offered in Aristotle's thought provides an excellent

launching point for investigating such principles. For Aristotle, prudence is the intellectual virtue whereby we grasp the relevant particulars to action and decide the best—that is, the most noble and advantageous—means to achieve our ends.

Prudence is the most important virtue for political leadership because all political leaders must determine the means by which a political community can best achieve its goals. While some virtues (e.g., courage or moderation) are most relevant under specific circumstances (e.g., war or bribery), prudence pertains to every decision leaders make. In Aristotle's account, prudence operates in three stages. To act prudently, we must (1) amass and deliberate about the relevant contextual information for action, (2) comprehend the validity and truth of this information, and (3) decide the best action. Prudent actions exhibit excellence in each of these steps. Bad leadership decisions, in other words, can often be attributed to faults in one (or more) of these three stages of prudence.

By proposing prudence as the central virtue of political leadership, we glean some channels by which personal character affects the actual practice of political leaders. Anyone who has participated in political discourse and action recognizes that good deliberation, comprehension, and decision require certain characteristics and habits of behavior. We cannot deliberate well if we are consumed by self-importance or partisan passion. We cannot comprehend the quality of our information and context if we are distracted or undisciplined. We cannot lead if we lack the courage to carry out our decisions. The relationship of character to decision-making, therefore, is intimate. Without steady, disciplined habits our achievement of excellent deliberation, comprehension, and decision will be susceptible to the winds of passion or the whims of a passing moment. Our moral character, under the direction of prudence, provides the most fertile soil in which noble and advantageous actions grow. Understanding prudence, in short, provides several guiding principles for responding to the *what* and the *why* questions of character and political leadership.

The final question concerning this relationship, however, remains largely unaddressed: *how* can ideals of character be made

practical for political leadership? Aristotle's account of prudence is a formidable standard. Does it bear any promise for helping actual political leaders, so often bemoaned for their negligence of ethical principle? I conclude with a few thoughts concerning the cultivation of prudence.

Readers of Aristotle often mistake the virtue of prudence as a deeply philosophical and theoretical capacity. Given its role in guiding our actions, prudence seems to require philosophical formation and understanding—perhaps requiring even the other intellectual virtues of science (*episteme*), understanding (*nous*), or wisdom (*sophia*). This would be a daunting ideal indeed. It also would suggest that only the most sophisticated and educated are capable of prudence and, consequently, of good political leadership. But this interpretation ignores how deeply practical prudence is. Prudence is practical not only in its aim—to direct concrete actions—but also in its origin.

Aristotle suggests that intellectual virtues are taught, not habituated, and require both experience and time to cultivate (*EN* 1103a14–16). Who, then, are the teachers of prudence? Given prudence's close relation to moral virtue, it seems that prudence first grows from our earliest days, as we undergo the trial and error of being courageous, moderate, just, or tolerant. We begin practicing these capacities before we fully understand them; they are often formed through the instruction of our family, friends, and schoolteachers. Only with time do we understand why one ought to share, stand up to bullies, or return something borrowed. Thus, we do not often learn principles of action—that is, principles of prudence—as philosophical maxims. Instead, as one scholar notes, they are fixed "empirically, in each person, thanks to virtuous action which prepares his understanding to grasp and acknowledge the truth of the principles which prompt his action."[48] The time and experience of early moral life fixes in us habits that inflect our understanding of how to act and live well. The first lessons of prudence, in other words, begin in the nursery; our first teachers are our closest relations (*Pol*. 1336a18–35).

The humble beginnings of prudence demonstrate the great importance of moral education. If we want prudent leaders, we

must pay careful attention to the ethical habits and principles being taught in our culture, even those introduced at an early age. In addition to formal education, prudence is also learned by example—through witnessing the behavior of our close relations and leading figures of society. Acting well requires us to grow—through time and experience—in the stages of prudence that process and examine circumstantial particulars. As I have argued, these stages are deliberation, comprehension, and decision. While we can grow in these capacities through our own trial and error, we are greatly aided by real examples of their excellent operation. An image of prudential action speaks far more than words. Aspiring political leaders often look to current and previous generations for guidance and precedents of action. The current conduct of political leaders, therefore, is itself an education unto prudence.

These brief reflections on the cultivation of prudence draw our attention to three important points. First, prudence often arises from normal, everyday experiences; it is not imited to elite members of the Academy. Second, our education and early moral life bears great importance for our capacity to grow in prudence. And third, whether recognized or not, the prevailing conduct of political leaders provides a pattern and precedent for those who seek to fill their shoes. It is no coincidence that Aristotle's account of the best regime devotes significant attention to education and ethical conduct. Prudence does not grow up on its own. It is forged and formed by the prevailing habits and principles of its surroundings. Those who grasp the importance of character for good political leadership and desire more prudent leaders would do well to focus their attention on the wellsprings that conclude Aristotle's political analysis: education and culture.

Notes

1. Lee Rainie, Scott Keeter, and Andrew Perrin, "Trust and Distrust in America," *Pew Research Center*, 2019, 12. The concern with ethical governance was topped only by drug addiction (which 70 percent consider "a very big problem") and exceeds worries about unproductive partisanship (62%), income inequality (51%), climate change (46%), racism (40%), and illegal immigration (38%).

2. This number is a 6 percent drop from two decades earlier. Jeffrey M. Jones, "Presidential Moral Leadership Less Important to Republicans," *Gallup*, May 29, 2018, https://news.gallup.com/poll/235022/presidential-moral-leadership-less-important-republicans.aspx.
3. "These two historical developments—the trend toward a much more demanding set of presidential duties and the dismay generated by gross misuses and abuse of presidential power—do much to explain the tendency of many voters to regard character as perhaps a critical if not the most important requirement of candidates for the presidency." Alexander L. George and Juliette L. George, *Presidential Personality and Performance* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 7.
4. For more concerning each of these thinkers' conception of virtuous leadership, see David R. Weaver, "Leadership, Locke, and the Federalist," *American Journal of Political Science* 41, no. 2 (1997): 420–46; Ryan Patrick Hanley, "Enlightened Nation Building: The 'Science of the Legislator' in Adam Smith and Rousseau," *American Journal of Political Science* 52, no. 2 (2008): 219–34; Zachary German, "The Confines of Prudence: Montesquieu on the Knowledge of Statesmanship," *Political Science Reviewer* 44, no. 2 (2020); Brian Danoff and L. Joseph Hebert, eds., *Alexis de Tocqueville and the Art of Democratic Statesmanship* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011).
5. Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, *The Federalist Papers*, ed. Clinton Rossiter (New York, NY: Signet Classic, 2003), 348. Pangle argues that the "authors of the *Federalist Papers*, like Jefferson, and like Anti-Federalists," share a similar conception of virtue and its relation to leadership (Thomas L. Pangle, *The Spirit of Modern Republicanism: The Moral Vision of the American Founders and the Philosophy of Locke* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 72–73.
6. James P. Pfiffner, *The Character Factor: How We Judge America's Presidents*, 1st ed., The Presidency and Leadership, (College Station, Tex.: Texas A&M University Press, 2004), xii.
7. Although attuned to the subfield of international relations, Byman and Pollack helpfully characterize the discipline of political science's skepticism of individual character. They argue that three causes for skepticism pervade: "First, many political scientists contend that individuals ultimately do not matter. . . . Second, other political scientists posit that although individuals may matter from time to time, their influence does not lend itself to the generalizations that political scientists seek. . . . Third, several leading international relations theorists have raised a number of specific objections that they argue render

the study of individuals theoretically hopeless." Daniel L. Byman and Kenneth M. Pollack, "Let Us Now Praise Great Men: Bringing the Statesman Back In," *International Security* 25, no. 4 (2001): 108.

8. For a collection of several prominent thinkers, see J. Thomas Wren, Douglas A. Hicks, and Terry L. Price, eds., *Traditional Classics on Leadership* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2004).
9. For a recent overview of this genre, see Lisa Blaydes, Justin Grimmer, and Alison McQueen, "Mirrors for Princes and Sultans: Advice on the Art of Governance in the Medieval Christian and Islamic Worlds," *Journal of Politics* 80, no. 4 (2018): 1150–67.
10. See, e.g., Paul O. Carrese, *Democracy in Moderation: Montesquieu, Tocqueville, and Sustatinable Liberalism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Brian Danoff, "Lincoln and Tocqueville on Democratic Leadership and Self-Interest Properly Understood," *Review of Politics* 67, no. 4 (2005): 687–719.
11. Aristotle, *Aristotle's Politics*, trans. Carnes Lord, Second edition. ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 1277b26. Subsequent references to the *Politics* (hereafter cited as *Pol.*) draw from this translation and provide the Bekker number in the main body text.
12. "Aristotle gave these ideas technical precision and far more systematic development, and . . . has remained the canonical explication of the concept." Robert Hariman, ed., *Prudence: Classical Virtue, Postmodern Practice* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), viii.
13. For evidence of this history, see Marco Toste, "Virtue and the City: The Virtues of the Ruler and the Citizen in the Medieval Reception of Aristotle's Politics," in *Princely Virtues in the Middle Ages: 1200–1500*, ed. István Pieter Bejczy and Cary J. Nederman (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2007), 91–98. Toste comments that the centrality of prudence to leadership was widespread and found in *specula principum* as well as medieval commentaries on Aristotle's *Politics*. For a historical overview of the virtue of prudence, and Aristotle's prominent place therein, see Douglas J. Den Uyl, *The Virtue of Prudence* (New York: P. Lang, 1991).
14. In his account of the challenges to practical and prudential knowledge, Oakeshott traces the dethroning of this capacity to Bacon and Descartes. Their arguments were challenged by Pascal and others who detected "that the significance of Rationalism is not its recognition of technical knowledge, but its failure to recognize any other; its philosophical error lies in the certainty it attributes to technique and in its doctrine

of the sovereignty of technique." Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in politics and other essays*, New and expanded ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1991), 25. Another commentator writes that "the greatest threat in the history of prudence came from the Enlightenment, and particularly with Kant's subordination of self-interest and social context alike to universal moral principles." Hariman, *Prudence: Classical Virtue, Postmodern Practice*, Preface, ix.

15. For a prominent example, see Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Revised Student ed., ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), chap. 46, 458.
16. Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues: Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, Temperance*, 1st ed. (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1966), 4–5.
17. John Locke, *The Educational Writings of John Locke: A Critical Edition with Introduction and Notes*, ed. James Axtell (London Cambridge University Press, 1968), 411–12.
18. Montesquieu, *The Sprit of the Laws*, ed. Anne M. Cohler, Basia Carolyn Miller, and Harold Samuel Stone (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge, University Press, 2017), 192.
19. Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1982), 216.
20. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (London: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 297, 601.
21. As an example of the latter, Adam Smith writes, "We talk of the prudence of the great general, of the great statesman, of the great legislator. . . . It is the most perfect wisdom combined with the most perfect virtue. It constitutes very nearly the character of the Academical or Peripatetic sage." Smith, *TMS* 216.
22. Turning to Aristotle for such a purpose is a well-trodden path in the scholarship. See, e.g., Richard Avramenko and Michael Promisel, "When Toleration Becomes a Vice: Naming Aristotle's Third Unnamed Virtue," *American Journal of Political Science* 62, no. 4 (2018): 849–60; Susan D. Collins, "Moral Virtue and the Limits of the Political Community in Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics," *American Journal of Political Science* 48, no. 1 (2003): 47–61; Mary G. Dietz, "Between Polis and Empire: Aristotle's Politics," *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 2 (2012): 275–93; John Lombardini, "Civic Laughter: Aristotle and the Political Virtue of Humor," *Political Theory* 41, no. 2 (2013): 203–13.

23. "It is the activities in accord with virtue that have authoritative control over happiness." Aristotle, *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 1100b10–11. Subsequent references to the *Ethics* (hereafter cited as *EN*) draw from this translation and provide the Bekker number in the main body text.
24. "The work (*ergon*) of a human being is an activity of soul in accord with reason, or not without reason" (*EN* 1098a8).
25. Aristotle lists the five intellectual virtues at *EN* 1139b14–18.
26. Aristotle identifies eleven moral virtues: courage, moderation, generosity, magnificence, magnanimity, justice, and five "nameless" virtues. For more on these virtues, see Paula Gottlieb, *The Virtue of Aristotle's Ethics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
27. The eight chapters are 5 and 7–13. Many do not recognize that chapters 9–11, which concern the virtues of good deliberation (*euboulia*), comprehension (*sunesis*), and decision (*gnome*), are in fact sub-virtues of prudence. As I will argue, these sub-virtues may be understood as the three "stages" of prudence's operation.
28. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*. trans. C. I. Litzinger (Dumb Ox Books, 1993), 376.
29. Pieper, *Cardinal Virtues*, 27–28.
30. In fact, insofar as prudence requires an other-regarding and intimately aware discernment of reality, true prudence, by its very operation, necessitates looking beyond the muddied and distorted designs of self-love. As Pieper asks, "[H]ow utterly, therefore, the virtue of prudence is dependent upon the constant readiness to ignore the self, the limberness of real humility and objectivity?" Pieper, *Cardinal Virtues*, 21.
31. Here, again, Pieper's commentary is helpful: "Desiring the good does not make a decision prudent; but real understanding and proper evaluation of the concrete situation of the concrete act does." Ibid., 35.
32. The recognition of partial prudence in various areas of life is a clue as to how one might grow in the complete virtue—by cultivating prudence in various domains of life so as to make whole that which initially germinates across disparate realms of practical action.
33. As one scholar notes, the prudent person "will not have that intellectual disposition unless he has those ethical virtues that embody it, because an inappropriate emotion or motive in any sphere will undermine that intellectual state." Gottlieb, *Aristotle's Ethics*, 106.

34. The public assassination of Remirro de Orco comes to mind: Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield, Second Edition ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998, 1998), chap. 7, 29–30.
35. This is not the case for Machiavelli, who in the lines preceding the account of de Orco's assassination deems Cesare Borgia—the clever orchestrator of the affair—a "prudent (*prudente*) and virtuous man." Ibid., 27.
36. Aquinas's commentary on this quote is helpful: "[H]e shows that prudence adds something to this principle, saying that prudence is not identical with this trait of shrewdness, although prudence cannot be without it. But the habit of prudence in the soul is not joined to this insight, i.e., this perceptive principle of shrewdness, without moral virtue which always refers to good, as has been pointed out." Aquinas, *Commentary on Ethics*, 400.
37. Aristotle, *N. Ethics* 1145a2–3. "If different species of prudence were concerned with the matter of different moral virtues (as is the case with the different objects in the genus of art), one moral virtue would not be hindered from existing without another, each of them having a prudence corresponding to it. But this is impossible because the same principles of prudence apply to the totality of moral matter so that everything is subjected to the rule of reason. Therefore, all moral virtues are connected one with another by prudence." Aquinas, *Commentary on Ethics*, 405.
38. This interpretation of various species of prudence is endorsed by C.D.C. Reeve, *Aristotle on Practical Widsom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 189–96.
39. This point is reminiscent of Aristotle's discussion of justice: "[H]e who possess [complete justice] is able to use virtue also in relation to another, and not only as regards himself." Aristotle, *N. Ethics* 1129b32–33.
40. For more on Aristotle and executive power, see Harvey C. Mansfield, *Taming the Prince: The Ambivalence of Modern Executive Power*, Johns Hopkins paperbacks ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 23–72.
41. From the Latin, *auriga virtutum*: Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Supplementum, Q. 2, A. 4.
42. Recall that Aristotle says of the intellectual virtues, there are "five in number. These are art, science, prudence, wisdom, and intellect" (*EN* 1139b16–17).
43. These references occur at *EN* 1142b29–34, 1143a7–16, and 1143a25–30.

44. The first of these interpretations the author is aware of occurs in Aquinas, *Commentary on Ethics*, 387. For a more recent account, see Eugene F. Miller, "Prudence and the Rule of Law," *American Journal of Jurisprudence* 24 (1979): 195.
45. Another possible translation of this sub-virtue is judgment. I retain Bartlett and Collins's translation because Aristotle uses the Greek word for judgment to render the third and final sub-virtue of prudence.
46. For a recent account of these social virtues (ambition, gentleness, wit, truthfulness) and especially toleration, see Avramenko and Promisel, "When Toleration Becomes a Vice," 5–6.
47. The translation of *gnome* as "decision" is a deviation from Bartlett and Collins's rendering, "judgment." I make this adjustment because the English "judgment" often connotes the intellectual task of judging distinct from its execution. A "judgment," we assume, is rendered by a court and executed by someone else. Aristotle's *gnome* involves this intellectual judgment but also includes a certain firmness in carrying out an act. "Decision" and "decisive," therefore, seem better descriptors for this capacity as it pertains to prudence.
48. Richard Bodéüs, *The Political Dimensions of Aristotle's Ethics*, trans. Jan Edward Garrett (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), 37.