

Crazy in the Right Way

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We hear more about the virtues these days, but not enough about what has been called “the mother of all the virtues,” prudence. Prudence too often is taken to mean being cautious or careful. Thus when modern people hear that for Thomas and Aristotle prudence is the prerequisite for the other virtues, it sounds strange even contradictory. Being “prudent” seems to be the opposite of being brave.

I show my students the wonderful movie *Of Gods and Men* ^[1] about the French Trappist monks martyred in Algeria whose cause for beatification is in the works. I ask them whether the monks made a “prudent” decision to stay in Algeria when they knew there were terrorists in the area killing foreigners, especially Christians.

Their immediate answer is that it was very *imprudent*. “They were crazy,” said one student. “So you think they were wrong to stay?” “No, they did the right thing.” “But they were *crazy*?” “Yes,” said one young woman. “They were crazy – but *in the right way*.”

In a culture as devoted to individual autonomy as ours, perhaps this is how we need to describe the classic idea of prudence – the kind of prudence that causes people to risk their lives for others: it is being *crazy in the right way*.

Young firemen are told by older experienced firefighters, “We don’t want *heroes* around here!” Of course, they’re all heroes by what they do every day. So what do the older, more experienced firemen mean? They mean you don’t just go running into a burning building; this is foolish, and you will likely just get yourself killed and others injured trying to rescue you. Courage means doing the right thing in the right way at the right time.

Prudence is the intellectual virtue that allows us to determine the mean between the extremes. Should you run into a burning building to save a person trapped inside? If you are a frail 80-year old woman and the person inside is 300 pounds, probably not. If you are a strong linebacker with some training as a volunteer fireman, maybe so.

Should you jump in to save a drowning man 400 yards from shore? Not if you don't know how to swim. You should try to do *something*, but *what* you should do will have a lot to do with your abilities and the specific circumstances. You need prudence.

The classic idea of prudence is often unpopular among the proponents of rule moralism and moral relativism. Rule moralists of a certain sort, influenced by the ethics of Immanuel Kant and the insistence that moral principles must involve "universal maxims" that can apply the same way in all circumstances, have trouble with what they see as the "relativism" inherent in prudence.

Should I save a drowning man? The answer is supposed to be yes or no. We are supposed to be able to formulate a universal maxim which can apply to all people and circumstances. The question for these moralists is not merely what should *I* do; but what should *everyone* or *anyone* do in this situation.

We could try to formulate more rules to cover special situations: "You should jump in to save him unless you can't swim." What if there is a terrible storm? "You should jump in to save him unless you can't swim or unless there is a terrible storm." How terrible? There is simply no way of enunciating enough rules to cover every eventuality. What we need is prudence: the virtue that allows us to apply general principles to a specific situation.

Since with prudence, what ought to be done is "relative" to the person and the situation, at least in part, this will seem to strict rule moralists too much like "situational ethics" and "moral relativism." But moral relativists are no more likely to be pleased with classic views of prudence than rule moralists because of its insistence that the "mean" is an *objective* measure.



Prudence, on this view, is not like modern notions of conscience, which encourage people to decide what is right "for them." The temperate mean when it comes to alcohol may be different for you than for me, but neither of us should drive when impaired. And whether or not I am capable of driving safely is not a subjective matter.

So too, if Jewish refugees show up at your door fleeing the Nazis, then you *should* do everything you can to help, whether you "feel" like doing it or not. *What* exactly you should do requires

prudence. But the prudent person will apply the general principle about protecting human life to this particular circumstance and make the judgment, "I have to help these people as best I can."

So too, if an unborn child results from a sexual act, the virtue of prudence dictates, first, that terminating the life of the child is out of the question. Period. Whether to raise the child or offer it for adoption involves a further judgment of prudence.

Helping the Jewish refugees and bringing the baby to term will require *courage*. Even having the presence of mind to make the judgment will require courage. This is one reason Aristotle and Aquinas spoke frequently about the connectedness of the virtues.

People often talk about "conscience" as if it were purely mental, as though our choices were unaffected by our appetites, passions, and prejudices. We would do better to focus on developing the virtue of prudence in tandem with the other moral virtues, which together enable us to make wise moral judgments.

This means not merely following rules without a sense of what ends the rules were meant to serve, but it also means not merely doing what I "feel" is best without any cognizance of the fact that my "feelings" may be the result of cowardice, intemperance, or bias. Prudence is applying the objective general principles wisely, courageously, and temperately, with virtues formed by love, to the specific circumstances.

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[1] *Of Gods and Men*: https://www.amazon.com/Gods-Men-Lambert-Wilson/dp/B0056AJMCG/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1529416811&sr=8-1&keywords=of+gods+and+men

[2] Image: <http://www.royaliconstudio.com>

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