

Doing the Right Thing

Imagine a boy is taking a test and is tempted to cheat by looking at his notes. He evaluates the situation: his notes are on the floor, and he could easily look at them without being caught. Plus, if he aces the test, he will finish the semester with an “A” rather than a “B” in the class. At the same time, he knows that cheating is wrong because it is a form of lying. So, he quickly overcomes his temptation, and decides not to cheat.

The above account is an example of the virtue of prudence in action.

Without question, Aristotle’s understanding of prudence has had the greatest influence on the Western tradition. By no means, though, is the idea of prudence unique to Aristotle. Some form of it is commended by just about every moral philosopher in both the West and the East. [Plato](#) and [Plotinus](#), [Cicero](#) and [Confucius](#), [Boethius](#) and [Buddha](#): all either explicitly or implicitly advocate some form of prudence.

Prudence is often listed as one of the “four cardinal virtues,” so named because they represent the “hinges” (*cardines*) of the other virtues. These virtues are first [listed](#) together in Plato’s *Protagoras*.

In the [Nicomachean Ethics](#), Aristotle defined prudence (*phronesis*) as “a state grasping the truth, involving reason, concerned with action about things that are good or bad for a human being.” Basically, a prudent person knows the right thing to do in each situation and acts upon that knowledge. Prudence, then, is a form of wisdom about practical matters and actions, rather than a more general wisdom (*sophia*). It deals with what one should do in the here and now.

But the two forms of wisdom depend on one another: to

prudently do the good we must know what *is* good—and vice versa, we more clearly know the good if we live good lives. The classic view of virtue is thus built on a strong link between knowledge and action that one does not often find today. In modern times, it is popular to value those who are “smart” or display “critical thinking skills.” But, for Aristotle and other ancients, such knowledge is useless if not applied toward leading a good life.

Like the other virtues, Aristotle believed prudence is learned through both example and experience. A person becomes prudent through being around a prudent person, observing him/her, and trying to do likewise. This means that it’s crucial for young people to be exposed to good examples of prudent behavior, and avoid association with those who are imprudent. Ideally, parents provide an example of prudence to their children, but prudence can also be learned through other family members, teachers, mentors, bosses, peers, and close friends.

In addition, one becomes prudent through knowing and doing what’s good in many different situations. As the saying goes, “Practice makes perfect!” Because prudence is gained through experience, then, Aristotle believed that one typically does not find young people who are prudent.

Sometimes we think of the “prudent” person as one who is very hesitant to act and does not take chances. We oppose the prudent person to the brave person who rushes headfirst into danger without getting stuck on pondering the consequences.

But that is not the case at all. When it comes to prudence, the maxim that “He who hesitates is lost” definitely applies. The prudent person, once he has deliberated and decided upon the right course of action (which oftentimes takes place almost instantaneously), must quickly act upon it. A person who does not act quickly after deliberation does not trust his reasoned judgment; there is a disconnect between his intellect and will. The person who hesitates too long, then, is

“imprudent.”

Prudence is also compatible with putting yourself in dangerous situations...sometimes. For instance, if there were people still alive in a burning building, it might be the prudent thing to charge in to try to save them. Even though it is dangerous, you would be acting on the principle that it is a good thing to save another person's life. But if you charged into a burning building that was about to collapse before you had any evidence that there were people inside, that would be an imprudent action.

The person who acts for motivations other than the good is also imprudent. Thus, the person whose actions are primarily motivated by money (whether he be rich or poor) is imprudent, since he places wealth above other goods. So also, the person primarily motivated by pleasure is imprudent, since, as Aristotle held, pleasure is a byproduct of doing the good, rather than something to be sought after itself.