Douglas J. Den Uyl's
The Virtue of Prudence
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I think it is accurate to describe our scene as awash in cleverness but devoid of wisdom. As defined by Aristotle, cleverness is ingenuity of persons at getting what they want. As a form of wisdom, *phronesis* is knowledge of the good. As "practical wisdom" it is self-guidance in progressive actualization of one's own potential worth, producing objective value in the world and providing to the self *eudaimonia,* which is the gratification of self-fulfilling living. *Phronesis* became the Latin *prudentia* and our "prudence," but in the translations wisdom was lost, and our term means to us something like cautious foresight. While *phronesis* was in Aristotle's world the supreme personal virtue, we regard prudence as a skill with dubious moral standing.

With exemplary clarity and insight, Professor Den Uyl shows how and why the transformation has come about. Fulfilling the promise of its title, the book is a careful study of the virtue of prudence, but it is also a scrupulous study of prudence as a non-virtue. Because the transformation was effected by the exchange of the classical model of ethics for the modern model, the book is a comparison of the two models. As such it is immensely useful at explaining the current revival of "virtues ethics" by increasing numbers of American (and some British) ethical theorists. By demonstrating the incommensurability of the two models, it is also a powerful argument that one can't "have it

both ways" by mixing the two modes. This should be heeded by, for example, today's so-called "moderate" virtues ethicists[1] who propose to simply add virtues considerations to mainstream ethics (Kantian, utilitarian, or contractarian). It should likewise be heeded by feminists who presently argue that caring for the self (prudence) is a condition of caring for others,[2] without recognizing that this entails an exchange of ethical frameworks with implications spreading in all directions. And in the end I think it forbids the conjunction of Aristotelian ethics and libertarian (classical liberal) politics that Den Uyl arrives at. But this comes late in the book, and I will save my comments on it for the end of this review.

In its historical aspect, *The Virtue of Prudence* begins with a consideration of the work of practical wisdom in Aristotle's ethics, and then charts the decline of prudence as a virtue in Aquinas, Hobbes, Adam Smith, and Kant. Den Uyl uses Aquinas to show that the decline of prudence as a virtue is not entirely attributable to the intellectual revolution that inaugurated modernity, having been begun by Christianity in its subordination of natural life to a supernatural afterlife, access to which is ultimately gained by God's grace. In this context human wisdom is incapable of knowledge of human ends, for it is natural and they are supernatural. This of course is the summoning of Christian faith.

In chapters devoted to each, Hobbes inaugurates modernity by renouncing the classical worldview including the classical mode of ethical theory; Adam Smith is presented as the last significant moral theorist to ascribe importance to prudence, while at the same time undermining his own effort by working within the modern framework; and Kant marks the first appearance of an ethics from which prudence is expressly and decisively excluded.

The concluding four chapters of the book are Den Uyl's work at restoring prudence to the status of the supreme virtue, which requires nothing less than a reconceptualization of the nature of human beings, of individuality, of good lives, including good social relations (which in Aristotelian fashion Den Uyl extrapolates from a close analysis of friendship), and of politics. Throughout, Den Uyl is reviving Aristotelianism, but by no means slavishly, for he makes important revisions that are required both by knowledge that has been gained since Aristotle and by our allegiance to democracy. He rejects as contradictory Aristotle's contention that it is the function of government to *produce* a citizenry of self-directed persons (p. 232). He insists upon the "inclusive end" reading of Aristotle, in which persons differ in the kind of life that is best for each, against the "dominant end" reading that specifies an identical outcome for all well-lived lives (and he provides the strongest argument I have seen for the "inclusive end" interpre-

tation: see p. 212). And he modifies Aristotelian teleology by rejecting the idea of an innate end, or *daimon,* in favor of what he terms a "nexus," which he describes as "that set of habits, endowments, circumstances, talents, interests, histories, beliefs, and the like which descriptively characterize an individual and which he brings to any new situation" (p. 170). It is this nexus that Den Uyl employs as the objective criterion of individuated choices. It enables him to avoid in his teleology what Israel Scheffler has termed the "myth of fixed potentials" in classical teleology.[3]

The heart of the book on its descriptive and historical side is the author's proposal of five contextual conditions under which prudence is likely to be regarded as a crucial virtue, together with their five contraries representing conditions under which prudence is unlikely to be regarded as a virtue. Because the former are the foundations of classical ethics while the latter are the foundations of modern ethics, this keen analytical work equips the reader with clear maps of the two territories together with a demonstration of their incommensurability. I will here provide just the obstructive conditions of modernity (pp. 50-51), leaving the reader to supply their classical contraries, and then I will briefly suggest Den Uyl's line of argument in regard to the one he regards as the keystone.

Negative Condition 1, the "Polarity" condition: "When ethics is considered to be fundamentally concerned with the conflict between duty and self-interest, prudence will be unlikely to surface as a significant virtue."

Negative Condition 2, the "hedonic" condition: "Any moral theory which takes desire alone to be either motivationally or axiologically foundational will thereby fail to accord prudence the status of a virtue."

Negative Condition 3, the "impersonalist" condition: "A moral theory which understands duty in essentially impersonalist or agent-neutral terms will be inimical to the development of prudence as a virtue."

Negative Condition 4, the "non-teleological" condition: "Prudence does not thrive in non-teleological contexts."

Negative Condition 5, the "communitarian" condition: "If our relations with others are given foundational importance in ethics, the virtue of prudence will, to the extent that the individual self is given secondary or derivative status, diminish in importance as a virtue."

I cannot here follow Den Uyl is his careful attention to each of these five theses (as well as to their positive counterparts), but must content myself with offering something of his argument against the "impersonalist" negative condition, which he regards as the most decisive.

Impersonalism is clearly definitive of modern ethics, being established alike by Hobbes's Leviathan, Smith's Impartial Observer, Kant's universalizability criterion, utilitarianism's "each to count for one and only one," and Rawls's veil of ignorance. It serves the important purpose of preventing persons from giving preference to themselves, either as recipients of value or as exceptions to a rule; but it also has the effect of precluding justification to the dedication by particular individuals to particular values. On this point, Den Uyl cites Loren Lomasky as observing that impersonalism requires that "one be tentative with respect to all one's values and goals, because no license can be taken to weight one's own goals higher than the next person's" (p. 28). In other words, impersonalism erases the commitment that is entailed in truly accepting responsibility for particular values. To see this, suppose that one has chosen to identify with values composing set A, and these values come under attack. If values are agent-neutral, one can with impunity shift to set B, thereby avoiding trouble; and if set B is attacked, allegiance may again be shifted with impunity to set C, and so on. In short we have here a fair weather philosophy that erodes both integrity and responsibility, in any real meaning of either term.

A virtue of impartiality and universalizability is that they serve as a corrective to the provincialism in which all human lives begin. Thanks to the fatality of being born at a particular time and place, as a helpless infant destined to a lengthy childhood of dependence, we inevitably begin by knowing only the beliefs, values, and patterns of conduct that we are taught. As we gradually learn of others, we initially maintain allegiance to those we have been taught by regarding them as the whole and exclusive truth, while perceiving alternatives as the many ways of going wrong. This provincialism-cum-absolutism requires a corrective, and impartiality supplies it by demanding recognition and appreciation of varieties of value. But we speak here of the domain of knowledge. In the domain of practice, actions are particulars, and human lives are finite. One can appreciate a multiplicity of values, but one can dedicate oneself to only a few, because dedication entails actualization, conservation, and defense of these values, and to dedicate oneself in this sense to all values is clearly impossible to a finite being. If there is no good reason for an individual to assume responsibility for certain values rather than others, then allegiance may shift with impunity, and we have the fair weather syndrome described above. If it is thought that society assigns our values-identifications ("my station and its duties"), then this is sociological determinism that precludes self-directed living and is inimical to the autonomy that we expect of adult lives.

Den Uyl criticizes the impartiality requirement of modern ethics

for its employment of empty universals, which preclude justification to choices of particulars (values) by particulars (individual persons). Against it he commends the Aristotelian insistence that judgment is "a process of employing the universal to gain insight into the particular, while at the same time recognizing the contingent and unique character of particulars" (p. 72). One might say that Aristotle is here exhibiting loyalty to his kind - his humanness - as a "thinking particular," while modern impersonalists are betraying their kind. (I cannot resist invoking Nietzsche's profound observation that human beings are perpetually prone to self-betrayal and have assembled innumerable ingenious devices by which to accomplish it.)

Aristotelian prudence, then, is precisely the judgment that mediates between particulars and universals without abandoning either. It is in Den Uyl's words "the practical wisdom needed by individuals for achieving their own particular form of self-perfection" (p. 238). It is "the intelligent management of those goods necessary for eudaimonia" (p. 187). It serves alike the self and others (this is part of Aristotle's meaning in defining human beings as inherently social), because it produces objective values in the world, i.e., values that will be of worth to (some) other persons.

Den Uyl makes a substantial contribution by spelling out what he believes are certain implications of Aristotle in regard to prudence that remain merely implicit or insufficiently explicit in Aristotle's writings. Den Uyl makes a case for certain "generic goods" (the moral virtues, health and beauty, pleasure, economic sufficiency, friendship, honor, justice, intellectual ability, and intellectual and artistic pursuits) as necessary to all good lives. Then prudence, in one of its dimensions, "is the application of intelligence to a compossibility problem" (p. 175), namely the problem of integrating these goods. Den Uyl terms this the "horizontal" dimension of prudence, and devotes half of Chapter 8 to it. The rest of the chapter is given to excellence, the "vertical" dimension, which prudence contains because the good that practical wisdom perceives is an ideal that requires to be served by actualization.

Primary goods are generic, but how these goods are combined, and in what proportions, "is open to the individual's own creative input" (p. 168), as likewise is the specificity that generic goods require (the particular way to earn one's income, the preferred liquid to satisfy one's thirst, and so on). Here is Den Uyl's conception of individuation, and he contends that it is not an arbitrary or merely conventional matter. For Aristotle its objective ground is innate and individuated (on the "inclusive end" reading) potentialities. For Den Uyl individuation likewise has an objective ground, but it is what he terms each person's "nexus."

For my part, I think that only Aristotle's full-bodied teleology

can do the work that Den Uyl asks of the nexus. We earlier followed Den Uyl in his description of the nexus as each individual's habits, endowments, circumstances, talents, interests, histories, beliefs, and the like. This avoids Aristotle's predication of what are in some sense fixed potentials. The problem is that what Den Uyl describes is pretty clearly produced in persons initially by the processes of socialization in childhood, and evidently Den Uyl is comfortable with this because at one point he says that the formative agencies in the early formation of a person's nexus may be "as arbitrary as one's father pushing one into mathematics because he liked it and did well in it in school" (p. 172). True, Den Uyl has introduced objectivity into the formation of good character by his identification of generic goods, i.e. goods that all well- lived lives require. But he holds that individuation is modulation of these goods in accordance with one's nexus, and if the nexus can satisfactorily be formed by arbitrary factors, then whatever may be the objective contraints on generic full humanness, the individuation of that humanness will be arbitrary.

I will conclude by amplifying my remark at the outset that I perceive Den Uyl as hoist by his own petard when he combines Aristotelian ethics with libertarian (classical liberal) politics. Aristotle famously held that ethics and politics are inseparable, and it is because Den Uyl agrees with this that he turns to politics in the penultimate chapter of the book. But the politics that Aristotle combined with his eudaimonistic ethics is eudaimonistic politics. Den Uyl's combination is I think precluded by his own demonstration of the incommensurability of classical and modern frameworks.

I must make two qualifications here. The first is my complete agreement with Den Uyl that contradiction appears when Aristotle expects politics to produce self-perfecting persons, whereas on his own thesis self-perfection presupposes self-direction. The second is my belief that Den Uyl in fact compromises his libertarianism by accepting a key Aristotelian political thesis, namely that rights derive from responsibilities. In support of this Den Uyl says, "But the appeal to self-perfection does make politics dependent on ethics, for it is the obligation to achieve self-perfection that gives politics a context of meaning" (p. 232), and ". . . rights are given their contextual meaning and purpose by the obligation for self-perfection" (p. 233). Classical liberalism and libertarianism define human beings as rights-bearers and derive responsibilities from this base, beginning with the responsibility to respect the rights of others. Conversely eudaimonism begins with the responsibility of every person for self-perfection, and derives rights therefrom.

Den Uyl's libertarianism is apparent in his insistence that natural rights are exclusively the negative rights to non-interference. And it is certainly true for eudaimonism that some natural rights are negative,

for self-directed living requires the protection they provide. But eudai-
monism (on my understanding, of course) gives equal importance to
positive rights. The reason for this is its recognition of the imperative
for good growth. No human being begins life as self-directed, for we
are neotenus beings, born in an embryonic condition. As a develop-
mental outcome from initially helpless creatures, self-directedness can
be prevented, not just by others' interference, but by absence of the
necessary conditions for such development. To see that some of these
conditions are positive, we need only ask ourselves if we think that in
order to grow optimally, children and young people need only protec-
tion against interference.

     I will close by saying that it is a pleasure and a privilege to
take issue in one or two matters with so scrupulous and insightful an
author as Professor Den Uyl. His book does great service, alike for
the virtue of prudence, for virtues ethics generally, and for ethical
philosophy as a whole. It is a valuable contribution to our discipline.
Because it provides solid orientation by skillfully contrasting the classi-
cal and modern frameworks, it is likely to be received with gratitude
by students in college ethics courses, undergraduate and graduate,
which use it as a text.

1. See, e.g., Kurt Baier, "Radical Virtue Ethics," in Peter A. French, Theodore E.
Uehling, Jr., and Howard K. Wettstein, *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, vol. XIII, *Ethical
Theory: Character and Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), pp.
126-135.
2. A leading example is Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard
University Press, 1982), ch. 3.
3. Israel Scheffler, *Of Human Potential* (Boston, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul,
1985), pp. 10-16.