R. Hariman, ed. Prudence: Classical Virtue, Postmodern Practice

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Prudence: Classical Virtue, Postmodern Practice (review)

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“This volume,” writes the editor, “is one contribution to the contemporary revival of interest in the concept of prudence” (ix). What interest? Notably, that of latter-day “virtue ethicists,” whose discontents with the algorithmic decision-making procedures of modernism have given wings to a hope that we (considered as members of some sort of imagined polis) will return to the context-sensitive “practical wisdom” of the ancients. (*Prudentia* is Cicero’s Latin translation of the Greek *phronesis*, practical wisdom.)

In theory, this line of reasoning was supposed to break the mold of contemporary politics. In practice, it has been captured by the political right. Virtue ethicists and civic republicans like Benjamin Barber have been outflanked by “virtuecrats” such as Bill Bennett (he of the gambling habit), the pompous columnist George Will, and Amitai Etzioni, the neo-corporatist founder of the Communitarian Party. It should be said right away, then, that few, if any, of the contributors to this collection are sympathetic to this sort of thinking. Admittedly, they share with virtuecrats a critique of rule-governed forms of decision-making, whether deontological or utilitarian, especially when these procedures masquerade as ways of “operationalizing” morality. Such calculi are indeed creatures of the institutional cultures of business firms and bureaucracies, which have increasingly affected law and politics. In addition, the authors of this volume are no less inclined than right-leaning virtuecrats to rake through intellectual history in order to come up with something relevant to the present and future. “There is a looking backward in order to see more clearly a mentality that is overlooked and undervalued in the present” (20). But they do so with a view to seeing what will come up when management of the topic of prudence is taken away from philosophers and reconnected (as it was from antiquity...
until the nineteenth century) with the art of rhetoric, considered as an array of teachable discursive practices that are helpful in identifying and commending appropriate responses to contingent circumstances. The most salient features of the volume follow: a shift of the center of gravity from Aristotle to Cicero (ix), and a consideration of how, through rhetorical performances that involve the construction of a visible, embodied self, that strangest of creatures, a post-modern prudence, might be brought forth.

I am pleased to report that changes of meaning in the collection’s key term are discernible as we move from Cicero’s prudentia to Machiavelli’s prudenzia, and from the prudence that Edmund Burke invoked to justify American independence against his government’s blind, imprudent rule-following to the quite different, and indeed incompatible, prudence that the Americans actually ended up with by the Jacksonian period, which is explored here by James Jasinski and Christine Oravec. Still, greater attention to the first great fracture in the concept, as phronesis moved across the Adriatic and became prudentia, would have made it clearer that, if there is to be a post-modern prudence, whether on terms set forth here by Maurice Charland or Hariman, or elsewhere by others, it cannot conceivably be seen as emerging out of a continuous root-stock that managed to cross two seas intact, but as invented by doing repeated violence to a term, in part by providing it with a handsome pedigree that must be fitted up for the occasion.

At this point let me register my only complaint. In spite of some useful remarks about Aristotle’s notion of phronesis by Hariman and Charland, the volume lacks a systematic treatment of the Greek notion of practical wisdom (phronesis) even as a foil. This makes it difficult to see that the notion of phronesis was diversely interpreted by fourth-century Greeks; that Cicero’s assimilation of phronesis to a Latin term already loaded with local associations—the subject of an informative essay by Robert Cape—might not preserve the Greek notion intact; that to the extent that Cicero does preserve aspects of Greek phronesis, his version is probably closer to Isocrates’ rhetoric-friendly conception of it than to Aristotle’s; and that, in consequence, the contemporary virtuocrats whose views are implicitly being countered in this volume might not find much that is practically wise about conceptions of prudence that descend from the rhetorically coded Roman tradition. (This omission perversely mirrors that of Alasdair MacIntyre, a seminal philosophical virtue theorist whose discontents extend to modernity itself, not just modernism; MacIntyre tends
to jump from Aristotle to the Aristotelian scholastics in constructing his
tendentious genealogy of *prudentia*.)

Let me say something more, then, about Aristotle’s conception of
*phronesis*. It is, in the first instance, a cognitive act (*pace* Charland, 268).
It is supposed to be intellectual insight (and not mere opinion [*doxa*], á la
Isocrates) into what course of action should be chosen in a particular, usu-
ally vexing, situation if the best interests of the self and those who are
extensions of the self (family, friends, fellow citizens) are to be preserved.
(It differs from *sunesis*, which is insight into what others should do; advis-
ing is not deliberating.) The best interests of the self are made evident in
the practically wise person’s emotional reactions to situations that call for
decision (*prohairesis*). It is in and through the emotion-laden construc-
tions of these situations (what Heidegger called “moods”) that appropriate
actions are found by way of deliberation. (The editor regrets that he and
his collaborators were unable to explore the relation between emotion and
prudence [28n22]; so do I.) These correct emotional reactions are implanted
by early socialization (*paideia*), in large measure through inculcation of
socially shared narratives (*mythoi*). They are subsequently shaped by trial
and error into good habits. Habits are good, or virtuous, if the emotions
they evoke and the actions they help identify subordinate instrumental and
external goods to noble values (*ta kala*). They are bad, or vicious, if instru-
mental and external goods, such as money or power or reputation, deter-
mine ends. For Aristotle, then, a prudent person is one who habitually lights
on an action that both preserves the noble values that are accessible to him
affectively and is practically effective in an often complex, sometimes vi-
cious world. These values are, of course, the subset of polis values that
have survived philosophical scrutiny.

As they track the subsequent history of this general notion, the au-
thors cannot help showing how reconceptualizations of *phronesis/prudence*
reveal how difficult it is to maximize nobility and expediency at the same
time. If Aristotle himself is rather blithe about this, it might be because he
is constructing an ideal, or, as Charland suggests, because he assumes a
social order that, unlike ours, isn’t plagued with (or graced by) disagree-
ments about fundamental values (270–71). Then, too, a phronetic choice
does not have to last forever; indeed, given the context-dependence of
*phronesis*, it cannot (Hariman, 310). So the fact that Pericles set up the
conditions that led to Athens’s downfall does not qualify either Thucydides’
or Aristotle’s admiration for his practical wisdom. We are not talking here
about Thousand Year Reichs.
Be that as it may, Cicero, for his part, is aware of a gap between the noble and the expedient. His response is to conjoin practical thinking with good speaking (euphronein with eulegein) so that the “optimal rhetor” can stabilize unstable situations by discursive constructions into which others are swept up. (Cicero implausibly ascribes the same view to Aristotle [Cape, 51]. I would argue that it is Isocrates who is actually in play.) By the time one gets to Machiavelli, however, the tension between nobility and expediency is intolerably high, largely because the ante has been upped on intrinsically good values; they are now Christian, and so cannot possibly guide prudent political behavior in Italian city-states. This has fueled an interpretive problem. Those who see Machiavelli as a proto-modern realist, or even a nihilist, find it hard to take straight his apparent devotion to ancient values and virtues, especially prudenzia. Eugene Garver offers an intriguing solution. Working from a distinction between real and nominal possibilities, he argues that Machiavelli recognizes that “Christian values are good ones.” But he also knows that they are “not real possibilities” for the political actor. It is prudent, then, not nihilistic, to appear to favor Christian values, but to act in accord with ancient ones.

Machiavelli is clearly at work in Elizabethan England, albeit under a potentially nihilistic interpretation (just read Shakespeare). Remarkably enough, however, by the time we get to Edmund Burke, the conflict between expediency and goodness does not seem quite so intractable after all. On the contrary, something like Cicero’s solution appears accessible to Burke. The aim of Burke’s speeches, Stephen Browne argues, is to “protect the conditions of [their] own performance” (129), conditions that are as centered for Burke on “organized efforts to act for the common good and against those who would despoil it” as they are for Cicero (138). Browne puts himself in a position to say that Burke achieves this aim by treating the historical tradition, including the religious tradition, not just as a source of topoi (as Cicero does), or of exempla (like Machiavelli), but as the locus and criterion of the values whose preservation virtually defines prudential action for him. Browne could also have said that in his rhetorical performances Burke links the preservation of tradition to specific policies by inciting in his audience/readers a range of human reactions that include physical fear of death, natural attachment to others with whom one is linked, powerful emotions, wild imaginings, the resonance of words as causal forces, even weapons, and huge gobs of collective memory—everything, it would seem, except reason. If an essay on Hume had been included in the book we would have found out why good values and good ideas (including the Aristotelian notion that humans are naturally social) can be preserved.
for Burke only by treating reason in this anti-Aristotelian, anti-intellectualistic way; and why, unlike the Scots, Burke’s account of rhetoric is not, and cannot be, grounded in a prior, independent “philosophy of rhetoric,” but rests upon rhetorical performance itself. We can, however, infer something about this issue from Peter Diamond’s essay on Thomas Reid. If Diamond labors mostly in vain to find a strong conceptual connection between Reid’s Common Sense epistemology and common sense in the prudential sense, this, to my mind, is Reid’s fault, not Diamond’s. Reid thinks the problem is Hume’s representationist epistemology, which locks the self up into its own subjective experience. Beyond the fact that this is a bad reading of Hume, the problem isn’t Hume’s epistemology. It is epistemology itself, including Reid’s realism, which privileges philosophy as setting terms for and constraints on rhetoric, thereby missing the locus within which prudential speech sensu Burke is available.

Another, related theme runs through these essays. In a world pockmarked by fortuna, the gap between the good and the expedient tends to shift the very notion of prudence toward the side of caution. For Aristotle, erring on the side of caution is still erring; it is a vice, not a virtue. But in a world of competing, non-negotiable basic values, rife with uncontrollable contingencies, prudential maxims favoring caution come virtually to define the notion of prudence itself—so much so that Hariman, in introducing the book, seems compelled to capture the benevolence of his readers by profusely apologizing for bringing up this “prudish” topic at all (1–2).

Cape throws an interesting light on the remote origins of this bias toward caution. Cicero wants to make prudence as bold as it was for the Greeks by pouring the contents of Greek phronesis into the Latin prudentia, a contraction of providentia, or foresight. But prudentia already connoted something like the “good buddy” (my term) who “serves as a public man’s confidant” and presumably cautions him against overreaching (38). The term passes on these traces in spite of Cicero. (By this measure Tonto was prudent, not the Lone Ranger; the Lone Ranger, noble soul that he was, was practically wise, though perhaps without Tonto he might have been imprudent.) More proximally, Jasinski suggests that the conflation of prudence with caution derives from Guicciardini’s opposition to Machiavelli. Transmitted through the English “country ideology” to colonial Americans by way of Pocock’s famous “Atlantic Republican tradition,” Guicciardini’s stress on “accommodation over audacity” explains how difficult it was for Americans to work themselves into a lather sufficient to bring them to the point of separating from perfidious Albion. To do so, they had to override what one revolutionary pamphlet called “a feeble and intimidating pru-
ence” (quoted; 154). It was precisely this challenge that Paine met by arguing that, pace Guicciardini, time was not on the colonials’ side.

Jasinski cites a return after the revolutionary period to the “dysfunctional,” accommodating conception of prudence to explain the bad, and in the end imprudent, habit of temporizing about slavery (176). Oravec’s essay on audience response to the ante-bellum feminist Fanny Wright throws, for me, a flood of light on why antebellum America blustered, but did not act. Because clear lines had not yet been drawn between mobocracy and democracy, and mobocracy was perceived as both entrancing and dangerous, prudence came to be identified not just with caution, but with decorum. (One might call this the aestheticization of prudence, and note that the process was already underway in Blair’s Scotland.) If Wright’s scandalized audiences regarded her descent from the galleries to which ladies were confined into the masculine world of democratic eloquence as the exhibitionism of a freak in a carnival show, this was in part because the world that universal manhood suffrage had created was itself pretty carnivalesque. “The Jacksonian audience,” Oravec writes, “was interactive to a degree barely conceivable to the contemporary mind,” nowhere more so than in the rhetorical performances that were its favorite indoor and outdoor sport (206). Precisely because they did not actively participate in it, women were figured as the better angels of our nature. It was on the bodies of women that decorum was first inscribed, a marking that gradually drew the line between the mob and the public, and grounded the weak democracy we actually have. It occurs to me that this mentalité may help explain the nature of the masculinist prejudice that prevented American women from being able to vote until the second decade of the twentieth century. By a perverse logic into which many women entered, the preservation of female decorum, precisely by not participating in politics, might have been perceived as necessary if democracy was to be saved from its unruly (male) self. Oravec does not pursue this theme here. Instead, she suggests that the difficulty we have in entering into the Jacksonian mind demonstrates just how decorously tamed we have all become, in part through the relentless work of initially “feminized” rhetorical critics in turning the prudent, already marked as the cautious, into the decorous. It is in this vein that John Nelson can cite Miss Manners as “a champion theorist of prudence as propriety” (248).

This brings us to the present, and to the occasion for this volume. In our time, democracy is reaching out toward treating individual styles, cultural diversity, and pluralism about values as intrinsic goods. These goods, it is said, can be recognized and fostered only by democracy, and any cul-
ture or regime that does not recognize them is, to that extent, not a democracy. Because they reinscribe prudence as the decorous cooptation, even repression, of democracy in precisely this sense, it is easy to paint the virtueocrats among us as the “old oligarchs” of the day. The antidote, it would seem, is to urge people to “act up,” either by “imprudently” opposing the conventional wisdom that has tamed us, or, better yet, by refriguring prudence itself. All three of the authors who treat explicitly of the present in this volume favor refiguration.

Nelson’s version of the refiguration option depends on the claim that it was liberal versions of democracy, not (Pocockian) republican versions, that were done in by expert calculation. The narratives and myths of American popular (and I presume populist) culture, he argues, are still chock full of prudentially useful republican maxims of action, just itching to be redeployed by novel forms of troping and, through troping, deciding. In Hariman’s refiguration doctrine the prudent actor is a performer, like Cicero, whose self is not expressed in judicious speech, but constructed in and through the rhetorical act itself. (Hence the connection between eulegein and euphronein is even closer than we had thought.) Agency of this constructed sort need not be the property of an individual self, Hariman says. “Prudence, like the art of rhetoric, has a portability that allows application to groups, subcultures, institutions, and publics” (305). He uses this notion of agency to argue that “the public” acted prudentially in collectively resisting the impeachment of Bill Clinton. Given the deeply entrenched rhetoric of decorum, and Clinton’s jaw-dropping lapses, his enemies could surely expect to undo him. They found out otherwise. The issue was not Clinton, but the Constitution, and how prudentially to keep it intact. So prudence has not been entirely subverted by decorum, according to Hariman.

Hariman and Nelson seem to suggest that our situation is not as frayed it might seem. But perhaps that is because, if postmodern democratic life requires intellectual habits that value unrestricted difference as intrinsically good, neither Hariman or Nelson is especially postmodern. Nelson’s examples show people acting prudently in their own spheres of competence, but not around the politics of identity, where issues about diversity and democracy are fought out. Hariman’s argument about Clinton, meanwhile, recycles a topos as old as Aristotle’s so-called “summation argument,” according to which the weaknesses of individual deliberators can sometimes be compensated by the collective wisdom of the democratic assembly. (This allows Aristotle to show his bona fides to the Athenian democrats who had him surrounded.) The Clinton episode, Hariman writes, “demonstrates how the public can uphold the rationality and stability of
the political system” (310). As the child of New Deal parents, I grew up on this mythos: America always finds the vital center (so not to worry). Of course, there is a difference. Hariman’s rejection of the old ontology of agents allows him to break with the Aristotelian view that a prudent actor, whether it be a person, a public, or a government, must always act prudently out of some sort of permanently virtuous substantiality. So presumably Hariman is not logically committed to saying that a public that was practically wise in the case of Clinton must also be showing prudence in letting George Bush invade a country without due cause, erode its own civil liberties, and happily transfer its wealth to a minority who mean “the people” no good. It is not just that circumstances change, or that folks are now acting out of fear. As I understand the argument, it is that for each rhetorical situation in which audiences construct the texts by which they are addressed, a different agent is brought, discursively, into being. Now that is postmodern. But such subtleties may go unnoticed in any real world in which Hariman’s argument about Clinton might circulate. There it will appear to rely on, and so to reinscribe, the mystical view of the American polity on which I grew up, which, to the extent that it is entrenched, provides the “stability” of which Hariman speaks by constraining the conceptual connection between democracy and difference.

No one can possibly make similar observations about Charland’s essay, which favorably recounts Lyotard’s views about how to “instantiate a prudential [but] non-republican ethos” (275). Lyotard, like Deleuze, treats reason and judgment as forms of pure invention; where they are not so, they are simply terror enacted on each subject’s body. This view of pure reason leads to a view of practical reason. If intelligence is “inventiveness,” a rewrite of Kant’s categorical should read: “Act such a way that the maxim of your will may erect a principle of multiplicity” (278). Decorous behavior that robs subjects of autonomy and induces them to betray the democratic value of “multiplicity” cannot, then, possibly be prudent if the prudent is recognized, as Aristotle would have it, by choices that serve “noble” values. So Lyotard validates indecorous “acting up” on behalf of “pagan,” rather than “polis” or “republican,” values as a prudent response to the repression of democratic spontaneity, diversity, and inventiveness. Take that, virtuecrats!

As a rhetorical scholar, Charland is in a good position to show that “rhetorical categories infuse [Lyotard’s] thought”—invention, agonistics, contingency, etc. (276). But the result makes Hariman, for one, nervous (292), and so the volume, and this review, ends on a note of controversy. Although Lyotard rejects the aesthetics and politics of decorously beauti-
ful behavior, he commends the aesthetics and politics of the sublime. The sublime always exceeds measure and comprehension. That is why it can approximate to a “justice of multiplicity [that] can never be attained” (275). But, unless punches are pulled, actions in accord with a universalized maxim to “act up” either nibble ineffectively around the edges of a system of authority that is impervious to them, or, if they are effective, bring to mind images of the sublime people stringing up their enemies from lampposts. Moreover, the twentieth century has shown that some regimes, notably that of the Nazis, have shown themselves quite adept at co-opting just such sublime fantasies. I wonder, then, whether Charland’s account comes trailing clouds of radical, romantic Jacobinism just as Hariman’s analysis of Clinton comes trailing clouds of American civil religion. If so, we might remind ourselves (if logic still counts) that from the fact that the decorous is sometimes imprudent it does not validly follow that the indecorous is always prudent. Indeed, to the extent that the cautious and decorous have captured the concept of prudence for themselves, it is hard to see that it ever is. One can reply, of course, that logic does not count. Articulations are binary. So anyone who separates sublime misperformance and democratic prudence might be accused of supporting anti-democratic constraints. Although I applaud the reconceptualizing of democracy in terms of boundless diversity, still I do not much feel like being put in the old Jacobin double-bind, or being asked to reinscribe just the sorts of meta-narrative that we were supposed to have got beyond.

Have we yet found the prudent mean on this issue? I don’t know. But if anyone seriously doubts that rhetorical studies can flourish only when its students critically interrogate the history of their discipline to see how its key ideas respond to contemporary issues and topics, I invite them to read this well-edited collection.

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