

Interpretation

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In a recently published French dictionary, *Conservatisme* (2017), the reader will be at a loss to find an entry for *prudence*. She will find the entry for *justice*, of course, but also a long entry dedicated to *modération*. *Courage* is nowhere to be found either. This may be due to a lapse of mind on the part of the dictionary's editors. Or maybe it just happens that you cannot put everything in a dictionary. A number of important things will always need to be left out. On the other hand, why would *prudence* qualify as a special virtue in its own right? Voltaire even described it as a "foolish virtue." Moreover, one finds oneself justified when wondering what, if anything, makes *prudence* a *conservative* virtue. It goes without saying that a virtue is never simply conservative nor for that matter liberal, nor socialist. Either it is a virtue or it is not—*simpliciter* and without a political qualifier. Would anyone dare to offer a distinction between, say, *conservative* courage, or moderation, and *liberal* courage, or moderation?

Granted, Russell Kirk, the patriarch of contemporary traditionalist conservatism, once called *prudence* "that transcendent conservative virtue." But, more recently, there is at least one other scholar who does make the claim that *prudence* is the conservative virtue par excellence. In his thoughtful and thorough book, Ferenc Hörcher claims that there is such a thing as "a normatively defensible, conservative understanding of *prudence*" (13). But what can make *prudence* a particularly relevant virtue specifically for conservatives?

It may be said that a concern for prudence underlies an approach that is willing to give the statesman's standpoint its due. Comparatively speaking, conservative political thought is more inclined to preserve the sphere of the political man who has to decide on the spot than is liberalism or socialism (in their European meaning) with their primal concern for the infrastructure of society—either its legal infrastructure or its social and economic infrastructure. That is another way of saying that conservatism as a set of political principles accepts no theory that works as a substitute for political judgment and action in concrete historical circumstances. Both liberalism and socialism accept that (political) practice should more or less be action according to a theoretical script—which of course can accommodate a limited number of improvisations, or deviations, as matters may demand. The radical contingency of the current state of things is more easily integrated by conservative political principles than by liberal or socialist political theory. Conservatism seems to be, in Hörcher's words, an "agent-centred" kind of politics. Since prudence as a virtue directs the mind and human action towards what is fleeting and contingent as opposed to what is permanent and unchangeable, granting prudence the status of the conservative virtue *par excellence* would be tantamount to claiming that conservatism takes into greater consideration the autonomy of politics as compared to ideological alternatives. Conservatism grants a higher standing to politics as the realm of calculation, (public) deliberation, and opinion, as well as of change, human agency, and time, than its alternatives.

Moreover, one could argue that the typical modern conservative statesman is not the intellectual-cum-politician who has chosen the "vocation" of politics. Neither is he known for a love for the life of the mind, although here the names of Winston Churchill and Charles De Gaulle come immediately to mind, signaling the inevitable exceptions. And surely other names associated with one version or another of conservatism would join Churchill and De Gaulle if we put our mind into the exercise of finding statesmen of the conservative persuasion with an intellectual bent of mind. But prudence is a form of (practical) wisdom. It is, according to Aristotle, an *intellectual* virtue. It cannot be mistaken for cunning or "instinct," as would appear from our present-day media. If we accept this Aristotelian understanding of prudence, and then import it, as Hörcher has, to become the cornerstone of conservative political principles, we may be creating a not irrelevant problem. For it makes us wonder whether conservatism is in fact an *aristocratic* interpretation of *democratic* politics. And if so, how in the twenty-first century can it be connected with the present-day demotic or populist brand of conservatism

which has proved to be politically far more appealing and incomparably more successful from the point of view of electoral efficacy?

A Political Philosophy of Conservatism is divided into two parts. To a very large extent, the two parts are perfectly autonomous. First, the reader is offered a historical-intellectual presentation of the tradition of prudence. It begins with the usual canonical itinerary: from Plato and Aristotle, continuing with Cicero, the two great Catholic fathers Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas, to the Renaissance and the moderns. Notably, this historical account concludes with late twentieth-century authors, such as Bernard Williams, Paul Ricoeur, and Raymond Geuss. It is an interesting summation of theories of prudence, but perhaps not absolutely indispensable. Also, it is not exempt from criticism. For instance, in examining Machiavelli's notion of prudence, Hörcher gathers a number of authoritative interpretations to argue that with Machiavelli prudence became a morally neutral art of political decision. However that may be, this does not mean that Machiavelli's prudence is devoid of (moral) content. It does not mean that Machiavelli makes prudence a synonym for decision pure and simple. The importance of *Fortuna* ends up giving a new content to *prudenzia*: it becomes the political ability to decide with a view to the prevention of future evils, that is to say, future *dangers*. It becomes future-oriented decision ordered to building protections against future adversities. To build river dikes during the summer is a prudent decision made in order to avoid flooding in the winter. It is a combination of foresight and knowledge of what avoids threats to your personal (or collective) safety and power. In this decisive respect *prudenzia* cannot be equated with "caution," as Hörcher suggests. *Prudenzia* is closer to *preparation*. Now, preparation is a form of action and not to be confused with passiveness. It is likewise the opposite of rashness. You may be prudent in Machiavelli's sense and still be without *alcuno rispetto*.

The second part is analytical-conceptual. Here Hörcher offers an analytical investigation of the concept of political prudence as the key to understanding conservatism. But mainly he deals with the context in which prudent action takes place. Three aspects of prudent action's fundamental constraints are discussed: time-, agency-, and knowledge-restraints. Particularly illuminating is the discussion of the Greek notion of *kairos* as opportunity and occasion and its eventual assimilation by Stoicism and the Latin tradition (164–69). *Kairos* as sense of good timing becomes intertwined with proportion, due measure, and moderation—in a (Latin) word, *decorum*. This is followed by a discussion of another aspect of prudent action's context:

the “resources” available both to the individual prudent person and to the community in which she acts. To Hörcher’s wider project of presenting conservative political principles, this becomes decisive. In his view, conservatism never meant to be grounded on clear-cut “founding principles.” It prefers to use, or *to be*, a “narrative about politics.” And this narrative, in order to be a conservative one, has to include a description of “both the challenges of finding the proper act in a delicate political situation and the resources, which the political agent can mobilize” (135).

However, in order to remain faithfully bound by the Aristotelian teaching on *phronesis*, would it not be advisable to follow the philosopher’s approach to this problem? More than providing an analytical-conceptual framework one needs to see *phronesis* in action. Aristotle tells us: look at Pericles, an example of what *phronesis* in action is; Pericles in action is prudence in action, and that incarnate example speaks more clearly than a treatise. To understand *phronesis* one has to recognize the *phronimos*. Hörcher is perfectly aware of this. His priority, though, lies in not allowing the *phronimos* to be radically free, or sovereign, when he makes some decision. This forces him to sail across the Scylla and Charybdis straits of this whole question. In other words, the political principles presented here can be characterized as a *via media* between, on one hand, the ideal world of the Rawlsian utopia of a rather deep moral intrusion into the world of politics, and, on the other, the amoral attitude of political realism, from Machiavelli and Hobbes to Carl Schmitt and Raymond Geuss (132). Traditionally, it was not uncommon for philosophers to ask the reader that they be understood as being situated between two parties: the party of authority and the party of freedom. Hörcher asks us to take his political thought as a *via media* between the roughness of *concrete reality* and the softness of the *norm*. It is Schmitt vs. Kelsen all over again, or to use Hörcher’s references, Geuss vs. Rawls. It is at this juncture that Hörcher implies that, accordingly, justice can, and should, be replaced by prudence as the central virtue of conservative political philosophy.

Two difficulties immediately emerge from this. First, this project makes sense only if justice-oriented political thought somehow defeats conservatism’s purposes. It is one thing to argue that a conservative approach to politics puts (the requirements of) order ahead of (the requirements of) justice. The measure of this priority is given by the opposite stance of the progressivist approach to politics which puts (the requirements of) justice ahead of (the requirements of) order. But to dismiss entirely from the conservative horizon a justice-oriented political philosophy seems to be a condemnation

of the theoretical plausibility of conservatism as such—or, what amounts to the same thing, to grant Rawlsianism and its offshoots the ultimate power to determine by opposition what conservatives may think and stand for. Second, to be a *via media* between the demands of the concrete situation and the demands of the norm may be equivalent to standing for the demands of order as opposed to the demands of justice. But from the point of view of conservatism, can there be a quest for order without listening to the claims of justice? Can there be a quest for justice without meeting the claims of order? Ultimately, that is the reason Hörcher describes his own claim as a *via media*, for prudence is itself a *via media*—between abstract justice and naked self-interest. It seems to be an excess of the *via media* metaphor itself!

Ultimately, Hörcher wants to sanitize the *phronimos* from Schmitt's infection. The conservative *phronimos* is embedded in a deep tradition, acting within a moral-legal framework that restrains his movements or decisions. Hörcher warns us that this is the indispensable condition for having a responsible *phronimos*. Otherwise, one will be led astray by the infinity of his freedom or sovereignty. It is doubtless a laudable objective. But in the end not even Pericles was able to educate his sons to be *phronimoi* like himself.

