

# The Dualism of Prudence

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Contrary to the rather commonly held opinion that the understanding of prudence (as a certain virtue) has not changed essentially since the ancient times, it is argued in the paper that there are two not only *distinct* but also *incompatible* concepts of prudence: the modern – amoral or non-moral, and the classical (Aristotelian-Thomist) – strictly moral. The claim that these concepts are distinct and incompatible implies that ‘modern prudence’ is not part of ‘classical prudence’ but is essentially different from it: one cannot be prudent in both senses (for instance, part of modern prudence is continence/self-control, whereas classical prudence excludes continence/

self-control). Apart from the comparison of both concepts of prudence, the paper also provides an analysis of their relations with the so-called ‘prudential values’ as well as of the causes of the evolution (or rather: revolution) in the understanding of prudence which took place in modern philosophy; It is also argued that within ethics which assumes the classical understanding of prudence there is no place for what Sidgwick called the ‘dualism of practical reason’.

**Key words:** prudence, virtue, values, moral motivation, egoistic motivation, well-being, practical reason

## Introduction

The general definition of prudence/practical wisdom (Latin: *prudentia*, ancient Greek: *phronesis*) provided by Cicero as *cognitio rerum appetendarum et fugiendarum* (*De officiis*, III, 47)<sup>1</sup> may suggest that

<sup>1</sup> And similarly in *De inventione* (2.53.160): *Prudentia est rerum bonarum et malarum neutrumque scientia*.

prudence is a unitary virtue, or that, at least, its (possible) varieties share some essential features which justify treating them as *species* of the same *genus*<sup>2</sup>. But, as we shall argue in this paper, this view is mistaken: there are two essentially different concepts of prudence – the classical (ancient and Christian<sup>3</sup>) and the modern. In other words, the modern concept of prudence is not a part (or just a truncated version) of the classical one but is essentially different from it: the two concepts are incompatible with each other, which implies that one cannot be at the same time prudent in the modern and in the classical sense. This incompatibility results from the fact that prudence (in both senses) describes not only a specific mode of acting (to a large extent shared by the two varieties of prudence) but also a more general, as one may call it, ‘axiological orientation’ of an agent – towards well-being subjectively understood as self-interest (in the case of modern prudence), and towards moral goodness (in the case of classical prudence). This fact is of crucial importance: if prudence (in both senses) did not imply certain more

<sup>2</sup> This view is assumed, e.g., in Bricker 1980, 2008, Sumner 1998, and in the works of many other thinkers. Furthermore, the meaning of prudence they assume usually corresponds only to what we have called ‘modern prudence’, i.e., they do not define prudence as necessarily serving moral or at least morally neutral goals, if their realization is morally permissible (e.g., Bricker defines prudence in various ways; as “desiring that our lives live up to their full potential, developing as integral wholes” (1980, p. 381); or: a prudent person “acts so as to get what he wants, has wanted, or will want (1980, p. 382)”; however, none of these otherwise different definitions contain a reference to moral goals). But there are exceptions. The view on the dualism of prudence which is similar to ours seems to be defended by Deirdre McCloskey (2002, 2006), who, ascribing this view, for instance, to Oakeshott, wrote that he belongs to those philosophers who “have erected systems on the distinction between “prudential” (or “enterprise”) associations such as business firms on the one hand and “moral” associations on the other such as families. I am saying that in this matter Oakeshott was mistaken. It may be that such a distinction is the typically modern ethical mistake (McCloskey 2006, p. 254)”. It should be noticed that this statement seems to imply not only the claim that the existence of two concepts of prudence, but also the claim (which we also share) that classical prudence is (on normative grounds) superior to the modern one.

<sup>3</sup> As will be shown further in this paper, there are some differences between the two varieties of the classical concept of prudence but they are less important than their similarities.

general – and different – ‘axiological orientations’ but only a specific way of acting (oriented towards *any* goals), then our claim about the *dualism* of prudence, i.e., about the existence of its two distinct and incompatible varieties, would be untenable. One could then plausibly argue that some prudent agents are moral and some are immoral but all of them are nevertheless prudent. This argument is, however, ‘blocked’ by the fact that the motivation of an agent who is prudent in the modern sense is egoistic, whereas the motivation of an agent who is prudent in the classical sense is moral. It may happen, of course, that they act in the same way (prudence in the modern sense may recommend a moral action – as best serving the agent’s self-interest, and prudence in the classical sense also recommends certain morally neutral actions if they are morally permissible) but in the case of conflict between egoistic and moral reasons they will act differently. Furthermore, it cannot be denied that the two concepts of prudence display several similarities, which justify calling both of them ‘prudence’ (they concern mainly certain specific mental capacities implied by both varieties of prudence, e.g., cautiousness, deliberation, foresight, which determine certain ‘formal’ features of acting<sup>4</sup>). We shall also discuss these similarities, though, as it will turn out, the differences go much deeper (and include not only the above mentioned difference

<sup>4</sup> In ordinary speech prudence is usually identified with these capacities; it is therefore defined in detachment from the goals which it can serve. But this fact does not undermine our thesis about the dualism of prudence because prudence understood as axiologically neutral, i.e., as potentially serving moral *and* egoistic goals (and therefore combined with a mixed motivation), can be viewed as a *weaker* variant of what we called prudence in the modern sense. It is therefore still essentially different from classical prudence which is necessarily connected with moral and morally neutral goals (if they are morally permissible). Thus, to make our point entirely clear: prudence in the modern sense has two variants – the strong (axiological orientation towards self-interest) and weak (the mixture of both – moral and egoistic – orientations), whereas prudence in the classical sense has a moral orientation. Our analysis is mainly focused on the comparison of classical prudence with the strong variant of modern prudence, though most of the remarks we make on the strong variant also refer to the weak one.

in the axiological orientation). We shall also try to identify the factors that led to the evolution (or rather: revolution) in the understanding of prudence (from the classical to the modern).

## Prudence in the modern sense

We shall start our analysis of the concept of prudence from its less complex, i.e., modern, variety. Its general definition can be formulated in this way: it is the capacity for making reasoned choice (but not *moral* choice) through practical syllogism in *concrete* situations, and the objects of this choice are means for realizing the overarching goal which is the protection of enlightened (long-run) self-interest, involving such 'prudential' goods or values as health, good mental and physical functioning, wealth, prestige, and various other types of (non-moral) achievement (we shall explain later in this section the appearance of the adjectival phrase 'prudential' in this context). Modern prudence is therefore supposed to serve the agent's own well-being.

Thus understood, it involves several faculties or capacities, from the more general to the more particular. The former include instrumental rationality (the Aristotelian *deinotes*<sup>5</sup>), and what is temporarily referred to as rationality over time, i.e. attaching sufficient importance to the future utility. Given this last feature, it can also be said that modern prudence is opposed, among other things, to the spontaneous/unreflective living in the present, to 'seizing the present'. The more particular faculties/capacities that are connected to modern prudence embrace the capacity for deliberation, cautiousness, circumspection, *solertia* (clear-sightedness in the face of unexpected), memory (which gathers recollections of past decisions and their effects, thereby providing knowledge of particulars that enables making more informed decisions), and foresight<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> Translated by W. D. Ross as "cleverness".

<sup>6</sup> 'Prudence' is etymologically derived from *porro videns* which mean 'seeing far', and from the resulting noun *providentia*.

This general account of modern prudence clearly shows that it is potentially in tension with moral virtues: it is *not* part of a definition of moral goodness. Being prudent in that sense does not exclude (and often goes in pair with) being timorous, small-minded, avaricious, greedy, ‘materialistic’, insidious, cunning, unjust/partial, though it does exclude some other vices, e.g., prodigality, intemperance, laziness, thoughtlessness, indecisiveness, negligence, and thereby goes in pair with, e.g., frugality, moderation. Furthermore, as we have already mentioned in Section 1, ‘honesty’ may sometimes be indeed “the best policy”; that is, prudence and morality may recommend (though on different grounds) the same action – the conflict between morality and prudence is therefore not necessary. But in a large number of situations the precepts of morality and those of prudence will diverge; and in those situations in which they converge, when we pay attention not only to the consequences of the action but also the motivation (intention) behind the deed, (if we assume this double way of morally evaluation human actions – not only be their consequences but also by their motives, it is clear that the moral value of the actions dictated by prudence will be different (morally lower) than the value of the same act dictated by respect for morality.

Two other important features of modern prudence need to be stressed. Firstly, it does not exclude self-control/self-restraint/continence: one can be prudent and continent. What is more, self-control/continence is usually regarded as naturally accompanying prudence. Secondly, it does not have any meta-ethical implications: moral truth is not the pre-condition of modern prudence (for the simple reason that it is supposed to serve non-moral goals, and thereby does not necessitate any definite position on the problem of the truthfulness of ethical statements); though it should also be added that modern prudence does not exclude metaethical cognitivism.

It is not accidentally that (at the beginning of this section) we have used the disjunctive phrase ‘prudential goods or values’. In

modern moral philosophy we can see in fact a double twist regarding the concept of prudence. The first twist (described above) is that although prudence is still treated as a kind of virtue, it is no longer regarded as a *moral* virtue. However, there is also the second twist, connected to the fact that in modern moral philosophy the notion of value seems to be more prominent than that of virtue. Accordingly, it seems that the adjectival phrase ‘prudential values’ is more frequently used than the noun phrase ‘prudence’. Prudential values are understood as denoting all things which are good for a person, contribute to her well-being. The concept of a prudentially good life, which means a life high in well-being, is distinguished from the concepts of a morally good life, a spiritually good life, an aesthetically good life *etc.* (cf. Campbell 2016). The essential feature of the prudential values, which differs them from the moral ones is their subject-relativity. According to contemporary philosophers, something can be good for one person and bad for the other one. As Tim Taylor puts it “(...) if there is a kind of value – a sense of ‘good’ – that is specific to moral contexts, then either it is not relative at all, or it is relative on a rather different level than prudential value (which is relative to particular individuals): perhaps to humans or sentient beings in general, or to the members of a moral community (Taylor 2011, p. 14)”. Therefore, the adjectival phrase ‘prudential values’ refers to non-moral values towards which a prudent (in the modern sense) person is axiologically oriented. Accordingly, prudence in the modern sense (as a virtue) implies the endorsement by an agent of prudential values but is a richer concept; in order to be prudent in the modern sense, the agent must not only pursue prudential values and treat them as superior to other kinds of values (including the moral ones), but also must exhibit some additional features (e.g., the capacity for deliberation, self-control).

## Prudence in the classical sense

Classical prudence is similar to modern prudence in that it is also an intellectual virtue that deals with human actions. But there is a crucial difference between them: classical prudence is the capacity for making not just a reasoned choice, but a reasoned *moral* choice (*ratio recta/orthos logos*), through practical syllogism, in *concrete* situations; it is, therefore, to enable choosing means to *moral* ends or at least to morally neutral ends (if it does not amount to giving them priority over moral ends, that is: if realizing a morally neutral goal is in a given situation morally permissible); as Aristotle put it: “(...) it is not possible to be good in the strict sense without practical wisdom [prudence – WZ, TK], nor practically wise without moral virtue (EN, 1144b30-32)”<sup>7</sup> The function of classical prudence is therefore not to protect the agent’s (long-run) self-interest (though it may do it accidentally) but to protect his moral integrity (*eudaimonia* – *good life*). It is therefore connected with *bonum honestum*, not with *bonum utile*. One can also equivalently say that classical prudence is focused in the first place on the realization of moral values, not prudential ones; it is true that it may also serve the realization of the prudential ones but only if they do not come in

<sup>7</sup> Cf. also the following quotations, which leave no doubt as to the strict connection between (classical) prudence and morality: “Practical wisdom is the quality of mind concerned with things just and noble and good for man (Aristotle, EN, 1143b21-23)”; “Practical wisdom is not the faculty [of *deinotes* – instrumental rationality/cleverness – WZ, TK] but it does not exist without this faculty. And this eye of the soul acquires its formed state not without the aid of virtue (...) for the syllogisms which deal with acts to be done are things which involve a starting-point, viz. ‘since the end’, i.e., what is best, is of such and such nature’, whatever it may be (let it for the sake of argument be what we please); and this is not evident except to the good man; for wickedness perverts us and causes us to be deceived about the starting-points of action. Therefore it is evident that it is impossible to be practically wise without being good (Aristotle, EN, 1144a28-37)”; “It is thought to be the mark of a man of practical wisdom to be able to deliberate well about what is good and expedient for himself, not in some particular respect, e.g. about what sorts of thing conduce to health or to strength, but about what sorts of thing conduce to the good life in general (EN,1140a25-28)”.

conflict with the moral ones (in those situations the realization of prudential values can be regarded as a *moral* choice, and more precisely: a *morally permissible* choice). This account of prudence must seem paradoxical to the ‘modern mind’, which may readily concede that one cannot do morally good acts without being prudent/practically wise, but will find the reverse claim (that one must be morally good in order to be prudent/practically wise) implausible.

The similarity between the two types of prudence consists in that many of the faculties or capacities they imply are the same. Classical prudence, like the modern one, embraces instrumental rationality (Aristotelian *deinotes*), capacity for deliberation, *solertia*, memory, foresight. But even as regards the implied faculties and capacities, the differences between the modern and the classical variety of prudence can be easily discerned. Classical prudence (or at least its Christian variety) puts a weaker emphasis on rationality over time (cf. Matthew 6:34: „Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble”) and cautiousness. It also treats as part of prudence (again, especially in its Christian variety) docility and the consequent reliance on the judgment of other, more experienced, agents. Furthermore, it regards *gnome* – ‘sympathetic judgment’ – as part of prudence: as was argued by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean ethics*, *gnome* is supposed to facilitate the realization of equity.<sup>8</sup> Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas also stressed that the act of prudence is the act of *commanding*.<sup>9</sup> This emphasis on the commanding character of (classical) prudence is absent in the case of modern prudence. The difference may stem from the fact that classical

<sup>8</sup> Aristotle (EN, 1143a20-25) seems to have claimed, by rather contrived etymological considerations, that there is some deeper connection between *gnome* and equity: he noticed that *gnome* is etymologically related to *sygnomon*, which means ‘forgiving’, ‘indulgent’, / ‘sympathetic’, with the additional implication that an equitable decision will be motivated by forgiveness, and thus will be more often than not in favour of the accused person.

<sup>9</sup> For instance, Aristotle wrote that “practical wisdom issued commands, since its end is what ought to be done or not to be done (EN, 1143a7-9)”.

prudence is part of *moral* virtues (as will be explained below); this connection with morality seems to justify a stronger normative character of classical prudence.

It follows from the very definition of classical prudence that, unlike the modern one, it cannot come into conflict with moral virtues. What is more, classical prudence is part of each moral virtue: it ‘transforms’ a natural virtue (imperfect virtue, *inclinatio*) into a (full-fledged) moral virtue, since each moral virtue requires the existence of a harmony between one’s moral judgment, made by prudence, and the desire flowing from the appetitive/sensual part of the soul (the morally proper appetitive desire, taken in isolation from the moral judgment, constitutes precisely a ‘natural virtue’). Accordingly, the rational desire, i.e., the desire determined by prudence (which finds the ‘mean’ and is, therefore, *habitus electivus*) and the appetitive desire are, in the case of a virtuous person, identical (one and the same). This description of the ‘place’ of prudence within moral virtues, however, leaves one important question unanswered, viz.: what determines the moral ends to which prudence finds the means? Aristotle did not tackle directly this question (he seems to have implied that moral virtues themselves determine these ends<sup>10</sup>), unlike the Medieval thinkers, especially Thomas Aquinas, who following Albert the Great, posited the existence of a separate intellectual/intuitive capacity for discovering the ends of virtues (*finis virtutum moralium*), viz. *synderesis*<sup>11</sup>; as Aquinas put it: *synderesis movet prudentiam* (ST, II, II, 47, 6 ad.3),

<sup>10</sup> As he wrote, not developng this thought further (and thereby leaving commentators in a quandary): “The work of man is achieved only in accordance with practical wisdom as well as with moral virtues; for virtue makes us aim at the right mark, and practical wisdom makes us take the right means (EN, 1144a7-10)”.

<sup>11</sup> It is interesting to note that Aristotle does write about the role of intuitive reason in practical reasoning, but this reason is not supposed to grasp the general principles (major premises) but empirical facts, relevant for a practical decisions; this intuitive reason is therefore not *synderesis* (in the Thomist sense); cf. the following quotation: “(...) the intuitive reason involved in practical reasonings grasps the last and variable fact, i.e., the minor premise (Aristotle, EN, 1143b1-2)”.

and, in his view, *synderesis* together with *prudentia* constitute *conscientia*. He described the nature of *synderesis* in the following way:

(...) so also in practical reason some things preexist as principles naturally known; and of this sort are the ends of moral virtues, because the end in things to be done is related as the principle is in theoretical matters (...) And thus it does not belong to prudence to fix the end for the moral virtues, but only to arrange about the means to the end (...) What fixes the end for the moral virtues is the natural virtue in the natural reason which is called *synderesis* (ST II-IIae, q. 47, a.6., ad 1).

This very thing that is being conformed to correct reason is the proper end of each moral virtue. For temperance aims at this, namely that a human being should not deviate from reason because of appetites; and similarly (the aim of) bravery is that a human being should not deviate from the correct judgment of reason because of fear or rashness. And this end is fixed for a human being in accordance with natural reason; for natural reason instructs each person to act in accordance with reason (ST II-IIae, q. 47, a.7.).

*Synderesis*, therefore, grasps in a non-deliberative way the first principles of natural law, 'right ends', or – as Albert the Great called them in his treatise *De bono – principia boni, universalia iuris*, which are self-evident and possessed without error (*per se nota*) (cf. Payer 1979, p. 62). Deliberation is therefore a feature of prudence, not of *synderesis*.<sup>12</sup> The role of *synderesis*, however, is not entirely clear. According to Pinches (1995, p. 105–106), the substantive content of the principles which *synderesis* discovers is rather limited: it boils down to the claim that the good of the human soul consists in acting in accordance with reason. For example, in his treatise *De homine* Albert the Great provided the following example of a practical syllogism: *Omne bonum est faciendum* (major premise); *Hoc est bonum* (minor premise); *Ergo hoc est faciendum* (conclusion, called

<sup>12</sup> It may be worth mentioning that a very interesting analysis of the concept of deliberation from a phenomenological perspective has been made by Adolf Reinach (1989).

*conscientia* by Albert) (cf. Payer 1979, p. 63). The major premise provided by *synderesis* is, as we can see, very general. Thomas Aquinas gave those principles, as the fragments quoted above indicate, a similarly general content. Clearly enough, the assumption that the principles discovered by *synderesis* have such character strengthens the role of prudence in making a practical judgment.<sup>13</sup>

It should also be emphasized that a consequence of the classical account of prudence is the claim about the interconnection (unity) of (moral) virtues.<sup>14</sup> The argument for this claim can be succinctly presented as follows: one cannot have any moral virtue if one is not prudent, and one cannot be prudent if one does not have all moral virtues; so if one has at least one moral virtue, one must have all of them and prudence can be viewed as a ‘thread’ which connects all virtues.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, each vice is in a sense opposite to prudence. For these reasons, prudence can be regarded as a kind of intellectual, quasi-moral (because inextricably connected with moral virtues) ‘meta-virtue’.

<sup>13</sup> On *synderesis*, see, e.g. Irwin 1990.

<sup>14</sup> But the interconnection/unity thesis concerns only moral virtues; Aristotle firmly rejects the claim that they can „exist in separation from each other (EN, 1144b32-33)”. He writes that “this is possible in respect of the natural virtues, but not in respect of those in respect of those in respect of which a man is called without qualification good; for with the presence of the one quality, practical wisdom, will be given all the virtues (...) the choice will not be right without practical wisdom any more than without virtue; for the one determines the end and the other makes us do things that lead to the end (EN, 1145b1-7)”.

<sup>15</sup> But, clearly, one can have prudence without having other intellectual virtues - with the exception of *synderesis*, if we assume its existence. An interesting problem appears here, viz.: whether the introduction of *synderesis* does not undermine in some way the argument for the interconnection thesis, and, specifically, its second premise (that one cannot be prudent if one does not have all moral virtues); the premise implies that virtues are necessary for providing prudence with general ends (as Aristotle seems to have implies), but this function is fulfilled by *synderesis*. It seems, therefore, that the introduction of *synderesis* undermines the above argument for the interconnection thesis. This does not mean, however, that the introduction of *synderesis* entails the rejection of this thesis; classical thinkers have formulated also other arguments for it, which we cannot analyze here (on the interconnection and unity of virtues see, e.g., Vlastos 1972, Langan 1979, Porter 1993, or Telfer 1989–90).

Some other differences between classical prudence and modern prudence are worth pointing out.

*Firstly*, classical prudence, unlike modern prudence, seems to exclude self-control/self-restraint/continence: one can be *either* prudent *or* continent, but not both (a continent person is not virtuous). Prudence is therefore beyond the opposition continent-incontinent: not only the incontinent but also the continent is not prudent. As was mentioned, the person who is prudent in the classical sense must possess all moral virtues, and if he does possess those virtues, no inner conflicts, no inner disharmony, characteristic for those who are continent or incontinent, can arise within his personality. But it must be admitted that this conclusion is not uncontroversial, and also classical thinkers are not clear on this point. If this conclusion is accepted, it is not easy to say what the source may be of the continent or incontinent person's proper moral judgment. For that reason some scholars assume that a prudent agent can, after all, be continent or incontinent; e.g., Elizabeth Telfer writes that "possessing practical wisdom [prudence – WZ, TK] is compatible with having self-control rather than virtue (Telfer 1989–90, p. 42)".

*Secondly*, classical prudence implies metaethical cognitivism: moral truth is the pre-condition of classical prudence. Moral truths may be general (discovered by *synderesis*) or concrete (discovered prudence). One more remark is worth making in this context, regarding the general character of ethics implied by the classical account of prudence. It is clear that from the Christian version of this account, which assumes the existence of general principles to be discovered by *synderesis*, one cannot derive any form of situational ethics: the function of prudence is to apply the general principles to the concrete circumstances – the word *applicatio* is central in the account of Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas (cf. Payer 1979: 66). Situational ethics would be a more suitable term for describing the Aristotelian ethics, which, as was mentioned, does not explicitly introduce *synderesis* whose principles ought to be

later applied by prudence; but a closer analysis of the Aristotelian ethics reveals that it is also not situational (Aristotle seems to have implicitly assumed the existence of such principles; such an interpretation of his thought was also endorsed by Thomas Aquinas).

*Thirdly*, it is instructive to compare classical and modern prudence by analyzing the opposites of classical prudence (as they were understood by Thomas Aquinas in ST II-IIae q. 54 and 55). The first type of the opposites includes those which consist in *the nonfulfilment of the active prerequisites of prudence*. They include, e.g., precipitation/thoughtlessness, the lack of well-founded judgment, negligence (in St. Isidor's sense of *nec eligens* – of not choosing due to the lack of promptitude in will), laziness – the delay in the execution, torpor – the relax in the very execution, *inconstantia* (which, unlike incontinence, is a defect in the reasoning part of the soul). Now, as far as this type of the opposites is concerned, the differences between classical prudence and modern prudence are not visible: they are also the opposites of modern prudence.<sup>16</sup> The second type of the opposites of prudence embraces various forms of *false prudence*: prudence of the flesh, cunning (*astutia*), tactics, intrigue, fraud, (excessive) concern for the worldly goods<sup>17</sup>, or (excessive) concern for the future. Here the difference between classical prudence and modern prudence is striking: while the former is opposed to all the varieties of false prudence, the latter does not exclude *any* of them.

To sum up, prudence in the classical sense is an intellectual, quasi-moral, not 'prudential', virtue; it is a meta-virtue and maximalist virtue: its definition implies the possession of all moral virtues (it is similar in these two respects to magnanimity, which implies the pos-

<sup>16</sup> The adherents of modern prudence might only object to Aquinas's claim that they are caused mainly by *luxuria* (unchastity), which – as Aquinas believed – switches off the reason entirely (unlike, e.g., anger).

<sup>17</sup> According to Thomas Aquinas, it takes place when we seek for them as an end in itself, or when we seek for them with too much solicitude, and thereby drift away from spiritual goods, or when concern with worldly goods breeds superfluous fear (and thereby the lack of trust towards God).

session of all other moral virtues, and justice in the broad sense, which Aristotle defined as any virtue practiced in relation to other people). Given these features, it not surprising that it can be so highly praised – as being „more noble” than other moral virtues (ST II-IIae q. 55), and as leading to „objectivity, self-forgetfulness, humility, unbiased perception, true-to-being memory, purity, candor, simplicity of character (Pieper 1966, p. 22)”.

### **The prudential character of ancient ethics?**

Even though classical prudence is not ‘prudential’ (in the modern sense of this term), one could argue that the ancient ethics as a whole was prudential in this sense, i.e., was justified as serving the (enlightened – long-term) self-interest of the agent who practised it. The scholarly opinions on this issue are divergent. For instance, Terence Irwin (1995) argues that ancient ethics can be called prudential (in the modern sense), while Julia Annas (1995) defends the opposite view. She maintains that in ancient ethics a discourse on the agent’s well-being, interests, happiness was conducted within the moral mode of reasoning: there did not exist in the dominant Greek moral theories (Plato’s, Aristotle’s, Stoic) what Henry Sidgwick called the ‘dualism of practical reason’ – “no distinct competing role is left, within the theories, for prudential reasoning (Annas 1995, p. 242)”.<sup>18</sup> Annas’s opinion seems to us more plausible. The Greek conception of ethics was ‘prudential’ only in so far as its central question was: what is good for the agent, what lies in his interest, and its main answer was, consequently, a final end of a human being is happiness. But what was understood by ‘happiness’ on the grounds of this ethics was, in fact, something strictly moral on our modern standards, viz. a (morally) good life. According to Annas (1995, p. 242) “a correct conception of my final end

<sup>18</sup> We shall return to Sidgwick’s claim about the dualism of practical reason in the last point of this paper.

give weight to the interests of others in a way that does not reduce to giving them weight insofar as they further my own aims". It means that the ancient concept of happiness demands taking care of other people for their own sake. The notion of 'interest' that underlies this concept of happiness is not subjective but objective – teleological/metaphysical: an agent ought to pursue certain 'interests' if he wants to achieve his full potential as a human being – his true happiness, that is: *eudaimonia*. Such an agent is egoistic (prudential) only in the positive sense of the Aristotelian *philauton* (egoist/self-lover) who is focused on moral goods (cf. EN, book 9, ch. 8). But, apart from the misleading term – *philauton* – which is referred in Greek both to a good egoist – focused on moral goods, and a bad egoist – focused on riches, sensual pleasures, honors, power, there is little that is common for these two essentially different types of human being; a good 'egoist' is by no means prudential in the modern sense, whereas a bad egoist can be (if he is at the same time farsighted, and also possesses some other mental faculties/capacities, e.g., self-control). This argument would suffice to treat ancient ethics as non-prudential. But an additional argument can be advanced for this claim. It is noteworthy that Aristotle justifies taking virtuous acts in two ways: not only by pointing out that they are *agathoi* (good for the agent – in the above sense of realizing his human essence/potential) but also by stressing their being *kaloi* (morally beautiful, good in themselves). This second way of justification has nothing to do with 'prudential' justification (even in the sublime sense of realizing one's human potential): there is no reference to the good of the agent who takes this act.

### **The causes of the evolution (or rather: revolution) in the understanding of prudence**

Before we pass to the analysis of the causes of the (r)evolution in the understanding of the concept of prudence, a few remarks on the evolution of the understanding of prudence within the classical

(the ancient and the Christian) tradition itself are in order. It is interesting to note that in the Christian tradition, prudence was not immediately regarded as valuable, i.e., as a true virtue. As was argued by Pierre Payer, “in the early period [e.g., in the thought of Bernard of Clairvaux – WZ, TK] the focus of concern was on the related notion of *discretio*, and only gradually did prudence emerge as the central cardinal virtue (Payer 1979, p. 56)”. More importantly, at this period neither *discretio* nor prudence were regarded as true virtues; e.g., in Abelard’s thought, *discretio* had a sense similar to what we have called modern prudence: *Horum itaque discretio tam bonorum scilicet quam malorum prudential dicitur. Que quidem discretio, quia eque perversis ut bonis inesse potest hominibus, nec meritum habet* (quoted after Payer 1979, p. 57). This evaluation of prudence was, in Payer’s opinion, caused by the fact that, prior to the reception of the complete text of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, and especially: its sixth book (devoted to prudence/*phronesis*), prudence was regarded only as a kind of knowledge, not as a virtue. Connection of prudence to the will was not clearly visible. It is hard to say when exactly the moral character was conferred upon prudence; but it is certain that it possesses such a character not later than in the thought of Albert the Great who “perceived a close relationship between prudence and natural law (Payer 1979, p. 64)”.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> For a similar view cf. Brucker 1971. Another question, which we cannot examine here at greater length, is to what extent the classical account of prudence was preserved in the Roman ethical and political thought. Our hypothesis is that the Roman thinkers tended to depart from the classical (Aristotelian) understanding, and were prone to define it without clear reference to moral goals. This tendency is already visible in Cicero, and especially in Tacitus, for whom prudence meant primarily the capacity to preserve one’s one life in the turbulent time (which was, for instance, the reign of vicious emperors). Nonetheless, the link between morality and prudence was not entirely severed; the paradigmatically (for Tacitus) prudent person – his father-in-law Gnaeus Julius Agricola, a Roman governor of Britain (whose life Tactus described in *De vita et moribus Iulii Agricolae*) was at the same time a paragon of moral virtues. On Tacitus’s understanding of prudence see especially Kapust 2011, p. 111–140.

Let us now move on to the analysis of the causes of replacing the classical account of prudence with the modern one.<sup>20</sup> In general, one can say that the change in the understanding of prudence took place in the Renaissance and was above all caused by the change in the understanding of the notion of the human good – the ‘discovery of the individual’ led to stressing the importance of individual well-being (cf. Martin 1997). Prudence became clearly separated from morality in the work of Machiavelli; as was pointed out by Terence H. Irwin, “when Machiavelli (..) uses *prudence* with a much narrower reference than Aquinas gives to the term, he does so because of substantive disagreement with Aquinas. He rejects Aquinas’ view about what many components of the human good actually are (Irwin 1995, p. 289)”. The following passage from *The Prince* well illustrates this change in the understanding of the concept of prudence:

A wise ruler [*uno signor prudente*] cannot, nor should he, keep his word when doing so would be to his disadvantage and when the reasons that led him to make promises no longer exist (...) But one must know how to disguise this nature well, and how to be a fine liar and hypocrite; and men are so simple-minded and so dominated by their present needs that one who deceives will always find one who will allow himself to be deceived [Machiavelli 1985, p. 144–147].

But this new meaning was not immediately accepted. For instance, in the work *Trattato della prudenza* (1537–1538) by Bartolomeo Carli Piccolimini the strategy of dissimulation (conforming to what others do, not revealing one’s real thoughts and convictions, acting cautiously, but preserving inner freedom and detachment) is recommended as a precept of prudence but its goal is still moral – the achievement of religious perfection, getting closer to Christ (cf. Martin 1997, p. 1324). The trend towards a non-

<sup>20</sup> Of course, this replacement did not take place among those philosophers (e.g. the Thomists) who continued the tradition of classical philosophy; but they started to belong to the minority.

moral understanding of prudence was strengthened in the following centuries. The classical understanding of prudence was, by and large, also accepted, e.g., by Bodin (see Tentler 1959). But, for instance, already in the works of Baltasar Gracián (*Oráculo manual y arte de prudencia*, 1647) and Christian Thomasius (*Introductio ad philosophiam aulicam*, 1688) the shift in the meaning of prudence was clear<sup>21</sup>, and in Kant's philosophy – complete: Kant gave to *Klugheit* (prudence) a non-moral meaning; *Klugheit* generates pragmatic imperatives which are to lead an agent *zum eigenen Wohlsein*, but this *Wohlsein* does not have a moral sense, unlike the Greek *eudaimonia* (cf. Aubenque 1975). In general, one can say that that prudence in the classical sense did not fit in with the ethics of enlightened self-interest, which better suited the goals of the emerging social classes, especially, bourgeoisie<sup>22</sup> (one may ask whether the industrial revolution could have taken place if the bourgeoisie had been prudent in the classical sense).

In addition to the change in the axiological hierarchy that took place in modern history, some other causes may have played a role in abandoning the classical concept of prudence in the 'mainstream' philosophy (though we refrain from ranking them in the order of importance; this would involve too much speculation). Firstly, the very complexity of the classical concept of prudence with its various paradoxical consequences (e.g., that prudence implies the possession of all moral virtues) could have contributed to replacing it with its much simpler counterpart. Secondly, moral subjectivism of modern moral philosophy (which, in turn, may be a product of *res-*

<sup>21</sup> But not complete. For instance, Gracián, throughout most of his book, was developing a thoroughly modern conception of prudence (implying such immoral or morally neutral precepts, as, e.g., those of hiding one's real thoughts, knowing the weak points of one's enemies, making suffer others rather than oneself), yet, at the very end (aphorism nr. 300), he wrote that the most general precept of prudence is that of being saint, virtuous. In general, in Gracián's book prudence has primarily a modern sense (though also retaining some traces of the classical one), but Gracián himself seems to have believed that he did not depart from its classical understanding.

<sup>22</sup> See especially Ossowska 1985.

*sentiment*, as maintained by Max Scheler in his classic work *Ressentiment*) is incompatible with classical prudence. As has been shown above, while ancient philosophy interpreted well-being (i.e. *eudaimonia*) as an objective concept and virtue as agent-centered (i.e. in the first place contributing to, or constituting, the agent's moral perfection) the contemporary philosophers stress subjectivity of well-being and link virtue with morality which, in turn, is focused on respecting duties regarding other people (cf. Sumner 2009, p. 27). Thirdly, the expansion of the instrumental conception of rationality, which narrows down its scope to the selection of means to given ends, may also have played an important part in the departure from the classical account of prudence; this account, let us recall, implies that, in order to be 'rational', one must not only 'rationally' choose means to the ends also the ends themselves (and the rational choice of ends, on this account, amounts to the *moral* choice). Fourthly, the modern distinction between private and public sphere, esp. difference between family and business, may have also contributed to the change of the meaning of prudence: while morality became women's issue inside a family, men's business world focused on prudentially pursuing self-interest (cf. McCloskey 2006, p. 254). Finally, the development of modern science undermined the teleological picture of the world, and, in consequence, may have also undermined the classical – teleological – picture of human nature (with its central idea that virtues are necessary for the realization of the full human potential).

### **Concluding reflections: the dualism of prudence and the dualism of practical reason**

The dualism of the concept of prudence discussed in this paper may be regarded as a particular instance of what Sidgwick called 'the dualism of practical reason'. As Sidgwick wrote: "it is important to take separately the two species of judgments which I have distinguished as 'moral' and 'prudential' (...). In ordinary thought we

clearly distinguish cognitions or judgments of duty from cognitions or judgments as to what “is right” or “ought to be done” in view of the agent’s private interest or happiness (Sidgwick 1989, p. 25–6)”. And since, according to Sidgwick, the most plausible theory of prudential reasonableness is egoism (or “Pure or Quantitative Egoistic Hedonism”), whereas the most plausible theory of moral reasonableness is utilitarianism (or “Universal Hedonism”), in his analysis the dualism takes the form of the opposition between egoism and utilitarianism.<sup>23</sup> But, clearly, the dualism can be also expressed by the terms introduced in this paper: modern prudence vs. classical prudence.

The analyses we pursued have two further implications for Sidgwick’s claim about the dualism of practical reason. The first one, less important because only terminological, is that Sidgwick’s description of the dualism of practical reason (prudential vs. moral reasoning) is not quite apt since it assumes that ‘prudential’ must be opposed to ‘moral’; but, as we have argued, the opposition appears only on the modern understanding of prudence; on the classical one, prudence is a moral notion. The second implication is more interesting. Sidgwick regarded the dualism of practical reason as dismaying, and wrote about

the vital need that our Practical Reason feels of proving or postulating this connexion of Virtue and self-interest, if it is to be made consistent with itself. For the negation of the connexion must force us to admit an ultimate and fundamental contradiction in our apparent intuitions of what is Reasonable in conduct; and from this admission it would seem to follow that the apparently intuitive operation of the Practical Reason, manifested in these contradictory judgments, is after all illusory (Sidgwick 1989, p. 508).

But he admitted that he could not establish such a connection: both principles – of self-interest and of general happiness – seemed

<sup>23</sup> On various ways of understanding this dualism see, e.g. McLeod 2000, or Orsi 2008.

to him equally 'self-evident', equally strong. A closer analysis of the concept of prudence, however, casts a shadow of doubt on the 'self-evidence' and the equal strength of the egoistic principle. This principle was never regarded within the so-called classical tradition as a serious rival for the moral principles. Even if self-interest was somehow recognized as an acceptable motive of human action, it never reached the status of a principle that could really compete (at the theoretical level of normative discourse) with the moral principles. A telling manifestation of this ranking of the principles of the practical reason was the fact that even prudence was given an unequivocally moral sense. According to Annas (1993, p. 322–325), the ancient tradition did not treat intuitive conviction regarding incompatibility between prudential and moral motives of action as a problem worth to be solved by a philosophical investigation. She claims that "the ancient theories find the opposition of my own interests to those of others to be philosophically superficial, something to be accounted for in a moral theory but not something that should give that theory its characteristic form". It is therefore by no means clear that 'prudential' (as opposed to moral) reasons are, as Sidgwick maintained, equally self-evident, equally strong (let alone stronger) as moral reasons. The dualism of practical reason may therefore be much less dramatic than Sidgwick believed: the practical reason indeed gives rise to incompatible reasons for action (prudential and moral), but the claim about their equal strength cannot be regarded as a universal truth; for a larger part of history of the Western thought, within the so-called classical tradition, it was believed that what requires special justification is not taking the moral point of view, but taking the non-moral ('prudential') point of view – the hierarchy within the dualistic mode of practical reasoning was therefore clear. Of course, that fact that this way of resolving the problem of the dualism of Practical Reason was defended by the classical thinker is not by itself an argument for the claim that this way is correct - they may have simply been wrong (and therefore separate, normative arguments must be provided

for this claim). But it also seems to show that Sidgwick's argumentation for the claim about the dualism of Practical Reason is only partly convincing; it is convincing in so far as it shows that the Practical Reason generates two competing principles of action; it is not convincing in so far as it asserts, *relying on the purportedly uniform intuitions*, that the principles are equally valid (that is, that the normative strength of egoism/prudence and morality are equal). This is implausible since, for instance, the classical thinkers' intuitions were different. In order to demonstrate that the dualism of Practical Reason in the strong form (including the claim of equal validity) really exists, one would have to formulate other – non-psychological, normative – arguments. This 'dualism of practical reason', which sharply distinguishes the prudential reasoning from the moral one, can be maintained only by acknowledging the specific assumptions of modern ethical theories, the most important of them arguably being the shift of the meaning of the concept of happiness/well-being (from objective to subjective) and the concomitant change in the meaning of virtue (from agent-centred to patient-centred).

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## Streszczenie

### Dualizm roztropności

W polemice z dość powszechnie przyjmowaną opinią, że rozumienie roztropności (jako pewnej cnoty) nie ulegało istotnym zmianom od czasów antycznych, w artykule broniona jest teza, że istnieją dwa, nie tylko różne, ale i niedające się ze sobą pogodzić pojęcia roztropności: nowożytno/nowoczesne – niemoralne lub pozamoralne, i klasyczne (Arystotelesowsko-Tomistyczne) – ściśle moralne. Z tezy, iż oba pojęcia są różne i niekompatybilne, wynika, iż 'nowoczesna roztropność' nie jest częścią 'klasycznej', lecz jest od niej istotnie różna: nie można być równocześnie roztropnym w obu rozumieniach (przykładowo: składową nowoczesnej roztropności jest samokontrola/opanowanie, którą wyklucza roztropność klasyczna). Oprócz porównania obu pojęć roztropności artykuł dostarcza także analizy relacji między nimi i tak zwanymi 'wartościami roztropnościowymi', oraz analizy przyczyn ewolucji (czy raczej rewolucji) w rozumieniu roztropności, jaka nastąpiła w czasach nowożytnych. Broniona jest w nim także teza, iż w ramach etyki, która zakłada klasyczne rozumienie roztropności, nie pojawia się Sidgwickowski „dualizm rozumu praktycznego”.

**Słowa kluczowe:** roztropność, cnota, wartości, motywacja moralna, motywacja egoistyczna, dobrobyt, rozum praktyczny