

Prudent Virtues

Jay Elliott

Abstract

“I want to live again.” George Bailey (Jimmy Stewart) was a good man, but he was frustrated. His goodness seemed to have gotten him only “bankruptcy and scandal and prison.” He was ready to throw himself off that bridge, on that snowy Christmas Eve in Bedford Falls. What made him change his mind? Of course, *It’s a Wonderful Life* is a movie, and a Christmas movie to boot, and there’s an angel named Clarence, and the specter of Pottersville. But in the midst of all this, there’s a question for moral philosophy to take seriously: has a virtuous life been a good thing for George Bailey? In asking this question, we’re not trying to find a way to persuade just anyone – say, the villainous Potter (Lionel Barrymore) – to adopt virtuous ways. We’re simply trying to make sense of how a clear-sighted virtuous person could find his life worth living. George has been unlucky: his father dies suddenly, leaving him to take over the family business; his bungling Uncle Billy loses that \$8,000 deposit. In every crisis, George’s honesty, decency, and sense of justice have severely limited his options. What was the point of living within those limits? Of course, he was brought up that way, and maybe it’s too late for him to change. But is that all we can say? Why isn’t such an upbringing a burden and a misfortune? In *Prudent Virtues*, I make a case for a very old kind of answer to these questions: namely that it is, in a certain sense, prudent for us to cultivate and exercise the virtues. This way of thinking was common in ancient and medieval philosophy, but modern moral philosophy has largely been shaped by a sense that such an approach

cannot work. To show how it can work, I draw on a neglected aspect of pre-modern thought about prudence, according to which prudence can be *collective*.

Nowadays when we hear the term “prudence”, we tend to think either of a cautious avoidance of risk, or of a shrewd pursuit of one’s own interest. In modern philosophical usage, “prudence” generally refers to a systematic self-interest that takes account not only of the present moment, but also of the long-term future consequences of one’s actions. Modern philosophers, such as Thomas Nagel, who have developed an account of prudence along these lines, tend to oppose prudence to morality. In their view, prudence includes only consideration of one’s own interest, whereas morality includes a consideration of the interests of all others. They concede that it may sometimes incidentally be prudent to do some virtuous action, such as keeping a promise or aiding a stranger, insofar as it may sometimes further one’s long-term interest to do so. But virtuous actions often may not be prudent; in fact, prudence may often counsel against them. Since people rightly and rationally act contrary to prudence on these occasions, morality must be a principle of action distinct from prudence. Even if, as modern philosophers sometimes allow, we expand the scope of prudence to include consideration of those we care about, such as our friends and family, it will still be true that prudence and morality may be opposed, since keeping a promise to one friend, for example, may not only conflict with something you want for yourself, but also with something you want for another friend or family member.

The opposition between prudence and morality is deep-seated in modern philosophy, but it is foreign to pre-modern philosophers such as Aristotle and Thomas

Aquinas. For them, prudence (*phronēsis*, *prudentia*) is all-around excellence in practical reason. On this pre-modern conception, prudence does include an ability to reason well about what is good for oneself. But it also includes an ability to reason well about how to organize the life of a political community. For Aristotle and Aquinas, prudence and the moral virtues, far from being opposed, actually complement one another. In their view, the moral virtues keep our desires oriented toward our good on the whole, and prudence finds the means to give our good desires fitting expression in action. At the center of this conception is the idea that, as human beings, we have a certain nature, including certain ends, and that among these ends is participation in certain forms of community. The moral virtues serve the pursuit of our ends insofar as they suit us to take part in these forms of community.

I take this conception of prudence and its relation to virtue to be appealing, insofar as it shows how a virtuous life may be worth living in terms of the way it serves our ends. But in *Prudent Virtues* I focus on a problem that stands in the way of our appropriating this tradition in the context of a modern naturalistic outlook. It is not implausible to think that communal life affords us many goods that are essential to our well-being. Nor is it implausible to think that many familiar virtues, such as justice and courage, are needed in order to make communal life succeed. The problem is that these considerations, taken together, don't obviously make sense of why any given individual would cultivate the virtues. Modern philosophers surely have something right when they suggest that even someone who took a very inclusive view of his own interest might often find his interest at odds with the requirements of courage or justice. Aristotle and

Aquinas appear to have materials to solve this problem. On the one hand, they are confident that cultivating and exercising the virtues is something that belongs to our nature, and thus is in itself a great good, quite apart from the worldly things it gets us. On the other hand, they have special conceptions of what our ultimate end is: in Aristotle, it is the divine activity of contemplation; in Aquinas, it is the vision of God enjoyed by the blessed in the afterlife. Each of them has ways of arguing that cultivating moral virtue in fact serves this ultimate end. If we were in possession of conceptions like these of what an individual human being's good consists in, then we might have the makings of a fairly straightforward argument that the virtues are prudent. But in a modern naturalistic context in which we do not appeal to such conceptions, is there any room for a pre-modern conception of prudence and its relation to virtue?

To bring this problem into focus, consider Philippa Foot's attempt to adapt Aristotle and Aquinas' way of thinking to a modern naturalistic context in her essay "Moral Beliefs". In that essay, Foot attempts to explain why we have reason to cultivate justice, for example, by pointing to the kind of need we have of one another. Foot points out that we cannot manipulate people like household objects or beat them into reliable submission like donkeys. Rather, we need to secure the *willing* cooperation of others, and we do that by treating them justly and earning their trust. In this way, Foot aims to show that justice is better for us than injustice. She acknowledges that this is a surprising thing to say, given that acting justly can be terribly costly. We assume that a just person will even face death rather than do something unjust, such as get an innocent man convicted of a crime. In response to this problem, Foot points out that if we have reason to cultivate

justice, then we must be prepared to face dangers like this, since a person cannot “have it both ways and while possessing the virtue of justice hold himself ready to be unjust should any great advantage accrue.” This is perfectly true, but it is only the beginning of the problem, since all it does is focus the question: why cultivate a character trait that could be so disastrous? In particular, why cultivate a trait that so drastically limits your options for extricating yourself in a jam? In the face of the fact that a just person won’t be “ready to be unjust should any great advantage accrue”, someone might happily say: so much the worse for justice.

In response to this kind of problem, Peter Geach proposed, in his lectures on *The Virtues*, that we could distinguish between, on the one hand, the thought that human beings need virtues such as courage and justice for their benefit and, on the other hand, the thought that justice or courage must benefit the individual just or courageous man. The appeal of Geach’s suggestion is clear. It is not hard to see how a person might be grateful for a system of laws and punishments, insofar as they protect us from violence and from interference with our property and activities. Nor is it hard to see how justice is essential to the well-functioning of such a system, since justice makes us refuse, even when hard pressed, to seek the condemnation of an innocent person. But there is a problem in the way of accepting Geach’s suggestion. The problem is that it does not look necessary for me to be just in order for *me* to enjoy the benefits of a system of laws and punishments. Maybe *someone* has to be, but why *me*? Worse, even if I wanted to make the maintenance of such a system my aim, no contribution on my part looks sufficient to attain that. No matter how admirably I act, if others routinely abuse the system, I may

lose the benefit of it. On the one hand, consideration of my own interest in a system of laws and punishments does not seem to counsel just behavior. On the other hand, it is not clear how I could act for the collective good of the system even if I wanted to.

I mentioned above that Aristotle and Aquinas think of prudence as having a collective dimension, so that it is not merely concerned with the good of an individual, or even that of his family and friends, but also with the good of a political community. Aristotle and Aquinas tend to associate this idea with occupying a special office, such as that of statesman or king. Thus Aristotle, for example, tells us that Pericles and people like him are exemplars of prudence since they get what is good not only for themselves but for human beings in general. Someone who occupies such a special position might be able to think of his contribution as necessary, or sufficient, to secure some large-scale collective good. But what about an ordinary person who occupies no such position? In *Prudent Virtues*, I argue that we can see the virtues as having a kind of collective prudence for the ordinary individual as well. The essential step in my argument is to show that it can be prudent for an individual to cultivate virtues for the sake of a certain end, even if his possessing those virtues is neither necessary nor sufficient for that end. The problem has the shape of a classic “free-rider” problem: if my contribution makes no material difference to the outcome, what reason do I have to contribute? I undertake to answer this question in a restricted sense. I do not propose to show a reason why someone who is happy to free-ride, and doesn’t care about the common good, *ought* to care. Instead, I propose, more modestly, to show how we can justify the conduct of the

virtuous person who does not free-ride by reference to the goods he aims at, even though his contribution is neither necessary nor sufficient to secure them.

To do that, I show how a teleological structure found in shared intentional action can serve as a model for thinking about collectively beneficial virtues. Suppose I'm a member of a crowd of rowdy soccer hooligans who are out to create mayhem on the streets of a city. I can commit my many small acts of mayhem – smashing a shop window, say, or beating up a hapless kid – for the sake of *our* making mayhem. I may know full well that my humble contribution is neither necessary nor sufficient in order to bring mayhem off. But I know that we will successfully bring off mayhem if many of us perform such small acts in concert. In acting for that purpose, I situate myself as a characteristic participant in the group's action. This structure of shared intentional action has not been generally recognized in the philosophy of action. But I argue that it is essential to understanding many typical cases of shared intentional action, and especially to understanding the relevance of thought about shared intentional action for ethics.

There is nothing in itself virtuous about participating in shared intentional action, as my rowdy soccer hooligan example shows. And of course virtuous actions are not always shared actions, either: a person can perfectly well do a virtuous action by himself. The relevance of thought about shared intentional action to my argument is as an analogy for the particular teleological *structure* in which an individual can cultivate virtue for the sake of a large-scale collective good. The value of a given virtue, such as justice, will depend on the collective goods that it enables us to attain. In *Prudent Virtues*, I don't address this question directly. I instead work from familiar ideas about the good of

justice, as for example that justice in punishment protects us from violence in the course of innocent activities. My aim is to illuminate how thoughts like this can function in an account of why it is worthwhile for an ordinary person to live a virtuous life.

A virtue such as justice, whose point is social, can be thought of as beneficial to its possessor as a participant in a certain form of community. A just person does not merely find himself in some community or other, nor does he see his community merely as an impediment or an instrument in the pursuit of his separate good. Rather, he adopts for himself the task of taking part in preserving sound collective life, and on that basis he cultivates habits of thought and choice that suit that task. He does not accomplish this work alone, of course; but he is not a mere passive beneficiary of the work of others, either. He takes an active role in securing the kind of life he wants, and thus attains for himself a kind of freedom and completeness. With this conception fully laid out, someone might ask whether I have not, after all, shown that even a virtue like justice can be good for the individual agent. Why not say that an individual needs justice in order to secure this kind of freedom and completeness for himself? If we are to think of the individual human being as characteristically a participant in certain forms of social life, then why not after all say that this kind of participation, and so the virtues that go with it, belongs to the individual human being's good?

We can say this. But nonetheless, I do not think the course of my argument is unnecessary or misleading. For it is only by clarifying the distinctive teleological structure involved in social virtues that we have put ourselves in a position to say it. I said that justice gives its possessor a kind of freedom because justice makes him an agent in

the maintenance of sound social life. But he only is such an agent by way of being a participant. His contribution, even over a lifetime, generally is not necessary or sufficient to provide for the social conditions of a successful life, either his own or anyone else's. So there is still a break, in my fully developed picture, from the kind of view that Foot was trying to defend in "Moral Beliefs". The hallmark of that kind of view was an attempt to locate the good of the virtues generally, including justice, in something that the individual agent's exercise of virtue could effect. Taking this as our benchmark for an "individualistic" view, I can say that the view I have defended is not individualistic.

I have argued that justice is worth cultivating for the sake of what a community of just people can achieve. But what about the case of a community pervaded by injustice? Isn't this the question that George's case raises, insofar as Bedford Falls is ruled by the spirit of Potter? How could it be prudent to cultivate justice in a situation like that? My argument foregrounds the aspect of prudence that has to do with the ordering of things to their proper ends. I have approached the question of whether the virtues are prudent by asking how their cultivation and exercise serves the pursuit of our good. But there is another side to prudence, and that is the reckoning of our limitations. In the context of social injustice, the prudent thought of one's limitations plays a special role. George fears he is a failure because he has given his life to the town, and the town is still bad. He gave himself to the principle that people shouldn't have to crawl to Potter, and yet he has crawled to Potter himself. His vision of Pottersville shows him the true nature of Bedford Falls, and thus reminds him that he has all along gone against the ruling spirit of the town. He had taken upon himself – in a kind of heroic compensation for being stuck in

Bedford Falls – the impossible task of making up in himself for what the town lacks. That almost destroyed him. But he was saved from thinking himself a failure by seeing clearly, perhaps for the first time, that this task was impossible. He was trying to make the town a fit home for human beings, but that is something that can only be done collectively. In the absence of a community that can achieve this kind of collective good, a sense of justice keeps him from blaming himself for a collective failure. George might have gone on living in many ways. He might have taken the job Potter offered him; he might have lost himself in dreams of what might have been; he might have lost himself in resentment and stifled rage. His justice made him want to live, but it did not merely keep him alive. It kept alive in him the representative man who stands for a better way of living than the world may be prepared to offer. His virtues preserved the prudence whereby we know both what we have done and our place in what George calls “the whole vast configuration of things.”