

# A Forgotten Moral Value: Prudence

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## Abstract

What we consider a virtue at a certain age depends on a lot of circumstances. It must also be taken into account at which age we can interpret which virtue at all. Prudence is a virtue whose importance and role can also be measured in the usage of words of the given era. Nowadays, very few people know the term, but explaining the content of it is a difficulty in itself, let alone transferring it from the passive to the active vocabulary. The real stake of the question is not a linguistic, but an ethical one. First of all, I examine the meaning of the concept, and then I turn to how Adam Smith analyses it in his work *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Next, I examine which thinkers influenced Smith's theories about prudence and which contemporaries in the Enlightenment had similar or different opinions about the same concept. Finally, I evaluate the importance of all the features that prudence includes in the conditions of the 21st century, and what possibilities and ways there are for their linguistic expression.

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In my lecture held in Pécs on the occasion of the 300th anniversary of Adam Smith's birth, first of all, I was curious to know what the people who have read so much about the Enlightenment thinker and know the ideas of the era think about prudence. I asked three questions: Who has heard the term? Who knows what it means? and Who is using it? Almost everyone raised their hand to the first question, slightly fewer people responded to the second, and the answer to the third was mostly just a smile.

It is interesting to observe how the importance of certain values increases during the course of the story, while that of others decreases. We have already seen an example of a complete change, deviation or shift in the order of values. Take the ancient Athenian and Spartan ideals of man as an example. In both policies, the required value was different, depending on the environment in which the citizens

lived. Athens was considered a more peaceful state, where culture flourished and there was great interest in the sciences, which is why education was also targeted as a main value. On the other hand, in Sparta, which was preparing for continuous warfare, strength, courage, and persistent struggle were the most useful qualities of a person, so even education was aimed more at the values of a warrior. But we can also see an example of how the importance of values is influenced by the change in social role, when we compare the relationship of classical values to each other, as Aristotle did in his writing, the *Ethics of Eudemos* (Kenny, 2011) and as discussed by the Renaissance thinker Machiavelli in his work *The Prince*. (Machiavelli, 1532/2014) We could see an interesting value shift when we examine how much the view of values had changed for the 21st century, as judged by young people in the early 2000s. A strong shift in the direction of exaggeration was visible in the Aristotelian table of values. According to the results of the research, none of the mean values was of considerable importance. (Bertók, 2008)

The assignment of individual values as values, or the change in their significance, depends on the circumstances, and historical, social, and cultural processes of the given era. The extent to which a term is present in the public consciousness can be measured by the use of words in each historical period. If a term cannot be interpreted within a specific language-using community, I conclude that its meaning is not constituted as an independent element in the sense either. This is precisely why the term prudence has become extremely interesting. Very few people know the term, but explaining the content of it is a difficulty in itself, let alone transferring it from the passive to the active vocabulary. The real stake of the question is not a linguistic, but an ethical one. Does the meaning of the word make sense for the people of the 21st century? To do this, first of all, I examine the meaning of the concept, and then I turn to how Adam Smith analyses it in his work *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. (Smith, 1759/2010) Next, I examine which thinkers influenced Smith's theories about prudence and which contemporaries in the Enlightenment had similar or different opinions about the same concept. Finally, I evaluate the importance of all the features that prudence includes in the conditions of the 21st century, and what possibilities and ways there are for their linguistic expression.

For analysing the concept, I used the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, where I found that prudence as a noun has four interpretations. First, (1) the ability to govern and discipline ourselves by reason. This first sense requires a determined personality with consistent and conscious thinking and reflexivity. According to the second meaning, (2) wisdom or cunning in the management of affairs, which refers to the practicality of the mind, and skill in thinking. This second sense perhaps even more powerfully includes the ability to foresight in time, since the insight into long-term processes is essential for this „cunning”. The following states that prudence is nothing but (3) skill and good judgment in the use of resources, which strongly evokes the main value of Aristotelian moderation as finding the measure of all values. According to the fourth meaning, prudence (4) is caution or prudence regarding danger or risk, which is the most static description of the concept in terms of dynamics. Interpretation (1) is about turning attention inward, while (2)

focuses on some kind of objectification of affairs, i.e., outward from the individual. (3) and (4) focus on temporal foresight, on the one hand, through planning and activity, and on the other hand, freedom from problems, maintaining passivity. The four senses describe four directions, yet so many abilities are concentrated in one concept. As a result, he perhaps became aware of why we call prudence a complex concept. We can try to translate the meaning of the word into Hungarian, but we have not yet found a single expression that includes all 4 directions. The interpretation of prudence cannot be done with a single word, entire phrases and word combinations must be used. The complex concept thus becomes special through the complex interpretation. It is difficult and cumbersome to describe, so it cannot be replaced by other concepts.

The meaning of prudence includes the virtue in such a way that, according to the concept, it also includes the person, the prudent. The individual is both active and passive, his attention is on the past, present and future at the same time. Those experiences come from the past, with the help of which you can plan your activity, or with the knowledge of which you know when to choose passivity. The present refers to awareness, attention to all senses, and focus. Conscious presence does not mean dissolving into the moment, but rather the interpretation of the details and elements of the present and grasping them in thought. The appearance of the future as a time perspective shows complexity in itself in the interpretation of the concept, because looking into the future takes place in the present moment in such a way that knowledge from the past provides the appropriate „glasses”.

Smith interprets prudence at several points in his book *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. (Smith, 1759/2010) Above all, he refers to it as a virtue. A desire that should provide the inner motivation for a person's actions, which he should strive for. At the same time, he writes about him as an individual character, that is, one of the possible characteristics of human nature. However, the description of human nature is a very sensitive area. The fact that a thinker - in our case, Adam Smith - describes what a person is like or what they are capable of, what can characterize a person, and what human nature is like, does not automatically mean that this applies to every single person. Sorting out the characteristics of human nature means sorting out a person's potential. Prudence, as a human characteristic, is also a potential. A person is capable of becoming prudent or has the potential to be prudent, but this is not self-evident. We could ask – to which Smith does not refer anyway – whether prudence can be an innate characteristic. However, I think we can safely answer with no. No one is born prudent because that requires a kind of wisdom, practical wisdom. Having experience is also an element of prudent behaviour. Someone is born with the ability of prudence, and then the ability becomes a characteristic through the way of thinking, awareness and leading one's life. Smith writes about prudence as a commendable characteristic. Perhaps precisely because praise can only be given to activity, to actions practised on the basis of a free decision. What in itself does not deserve praise, because it carries no added value, its existence is purely a matter of luck. Just as the features of beauty do not deserve praise unless they are accompanied by the neatness

that comes with activity, in the same way, quick and accurate reasoning cannot be praised until it is experienced through action. Smith also writes about prudence as a moral rule. The moral rule works as an internal compass. In other words, the prudent person's expectation of himself is wary, careful, and considered behaviour. It can serve as a guiding principle for his actions, more precisely for how he acts. However, the prudence expected from the other cannot be coercive. We cannot necessarily expect the other person to see through processes, to be able to learn from lessons, because it is not certain that they have the ability or practice of thinking to such a degree. At the same time, however, the one who sees the processes, who is thoughtful, conscious, and considers, can be disturbed if he does not experience the same from the other. Only those can expect prudence who are capable of it themselves, otherwise one cannot know what it was that they should have paid attention to or what they should have learned from. Smith also refers to prudence as self-control. The activity of a prudent person is subject to limits, and he sets these limits for himself. The limits of prudence are not exclusionary, but protective limits, because they exclude evil and warn against acting inappropriately. For the prudent, this limitation is part of freedom, since he realizes how far it is worth spreading, what he should keep himself away from in the name of prudence, and what he should strive for in order to get ahead.

Several of Smith's contemporaries were engaged in the study of Stoic thinkers. Self-control, abstinence from desires, and acceptance of fate are all part of Stoic teaching. Thomas Gataker (1574-1654) and David Hume (1711-1776) also discussed the Stoics of the Roman Empire. In *Maxims of the Stoics*, Gataker pointed to Marcus Aurelius as a moral role model. (Gataker, 1752) It is interesting to note how the Christian thinker elevated the Stoic teaching into a completely different narrative because he did the translation as an interpretation at the same time. He describes the subtle attention practised by the Stoics towards the divine, or the acceptance of the divinity as love for God, even though love was not associated with the divine in Stoic language. Even in his own time, the editors drew attention to this in a footnote. But his reflection on the Stoic value system, and his commentary on the texts of Marcus Aurelius, say that a virtuous person is just as attentive to his actions and their consequences, which can be applied to himself as to those directed to others. In this value system, there is room for foresight, caution and awareness at the same time. Furthermore, Gataker also emphasizes that this virtue must be realized in such a way that attention to action is constantly present. It must see through all the actions of our lives, thereby creating continuity. Interpreting Gataker, I concluded that, according to him, this attentiveness cannot be a virtue practised periodically, it does not show itself during a single action, but becomes a characteristic of the individual with its continuous presence. In his essay *The Stoic*, David Hume defined Stoic happiness as exercising virtue. (Hume, 1742) He emphasized the importance of nature and the clarity of alignment with natural laws. The Stoic recognizes the magnificence of nature, as it makes everything available to man. How a person deals with these conditions, how much he strives to learn the laws of nature and plan his actions in accordance with them, will be

the key to his prosperity. We can achieve happiness if we accept the order of nature and try to understand it so that we can plan through understanding and not be vulnerable to the vicissitudes of luck. Effort and diligence exercised in the spirit of prudence therefore bring happiness. In reflecting on the Stoics of the Roman Empire, Smith distinguishes between two branches of the teachings, depending on whether they emphasize self-control or goodwill. Smith himself attached less importance to self-control. He emphasized that for Epictetus, there are two main determinants of behaviour, and these are propriety and prudence. Exercising the virtue of „propriety” means compliance and alignment. The Stoic teaching is not only about the recognition of natural laws, it not only emphasizes that man must accept the omnipotence of nature because he can fight against its processes for a while, but in the end, it will still surpass his abilities, but it also extends to society. Perhaps the teaching of a freed slave (Epictetus the philosopher gained his freedom before the persecution in AD 93) could become so successful and supported precisely because it encourages the acceptance of social status. The Roman Empire could have fallen apart at any moment due to its enormous size and diversity, and the presence of many different communities and cultures. The retaining forces of the Empire included the roads, the network of the „limes”, and the spread of Stoic teachings. If it is a basic moral value for people to accept the situation that was given to them by Fate, then dissatisfaction with their situation, rebellion, is impossible from a moral point of view. For the Empire, conformity to the social situation and its acceptance have a sustaining force. Abstaining from desires and achieving peace of mind can be achieved by complying with the situation, rules, circumstances, and expectations. In the case of Epictetus, the virtue of „prudence” means being wary in such a way that the individual is aware of his presence in the community, thus he can be determined by the circumstances. Caution and prudence must extend to the future impact so that the outcome of the action created in the community can also be foreseen for the individual. It is interesting to note that what Thomas Wentworth Higginson translated as „prudence” in 1890 (in his Discourse 2.5 of Epictetus) was already translated by Robin Hard as „carefulness” in 2014, so instead of prudence, caution was included in the English texts as well, which caused the concept to lose its complexity. (Hard & Gill, 2014) Because prudence means some kind of denying or keeping distance, while in the sense of prudence, prudence is related to awareness.

When Smith makes a summary of prudence (Smith, 2010, p. 254-256), he shows how his judgement differs, depending on what is its focus. When prudence is aimed at individual leadership, health, luck, and wealth do not receive attention and appreciation as when this kind of awareness, caution and wary is shown in actions that serve a higher purpose. For the general, the statesman and the legislator, prudence is of particular importance in connection with the various virtues. Later, Comte-Sponville wrote about the same thing in Chapter 3 of his *A Small Treatise on the Great Virtues* - that without the virtues, they really cannot reach wisdom. (Comte-Sponville, 2002) Virtue alone cannot provide action with a positive outcome unless it appears simultaneously with the ability of wise foresight, which shows the need and extent of the given virtue.

Planning for the future with the lessons of the past is a responsibility in the present. Responsibility for ourselves, and responsibility for our environment through our actions. Prudence does not exist without knowledge of the processes of the world, since we must know, what actions are expected to have consequences, and it cannot exist without self-knowledge either, since we must know what pattern of action, we can expect from ourselves in which situation. We also need to know our abilities, limitations and desires. Conscious planning and action based on both the external and internal world will thus become an extended concept. The question remains, what will be the value and significance of prudence for the 21st century? During the interpretation of the concept, it seemed to be outlined that we can talk about an added value that includes all classical values. As it can be seen how devalued the Aristotelian virtues were by the beginning of the 2000s, and how incomprehensible their scope became (Bertók, 2008), it raises the question of whether prudence means anything to the people of the 21st century. It is not used in everyday speech. Certain legal texts contain the mention of the prudent person, but at the same time, due to technical-technological development, the view of time has rapidly decreased. Actions bring results quicker and quicker, nowadays, we don't even really know how to wait or focus on the long-term. Circumstances, environment and developments are changing quickly, all with the goal of bringing results as soon as possible. However, this does not mean that foresight and consideration are not important. Perhaps today the need for prudence is greater than ever.

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