

The Periclean Paradox: Aristotle and the Elusive Principles of Prudence

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Introduction

The Aristotelian corpus names only one exemplar of political prudence: Pericles of Athens.¹ This is an unsurprising choice. The “Age of Pericles” (ca. 460–429 BCE) is the pinnacle of Grecian life, when Athenian art, philosophy, architecture, and education become the epicenter of Western civilization. Building on the glory of the Persian Wars, Pericles, “the first man of his time at Athens, ablest alike in counsel and in action,” hastened Athenian supremacy throughout the Mediterranean.² Thucydides notes that by 430, Athens, though “nominally a democracy was becoming in his hands government by the first citizen” (2.65.9). Indeed, no Greek statesman receives more praise from subsequent commentators—Plutarch, John of Salisbury, Machiavelli, Montaigne, Bacon, Hegel, Mill, and Nietzsche, to name a few—than he whom Leo Strauss calls “the highest case [of] the enlightened statesman.”³

It is perplexing that despite this association of Pericles with political prudence, it is difficult to count Aristotle among the statesman’s champions. While Pericles’s prudential reputation is cited in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, his only mention in the *Politics* is hardly

*The author is indebted to the attentive commentary of the editor and reviewers of *The PSR* along with all members of this special issue who provided feedback. This article was drafted during a sabbatical made possible by the generous support of the Center for Citizenship & Constitutional Government at the University of Notre Dame. I am especially grateful to Phillip Muñoz, Susan Collins, Mark Blitz, Richard Avramenko, David O’Connor, and Luke Foster, who provided astute suggestions and improvements to this argument. All mistakes and inaccuracies are my own.

laudatory.⁴ In II.12, Aristotle examines Pericles alongside Lycurgus, Solon, and those who have “put forward some view concerning the regime” and “engaged in politics themselves.”⁵ It is worth noting Book II’s theme: investigation of regimes (*politeias*) “that are held to be in a fine condition, in order that both what is correct in their condition and what is useful may be seen” (1260b30–33). Pericles is thus examined as Athens’s lawgiver—as an example of architectonic prudence. Aristotle’s treatment of these politically active lawgivers is characteristically measured. Lycurgus’s Sparta lacks the completion of virtue. While “some suppose [Solon] to have been an excellent legislator” for establishing a mixed regime, Aristotle highlights Solonic reforms that induced leaders “to gratify the people as if they were a tyrant” (1273b35–1274a7).⁶ It is in this context that he mentions Pericles. Of all the statesman’s achievements, Aristotle focuses on two reforms Pericles supported at the beginning of his political career: diminishing the influence of the aristocratic Areopagus and establishing pay for jury duty.

Aristotle says these policies precipitated the proliferation of “demagogues . . . increasing [the power of the people] in the direction of the current democracy” (1274a10). While Aristotle is silent concerning Pericles’s motivation, Plutarch suggests a strategic rationale: A democratic stance positions him to oppose the aristocratic Cimon.⁷ But Aristotle is not here concerned with stratagems. He points rather to the consequences for the Athenian regime and people. The pseudo-Aristotelian *Constitution of Athens* says bribery first enters Athenian democracy during this period (sec. 27). In *Politics*, Aristotle highlights the imperial consequences of this democratic shift: “[B]ecause the people were the cause of [Athens’s] naval supremacy during the Persian wars, they began to have high thoughts and to obtain mean persons as popular leaders [*demagogues*] when they were opposed politically by the respectable” (1274a12–14). Demagoguery and empire enter Athenian politics and—given Athens’s fate following Pericles’s death—this entry is eventually perilous.⁸ In sum, Aristotle associates Pericles with a shift away from a stable, mixed regime toward demagoguery and empire. This hardly seems the paragon of prudence suggested in

the *Ethics*. What explains these contrasting depictions of Pericles? Is this a contradiction, an oversight, or something else?

The purpose of this article is to illustrate how Aristotle's conflicted treatment of Pericles is emblematic of his presentation of prudence, the "only virtue peculiar to the ruler" that remains precarious nonetheless (1277b26). We might call this the Periclean paradox—the inescapable temptation of prudence even, or especially, in its grandest forms to stray from common advantage. One reason for this drift is the ultimate inadequacy of prudence's own logic (cf. 1325a35ff.). Another arises from prudence's dependence on other capacities. It is well known, for example, that prudence requires moral virtue.⁹ Less clear is prudence's relation to the other intellectual capacities. This subject is so thorny because Aristotle makes few direct statements about the coexistence, relation, or tensions the intellect's capacities exhibit with one another. This opaque presentation is deliberate, I argue, for it cautions against straightforward conceptions of how to realize the intellect's purpose—to discern truth (1139b12). While some conclude this perplexing method of presentation as evidence of skepticism, I contend that its chief purpose is to teach us something about the intellectual virtues themselves, and especially prudence.¹⁰

For prudence ultimately depends upon other intellectual capacities for its existence. The pinnacle of political excellence requires a restraint and dialectic that prudence itself cannot supply. This teaching is woven throughout Aristotle's presentation and should give serious pause to anyone who contends that prudence alone is enough. The best evidence for this argument is found in the contours of prudence's presentation alongside the other intellectual virtues in Book VI of the *Ethics*, perhaps the most enigmatic section of Aristotle's ethical works. To repeat, the enigma of intellectual virtue is a caution against those who present the ascent to truth in simplistic or universal terms. For, above all else, Aristotle teaches that prudence, much like wisdom and truth itself, is elusive and evades the clarity we often seek.

This argument entails two interventions into current scholarship on Aristotelian prudence. First, I side with those who

recognize that prudence is guided by principles of moral action that it cannot itself supply.¹¹ Prudence, in other words, is the virtue whereby we put principles into action; it is not the repository or examiner of principles themselves.¹² Prudence thus requires its guiding principles to come from somewhere else.¹³ The second intervention concerns prudence's relation to wisdom. While these virtues are analogous and mutually reinforcing, they also entail significant differences and tensions.¹⁴ As the excellences of the practical and speculative intellect respectively, prudence and wisdom are often embroiled in a competition for supremacy that stacks the deck in favor of the practical to the demise of the contemplative. Aristotle's treatment of these virtues is extraordinarily subtle, yet it harbors a great political lesson.

These interventions give rise to the paradox that heads this article. As evident in his mixed treatment of Pericles, Aristotle teaches that prudence cannot endure long without guidance or guardrails that it cannot itself provide. Even the height of prudence is no guarantee against political peril.

The Purposes of Book VI of the *Ethics*

If students jump directly to Aristotle's presentation of prudence in Book VI of the *Ethics*, they miss the larger conversation of the book that casts a looming shadow on any effort to clarify the virtue. One point often missed is that prudence does not exhaust our search for truth and, in fact, is unlikely to persist without other intellectual virtues. This teaching becomes evident through examining the order, purposes, and perplexity of Aristotle's presentation of the intellect.

The proposed task of Book VI is to define "correct reason" (1138b20). Earlier in the *Ethics*, correct reason was posited, but not defined, as the foundation of virtue; the virtues prompt us to act "in the way correct reason commands" (1114b30, cf. 1103b31). Thus, the definition of correct reason bears consequence on the practice of all virtues and is essential to human flourishing. Immediately after proposing this definitional task, Aristotle invokes a metaphor associated with prudence: "[T]here is a certain target

that he who possesses reason looks to and so tightens or loosens; and there is a certain defining boundary of the middle, which middle, we assert, is . . . in accord with correct reason” (1138b22–24). The metaphor is tied to prudence later in Book VI: “For virtue makes the target correct, prudence the things conducive to that target” (1144a8–10, cf. 1144a25–27). For the present, Aristotle’s selection of the target metaphor suggests that prudence is inseparable from correct reason.¹⁵ But while prudence is concerned with the calibration of correct reasoning to a posited end, Aristotle alerts us to certain defining boundaries, a concern that falls under the domain of *nous*, or intellect (1142a26). In fact, the defining boundaries are of central concern to define correct reason (cf. 1138b34–35).

From the start, Aristotle’s search for correct reason evokes distinct capacities—the general boundaries associated with intellect and the tightening and loosening of prudence. By the end of the opening chapter, Aristotle reflects the cooperative nature of ascertaining truth by dividing the rational part of the soul into two parts: “the scientific” (*epistēmonikon*) and “the calculative” (*logistikon*). Then, he establishes a second task of Book VI: “[I]t is necessary to grasp what the best characteristic of each of these two parts is, for this is the virtue of each, and the virtue is relative to the work belonging to each thing” (1139a15–17). This task is relatively straightforward; prudence is the best characteristic of calculating reason and wisdom of scientific thought.¹⁶ The difficulty lies in grasping their interrelation. But, again, the most striking proposition is that truth comes in several forms and its acquisition requires distinct excellences.¹⁷

Having established the two primary tasks of Book VI and clarifying the function of intellectual virtue—to attain the truth—Aristotle begins again in VI.3: “[B]eginning, then, from a point further back [or higher up], let us speak about them again” (1139b14–15). He then enumerates the capacities “by which the soul attains the truth.” These are “five in number”: art, science, prudence, wisdom, and intellect (1139b15–17). This list is instructive for several reasons. First, an ancient Greek would notice what

Aristotle does not include: self-knowledge, philosophy, or piety. The first two appear nowhere in his account of the intellect, and the last appears in the context of poetic quotations (cf. 1139b10–11, 1139b20, 1141a15–16) or of the knowledge of the wise (1141b8). Does the absence of these prominent features of Greek thought suggest Aristotle’s dismissal? Another curiosity is the disharmony between the list’s order and the actual presentation, in which order come science, art, prudence, intellect, and wisdom, followed by political prudence.¹⁸ Finally, Aristotle leaves out the three virtues of VI.9–11: good deliberation (*euboulia*), comprehension (*sunesis*), and judgment (*gnōme*).¹⁹

The disharmony between Aristotle’s initial ordering and the actual presentation invites the reader to consider the interrelation of the virtues. By switching art and science, for example, Aristotle may be alerting us to common confusions of the two (*Theaetetus* 146c–d, cf. 1094a27–1094b7). Another possibility is his effort to properly situate and limit the virtues governing contingent human relations. Against the backdrop of Socrates and Plato, Aristotle’s elevation of prudence is a striking endorsement of excellence amid the variability, challenges, and temptations vexing practical affairs. Yet by moving science ahead of art, Aristotle suggests the need to frame human concerns within a broader cosmos.²⁰ This interpretation is supported by another change to the initial order: the interruption of his account of prudence by intellect and wisdom. As I hope to show, prudence must not only be framed and limited but also interwoven and supported by principles grounded in nontransient reality.

Aristotle’s last reordering—placing intellect before wisdom—is related to the absence of self-knowledge, philosophy, and piety from Book VI. For each of these ultimately concerns the origin or discovery of correct reason, the original task of the book. We are best positioned to understand Aristotle’s treatment of these subjects, therefore, once we appreciate the perplexities surrounding whether correct reason can ultimately be defined. For, as we will see, not only do the primary endeavors of philosophy and piety receive a veil of silence at this point, but even wisdom, the “best

characteristic” of the intellect, is shrouded in mystery. Indeed, Aristotle leaves the origins of correct reason largely opaque.

When Aristotle presents his list of five intellectual virtues, they are contrasted with conviction (*hypolēpsis*) and opinion (*doxa*), which cannot be excellences of attaining the truth because through them “one can be mistaken” (1139b18). Convictions and opinions describe conventional wisdom or unexamined hypotheses concerning all topics, including the divine (1339b7). The intellectual virtues stand in opposition to such opinions, and we imagine them subjecting received knowledge to greater scrutiny, purging it of falsehood, and revealing an unadulterated grasp of the truth. If Aristotle intends to sow doubt in traditional knowledge and belief (i.e., conviction and opinion), this is precisely the place to do it. Yet Aristotle does the opposite. Instead, like Socrates’s examination of the Athenians presuming to be wise, the effect of Aristotle’s treatment of intellectual virtue calls into question those who would presume to possess complete knowledge.²¹ In fact, not only do the error-prone notions of conviction and opinion reemerge throughout Book VI, together with trust and faith, they seem to reside at the heart of intellectual virtue itself. Aristotle’s portrait of the intellect is far more grounded in common sense and belief than is often supposed.

Just a few lines after cautioning against conviction and opinion, Aristotle grounds science (*epistēmē*) in these terms: “[W]e all suppose^[22] that what we know scientifically does not admit of being otherwise” (1139b21).²³ The language of supposition and opinion continues. Aristotle writes, “[F]urther, every science seems [*dokei*] to be teachable” (1139b25). And, perhaps most surprisingly, science is ultimately defined in terms of trust: “For whenever someone trusts in [*pisteuē*²⁴] something in a certain way, and the principles are known to him, he has scientific knowledge” (1139b33–34). If only scientists knew how much of their knowledge is grounded in belief, opinion, and trust! The reader of the Greek should indeed be surprised. The operations that first stood in opposition to intellectual virtue are apparently at the heart of scientific knowledge. The same is true for art (1140a19–20),²⁵

as it is for prudence (1140b13, 1140b27–28, 1142b34). Only intellect and wisdom are spared. But these virtues also stand on shaky ground.

Intellect (*nous*) appears in the shortest chapter of Book VI and receives only a few lines of explicit treatment. We are first reminded about the domain of science (universal knowledge), its mode of expression (demonstration), and its beginning from certain principles that are beyond its grasp: “[R]egarding the principle of what is known scientifically, there would be neither a science nor an art nor prudence” (1140b34–35, cf. 1095a31–1095b3). Next, Aristotle eliminates wisdom as the capacity responsible for identifying such first principles, for wisdom, like science, requires demonstration (1141a3). Having eliminated all other candidates for the knowledge of these defining boundaries, the first principles of correct reason, he ascribes them to intellect: “[I]t remains that it is intellect that pertains to the principles” (1141a8). The chapter ends and Aristotle moves onto wisdom. Why does this capacity, which Aristotle later calls the divine presence in us (1177b27–1178a5), receive such brief and stilted treatment? Like correct reason itself, the intellect evades clear and simplistic formulation.

Following this treatment of *nous* in VI.6, only wisdom remains to be defined, but Aristotle already established that “there is no wisdom with regard to these [first] principles of reason” (1141a1). In other words, the investigation into correct reason that begins by delineating various capacities eliminates each of these capacities as the home of correct reason in human nature. It is no wonder that some consider Aristotle a radical skeptic. The search for the foundation of virtue and the central task of Book VI appears a supreme failure. Is this the correct interpretation? If one expects a list of maxims, universal prescriptions, or an all-encompassing definition of the truth, Aristotle does indeed fail. But is it reasonable to distill the foundation of ethical action and human flourishing in this way? Not so. In fact, Aristotle invites us into the search for such a foundation and *deliberately frustrates* those who seek analytic clarity or casuistic guidance. Truth is too elegant and elusive to be contained

in this way, especially truth in human action. Instead, Aristotle recalibrates our expectations and sets them upon more worthy objects of inquiry.

If Aristotle does not clearly define correct reason, what does he offer? The most straightforward answer is the most promising: Aristotle offers a list and order of intellectual excellence. While he has not told us what correct reason is, he does highlight how we acquire it: science, art, prudence, intellect, and wisdom. This is a pregnant proposition. As Aristotle presents it, the search for truth is multifaceted and admits of varying excellences, the coexistence of which is highly unlikely. One should be wary of claims to complete command of the truth, especially of contingent reality. Moreover, intellectual virtues involve a surprising amount of opinion, trust, and belief—to know the truth, we must begin from what we know, patiently subject it to scrutiny, and remain circumspect in our commands. Finally, if the opening metaphors are instructive, Aristotle proposes the *activity* of correct reason as the cooperation of multiple capacities and virtues. The interrelation of the intellectual virtues is of special importance.

In other words, Aristotle's attention to the virtues whereby we attain the truth suggests something about correct reason itself—namely, that it is reached only through the virtues themselves. After all, we know that the morally unserious are unfit for prudential knowledge (1095a1–11) and that virtue is *defined* by the prudent person (1106b35–1107a1). Aristotle's refusal to clearly stipulate correct reason is not his final word. There is a pedagogical purpose at work. The philosopher is less interested in authoritatively defining correct reason than he is in teaching that the truth is unapproachable without the necessary moral prerequisites. If we walk away from Book VI with a settled conviction to practice the virtues as a path to uncover the truth of correct reason, then Aristotle's investigation is no failure but a masterpiece of moral invitation. And, most important for our purposes, Aristotle highlights how to grow in prudence and to begin assimilating its domain of truth: examined experience.

Experience, Teacher of Prudence

Growing in prudence is opaque, notwithstanding Aristotle's presentation. This fact affirms the credibility of Aristotle's elusive presentation as akin to the virtue it cultivates (1103a31–1103b2). For like art, prudential reasoning cannot be distilled into maxims, step-by-step instructions, or anything but the most abstract guiding principles. This is evident from the most consistent prerequisite of prudence outside of moral virtue: experience. While the young "become skilled in geometry and mathematics . . . a young person does not seem to be prudent" (1142a12–14). Aristotle has already explained why the young are not appropriate students of politics; Book VI of the *Ethics* applies this teaching to prudence of all forms (1094b15–1095a7). The potency of experience is among the most important positive teachings Aristotle presents on the intellect and is the subject of this section.

Experience provides the raw material out of which prudence is forged. The young are ineligible for prudence because they lack familiarity with and understanding of the practical truths that prudence examines. For prudence is "not concerned with the universals alone but must also be acquainted with the particulars" that inform reasonable action (1141b15–16). These particulars are learned only from experience and, Aristotle says, arise after "a long period of time" (1142a14–16). A young person may happen upon right action like a novice captain completing a maiden voyage. Though the youth may be successful, this accomplishment is not the same as prudence. The complete virtue requires a stable habit of excellence navigating conditions of many kinds. As soon as the young and inexperienced face unfamiliar circumstances, the rational command befitting the virtue is not available and guesswork begins (1142b2–5). The lines separating young and old, experienced and inexperienced, are, of course, blurry and subject to variation. Nor is growth in prudence a strictly linear process. For prudence does not arise from experience alone; it also requires moral virtue, which does not always correspond to age and may be lost as quickly as it is gained (1095a7–10).

Aristotle's explanation of the fruits of experience is best understood in light of Book VI's dramatic search for first principles. The

benefit of experience, he says, is a “trust” or “settled conviction” (*pisteuousin*) about the principles (*archai*) pertaining to the prudential action (1142a21). These are the “universals” mentioned earlier. Thus, in addition to a facility with contingency, prudence requires settled trust in certain guiding principles. The seasoned captain may appear harsh to the novice who does not share his appreciation for the perennial possibility of mutiny at sea. A stern commitment to obedience is born from years of undergoing the trials plaguing a crew stretched to its limits in unforeseen circumstances. Experience, in other words, contributes to both elements of the practical syllogism. Exposure to the contingencies and hard-earned lessons within a realm of practical conduct enriches the facility with what is best *here and now*. Over time, trial and error in this process, together with a maintained commitment to noble action, settles certain general lessons in the actor. Through the habitual choice of principle, a moral guideline becomes a second nature of our practical reasoning (1098b3-5). Prudential excellence in observing and selecting the appropriate principles and particularities cannot be learned in any other way.

Aristotle’s elevation of experience confirms the overall tenor of Book VI. The practical truth that prudence discovers—the right principle applied according to the right priority structure and achieved through a particular action—is seen only by the prudent. Several sailors may consult the same maps, weather conditions, and intelligence of enemy positions yet arrive at different conclusions about the best course to chart. Aristotle affirms the perceptive quality of prudential action when comparing the virtue to the achievement of the “clever” but immoral practitioner: So, “prudence is not the capacity in question, though it does not exist without this capacity, and this ‘eye of the soul’ does not acquire the characteristic [of prudence] in the absence of virtue” (1144a28–31). The language of vision is no coincidence. The prudent unite morally serious purposes with an astute perception of the realm in which they act. The counsel “Go with your gut” is thus not so unreasonable after all. For the morally serious, a “gut” judgment draws upon astute vision and trust in the most reliable stratagems of nobility amid contingency.

It is important to note that when Aristotle speaks of prudence's perceptive capacity, the intellect (*nous*) often reappears. He writes, "Indeed, prudence corresponds to [*antikeitai*] intellect, for intellect is concerned with defining boundaries [*horōn*], of which there is no rational account" (1142a26–27). Repeating the opening metaphor of Book VI, Aristotle affirms that prudence allies with intellect in discerning the right principles of action, though he does not specify their interrelation. One may surmise that the first principles—the defining boundaries—of the intellect delineate the terrain in which prudence operates, like the bounds of a playing field.²⁶ Though prudence may perceive or appreciate these principles, it is not primarily responsible for their discovery.

This reading is contested by those who maintain that it is up to prudence not only to determine the best means to achieve our ends but to know the human good itself and discern the principles of right action as well. For example, Harry Jaffa writes, "A practically wise man is one who understands what happiness is, and why the virtues are good. He alone *knows* that they are good, because he alone knows the end for the sake of which they are good."²⁷ As with others who maintain this position,²⁸ no explicit textual evidence is provided to ground this assertion.²⁹ Although correct in asserting that moral seriousness is a prerequisite to adopting sound principles, they transcend Aristotle's text to locate these principles in practical reasoning. For if prudence is responsible for discerning the means and the principles of action, what should we make of the several passages in which Aristotle highlights the contributions of the intellect? If Aristotle's presentation suggests any possibility, it seems the intellect, rather than prudence, is the most likely candidate to understand first principles. But this is nowhere asserted.

In other words, ascribing to prudence the responsibility to discover and implement all that reason commands neglects Aristotle's refusal to explicitly locate correct reason anywhere. Thus, both sides of the debate regarding first principles cannot escape the question looming over Book VI: What is correct reason? From whence do these first principles arise? Recognizing the difficulty of locating the principles in the intellect, some turn to the

moral virtues. While moral virtue does supply the ends of action, it is difficult to ascribe to them the responsibility for discovering first principles.³⁰ In sum, no clear picture of correct reason or the first principles of action is given. The search must follow Aristotle through subsequent books to see if a satisfying answer is given.

But moving on, let us deepen our appreciation for why and which kind of experience is so valuable. Prudence does not arise from mere trial and error. Emotional immaturity, carelessness, poor guiding principles, and a host of factors may obscure or distort the right lessons to be learned from past action. They also inhibit reasonable action itself, preventing the potentially prudent from learning through doing. Aristotle names at least two prerequisites for noble action and the right kind of experience: moral seriousness and dialectical reasoning. He writes:

“Hence of the political art, a young person is not an appropriate student, for he is inexperienced in the actions pertaining to life, and the arguments are based on these actions and concern them. . . . And it makes no difference at all whether he is young in age or immature in character: the deficiency is not related to time but arises on account of living in accord with passion and pursuing each passion in turn” (1095a2–9).

The morally unserious, passion-driven person does not undertake fully reasonable action and cannot be expected to accumulate sound practical wisdom. The arguments (*logoi*) Aristotle mentions are not abstract philosophical debates but are the form of argumentation he presents as appropriate to ethical and political thought: the investigation of prevailing opinions and reasonably available options of action (cf. 1094b23–27). Lest we equate this dialectic or prudential growth with academical debate, however, Aristotle offers a balanced and humane caution against the intellectually inclined: “Hence even some who are without knowledge—those who have experience, among others—are more skilled in acting than others who do have knowledge” (1142a17–18).

Rightly understood experience, even in the absence of genuine knowledge, is sufficient to achieve right action in many circumstances. When planted in the fertile soil of well-regulated passions and correct reason, experience may blossom into true prudence.

Once again, a sure sign that we are on the right path to growing in practical wisdom is a growing perception of the morally and practically relevant considerations for action. When one first enters the arena of public action, for example, distractions and diversions abound. New interns on Capitol Hill are entranced by majestic architecture, historic scenes, high-profile figures, and the peril of power. They might have trouble not tripping over their own shoes, let alone picking up on the subtle clues of “how we do things around here.” Exposure and experience are even more necessary for the morally serious who must learn how to act, how *not* to act and, especially, to imitate those who act well. At the heart of this learning curve is an enriched sense of what matters for action—the who, what, where, why, how, and when of noble conduct (cf. 1106b21–24).

But even the most astute observation is not a guarantee of making the right choice. This is why prudence is especially noted for excellent deliberation (1140a31–32). Explaining his dismissal of the young from prudence, Aristotle writes:

The cause is that prudence is also of particulars, which come to be known as a result of experience, but a young person is inexperienced: a long period of time creates experience. . . . Further, error in deliberation concerns either the universal or the particular, for one can err in deliberating either about the fact that all heavy water is bad, or about the fact that this water here is heavy (1142a14–24).

The deliberation of right action occurs on two levels: the relevant moral principle(s) and the identification of the circumstance(s) appropriate for application. There are also interactive effects between universals and particulars. The water may be heavy, but if it is the only drink available for soldiers who are three days’

journey into enemy territory, it may still be prudent to drink. The circumstances inflect even the clearest of actionable principles.

Experience thus affords the exposure, examples, and opportunities in awareness and deliberation wherein reasonable judgment is formed. Not every context or occasion is entirely new. By the end of their first week, congressional interns learn how managers like their coffee and can quit spending so much time trying to remember and focus on the policy briefs piling up. Over time, the morally mature and dialectically curious continue to ask questions, probe stories of success and failure, and identify the true causes of good action in each setting. Experience, rightly practiced, affords the material out of which practical wisdom is formed.

Unfortunately, however, the hard-earned wisdom of masters and veterans of action is nontransferable. General principles and instructional stories can, of course, be handed down, but the novice must still master the situational perception in which relevant principles are seen and applied. Maxims capture some fruits of experience, but they do not—they cannot—pass on the excellence of translating principles into practice that is prudence. If maxims or principles could do even half the work of guiding action, prudence would be a deductive science communicable in courses or handbooks.³¹ Instead, Aristotle associates prudence with perception. “Prudence is concerned with the ultimate particular thing, of which there is not a science but rather a perception, and a perception not of things peculiar to one of the senses, but a perception of the sort by which we perceive that the ultimate particular thing, in mathematics, is a triangle” (1142a27–29). Aristotle here describes the subtle domain of practical and ethical truth that is so elusive and natural it evades straightforward elucidation. When asked to explain why he chose a particular tactic, for example, the seasoned general cannot produce a rational proof, but he can explain his sense of the circumstances and the principles guiding his action. As Aristotle explains, this is not one of the five external senses but an internal sense of the action itself, which is analogous to the appreciation

that an object under consideration is a particular instance of the general category of triangle. This internal sense “is perception rather more than prudence” and so belongs to the intellect, the faculty charged with understanding the ultimate particular, or the practical syllogism.

In sum, when we approach prudence as Aristotle does and grasp its operation amid the practical affairs of everyday life, it is less surprising that this virtue is grounded in faith, trust, and gut feeling—our internal sense of how to realize noble purposes.³² This may seem an unstable or unsatisfactory grounding for the virtue Aristotle tasks with guiding practical affairs. But we should not let skeptical abstractions obscure Aristotle’s remarkable achievement: an elucidation of the intuitions and inner workings of ethical human action. If our effort to discover stable foundations for correct reason is frustrated for the time being, we can still reside in the house erected upon these grounds.

So far we have seen how prudence cannot operate without a rectitude toward noble ends supplied by moral virtue, a grasp of the practical syllogism in the intellect, and a “long period of time” navigating the relevant domain of experience. For it is not just any experience that will suffice but that which is akin to the form of prudence we aspire to practice. By the time we encounter wisdom—about halfway through Book VI—it is already clear that prudence does not stand alone. It requires a host of prerequisites as well as perseverance in a morally serious life. While the status of correct reason is still uncertain, in other words, we have learned much about practical reason’s operation. It is under these circumstances that Aristotle turns his attention to wisdom, the last of the intellectual virtues to be defined.

Prudence, Wisdom, and Things “Much More Divine”

Aristotle begins his investigation of wisdom where Socrates leaves off: with artisans (*Apology* 22c–d, cf. *Metaphysics* 981b13–20). He mentions two of the most famous sculptors in ancient Greece, Pheidias and Polycleitus, who “are the most precise in the arts” (1141a9) and are known, above all, for their statues of Zeus,

Athena, and Hera.³³ The sculptors of the gods are understandable candidates for wisdom—they forge connections between the human and the divine. Nonetheless, Aristotle dismisses the sculptors’ wisdom because “we suppose that there are some wise people who are wise generally and not partially” (1141a13). Artistic precision, even of the divine, is not sufficient for general wisdom. The evidence Aristotle presents for this assertion is a quotation from the *Margites*, a comic work ascribed to Homer: “But him gods made neither digger nor ploughman / Nor wise in some other respect” (1141a15–16). The play is now lost so we cannot be sure of the full meaning of these lines, but Aristotle’s commentary in the *Poetics* suggests a comedic response to the proposition that sculptors exemplify wisdom.³⁴ It is laughable, Aristotle suggests, to identify wisdom with a partial excellence or even with the masterful arts. Wisdom is a comprehensive virtue and does not yield material results the way other crafts do.

The sculptors thus do not possess true wisdom, according to Aristotle, but their precision fashioning divine images leads some to account them wise. This example immediately precedes the most complete definition of wisdom in the *Ethics*: “[T]he most precise of the sciences would be wisdom. The wise person, therefore, ought not only to know what proceeds *from* the principles but also to attain the truth *about* the principles. Wisdom, as a result, would be intellect and science, a science of the most honorable matters that has, as it were, its capstone” (1141a17–21). While this definition builds on premises from earlier chapters, this is Aristotle’s first mention of “the most honorable matters.” The incomplete knowledge of the arts and poetry, portrayed with comedic effect in the *Margites*, at least gets one thing right—wisdom’s concern is the highest matters.

After distancing wisdom from the arts, Aristotle takes on another candidate: the political art, or prudence. Many associate prudent leaders with wisdom. Yet an enduring theme of Aristotle’s political thought is a caution against the divinization of politics (1259b10). In VI.8 of the *Ethics* this apprehension takes center stage, and Aristotle devotes substantial space to dethrone political

reasoning as the exemplar of wisdom. If there is a threat to true wisdom that preoccupies Aristotle, in other words, it is politics, especially given that “a human being is not the best thing in the cosmos” (1141a22). He begins by delineating the distinct subject matter of the virtues. Wisdom concerns what is “always the same,” whereas prudence considers “the good condition for each sort of thing” (1141a24–26). As evidence for this, Aristotle presents an odd, Hobbesian example: “[C]ertain beasts too are prudent, namely, all those that manifestly have the capacity for forethought concerning their own life” (1141a27–28).³⁵ This statement is a striking contrast to the conception of prudence as the height of human excellence given just two chapters earlier. One imagines Aristotle’s students recoiling in disgust to hear prudence so demeaned as to be found among beasts.

Yet Aristotle doubles down against our repulsion. He writes: “whether a human being is the best in comparison with the other animals makes no difference, for there are other things whose nature is *much more divine* [*polu theiotes*] than that of a human being” (1141a33–1141b1). Just lines above, Aristotle characterized the existence of things above the human with the conditional “if.” Some might interpret the conditional as Aristotle’s reluctance to endorse divine natures. Lest there be any doubt, in a rare moment of emphasis, Aristotle drops this hedging and insists on natures so superior to the human that our distance from animals “makes no difference.” This class of superior beings is evidently large, for Aristotle backs this claim with “only the most manifest example, the things of which the cosmos is composed” (1141b2–3). This is not the place for us to consider Aristotle’s personal beliefs in such divine natures, but his message is clear—political affairs and human excellence do not come close to the highest reaches of being.

It is of special note that this reflection immediately precedes Aristotle’s delineation of the species of prudence (VI.8), including its architectonic (political) form. Recall that one way Aristotle alters the initial list of the intellectual virtues is by interrupting his reflection on prudence to consider both intellect and wisdom.

We are now positioned to better understand a possible explanation. Before the discussion of architectonic and political prudence, we are told they do not concern the same subject as wisdom, nor can they claim ultimate supremacy. In fact, Aristotle seems to warn us that without concern for matters transcending the human, even prudence can become bestial. Aristotle's engagement with the political is once again framed between the animal and the divine.³⁶ This suggests two important lessons for prudence. First, Aristotle cautions against the frequent elision of prudence with wisdom. The virtues and the lives they entail are distinct. Second, while distinct from wisdom, Aristotelian prudence is somehow incomplete without an appreciation for matters "much more divine" than the political.

After cautioning against too human or political a conception of wisdom, Aristotle addresses its inverse, saying that "people deny that Anaxagoras, Thales, and the wise *of that sort* are prudent when they see them being ignorant of the things advantageous to themselves" (1141b5–7, emphasis added; cf. *Hippias Major* 281c). It is worth noting that for the first time Aristotle agrees with his interlocutors' identification of wisdom. In the opening chapters of the *Metaphysics* he remarks: "[L]et us take up also those who came before us into the inquiry about beings and philosophized about truth. . . . Thales [is] the founder of this sort of philosophy."³⁷ Anaxagoras is mentioned just a few lines later and serves as a frequent interlocutor on metaphysical and theological matters—the proper subjects of wisdom. In fact, Aristotle approvingly cites his thoughts on the latter on several occasions (*Physics* 256b24–27, *De Caelo* 301a11, *Metaphysics* 1069b21). Anaxagoras and Thales, then, seem to be on the right track in studying matters above the human and the first causes and origins of being (*Metaphysics* 981b29–30).

But the real confusion Aristotle addresses is that people suppose this sort of wisdom stands in opposition to prudence. Those who hold this position "assert that such men know things that are extraordinary [*peritta*], wondrous [*thaumasta*], difficult, and daimonic—yet useless too, because they do not investigate the

human goods” (1141b7–8). Aristotle appears to affirm this interpretation because the rest of the chapter drops the subject of wisdom altogether and focuses on prudence, which “is concerned with the human things” and not “things that cannot be otherwise” (1141b9–12). Wisdom’s displacement by prudence could be interpreted, then, as Aristotle’s elevation of the human over the divine, politics over philosophy. Philosophy may begin in wonder, Aristotle’s interlocutors suggest, but it is of little use to practical affairs. This perennial criticism of philosophy and wisdom warrants consideration. Aristotle’s response is one of measured disagreement.

Once again Aristotle’s examples are illustrative. He selects Anaxagoras, Thales, and “the wise of that sort” as representatives of this class because of their apparent negligence of human concerns. Indeed, a famous fable claims Thales fell into a well while gazing at the heavens, and another suggests Anaxagoras neglected his family’s great wealth to spend time in study (1179a13–17). But if Aristotle’s true purpose is to criticize practically incompetent philosophers, Thales and Anaxagoras are especially curious representatives.³⁸ In the *Politics*, for example, Aristotle recounts Thales’s response “when some on account of his poverty reproached him with the uselessness of philosophy” (1259a9–10). The criticism against philosophy reappears! This time, however, Aristotle is ready with a response. He describes how Thales used his “knowledge of astronomy,” discerned the approach of a good harvest, bought all available olive presses, and, when the season arrived, “hired them out on what terms he pleased and collected a great deal of money, thus showing how easy it is for philosophers to become wealthy if they so wish, but it is not this that they are serious about” (1259a11–19). This characterization of Thales illuminates the irony of his appearance as a useless man in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. His example disproves that philosophy and practical competence are inconsistent. Instead, Aristotle suggests that the truly wise maintain a distance from the affairs that concern the prudent, for they do not rank human affairs among “the best of things in the cosmos.” Yet this detachment does not necessitate practical incompetence.

The example of Anaxagoras pushes one step further. Anaxagoras was the teacher of Pericles, Aristotle's lone exemplar of prudence.³⁹ Although Aristotle nowhere discusses this tutelage, it was well known among his audience. In the *Phaedrus*, for example, Socrates describes the fruits of this education in Pericles's rhetoric:

Pericles may possibly have become the most perfect of all in rhetoric. . . . All of the arts that are great require in addition, concerning nature, babbling and talk about what's above; for this element of high-mindedness and of bringing work altogether to perfection seems likely to enter in somehow from that source. And Pericles acquired this, in addition to being of a good nature. For falling in with Anaxagoras, who was such a one, and being filled with talk about what's above and attaining to the nature of mind and mindlessness, concerning which Anaxagoras made his long speech, he dragged from that source toward the art of speeches what is applicable to it.⁴⁰

In this characterization, Socrates suggests that wisdom—and “talk about what's above”—is an apt guide for practical arts. A similar suggestion is made at the conclusion of Plato's *Laws* when Anaxagoras's doctrine of an intelligently ordered universe is posited as a healthy political teaching.⁴¹ Speaking of an appreciation for the immortal soul and the intelligently ordered universe, Plato concludes, “[H]e who is incapable of acquiring these attributes in addition to the popular virtues would almost never become an adequate ruler of the city as a whole, but would be an assistant for the other rulers.”⁴² Plato's *Laws* thus points beyond politics to an appreciation for divine matters as a proper frame for political concerns. Aristotle's inclusion of Anaxagoras, the teacher of Pericles, suggests a similar concern. Whether Pericles lived up to this teaching is a different question.

Even though he defends the practical capability of these philosophers, Aristotle still agrees that Thales and Anaxagoras offer an incomplete pursuit of wisdom. The pre-Socratics, for example,

were on the right track when searching for the causes of nature, “but [they] did so dimly and with no clarity, rather in the way nonathletes do in fights; for while dancing around they often land good punches, but they do not do so out of knowledge” (*Metaphysics* 985a13–15). The disdain for human things, in other words, is an apt disposition for philosophy, but it is not a guarantor of true wisdom. This is true even of Aristotle’s exemplars: “For Anaxagoras uses the intellect as a makeshift contrivance for cosmos production [*kosmopoian*], and whenever he comes to an impasse about why something is necessarily a certain way, he drags it in” (985a18–21). These errors in philosophy often redound to mistaken notions of politics; a “cosmos-maker” may be a recipe for imperialistic cosmopolitanism.⁴³ Perhaps Pericles’s training was not so ideal after all.

In sum, we may conclude from the examples of Thales and Anaxagoras that Aristotle disagrees with those who suggest the uselessness of philosophy. Wisdom is, at the very least, not inconsistent with prudence and, in fact, might be an essential ingredient for its perpetuation. But, as these examples and that of Hippodamus (*Politics* II.8) remind us, the pursuit of wisdom does not guarantee sound politics either.⁴⁴ We reach the conclusion of VI.7 of the *Ethics* with a general definition of wisdom and its subject matter but only incomplete exemplars of its practice. Of course, the *Ethics* is not the appropriate venue for a complete account of wisdom or philosophy but rather its relation to becoming virtuous and happy (1103b26–30). Nonetheless, an important yet elusive relationship between wisdom and prudence, between philosophy and politics, remains a central feature of Aristotle’s portrait.

In the last chapter of Book VI, Aristotle advances a final claim concerning the opening question of correct reason. He argues that Socrates’s proposal that “all the virtues are kinds of prudence” is correct “in one respect, but in another respect he erred” (1144b18–20). Socrates was correct to say that no virtues are possible “in the absence of prudence” (1144b22), and this is evident in definitions of virtue, like Aristotle’s own, that ground virtue in correct reason in general and prudence in particular (1144b23–26). But Socrates

erred in suggesting that virtue is simply defined by correct reason. A definition is a fixed point of reference, but virtue orders human action in contingent circumstances. It is not possible to determine *a priori* what should be done in all scenarios. Consequently, the general character of scientific knowledge is inadequate to guide ethical conduct (1144b29–30). Correct reason, it seems, cannot be universally defined.

That is why we “ought to make a small change” to the initial search for correct reason, as Aristotle states at the end of Book VI (1144b26). For virtue is not merely that which accords with correct reason *ex post facto*; it also must be “*accompanied* by correct reason. And prudence is correct reason concerning such things” (1144b27–28, emphasis original). Returning to Aristotle’s opening metaphors of correct reason affords clarification. In the practice of virtue “there is a certain target that he who possesses reason looks to and so tightens or loosens; and there is a certain defining boundary of the middle” (1138b22–23). An overly scientific impulse impels us to identify the principles and boundaries of ethical action. One looks in vain to find such an exercise in casuistry throughout Aristotle’s corpus, even in the book devoted to defining correct reason. Instead, Aristotle stipulates the general boundaries of human flourishing—situating us between the beasts and the gods—and encourages a prudential process of constant adjustment and deliberation to fill in this outline (1104a1–5). This is why the truly virtuous act is accompanied by reason; reason cannot prescribe nobility beforehand.

Aristotle’s apparent failure to identify correct reason is ultimately a lesson in caution and circumspection. For “casuistry presents its own kind of peril, owing to that persistent human desire to achieve security . . . [and] the striving for certainty and security can gravitate, by virtue of its own direction and its natural inclination, into the degenerate, anti-natural state of nonhuman rigidity.”⁴⁵ This rigidity often arises from a failure to recognize the indeterminacy of prudential action. It is understandable why some search for such clear and consistent guidelines to direct action, yet a primary effect of Aristotle’s presentation is to caution against

thinking about prudence in this way. In the practical realm, correct reason is more akin to the constant calibration of an artisan than to the geometry of the mathematician.

In other words, I argue Aristotle's teaching about prudence occurs in both word and deed—through both what he says and how he says it. Following his criticism of Socrates's monolithic account of virtue, Aristotle offers a rare affirmation of the dialectical delivery of this teaching: "[T]he argument that someone might make in a dialectical manner would also be resolved, to the effect that the virtues are separate from one another" (1144b33–34). A simple recognition of the existence of several virtues and not just a single, all-encompassing excellence leads to a similar conclusion.

In sum, Book VI not only introduces the intellectual virtues, their subject matter, and their proper relation but also piques our interest in two fundamental questions. First, how does the intellect arrive at an adequate grasp of the principles that should guide practical conduct? And second, how might the delicate harmony of wisdom and prudence be achieved? These questions reappear in Aristotle's subsequent presentation.

Conclusion

Pericles of Athens undoubtedly ranks among the most capable and cultivated rulers of the ancient world. Born of ancestral nobility, tutored by a great philosopher, morally serious from a young age, and at the helm of state amid the greatest conflict in Greek politics—there seems no better example of political excellence available to Aristotle and his students. One easily imagines nodding heads among his audience when Aristotle asserts, "*We suppose Pericles and those of that sort to be prudent*" (1140b8, emphasis added). There is little doubt that under Pericles Athens rose to great power, influence, and prosperity in both peace and war. But was the Athenian regime better off on account of Pericles's rule? Is growth in power and extracting tribute from neighbors the appropriate measure of prudence?

The presentation of Pericles in the *Politics* does not think so. In his only mention of Pericles, Aristotle approaches him as a

lawgiver—bearing responsibility for the order and growth of the entire Athenian people and regime—in an analysis laced with doubt. Pericles’s innovations hastened demagoguery and imperial ambitions, the beginning of Athenian demise. As Strauss notes in his interpretation of Thucydides, “[T]he judgment of Pericles’ rule must not be made in oblivion of the unsolid character of its foundation. A sound regime is a moderate regime and dedicated to moderation.”⁴⁶ In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle’s choice to evaluate Pericles in terms of political prudence affirms this interpretation. Pericles does indeed exemplify a particular form of excellence in action. But this excellence is no guarantee of success for the regime. The promise of political prudence is no political panacea and—to state Aristotle’s position more clearly—prudence alone is not enough to maintain the ship of state for long. This is the Periclean paradox of Aristotelian prudence.

This paradox is confirmed in Aristotle’s presentation of prudence in Book VI. When situated amid the broader perplexities and purposes of his investigation into correct reason, prudence emerges a rather precarious virtue. This precarity arises from several sources. First, precisely when one might expect the pursuit of truth to disdain the influence of opinion, conviction, or belief, Aristotle grounds the intellectual virtues in these terms. Excellence in discerning the truth of reality is neither clinical nor systematic. Reality itself is divided into perennial and contingent layers, and the virtues appropriate to each are forged in the patient scrutiny of received knowledge. For its part, prudence requires a long apprenticeship in experience and moral seriousness. This virtue is hard-earned and hard to keep.

Another perplexity of prudence is the source of its guiding principles, which Aristotle does not reveal or enumerate over the course of Book VI. This apparent failure in obtaining his goal should be interpreted considering what Aristotle does highlight throughout the book. There are different layers of truth with distinct virtues appropriate to their discovery. In the practical realm, for example, Aristotle highlights the perceptive guidance of both prudence and intellect. When trained and calibrated by the

trials of experience, the “eye of the soul” perceives, receives, and processes the relevant considerations for action—the practical truth of noble conduct. Yet prudence is still a “collective” effort. The intellect, not prudence, affirms and orders the correct guiding principles while moral virtue chastens the passions that distract from sound discernment. A ship’s captain navigating a storm must be courageous enough to eschew his cabin, remain on deck, and assess the conditions as they are. Prudence’s rigorous attention to contingent reality is, in short, nothing less than the cumulative effort of the entire human character. Prudence does not stand alone.

Another lesson of Book VI is the opaque yet special relation of prudence to wisdom. Aristotle’s presentation of prudence is routinely interrupted and penetrated by the quest for wisdom. This suggests a certain kind of coexistence, or at the very least a mutual recognition between these two virtues. The nature of this relation, however, is elusive and full of enduring tensions. Although some are mentioned above, the most important is one not examined here: the competing claim to superiority of prudence and wisdom, of action and contemplation. This competition, which concludes Book VI, becomes a central theme of the concluding chapters of both the *Ethics* and the *Politics*. Any account of prudence that does not appreciate this dynamic—and its tensions—is incomplete. In fact, if the Periclean paradox is of any import, the navigation of this dyad contains the deepest lessons for prudence and political rule—for promise or peril.

Notes

1. “We suppose Pericles and those of that sort to be prudent—because they are able to observe the good things for themselves and those for human beings” (1140b8–9). Unless otherwise noted, all translations of the *Nicomachean Ethics* are drawn from Aristotle, *Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins (University of Chicago Press, 2011).
2. Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War*, ed. Robert B. Strassler (Simon & Schuster, 2008), 1.139.4.

3. Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (University of Chicago Press, 1964), 28.
4. Pericles appears several times in *Rhetoric* as a model of the art (e.g., 1407a1, 1411a1, 1419a2–5).
5. Aristotle, *Aristotle's Politics*, 2nd ed., ed. and trans. Carnes Lord (University of Chicago Press, 2013), 1273b28–32. Subsequent quotations are drawn from this translation.
6. Lintott suggests that Aristotle prefers Solon's mixed democracy, "a constitution based on the farmers, who are content with a limited amount of government and are prepared to spend most of their time on their farms. . . . Thus the better sort are left to rule, but they will rule justly, because they are subject to audit for their activity in office." Andrew Lintott, "Aristotle and Democracy," *Classical Quarterly* 42, no. 1 (1992): 123.
7. "The time came when Aristides was dead, Themistocles in exile, and Cimon frequently absent on distant campaigns. Then at last Pericles decided to attach himself to the people's party and to take up the cause of the poor and the many instead of that of the rich and the few, in spite of the fact that this was quite contrary to his own temperament, which was thoroughly aristocratic. He was afraid, apparently, of being suspected of aiming at a dictatorship; so when he saw that Cimon's sympathies were strongly with the nobles and that he was the idol of the aristocratic party, he began to ingratiate himself with the people, partly for self-preservation and partly by way of securing power against his rival." Plutarch, *The Rise and Fall of Athens: Nine Greek Lives*, trans. Ian Scott-Kilvert (Penguin Books, 1960), sec. 7, p. 171.
8. After naming Pericles a demagogue, the *Constitution of Athens* also links Periclean democracy to empire. "[Pericles] took away some of the privileges of the Areopagus, and, above all, he turned the policy of the state in the direction of sea power, which caused the masses to acquire confidence in themselves and consequently to take the constitution more and more into their own hands." Aristotle, "The Constitution of Athens," in *Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, vol. 2, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton University Press, 1984), 27.
9. "It is impossible for someone who is not good to be prudent" (1144a36).
10. For a catalogue of skeptical interpretations, see Thomas L. Pangle, *Aristotle's Teaching in the "Politics"* (University of Chicago Press, 2013), 2–3.

11. Bodéüs presents a brilliant overview of the debate and refutes both Gauthier's and Jolif's support of the supposition that prudence supplies its own principles. Richard Bodéüs, *The Political Dimensions of Aristotle's Ethics*, trans. Jan Edward Garrett (SUNY Press, 1993), 30–38.
12. Schollmeier argues the opposite and cites Aristotle's invocation of Pericles as the proof: "Pericles is practically wise because he can see what is good for men. . . . Pericles and those other men can see what is an end for human beings. For what is good for us is an action which is itself an end." Paul Schollmeier, "Aristotle on Practical Wisdom," *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung*, 43, no. 1 (1989): 128.
13. This conclusion echoes Richard Ruderman's assessment: "If . . . *phronesis* is allowed to construct ends or goals, free of theory's guidance, two crucial elements of Aristotle's thought are lost: (1) the most important human ends (virtue and happiness) are natural, and (2) politics generally works best when its ends (and the law) are unchangeable." Richard S Ruderman, "Aristotle and the Recovery of Political Judgment," *American Political Science Review* 91, no. 2 (1997): 415.
14. For more on the tense relation between prudence and contemplation, see Stephen G. Salkever, *Finding the Mean: Theory and Practice in Aristotelian Political Philosophy* (Princeton University Press, 1990); Thomas W. Smith, *Revaluing Ethics: Aristotle's Dialectical Pedagogy* (SUNY Press, 2001); Pangle, *Aristotle's Teaching in the "Politics."*
15. "Virtue, therefore, is a characteristic marked by choice, residing in the mean relative to us, a characteristic defined by reason and *as the prudent person would define it*" (1106b35–1107a1, emphasis added).
16. These capacities are those "by which each part [of the intellect] to the greatest degree attains the truth" (1139b12–13).
17. E.g., each of the intellectual virtues Aristotle mentions appears in Plato, but their delineation and systematic treatment is lacking. See, e.g., the *Theaetetus's* inability to define science (210a–b), the absence of intellectual virtues appropriate to contingent reality (*Republic* 479e, cf. 1094b15–17), Socrates's dismissal of nonphilosophic wisdom (*Apology* 21b–23b), and the apparent elision of prudence and wisdom (*Republic* 429a, 433b) or craft and science (*Statesman* 293).
18. Thus Aristotle makes three changes: (1) Science is discussed before art, (2) the treatment of prudence is interrupted and ends the book, and (3) intellect jumps in front of wisdom.
19. This last dilemma may be explained as a specification of the prudential process. This is Aquinas's interpretation (cf. *Summa Theologiae* II–II, q. 51).

20. “The human or, rather, political horizon—which at first claimed comprehensiveness—is now quite explicitly shown to be limited, to say the least. . . . By deliberately placing the search for the eternal things both before and after the account of the variable, including the human and political, Aristotle hints that the knowledge of eternal matters is ultimately constitutive of the horizon of human matters.” Leon R. Kass, “Professor or Friend? On the Intention and Manner of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*,” in *Athens, Arden, Jerusalem: Essays in Honor of Mera Flaumenhaft*, ed. Paul T. Wilford and Kate Havard (Lexington Books, 2017), 17.
21. “Whereas Socrates refuted those he cross-examined in his search for wisdom and aroused the anger that eventually led to his trial and execution, Aristotle, in contrast, allies himself with Homer for a comic treatment of pretension. Perhaps this difference turns on Aristotle’s finding what others know rather than revealing what they do not, while offering to both philosophy and politics something more than a knowledge of ignorance—the many ways in which human beings can attain truth.” Mary P. Nichols, *Aristotle’s Discovery of the Human: Piety and Politics in the “Nicomachean Ethics”* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2023), 179.
22. From the verb related to conviction: *hypolambanomai*.
23. I am indebted to Mary Nichols for this and several of the following observations. Nichols, *Aristotle’s Discovery of the Human*, 164–70. When Aristotle returns to science, he again refers to it in these terms: “Now, since science is a conviction (*hypolēpsis*) concerning universals and the things that exist of necessity” (1140b31–32).
24. Bartlett and Collins define the verb *pisteuein*: “[I]n the first place simply to trust or have faith in something and then, following from this, the sense of confidence or certainty one may feel as a result of such trust or faith.” Aristotle, *Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, 199n22.
25. See, Nichols, *Aristotle’s Discovery of the Human*, 172n15.
26. “According to both the *NE* [1139a35–36] and the treatise *On the Soul* [433a15–20], understanding, by itself, moves nothing. Thus practical understanding is understanding penetrated by desire [*orexis*]; and so its virtue, prudence, because its specific task is to govern action, is not a purely intellectual virtue.” Bodéüs, *The Political Dimensions of Aristotle’s Ethics*, 32.
27. Harry V. Jaffa, *Thomism and Aristotelianism* (University of Chicago Press, 1952), 185, emphasis in original. In a footnote (224n40), Jaffa continues: “Even this is not unequivocally true. There is, in fact, a

tension between *phronesis* and *sophia*, in Aristotle's doctrine, which, for reasons of obvious prudence is never emphasized. . . . *Sophia* is the virtue, par excellence, of private life but *phronesis*, like justice, which it directs, reaches its highest perfection when in relation with 'others.' In other words, practical wisdom reaches its highest peak when it obtains the common good, but philosophic wisdom obtains a good that is enjoyed only by the philosopher, and perhaps his very few friends."

28. See also John M. Cooper, *Reason and Human Good in Aristotle* (Hackett, 1986), 63–65.
29. "One will look in vain in Aristotle for a single passage, a single allusion, endorsing the belief that prudence is an intellectual operation assigned to the discursive search for principles of action." Bodéüs, *The Political Dimensions of Aristotle's Ethics*, 35. This, of course, does not necessitate that this interpretation is false. It does reveal, however, that Aristotle makes no such assertion up to this point in the *Ethics*, nor anywhere else in his corpus.
30. In response to Cooper's maintenance of this assertion, Collins writes, "The difficulty remains, however, that Aristotle has not supplied the account of 'right reason' he promised and that moral virtue, which is to supply the 'correct ultimate end,' is sometimes inadequate to the task." Susan D. Collins, *Aristotle and the Rediscovery of Citizenship* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 94n4.
31. "That prudence is not science is manifest: prudence concerns the ultimate particular thing, as we said, for the action performed is of *this* kind" (1142a24–25, emphasis added).
32. "Just as the understanding of principles is necessary to specific knowledge, so natural conscience is the prerequisite and the soil for the concrete decisions of 'situation conscience,' . . . [and] the word 'conscience' is intimately related to and well-nigh interchangeable with the word 'prudence.'" Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues: Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, Temperance*, 1st ed. (Notre Dame University Press, 1966), 11.
33. Although these statues were likely constructed of gold and ivory over wood casings, Aristotle describes them otherwise: "Pheidias a wise sculptor in marble and Polykleitus a wise sculptor in bronze" (1141a10–11). Pheidias's most noteworthy stonework is perhaps the Parthenon itself, the house of Athena, though Plato mentions his incorporation of stone into features of his divine statues (*Hippias Major* 290c).

34. Aristotle presents *Margites* as a prototype of the comedic genre in the following terms:
 Poetry, however, soon broke up into two kinds according to the differences of character in the individual poets; for the graver among them would represent noble actions, and those of noble personages; and the meaner sort the actions of the ignoble . . .[.] instances [of the meaner sort], however, may be found from Homer downward, e.g. his *Margites*, and the similar poems of others. Homer's position, however, is peculiar: just as he was in the serious style the poet of poets, standing alone not only through literary excellence, but also through the dramatic character of his imitations, so too he was the first to outline for us the general forms of comedy by producing not a dramatic invective, but a dramatic picture of the ridiculous; his *Margites* in fact stands in the same relation to our comedies as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* to our tragedies.
 Aristotle, *The Poetics of Aristotle*, trans. Ingram Bywater (Modern Library, 1984), 1448b24–1449a1.
35. "Prudence," writes Hobbes, "is not attained by Reasoning, but is found as well in Brute Beasts, as in Man." Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, revised student ed., ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge University Press, 1996), chap. 46, p. 458. Aristotle evokes animalistic comparisons two other times in Book VI. Earlier, he differentiates human action from animal perception (1139a20), and later he assimilates beasts and children as possessing natural virtues that may become "harmful in the absence of intellect" (1144b8–10).
36. "One who is incapable of sharing or who is in need of nothing through being self-sufficient is no part of a city, and so is either a beast or a god" (1253a28–29).
37. Aristotle, *Aristotle's Metaphysics*, trans. Joe Sachs (Green Lion Press, 1999), 983b1–20.
38. Nichols suggest that Aristotle here distances himself from this class of philosophers because his "philosophizing does not take refuge in words rather than in deeds." Nichols, *Aristotle's Discovery of the Human*, 180. I hope to show, on the contrary, that Aristotle specifically chooses Anaxagoras and Thales because their disinterest in human concerns is a healthy antidote to political ambition and divinization. Nonetheless, their pursuit of higher things is not inconsistent with, and perhaps even responsible for, their prudent navigation of human affairs.
39. Commenting on the appearance of Pericles and Anaxagoras, Tessitore writes, "Practical and theoretical wisdom are the only two intellectual virtues to be personified in Book VI. Aristotle's use of offsetting models

- for the two peaks of intellectual virtue subtly but effectively introduces readers to a rivalry between the competing demands and claims of moral-political and philosophic excellence.” Aristide Tessitore, *Reading Aristotle’s Ethics: Virtue, Rhetoric, and Political Philosophy* (SUNY Press, 1996), 48.
40. Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. James H. Nichols (Cornell University Press, 1998), 270a.
41. Plato, *The Laws of Plato*, trans. Thomas L. Pangle (University of Chicago Press, 1988), 967b. To be clear, the Athenian stranger suggests that Anaxagoras “erred again about the nature of the soul,” recalling Socrates’s great interest followed by eventual disappointment in the teachings of Anaxagoras (*Phaedrus* 97b–98c).
42. *Laws* 968a. Pangle argues that the divine origin and significance of this intelligence is dubious: “Yet in his final statement on the soul the Athenian conspicuously drops the claim that soul is divine; what is more, he fails to call intelligence ‘divine’ and evinces a certain reluctance to claim that it is in fact ‘in the stars’ (cf. 967d–e with 966e).” *Ibid.*, 508.
43. Nichols suggests that “it is no accident that Anaxagoras was known as a mentor for Pericles, one of the proponents of Athenian imperialism.” Nichols, *Aristotle’s Discovery of the Human*, 175–76n19.
44. Tessitore suggests that “Aristotle’s extreme characterization of Thales and Anaxagoras may be part of an ironic commentary on the absence of any political philosophy in their theoretical investigations of nature. Viewed in this light, the actual and conspicuous involvement of Thales and Anaxagoras in practical affairs may point to a certain inadequacy or incompleteness in their philosophic teachings; both failed to give sufficient theoretical weight to the distinctive and pivotal character of human nature in the attempt to provide an intelligible account of nature as a whole.” Tessitore, *Reading Aristotle’s Ethics*, 133n37.
45. Pieper, *Cardinal Virtues*, 26.
46. Strauss, *The City and Man*, 153.