

A POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY OF CONSERVATISM, PRUDENCE, MODERATION AND TRADITION, by Ferenc Hörcher. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic. 2020. vi + 210pp. Hardback: \$103.50; Paperback: \$35.96. ISBN: 978-1-350-06718-9.

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Ferenc Hörcher is Head of the Research Institute of Politics and Government of the National University of Public Service, Hungary. His new book, *A POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY OF CONSERVATISM*, appears in the Bloomsbury Studies in the Aristotelian Tradition. Hörcher aims to understand, elucidate and develop political conservatism in the long Aristotelian-Stoic tradition, emphasizes the role of character formation for statesmanship and political actors, the constraints implied by specific cultural traditions and the details of factual context, and addresses the contemporary standing and revival of Aristotelian virtue ethics and the specifically political virtue of prudence or “practical wisdom.” The book comes recommended by Harvard University historian James Hankins, who, on the back cover, recommends it for readers “disturbed by the collapse of statesmanship in the contemporary world.”

Regarding both political theory and law, Hörcher emphasizes Aristotle’s “phronesis,” or practical wisdom, in contrast to abstract, theoretical or “scientific” reasoning. The author is strongly oriented to the conservatism of the contemporary Cambridge school of the history of political thought, and his “Introduction” contains an opening contrast between political roles of abstract conceptions of justice (as found in authors from Plato to John Rawls and Ronald Dworkin) and the virtues of prudence and moderation. “The aim of the venture is to draw the outlines of a political philosophy of conservatism based on prudence” (p. 3).

The clear implication is that there can be an excessive and distorting emphasis on justice, or that single-minded focus on rights and justice tends to be imprudent and/or lacks for moderation. Beyond his historical treatment of the political roles of the concept of prudence, Hörcher engages with contemporary political thought, including, authors such as Richard Bourke, Michael Oakeshott, and the Cambridge political historians and theorists. John Dunn’s *INTERPRETING POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITY* (1990) is especially worth considering in this connection with Hörcher’s book. The “political realism” associated with the English moral philosopher Bernard Williams (1929-2003) and the more radical and continentally oriented version due to philosopher Raymond Geuss contribute significantly to the overall picture and the development of Hörcher’s conservatism.

In the wake of the globalizing regime of neo-liberal, economic “creative destruction” and our recent experience of Mr. Trump’s impulsive responses, readers might suppose that deeper interest is now arising for the revival and reconsideration of conservative political thought. It may appear that in the U.S., for example, we have few political thinkers of a distinctly conservatives cast and that their place has often been taken by utilitarians or libertarians. But “those who explain (or celebrate) the workings of modern capitalist politics through the model of market rationality presume a high degree of prudence in the agents concerned,” and “Inspection of the world in which we live does little to confirm these fond imagings” (Dunn 1990, p. 4, Cf. Hörcher 2020, p. 167, n7). The present book features attention to the thought of Friedrich Hayek in political economy for example, but not that of Robert Nozick. Still, the chief line of criticism or opposition in the present volume is directed against the domination of abstract philosophical ethics (chiefly utilitarian or Kantian) over practical political aims and decisions.

Given the centrality of Aristotle's *POLITICS* and the *NICOMACHEAN ETHICS*, for Hörcher, it is important to note his emphasis on Aristotle's work, *THE CONSTITUTION OF ATHENS*. The point is that Aristotle's political thought is not simply a reflection of his experience in, or the power of the Macedonian court. Law and politics are not purely abstract, rational or deductive subjects. This kind of point reflects criticism of "rationalism in politics," and rejection of the notion that abstract principles imply the specifics of policy or political action. Experience-based, "practical wisdom" which exists in particular social and political traditions, contrasts with "episteme, scientia and sophia." Rejecting moral and cultural relativism (p. 2, pp. 98-99), adequate conceptions of universal values are to be arrived at via consideration of the varieties of particular cultural and political developments. Neither is practical wisdom in politics merely an expressions of power. Prudence, or practical wisdom, for Aristotle, Cicero, and the Renaissance thinkers, and for Montaigne, is a virtue or habit of action standing between excessive caution and impetuosity.

The conception of prudence in the present book looks back to an earlier work, Hörcher's *PRUDENTIA JURIS* (2000) (Latin for "jurisprudence"), which aimed to outline "a pragmatic theory of natural law." But explicit themes of pragmatism do not reappear. The Aristotelian thesis is that human beings are not only rational animals, but (quoting Thomas Aquinas) "Man is by nature . . . a social and political animal, living among a multitude of his kind . . ." (quoted, p. 29); and as we may infer, the particularities of social and political traditions and circumstance make a difference to virtuous practice. Hörcher's criticism of relativism draws on the Aristotelian-Thomist conception of ethical naturalism and German, Catholic philosopher, Josef Pieper's *THE FOUR CARDINAL VIRTUES* (English translation, 1966). The overall emphasis on prudence, as exemplified in the action of the experienced and cultivated politician. Since this is often or chiefly incapable of more theoretical explication, one finds a tension between the author's conservative prudence and the value placed on transparency and publicity in the contemporary use of political power. The problem is reflected in the author's concluding emphasis on "Agency Constraint" (p. 163), drawing on Kantian and Catholic conceptions of "asocial sociability." This suggest less the Stoic practice of discursive intervention and exchanges in the public sphere and more the ancient Epicurean practice of discourse and decision with a walled garden.

The book is divided into two chief parts: Part One, "Prudence in History," traces the history of prudence as a virtue and includes chapters on "Ancient and Christian Tradition of Prudence," "Renaissance and Early Modern prudentia," and "Late Modern prudentia." The chief historical authors of interest include "Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Aquinas, the Italian Christian and non-Christian humanists of the Renaissance," and "early modern moral theorists such as Montaigne and Lipsius" (p. 162). Part Two is devoted to "Prudence in Conservative Philosophy" and contains chapters devoted to "Agency constraint," "Time constraint," "Knowledge constraint," "Virtue and character," "Tradition and political culture," and "How to find the proper action in politics." Chief authors of interest in the second part of the book and concerning the revival of the Aristotelian tradition start with Elizabeth Anscombe (1958) writing on virtue ethics, and there is much emphasis on "political realism" drawing on Bernard Williams and Raymond Geuss. The book concludes with a summary of "A conservative political philosophy of prudence."

In general terms, contemporary theorists of politics and law hold to the principle of the rule of law; and we are to have a government of law, and not of men. (Cf. p. 8; p. 136). Yet no law and no body of law meets the problems of each and every concrete situation arising in completely clear and unambiguous terms. That is part of the reason that we have judges to interpret and apply the law in difficult cases and standing legislatures to supplement and

modify existing law. In a similar way, though the executive acts to implement the law, the law cannot define and determine every detail of needed and appropriate action. The coherent polity relies on precedent, unwritten custom, virtuous habit and tradition. The central Aristotelian concept of interest, phronesis, or “practical wisdom,” reflects an Aristotelian innovation over Plato’s REPUBLIC and contrasts with “sophia” or theoretical wisdom (p. 15). In this way, practical experience of politics becomes highly relevant to political practice, conceived as an “art” of making, “knowing how.” The art of statesmanship has some similarity to “techne,” but it is unlike the mere technical skill of the craftsman who has a completely preconceived product in mind. The reader will recall that Aristotle had direct contact with the Macedonian court, as teacher to Alexander, and that he taught the sons of the Athenian elites at the Lyceum (p.15). Like any of the Aristotelian virtues, practical wisdom and political prudence require self-restraint, practical experience; and acquisition of this virtues requires much practice. Yet practical wisdom operates under scrutiny of the rule of law. The author also leaves no doubt on the need for “the separation of powers, of checks and balances and other techniques of institutional balancing ... due to the fallible nature of men” (p. 165).

One of the more engaging themes of the present book is its discussions of Niccolo Machiavelli and the related theme of prudence interpreted as “reasons of state.” What made Machiavelli’s work, THE PRINCE so controversial, and a subject of criticism ever since, was his advice on the use of expedient, audacious action and deception, suggestive even of “cruelty and unscrupulousness” (p. 44) –in order to maintain the regime and the continued power of the prince. Are “reasons of state” (or methods of power politics) a form of prudence and instruments of “practical wisdom”? Machiavelli’s advice was directed to the rulers of the Medici regime in Florence after the Florentine Republic had been overthrown by foreign forces. Machiavelli wanted to return to Florence, where he been an official of the republic; but understandably he was not accepted by the recently re-installed Medici rulers. Machiavelli’s advice to the prince constituted an important departure from the teachings of Aristotle, Cicero and the Christian humanists of the Renaissance; and our current popular usage of the adjective “Machiavellian” reflects the criticism. But can the prince possibly conduct the affairs of state in the spirit of the classical and Christian “cardinal virtues,” in a world of dangerous foreign powers and treacherous political developments? Francis Fukuyama reminds us that even the apparently most stable countries have an element of political violence in their historical foundations. “The twenty-five or so nations that made up Europe at the middle of the twentieth century were the survivors of the five hundred or more political units that had existed there at the end of the Middle Ages (Fukuyama 2014, POLITICAL ORDER AND POLITICAL DECAY, p. 195); and as Machiavelli observed in the DISCOURSES, the founding of Rome “was based on a fratricide, the killing of Remus by Romulus;” and “all just enterprises originate in a crime” (Fukuyama 2014, p. 197; Cf. Harvey Mansfield 1996, MACHIAVELLI’S VIRTUE, pp. 64-66; p. 262). Hörcher, following Montaigne and Lipsius, accepts a minimal Machiavellian provision within the classical accounts of the virtues. “The only excuse for a politics of ‘dirty hands’ is if it is in the interest of the common good” (p. 165). But wouldn’t this amount to “disruption” of merely self-aggrandizing political corruption?

The core of the political realism advocated in the present book is an application of virtue ethics to politics with particular emphasis placed on prudence and moderation. British philosopher Bernard Williams and Cambridge political philosopher Raymond Geuss provide a critical perspective on the influence of rationalist-universalist and Kantian models of ethics and corresponding systematic inferences regarding political justice as found in John Rawls 1971/1999, A THEORY OF JUSTICE. According to Williams both traditional British utilitarianism and Kantian ethical thought, as manifested in Rawls and his followers, “repre-

sent the priority of the moral over the political” (quoted, p. 67; from Williams 2005, *IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE DEED*, p. 1). The point of departure of Williams’s political realism is “the securing of order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation,” and securing these basic conditions turns his attention to particularities of historical circumstances which help define the problem. Also needed, since “might does not make right” (quoted, p. 67), is a basic “legitimation demand,” which amounts to a common historical understanding of why it is possible for members of a given political community to live together in a common polity with a governmental monopoly on the use of force. Williams stipulates that his political realism arose partly as a reaction against “mainstream American discussions of liberalism” which are “over-moralized,” and [because of this] the distinguishing mark of the political . . . falls out of their focus” (p. 67).

Hörcher’s *A POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY OF CONSERVATISM*, though densely argued, and involving an intricate interweaving of sources, will be helpful to readers less familiar with the general themes and historical method of the contemporary Cambridge school of political thought—including due attention to major figures such as J. G. A. Pocock and Quentin Skinner. It also provides a somewhat more “continental” perspective based, for instance, in the writings of German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) and French philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005). (See, for instance, Gadamer 2001, *GADAMER IN CONVERSATION*.) The lesson conservatives may draw for American politics and law is that the non-political, ahistorical, “over-moralized” and imprudent character of contemporary American political discourse threatens our common historical narrative and self-understanding—and their roles in the legitimation of the republic. Liberal readers may prefer to contest this book and related contemporary developments; and yet it may be doubted that any country (or sub-polity) will more fully prosper by thorough marginalization, exclusion or elimination of its own, distinctive conservative political tradition.

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