There has always been a deep friendship among good life, good economy and the virtue of prudence. But what has always been really important is to be able to recognize prudence that is not virtuous, as well as the imprudence that may be called a virtue.

The dawn of modernity was crossed by the debate on the mechanisms - sometimes considered providential - that were supposed to provide orientation towards social welfare not only through the scarce virtues, but also through the many flaws of real people, the vices of *the man that he is, to make good uses of him in human society* (Vico, “The new Science”, 1744).

In this context, Adam Smith showed in a very convincing way that the development and the wealth of nations were not born from the vice of avarice nor from the sad passion of selfishness, but from the cardinal virtue of prudence, *the care of the goods, rank and reputation of the individual >* (Smith, “Theory of Moral Sentiments,” 1759). A good father (or mother) is, therefore, prudent, as he takes care of the family assets, assures their maintenance, makes them grow. He is the one who gives the car to his grown-up son and says: *Please take good care of it*. All this can certainly be called virtue; it is individual good and common good, too. And if we look at our history we realize that the virtue of prudence is found at the root of our peasant and artisan civilisation: that is where the proper use of assets, the maintenance of a the few things they had was taught, as well as the ways of increasing assets, having ever greater dreams and projects in life in a prudent way. Our history reminds us that vicious behaviours going against prudence include producing waste, being careless or foolish like those that squandered their assets (or those of their parents), and that we must bring to mind that our well-being depends also, and often above all, on the virtue of our fellow citizens, it depends on how and if a neighbour tends their garden and pays their taxes, and also on the virtue of the clients or public administration.

That first optimism of the Enlightenment that proposed the transformation of the prudence of individuals into public virtue did not last long - even though some still continue, ideologically or naively, to make appeal to it. It is enough to read the novels of Giovanni Verga to realize that this scenario had been already radically changed by then. The vices of individuals already left too many *battles won* along the *great river of progress*, and Providence had become the shipwrecked boat of Patron ‘Ntoni. That much desired market economy which was cried for in a chorus, the one that would be harmonious and mutually beneficial was in fact turning into capitalism. Its power structures were recreating new forms of feudalism, new inequalities, new types of revenues, new nobles marked by a different, but no less effective, blue blood. In particular, we noticed - and we see it more and more - that the most important processes of economy are taking place inside the institutions and organizations (among them, the state), in banks and in enterprises where prudence and the virtues of individuals do not produce good life if you implement them within asymmetrical power relations that reinforce inequalities of all kinds.

It is here that the scenery changes dramatically, and the prudent person is not only asked to conduct their own lives and that of their families according to the virtues, but to act in order to ensure that laws, structures, systems of corporate governance and the many common goods are changed. And this is how the writing of a new-old moral chapter of crucial importance begins: if a virtuous person lives inside vicious
institutions, in order to truly live the virtue of prudence they must also know how to act imprudently. If they want to be truly virtuous and prudent, they must be able to put the care of themselves, their interests, their fortunes, even their loved ones to the second place. If the person who wants and should denounce manifestations of injustice and untruth chooses to remain “prudently” silent when facing blackmail and revenge, they do not live the dimension of prudence that we call virtue. Sure, a good philosopher could argue that we should expand the concept of prudence until we return to a meta-individual self and spiritual or even otherworldly goods. Instead, I personally prefer to think that to understand the value and logic of the virtues it is necessary to take their paradoxical nature seriously. Virtue is truly virtuous when it dies and opens up to a greater “beyond”, in a new relationship with the other virtues, and it does not surrender to the pseudo-virtues of what is “politically correct”. So prudence is right when it is capable of being imprudent, fortitude is prudent when it is capable of turning into mild weakness, and every virtue is fulfilled when it blooms in agape, where the kind of justice that reigns can lead to giving the daily payment to those who, without any fault on their part, worked only for the last hour. Outside this horizon, behaviour that is prudent in itself loses contact with the virtue, just like those who park in the second row, and “prudently” turn in the rear-view mirror onto the car’s door. In fact, if we do not take this crucial (at least for me) and formidable paradox seriously, the virtue ends up turning into the biggest vice because it becomes a selfish exercise aimed at individual perfection, forgetting the other.

The fulfilment of every moral action is agape because it is never defined and accomplished within any legal horizon, not even that of the virtues, because the agape invites them to transcend themselves in order to become (paradoxically) themselves. If whoever has to deal with the many moral and anthropological peripheries of the world today does not touch and does not occasionally cross the border of justice as outlined by the laws of the city, they cannot be truly righteous. When Ali knocked on the door of my Sicilian parish priest friend that night, if this latter one had stopped prudently on the threshold of our justice and had not let the man into his house (thinking about the possible legal consequences that later affected him, too), he would not have been truly virtuous. It is a paradoxical dynamic that is familiar to those working in rehabilitation communities and juvenile prisons and to the many who continue to risk their career, assets, revenues, jobs and the failure of their enterprise.

It is not asked of everyone to experience this paradoxical dimension of virtue all the time. But if we do not respond when the call comes, we compromise the ethical and spiritual quality of our existence, because these are not extraordinary acts of a few heroes, but actions we are all potentially capable of. This virtue-beyond-the-virtue is the yeast that raises the bread of an already virtuous life, and gives it the strength to move mountains. Gandhi would not have freed India if he had not been virtuously imprudent, and similarly, St. Francis of Assisi would not have taught us fraternity if he had not kissed the leper because of prudence. Many women and homeless would not have been released and recalled to life if they had not met people of agape-inspired imprudence who wanted to and could hug them, without the complacency of immune solidarity that is filling our economy and, unfortunately, also a part of our non-profit. The territory of the virtues - and therefore of the human - extends and is humanized every time someone has the imprudence to push the boundaries assigned to the virtues paying the price in person, and almost always without discounts. Blessed are the imprudent who push civilization forward and make the world a worthy and beautiful place to live in.

Translated by Eszter Kató