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A Plea for Prudence

James L. D. Brown

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Dear Prudence: The Nature and Normativity of Prudential Discourse

By Guy Fletcher

Oxford University Press 2021, 224pp

A Theory of Prudence

By Dale Dorsey

Oxford University Press 2021, 336pp

1. Introduction

Non-philosophers could be forgiven for thinking that philosophers are a cautious bunch. For philosophers are becoming increasingly preoccupied with prudence. Naturally, however, philosophers have something different in mind than the ordinary sense of ‘prudence’. Rather than denoting the quality of cautiousness, philosophers typically take ‘prudence’ to denote an evaluative or normative standpoint, one whose evaluations are in some sense determined by facts about what is good and bad for us; or, to use some more terminology that is apt to mislead the lay reader, facts about *well-being*, *welfare*, or *self-interest*.

Two recent examples of this trend are Guy Fletcher’s *Dear Prudence: The Nature and Normativity of Prudential Discourse* and Dale Dorsey’s *A Theory of Prudence*. Each book covers a lot of ground, incorporating previously published work together with new material. Fletcher’s primary focus is the *meta-prudential*, the philosophy of well-being’s answer to meta-ethics. His book covers such topics as the nature of prudential judgment, the semantics of prudential language, the normativity of prudence, its implications for traditional meta-ethical views such as realism, anti-realism, and error theory, and much else besides. While Fletcher defends various views in relation to these issues, the

primary aim of the book is to argue that these debates, which he thinks have been largely neglected, deserve much more attention. To adapt a well-worn platitude from recent political discourse, the idea is that whatever you think about the issues, it would be good if we were having a robust debate about them.

By contrast, Dorsey's primary focus is on first-order prudential issues, although he also devotes some discussion to our concept of prudential value. His book covers such topics as subjectivism about well-being, the nature of valuing attitudes, the prudential significance of projects, well-being across time, temporal bias, the structure of prudential rationality, and much else besides. The primary aim of the book is to motivate and defend Dorsey's preferred version of subjectivism about prudential value, which he calls *project-oriented subjectivism*, and to defend a view of prudential rationality according to which prudence issues requirements to maximize welfare goods across a life.

Clearly, then, the aims and scope of each book are quite different. What I'd therefore like to do in this critical notice is to take a step back and question an underlying assumption shared by both inquiries. Specifically, I want to draw attention to an underlying conception of prudence as an independent, autonomous evaluative standpoint. Although this is a common assumption in debates about prudence, we will see that it is neither mandatory nor obviously true. Moreover, the assumption plays a crucial but unacknowledged role in framing and defending some of the main claims of each book. By highlighting this role, my primary aim is not polemical, but to show that the theoretical landscape in this area is far broader than either inquiry seems to allow for. More ambitiously, I hope to show that substantive questions about the nature of prudence cannot be entirely separated from the conceptual question of what prudential thought and discussion is *about*. Before examining the assumption in section 3, in section 2 I will first motivate the conceptual question in more general terms and explain why I think neither inquiry answers it.

2. What is prudence?

What are we talking about when we talk about prudence? When we ask this question, we might be asking about the nature of the *thing* that is prudence. But we might also be asking about our *concept* of prudence. To ask this second question is to ask about the subject matter of prudential thought and discussion

without necessarily taking a stand on the nature of prudence itself. It is a commonplace of contemporary practical philosophy to distinguish between different evaluative or normative standpoints (e.g. prudence), different kinds of practical reason (e.g. prudential reasons), and different kinds of practical ought (e.g. the prudential ought). However, it is far from obvious what these distinctions amount to, and indeed whether they amount to the same thing for different people. So before embarking on a theoretical Odyssey into the nature of prudence, we would do well to get clear on what it is that we are theorizing about.

Although some might wish to define prudence in terms of some theoretical role it plays, its proper home is in ordinary ethical and practical thought and discussion. For instance, you might tell me that I *need* a holiday, or that it would be *better* for me to spend less time on social media, or that it is in my *interest* to vote yes to industrial action over cuts to my pension. Because ordinary prudential claims are expressed using deontic and evaluative vocabulary that is not explicitly marked as prudential, it is always possible to give non-prudential interpretations of these sentences. But in some conversational contexts, it will be most natural to interpret these sentences as being about what I need, what would be better for me, and what is in my interest *in view of my well-being* (or *self-interest*, or...). Thus, prudential claims are about a distinctive kind of value and consideration. This proposal, while undoubtedly true, simply leaves us where we started. While the introduction of explicitly prudential vocabulary allows us to name the kind of value and consideration we are interested in, it fails to offer any informative characterization of them.

A more informative approach would be to explain all prudential notions in terms of a single, fundamental prudential notion, and then to provide an independent account of the fundamental notion. This approach is taken by Dorsey. He begins by proposing that prudence be thought of as a *domain of evaluation* akin to morality or etiquette that evaluates acts, attitudes, traits, events, and so on, as good, bad, required, impermissible, permissible, and so on (2021: 9). What distinguishes prudence from other evaluative domains is that its evaluations are determined solely by facts about *prudential value* (2021: 10), which is the fundamental notion. To understand prudential value, however, Dorsey proposes a strategy of delayed gratification that he calls the *substantive theory strategy*: “we start with a rough characterization of the concept we’re attempting to elucidate, and then proceed directly to theorizing. We discover

the outlines of the concept only *after* we conduct and hopefully conclude our first-order theorizing.” (2021: 22)

Given the attractions of instant gratification, I think we should resist the substantive theory strategy. First, however, let me raise a brief worry about Dorsey’s characterization of prudence as an evaluative domain. Assuming for now that prudential evaluations are determined solely by facts about prudential value (we’ll return to this assumption later), this could be at most a necessary condition for characterizing prudence. This is because there are other domains whose evaluations are explained solely by facts about prudential value. For instance, consider the domain of *anti-prudence*, whose evaluations are solely determined by prudential value but are the inverse of prudence. According to anti-prudence, you really shouldn’t take that holiday, it would be better for you to go along with the unjust and financially deleterious pension changes your employer is imposing on you, and don’t even think about getting that surgery you need. Because the evaluations of anti-prudence are also solely determined by facts about prudential value, Dorsey’s characterization of prudence is not sufficient to individuate the relevant domain.¹

Returning to the substantive theory strategy, it’s unclear to me why substantive theorizing about prudential value will tell us much about the *concept* of prudential value. Consider the following comparison. Suppose that the correct theory of water is that it is H₂O. According to the substantive theory strategy, this theory should tell us everything we want to know about the concept of water. However, suppose an alien species were to learn that we have a concept called *water* and that this theory is true of it. While this species would be in a position to know the *extension* of our concept of water, it would not put them in a position to understand much about the concept itself. To understand *that* they would need to know that water is the stuff that falls from our skies and fills our oceans, lakes, and rivers, that we drink when thirsty and that supports life, and so on. Thus, simply from learning the correct substantive theory of water, we learn nothing of the distinctive role and uses that the concept of water has in our cognitive economy and social intercourse, or in human life more generally. Similarly, I think, we learn nothing about the concept of prudential

¹ Another example: if some welfarist version of consequentialism is true, then moral evaluations will be determined solely by facts about prudential value; however, it would not follow that morality is prudence.

value simply by learning that (say) some form of subjectivism is the correct first-order theory of prudential value.

Fletcher's book, by contrast, is a sort of Anti-Substantive Theory Strategy Manifesto for prudence. It is therefore surprising that he offers little positive informative characterization of our prudential concepts. For instance, one of Fletcher's central aims is to argue that prudential discourse is a normative form of discourse. He argues that prudential discourse bears all the markers of normativity possessed by paradigmatically normative forms of discourse like moral discourse (2021: ch.2). He also defends a semantics for prudential terms as part of a more general semantics for evaluative and deontic terms (2021: ch.3). Here, he defends a Finlay (2014) style end-relational semantics for 'good for' according to which X is good for Y just in case X promotes some relevant outcome O (2021: 72). Fletcher argues that where Y is a paradigmatic welfare subject, the default interpretation of the sentence is that O concerns the promotion of the subject's well-being (2021: 73). And where it is not the default interpretation, it can always be forced by explicitly mentioning the relevant outcome. Further, he offers a standard Kratzerian ordering semantics for 'needs' and 'must' according to which 'needs' or 'must' claims are (roughly) about what is required by some body of laws or standard. Prudential 'needs' and 'must' claims are those in which the relevant standard is the *prudential* standard (2021: 90).

Both accounts do well to explain the variety of 'good for', 'needs', and 'must' talk within unified and independently motivated semantic frameworks. And it seems to me that Fletcher's arguments for the parity of prudential discourse with other normative forms of discourse are persuasive. But we still do not have an answer to the question of what prudential discourse is about, because we have said nothing about what *distinguishes* prudential discourse from other normative forms of discourse.

What would an answer to our question look like? Dorsey seems to think that any such answer must take the form of a classical reductive analysis (2021: ch.1). In this context, he spends some time arguing against *locative* analyses of prudential value according to which prudential value is absolute value located in a particular place (2021: 14-21). Dorsey's arguments here are well taken, but locative analyses are hardly exhaustive of the possibilities. Moreover, there are many ways of individuating concepts other than classical reductive analyses (e.g., cluster analyses, conceptual roles, functions, etc.). But we do not need

anything so specific. All we need is some informative gloss of the concept in question that determines a relatively determinate subject matter.

Morality provides an instructive comparison. For instance, consider the proposal that morality is distinguished from other normative standpoints in terms of the reactive attitudes it involves (see Gibbard 1990), the distinctive authority it has grounded in a distinctive second-personal standpoint (Darwall 2006), its function of ameliorating human conflict arising from limited resources and sympathy (see Copp 2009), various platitudes that together constitute a folk theory of morality (see Jackson 1998), and so on. All these proposals aim to tell us what morality is about without taking a stand on the correct first order moral theory. What I am suggesting is that we would do well to provide the same type of account of prudence.²

This is not because such an account must be prior to any substantive inquiry.³ And it is not simply a matter of philosophical bookkeeping, though the question of how to individuate normative domains is interesting in its own right. Rather, if we do not properly attend to our starting assumptions concerning what we think prudence must be like, then we are apt to be blinded to theoretical alternatives, and we may see that some of our substantive views are less plausible given other starting points. The task of providing such an account is for elsewhere. This is simply a plea, on behalf of prudence, to get to know it better. In the remainder of this discussion, I want to make good on this more general claim by focusing on a specific example of how our prior conception of the subject matter of prudence can make a difference to substantive debates. Specifically, I will examine how Fletcher and Dorsey's *pluralist* conception of practical normativity influences their discussions of prudence.

3. Prudence and normative pluralism

Normative pluralism is the view that practical normativity is constituted by a number of distinct evaluative domains, such as morality, prudence, and so on. The contrasting view is normative monism, which maintains that practical

² One such account is Darwall's (2002) rational care theory of well-being, which we'll examine below.

³ As Dorsey (2016a) criticizes such views for.

normativity is constituted by a single, unified domain of evaluation, which we might call simply *practical reason*. On the pluralist view, practical deliberation involves working out what we ought to do from various different standpoints and then weighing these evaluations against each other to determine what we ought *simpliciter* to do.⁴ On the monist view, practical deliberation involves weighing up various kinds of considerations from within a single standpoint. Here, domains like morality and prudence are not distinct from practical reason; they are *part* of it. Thus, while the pluralist view can allow that the evaluations of any domain are sensitive to the evaluations of any other domain, the system of evaluation *itself* is autonomous and independent from any other domain. By contrast, the monist view maintains that domains like morality and prudence not independent of practical reason; they are, somehow, contained *within* it.

Fletcher and Dorsey both assume pluralism without argument.⁵ However, conceiving of prudence along pluralist lines is a substantive position with substantive implications. In what follows, I will examine three examples where pluralism plays a central but unacknowledged argumentative role in one or both inquiries: Dorsey's discussion of the demands of prudence; Fletcher's discussion of the motivational character of prudential ought judgments; and their discussions of the nature of prudential reasons. To be clear from the outset, my aim is not to argue against pluralism, but to highlight the difference that accepting or rejecting pluralism can make to substantive debates about prudence. This will thus serve as an example of the more general claim that our conception of the subject matter of prudence can make a difference to such substantive debates.

3.1 The demands of prudence

Dorsey's book is structured around three topics: the *concept* of prudential value, the *nature* of prudential value, and the *demands* of prudence. We have already briefly examined the first topic. Our main concern in this section will be with the third. But let me briefly say something about the second. In relation to prudential axiology, Dorsey defends a *project-oriented subjectivist* theory of

⁴ Or, if one rejects the existence of an all-things-considered standpoint, one will adjudicate between normative standpoints in some other way (see Copp 2021).

⁵ See Fletcher (2021: 8) and Dorsey (2021: 308; 2016b: ch.1).

prudential value. According to this theory, something is good for us only if we value that thing, where to value something is to believe under certain idealized conditions that it is good for oneself. However, the extent to which something is good for us is not simply a matter of the degree to which we value it. For Dorsey, valued *projects* that unify activities and events throughout one's life have a special kind of prudential value that goes beyond the extent to which we value those projects (2021: ch.7). Dorsey thinks we need this additional claim about projects to account for the prudential value of the shape of a life, 'good' or 'fitting' deaths, and the structure of a life.

I found the rationale for this view somewhat difficult to understand. It is true, as Dorsey maintains, that there is nothing strictly inconsistent in endorsing a subjectivist theory in which the prudential value of some goods is not explained solely on subjectivist grounds. The worry, however, is that we are tailoring our subjectivist theory to fit intuitions that are more plausibly motivated on objectivist grounds. Now, it might seem that this worry is misplaced, because Dorsey only argues that valuing something is *necessary* for its being prudentially valuable (2021: 80).⁶ And because he also argues that projects have "a kind of *per se* normative significance" (2021: 308), we might think that this explains the special value of projects. The problem with this response, however, is that many other things we value (e.g. love, art, morality) have *per se* normative significance. As such, we lack any explanation of why these other goods lack the same kind or degree of prudential value as projects. So adopting this response seems to rob projects of any special significance.

Moving on, Dorsey's inquiry into the demands of prudence is structured around an examination of what he calls *the traditional view of prudential rationality*. This is the view that prudence (a) *requires* that (b) the prudentially rational individual will *maximise* (c) the welfare *value* (d) of their *life* (2021: 208). Dorsey defends (a), (b), and (d), arguing that prudence issues requirements that are maximising and temporally neutral with respect to one's life. However, he argues that prudential reasons are not about *levels of well-being* but rather *prudential goods*. We'll examine this proposal about prudential reasons in a little more detail below. The claim I want to argue for now is that, if we reject

⁶ Though he does express sympathy for the view that valuing something is also sufficient for its being good for oneself (2021: 110-11).

normative pluralism, it is not obvious that there *is* a distinctive system of demands called prudential rationality.

To see why, suppose that normative monism is true and that prudence is a part of a unified domain of practical reason. Prudential reasons are simply a particular kind of practical reason. If what I ought to do is determined by the reasons I have, then what I *prudentially* ought to do is determined by the *prudential* reasons I have. There are different ways of cashing this out on the monist view. For instance, we might think that what I prudentially ought to do is what I ought *simpliciter* to do if only prudential considerations were in play (see Brown forthcoming). Or we might think that what I prudentially ought to do is what I ought *simpliciter* to do where this is explained by prudential considerations (see Harman 2021). In both cases, however, what I prudentially ought to do is just a special case of what I ought *simpliciter* to do.

The problem is that once we conceive of prudential demands in this way, there is little motivation for thinking that prudential considerations give rise to a distinctive kind of demand to be theorized about independently of the demands of practical reason more generally. This is so for at least two reasons. Firstly, if monism is true, it is not obvious that prudential ought judgments have a distinctive role in practical reasoning. It is true that when deliberating about cases, we often abstract away from other kinds of consideration to determine what we ought to do with respect to a particular kind of consideration. But such deliberation will be action-guiding only if we think that there are in fact no other kinds of considerations in play, or perhaps if the considerations in question are of overriding importance. While these scenarios exist, in such cases we are not doing anything different from reasoning about what we ought *simpliciter* to do. We are just considering one kind of case amongst many.

Secondly, consider that there are innumerable kinds of consideration we can choose to focus on when deliberating about cases. As well as reasoning about what I prudentially or morally ought to do, I can reason about what I ought to do with respect to donating to charity, travelling the Trans-Siberian Railway, maximizing the number of times I see the Ring Cycle, and so on. I'm assuming I have *some* reason to do all of these things, so the point is *not* that one cannot ask what one ought to do with respect to such considerations. Indeed, in certain practical contexts, it will make sense to ask such questions. But in each case, we do not expect there to be a distinctive system of demands, which we might call *Trans-Siberian Railway rationality* or *Ring Cycle rationality*. Again, we are just

asking the question of what one ought *simpliciter* to do with respect to a particular type of consideration. Thus, if we do not expect a proliferation of distinctive kinds of systems of demands with respect to other kinds of practical considerations, it's not clear why we should expect prudence to be any different. Unless, that is, we reject monism.⁷ Thus, it seems that inquiry into the distinctive demands of prudence presupposes normative pluralism.

3.2 Prudence and motivation

Fletcher defends the following internalist claim about prudential thought: judgments about what one prudentially ought to do (among current options) are necessarily connected to motivation in rational agents (2021: 120). Fletcher's basic thought is that if we know that someone judges some option to be what they prudentially ought to do, then we expect that person to be *at least somewhat motivated* to choose that option, even if they are more motivated to choose another option. That is, we do not expect people to be motivationally indifferent to what they judge to be best for themselves. Indeed, Fletcher claims that failing to be at all motivated "would be to manifest a *failing*" or "a deficiency of some sort" (2021: 122).

However, consider the following variant on the story of Gyges. Gyges, a poor shepherd, has in his possession a magic ring that makes him invisible when wearing it. He realizes that with this ring, he has it in his power to kill and usurp the current king of Lydia. Of course, the attainment of untrammelled power is rarely if ever the path to true happiness, but this *is* a mythical story after all, so let's suppose that if Gyges were to become king, he would be far better off than any other alternative available to him. However, in this version of the story, although Gyges knows that he prudentially ought to kill the king, his belief that it would be immoral renders the former judgment motivationally inert. It is not that the motivational power of the moral judgment *outweighs* that of the prudential judgment. Rather, the very thought of just how morally bad it would be to pursue the prudentially best option leaves him completely cold. So Gyges is completely unmotivated by his judgment that he prudentially ought to kill the king.

⁷ See Dorsey (2016b: ch.1) for a pluralist explanation of what's going on here.

Is Gyges thereby irrational? Does he manifest a failing or deficiency? It seems doubtful. One might therefore conclude that internalism about prudential judgment is false. However, a different diagnosis is available. For things look quite different if we accept a monist picture according to which prudential judgments are a species of a unified class of practical ought judgments. Specifically, suppose that prudential ought judgments are judgments about what one ought *simpliciter* to do if only prudential considerations were in play. If ought *simpliciter* judgments are necessarily connected to motivation, and prudential ought judgments are necessarily connected to ought *simpliciter* judgments, it follows that prudential ought judgments are necessarily connected to motivation. It is just that motivation in the rational agent is *conditional* on the agent believing or deciding that only prudential considerations are in play. Thus, on this picture, Gyges is not irrational in lacking any motivation because he (correctly) believes that non-prudential considerations are also in play. Nonetheless, it remains true on this picture that there is a necessary, internal connection between prudential ought judgments and rational motivation. Thus, it seems that the plausibility of internalism about prudential judgment is affected by whether we accept pluralism or monism.

3.3 Prudential reasons

Fletcher and Dorsey have slightly different views of prudential reasons. Following Worsnip (2018), Fletcher (2021: 13) conceives of prudential reasons as reasons that are distinctively and fundamentally about the promotion of an agent's well-being. Thus, the fact that, despite popular opinion, I would have been better off to have never watched the film *1917* is a reason for me to have not watched the film. By contrast, Dorsey (2021: 216-17) thinks that prudential reasons are about the promotion of prudential *goods*. Thus, the fact that I would be happier having not watched such a terrible film is a reason not to watch it, assuming being happy is a prudentially valuable. In this case, although facts about prudential value *explain* why this is a reason, the reason itself is not distinctively or fundamentally *about* promoting the agent's well-being.

Whereas Fletcher assumes his view of prudential reasons without argument, Dorsey at least feels the need to defend his position against the alternative. However, the landscape of alternative possibilities is far broader

than either discussion allows for. For consider the following view that is suggested by Darwall's (2002) rational care theory of well-being. According to the rational care theory, X is good for Y just in case there is reason to want X for Y insofar as one cares for Y. In the first instance, this is offered as an account of our concept of prudential value. But it suggests a view of prudential reasons quite different from Dorsey and Fletcher's. On this alternative, prudential reasons are explained as a particular *kind* of practical reason. Specifically, they are those reasons *simpliciter* we have to want certain things for those we care about. Something's having prudential value is then explained in terms of the reasons we have. Specifically, something is prudentially valuable to the extent that we have reason to want that thing for those we care about.

Thus, if we accept pluralism, it can seem inevitable that prudential reasons must be about or somehow explained by prudential value. Indeed, Dorsey (2021: 21) argues against buck-passing accounts of prudential value on the grounds that it is not clear how one could explain the distinctiveness of prudential reasons without adverting to prudential value. However, Darwall offers precisely such an account. More generally, accepting monism opens up an approach to thinking about prudential reasons that need not appeal to prudential value. To be sure, neither pluralism or monism entails a particular view about the priority (or lack thereof) of prudential reasons in relation to prudential value. But certain combinations of these views will be more plausible than others, and so we have another example of how the debate about pluralism affects substantive debates about prudence.

4. Conclusion

Of course, we must always start somewhere, and one needn't, indeed can't, argue against all other starting points in order to justify one's own. So it needn't be a criticism of Fletcher or Dorsey that they haven't considered other starting points. Moreover, I should stress that, notwithstanding Dorsey's discussion of prudential rationality, the general project of investigating the nature of prudence and prudential thought and discussion does not (obviously) rely on pluralism. So card-carrying monists have plenty to gain from reading these books. But more generally, to give an adequate assessment of their views, we need a fuller appreciation of the assumptions upon which they are based and the comparative plausibility of other starting points. Some of this work will be

downstream from the kind of work Fletcher and Dorsey engage in. Once we have the substantive views fully worked out, we can compare their relative merits and demerits. However, I think much of the work will be upstream. To motivate our starting assumptions in the first place, we must ask what are our prudential concepts *for*, what are they *about*? I haven't really begun to answer these questions here. But I hope to have shown that debates about the nature of prudence and prudential thought and discourse cannot completely stand apart from these questions.⁸

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