Prudence is a classical quality, with many ancient authorities praising it as the source of common sense and good judgment. Prudential leadership is not an easy concept to clarify precisely because prudence seems so old fashioned and perhaps stodgy. We tend not to choose friends based on their prudence, although we often do choose advisors based on their good judgment. Prudential advice can alert us to risks we had not appreciated, where prudence in effect means knowing how to minimize personal risk. The term “prudential leadership,” however, captures something important about leadership ethics that is not associated with minimizing risk. The classical virtue of prudence is the excellence of good judgment which leadership thinkers since Aristotle have aligned with excellent rulers or excellent public leaders. This chapter unfolds the concept of prudential leadership as a companion to the concept of rhetorical leadership examined in the former chapter. Together, the two chapters lay out the foundations of leadership ethics which gets its dramatic “road test” in the following chapter on “dirty hands” dilemmas.

Characteristic of recent revivals of Aristotelian-derived models of political prudence is the edited collection Good Democratic Leadership: On Prudence and Judgment in Modern Democracies (Kane and Patapan 2014). Aristotle is here invoked and his concept of prudence applied to many instances of contemporary political leadership. None of the 12 contributors turn back to Aristotle to relearn the original lesson about the nature of prudence, but all apply something derived from Aristotle when examining the strengths and weaknesses of current styles of public and especially political leadership. None of the contributors single out the leadership of public administrators as an instructive case study, but all recognize that “good democratic leadership” is more than the sole responsibility of the...
political executive. Some discern prudence in the public leadership of civil society groups, some in think tanks, some in political parties, and some in centers of public administration such as foreign policy agencies. This collection of chapters on prudence in public leadership nicely illustrates the reawakening academic interest in Aristotelian frameworks of leadership, and this informed interest makes us all the more curious about the deeper substance of prudence and prudential leadership in the political science of Aristotle.

But first, before we dig deeper into Aristotle, we turn to robots!

**Robots with Ethics?**

Can robots be taught to act ethically? This question comes from recent reports about experiments to make robots behave more like humans. We know that robots cannot really be taught to think like humans but can they be taught to act a little more responsibly—like humans whose responsibility helps them manage best when circumstances pose problems? Robots are being designed to carry out more and more activities once only performed by humans in such traditional fields as manufacturing and in new fields like medicine and more disturbingly in warfare. Robots will increasingly occupy greater space in many areas of society, forcing designers to think of ever-greater sophistication in the computer intelligence given to robots to program their choice of functions as they gather and process intelligence around them. Is it possible to equip robots with something like ethical intelligence so that they could “do the right thing” when they encounter problems inhibiting their programmed activities (Woollacott 2014)?

The relevance for leadership ethics is the remarkably open debate over what sort of ethics people would consider appropriate for robots to rely on. If we think it possible to adapt their functionality to include “an ethics function,” which school of ethics would stand out as the preferred source in this new phase of ethical robotics? Would designers program robots to “dream of electric Kant” as the preferred way of “trying to teach them to behave ethically?” If the menu of ethics sources “is certainly not Kantian ethics, or even Aristotelian ethics,” then “what is it?” (Woollacott 2014). Would we ask designers to think more simply of forms of utilitarian ethics so that robots could calculate their best guess of what actions might promote the greatest happiness of the greatest number—that is, the happiness of humans rather than of robots, who remain a minority of programmable “ethics adaptors” operating under the instruction and presumably the ethics of those who built them?