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Print ISSN: [3006-2497](#) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](#)Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17368061>**Aristotle's Virtue Ethics and the Crisis of Ethical Leadership Today****Author: Ahmad Qadeer**

MPhil Political Science Scholar at Forman Christian College University Lahore

ahmadqadeer19@gmail.com**Co-Author: Shadab Ali Mian**

MSc International Relations, University of Glasgow, United Kingdom

shadabalimiang@gmail.com**ABSTRACT**

This paper examines virtue ethics of Aristotle to the modern day crisis of ethical leadership. It starts by examining the model presented by Aristotle on views of moral character and virtue, as well as the golden mean, and how all of them compose the building block of ethical action. The paper then relates all these classical concepts with what is expected of modern leaders in politics, business, and in the society at large. The comparison of the Aristotelian ideal of virtuous leader and the outcome of leaders who failed to succeed in their leadership will underline the importance of the character-based ethics in modern-day world. The paper concludes by citing that the only viable cure to the continued erosion in the credibility of the leadership is the reversion to a virtue-based ethical growth.

Keywords: *Virtue Ethics, Aristotle, Ethical Leadership, Moral Character, Golden Mean.*

Introduction

Ethical leadership is experiencing a crisis now in the modern world as compared to past years. There have been cases of corruption, corporate scandals and political dishonesty that have resulted in the loss of huge levels of people confidence in all institutions. Business, political, and civil society leaders find themselves more and more under the scrutiny of their decisions made but also of their values and character that drives the decisions made. Although contemporary theories of ethics including utilitarianism and deontology emphasize on rules or consequences, they usually fail in providing sufficient leaders with high moral character (Aristotle, 1999). Conversely, virtue ethics presented by Aristotle is panoramic and everlasting since it revolves around the building of personal virtues. Instead of giving unbending rules or computing penalties, Aristotle stresses value of training the good to arrive at a eudemonia or a flourishing in a human being. His main philosophy underlines that ethical actions are determined by the nature of an individual, especially by practicing such virtues as courage, justice, temperance and wisdom. The present paper asserts that the virtue ethics theory first developed by Aristotle offers the necessary paradigm that can be used in explaining and solving the impending crisis in ethical leadership. With this reoccurrence to this classical view, researcher can be able to look at how nurturing moral character is very important even nowadays to restore integrity and trust in leadership.

Aristotle's Virtue Ethics: An Overview

Aristotle (384-322 BCE) was probably the most influential philosopher in the Western philosophical tradition and in his classical treatise, *Nicomachean Ethics*, he puts forward his account of ethics. Here he presents a conception of the good life based on eudaimonia, eudaimonia is commonly translated as flourishing or human well-being in this text. The

eudaimonia is not a short-time feeling or a sensation of pleasure but a life-long journey of virtuous action in line with reasoning to Aristotle. It is a supreme good to the humans and the end of all activities. What is needed to reach this condition is aret (excellence or virtue) which is not instilled by indicating but instead through hard practice, training and conscious effort over an extended amount of time (Ciulla, 2004).

The Doctrine of the Mean

The Doctrine of the Mean is at the core of the ethics of Aristotle and it states that virtue resides in the midway between the excesses and the defaults. This mean is not absolute median but depends on a person and the situation. As an example, courage is the virtue that is between the vice of cowardice (deficiency) and recklessness (excess). Equally, generosity is the yin/yang relationship of stinginess versus extravagance. Aristotle points out that the determination of the mean is to be done through a practical judgment under the guidance of phronesis practical wisdom. This is an intellectual virtue that enables one to overcome difficult moral problems as well as to decide what the right action to take at the right time, and the right reasons (Aristotle, 1999).

The Doctrine of the Mean also resists puristic rigidity of morals by looking into the changeability of human experiences. It trains leaders not to be moral extremist but to develop balance and sharpness which are qualities needed in real-life tricky leadership situations.

Role of Character and Habituation

In contrast to most of the current theories of ethics, which revolve around individual moral choice, Aristotle virtue ethics centres upon the shaping of moral character? Virtue, to him, is not a series of good deeds in and by them but it is a settled orientation toward acting decently. Aristotle makes the famous statement: We are just, by doing just things (Nicomachean Ethics, Book II). This highlights the concept of moral habituation in which repetitive action of right deeds results in virtuous personality.

By the term habituation, it means that ethical leadership cannot be achieved purely by theoretical knowing but living, reflection, and moral direction. As a musician will be great after practicing day in and day out, likewise a leader will be excellent after exercising virtues habitually in terms of ethical conduct (Lenka & Kar, 2021).

Moreover, Aristotle draws the line between moral and intellectual virtues (courageous vs. wise, generous vs. wise, temperate vs. wise). As much as we need this, phronesis is critical because it coordinates the moral swerving with a prudent step, which must be cited as vital in any leadership.

The Virtuous Leader

According to the framework by Aristotle, leadership is originally a moral practice. The model of a real good leader is not the one who succeeds in fulfilling the aims but who behaves well and is good to the people (Lombarts, 2020). The good ruler is just, honest, courageous, temperate, and phronimon which acts as a moral model to other people. This kind of a leader does not inspire his or her followers with coercing them or charisma but with character and moral consistency. Aristotle (Politics) accentuates in his political works the need of all leadership to focus on the well-being of the community and not to selfish means. When the individual purpose is connected with the collective flourishing, then the policies and decisions will be efficient and ethically based and this is represented by a virtuous leader (Lalor, 2020).

In a modern context, this is translated into honest, responsible and inspired by civic duty as opposed to ego of leaders. Accordingly, virtue ethics criticizes the ordinary paradigm of leadership as one that is strategic or goal-oriented and redefines it as a virtue-oriented one.

Ethical Leadership: Definitions and Theories

Contemporary conceptions of ethical leadership can be viewed through the prism of utilitarianism (maximising payoffs), deontology (the duty rule) and virtue ethics (the character based view). Brown et al. (2005) have asserted that they define ethical leadership as the act of exhibiting normatively acceptable behaviour in a personal way and interpersonal relationships, and the enactment of one to the followers.

Leaders should not only be ethically in charge of their decision but also persuasive on ethics of their followers and organizations. Modern day ethical leadership, however, is hard pressed to balance the conflict between profitability, popularity and principle.

The Crisis of Ethical Leadership Today

The world is experiencing a serious ethical crisis in the leadership arena, cynicism among the populace is on the rise, institutional trust is plunging, and there is an endless amount of ethical scandals in fields. Loss of ethical norms is not the thing of individual malpractices but to a larger cultural and structural failure in the moral demands of all those who are in power. Virtue ethics as advanced by Aristotle can be embraced to aid in understanding the source of the cause of this crisis, which is failure in wholesomely developing and maintaining virtuous character in the leadership positions.

Political Corruption and Public Distrust

This crisis has become the most conspicuous in the political arena. Most of the governments around the world have been tangled up with corruption scandals, cronyism, and wastage of government revenue and power abuse. Political leaders tend to sacrifice the long-term interests of the citizen in favour of the short-term electoral considerations, partisan considerations or personal ambition. As the Pew Research Center (2022) notes, the number of those, who trust their governments, has declined in a significant number of liberal democracies because citizens saw politicians and authorities as less interested in serving them, but in self-interests (Pew Research Center, 2022).

In terms of Aristotelians, this leadership is an indication of failure to acquire virtues, including justice, temperance, *phronēsis* (practical wisdom). In absence of these moral virtues leaders are prone to *akrasia*, which is a situation where a leader is aware of good but lacks the ability to do something about it. Such split between moral knowledge and ethical practice brings about the unhealthiest of democratic institutions and communal life.

Corporate Malfeasance

Ethical misconducts are increasingly common in the business environment. Examples of well-publicized cases like Deepwater Horizon oil spill (BP), the fall of Enron, and the Theranos scandal exemplify how corporate decision-making choices are fuelled by greed, deception and negligence towards others can result into causing harm to many. Such failures cannot be attributed to some technical or legal shortcomings; they are problems of the lack of a corporate moral character in leadership (Aristotle, 1999).

Ethics of Aristotle stresses the significance of moral habituation and formation of virtuous attitudes, which occur in the course of time. In those corporate cases executives were showing the opposite vices like avarice, dishonesty, and hubris. The focus on shareholder value and creation of individual profit both revealed a lack of the virtues that are required to make sustainable and just decisions. The impacts have been both widespread and long-lasting, both economically and the general confidence of people who are increasingly becoming uncertain about the moral fibre surrounding capitalism.

Leadership in Non-profits and Religious Institutions

Even organizations are supposed to be exalted as exemplars of morality have faced damage to their reputations because of unethical leadership. Cases of sexual abuse and monetary

mismanagement and concealment in religious organizations like the Catholic Church have rocked the faith of people. Similarly, the NGOs have been accused of mismanagement, exploitation and lack of consistency (Ciulla, 2004).

Such failures are especially harmful due to the fact that they take place in the institutions where ethical behaviour is enforced and is exemplified. Aristotle would say that leaders like them had neglected their key role of being role models in matters of morality. In these regards, honesty, humility, and integrity are all principles upon which leadership is built, but these virtues have many times been compromised in place of vice and self preservation of the institutions. This leads to what Aristotle may describe as moral decadence, in that due to the lack of moral virtue of leadership, the moral fiber of societies is rotted and the moral authority of societies is compromised (Pew Research Center, 2022).

Aristotle's Ethics as a Remedy for Modern Failures

The ethical leadership problem is a problem of character at the very root of the crisis. Deontology and utilitarianism do not always help to develop the internal moral path that leads to strong and also supportive leadership. Virtue ethics offers an alternative foundation that is rooted on internal character building given by Aristotle.

The Moral exists Over the Rules or the Consequences

The framework by Aristotle is not based on computing the outcome or following the hard and fast judgment. It is rather concerned with the leader. This internal orientation promotes virtue maturation over the long term, making virtue ethics much easier to maintain and not as manipulable as regulation or goal-based theory.

The Role of *Phronēsis* (Practical Wisdom)

Contemporary leaders find it hard to strike a balance between conflicting duties. The answer to how to regain our decision-making abilities may be found in the thought of Aristotle who spoke of *phronesis*, which means to be able to make prudent decisions that are dependent on the context. Leaders who possess *phronesis* are not fast trackers in following the law but are able to examine a situation through the experience and moral understanding of things (Lombarts, 2020).

Character as a Public Good

It is personal, not only social. Aristotle considers *polis* (community) the place where virtues are achieved and practiced. Ethical leadership is a community good in the contemporary setting. Organizational and societal cultures are formed by leaders. Not only do their personalities affect results but also create a moral atmosphere of a whole institution.

Case Studies: Ethical Leadership vs. Moral Failure

In virtue ethics proposed by Aristotle, the focus is put on the importance of character and moral habituation to wise things along with practical wisdom in accomplishment of the ethical leadership. In the modern world, one can easily witness the situation involving both good and evil leadership as case studies observed in real life. A look at these examples can therefore cast some light into the ways in which the thoughts of Aristotle can be used in a modern society.

Jacinda Ardern (Former Prime Minister of New Zealand)

Jacinda Ardern, who was a Prime Minister of New Zealand, is frequently pointed as a recent example of an ethical leader. Her crisis management skills particularly the very recent Christchurch Mosque shootings in the year 2019 and the COVID-19 pandemic were marked with empathy, moral decisiveness and openness in the decision-making process. After the Christchurch attacks, Ardern showed *phronēsis* (practical wisdom) and justice through her instant and preconcert act of both comforting people and being a uniting force between a nation in mourning and the systematic solutions to the problem, including gun laws and racial hatred (Duffy et al., 2018).

There was also temperance and courage in how she led through the pandemic because she made definite actions to safeguard the health of the people, actions that put her economy and political standing at risk. The style of both Arden and the conception of the virtuous leader offered by Aristotle are closely interconnected, because according to Aristotle, it is through good character and the care about the well-being of other individuals that a virtue must govern a ruler, but rather than by rules and expediency. She is able to relate to everyone whether emotionally or high-principled action and this is eudaimonia in the political arena.

Elizabeth Holmes (Theranos)

By contrast, the case of Elizabeth Holmes, the founder and ex-CEO of Theranos shows what the results of ethical failure based on a lack of virtue might be. Holmes was a marketing spokesman of an uprising blood-testing technology which ended up being flawed and untrue. Her choice of overbilling capacity and misinforming investors, patients, and regulatory agencies led to the large sum of money losses and a threat to disrupt the health of the population (Aristotle, 1999).

In Aristotelian view, Holmes did not have the commendable characters of being an ethical leader. Her deeds were founded on insolence (extravagant pride) and deception, instead of frankness, wisdom, and moderation. Instead of having a well-established moral character of being a habituated and truthful individual Holmes worked on an image of fame and success at any cost. The fact that she falls down exemplifies the caution given by Aristotle that vices, particularly those entrenched in institutional form, can be disfiguring not only to the life of individuals but also to the systems in general. The key reason behind Holmes failure was not because of the lack of intellect and technical expertise but the lack of the inner moral compass that virtue ethics entails.

The 2008 Financial Crisis

The 2008 crisis related to global finance expressed a magnanimous lapse of ethical conduct and particularly among business and monetary administration. The crisis was driven probably by irresponsible risk taking behaviour, short run profit convergence and dishonesty by the institutions; vice traits that Aristotle would characterize as vices of intemperance, greed and prudence. Most financial institutions sold risky mortgage products, misinformed investors, and took advantage of the weaknesses of the system whilst executives received the highest compensation possible (Hartman, 2008).

Based on virtue ethics approach, the crisis highlights a case of a general failure of moral character among the leadership. Phronesis was hardly present, and executives acted according to the short-term gains, which had crippling long-term results. Lack of virtues like justice, moderation and accountability caused a domino effect and eventually the world lost confidence with the financial institutions.

According to Aristotle, the leaders should have cultivated some virtuous tendencies, that is, based on the common good and not self-interest, which could have alleviated the extent of the crisis. The following effects such as numerous loss of jobs, home foreclosures and economic turmoil show that degeneration of virtue in leadership may lead to a systemic damage to millions (Klein, 1995).

Cultivating Virtue in Contemporary Leadership

The society should be able to develop the character on a grass-root level to rebuild ethical leadership. This will only be possible through planned education, mentorship and reform of institutions.

- **Educational Initiatives**

Ethics courses are becoming common in business schools and leadership programs. But Aristotle would tell you that is not enough to be simply taught. Moral habits must be instilled into the

students by conducting real-life interactions, contemplating and guidance to help the students internalize the virtues.

- **Institutional Design**

Leadership must also be rewarded through integrity among the existing performance in organizations. Virtuous conduct can be supported by corporate codes of ethics, open decision making as well as accountability procedures (Duffy et al., 2018).

- **Role Models and Mentorship**

Aristotle pointed out the significance of role models when it comes to the moral growth. Leaders are required to be role models not just be bosses. Moral leadership involves developing characters in future leaders through ethical modelling through actual examples on moral behaviour (Lombarts, 2020).

Critiques and Limitations of Aristotle's Ethics

Although the virtue ethics has profound ways of seeing, it is not devoid of shortcomings.

- **Cultural Relativism**

Critics claim that virtues are a culturally relative and change throughout history and therefore conclude that the virtues on the list of Aristotle are too specific or limited. Nevertheless expressions of virtue can vary, some fundamental concepts such as justice, honesty and courage can be found in most of the traditions.

- **Ambiguity in Application**

The problems with determining the "mean" may be complicated and questionable. In stressful situations, it might become hard to find the righteous path to take as a leader. Here *phronēsis* comes in to play, and it takes long-term experience, and reflection to master it (Hursthouse, 1999).

- **Elitism in Aristotle's Philosophy**

One way in which Aristotle did not subscribe to the democratic ideals is in his view that only an educated and leisurely person could develop virtue. Contemporary accounts of virtue ethics, however, are more democratic, in the sense of stating that all individuals can have their character, given any backgrounds.

Conclusion

Virtue ethics introduced by Aristotle provides a rich framework in an age when ethical leadership appears to be in short supply. In respect to character, habituation, and practical wisdom, Aristotle thus gives us a guide on how to create leaders who can do what they do, not because they feel obliged to do it or because some form of punishment might arise, but because they really feel strongly inclined towards the good. Although there are certain problems associated with utilizing the concepts of virtue ethics in the modern, globalized world, its main logical thinking still remains very applicable in the current environment as it was when applied in ancient Greece. To resolve the current ethical leadership crisis, societies ought to invest into the development of moral character- not just as guides and regulations should be established on the basis of rules but by raising the development of the moral character that would establish the ethical, courageous and prudent leader that would lead with integrity.

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