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What Does Ethics Have to do with Leadership?

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Abstract Accounts of leadership in relation to ethics can and do go wrong in several ways that may lead us too quickly into thinking there is a tighter relationship between ethics and leadership than we have reason to believe. Firstly, these accounts can be misled by the centrality of values talk in recent discussions of leadership into thinking that values of a particular kind are sufficient for leadership. Secondly, the focus on character in recent leadership accounts can lead to a similar error. The assumption here is that because good character is often a locus of descriptions of leaders, such character is necessary and sufficient for leadership. Thirdly, we can fall victim to an observer bias that colors our accounts of the leaders we admire and thus wish to either have or be, which in turn leads to the fourth way in which accounts of leadership can go wrong in their description of the role of ethics in leadership. Through inattention or through wishful thinking accounts of leadership can become merely prescriptive and stipulate that ethics is requisite and at least partly constitutive of leadership. Keeping in mind these ways in which accounts of leadership commonly go astray, we can say that any adequate account of leadership must, at least in the first instance, be able to differentiate not only between leadership and good ethical character, but also between leadership and power, authority, influence, managerial ability, and charisma. Taking a closer look at some of the ways that the relation between leadership and ethics is misconstrued is necessary to better understanding both leadership and its

connection to ethics. It is, however, just a first step. Asking whether we have reason to think of leadership as an Aristotelian virtue should, we think, enable us to give a more accurate and useful account of the complexity of the relation. It also captures underlying reasons for wanting to see the two as intrinsically connected.

Keywords Leadership · Virtue · Ethics · Machiavelli · Aristotle

...the definition question in leadership studies is not really about the question “What is leadership?” It is about the question “What is good leadership?” By good, I mean morally good and effective. This is why I think it is fair to say that ethics lies at the heart of leadership studies.¹

Leaders worthy of the name, whether they are university presidents or senators, corporation executives or newspaper editors, school superintendents or governors, contribute to the continuing definition and articulation of the most cherished values of our society. They offer, in short, moral leadership.²

Introduction

What is the relationship between leadership and ethics? One of the key questions (or in some cases assumptions) in the literature on leadership is regarding the nature of the relationship between leadership and ethics.

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¹ Ciulla (1995), p. 17.

² Gardner (2006), p. 121.

Most accounts and discussions of leadership start with what Ciulla refers to as “the definition question”.³ They then either avoid that question of the definition of leadership, either by doing what Ciulla herself does and claiming that we all have a sufficient level of agreement about what leadership means to make the question of a definition of leadership unnecessary or by making reference to the sheer number of definitions offered or they offer a definition of leadership that begs or closes off this very important question of leadership’s connection with ethics.

We believe the question of the definition of leadership—just what leadership is—is both central to the question of its relationship to ethics and problematic. It cannot be solved by either course of action taken by most authors—namely either dismissing the question or answering it preemptively. But, nor can it be ignored. It must be answered in order to tell us what we need to know about the relationship between ethics and leadership and also to ground that answer.

This article addresses both of these questions. In the course of doing so, we offer (and defend) our own definition of leadership and its relation to ethics. We start by examining how the existing such accounts go wrong, often at the very moment at which they address or dismiss the question of the definition of leadership.

Notwithstanding the absence of an answer to this “definition question,” these accounts often also start with a claim of the need for (more) ethical leaders, frequently underscored by reference to a recent catastrophe of some kind or other.⁴ Thus, for example, Liden et al. (2008) open their paper with the claim that “with confidence shaken in business leadership, interest has been increasing in the development of leaders who set aside self-interest for the betterment of their followers and organizations.”⁵

This eliding of the question of the definition of leadership, often combined with this call for more ethical leadership, can lead to mistaken accounts of leadership with respect to ethics.

³ Grint (2010), for example, opens with the acknowledgement that the enormous amount of the leadership literature has led no closer to a consensus about the definition of leadership (p. 1). Indeed, Grint argues that the different approaches to leadership that he identifies are neither close nor likely to agree on a shared definition of leadership (p. 4).

⁴ The fact that, regardless of when any particular account of leadership and ethics is published, the author can find a recent or cotemporary such catastrophe that is commonly known and significant enough to form a reference point for their audience, whether it be the Enron collapse, the recent Global Financial Crisis, the earlier dotcom bubble bursting or one of any number of events, should tell us something both about the nature of such appeals and the success of the earlier similar appeals to greater and more ethical leadership to prevent just such disasters.

⁵ Liden et al. (2008), p. 161.

The Problem

Accounts of leadership in relation to ethics can and do go wrong in several ways that may lead us too quickly into thinking there is a tighter relationship between ethics and leadership than we have reason to believe. Firstly, these accounts can be misled by the centrality of values talk in recent discussions of leadership into thinking that values of a particular kind are necessary and sufficient for leadership. Even if some such values are necessary, the connection needs to be explained and just what those values are needs to be determined. In any case, having values is clearly not enough—not sufficient—to make one a leader.

Secondly, the focus on character in recent leadership accounts can lead to a similar error. The assumption here is that because good character is often a locus of descriptions of leaders, such character is necessary and sufficient for leadership. But again, even if good character is necessary, it needs to be shown what the connection is and why it is necessary—particularly given that such a connection is explicitly denied in the Machiavellian literature on leadership. In any case, good character is clearly not sufficient for leadership.

Thirdly, we can fall victim to an observer bias that colors our accounts of the leaders we admire and thus wish to either have or be, which in turn leads to the fourth way in which accounts of leadership can go wrong in their description of the role of ethics in leadership. Through inattention or through wishful thinking accounts of leadership can become merely prescriptive and stipulate that ethics is requisite and at least partly constitutive of leadership. This is partly due to a deep seated desire that it be the case that power and ethics should go together. We want to be taken care of as well as led by our leaders. As evidence of this desire think of the intellectual and theoretical gymnastics resorted to by writers such as Dietz to deny that Machiavelli’s *Prince* really does attempt to separate power from ethics. It is also partly due to our positioning and responses when we start to think about the kinds of leaders that we want and admire (or might think ourselves to be).

Keeping in mind these ways in which accounts of leadership commonly go astray, we can say that any adequate account of leadership must, at least in the first instance be able to differentiate not only between leadership and good ethical character, but also between leadership and power, authority, influence, managerial ability, and charisma. All such features may at times figure in leadership, but they are not the same as leadership, nor does leadership need to always incorporate them.

Ciulla claims that “...the definition question in leadership studies is not...” about “What is leadership?” but about “What is good leadership?” By “good” she means both “morally good and effective.” Given the intrinsic

connection between leadership and ethics that she posits she is able to claim that it is fair to say that ethics lies at the heart of leadership studies. She may be right. But without making the grounds for this view explicit, this approach toward leadership can reduce to wishful thinking.

Moreover, it is not apparent that it is the case that applications of the term “leadership” and ethics always do coincide. While it may be true that some of us may at times desire our leaders to be moral, it is clearly not the case much of the time. At least there is an ambivalence that needs to be taken seriously. Think of cases, for example, where one’s material well-being is going to be even mildly, let alone substantially, affected. We want our fund managers and our prime-ministers to “show us the money”; and if doing so involves ethically questionable practices—a euphemism for practices either immoral but legal, or practices both immoral and illegal—then so be it.

For the sake of clarity we shall call the skeptical position, that denies that there need be a connection between leadership and ethics, that of the “Machiavellian skeptic.” Often an advocate of *realpolitik*, the Machiavellian skeptic would reject the argument of Burns etc., that the kind of leadership we are interested in is both ethically good and effective. The Machiavellian skeptic is interested only in what is effective and would deny that the “good” leader is ethically good as well as effective (the prescriptive claim) and would also deny that effectiveness in a leader and ethical goodness are even likely to go together—the Machiavellian skeptic follows Machiavelli in the Prince in positing that in fact unethical uses of power are often more effective and that we have no grounds for believing that leadership is any different.

The split here is between prescriptive and descriptive accounts of leadership—we may (we think) want our leaders to fit the prescriptive theories that our leaders should be ethical but prescriptive accounts are problematic. Prescriptive models are problematic for five reasons. (1) You have your prescriptions and I have mine, (2) they are not performance based, (3) they ignore critical aspects of performance not consistent with the model, (4) they do not take situational variation into account, (5) they are framed in terms of individual behavior when leadership is a multi-level phenomenon.

As well as these problems, there are additional problems for prescriptive accounts, ones that they have in common with descriptive accounts—namely the Machiavellian skeptic’s claim that denies that ethics and leadership do have any intrinsic connection. Accounts that merely stipulate that ethics and leadership go together are not merely prescriptive (arguing that they should go together or we prefer leadership that is ethical), more than that they are stipulative—they simply stipulate that ethics and leadership do go together. The merely prescriptive account is

honest that there are types of leadership that are not ethical but we happen to prefer the types of leadership that are ethical. The accounts that stipulate that leadership and ethics do go together close the discussion, of whether this is in fact the case. Given this, the problem for stipulative accounts is more fundamental and conceptual than the five problems listed above.

If attempts to tie leadership and ethics together are not to be subject to either the problems with prescriptive accounts listed above or the challenges of descriptive accounts that echo the Machiavellian, we need to ground this connection between leadership and ethics in a way that is not merely stipulative. Doing so will address the above problems for prescriptive accounts, by showing that the connection is neither subjective nor hypothetical, and address the Machiavellian skeptic by demonstrating that even on a purely descriptive account leadership and ethics must go together. Doing this will also defend such accounts (namely, those that tie leadership to ethics) against the threat posed by the instrumentalist accounts of leadership and ethics—that is, accounts that ground the relationship between ethics and leadership by arguing for ethical leadership as increasing follower performance. Such accounts are vulnerable and incomplete in that they rely on the contingent fact (if it is one) that such leadership does increase follower output. If that were to change or not be demonstrable in some contexts, the prescriptive account shown to be instrumentally valuable is vulnerable,

A good corporate leader is not necessarily seen to be one who is, as Ciulla claims—“morally good and effective,” but rather simply as “effective.” Or consider political leadership. Where issues of justice and fairness are perceived, as they inevitably are, as clashing with matters of well-being (political, social and personal), the connection between morality and leadership again comes apart. If torture (enhanced interrogation techniques)—is what it takes to protect us, or if unjust inequities are what it takes to provide us with certain desired goods, then the good leader is the one who provides us with those goods. Despite the rhetoric (particularly of CEO’s, politicians, and at least some in leadership studies), “good” leadership is rarely perceived as an intrinsic or even fortuitous blend pursuing and achieving goals that are both morally good and effective. It is rather about being effective in the pursuit of desires and aims that one favors largely because of their perceived benefits. The illusion that good leadership is perceived, let alone entails, being both ethical and effective is fostered by both leaders and followers. Often procrustean, the ethical dimension of leadership is obfuscated (not always consciously) in an effort to make it seem as if it fits naturally with effective means to desired outcomes—whatever they may be.

Ciulla's claim that good leaders are "morally good and effective," or that that is the kind of leadership we are interested in, is subject to dispute on virtually all grounds. Must leaders be morally good? Must they be effective? Isn't it possible to have a good leader who simply fails? Mustn't a morally good leader at least sometimes fail? Ciulla's understanding of leadership, of good leadership, and of leadership studies, appears to ignore the essential problem about leadership that Machiavelli raises in *The Prince*. To equate leadership with morally good leadership begs the most significant question—and related questions—about the nature of leadership. Furthermore, to claim "that ethics lies at the heart of leadership studies" exacerbates the problem insofar as it claims that understanding leadership per se is necessarily bound up with understanding some purported intrinsic ethical dimension.⁶ This may be true, and indeed following Aristotle we think it is true, but it needs to be shown why.

As well as Ciulla, other authors on leadership express a similar approach. Eubanks, Brown and Ybema, for example, in their introduction to the *Journal of Business Ethics'* recent special issue on leadership, ethics and identity assert that "Leadership is intrinsically bound up with ethics." (p. 1), but the examples they offer the reader are in fact only examples of the fact that leadership behavior (in the sense not only of actions but also of relations to others and their decisions) has ethical implications—that is, it can be judged as more or less ethical. Thus, the focus is on whether leadership is ethically *done* rather than whether leadership itself is intrinsically ethical.⁷

Far from aiding or enhancing an understanding of leadership, approaches such as this with their supposition that ethics are intrinsic to "good" leadership, as opposed to say ethical leadership, prevents one from investigating leadership; that is leadership that is frequently unethical. It prevents it by stipulatively preventing any coherent conceptualization of it. On Ciulla's account, leadership that is unethical is not really leadership; or at least not any kind of leadership that should be of primary interest. This introduces a dilemma. Either we think of David Cameron etc. as both a leader and as ethical or we think of him as not a leader. The dilemma is easily discarded if it is supposed, as

⁶ Eubanks et al. (2012), pp. 1–3.

⁷ Thiel et al. (2012), pp. 48–64, make a similar point. Despite claiming that "the discretionary decisions made by leaders are inherently ethical because of the far-reaching and high-stakes consequences these decisions may have for internal and external to the leader's organization" (p. 52), in fact their descriptive account of how leaders make ethical decisions and how they can adopt strategies to make decisions more in line with their ethical values at most address how leadership can be done in an ethical manner and for ethical ends (two of Ciulla's three kinds of "good leadership") and gives us no reason to think that leadership itself is intrinsically ethical, nor that one must be an ethical person to be a leader.

many do,⁸ that while some of those whom we regard as leaders may exhibit moral character and make sound ethical decisions some of the time, particularly on matters of great importance, others routinely do not. Alternatively, the dilemma may point us in the right direction. Perhaps some of those we think of as leaders should not be so regarded. Indeed, this is what we will try to establish.

What is interesting in terms of leadership in relation to John Howard, George W Bush, Tony Blair, Hilary Clinton and Rupert Murdoch is not how they manage to blend ethical standards they purport to adhere to, let alone genuinely sound moral judgment, with whatever leadership qualities it is they may exhibit; rather it is how and why they frequently failed to do so. The Machiavellian-like idea that they act in accordance with standards they generally believe to be morally sound, or that they travel to the tune of a different moral drummer—that is, that they adhere to a different set of moral principles suitable for leaders, is as naïve as it is mistaken. After all, if they are regarded as formidable leaders it is unlikely, even for many of those who do think of them as such, that it is because—like Mandela, Gandhi or King—they exhibit great, let alone visionary moral character (in at least some significant aspects of their public life).

Note too that if positions of power are distinguished from those of leadership—a distinction often ignored or sloughed off, the terrain becomes even more complex. A person in power is frequently thought of as a leader (much as successful business people—i.e., the rich—are often assumed to be intelligent). However, in the interests of understanding leadership as a virtue or in relation to virtue vis-a vis power, there are ample reasons to distinguish between the two. Exercising power is not the same as exercising leadership. Nevertheless, while—*apart from further argument*—there is no good reason to regard morality as intrinsic to leadership—and many good reasons not to, this is not the case with power. Leadership does appear to intrinsically require the presence and exercise of power if for no other reason than that leadership requires exercising influence, not necessarily always successfully, over others.

Taking a closer look at some of the ways that the relation between leadership and ethics is misconstrued is necessary to better understanding both leadership and its connection to ethics. It is, however, just a first step. Asking whether we have reason to think of leadership as an Aristotelian virtue should, we think, enable us to give a more accurate and useful account of the complexity of the relation. It also captures underlying reasons for wanting to see the two as intrinsically connected.

⁸ See, for example, Kellerman (2004), pp. 4–5.

The Theory: How “Good” Does Leadership Have to be to be “Good”?

In considering the issue of leadership in the context of virtue ethics, the central interrelated questions are these: (1) can leadership be considered a virtue? (2) is leadership intrinsically ethical? (3) is a virtuous character compatible with or necessary to good leadership? (4) is there a positive, whether correlative or causal, relationship between the virtuous character and leadership? Alternatively, is leadership inconsonant or even incompatible with vice and immorality? (5) can the virtuous agent be an effective leader and if so, under what conditions? We want to know whether Machiavelli’s Soderini was an otherwise virtuous agent who contingently happened to lack the property of leadership *or* whether the very fact that Soderini was a virtuous agent prevented him from being an effective leader.

Burns’ seminal and still dominant account of what he terms “transforming leadership,”⁹ like Ciulla’s, claims a conceptual connection between ethics and leadership. They build ethics into leadership—conceptually and prescriptively, by stipulating that it is so. To them it is self-apparent that leadership means, as Ciulla says, “good” in the sense of both effective and morally good. Gardner’s account is also stipulative. It holds that to be “worthy of the name,” “leaders” must offer moral leadership, that is articulate and contribute to the definition of “the values that hold the society together” and lift followers out of everyday considerations to “unite them in the pursuit of objectives worthy of their best efforts.”¹⁰

Although Ciulla regards the claim that “we want our leaders to be good in both ways”¹¹ as a self-evident truth, there is, as noted above, ample reason to deny it. The common discourse about the dearth of “good leadership” is quite compatible with the view that if and when we allegedly care about the ethics or character of our leaders at all, then we do so largely for prudential and self-centered reasons—despite whatever fanciful and self-protective stories are concocted to the contrary. (Whatever one thinks of Bush, Blair, and Howard as leaders, lying was endemic and systemic in their administrations, and their lies are well documented.)¹² On this account, the alleged concern for the moral character of leaders is likely not a genuine ethical concern—not even on Utilitarian grounds that sees the right course of action as one which produces the greatest good for the greatest number. Instead, any concern with ethics is far more likely to be grounded in some half-baked

version of ethical egoism. In any case, the question about the relation between ethics and leadership cannot be prescriptively resolved, and to reiterate, any attempt to do so moves us away from a better understanding of leadership while moving leadership studies in the direction of homiletics.

Even if what Ciulla says is in a sense correct, we need to know why some notions of leadership might be taken to include and imply ethical leadership; why others see it as an optional (and possibly desirable) feature of some leaders and leadership styles; and why ethical reasoning, judgment and character, is seen as in fact incompatible with leadership in at least some cases. We also need to know what Ciulla means by “ethically good.” Does she mean leadership that has ethical aims as its goal? Is the reference to a leader who acts in ethical ways in private, or when dealing with followers¹³? How do we separate out the senses of “ethically” good that involve right and wrong (the part of ethics that is concerned with a theory of the Right) and those that involve claims about the Good (the part of ethics that is concerned with a theory of Value)? Ciulla herself identifies these “three general, obvious and completely interlocking categories for the moral assessment of leadership” in her 2005 paper¹⁴ but does not say which of these senses she has in mind when referring to “good leadership.”

Much rides on the answer to these questions. If leadership does imply ethically good leadership; that is, if there is something about the concept of leadership that means on a correct understanding we would not apply the term to Hitler but we would to Gandhi or Martin Luther King, Jr. (what Ciulla succinctly refers to as “the Hitler problem”¹⁵), then we need to ask why. If, on the other hand, leadership neither implies nor requires ethics, then why is it that we still demand and expect—or at least have the illusion of demanding and expecting—that would-be leaders be ethical? Why suppose, as it often is, that those we have accepted as leaders are, in virtue of that very fact, by and large ethically competent and moral? Even if Ciulla is correct that most debates that purport to be about

¹³ The questions raised by Eubanks et al. (2012) in their introduction to the recent special issue of the *Journal of Business Ethics* address this element of ethics and leadership—what we might call leadership done in an ethical manner.

¹⁴ In Ciulla’s outline of these three “categories”, effectiveness (so central to virtue ethics) is omitted. Ciulla lists firstly “the ethics of leaders themselves”—their “intentions... [and] personal ethics”; secondly “the ethics of how a leader leads (or the process of leadership)”; and thirdly “the ethics of what a leader does—the ends of leadership”. None of these however refer to the effectiveness, the skill level of the leader *qua* leader. Ciulla (2005), p. 332

¹⁵ Ciulla (1995). Kellerman refers to this as “Hitler’s Ghost”. In both cases, the reference is to the familiar idea outlined above—the concern over whether we must categorize Hitler as a leader.

⁹ Burns (1978).

¹⁰ Gardner (2006), p. 121.

¹¹ Ciulla (1995), p. 13.

¹² See, for example, Rich (2006) and Cox et al. (2009).

leadership are in fact debates about what constitute *good* leadership, she is wrong about not needing to discuss the nature of leadership. Contra Ciulla's claims, even if the term "leadership" has reached the status of a paradigm in the sense deployed by Kuhn¹⁶ we need to clarify what it is, to determine whether there is such an agreed definition and, importantly, whether it is correct. Aristotle can help clarify the issue.

Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim. But a certain difference is found among ends... Now, as there are many actions, arts, and sciences, their ends also are many; the end of the medical art is health, that of shipbuilding a vessel... that of economics wealth. But where such arts fall under a single capacity—as bridle-making and the other arts concerned with the equipment of horses fall under the art of riding... the ends of the master arts are to be preferred to all the subordinate ends; for it is for the sake of the former that the latter are pursued.¹⁷

Of course that leadership is a virtue does not follow directly from Aristotle's point here. Nevertheless it does hint at it, especially in its establishment of hierarchies of arts and of ends. As Damian Cox notes:

Aristotle is talking... about master arts and the hierarchy he describes is a hierarchy of ends, not virtues. I don't think Aristotle had an idea of a hierarchy of virtues; though perhaps he should have. I think you are right that you can fit an account of leadership and the value of leadership into a eudaimonistic framework, but it wouldn't be Aristotle's—or Hursthouse's either I would think.¹⁸

In the case of leadership, we want to know whether it is of the kind of single capacity activity such as bridle-making, where the excellence that attaches to it is simply to make a good bridle, or whether it is a kind of "master art" (like the art of riding or of ship-building) within which, or under which, other arts or virtues associated with leadership may fall.¹⁹ Further, beyond the question of whether leadership is

merely an art or a master art, our inquiry in this paper leads us to ask whether we can go further and in fact consider leadership a virtue and possibly a master virtue.²⁰

Aristotle of course clearly gives us grounds for seeing leadership as a master art, both in the passage above and in the *Politics* where he tells us that the ruler's "function, taken absolutely, requires a master artificer" while "the subjects, on the other hand, require only that measure of excellence which is proper to each of them".²¹ The question of course is whether we have reason to consider this "excellence" a virtue?

Of course there are technical restrictions on what can be a virtue. For example, is leadership, as Aristotle says a virtue must be, a character trait rather than either a passion such as appetite, fear or pity, or a faculty that is the capacity to feel these passions?²² To qualify, the trait or behavior must be behavior that the person is *disposed* to display, not simply a one-off.²³ The (putative) virtue should not be equated or identified or reduced to the associated behavior. The requirement that virtue admits of a mean between two extremes (vices) is one reason for seeing leadership as a master virtue rather a virtue proper. What might too much or too little leadership look like and what would the associated vices be?²⁴

Beyond these, the main reason we argue that we have grounds to go further than seeing leadership as a master art and instead propose to see it as a virtue is the very end that leadership, properly understood, pursues—that is, human flourishing. If leadership is truly a master art as outlined above, should its ends and goals not also be subordinated to the ends of perhaps some even greater master art if it is "for the sake of" the more encompassing and significant ends of such a master art that the ends of leadership are or should be pursued? On this view, leadership as a master art may be seen as the kind of excellence that is part of the set of virtues, incorporating many other virtues—perhaps different virtues at different times and in different situations—that aims overall at the ultimate good for humans. We might see the ship-building/master art view as a metaphor in the case of leadership—where the end of riding or ship-building is analogous to human flourishing and all other virtues are analogous to the arts the combine to produce shipbuilding—or we could see it as the outcome of combining all arts and master arts into a hierarchy. On this

¹⁶ Ciulla (1995), p. 10.

¹⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 2, ch. 5.

¹⁸ Cox personal correspondence.

¹⁹ See the discussion of integrity as a virtue in Cox et al. We leave aside the question of whether leadership as a virtue is the kind of "cultivable and admirable" trait that admits of a mean between two extremes. At least for neo-Aristotelian accounts of virtue, the putative virtue must be expressible as a mean between two extremes—a balance representing neither of the vices represented by either extreme of the continuum.

²⁰ This distinction and the discussion of it owe much to the generous comments and suggestions of Cox.

²¹ Aristotle, *Politics*, (1996), pp. 15–20.

²² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 2.

²³ Driver (1989), p. 378, 380.

²⁴ See the *Tao Te Ching* (1963), ch 60. "Ruling a big country is like cooking a small fish." Lao Tzu talks about "ruling" or leadership in ways that suggest the doctrine of the mean does apply.

view, shipbuilding or riding would not be an analogy, but rather all arts and master arts would ultimately nest under the ultimate human good to be served—*eudaimonia*. On this understanding, while Aristotle may not directly give us grounds for making the direct leap from master arts to leadership as a virtue or a master virtue, he does offer us the conceptual tools to do so—both by grounding leadership in pursuing this human flourishing and in noting that because the ruler is required to be a master artificer, he (or she) “ought to have excellence of character in perfection”—that is, that while the ruled (or on our view the led) only require the individual excellences of character that are particular to their roles, the ruler (leader) must have all the perfections of character.²⁵

Subsuming some virtues and together with other virtues, on this view leadership aims at *eudaimonia*. *Eudaimonia* can be loosely translated as a state of well-being in which human beings become what they should by living as they should. It is the end or proper goal of the master art of living virtuously and it is also the only way, on an account such as Aristotle’s, to achieve real happiness. Paul Taylor describes it as

the good of man as man. Happiness (*eudaimonia*, well-being) is the kind of life that is suitable or fitting for a *human* being to live, and a *human* being is one who exemplifies the essential nature (or essence) of man. Thus happiness is not to be identified with any kind of life a person might actually want to live. Instead, it characterizes the kind of life we all *would* want to live if we understood our true nature as human beings. Happiness, then, may be defined as that state of the “soul” or condition of life which all human beings, *insofar as they are human*, ultimately aim at.²⁶

Hursthouse, for example, shows how the maxims of virtue ethics are grounded in this conception of human flourishing. Thus it is here that we find both the limiting factor on what is a virtue and also the content of virtue ethics: the virtues are those traits that foster just this particular human flourishing.²⁷ Grounding leadership in flourishing is one possible way to make sense of the claim that leadership just is ethically good leadership, and demonstrates what grounding in virtue ethics can offer to leadership studies.

Must leadership *per se* (by definition) serve the human good? If so, does it serve the human good in the way that, for example, single-capacity activities or even some master arts might; by furnishing the material requirements for humans to live in a way that allows them to develop the

virtues and thus to flourish?²⁸ Or does it serve the human good in ways virtues such as temperance and practical wisdom do? Is leadership itself a master art or virtue that incorporates other virtues, whose ends can themselves be subsumed under some “single capacity” of a greater and more basic master art; one for whose preferred ends the subordinate ends of leadership are, or properly should be pursued? As Aristotle says (above), “the ends of the master arts are to be preferred to all the subordinate ends; for it is for the sake of the former that the latter are pursued.” Is it for the sake of the ends of virtue itself or of well-being or the ends of some other master art that the subordinate ends of leadership are to be pursued?

On this (broadly Aristotelian view) so-called leadership that is pursued either as an end in itself, or that fails to integrate itself properly with other virtues, or that fails to subordinate its ends to the larger ends for which it should be pursued—whether by failing to identify those larger preferable ends or for ulterior reasons, is not real leadership. It is leadership gone awry. This seems intuitively right if we consider cases of those in positions of power that we remain reticent to say exhibit qualities of character associated with leadership (as a virtue or master art).

Among other things this broadly Aristotelian account helps us to isolate the kinds of positive leadership that we are interested in—the ethically good sense of leadership that prompts Ciulla to identify “leadership” as an “honorific”—from the “bad leadership” that is the subject of authors such as Kellerman²⁹ and Ünal et al.³⁰ It addresses, in other words, Ciulla’s “Hitler problem”—how to satisfactorily account for our positive sense of the term leadership and give a reason beyond wishful thinking or mere stipulation that it doesn’t apply to those such as Hitler. It also addresses what we have called the Machiavellian skeptic—the position that would reject a connection between leadership and ethics. And, it does so without falling into any of the four mistaken ways of thinking about leadership that we began this paper with.

Slote, in his “Virtue Ethics and Democratic Values,”³¹ offers a way of conceptualizing how the virtues can be served by, and more importantly can ground, democratic political values. Slote gives primacy to the virtue of

²⁵ Aristotle (1260), pp. 15–20.

²⁶ Taylor (1975), p. 132 (emphases in original).

²⁷ Hursthouse (1991), pp. 225–226.

²⁸ The Aristotle scholar might well point us toward Book 1, Chap 2 of the *Nicomachean ethics* and Aristotle’s treatment of politics as the master of these arts and sciences since it aims at the good for all, not just for the one individual. While the topic at hand is *leadership* as distinct from the formal role of statesmanship or headship that Aristotle refers to when discussing politics, the point is salient in discussing why we have reason to think that leadership might be a virtue and if so what kind of virtue it might be.

²⁹ Kellerman (2004).

³⁰ Ünal et al. (2012), pp. 5–19.

³¹ Slote, 1993, pp. 5–37.

self-sufficiency and purports to demonstrate that social democracy is the best political environment to promote that virtue. Thus, for Slote, virtue ethics grounds the value and vindication of democracy. A similar argument can be made, that grounds the value of leadership in virtue ethics but does so more generally by demonstrating that leadership serves not just one virtue but rather the broader goal of flourishing.

A parallel can be drawn between our grounding of leadership as a master virtue in eudaimonia, insofar as it serves human flourishing, with Slote's grounding of liberal democratic political values in the virtue of self-sufficiency. That is, Slote shows how virtue ethics can demonstrate the value of the political system and values of liberal democracy—because they directly and best serve the virtue of self-sufficiency in members. Similarly, our account of leadership as a master virtue grounds leadership in eudaimonia—the kind of leadership that subsumes other goals and ends to eudaimonia is both the kind we (and Ciulla et al.) are interested in *and* gains its content and ethical value from promoting eudaimonia.

The Four Ways Leadership Accounts Go Wrong on Ethics

In contrast with a model of leadership grounded in virtue ethics and eudaimonia, talk about “values” in discussions of leadership, particularly as it occurs in the context of the business leadership literature, can be misleading and confusing. Audiences comprised of business “leaders,” and those who address them on the topic of leadership, can be forgiven for thinking them receptive to hearing that leadership is, by its very nature, an ethically sound activity improved and displayed by ethically sound character. Ironically, they may well be right. But if so, it is for reasons other than they think, and given the kind of criteria for genuine leadership outlined above, arguably few politicians or CEO's would merit the appellation “leader,” in anything approaching an Aristotelian sense.

But even outside of this context, when we consider who are the kinds of leaders we allegedly want and admire—remembering here that there is good reason to suppose what we allege we want is not always what we do want, we have different biases and vested interests. The centrality of values talk also leads to the risk of conflating mere authority and power with moral authority and superiority.³² If we are not clear about the role that the moral values are playing in particular cases of leadership—for example that the leadership is being aimed *at* a morally valuable objective but may not be done in an ethically palatable

manner—we can confuse ourselves in dangerous and important ways, such as transferring the moral gloss of the valued ethical objective of leadership and projecting it on to the moral character of the leader themselves. It is partly this that is at the root of the kind of cult of the CEO/president that Hoopes identifies.³³ In all cases, clarity about the nature and role of ethics in leadership is required—and again, not because we disagree with Ciulla that the sense of leadership we are interested in is leadership that is ethical and in some sense a virtue. It is because we do agree, and therefore do not want to judge precipitously that our leaders do in fact exhibit the virtue of good leadership or, in an Aristotelian sense, leadership *per se*.

Contrary to the Aristotelian account that, we have been examining, some definitions of leadership attempt do value neutrality. Thus, Bass' account reduces “leadership to influence,” and “the production of a change in circumstances achieved via a change in perceptions and motivations of followers.” He sees the “leader” as “the individual whose balance sheet shows more of these effects than others.”³⁴ House and Howell, in their seminal account, note that charismatic leadership can be used to both desirable and undesirable ends—making the distinction between socialized charismatic leadership that is to be preferred from personalized charismatic leadership that is generally used to morally undesirable ends.³⁵ Rost defines leadership as “an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes”.³⁶ This neutrality is implicit in Kellerman's thesis that we need to take into account negative or evil leadership.³⁷ These are the exceptions in modern accounts of leadership. And while value neutrality maybe be desirable in a great many circumstances involving judgment and adjudication, leadership, on the account we have examined, cannot be one of them.

Closer to the Aristotelian notion of leadership as a virtue or master art is Burns's account of transforming leadership as an activity whereby “people can be lifted into their better selves.”³⁸ That is, it operates at the level of values, and operates by improving them. Transforming leadership occurs when leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of morality. It is “*moral* in that it raises the level of human conduct and ethical aspiration of both leader and led.”³⁹ This is reminiscent of those leaders whom we see, as in the close of Lincoln's First Inaugural

³² Hoopes (2003), pp. 273–282.

³³ Hoopes (2007).

³⁴ Bass (1990).

³⁵ House and Howell (1992), p. 102.

³⁶ Rost (1991).

³⁷ Kellerman (2004).

³⁸ Burns (1978).

³⁹ Burns (1978), p. 20.

Address, as appealing to “the better angels of our natures.” Although Burns sees transforming leadership as affecting both leaders and the led, his emphasis is on improvements in the ethical assessments made by followers rather than the ethical actions of the leader toward the followers or in their own private lives. This emphasis may hide, though it ultimately cannot avoid, some of the thorniest ethical issues with regard to the nature of leadership—like the problem of dirty hands. Suppose, as Machiavellians would have it and as is all too often alleged; that in order to raise the level of human conduct one must act unethically?

Den Hartog and Belschak for example elide this very issue when in discussion of ethical leaders they note that “The research on ethical leadership to date shows that ethical leaders inspire high levels of commitment and trust and foster desirable behaviors among followers”⁴⁰ In addition to this posited instrumental value for authentic leadership, the authors then find that such ethical leadership can in essence be faked—that so-called “Machiavellian” leaders can in essence perform an ethical leadership that does not correlate to their privately held views.⁴¹ Further, when followers do recognize that a leader’s externally ethical behavior does not match their internal views or character, i.e., that it is not “authentic”, this leadership can “make their leadership less impactful.”⁴² Leadership that is in part valued because its ethical character is instrumentally valuable in producing desired behaviors and outcomes from followers and that can in essence be faked is not the kind of robust grounding in ethics that shows the kind of relationship between leadership and ethics that we are here trying to establish. It may explicitly claim an ethical aspect to leadership but it cannot successfully ground one. It certainly would not ground leadership as a virtue, virtues serve human flourishing but they are never purely instrumental. Nor is it clear that this claim for an ethical aspect for leadership is successful—ethically done leadership or leadership that talks with followers about values may contingently be instrumentally valuable in meeting organizational goals but the Machiavellian skeptic is far from answered—for what can instrumentalist accounts say about cases where ethically done leadership ceases to be instrumentally valuable? What if unethically done leadership becomes more effective? And what if the ends and goals that are being served by such leadership are themselves unethical? Certainly in none of these cases are the ends that are instrumentally served likely to be the eudaimonia of followers.

On the flipside—consider cases where the ends to be met are in fact the eudaimonia of followers but we have no

commitment to ethically done leadership (beyond the prescriptive)—what happens to democratic decision making, consensus and equal input when leadership is understood to be fundamentally connected to the welfare of the followers but at the expense of the moral standing of those leaders in charge? More generally, how do we respect the distinction that Hoopes notes between leading *for values* and leading *by values*?⁴³

Many accounts of leadership illustrate just how loose talk about values can be. They either deny or ignore any connection with ethics—some even making it a point of pride—with many of them offering accounts of what we do in fact value rather than what we should (ultimately) value.

Not all values are ethical or moral values; not all ethical or moral values are ones we would all agree with or endorse (a leader as much as anyone might well have radically mistaken moral values and be ruthlessly consistent in holding to and expressing them). And not all of those are sufficient for the Aristotelian, grounding in eudaimonia that we have expressed. Thus, a focus on “values” as important in a leader is not sufficient for showing the leadership is ethically valuable.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the discussions of “managing meaning”⁴⁴ as a task of leadership. DePree, for example, tells us that “the first responsibility of the leader is to define reality”⁴⁵ and then achieve “momentum” among followers to achieve the “vision” articulated by the leader.⁴⁶ For Smircich and Morgan leaders “shape and interpret situations into a common interpretation of reality” as “an important foundation for organized activity.”⁴⁷ Takala also endorses this view in his discussion of Plato on leadership.⁴⁸ But apart from an account of objective value, of what is right and good, such accounts fail to distinguish leadership from mere influence. Not only do such accounts fail to account for the sense we have that the (true) leader gets things right in this area, but they intentionally distance themselves from substantive ethical issues. Furthermore, they regard it as a virtue of their accounts and theories that the “ethics” drops out. Without explicitly saying so, they insist, on divorcing leadership from ethics.

To a certain extent this “management of meaning” is implied in the common talk of leadership “vision”—we hear about skills such as “shaping views,” “selling objectives.” One way of approaching these accounts is to bear in mind the balance between and the origin of these

⁴³ Hoopes (2007).

⁴⁴ See, for example: Smircich and Morgan (1982), DePree (2010) and Takala (1998).

⁴⁵ DePree (2010), p. 5.

⁴⁶ DePree (2010), pp. 8–9.

⁴⁷ Smircich and Morgan (1982), p. 261.

⁴⁸ Takala (1998), pp. 785–798.

⁴⁰ Den Hartog et al. (2012), p. 35.

⁴¹ Den Hartog et al. (2012), p. 44.

⁴² Den Hartog et al. (2012), p. 45.

meanings and values. At the extreme end, we have accounts where meaning and value is meant to emanate from the leader. In such cases, a large part of the role of leadership is to convince followers of their merits. Another extreme would be for the leader to (however organically or however genuinely) determine or represent the actual values of the followers and pursue these—whatever they are. It is this kind of account that is so often decried in the despair over politicians who are overly influenced by focus groups and fail to “show leadership” instead of merely pandering to popular opinion. Few would apply the term “leader” to someone who merely mirrors the average or median public opinion, nor would we think that someone who happens to agree with and thus be an effective barometer of the values of followers is therefore a good leader, even if they also happen to have the other attendant skills of leadership. We are not inclined to call it “leadership” when President Obama waits until the majority of Americans support same-sex marriage before “bravely” announcing that he shares this view. Of course there are also various kinds of interactions between these two accounts. Both of these accounts are inconsistent with the Aristotelian account of leadership as a master virtue we have outlined. They are fundamentally inconsistent with any theory of leadership that sees ethics and values as intrinsically connected.

As Ciulla notes, “transforming leaders have very strong values. They do not water down their values and moral ideals by consensus, but rather they elevate people using conflict to engage followers and help them reassess their own values and needs.”⁴⁹ This is explicitly contrasted with less ambitious forms of leadership; those that are characterized by “consensus procedures and goals” that Ciulla explicitly claims “erode such leadership.”⁵⁰ It is also contrasted of course with the kind of democratic decision making, consensus, and equal input that we might think important. There is an underlying assumption in Ciulla’s account without which it would not be consistent with Burns’. That is, the “strong values” that transforming leaders adhere to and promote are genuinely good and just. Securing a role for values in leadership does not secure an ethical status for leadership. After all, the “value” in question might for example be monetary profit or leadership might be a misguided or unethical way to pursue even ethically valuable ends. Adherence to simply any set of values, right or wrong, is not sufficient. Leaders, insofar as they are leaders, fallibly promote goodness and justice.

This is precisely why Avolio’s theory of authentic transformational leadership, in contrast to what he terms “pseudotransformational” leadership does not sufficiently

ground leadership and ethics. In contrast to the pseudo-transformational leader who “caters in the long run to his or her self-interests,” “truly transformational leaders transcend their own self-interests for one of two reasons: utilitarian or moral principles.”⁵¹ The former of these represents the goals of the group to which the followers and the leader belong. But while the element of sacrifice of personal self-interests by the leader is a familiar element from our discussions here, this is not sufficient for grounding the relationship of leadership and ethics. No content is given to what these principles are—are they moral principles or other kinds of values? endorsable moral principles or mistaken ones? Firstly, the “utilitarian” goals to which the leader’s self-interests are being subsumed need not be morally good ones. It matters that in either case, either moral or utilitarian principles, are grounded in *correct* moral values. For example, it is not clear on this view that a Hitler need, be a pseudo-transformational leader. In fact Avolio is correct that Hitler left “a legacy of destruction”⁵² but this need not be the case. A leader who sacrifices their own self-interests to the overall goals of the group where these goals are morally neutral or objectionable would qualify, on Avolio’s model, as a transformational leader. That they do shows that Avolio’s model does not offer us the strong relationship between leadership and ethics that we are trying to establish. Avolio’s pseudo-transformational leaders may be “self-oriented, self-aggrandizing, exploitative, and narcissistic”⁵³ but it does not follow that beyond the absence of these qualities authentic transformational leaders are otherwise ethical.

The would-be values focused accounts of leadership in the business literature also differ from the Aristotelian account of leadership we offer in the role that values play. Rather than serving, or being necessary to promote, flourishing in followers, to the extent that the recent business literature focuses on the need for leaders to have and be true to values, it is for pragmatic, instrumental reasons.

In short, these accounts, while emphasizing the role of values in ethical leadership, are agnostic on what values these might be (beyond specifying that the leader should have values and transmit these to followers, they are silent on whether these need to be correct moral values) and moreover values are taken as important in ethical leadership in the main for instrumental reasons. Even when these accounts come close to asserting that leadership that is conducted in accord with ethical values might increase followers (subordinates’) well-being, this too is valued for instrumental reasons. The values in question and the well-being of followers are subsumed to the organizational

⁴⁹ Ciulla (1995), p. 15.

⁵⁰ Burns (1991), p. xii.

⁵¹ Avolio (2002), p. 8.

⁵² Avolio (2002), p. 8.

⁵³ Avolio (2002), p. 8.

outcomes. In the recent special issue of the *Journal of Business Ethics* focused on the relationship between ethics, leadership and identity for example, Avey et al. tell us that ethical leadership results in both increased job satisfaction and well-being of followers, and well-being of followers is important to organizations because it results in increased job satisfaction and organizational commitment among employees.⁵⁴ Den Hartog, in the same issue, tell us “ethical leadership ... is a value-driven form of leadership”, which influences “the self-concept and beliefs of their followers”⁵⁵ and ultimately their work output and focus on the organization’s good rather than (just) their own.⁵⁶ Unal et al. call for a more robust normative foundation to ethically *done* supervision (including acknowledging the existence of both ethical and unethical leadership thus implicitly rejecting the conflation of leadership and good leadership), but are thus limited to one of Ciulla’s three senses of “good leadership”.⁵⁷

The model of servant leadership, common in the literature, sits in this area of leadership that instrumentally serves follower output and chosen ends, which need not be endorsable moral values. While in some ways closest to a broadly Aristotelian model of leadership proposed here, with its emphasis on serving over other objectives the needs of followers, the overall “good” that the model of leadership is shown to serve are the organizational goals. While it may prove its claims that ethical leadership works best, this “works best” is in large part defined as serving the organizational goals and improving job role performance by subordinates. Liden et al. explain that “The relation between the “behaving ethically” dimension of servant leadership and follower job performance ... suggests that special concern be shown for selecting leaders of integrity and ethics.”⁵⁸ Ethical behavior by leaders is thus, on Liden’s view, a desirable add-on (not intrinsic to

leadership) because of its facilitation of improved performance by followers.

On the strongest interpretation, this offers merely a contingent finding that there is a connection between serving the needs of followers and achieving one’s own ends without answering most of Ciulla’s three questions or telling us way that should be the case, on the weakest and to the cynical it represents an argument for a leadership style that serves the needs of followers so that and because it will increase their work output and support for the organization or group’s goals (whatever and how ethical or otherwise these might be). Both interpretations cede too much ground to the Machiavellian skeptic—either because the relationship is merely contingent or because the ends served need not be ethical goals at all.

Servant leadership may well be “based on the premise that to bring out the best in their followers, leaders rely on one-on-one communication to understand the abilities, needs, desires, goals, and potential of those individuals”, emphasize personal integrity and long-term relationships, and thus “shows promise as a way to build trust with employees, customers, and communities”⁵⁹ but it does so without examining whether the values that followers reason about and support leaders to pursue are correct ones, nor is it clear why this grounding need be necessary. And since it leaves itself open to an interpretation that would consistently allow the inauthentic performance of such a style of leadership to instrumental ends (namely increasing job role output by followers), it cannot be our answer to whether there is an intrinsic connection between leadership and ethics. The Machiavellian skeptic, who questions whether there need be any connection between leadership and ethics, is not answered by the servant leadership account.

This is also true in the case of another popular distinction made in the literature on leadership—that between the so-called personalized and socialized leadership. Personalized leaders, according to the literature, are “self-aggrandizing, non-egalitarian, and exploitive”.⁶⁰ In contrast, socialized leadership, (the endorsed option in the literature), is that of leaders who are “collectively oriented, egalitarian, and nonexploitive.”⁶¹ Here again, the more “supportive, sensitive, nurturing” socialized leaders that House and Howell identify as common to the accounts of Burns, Avolio, Bass and others “transform the needs, values, preferences, desires and aspirations of followers from self-interests to collective interests. Further, they cause followers to become highly committed to the leader’s mission, and to perform above and beyond the call of

⁵⁴ Avey et al. (2012), p. 22 Elsewhere in their article the authors note that ethical leadership yields increased “psychological ownership” by followers (p. 35), by which they mean a feeling of responsibility among followers (p. 24) which in turn “encourages them to take responsibility for work projects at a time when restructuring managers are being asked to do more than ever” (p. 32).

⁵⁵ Den Hartog et al. (2012), p. 35.

⁵⁶ Den Hartog et al. (2012), p. 36. The authors note this value-driven leadership lead followers to focus more on the needs and the good of the organization beyond their own individual needs and interests, “increases attachment to the collective and their willingness to make personal sacrifices”.

⁵⁷ Ünal et al. (2012), pp. 5–19. Note though that despite expressing such a need, the authors themselves are not very robust in their ethical grounding of the issue. Their treatment of the ethical evaluations and grounds of leadership decisions essentially reduces to a brief, cursory introduction of teleological, deontological and virtue ethics and then treating these as a checklist of criteria that an action needs to meet in order to qualify as “ethical”.

⁵⁸ Liden et al. (2008), p. 174.

⁵⁹ Liden et al. (2008), p. 162.

⁶⁰ House and Howell (1992), p. 81.

⁶¹ House and Howell (1992), p. 81.

duty.”⁶² That is, while such accounts may operate at the level of character traits and of values, they are endorsed because of their instrumental value—simply put, they increase follower work levels.⁶³ In seeking to explain why socialized leaders “perform better... than personalized leaders,”⁶⁴ Mumford notes the central predictor role of integrity on the part of the socialized leader⁶⁵ and their use of “prosocial” arguments, in contrast to personalized leaders who are less able to “grasp the needs and concerns of others.”⁶⁶ While such an explanation involves a nod to the needs of followers and the integrity of leaders it is essentially reduced to a performance driver, rather than any exploration of why this might be. On this view, the socialized leadership style is instrumentally valuable, and the theory offers no grounding of the implied relationship between such leadership and ethics other than the instrumental nor a focus on what such ethics or values might be—correct or otherwise. Socialized leaders are preferred because “personalized leaders undermine organizational performance.”⁶⁷ They are really referring to ethical leadership’s efficacy as a performance driver, with no commitment to what such performance is being driven toward. Further, while there is some indication by Mumford that the kind of socialized leadership requires some personal traits, some aspects of what we would call a good ethical character—for example, not being ego driven in order to be able to work with a team of leaders/managers⁶⁸—others suggest leadership style over personal traits—that is, “the capacity to present arguments in a positive social context.”⁶⁹

However, Ciulla’s three questions are not answered—the preference for socialized leadership (on instrumental grounds)—does not insure that we require leadership that is ethically done, aimed at ethical ends and by ethical persons. If socialized charismatic leadership is equally effective when aimed at unethical objectives of organizations, Mumford’s and House’s accounts gives us no reason that is not stipulative or prescriptive to prefer a leadership that does meet all three of Ciulla’s criteria nor to think that leadership and ethics need be connected. House and Howell, for example, note that while both the socialized and

personalized forms of charismatic leadership are more effective than non-charismatic leadership we have prescriptive reasons to prefer socialized charismatic leadership. At the same time, they note that because of our prescriptive preference for the generally more ethical socialized leader over the personalized we will likely only be able to do so through legislative “preventative mechanisms” and checks and balances and even that may not be sufficient to do the job. Nor can House and Howell’s suggested approach of supplementing such measures with individuals having awareness of the potential for negative and dangerous styles of charismatic leadership.⁷⁰ This approach does not get us further than any other prescriptive approach. The kinds of restrictions that would do what House and Howell want them to do—to define and identify the desirable kinds of leadership that are good in all three of Ciulla’s senses—are precisely the kinds of conceptual connections we are advocating and that need to be drawn out rather than avoiding the question of definition.

Therefore, for this reason and in this way, both theoretical and practical accounts of leadership must rest on the study of ethics. This includes a robust, prudent and ongoing identification and examination of what morally just and good ethical principles and actions are, and what makes them so. It also requires protecting those conditions—the many freedoms—that make such inquiry possible and pertinent.

IV

There are, however, also accounts of leadership to which the idea of objective value is central, where not just any values will serve the purpose. Values, along with facts about what is right, just, and fair, are located outside of both leader and followers and not just relative to, or a matter of, whatever anyone happens to think. Descriptively speaking it is a fact that people do have different ideas about what is ethical (right and valuable). But nothing normative follows from this. It does not follow from the fact that people believe different things about what is moral, that what is in fact moral is merely a matter of what anyone thinks. On these accounts of leadership, the leader as moral reformer (e.g., Lincoln and King) is the one who is better (“ahead of”) the rest of us in apprehending these objective (i.e. correct) ethical truths and “good” values. It is not (just) the case that the public at the time (nor perhaps even all of Lincoln or King’s followers) held the goals of ending slavery and of achieving civil rights. Indeed part of why we and the respondents to Kouzes’ question⁷¹ are so likely to

⁶² House and Howell (1992), p. 82.

⁶³ Note that this account also operates at the level of the character and traits of the leader, thus fitting another of the ways that we argue accounts of leadership preemptively assume that leadership and ethics go together.

⁶⁴ Mumford (2006), p. 275.

⁶⁵ Mumford (2006), p. 275.

⁶⁶ Mumford (2006), p. 276.

⁶⁷ Mumford (2006), p. 281.

⁶⁸ Mumford (2006), p. 280.

⁶⁹ Mumford (2006), p. 280.

⁷⁰ House and Howell (1992), p. 102.

⁷¹ Kouzes (2010), p. xvii.

name these two as paradigms of admired leaders is just because this was not the case; that we think of them as ahead of the sensibilities of their followers and the general public. Nor do we think of these goals as particular values of the two individuals who were able to convince others of these through their skill and charisma—so the “managing meaning” accounts don’t capture the leadership that we attribute to these individuals. We don’t think that moral reformers are “leaders” just because they are able to convince others of their point of view. That’s just not what we perceive them to be doing when we call them leaders. It matters that we think that it is the correct point of view, that there is a fact of the matter, and this is what they convince their followers of. Rather, what is at play is that we feel there is something objectively correct about their goals. We endorse them and their goals retrospectively from the view of history as “visionary”, and we admire their skill and ability to achieve these.

This is also at play in the incredibly common metaphors of pathways in leadership discourse—again and again we hear and talk of leaders who “forge the trail”, who have a vision of “the way forward”. In each of these cases the geographical metaphor’s underlying assumption is that there is a progress, an improving, a movement toward values that are objectively preferable (equality over inequality, social justice over injustice etc.). But it is this idea of an objective truth apprehended (naturally and unmistakably) by the leader that also underlies Plato’s account of the philosopher-king. Such accounts invariably move us closer to the “father knows best” theory of leadership along with a concept of “authority” that is grounded in an alleged special knowledge that may be inaccessible to others. (Surely the CEO, President, Prime Minister knows relevant matters of fact that we do not know and so acts accordingly?) These accounts rely on blind obedience rather than the considered endorsement by followers that a morally robust concept of leadership implies. It is this considered endorsement that is one of the positive appeals of “leadership” over mere authority. One need not reject the idea that morality and value is objective to reject the idea of the “father knows best” theory of leadership along with the idea of relying on “special knowledge.”

On the Platonic account, there is an objective truth about how society and individual lives should be ordered and the philosopher-king just is, in virtue of their special capacities, by definition, the individual who sees this. These truths are objective, in the sense that their truth is independent of, and not reliant upon, what any individual follower thinks. Unlike the philosopher-king (who has knowledge of unchanging reality as such in knowing the Forms) some of these truths are beyond us and we, the ship-hands are in no position to judge or object to these

values. And yet this is at least one source of consternation and tension with regard to the concept of leadership. We seem committed to the idea of a leader as, in part, one who sees truths and worthwhile goals better than we do, and yet as moral agents (and people) we cannot relinquish trying to come to know for ourselves what is right and good and challenging the leader as we see fit. Leadership can never demand blind obedience, and insofar as the notion of a philosopher-king demands such obedience, it is no more palatable than a dictator.⁷²

Nor is the question resolved by answering whether we think there are such objective truths that may be accessible to some among us. The question of whether there is an objective truth or value does not address what follows from that. We might still not want a perfect authority, a Philosopher-King because of other goods that are precluded by this (such as eudaimonia). The idea that objective truths and values are to be pursued and enforced on behalf of the populace for their own good and in the interests of well-being and justice, but without their approval or consent, is rightly terrifying after the 20th Century. Models of leadership where the leader chooses and dictates what is “best” without due consideration of, and considered endorsement by, followers or others who may be affected, are rightly generally regarded (though not always so regarded in the literature on leadership), as unacceptable on either or both moral and practical grounds. Even those, like Graham, who think that there is nothing wrong in principle with the idea of a philosopher-king, reject the idea in practice. Who after all, fits the job description? Also unacceptable are models of leadership where the values pursued are those of either the leader alone or simply a mirror reflection of (or “led by”) what the followers value. Ideally we want leaders (Nelson Mandela or a Martin Luther King) who both articulate and help shape the desires and values of those they lead toward valuable moral goods, and objectively good values, and who do so in a way that is right, just and objectively good. Tyrants who focus merely on external good and pursue goals at any cost, regardless of the opinion of his or her followers, are not “leaders” in the Aristotelian sense of leadership as a master virtue. They have not subsumed subsidiary goals and objectives to the requirements of leadership properly understood.

V

The claim that objectively sound ethical values are required for leadership does not, by itself, show that an acceptable

⁷² See Popper (1957), for what is perhaps the best known critique of Plato’s philosopher-king in the 20th century. For a limited defence of Plato see Graham (1983, 2002).

account of leadership belongs to virtue ethics alone, or that an adequate account of leadership cannot be given by other normative ethical theories (e.g. Kantianism or some form of consequentialism). Such a claim would need to further connect leadership, theoretically and practically, in the right kind of relationship with human flourishing. It is the virtues' fostering of human flourishing, or *eudaimonia*, that grounds both virtue ethics as a whole and the status of the individual virtues as such.⁷³ For leadership to qualify as a master virtue, all of the skills and "excellences" associated with various aspects of leadership need to serve human flourishing, both for the agent (the leader) and for those around him or her.

Oakley's distinction between virtue ethics and the character-based expressions of Kantian and consequentialist ethics give us a way into distinguish the virtue ethicists' claims about the primacy of character from those of leadership theorists' generally. Oakley identifies the "normative conception" orienting these accounts as the point of difference. A consequentialist account that emphasizes the role of character does so by describing the ethically good character as the character best able to apply the normative conception of that theory—that is, the outcome with the most utility. Whereas a Kantian account of the goodness of an agent's character would make such an evaluation based on the ability of the agent to, in Oakley's words, "determine the universalisability of their maxims".⁷⁴ In neither case is the focus on character sufficient to qualify it as consonant with virtue ethics. Character may be the focus of these accounts, but the criteria and the evaluative bar are not the same as that of virtue ethics.

Just as accounts that emphasized the instrumental worth of values based leadership in producing increased worker outputs were not sufficient to show that leadership is intrinsically valuable or values-based, nor do accounts that show the character of "leaders" in the workplace to be instrumentally valuable at producing such follower outputs show that character is necessary nor sufficient for leadership.⁷⁵ Nor do they come close to fitting our Aristotelian model of leadership as a master virtue—the character in question, just as the values were in the parallel accounts, subsumed to the organizational outputs by being instrumentally valuable for their ability to produce these results.

We should not be surprised to find that a focus on character is not sufficient for virtue ethics: not just any focus on character qualifies a theory as belonging to virtue ethics and in fact it is precisely the strawman fallacy reductions of virtue ethics by some opponents that depict virtue ethics this way. The locus of evaluation may be the

same (that is, the internal traits of persons), but the normative conception to which these traits address themselves is different—whether it be calculating the maximum utility or assessing the best course of action to achieve certain strategic aims, convince others of the desirability of a course of action, maintain morale among followers etc. The (essentialist) concept of human flourishing, central to virtue ethics, is lacking. While Oakley correctly notes that different instantiations of virtue ethics vary in their conception of the relationship between the virtues and human flourishing⁷⁶ it is in all of these cases a tight relationship that grounds the virtues that is not captured by the kind of character traits that are posited in these other accounts of character in relation to leadership. In the case of leadership these traits, even if they match up with the virtues of a virtue ethics, are valued because they are strategically (instrumentally) useful in a leader, not because expressing them is, or yields, human flourishing in a virtue ethics sense.

Because it is obliged to consider only the outcomes, consequentialism simpliciter cannot account for the positive connotations that we attribute to "leadership" over equally instrumentally effective power or managerial skill—the reasons why Ciulla notes that, in English at least "the term *leadership* is an honorific".⁷⁷ It cannot capture the positive evaluation attributed to achieving the same aims by a positively valued leadership in contrast with the same outcomes achieved merely by power or managerial skill. (The distinctions are not always made—and to some they hardly seem relevant. A leader just is a good manager who get the right results.)

Although a focus on character is insufficient to establish a meaningful connection with virtue ethics, accounts of leadership that rely essentially on an elaboration of the "good" character of the leader can be supported by virtue ethics. Right actions are specified by reference to the actions of the virtuous agent. Hursthouse notes that virtue ethics specifies the virtuous agent "in terms of the virtues, and then specifies these, not merely as dispositions to right action, but as the character traits (which are dispositions to feel and react as well as act in certain ways) required for *eudaimonia*."⁷⁸ According to Oakley "Virtue ethicists give primacy to character in the sense that they believe reference to character is *essential* in a correct account of right and wrong action."⁷⁹ While this emphasis on character fits squarely with the Aristotelian account of leadership as a master virtue, as we noted above the "primacy of character" in determining the correct action can lead us into

⁷³ See, for example, Hursthouse (1991), pp. 225–226.

⁷⁴ Oakley (1996), p. 132.

⁷⁵ See, for example, Avey et al. (2012), p. 22, 25, 32.

⁷⁶ Oakley (1996), p. 133.

⁷⁷ Ciulla (2005), p. 325.

⁷⁸ Hursthouse (1991), p. 226.

⁷⁹ Oakley (1996), p. 131.

thinking that these accounts dovetail more closely with popular accounts of leaders and leadership than they do. Focus on the character of the leader is often used to distinguish leadership from power or authority simpliciter. In contrast with depictions of power gained through inheritance or other arbitrary means, leadership is depicted through its focus on character as earned, or rightful power and influence. Accounts of leadership that place character as central to or constitutive of leadership in these approaches abound, often as a corrective to earlier accounts of management by incentives, coercion or other systematized, behavioral approaches. In response to these, accounts that valorise “leadership” over management often dwell on the character of the leader.

Nevertheless, asserting that a leader must be a person of good character tells us remarkably little apart from an account of (i) what good character is, as in virtue ethics, and (ii) why good character is essential to leadership as can be seen in the Aristotelian account of leadership as a master virtue. Only a person of good character is capable of advancing both their own well-being and that of others through the exercise of their leadership.⁸⁰ Only a person of good character will not (intentionally) subvert the ends to which leadership, properly understood, strives by seeking goals and ends (for example, power and influence for personal gain or their own sake) incompatible with, or not conducive to the ends of leadership understood as intrinsically ethical and a master virtue.

Plato has an answer to the question of who can be a leader (or Philosopher-King). Not only do they have to be born with certain capacities, they also need to be educated in the specific way Plato lays out in *The Republic*. While recognizing that leadership may well require both certain constitutive (genetic) capacities as well as those cultivated by means of education, the idea that leaders are somehow essentially different from or other than, followers or the rest of us needs to be challenged. Is “leadership” as a master virtue, something that should be cultivated by each of us? Given that people have various roles and duties to fulfill it is likely that some of those roles cast them as a follower while undoubtedly others—parenting, teaching, working with others, put them in positions of leadership. The very same role, whether that of being a teacher or a CEO, suitably understood, may require leaders to be followers and vice-versa, in such a way that being one and the other are essentially bound up with one another. Good leadership may and likely does, require virtues associated

with being a person who is capable of, and at the same time is a good “follower” and vice versa. Consider the fact that those in positions of management will often see their primary role as that of a follower—one that does the bidding of those higher up and in charge. This may be used by the manager (think of university deans), as mitigating certain responsibilities of good leadership. However, the claim that “I was merely following orders,” is never sufficient in and of itself to absolve responsibilities associated with leadership—whether one is a foot soldier or a dean. In contrast to the approach that sees leadership as largely the preserve of CEOs and politicians, some leadership theory emphasizes how many of us are leaders. Few however emphasize the inescapable crossover and connections in everyday life of leadership roles with those of following and being led.

Given the extent of this overlap as well as the kinds and extent of various compromises that inevitably must be made, it is worth asking whether a virtuous person, or a person who could practise leadership as master virtue, would be interested in the job. Note that such references to “the job”, the role make it abundantly clear that leadership *qua* role is itself already separated from the quality of leadership. Remember that Plato’s Philosopher-King is reluctant to take on the role. In regard to contemporary politicians it is sometimes said that anyone who wants the job should not have it. And the reason that wanting the job *ipso facto* may be thought to rule a person out is because such a position is regarded as incompatible with virtue and leadership in the broad Aristotelian sense as a master virtue. Leaders frequently rely on such a tacit understanding of the requirements of the position of leadership to eschew meaningful culpability. Consider the fact that an aspect of being an ordinary university employee—let’s say a professor, routinely requires one to fabricate, distort, deceive, use subterfuge and hyperbole, and otherwise go easy on the truth. The idea that those in more substantial positions of leadership (but also followers), must frequently put value and truth to the rear, gains force. No person is an island. And insofar as leadership, conceived of as a master venture, requires a reasonably ethical environment in order to operate at all—let alone effectively—even if leadership were possible, its scope may be severely limited.

Our prima facie and ethically robust accounts of leadership have an emphasis on the leader’s judgment—the ability to judge what the right goals to be pursued are, when the timing is right to pursue them, what strategies are likely to be successful, how far or how emphatically to pursue a goal or objective in a way that seems to parallel the phronesis of Aristotelian virtue ethics. As Hursthouse notes, the Aristotelian sense of a virtue requires not only that the possessor have the trait that makes them morally good but that they correctly judge when and how best to act on the trait—“a virtuous person is a morally good

⁸⁰ Avey et al. (2012), p. 21. In positing that good ethical character is instrumentally valuable in serving business motives, Avey et al. fall short of both of these marks.

excellent, or admirable person who acts and reacts well, rightly, as she should—she gets things right.”⁸¹ In other words, the virtuous agent does the right thing in the right way—the implication here is one of skill as well as of intention. Suppose however that one lives in what is tantamount to a moral vacuum of sorts? What are the chances then of being able to exercise such virtues?

Not all, or even most, of the literature that sees “value” as central to leadership should be equated with virtue theory. Kouzes places values firmly at the center of leadership, noting that the common characteristic of those most named as admired leaders is that of “strong beliefs about matters of principle. (Hitler might be thought to have had such beliefs as well.) His account is typical both of a range of leadership literature and of our *prima facie* thinking about leadership. House, for example, notes that among other traits, charismatic leaders have “exceptionally strong convictions in the moral correctness of their beliefs”.⁸² Leaders like Lincoln all have, or had, unwavering commitment to a clear set of values. They all are, or were, passionate about their causes.”⁸³ Several questions arise with regard to such accounts. Is such commitment to values constitutive of leadership, or does the admiration of those asked come from the fact that the “leadership” of those cited was applied to a project and values that these observers endorsed. Additionally, does a commitment to such (presumably admirable) values and principles suffice or do the leaders have to be overall “successful” in their pursuits as well? Suppose the Civil War was won by the south; England was defeated in World War II and the civil rights movement in the U.S. failed? What then becomes of Lincoln, Churchill and King?

Kouzes’s conclusion does not necessarily follow from the evidence he cites. For one thing it assumes that those asked know which qualities in a leader they do most admire and that they are answering truthfully. It might be that those who are asked are actually answering as they think they should believe rather than what they do believe—citing qualities that they would like to most admire but in fact do not. Suppose those being asked are in the middle of some kind of leadership training course and thus primed to think of themselves as (presumably ethically good) leaders? Asking which leaders one most “admires” and then taking these as the paradigmatic of leadership *per se* is not only tantamount to “leading the witness,” it also begs the question in assuming such characteristics are essential to leadership and to what we want in leaders. Different

answers might be given if asked “who in your opinion showed the most leadership?” or “who most embodies the concept of leadership?” rather than “which qualities in a leader do you most admire?” or trying to glean those qualities from a list of those most admired.

Our answer to the question “Which architect do you most admire?” might plausibly be to respond with the example of an architect who donates the bulk of her professional time and skills to designing hospitals and water sanitation facilities in poorer countries, although we might instead name another architect altogether when asked whom we consider the most skilled architect. Seeing that these are two different questions with (conceivably) different responses helps to show that Kouzes’s example does not prove that values are constitutive of leadership—or that people generally tend to think so. Thus while Kouzes’s account does place ethics, value and principle at the core of leadership, and thus superficially resembles a virtue theory account, it does not tell us what leadership is or why value is essential—if it is. It is a report on what some people *allegedly* think. It is however also what the intended audience of handbooks on leadership presumably wants to hear. After all, they mostly already are (or wish to be) in positions of management, presuming themselves to be “leaders” and want to know how to be the kind of leader others admire.

So leadership cannot be conceived as a virtue in the narrow, Aristotelian sense that traits such as courage and temperance are virtues and the accounts that assert that leadership just is good character or good ethics are mistaken. However, we believe that the broadly Aristotelian account outlined above demonstrates that leadership can and should be conceived of as a master virtue that, correctly understood, serves human flourishing. This is both a way of grounding leadership in ethics and showing that there is an intrinsic connection between leadership and ethics—one that goes beyond mere wishful thinking or stipulation. That this, we believe correct, sense of leadership requires that the leader subsume all other goals to that of human flourishing indicates both the nature of the connection between leadership and ethics as well as how high the bar is set—it retains the honorific sense of “leader” but very few will meet it. Certainly it is not the kind of personal quality that can be taught in a short time frame and then used to increase the profitability of any and all private companies (which is surely the sales pitch of most courses and manuals of frontline leadership that are so popular and profitable today). Further, the broadly Aristotelian account of leadership as a master virtue that serves human flourishing shows that just as leadership is not simply regular ethics—as Cordell’s account’s failure to account for the special case of leadership shows—yet it cannot be separated from regular ethics (*contra* those such as Machiavelli

⁸¹ Hursthouse (1999), p. 13.

⁸² House and Howell (1992), p. 87.

⁸³ Kouzes (2010), p. xvii.

who would claim that leadership and ethics are entirely separate or that leadership ethics is categorically different from regular ethics).

Directions for Further Research

Our argument shows how leadership can and should be grounded in a eudaimonistic framework using the conceptual framework that Aristotle provides us with although we do not claim to have shown that this need be the only way a connection between leadership and ethics can be grounded. This indicates two major directions for future research, one direct and one indirect. The direct area is to take the argument we have offered and explore how this might play out in specific and concrete contexts—how, for example, on this understanding of leadership, should the leaders of individual kinds of organizations and groups act in different contexts? How might we evaluate such leaders and how might we help them apply this framework to inform how they should pursue particular goals? The second major area of research is to explore how we might ground a connection between leadership and ethics on other models. How, for example, might a consequentialist ethics or a Kantian one ground such a connection? We believe we have shown how existing answers are lacking in some ways and offered one possible way to fill these gaps, a eudaimonistic one. But we do not claim to have shown that similar answers might not be possible for Kantian or consequentialist ethics. Similarly, the individual theories we have considered might be furthered in a way that fills these gaps, whether using our eudaimonistic approach or a potential Kantian or consequentialist one. As we argued above, we are sympathetic to the claims of those such as Burns, House and Howell, and Ciulla who believe that we are and should be interested in leadership that is “good” in all of these senses outlined above, and we would be keen to see further research that uses the arguments we have made to identify and fill these gaps.

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