How Much Aristotle Is in Levine and Boaks's Leadership Theory?

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A COMMENTARY ON Michael P. Levine and Jacqueline Boaks (2014), "What Does Ethics Have to do with Leadership?", *J Bus Ethics* 124: 225–242, http://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-013-1807-y

ABSTRACT

Levine and Boaks criticize the extant leadership literature for misrepresenting the connection between ethics and leadership. They propose a definition that they claim is novel and based on Aristotelian virtue ethics. This commentary argues that this approach, while it is an interesting idea, is essentially un-Aristotelian and that other approaches, for instance Alejo Sison's and Joanne Ciulla's are not only closer to Aristotle, but also do not have the problems that the authors identify in the mainstream of the leadership literature.

LEVINE AND BOAKS (2014) argue that there are misconceptions about the connection between leadership and ethics within the leadership ethics literature. They argue that Ciulla's (1995) claim that questions about leadership *a priori* are ones about "morally good and effective" leadership cannot be accepted universally, given that this, for example, is strongly at odds with the opinion of the Machiavellian skeptic (Levine and Boaks 2014: 226–227).

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Levine and Boaks want to replace the extant, and in their opinion misleading, definitions of leadership with their own. The core of their paper therefore lies in a reconceptualization of Aristotelian virtue ethics and a proposal to think of leadership as a master virtue. The authors (2014: 230) start by describing Aristotle's understanding of causality between means and ends, the hierarchy of ends, and the accompanying differentiation between arts and master arts, and then argue that there is a hierarchy of virtues. To reach this conclusion, the authors first portray leadership as a master art, before expanding their claim to the realm of a master virtue. The latter analogy rests upon the unique end that leadership pursues: human flourishing.

Building on this understanding of leadership as a master virtue, Levine and Boaks return to their paper's starting point and describe the supposed flaws of prevailing accounts of leadership with respect to ethics. Essentially, Levine and Boaks (2014: 240) argue that although leadership is not solely about ethics, the intrinsic link they proposed at the beginning of their explanations can be demonstrated and applied to gain a more sophisticated understanding of specific leadership problems, such as how leaders should be evaluated.

Levine and Boaks tackle an important topic – the relationship between ethics and leadership – and they do so from a much-needed philosophical perspective. The paper contains many deep insights that a real debate about leadership would benefit from. Ciulla (1995: 7) aptly summarized the situation in leadership theory twenty years ago:

> Scholars who either reject or ignore writings on ethics, usually end up either reinventing fairly standard philosophic distinctions and ethical theories, or doing without them and proceeding higgledy-piggledy with their discussion.

And we agree with Levine and Boaks that not much has changed: the only game in town is what House and Aditya (1997) and Brown and Treviño (2006) call the "social scientific study of leadership" and that delegitimizes all philosophical approaches to the study of leadership.

However, Levine and Boaks's paper has a blind spot itself. The two authors build their argument on not even a rudimentary leadership literature review; rather, they pick contributions from very diverse sources and claim that these are representative. We believe that this is a mistake, because it mixes rare philosophical approaches to leadership with "social scientific" mainstream approaches. As a result,

Levine and Boaks do not adequately consider existing philosophical approaches, such as Sison's approach, which focuses on the moral capital of leaders (Sison 2003, 2006), and Ciulla's ethical leadership approach.

In this short commentary we will not discuss the four fallacies that Levine and Boaks identify in leadership theory. We will instead concentrate on two main claims of their paper, namely: 1) that the existing definitions of leadership out there fall short in describing the role of ethics in leadership, and 2) that the authors offer a completely new definition themselves in line with Aristotelian virtue ethics.

Levine and Boaks (2014: 226f) frequently refer to Ciulla, whom they seem to view as a valid representative of the mainstream, and whose view merely stipulates a wished-for relationship between ethics and leadership. To us that is a strange strawman argument. In her work, Ciulla (1995) analyzed 20 years of leadership literature, found it lacking in the same areas as Levine and Boaks, and therefore proposed "that ethics is at the heart of leadership" (1995: 9). Levine and Boaks seem to argue that, like the mainstream, Ciulla conflates the "is" and "ought" of ethics in leadership. This is not the case, as has been made clear in many of Ciulla's subsequent publications, when there were hardly any philosophers engaged in leadership studies (Ciulla 2005: 323). Ciulla herself pointed to this deficiency and challenged prominent leadership scholars (1995: 5f). Just like Levine and Boaks, Ciulla (2005: 333) based her thoughts about the relationship between leadership and ethics on Aristotelian virtue ethics, and especially emphasized the notion of *arête* inherent in Aristotle's work. Consequently, her reference to the Hitler problem should be understood as a demonstration of the prevailing shortcomings in mainstream leadership literature (Ciulla 1995: 13).

Leadership as an Aristotelian Master Virtue?

Levine and Boaks choose Aristotelian virtue ethics as the theoretical base from which to develop their framework. However, they depart from Aristotle in two important respects: 1) they introduce the new concept of a master virtue through which leaders create human flourishing in others, and 2) they argue that Aristotle intended to have a hierarchy of virtues. Both claims are rather brave and, in our opin-

ion, wholly unnecessary to ground leadership in (Aristotelian) virtue ethics.

The authors (2014: 230) quote personal correspondence with Damian Cox, who expresses his skepticism regarding the authors' endeavor to ground leadership in ethics through Aristotle's virtue ethics:

> 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.

Levine and Boaks – without further explaining their reasoning – proceed by claiming that a) leadership can and should be viewed as an Aristotelian master virtue and that b) there should be a hierarchy of virtues. The massive clashes with Aristotelian virtue ethics they refer to as mere "technical restrictions" (2014: 230).

Levine and Boaks (2014: 230) acknowledge the difference between a master art and a master virtue:

> 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 . . .

The authors argue, rather cleverly, that "Aristotle of course clearly gives us grounds for seeing leadership as a master art" and that it is therefore only a small second step towards interpreting leadership as a master virtue. On the contrary, we think it is a very big step indeed. Virtues and arts are completely different categories that – in the case of a virtuous person – can appear to be connected, but Aristotle would have never, for example, put an aristocrat on the same level as a master craftsman: only one of them could cultivate the virtues.

Aristotle's doctrine of the mean holds that a virtue is the mean between two extremes (*Nicomachean Ethics* (hereinafter *NE*) II. 2). Again, Levine and Boaks (2014: 230) discount this central concept as a mere "technical restriction" and fail to explain how leadership is a virtue, let alone a master virtue in the Aristotelian system. Aristotelians as a whole disagree with Levine and Boaks here rather strongly, we believe. Edwin Hartman (2008), for instance, says that *phronesis* can be seen as a master virtue, as it is the sufficient condition of all other virtues (*NE* VI. 13). *Phronesis* then can be seen

as the sufficient condition to lead a good life as it results in *eudemonia*. Levine and Boaks depart completely from this inward-looking concept of ethics and imply that the virtues, as habituated inner dispositions, are in fact directed towards others. Would it not be much more plausible to argue, as Ciulla does, that leadership without *phronesis* is never truly good leadership, but at the most, effective leadership?

Secondly, Levine and Boaks seem to argue that a virtuous leader sometimes must lead *for* values and not *by* values; in other words, at times the habitual disposition to act in the right manner must be subordinated to an end that has been identified as being valuable. This is maybe one of the most important questions in ethical leadership and has been addressed by Ciulla and Sison amongst others. Levine and Boaks seem to find the answer reached by such scholars, namely that leadership in the Aristotelian framework cannot be Machiavellian or situational, unsatisfactory. However, *phronesis* cannot be primarily guided by utilitarian motives and stay wise. It is also not practical for leaders to lie, exaggerate, or be buffoons to achieve something: trust would be lost, and without trust leading/managing is not possible.

In our view, Levine and Boaks change Aristotle's model to a point where it becomes un-Aristotelian. That does not mean that we think that their concept is not useful—far from it. We would just think that existing Aristotelian models – among them one proposed by Alejo Sison (2003, 2006), who argues to think about leadership as a master art with a "master artificer" (*Politics* I. XIII) at the center – are better grounded in (Aristotelian) ethical theory.

Conclusion

We strongly support Levine and Boaks's aim to better connect leadership and ethics or even to ground leadership in ethical theory. However, we think that there are existing models based more closely on Aristotelian ideas that should be explored further. In an email exchange with us, Joanne Ciulla highlighted the similarities and wrote that, "in a number of . . . places, [I am] not philosophically far from Levine and Boaks's project on leadership and virtue." We agree with Ciulla that the authors "overplay their differences with [Ciulla's] ideas in places," but that contributions like Levine and Boaks's "promise more innovation and progress in understanding the ethics of leaders

and leadership than the endless repetition of studies that currently comprise most of the literature on the topic today." However, in the face of the strongly anti-philosophical attitude by the social scientific mainstream, splitting the Aristotelian voice could have the unwanted side effect that it becomes even more difficult to be heard.

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