INTRODUCTION

Today we often find ourselves disappointed by the moral character of leaders. As humans, leaders are subject to the same flaws and weaknesses as everyone else. Yet we want our leaders to transcend them and live up to higher moral standards. Some people turn wistfully to the past and wonder where all the leaders and heroes have gone. But when you think about it, ordinary people did not know as much about the personal behavior of their leaders in the past as we do today. It is difficult to have heroes in the information age where every wart and wrinkle of a leader’s life can and often is made public. Ironically, the increase in information that we have about leaders has also increased our concern about their ethics. The more defects our leaders have, the more we long for ethical leaders. We have demystified our leaders and we’re not sure we like it. The readings in this chapter help us to reflect on the public and private morality of leaders.

This chapter looks at leadership from the perspective of virtue. Aristotle tells us that virtues are habits that form our character. When we select a leader for a political office or for an organization, we typically look at the person’s track record and assume that if that person has been honest in the past, he or she will be honest in the future. Sometimes we make the opposite assumption, that if someone has deceived us in the past, he or she will do so in the future. For example, the American public subjected presidential candidate Gary Hart to such scorn when he was caught cheating on his wife that he was forced out of the primary race. Yet there have been other times when we were willing to give a leader the benefit of a doubt. In the first presidential campaign of Bill Clinton, Clinton admitted to having an extramarital affair and went on to win the election. However, when Clinton lied about his affair with an intern during his second term in office, citizens and political leaders were outraged. The Clinton case raised some fundamental issues about the ethics of leaders, some of which are discussed in this chapter.
We often assume that we can judge a person’s future moral behavior by his or her past moral behavior. The case “Sleazy or Stupid” helps us think about this question in a commonplace situation in the workplace. Here a manager has to decide if a comment made by a job applicant after the interview is grounds for not giving him the job.

Because leaders are also imperfect humans, they have moral weakness too. Yet, unlike most people, the impact of leaders’ moral weaknesses are multiplied in proportion to their visibility, power, and the size of their constituencies. Leaders are supposed to model the virtues of their society or organization. When they don’t, they often lose credibility and legitimacy. Morality not only requires good habits, but it also requires self-discipline and self-knowledge. Buddha’s “First Sermon” tells us that people suffer when they lose touch with who they are and they become enslaved by their wants and “cravings.”

Aristotle and Buddha both believe that the morality of a person is one seamless whole. People cannot segment themselves into the work person and the home person. Yet today some believe that when it comes to practical questions of leadership, a leader’s behavior at home is none of our business and that we should only judge leaders by their performance on the job. The case “Does Personal Morality Matter?” makes us see how difficult it sometimes is to judge a person only by what he or she does at work.

The pressures of leadership make leaders more vulnerable to their moral weaknesses and their desires than others. One of the greatest fears we have about leaders is that they will abuse power or that power will distort their sense of self, moral purpose, and accountability. The temptations of power are perhaps the greatest personal challenges faced by leaders. Both the Old Testament and the Torah tell the story of “David and Bathsheba.” It’s the tale of a good leader who falls prey to his own moral weakness. King David abuses his power to satisfy his desire and cover up his mistake. The article, “The Bathsheba Syndrome: The Ethical Failure of Successful Leaders,” vividly illustrates how personal moral failings and loss of focus can lead to failure on the job.

The last reading in this chapter, “The Conscience of Huckleberry Finn” is about the role of moral sentiments such as empathy, sympathy, or what we sometimes call “gut feelings” in ethics. Leaders are subject to the mores and moral norms of their society, but there are times when doing what is “right” doesn’t feel right. Sometimes their gut feelings correct their moral choices; sometimes they misguide them.

As you read this chapter, consider the following questions: Is it fair to judge a leader’s character by one or two “unfortunate” incidents? Can we predict a leader’s future behavior from his or her behavior in the past? Should leaders be penalized on the job for what they do off the job? Can we separate the character of a person’s leadership from his or her moral character? When should leaders follow their hearts?
Virtue Ethics

Aristotle 384 B.C.—322 B.C.

Aristotle was born in Stagira in Macedonia. His father, Nicomachus, was the court physician to the king of Macedonia, who was the grandfather of Alexander the Great. The following selections are from Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, which Aristotle named after his father. Aristotle went to study at Plato’s Academy when he was seventeen and remained there for twenty years. In 345 B.C. he returned to Macedonia to be tutor to Alexander the Great. When Alexander became king in 335 B.C., Aristotle returned to Athens and started his own school called the Lyceum.

Aristotle believed that the study of ethics is inseparable from the study of politics. Humans are political animals and because most people live in groups, the ethics of the individual has to be studied as part of the ethics of groups. Like Plato, Aristotle attempts to show that people are better off being ethical than unethical. Happiness is the highest good in life, but Aristotle’s notion of happiness, *eudaimonia*, is somewhat different from our own today. By happiness he meant that people fill their function, which is to live in conformity with reason and have virtues that will allow them to exert rational control over their desires. By this definition, a happy life is one where people flourish. They do the things they want to do well and they are virtuous in the things they seek and the things they do. You will notice that technical excellence, which Aristotle often speaks of as craft, and moral excellence are tied to each other. There is no split between ethics and effectiveness for him. Aristotle said that the rational part of people consists of theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge. Ethics and politics are parts of practical knowledge. That’s why he says both subjects should not be taught to the very young, but to people with experience.

The following reading focuses on Aristotle’s description of virtue. Notice that a virtue is something that you can only have if you practice it. Aristotle says that virtue is a habit, but not a mindless one. You act virtuously with the intent to do the right thing. People learn about virtue from role models and from society. (The same is true of vices.) On a daily basis we make judgments about people’s character, whether we are choosing a president, a baby-sitter, or a new employee.

2. Virtues of Character in General

2.1 How a Virtue of Character Is Acquired

Virtue, then, is of two sorts, virtue of thought and virtue of character. Virtue of thought arises and grows mostly from teaching, and hence needs experience and time. Virtue of character [i.e., of ἄθος] results from habit [εἴθος]; hence its name “ethical,” slightly varied from “ethos.”

“Virtue Ethics” by Aristotle from The *Nicomachean Ethics*, edited by Terence Irwin. Copyright © 1985. Reprinted by permission of Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. All rights reserved.
Virtue Comes About, Not by a Process of Nature, but by Habituation

Hence it is also clear that none of the virtues of character arises in us naturally.

(1) What is natural cannot be changed by habituation
For if something is by nature [in one condition], habituation cannot bring it into another condition. A stone, e.g., by nature moves downwards, and habituation could not make it move upwards, not even if you threw it up ten thousand times to habituate it; nor could habituation make fire move downwards, or bring anything that is by nature in one condition into another condition.

Thus the virtues arise in us neither by nature nor against nature, but we are by nature able to acquire them, and reach our complete perfection through habit.

(2) Natural capacities are not acquired by habituation
Further, if something arises in us by nature, we first have the capacity for it, and later display the activity. This is clear in the case of the senses; for we did not acquire them by frequent seeing or hearing, but already had them when we exercised them, and did not get them by exercising them.

Virtues, by contrast, we acquire, just as we acquire crafts, by having previously activated them. For we learn a craft by producing the same product that we must produce when we have learned it, becoming builders, e.g., by building and harpists by playing the harp; so also, then, we become just by doing just actions, temperate by doing temperate actions, brave by doing brave actions.

(3) Legislators concentrate on habituation
What goes on in cities is evidence for this also. For the legislator makes the citizens good by habituating them, and this is the wish of every legislator; if he fails to do it well he misses his goal. [The right] habituation is what makes the difference between a good political system and a bad one.

(4) Virtue and vice are formed by good and bad actions
Further, just as in the case of a craft, the sources and means that develop each virtue also ruin it. For playing the harp makes both good and bad harpists, and it is analogous in the case of builders and all the rest; for building well makes good builders, building badly, bad ones. If it were not so, no teacher would be needed, but everyone would be born a good or a bad craftsman.

It is the same, then, with the virtues. For actions in dealings with [other] human beings make some people just, some unjust; actions in terrifying situations and the acquired habit of fear or confidence make some brave and others cowardly. The same is true of situations involving
appetites and anger; for one or another sort of conduct in these situations makes some people temperate and gentle, others intemperate and irascible.

Conclusion: The importance of habituation

To sum up, then, in a single account: A state [of character] arises from [the repetition of] similar activities. Hence we must display the right activities, since differences in these imply corresponding differences in the states. It is not unimportant, then, to acquire one sort of habit or another, right from our youth; rather, it is very important, indeed all-important.

2.12 What Is the Right Sort of Habituation?

*This is an appropriate question, for the aim of ethical theory is practical*

Our present inquiry does not aim, as our others do, at study; for the purpose of our examination is not to know what virtue is, but to become good, since otherwise the inquiry would be of no benefit to us. Hence we must examine the right way to act, since, as we have said, the actions also control the character of the states we acquire.

First, then, actions should express correct reason. That is a common [belief], and let us assume it; later we will say what correct reason is and how it is related to the other virtues.

But let us take it as agreed in advance that every account of the actions we must do has to be stated in outline, not exactly. As we also said at the start, the type of accounts we demand should reflect the subject-matter; and questions about actions and expediency, like questions about health, have no fixed [and invariable answers].

And when our general account is so inexact, the account of particular cases is all the more inexact. For these fall under no craft or profession, and the agents themselves must consider in each case what the opportune action is, as doctors and navigators do.

The account we offer, then, in our present inquiry is of this inexact sort; still, we must try to offer help.

**The right sort of habituation must avoid excess and deficiency**

First, then, we should observe that these sorts of states naturally tend to be ruined by excess and deficiency. We see this happen with strength and health, which we mention because we must use what is evident as a witness to what is not. For both excessive and deficient exercises ruin strength: and likewise, too much or too little eating or drinking ruins health, while the proportionate amount produces, increases and preserves it.

The same is true, then, of temperance, bravery and the other virtues. For if, e.g., someone avoids and is afraid of everything, standing firm against nothing, he becomes cowardly, but if he is afraid of nothing at all and goes to face everything, he becomes rash. Similarly, if he gratifies himself with every
pleasure and refrains from none, he becomes intemperate, but if he avoids them all, as boors do, he become some sort of insensible person. Temperance and bravery then, are ruined by excess and deficiency but preserved by the mean.

The same actions, then, are the sources and causes both of the emergence and growth of virtues and of their ruin; but further, the activities of the virtues will be found in these same actions. For this is also true of more evident cases, e.g. strength, which arises from eating a lot and from withstanding much hard labour, and it is the strong person who is most able to do these very things. It is the same with the virtues. Refraining from pleasures make us become temperate, and when we have become temperate we are most able to refrain from pleasures. And it is similar with bravery; habituation in disdain of what is fearful and in standing firm against it makes us become brave, and when we have become brave we shall be most able to stand firm.

2.14 But Our Claims about Habituation Raise a Puzzle: How Can We Become Good Without Being Good Already?
However, someone might raise this puzzle: "What do you mean by saying that to become just we must first do just actions and to become temperate we must first do temperate actions? For if we do what is grammatical or musical, we must already be grammarians or musicians. In the same way, then, if we do what is just or temperate, we must already be just or temperate."

First reply: Conformity versus understanding
But surely this is not so even with the crafts, for it is possible to produce something grammatical by chance or by following someone else's instructions. To be a grammarian, then, we must both produce something grammatical and produce it in the way in which the grammarian produces it, i.e. expressing grammatical knowledge that is in us.

Second reply: Crafts versus virtues
Moreover, in any case what is true of crafts is not true of virtues. For the products of a craft determine by their own character whether they have been produced well; and so it suffices that they are in the right state when they have been produced. But for actions expressing virtue to be done temperately or justly [and hence well] it does not suffice that they are themselves in the right state. Rather, the agent must also be in the right state when he does them. First, he must know [that he is doing virtuous actions]; second, he must decide on them, and decide on them for themselves; and, third, he must also do them from a firm and unchanging state.

As conditions for having a craft these three do not count, except for the knowing itself. As a condition for having a virtue, however, the knowing counts for nothing, or [rather] for only a little, whereas the other two conditions are
very important, indeed all-important. And these other two conditions are
achieved by the frequent doing of just and temperate actions.

Hence actions are called just or temperate when they are the sort that a
just or temperate person would do. But the just and temperate person is not
the one who [merely] does these actions, but the one who also does them in
the way in which just or temperate people do them.

It is right, then, to say that a person comes to be just from doing just
actions and temperate from doing temperate actions; for no one has even a
prospect of becoming good from failing to do them.

Virtue requires habituation, and therefore requires practice, not just theory
The many, however, do not do these actions but take refuge in arguments,
thinking that they are doing philosophy, and that this is the way to become
excellent people. In this they are like a sick person who listens attentively to
the doctor, but acts on none of his instructions. Such a course of treatment will
not improve the state of his body; any more than will the many’s way of doing
philosophy improve the state of their souls.

Virtue and the human function
It should be said, then, that every virtue causes its possessors to be in a good
state and to perform their functions well; the virtue of eyes, e.g., makes the
eyes and their functioning excellent, because it makes us see well; and simi-
larly, the virtue of a horse makes the horse excellent, and thereby good at gal-
loping, at carrying its rider and at standing steady in the face of the enemy. If
this is true in every case, then the virtue of a human being will likewise be the
state that makes a human being good and makes him perform his function
well.

Virtue seeks the mean relative to us: Argument from craft to virtue
This, then, is how each science produces its product well, by focusing on what
is intermediate and making the product conform to that. This, indeed, is why
people regularly comment on well-made products that nothing could be added
or subtracted, since they assume that excess or deficiency ruins a good [result]
while the mean preserves it. Good craftsmen also, we say, focus on what is
intermediate when they produce their product. And since virtue, like nature, is
better and more exact than any craft, it will also aim at what is intermediate.

Arguments from the nature of virtue of character
By virtue I mean virtue of character; for this [pursues the mean because] it is
concerned with feelings and actions, and these admit of excess, deficiency and
an intermediate condition. We can be afraid, e.g., or be confident, or have
appetites, or get angry, or feel pity, in general have pleasure or pain, both too
much and too little, and in both ways not well; but [having these feelings] at
the right times, about the right things, towards the right people, for the right end, and in the right way, is the intermediate and best condition, and this is proper to virtue. Similarly, actions also admit of excess, deficiency and the intermediate condition.

Now virtue is concerned with feelings and actions, in which excess and deficiency are in error and incur blame, while the intermediate condition is correct and wins praise, which are both proper features of virtue. Virtue, then, is a mean in so far as it aims at what is intermediate.

Moreover, there are many ways to be in error, since badness is proper to what is unlimited, as the Pythagoreans pictured it, and good to what is limited; but there is only one way to be correct. That is why error is easy and correctness hard, since it is easy to miss the target and hard to hit it. And so for this reason also excess and deficiency are proper to vice, the mean to virtue; "for we are noble in only one way, but bad in all sorts of ways."

2.23 Definition of Virtue

Virtue, then, is (a) a state that decides, (b) [consisting] in a mean, (c) the mean relative to us, (d) which is defined by reference to reason, (e) i.e., to the reason by reference to which the intelligent person would define it. It is a mean between two vices, one of excess and one of deficiency.

It is a mean for this reason also: Some vices miss what is right because they are excessive, in feelings or in actions, while virtue finds and chooses what is intermediate.

Hence, as far as its substance and the account stating its essence are concerned, virtue is a mean; but as far as the best [condition] and the good [result] are concerned, it is an extremity.

The definition must not be misapplied to cases in which there is no mean

But not every action or feeling admits of the mean. For the names of some automatically include baseness, e.g. spite, shamelessness, envy [among feelings], and adultery, theft, murder, [among actions]. All of these and similar things are called by these names because they themselves, not their excesses or deficiencies, are base.

Hence in doing these things we can never be correct, but must invariably be in error. We cannot do them well or not well—e.g. by committing adultery with the right woman at the right time in the right way; on the contrary, it is true unconditionally that to do any of them is to be in error.

[To think these admit of a mean], therefore, is like thinking that unjust or cowardly or intemperate action also admits of a mean, an excess and a deficiency. For then there would be a mean of excess, a mean of deficiency, an excess of excess and a deficiency of deficiency.

Rather, just as there is no excess or deficiency of temperance or of bravery, since the intermediate is a sort of extreme [in achieving the good], so also there is no mean of these [vicious actions] either, but whatever way anyone
does them, he is in error. For in general there is no mean of excess or of deficiency, and no excess or deficiency of a mean.

2.3 The Definition of Virtue as a Mean Applies to the Individual Virtues

However, we must not only state this general account but also apply it to the particular cases. For among accounts concerning actions, though the general ones are common to more cases, the specific ones are truer, since actions are about particular cases, and our account must accord with these. Let us, then, find these from the chart.

2.31 Classification of Virtues of Character

Virtues concerned with feelings

(1) First, in feelings of fear and confidence the mean is bravery. The excessively fearless person is nameless (and in fact many cases are nameless), while the one who is excessively confident is rash; the one who is excessively afraid and deficient in confidence is cowardly.

(2) In pleasures and pains, though not in all types, and in pains less than in pleasures, the mean is temperance and the excess intemperance. People deficient in pleasure are not often found, which is why they also lack even a name; let us call them insensible.

Virtues concerned with external goods

(3) In giving and taking money the mean is generosity, the excess wastefulness and the deficiency ungenerosity. Here the vicious people have contrary excesses and defects; for the wasteful person spends to excess and is deficient in taking, whereas the ungenerous person takes to excess and is deficient in spending. At the moment we are speaking in outline and summary, and that suffices; later we shall define these things more exactly.

(4) In questions of money there are also other conditions. Another mean is magnificence; for the magnificent person differs from the generous by being concerned with large matters, while the generous person is concerned with small. The excess is ostentation and vulgarity, and the deficiency niggardliness, and these differ from the vices related to generosity in ways we shall describe later.

(5) In honour and dishonour the mean is magnanimity, the excess something called a sort of vanity, and the deficiency pusillanimity.

(6) And just as we said that generosity differs from magnificence in its concern with small matters, similarly there is a virtue concerned with small honours, differing in the same way from magnanimity, which is concerned with great honours. For honour can be desired either in the right way or more or less than is right. If someone desires it to excess, he
is called an honour-lover, and if his desire is deficient he is called indifferent to honour; but if he is intermediate he has no name. The corresponding conditions have no name either, except the condition of the honour-lover, which is called honour-loving.

This is why people at the extremes claim the intermediate area. Indeed, we also sometimes call the intermediate person an honour-lover, and sometimes call him indifferent to honour; and sometimes we praise the honour-lover, sometimes the person indifferent to honour. We will mention later the reason we do this; for the moment, let us speak of the other cases in the way we have laid down.

Virtues concerned with social life

(7) Anger also admits of an excess, deficiency and mean. These are all practically nameless; but since we call the intermediate person mild, let us call the mean mildness. Among the extreme people let the excessive person be irascible, and the vice be irascibility; and let the deficient person be a sort of inrascible person, and the deficiency be inirascibility.

There are three other means, somewhat similar to one another, but different. For they are all concerned with association in conversations and actions, but differ in so far as one is concerned with truth-telling in these areas, the other two with sources of pleasure, some of which are found in amusement, and the others in daily life in general. Hence we should also discuss these states, so that we can better observe that in every case the mean is praiseworthy, while the extremes are neither praiseworthy nor correct, but blameworthy. Most of these cases are also nameless, and we must try, as in the other cases also, to make names ourselves, to make things clear and easy to follow.

(8) In truth-telling, then, let us call the intermediate person truthful, and the mean truthfulness; pretence that overstates will be boastfulness, and the person who has it boastful; pretence that understates will be self-deprecation, and the person who has it self-deprecating.

(9) In sources of pleasure in amusements let us call the intermediate person witty, and the condition wit; the excess buffoonery and the person who has it a buffoon; and the deficient person a sort of boor and the state boorishness.

(10) In the other sources of pleasure, those in daily life, let us call the person who is pleasant in the right way friendly, and the mean state friendliness. If someone goes to excess with no [further] aim he will be ingratiating; if he does it for his own advantage, a flatterer. The deficient person, unpleasant in everything, will be a sort of quarrelsome and ill-tempered person.

Mean states that are not virtues

(11) There are also means in feelings and concerned with feelings: shame, e.g., is not a virtue, but the person prone to shame as well as the virtuous
person we have described receives praise. For here also one person is
called intermediate, and another—the person excessively prone to shame,
who is ashamed about everything—is called excessive; the person who is
deficient in shame or never feels shame at all is said to have no sense of
disgrace; and the intermediate one is called prone to shame.

Proper indignation is the mean between envy and spite; these conditions
are concerned with pleasure and pain at what happens to our
neighbours. For the properly indignant person feels pain when someone
does well undeservedly; the envious person exceeds him by feeling pain
when anyone does well, while the spiteful person is so deficient in
feeling pain that he actually enjoys [other people’s misfortunes].

There will also be an opportunity elsewhere to speak of these [means that
are not virtues].

**Review Questions**

1. According to Aristotle, how do leaders cultivate virtue in their followers?
2. What is the role of good habits in organizations? In societies?
3. What are the practical implications of Aristotle’s theory for the way
   leaders run organizations?
4. What are the virtues cultivated in the organizations and the society to
   which you belong?