Centre for Ethical Leadership Launch Event

Ethical Leaders Born or Made?
Exploring the Notion of the Virtuous Leader

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The purpose of this workshop is:

- to consider what is meant by ethical leadership;

- to outline virtue ethics;

- to consider in what ways virtue ethics might contribute to our understanding of the notion of ethical leadership in light of your own practice;

- to explore the implications of a virtue ethical perspective upon leadership formation;

- To offer a critique of virtue ethics in relation to the concept of ethical leadership and its use in practice.

In this workshop I'm going to provide some thoughts on virtue ethics in relationship to leadership punctuated with moments for private reflection/discussion.

I should say from the outset, I have no life-or-death loyalty to Virtue Ethics, so I don't mind if we find lots of holes in it today. Nonetheless I think virtue ethics is worth consideration in that I think it offers an alternative perspective to other ways of understanding the concept of ethical leadership. Virtue ethics I believe offers an antidote to those views of ethical leadership which stress rule-based, 'must do' (deontological), ways of understanding ethics, and the goal focused (consequentialist), 'we should do what results in the best ends' approaches to ethical decision-making. Virtue ethics exists in various forms, but strictly what each of these have in common is a focus upon the 'primacy of character in the justification of right action'; that 'what *makes* the action right is that it is what a person with a virtuous character would do here' (Oakley and Cocking, 2001: 9). It is the identification of the ideals of good character, and the induction of people into understanding and emulating what is of good character that is at the heart of virtue ethics.

Introductory Aside:

I wonder what the term 'virtue' conjures up for you? Does it seem like a contradiction in terms to put the two words, virtue and leadership, together? Would you, for instance, put the terms virtue, effective and leader in the same sentence?

- Who you would characterise as an outstanding leader?
- What makes them an outstanding?
- Would you describe them or their methods as ethical?
- Would you describe them as virtuous – however you understand this term?

Perhaps it's one thing to describe a leader as ethical – particularly if the focus is upon their adherence to a professional code or legal standards – another to describe them as virtuous? Is the keeping of rules 'slavish' even disingenuous if the principles adhered only superficially kept, rather than deeply embedded in the character of the leader? Moreover, perhaps some of the most principled and effective leaders in history by this token could hardly be described as virtuous!

What this apparent internal contradiction in the concept of 'leadership' centres upon is subtle, but clearly relates to how we define the word 'good'. An effective leader is clearly a 'good' leader in certain respects, but he or she may not necessarily be so in the moral sense of the term. Likewise, an ethical leader, may well be 'good' in the sense that they *do* what specific 'codes of conduct' insist must be done, but they may well be a bad leader by both standards of effectiveness, and by certain moral understandings of the term 'ethical' – not least those proscribed by virtue ethics.

As an aside, by proposing that we consider, explore, debate and research the term ethical leadership at this event today, and in the establishing of a *Centre for Ethical Leadership* (incidentally notice the placing of the word 'for' here – in the sense that this promotes the notion and the action of ethical leadership), we are urged to consider those aspects of our agency in our leadership roles, and in our public engagement, we might describe as both 'ethical' and 'leadership'; to come aside to meetings such as this, which provide a 'safe' public space in which to discuss the ethical dimension of our responsibilities; and to put into the ring – so to speak – and to scrutinise - both our own roles as leaders, and those aspects of our responsibility in the public sphere we might describe as 'ethical' is in itself an interesting phenomenon. Moreover, perhaps it is forums such as this that provide opportunity for the moral education of leaders?

Ethical Leadership?

Consider:

- Which aspects of your leadership role would you describe as having an ethical dimension?
- How do you know it's got an ethical dimension?
- What standards do you use to make your judgements?
- What would you rank as the aspect of your leadership role that is most ethically demanding; which least?

An outline of Virtue Ethics

As I've already briefly said, there are three main approaches to ethics – the 'duty' and 'rule-based' approach (deontological); the 'ends' and 'goals' approach (consequentialist – a good example being the various forms of utilitarianism); and character-based approaches (the various forms of virtue ethics). In contrast to the other two ways of interrogating and defining the 'good', virtue ethics draws our attention away from the external frameworks by which the 'good' may be prescribed, towards a focus upon the character of the agent themselves – both as the source of knowledge about virtue, and the site of ethical decision-making and action.

Aristotle, who first propounded a virtue ethics, understood philosophy and ethics to be two sides of the same coin, thinking and acting together prescribe and define what is needed for human flourishing. Human flourishing – a key notion in virtue ethics - occurs when people live according to the identifiable virtues of moral character. To put it crudely, being good makes sense; you can know what is 'good' by looking at how the virtuous live. Observably, it is the virtuous that are happy and who enjoy well-being; it our job is to emulate them and make their virtues our own. What is also implicitly asserted by virtue ethicists is that being good is 'natural' to human beings – 'to live a life without the virtues would in some sense be to go against our basic nature' (Oakley and Cocking, 2001: 17).

Three ideas are particularly important in Aristotle's virtue ethics and core to thinking of later theorists: *virtue*, *prudence or practical wisdom (phronesis)* and *eudaimonia*.

Virtues are not abstract qualities, they are deeply embedded and desirable character traits – the *dispositions* – of virtuous people. In virtue ethics being 'good' is not about following rules and doing 'good', it is about understanding what is good- 'being' good-and doing good all rolled into one. The

'good' is so well sewn into the agent's character it becomes virtually instinctive – even if sometimes the person fails to live up to their own ideals.

Likewise, the virtuous individual will have the cardinal virtue of prudence or 'practical wisdom' (phronesis), an astute ability to deliberate and make ethical judgements in different circumstances – clearly a virtue of great import, therefore, in leadership formation – which we will return to later. Arguably, the very purpose of the Centre for Ethical Leadership is the fostering of prudence.

Eudaimonia – the idea variously translated as 'well-being', 'human flourishing' and 'happiness' – is the harmony achieved by living according to one's basic nature. If I'm living well – i.e. virtuously – then Eudaimonia is achieved. However, it would be misleading to suggest that living virtuously is a self-centred moral enterprise. Our personal morality also has social implications. Living well – fostering Eudaimonia in our organisations, and in society itself, means living with regard to the civic virtues - such as justice - as well as the intellectual and moral ones. The virtuous individual understands what makes for their own and others' human flourishing and well-being.

Some of the key virtues put forward by virtue ethicists are:
- Care
- Trustworthiness
- Friendship
- Respectfulness
- Courage
- Justice
- Integrity

Clearly, each of these has a lot of applicability to the exercise of leadership. The virtues do not work in isolation, rather they work in conjunction in the character of those who display them, though they may be, and are, described separately.

There isn't the time today to explore each of these virtues in turn, or their implications to the exercise of leadership – so some thought on just two of these in relationship to the leadership role: courage and integrity.

Courage as a Virtue of Leadership

Firstly: courage. Remember virtue ethics holds that 'an action is right if and only if it is what a virtuous agent would do in the circumstances' (Oakley and Cocking, 2001: 129). Faced with the ordinary decisions of leadership – the hiring, the disciplining, the marketing, the presenting ourselves and our organisation to others, every action we take is judged by the criterion: 'is this what a virtuous leader would do?' More specifically here: 'is this what a virtuous leader who is showing courage would do in this instance?'

The most mundane and ordinary circumstances of leadership can demand courage. Courage is associated with resilience and with resistance, confronting fears and facing difficulties with endurance. Courage can be physical, emotional or psychological – or all at once. In leadership, courage can be demanded when facing both individual issues, and corporate difficulty. Encounters with others that may evoke fears about losing face, or popularity, or even being subject to antagonism in response to decisions may require courage. Corporate decisions may require uncomfortable choices between options which frankly seem to have no positive outcome at all.

As with all the virtues, however, Aristotle warns of both a deficiency in the virtue – a vice – and the disproportionate amount of virtue – a virtue excess: Aristotle urged us to seek the 'golden mean' – we need exhibit the right amount of the virtue in particular circumstances. So instead of courage we may tend towards the vice of cowardice, and not face the people, the situation, or the decision we need to make. Or we may tend to an excess of the virtue and be overly confident, brash, and foolhardy in rushing into a circumstance disproportionately and without care. We need prudence 'practical wisdom' to decide how to much courage to deploy in the circumstances, and we need to consider whether the actions we are promoting lead to human well-being, else the virtues are – as Comte-Sponville wrote - merely 'good intentions that pave the way to hell' (Banks and Gallagher, 2009: 190). All three characteristics of the virtuous person, prudence, Eudaimonia and courage are in operation when the leader – who might be described as a 'good' leader from a virtue ethics perspective – is acting.

Consider:
- In what circumstances in your own role is courage demanded?
- How does courage help?
- How do you know when the right amount of courage being demonstrated in others?

Integrity as a Virtue of Leaders

Integrity is a virtue which promotes consistency and balance in the character of the virtuous – in a sense it is a governing virtue promoting a wholistic perspective across the areas of a person's life. We would expect the 'good' person to be the same kind of person from a moral point of view, perhaps this explains why when someone in a trusted role does something inconsistent to their character we tend to express surprise, disappointment and sometimes outrage.

Integrity is a 'matter of people integrating various parts of their personality into a harmonious intact whole' (Banks and Gallagher, 2009: 199). Integrity is demonstrated in showing commitment to the projects and ideals one has identified for oneself unstintingly and without waiver, within the context of what leads to human flourishing. So it is not virtuous to be wholeheartedly committed to a one's projects and ideals if those things are not governed by the virtue of Eudaimonia. In this context one might claim, for instance, that Tony Blair acted with integrity – and indeed has consistently displayed this virtue in his approach to war in Iraq – but it is debatable whether his version of Eudaimonia holds water – but here we are straying into judgements based upon consequences rather than virtue ethics.

Consider:
- What pressures are there upon our demonstrating integrity in our public and private roles?
- Is integrity a virtue if we are consistently wrong?
- To what extent should we be 'merciful' to those who show weak integrity?

The regulative ideal, prudence, and the moral education of leaders

From all that's been said, I hope it's clear that from a virtue ethics point of view ethical leaders are not born, they are made. The education of the virtuous leader is life-long and career-long. In particular, the education of the virtues – the moral education of leaders – depends upon developing understanding of the virtues as displayed by those that hold them, exploring what it means to be virtuous in relation to the particular, but ordinary and everyday, knotty problems of leadership, and exercising and reflecting upon our own roles as leaders in forums such as this.

Becoming a virtuous leader depends upon our developing practical wisdom in judging what the virtuous decision is in specific circumstances and by forming, what Oakley and Cocking call, a 'regulative ideal'. The regulative ideal is the complex moral judgement made by an individual in giving a precise and appropriate response in specific circumstance, what MacIntyre describes as the 'capacity to judge and to do the right thing in the right place at the right time and in the right way' (MacIntyre, 1987: 150). 'Be

courageous'; show integrity' can sound like empty idealism without learning the grammar of ethical leadership and of moral decision-making. Leaders need opportunities to hone their sense of prudence and exercise their 'regulative ideal' – so that increasingly moral judgements are instinctive and habitual – second nature. Moral leadership formation is essential because according to virtue ethics 'good' leaders are not just people who obey the rules!

From a virtue ethics perspective knowing the virtues depends upon familiarity with the character of the virtuous. I can only know what I ought to be like if I have role models who show me. Leadership formation, therefore, depends upon exposure to the identifiably 'good' leaders, who demonstrate virtue in action. Meeting other leaders, wrestling with and responding to similar problems to ours, is grist for the mill of ethical leader formation. Similarly, exploring virtuous leadership by means of representations in literature or through drama, the virtues and the nature of virtue can be explored.

Take for example the qualities of courage and integrity on display and explored in Jimmy McGovern's screenplay for the film *Priest*. Greg Pilkington and Matthew Thomas are two very different priests serving in Liverpool – one religiously conservative, the other radical. They each display quite different leadership styles, and in their own ways they are courageous. Greg finds courage to challenge and abusive father, Matthew his own congregation and bishop for turning their back on Father Greg after the public revelations of his homosexuality. Both Greg and Matthew struggle with integrity: Greg, with matching his sexuality and his vow to celibacy. Matthew similarly struggles with his radical anti-establishment views, his sexual relationship with the housekeeper, and his loyalty to the institution of the Church. Priest is a very human portrayal the challenges of living the ideals of leadership, and of virtue of various kinds, in practice.

Focusing upon the morality of leadership in this way can sound highly individualistic: it's not. Most virtue ethicists talk about the tendency for the virtuous to mix with the virtuous, and that virtue begets virtue. Virtue ethics is strong on the civic and public effects of the life of virtue, as MacIntyre suggests 'such qualities as truthfulness, courage, and justice are virtues because they enable us to achieve the good internal to the…human practices which strengthen tradition and the communities which sustain them' (Oakley and Cocking, 2001: 16). Aristotle's virtue ethics was written in very different social and political conditions, the polis of ancient Greece – and the relationship between the ideals of the community and their embodiment in the citizens of communities is important to underline, but beyond the scope of today's presentation.

Consider:

- How do leaders become virtuous leaders (if such a concept is desirable)?
- What kinds of training in the virtues would be desirable?
- Are ethical leaders born or made?
- How might leaders facilitate the formation of moral communities in their organisations?

Conclusion

In conclusion, I hope I have demonstrated that virtue ethics offers an alternative perspective in the conceptualising of ethical leadership. Focusing upon the character of the leader themselves as the basis for moral judgements – and the communities within which they operate as having a moral climate to them – virtue ethics promotes the development of moral judgements which aim at human flourishing. Shifting the locus of moral judgement away from externally imposed moral authority, grounding it instead within organisations and with individuals themselves at the very least tends to foster the view that moral responsibility lies with us as leaders, causing us to query the moral culture and values of organisations themselves.

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