

# Chapter 10

## Aristotle's Theory of the Virtues of Temperance, Courage, and Generosity as Part of a Universal Model for Leadership Practices Today

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**Abstract** Aristotle's theory of the virtues of self-control, courage, and generosity are still applicable to good leadership practices today. These virtues are crucial in this context because they are connected to the most basic human drives: self-control in relation to eating, drinking, and sex; courage in relation to situations involving various fears; and generosity, the virtue in relation to sharing valuable things with others. Although these virtues tend to be considered personal, they play a crucial role in the development of every social and political institution, including large and small businesses. Aristotle's model of human excellence is one good starting point for developing a universal model of good leadership.

### 10.1 Introduction

#### *10.1.1 Moderation in All Things: A Way of Life and a Legacy*

According to Aristotle, the wise person understands the underlying, unchanging principles and causes behind both natural and cultural dimensions of reality. Aristotle's work is still worth reading and applying to our lives today, because Aristotle had the ability to recognize and articulate the most basic principles of the natural world, human nature, and the relation between them. Aristotle shows that human beings are by nature social and political animals, and he shows why our need for good leaders and good managers arises from the human condition. Our extreme dependence on each other, beginning with our vulnerability at birth, leads to relationships based on power.

Good leaders demonstrate their strength of character most vividly, perhaps, in the way they raise their children. If they truly believe in moderation as a virtue, they

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will choose to live in moderate homes in middle-class neighborhoods. If at all possible, they will send their children to good public schools, because they know how important it is that children grow up able to relate to their fellow citizens, regardless of race, sex, creed, or income. Good leaders will know the importance of having a good, well-structured public school system and will work with government and civic leaders to create and maintain high quality public education. High quality schools have a profound impact on community life. In a healthy community, people from all walks of life become educated, find good jobs, do their jobs well, and contribute to an overall *ethos* of good will and trust between citizens.

Leaders who are committed to virtue will encourage their children to choose careers based on what they find meaningful to themselves and their society, not on the basis of the amount of money made or power exercised. Wealth and power are not appropriate goals in themselves, but only things that follow from finding a sense of purpose in one's work, being motivated to do it well, and being rewarded with wealth, power, or public honor because of the quality of the effort made. If a family has a long tradition of success in the business sector, the family can leave behind a legacy of generous giving to other valuable activities. Leaders who encourage their children to go into education, ministry, the arts, or politics, even though they will have lower salaries, demonstrate to everyone around them the value they place on a well-functioning society as a whole. They do not use the social and political system to make as much money as possible.

One of the most important legacies a human being can leave behind is a well-organized society that rewards moderation in its citizens. Every citizen exercises leadership roles, as a parent, trusted friend, co-worker, employer, government official, or member of any organization, to promote the well-being of those who depend on them. Aristotle's understanding of ethics as the exercise of the virtues makes it clear that private, public, and professional life cannot be separated. The character traits citizens develop as children must be reexamined and refined as adults, and then exercised in all aspects of community life. Each social role places citizens in different kinds of situations, but the virtues they exercise while in those situations are the same.

Aristotle describes and defines a number of personal and interpersonal virtues: (1) temperance, or self-control in relation to physical pleasures and pains; (2) rational courage, the appropriate response in relation to situations involving fear; (3) rational generosity; (4) rational anger; (5) rational humor; (6) rational friendships; (7) sociability; (8) rational pride; (9) rational ambition; (10) high-mindedness; and (11) self-knowledge. Aristotle's view is comprehensive and systematic without being overly complicated. Readers who reflect on Aristotle's discussion of the personal virtues will be struck by the fact that they are simply a careful classification of what is usually called common sense. Human beings continually run into situations that demand the exercise of these virtues. They can use Aristotle's descriptions of both the mean and the extremes when they are evaluating the relative success or failure of themselves or others in their common pursuit of human excellence, their desire to live well.

Aristotle also emphasizes the fact that human beings are political creatures by nature. The political virtues grow out of the personal virtues and are exercised in relation to people one does not necessarily know personally, but who are fellow-citizens. These virtues are exercised when human beings create, apply, and enforce a body of laws that regulate: (1) the accumulation of wealth; (2) the distribution of social goods, including wealth, education, power, and status; (3) the punishment of citizens who undermine political life; and (4) equity, the ability to apply the laws in particular situations.

The virtues connected to political life require greater emotional and intellectual maturity than the personal virtues, because it is more difficult to know how to act in relation to people one doesn't know than in relation to people one does know. Further, fellow citizens make claims on our behavior that sometimes conflict with our personal and social relationships. Although becoming a just person takes effort, the rewards are obvious. Living in a just community gives more people more motivation and leisure time to pursue the highest human activities of soul: curiosity about the natural world, the desire to create works of art, and the desire to relate to others for the sake of the good life rather than merely for the sake of meeting necessary needs or gratifying unnecessary desires.

Human beings cannot develop their full human potential without organizing and managing many different types of social institutions, including those that meet economic, educational, political, medical, religious/philosophical, and aesthetic needs. The process of specialization to meet more and more complex needs has gradually increased over time and will continue to do so. The degree of complexity in human societies today means that each individual must develop a higher level of expertise in a specific subject than ever before in order to get a good job and do it well. Consequently, everyone depends on experts to be competent and to exercise their authority in a way that promotes others' well-being rather than simply to use their skills to exploit and oppress others. A failure to do what is best in a given situation could have many possible causes, including: (1) ignorance about the important facts in a given situation; (2) incompetence; (3) cynicism, the belief that everyone who has power will use it for their own benefit.

If there is any substantive distinction between leaders and managers, a leader could be understood as someone who has a vision of the highest good an organization can achieve in all aspects of its existence. A manager could be defined as someone who is excellent at figuring out what policies, procedures, and particular decisions are necessary to actually achieve that goal. Both skills are necessary to run an organization well. Some leaders have both skills; others are better at one or the other.

Every organization also has a spirit – an *ethos*, a cultural climate – within which people exercise their professional expertise. The cultural climate of an organization is determined by the character traits of its members, particularly the most powerful ones. Good leaders and managers are role models for others to follow in forming a positive company climate. Although Aristotle's theory of the virtues sets a very high standard for human excellence, the ancient Greeks were consummate realists. They understood the need for all adults to dedicate themselves to the love of wisdom, not as a detached ideal, but as the only way to be able to make the best choices in the many situations in which they would inevitably find themselves.

The virtues of temperance, courage, and generosity – as well as their associated vices – which can greatly influence the effects of the most basic human drives, have a prodigious impact on the well-being of any society. Aristotle argues in the *Politics* that the desire for more than one's share of the goods and services a society has to offer has a more negative impact on social and political well-being than any other vice. Temperance, courage, and generosity are the virtues that inhibit this desire most. Citizens who are self-indulgent, fearful, and stingy are obsessed with personal gain and personal security at the expense of everyone else.

### ***10.1.2 Temperance: Self-Control in Relation to Pleasure and Pain***

Aristotle defines temperance as the ability to act rationally in relation to pleasure and pain. “Temperance is a mean with regard to pleasures” [1117b25-26] (Barnes, 1995, 1764). In particular, this virtue is exercised in relation to “the kind of pleasures that the other animals share in, which therefore appear slavish and brutish; these are touch and taste” [1118a23-26] (Barnes, 1995, 1765). The self-indulgent man “is led by his appetite to choose [pleasant things] at the cost of everything else” [1119a4] (Barnes, 1995, 1766). The temperate person “neither enjoys the things that the self-indulgent man enjoys most – but rather dislikes them – nor in general the things that he should not, nor anything of this sort to excess” [1119a12-14] (Barnes, 1995, 1766). The wise person chooses the mean for the same reason he or she makes every choice: because that is what the highest power of the human soul, the power of reason, requires. “The appetitive element in a temperate man should harmonize with reason; for the noble is the mark at which both aim, and the temperate man craves for the things he ought, as he ought, and when he ought; and this is what reason directs” [1119b 14–16] (Barnes, 1995, 1767).

To take one example, even though self-control in relation to sexual desires might seem to be a strictly personal virtue, Aristotle points out that the sexual relationship between spouses depends on mutual trust. Leaders who betray their spouses destroy that trust. Similarly, relationships between good leaders and the people they lead require the led to have trust in their leaders and the leaders to have good will for their people. The betrayal of a spouse, then, exposes a character that cannot be trusted in any relationship, private or public. A good leader would not even be tempted to be unfaithful, because such behavior is irrational, hence inhuman.

Unfortunately, as the free market system becomes ever more interconnected and people depend on each other more and more, markets increasingly focus on creating and selling unnecessary goods and services. Human vices are cultivated and increased. Pleasure, pain, and fear are used to sell all sorts of goods and services. To help counteract this tendency, good leaders in every sector of society must model living in harmony with reason. Business leaders should find ways to develop products that improve the quality of people's lives, in spite of the trend toward excesses. The business sector has the power to direct consumption habits toward more rational or less rational ways of living.

Although Aristotle would agree that a free market aggravates the problem of the desire for more, he does not advocate abolishing private property as a solution. Most importantly, any authoritarian way to solve a social problem assumes that the rulers will not be corrupted by their power. Further, authoritarian solutions assume people do not have the power of choice and that they can be molded to conform blindly to what rulers dictate. These assumptions are based on a false view of human nature. On the one hand, Aristotle recognizes the deep impact of childhood habits in the formation of character. However, on the other hand, Aristotle also argues that the transition from childhood to adulthood requires an intellectual change from living according to imitation and habit to living according to the power of one's reason. Adults are not human until and unless they recognize their powers of choice and reason – their natural capacity to know how to choose correctly.

Aristotle says, "Men are themselves responsible for being unjust or self-indulgent" [1119b 14–16] (Barnes, 1995, 1767). Certainly, children raised in households where the power of reason is exercised and valued will be better judges of what to do in a given situation. "For each state of character has its own ideas of the noble and the pleasant, and perhaps the good man differs from others most by seeing the truth in each class of things" [1113a31-34] (Barnes, 1995, 1758). Those who are not as well-raised might have more difficulty developing the power of rational choice. They might even argue that they are not responsible for the irrational goals they seek. "Now some one may say that all men aim at the apparent good, but have no control over how things appear to them; but the end appears to each man in a form answering to his character" [1114a32-1114b2] (Barnes, 1995 1758–59). Children who grow up cared for by irrational adults might not develop any understanding of the nature of a rational life and why they are expected to live rationally when they become legal adults.

However, when children grow up and attain legal independence from their guardians, they have to be held responsible for what they choose even if their idea of the good is irrational. "If each man is somehow responsible for the state he is in, he will also be himself somehow responsible for how things appear" (For each state of character has its own ideas of the noble and the pleasant, and perhaps the good man differs from others most by seeing the truth in each class of things) [1114b3] (Barnes, 1995, 1759). The alternative is to deny human responsibility: "If not, no one is responsible for his own evil-doing" [1114b4] (Barnes, 1995, 1759). Thus we are responsible for the choices we make even when we do not understand the most important goals in life or how our actions relate to them. "In the case of the bad man there is equally present that which depends on himself in his actions even if not in his end" [1114b20-21] (Barnes, 1995, 1760).

The purpose of teaching ethics is to give human beings the tools to live well by helping us understand both the rational goals in life and the choices most likely to achieve those goals. It reduces the gap between what we understand and what we are responsible for. Ethics defines the intellectual and moral powers of the human soul and how they must be exercised in a complete rational life. With those definitions in mind, adults can examine their lives in the light of reason and can teach others through example and dialogue.

Leaders in every organization can and ought to offer employees rational choices that foster a climate in which everyone is acting rationally. A company that values self-control in relation to food and drink will offer employees healthy foods in appropriate amounts. The company will encourage self-control rather than undermine it. Within the company, workers should not be inundated with sexually suggestive music, television, or other media while they are focused on their work. Maintaining an atmosphere of temperance goes beyond mere legal issues, such as punishing sexual harassment. A company can show it is proactively preventing a sexually intimidating climate. In a world where so much advertising and so many public spaces are saturated with sexual innuendo, a work environment without such media input will be noticed. Employees who care about temperance will appreciate being able to work in such an environment.

Businesses that respect sexual fidelity will not pay advertising companies to use sex to sell their products, particularly when the product has nothing to do with sex. Companies that use sex to sell their products are sending a signal to employees and to the public in general that they will do anything to make an extra dollar. Instead, a company can deliberately hire advertising firms that work with them on advertising campaigns that link their products to a meaningful life, to ultimate values. Employees and consumers will then associate the company with positive, community-centered values. If the company presents itself consistently with this kind of image, consumers might spend more money on their products over time.

The value of temperance can also affect the direction a company takes in the research and development of new products. Companies can choose to create and successfully market products that meet consumers' basic needs. This may seem to lead to bankruptcy, since so many products on the market today, all over the world, are unnecessary and purchased on impulse. But limiting a company's dependence on such products can lead to overall stability. At best, business leaders who make products that meet more basic human needs are more likely to have a stable market niche over time. The demand for superficial and unnecessary goods and services fluctuates more, leading to less stability in the company.

If the company has a policy of trying to sell necessary products or products that focus on the quality of life, people looking for work might choose to work in such a company because of their policy. The company might receive applications from more highly qualified workers who are seeking this type of environment. Workers who value moderation are more likely to be more reliable workers. Those who work in companies that sell products that appeal to irrational desires and harmful ways of living would more likely attract employees who live this way. Company morale can be undermined by the common knowledge that the company has no meaningful purpose. When workers do not believe in what they make, they are less likely to be motivated and to do their jobs well. Leaders then have to use threats and external force to get workers to do their jobs. This creates a greater gap between workers and leaders, which undermines trust and good will. Creating products employees are proud to be producing, therefore, is at least as likely in the long run to lead to the overall health and well-being of a company as to undermine it.

Temperance is also important in humanity's relationship to the natural world. Aristotle's model of natural reason is based on the assumption that the universe is fundamentally ordered and that human beings can understand the basic foundations of reality, natural and human, by exercising the power of reasoning in the study of nature and culture. The power of human choice also gives human beings the power to deliberately deny or even defy that order. Excess desires are the motive behind such arrogance. A company that values temperance will model a respect for the natural world. Company policies will focus on avoiding unnecessary use of natural resources. "Reduce, reuse, restore, recycle" will be incorporated into every facet of company life. Conservation of resources should lead to saving money. Using "green" products leads to more companies that make such products, leading to lower prices because of competition and economy of scale. The economic system can be redirected toward conservation of natural resources. Aristotle would consider this approach obvious.

### ***10.1.3 Courage: The Virtue in Relation to Situations Involving Fear***

The human condition of ignorance and vulnerability leads to the virtues and vices connected to fear. We experience fear in response to situations of harm, either physical or psychological. We fear pain, sickness, and death. We also fear being humiliated by other people, being ostracized from society, the betrayal of friends, violence and abuse from friends and strangers, and all the ways our relationships with others can break down. As citizens, we fear the animosity of other nations and seek security from attack. The virtue in relation to the experience of fear is courage; the vices are cowardice and rashness. Cowards run away from fearful situations when they should not; those who are rash seek out situations of danger unnecessarily, to prove themselves in some way. Courage is the capacity to face situations of fear and respond appropriately simply because it is the noble and dignified thing to do.

Aristotle says, "We fear all evils, e.g. disgrace, poverty, disease, friendlessness, death" [1115a10-11] (Barnes, 1995, 1760). He describes a courageous person as one "who faces and who fears the right things and with the right aim, in the right way and at the right time, and who feels confidence under the corresponding conditions . . . for the brave man feels and acts according to the merits of the case and in whatever way reason directs" [1115b17-22] (Barnes, 1995, 1761). Because courageous people make choices based on reason alone, they are choosing to do what is best simply because it is noblest and best and for no other ulterior motive. "It is for a noble end that the brave man endures and acts as courage directs" [1115b23] (Barnes, 1995, 1761).

Leadership requires courage in many senses. Leaders continually have to take calculated risks, knowing they might not work out. Knowing when to take a chance and when to hold back is difficult. Sometimes the choices made within a few weeks can have long-term consequences. Leaders can fail to act or can overreact in any given situation. Leaders also have to overcome the fear of a loss of reputation or

respect among followers. A leader might believe the best choice is not the most popular one, but do it anyway. The choices leaders make are usually made public. The people affected almost always disagree among themselves about whether any given decision was best. Some people have difficulty accepting any decisions made, simply because they do not like being reminded that they are so dependent on another human being. In such cases, unjustified criticism undermines the organizational climate. At the other extreme, some people blindly accept the choices leaders make, assuming they have power simply because they have proven in the past that they can exercise it well. In such cases, an organization can be run into the ground because the leaders are not given any meaningful feedback. The best leaders have the courage to admit they don't know, to admit when they make mistakes. They will explain to employees what they have done to correct a mistake and to prevent future similar mistakes. The best leaders do not find scapegoats to blame, but take as much responsibility as they can for mistakes. The best leaders seek out and listen to feedback from all members of their organizations.

In their efforts to motivate employees to do their jobs well, courage and fear can be used productively or destructively. If a company is, indeed, in danger of closing or of losing a large profit, good leaders will be honest and engender appropriate fear, so that everyone will work harder and make sacrifices for the sake of the preservation and well-being of the company. Bad leaders are always using threats and intimidation to motivate workers. They might intimidate each individual employee. They might send messages that claim the company is in danger when it is not in order to justify making employees work harder, not giving them pay increases or promotions, or firing more employees than necessary. Since employees often depend on employers to make the right decisions, it is important to maintain trust between leaders and employees. Once trust and good will have been destroyed, the best employees will leave, those who tend to be lazy will continue to drag their feet, and employees will use passive-aggressive techniques to get what they want with no concern for the company as a whole.

Good leaders also need to understand the outside threats to the well-being of their organizations. Within their own sphere, leaders need to understand the competition. At one extreme, they can try and fight head-to-head against a company producing a similar product with the goal of destroying the competition. On the other hand, they can create a market niche of their own by developing a product that is unique and thus more desirable. By doing so, they create an economic climate that motivates companies to focus on inventing better and better products at more reasonable prices. Companies can be a creative or a destructive influence in the social subcultures they belong to.

#### ***10.1.4 Generosity: The Virtue in Relation to Giving***

Another very important social virtue is generosity or liberality, the virtue "with regard to the giving and taking of wealth, and especially in respect of giving" [1119b23-24] (Barnes, 1995, 1767). A temperate, self-controlled life makes



possible the existence of dispensable income. A virtuous person takes pleasure in giving extra money away. Generosity is a concrete way of showing others and reminding oneself how much human beings depend on each other. The liberal person "will give for the sake of the noble, and rightly; for he will give to the right people, the right amounts, and at the right time, with all the other qualifications that accompany right giving; and that too with pleasure or without pain" [1120a23-27] (Barnes, 1995, 1768). This character trait belongs to people who care more about others even than about themselves. "It is highly characteristic of a liberal man also to go to excess in giving, so that he leaves too little for himself; for it is the nature of a liberal man not to look to himself" [1120b5-7] (Barnes, 1995, 1768). The goal of generosity should always be the development of virtue in others, leading everyone to a higher quality of life. Generosity creates trust and good will much more than good opinions or other public displays aimed at creating the impression of virtue. It is possible to make a mistake in the giving of money. "If [the liberal man] happens to spend in a manner contrary to what is right and noble, he will be pained. . . for it is the mark of excellence both to be pleased and to be pained at the right objects and in the right way" [1121a1-4] (Barnes, 1995, 1769).

When the richest citizens give huge sums to public projects, the virtue they exercise is what Aristotle calls magnificence. Magnificence is "fitting expenditure involving largeness of scale" [1122a23] (Barnes, 1995, 1771). Public well-being is improved or harmed when those with the most wealth make public displays of their generosity. "The magnificent man is like an artist; for he can see what is fitting and spend large sums tastefully . . . The magnificent man will spend such sums for the sake of the noble; for this is common to the excellences" [1122a35-1122b7] (Barnes, 1995, 1771). When the wealthiest exercise this virtue, citizens are led toward appreciating the arts, education, the sciences, community-building, and all the activities people engage in for the sake of a high quality of life, not mere survival. One of the great debates in modern society is the quarrel over whether the virtues related to the distribution of wealth ought to be understood as collective, through a system of taxes and legally established social and political institutions or, instead, strictly voluntary, leading to the formation of privately funded institutions. This debate will not go away and has taken on new forms with the development of science and technology.

In relation to the issue of funding for health care, debates about private or public funding are closely connected with the virtue of temperance and the vices associated with intemperance. Science and technology have led to more sophisticated and expensive ways of distorting natural experiences of pleasure and pain, both physical and psychological. Nations and citizens around the world debate whether justice requires tax-supported health care or whether health care ought to be paid from citizens' salaries. Technology leads to products and services that go beyond the need to be healthy. People cannot agree on whether to fund seemingly "cosmetic" kinds of care through taxes or not. The desire for excess wealth can undermine health, even within the health-care industry. When the system is corrupt, everyone involved in the corruption is using the power they have to gratify their own excess desires at the expense of others and of the society as a whole. Those who provide health-care products and services can be blinded by greed rather than the desire to figure out what is just and best. Doctors and pharmaceutical companies

can make huge amounts of money pandering to citizens' irrational desires. Overeating, smoking, drinking excessively, a failure to exercise, and other bad habits increase corporate profits and health care costs.

Corporations also make huge profits by selling mood-altering drugs. Advertising tries to convince citizens that they deserve a psychologically pain-free life. The nurturing of impulsive behavior leads people to hurt everyone around them. Broken relationships lead, in turn, to serious emotional problems. Profits made from emotional problems leads away from an investment in finding out and fixing the root causes of such problems. Less money is invested in publicly funded services that prevent such problems, because prevention would reduce corporate profits.

Health care is also profoundly affected by fear of pain, old age, and death. Cowardice leads to excessive fear in situations involving pain, aging, or death, which leads in turn to excessive and expensive health care. Science and technology have distorted and corrupted debates about facing the fact of human mortality and death. An excessive and unnatural fear of death has led to expensive and sophisticated products that delay the natural dying process. Providers who make huge profits pander to citizens' irrational desire to stay alive at any cost. Corporate advertising claims that people 'deserve' to stay alive as long as possible. A combination of fear and manipulation leads to enormous health care costs that are unnatural and unnecessary. The cost of health care, whether privately or publicly funded, lowers the quality of life in other sectors of society. Spending more money on health care leaves less money for high-quality schools, parks, environmental protection, roads, and all the other needs human beings share.

Leaders show concern for the well-being of their communities by setting up a program of corporate philanthropy within their companies. They can find out from employees which organizations have the best goals and the most cost-effective ways of implementing them. Research about the network of philanthropic organizations in their area can be one small part of one employee's job description. This person can become knowledgeable about the history of corporate philanthropy in the places where they do business so they know what has worked in the past and what has failed. This person can also research government-funded programs and set up ways for private and public funds to be invested in well-designed and well-run programs.

Good leaders are savvy about corporate philanthropy. They use it to improve their company's public image and to improve the social climate within which they do business, and this, in turn, improves efficiency and profitability. Within a company, wellness programs have been shown to lead to less illness, less absenteeism, and hence greater profitability for a company. Supporting public parks and recreation promotes community health for young and old, decreasing the cost of health care. Supporting the public schools means companies do not have to pay for remedial education when employees are hired. Supporting high quality day care programs for the underclass has been shown to reduce crime and all of the public costs associated with it.

Good leaders will let their employees know that they link the success of their companies to the quality of life in the community. They might hold meetings with employees who want to gather to debate current issues, in the company and in the

community. They provide opportunities for workers to form opinions and to listen to the opinions of others, a necessary precondition for cultivating practical wisdom. They might provide time off from work for volunteerism at times when the community is in particular need. They could encourage employees to set up discussion groups to meet before or after work or during lunch hours. People with young children might want to discuss a book or invite a speaker to talk to them about child-raising. People who are caring for aging parents might want to meet to discuss a book or hear a speaker. Over time, employees who meet in such groups develop practical wisdom not only about their lives, but about human life in general and about the lives of people around them.

Good rulers rule so well that their authority is least needed. They create a body of employees who can solve the problems that arise within the many sub-divisions of their organizations. Workers who are encouraged to be thoughtful about their communities and their places of work can provide good recommendations for what those with power ought to do. Political life, community life, and life-at-work are all improved greatly when everyone has the opportunity and desire to develop the virtues. Good leaders know that employees who are virtuous are the most valuable asset of their company. As the Greeks would say, in a healthy society, leaders and led are 'of one mind' about what is best. Although members of every kind of social group have different areas of expertise and different levels of power and responsibility, in the best societies they work together for the well-being of everyone.

The business world is primarily dedicated to providing goods and services that provide value. Every social sector includes an exchange that is usually mediated by money. Education, the arts, medicine, and most human activities involve money. Every sector of society can become corrupted when the desire to become wealthy becomes excessive. Citizens should value doing their jobs well and exercising their skills in a way that promotes the well-being of those who seek out their services more than exercising their skills for the sake of gaining power or wealth. Good business leaders should be able to lead their societies in establishing company policies and laws that maintain a healthy balance between nurturing the pleasure that comes from making money and inhibiting it. Good business leaders understand their place in society and their particular skill at making money within the context of the nature and purpose of all sectors of a flourishing society. The business community and the political community have to work together, because they represent the two most powerful sectors of a society. Too much legal interference in the economic sector of society leads to a lack of motivation. Too little redistribution of wealth leads to greed and all the harm caused by the desire for excesses of all kinds. There is an art to the creation and distribution of wealth. Good business leaders want to establish a political community and a body of laws that help all sectors of society to flourish and to reinforce each other.

Good leaders create and enforce company policies for punishing employees who violate the conditions of their employment. Well-run companies operate in the same way as well-run legal systems in the political sector of society. Those at the top should be punished as severely, or even more severely, than those with less

status, power, and wealth, because the violations of those at the top have a more profound negative impact on everyone else, especially those lower down. Making sure those with the most power are punished, and punished severely, is the only way to develop trust.

### ***10.1.5 The Universality of Aristotle's Virtues***

On the one hand, a case can be made for the plasticity of human nature. Human choice lends itself to many, many different ways of living and of understanding good and evil, virtue and vice. On the other hand, Aristotle's virtues present an outline for what could be developed into an international and universal ethic. When observing human behavior, we are at first struck by the many differences between people and the power of cultures to mold individuals. If we go beyond the world of appearances – mere behavior – and focus instead on the underlying principles and causes of human action, it is possible to describe the human condition in a way that applies to all human beings, past, present, and future.

Aristotle's theory of the virtues claims to be such a universal ethic. It starts with the human condition, its situation of ignorance and vulnerability, and the many obstacles human beings encounter in their effort to develop the natural powers of the human soul. Every society has some standards for excess and defect in relation to all these virtues, even though there are clearly cultural differences between how each society addresses each virtue or vice. The plasticity of human nature, however, does not prove that morality is entirely relative. Aristotle argues that an entire society can be excessively dedicated to pleasure, to war, or to empire-building, and can nurture animosity between citizens or a cooperative spirit. There are natural standards according to which every society can be evaluated as better or worse.

Businesses create and reward different kinds of community climate and can be evaluated as better or worse, more just or less just, according to the ultimate goals they pursue and the ways they pursue them. A company can have a reputation for being authoritarian or egalitarian, for encouraging employees to develop themselves and contribute to company life in many way – or for intimidating employees and expecting them to do what they are told. A company can nurture intemperance, fear, and greed – or moderation, courage, and self-sufficiency. People who can rule themselves in their private lives create communities of individuals who will work together for the sake of the good of the whole. This is true all over the world. Cultural differences might lead to disagreements at first, but rational adults will be able to work out those disagreements and irrational adults will not.

Given the continually increasing communication and contact between human beings all over the world, it is now more important than ever to reflect on which ways of living are better and or worse from the point of view of natural and international standards of virtue and justice, without favoring or condemning one entire society's traditions over another. One way to begin a comparative study of the mores of different cultures is to compare Aristotle's list with the behavior and

teachings of other leaders who have been considered outstanding models of virtue and justice. Jesus, Muhammad, Buddha, Confucius, and Lao-tzu are a few examples of leaders who history has thought of as living excellent lives. History has also honored various leaders in business, politics, and every sector of human life. Scholars could do a comparative study of how each leader exhibits Aristotle's virtues, as well as those aspects of their lives that seem incompatible with the biases of the ancient Greeks in general or Aristotle in particular. Certainly Aristotle's bias in relation to women must be rejected and his description of 'natural slaves' must be changed.

No one standard can be the only model to follow. Aristotle himself argues that the best social and political system for a particular nation at any particular time varies, depending on the history, climate, culture, and many other factors. A comparative study would be a great starting point for a dialectical conversation, leading to a commitment to continual self-examination and examination of others throughout one's life and in all dimensions of life. Both study and experience should enable leaders, or those with authority in all sectors of society, to take the situations they find themselves in and promote human excellence in whatever ways they can.

## Further Reading

- Beck, M. (2006a). *Tragedy and the philosophical life: A response to Martha Nussbaum/Vol. II, The Republic*. Lewiston: E. Mellen Press.
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