
How Much Aristotle Is in Levine and Boaks’s Leadership Theory?: Response to Schäfer and Hühn

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A RESPONSE TO Viktoria Ramona Schäfer and Matthias Philip Hühn (2016), “How Much Aristotle Is in Levine and Boaks’s Leadership Theory?”, *Bus Ethics J Rev* 4(4): 21–26, <http://doi.org/10.12747/bejr2016.04.04a>

ABSTRACT

While accepting and welcoming our main thesis and project, Schäfer and Hühn’s Commentary on our paper focuses on two main criticisms, both of which seem to us mistaken. The first of these is that our paper falsely argues “that the existing definitions of leadership out there fall short in describing the role of ethics in leadership.” The second seems to be a belief that (i) we claim to be offering an entirely new definition of leadership and misrepresenting its nature because (ii) in the view of Schäfer and Hühn this supposedly new definition “is essentially un-Aristotelian.”

1. On the existing definitions in the literature

IT IS NOT true that we wish to “replace the extant and, in [our] opinion misleading, definitions of leadership” (Schäfer and Hühn 2016:

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22) with our own and it is difficult to see how the reader could gain this impression from our paper. As we state in our paper, we agree entirely with Joanne Ciulla that the kind of leadership we are and should be interested in is the ethically good kind. Further, we agree with Ciulla that any sufficient account of leadership should address the question of leadership done in an ethically good manner, by an ethically good character, and towards ethically good ends. We are also supportive of the objectives of many of the accounts found throughout the existing and contemporary literature on leadership (see Levine and Boaks 2014: 227, 228, 229, 239).

We believe though that there is more philosophical work to be done to ground and justify such accounts and we believe our own proffered account is one way towards this. It is not because we overlook or misrepresent Ciulla's assertion that we do and should want to ground a normative theory of leadership. Indeed, as we write in our paper, Ciulla (and others who assert that ethics is central to leadership) may well be correct, "[b]ut without making the grounds for this view explicit, this approach toward leadership can reduce to wishful thinking" (Levine and Boaks 2014: 227).

We think this grounding is essential, but also absent in much of the extant literature. In fact we strongly agree with Ciulla when she writes (in the Foreword to our edited volume, Boaks and Levine 2015: xvii): "As I have shown, the dominant empirical theories on leadership ethics would benefit from a richer understanding of philosophic ethics."

On our reading of the existing literature, much of this work remains to be done and philosophy has a lot to contribute to it. The leadership literature may be vast – as any cursory glance at it shows – but the accounts given of the shortcomings of the claimed and wished for relationship between ethics and leadership are few. Notwithstanding the enormous amount that has been written not only on leadership but specifically on the question of leadership and ethics, the fundamental questions raised in and by this literature remain. These questions concern the grounding of the relationship between leadership and ethics in a way that avoids precisely the fallacies and errors that we cover in Levine and Boaks (2014), which fallacies and errors Schäfer and Hühn fail to discuss.

We see our own contribution to this area as supporting and furthering the work of those also writing on this area, philosophers and non-philosophers alike. As Ciulla says about the essays collected in Boaks and Levine (2015: xv–xvi):

The chapters in this book contribute to leadership ethics and leadership studies in two ways. First, they identify and discuss some of the distinctive normative issues in leadership. Second, they critically examine key conceptual issues that are vital to the study of ethics and leadership.

2. That our approach is ‘essentially un-Aristotelian’

We are quite clear in Levine and Boaks (2014) on the question of how close our account – what we describe as a ‘broadly-Aristotelian view’ – is to Aristotle’s own. Nor do Schäfer and Hühn make it clear why we or the reader should be interested in a narrowly Aristotelian reading rather than the approach that we do take. This approach is that of applying the conceptual tools and framework that Aristotle provides us with to consider questions outside of what Aristotle himself discussed. It is an approach common to much of philosophy and ethics as it is currently practised. Our objective is a conceptual grounding of leadership and ethics, not a historiographical representation of Aristotle’s own writing.

As with many areas in philosophy, the area of Aristotelian and virtue ethics is no longer limited to or circumscribed by what Aristotle himself wrote. Rather than treating Aristotle’s work as a gospel for interpretation and insight, the framework and conceptual tools provided by Aristotle have provided a basis for a wide range of ethical frameworks and explorations in contemporary philosophy. For philosophy (and indeed for most of the humanities and social sciences) such an approach is not problematic but rather something to be valued. As we note in Levine and Boaks (2014: 230):

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

To claim otherwise overlooks the fact that in saying that something is Aristotelian is not to claim that we are directly citing him but rather referring to and engaging with the school of philosophical thought that has grown from his work in the past 2.5 millennia. Philosophers and others have long done this in addressing a range of subjects. Thus,

questions about how close our account is to Aristotle's are germane neither to our intent nor to the account we offer. As we write in Levine and Boaks (2014: 231, emphasis added):

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

Nor do we believe that the framework we have proposed is the only way that more robust groundings of leadership in ethics can be achieved. Far from it, in our recent edited volume on Leadership and Ethics we invite a number of thinkers from a wide range of framework and theoretical backgrounds to explore exactly these questions. If Sison's account (the account of leadership to which Schäfer and Hühn refer) is one that seeks to make similar connections then we keenly welcome it. This follows on directly from one of the suggestions for future research we identified at the end of Levine and Boaks (2014: 241):

Our argument shows how leadership can and should be grounded in a eudaimonistic framework using the conceptual framework that Aristotle provides us with although we do not claim to have shown that this need be the only way a connection between leadership and ethics can be grounded.

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