Educating the Virtuous Leader: Exploring the Reflexive Practicum

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Abstract. The context of education under scrutiny in this paper is the post-experience practitioner sector, concerning students of ethics in Business Administration at both Masters and Doctoral levels. Responsible leadership is examined as a core theme in business ethics research and education. The paper proposes that responsible leaders require a virtuous mind-set, underpinned by Aristotelian thinking. Responsible leadership and romanticised models of leadership are interwoven in a critique of the technical-rational predominance in leadership and ethics research. The development of reflective practice is tracked from Argyris and Schon's reflection on and in action to reflexivity. The paper considers the essence of Aristotle's virtue ethics in proposing an integrative framework of skill and behaviour acquisition in organisational ethical decision-making. Reflective leadership and reflexivity are examined in relation to practitioner learning and the concept of a reflexive practicum explored to provide a praxis dimension to ethics education practice.

Keywords: reflective learning, reflexive practicum, virtuous leadership.

1. A Crisis of Confidence in Leadership Praxis?

Praxis refers to an Aristotelian perspective of thinking and doing, utilising knowledge and theory to underpin moral and responsible decision making and behaviour. Interzari (2014) defines praxis as "morally committed, socially responsible, right conduct, and embodied experience and actions" (p. 169). Responsible leadership has grown in stature as an area of academic interest out of an observed sense of toxicity in organisation life concerning the impact of business decisions and in particular, the growing concern for the environment and society. Leaders are singled out as decision-makers and architects of environmental ruin, given their assumed proclivity toward fuelling climate change (e.g. deforestation of the Amazon rainforest), severe water shortages (e.g. excessive drainage of the River Jordan) and direct harm to humans (e.g. the use of PET plastics and fossil fuel extraction) (Ciulla *et al.* 2018). Internal to organisational culture, leaders can be seen as potentially toxic, stifling creativity, dominating decision-making, acting autocratically and failing to identify threats or opportunities (Ormiston and Wong 2013).

This seems an unbalanced view of leaders and business in a society that can also appreciate the potential business has to contribute positively and proactively to agendas of poverty, climate change and disease. Yet there is a sense of moral abandonment today, societal institutions, religious and political, seem confused, blurred and anachronistic (Flanagan and Jupp 2001). Our education in leadership in business schools seems at odds with practice with no amount of psycho-sociological knowledge seemingly enough to produce positive, impactful, ethically minded people who have skill and competence in envisioning a better organizational and societal future and creating traction and momentum toward achieving this (Eisenbeib and Brodbeck 2014).

Education comes in many forms of course and while organisations deliver knowledge and skill acquisition to its employees and stakeholders through internal programmes, mentoring and coaching, this paper focuses on university provision for post-experience learners (Schein 2010). Aristotle himself held the view that adult humans are capable of reasoned action (praxis) through their ability to make decisions voluntarily (Meyer 2011). Their natural passion for knowledge and learning driven by a love of wisdom (philosophy), of an often practical nature. Conversely, leadership education and research seems to view leadership as something special when in fact, it is occurring at every level of society, in every age group and wherever people come together in social, business, governmental or voluntary settings (Collinson *et al.* 2018). This everyday activity has been exaggerated or romanticised through a variety of media and this version of leadership has worked its way into academia. The intentional fallacy, looking at impact rather than the intention of leaders, has delivered in leadership education a myopic tradition of attempting to justify and understand attribution. The tendency toward heroic and romanticised versions of leadership continues in today's research; beyond charismatic and visionary leadership (Kets de Vries 2009) and into related paradigms for example - "distributed" (Gronn 2002), "servant" (Hale and Fields 2007), "collaborative" (Archer and Cameron 2003) and "co-leadership"(Alvarez and Svejenova 2005). Moving beyond the leader to the context of leadership, authors such as Uhl bien *et al.* (2014) introduce "followership" and Fairhurst (2009) social setting.

The challenge for both organisations and educators has, for a long time, concerned how to affect a stepwise change in behaviour in the spirit of organization development (Schein 2010). Not just to leave it to the regulatory environment to threaten business with fines or closure, causing share prices to fall, revenues to plummet and profits to squeeze. Rather, to proactively create, through education, virtuous and responsible leaders who have the mind-set or skill to behave in a moral yet incisive manner. Aristotle expected virtuous decision-makers to act without inner conflict, with some rapidity, to make excellent decisions. Responsible leadership and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) academics could be charged with the criticism of romanticism just as readily, the work of Soltani *et al.* (2015) for example, falling into the trap of