Aristotle, Ethics and the ‘Art’ of Leadership

Key Concept
Aristotle’s ‘master virtue’ of phronesis, which combines ethics and action so that people can ‘live well’ and be happy, is often seen as the key to effective leadership. But it tends to be too narrowly defined. A re-reading of Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics reveals that phronesis is linked not only to knowledge, skill, wisdom and intelligence but also to sensory perception, intuition and aesthetics. For Aristotle, doing the right thing partly depended on seeing and appreciating the fine thing. This raises important questions about how leaders reach their decisions — and about the skills organizational leadership involves.

Idea Summary
In Aristotle’s great work the Nicomachean Ethics, happiness (eudaimonia) is not a feeling so much as a state — and a state with a distinctly moral dimension. Synonymous with ‘living well and acting well’, it arises from being part of and being active in a social life and a political community, and it originates in the exercise of virtues.

One virtue is seen as particularly important — phronesis. Sometimes translated (loosely) as ‘prudence’, phronesis is one of Aristotle’s ‘intellectual virtues’, belonging to the ‘rational part of the soul’ (rather than that encompassing emotions, desires and impulses, and ‘moral virtues’ such as self-control and justice). In book 6 of the Nicomachean Ethics, we are told that a person with phronesis is an expert at deliberating for the purpose of living well and doing well and is able to ‘locate’ the ‘correct account’ (the ‘mean’) of a moral virtue in any given situation.

Phronesis is, therefore, critical for decisions promoting eudaimonia — at both the level of the individual and the level of the state. It is, Aristotle tells us, “about having the right feelings at the right time on the right occasion towards the right people for the right purpose and in the right manner.”

Not surprisingly, phronesis has attracted the attention of writers on leadership and of scholars in fields such as the social sciences. (The term ‘phronetic leader’ has joined the modern lexicography of leadership.) Nonetheless, our understanding of what phronesis means remains quite limited.

Given its associations in the Nicomachean Ethics with knowledge, skill, wisdom and intelligence, social scientists have tended to stress its practical and rational aspects. Re-examination of the text, however, can reveal another side.

For Aristotle, phronesis is, it can be argued, not just a rational phenomenon...
but also one linked to the senses. Located in the ‘calculating’ or ‘deliberative’ subdivision of the rational soul, rather than the scientific part, *phronesis* is a ‘faculty of discerning’ that’s developed over time. (Men aren’t born with *phronesis* — they’re made.) Aristotle consistently uses the imagery of sight and seeing to explain the relationship between intelligence and *phronesis*, understanding and judgment: he tells us that men with phronesis have acquired, through experience, an “eye for things so they can see correctly”; he compares the exercise of *phronesis* to the kind of intuition mathematicians use to perceive the ‘ultimate figure’, the simple triangle.

More than this, he seems to draw a link between *phronesis* and the appreciation of what’s aesthetically pleasing. “When there are two possible ways of bringing about the appropriate end,” he tells us, “a person with *phronesis* will choose the one that is most fine.” Although he never says explicitly what he means by ‘fine’, the quality appears something distinct from (if necessary for) what is ‘good’. The Greek to *kalon* can also be translated as what is ‘noble’ or ‘beautiful’.

Further, the exercise of *phronesis* is associated with the experience of personal pleasure. The philosopher even tells us that if a man does not experience the pleasure of what is fine in a good action he cannot be called virtuous.

This returns us to the link between virtue and happiness — and suggests an aesthetic dimension to “living well and acting well”. For Aristotle, in other words, ethics, aesthetics and *eudaimonia* intersect. Understanding this is important for leaders today.

**Business Application**

Links between *phronesis* and intuition and the senses strengthen the case for ‘organizational aesthetics’. Originating in the 1980s, the field of organizational aesthetics has developed considerably over the past 30 years, and now includes a number of approaches. Some of its theories — and how they might apply in practice — are briefly explained below.

- People apprehend and experience organizations in terms of form — and through the senses, particularly the sense of sight. This means they use ‘aesthetic symbols’ as ‘ethical clues’. A person will, for example, ‘read the character’ of a boss partly by the way the seating is arranged in their office, the relative height of their chair and the ‘artefacts’ on their desk — family photos or executive toys? He or she may also sense that they won’t be happy in an office where the layout suggests regimentation and division — rows of desks, cubicles, etc.
- Good and effective leaders are often those who think about the aesthetic implications of their decisions. (This applies not just at the ‘micro’ level of the workplace but at the ‘macro’ level, too. It could, for example, be strongly argued that in 1960s Britain politicians and planners who failed to think sufficiently ‘aesthetically’ failed in their duty to society. Witness the collapse of the Ronan Point tower block in East London in 1968.)
- Strategic deliberation and planning benefit from conceptual and visual tools. The use of scenarios, for example, makes ‘seeing explicit’, helps create a common understanding between decision makers and lets clarity ‘spring forth’.
- Leadership training and development programs should include the aesthetics of organizing and decision-making. (*Phronesis*, Aristotle was clear, comes with experience: it’s not the same thing as IQ and, perhaps, might more usefully be compared with emotional intelligence.)

**Further Reading**

“‘The Eye Of The Soul’: Phronesis And The Aesthetics Of Organizing,” Esther Eidinow and Rafael Ramirez, Organizational Aesthetics, Volume 1, Number 1, 2012.