

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The virtues of the exemplary moral leader. Lessons from Aristotle's ethics

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Email: berry.tholen@ru.nl**Abstract**

Many contemporary theories on good leadership (e.g., 'moral leadership', 'responsible leadership', 'authentic leadership' or 'transformational leadership') emphasize the importance of intrinsic motivation in followers and of leading by example. This also involves a rejection of the use of power and manipulation as well as advocacy for virtues such as modesty and a concern for equality. By focusing on magnanimity (Aristotle's virtue of the great), we show that, contrary to what contemporary theories often claim, there are good reasons for exemplary leaders not to be modest, to point out their greatness in comparison with others, and to make use of external goods and incentives, particularly honor. This conceptual virtue ethical analysis results in specific lessons for the ethical manager who wants to lead by example and points to new questions for empirical research on the determinants of effective ethics management.

KEYWORDS

Aristotle, leadership, magnanimity, moral exemplar, role modeling, virtue

1 | INTRODUCTION

The current literature contains an apparently diverse set of theories of good leadership, such as 'moral leadership', 'responsible leadership', 'authentic leadership', 'servant leadership', 'spiritual leadership' or 'transformational leadership' (see, e.g., Avolio et al., 2009; Bass & Stiedlmeier, 1999; Becker, 2009; Burns, 1978; Fry, 2003; Laasch & Conaway, 2015; Maak & Pless, 2006). On closer inspection, however, these theories are remarkably similar, as comparisons of Sendjaya (2005), Miska and Mendenhall (2018) and Sims and Brinkman (2002) show. One such similarity is the advocacy of leading by example. Leading by example involves being a role model and exhibiting your virtues and values in what you do and what you pay attention to as a means to motivate followers (Schein, 1985). This implies showing followers what is worthwhile, what leads to individual development, and what is intrinsically valuable. These theories of good leadership maintain, moreover, that ethical management means reaching the hearts and minds and "tapping into their follower's

moral beliefs" (Fehr, 2015: 182). They suggest that merely showing followers what is good will lead to the desired effect. Providing a good example directly inspires followers (Burns, 1978). The leader's moral values themselves are what create the legitimacy that others follow (Bass & Stiedlmeier, 1999). In opposing transactional and directive approaches, these theories of good leadership are presented as alternatives to leadership approaches that rely on incentives or punishments as a way to achieve the compliance of followers. These theories also emphasize the need for virtues such as justice, modesty, equity, power sharing and service to others in leaders and managers (see: Hackett & Wang, 2012: 883; Morales-Sánchez & Cabello-Medina, 2015).

In empirical studies, we find a different message, however. Leading by example has also received increasing attention in these studies. Here, the focus is on the determinants of effective exemplary leadership, such as individual characteristics, the alignment between opinions of leaders and followers and contextual values (e.g., Fehr et al., 2015; Jordan et al., 2013; Moberg, 2000; Ven et al., 2019;

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Walker, 1999). One claim in such studies is especially remarkable in light of the advocacy in the literature for good leadership. In more empirically oriented studies, it is argued that ethics management demands more than merely being an ethical manager. To be effective, transactional elements such as incentives and punishments to achieve compliance are also needed (Brown & Treviño, 2006: 596, 568–600; Constantinescu & Kaptein, 2020: 159 ff; Fehr et al., 2015).¹

Thus, the literature on exemplary leadership contains a tension. On the one hand, leading by example seems to demand good behavior and good behavior only, wherein good behavior is often understood as virtuous behavior. Manipulative instruments and a focus on mere compliance do not fit into the concept of leadership that endorses leading by good example. On the other hand, it is said that leading by example, based on empirical study, is not effective if one does not also use incentives and other means. The one builds on some idea of direct internal motivation (by showing the value in certain actions), while the other motivates by relying on goods that are external to the good actions (offering or withholding things that everybody needs or wants). This tension leads to the question: what can and what should be the relationship between ethical management (being exemplary in integrity as a leader) and ethics management (creating integrity in the organization), particularly in the case of role modeling? Or, more practically, what capacities must a leader who wants to lead by example have?

To answer this question, I turn to Aristotle's virtue ethics, particularly to his analysis of *magnanimity*, the typical virtue of the great. This turn is motivated by the points of resemblance between theories of good leadership and virtue ethics: the use of virtue terms, idea of intrinsic motivation, and inspiring by role modeling. Magnanimity, according to Aristotle, is the virtue of the great or excellent individuals who stand out in success and virtue. The magnanimous are those great individuals who know how to deal properly with the attention (honor) of the (still) less virtuous, the less well-developed, the less successful (EN IV ii–iv, 1123b1–1125b6).² This particular virtue, therefore, seems to be most relevant for leaders who want to motivate others by showing their own excellence.

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in virtues and virtue ethics in our field. Some contributions have pointed out the advantages of virtue ethics as measured against deontological or utilitarian approaches (e.g., Bass & Stiedlmeier, 1999; Cameron, 2011; Hackett & Wang, 2012; Pless et al., 2021). Others have elaborated on the relevance of general virtues such as prudence ('phronesis'), courage or justice for management (e.g., Dobson, 2008; Moore & Beadl, 2006). This article clearly differs from earlier studies in its focus on an often-neglected virtue and shows that it is of importance for understanding what ethical management encompasses. It will be shown that leaders as role models must employ attitudes and actions that are opposed to what many contemporary theories of good leadership demand. Contrary to the claims of such theories, the exemplary leader should know how to make use of external goods or incentives and not merely rely on the effect of his good example.³ For managers this means that they need to develop competencies

and to employ particular instruments that are neglected by current advocacies of leading by good example.

In the following section, I will, first, explain more specifically why Aristotelian virtue ethics is particularly relevant here. In section three, I will present the main elements of Aristotle's virtue ethics and of magnanimity in particular. Aristotle's text on this topic is not always clear and sometimes even seems to be contradictory. In the following sections of this paper, I will single out a number of these problems, clarify them, and show what can be learned on these points concerning leading by example. These (ethical) lessons for the exemplary leader are formulated at the end of every section. In the concluding section, I will combine these lessons and point out what they imply for managers and what new directions they imply for the empirical study of the determinants of effective ethics management.

2 | FROM CONTEMPORARY DEBATES TO ARISTOTLE'S VIRTUE ETHICS

As explained in the Introduction, the literature on exemplary leadership contains a tension that leads us to the question of what is, and what should be, the nature of the relation between ethical management and ethics management, particularly in the case of role modeling. This question has empirical aspects (How does role modeling work? When is it effective?) and normative aspects (What kind of attention-seeking behavior is good or desirable? What is the right way to deal with motivational instruments?). In the contemporary literature on leadership and management, empirical research and normative analysis often take separate routes (comp. Brown & Treviño, 2006: 595). In Aristotelian virtue ethics, however, these perspectives are not distinguished. Different from utilitarianism and deontology, virtue ethics does take the empirical conditions of acting and personal development into account. It goes beyond a mere focus on universal rules or principles. Virtue ethics, furthermore, uses concepts that belong to both the normative realm and the realm of the social sciences. An example is the concept of virtue embodied in the explanation of individual competency that is prominent in contemporary organization research and psychology and, at the same time, evaluates such competencies (Morales-Sánchez & Cabello-Medina, 2015; Sinnicks, 2018).

A second, and connected, reason to turn to virtue ethics lies in the relevance of its moral psychology. It has been emphasized that the moral psychology that is basic to Aristotelian virtue ethics is similar to that which is presupposed in leading by being an example to others, especially in education studies (e.g., Kristjánsson, 1998; Sanderse, 2013; Zagzebski, 2013). This moral psychology is not focused on providing general principles for action or giving clear directives or standard desired outcomes but rather on learning to deal with all kinds of circumstances through the development of virtuous character in others (Annas, 2014; Kraut, 2012).

In recent years, virtue ethics, be it Aristotelian, Confucian or that of another philosophic tradition, has increasingly been invoked in business ethics. Often, these contributions are limited to introducing

virtue ethics by presenting its main characteristics or by offering an overview of virtues. (For examples of this practice and related comments, see, e.g., Steyl, 2020; Vallor, 2016). Studies in business ethics that offer a more elaborate virtue ethical approach sometimes focus on management and leadership, although not on exemplary leadership (e.g., Beadle & Moore, 2006; Dobson, 2008; Heath, 2014). For a broader literature overview, see Morales-Sánchez & Cabello-Medina, 2015: 156, 162).

Aristotle's catalog of virtues, to be sure, does not contain a virtue of exemplarity. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, however, there are some virtues that concern the way in which one presents oneself to others, for example, the virtues of gentleness and agreeableness (NE IV v, 1125b26 ff and NE IV vi, 1126b12 ff). There is one virtue that is particularly relevant here: the virtue of *greatness of soul* or *magnanimity*.⁴ It concerns the way in which individuals deal with the honor that they receive, that is, with the approving or even admiring attitude of others. This virtue, more specifically, does not concern the average person but only those individuals who are great. Aristotle also presents magnanimity as a virtue that is layered on top of others. It seems to be, he maintains, as it were a crowning ornament of the other virtues (NE IV iii 15, 1124a1). The magnanimous person knows his own qualities, sees how others see him, and understands how he should act toward them.

3 | THE VIRTUE OF MAGNANIMITY IN OVERVIEW AND A FEW QUESTIONS

In his *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle offers an encompassing understanding of what it means to lead a good life, that is, a life in which one is able to develop one's potentialities and flourish. This implies working toward a state of happiness or fulfillment that Aristotle calls *eudaimonia*. It involves gradually acquiring all kinds of virtues, that is, learning to have the proper emotion in particular circumstances and, thus, being inclined to choose the proper action in that setting. Aristotle analyses what it means to lead a good life and what role virtues have and discusses a range of specific virtues: these include intellectual virtues such as prudence and wisdom and practical or moral virtues such as courage or friendliness.⁵ Among the moral virtues, two virtues stand out because they are both relevant for a specific group of persons only, an elite. One of them is magnificence; this is a virtue for the very wealthy and concerns giving and receiving money and material goods. The other is magnanimity; it is the virtue of those 'who claim and are worthy of great things' (NE IV iii 9, 1123b18).⁶ Among the external goods, such as wealth, power or honor, the latter is the greatest that one can claim because men also offer it as a tribute to the gods, Aristotle maintains. Thus, magnanimity is the virtue of claiming the proper amount of honor by those that are truly great. Someone who claims little although his deserts are great is called 'small-souled'. Someone who claims much without deserving it is vain and foolish. "*The magnanimous, thus, is he who has the right disposition in relation to honours and disgraces*" (NE IV iii 10, 1123b23).

Those who are wealthy or powerful are generally thought to deserve honor. It is by being good, by excelling in the virtues, that they deserve honor. The magnanimous person also masters the other virtues. Magnanimity appears as a 'crowning ornament' (*kosmos*) of the virtues. "*It enhances their greatness, and cannot exist without them*" (NE IV iii 16, 1124a1-2). Because of this special, additional role toward the other virtues, commentators count magnanimity among the non-basic virtues (Gardiner, 2001). After this more general definition of magnanimity, Aristotle provides a list of more specific characteristics of the magnanimous person. Among these is that the magnanimous will despise honor rendered by common people and given on trivial grounds. Furthermore, he does not care much about wealth, good or bad fortune, or even about honor. (For this indifference to external goods (i.e. goods that are not really part of a good or *eudaimonic* life), the magnanimous are thought to be haughty, according to Aristotle.) He does not run into danger for trifling reasons and is slow to act, except when pursuing some high honor or achievement, and he will engage only in undertakings that are important and distinguished. He cares more for the truth than for what people think and therefore tends to be outspoken and open, although he might speak with ironical self-depreciation when he talks to the common people (NE VI iii 17-26, 1124a5-1124b23). In most of the items on this list, we can recognize one of the other virtues (*courage* in knowing when to expose oneself to danger, *truthfulness* in putting truth over what people think, etc.). The list of characteristics thus illustrates the combination of the other virtues and this non-basic virtue (Pakaluk, 2004: 264).

The magnanimous person, in short, will think himself worthy of great honor at the right times, for the right reasons, from the right persons and will act upon it in the proper way. This quick overview of magnanimity in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is likely to raise some questions, especially if it is to help us obtain a better idea of the ideal disposition of the exemplary leader. First, there are some obscurities and apparent contradictions in Aristotle's presentation of magnanimity:

- What exactly is meant by 'the great', that is, who exactly are the happy few who deserve great honor and for whom the virtue of magnanimity is relevant? Are they the powerful and wealthy or are they those that excel in virtues, or are these groups in some way identical?
- In what sense does magnanimity contribute to the other virtues and make them greater? How is this 'non-basic' virtue a contribution and not only a mere decoration of the other virtues?
- What, exactly, is the value of honor for the magnanimous? First, we read that magnanimity is all about being worthy of external goods, especially honor, but later Aristotle maintains that the magnanimous is not truly concerned about honor and the other goods. How can these claims be combined?

Given our interest in the possible contribution of Aristotle's explanation of magnanimity to the idea of exemplary leadership in our day, two further questions must be formulated:

- The concern for the good life, and for the virtue of magnanimity therein, seems to be all about the well-being and the grasp over external goods of the great persons themselves. How is this related to a common good or the general cause that we expect a leader to be concerned about?
- -The virtue of magnanimity seems to be at odds with contemporary ideals. The elitism that seems to be expressed by the focus on great persons and the behavior of these great persons toward the common people (despising their praise) do not seem to be in line with the modern ideal of equality. The disqualification, furthermore, of the small-souled (who claim less than their deserts) is at odds with the high regard that humility and modesty currently seem to have. (For expressions in contemporary leadership literature of the value of humility, modesty, servility to others, etc., see Hackett and Wang (2012): 883, Morales-Sánchez and Cabello-Medina (2015): 168/9). What does this (apparent) contradiction between the Aristotelian perspective and contemporary evaluations entail?⁷

We thus have a set of questions and concerns about the nature, relevance and consequences of magnanimity as a virtue of good leaders. To obtain a better idea of what it means to be an exemplary leader from an Aristotelian perspective, these subquestions must be answered. They will be addressed consecutively in the following sections.

4 | A VIRTUE FOR THE GREAT?

The first issue that needs to be addressed is: who might be meant by 'the great' that have to live up to the special virtue of magnanimity? Who, exactly, is worthy of great honor? Aristotle's text offers support for two possible readings. One of these readings states that the relevant individuals for this virtue are the members of a particular class or social group in society: the wealthy and the powerful, those with a high-ranking position in society, the aristocracy. Such a reading seems to be supported by Aristotle's claim: "(F)or the high-born and those who are powerful or wealthy are esteemed worthy of honour, because they are superior to their fellows" (NE IV iii 19, 1124a21-23). One might add for further support that the other special virtue (i.e., magnificence) also concerns such a particular social category. Scholars that interpret magnanimity as the virtue of the great statesman, moreover, emphasize that Aristotle often relates magnanimity to political leadership, especially in his *Politics* (see, for example, Arnhart, 1983; Faulkner, 2007). Russell uses the example of a university president to express this reading. He points out that this official has a prominence that goes with his position and that fulfilling the role of that office properly demands that he act in the manner of the magnanimous (Russell, 2012: 137-140).

Critics of this reading of 'the great that deserve great honour' point out, however, that Aristotle explicitly maintains that "*in reality only the good men ought to be honoured*" (This line immediately

follows upon the one cited above. NE IV iii 20, 1124a25-26). What he has in mind by those that are good is those that are well disposed in the other virtues. This reading is also in line with the claim that magnanimity functions as the ornament of the other virtues (Bae, 2003; Crisp, 2006; Curzer, 1991; Pakaluk, 2004; Stover and Polansky (2003).

The tension between these two readings is lessened when the remarks on the honor that ordinary people tend to bestow on the wealthy, powerful and high-ranking is understood as a statement of fact about common practice and not as a characterization of the true meaning of magnanimity. In several places, Aristotle emphasizes that people seek to be honored by men of good judgment and by people who know them, that is, they desire to be honored on the ground of their virtue. The honor rendered by common people is something the good despise (NE I v 5, 1195b28-29; NE IV iii 17, 1124a10-12). The implication clearly is that common people can be wrong about the honor someone deserves. They can be wrong because they do not truly know the person, and they might also be wrong because they do not actually have the capacities to judge the true level of virtue of someone and thus whether he deserves honor or not. This understanding finds further support in a distinction that Aristotle makes later in his *Ethics*. He distinguishes between different states of moral character (or levels of moral development) that include unrestraint, restraint and virtue. The restrained (or continent, *enkrates*) who have not reached the level of virtue (yet) might fall short in proper rational judgment of someone's greatness (NE VII i, 1145a15 ff; see also Hardie, 1978: 72). They might mix up having a high social or political position and being truly great.

For a further way to lessen the tension between the two readings, we must return to the illustration of the university president that is offered by Russell. He adds to the picture, referring to Aristotle, that "(s)uch a person (...) must understand that he is not worthy of great honour just because it comes with his social position; rather, he must be virtuous, and that in a complete and outstanding way" (Russell, 2012: 139). It is, then, not simply the position that makes one great; one has to be good as well. Given that developing excellence in the virtues takes time and training in Aristotle's frame (e.g., NE II iii 2, 1104b11-12), it seems logical that especially those who already have reached a high level of excellence are to be called to high office. It can be expected that those in high positions that do not have these qualities will try to act as if they do.

When combining these considerations, it seems quite reasonable to take Aristotle's understanding to be that the great are those who are excellent and that they therefore belong in high office. Because of this, and because excellence and high office in a functioning society also tend to overlap, ordinary people take being in high office as an indication for deserving honor, although the proper ground for granting great honor to people lies in the qualities they have (see, e.g., Pol III ii, 1276b16ff).

In the literature, Aristotle's virtue of magnanimity is often presented as a virtue of the statesman (e.g., Arnhart, 1983; Fetter, 2012; Holloway, 2008). There is, however, no textual evidence that Aristotle understood it as a virtue exclusively for those of high rank

in politics. Neither does his definition and elaboration of this notion give any reason not to consider it as a virtue for leaders in the corporate world. In this sphere, certain individuals are also seen as great. Some, such as James Burke of Johnson & Johnson or John Mackey of Whole Foods, are known to a broader public and admired for their integrity and concern (Fehr et al., 2015: 182). Other business leaders are admired in smaller circles. For all, magnanimity is, thus, relevant.

Great leaders in business can influence not only their employees but also other leaders. Their example can inspire their peers. Here, Bill Gates' philanthropy might be considered an example: the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is often referred to as an inspiring example of what successful businessmen can contribute to combatting global problems.⁸ The effect of the behavior and decisions of leaders in business might be even broader. Customers may also be motivated to follow their example (Van Quaquebeke et al., 2019). Here, a more general point must be made: the distinction between the public and business domains becomes less significant, particularly regarding exemplary ethical leadership. The ethical virtues of a good business leader are also relevant for other sectors of society. This also explains why Aristotle presented magnanimity as a virtue of all great leaders, not just of political leaders, as many of his followers did.

Great persons, whether they are public or business leaders, thus, are to claim the honor they deserve. However, those who claim honor, but do not deserve it, regardless of the sector they are active in, are foolish, "*but no one of moral excellence is foolish or senseless*" (EN IV iii 3, 1123b3-5).

What can we learn, thus far, from this elaboration of magnanimity and greatness for our understanding of exemplary leadership? First, it can be concluded that with magnanimity, we have a virtue specifically for those in high positions. Holding such a position demands excellence, that is, having other virtues. Second, we have seen that people can be wrong in the way they judge someone's quality. The good or great, that is those who actually are worthy of much, must rely on their own judgment. They must be aware of the limited qualities that others might have, and they must know how to value the way those others look at them. Third, and related, people who are in the leading positions that demand magnanimity need a high level of self-knowledge and self-worth. Aristotle's explanation of magnanimity shows that thinking too much of oneself, that is, demanding more than one is worth, easily makes one appear a fool, the object of ridicule.

5 | HOW DOES MAGNANIMITY ENHANCE THE OTHER VIRTUES?

Aristotle presents magnanimity as an ornament to the other virtues: it cannot exist without excellence in the other virtues, but it also enhances them. How and in what sense does magnanimity enhance them? Aristotle himself, unfortunately, does not explain what he means exactly here. Some commentators, such as Bae (2003), Crisp (2006: 167), Stern-Gillet (2014: 104 ff), and Stover and Polansky (2003), have elaborated on the meaning of magnanimity as an ornament, arguing that the disposition of the magnanimous

makes them excel even more in the other virtues. Such individuals are motivated to go the extra mile. In Pakaluk (2004, referring to NE VII i; 1145a18), we even find the suggestion that magnanimity stimulates individuals to reach the status or level of morality that goes beyond mere virtue and brings them to the level of superhuman virtue, that is, goodness on a heroic or divine scale. These commentators also point to one of the vices that stands in opposition to magnanimity as their starting point: smallness of soul (EN IV iii 35, 1125a17). The small-souled, in their diffidence, refrain from noble actions. They underestimate their potential and therefore miss opportunities. By playing it safe, a small-souled person trains himself in the wrong direction; he underachieves and enters a downward spiral of missed opportunities, a weakening of the will and the diminishing of qualities.

A problem with this interpretation is that although it does explain why and how the smallness of soul can undermine the performance of the virtuous, it does not explain why magnanimity enhances the virtues. Why would the virtuous need any further encouragement in virtuousness? That even seems to be a contradiction: someone who is virtuous by definition acts well for the right reasons; he needs no extra motivation (of external goods) (NE VII i, 1145a15 ff. Compare Sarch, 2008: 242). This problem can be overcome if we consider that magnanimity is a virtue for people in high positions. In such a role, one needs to be virtuous, but one also has to act in ways that are proper for the position. That might well involve being slow to act and not running into danger for trifling reasons, except when pursuing some high honor or achievement and engaging only in undertakings that are important and distinguished (see NE VI iii 17-26, 1124a5-1124b23). Those in high positions, thus, must be selective in the application of their qualities, choose particular challenges that are appropriate to their positions, and leave the lesser tasks to others. Consequently, the actions they engage in are more demanding, and their qualities are put to the test more extremely. In this setting, the virtue of magnanimity gives an extra drive to perform in an extraordinary manner. It "*disposes someone to realize [the other virtues] in an exemplary way*", as Pakaluk puts it. He illustrates his point by referring to the doctor who knows that his white coat creates high expectations in his patients and is motivated by this realization to perform even better (Pakaluk, 2004: 246, 262/3). The magnanimous, thus, is well aware of his special position and the demands this virtue confers. He makes choices and acts in a way that fits these demands; this, in turn, has consequences, enhancing consequences, for his performance in the other virtues.

The lesson here, first of all, is that the proper performance of a high function demands a selective employment of one's capacities. This might mean stepping back in some cases but acting in other particular cases. Making the right choices here means that one can perform better—extremely well, even—in high profile matters. Magnanimity means knowing how to pick one's battles and showing it: battles that are so challenging that one can be most exemplary.

The magnanimous person, second, is well aware of his virtues and competencies, which should fuel his ambitions and courage. Vallor emphasizes this point in the context of contemporary

challenges in the use of new technology. A magnanimous leader has the courage, she maintains, to present himself as an example in making the decisions that are now necessary on issues such as dealing with social media, surveillance and the examined life, robots and war, and enhancement. Our time demands “*genuinely magnanimous moral leadership to point the way to a positive vision on the human future*” (Vallor, 2016: 241, also 151–154). The same can, of course, be said of other contemporary issues such as the COVID-19 pandemic or global warming.

6 | IS HONOR TRULY THAT IMPORTANT?

The basic issue for the magnanimous, according to Aristotle, is to claim the proper amount of honor. This focus on honor – an external good – seems to be at odds, however, with the focus on personal development. A good life, *eudaimonia*, in Aristotle's ethics is not about acquiring power, wealth, and honor. The list of characteristics of the magnanimous includes the claim, moreover, that he does not care much about external goods such as honor. Can this seeming contradiction about the value of honor for the magnanimous be overcome?

The contradiction disappears if one takes into account two clarifications that are offered in the literature. First, although external goods from the Aristotelian perspective are secondary to the (internal) good that is acquired by personal development, these external goods are still an indispensable part of human life. Granting and receiving honor is, similar to friendship, a natural element of being human, of being a social animal. Feeling shame if one falls short in one's performances and feeling pride and expecting honor when one excels is part of Aristotle's moral psychology (Cooper, 1989: 199; Hardie, 1978: 64; Held, 1993; Sim, 2010). The virtue of magnanimity, furthermore, is not about acquiring as much honor as possible but about dealing properly with the honor that one receives. The magnanimous knows how much honor he is worth and from whom he can expect to receive it. This is the reason why he despises the honor of some and is keen to get it from others. The real concern of the magnanimous is not to get honor, but to be honorable, that is to be good (and receive the proper honor for it) (Crisp, 2006; Curzer, 1990: 519; Curzer, 1991; Hanley, 2002; Holloway, 1999: 592; Horner, 1998: 419–420; Sarch, 2008: 252/3).

This shift from a concern for honor to a concern for being honorable solves the problem of seemingly contradicting elements in the understanding of magnanimity. It also implies a lesson: it shows that expecting recognition for one's qualities is fine but being overly concerned about it is not. This point is nicely illustrated in the not quite magnanimous Coriolanus in Shakespeare's play of the same name (See: Alvis, 1978; Holloway, 2007). In the contemporary world of private corporations, some business leaders might find themselves in such a position because of their appearance in TV shows to talk on issues well beyond their expertise or because of the spectacles they organize in which they present themselves as heroes or saviors, even (think of the likes of Richard Branson or Elon Musk). Especially

under the current conditions of visibility and the use of social media, the dangers of vanity loom large and demand magnanimity.

7 | HOW DOES MAGNANIMITY RELATE TO THE WELL-BEING OF OTHERS?

Although the magnanimous is not concerned with piling up honor, he still seems to be focused on his own wellbeing and flourishing. How can a virtue that expresses self-centeredness, if not egoism, tell us anything about being an exemplary leader, that is someone we expect to be concerned with the well-being of others and the common good? This question touches on a broader issue. Some commentators, starting at least with Thomas Aquinas, have argued that Aristotle's ethics is lacking benevolence – an omission that, allegedly, surfaces especially in the virtue of magnanimity. The concern for honor is in dire contrast with an altruistic concern for the well-being of others (for such comments see: Holloway, 1999; Keys, 2003; Compare Crisp, 2006: 173).

In reaction, it must be acknowledged first of all that in Aristotle's *Ethics*, a virtue of benevolence cannot be found. An attitude of altruism, moreover, is completely foreign to Aristotle's approach. That does not mean, however, that notions of self-centeredness or even egoism apply, at least not in the sense of not taking into account the interests and wellbeing of others. A reply to such a charge can be given on several levels. First, it must be emphasized that avoiding shame and hoping for honor are emotions that can exist and have meaning only in relations with others, especially others that one values. One wants to be honorable in the eyes of others, especially others that have the capacities to judge the value of one's actions and character. In this sense, honor is quite different from other external goods such as money and wealth. As Held puts it, in the Aristotelian world, a person, especially the high placed, is permanently ‘on show’, “*he is forever courting the public opinion of 'equals' so that they pronounce him worthy*” (1993: 103).

Second, it is important to bring to mind Aristotle's idea of magnanimity as the ornament of the other virtues. The other virtues that he mentions, or refers to implicitly, are justice, courage, and truthfulness. These are virtues that typically involve taking into account the consequences of actions for others and for living well together. They are virtues that express, or at least enact, concern for others (NE VI iii 17–26, 1124a5–1124b23; Pakaluk, 2004 : 264; Hanley, 2002: 10). Third, on the deepest level, it can be pointed out that leading a good life for Aristotle essentially involves leading a social or political life. Aristotle repeatedly claims as much in the *Ethics*, and even more so in his *Politics*: A good person is a good member of (political) society (*polis*). (For an elaboration of this point and references to Aristotle's works see Crisp, 2006: 176–177; Curzer, 1991; Hardie, 1978: 71; Horner (1998): 425/6; Schütrumpf, 1989: 15; Stern-Gillet, 2014: 97, 104).

The good person in Aristotle's *Ethics* and *Politics* is no egoist, to the contrary. He values others, tries to give them their due and is concerned about the common good. This attitude, this concern, cannot be

captured by some encompassing virtue of benevolence or a sense of altruism. Such an idea is foreign to Aristotle's ethics. The motivation of the good person is to be honorable, to be great. He is concerned about his own nobility or excellence. In this sense, and in this sense only, the individual in eudaimonistic ethics might be called self-absorbed or self-centered. Aristotelian virtue ethics, therefore, does not express the altruism of benevolence, nor does it express the egoism of selfishness. Its core is a concern for oneself that implies a concern for others (Crisp, 2006: 176; Hanley, 2002: 17–19; Kraut, 2018).⁹

Before we can draw a lesson from this investigation, it has to be taken one step further. Above, it was shown that the valuation of our actions by others is something we as humans care for. It is, however, only those who have reached the highest level of development that know and can act upon the understanding that honor and praise, as external goods, are only of secondary importance. We have to learn to be motivated not by a desire for honor per se but by a desire for being honorable. Kristjánsson (1998, 1989: 14/15) argues, in line with Aristotle's approach, that honor as a desirable external good can have an important role in the moral education of others. He points out that those who have self-restrained (the continent, *enkrates*) but have not yet reached the level of virtue will not recognize the true value of the actions of a virtuous person. The honor that such a virtuous person receives might, however, motivate the self-restrained to copy that behavior, hoping to be praised too. Gradually, they learn that good actions are in themselves valuable and not merely because of the accompanying external good. When they reach the higher level of development, these individuals will discover the true (that is secondary) value of honor as understood by the magnanimous (A similar line of reasoning offer; Hardie, 1978: 72; MacIntyre, 1985: 188). In this way, a desire for honor, the honor that is now granted to the excellent, fulfills a useful function in personal development. Following this line of reasoning, the exemplary leader who wants to inspire the continent has good reason to take care that he gets the proper honor for his performance.

Not everybody is able to judge someone's true qualities. Good leaders must be able to distinguish the praise and admiration of those who cannot from those who truly do understand the value of their performance and act accordingly. As a consequence, they must react differently to the praise or blame, be it appropriate or not, of peers who know the real worth of actions and of those who do not. Given that people might try to imitate their good actions, not because of the quality of these actions (which they might not understand) but because of the honor or praise the leader receives for them, it is important to claim the honor that one deserves. Only then is the praise one receives likely to put those who are motivated to imitate the exemplary behavior on the right track.

Knowing that some people will imitate good behavior for external reasons, such as obtaining honor, is also important for a leader. Imitation of good behavior might be a first step toward virtuous behavior but is not yet what excellence is all about. The exemplary leader should, therefore, not only ensure that he receives the honor deserved but also show that it is not such external goods

that are most important. Offering a good example from the virtue ethical perspective, ultimately, is not about showing which actions are good or appropriate; rather, it contributes to the development of followers' potential and their flourishing (see Section 3 above). Good exemplary leadership, therefore, does not aim at compliance or the knowledge of rules or desirable behavior. Its goal is to form followers—also by using external goods—into individuals of excellence who have the right attitudes or dispositions to do the right thing in specific circumstances.

Earlier, it was observed that the magnanimous leader should be selective in showing courage or any other virtue and should pick his battles carefully. By choosing a high profile and particularly demanding opportunities, one is in for great performances, and such performances stand out. Being selective in this way has a further advantage. It leaves the less demanding tasks to those who have not yet reached higher levels of excellence and, thus, gives them the opportunity to practice and succeed and be honored for it.

8 | MAGNANIMITY, EQUALITY, AND HUMILITY

In the last section, a comment was mentioned that does not concern the consistency of Aristotle's explanation of magnanimity but the true moral quality of this virtue (its opposition to benevolence). Similar comments have been made regarding humility and equality. Critics, often critics that have a positive stand on Aristotle's ethics, feel uneasy about a virtue for the elite only and object to the display of self-esteem, the disdain, the lack of modesty, and the discrimination between the excellent and the ordinary by the magnanimous person. For this reason, they discard magnanimity as an aristocratic virtue that is of no relevance for our day and time (e.g., MacIntyre, 1967: 66. For overviews of these comments, see Crisp, 2006: 172; Curzer, 1991; Horner, 1998; Kristjánsson, 1998: 13; Stern-Gillet, 2014:87). Some commentators even suggested that we should not take Aristotle seriously in his remarks on magnanimity. (Burnet writes that this part of the *Ethics* "has much quaint humour and is surely half ironical" (Burnet, 1900: 179n)).

Many others, however, are not prepared to dismiss magnanimity and have replied to these charges by arguing that the differences between magnanimity and modern values such as humility and equality are not as large as they might seem. They maintain, first of all, that the ideal of egalitarianism, as it functions in our time, has different aspects. When it refers to moral consideration or a minimum of respect, it means absolute equality. In the distribution of goods, however, our understanding of equality also means taking merit or moral quality into account: because of the input or results, it is fair that some get more than others. As to magnanimity the latter meaning is relevant. The divide between the great who deserve more honor and the others who deserve less, which is central in the virtue of magnanimity, and the ideal of equality, therefore, is not as deep as it might seem, these commentators maintain (Crisp, 2006: 175/6; Sarch, 2008: 250).

This reference to meritocratic elements in contemporary ideas of justice surely are correct. This does not mean, however, that a concern for personal quality and merit on the one hand and a concern for equal respect never clash and that there are no occasions in which intricate solutions are demanded to combine them in some way. J.S. Mill's elaborate efforts to combine both of these concerns in a system for good government might suffice to illustrate the reality of such contradictions and the challenge of combining them (as do the comments that his effort has received) (Mill, 1991).

Commentators like Curzer (1991: 135–137) try to downplay the alleged gap between magnanimity and humility. They maintain that the magnanimous might be self-conscious. That does not mean, however, that he is snobbish, cocky or arrogant, nor that he is condescending toward those who are less great. There is no remark in Aristotle's text that he actually has or should have those characteristics; he acknowledges, however, that people might think the magnanimous is arrogant, etc (EN IV iii 18, 1124a21). The magnanimous, to be sure, does know that he is great and that others are not. That does not mean, however, that he should be derogatory to the less great. According to Aristotle, he might, in contrast, speak with ironic self-depreciation when he talks to them (EN IV iii 28, 1124b 30–31).

Curzer (1991) might be right that the magnanimous are not arrogant and that they are not snobs, but this does not mean that they are humble. Humility is not the absence of arrogance or condescension. In fact, one of the vices between which magnanimity takes an optimal position is smallness of soul, a vice that is sometimes translated as humility. The small-souled, according to Aristotle, is he who claims little, although his deserts are great (NE IV iii 7; 1123b10). Magnanimity and the Christian virtue of humility here are clearly at odds. While being humble in the Christian understanding is an expression of greatness, smallness of soul in the Aristotelian ethics is a barrier to great actions and therefore a vice. Or, put differently, for Aristotle the magnanimous person is well-aware of his qualities and role and acts upon it. That includes claiming attention and honor for it. In the Christian approach, to the contrary, the humble person knows his qualities and his role and makes himself small. While the magnanimous proudly shows what he is capable of, the humble tends to refer to accidental circumstances and luck to explain his success. The tension here is inescapable (Crisp, 2006: 172; Curzer, 1991: 148; Sarch, 2008: 252; Stern-Gillet, 2014: 87).

What lesson can we draw here, especially concerning the tension between the virtue of magnanimity on the one hand and humility and equality on the other? One might take the position that humility and equality are the values that have predominance and that magnanimity, therefore, has to be disqualified: it should be of no importance to us. Taking this position is problematic if one at the same time would like to hold on to the other elements of Aristotle's ethics. If one wants to build on the Aristotelian moral psychology of personal development, as seems to be the case more or less explicitly in moral leadership literature, magnanimity is part of the package. Aristotle's remarks on the appropriateness of slavery and the inferiority women might be cut from the corpus of his ethical theory, without consequence. That, however, might be different in

the case of magnanimity. This virtue seems to be much more woven into Aristotle's ethical system, as shown above: it gives expression to the particular role of the excellent in high positions and shows what having such a role means for the employment of one's (other) virtues, and it explains the worth of the external good of honor and makes clear what it means for those in high positions. Discarding humility or strict equality, on the other hand, is not an option either. These values evidently have deeply penetrated our moral universe. The remaining option is accepting that humility and equal respect are not the only values that are of relevance to us; magnanimity, or at least the moral considerations that go with it, is so too. This implies accepting that our moral universe contains contradicting elements and tensions. More specifically, it means that anyone who aims at being an exemplary leader has to deal with contradictory demands; he encounters particular dilemmas. He must, for example, enact the virtue of humility and makes oneself small. The virtue-ethical logic that is embodied in magnanimity demands, however, that he shows his excellence and carries the honors that go with the position in an appropriately grand style.

There is a difference between the dilemmas that the leader encounters concerning humility and those that involve equality. Leaders probably encounter tensions between merit-based and equality-based ethics in many parts of their job. Sometimes it may be appropriate to reward those of merit, but at the same time, a leader might feel the need to treat others according to the rule of equal rights and equal rewards in the same function. He might want to treat peers differently and take their opinions more seriously than the ideas of those who show lesser quality and at the same time might feel the demand of equal treatment. He might see reason to use the drive for honor to help some, treat others as more mature and be bothered about taking an instrumentalist approach to treating them. In the case of humility, however, the dilemma for the leader who wants to lead by example is more particular. On the one hand, there is the logic of the leader who claims honor for his greatness. He does not want more honor and praise than is appropriate, and yet, is keen to receive what is deserved. An important reason for showing what he is worth and claiming the honor that goes with it is that in this way, he can literally stand out and be an example. On the other hand, there is the leader who is well aware of the virtue of humility and wants to live up to it.¹⁰ Additionally, in his leadership, he wants to enact this virtue and therefore is dismissive of honor and attributes achievements to others or to favorable circumstances. The leader who takes the first horn of the dilemma shows his greatness, thereby proving that he does not live up to the virtue of humility. The one who takes the second, however, makes himself small, thereby undermining, or at least complicating, the opportunity to lead by example.

The findings in this section finally add to a lesson that we found above concerning magnanimity as a virtue for the great. The danger of showing oneself as being 'too great', first of all, refers to a lack of knowledge of one's true capacities and virtues and. Second, there might be a deficient competency in combining magnanimity and humility suggests a deficient competency. There is, however, another

danger here. A virtuous business leader might fail to be an exemplary leader because he fears to be a show-off. His humility entails that his qualities remain invisible. This business leader also lacks the extra virtue that a real exemplary leader needs to have. (See Table 1 for an overview of the lessons from this analysis on the virtue of magnanimity.)

9 | CONCLUSION: WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR UNDERSTANDING EXEMPLARY LEADERSHIP?

9.1 | Implications to academia

The aim of this article is to develop a better understanding of what it means to be an exemplary leader, that is, to perform ethics management by role modeling. To obtain such an understanding, a conceptual or philosophical analysis of Aristotle's virtue ethics, particularly the virtue of magnanimity, has been carried out. Our findings and contributions to existing scholarship can be summarized in three areas.

First, our analysis gives rise to corrections on contemporary theories of good leadership such as 'moral leadership', 'responsible leadership', 'authentic leadership', 'servant leadership', 'spiritual leadership' or 'transformational leadership'. A central element of such theories is the suggestion that showing one's own virtues, or being an ethical manager, is enough for effective ethics management (e.g., Bass & Stiedmeier, 1999; Becker, 2009; Burns, 1987; Fry, 2003; Laasch & Conaway, 2015; Maak & Pless, 2006. For compassions and overviews of these theories, see Denjaya, 2005; Miska & Mendenhall, 2018; Sims & Brinkman, 2002). Against this idea that leading by example directly reaches the hearts and mind of followers, our analysis of Aristotle's virtue ethics shows that external goods, attention and respect (honor), more particularly, also play a role. The ethical manager must be able to receive the attention and

respect he deserves and he must know how to deal with those who are (still) less well developed. An exemplary leader should be able to recognize the (lack of) capacities of those who pay them respect, understand what it is that these followers respect in him and use this knowledge to address particular individuals and groups effectively. This also involves being able to know to pick one's battles in such a way that they contribute optimally to the ethical learning of followers. An exemplary leader should understand, furthermore, that striving for honor and recognition is part of the job. He should be aware of the dangers of this ambition, and he should have the capacity to fight the tendency of it becoming an end in itself. Honor and a proper concern for it thus play an important intermediary role between acting well and being an effective role model. The competency and attitude that a leader needs to have, therefore, is the virtue of magnanimity.

Current theories of leadership typically express virtues such as modesty, equality, and amiability (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Hackett & Wang, 2012). Additionally, on this point, our analysis urges a correction. Being an example demands magnanimity and that implies taking center stage, showing how one excels, expressing one's achievements over those of others and treating individuals of unequal development differently. By doing so, the magnanimous leader, of course, does not show humility or a concern for equality. The conclusion must be that being an exemplary leader is more complex than current theories suggest. The ethical manager who wants to lead by role modeling must be able to deal with the tensions and dilemmas that are an inevitable consequence of our modern moral situation: he must be great and also humble.

Our second set of contributions addresses empirical studies on effective leadership. Different from the current leadership theories mentioned above, empirical studies distinguish the determinants of effective ethics management. Among such determinants are the individual characteristics of the leader, the relation between leader and followers and the organizational context. Research on the effects of individual factors often deals with character type, psychological

TABLE 1 Lessons from the textual analysis on the virtue of magnanimity

Issue	Textual puzzle	Answer	Main lesson
Who are the great?	Is it those in high office or those who are excellent?	These are ideally the same	Magnanimity typically is the virtue for those in high office
Why an extra virtue for the great?	Is magnanimity as an extra virtue for the excellent not redundant?	The extra virtue is about dealing properly with one's excellence when visibly functioning in high office	The excellent must know when and how it is best to show excellence and deal with the honor they receive
Why is honor of value?	Why strive for honor as it is merely an external good?	Issue ultimately is not about receiving honor, but about dealing with it properly	The excellent are concerned about the honor they receive, but are not interested in honor itself
What is the relation between honor and the well-being of others?	Is concern for one's honor not selfish?	Properly dealing with honor is functional for the development of virtues in others	The excellent must know how to use the honor they receive to inspire their followers in the right way.
Relation between magnanimity and other virtues?	Magnanimity does not go well with (modern) virtues like humility and equality	There is an inevitable tension within a modernized virtue ethics	The excellent leader has to be able to deal with tensions between concern for honor and humility and equality.

characteristics and the possession of certain competencies or virtues (for a brief overview, see Brown & Treviño, 2006). Our analysis suggests adding magnanimity to the list of virtues and competences that are to be investigated. Do managers have the competencies that go with magnanimity? Do they know how and when to take center stage and how to deal with the attention by different groups of people? Additionally, the tension that we found in the demands on good exemplary leaders leads to further research questions: Are leaders aware of the complications and dilemmas inherent in leading by example? How do they deal with them? What strategies have the best results in particular settings?

Some studies on the relation between leaders and followers focus on the perception that followers have of their leaders. That might be the status and power they think the leader has (Brown & Treviño, 2006: 597) or the leader's reputation in a more general sense (Fehr, 2015: 195; Han et al., 2017). This study of magnanimity suggests taking into account the honor that followers grant leaders: What do they think deserves admiration, and what do they think of the way leaders deal with the honor bestowed on them? What effect does this have on them? Other studies focus on the alignment of ideas and competencies of leaders and followers (Fehr et al., 2015: 185; Jordan et al., 2013; Heres, 2014; Moberg, 2000; Walker, 1999). A recurring hypothesis in these studies is that a stronger alignment in values or moral development leads to a greater effectiveness of the exemplary leader. The analysis of magnanimity suggests a more complex picture: the exemplary leader can also influence those who have not yet reached the same level of moral development. Alignment, then, is not a crucial factor.

A central concern in the empirical research on the role of context is the ethical climate or the organizational culture (Brown & Treviño, 2006: 601; Constantinescu & Kaptein, 2020). Virtue ethics emphasizes that virtues, as personal characteristics, are not fixed but can and should be developed. The organizational culture has an important role in the development of individuals and its (future) leaders. This requires research into issues such as the following: What ethical culture fosters the development and action of leaders who dare show their qualities, but at the same time know where the limits are of public exposure? In what ethical climate can admiration and honor aid the constructive role of the magnanimous leader?

A third contribution to scholarship of this article lies in its example of how philosophical analysis, and the study of Aristotelian virtue ethics, more particularly, can be employed in the study of business ethics. There are now many publications on the importance of virtue ethics, next to utilitarianism and deontology (e.g., Bass & Stiedlmeier, 1999; Cameron, 2011; Hackett & Wang, 2012; Pless et al., 2021). There are also some studies that explicate the general relevance for business and management of basic virtues, such as justice, prudence (phronesis) and courage (e.g., Dobson, 2008; Moore & Beadl, 2006). In this article, it is shown that it pays off to delve deeper into Aristotle's virtue ethics and concentrate on the less well-known virtues. One of our findings—one that answers the puzzle that started this paper—is that we can now explain how exemplary

leadership and a concern for intrinsic values and moral development can go together with the use of external goods (such as honor). The analysis of the virtue of magnanimity has made clear how these two aspects are entangled and are complementary in the actions of the competent exemplary leader.

9.2 | Managerial implications

This analysis also leads to recommendations for managers and organizations. To lead by example requires more than merely being an ethical manager. To be an effective manager, one should know how to pick one's battles, when and how to take center stage, and how to deal with attention from different groups; in short, one should develop one's magnanimity-competences. Being an effective role model also requires being aware of the tensions between the demands of magnanimity on the one hand and of humility and equality on the other. This also has consequences for recruitment and human resource management in organizations. Judging who should occupy high office and how future leaders should be supported not only requires an understanding of excellence in other respects but also that magnanimity should be an issue of concern.

9.3 | Limitations

This study focused on the virtue of magnanimity, especially on Aristotle's analysis of this virtue. This special focus also makes for limitations of this study. Future studies could further develop the enquiry started here by taking the elaborations of magnanimity by Roman authors (like Cicero) and Medieval authors (like Thomas Aquinas) into account. Furthermore, in focusing on magnanimity the other Aristotelian virtue of 'the great' had to be neglected: magnificence. This leads to the questions: how or in what sense can Aristotle's understanding of magnificence help us to better understand problems and ambitions in contemporary business and management? A third suggestion for further study follows from the tension that was discovered in this study between classical and modern (Christian) virtue ethical demands. This tension might be analyzed much deeper than was possible in this paper. Further elaboration of this tension would surely contribute to contemporary debate on the revitalization of virtue ethics.

FUNDING INFORMATION

No funding was received for conducting this study.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author has no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

PEER REVIEW

The peer review history for this article is available at <https://publons.com/publon/10.1111/beer.12504>.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Erasmus made a similar observation in his early-modern handbook on becoming a good leader. He maintained that "(i)t is not enough for the prince to keep his own character pure and uncorrupted for his state. He must give no less serious attention, in so far as he can, to see that every member of his household - his nobles, his friends, his ministers, and his magistrates - follows his example" (Erasmus 1516/1963: 211).
- ² References to Aristotle's (1982, 1990) *Nicomachean Ethics* will be made by NE, to his *Politics* by Pol.
- ³ In this sentence and elsewhere in this paper 'he', 'him' and 'his' are used in their function of general third person singular pronouns without any gender specification intended.
- ⁴ Magnanimity is a poor and even misleading translation of Aristotle's *μεγαλοψυχία*. (On the problems of translation see, for instance, Stern-Gillet, 2014). Not knowing of a better alternative, I will follow common practice and use magnanimity.
- ⁵ For a more extended overview of Aristotle's virtue ethics, see, for example, MacIntyre (1985) or Vallor (2016)
- ⁶ Additionally, in other works that have been attributed to Aristotle the virtue of magnanimity is mentioned. In the *Posterior Analytics*, for instance, magnanimity is used to illustrate a method of getting to grips with complex terms. Here I will not go into differences between these sources on magnanimity and ways to interpret those differences. (See, for example, Crisp, 2006.)
- ⁷ For a detailed overview of comments and questions to Aristotle's presentation of magnanimity that can be found in the literature see Crisp (2006), Curzer (1991), Hardie (1978), Schürtrumpf (1989).
- ⁸ This of course, is not a valuation of this inspiring example. On the (inspirational) role of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation see, for instance, Youde (2013).
- ⁹ In this paper, I cannot do justice to the broad scholarly debate on the (alleged) egoism in Aristotle's ethics. (See, e.g., Gottlieb, 1996; Kahn, 1981; Wielenberg, 2004). The intention here merely is to indicate that it is far too simple to identify the self-regarding attitude of the excellent with egoism.
- ¹⁰ Hackett & Wang (2012: 877) show that humility also is part of all the current approaches to leadership that emphasize the importance of leading by example.

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How to cite this article: Tholen, B. (2022). The virtues of the exemplary moral leader. Lessons from Aristotle's ethics. *Business Ethics, the Environment & Responsibility*, 00, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1111/beer.12504>