Aristotle on Leadership—
Free from the Tyranny of Passion

David L. Cawthon

. . . from the hour of their birth, some are marked out for subjection, others for rule . . . —Aristotle

A stream of scholarship has recently emerged concerning our understanding of leadership in contemporary society. Having been deluged by a myriad of contingency and behavioral theories for the latter part of the twentieth century, a few scholars now seek an alternate approach to this most elusive topic. Rather than continuing to rely on the methodologies of popular psychology, they are turning to philosophy to enhance their understanding of leadership.

An example of this shift in methodology can be found in Tom Morris' book, *If Aristotle Ran General Motors.* Although his book often lacks the intensity of philosophical scrutiny, it nevertheless proposes that the study of leadership must be more than a long series of empirical observations.

Morris is correct. It is quite appropriate to seek unity between the physical and the metaphysical, between the natural and the supernatural. Yet in many ways his work falls short, for it fails to grope with those philosophical questions that should lie at the core of our inquiry. *What does it mean to be human? Are we, indeed, equal? Who among us should lead?* Until we approach these questions, we cannot understand what gives one the right to exact obedience from another. And the answers to these questions are rooted in our philosophies regarding the nature of humanity. Without question, Aristotle has answers to our questions. Yet, before we can assess his answers, we must briefly examine his philosophy regarding the nature of the universe.

Unlike his mentor, Plato, Aristotle was a *realist*. His feet were firmly planted in the world of nature. Although he believed in the existence of the *ideal*, he did not share Plato's contention that the *ideal* exists apart from nature. Instead, Aristotle believed it to be one with the matter it informed. What we perceive through our senses *is not* a mere imitation of the real world; *it is the real world itself.*

Yet, the fact of change threatens our understanding of reality. The acorn, for example, will change into a tree. The girl will become a woman. Nothing will remain the same. Thus, the perplexing philosophical question: How can an object be what it is since it exists in a state of continuous change?

In order to explain these changes, Aristotle proposed that matter continuously moves toward its proper end, taking on different forms, becoming what it was intended to become. Included within its *actuality* is the *potential* to become something else.

Professor S. E. Frost, Jr. cites the example of a sculptor creating a statue to explain:

> If we wish to understand the universe, then, we may think of it in terms of a sculptor producing a statue. But, while in the case of Plato the sculptor is independent, free from his marble, in the case of Aristotle he is dependent on his marble. His idea of a perfect statue is actually in the marble, a form which the marble seeks to realize.
>
> Therefore, Aristotle taught that every object in the universe had four causes. The first corresponds to the idea of the statue which the artist has before he begins work, the form which is to be realized. This he called the "formal cause." Then there is the marble with which the artist is to work, the matter. This is the "material cause." The third cause is that by which the statue is made, the tools employed to make the statue. This he called the "efficient cause" or "moving cause." The fourth cause is the purpose or end for which the statue is made, that for the sake of which the work is done. This he termed the "final cause."

Aristotle, thus, taught that all phenomena have a purpose, that toward which they strive, and it is from within this framework that he developed his philosophy regarding the nature of humanity. If all things move toward a final cause, he asks, what is the final cause of humans? What is our purpose? Toward what are we striving? Aristotle offers answers to these questions in the first chapter of his *Nicomachean Ethics*. Simply stated, he taught that it is the nature of humans to be happy, and it is toward happiness that each of us strives. Professor Austin Fagothy explains this proposition as follows:

> Happiness is the end of man. It is not inactivity, but action, else one could be happy while asleep. It must be the highest kind of action, not done for something else but desirable for its own sake. It is not amusement, which is only relaxation between work. It is not found in producing things, since such actions are for the sake of the product and happiness is for its own sake. It is not action of the body or senses, but of what is noblest and best in us, our reason. It is not activity of the practical reason, for this is full of care and trouble; but of the speculative or theoretical reason which acts in quiet and leisure, for we work to have leisure. Hence it is not the activity of the soldier and statesman, but of the sage and scholar.
>
> Because it is the good life, it is the life of virtue, and of the highest virtue; not merely of courage and temperance which fit a man for practical life, but of the intellectual virtues which fit a man for contemplation, the contemplation of the highest truth and good. The contemplative life is most pleasant, leisurely, continuous, enduring, and self-sufficing. This is the life of God and it is the best.

Although Aristotle believed happiness can only be found through the pursuit of virtue, he did not suggest that human emotions and feelings should be denounced and ignored. He was a realist. Nevertheless, he did contend that

our passions must be tempered. They must be controlled by the mind. The irrational must be directed by the rational. There must be balance. Accordingly, the *golden mean* became Aristotle's guide for the achievement of excellence. Nothing in excess. Whether our action be toward the moral virtues of courage, temperance, and self-respect, or the intellectual virtues of art, scientific knowledge, practical wisdom, philosophic wisdom, or intuitive reason, excellence lies at the mean. It lies between the extremes.

Appropriate virtuous activity, however, should not be determined as if it were a mathematical calculation, for it is not an objective mean. Instead, the golden mean must be understood relative to the situation in which one finds oneself. It must be reflective and thoughtful. It must be rational. It must lead to realistic action. Thus, the virtuous person is one, who, through deliberation, blends action with knowledge, and, in doing achieves happiness.

Yet, Aristotle did not believe that all humans have the intellectual capacity to participate in the truly happy life, and it is from this framework that he developed his leadership dyad. Basically, he taught that there are two types of human beings. Those whose lives are virtuous and rational, and those whose lives are directed by passion, whim, and social convention. To the former he bestowed citizenship within the community, for they had the ability to enable the community to achieve its purposes. Accordingly, they were assigned roles of leisure in order that they might contemplate and act upon the *ultimate good*. As *freemen*, they were free from the necessities of work.

To the latter, however, he denied citizenship. Instead, they were subjugated to the rule of the *freemen*, for according to Aristotle, women, laborers, artisans, and farmers lacked the ability to participate in the good life. Driven by lust, gluttony, and physical necessity, they lacked virtue. They lacked the ability as well as the time to contemplate the *ultimate* good.

In brief, Aristotle was in no way an egalitarian in his delineation of the leadership dyad. For him, humans are not created equal, whether by nature or by law. He explains:

> But is there any one thus intended by nature to be a slave, and for whom such a condition is expedient and right, or rather is not all slavery a violation of nature?
>
> There is no difficulty in answering this question, on grounds both of reason and of fact. For that some should rule and others be ruled is a thing not only necessary, but expedient; from the hour of their birth, some are marked out for subjection, others for rule. . . . Whereas the lower animals cannot even apprehend a principle; they obey their instincts. . . . And indeed the use made of slaves and of tame animals is not very different; for both with their bodies minister to the needs of life . . . . And, if this is true of the body, how much more just that a similar distinction should exist in the soul? But the beauty of the body is seen, whereas the beauty of the soul is not seen. It is clear, then, that some men are by nature free, and

> others slaves, and that for these latter slavery is both expedient and right.

Accordingly, the *freeman* should rule the slave, for the slave lacks virtue. Like lower forms of animals, he lacks the capacity to apprehend principle. His destiny is to use his body to minister to the needs of his life. Simply stated, as the soul is superior to the body, so too is the *freeman* superior to the slave.

For women and children, however, Aristotle's approach to the dyad is somewhat different. Even though he considers both to be inferior to the *freeman*, he allows that children have the potential to be virtuous. Moreover, unlike slaves, women have virtues peculiar to their nature.

> But the kind of rule differs; the freeman rules over the slave after another manner from that in which the male rules over the female, or the man over the child; although the parts of the soul are present in all of them, they are present in different degrees. For the slave has no deliberative faculty at all; the woman has, but it is without authority, and the child has, but it is immature. So it must necessarily be supposed to be with the moral virtues also; all should partake of them, but only in such manner and degree as is required by each for the fulfillment of his duty. . . . Clearly, then, moral virtue belongs to all of them; but the temperance of a man and of a woman, or the courage and justice of a man and of a woman, are not, as Socrates maintained, the same; the courage of a man is shown in commanding, of a woman in obeying. . . . The child is imperfect, and therefore obviously his virtue is not relative to himself alone, but to the perfect man and to his teacher, and in like manner the virtue of the slave is relative to a master.

As a result, he taught that since a slave has no deliberative faculty, the master must lead as a despot. Since the child has the potential for virtue, it should be treated as a king would treat his subjects. Since the wife has virtue, though it be without authority, she should participate in the management of the household to the extent her specific nature might allow.

As might be readily surmised, if Aristotle did, indeed, run General Motors, no women would be in the corporate boardroom. There would be no representation of labor on its board of directors. These inner-sancta of power would be the exclusive domain of the more talented, the more virtuous, the more privileged of our society. Women and laborers would be relegated to roles of obedience.

It should be noted, however, that although such distinctions in the leadership dyad have strong elitist implications, Aristotle's leaders were men of courage and temperance. They were learned. They were compassionate. They sought the *ultimate good*, not only for themselves, but for all who were under their rule. They were undaunted by private interest and the pursuit of trinkets. Free from the tyranny of passion, their leadership was rooted in justice and virtue.

Interestingly, Aristotle seems to hedge in his identification of those who should be the leaders within his society of *freemen*. At times he suggests that each, being equal, should take his turn as leader, noting that since no one man among equals is superior to the others, none should have permanent rule. Later in his

Politics, he proposes that many of the primary talents required by a society may be inherent at various times within the same individual, thus suggesting that citizens should be warriors when they are young, leaders when they reach middle age, and priests as they grow old.

Regardless, like Plato, Aristotle held that there are those who are born to lead; the rest are born to follow. For Plato, however, such leadership endowments were distributed among many throughout society, regardless of one's accident of birth, and it was the responsibility of the philosopher-kings to identify those who possessed these talents and prepare them for their proper place in society. Aristotle, however, taught that *freemen* are mostly born of *free* parents. Thus, citizenship was a birth right. Only those born into the leisure class could be citizens. Likewise, the sons of slaves remained slaves, for as laborers they lacked the time necessary for the leisurely contemplation of the *ultimate good*. Their task was to work. Considering physical labor to be demeaning to the soul, Aristotle believed that slaves were unfit for virtue. Consequently, the sons of slaves were never afforded the opportunity to rise to the status of *freemen*.

In many ways, Aristotle's proposition that leaders should be men of virtue has provided us a philosophical foundation that has served us well. Although we are often disappointed, we denounce self-serving behavior among our leaders. For the most part, we have little tolerance for opportunistic demagogues pursuing personal gain at the expense of others. Without question, if Aristotle were to run General Motors, we would find leadership seeking to unify the corporation toward the *ultimate good* common to all humans. We would find trust. We would find truth and honesty. We would find beauty and goodness. We would find focus on those qualities of our souls that separate us from animals.

In other ways, however, it is painful to illustrate how Aristotle's philosophy regarding the inequalities of humans served for more than 2000 years as a foundation for leadership behavior in our society. Without question, such ideas within Western democracies have become mostly abhorrent. But it is important to highlight Aristotle's attempt to wrestle with these issues, for these are the issues that have confronted humans throughout history. Indeed, current examples of our attempts to address them are numerous: *Affirmative action, Civil rights, Human rights, Women's rights, Worker's rights*. Each is rooted in concepts of equality. Each is embedded in one's understanding of the nature of humans. And whereas we who live in a democracy may not be satisfied with Aristotle's response to these issues, there is considerable evidence that we are equally dissatisfied with our own responses. Leaders speak of equality; yet, they often treat others as inferior, as the *freeman* would treat his slave. The *haves* often deny human dignity to the *have nots*. Indeed, it is not all that uncommon to find that some continue to proclaim a *natural* superiority over others within our society.

For example, some would deny women opportunities to develop their leadership talents under the guise that such is not within the scope of their intended nature. They would agree with Aristotle's assertion that the courage of a man is properly manifested by his ability to *command*, while the moral virtue of a woman is revealed through her willingness to *obey*. As a result, the

glass ceiling continues to exist, not only for women but for all considered by some to be innately inferior, either by gender or by race. And wherever we justify elitism based on an accident of birth, whether in our corporate board rooms or within the hierarchies of our military institutions, or within the sanctuaries of our cathedrals, we are acknowledging our agreement with Aristotle's contention regarding a natural inequality among humans.

Indeed, the history of the United States is filled with examples. Even though our Constitution was framed upon concepts of equality advanced by John Locke, those who helped shape American political thought often stood on the philosophical shoulders of Aristotle as well. In an 1813 letter to John Adams, for example, Thomas Jefferson noted that there is a *natural* aristocracy among men. While refuting the *pseudo-aristoi* position that included the accidents of beauty, wealth, and birth among the five pillars of an aristocracy, Jefferson concluded that the elements of a *natural* aristocracy are simply genius and virtue. Accordingly, he considered these to be the most precious gifts that nature has given us. This is not to suggest that Jefferson would deny citizenship to those with lesser ability. He would not. It is, however, to note that Jefferson drew clear distinctions concerning the inequalities of ability and virtue among human kind. He, as did many of our Founding Fathers, shared Aristotle's convictions regarding women and children and slaves. And, as his biographers continue to remind us, he anguished over those convictions throughout his life.

We should not be surprised, then, to find that throughout history our philosophies regarding the nature of humans have been influenced by Aristotle. We should not be surprised to read of Jim Crow laws. We should not be surprised that until this century women were denied the right to vote because they were considered to be naturally inferior. This is our heritage in Western society, and whenever we proclaim superiority based on race or gender or other accidents of birth, whether it be within our countries or within our organizations, we are witnessing our agreement with Aristotle's teachings of inequality.

Without question, the philosophical insights of Aristotle have made a considerable impact upon our current understanding of leadership. Of all the philosophers who emerged from this golden age of Greek history, along with Socrates and Plato, he is among those who have been most influential in the formation of our understanding of leadership. And rightly so! For Aristotle confronted those difficult issues that continue to haunt us today. And if we are to seek a deeper understanding of what it means to be a leader, we, like Aristotle, must confront those same questions that he posed more than 2,400 years ago. *What is the nature of humans? What is the meaning of equality? What gives one the right to exact obedience from another?* Ω