

ARISTOTLE'S ACCOUNT OF VIRTUOUS LEADER AND THE QUEST FOR GOOD GOVERNANCE IN AFRICA

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Abstract

This paper focuses on Aristotle's account of the virtuous leader as a paradigm for achieving good governance in Africa, particularly Nigeria. It examines how morally upright, responsible, responsive, accountable, transparent, courageous, and wise leaders can intellectually and morally harness societal resources for the sustainable development of society and the eradication of poor governance. Aristotle's account of virtuous leadership is particularly imperative in societies where poor governance—characterized by corruption, prebendalism, nepotism, favouritism, economic sabotage, unequal distribution of wealth and resources, and the misappropriation of public funds—has led to widespread political, social, and economic instability. To capture the nuances of the thesis of this project, the research explores the meaning of good governance, identifies the qualities that define a virtuous leader, and analyzes how these two elements can help address leadership problems in Africa, particularly Nigeria. Using the analytical and critical methods of philosophizing, the study compares Aristotle's ideals of moral virtue with the current realities of political leadership in Nigeria. The paper argues that many of Nigeria's challenges, including corruption and nepotism, are rooted in moral decay rather than in structural or legal deficiencies. Thus, the study asserts that meaningful reform must begin with ethical leadership grounded in character, discipline, and a genuine commitment to the common good. It further encourages educators, policymakers, and civil society organizations to invest in deliberate character formation as part of leadership training. By prioritizing moral integrity alongside competence, nations like Nigeria can lay the groundwork for more just, effective, and trustworthy governance.

Keywords: Good Governance, Virtuous Leaders, Nigeria, Corruption, Moral Character

Introduction

Aristotle (384-322 BCE) was a Greek philosopher and polymath, who made significant contributions to various fields, including philosophy, science, and ethics. His ideas on virtuous leadership and good governance were heavily influenced by his philosophical views on human nature, ethics, and politics. He believed that "humans have a unique potential for rational thought and that the ultimate goal of human life is to achieve *eudaimonia*, often translated as happiness or flourishing"¹. He argued that this goal can be achieved through the cultivation of virtues, which are habits of character that enable individuals to live a life of moral excellence. His ideas on virtuous leadership and good governance were influenced by his study of the Athenian constitution and his observations of the politics of his time. He was critical of the excesses of democracy and the concentration of power in the hands of a few individuals. Instead, he advocated for a mixed constitution that balances the power of different groups and promotes the common good.

His ideas on virtuous leadership and good governance have had a profound impact on Western philosophy and continue to influence contemporary debates on ethics, politics, and leadership. His emphasis on the importance of virtues, education, and the common good, remains a powerful framework for thinking about good governance and leadership. In his work *Politics*, he explored the concept of virtuous leadership and good governance. He believed that "a good leader should possess certain virtues, such as wisdom, justice, and temperance, which enable them to make decisions that promote the common good"². Aristotle also emphasized the importance of education and habituation in cultivating these virtues in leaders. He believed that humans have a unique potential for rational thought and moral agency, which enables them to pursue virtue and achieve happiness.

In his book, titled *Nicomachean Ethics*, he explores the concept of *hexis*, or character, which refers to "the stable and enduring qualities of an individual's moral character"³. His idea of virtuous leadership is closely tied to his concept of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom. *Phronesis* refers to "the ability to make informed decisions that take

1 Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by Terence Irwin. Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing, 1999: 1097b22-1098a20.

2 Aristotle. *Politics*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve, Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing, 1998: 1267a1-1267b10.

3 Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin, Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1999: 34.

into account the complexities and nuances of a particular situation"⁴. According to Aristotle, "*phronesis* is a key virtue for leaders, as it enables them to navigate complex moral and political dilemmas"⁵.

Aristotle's concept of virtuous leadership also emphasizes the importance of *megalopsychia*, or greatness of soul. *Megalopsychia* refers to "the quality of having a noble and elevated character, which is characterized by a sense of dignity, honour, and moral integrity"⁶. According to Aristotle, "*megalopsychia* is a key virtue for leaders, as it enables them to inspire confidence and respect in their followers"⁷. The concept of leadership has been a subject of interest and debate among scholars, researchers, and practitioners, across various disciplines.

Effective leadership is widely regarded as "a crucial factor in determining the success or failure of organizations, communities, and societies"⁸. In the context of Africa, particularly Nigeria, the need for effective leadership has become increasingly urgent. Nigeria, like many other African countries, has struggled with the challenges of development, poverty, corruption, and poor governance. Despite its vast human and natural resources, Nigeria has failed to realize its full potential, and the country's development has been hindered by a range of factors, including poor leadership. The importance of effective leadership in Nigeria cannot be overstated. Good leadership has the potential to transform societies, promote economic growth, and improve the overall well-being of citizens. Conversely, poor leadership can lead to social unrest, economic stagnation, and political instability.

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the need for a new paradigm of leadership in Africa, one that is rooted in the values of accountability, transparency, and responsiveness to the needs of citizens. This new paradigm of leadership emphasizes the importance of leaders who are committed to the common good, who are guided by a sense of justice and fairness, and who are willing to make difficult decisions in the interests of their people. One of the key challenges facing Nigeria and other African countries is the lack of effective leadership. Many African leaders have been criticized for their authoritarian tendencies, their lack of accountability, and their failure to deliver on their promises. In Nigeria, the situation is particularly dire, with widespread corruption, insecurity, poverty, and economic stagnation, threatening the very foundations of the state. The consequences of poor leadership in Nigeria are far-reaching and devastating. The country's economy has struggled to grow, despite its vast natural resources. Poverty and inequality have increased, with millions of Nigerians living in poverty. The country's infrastructure has deteriorated, with roads, schools, and hospitals in disrepair. The security situation has also deteriorated, with the rise of Boko Haram and other militant groups, causing civil unrest, and other inimical activities that threatened the quality of life of the people.

In this context, it is essential to explore alternative models of leadership that can help to address the challenges facing Nigeria and other African countries. One such model is the concept of virtuous leadership, which emphasizes the importance of leaders who possess a range of moral virtues, including wisdom, justice, and temperance. The concept of virtuous leadership has its roots in the philosophy of Aristotle, who argued that effective leaders must possess certain moral virtues that enable them to make informed decisions and prioritize the common good. According to Aristotle, "leaders who possess these virtues are better equipped to promote the well-being of their people"⁹. In the context of Nigeria, the concept of virtuous leadership offers a promising alternative to the dominant models of leadership that have failed to deliver on their promises. By emphasizing the importance of moral virtues, such as wisdom, justice, temperance, honesty, transparency, and integrity, virtuous leadership offers a framework for leaders who are committed to the common good and who are willing to make difficult decisions in the interests of their people.

This paper aims to explore the concept of virtuous leadership and its relevance to the Nigerian context. It will examine the key components of virtuous leadership, including the moral virtues that are essential for effective leadership. The study will also analyse the challenges and opportunities of implementing virtuous leadership in Nigeria, and it will explore the implications of this concept for promoting good governance and development in the country. Furthermore, the study will examine the role of institutions and structures in promoting virtuous leadership in Nigeria. It will analyse the ways in which institutions such as the judiciary, the legislature, and the executive can promote accountability, transparency, and responsiveness to the needs of citizens. The study will also explore the role of civil society organizations and the media in promoting virtuous leadership in Nigeria.

4 Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*, 114.

5 Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*, 114.

6 Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*, 98.

7 Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*, 99.

8 Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*, 116.

9 Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*, 116.

Conceptual Clarifications

Good Governance

Good governance is a concept that has been examined and debated by philosophers over the time. Governance refers to "the exercise of authority and power over a group of individuals or a specific territory. This may involve governments, corporations, non-profit organizations, or even local communities"¹⁰. Governance encompasses decision-making, policy-setting, and resource allocation. It can manifest as either good or bad. "Bad governance is marked by the abuse of power, corruption, and a disregard for the needs and rights of citizens. Good governance on the other hand, focuses on utilizing power and resources in a manner that fosters the well-being and prosperity of everyone involved"¹¹. Good governance pertains to the responsible and effective management of power and resources for the benefit of all members of society.

One way to conceptualize good governance is through the lens of the *social contract*. This idea, first articulated by philosopher Thomas Hobbes, posits that "individuals willingly relinquish some of their personal freedoms in exchange for the protection and security provided by a governing authority"¹². In this framework, good governance represents a fulfilment of the social contract. It encompasses the establishment of institutions and processes that ensure the safety, security, and well-being of all citizens while simultaneously safeguarding their individual rights and freedoms. Good governance transcends the mere provision of essential services such as security and infrastructure; it also encompasses the creation of a just and equitable society where all citizens have access to the opportunities and resources necessary for their success. This is where the concept of the common good becomes relevant. According to Thomas Aquinas, "the common good embodies the notion that certain values and interests are shared by all members of society, guiding decision-making and policy formulation accordingly"¹³. In a well-governed society, the common good is prioritized above individual or special interests. When leaders put the public interest first, they tend to make choices that enhance the welfare of the entire community. They invest in vital services like education, healthcare, and infrastructure, all of which improve the overall quality of life for every member of society. But how can we discern whether leaders are genuinely acting in the public interest? This is where transparency, efficiency, and responsiveness become crucial.

Transparency encompasses "the openness and honesty of leaders regarding their decision-making processes"¹⁴. It involves providing clear explanations for their choices and sharing how these decisions will impact the community. Leaders should strive to avoid wasteful expenditure of time and money on unnecessary projects, focusing instead on initiatives that will genuinely benefit the community. Meanwhile, responsiveness entails "leaders actively listening to the needs and concerns of citizens. They engage with the community to understand what people desire and consider these viewpoints in their decision-making"¹⁵. When leaders embody transparency, efficiency, and responsiveness, they foster trust within the community. Citizens feel assured that their leaders are acting in their best interests, making them more likely to support and engage in the decision-making process. Moreover, leaders must be willing to take responsibility for their actions and decisions. In the event of a mistake, they should acknowledge it and communicate their plan to rectify it. Accountability prevents leaders from abusing their power or prioritizing personal interests. It encourages them to be more thoughtful and deliberate in their decision-making, fully aware that they will be held accountable for the outcomes.

Good governance can be understood through the lens of virtue ethics. Virtue ethics emphasizes the "importance of character traits like compassion, fairness, and wisdom in guiding decision-making and action"¹⁶. In a well-governed society, decision-makers embody these virtues, and strive to create policies and programmes that promote the common good. They are motivated by a sense of justice, fairness, and compassion, rather than personal gain or special interests. Good governance is characterized by the promotion of social justice and equality. This necessitates that governments and institutions take active measures to address the social and economic disparities present in society, while upholding the rights and dignity of every citizen. Essential to this effort is ensuring that all individuals have access to fundamental services such as healthcare, education, and social security, as well as advocating for the rights of marginalized and vulnerable groups. Good governance entails creating a system that earns the trust and confidence of citizens, fostering the common good, and enhancing the

10 James N. Rosenau, *Governance, Order, and Change in World Politics*, edited by James N. Rosenau and Ernst-Otto Czempiel, Cambridge University Press, 1992: 129.

11 United Nations. *Good Governance and the United Nations*. United Nations, 2007: 23.

12 Thomas Hobbes. *Leviathan*. London: Andrew Crooke, 1651: 87.

13 Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologica*, trans. Alfred J. Freddoso, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012: 1225–1274.

14 Christopher Hood. *Transparency in Historical Perspective*, edited by Christopher Hood and David Heald, Oxford University Press, 2006: 323.

15 World Bank. *World Development Report: The State in a Changing World*. Oxford University Press, 1997: 114.

16 Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by Terence Irwin. 2nd ed. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1999: 1103a14-1103b10.

well-being of all members of society. It demands a commitment to transparency, accountability, and responsiveness, along with a dedication to advancing social justice and equality.

Leader

The concept of a leader encompasses a wide range of characteristics, skills, and qualities. Leadership is "a dynamic and interactive process that involves influencing, guiding, and directing others, towards a common goal or objective"¹⁷. This means that leaders must be able to inspire and motivate others to work together towards a shared vision, rather than simply dictating what needs to be done. This influence is not limited to formal authority or power, such as a title or position. Rather, it is a subtle process that involves building relationships, establishing trust, and creating an environment that encourages collaboration and teamwork.

Leaders must be able to connect with others on a personal level, understand their needs and motivations, and tailor their approach to inspire and empower each individual. In other words, leadership is about creating a sense of purpose and direction that inspires others to follow. Leadership is about "building a community of people who share a common goal and are working together to achieve it"¹⁸. It is about creating an environment that encourages creativity, innovation, and growth, where individuals feel valued, empowered, and motivated to contribute their best efforts. A leader is not just someone who holds a position of power or authority, but rather someone who has the ability to inspire, motivate, and empower others to achieve their full potential. This requires a deep understanding of human nature, behaviour, and motivation, as well as the ability to communicate effectively, build trust, and foster collaboration.

Effective leaders have the ability to create an environment that fosters creativity, innovation, and growth. This means that they are able to bring out the best in people, encouraging them to think outside the box, share their ideas, and collaborate with others to achieve a common goal. To achieve this, effective leaders are skilled at bringing people together, building coalitions, and mobilizing resources. They are able to identify common interests and goals, and use these as a foundation to build strong relationships and partnerships. This enables them to tap into the skills, expertise, and resources of others, and to leverage into achieving their goals. Effective leaders are also able to navigate complex and dynamic environments with ease. They are able to analyse complex situations, identify patterns and trends, and make sense of ambiguous or uncertain information. This enables them to make informed decisions, even in the face of uncertainty or adversity.

Making informal decisions is another key aspect of effective leadership. Leaders are often faced with difficult choices, where there is no clear right or wrong answer. Effective leaders are able to weigh up the options, consider different perspectives, and make a decision that is in the best interests of the organization or community. Effective leaders are able to adapt to changing circumstances with ease. They are able to pivot when necessary, adjusting their plans and strategies to reflect changing circumstances.

"Leadership is a philosophy of influence, guidance, and direction that is focused on empowering others to achieve their full potential."¹⁹ It is a dynamic and interactive process that involves building relationships, establishing trust, and inspiring others to work together towards a shared vision. This requires leaders to be able to connect with people on a personal level, understand their strengths and weaknesses, and tailor their approach to bring out the best in each individual.

Leadership is about fostering a culture that values experimentation, learning from failure, and continuous improvement. It is about creating a space where people feel safe to share their ideas, take risks, and push the boundaries of what is possible. This concept of leadership is rooted in the idea that leadership is not just about the leader, but rather it is about the people being led. It is about recognizing that leadership is not a solo act, but rather a collective effort that requires the participation and engagement of everyone involved.

Challenges to Good Governance and Virtuous Leadership in Nigeria

In a society, good governance and virtuous leadership are essential for progress. When leaders are guided by justice, truth, and a genuine concern for the well-being of the people, the result is often peace, stability, and development. However, in Nigeria, these ideals are far from being a reality. Many citizens have lost confidence in their leaders, and government actions often fall short of moral and practical expectations. The question to be asked is: why has Nigeria struggled for so long with poor leadership and weak governance? In this sub-chapter, some of the key challenges that continue to hold the country back will be discussed.

¹⁷ Peter G Northouse, *Leadership: Theory and Practice*. 9th ed. Sage Publications, 2021: 56.

¹⁸ Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of The Learning Organization*. Doubleday, 1990: 345.

¹⁹ Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of The Learning Organization*, 346.

One major problem is *corruption*. This is more than just stealing money; it is a mindset that puts selfish gain above the common good. It appears in many forms; bribery, favoritism, inflated contracts, and even the sale of public office. When leaders enrich themselves instead of serving the people, it becomes difficult for any real development to take place. Resources meant for roads, schools, hospitals, and electricity are often wasted or stolen. Worse still, those who are caught are rarely punished, which sends a message that corruption is acceptable or even necessary to survive in politics.

Another serious issue is the *weakness of public institutions*. In a well-governed country, the police, courts, and government agencies are expected to operate independently and fairly. But in Nigeria, these institutions are often manipulated by those in power. For instance, the judiciary, which is supposed to uphold the law, sometimes bends to political pressure or accepts bribes. When laws are not applied equally, people lose faith in the system, and justice becomes a privilege for the rich and powerful. Many leaders in Nigeria are not held accountable for their actions. They often act as if they owe nothing to the people who elected them. Important decisions are made behind closed doors, and government funds are spent without proper explanation. Because there are few consequences for failure or dishonesty, there is little motivation to lead with integrity. In a just society, leaders must be answerable to the people. Without that, democracy becomes an illusion.

Elections, which are meant to give the people a voice, are also part of the problem. Instead of being free and fair, they are often characterized by vote-buying, violence, and fraud. As a result, many leaders do not truly earn their position, and those who lose are often unwilling to accept the result. This undermines the moral authority of those in power and makes it difficult to build a government based on trust and cooperation.

In addition, there is a general culture of *impunity* in Nigeria. This means people in positions of power often do wrong without facing any punishment. Over time, this weakens society's sense of right and wrong. When leaders are not punished for wrongdoing, it encourages others to follow the same path. It also discourages young people who want to lead with honesty, because they see that doing the right thing often goes unrewarded.

The failure of good governance and virtuous leadership in Nigeria is not just a political problem. *Corruption, weak institutions, lack of accountability, election malpractice, and impunity* all contribute to a system that works against justice and truth. As future philosophers, our role is not only to point out these problems but also to reflect on the kind of values and leadership that can bring about real change. Until Nigeria embraces leaders who are truly guided by conscience, courage, and the common good, the hope for a better future will remain a distant dream.

Corruption as a Threat to Good Governance and Virtuous Leadership

Corruption remains one of the most serious obstacles to achieving good governance and virtuous leadership, particularly in countries like Nigeria where its effects are rooted in public life. At its core, corruption involves "the abuse of power for personal gain, whether through bribery, embezzlement, favoritism, or manipulation of public institutions"²⁰. This not only weakens public trust but also distorts the moral foundations on which leadership and governance should rest.

Good governance is built on values such as *transparency, accountability, justice, and the rule of law*. When corruption enters the system, these values are undermined. If a corrupt official uses his position to enrich himself instead of serving the public interest, it will erode the fairness and efficiency of government institutions and make it harder for society to function properly. Citizens begin to lose faith in public institutions this way, believing that decisions are made not based on justice or merit, but on personal connections or wealth. Virtuous leadership, on the other hand, requires *moral integrity, selflessness, and a commitment* to the common good. A virtuous leader leads by example, promotes equality, and places the needs of the people above personal ambition. However, corruption eats away at these virtues. It encourages selfishness, dishonesty, and short-term thinking, all of which are the opposite of what true leadership should embody.

Corruption not only damages society on a practical level but also on a moral and ethical level. It reflects a failure of character and a neglect of civic responsibility. In Plato's view, "a just society is one where rulers govern not for their benefit, but for the good of all"²¹. Corruption turns this ideal upside down, as leaders become more concerned with preserving their own power than promoting justice.

²⁰ Transparency International, *Corruption Perceptions Index*. Berlin: Transparency International, 2023, <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2023>.

²¹ Plato. *The Republic*, trans. G. M. A. Grube, revised by C. D. C. Reeve, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1992: 419a–421c.

From the foregoing, corruption is not just a political issue; it is a moral failure that threatens the very principles upon which good governance and virtuous leadership are founded. If Nigeria and similar societies hope to develop, there must be a serious commitment to fighting corruption, not just through laws and policies, but by cultivating a culture of integrity, responsibility, and public-minded leadership.

Bad Leadership as an Impediment to Good Governance and Virtuous Leadership

Bad leadership is one of the most serious obstacles to the realization of good governance and the emergence of virtuous leadership, especially in Nigeria, where leadership is often reduced to a mere occupation of office rather than a responsibility to serve. Leadership is not just about having power but also about how the power is used. When we talk about *good governance*, we are basically talking about leadership that works for the good of the people: leadership that is just, fair, transparent, and focused on the well-being of society. But when leadership is bad, all of that breaks down. Bad leadership becomes a serious obstacle to both good governance and the emergence of *virtuous leadership*. A society with good leadership is more likely to achieve justice, peace, and development. But in Nigeria, bad leadership has become a serious barrier to these ideals. Despite having anti-corruption agencies like the EFCC (Economic and Financial Crimes Commission) and ICPC (Independent Corrupt Practices Commission), corruption continues to spread like a virus.

Plato, in *The Republic*, makes a clear distinction between rulers who lead for the sake of justice and those who lead out of desire for power. For him, the ideal leader is the philosopher-king. A philosopher king, according to Plato, is “a ruler who combines knowledge, wisdom, and virtue”²². Plato believed that unless political power and philosophical wisdom meet in the same person, there can be no end to corruption and injustice in the state. Similarly, Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics* emphasized the concept of virtue ethics, arguing that “a good leader must cultivate moral virtues such as justice, temperance, and courage”²³. Leadership is not just about knowing what is right, but about *doing* what is right consistently. According to Aristotle, “a good leader must have *phronesis* (practical wisdom), *justice*, *self-control*, and a genuine concern for the common good”²⁴. But many Nigerian leaders seem to be more interested in themselves than the people they are supposed to serve. This is why even with all the anti-corruption structures in place, corruption is still very much alive.

In African philosophy, thinkers like Kwasi Wiredu and John Mbiti have emphasized the communal and moral basis of leadership. In traditional African societies, a leader is expected to serve the people and act as a moral compass for the community. This idea is often summed up in the Ubuntu philosophy: “*I am because we are*”. But in today’s Nigeria, many leaders have abandoned this communal ethos in pursuit of selfish gain.

For instance, the former Minister of Petroleum, Diezani Alison-Madueke, was accused of stealing billions of dollars from the country, money that could have built schools, hospitals, or repaired roads. Also, Sambo Dasuki, the former National Security Adviser, who allegedly mismanaged about \$2.1 billion meant for arms procurement. People were dying in the North because of Boko Haram, yet funds meant to stop the violence were allegedly being shared among politicians. These are not just scandals; they show a lack of ethical leadership. Even institutions like the Nigerian Police Force or Customs have been accused of bribery and extortion. Some public officers demand “settlement” before doing their jobs. So even the ordinary citizen is affected by this system of bad leadership. The system is so corrupt that good people either stay away from politics or get swallowed by it. The most painful part is that we keep recycling the same type of leaders. During elections, politicians promise change, but once in power, the same old behavior continues. Even the anti-corruption agencies are sometimes used to fight political enemies rather than genuinely clean up the system, and it becomes hard to trust anyone.

This reflects a failure of moral development. Plato talked about the idea of the “philosopher-king”, someone who rules not because he wants wealth or power, but because he has the knowledge and virtue to lead justly. In Nigeria, it seems we have more “power-seekers” than philosopher-leaders. People go into politics not to serve but to enrich themselves.

What then will be the way forward? Do we just keep setting up more agencies and hoping for the best? Or do we need a change in mindset, a sort of moral revolution? Maybe we need to go back to the basics and start teaching values from primary school. Maybe we need to stop worshipping money and start asking hard questions about character, honesty, and justice.

²² Plato, *The Republic*, 473c–480a.

²³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* Books II–IV, trans. Terence Irwin, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1999: 1103a–1115b.

²⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1140b–1145a.

Bad leadership has become a moral issue. No matter how many agencies we create, if the people leading the agencies are not morally upright, nothing will change. What Nigeria need is not just more laws or policies, but more *virtuous leaders*, leaders who see politics as service, not business. Until then, good governance will remain a dream, and corruption will continue to undermine our future.

Partiality, Nepotism, and Ethnicism as Hindrances to Good Governance and Virtuous Leadership

Partiality, *nepotism*, and *ethnicism* represent profound moral and structural failures that continue to hinder the realization of good governance and virtuous leadership, particularly in societies with complex social identities such as Nigeria. These vices, while often normalized under the guise of loyalty or cultural obligation, run contrary to the very ideals that good governance is meant to uphold: fairness, justice, merit, and the equal treatment of all citizens. At their core, they reflect a failure to treat individuals as moral equals and a distortion of the ethical obligations of public office.

In a just society, leadership should be guided by the principle of impartiality, the idea that "individuals in authority ought to act based on reason, merit, and the common good, rather than personal relationships, tribal affiliations, or ethnic loyalties"²⁵. However, when leaders allow their decisions to be influenced by family ties or ethnic sentiment, they betray this principle. Nepotism, which involves "favoring relatives or close associates in appointments and opportunities, compromises the integrity of leadership by sidelining more qualified individuals in favor of personal loyalty"²⁶. Ethnicism, on the other hand, is "the practice of giving undue preference to members of one's own ethnic group, creating national unity and entrenching division within the polity"²⁷.

These practices weaken governance by prioritizing identity over competence and personal interest over public service. When public offices are filled not by those best equipped to serve, but by those who happen to be connected by blood or background, institutions begin to lose their efficiency, credibility, and legitimacy. Citizens begin to feel alienated, especially when they perceive that their identity determines their access to opportunities, rather than their capabilities or contributions. This breeds resentment, fuels social tensions, and creates a fertile ground for disunity and instability. More critically, it erodes the moral fabric necessary for virtuous leadership to thrive. A virtuous leader, by nature, must rise above narrow loyalties and act out of a commitment to justice and the well-being of all. He or she must view the community as a whole, not as a collection of favored and unfavored groups. Such biased practices represent a departure from the universalist ideals of moral and political theory. Immanuel Kant emphasized the importance of treating persons as "ends in themselves, not as means to personal or group advancement"²⁸. Plato's notion of the philosopher-king presupposes "a ruler who is guided by truth and the good of all, not by personal attachments or tribal instincts"²⁹. When leadership fails to uphold such ideals, governance becomes a tool of exclusion, and the very possibility of justice in the state is compromised. In the Nigerian context, the consequences of partiality, nepotism, and ethnicism are all too evident. From public appointments to resource allocation, these biases not only weaken the capacity of institutions to serve all citizens equally but also promote a dangerous politics of identity. Rather than cultivating a shared national purpose, bad leadership strengthens ethnic rivalries and reinforces the idea that one must "belong" in order to benefit. This kind of system discourages excellence, stifles national development, and pushes competent individuals to the margins of public life.

One of the most destructive forms of bad leadership in Nigeria is *partiality*, when those in power prioritize their own ethnic group, religion, region, or even family over the national interest. This leads to disunity, resentment, and even violent resistance. *Partiality* in leadership is a betrayal of justice, which Aristotle defined as "giving each their due and ensuring fairness in public life"³⁰. When fairness is replaced with favoritism, leadership loses legitimacy, and citizens begin to feel alienated from the state. For instance, the persistent Igbo agitation for Biafra, especially through the activities of IPOB (Indigenous People of Biafra). While the group's methods have been controversial, it is impossible to separate their demands from the historical and ongoing perception of

²⁵ Aristotle. *Politics*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998: 1287b–1288a.

²⁶ Frank J. Thompson. *Public Administration: Balancing Power and Accountability*, Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2003: 112.

²⁷ Donald L. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, updated edition, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000: 3–6.

²⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor, Cambridge University Press, 1998: 37–38.

²⁹ Plato. *The Republic*, trans. G. M. A. Grube, revised by C. D. C. Reeve, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1992: 473c–474d.

³⁰ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book V, trans. Terence Irwin, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1999: 1130a–1132b.

marginalization in political appointments, resource allocation, and development. The South-East, for instance, has not produced a Nigerian president since 1966, and this has led to a sense that Igbos are excluded from the center of power. Similarly, the Niger Delta militancy did not emerge from nowhere. Despite being the region that supplies Nigeria with most of its oil revenue, the people there have long suffered environmental degradation, poverty, and underdevelopment. Leaders from other regions have often controlled oil wealth while the host communities remained neglected. This injustice reflects what John Rawls would call a violation of the "difference principle", where inequalities are only justifiable if they benefit the least advantaged. In Nigeria, inequalities seem to benefit those already at the top.

Another example is the 2020 Ogun State Government appointments, where criticism arose over the over-concentration of cabinet positions among people from the same ethnic block or even political loyalists of the governor. In many states, appointments are no longer based on merit or competence, but on kinship, loyalty, or shared identity. This pattern is repeated across the federation and at the national level, where political leaders often award contracts and high positions to friends, family, or ethnic allies, regardless of their qualifications. One of the most widely debated instances was during President Buhari's administration, where Yinka Odumakin, the spokesperson of Afenifere, a Yoruba socio-cultural group, argued that key security and economic positions were dominated by individuals from the North, especially from his home state of Katsina. While the government denied intentional bias, the optics reinforced perceptions of ethnic favoritism, leading to further distrust among southern and minority populations.

The practice of favoritism is socially dangerous. When citizens believe the system is rigged in favor of a few, they begin to withdraw their loyalty from the state and seek refuge in ethnic, religious, or regional identities. This is how national unity begins to collapse. It is not enough to declare that "Nigeria is one" when policies and leadership behaviors constantly divide.

A just leader must treat all citizens as moral equals, regardless of their tribe or religion. Ubuntu, the African moral philosophy that emphasizes shared humanity, reminds us that "a person is a person through other persons",³¹ meaning leadership should be guided by communal wellbeing, not sectional privilege.

To overcome these challenges, Nigeria does not just need new faces in office, she needs a new ethic of leadership. Leaders must recognize that their power is not for the benefit of their families or ethnic groups but for the common good. Political appointments and contracts must be based on competence and equity, not connections or identity. This calls for a moral reawakening, not just in leaders, but in the people who elect and support them. Nigerians must begin to reject the normalization of nepotism and ethnic loyalty, and instead demand fairness, transparency, and inclusion. As long as leadership is used to promote narrow interests, we cannot speak of justice or unity, only organized selfishness under the guise of governance.

As Socrates teaches in *The Republic*, "justice begins in the soul before it is found in the state"³². Until Nigerian leaders develop the moral courage to treat every citizen as deserving of equal respect, no constitution or institution can save the country from disintegration. A society built on partiality cannot endure. But with leadership rooted in fairness and a genuine commitment to the common good, Nigeria can begin to heal.

Aristotle's Concept of Virtue

According to Aristotle, "virtues are not innate, but rather acquired through habit, practice, and deliberate effort"³³. "Aristotle's concept of Virtue is rooted in his idea of *"arete"*, or excellence, which is achieved through the cultivation of character traits that enable individuals to live a life of purpose and fulfilment"³⁴. This concept emphasizes that virtues are not inherent, but rather developed over time through consistent practice, habituation, and intentional action. As individuals cultivate virtues, they develop a disposition to act in ways that are conducive to their well-being and the well-being of others. This process of development is central to Aristotle's understanding of human flourishing, where individuals realize their full potential and live a life of happiness and fulfilment.

Aristotle's idea that "virtues are means between extremes"³⁵ implies that virtues are about finding a balance in one's actions and emotions. This balance is not a fixed point, but rather a dynamic equilibrium that takes into account the specific circumstances of a situation. According to Aristotle, "virtues are characterized by a certain kind of moderation, where individuals avoid excess and deficiency in their behaviour"³⁶. This moderation is not

³¹ Desmond Tutu. *No Future Without Forgiveness*, New York: Doubleday, 1999: 31

³² Plato, *The Republic*, trans. G. M. A. Grube, revised by C. D. C. Reeve, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1992: 435b–444e.

³³ Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103a 15-20.

³⁴ Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*, 22.

³⁵ Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1106a26-1107a8.

³⁶ Aristotle. *De Anima*, trans. Mark Shiffman, Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing/R. Pullins Co., 2011: 28.

about being passive or neutral, but rather about being actively engaged in living a virtuous life. By finding this balance, individuals develop the character traits that enable them to live a life of purpose, happiness, and fulfilment.

“Aristotle's distinction between moral virtues and intellectual virtues highlights the diverse nature of human excellence”³⁷. Moral virtues, which include traits like courage, justice, and temperance, are concerned with shaping an individual's character and guiding their interactions with others. These virtues are developed through habit and practice, and they enable individuals to navigate complex social situations with integrity and compassion. In contrast, intellectual virtues, such as wisdom and understanding, are focused on the pursuit of knowledge and insight. These virtues enable individuals to think critically, reason effectively, and discern truth from falsehood. Cultivating both moral and intellectual virtues will help individuals achieve a significant form of excellence that encompasses both character and intellect. This distinction also emphasizes the importance of education and personal development in Aristotle's philosophy, as he sees the cultivation of virtues as essential to human flourishing.

The cultivation of virtues is a major aspect of Aristotle's vision for human flourishing. By developing virtues, individuals will unlock their unique capacities and live a life that is significant in purpose and meaning. Aristotle's notion of *eudaimonia*, often translated as happiness or flourishing, is not simply a fleeting emotional state, but rather a long-term condition of living a life that is deeply fulfilling. “*Eudaimonia* is achieved when individuals cultivate virtues that enable them to realize their full potential, form meaningful relationships, and contribute to the greater good”³⁸. In this way, virtues serve as the foundation for a life of happiness, fulfilment, and human flourishing, allowing individuals to live in accordance with their highest potential and achieve a sense of lasting satisfaction and contentment.

In essence, Aristotle's concept of virtue emphasizes the importance of developing character traits that enable individuals to live a life of excellence, balance, and fulfilment.

The Role of Reason and Wisdom in Leadership

In Aristotle's philosophy, reason and wisdom are essential components of effective leadership. He believed that good leaders use reason to make informed decisions. That is, they think carefully about complex issues, consider different viewpoints, and weigh the evidence before acting. It is not just about making quick decisions or following instincts, but rather taking the time to understand the situation, analyse the problems, and think about the potential consequences. By doing so, leaders will make wise and effective decisions that benefit everyone, and promote human flourishing. This approach helps leaders to be more thoughtful, fair, and effective in their decision-making. Reason enables leaders to deliberate effectively, making informed decisions that take into account the complexities of human experience and the nuances of particular situations. This involves the ability to analyse complex problems, evaluate evidence, and consider multiple perspectives.

Wisdom or *phronesis*, is a unique and crucial aspect of effective leadership. It enables leaders “distinguish between worthy and unworthy goals, and to identify the most effective strategies for achieving their objectives”³⁹. This form of intelligence is rooted in a profound understanding of human nature, including the complexities of human motivation, desire, and behaviour. Wise leaders are able to navigate complex social dynamics, building coalitions, resolving conflicts, and enhancing collaboration. They possess a rigid understanding of the contexts in which they operate, and are able to make decisions that balance competing interests and promote the common good. By combining insight into human nature with a deep understanding of the specific challenges and opportunities facing their organization or community, wise leaders are able to make decisions that are both effective and ethical. This enables them to build trust, foster cooperation, and create a sense of shared purpose, ultimately leading to more sustainable and equitable outcomes.

Reason and wisdom are fundamental to a leader's character, shaping their decision-making and guiding their actions. These qualities are not just tools or skills, but rather essential aspects of a leader's moral and intellectual makeup. When leaders possess reason and wisdom, they are able to make decisions that reflect a deep understanding of the community's needs and values. They are motivated by a sense of responsibility to the greater good, rather than personal ambition or short-term gains. This enables them to prioritize the well-being of the community, even when it requires making difficult or unpopular decisions. By integrating reason and wisdom into their character, leaders will build trust, enable a sense of shared purpose, and create a lasting positive impact on

³⁷ Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VI, 1139a5–1139b10.

³⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1098a15-20.

³⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1999), 1140a25-1140b30.

the community they serve. Eventually, reason and wisdom are the hallmarks of a leader who is truly committed to the common good.

The cultivation of reason and wisdom is a critical imperative for leaders who aspire to make a meaningful and lasting impact. Developing these essential qualities makes it easier for leaders to create a more just society by promoting fairness, equality, and human rights. They enhance an equitable society by addressing the needs of marginalized and disadvantaged groups, and ensuring that everyone has access to opportunities and resources. Additionally, wise leaders can build a prosperous society by making informed decisions that balance economic growth with social and environmental responsibility. By prioritising the well-being of both current and future generations, leaders can leave a lasting legacy that continues to inspire and benefit others long after they are gone. This legacy can take many forms, from institutions and policies that promote the common good, to cultural and social norms that value justice, compassion, and wisdom.

Aristotle's Idea of the Mean in Virtuous Leadership and the Imperative for Good Governance in Nigeria

In Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, "the concept of the *mean* is a fundamental aspect of his virtue ethical theory"⁴⁰. Virtues, according to Aristotle, are situated in a delicate balance between excess and deficiency. This balance is not a precise calculation, but rather a thoughtful and context-dependent equilibrium that is shaped by reason and informed by practical wisdom. "The mean is determined by considering the specific circumstances of a situation, allowing individuals to navigate complex choices and actions with sensitivity and discernment"⁴¹. By finding this middle ground, individuals can cultivate virtues that enable them to live a life of excellence, fulfilment, and human flourishing. Aristotle's emphasis on the mean, highlights "the importance of subtle in moral decision-making, encouraging individuals to approach challenges with a thoughtful and balanced approach"⁴².

In leadership, "the concept of the mean is vital due to the complex nature of decision-making"⁴³. Leaders are frequently confronted with diverse perspectives, conflicting priorities, and uncertain outcomes. The mean allows them to steer a course that avoids the pitfalls of overreaction or under reaction, instead opting for a nuanced approach that takes into account the specific circumstances. By embracing this balanced approach, leaders can respond to challenges in a way that is adaptable, resilient, and considerate of multiple viewpoints, ultimately leading to more effective and sustainable decision-making. This thoughtful approach enables leaders to build trust, foster cooperation, and drive positive outcomes in the state.

A courageous leader will strike a balance between bold action and prudent caution. He/she will assess risks carefully, weighing potential benefits against potential costs, and then act decisively when necessary. This leader will not shy away from challenges or difficulties, but will instead confront them directly, using their judgment and expertise to navigate complex situations. At the same time, this kind of leader will avoid impulsive or reckless behaviour, recognizing that courage is not the absence of fear, but the willingness to act in the face of uncertainty and risk. By finding this balance, a courageous political leader will inspire confidence and trust in their people, and will be better equipped to achieve common goals and overcome obstacles. This balanced approach to courage will also help a political leader to build a strong reputation and foster a culture of resilience and determination in governing the state.

The mean is a context-dependent concept that demands a deep understanding of the situation at hand. Leaders must be able to read the differences in their environment, taking into account various factors such as the people involved, the stakes, and the potential consequences of their actions. This requires a high degree of situational awareness, emotional intelligence, and social acumen. By being attuned to the specific needs and interests of their constituents, leaders will easily adjust their approach to find the optimal balance between excess and deficiency. This flexibility enables them to respond effectively to changing circumstances, navigate uncertainty, and make decisions that are tailored to the unique demands of the people.

In essence, the mean is not just a moral ideal, but a practical and effective approach to decision-making and action. It allows political leaders to navigate difficult situations with sensitivity, and to make decisions that promote the common good. The mean enables leaders create a more harmonious and balanced environment, where individuals can thrive and reach their full potential. The mean is a dynamic and adaptive concept that requires leaders to be responsive, resilient, and highly committed to providing good governance that will enhance quality living and human flourishing.

⁴⁰ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 35–36.

⁴¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 35–36.

⁴² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 35–36.

⁴³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1999, 1106a26-1107a8.

Conclusion

Virtuous leadership and good governance remain central to the political and moral development of African societies, particularly Nigeria, where their absence continues to hinder progress. The concept of virtuous leadership emphasizes the moral character of those in power—leaders who are guided by justice, integrity, courage, and a genuine commitment to the common good. In contrast, the reality in Nigeria often reveals a leadership crisis marked by ethical failure and institutional weakness. Governance is deeply affected by corruption, which undermines transparency and accountability and erodes public trust. Leaders who are more concerned with personal enrichment than with public service distort the aims of governance and reduce political office to a tool for self-interest.

The challenge is further complicated by the persistence of poor leadership, which disrupts the functioning of institutions and prevents meaningful reform. Instead of visionary leadership committed to the welfare of all, the country frequently witnesses leadership that lacks moral direction, administrative competence, and political will. This form of leadership not only fails to address national issues but also actively contributes to them. In addition, partiality, nepotism, and ethnicism are ingrained in the political culture, where appointments and opportunities are often determined by personal connections or ethnic loyalty rather than merit. This practice compromises the efficiency of governance, deepens divisions, weakens national unity, and denies many citizens equal access to justice and development.

Through the lens of Aristotle, the failure of leadership in Nigeria can be understood as a failure of virtue. Aristotle maintained that the purpose of the state is to promote the good life, which can only be achieved through leaders who possess practical wisdom and moral excellence. In his view, leadership is a moral responsibility, not merely a position of authority. Nigerian leadership, however, often lacks this ethical grounding. When leaders fail to pursue the good of the whole and are instead driven by self-interest, governance fails to fulfil its proper function. Aristotle's emphasis on virtue as a precondition for just rule offers a valuable framework for reimagining leadership in Nigeria—not as a means to dominate or divide, but as a service grounded in the pursuit of the common good. Thus, the crisis of governance in Nigeria cannot be addressed by policy reforms alone; it demands a transformation in the moral character of leadership. Until those who lead are shaped by virtue and guided by ethical principles, good governance will remain out of reach.

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