

AN EVALUATION OF ST. THOMAS AQUINAS' VIRTUE ETHICS AND EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP FRAMEWORKS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL CULTURE IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The increasing prevalence of ethical challenges in educational institutions has raised concerns about the adequacy of contemporary educational leadership frameworks in promoting morally responsible leadership and positive school culture. While existing leadership models have contributed to school administration and organisational effectiveness, they often emphasise managerial competence and institutional performance over the moral character of educational leaders. This paper evaluates St. Thomas Aquinas' virtue ethics and contemporary educational leadership frameworks and examines their implications for school culture in Nigeria. Using conceptual analysis and critical evaluation, the study examines Aquinas' conception of virtue, particularly the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance, together with charity as the foundation of moral leadership, and evaluates the convergence and divergence between this framework and major educational leadership theories. The paper argues that while contemporary leadership theories provide practical administrative strategies, Aquinas' virtue ethics supplies the moral foundation necessary for ethical decision-making and sustainable school improvement. It concludes that integrating virtue ethics with educational leadership frameworks can strengthen school culture by promoting integrity, accountability, justice, and the common good, and recommends that leadership preparation programmes and educational policies intentionally incorporate virtue-based leadership principles.

Keywords: St. Thomas Aquinas, virtue ethics, educational leadership, school culture, Nigeria.

Introduction

Education is one of the principal means through which societies preserve their values, cultivate responsible citizenship, and promote holistic human development (Dewey, 1916; Noddings, 2013). Beyond transmitting knowledge and vocational skills, schools are expected to nurture individuals of sound moral character (Arthur, 2021), and this depends heavily on the quality of leadership exercised within them. Educational leaders shape institutional vision, influence organisational behaviour, and establish the ethical standards within which teachers and learners interact (Bush, 2022; Sergiovanni, 2000). Leadership in education is therefore fundamentally a moral enterprise, not merely an administrative one (Starratt, 2018).

In recent years, educational leadership has increasingly been shaped by managerial philosophies that emphasise accountability, performance indicators, and organisational efficiency (Bush, 2022). These approaches have improved administration, but they often pay insufficient attention to the moral character of those entrusted with leadership, evaluating leaders by technical competence rather than the ethical dispositions that shape decision-making and institutional culture (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2022; Starratt, 2018). Within the Nigerian educational system, this imbalance is reflected in persistent favouritism in appointments and promotions, abuse of administrative authority, inconsistent discipline, and weakened institutional trust (Federal Ministry of Education, 2021) problems that are fundamentally ethical rather than merely structural (Okeke & Drake, 2014).

It is within this context that the moral philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas becomes significant. Building on Aristotle, Aquinas developed one of the most comprehensive accounts of virtue ethics in Western philosophy (Aquinas, 1947; Aristotle, 2009). His understanding of virtue as a stable habit (*habitus*) directed by reason towards the common good offers a framework for examining the moral responsibilities of leadership, grounded not in rule-compliance but in the cultivation of virtuous character (Porter, 2022). His cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance, together with the theological virtue of charity, present a vision of human flourishing that continues to inform ethics, leadership, and education (Davies, 2023; Arthur, 2021).

Much of the existing literature, however, treats contemporary leadership theories and general ethical leadership without sustained engagement with Aquinas' own framework (Kristjánsson, 2022), and Nigerian scholarship on educational leadership has concentrated on administrative effectiveness and policy implementation rather than its philosophical foundations (Bush, 2022). This paper addresses that gap: it examines Aquinas' virtue ethics as a philosophical system, evaluates its relationship with contemporary educational leadership frameworks, and considers the implications of their integration for school culture in Nigeria. The study adopts the philosophical method of conceptual and critical analysis, drawing on Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae* and relevant contemporary scholarship to clarify concepts, evaluate arguments, and demonstrate their practical significance for educational leadership (Copi et al., 2019; Audi, 2015).

The Philosophical Foundations of Virtue Ethics in the Thought of St. Thomas Aquinas

Ethics is the branch of philosophy concerned with the principles governing human conduct and prescribing how individuals ought to act to achieve moral excellence, rather than merely describing how they do act (Rachels & Rachels, 2019; Shafer-Landau, 2021). Where deontological ethics evaluates actions by duty and consequentialism by outcomes, virtue ethics focuses on the moral character of the agent, holding that ethical behaviour is the natural expression of a character formed through the habitual practice of moral excellence (Annas, 2011). This approach reached one of its fullest expressions in Aquinas, whose synthesis of Aristotelian philosophy and Christian theology continues to shape

discussions of morality and leadership (Aquinas, 1947; Aristotle, 2009; Porter, 2022).

For Aquinas, virtue is not the performance of isolated good actions but a stable disposition of character enabling a person to act consistently according to reason "a good habit bearing on activity" (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I–II, q.55, a.4). Virtues are acquired through repeated moral action and rational reflection rather than given innately; a virtuous person acts well not accidentally or under compulsion but as the natural expression of a well-formed character, choosing what is right consistently and willingly (Davies, 2023). This is the concept of *habitus*: a stable disposition built up through repeated action, so that good habits produce virtue and bad habits produce vice. Moral excellence is therefore neither instantaneous nor accidental but the product of continuous practice, discipline, and education which is why, for Aquinas, education itself carries a profoundly moral dimension (Porter, 2022).

Building on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aquinas accepted that happiness (*eudaimonia*) is achieved through virtue, but argued that human fulfilment ultimately consists in *beatitudo*, perfect happiness in union with God (Aquinas, 1947; Aristotle, 2009). Thomistic virtue ethics is thus teleological: every action is directed towards an end, and virtues align desires and choices with right reason and the objective moral order. Unlike ethical systems built on obedience to external law, it focuses on the interior formation of the whole person, which is what makes it particularly relevant to professions such as educational leadership, where personal integrity shapes institutional culture.

Aquinas adopts the four cardinal virtues inherited from Aristotle. **Prudence** (*prudentia*), "right reason applied to action," is the intellectual virtue that directs practical judgement and guides the exercise of the other virtues; without it, moral action lacks direction. **Justice** (*iustitia*) is the constant will to give every person what is due, governing relationships and promoting fairness and respect for rights. **Fortitude** (*fortitudo*) enables perseverance in the pursuit of moral good despite fear or adversity. **Temperance** (*temperantia*) moderates desires and passions so that they remain subject to reason, preventing excess and enabling responsible freedom. These four function together rather than independently: prudence directs judgement, justice regulates relationships, fortitude sustains perseverance, and temperance disciplines desire.

Beyond these, Aquinas identifies the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity, which are infused by God rather than acquired through practice. Faith perfects the intellect, hope directs the will towards eternal happiness, and charity which Aquinas calls the "form of the virtues" orders the whole of moral life towards love of God and neighbour, giving unity and purpose to all the other virtues (Aquinas, 1947). Though rooted in Christian theology, the theological virtues reinforce Aquinas' account of ethical leadership by emphasising selflessness, compassion, and genuine concern for the flourishing of others.

Aquinas' framework has enduring strengths: its emphasis on character formation rather than rule-compliance offers a holistic account of morality well suited to professions where

personal integrity shapes institutional life, and its integration of reason, habit, and the common good goes beyond legalistic or consequence-based approaches. It also has limitations. Its theological foundations may limit universal applicability in religiously plural societies; it offers less explicit procedural guidance for resolving complex moral dilemmas than rule-based theories; and its focus on individual character has been criticised for underweighting structural and institutional factors. Despite this, it remains one of the most influential accounts of moral formation available to contemporary discussions of leadership and education.

Educational Leadership Frameworks

Educational leadership is the process by which individuals influence, direct, and inspire members of an educational community towards shared goals. Where educational management concerns planning, organising, and controlling institutional resources, leadership concerns vision, influence, motivation, ethical decision-making, and the promotion of teaching and learning (Bush, 2022; Hallinger & Heck, 2022). It is increasingly recognised as a moral and relational enterprise rather than a purely technical one: school leaders shape institutional culture through their decisions and interactions with teachers, learners, and the wider community, so their effectiveness cannot be judged by organisational performance alone but also by the ethical quality of their practice.

Four frameworks dominate the literature. **Instructional leadership** places teaching and learning at the centre of administration, with leaders supervising instruction, developing teachers, and directing resources towards learning outcomes (Hallinger & Heck, 2022); its strength is a direct focus on academic achievement, but it pays comparatively little attention to the moral dimensions of leadership or to character formation. **Transformational leadership** inspires followers towards shared goals through motivation, intellectual stimulation, and personal example rather than authority (Leithwood et al., 2020); it motivates change and professional growth well, but depends heavily on the leader's personal charisma, and without a clear ethical foundation this influence can be directed towards outcomes that are effective but morally questionable (Northouse, 2022). **Servant leadership** places service before power, prioritising the needs of followers and the holistic development of the organisation (Sendjaya, 2015); it builds trust and morale but can lack clear guidance for situations requiring firm authority or difficult disciplinary decisions, creating ambiguity around accountability (Yukl, 2013). **Ethical leadership** emphasises honesty, integrity, fairness, and accountability, modelling moral conduct to build trust and organisational legitimacy (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2022); its concern for justice and accountability is a clear strength, but the literature often addresses compliance with ethical standards without explaining how leaders come to acquire virtuous character in the first place (Starratt, 2018).

Each framework, then, contributes something distinct instructional leadership to teaching quality, transformational leadership to institutional change, servant leadership to collaboration, ethical leadership to accountability but each also tends to describe desirable leadership behaviours and outcomes rather than explain how leaders develop the underlying moral dispositions needed to sustain them over time (Ciulla, 2020). This is the

point at which Thomistic virtue ethics becomes relevant: rather than beginning with leadership behaviours or institutional outcomes, Aquinas begins with the moral formation of the leader asking not only what leaders should do, but what kind of people they should become (Aquinas, 1947). A prudent leader decides wisely because prudence has become habitual; a just leader treats others fairly because justice has become part of their character; fortitude sustains them under pressure, and temperance moderates their exercise of authority (Aquinas, 1947; Davies, 2023).

A Critical Evaluation of Aquinas' Virtue Ethics, Educational Leadership, and Their Implications for School Culture in Nigeria

Bringing Aquinas' virtues into direct conversation with the leadership frameworks above and with the realities of Nigerian schools clarifies both what each cardinal virtue contributes and where it meets resistance in practice. **Prudence** (*recta ratio agibilium*, right reason applied to action) governs deliberation: weighing alternatives, judging soundly, and choosing what promotes the common good (Aquinas, 1947). For school leaders, who constantly face decisions involving conflicting interests, limited resources, staff welfare, and discipline, prudence reduces impulsiveness and arbitrary administrative action, and encourages the reflection and foresight that instructional and transformational leadership also value but rarely explain philosophically. Its limitation is that Aquinas assumes a level of moral formation that institutional pressure political interference, bureaucratic constraint, competing stakeholder demands can undermine in practice (Davies, 2023). In Nigerian schools specifically, where administrators routinely manage recruitment, discipline, and resource allocation under such pressures (Bush, 2022; Starratt, 2018), the absence of prudence shows up directly as impulsive decisions, inconsistent policy, and avoidable conflict; cultivating it is therefore one of the more immediately practical levers available for improving school governance (Arthur, 2021).

Justice (*iustitia*) is the constant will to render to each person what is due, regulating relationships and directing them towards the common good (Aquinas, 1947). It demands fairness in recruitment, promotion, assessment, discipline, and the distribution of resources, and where ethical leadership frameworks tend to treat fairness as compliance with an institutional code, Aquinas treats it as a permanent quality of character (Ciulla, 2020). This matters acutely in the Nigerian context, where perceptions of favouritism, nepotism, and administrative bias are a recurring source of weakened institutional trust and staff morale (Federal Ministry of Education, 2021; Bush, 2022). A school culture grounded in justice fosters confidence in leadership and consistent, non-discriminatory treatment of both staff and students (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2022; Starratt, 2018) though achieving it is genuinely harder under conditions of limited funding, political influence, and competing institutional priorities, and virtue ethics alone offers limited procedural guidance for resolving such conflicts.

Fortitude (*fortitudo*) is steadfastness in pursuing moral good despite fear or adversity not recklessness, but the capacity to hold ethical ground under pressure (Aquinas, 1947). This is what sustains ethical leadership through institutional crisis: corruption, political interference, resistance to reform, and public criticism are common features of Nigerian

school administration (Bush, 2022), and fortitude is what allows a leader to uphold standards rather than yield to them. Transformational and servant leadership both assume this kind of perseverance without explaining where it comes from; Aquinas supplies that explanation. Its risk, if unmoderated by prudence, is rigidity a leader who mistakes stubbornness for courage and becomes resistant to legitimate criticism (Eva et al., 2019).

Temperance (*temperantia*) moderates desire and passion under reason, and without it, authority tends towards self-interest or authoritarianism. In educational administration it supports humility, patience, and emotional composure under conflict qualities servant leadership also prizes, though Aquinas' account is broader, since temperance governs the whole range of human passion rather than compassion specifically (Porter, 2022). Where Nigerian school leaders exercise it, schools tend towards mutual respect, open communication, and conflict resolved through dialogue rather than intimidation (Hallinger & Heck, 2022; Bush, 2022); where it is absent, the result is often the hostile, authoritarian climate that discourages both staff collaboration and student engagement (Northouse, 2022). Its limitation is symmetrical to fortitude's: unchecked, moderation can slide into indecisiveness in situations that genuinely require prompt, firm action.

Charity (*caritas*) is, for Aquinas, the "form of all the virtues," the one that gives the others their unity and ultimate purpose by directing them towards the love of God and neighbour (Aquinas, 1947). Its practical effect is to convert leadership from the exercise of authority into service: a school led with charity treats the flourishing of teachers, learners, and parents as the point of the institution, not a byproduct of it. Servant leadership expresses much of this in practice, but Aquinas supplies the deeper account of why such service is owed in the first place. Its theological grounding raises a fair question about universal applicability in religiously plural societies, but the underlying commitments compassion, solidarity, concern for human dignity travel well beyond the theological framework that produced them, and are arguably what Nigerian schools most need where academic performance has been allowed to eclipse the welfare of the people the institution exists to serve.

Taken together, these five virtues do not compete with the four leadership frameworks so much as answer a question those frameworks leave open: not merely what an effective or ethical leader does, but what kind of person a leader must become to do it consistently. Aquinas' account has real limits its theological orientation needs careful translation into a religiously plural, secular educational system, and character formation alone cannot substitute for institutional reform where funding, policy, and systemic inequality are themselves the problem. But as a philosophical foundation for the kind of school culture Nigerian education reform keeps invoking one marked by integrity, accountability, fairness, and genuine concern for the common good, it supplies something the existing leadership literature does not: an explanation of how leaders become, and remain, the kind of people capable of sustaining that culture over time.

Conclusion

This paper has evaluated St. Thomas Aquinas' virtue ethics alongside contemporary educational leadership frameworks, with particular attention to their implications for school culture in Nigeria. It was motivated by the recognition that many of the difficulties facing Nigerian schools are not simply administrative but ethical deficiencies in leadership character that policy and regulation alone cannot resolve. Aquinas' account of virtue as a stable disposition, cultivated through habitual practice and directed by reason towards the common good, offers a moral foundation that contemporary leadership theories largely assume rather than explain.

Instructional, transformational, servant, and ethical leadership each contribute real strengths to teaching quality, institutional change, collaboration, and accountability respectively but each tends to describe desirable leadership behaviour without accounting for how leaders acquire the character needed to sustain it. Aquinas' cardinal virtues, together with charity, fill that gap: prudence for sound judgement, justice for fairness and institutional trust, fortitude for perseverance under pressure, temperance for the responsible exercise of authority, and charity for a leadership oriented towards the flourishing of others rather than institutional prestige.

The paper recognises the limits of this framework: its theological foundations require careful adaptation to a religiously plural educational system, and individual character formation must be paired with institutional reform if systemic problems inadequate funding, weak policy, structural inequality are to be addressed. These limits do not diminish its relevance so much as clarify how it should be used: as a complement to, not a replacement for, existing leadership theory and institutional reform.

Leadership preparation programmes in Nigeria should intentionally build character formation and ethical reasoning into the training of school administrators, and educational policy should reinforce professional standards of fairness, accountability, and service. Ultimately, Aquinas' enduring point is a simple one: schools become ethically healthy and academically successful not merely through efficient administrative systems, but because they are led by people whose decisions consistently reflect the virtues that serve the common good.

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