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The Ethics of Leadership

JOANNE B. CIULLA, PH.D.

Introduction

ETHICS AND THE STUDY OF LEADERSHIP

The study of ethics is about what we should do and what we should be. It's about right, wrong, good, evil and the relationship of humans to each other and to other living things. Leadership is a particular type of relationship, the hallmarks of which are power and/or influence, obligation, and responsibility. By understanding ethics we gain a better understanding of the leader/follower relationship. The central issues in ethics are also the central issues of leadership. They include the problems of authenticity, self-interest, and self-discipline, and moral obligations of justice, duty, and the greatest good. In leadership we see morality magnified. The actions of leaders usually have a greater impact on a greater number of people than the actions of other individuals. We also look to leaders as role models. Hence, their moral failures and triumphs carry a greater weight and volume than those of nonleaders.

We often hear people say that leaders should be held to a “higher” ethical standard. The problem with this idea is that it assumes it is acceptable for everyone else to have a lower ethical standard. The ethical standards of followers are just as important as those of leaders. The morality of followers can have a strong influence on the morality their leaders. People often get the leaders they deserve.

Some leadership scholars don't like to use the word “followers” because they think it carries a negative connotation. They prefer to use words like “associate” or “constituent” instead. I have no problem with the word “follower.” Its denotation is clear and in reality the leader/follower relationship is fluid—sometimes leaders are followers and sometimes followers are leaders. We all play both roles. Good followers have many of the same qualities as good leaders. As you will see in this text, the ethics of leadership is not about *higher* or *lower* standards, but about the distinctive moral challenges that come from the role of leaders and their relationship to followers.

THE DEFINITION PROBLEM

Leadership scholars are often concerned about the definition of leadership. Some believe that if they could agree on a common definition of leadership, they would be better able to understand it. The meaning of a word is not decided by scholars. It is determined by the way people in a culture use it and think about it. The denotation of the word “leadership” stays basically the same in English, with slight variations that tell us about the values and paradigms of leadership in a certain place and at a certain time. Joseph Rost collected 221 definitions of leadership, ranging from the 1920s to the 1990s.¹ All of these definitions generally say the same thing—leadership is about one person getting other people to do something. Where the definitions differ is in how leaders motivate their followers and who has a say in the goals of the group or organization. As you look at the following definitions from American sources, think about the famous leaders of that era. What were they like? What were their followers like? What events shaped the ideas behind these definitions?

- 1920s [Leadership is] the ability to impress the will of the leader on those led and induce obedience, respect loyalty and cooperation.
- 1930s Leadership is a process in which the activities of many are organized to move in a specific direction by one.
- 1940s Leadership is the result of an ability to persuade or direct men, apart from the prestige or power that comes from office or external circumstance.
- 1950s [Leadership is what leaders do in groups.] The leader’s authority is spontaneously accorded him by his fellow group members.
- 1960s [Leadership is] actꝑ by a person which influence other persons in a shared direction.
- 1970s Leadership is defined in terms of discretionary influence. Discretionary influence refers to those leader behaviors under control of the leader which he may vary from individual to individual.
- 1980s Regardless of the complexities involved in the study of leadership, its meaning is relatively simple. Leadership means to inspire others to undertake some form of purposeful action as determined by the leader.
- 1990s Leadership is an influence relationship between leaders and followers who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes.

¹Rost, Joseph, *Leadership for the Twenty-First Century* (Praeger, 1991), see pp. 47–102.

Notice that in the 1920s leaders “impressed” their will on those they led. In the 1940s they “persuaded” followers, in the 1960s they “influenced” them, and in the 1990s leaders and followers influenced each other. Although these definitions are social and historical constructions, they are also personal. There are still people today who subscribe to the 1920 model of leadership. The difference between the definitions rests on a normative question: How should leaders treat followers and How should followers treat leaders? What is and what ought to be the nature of their relationship to each other?

Leadership scholars who worry about constructing the ultimate definition of leadership are asking the wrong question, but inadvertently trying to answer the right one. The ultimate question about leadership is not “What is the definition of leadership?” The whole point of studying leadership is, “What is good leadership?” The use of word good here has two senses: morally good and technically good or effective.

ETHICS AND EFFECTIVENESS

In the center of many public debates about leadership today is the question, “What constitutes a good leader?” We want our leaders to be effective and morally good. Nonetheless, we are often more likely to say leaders are good when they are effective but not moral, than they are good when they are moral, but not effective. Leaders face the same challenge found in all areas of professional ethics. They have to stay in business, produce results, or get reelected to be leaders. If they are not minimally effective at doing these things, their morality as leaders is usually irrelevant, because they are no longer in charge. Some people justify their ruthless climb to the top with the claim that when they get there they will do ethical things. In leadership, one is often tempted to put what is effective before what is ethical. We hope for leaders who know when ethics should and shouldn’t take priority over effectiveness. For example, in business this may mean knowing when employee safety or protection of the environment are more important than profits. History tends to dismiss as irrelevant the morally good leaders who are unsuccessful. President Jimmy Carter was a man of great personal integrity, but during his presidency, he was ineffective and generally considered a poor leader. However, after he left the White House Carter took on other leadership roles in which he was very successful. He is now respected and admired as a leader.

The conflict between ethics and effectiveness and the definition problem are apparent in what I have called, “the Hitler problem.”² The answer to the question “Was Hitler a good leader?” is yes if a leader is defined as someone

²Ciulla, Joanne B., “Leadership Ethics: Mapping the Territory,” in *Ethics the Heart of Leadership*, ed. Joanne B. Ciulla (Praeger, 1998), pp. 3–26, and in *Business Ethics Quarterly*, January, 1995, pp. 5–28.

who is effective at getting people together to perform some task. The answer is no, if the leader gets the job done, but the job itself is immoral or is done using immoral means. In other words, leadership is about more than being effective at getting things done. The quality of leadership also depends on the ethics of the means and the ethics of the ends of a leader's actions. Robin Hood steals from the rich to give to the poor. He uses unethical means to achieve morally worthy ends. Most of us want leaders who do the right thing, the right way, and for the right reasons and are personally moral. It's a tall order, one that shows why ethics is so important for leadership development. As you read this text you will find this tension between ethics and effectiveness in a number of the readings.

THE DESIGN AND OVERVIEW OF THIS TEXT

This text is designed not only for a course on ethics and leadership, but also as a companion text in other courses in professional ethics, such as business, public administration, law, and education. The book consists of selections from major Eastern and Western philosophic texts. Because this is a text on applied ethics, each chapter includes an introduction that helps the reader frame how the ethical theories apply to leadership issues. Each philosophic reading is preceded by an introduction that helps those without philosophy backgrounds understand who the author is and the context of the selection.³ After each philosophic reading there is a short case or story designed to help students apply the ethical concepts in the reading to practical problems. The cases in this book are not geared toward any particular business or profession. They are designed to illustrate particular types of moral situations. When students read these cases, they are encouraged to think about how the issues in the case apply to problems in their own profession or area of study. Instructors who use this as a companion text will probably want to supplement it with cases specific to the topic of their course. Last, the chapters in this text also contain readings from leadership studies, literature, management, and anthropology that further integrate the discussion of ethics with leadership.

Following this introduction is a short case called "The Parable of the Sadhu." The case raises a number of the ethical issues found in this text, such as questions about individual and group responsibility and leadership and cultural values.

³I use the convention of inserting a short biography of authors who are dead. Contemporary authors are identified by their field and university.

The first chapter starts with one of the most morally distinctive elements of leadership—how leaders use their power. Power is not inherently bad, but there are ethical and unethical uses of power. Leaders can use their power and authority for their own self-interest or the interest of others, or if they are lucky, they can use it for both. The readings in the first chapter present a set of challenging questions about the relationships among self-interest, power, and morality.

Chapters 2 through 4 look at leadership from the ethical frameworks of virtue, duty, and utility. Chapter 2 treats one of the most talked-about aspects of leadership today, the leader's moral character. The readings in this chapter discuss virtue and character development. They also explore the moral failures of leaders and make us reflect on how a leader's behavior in private life is related to his or her behavior as a leader. Chapter 3 focuses on the duties of leaders and followers. Hannah Arendt's description of Eichmann helps us examine the moral responsibilities of followers to object or resist following orders when they disagree with their leaders.

Leaders are obliged to promote the greatest good for their constituents and organizations. Chapter 4 helps us reflect on this obligation. However, it also looks at the fundamental conflict we face when their moral principles conflict with their obligation to serve their constituents. This kind of conflict highlights the need for leaders to develop a moral perspective and imagination that facilitates a deeper understanding of what really constitutes the greatest good.

In chapter 5 readings on charismatic leadership, servant leadership, and transformational leadership provide the reader with an opportunity to critically reflect on the moral implications of these leadership theories. The case study of Jim Jones and the People's Temple highlights the emotional nature of charismatic leaders and the potential dangers inherent in the relationship of charismatic leaders to their followers. Robert C. Solomon's provocative article on charismatic leadership and trust ties together the moral and emotional aspects of leadership.

Leadership and ethics vary across cultures in obvious ways, but they are fairly uniform across cultures in less obvious ways. Chapter 6 looks at the question of ethical relativism and leadership: Are there universal ethical values that should guide leaders of international organizations or leaders in cultures other than their own? In an increasingly interconnected world and diverse society, leaders are often forced to choose the values they think are best, regardless of the culture they live in or the culture of their followers. These choices are among the most difficult moral challenges leaders face today. The final article in the text is about Kofi Annan, a global leader who regularly makes these kinds of ethical choices on a global stage.

Case: The Parable of the Sadhu

Bowen H. McCoy

This case is a true story of what happened to Bowen McCoy when he went on a walking trip in the Himalayas. At the time of this story McCoy was a managing director of Morgan Stanley and president of Morgan Stanley Realty. The company had given him a six-month sabbatical leave. McCoy, who is also an ordained ruling elder of the United Presbyterian Church, said he wanted to use this time to travel and collect his thoughts. He spent the first three months walking 600 miles through 200 villages and climbing some 120,000 vertical feet. His only Western companion was an anthropologist who explained the culture to McCoy as they passed through the villages along the way.

The case sets the stage for a number of themes in this text. As you read the case, reflect on not only the ethics of the main characters, but the role of self-interest, influence, personal responsibility, cross-cultural ethics, and leadership in a group and between groups. Also think about the role a leader plays in setting and revising his or her goals and the goals of a group.

The Nepal experience was more rugged and adventuresome than I had anticipated. Most commercial treks last two or three weeks and cover a quarter of the distance we traveled.

My friend Stephen, the anthropologist, and I were halfway through the 60-day Himalayan part of the trip when we reached the high point, an 18,000-foot pass over a crest that we'd have to traverse to reach to the village of Muklinath, an ancient holy place for pilgrims.

Six years earlier I had suffered pulmonary edema, an acute form of altitude sickness, at 16,500 feet in the vicinity of Everest base camp, so we were understandably concerned about what would happen at 18,000 feet. Moreover, the Himalayas were having their wettest spring in 20 years; hip-deep powder and ice had already driven us off one ridge. If we failed to cross the pass, I feared that the last half of our "once in a lifetime" trip would be ruined.

The night before we would try the pass, we camped at a hut at 14,500 feet. In the photos taken at that camp, my face appears wan. The last village we'd passed through was a sturdy two-day walk below us, and I was tired.

During the late afternoon, four backpackers from New Zealand joined us, and we spent most of the night awake, anticipating the climb. Below we could see the fires of two other parties, which turned out to be two Swiss couples and a Japanese hiking club.

To get over the steep part of the climb before the sun melted the steps cut in the ice, we departed at 3:30 A.M. The New Zealanders left first, followed by Stephen and myself, our porters and Sherpas, and then the Swiss. The Japanese lingered in their camp. The sky was clear, and we were confident that no spring storm would erupt that day to close the pass.

At 15,500 feet, it looked to me as if Stephen were shuffling and staggering a bit, which are symptoms of altitude sickness. (The initial stage of altitude sickness brings a headache and nausea. As the condition worsens, a climber may encounter difficult breathing, disorientation, aphasia, and paralysis.) I felt strong, my adrenaline was flowing, but I was very concerned about my ultimate ability to get across. A couple of our porters were also suffering from the height, and Pasang, our Sherpa sirdar (leader), was worried.

Just after daybreak, while we rested at 15,500 feet, one of the New Zealanders, who had gone ahead, came staggering down toward us with a body slung across his shoulders. He dumped the almost naked, barefoot body of an Indian holy man—a sadhu—at my feet. He had found the pilgrim lying on the ice, shivering and suffering from hypothermia. I cradled the sadhu's head and laid him out on the rocks. The New Zealander was angry. He wanted to get across the pass before the bright sun melted the snow. He said, "Look, I've done what I can. You have porters and Sherpa guides. You care for him. We're going on!" He turned and went back up the mountain to join his friends.

I took a carotid pulse and found that the sadhu was still alive. We figured he had probably visited the holy shrines at Muklinath and was on his way home. It was fruitless to question why he had chosen this desperately high route instead of the safe, heavily traveled caravan route through the Kali Gandaki gorge. Or why he was almost naked and with no shoes, or how long he had been lying in the pass. The answers weren't going to solve our problem.

Stephen and the four Swiss began stripping off outer clothing and opening their packs. The sadhu was soon clothed from head to foot. He was not able to walk, but he was very much alive. I looked down the mountain and spotted below the Japanese climbers marching up with a horse.

Without a great deal of thought, I told Stephen and Pasang that I was concerned about withstanding the heights to come and wanted to get over the pass. I took off after several of our porters who had gone ahead.

On the steep part of the ascent where, if the ice steps had given way, I would have slid down about 3,000 feet, I felt vertigo. I stopped for a breather, allowing the Swiss to catch up with me. I inquired about the sadhu and Stephen. They said that the sadhu was fine and that Stephen was just behind. I set off again for the summit.

Stephen arrived at the summit an hour after I did. Still exhilarated by victory, I ran down the snow slope to congratulate him. He was suffering from altitude sickness, walking 15 steps, then stopping, walking 15 steps, then stopping. Pasang accompanied him all the way up. When I reached them, Stephen glared at me and said: "How do you feel about contributing to the death of a fellow man?"

I did not fully comprehend what he meant.

"Is the sadhu dead?" I inquired.

"No," replied Stephen, "but he surely will be!"

After I had gone, and the Swiss had departed not long after, Stephen had remained with the sadhu. When the Japanese had arrived, Stephen had asked to use their horse to transport the sadhu down to the hut. They had refused. He had then asked Pasang to have a group of our porters carry the sadhu. Pasang had resisted the idea, saying that the porters would have to exert all their energy to get themselves over the pass. He had thought they could not carry a man down 1,000 feet to the hut, retrace the slope, and get across safely before the snow melted. Pasang had pressed Stephen not to delay any longer.

The Sherpas had carried the sadhu down to a rock in the sun at about 15,000 feet and had pointed out the hut another 500 feet below. The Japanese had given him food and drink. When they had last seen him he was listlessly throwing rocks at the Japanese party's dog, which had frightened him.

We do not know if the sadhu lived or died.

Questions

1. Who is responsible for the well-being of the sadhu? What are the duties of the people involved in this case? What action would best serve the greatest good? What is the greatest good here?
 2. Would the climbers have acted differently if the sadhu were a Western woman?
 3. How are the problems in this case similar to problems that arise in organizations every day? What kinds of sadhus do people confront in everyday life?
 4. Who were the leaders in this case? Were they "good" leaders? What do you think a good leader would do in this situation?
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