Valuing servants ends: a new theory of ethical service

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Valuing Servants' Ends:  
A New Theory of Ethical Service  
by  
Patricia Grace Devlin

Senior Honors Thesis  
in  
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Advisor: Dr. Terry L. Price
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Introduction: Regarding service and leadership

Many of today’s universities encourage students to develop an ethic of service. Administrators, faculty, and staff members accompany students in campus-wide service activities; a number of collegiate honor societies reward students who engage in community service; and some academic programs require students to volunteer with local non-profit organizations. At its best, service learning inspires students to make a general commitment to service. The current emphasis placed on service learning in today’s educational system reveals an emerging academic perspective not only on the value service has as an educational device but also on the significant role service plays in society. For example, with particular regard for service’s function in society, the Jepson School of Leadership Studies promotes leadership as service to society. Its mission statement reads, “The Jepson School will develop people who understand the moral responsibilities of leadership and are prepared to exercise leadership in service to society.” As a student at the Jepson School, I have experienced firsthand the emphasis placed on service in the leadership studies curriculum. In fact, the Jepson School’s requisite service learning course inspired this project.

Entitled “Service to Society,” the class requires students to serve a minimum of thirty hours in the community in addition to participating in more traditional classroom activities. Using relevant theoretical and practical texts to provide the critical background for understanding the nature of service, class members analyze the duty to serve others and the characteristics of ethical serving behavior. Ultimately, the course addresses broad societal concerns such as justice, equality, and change in order to demonstrate how service acts as a means to better society. The class aims to instill in students the belief
that, by serving others, they may act as leaders – advancing the cause of social justice, correcting disparities in social equality, and inspiring beneficial social change.

Given the dedication required to achieve social progress, service ought to be distinguished from other forms of helping behavior. In *The Call of Service*, a principal text in the “Service to Society” course at the Jepson School, author Robert Coles includes the following examples of service action: social and political struggle, community service, personal gestures and encounters, charity, religiously sanctioned action, government-sanctioned action, and service to country (Ch. 2). For Coles, while differences in the objectives and motives of various service behaviors distinguish one type of service action from another, a common denominator exists in every ideal service equation: the servant’s commitment to improving society through his own continued effort and long-standing dedication (33). Thus, service is best understood as particular long-term commitments of public assistance. Considering the substantial investments demanded of servants in terms of their time, effort, and overall dedication, which service as a long-term commitment to societal progress requires, service stands out as a specific social means to provide benefit to others. An individual can help others to varying degrees, through an array of action. For example, the volunteerism of a Peace Corps member is justifiably viewed as different in kind to the commitment an individual makes to hand out sandwiches to homeless people on Thanksgiving. While the latter helps others, the former is engaged in service, because the long-term commitment of the Peace Corps requires the restructuring of the servant’s ends. Similarly, service does not refer to the immediate help which an individual provides to others in emergency situations. For example, rescuing a drowning child ought not to be considered service action. While
saving the child’s life does provide clear, substantial benefit to him, the helping behavior consists of a single, temporary act and, therefore, is not representative of service action.

Service ideally produces substantial net benefit for the individual, the group of people, or the cause being served. The fundamental reason service exists is that social injustice still plagues today’s society and people continue to live with their essential needs unfulfilled. Ethical service aims to reduce this injustice and satisfy these individuals’ basic needs. Since the satisfaction of these needs is the fundamental purpose of service, the root of its existence, service traditionally is considered justified when the servant successfully produces net benefit for others. The benefits received by those being served ought to outweigh any costs incurred by them as a result of service. Without the ability to assure the realization of this outcome, individuals who engage in service must merely aim for this objective end in order to act ethically. Servants can only be held accountable for their subjective intentions. This means that, as long as a servant aims to provide benefit for others, the accepted objective end of service, she has done the best that she can do, for which is all that she is reasonably held responsible.

If service’s purpose is understood to be to produce benefit solely for the people being served, the assessment of ethical service action only considers whether or not the interests of others are advanced. In this model, how service affects the servant’s own needs and interests remains ethically irrelevant. The judgment of the servant’s morality relies upon his intent to improve the lives of others. Since the justification of service remains contingent upon the satisfaction of others’ interests, when evaluating the moral value of service, the interests of the individuals being served are prioritized over the interests of the servants. Greater moral weight is assigned to the needs of others.
Consequently, servants, as the other-concerned participants in service action, receive relatively little consideration in the determination of ethical service action. In fact, the interests of the servant may be sacrificed in order to secure benefit for the individuals being served. Given the other-interested objectives of service, this sacrifice is typically viewed as justified. A servant’s sacrifice may appear to be a necessary consequence, since service occurs as a result of others’ need existing. Without injustices to correct, for example, in an ideal world, the purpose of service would radically change. Service action would perhaps disappear completely.

Similar to this model of service ethics, characterizations of ethical leadership depict other-interested, rather than self-interested, objectives which justify action. In fact, this tendency to view the ethical leader as working for the benefit of others appears throughout both historical and theoretical conceptions of leadership. Ancient and modern philosophical texts present fundamentally similar understandings of leadership’s purpose: to serve the common interests of others. Several prominent leadership theories, such as servant leadership, transformational leadership, and charismatic leadership, characterize moral leadership as for the benefit of followers. In these conceptions of leadership, other-oriented leader objectives determine its moral legitimacy. Recognizing this trend, Terry Price writes in *The Encyclopedia of Leadership* entry on “Ethics,” “Commentators who make their normative commitments explicit by offering recommendations for how leaders ought to behave often identify good leadership with what thinkers from Plato to Burns hold is necessary for leadership itself, namely, concern for the good of others” (4).

In contrast to these normative theories of service and leadership, I propose that the evaluation of ethical service must consider the interests of the servant in the justification
of service action. As alluded to above, the inspiration for this project and my distinct stance on ethical service began while I was enrolled in the “Service to Society” course at the Jepson School during my sophomore year of college. Having recently read Ayn Rand’s novels, *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*, I maintained a strictly egoistic perspective on individuals’ responsibilities to others for most of the semester. I believed that I, as well as everyone else, had no responsibility to help others with serious social needs. My opinion stood in stark contrast to the course materials which promote service action as a moral duty, justified by the benefit it causes for others. Overall, the course presents service as a vehicle through which leaders promote societal benefit, but it would be unfair to suggest that it depicts ethical servants as completely altruistic. The “Service to Society” course by no means ignores the benefits that service provides for individuals who serve others. Class discussions often return to the satisfactions servants experience as a result of service. As outlined in Coles’ book, *The Call of Service*, these satisfactions include a sense of accomplishment, a feeling of belonging, and an affirmation of purpose for the servant (Ch. 3). Although these satisfactions recognize how servants benefit from serving others, service remains typically justified by its other-oriented purpose. While servants may benefit from their service commitments, their benefit does not factor into the justification of the service. It is not considered a necessary condition for ethical service. Instead, the servant’s benefit is viewed as an added positive outcome.

Ultimately, the community service I performed in the “Service to Society” course allowed me to experience the benefits and the satisfactions of service. I realized I liked to serve others. Not only that, as a result of the course’s in-depth discussion of justice and equality, I also began to understand the duty individuals, as members of society, have to
help others in need. Yet, I still could not ascribe to the course’s proposal that ethical service action is *solely justified* by the benefit it produces for those individuals being served. Service remained a worthwhile activity, I suspected, to some large extent, because of the personal benefits I received from it. While the hours of English language instruction undoubtedly benefited the Bosnian family I was tutoring, my assessment of the service’s overall value gave equal consideration to my interests. Had I not been receiving any benefits or any sense of satisfaction from the service, it would not have been justified on account of the benefit I was providing for the family. Suspecting that my interests also mattered, I felt that they ought to count equally. My interests ought to be significant to the ethical justification of the service. Yet, how could a justification of service that considers the interests of servants as equally important as the interests of the individuals being served, who have serious social needs, be correct? My thesis serves as my answer to this question.

My theory for ethical service defends the claim that for service to be justified, it must be the case *not only* that the benefits outweigh the costs for the individuals being served *but also* that the benefits outweigh the costs for the servant. The moral requirements on the servants’ interests must be as stringent as the moral requirements usually placed on the interests of the individuals being served. Since service action is justified by the benefit it produces for servants as well as others, I argue that servants ought to pursue service activities only when they anticipate that the benefits for themselves will outweigh the costs. This theory of ethical service signifies that servants should prioritize their interests in making choices about service. In servants’ decisions to serve others, servants’ own interests are placed ahead of the interests of some, but not all,
others. Prioritization, therefore, does not signify that the interests of the servant account for more than the interests of others. A servant has to help others in the pursuit of their ends, but her own ends get put first in the choice of whom she will help. She prioritizes her interests in the selection of service and chooses particular forms of service which align with her ends. For example, the servant who enjoys children and the outdoors is allowed to limit her service to cases in which these two interests are involved. Within these limitations, in order for her service to be ethical, she must engage in service in which the benefits she receives outweigh the costs. In this theory of ethical service, the servant’s determination of benefits and costs are subjective. The servant’s ends define what constitutes a benefit or a cost for her. As discussed above, unable to assure that the required outcome of benefit for herself as well as for others is secured, all the servant can be held responsible for, and thus accountable for, is that her intention aimed at this end.

The justification of ethical service which considers the servants’ interests as equally important as the interests of the individuals being served has implications for the discussion of ethical servant motivation. If it is understood that service’s only purpose is to produce benefit for others, it is unlikely that servants could be ethically motivated by self-interest. One would assume that having others’ interests as the justifying determinant of ethical service would demand that servants be motivated to serve others out of an altruistic desire to advance others’ interests. In contrast, assuming that the justification of service also includes the benefit it produces for the servant, it would seem to follow that the servant is allowed to be motivated by self-interest. This signifies that servants can be motivated to serve others because of the benefit they themselves will receive from the service. In fact, in order for the service to be ethical, meaning that it also produces overall
benefit for oneself and not just for others, it would appear that a degree of self-interested motivation is the best way to assure that these self-interested ends are likely realized. However, as long as servants receive more benefits than costs from service, they may be altruistically motivated as well. Thus, motivation is not a determining factor in the justification of ethical service. Instead, service is justified by the following two outcomes: when the servant produces net benefit for the individuals being served and the servant herself receives net benefit from performing the service.

My thesis begins with an overview of historical perspectives and current leadership theories which conceptualize leadership as primarily other-interested. This review establishes the legitimacy of viewing other-interested ends as the standard prescription for leadership's purpose. The historical discussion remains crucial to the formulation of a normative conception of leadership as service. In addition, it demonstrates how few modern leadership scholars consider the potential for leaders to prioritize their own interests in leadership, especially when understood as service. Writing on leadership ethics, Price agrees with this conclusion and comments, "What these normative theories of leadership have in common with traditional ethical theory is a firm commitment to the opposition between the demands of self-interest and moral requirements that protect the interests of others" (6).

Having established the theoretical consensus on leadership's purpose against which I argue, I discuss my theory of ethical service in terms of three philosophical traditions: utilitarianism, ethical egoism, and Kantianism. I dedicate a chapter to each moral tradition. I begin each chapter with an explanation of the relevant foundational principles of the particular philosophy being addressed. I then describe the implications
the philosophy has for service action. I end the discussion with an argument that either rejects or supports the implications the philosophy has for understanding ethical service. Regarding the philosophy of utilitarianism, I demonstrate how its standards for ethical action reflect an inadequate concern for the individual, specifically for the servant herself. I then examine ethical egoism, the philosophy which appears to relate most readily to my theory on ethical service, in order to show that one can have too much concern for oneself in action. Ultimately, Kant’s moral theory regarding duties to others and duties to oneself provide the necessary philosophical framework for me to justify my argument for a view of service in which the requirements regarding benefits to the servant are as stringent as the requirements regarding benefits to the individuals being served.

I end my thesis with a more detailed discussion of the nuances of my theory of ethical service. I outline the implications this theory has for performing service and ultimately leadership action in general. To conclude, this project represents the culmination of my three years at the Jepson School of Leadership Studies. It is the product of my most challenging and rewarding intellectual experiences in leadership studies and reflects the personal development I believe I have undergone while at Jepson.
Chapter One: The other-oriented purpose of ethical leadership

Through a survey of ancient and modern philosophical texts, the historical trend of understanding ethical leadership as justified by its other-oriented purpose emerges. In the history of political thought, moral leadership is characterized as that which works for the benefit of others. Ethical leaders are those who pursue the interests of others or the common good. Several prominent leadership theories, specifically, servant leadership, transformational leadership, and charismatic leadership, characterize leadership in similar terms. While these philosophical perspectives focus on what grounds ethical leadership, their prescriptions have implications for the evaluation of ethical leader motivation.

Given the other-oriented objective of moral leadership, altruism is often represented as the desirable motivational complement to the prescribed ends of leadership. Although altruistic leader motivation is not always considered in all of the following conceptions of ethical leadership, its pervasiveness reinforces the argument that the prevailing view of ethical leadership recognizes it as justified by its other-oriented purpose.

Written around 360 BCE, Plato’s Republic, offers one of the first conceptions of leadership in political philosophy. In his portrayal of the ideal leader, whom he characterizes as the philosopher-king, Plato prescribes a form of other-interested leadership. As revealed through Socrates’ discussion with Thrasymachus, Plato believes that the moral leader prioritizes his followers’ interests. Socrates likens leadership to a craft, arguing that:

No one in any position of rule, insofar as he is a ruler, seeks or orders what is advantageous to himself, but what is advantageous to his subjects; the ones of whom he is himself the craftsman. It is to his subjects and what is advantageous and proper to them that he looks, and everything he says and does he says and does for them. (38)
In this passage, the subjects’ advantage, their benefit, not only represents the objective end of a ruler’s action but also seems to reflect the source of a ruler’s motivation to rule. Given the other-oriented ends which Socrates prescribes and his statement that “everything he says and does, he says and does for them,” he seems to promote altruistic rather than self-interested motivation in leaders. They seek the good of their subjects.

Plato’s allegory of the cave, appearing in another section of the Republic, also implies that moral leaders are altruistic and even self-sacrificial. First, they lead in order to further the ends of their subjects. Second, their pursuit of others’ ends often requires the sacrifice of their own. When Socrates states that the leader must go back down into the cave, Glaucon responds, “Then are we to do them an injustice by making them live a worse life when they could live a better one?” (134). Socrates answers:

You are forgetting again that it isn’t the law’s concern to make any one class in the city outstandingly happy but to contrive to spread happiness throughout the city by bringing the citizens into harmony with each other through persuasion or compulsion and by making them share with each other the benefits that each class can confer on the community. (134)

Socrates responds that while requiring a ruler to sacrifice his personal happiness may appear to be an injustice, it is not appropriately considered as such, since the ruler’s personal happiness is not of ethical consequence to securing the good of society as a whole. Plato, through the voice of Socrates, requires that leadership benefit the collective group of followers, even when this purpose implies the loss of happiness for the leader.

It is thus easy to understand why, in envisioning the ideal society, in which men are equally virtuous and just, Socrates proposes that good individuals would compete with one another to avoid a position of leadership (40). He explains that the just, moral leader, motivated by neither money nor honor, is compelled to lead because of “some
compulsion or punishment . . . brought to bear on [him]” (40). He describes what motivates good men to assume leadership positions:

Now, the greatest punishment, if one isn’t willing to rule, is to be ruled by someone worse than oneself. And I think that it’s fear of this that makes decent people rule when they do. They approach ruling not as something good or something to be enjoyed, but as something necessary. (40)

As voiced by Socrates in this argument, Plato stresses that leadership is not naturally in the leader’s self-interest; therefore, his desire to lead must be compelled by external, unwanted consequences. This promotes a self-sacrificial quality to the assumption of leadership, since it is not completely of the leader’s free will nor does it promote his own benefit. While leaders may appear self-interested in that they avoid being ruled by worse individuals, their decision to lead actually represents their respect for the overall good.

Another early philosophical text, Aristotle’s *Politics*, requires that moral leadership advance the ends of the collective of society. Considering political leadership in the form of constitutions, Aristotle uses the criteria of promoting communal benefit to distinguish between good and bad government. He writes:

It is evident, then, that those constitutions that look to the common benefit turn out, according to what is unqualifiedly just, to be correct, whereas those which look to the benefit of the rulers are mistaken and are deviations from the correct constitutions. For they are like rule by a master, whereas a city-state is a community of free people. (324)

According to Aristotle, a constitution’s intended beneficiary matters more than its particular form: “Whenever the one, the few, or the many rule for the common benefit, these constitutions must be correct. But if they aim at the private benefit, whether of the one or the few or the multitude, they are deviations” (324-325). Like Plato, Aristotle implies the requirement of altruistic motivation in leadership, demanding that leaders pursue “the common profit,” his rendition of the common good and indicative of the
prescribed other-oriented ends of leadership (325). Moving towards a vision of the ideal city-state, Aristotle clarifies its purpose:

Evidently, then, a city-state is not a sharing of a common location, and does not exist for the purpose of preventing mutual wrongdoing and exchanging goods. Rather, while these must be present if indeed there is to be a city-state, when all of them are present there is still not yet a city-state, but only when households and families live well as a community whose end is a complete and self-sufficient life. (326)

Interestingly, he specifies that the city-state does not exist to enable the exchange of goods between people, but instead, to promote the performance of virtuous actions.

Relating this to modern leadership theory, Aristotle’s philosophy parallels a transformational conception of leadership, based on concern for others’ interests, in contrast to a transactional understanding, closely associated with an individual’s self-interest (Bass and Steidlmeier, 185-186). He continues:

So political communities must be taken to exist for the sake of noble actions, and not for the sake of living together. Hence those who contribute the most to this sort of community have a larger share in the city-state than those who are equal or superior in freedom or family but inferior in political virtue, and those who surpass in wealth but are surpassed in virtue. (327)

Aristotle characterizes the political virtue of both the state and the individual in terms of the benefit each produces for others. He thus provides a great example of the standard view that poor leadership occurs in the form of self-interested transactional leaders.

The trend of altruistic leader motivation in historical political philosophy continues in the work of Thomas Aquinas. Representative of a traditionally Christian understanding of leadership, Aquinas, in his thirteenth century treatise, On Kingship, communicates his vision of the moral leader in the form of a king who appears similar to an altruistic servant. Invoking Plato’s analogy of the leader as shepherd, Aquinas compares the king to “a shepherd who seeks the common good of the people and not his
own individual good” (398). Like Plato’s description of the ideal leader in the form of a philosopher-king, Aquinas understands the leader as a servant interested in acting for his followers’ benefit. Similar to Aristotle’s conception of just governments, he writes:

If a ruler should direct a community of free persons for the common good of the people, there will be a right and just regime, as befits free persons. And if the governance of a ruler be ordained for the private good of the ruler and not for the common good of the people, there will be an unjust and wicked regime. (398)

In Aquinas’ portrayal of moral leadership, leaders work to the benefit of followers.

This justification of leadership appears even in Niccolò Machiavelli’s famous work, The Prince. Underneath his assertion in the need for leaders to engage in seemingly unethical behavior in order to maintain power, he portrays proper leadership as considering the good it produces for others. Machiavelli allows for a leader to behave in ways that seem unethical, with one intention being to maintain his personal power. Although this seems to reflect the leader’s prioritization of his own interests, Machiavelli also characterizes this purpose in other-oriented terms, since the order itself which results from a constant source of leadership benefits the common good. For example, Machiavelli requires that the prince appear to be generous instead of actually be generous, because this behavior ultimately benefits the people more than that of a spendthrift prince. He writes:

So a ruler should not care about being thought miserly, for it means he will be able to avoid robbing his subjects; he will be able to defend himself; he will not become poor and despicable, and he will not be forced to become rapacious. This is one of those vices that make successful government possible. (449)

Machiavelli, notorious for prescribing leadership in the form of a purely self-interested prince, actually promotes leadership in which a leader’s self-interest and their concern for others are not as juxtaposed as they are usually construed to be. Machiavelli’s leaders
may appear overwhelmingly self-interested; however, Machiavelli does not obviously promote selfish ends on a larger scale. Machiavelli’s prescription of leadership’s other-oriented ends is prominent in his political treatise, *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius*. Presenting an even stronger case for other-oriented objectives in leadership, Machiavelli distinguishes between good and bad leadership, characterizing good leaders as “putting their own interests second and the public good first” (472). Describing the form of just governments, Machiavelli uses Aristotle’s archetypal constitutions to distinguish between good and bad political systems. He agrees with Aristotle’s requirement that ethical political bodies work for the benefit of society as a whole.

The understanding of political society in the form of a social contract appears in the political philosophies of Enlightenment thinkers Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes describes the social contract as a covenant between men. He writes:

> Lastly, the agreement . . . of men, is by covenant only, which is artificial: and therefore it is no wonder if there be somewhat else required (besides covenant) to make their agreement constant and lasting; which is a common power, to keep them in awe, and to direct their actions to the common benefit. (547)

In Hobbes’ perspective, man is self-interested to a point of detriment. Therefore, morality, a consequence of the covenant, is grounded in a constrained form of self-interest, since unrestrained self-interest ultimately benefits no one. For Hobbes, leadership, in the form of government, works to extricate men from their selfish, self-destructive nature. In Hobbes’ conception of the commonwealth, the leader derives authority from his followers and acts to protect their interests. If the leader does not fulfill this required objective, followers have no duty to obey. Hobbes writes, “The obligation of subjects to the sovereign, is understood to last as long, and no longer, than the power lasteth, by which he is able to protect them” (564). This signifies that when the sovereign
no longer serves his subjects' interests, they may reject his authority. Consequently, Hobbes' portrayal of the social contract communicates the standard historical perspective that leadership exists to protect followers' interests.

Locke, in his *The Second Treatise of Civil Government and a Letter Concerning Toleration*, grounds civil society even more deeply in the authority of the people. Locke describes why individuals give up the liberty they enjoy in the state of nature to form political societies:

> For all being kings as much as [each other], every man his equal, and the greater part no strict observers of equity and justice, the enjoyment of the property he has in this state is very unsafe, very unsecure . . . [therefore,] it is not without reason, that he seeks out, and is willing to join in society with others, who are already united, or have a mind to unite, for the *mutual* preservation of their lives, liberties, and estates, which I call by the general name, property. (657-8)

Established by the people, government strives to benefit the common good. Locke writes, “The power of the society, or legislative constituted by them, *can never be supposed to extend farther, than the common good*; . . . to be directed to no other *end*, but the *peace, safety, and public good* of the people” (659). This concern for the collective benefit in society signifies that leaders prioritize the ends of others and, therefore, promotes the standard view that good leadership demands primarily other-concerned leadership. Social contract theory represents the political priority of concern for followers. This priority is derived from the view that followers themselves are the source of authority that legitimates leadership. For Hobbes and Locke, who, although to different degrees, view man as primarily self-interested, the establishment of political society appears as a transaction in which natural liberties are exchanged for the civil protection of these liberties, now understood as rights. Therefore, both political thinkers propose that the
purpose of government, or leadership, is to regulate the injustices which unavoidably result from man’s uninhibited self-interest.

The last political philosopher to be discussed, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, similarly conceptualizes leadership’s authority as justified only when it is granted by the collective. In his *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men*, Rousseau concludes that “the commitments that bind us to the body politic are obligatory only because they are mutual” (782). In this description, Rousseau agrees with Hobbes and Locke and assumes that legitimate leadership occurs only when it serves the collective ends of others. Unlike Hobbes and Locke, Rousseau envisions man, although still self-interested, as enjoying equality and peace in the state of nature. This occurs, because “the state of nature is the state in which the concern for our self-preservation is the least prejudicial to that of others” (735). In the *Discourse*, Rousseau conveys a very negative perception of leaders, since they arguably deceive people into giving up their natural liberties for the sake of property and protection, thus granting leadership its authority over the people. Describing man’s fall from the state of nature, Rousseau critiques the self-serving intentions of the first leaders and argues that they “invented specious reasons” such as rules of justice and peace in order to convince others to unite and eventually serve them (747). Rousseau’s regard for equality between men causes him to be critical of leadership as a whole. He writes, “In relations between men, the worst that can happen to someone is for him to see himself at the discretion of someone else” (748).

While Rousseau criticizes the self-interest of the very first leaders in the *Discourse*, he continues to reject self-interested leader objectives in his assessment of leadership in political society as a whole in *On the Social Contract*. In this treatise, Rousseau
specifically condemns leaders when they lead because of “the pleasure [they feel] in commanding” (772). He concludes that leaders, as representatives of the collective, ought to lead in order to maintain “the common interest,” or forced equality in society (777).

Concerned with equality, Rousseau represents a unique perspective on self-interest. His conception of the social contract reflects leadership as a transformational vehicle instead of a transactional necessity, as it is in Hobbes’ and Locke’s perspectives. While the self-interest of followers is the primary concern for Hobbes and Locke, Rousseau is interested in the opportunity that the social contract provides for man to have moral agency. He writes:

Although in this state [of civil society] he deprives himself of several of the advantages belonging to him in the state of nature, he regains such great ones. His faculties are exercised and developed, his ideas are broadened, his feelings are ennobled, his entire soul is elevated to such a height that . . . he ought constantly to bless that happy moment . . . which transformed him from a stupid, limited animal into an intelligent being. (778)

This passage stresses the benefits people receive from human interaction and society. In the state of nature, man is too individualistic. In civil society, he is transformed. He is more intelligent, more capable, and more profound. Rousseau continues to remark on this transformation:

This passage from the state of nature to the civil state produces quite a remarkable change in man, for it substitutes justice for instinct in his behavior and gives his actions a moral quality they previously lacked. (778)

In the supporting paragraphs, Rousseau notes that once man is bound to another by the social contract, he is forced to define justice and adhere to a moral code. From this, Rousseau implies that only when living with and working for others does man’s life gain meaning. Rousseau’s social contract signifies the creation of a collective will and the complete loss of traditional individualism, a change in man that he admires. However,
this transformation does not represent the complete loss of self-interest nor does it apply
to the collective body of society and exclude leaders. Instead, both leaders and members
of society at large move beyond simple self-interest to an enlightened form of it.
Rousseau’s conception of the social contract is consistent with that of Hobbes and Locke
in that the legitimacy of leadership is derived from the authority of the collective and,
thus, the purpose of leadership is to serve the interests of the collective. What is original
to Rousseau’s version of the social contract is its positive, transformational effect on
everyone’s self-interest.

Moving into today’s understandings of ethical leadership, three prominent
leadership theories conceptualize leader behavior as other-interested action. Robert K.
Greenleaf’s servant leadership most explicitly applies to the discussion of leadership as
service. In his classic text, Servant Leadership, he describes the quintessential servant
leader:

The servant-leader is servant first. . . . It begins with the natural feeling that one
wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead.
He is sharply different from the person who is leader first, perhaps because of the
need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions. For
such it will be a later choice to serve – after leadership is established. (7)

Greenleaf describes the critical difference between leader-first and servant-first leaders in
terms of the servant’s consideration of the interests of those individuals being served. He
writes, “The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure
that other people’s highest priority needs are being served” (7). Servant leaders prioritize
the interests of others. While this does not necessarily mean that they ignore their own
interests, having the ends of others as their primary objective would not allow them to
pay attention to their own interests with equal concern. Promoting a high level of other-
oriented concern in ethical leaders, Greenleaf’s conception of leadership recognizes altruistic motivation as a required component of ethical leadership.

In an article entitled, “Servant Leadership: its origin, development, and application in organizations,” authors Sen Sendjaya and James C. Sarros agree with this characterization. They argue that servant leadership is based on altruistic leader motivation (60). Interestingly, Sendjaya and Sarros propose a different origin for the concept of servant leadership. They write:

As appealing and refreshing as Greenleaf’s conceptualization of servant leadership is, Greenleaf is not the individual who first introduced the notion of servant leadership to everyday human endeavor. It was Christianity’s founder, Jesus Christ, who first taught the concept of servant leadership. From the narrative accounts of his life in the Bible, it is evident that servant leadership was taught and practiced more than two thousand years ago. (58)

They cite a passage from the Gospel of Luke, when Jesus states, “I am among you as one who serves” (60). They continue, “The first premise, ‘I serve because I am the leader’ signifies the act of altruism” (60). In recognizing the presence of servant leadership in the acts of Jesus Christ, Sendjaya and Sarros depict leader motivation once again as ethical when it is altruistic.

The theory of servant leadership has pronounced similarities to transformational leadership and charismatic leadership, the two prominent leadership theories yet to be considered. At the most simplistic level, similarities between the theories exist in their concern for followers’ interests. In Leadership, James MacGregor Burns’ crucial contribution to the field of leadership studies, ethical leadership is defined by the moral transformation it inspires in both leaders and followers. Explaining the theory of transforming leadership, Burns writes:
The essential strategy of leadership in mobilizing power is to recognize the arrays of motives and goals in potential followers, to appeal to those motives by words and action, and to strengthen those motives and goals in order to increase the power of leadership, thereby changing the environment in which both followers and leaders act. (40)

While Burns considers both parties of the leadership dynamic, he maintains that leadership is primarily interested in followers’ concerns. Burns’ emphasis on followers is subtle, yet it is present in his theory. For example, Burns specifies, “The first task of leadership is to bring to consciousness the followers’ sense of their own needs, values, and goals” (41). From this statement, Burns reveals that the principal objective of leadership is to affect the moral consciousness of followers rather than leaders. Providing more evidence, he writes, “Moral leadership emerges from, and always returns to, the fundamental wants and needs, aspirations, and values of the followers” (4). While Burns’ transforming leadership is defined by its intent to raise the morality of all concerned, ultimately, transforming leaders are ethical when they seek the good of followers. Burns himself does not directly mention the need for altruism in leader motivation, yet his portrayal of transforming leaders as primarily and personally concerned with followers’ interests reflects a necessary degree of altruistic intention.

Although Burns avoids an explicit requirement of altruistic leader motivation, Bernard M. Bass and Paul Steidlmeier make this distinction in their theory of authentic transformational leadership. Altruistic leader motivation is one of the four criteria they demand of moral leadership. Distinguishing between authentic and inauthentic transformational leadership in their article, “Ethics, character, and authentic transformational leader behavior,” they write:

Both the dynamics and mean-to-ends as well as the ends are different for authentic and inauthentic transformational leaders. The authentic are inwardly and
outwardly concerned about the good that can be achieved for the group, organization, or society for which they feel responsible. The inauthentic and pseudo-transformational may publicly give the same impression and be idealized by their followers for it, but privately be concerned about the good they can achieve for themselves. (188)

Bass and Steidlmeier maintain strict lines between the two oppositional motivations of self-interest and altruism. They write, "Personalized leaders, primarily concerned with their self-interests, could not be truly transformational leaders" (186). While they give several arguments to validate this conclusion, they ultimately argue that "followers should not be mere means to self-satisfying ends for the leader but should be treated as ends themselves" (186). They generally focus much less on the effect leadership has on leaders.

Bass and Steidlmeier also promote a comparison between transformational leadership and servant leadership. Discussing the need for individualized consideration in authentic transformational leadership, which they believe "underscores the necessity of altruism if leadership is to be anything more than authoritarianism" (189), they write:

The difference between authentic and pseudo-transformational leadership is also seen in that authentic transformational leaders, who may have just as much need for power as pseudo-transformational leaders, channel the need in socially constructive ways into the service of others. (189)

Explicitly attacking self-interested motivation, Bass and Steidlmeier claim moral leadership consists of altruistic leader motivation and action and, therefore, promotes the view of leadership as appropriately intended to serve others. In fact, as Patrick Gavan O’Shea notes in The Encyclopedia of Leadership entry on “Altruism,” “Leadership behaviors including charisma, inspiration, and intellectual stimulation are thought to be transformational precisely because they compel followers to transcend narrow self-
interest” (5). In this theory of authentic transformational leadership, self-interested leaders once again do not represent the prescribed form of leadership.

The last leadership theory to be discussed, charismatic leadership, also invests in other-oriented objectives as the determinant of leadership’s moral value. In an article entitled, “Beyond the Charismatic Leader: Leadership and Organizational Change,” David A. Nader and Michael L. Tushman validate the theory:

The concept of the charismatic leader is not the popular vision of the great speech maker or television personality. Rather, a model has emerged from recent work aimed at identifying the nature and determinants of a particular type of leadership that successfully brings about changes in an individual’s values, goals, needs, or aspirations. (109)

Charismatic leadership consists of leader behavior that envisions goals and expectations for followers, energizes followers to feel confident in their ability to achieve such ends, and enables them to do so, as is possible. Although the theory of charismatic leadership does not necessarily signify altruistic leader motivation, the actions of charismatic leaders are generally understood as good when performed in the interests of others.

Jane M. Howell and Bruce J. Avolio in their article, entitled “The ethics of charismatic leadership: submission or liberation?,” distinguish between ethical and unethical charismatic leaders. They write:

Many charismatic leaders incorporate their followers’ hopes, dreams, and aspirations in their vision. These leaders . . . have moral standards that emphasize collective interests of the group, organization, or society. We call these leaders ‘ethical charismatics.’ Other charismatic leaders are interested in pursuing their own personal vision. These charismatic leaders control and manipulate their followers, promote what is best for themselves rather than their organizations, and have moral standards that promote self-interests. We call these leaders ‘unethical charismatics.’” (44)

Throughout their descriptions of ethical and unethical charismatics, Howell and Avolio emphasize their belief that ethical charismatic leaders “use power in socially constructive
ways to serve others” (44). Leadership scholars hesitate to lend support to the theory of charismatic leadership because of the personalized motivation and power that this form of leadership encourages. The theory is criticized precisely because it does not ensure the good of others. In these assessments, charismatic leaders lose their moral integrity and the legitimacy of their authority when they prioritize their own ends. For example, both Martin Luther King, Jr. and Jim Jones are often viewed as charismatic leaders; however, while Dr. King is considered to be a moral leader, Jones, on account of his abuse of power, his manipulation of followers, and his detrimental effect on them, is justifiably deemed unethical. Similar to the contingencies of Bass and Steidlmeier’s theory of authentic transformational leadership, charismatic leadership is considered ethical, or “authentic,” when performed to benefit followers’ interests.

Commenting on ethical leadership, Rabinda N. Kanungo and Manuel Mendoca define leadership as the dynamic relationship between leaders and followers. In Ethical Dimensions of Leadership, they assert the necessity of altruistic leader motivation:

> Our thesis is that organizational leaders are truly effective only when they are motivated by a concern for others, when their actions are invariably guided primarily by the criteria of ‘the benefit to others even if it results in some cost to self.’ The underlying rationale or purpose for having a leader in a group or an organization is to move it toward the pursuit of objectives that, when attained, would produce benefits to both the organization and its members. Because the ‘other’ – that is, the organization and its members – is the raison d’etre of the leader’s efforts, the altruistic motive becomes the only consistent motive for the leader role. Therefore, leadership effectiveness is ensured only by altruistic acts that reflect the leader’s incessant desire and concern to benefit others despite the risk of personal cost inherent in such acts. (35)

Kanungo and Mendoca’s perspective represents an explicit demand for altruistic motivation in leaders. This requirement is derived from their belief in the other-oriented objective of leadership. Similar to several political thinkers’ conceptions that the
collective legitimates leadership through a social contract, Kanungo and Mendoca claim that leadership exists because of "the other" and, therefore, for its benefit. Thus, they adhere to the trend in historical political philosophy and modern leadership scholarship that conceptualizes leadership as primarily concerned with followers' interests, as intended to serve their ends, and as morally justified by its other-oriented purpose.
Chapter Two: Utilitarianism and its inadequate concern for the individual

This chapter begins with a basic explanation of the moral philosophy of utilitarianism, with particular attention to its foundational principles relevant to this discussion of ethical service. The second section outlines utilitarianism’s specific implications for service action. The chapter ends with a discussion of the basic criticism of utilitarianism; namely, that the utilitarian standard represents inadequate concern for the individual. As part of this criticism, I argue against utilitarianism’s requirement that individuals give no special consideration to their own interests.

Relevant Foundational Principles of Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism advocates a consequentialist approach to ethics. It proposes that the value of an action is determined by its outcome. Specifically, an action’s moral value is grounded in the action’s production of happiness. John Stuart Mill, in his treatise entitled *Utilitarianism*, writes, “The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals ‘utility’ or the ‘greatest happiness principle’ holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to promote the reverse of happiness” (10). Utilitarian philosophy argues that actions ought to be pursued based on the amount of happiness that they will produce. In comparing the ethical value of two separate actions, the action which produces the greater amount of happiness is considered to be of higher moral worth. Utilitarianism requires that in all instances, utility, in terms of happiness, be maximized. This means that, given the choice between two potential actions, an individual, in order to act ethically, must pursue the option in which greater happiness is produced as a result of the performed action.
It is important to note several characteristics of Mill's treatment of happiness. First, Mill thinks of happiness as an impersonal good. He makes no distinction between the value of one's personal happiness and the happiness of another. As a result, each individual's happiness receives equal, impartial consideration. Second, happiness is judged on a cumulative scale. Commenting on the effects of these two requirements, Mill writes that the utilitarian standard "is not the agent's own greatest happiness, but the greatest amount of happiness altogether" (15-16). As revealed in this quote, the quantitative value of happiness affects an action's moral worth. Third, Mill judges happiness in terms of quality as well as quantity. As far as the qualitative value of happiness, Mill distinguishes higher pleasures from lower ones. He maintains that higher pleasures, such as intellectual inquiry and healthy exercise, grant an individual more happiness than do lower pleasures, which include the corresponding activities of academic indifference and indulgent drinking. Consequently, Mill values actions in terms of the nature of the happiness they cause in the affected individuals.

As a consequentialist philosophy, utilitarianism does not consider the motivation for action to be of moral significance in its evaluation of ethical behavior. As long as an action's outcome represents the maximization of utility in that given case, the action is moral regardless of the motivation which inspired the action. In other words, motivation does not enter the utilitarian scheme for justifying ethical action. Mill writes:

Utilitarian moralists have gone beyond almost all others in affirming that the motive has nothing to do with the morality of the action, though much with the worth of the agent. He who saves a fellow creature from drowning does what is morally right, whether his motive be duty, or the hope of being paid for his trouble. (148)
Mill distinguishes utilitarianism as a guide for moral action from moral judgments on human beings themselves. Focused on the outcome of actions, utilitarianism allows for ethical action to be inspired by any form of motivation. As far as the utilitarian is concerned, motivation, whether altruistic or self-interested, does not affect the determination of an action’s ethical value.

*Utilitarianism’s Implications for Service Action*

Utilitarianism does not make service, defined as particular long-term commitments of public assistance, an explicit moral requirement. However, one implication of the utilitarian philosophy is that service is often understood as required ethical action. This implication exists for several reasons. First, serving others can be morally required, because service generally acts as a means to increase the happiness of others and, therefore, overall happiness. Theoretically, to serve others is to produce benefit for them, and this benefit translates into an increased happiness. Second, as opposed to mandating a general increase of happiness, according to utilitarianism, one has a moral obligation to *maximize* happiness. As noted earlier, the targeted beneficiaries of service are those individuals with the greatest amount of need in society. The maximization of overall happiness is often assured by helping the least well-off people in a society, since they have the most to gain and thus get more utility from the service than someone who doesn’t need such help. For example, giving five dollars to a homeless man gives him substantially greater happiness than giving five dollars to a millionaire. This represents the concept of diminishing marginal utility for income. Third, utilitarianism’s potential service requirement is also strengthened by its foundational principle that happiness be evaluated on an impersonal, collective scale. Self-interested action, action
which produces benefit for oneself, is not assigned any special value, since one's own benefit is treated as equally important as the benefit of another. Mill affirms this conclusion:

The utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct is not the agent’s own happiness but that of all concerned. As between his own happiness and that of others, utilitarianism requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator. In the golden rule of Jesus of Nazareth, we read the complete spirit of the ethics of utility. ‘To do as you would be done by,’ and ‘to love your neighbor as yourself,’ constitute the ideal perfection of utilitarian morality. (22)

In this passage, Mill invokes Jesus’ teachings to reveal how the principles of utilitarianism are exercised through altruistic practices. He promotes service action which benefits others as morally responsible behavior.

Therefore, utilitarianism argues that, when the servant can maximize overall benefit by promoting the happiness of others, he morally ought to do so. However, utilitarianism would not assume that the interests of the individuals being served are always prioritized over the interests of the servant. The utilitarian philosophy does sometimes allow for the interests of servants to be pursued in ethical action based on the standard of maximizing utility. For example, the utilitarian perspective requires that when a servant can promote his own happiness, as part of maximizing the sum total of overall happiness, he is morally required to do so. Remaining within a purely consequentialist justification for action, the servant’s attention to his personal interests in service action is not just permissible but is actually required, since it may be the most effective manner to guarantee that happiness, still valued impersonally, is maximized. The argument for service in which servants ethically pursue their own benefit is based on the cognitive contingency that allows them to maximize utility by giving the most attention to their
own interests. It implies that individuals in fact are not truly impartial agents, but are
cognitively partial to themselves. Since an individual knows what happiness is for
himself better than what happiness is for another person, or other people, service that
prioritizes the servant’s interests may most effectively produce overall happiness, still
valued on an impersonal scale. In this argument, one’s cognitive bias allows for
motivational partiality. For the servant, this means that, because he has greater
knowledge of his own interests, in relation to the interests of others, he is justifiably
allowed to prioritize his own interests in service and, in terms of motivation, be self-
interested. This rationalization of a self-interested prioritization of ends depends upon the
recognition of one’s ends as one’s own. It also reflects the idea that an individual may be
more easily motivated by his own happiness than the happiness of others.

Although utilitarianism offers a consequentialist approach to evaluating ethical
action that appears as though it would support an argument for servants to prioritize their
personal interests in service, its promotion of self-interested action has to be limited to
ordinary, daily affairs. Based on utilitarian standards, only in those instances when
prioritizing the servant’s interests assures that overall happiness will be maximized is the
servant’s self-prioritization justified. In service activities, this case is highly unlikely,
given that the benefit the servant gains through service is generally not greater,
quantitatively and qualitatively, than the benefit which those individuals being served
receive as a result of service. The great need of others ensures that a servant can almost
always do more to maximize utility by pursuing others’ interests in service. Therefore,
utilitarianism most often promotes the traditional perspective on ethical service; namely,
that service aim to produce benefit for others. This conclusion is based upon
utilitarianism's impartial treatment of happiness which is calculated on a cumulative scale that disregards distributional details.

At times, utilitarianism's maximization of cumulative happiness requires that a relatively smaller amount of happiness be sacrificed in order to secure an overall greater amount of happiness. If the benefits that a servant produces for another individual, or other individuals, in service outweigh the costs incurred by the servant as a result of service, utilitarianism views this cost as justified, and the service, along with the servant's sacrifice, is required. Military service exemplifies this principle. Soldiers sacrifice themselves personally in order for the rest of the nation to remain safe. Their potential loss of life is justified by the relatively greater security and happiness that it grants the rest of society. In this way, utilitarianism justifies the individual's self-sacrifice on account of the good it produces for others. This sacrifice occurs in cases in which service cannot produce benefit for both parties of the service relationship. When mutual benefit is impossible and one party's interests have to be prioritized in service, the philosophy of utilitarianism, as has been noted above, would preference the interests of the individuals being served in nearly all cases, because these individuals are likely greater in number and greater in need.

In his conception of moral duties, philosopher Peter Singer takes the utilitarian standard to its logical extreme. In an article entitled "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," Singer proposes that, "if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it" (231). This means that, in the case of service, as long as servants, while producing benefits for others, do not reduce themselves, the servants, to a point of existence below
that of the individuals whom they are serving, the service, and whatever sacrifice it includes, is required. In Singer's words:

It follows that I and everyone else in similar circumstances ought to give as much as possible, that is, at least up to the point at which by giving more one would begin to cause serious suffering for oneself and one's dependents – perhaps even beyond this point to the point of marginal utility, at which by giving more one would cause oneself and one's dependents as much suffering as one would prevent. (234)

For Singer, those instances of giving which are generally viewed as charitable, meritorious acts are actually required moral duties. Although Singer's conception of moral duties appears extreme, his logic merely follows utilitarianism's foundational principles. Singer's conclusion that a servant's sacrifice of her personal standard of living to a point equal to that of the individuals being served is justified by traditional utilitarian principles which demand that individuals maximize utility according to an impartial treatment of happiness that is considered on a cumulative scale.

With respect to motivation, utilitarianism, as a consequentialist philosophy, does not consider the motivations of servants as relevant to the justification of ethical service. In theory, servants may be motivationally self-interested or other-interested and still perform ethical service action as long as utility is maximized. In contrast to standard views of ethical service, the good of others need not be the source of a servant’s motivation. Thus, while utilitarianism recognizes the need to sacrifice one’s own interests in order to produce the greatest amount of cumulative happiness, self-sacrifice is merely a condition of the action, not a determinant of its moral value. Mill writes, “The utilitarian morality does recognize in human beings the power to sacrifice their own greatest good for the good of others. It only refuses to admit that sacrifice is itself a good” (22).

However, since utilitarian principles by and large demand that, in the case of service,
others’ interests ought to be prioritized over those of servants, it is likely that servants ought to be motivated by the interests of others as opposed to self-interest.

**Utilitarianism’s Inadequate Concern for the Individual**

The principal criticism of utilitarianism is that it does not show adequate concern for the individual. Mill reveals utilitarianism’s implications for the individual:

Utilitarianism, therefore, could only attain its end by the general cultivation of nobleness of character, even if each individual were only benefited by the nobleness of others, and his own, so far as happiness is concerned, were a sheer deduction from the benefit. (16)

As philosopher John Rawls argues, the utilitarian standard provides a morally inadequate guide for ethical action. In his *Theory of Justice*, Rawls argues that utilitarianism, due to its collective treatment of happiness, does not grant enough respect to individuals. He argues that the utilitarian philosophy disregards the separateness of individuals and the value of the agent’s interests. Rawls writes that the requirement that “we are to accept the greater advantages of others as a sufficient reason for lower expectations over the course of our life . . . is surely an extreme demand” (178). Rawls opposes utilitarianism’s strict guide for action, since it often requires the individual to sacrifice his personal interests to those of others. He argues that utilitarian requirements for moral action do not sufficiently recognize an individual’s ends as particular to himself, as separate from others’ ends, and as worthy of individualized consideration.

In *Equality and Partiality*, Thomas Nagel explains how utilitarianism’s treatment of interests is unjustified. He argues against the collective consideration of individual’s interests. Nagel writes:

Concern for everyone has to be particularized: It must contain a separate and equal concern for each person’s good. When we occupy the impersonal standpoint, our impartial concern for each person exists side by side with out
impartial concern for every other person. These concerns should not be conglomerated. (66)

The explanation of the impersonal perspective depends upon an individual's ability to imagine himself as another person. Yet, Nagel notes that there is a tension present in this explanation: by valuing each individual, egalitarianism requires us to value all individuals; however, if we value all individuals, we must also value each individual as an individual. Because each person's interests are being considered individually, we must logically assign value to the individual interests of each person. It is the individual interests that matter, and, as a result, they ought not to be viewed collectively. Even in the argument for egalitarian action, there remains an acknowledgement of the separateness of individuals. From this descriptive recognition, that individuals' interests are separate, it follows that normatively, there ought to be a consideration of those individual ends.

In the context of service, utilitarianism refuses to let the servant consider his own interests as important to him personally and thus worthy of special consideration. As a result, utilitarianism demands too much concern for others' interests in its requirements for ethical action. Making individuals see others' ends as equally important as their own ends is an unjustified expectation for human beings. If these individual interests matter morally, they must retain their identity as individual interests. Moral theory must respect this starting point. Both Rawls and Nagel agree that valuing individual interests requires that these interests as individual interests be seen as valuable as well.

Although we, as moral theorists, have to see them this way for moral reasons, agents have conceptual reasons to value their own ends. An individual chooses his specific ends instead of other interests, because he sees them as more valuable for him. This has practical implications. Individuals cannot help but see their ends as more
valuable than other ends, otherwise they most likely would have chosen these other ends to be their own. In this argument, the nature of what it is to have individual interests as personal, separate ends implies the normative rule for action. The individual is justified in pursuing his own ends. What is necessary to have ends as his own entails that he must see the pursuit of his own ends is justified. He cannot see himself treating the ends of others as equally valuable to him as his own ends, unless he understands the ends of others as his own ends. For us, as moral theorists, ought implies can. While we may require that individuals not impede the ends of others, requiring their positive action in pursuit of these impersonal ends to be equal to the effort that they exert in pursuing their own ends is too extreme. Individuals must be justified in pursuing their own ends. Service in which the servant prioritizes his own interests over the interests of others is justified through the rejection of utilitarianism’s collective scale of valuing happiness. This rejection is possible, because, if one acknowledges that human beings are best regarded individually, it follows that they are constituted as separate entities with their own personal interests which cannot be completely disregarded.
Chapter Three: Ethical egoism and its excessive self-interest

This chapter begins with an explanation of the foundational principles of ethical egoism, for the most part, as they are articulated by Ayn Rand in her objectivist philosophy. A discussion of ethical egoism's implications for service action follows this introductory section. While this moral philosophy justifiably allows the agent to pursue his own ends, ultimately, its strict requirement that uncompromising self-interest serve as the only principle for morality warrants critique. The chapter ends by presenting two common criticisms of ethical egoism. I ultimately agree with James Rachels’ criticisms of ethical egoism; namely, that its self-interest is excessive and, therefore, cannot serve as an appropriate basis for moral action.

Relevant Foundational Principles of Ethical Egoism

In contrast to utilitarianism’s standard of maximizing overall utility based on an impartial treatment of happiness, the philosophy of ethical egoism demands that individuals consider only their own ends. Specifically, ethical egoism holds that individuals must act in their self-interest in order for an action to be moral. They are encouraged to maximize utility for themselves personally. Describing the foundational principles of the philosophy, James Rachels writes in The Elements of Moral Philosophy:

Ethical Egoism is the radical view that one’s only duty is to promote one’s own interests. According to Ethical Egoism, there is only one ultimate principle of conduct, the principle of self-interest, and this principle sums up all of one’s natural duties and obligations. (77)

Thus, the philosophy of ethical egoism does not merely allow for individuals to prioritize their own ends, but instead, requires that they act in order to produce benefit for themselves. It also expects not only that individuals achieve self-interested ends but also that they be motivated by self-interest. This agreement is not unreasonable, since, in
action, the ends that an individual intends to achieve, for the most part, reflect a similar motivational desire. This parallel between the intended outcome of an action and the motivational desires of the actor appears throughout ethics literature. As established in the literature review, altruistic leader motivation usually accompanies prescriptions of leadership seen as justified by the good it causes for others. For the ethical egoist, the pursuit of completely self-interested ends logically coincides with self-interested motivation.

The work of Ayn Rand represents the best articulation of ethical egoism’s foundational principles. Explaining the grounding for the philosophy, Rand affirms the intrinsic value each individual has as a human being. In her classic novel, *Atlas Shrugged*, main character John Galt delivers a speech in which he summarizes the justification of objectivism, Rand’s egoist philosophy. He states:

> Man’s life, as required by his nature, is not the life of a mindless brute, of a looting thug or a mooching mystic, but the life of a thinking being – not life by means of force or fraud, but life by means of achievement – not survival at any price, since there’s only one price that pays for man’s survival: reason. Man’s life is the standard of morality, but your own life is its purpose. If existence on earth is your goal, you must choose actions and values by the standard of that which is proper to man – for the purpose of preserving, fulfilling and enjoying the irreplaceable value which is your life. (1014)

In conceptualizing why individuals ought to prioritize their own ends, Rand assigns value to the rational nature of human beings. For Rand, the ability to think rationally requires that individuals fulfill their potential, as evidenced by her demand for achievement. Importantly, she understands achievement in strictly personal terms. She continues, “Every man – is an end in himself, he exists for his own sake, and the achievement of his own happiness is his highest moral purpose” (1014).
Rand has a specific vision of what constitutes the best moral life. Yet, in her presentation of self-interest as a general ethical standard, she does not detail which specific actions ought to bring individuals happiness. This would be a contradiction in the ethical egoism philosophy, since it maintains the utmost respect for the individual. Accordingly, the philosophy must let the individual define his or her own sense of happiness and achievement. It proposes that individuals make a subjective assessment of their own interests. These interests can vary as long as they are based on an objective rational standard. In an article entitled, “The Ethics of Emergencies,” Rand articulates objectivism’s principal rule for action, she writes:

The rational principle of conduct is . . . always act in accordance with the hierarchy of your values [italics added], and never sacrifice a greater value to a lesser one. This applies to all choices, including one’s actions toward other men. It requires that one possess a defined hierarchy of rational values (values chosen and validated by a rational standard). (534)

While she may specify that happiness can only be truly achieved when an individual acts in accordance with his values, which represents a loyalty to himself which she calls integrity, she does not define what those values ought to be for each individual, beyond that they be rational. For example, she would not presume to determine whether a successful acquisition accomplished by a dedicated capitalist entrepreneur is of more value than a news article published by a skilled writer. The moral value of each action is dependent upon the actor’s system of values. As Rand illustrates through her various characters in her two classic novels, *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*, while ethical egoism’s standards for living the moral life are extremely high, achieving the good life can occur in many forms. For example, the CEO of the most successful railroad company based in New York City may be as ethical as the hamburger cook at a diner in the middle
of the Rockies as long as their motivation to have these jobs and their successfulness, or achievement, in these roles adhere to their personal standard of values.

*Ethical Egoism’s Implications for Service Action*

Unlike most moral philosophies, ethical egoism denies that human beings have a moral responsibility to others. As Rachels notes, with self-interest serving as the philosophy’s determinant of ethical action, an individual’s responsibilities are limited to those which concern himself. Regarding service action, ethical egoism would not promote service as it has been defined here. Understood as particular long-term commitments of public assistance, service generally aims to better society at large, often times, by helping its least well-off members. Service action in most cases consists of helping strangers for extended periods of time. Rand would not support service commitments even if the servant believes that serving others is in his self-interest and is aligned with his values. Rand would deem this servant irrational. She would argue that this servant has no values. For the ethical egoist, service action represents the substitution of others’ values for one’s own. Service entails the sacrifice of one’s life, because the nature of service, as a long-term commitment of public assistance, does not allow one to pursue one’s own values, interests, and ends. Rand argues that serving others represents the sacrifice of one’s life, which, as one’s highest value, is never justifiably sacrificed.

Thus, ethical egoism rejects the standard view that moral service is justified by the good it causes for others. Rand defiantly opposes a code of morality in which the interests of others are prioritized. She calls this standard “a morality of sacrifice.” Since one’s own happiness is the purpose of one’s life, valuing the interests of others more than one’s own interests represents the sacrifice of a greater value to a lesser one. Therefore,
Rand fervently opposes altruistic acts and especially denies that altruistic motivation justifies action. She writes:

Altruism has destroyed the concept of any authentic benevolence or good will among men. It has indoctrinated men with the idea that to value another human being is an act of selflessness, thus implying that a man can have no personal interest in others – that to value another means to sacrifice oneself. (533).

In contrast to the selflessness fundamental to a morality of altruism, Rand believes that selfishness is necessary in moral relationships with others. She argues that love and friendship are only genuine when one selfishly values the other person. Explaining how selfishness is required for love and friendship to be authentic, Rand writes:

Love and friendship are profoundly personal, selfish values: love is an expression and assertion of self-esteem, a response to one’s own values in the person of another. One gains profoundly personal, selfish joy from the mere existence of the person one loves. It is one’s personal, selfish happiness that one seeks, earns and derives from love. A ‘selfless,’ ‘disinterested’ love is a contradiction in terms; it means that one is indifferent to that which one values. (534).

Although the requirement of selfishness in relationships in which one cares about another can appear contradictory, love and other intimate relationships are often times thought of as the investment of oneself in another person. For Rand, ethical individuals love themselves and their own values and love individuals with whom they share their values.

Certainly, this understanding of required selfishness in moral relationships has implications for a discussion of ethical helping behavior. Since love and friendship must actually be selfish commitments in order for them to be genuine and moral, the welfare of an individual’s loved ones is understood to be his own, selfish concern. As a result, when these loved ones are in need, he is required to help them. Rand writes:

If one’s friend is in trouble, one should act to help him by whatever nonsacrificial means are appropriate. For instance, if one’s friend is starving, it is not a sacrifice, but an act of integrity to give him money for food rather than buy some significant gadget for oneself, because his welfare is important in the scale of
one’s personal values. If the gadget means more than the friend’s suffering, one had no business pretending to be his friend. (535)

Although the philosophy of ethical egoism does not prohibit helping behavior, the justification for helping others remains contingent upon the values and desires of the helping individual. In *Atlas Shrugged*, Rand writes, “Do you ask if it’s ever proper to help another man? No – if he claims it as his right or as a moral duty that you owe him. Yes – if such is your own desire based upon your own selfish pleasure in the value of his person and his struggle” (1059-1060). According to Rand, in order for helping acts to be ethical, the servant must desire to help individuals out of respect for and love of their values.

Contrary to the general stance ethical egoism takes in regard to service, Rand acknowledges that there are some instances in which individuals are required to help strangers in need. These are in emergency cases, which she defines as “an unchosen, unexpected event, limited in time, that creates conditions under which human survival is impossible” (536). Importantly, emergency cases are temporary, and this distinguishes them from service action in which the social need is long-standing and the commitment is long-term. Rand gives the following two examples to show the distinction, she writes:

It is only in emergency situations that one should volunteer to help strangers, if it is in one’s power. For instance, a man who values human life and is caught in a shipwreck, should help to save his fellow passengers (though not at the expense of his own life). But this does not mean that after they all reach shore, he should devote his efforts to saving his fellow passengers from poverty, ignorance, neurosis or whatever other troubles they might have. Nor does it mean that he should spend his life sailing the seven seas in search of shipwreck victims to save. Or to take an example that can occur in everyday life: suppose one hears that the man next door is ill and penniless. Illness and poverty are not metaphysical emergencies, they are part of the normal risks of existence; but since the man is temporarily helpless, one may bring him food and medicine, if one can afford it (as an act of goodwill, not of duty) or one may raise a fund among the neighbors to help him out. But this does not mean that one must support him from then on, nor that one must spend one’s life looking for starving men to help. (536)
Rand believes that an individual should help others in emergency situations out of respect for their human value, specifically their potential for rationality and achievement. Helping others in these cases reflects a servant’s integrity to the moral value of life.

Therefore, from the ethical egoist perspective, there are several cases in which helping behavior is required ethical action. Two have been addressed: the case of loved ones in need and cases of strangers in emergencies. In order for an individual to maintain integrity to his hierarchy of rational values, he must help those individuals who have earned his respect. Emergency cases include the consideration for the well-being of strangers only on account of their potential value and in extreme situations of life and death. Ethical egoism allows for individuals to help others when they perceive that it is in their self-interest to help them. They understand that helping others helps them. The justification for this self-interested helping behavior is based upon a reciprocal, tit-for-tat understanding of helping. It is a consequentialist justification: I help you so that you help me. However, with regard to service, the long-term commitment to public benefit is both too long and too impersonal for the action to be justified. Rand would seem to suggest that service necessarily conflicts with an individual’s pursuit of his own values. Rand writes, “In the normal conditions of existence, man has to choose his goals, project them in time, pursue them and achieve them by his own effort.” (536). Ethical egoism, guided by the principle of self-interest, requires that ethical individuals value their own projects to the extent that they are never justifiably sacrificed to the interests of others.

Two Criticisms of Ethical Egoism

Ethical egoism’s rejection of service depends upon Rand’s strict view of the potential ethical values of action. She maintains that actions are either selfish or self-
sacrificial. She does not allow for a compromise between these two possibilities. As James Rachels argues in *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, this dichotomy for judging the nature of action represents an unqualified understanding of the moral value of action. He criticizes Rand’s philosophy for being too radical and too rigid. Rachels writes:

> The problem with [Rand’s] argument, as you may have already noticed, is that it relies on picturing the alternatives in such an extreme way. ‘The ethics of altruism’ is taken to be such an extreme philosophy that *nobody*, with the possible exception of certain monks, would find it congenial. As Ayn Rand presents it, altruism implies that one’s own interests have *no* value, and that *any* demand by others calls for sacrificing them. If that is the alternative, then any other view, including Ethical Egoism, will look good by comparison. But this is hardly a fair picture of the choices. What we called the common-sense view stands somewhere between the two extremes. It says that one’s own interests and the interests of others are both important and must be balanced against one another. Sometimes, when the balancing is done, it will turn out that one should act in the interests of others; other times, it will turn out that one should take care of oneself. (81-82)

Rachels argues for a middle ground in ethical action. He proposes that one’s interests ought to be valued as well as the interests of others so that an individual cannot only pursue his own self-interest but he must also pursue the interests of others. According to Rachels, morality demands a balance of one’s own interests and others’ interests. Rachels conceptualizes morality as being successfully enacted when one works for one’s own benefit at certain times, and the benefit of others, at other times.

However, Rand would respond that her interpretation of the two potential values of action is valid. Rand’s strict dialectical framework for ethical action is grounded in understanding an individual’s ends as his own and separate from others. She requires that individuals pursue their own ends. Therefore, any time that an individual pursues the ends of others, he is not pursuing his own ends, and therefore sacrifices himself to that extent. Rachels himself describes the nature of Rand’s conception of self-sacrifice:
By ‘sacrificing one’s life’ Rand does not necessarily mean anything so dramatic as dying. A person’s life consists (in part) of projects undertaken and goods earned and created. To demand that a person abandon his projects or give up his goods is also a clear effort to ‘sacrifice his life.’ (80)

Because an individual’s own ends reflect his values, giving up these ends, if only temporarily, signifies the sacrifice of his life. As mentioned earlier, Rand would argue that a requirement of service is clearly a requirement that an individual sacrifice his own projects, and, thus, himself. She proposes that, in the moral code of altruism, individuals are either victims or parasites. Rand considers service action within this moral code of altruism so that servants are always victims, sacrificing their lives to others, and the individuals being served are always parasites, dependently feeding off the self-sacrifice of the servants.

However, neither Rand nor Rachels account for the possibility that the servant can pursue both his own interests and the interests of others in service action. The extremity of Rand’s view does not allow for a combination of interests to occur in any manner, and Rachels presents a balance where interests are pursued at different times. What he does not describe is the case in which the interests of both the servant and the individuals being serving are pursued at the same time. In these cases of service, the interests of the servant and those individuals being served are combined and therefore can be advanced at the same time. There are two possible ways in which servants and the individuals being served mutually benefit from service. In the first case, the servant receives the same direct benefit as the individuals being served. For example, in the civil rights movement, the African American leaders who helped secure greater personal rights for their followers received the same direct benefits as the individuals whom they served. In the second case, the servant receives a different, indirect benefit from service that still
produces benefit for others. One example of this type of benefit is the psychological and emotional satisfactions that a servant feels as a result of serving others. These satisfactions were mentioned previously and include a sense of accomplishment, a feeling of belonging, and an affirmation of purpose (Coles, Ch. 3). As articulated in the introduction, today’s society respects and encourages service commitments to the degree that serving others provides another type of indirect benefit for the servant. Through performing service, a servant can strengthen his professional experience and self-presentation, and, as a result, receive future benefits, such as a new job or higher wages.

However, ethical egoism is still left with the objection that it does not justify why an individual can preference his own ends over the ends of others. The philosophy does not provide an adequate explanation as to why one’s own ends are of higher value than another’s ends beyond the justification that they are one’s own ends. Articulating why the ends of others ought to be considered, Rachels compares ethical egoism’s singular concern with one’s own ends to systems of arbitrary preference and discrimination such as racism. His argument against these systems begins with the premise that “any moral doctrine that assigns greater importance to the interests of one group than to those of another is unacceptably arbitrary unless there is some difference between the members of the groups that justifies treating them differently” (89). According to this statement, it appears as though Rachels allows for greater importance to be assigned to a group’s, or theoretically, an individual’s, ends as long as the reason for the distinction is not arbitrary. However, Rachels argues that there is not a legitimate difference between persons that justifies an individual assigning greater importance to his own interests than the interests of others. He writes:
Ethical egoism would have each person assign greater importance to his or her own interests than to the interests of others. But there is no general difference between oneself and others, to which each person can appeal, that justifies this difference in treatment. Therefore, ethical egoism is unacceptably arbitrary. (89)

By not respecting others’ ends, ethical egoism does not provide an adequate account of one’s moral duties to others. Ethical egoism promotes a system of values and ethics that represent too much concern for oneself in action. The dignity embedded in oneself, which justifies being concerned with one’s own ends, does not legitimize the complete disregard of others’ ends. Instead, as Rachels affirms, “We should care about the interest of other people for the very same reason we care about our own interests; for their needs and desires are comparable to our own” (89). While this likeness shows how others’ interests cannot be ignored, their interests cannot be viewed as the agent’s own interests.
Chapter Four: Kantianism and its moral duties to others and agents

The final chapter on philosophical traditions begins with a basic explanation of the foundational principles of Kantianism. It next outlines the moral philosophy's implications for service action based on Kant's moral duty to help others. The final section of this chapter presents two respected philosopher's interpretations of Kant's treatment of moral duties. The first philosopher, Susan Wolf, raises questions about Kant's duties to others; the second philosopher, Thomas Hill, argues in support of Kant's duties to oneself, indirectly disputing Wolf's claims. Kant's treatment of agent's duties is crucial to the justification of my theory of ethical service. Through a reasoned line of argument, I articulate how a non-arbitrary difference between one's own ends and those of others actually grounds the duty we have to value the ends of others, and I ultimately show how this distinction justifies the servant's prioritization of his interests in service.

Relevant Foundational Principles of Kantianism

Kantianism refers to the moral system of thought conceived by arguably the greatest modern moral philosopher, Immanuel Kant. The foundational principles for action in Kantianism rest on the following two central beliefs. First, Kant supposes that the only unqualified good is the good will. Second, he proposes that reason is the only way to establish a good will. Based on these two grounds, Kant maintains that reason is the only source of moral motivation and that adherence to reason serves as the universal requirement for moral action. In his treatise, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant explains why the will, or intention in action, is of singular ethical significance:

Thus the moral worth of an action does not lie in the effect expected from it and so too does not lie in any principle of action that needs to borrow its motive from this expected effect. For all these effects, (agreeableness of one's condition, indeed even promotion of others' happiness) could have been brought on by other
causes, so that there would have been no need, for this, of the will of a rational being, in which, however the highest and unconditional good alone can be found. Hence nothing other than the representation of the law in itself, which can of course occur only in a rational being, insofar as it and not the hoped-for effect is the determining ground of the will, can constitute the preeminent good we call moral. (14)

Kant concludes that only the good will is of intrinsic moral value, since all other things are good conditionally. However, the will is only good when determined by reason.

Noting the distinction between his understanding of the purpose of reason and common interpretations of its effects, Kant writes, “But as much as reason has been imparted to us as a practical faculty, i.e., as one which is to have influence on the will, its true function must be to produce a will which is not merely good as a means to some further end, but is good itself” (97).

Kant distinguishes his deontological theory from consequentialist philosophies that view the production of happiness to be of ultimate moral worth. He explains how the alignment of one’s will with reason remains the only possible good, yet it does not necessarily lead to happiness:

This will need not . . . be the sole and complete good, but it must still be the highest good and the condition of every other, even of all the demands for happiness. In this case it is entirely consistent with the wisdom of nature if we perceive that the cultivation of reason, which is requisite to the first and unconditioned purpose, may in many ways restrict – at least in this life – the attainment of the second, namely happiness, which is always conditional; indeed it may reduce it below zero without nature proceeding unpurposively in the matter, because reason, which cognizes its highest practical vocation in the establishment of a good will, in attaining this purpose is capable only of its own kind of satisfaction, namely from fulfilling an end which in turn only reason determines, even if this should be combined with many infringements upon the ends of inclination. (10)

In the evaluation of ethical action, moral weight is thus assigned to the nature of an individual’s intention. Kant proposes that actions are moral when the intention is
grounded in reason and not in the foreseen outcome of the action. An action has moral value only when an individual acts out of duty to reason as defined by reason.

According to Kantianism, the rational aligning of individuals’ wills, out of a respect for reason itself and individuals’ rationality, acts as the principle guideline for moral action. Kant’s rules for action emerge in two distinct forms according to the nature of the reason which motivates them. Using Kant’s terms, there are both hypothetical and categorical reasons for action. Hypothetical reasons apply to those actions undertaken to obtain a desired good which ought to follow from them. For example, if one wants to be a doctor, then one rationally must will the extra years of higher education. In contrast, categorical reasons for action support action that is necessary in itself. Kant argues for the universality of all moral behavior, as pronounced in his first categorical imperative: “I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law” (15). Kant’s universal laws for action assure that each individual is held to the similar standard.

From the first categorical imperative, basic moral duties are delineated. In Kantian philosophy, there are two types of duties: strict duties and broad duties. Assessing duties as strict signifies that they must always be followed. Suicide and lying represent two examples. Kant requires that individuals tell the truth, because lying reflects a “contradiction in conception.” This means that in a world where everyone lies, there is no incentive to lie, because there would be no telling the truth and no expectation that anyone would do so. In contrast, Kant’s conception of broad duties includes actions which if not undertaken represent a “contradiction in will.” Kant’s two examples of this kind of duty are developing one’s talents and helping others in need. The duty to develop
one’s talents is required, because to will a world in which no one developed their talents would be a contradiction, which reason does not allow. The requirements placed on these duties are not as stringent as those assigned to strict duties; as a result, individuals are granted greater liberty in the fulfillment of these duties.

Kantianism’s Implications for Service Action

Kant proposes that individuals have a broad duty to help others in need. Helping action is required, because we all need the help of others, and, thus will their help. To will a world in which no one helped others would be a contradiction, which reason does not allow. Kant presents the following example to characterize the duty to help others:

A fourth [man,] for whom things are going well while he sees that others (whom he could very well help) have to contend with great hardships, thinks: what is it to me? let each be as happy as heaven wills or as he can make himself; I shall take nothing from him nor even envy him; only I do not care to contribute anything to his welfare or to his assistance when in need! Now, if such a way of thinking were to become a universal law of nature the human race could admittedly very well subsist . . . but although it is possible that a universal law of nature could very well subsist in accordance with such a maxim, it is still impossible to will that such a principle hold everywhere as a law of nature. For, a will that decided this would conflict with itself, since many cases could occur in which one would need the love and sympathy of others and in which, by such a law of nature arisen from his own will, he would rob himself of all hope of the assistance he wishes for himself. (33)

Kant thus substantiates the requirement to help others, because reason mandates that, if individuals desire to receive aid from others in times of need, they must adhere to a standard of action in which all individuals are required to help others. If an individual says that he won’t help others, in Kant’s moral theory, he is willing that no one help anyone. The universalization of ethical action means that individuals do not help others for practicality’s sake, meaning that they help others in order to receive help later. This would represent a tit-for-tat, reciprocal justification of the duty to help others. Instead, an
individual is rationally required to help others. If she wills that another individual help
her, it would be a contradiction in reason to refuse to help others.

Kant's second categorical imperative also contributes to one's duty to help others.
It states, "Act [in such a way] that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in
the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means"
(38). This originates from Kant's belief in the shared, equal dignity of human beings.
Kant argues that individuals cannot merely be treated as instruments for the betterment of
others. This would mean treating them as things instead of persons. Kant believes that
individuals have intrinsic value, because they are capable of aligning their wills with
rationality. The second categorical imperative has implications for how helping action
ought to be performed. Regarding what constitutes a moral motivation to help others,
Kant argues that neither altruistic nor self-interested motivation constitutes an ethical
reason to help others. Instead, helping acts have moral value only when a person
acknowledges her duty to help others out respect for their rationality, which is demanded
by reason itself. Kant therefore requires a sense of heightened self-consciousness in the
helping individual as to why she is providing help to others: she must acknowledge that it
is her duty to help others because reason dictates that helping others is a moral duty.

Although Kant requires individuals help others as a broad, meritorious duty, he
does not explicitly consider the specific form of helping behavior which service,
understood as particular long-term commitments of public assistance, represents.
However, there is the potential to view service an integral component of Kant's broad
duty to help others. The duty to serve others is supported by Kant's requirement that
individuals, at times, make the ends of others their own ends. Kant writes:
Concerning [the] meritorious duty to others, the natural end that all human beings have is their own happiness. Now, humanity might indeed subsist if no one contributed to the happiness of others but yet did not intentionally withdraw anything from it; but there is still only a negative and not a positive agreement with humanity as an end in itself unless everyone also tries, as far as he can, to further the ends of others. For, the ends of a subject who is an end in itself must as far as possible be also my ends, if that representation is to have its full effect in me. (39)

In this explanation, Kant justifies the duty to help others by requiring that individuals view the ends of others as their own on account of the equal dignity of human beings. This interpretation assumes that an individual pursues the ends of others as if those ends are her own, since reason dictates that they are equally valuable to her own ends. Given this condition, serving others is perhaps the most practical means to fulfill one’s duty to help others, because the long-term dedication which service requires allows for servants to view the ends of others as their own ends to an extent that other, temporary forms of helping behavior may not permit. In this interpretation of Kant’s duty to others, it appears that the servant at times is required to substitute the ends of others for her own ends. As has been previously discussed, this substitution implies a sacrifice of one’s own ends.

Derived from Kant’s duty to help others, service is understood as a moral duty which not only includes, but also requires, the sacrifice of servants’ ends.

Two Philosophical Interpretations of Kant’s Moral Duties

Philosopher Susan Wolf, in an article entitled, “Moral Saints,” argues that Kantianism requires this sacrifice of servants’ ends. She proposes that a strict adherence to Kant’s moral duties can lead to individuals working to benefit only others, which does not represent ethically responsible behavior. She uses the term “moral saint” to refer to individuals who strictly adhere to moral rules for action. Describing the repercussion of such a dedication to morality, she writes, “A necessary condition of moral sainthood
would be that one’s life be dominated by a commitment to improving the welfare of others or of society as a whole” (31). She describes two types of moral saints – the Loving Saint and the Rational Saint. The Loving Saint represents the individual who adheres to utilitarian moral standards and works to promote the good of others, because this makes him happy. Wolf writes, “[His happiness] truly lies in the happiness of others, and so he would devote himself to others gladly, and with a whole and open heart” (31). In contrast, the Rational Saint serves others out of a sense of duty. The Rational Saint represents the individual dedicated to Kant’s conception of moral duties. Wolf writes, “He pays little or no attention to his own happiness in light of the overriding importance he gives to the wider concerns of morality” (31). Wolf criticizes Kant’s system of morality. She argues that its code of ethics can result in an individual’s loss of self-interest and the justified pursuit of his own ends.

Wolf is right to conclude that to aim to benefit only others and not oneself is unjustified. She writes:

The ideal of a life of moral sainthood disturbs not simply because it is an ideal of a life in which morality unduly dominates. The normal person’s direct and specific desires for objects, activities, and events that conflict with the attainment of moral perfection are not simply sacrificed but removed, suppressed, or subsumed. The way in which morality, unlike other possible goals, is apt to dominate is particularly, disturbing, for it seems to require either the lack or the denial of the existence of an identifiable, personal self. (35)

In addition, Wolf is correct in estimating the limitations which result from a life dedicated to improving the welfare of others instead of one’s own. Wolf believes that the Rational Saint, in constantly adhering to morality’s rational duties, likely loses the ability to benefit others by not being self-interested. Since moral saints end up furthering others’ ends instead of their own, they do not develop the excellent skills or attributes they need
to help others. This argument proposes that solely working for the ends of others is self-defeating or counter-productive. She continues to support her argument against a singular dedication to the ends of others, by noting how an individual’s successful personal development is generally respected and valued:

The feats of Groucho Marx, Reggie Jackson, and head chef at Lutéce are impressive accomplishments that it is not only permissible but positively appropriate to recognize as such. In general, the admiration of and striving toward achieving any of a variety of forms of personal excellence are character traits it is valuable and desirable for people to have. In advocating the development of these varieties of excellence, we advocate nonmoral reasons for acting, and in thinking that it is good for a person to strive for an ideal that gives a substantial value to the interests and values that correspond to these virtues, we implicitly acknowledge the goodness of ideals incompatible with that of the moral saint. Finally, if we think that it is as good, or even better for a person to strive for one of these ideals than it is for him or her to strive for and realize the ideal of the moral saint, we express a conviction that it is good not to be a moral saint. (?)

Thus, the Rational Saint’s lack of self-interest is ethically unacceptable from an intrinsic standpoint. Self-development is valuable in itself. Wolf justifiably argues that it is right for people to pursue their own interests. While Wolf is right about several moral issues, she remains wrong about Kant’s disregard for an individual’s duty to herself.

Philosopher Thomas Hill, in an article entitled, “Servility and Self-Respect,” shows how Kant, instead of promoting self-sacrificial duties, requires that individuals view their own ends as equal to the ends of others. Hill first questions the morality of servile behavior. In order to communicate the specifics of his conception of servility, Hill constructs three examples of characters displaying stereotypical servile behavior: the Uncle Tom figure, the Self-Deprecator, and the Deferential Wife. The Uncle Tom figure works in deference to another individual, because social prejudices have corrupted his sense of self-worth, and as Hill writes, “he does not feel that he has the right to expect anything better” (5). While the Self-Deprecator correctly assesses his personal flaws, he
does not understand that his character deficiencies do not undermine his personal value. The Deferential Wife subordinates her interests to those of her husband, because fulfilling his wants makes her happy. Hill notes the flaw in her behavior in that “she tends not to form her own interests, values, and ideals; and, when she does, she counts them as less important than her husband’s” (5). Shown in the specificity of his examples, Hill’s construction of servility does not apply to all forms of helping behavior. He believes that individuals can justifiably work to produce benefit for another person without necessarily being servile. He defines servility as “a kind of deferential attitude towards others resulting from ignorance or misunderstanding of one’s moral rights” (10).

From this understanding of servility, Hill then argues that such servile behavior conflicts with a person’s required level of self-respect. He proposes that those individuals acting in service to another out of perverted notions of personal rights or values are acting immorally. He writes, “To avoid servility to the extent that one can is not simply a right but a duty, not simply a duty to others but a duty to oneself” (4). He supports this thesis with both utilitarian and deontological justifications; however Hill maintains that justifying the immorality of servile behavior in utilitarian terms fails to address the intrinsic violations such behavior represents to an individual’s self-respect. If one moves outside the realm of utilitarian justification and looks at instances of self-sacrificial service in terms of deontological values, the weight of the outcome is disregarded. Instead, the action is judged by its intrinsic worth. Hill writes:

When a person’s happiness stems from a morally objectionable attitude, it ought to be discounted. That the sadist gets pleasure from seeing others suffer should not count even as a partial justification for his attitude. That a servile person derives pleasure from denying her moral status, for similar reasons, cannot make her attitude acceptable. (7)
Hill affirms that it is inherently wrong for an individual to sacrifice her personal ends. To work solely for the ends of others signifies that an individual lacks appropriate understanding of her own rights and a required sense of self-respect as far as fulfilling her duties to herself is concerned.

Hill argues that the requirement of self-respect must be grounded in a universal attribute of human beings. He writes, “The capacities of different persons vary widely; but what the servile person seems to overlook is something by virtue of which he is equal with every other person” (9). The servile individual disrespects his moral rights. Examining the three cases of servile behavior, Hill concludes that “the objectionable feature is . . . a willingness to disavow one’s moral status, publicly and systematically, in the absence of any strong reason to do so.” (12). The cases exemplify the immorality of inadequately respecting oneself. The servile individuals fail to fulfill their moral duty to themselves. Using a Kantian perspective on one’s moral duties to oneself, Hill explains the crux of his argument:

The objection to the servile person, given our premises, is that he does not satisfy the basic requirement to respect morality. A person who fully respected a system of moral rights would be disposed to learn his proper place in it, to affirm it proudly, and not to tolerate abuses of it lightly. This is just the sort of disposition that the servile person lacks . . . The servile person, as such, does not express disrespect for the system of moral rights in the obvious way by violating the rights of others. His lack of respect is more subtly manifested by his acting before others as if he did not know or care about his position of equality under that system. (14)

Hill proposes that servile behavior violates one’s moral duty, because morality, founded upon equal assessment of human beings’ individual value, demands that people treat themselves with equal respect as they treat others. The philosophy is egalitarian. It aims to redress the conditions that servility encourages in which the servant places himself
below those individuals he serves. Importantly, Hill understands that the moral duty to oneself implies the requirement of benefiting oneself. Hill writes:

Clearly a duty to avoid servility would be a duty to oneself at least in this minimal sense, for it is a duty to avoid, so far as possible, the denial of one’s moral status. The duty is concerned with understanding and affirming one’s rights, which are, at least as a rule, for one’s own benefit. (16)

In Hill’s argument, benefit is construed as granting oneself equal rights to the rights which one grants to others. In this interpretation of Kant’s moral duties, one’s own ends matter as much as the ends of others so that individuals are required to act in ways in which they do not ignore or disrespect their own ends.

In the context of service, this requirement has important implications for the duties of the servant. According to Hill’s belief in required self-respect, service committed without the morally appropriate self-respect would contain a similar misunderstanding of, or undervaluing of, the servant’s rights, or agency. In the case of service, the servant has the moral duty to herself to not engage in any service activities in which she would, in Hill’s terms, disrespect her moral status through servile behavior, or, in Wolf’s perspective, commit herself to work for only the ends of others. What has not been appreciated in these interpretations of Kant’s moral standards for helping others is the possibility that in service, the servant maintains self-respect for her own ends only by prioritizing these ends. In this conception, the servant ought to promote her personal ends in performing service so that she is not disrespecting her moral worth as a moral agent.

An Argument for the Servant’s Prioritization of her own ends in Service

While Kant generally evaluates one’s own good to be of equal importance to the good of others, Kant’s derivation of the duty to help others prioritizes the individual interests of the person who is required to help. He grounds the requirement for helping
action in the understanding that if one wills to benefit from others in the pursuit and successful advancement of one's own ends, then one must, at times, serve others in order to uphold the willed universal law of action. Conceptually, one's own ends are the starting point of the argument. Underneath the egalitarian standard of universality, there thus remains a degree of required self-prioritization. Notice, for example, that in articulating the reason for a broad duty to help others, Kant writes, "For, the ends of a subject who is an end in itself must as far as possible be also my ends, if that representation is to have its full effect in me" (39, emphasis added). This means that, in developing the moral imperative of service, one must do justice to the conceptual prioritization of one's personal ends. Kant maintains that only through the acknowledgement of an individual's own ends and her desire to achieve those ends through the help of others must she understand service as a required universal action. The reason that we must help others with their ends, although it ultimately is grounded in reason itself dictating that it is rational to do so, originates in our own desires to achieve our own ends. Kant's qualifier "as far as possible" affirms that rationally there are circumstances in which we cannot see others' ends as our own.

This means that the distinction between one's own ends and the ends of others is not arbitrary; instead, preferring one's own ends is completely rational. Kant reveals the conceptual prioritization of the agent's ends in his statement that the agent ought to see others' ends as his own only "as far as possible" (39). This indicates that an agent may not ethically be able to see others' ends as her own, for seeing others' ends as her own would not allow her to pursue her own ends. Kant argues that an individual has to pursue her own ends, because, since she has willed her own ends, it would be a contradiction in
will not to pursue them and instead pursue others’ ends. Kant, in using the phrase “as far as possible,” does not permit an individual to see others’ ends as her own. Even seeing others’ ends as equal to one’s own undermines her ability to pursue her own ends, unless these ends are shared. Based on Kant’s derivation of the moral duty to help others, in which one’s own ends are conceptually prioritized, and based on the view that one’s ability to view others’ ends as one’s own is not only limited but also unethical, the servant’s prioritization of her own ends in the performance of service is justified. The logical consequence of this argument is that ethical service requires that servants and the individuals being served have shared ends.
Chapter Five: Implications of this theory of ethical service

While service fundamentally aims to produce substantial social benefit for others, this other-oriented objective does not justify disregarding the servant’s interests. I argue that, for service to be justified, it must be the case not only that the benefits outweigh the costs for the individuals being served but also that the benefits outweigh the costs for the servant. This theory of ethical service is egalitarian in that it requires that service produce overall benefit for both the servant and the individuals being served. The servant’s interests cannot be ethically sacrificed to the interests of others. The justification for this argument is grounded in Kant’s duty to oneself. As shown in the last chapter, he requires that individuals pursue their own ends. Pursuing others’ ends instead of one’s own ends would constitute a lack of self-respect and a violation of one’s moral duty to oneself. It would also undermine the grounding of the duty to help others in need. So, this theory of ethical service moves beyond the egalitarianism justification and demands that servants prioritize their own interests in service. This prioritization does not signify that the servant grants more moral weight to his own interests than the interests of others; instead, it means that the servant must put her ends ahead of the ends of some, but not all, other individuals. In other words, in serving others, the servant has to help others in the pursuit of their ends, but her own ends get put first, allowing her to choose whom to help. She prioritizes her interests in the selection of service. Since service action is justified by the benefit it produces for servants and the individuals being served, servants ought to pursue service actions only when they anticipate the benefits for them will outweigh the costs. Servants therefore ought to choose particular forms of service which align with their interests.
There is a crucial conceptual connection between pursuing one's own ends, which Kant understands as one's goals or projects, and prioritizing one's interests, which generally refers to one's desires, needs, or preferences. This connection is best viewed as a reciprocal relationship in which one referent reflects the other. By and large, one's subjective interests determine one's subjective goals. For example, if an individual hates sports, it is highly unlikely that one of her goals would be to reach the Olympics. On the other side, individuals' projects become one of their desires. Let's say this same individual prefers theater and has made going to New York to see a Broadway play one of her goals. For her, viewing the play would come to be one of her desires. There is a commonsense connection between an individual's ends, in terms of goals or projects, and her interests, which refer to her desires, needs, or preferences. The two concepts interact in such an essential way that, in practical terms, allows for the ideas of ends and interests to be considered nearly the same. Thus, in order to pursue her own ends in service, a servant has to consider her personal interests and select a form of service activity that will include and satisfy these interests and fulfill her ends.

This theory of ethical service appears to apply strict restrictions on the servant's behavior in that the servant must produce benefit for herself as well as for others. For example, she is not allowed to sacrifice her own interests in service; she is required to pursue her own ends in service action; and she must prioritize her interests in choosing a service activity in order to assure as best she can that the service is beneficial to her. However, this theory of ethical service actually grants a great deal of liberty to the servant in the selection of service activities. First, it allows the servant to determine what constitutes her own interests, goals, and projects. It recognizes that it is not the role of
social or moral systems of thought to determine an individual’s interests for her. Morality cannot demand that individuals enjoy politics over the outdoors, art more than sports, or reading instead of writing. These constitute personal preferences which contribute to an individual’s assessment of what inspires her own happiness. It would represent a violation of an individual’s personal autonomy to have her desires or interests decided for her. Instead, this theory of ethical service agrees that servants are free to prefer those interests that they naturally enjoy. Second, this theory of ethical service lets the servant determine whom she serves given the many available options of service action. Based on the pluralistic nature of service, individuals necessarily choose the service activity they will perform; in my theory, they are able to choose what type of service they want to perform. As a result, third, individuals do not have strict obligations with respect to public service as far as specific benefactors, activities, or commitment. Individuals ought not to feel that one form of service is definitely better than another. While ethical service is valuable to both parties of the service dynamic, servants are given the chance to assess the value of a potential service experience in terms of how the service will benefit them.

To provide a practical example of my theory, the volunteer who enjoys children and the outdoors is not required to work with an organization that rehabilitates juvenile delinquents on backpacking trips; however, she is required to pursue a service activity that she believes will produce more benefits than costs for her. It appears logical that a service organization that mirrors her personal interests would most likely benefit her more than one that opposes her general personal preferences. One would think that, for this individual, working for the National Outdoor Leadership School would be a more suitable service choice than working for a state congressman. Given the likelihood of her
receiving more benefits from the service than costs, it is a more justified decision as well. Of course, in order for her eventual service to be ethical, the service must benefit the individuals being served as well as herself as servant.

My theory of ethical service has two important implications that disagree with traditional perspectives on ethical service. First, by assigning equal moral restrictions on the interests of both the servant and the individuals being served, certain cases of service that are usually considered ethical are not justified. The service case in which the servant incurs a small net cost and many individuals receive a high degree of net benefit is unjustified according to this theory. While it is argued that this cost to the servant is of little ethical consequence in relation to the great net benefit that the individuals being served receive, one individual’s sacrifice cannot be justified by the benefit it causes for others. The service case which results in the opposite outcome, where the individuals being served incur a small net cost and the servant receives a large net benefit, would not be considered ethical, because the individuals being served rightly appear as though they are being used as mere instruments in the servant’s pursuit of her own ends. Although it is not usually considered this way, when the servant incurs a net cost for the net benefit of others, the servant ought to be equally viewed as being used as a means to advance others’ ends. This is what equality demands.

This theory of ethical service also contradicts traditional perspectives on ethical servant motivation. Established in the literature review, the other-oriented ends of leadership and service encourage the view that ethical leader and servant motivation is altruistic. This theory instead requires that servants pursue their own ends in service action. This demands a significant degree of self-interest in ethical servants, because they
must prioritize their own interests in the selection of service activities. Since the service’s production of benefit for the servant as well as for others is what determines whether the service is justified, the intention to serve others in order to procure benefit for oneself must be deemed ethical. Thus, it is permissible for the servant to serve others out of self-interested motivation. However, by not requiring self-interested motivation in ethical service, service actions in which motivations are not necessarily self-interested are also justified. For example, the volunteer who intends to benefit others with little concern for producing self-benefit may engage in ethical service if she ultimately receives more benefits than costs in serving others. However, the service of the self-interested servant which, even though she had intended to benefit from service and anticipated that outcome, is unjustified if she does not ultimately receive more rewards than costs through serving others. Service action is justified by its consequences; however, service’s required outcome influences the possibilities of ethical motivation. In contrast to traditional perspectives, proposing that the servant’s net benefit be a required outcome of service action allows for self-interest to serve as ethical servant motivation.

A complication arises in evaluating the service of individuals who understand the ends of others as their own ends. If we grant individuals the right to decide what consists of their own interests and ends, then it follows that people may understand the ends of others as their own ends. Applied to my theory of ethical service, the servant can work for the benefit of others and, if that benefit is secured, it signifies that the rewards outweigh the costs for her. Mother Teresa is a classic example of this altruistic servant. She serves others to produce benefit for them and does so purely out of her love for them and her disregard for herself. The service of the Mother Teresa-type servant is unjustified
as long as she disregards her own interests. However, when the servant does not accept the ends of others as substitutes for her own ends, but instead, regards the service as providing benefit for her, the service is justified. In order for the service to be ethical, the servant must understand that its benefit to her, even if the benefit includes feelings of purposefulness, satisfaction, and accomplishment which depend upon the value she assigns to helping others, is in part what justifies the service. Ultimately, only when the ends of others agree with the servant's separate, individual, and personal projects can the servant be justified in having chosen to perform the service.

My theory of ethical service action, in which the servant ethically prioritizes his own interests in service justified by its production of benefit for everyone involved, has important implications for leadership generally. Leadership, one version of which is sometimes seen as service, is also a long-term commitment of an individual's time, effort, and interests. Just as service consists of a relationship between servants and the individuals being served, leadership is often viewed as a relational dynamic between leaders and followers. While service and leadership share many attributes, the principal similarity is their other-oriented purpose. This explains why leadership is often referred to as public service. Based on their other-oriented objective, both leadership and service exist to further the ends of others and are justified when others receive benefit. Thus, my theory of ethical service neatly applies to nearly all cases of leadership. One of its implications for ethical leadership is that it, leadership, is justified in the case that not only the benefits outweigh the costs for the followers but also the benefits outweigh the costs for the leaders. The theory maintains that no matter how great the net benefit leadership causes for followers, leadership is unjustified if the leader does not receive net
benefit as well. With regard to ethical leader behavior, leaders therefore cannot justifiably sacrifice their own interests for the interests of others; they are required to pursue their own ends in leadership; and they are required to prioritize their own interests in selecting leadership positions. They are allowed to accept or decline leadership opportunities based upon how they will benefit from the experience. This requires that leaders act self-interestedly in leadership, a proposal that does not resound well with traditional perspectives on leadership’s objectives, and its corresponding values, as other-oriented concerns. Thus, my theory for ethical service when applied to the leadership context is at odds with traditional perspectives on ethical leadership and ethical leader motivation.

My thesis works from the perspective that we, as members of the human community, are required to help others. We are not allowed to live completely egoistically – we can neither exploit not entirely ignore other people. To remain morally responsible individuals, we must engage in some form of positive interaction with other human beings. Both leadership and service represent vehicles in which we can help others. In the special case of service, we help others in high social need. What my thesis aims to redress is the common assumption that, since the objective of service and leadership is highly other-interested, the justification for service as well as leadership is solely determined by the production of benefit for others. In this justification, the interests of servants and leaders are not granted equal consideration in the ethical evaluation of either service or leadership. In contrast, my theory assures that servants’ ends are recognized as equally morally valuable as the ends of others and, therefore, of equal moral consequence to the determination of the ethics of service or leadership. I argue that, in order for servants to assure as best they can that they too will benefit from
service action, they must prioritize their interests over the interests of some others in selecting service activities. The same can be applied to ethical leader behavior. This implication of my thesis considers the multiplicity of service and leadership opportunities available and concludes that both servants and leaders ought to pursue those activities in which they will not only inspire beneficial change for the individuals they are serving but also secure substantial benefit for themselves.
Final Bibliography


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