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The Quest for Moral Leaders: Essays on Leadership Ethics

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The Quest for Moral Leaders

Essays on Leadership Ethics

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NEW HORIZONS IN LEADERSHIP STUDIES

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Introduction

Joanne B. Ciulla

The greatest strength and the greatest weakness of leaders is that they are human beings. As such, they are unpredictable creatures, capable of extraordinary kindness and cruelty. They are wise, foolish, careless, reckless, arrogant, and humble – sometimes all at the same time. As the philosopher Immanuel Kant notes, “from such warped wood as is man made, nothing straight can be fashioned.”¹ Leaders do not have to live by higher moral standards than the rest of us, but it is imperative that they have a higher compliance rate, because the impact of their behavior impacts on many lives. There are, however, two distinctive factors that make the ethics of leadership different from the ethics of other individuals. The first is power – the way that leaders exercise it and the temptations that come with it. The second is the special moral relationship that they have with followers and the range of people with whom they have moral relationships and obligations.

Leaders have to care about and consider the wellbeing of more people than the rest of us. They have moral obligations to people that they do not know and maybe do not even like. Morality requires this of everyone, but for leaders it is central to the special role that they play. The moral obligations of leaders are painted on a large canvas. Leaders are responsible for the big picture and everything in it. Furthermore, part of any leader’s job, in either a small group or as the head of a nation, is to make other people care about something bigger than themselves and help them recognize their own moral obligations. The theme that runs through the chapters in this book is the scope of leaders’ relationships to followers and the way that they see themselves in the context of their relationships with the people they lead. Leadership is morality and immorality magnified, which is why we search and hope for moral leaders.

Today, quite a bit of popular and scholarly work centers on extraordinary leaders, on how to be a great leader, and on transformational and charismatic leadership. There are also books on bad and “toxic” leaders.² The authors in this collection do not write to praise leaders, nor do they write to disparage them. Our focus is on the complex ethical relationships that are the core of leadership. The quest for moral leadership is both a personal quest that takes place in the hearts and minds of leaders as well as a quest by individuals, groups, organizations, communities, and societies for leaders who are both

ethical and effective.³ The chapters in this book explore the ethical challenges of being a leader and practicing leadership. Some look into the hearts and minds of leaders, and others examine the body of leadership – the way that it is practiced in various groups and organizations.

We begin by looking at the hearts of leaders, which includes their virtues, vices, emotions, and religious beliefs. Paul Woodruff's chapter on leadership in the ancient world reminds us that the quest for moral leaders is an old one that is intimately tied to the values of democracy. People search for moral leaders only when they have some say in the matter. When they have no say, they can only hope for moral leaders or for leaders who will overthrow their bad leaders. Woodruff argues that the ancient Greeks not only developed a concept of democracy, but also a concept of democratic (and, one might argue, moral) leadership. The Greeks defined leadership by clearly characterizing its opposite, the tyrant, who holds total power and rules by fear.

Poets, playwrights, and philosophers of the ancient Greek world had a clear understanding of the human frailties of leaders. At one end of the moral spectrum they identified *hubris* as the main occupational hazard of leaders. Hubris is the pride and arrogance that comes from power and often motivates the strong to take advantage of the weak. At the other end of the spectrum we find reverence, the antidote for hubris. Woodruff tells us that the democratic poets of ancient Greece celebrated reverence because it was the virtue of leaders who recognized the difference between the human and the divine. A reverent leader understands that we all share a common humanity and is conscious of his or her limitations. Reverence, says Woodruff, is the virtue that prevents leaders from abusing their power. Questions concerning hubris and reverence run through all of the chapters in this book.

Power is one characteristic that differentiates leaders from others. It is the key factor that makes ethics particularly difficult for them. The ethical challenges faced by leaders are both intellectual and emotional. In common usage, we only call people *leaders* because they have (willing, or at least not unwilling) followers. Leadership is not a singular concept; it is a complex relationship. As Robert C. Solomon explains, this relationship is not only an ethical relationship but it is also an emotional one – emotions are part of ethics. Niccolò Machiavelli and many authors before and after his time realized that the emotions of fear, pride, resentment, and love, are as much a part of leadership as power, motivation, and vision.

Solomon argues that emotional integrity is the super-virtue of leadership. Emotional integrity is when a person's system of emotions is in balance and he or she has a clear sense of being a part of a larger whole. In some ways, it resembles the Greek virtue of reverence. In his chapter, Solomon talks about the relationship between emotions, ethics, and reason. Often leaders' emotions are far more eloquent and have a greater impact on followers than the rationale

that leaders give for their actions and policies. Emotions mask or enhance the way people understand the morality of an action. Solomon notes how difficult it is for leaders to have emotional integrity when the media and professional consultants literally mediate and repackage their emotions.

Solomon's chapter touches on two important themes in leadership literature, charisma and trust. He points out that charisma is not really a quality of a leader, but a set of emotions. These emotions are not necessarily irrational emotions. In the case of good leaders, they are reasonable emotions. We all want leaders whom we can trust and leaders want to be trusted. Solomon notes that this is not simply a matter of finding leaders worthy of trust, but rather a matter of finding leaders who are able to give trust. Often leadership scholars talk about leaders as moral role models. Solomon extends this idea to emotions. Leaders don't just show us how to act; they show us how to feel. Similarly, Solomon says, leaders who project their trust of followers usually have it projected back to them by followers. He says that in the end, the burden of trust is on followers who, like leaders, also need emotional integrity. Followers can be wise or foolish in terms of whom they decide to trust and to follow.

The last chapter in Part One is about religious beliefs. Religion has always been an element of leadership and the way people think about leaders. Most cultures construct their own description of the personality and traits of God or the gods. These descriptions tell us some interesting things about what people in a society think their ultimate leader should be like. Consider, for example, the difference between the way God is described in the Old and New Testaments of the *Bible*. Most religions possess a fervent belief that their gods are the only true gods and many have been willing to kill or die for this idea. Throughout history, some leaders have claimed that they are gods or that they were told what to do by God or the gods. Some have also changed or tried to change followers' religious beliefs or persecuted people for their beliefs. Most religions include the same basic moral principles in their ethical systems, such as prohibitions against killing, lying, stealing, and so on. The way that leaders use their religion to lead sometimes strengthens their moral relationship with followers and sometimes also destroys it. Religion can bring people together or tear them apart.

Douglas A. Hicks examines the question "how should the leader draw upon his or her religious faith as a source of ethical ideas and actions?" Many societies today consist of people from a variety of religions. Since positional leaders have power, their comments concerning faith evoke strong emotions of agreement or concern among followers. The challenge, as Hicks describes it, is for leaders to be able to express their beliefs, but not exclude those who do not share their beliefs. Here again, we see the challenge of moral inclusiveness characterized by both reverence and emotional integrity. Hicks introduces a

third kind of inclusion that he calls “respectful pluralism.” Respectful pluralism allows for religion in the public life of a leader as long as a leader does not use his or her religious beliefs to degrade or coerce others or to set policies based on religious beliefs that are not shared by everyone. Hicks says that leaders who practice respectful pluralism should not make their religion’s position on an issue the official position. A leader’s job, according to Hicks, is to create communities where people’s religious beliefs can be shared openly and respected.

Respectful pluralism is a tall order for most leaders. One simple strategy for leaders in religiously diverse groups or societies is to make the public space secular and keep their religion private, but Hicks argues that leaders should not have to keep their religious beliefs private as long as they are able to restrict using them to exclude or demean other faiths or to dominate policies. The restrictions of respectful pluralism on faith and the emotions of faith certainly require a tremendous amount of self-control and self-knowledge from a leader who is a true believer. Hicks demonstrates how difficult this is when he discusses how President Bush’s public expressions of his faith have fallen short of the requirements of respectful pluralism.

In the first part of the book, we see how religious beliefs and emotions color the way leaders (and the rest of us) make decisions. The second part looks at how leaders think about morality. Terry L. Price raises two questions: should we hold leaders responsible for acting on the wrong moral beliefs and should we hold leaders responsible for moral ignorance? Price points out that many leaders in history such as Stalin, Pol Pot, and Hitler had bad childhoods that may have warped their beliefs about morality and partly explain their behavior as leaders. Other leaders may have grown up in societies where they never learned that slavery, for example, is wrong. Price argues that it would be difficult to let leaders off the hook for bad behavior because they had a troubled childhood; but we may want to cut them some slack if they lived in a society or period of history where they did not learn that certain things were wrong. Price argues that the moral mistakes of leaders fall into two categories. The first is mistakes about the content of morality – that is a leader never learned that slavery was wrong. He says these kinds of mistakes are not difficult to correct. The second kind of mistake is about the scope of morality – who is bound by morality and who is protected by it.

Once again, we see inclusion as a key aspect of moral leadership, but Price shows us another facet to this theme. Some leaders, such as royalty, grow up with special privileges, which may make them feel that they are not included in the group of people who have to follow the rules. As Price notes, even when leaders are not from privileged backgrounds, we grant them special privileges on the job. These privileges may include everything from a fat salary, to perks like private jets and personal assistants, to special access to information and

resources. In a provocative twist, Price suggests that when we grant these privileges to leaders, we create situations that make it easy for them to believe that they are outside of the scope of morality by which the rest of society lives. He suggests that by giving leaders privileges or socially constructing leadership as something done from a privileged position, we make those involved in the very exercise of leadership prone to mistakes about the scope of morality. If this is indeed the case, then whom do we hold responsible for the moral mistakes of a leader when that leader does not believe that he or she is subject to the same rules as followers? To what extent are institutions and organizations responsible for the misdeeds of their leaders because of the way that they frame the position and privileges of the leader? And of course, do people sometimes get the leaders they deserve? Notice that this is more than a question about due diligence and checks and balances. It extends into the fuzzy territory of how we create images of and contexts for leaders that make it especially difficult for them to behave morally.

The next chapter in this section offers a concrete illustration of some of Price's concerns about the privileges that we afford leaders. Jay A. Conger writes about how executive power and compensation can corrupt business leaders. Like Price, Conger does not think that all immoral business leaders are simply bad apples in a barrel. The larger problem, says Conger, is that the barrel is broken. In his chapter, he shows how structural problems in American corporations (such as cases where a CEO is also the chairman) fail to provide the right checks and balances. However, he also points to two psychological phenomena that contribute to the problem of what Price calls "special privileges." The first, according to Conger, is called "the romance of leadership," which is when people over-attribute control to leaders because they prefer to feel that someone rational is in control rather than to believe that events are controlled by fate. Business books and the media feed into this by turning successful business leaders into heroes and celebrities. The second psychological phenomenon is the growing number of narcissistic corporate executives. These narcissists are highly competitive, they constantly benchmark themselves with others, and they believe the romancing the leader myth. Top executives rationalize their high salaries by using the equity theory of compensation, namely that they deserve to be paid as much as others in their position. This not only creates a sense of privilege for one leader, but for a whole class of CEOs, who in turn sit on each other's boards and approve each other's salaries.

Conger highlights some social trends that have made corporate executives more susceptible to moral mistakes that stem from what Price calls scope problems. Corporate leaders used to take a social entity view of the corporation, which meant that the corporation had a moral obligation to distribute wealth throughout society. They were much less likely to see themselves as

exceptions or deserving huge salaries and perks when they thought of their obligations in this context. Nowadays, executives hold a property conception of the corporation, which means that their primary obligation is to make profits for stockholders. Under these conditions, Conger says, it is much easier for executives to ask for huge compensations because profits are private, not social goods. As things stand today, it is not considered unethical for a CEO to make a lot of money, especially if it is tied to performance, but as we have seen in business scandals, it is often the celebrity CEO with the excessive paycheck who commits some of the most unethical deeds. Corporate executive compensation has gotten so enormous, in comparison to other workers' salaries, that it has made it difficult for the public to believe that the CEO has the company's interests at heart. This is one reason why the public has lost faith in the integrity of business leaders.

Peter Temes' chapter takes us on a somewhat different tack. Sometimes leaders have to do bad things. Perhaps this is one of the most emotionally and intellectually difficult parts of being a leader – knowing when to do something that is ethically wrong but in the interests of those served. Ethics is about acting on moral principles, but it is also about knowing when it is right to violate a moral principle. For example, killing is wrong, but there are circumstances, such as self-defense, where killing is necessary. Moral principles are precarious. We violate moral norms with great care lest we lose the habit of following them. Some of the most difficult decisions leaders make involve what Peter Temes calls the problems of dirty hands and necessary sin. Leaders have dirty hands when they make a deal with a ruthless person, but deliver something good to their constituents – to some extent the ends justify the means. Temes says that in these cases, the leader's conscience is clean because he or she has at least delivered the goods. The necessary sin leaders are not as fortunate. They choose between two evils, but also sacrifice their own sense of being a person who does good instead of bad acts.

Both dirty hands and necessary evil sound like nothing more than the ends justifying the means, but they are not. These kinds of decisions leave behind a remainder of wrong. They do not let you off the moral hook. Killing people to save lives is still killing people. Killing people is still morally wrong, even if that is what one has to do. Nonetheless, because leaders sometimes have to make these kinds of decisions, Temes offers guidelines for committing necessary sins. The first involves identifying the good in terms of the distinction between acts that improve people's wellbeing, but not necessarily their happiness. Leaders often have to make decisions that their followers do not like. The second entails isolating what really matters, which requires looking at the problem in a broader context, whereas the third, and perhaps most controversial, guideline involves thinking about morality at the level of the person rather than the group. In this way, Temes incorporates both utilitarian principles and

a corrective to utilitarian excesses. By thinking about morality as it applies to each individual, a leader is better able to consider the variety and scope of his or her constituents.

Part Three of the book shifts our attention to leadership in organizations. The quest for moral leaders is also a quest for leaders who motivate (or simply allow) followers to be ethical too. Like ethical leaders, ethical followers should, in their own capacity, care about others in a community, group, or organization. In Tom R. Tyler's chapter, we see how a leader's ethics influence the work of people in an organization. Tyler's chapter is quite different from the rest of the book, but it complements the others by empirically testing the relationship between ethical leadership and effective leadership in organizations in the "real" world.

Motivation is a key element of leadership. Tyrants motivate by fear, and in modern organizations leaders motivate people with money and status (and sometimes fear). One reason why vision is so important to leadership is because a compelling vision contains more than a common end or goal. It consists of a rationale for why an end or goal is good in some larger context. Morality is a powerful motivator and an extremely powerful de-motivator. When people complain about their jobs, it is usually because they feel that they are either not being treated with respect or because they are not being treated fairly. Solomon argues that followers reflect the emotions of a leader. Tyler's study illustrates how followers reflect their perception of the leader's ethics. If a leader does not treat people with respect and fairness at work, workers may not treat their jobs and the organization with fairness and respect. Creating justice, fairness, and trust in the workplace (and elsewhere) is a full-time job, especially because leaders have to make dirty hands decisions, such as firing people when business is bad. From the workers' or followers' perspective, the ethics of leaders and justice in the organization are major components of motivation and commitment. Tyler's study tells us what we all hope is true – namely that ethical leadership works better than tyrannical leadership.

As we see from Tyler's research, the ethical relationship between leaders and followers takes place in a large system of variables and relationships. S.D. Noam Cook's chapter offers a systems perspective of leadership ethics. From a systems point of view, a leader's job is to provide and maintain the infrastructures that make public discussion of ethics possible. Cook agrees with Conger that unethical behavior is not simply a matter of bad apples. If you only focus on the individual, you overlook the question, what in the system made that bad apple possible? Cook argues that it is the leader's job to maintain an infrastructure that allows for discussions of ethics and safeguards the participation of all people affected by that discussion. By its very nature, a human system cannot flourish unless any potential interventions in it consider

all of its parts and how those parts are related. Furthermore, human systems cannot flourish without taking into account how they interface with other systems.

According to Cook, all human systems have values infrastructures, where moral discourse takes place. Leaders should oversee the infrastructure, but they should not dominate it. Cook says leaders need to know when to interfere with a conversation about ethics and when not to interfere. Like sailors, they have to be careful that they do not “oversteer” the system. When a leader oversteers the ethics conversation, he or she may stifle healthy discussion. Cook believes that the best leadership occurs when the constitution is sound, the team is well trained, and the orchestra is well rehearsed. When a human system is well prepared both ethically and technically, then leaders can move from the stance of intervention to stewardship. In other words, well-constructed and maintained systems of good followers yield the best leaders. Cook thinks Henry David Thoreau got it right when he said, “government is best which governs not at all.”

A systems approach to leadership measures the health of the organization by the extent to which it flourishes. Norman E. Bowie uses a related concept to evaluate good leadership – sustainability. The leadership and business literature is filled with articles about change, but perhaps this is because leaders are either unwilling to maintain, or incapable of maintaining, healthy organizations. Bowie agrees with Conger that the excessive focus on shareholder value has been detrimental to the ethics of business leaders. While Conger discusses this in terms of compensation, Bowie talks about the responsibility of business leaders to take into account other stakeholders. Again, we see questions about how a leader sees his or her scope of moral obligations:

Bowie ties the scope question to the personal virtues of a leader. The virtues of a sustainable business leader are related to reverence. They are empathy, humility, and personal resolve. Using James Collins’ image of the window and the mirror, Bowie says that great leaders look out the window when things go well, to see who is responsible, and they look in the mirror when things go wrong. Bowie observes that one rarely sees a humble person involved in a business scandal.

Bowie also argues that you cannot separate the character of a private person from the public leader. Great business leaders, observes Bowie, also seem to be moral in their personal lives. He offers a series of examples of unethical business leaders, from Bernie Ebbers to Martha Stewart, who had morally problematic personal lives. They offer some nice illustrations of people who do not think that they have to play by the rules. They also raise questions about emotional integrity and ethics. Do these leaders have a kind of emotional integrity – rotten at home and rotten at work? Is it possible for bad people to

do good things as leaders? Bowie struggles with these questions, especially when it comes to the case of President Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinski.

There is something almost unnatural about being an ethical leader. Several aspects of leadership defy normal inclinations. We naturally care about and are willing to make sacrifices for friends, family, and neighbors, but leaders frequently have obligations to strangers and communities outside of their own. Their job often requires them to serve the interests of a variety of strangers and groups over their own interests and the interests of their families and friends. Morality requires this of all of us sometimes, but once again, this requirement is inherent in what it means to be a leader and to do the work of a leader. Ethical leadership is, for most leaders, a constant quest to keep a perspective on who they are, how they relate to the group, and to whom they have obligations. It entails a level of self-knowledge and self-control that is challenging to sustain over time and under the pressures of the job. Ethical leaders have to be above the crowd and yet one of the crowd.

Leadership ethics encompasses much more than the content of a leader's values. Ethical values and norms are always in motion at the center of how leaders do their jobs. Justice, fairness, duties, and the greatest collective good are more than just values and beliefs. They are the currency of all leader/follower relationships. While this book is not designed to praise leaders, it should help the reader understand why we treasure the good ones. Moral leadership is both difficult to find and difficult to sustain.

NOTES

1. Immanuel Kant, "The Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent," in T. Humphry (ed. and tr.), *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1983, p. 34.
2. See: Barbara Kellerman, *Bad Leadership: What it is, How it Happens and Why it Matters*, Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2004, and Jean Lipman-Blumen, *The Allure of Toxic Leaders*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.
3. Joanne B. Ciulla, "Ethics and Leadership Effectiveness," in John Antonakis, Anna T. Cianciolo and Robert J. Sternberg (eds), *The Nature of Leadership*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2004, pp. 302-27.