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# Ethics Effectiveness: The Nature of Good Leadership

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## Ethics and Effectiveness

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### *The Nature of Good Leadership*

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The moral triumphs and failures of leaders carry a greater weight and volume than those of most other people (Ciulla, 2003b). In leadership, we see morality and immorality magnified, which is why the study of ethics is fundamental to the study of leadership. The study of ethics concentrates on the nature of right and wrong and good and evil. It examines the relationships of people with each other and with other living things. Ethics explores questions related to what we should do and what we should be like as individuals, as members of a group or society, and in the different roles that we play in life. The role of a leader entails a distinctive type of human relationship. Some hallmarks of this relationship are power and/or influence, vision, obligation, and responsibility. By understanding the ethics of this relationship, we gain a better understanding of leadership because some of the central issues in ethics are also the central issues of leadership. They include personal challenges such as self-knowledge, self-interest, and self-discipline, and moral obligations related to justice, duty, competence, and the greatest good.

The challenges of leadership are not new, which is why we find some of the most perceptive work on leadership and ethics in ancient texts. History is

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filled with wisdom and case studies on the morality of leaders and leadership. Ancient scholars from the East and West offer insights that enable us to understand leadership and formulate contemporary research questions in new ways. History, philosophy, and the humanities in general provide perspective and reveal certain patterns of leadership behavior and themes about leadership and morality that have existed over time. Perhaps the most important benefit of the humanities approach to leadership studies is that it does not allow us to study leader effectiveness without looking at the ethics of what leaders do and how and why they do it. In short, the humanities approach never lets us forget that the very nature of leadership is inextricably tied to the human condition, which includes the values, needs, and aspirations of human beings who live and work together.

The study of ethics and the history of ideas help us understand two overarching and overlapping questions that drive most leadership research. They are: What is leadership? And what is good leadership? The first is about what leadership is, or a descriptive question. The second is about what leadership ought to be, or a normative question. These two questions are sometimes confused in the literature. Progress in leadership studies rests on the ability of scholars to integrate the answers to these questions. In this chapter, I discuss the implications of these two questions for our understanding of leadership. I begin the chapter by looking at how the ethics and effectiveness question plays out in contemporary work on leadership ethics, and I discuss some of the ethical issues distinctive to leadership. Then I show some of the insights gleaned from the ancient literature and how they complement and provide context for contemporary research. In the end, I suggest some directions for research on ethics in the context of leadership studies.

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## Ethikos and Morale

Before I get started, a short note on the words *ethics* and *moral* is in order. Some people like to make a distinction between these two concepts. The problem with it is that everyone seems to distinguish the concepts in a different way. Like most philosophers, I use the terms interchangeably. As a practical matter, courses on moral philosophy cover the same material as courses on ethics. There is a long history of using these terms as synonyms of each other, regardless of their roots in different languages. In *De Fato* (II.i) Cicero substituted the Latin word *morale* for Aristotle's use of the Greek word *ethikos*. We see the two terms defining each other in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The word *moral* is defined as "of or pertaining to the distinction between right and wrong, or good and evil in relation to the actions, volitions, or character of human beings; ethical," and "concerned with virtue and vice or rules of conduct, ethical praise or blame, habits of life, custom and manners" (*Compact Oxford English Dictionary*, 1991, p. 1114). Similarly, it defines *ethics* as "of or pertaining to morality" and "the science of morals, the moral principles by which a person is guided" (*Compact Oxford English*

*Dictionary*, 1991, p. 534). Perhaps the most compelling evidence for why these terms are not significantly different is that people rarely define the difference between them in the same way. They often tend to define the two terms in ways that best suit their argument or research agenda.

## Ethics as Critical Theory ---

In 1992, I conducted an extensive search of literature from psychology, sociology, anthropology, political science, religion, and philosophy to find work on ethics and leadership (Ciulla, 1995). The results were disappointing both in terms of the quantity and quality of articles in contemporary books and journals. This is not to say that prominent leadership scholars ignored the subject or failed to see the importance of ethics to leadership. Missing were rigorous philosophic analyses of ethical issues that are distinctive to leaders and leadership. Philosophers differ from social scientists in their approach to ethics. Studies of charismatic, transformational, visionary, and authentic leadership often talk about ethics. In these studies, ethics is part of the social scientist's description of types or qualities of leaders and/or leader behaviors. From a philosopher's point of view, these studies offer useful empirical descriptions, but they do not offer a full analysis of the ethics of leadership. The study of ethics in any field, such as business or law, also serves as a critical theory. Philosophers usually question most of the assumptions in the field (which might explain why people often try to serve them hemlock!). My point here is not that philosophy is better than the social sciences, but that it brings out different aspects of leadership by employing different methods of analysis. If we are to gain an understanding of ethics and leadership, we will need both kinds of research and analysis.

## Explanation and Understanding ---

The other striking thing I observed about the leadership literature was that writer after writer complained that researchers did not seem to be making much progress in understanding leadership (Hunt, 1991). Fortunately, I will not be adding my voice to that chorus of lamentation. Many things have changed in leadership studies since the early 1990s. Several initiatives are afoot to pull research together. The "full-range leadership theory" consolidates research on transformational and charismatic leadership theories and research with empirical findings on leadership behaviors (Antonakis & House, 2002). Also, more scholars from the humanities have entered the field, and more leadership scholars are doing interdisciplinary work. This is a substantial development because the humanities give us a different kind of knowledge than do the sciences and social sciences. The humanities provide a larger context in which we can synthesize what we know about leadership (Ciulla, 2008a, 2008b).

This context also shows us patterns of leadership that we can use to analyze contemporary problems. The challenge for today's leadership scholars is how to bring the two together. As C. P. Snow noted in his famous 1959 Rede lecture, there are "two cultures" of scholars, the humanities and the natural sciences. He said the sciences provide us with descriptions and explanations, but we need the humanities for understanding (Snow, 1998). Similarly, in 1962, Bennis observed that the science part of social science is not about the data the scientists produce, "nor is it barren operationalism—what some people refer to as 'scientism' or the gadgetry used for laboratory work. Rather it is what may be called the 'scientific temper' or 'spirit'" (Bennis, 2002, pp. 4–5). The temper and spirit of science include freedom and democratic values. Bennis (2002) argued that the scientist and citizen cannot be sharply separated and that empirical research had to be done from "a moral point of view" (p. 7). Although the quantity of research that focuses solely on ethics and leadership is still very small, this perspective on leadership is already changing the way some traditional social scientists think about their work.

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## Ethics as Exhortation

Whereas some of the leadership studies literature offers descriptive accounts of ethics, other parts of the literature treat ethics as an exhortation rather than an in-depth exploration of the subject. Researchers often tell us that leaders should be honest, have integrity, and so forth. For example, John Gardner makes his plea for ethical leaders in his working paper "The Moral Aspect of Leadership" (1987), later published in his book *On Leadership* (Gardner, 1990). In the chapter titled "The Moral Dimension of Leadership," Gardner begins by categorizing the different kinds of bad leaders, or what he called "transgressors," that we find in history. He said some leaders are cruel to their subjects; some encourage their subjects to be cruel to others; some motivate their subjects by playing on the cruelty of their subjects; some render their followers childlike and dependent; and some destroy processes that societies have set up to preserve freedom, justice, and human dignity (Gardner, 1990, pp. 67–68). Gardner picks an important and provocative place to start a discussion on ethics and leadership. However, he never takes us much beyond the "leaders shouldn't be like this" phase of analysis.

When Gardner gets to the meat of the chapter, he offers a series of eloquent and inspiring exhortations on the importance of caring, responsive leaders and empowering leaders who serve the common good. He does not tell us anything we do not already know, but he says it beautifully: "We should hope that our leaders will keep alive values that are not so easy to embed in laws—our caring for others, about honor and integrity, about tolerance and mutual respect, and about human fulfillment within a framework of values" (Gardner, 1990, p. 77). Missing in Gardner's discussion is what this means in terms of

moral commitments and relationships. Why do so many leaders fail in these areas? What does it take to stay on the moral track? And what role can and do followers play in the moral behavior of leaders?

## The Normative Aspects of Definitions

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Leadership scholars often concern themselves with the problem of defining leadership. Some believe that if they could only agree on a common definition of leadership, they would be better able to understand it. This really does not make sense because scholars in history, biology, and other subjects do not all agree on the definition of their subject and, even if they did, it would not help them to understand it better. Furthermore, scholars do not determine the meaning of a word for the general public. Would it make sense to have an academic definition that did not agree with the way ordinary people understood the word? Social scientists sometimes limit the definition of a term so that they can use it in a study. Generally, the way people in a culture use a word and think about it determines the meaning of a word (Wittgenstein, 1968). The denotation of the word *leadership* stays basically the same in English. Even though people apply the term differently, all English-speaking leadership scholars know what the word means. Slight variations in its meaning tell us about the values, practices, and paradigms of leadership in a certain place and at a certain time.

Rost (1991) is among those who think that there has been little progress in leadership studies. He believed that there will be no progress in leadership studies until scholars agree on a common definition of leadership. He collected 221 definitions of leadership, ranging from the 1920s to the 1990s. All of these definitions generally say the same thing—leadership is about a person or persons somehow moving other people to do something. Where the definitions differ is in how leaders motivate their followers, their relationship to followers, who has a say in the goals of the group or organization, and what abilities the leader needs to have to get things done. I chose definitions that were representative of definitions from other sources from the same era. Even today, one can find a strong family resemblance in the ways various leadership scholars define leadership.

Consider the following definitions (all from American sources), and think about the history of the time and the prominent leaders of that era. What were they like? What were their followers like? What events and values shaped the ideas behind these definitions?

**1920s:** [Leadership is] the ability to impress the will of the leader on those led and induce obedience, respect, loyalty, and cooperation.

**1930s:** Leadership is a process in which the activities of many are organized to move in a specific direction by one.



**1940s:** Leadership is the result of an ability to persuade or direct men, apart from the prestige or power that comes from office or external circumstance.

**1950s:** [Leadership is what leaders do in groups.] The leader's authority is spontaneously accorded him by his fellow group members.

**1960s:** [Leadership is] acts by a person which influence other persons in a shared direction.

**1970s:** Leadership is defined in terms of discretionary influence. Discretionary influence refers to those leader behaviors under control of the leader, which he may vary from individual to individual.

**1980s:** Regardless of the complexities involved in the study of leadership, its meaning is relatively simple. Leadership means to inspire others to undertake some form of purposeful action as determined by the leader.

**1990s:** Leadership is an influence relationship between leaders and followers who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes.

Notice that in the 1920s, leaders “impressed” their will on those led. In the 1940s, they “persuaded” followers; in the 1960s, they “influenced” them; whereas in the 1990s, leaders and followers influenced each other. All of these definitions are about the nature of the leader–follower relationship. The difference between the definitions rests on normative questions: How should leaders treat followers? And how should followers treat leaders? Who decides what goals to pursue? What is and what ought to be the nature of their relationship to each other? One thing the definition debate demonstrates is the extent to which the very concept of leadership is a social, historical, and normative construction.

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## The Hitler Problem

Some scholars would argue that bullies and tyrants are not leaders, which takes us to what I have called “the Hitler problem” (Ciulla, 1995). The Hitler problem is based on how you answer the question, Was Hitler a leader? According to the morally unattractive definitions, he was a leader, perhaps even a great leader, albeit an immoral one. Heifetz (1994) argued that, under the “great man” and trait theories of leadership, you can put Hitler, Lincoln, and Gandhi in the same category because the underlying idea of the theory is that leadership is influence over history. However, when your concept of leadership includes ethical considerations, Hitler was not a leader at all. He was a bully or tyrant—or simply the head of Germany.

We see how ingrained ethical ideas are in the concept of a leader when scholars differentiate between leaders and “real leaders” or “true leaders.”

Burns (1978) and Bass (1997) suggest that many leaders—transactional ones—are competent in that they promote exchanges among subordinates in their pursuit of collective outcomes, but that only transformational leaders are leaders in a strong moral sense. Extending this distinction, Bass attempts to separate leaders who fit the description of a transformational leader but are not ethical, from ethical leaders by distinguishing between transformational and pseudotransformational leaders or authentic transformational leaders (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999). Brown, Treviño, and Harrison (2005) make this distinction between common leadership and ethical leadership explicit in their concept of ethical leadership: “the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relations, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making” (p. 120). Using Bennis and Nanus’s (1985) characterization of leadership—“Managers are people who do things right and leaders are people who do right things” (p. 21)—one could argue that Hitler was neither unethical nor a leader. (Maybe he was a manager?) Bennis and Nanus are among those scholars who sometimes slip into using the term leader to mean a morally good leader. However, what appears to be behind this in Bennis and Nanus’s comment is the idea that leaders are or should be a head above everyone else morally.

This normative strand exists throughout the leadership literature, most noticeably in the popular literature. Writers will say leaders are participatory, supportive, and so forth, when what they really mean is that leaders should have these qualities. Yet it may not even be clear that we really want leaders with these qualities. As former presidential spokesman David Gergen (2002) pointed out, leadership scholars all preach and teach that participatory, empowering leadership is best. A president like George W. Bush, however, exercises a top-down style of leadership. Few leadership scholars would prescribe such leadership in their work. Nonetheless, President Bush scored some of the highest approval ratings for his leadership in recent history (Gergen, 2002). A number of studies help explain this based on the context of Bush’s leadership in post-9/11 America. For example, Pillai found that charismatic leadership is not only about personal characteristics but is also something that emerges in leaders during a crisis (Pillai, 1996). When people feel a loss of control, they look for decisive leaders. In the case of Bush, they may have found his autocratic leadership style comforting. As the crisis subsided later in his presidency, Bush’s ratings hit rock bottom. Another explanation for this disparity between what leadership scholars preach and what people want reflects conflicting cultural values. The American ethos of rugged individualism may also help explain Bush’s ratings. On one hand, Americans admire leaders who take bold, decisive, and autocratic action, but on the other hand, they do not want to work for them (Ruscio, 2004).

Philosopher Eva Kort offers a solution to the Hitler problem that goes beyond semantics. She notes that group actions, not relationships, reveal the features that identify what she calls “leadership proper” or “real” leadership

from cases of “purported” leadership. Real leadership is ethical and effective leadership. Purported leadership is basically someone in a leadership role, telling people what to do. Kort uses a simple example to illustrate the normative and technical aspects of leadership. A concertmaster holds a formal leadership position. If he conducts the orchestra with instructions that the musicians know are bad, they will follow him because of his position. In this case, Kort says the concertmaster is merely a purported leader, not a leader proper. She writes: “It is only when the concertmaster does lead-participate in the plural action in (generally) the right sort of way—that the concertmaster is the leader in the proper sense” (Kort, 2008, p. 422). Notice how Kort’s definition includes unavoidable judgments. Leaders are people whom we choose to follow because they seem competent and, where relevant, ethical. For Kort, leaders are those whose ideas are voluntarily endorsed and acted on by others in various situations. This is a useful way to understand how ethics and effectiveness are woven together in the concept of leadership. For Kort, the answer to the Hitler problem depends on whether followers freely choose to follow him because they endorse his ethics and think he is competent. Notice that this speaks directly to his leadership, but still does not account for cases where followers are unethical or morally mistaken or when they misjudge the competence of their leaders.

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## Moral Luck

The ultimate question about leadership is not, What is the definition of leadership? We are not confused about what leaders do, but we would like to know the best way to do it. The point of studying leadership is to answer the question, What is good leadership? The use of the word good here has two senses: morally good leadership and technically good leadership (i.e., effective at getting the job at-hand done). The problem with this view is that when we look at history and the leaders around us, we find some leaders who meet both criteria and some who only meet one. History only confuses the matter further. Historians do not write about the leader who was very ethical but did not do anything of significance. They rarely write about a general who was a great human being but never won a battle. Most historians write about leaders who were winners or who change history for better or for worse.

The historian’s assessment of leaders also depends on what philosophers call moral luck. Moral luck is another way of thinking about the free will/determinism problem in ethics. People are responsible for the free choices they make. We are generally not responsible for things over which we have no control. The most difficult ethical decisions leaders make are those where they cannot fully determine the outcome. Philosopher Bernard Williams (1982) described moral luck as intrinsic to an action based on how well a person thinks through a decision and whether his or her inferences are sound and turn out to be right. He stated that moral luck is also

extrinsic to a decision. Things like bad weather, accidents, terrorists, malfunctioning machines, and so forth can sabotage the best-laid plans. Moral luck is an important aspect of ethics and leadership because it helps us think about decision making, risk assessment, and moral accountability.

Consider President George W. Bush's decision to invade Iraq. The morality of this decision is based on what Bush intended to do and the actual outcome of the war. His decision was allegedly based on the following argument:

1. Just because the U.N. weapons inspectors have not found weapons of mass destruction, does not mean that there are no weapons of mass destruction.
2. If there are weapons of mass destruction, Saddam Hussein will use them on the United States.
3. As president, Bush has a moral obligation to protect the public.
4. Therefore, we must go to war with Iraq.

Premises 1 and 2 were later modified to:

- 1a. Saddam Hussein is an evil leader who has used biological weapons on his own people.
- 2a. If given the chance, he will harm his people and use weapons of mass destruction on the United States and its allies.

Leaders must justify war with powerful moral arguments—genocide, self-defense, and so forth. Just wars are usually a last resort after other measures have failed. Leaders who go to war when there are other viable options or for personal, ideological, or economic designs are ethically problematic, especially when they fail. In the case of the Iraq war, Bush and the British Prime Minister Tony Blair both believed that the war was justified; however, their belief was allegedly based on the conditional premises 1, 1a and 2, 2a. Bush and Blair also may have had an ideological reason, which they considered a moral reason, for the war—to bring democracy to Iraq and eventually the Middle East.

Moral luck is when the consequences of the action justify the means and or intentions of the action. So in this case, we can imagine history revealing the following:

1. If sometime in the future, we discover weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and plans by Saddam Hussein to use weapons of mass destruction on the United States and other countries, then Bush and Blair's war initiative will appear ethical.
2. If we never find weapons or any evidence of Saddam Hussein's intentions, then the morality of their actions will continue to be hotly contested.

3. If we find evidence that Hussein was bluffing and had no weapons or plans to use weapons on anyone, then the war in Iraq will look like a waste of human life.
4. If in the next decade, an unforeseeable set of events produce democracy in Iraq, then Iraqis may celebrate the U.S. invasion and erect a statue of George Bush in Bagdad—history tells us that such strange things can happen.

In this case, the moral luck of leaders rests on whether they make the right choice or assessment of risk in a case of uncertainty. How they assess the risk and their intentions also matter, especially if they lose the war.

Some leaders are ethical but unlucky, whereas others are not as ethical but very lucky. Most really difficult moral decisions made by leaders are risky because they have imperfect or incomplete information and lack control over all of the variables that will affect outcomes. Leaders who fail at something are worthy of forgiveness when they act with deliberate care and for the right moral reasons, even though followers do not always forgive them or lose confidence in their leadership. Americans did not blame President Jimmy Carter for the botched attempt to free the hostages in Iran, but it was one more thing that shook their faith in his leadership. He was unlucky because if the mission had been successful, it might have strengthened people's faith in him as a leader and improved his chances of retaining the presidency.

The irony of moral luck is that leaders who are reckless and do not base their actions on sound moral and practical arguments are usually condemned when they fail and celebrated as heroes when they succeed. That is why Immanuel Kant (1785/1993) argued that because we cannot always know the results of our actions, moral judgments should be based on the right moral principles and not be contingent on outcomes. The reckless, lucky leader does not demonstrate moral or technical competency, yet because of the outcome, he or she often gets credit for having both. Because history usually focuses on outcomes, it is not always clear how much luck, skill, and morality figured in the success or failure of a leader. This is why we need to devote more study to the ethics of leaders' decision-making processes in addition to their actions and behavior.

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## The Relationship Between Ethics and Effectiveness

History defines successful leaders largely in terms of their ability to bring about change for better or worse. As a result, great leaders in history include everyone from Gandhi to Hitler. Machiavelli was disgusted by Cesare Borgia the man, but impressed by Borgia as the resolute, ferocious, and cunning prince (Prezzolini, 1928, p. 11). Whereas leaders usually bring about change or are successful at doing something, the ethical questions waiting in the wings are always these; Was the change itself good? How did the leader go

about bringing change? And what were the leader's intentions? A full analysis of the ethics and effectiveness of any action requires one to ask: Was it the right thing to do? Was it done the right way? Was it done for the right reason?

In my own work, I have argued that a good leader is an ethical and an effective leader (Ciulla, 1995). Whereas, this may seem like stating the obvious, the problem we face is that we do not always find ethics and effectiveness in the same leader. Some leaders are highly ethical but not very effective. Others are very effective at serving the needs of their constituents or organizations but not very ethical. United States Senator Trent Lott, who was forced to step from his position as Senate majority leader because of his insensitive racial comments, is a compelling example of the latter. Some of his African American constituents said that they would vote for him again, regardless of his racist comments because Lott had used his power and influence in Washington to bring jobs and money to the state. In politics, the old saying "He may be a son-of-a-bitch, but he's our son-of-a-bitch," captures the trade-off between ethics and effectiveness. In other words, as long as Lott gets the job done, we do not care about his ethics.

This distinction between ethics and effectiveness is not always a crisp one. Sometimes being ethical is being effective and sometimes being effective is being ethical. In other words, ethics is effectiveness in certain instances. There are times when simply being regarded as ethical and trustworthy makes a leader effective and other times when being highly effective makes a leader ethical. Given the limited power and resources of the secretary-general of the United Nations, it would be very difficult for someone in this position to be effective in the job if he or she did not behave ethically. The same is true for organizations. In the famous Tylenol case, Johnson & Johnson actually increased sales of Tylenol by pulling Tylenol bottles off their shelves after someone poisoned some of them. The leaders at Johnson & Johnson were effective because they were ethical.

The criteria that we use to judge the effectiveness of a leader are also not morally neutral. For a while, Wall Street and the business press lionized Al Dunlap ("Chainsaw Al") as a great business leader. Their admiration was based on his ability to downsize a company and raise the price of its stock. Dunlap apparently knew little about the nuts and bolts of running a business. When he failed to deliver profits at Sunbeam, he tried to cover up his losses and was fired. In this case and in many business cases, the criteria for effectiveness are practically and morally limited. It does not take great skill to get rid of employees, and taking away a person's livelihood requires a moral and a practical argument. Also, one of the most striking aspects of professional ethics is that often what seems right in the short run is not right in the long run or what seems right for a group or organization is not right when placed in a broader context. For example, Mafia families may have very strong internal ethical systems, but they are highly unethical in any larger context of society.

There are also cases when the sheer competence of a leader has a moral impact. For instance, there were many examples of heroism in the aftermath

of the September 2001 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center. The most inspiring and frequently cited were the altruistic acts of rescue workers. Yet consider the case of Alan S. Weil, whose law firm Sidley, Austin, Brown, & Wood occupied five floors of the World Trade Center. Immediately after watching the Trade Center towers fall to the ground and checking to see if his employees got out safely, Weil got on the phone and within 3 hours had rented four floors of another building for his employees. By the end of the day, he had arranged for an immediate delivery of 800 desks and 300 computers. The next day, the firm was open for business with desks for almost every employee (Schwartz, 2001). We do not know if Mr. Weil's motives were altruistic or avaricious, but his focus on doing his job allowed the firm to fulfill its obligations to all of its stakeholders, from clients to employees.

On the flip side of the ethics effectiveness continuum are situations where it is difficult to tell whether a leader is unethical, incompetent, or stupid. As Price (2000, 2005) has argued, the moral failures of leaders are not always intentional. Sometimes moral failures are cognitive and sometimes they are normative. Leaders may get their facts wrong and think that they are acting ethically when, in fact, they are not. For example, in 2000, South African president Thabo Mbeki issued a statement saying that it was not clear that HIV caused AIDS. He thought the pharmaceutical industry was just trying to scare people so that it could increase its profits (Garrett, 2000). Coming from the leader of a country where about one in five people tests positive for HIV, this was a shocking statement. His stance caused outrage among public health experts and other citizens. It was irresponsible and certainly undercut the efforts to stop the AIDS epidemic. Mbeki understood the scientific literature but chose to put political and philosophical reasons ahead of scientific knowledge. (He has since backed away from this position.) When leaders do things like this, we want to know if they are unethical, misinformed, incompetent, or just stupid. Mbeki's actions seemed unethical, but he may have thought he was taking an ethical stand. His narrow mind-set about this issue made him recklessly disregard his more pressing obligations to stop the AIDS epidemic (Moldoveanu & Langer, 2002).

In some situations, leaders act with moral intentions, but because they are incompetent, they create unethical outcomes. Take, for instance, the unfortunate case of the Swiss charity Christian Solidarity International. Its goal was to free an estimated 200,000 Dinka children who were enslaved in Sudan. The charity paid between \$35 and \$75 a head to free enslaved children. The unintended consequence of the charity's actions was that it actually encouraged enslavement by creating a market for it. The price of slaves and the demand for them went up. Also, some cunning Sudanese found that it paid to pretend that they were slaves so that they could make money by being liberated. This deception made it difficult for the charity to identify those who really needed help from those who were faking it. Here the charity's intent and the means it used to achieve its goals were not unethical in relation

to alleviating suffering in the short run; however, in the long run, the charity inadvertently created more suffering. This case illustrates the relationship between ethics and effectiveness. In short, the charity.

1. Did the right thing—trying to free children from slavery
2. But they did it the wrong way—buying the children is unethical because they took part in the buying and selling of a human being and ineffective because it created a market for slaves and increased rather than diminished slavery
3. They did it for the right reason—slavery violates the dignity and human rights of children

## Deontological and Teleological Theories

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The ethics-and-effectiveness question parallels the perspectives of deontological and teleological theories in ethics. From the deontological point of view, intentions are the morally relevant aspects of an act. As long as the leader acts according to his or her duty or on moral principles, then the leader acts ethically, regardless of the consequences, as was the case in the first moral luck example. From the teleological perspective, what really matters is that the leader's actions result in bringing about something morally good or "the greatest good." Deontological theories locate the ethics of an action in the moral intent of the leader and his or her moral justification for the action, whereas teleological theories locate the ethics of the action in its results. We need both deontological and teleological theories to account for the ethics of leaders. Just as a good leader has to be ethical and effective, he or she also has to act according to duty and with some notion of the greatest good in mind.

In modernity, we often separate the inner person from the outer person and a person from his or her actions. Ancient Greek theories of ethics based on virtue do not have this problem. In virtue theories, you basically are what you do. The utilitarian John Stuart Mill (1987) saw this split between the ethics of the person and the ethics of his or her actions clearly. He said the intentions or reasons for an act tell us something about the morality of the person, but the ends of an act tell us about the morality of the action. This solution does not really solve the ethics-and-effectiveness problem. It simply reinforces the split between the personal morality of a leader and what he or she does as a leader.

Going back to an earlier example, Mr. Weil may have worked quickly to keep his law firm going because he was so greedy he did not want to lose a day of billings, but in doing so, he also produced the greatest good for various stakeholders. We may not like his personal reasons for acting, but in this particular case, the various stakeholders may not care because they also benefited.



If the various stakeholders knew that Weil had selfish intentions, they would, as Mill said, think less of him but not less of his actions. This is often the case with business. When a business runs a campaign to raise money for the homeless, it may be doing it to sell more of its goods and improve its public image. Yet it would seem a bit harsh to say that the business should not have the charity drive and deny needed funds for the homeless. One might argue that it is sometimes very unethical to demand perfect moral intentions. Nonetheless, personally unethical leaders who do good things for their constituents are still problematic. Even though they provide for the greatest good, their people can never really trust them.

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## Moral Standards

People often say that leaders should be held to “a higher moral standard,” but does that make sense? If true, would it then be acceptable for everyone else to live by lower moral standards? The curious thing about morality is that if you set the moral standards for leaders too high, requiring something close to moral perfection, then few people will be qualified to be leaders or will want to be leaders. For example, how many of us could live up to the standard of having never lied, said an unkind word, or reneged on a promise? Ironically, when we set moral standards for leaders too high, we become even more dissatisfied with our leaders because few are able to live up to our expectations. We set moral standards for leaders too low, however, when we reduce them to nothing more than following the law or, worse, simply not being as unethical as their predecessors. A business leader may follow all laws and yet be highly immoral in the way he or she runs a business. Laws are supposed to be either morally neutral or moral minimums about what is right. They do not and cannot capture the scope and complexity of morality. For example, an elected official may be law abiding and, unlike his or her predecessor, live by “strong family values.” The official may also have little concern for the disadvantaged. Not caring about the poor and the sick is not against the law, but is such a leader ethical? So where does this leave us? On one hand, it is admirable to aspire to high moral standards, but on the other hand, if the standards are unreachable, then people give up trying to reach them (Ciulla, 1994, pp. 167–183). If the standards are too high, we may become more disillusioned with our leaders for failing to reach them. We might also end up with a shortage of competent people who are willing to take on leadership positions because we expect too much from them ethically. Some highly qualified people stay out of politics because they do not want their private lives aired in public. If the standards are too low, we become cynical about our leaders because we have lost faith in their ability to rise above the moral minimum.

History is littered with leaders who did not think they were subject to the same moral standards of honesty, propriety, and so forth, as the rest of society.

One explanation for this is so obvious that it has become a cliché—power corrupts. Winter's (2002) and McClelland's (1975) works on power motives and on socialized and personalized charisma offer psychological accounts of this kind of leader behavior. Maccoby (2000) and a host of others have talked about narcissistic leaders who, on the bright side, are exceptional and, on the dark side, consider themselves exceptions to the rules.

Hollander's (1964) work on social exchange demonstrates how emerging leaders who are loyal to and competent at attaining group goals gain "idiosyncrasy credits" that allow them to deviate from the groups' norms to suit common goals. As Price (2000) has argued, given the fact that we often grant leaders permission to deviate or be an exception to the rules, it is not difficult to see why leaders sometimes make themselves exceptions to moral constraints. This is why I think we should not hold leaders to higher moral standards than ourselves. If anything, we have to make sure that we hold them to the same standards as the rest of society. What we should expect and hope is that our leaders will fail less than most people at meeting ethical standards, while pursuing and achieving the goals of their constituents. The really interesting question for leadership development, organizational, and political theory is, What can we do to keep leaders from the moral failures that stem from being in a leadership role? Too many models of leadership characterize the leader as a saint or "father-knows-best" archetype who possesses all the right values.

## Altruism

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Some leadership scholars use altruism as the moral standard for ethical leadership. In their book *Ethical Dimensions of Leadership*, Kanungo and Mendonca wrote (1996), "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 oneself" (p. 35). When people talk about altruism, they usually contrast altruism with selfishness, or behavior that benefits oneself at a cost to others (Ozinga, 1999). Altruism is a very high personal standard and, as such, is problematic for a number of reasons. Both selfishness and altruism refer to extreme types of motivation and behavior. Locke brings out this extreme side of altruism in a dialogue with Avolio (Avolio & Locke, 2002). Locke argued that if altruism is about self-sacrifice, then leaders who want to be truly altruistic will pick a job that they do not like or value, expect no rewards or pleasure from their job or achievements, and give themselves over totally to serving the wants of others. He then asked, "Would anyone want to be a leader under such circumstances?" (Avolio & Locke, 2002, pp. 169–171). One might also ask, "Would we even want such a person as a leader?" Whereas I do not agree with Locke's argument that leaders should act according to their self-interest, he does articulate

the practical problem of using altruism as a standard of moral behavior for leaders. Avolio's argument against Locke is based on equally extreme cases. He draws on his work at West Point, where a central moral principle in the military is the willingness to make the ultimate sacrifice for the good of the group. Avolio also used Mother Teresa as one of his examples. In these cases, self-sacrifice may be less about the ethics of leaders in general and more about the jobs of military leaders and missionaries. The Locke and Avolio debate pits the extreme aspects of altruism against its heroic side. Here, as in the extensive philosophic literature on self-interest and altruism, the debate spins round and round and does not get us very far. Ethics is about the relationship of individuals to others, so in a sense both sides are right and wrong.

Altruism is a motive for acting, but it is not in and of itself a normative principle (Nagel, 1970). Requiring leaders to act altruistically is not only a tall order, but it does not guarantee that the leader or his or her actions will be moral. For example, stealing from the rich to give to the poor, or *Robinhoodism*, is morally problematic (Ciulla, 2003a). A terrorist leader who becomes a suicide bomber might have purely altruistic intentions, but the means that he uses to carry out his mission—killing innocent people—is not considered ethical even if his cause is a just one. One might also argue, as one does against suicide, that it is unethical for a person to sacrifice his or her life for any reason because of the impact that it has on loved ones. Great leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr., and Gandhi behaved altruistically, but what made their leadership ethical was the means that they used to achieve their ends and the morality of their causes. We have a particular respect for leaders who are martyred for a cause, but the morality of King and Gandhi goes beyond their motives. Achieving their objectives for social justice while empowering and disciplining followers to use nonviolent resistance is morally good leadership.

People also describe altruism as a way of assessing an act or behavior, regardless of the agent's intention. For example, Worchel, Cooper, and Goethals (1988) defined altruism as acts that "render help to another person" (p. 394). If altruism is nothing more than helping people, then it is a more manageable standard, but simply helping people is not necessarily ethical. It depends on how you help them and what you help them do. It is true that people often help each other without making great sacrifices. If altruism is nothing more than helping people, then we have radically redefined the concept by eliminating the self-sacrificing requirement. Mendonca (2001) offered a further modification of altruism in what he called "mutual altruism." Mutual altruism boils down to utilitarianism and enlightened self-interest. If we follow this line of thought, we should also add other moral principles, such as the golden rule, to this category of altruism.

It is interesting to note that Confucius explicitly called the golden rule altruism. When asked by Tzu-Kung what the guiding principle of life is, Confucius answered, "It is the word altruism (*shu*). Do not do unto others what you do not want them to do to you" (Confucius, trans. 1963, p. 44).

The golden rule crops up as a fundamental moral principle in most major cultures because it demonstrates how to transform self-interest into concern for the interests of others. In other words, it provides the bridge between altruism and self-interest (others and the self) and allows for enlightened self-interest. This highlights another reason why altruism is not a useful standard for the moral behavior of leaders. The minute we start to modify altruism, it not only loses its initial meaning but it starts to sound like a wide variety of other ethical terms, which makes it very confusing.

## Why Being a Leader Is Not in a Just Person's Self-Interest

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Plato believed that leadership required a person to sacrifice his or her immediate self-interests, but this did not amount to altruism. In Book II of the *Republic*, Plato (trans. 1992) wrote:

In a city of good men, if it came into being, the citizens would fight in order not to rule. . . . There it would be clear that anyone who is really a true ruler doesn't by nature seek his own advantage but that of his subjects. And everyone, knowing this, would rather be benefited by others than take the trouble to benefit them. (p. 347d)

Rather than requiring altruistic motives, Plato was referring to the stress, hard work, and the often thankless task of being a morally good leader. He implied that if you are a just person, leadership will take a toll on you and your life. The only reason a just person will take on a leadership role is out of fear of punishment. He stated further, "Now the greatest punishment, if one isn't willing to rule, is to be ruled by someone worse than oneself. And I think it is fear of this that makes decent people rule when they do" (Plato, trans. 1992, p. 347c). Plato's comment sheds light on why we sometimes feel more comfortable with people who are reluctant to lead than with those who are eager to do so. Today, as in the past, we worry that people who are too eager to lead want the power and position for themselves or that they do not fully understand the enormous responsibilities of leadership. Plato also tells us that whereas leadership is not in the just person's immediate self-interest, it is in their long-term interest. He argued that it is in our best interest to be just, because just people are happier and lead better lives than do unjust people (Plato, trans. 1992, p. 353e).

Whereas we admire self-sacrifice, morality sometimes calls upon leaders to do things that are against their self-interest. This is less about altruism than it is about the nature of both morality and leadership. We want leaders to put the interests of followers first, but most leaders do not pay a price for doing that on a daily basis, nor do most circumstances require them to calculate their interests in relation to the interests of their followers. The practice of

leadership is to guide and look after the goals, missions, and aspirations of groups, organizations, countries, or causes. When leaders do this, they are doing their job; when they do not do this, they are not doing their job. Ample research demonstrates that self-interested people who are unwilling to put the interests of others first are often not successful as leaders (Avolio & Locke, 2002, pp. 186–188).

Looking after the interests of others is as much about what leaders do in their role as leaders as it is about the moral quality of leadership. Implicit in the idea of leadership effectiveness is the notion that leaders do their job. When a mayor does not look after the interests of a city, she is not only ineffective, she is unethical for not keeping the promise that she made when sworn in as mayor. When she does look after the interests of the city, it is not because she is altruistic, but because she is doing her job. In this way, altruism is built into how we describe what leaders do. Whereas altruism is not the best concept for characterizing the ethics of leadership, scholars' interest in altruism reflects a desire to capture, either implicitly or explicitly, the ethics-and-effectiveness notion of good leadership.

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## Transforming Leadership

In the leadership literature, transforming or transformational leadership has become almost synonymous with ethical leadership. Transformational leadership is often contrasted with transactional leadership. There is a parallel between these two theories and the altruism/self-interest dichotomy. Burns's (1978) theory of transforming leadership is compelling because it rests on a set of moral assumptions about the relationship between leaders and followers. Burns's theory is clearly a prescriptive one about the nature of morally good leadership. Drawing from Abraham Maslow's work on needs, Milton Rokeach's research on values development, and research on moral development from Lawrence Kohlberg, Jean Piaget, Erik Erickson, and Alfred Adler, Burns argued that leaders have to operate at higher need and value levels than those of followers, which may entail transcending their self-interests. A leader's role is to exploit tension and conflict within people's value systems and play the role of raising people's consciousness (Burns, 1978).

On Burns's account, transforming leaders have very strong values. They do not water down their values and moral ideals by consensus, but rather they elevate people by using conflict to engage followers and help them reassess their own values and needs. This is an area where Burns's view of ethics is very different from advocates of participatory leadership such as Rost. Burns wrote, "Despite his [Rost's] intense and impressive concern about the role of values, ethics, and morality in transforming leadership, he underestimates the crucial importance of these variables." Burns goes on to say, "Rost leans toward, or at least is tempted by, consensus procedures and goals that I believe erode such leadership" (Burns, 1991, p. xii).

The moral questions that drive Burns's (1978) theory of transforming leadership come from his work as a biographer and historian. When biographers or historians study a leader, they struggle with the question of how to judge or keep from judging their subject. Throughout his book, Burns used examples of a number of incidents where questionable means, such as lying and deception, are used to achieve honorable ends or where the private life of a politician is morally questionable. If you analyze the numerous historical examples in Burns's book, you find that two pressing moral questions shape his leadership theory. The first is the morality of means and ends (and this also includes the moral use of power). The second is the tension between the public and private morality of a leader. His theory of transforming leadership is an attempt to characterize good leadership by accounting for both of these questions.

Burns's distinction between transforming and transactional leadership and modal and end values offers a way to think about the question of what is a good leader in terms of the leader–follower relationship and the means and ends of his or her actions. Transactional leadership rests on the values found in the means or process of leadership. He calls these modal values. These include responsibility, fairness, honesty, and promise keeping. Transactional leadership helps leaders and followers reach their own goals by supplying lower-level wants and needs so that they can move up to higher needs. Transforming leadership is concerned with end values, such as liberty, justice, and equality. Transforming leaders raise their followers up through various stages of morality and need, and they turn their followers into leaders.

As a historian, Burns was very concerned with the ends of actions and the changes that leaders initiate. Consider, for example, Burns's (1978) two answers to the Hitler question. In the first part of the book, he stated quite simply that "Hitler, once he gained power and crushed all opposition, was no longer a leader—he was a tyrant" (pp. 2–3). A tyrant is similar to Kort's (2008) idea of a purported leader. Later in the book, Burns offered three criteria for judging how Hitler would fare before "the bar of history." He stated that Hitler would probably argue that he was a transforming leader who spoke for the true values of the German people and elevated them to a higher destiny. First, he would be tested by modal values of honor and integrity or the extent to which he advanced or thwarted the standards of good conduct in mankind. Second, he would be judged by the end values of equality and justice. Last, he would be judged on the impact that he had on the people that he touched (Burns, 1978). According to Burns, Hitler would fail all three tests. Burns did not consider Hitler a true leader or a transforming leader because of the means that he used, the ends that he achieved, and the impact he had as a moral agent on his followers during the process of his leadership. By looking at leadership as a process that is judged by a set of values, Burns's (1978) theory of good leadership is difficult to pigeonhole into one ethical theory. The most attractive part of Burns's theory is the idea that a leader elevates his or her followers and makes them leaders. Near the end

of his book, he reintroduced this idea with an anecdote about why President Johnson did not run in 1968, stating, “Perhaps he did not comprehend that the people he had led—as a result in part of the impact of his leadership—had created their own fresh leadership, which was now outrunning his” (Burns, 1978, p. 424). All of the people that Johnson helped, the sick, the Blacks, and the poor, now had their own leadership. Burns (1978) noted, “Leadership beget leadership and hardly recognized its offspring. . . . Followers had become leaders” (p. 424).

Burns’s and other scholars’ use of the word value to talk about ethics is problematic because it encompasses so many different kinds of things—economic values, organizational values, personal values, and moral values. Values do not tie people together the way moral concepts like duty and utility do, because most people subscribe to the view that “I have my values and you have yours.” Having values does not mean that a person acts on them. To make values about something that people do rather than just have, Rokeach (1973) offered a very awkward discussion of the “ought” character of values. “A person phenomenologically experiences ‘oughtness’ to be objectively required by society in somewhat the same way that he perceives an incomplete circle as objectively requiring closure” (p. 9). Whereas Burns offers a provocative moral account of leadership, it would be stronger and clearer if he used the richer and more dynamic concepts found in moral philosophy.<sup>1</sup> This is not philosophic snobbery, but a plea for conceptual clarity and completeness. The implications of concepts such as virtue, duty, rights, and the greatest good have been worked out for hundreds of years and offer helpful tools for dissecting the moral dynamics of leadership and the relationship between leaders and followers.

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## Transformational Leadership

Burns’s (1978) theory has inspired a number of studies on transformational leadership. For example, Bass’s (1985) early work on transformational leadership focused on the impact of leaders on their followers. In sharp contrast to Burns, Bass’s transformational leaders did not have to appeal to the higher-order needs and values of their followers. He was more concerned with the psychological relationship between transformational leaders and their followers. Bass originally believed that there could be both good and evil transformational leaders, so he was willing to call Hitler a transformational leader. Bass has made an admirable effort to offer a richer account of ethics in his more recent work. Bass and Steidlmeier (1999) argued that only morally good leaders are authentic transformational leaders; the rest, like Hitler, are pseudotransformational. Bass and Steidlmeier described pseudotransformational leaders as people who seek power and position at the expense of their followers’ achievements. The source of their moral shortcomings lies in the fact that they are selfish and pursue their own interests at the expense of their

followers. Whereas Bass and Steidlmeier still depend on altruism as a moral concept, they also look at authentic transformational leadership in terms of other ethical concepts such as virtue and commitment to the greatest good.

Bass (1985) believed that charismatic leadership is a necessary ingredient of transformational leadership. The research on charismatic leadership opens up a wide range of ethical questions because of the powerful emotional and moral impact that charismatic leaders have on followers (House, Spangler, & Woycke, 1991). Charismatic leadership can be the best and the worst kinds of leadership, depending on whether you look at a Gandhi or a Charles Manson (Lindholm, 1990). Bass and Steidlmeier's (1999) recent work runs parallel to research by Howell and Avolio (1992) on charismatic leadership. Howell and Avolio studied charismatic leaders and concluded that unethical charismatic leaders are manipulators who pursue their personal agendas. They argued that only leaders who act on socialized, rather than personalized, bases of power are transformational.

## Critics of Transformational and Charismatic Leadership Theories

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There is plenty of empirical research that demonstrates the effectiveness of transformational leaders. Scholars are almost rhapsodic in the ways in which they describe their findings, and with good reason. These findings show that ethics and effectiveness go hand in hand. Shamir, House, and Arthur (1993) stated:

Charismatic leaders . . . increase followers' self-worth through emphasizing the relationships between efforts and important values. A general sense of self-worth increases general self-efficacy; a sense of moral correctness is a source of strength and confidence. Having complete faith in the moral correctness of one's convictions gives one the strength and confidence to behave accordingly. (p. 582)

The problem with this research is that it raises many, if not more, questions about the ethics. What are the important values? Are the values themselves ethical? What does moral correctness mean? Is what followers believe to be moral correctness really morally correct?

Critics question the ethics of the very idea of transformational leadership. Keeley (1998) argued that transformational leadership is well and good as long as you assume that everyone will eventually come around to the values and goals of the leader. Drawing on Madison's concern for factions in Federalist No. 10, Keeley (1998) wondered, "What is the likely status of people who would prefer their own goals and visions?" (p. 123). What if followers are confident that the leader's moral convictions are wrong? Keeley observed that the leadership and management literature has not been kind to nonconformists. He noted that Mao was one of Burns's transforming heroes and Mao certainly did not tolerate dissidents. Whereas Burns's theory tolerated conflict, conflict is



only part of the process of reaching agreement on values. Is it ethical for a leader to require everyone to agree on all values?

Price (2000) discussed another problem with the moral view of transformational leadership articulated by Burns (1978) and Bass and Steidlmeier (1999). The leaders they described are subject to making all sorts of moral mistakes, even when they are authentic, altruistic, and committed to common values. The fact that a leader possesses these traits does not necessarily yield moral behavior or good moral decisions. Price further argued that leaders and followers should be judged by adherence to morality, not adherence to their organizations' or society's values. "Leaders must be willing to sacrifice their other-regarding values when generally applicable moral requirements make legitimate demands that they do so" (Price, 2003, p. 80). Sometimes being a charismatic and transformational leader in an organization, in the sense described by some theorists, does not mean that you are ethical when judged against moral concepts that apply in larger contexts.

Solomon (1998) took aim at the focus on charisma in leadership studies. He stated charisma is the shorthand for certain rare leaders. As a concept it is without ethical value and without much explanatory value. Charisma is not a distinctive quality of personality or character, and according to Solomon, it is not an essential part of leadership. For example, Solomon (1998) stated, "Charisma is not a single quality, nor is it a single emotion or set of emotions. It is a generalized way of pointing to and empty explaining an emotional relationship that is too readily characterized as fascination" (p. 95). He then went on to argue that research on trust offers more insight into the leader-follower relationship than does research into charisma. Solomon specifically talked about the importance of exploring the emotional process of how people give their trust to others.

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## Knocking Leaders Off Their Pedestals

Keeley's (1998), Price's (2000), and Solomon's (1998) criticisms of transformational and charismatic leadership theories raise two larger questions. First, scholars might be missing something about leadership when they study only exceptional types of leaders. Second, by limiting their study in this way, they fail to take into account the fact that even exceptional leaders get things wrong. Morality is a struggle for everyone, and it contains particular hazards for leaders. As Kant (1795/1983) observed,

From such warped wood as is man made, nothing straight can be fashioned. . . . Man is an animal that, if he lives among other members of his species, has need of a master, for he certainly abuses his freedom in relation to his equals. He requires a master who will break his self-will and force him to obey a universally valid will, whereby everyone can be free. . . . He finds the master among the human species, but even he is an animal who requires a master. (p. 34)

The master for Kant (1785/1983) is morality. No individual or leader has the key to morality, and hence, everyone is responsible for defining and enforcing morality. We need to understand the ethical challenges faced by imperfect humans who take on the responsibilities of leadership, so that we can develop morally better leaders, followers, institutions, and organizations. At issue is not simply what ethical and effective leaders do, but what leaders have to confront and, in some cases, overcome to be ethical and effective. Some of these questions are psychological in nature, and others are concerned with moral reasoning.

Like many leadership scholars, Plato constructed his theory of the ideal leader—the philosopher king who is wise and virtuous. Through firsthand experience, Plato realized the shortcomings of his philosopher king model of leadership. Plato learned about leadership through three disastrous trips to the city-state of Syracuse. Plato visited Syracuse the first time at the invitation of the tyrant Dionysius I, but he soon became disgusted by the decadent and luxurious lifestyle of Dionysius's court. Plato returned to Athens convinced that existing forms of government at home and abroad were corrupt and unstable. He then decided to set up the Academy, where he taught for 40 years and wrote the *Republic*. In the *Republic*, Plato argued that the perfect state could come about only by rationally exploiting the highest qualities in people (although this sounds a bit like a transformational leadership, it is not). Plato firmly believed that the philosopher king could be developed through education. Hence, we might regard Plato's Academy as a leadership school.

About 24 years after his first visit, Dionysius's brother-in-law, Dion, invited Plato back to Syracuse. By this time, Dionysius I was dead. Dion had read the *Republic* and wanted Plato to come and test his theory of leadership education on Dionysius's very promising son Dionysius II. This was an offer that Plato could not refuse, although he had serious reservations about accepting it. Nonetheless, off Plato went to Syracuse. The trip was a disaster. Plato's friend Dion was exiled because of court intrigues. Years later, Plato returned to Syracuse a third time, but the visit was no better than the first two. In Epistle VII, Plato (trans. 1971a) reported that these visits changed his view of leadership:

The more I advanced in years, the harder it appeared to me to administer the government correctly. For one thing, nothing could be done without friends and loyal companions, and such men were not easy to find ready at hand. . . . Neither could such men be created afresh with any facility. . . . The result was that I, who had at first been full of eagerness for a public career, as I gazed upon the whirlpool of public life and saw the incessant movement of shifting currents, at last felt dizzy. (p. 1575)

Plato seemed to have lost faith in his conviction that leaders could be perfected. He realized that leaders shared the same human weaknesses of their

followers, but he also saw how important trust was in leadership. In the *Republic*, Plato had entertained a pastoral image of the leader as a shepherd to his flock. But in a later work, *Statesman*, he observed that leaders are not at all like shepherds. Shepherds are obviously quite different from their flocks, whereas human leaders are not much different from their followers (Plato, trans. 1971b). He noted that people are not sheep—some are cooperative and some are very stubborn. Plato's revised view of leadership was that leaders were really like weavers. Their main task was to weave together different kinds of people—the meek and the self-controlled, the brave and the impetuous—into the fabric of society (Plato, trans. 1971b).

Plato's ideas on leadership progressed from a profound belief that it is possible for some people to be wise and benevolent philosopher kings to a more modest belief that the real challenge of leadership is working successfully with people who do not always like each other, do not always like the leader, and do not necessarily want to live together. These are some of the key challenges faced by leaders today all over the world. Leadership is more like being a shepherd to a flock of cats or like pushing a wheelbarrow full of frogs (O'Toole, 1995).

Whereas Plato's image of the philosopher king in the *Republic* is idealistic, the *Statesman* and the early books of the *Republic* lay out some of the fundamental ethical issues of leadership; namely, moral imperfection and power. Near the end of the *Statesman*, Plato contended that we cannot always depend on leaders to be good and that is why we need rule of law (Plato, trans. 1971b). Good laws, rules, and regulations protect us from unethical leaders and serve to help leaders be ethical (similar to James Madison's concern for checks on leaders).

Plato, like many of the ancients, realized that the greatest ethical challenge for humans in leadership roles stems from the temptations of power. In Book II of the *Republic*, he provided a thought-provoking experiment about power and accountability. Glaucon, the protagonist in the dialogue, argued that the only reason people are just is because they lack the power to be unjust. He then told the story of the "Ring of Gyges" (Plato, trans. 1992). A young shepherd from Lydia found a ring and discovered that when he turned the ring on his finger, it made him invisible. The shepherd then used the ring to seduce the king's wife, attack the king, and take over the kingdom. Plato asks us to consider what we would do if we had power without accountability. One of our main concerns about leaders is that they will abuse their power because they are accountable to fewer people. In this respect, the "Ring of Gyges" is literally and figuratively a story about transparency. The power that leaders have to do things also entails the power to hide what they do.

Power carries with it a temptation to do evil and an obligation to do good. Philosophers often refer to a point made by Kant (1785/1993, p. 32) as "ought implies can," meaning you have a moral obligation to act when you are able to act effectively (similar to the free will/determinism question

mentioned earlier—more power, more free will). It means that the more power, resources, and ability you have to do good, the more you have a moral obligation to do so. The notion of helpfulness, discussed earlier in conjunction with altruism, is derived from this notion of power and obligation. It is about the moral obligation to help when you can help.

## The Bathsheba Syndrome

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The moral foible that people fear most in their leaders is personal immorality accompanied by abuse of power. Usually, it is the most successful leaders who suffer the worst ethical failures. Ludwig and Longenecker (1993) called the moral failure of successful leaders the “Bathsheba syndrome,” based on the biblical story of King David and Bathsheba. Ancient texts such as the Bible provide us with wonderful case studies on the moral pitfalls of leaders. King David is portrayed as a successful leader in the Bible. We first meet him as a young shepherd in the story of David and Goliath. This story offers an interesting leadership lesson. In it, God selects the small shepherd David over his brother, a strong soldier, because David “has a good heart.” Then as God’s hand-picked leader, David goes on to become a great leader, until we come to the story of David and Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11–12).

The story begins with David taking an evening stroll around his palace. From his vantage point on the palace roof, he sees the beautiful Bathsheba bathing. He asks his servants to bring Bathsheba to him. The king beds Bathsheba and she gets pregnant. Bathsheba’s husband, Uriah, is one of David’s best generals. King David tries to cover up his immoral behavior by calling Uriah home. When Uriah arrives, David attempts to get him drunk so that he will sleep with Bathsheba. Uriah refuses to cooperate, because he said it would be unfair to enjoy such pleasures while his men are on the front. (This is a wonderful sidebar about the moral obligations of leaders to followers.) David then escalates his attempt to cover things up by ordering Uriah to the front of a battle where he gets killed. In the end, the prophet Nathan blows the whistle on David and God punishes David.

The Bathsheba story has repeated itself again and again in history. Scandals ranging from Watergate to the President Clinton and Monica Lewinsky affair to Enron all follow the general pattern of this story (Winter, 2002, gives an interesting psychological account of the Clinton case). First, we see what happens when successful leaders lose sight of what their jobs are. David should have been focusing on running the war, not watching Bathsheba bathe. He was literally and figuratively looking in the wrong place. This is why we worry about men leaders who are womanizers getting distracted from their jobs. Second, because power leads to privileged access, leaders have more opportunities to indulge themselves and, hence, need more willpower to resist indulging themselves. David could have Bathsheba brought to him by his servants with no questions asked. Third, successful

leaders sometimes develop an inflated belief in their ability to control outcomes. David became involved in escalating cover-ups.

The most striking thing about leaders who get themselves in these situations is that the cover-ups are usually worse than the crime. In David's case, adultery was not as bad as murder. Also, it is during the cover-up that leaders abuse their power as leaders the most. In Clinton's case, a majority of Americans found his lying to the public far more immoral than his adultery. Last, leaders learn that their power falls short of the ring of Gyges. It will not keep their actions invisible forever. Whistle-blowers such as Nathan in King David's case or Sharon Watkins in the Enron case call their bluff and demand that their leaders be held to the same moral standards as everyone else. When this happens, in Bible stories and everywhere else, all hell breaks loose. The impact of a leader's moral lapses causes great harm to their constituents.

Read as a leadership case study, the story of David and Bathsheba is about pride and the moral fragility of people when they hold leadership positions. It is also a cautionary tale about success and the lengths to which people will go to keep from losing it. What is most interesting about the Bathsheba syndrome is that it is difficult to predict which leaders will fall prey to it, because people get it after they have become successful. One can never tell how even the most virtuous person will respond to situations in various contexts and circumstances (Doris, 2005). If we are to gain a better understanding of ethics and leadership, we need to examine how leaders resist falling for the ethical temptations that come with power.

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## Self-Discipline and Virtue

The moral challenges of power and the nature of the leader's job explain why self-knowledge and self-control are, and have been for centuries, the most important factors in leadership development. Ancient writers, such as Lao tzu, Confucius, Buddha, Plato, and Aristotle, all emphasized good habits, self-knowledge, and self-control in their writing. Eastern philosophers, such as Lao tzu, Confucius, and Buddha, not only talked about virtues but also about the challenges of self-discipline and controlling the ego. Lao tzu warned against egotism when he stated, "He who stands on tiptoe is not steady" (Lao Tzu, trans. 1963, p. 152). He also tells us, "The best rulers are those whose existence is merely known by people" (Lao tzu, trans. 1963, p. 148). Confucius (trans. 1963) focused on the importance of duty and self-control. He stated, "If a man (the ruler) can for one day master himself and return to propriety, all under heaven will return to humanity. To practice humanity depends on oneself" (p. 38). He tied a leader's self-mastery and effectiveness together when he wrote, "If a ruler sets himself right, he will be followed without his command. If he does not set himself right, even his commands will not be obeyed" (Confucius, trans. 1963, p. 38).

In the “First Sermon,” the Buddha described how people’s uncontrolled thirst for things contributes to their own suffering and the suffering of others. Not unlike psychologists today, he realized that getting one’s desires under control is the best way to end personal and social misery. This is a particular challenge for leaders because they often have the means to indulge their material and personal desires. Compassion is the most important virtue in Buddhist ethics because it keeps desires and vices in check. The Dalai Lama (1999) concisely summed up the moral dynamics of compassion in this way:

When we bring up our children to have knowledge without compassion, their attitude towards others is likely to be a mixture of envy of those in positions above them, aggressive competitiveness towards their peers, and scorn for these less fortunate. This leads to a propensity toward greed, presumption, excess, and very quickly to loss of happiness. (p. 181)

Virtues are a fundamental part of the landscape of moral philosophy and provide a useful way of thinking about leadership development. What is important about virtues are their dynamics (e.g., how they interact with other virtues and vices) and their contribution to self-knowledge and self-control. The properties of a virtue are very different from the properties of other moral concepts such as values. Virtues are things that you have only if you practice them. Values are things that are important to people. I may value honesty but not always tell the truth. I cannot possess the virtue of honesty without telling the truth. As Aristotle mentioned, virtues are good habits that we learn from society and our leaders. Aristotle wrote quite a bit about leaders as moral role models, and much of what he said complements observations in research on transformational leadership. He noted, “Legislators make citizens good by forming habits in them” (Aristotle, trans. 1984). Whereas virtues come naturally to those who practice them, they are not mindless habits. People must practice them fully conscious of knowing that what they are doing is morally right.

Perhaps the most striking thing about the Greek notion of virtue (*areté*), which is also translated as excellence, is that it does not separate an individual’s ethics from his or her occupational competence. Both Plato and Aristotle constantly used examples of doctors, musicians, coaches, rulers, and so forth to talk about the relationship between moral and technical or professional excellence. Aristotle (trans. 1984) wrote,

Every excellence brings to good the thing to which it is the excellence and makes the work of that thing be done well. . . . Therefore, if this is true in every case, the excellence of man also will be the state which makes man good and which makes him do his work well. (p. 1747)

Excellence is tied to function. The function of a knife is to cut. An excellent knife cuts well. The function of humans, according to Aristotle, is to reason.

To be morally virtuous, you must reason well, because reason tells you how to practice and when to practice a virtue. If you reason well, you will know how to practice moral and professional virtues. In other words, reason is the key to practicing moral virtues and the virtues related to one's various occupations in life. Hence, the morally virtuous leader will also be a competent leader because he or she will do what is required in the job the right way. Virtue ethics does not differentiate between the morality of the leader and the morality of his or her leadership. An incompetent leader, like the head of the Swiss charity that tried to free the enslaved children, lacks moral virtue, regardless of his or her good intentions.

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## Conclusion

The more we explore how ethics and effectiveness are inextricably intertwined, the better we will understand leadership. The philosophic study of ethics provides a critical perspective from which we can examine the assumptions behind leadership and leadership theories. It offers another level of analysis that should be integrated into the growing body of empirical research in the field. The ethics of leadership has to be examined along a variety of dimensions:

1. The ethics of a leader as a person, which includes things like self-knowledge, discipline, intentions, and so forth
2. The ethics of the leader–follower relationship (i.e., how they treat each other)
3. The ethics of the process of leadership (i.e., command and control, participatory)
4. The ethics of what the leader does or does not do

These dimensions give us a picture of the ethics of what a leader does and how he or she does it. But even after an interdependent analysis of these dimensions, the picture is not complete. We then have to take one more step and look at all of these interdependent dimensions in larger contexts and time frames. For example, the ethics of organizational leadership would have to be examined in the context of the community, and so forth. One of the most striking distinctions between effective leadership and ethical *and* effective leadership is often the time frame of decisions. Ethics is about the impact of behavior and actions in the long and the short run. Leaders can be effective in the short run but unethical and ultimately ineffective in the long run. For example, we have all seen the problem of defining good business leadership based simply on the quarterly profits that a firm makes. Long-term ideas of effectiveness, such as sustainability, tend to be normative.

A richer understanding of the moral challenges that are distinctive to leaders and leadership is particularly important for leadership development. Whereas case studies of ethical leadership are inspiring and case studies of evil leaders are cautionary, we need a practical understanding of why it is morally difficult to be a good leader and a good follower. Leaders do not have to be power-hungry psychopaths to do unethical things, nor do they have to be altruistic saints to do ethical things. Most leaders are neither charismatic nor transformational leaders. They are ordinary men and women in business, government, nonprofits, and communities who sometimes make volitional, emotional, moral, and cognitive mistakes. More work needs to be done on ordinary leaders and followers and how they can help each other be ethical and make better moral decisions.

Aristotle (trans. 1984) said that happiness is the end to which we aim in life. The Greek word that Aristotle uses for happiness is *eudaimonea*. It means happiness, not in terms of pleasure or contentment, but as flourishing. A happy life is one in which we flourish as human beings, both in terms of our material and personal development and our moral development. The concept of *eudaimonea* gives us two umbrella questions that can be used to assess the overall ethics and effectiveness of leadership. Does a leader or a particular kind of leadership contribute to and/or allow people to flourish in terms of their lives as a whole? Does a leader or a particular kind of leadership interfere with the ability of other groups of people or other living things to flourish? Leaders do not always have to transform people for them to flourish. Their greater responsibility is to create the social and material conditions under which people can and do flourish (Ciulla, 2000). Change is part of leadership, but so is sustainability. Ethical leadership entails the ability of leaders to sustain fundamental notions of morality such as care and respect for persons, justice, and honesty, in changing organizational, social, and global contexts. Moreover, it requires people who have the competence, knowledge, and will to determine and do the right thing, the right way, and for the right reasons. The humanities offer one source of insight into the nature of right and wrong.

Lastly, leadership scholars have just begun to scratch the surface of other disciplines. History, philosophy, anthropology, literature, and religion all promise to expand our understanding of leaders and leadership. Ancient writers such as Plato, Aristotle, Lao tzu, and Confucius not only tell us about leadership, they also capture our imaginations. What makes a classic a classic is that its message carries themes and values that are meaningful to people from different cultures and different periods of history. They offer well-grounded ideas about who we are, what we should be like, and how we should live. These ideas will help us understand current empirical research on leadership and generate new ideas for research. To really understand leadership in terms of ethics and effectiveness, each one of us needs to put our ear to the ground of history and listen carefully to the saga of human hopes, desires, and aspirations, and the follies, disappointments,



and triumphs of those who led and those who followed them. As Confucius once said, “A man who reviews the old as to find out the new is qualified to teach others.”

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## Note

1. I have been arguing this point with Burns since 1991. We continue to be equally stubborn on our positions.

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## Discussion Questions

1. Who would you prefer to work for, an effective but ethically questionable leader or an ethical but ineffective leader? How do you weigh the costs and benefits of each type of leader?
2. Why does success have the potential to corrupt leaders? How is corruption from success different from corruption from power?
3. Think of examples where ethical considerations interfere with a leader's ability to be effective. Then think of ways in which a leader's ethics interfere with his or her ability to be effective. Should leaders always pick ethics over effectiveness?
4. How would you redefine effective leadership to take into account normative considerations?

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