

# The state of leadership ethics and the work that lies before us

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The editors of this special issue asked me to write an article on the state of leadership ethics. In some ways, this is an easy assignment because the literature in this area is still quite small. In other ways, it is very difficult because I am not sure that there is a consensus on what constitutes the field of leadership ethics or whether it is a field rather than simply a topic. People might also disagree on what counts as an academic book or article on leadership ethics. As leadership ethics is still new and the approaches to it are quite fragmented, I would not presume to speak for everyone who works in this area. So what follows is a personal account of how I see the field, based on work that I have performed alone and with others over the last 14 years. I will highlight the problems that I have encountered, some areas that beg to be explored and, most importantly, some of the excellent new contributions to the field.<sup>1</sup> Again, I emphasize that the field is still young and wide open for development. Please regard my take on it as a heuristic and not as something set in stone. The goal of this paper is to stimulate research. I am eager to see more scholars from outside of the USA writing on leadership ethics.<sup>2</sup> We cannot begin to understand subjects like ethics and leadership without research from a variety of disciplines, cultures and points of view.

## Background

There have been a growing number of courses on leadership studies at universities all over the US. I asked the International Leadership Association whether they had data on the number of programs and they told me that the estimates were at about 1000. Several people have tried to count leadership programs, but there are still no firm numbers, in part because new leadership initiatives seem to be popping up everywhere and they come in all shapes and sizes. Most leadership courses of study are for undergraduates but there are also many in graduate and professional schools. I have visited many of these programs and have looked at the leadership curricula in a number of universities. From what I have seen, I think it is fair to say that a majority of leadership programs have a course on leadership and ethics in their curriculum. As a matter of fact, there seem to be far more courses on leadership ethics than there are journal articles and books on the subject.

When I started research in this area in 1991, it was difficult to sort out what counted as research on leadership ethics. I began my work in this field by writing a critical article about the research in leadership studies, which mapped out where ethics fit into the field.<sup>3</sup> I then brought together articles by leadership scholars, such as Bernard Bass, and Edwin Hollander on ethics, and philosophers, such as Robert C. Solomon and Al Gini, on leadership. Their essays published in *Ethics, The Heart of Leadership*, provide starting points for understanding the work that needs to be carried out on ethics in leadership studies.<sup>4</sup> One can easily see in these essays and in the leadership literature

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that when scholars talk about transformational, charismatic and servant leadership, their discussion is implicitly or explicitly about ethics.

Textbooks usually reflect the shape and content of a field of study. After teaching leadership ethics for 12 years, I published a textbook based on my course and research, called *The Ethics of Leadership*. It includes readings from Eastern and Western philosophy, leadership studies and a variety of other disciplines and short cases.<sup>5</sup> The book was my first cut on what one taught in a leadership ethics course. It begins with a chapter on the moral challenges of power and self-interest. The next three chapters are grounded in virtue theory, deontic and teleological approaches to ethics. These chapters treat questions about the self-control of leaders, their intentions and ability to influence outcomes and their ability to make judgments about the greatest good. The fifth chapter is about the moral and emotional relationship between leaders and followers. It consists of articles and cases on transformational, servant and charismatic leadership. The last chapter is about cross-cultural leadership. My approach to the text is a fairly standard one for applied ethics texts. The only difference is that, in the introductions to the chapters and readings, I explain what is distinctive about the ethics of leaders and leadership in contrast to other areas of ethics. My book treats the ethics of leadership in general, not leadership in a particular area. Craig E. Johnson's single-authored text, *Meeting the Ethical Challenges of Leaders: Casting Light and Shadow*, also treats leadership in general. His book covers some of the same topics that I do, but Johnson, a communication professor, includes other subjects such as spirituality and communication.<sup>6</sup> Johnson's book may be a better choice than mine for teachers who do not enjoy philosophical texts.

Most textbooks on leadership ethics are context specific. The lion's share of these are about business. For example William D. Hitt's book, *Ethics and Leadership: Putting Theory into Practice* and Lynn Sharp Paine's book *Cases in Leadership, Ethics, and Organizational Integrity* are actually more about business ethics than leadership *per se*; however, the two subjects

clearly overlap in a number of ways.<sup>7</sup> Military academies, graduate schools of education and other professional schools have their own textbooks on leadership and ethics. There are also numerous books on the subject in the popular literature, such as Steven Covey's *Principle Centered Leadership*, which seems to be beloved by a number of managers.<sup>8</sup> The problem with textbooks is similar to the problem with leadership studies in general, that is, how do we determine which books are actually about leadership and which books are actually about the ethics of leaders and leadership? These lines are difficult to draw in the early stages of a field. One is reluctant to draw them too soon, lest they keep out important new ideas and approaches.

### Problems with the word *leadership*

If leadership ethics is a field of applied ethics, like business ethics or medical ethics, we first have to determine what is ethically distinctive about leadership. There is a sense in which ethics are ethics regardless of the role a person plays. So I ask the question this way: what are the ethical challenges that are distinctive to leaders and the practice of leadership or how are leaders different from non-leaders? These tricky questions require us to start by sorting out the difference between the noun *leader* and the verb *leadership*. We then have to break down the noun to someone who is a leader and someone who holds the position of a leader, such as a president or CEO. Some people who hold positions of leadership do not lead, whereas some people lead but do not hold positions of leadership. A person has to lead to be a leader and we expect people who hold the position of a leader to exercise leadership. The same things can be said of the words *manager* and *management*.

One of the greatest difficulties in researching leadership is sorting out articles that have leadership in the title, but are basically traditional management articles. Here again, some people who hold managerial positions lead, and hence are leaders, whereas other managers simply manage. Many authors have tried to distinguish

between leadership and management. For example, Joseph Rost argues that most leadership literature rests on what he calls the industrial paradigm, which views leadership as nothing more than good management.<sup>9</sup> Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus tell us that managers do things right and leaders do the right thing.<sup>10</sup> The leader/manager distinction is a troublesome one because *leadership* is a popular word these days and the current trend is to put leadership in the title of books on traditional management subjects.

Another way to think about the leader/manager distinction is that someone who behaves like a manager is constrained by Kant's old adage that 'ought implies can' or you are only morally obligated to do what it is possible for you to do in your role. Someone who behaves like a leader thinks about how to enlarge the domain of what is possible, which means that he or she has a broader sense of what is possible and therefore a broader sense of moral obligation. The term 'vision' captures this aspect of leadership. Visions are not simple goals, but rather ways of seeing the future that implicitly or explicitly entail some notion of the good. The leader/manager confusion is understandable, given that in the past few decades businesses have come to realize that if they wish to be competitive and flexible, they need to have more people in the organization thinking like leaders. In most large American companies, leadership programs have become a regular part of training and development.

There are a few other problems with studying leadership. I have written about the prescriptive and descriptive problem in leadership studies and how it is related to the problems with defining leadership.<sup>11</sup> Authors frequently write that leaders are visionary, when what they actually mean is that leaders should be visionary. This is why most definitions of leadership are as normative as they are descriptive. Researchers study leadership to understand how and why it works and does not work. The point of studying leadership is to understand the nature of good leadership (and also bad leadership).

Another complication in researching leadership is that a number of books, articles, conferences and courses are about things that leaders and

managers should know about a particular subject. Rost contrasts the content of leadership (or what leaders need to know to lead) with the process of leadership.<sup>12</sup> For example, an article on 'Healthcare Leadership' may not be about leadership *per se*, but on information about trends in the industry. This article does not tell the reader how to lead in a healthcare organization. Instead, it assumes that leaders should have the information in it. Similarly, a conference called 'Ethical Leadership in Healthcare' might actually be a conference on bioethics. It is not about the act of ethical leadership, but the ethical issues that leaders in that industry may face.

The word *leader* carries emotional and normative baggage – its meaning is socially and historically constructed. In America, the word *leadership* is an honorific. The phrase 'she is a real leader' is a compliment, whereas the Italian word *duce* and the German word *Führer* have very different connotations. The cultural attitude toward the word leadership seems to influence the direction of research. In America, leadership has positive moral connotations embedded in it, which may explain why an overwhelming number of articles focus on charismatic, transformational, transforming and, most recently, authentic leadership. Some of this literature implicitly or explicitly assumes that only ethical leaders are 'real' leaders. Such theories assert rather than establish the ethics of leaders, hence begging the question of ethics altogether.<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps in response to all of the ethical problems with leaders in America today, some of the recent leadership literature is more critical of leaders, especially charismatic and heroic leaders. Consider, for example, Rakesh Khurana's book *Searching for a Corporate Savior: The Irrational Quest for Charismatic CEOs*.<sup>14</sup> Through careful research, Khurana demonstrates why the mythical belief in the powers of charismatic leaders is overestimated when it comes to their actual effect on corporate performance. He found that companies run by charismatic CEOs do not make more money than companies run by uncharismatic CEOs. However, Khurana discovered that charismatic CEOs were much better at negotiating large compensation packages than

their uncharismatic counterparts. Another book that stands as a counterweight to the grand heroic models of leadership is Joseph Badaracco's book, *Leading Quietly*.<sup>15</sup> In it Badaracco argues that most of the world is run by leaders who are inconspicuous, diligent and not at all charismatic. As a whole, the book repudiates the image of the bold, loud, forceful and charismatic leaders. These kinds of leaders receive the most attention, but are not the ones who make things work.

## Power and virtue

Given all of the difficulties of getting a handle on what counts as leadership literature, how can we delineate the parameters of what counts as leadership ethics? We might begin by asking: what is ethically distinctive about the role of a leader? The study of ethics generally consists of the examination of right, wrong, good, evil, virtue, duty, obligation, rights, care, justice, fairness and the greatest good in human relationships and relationships with all living things. When people take on the formal or informal role of leaders, they assume a unique kind of relationship with others. This relationship has some distinctive characteristics that make it morally different.

The first most obvious characteristic of this relationship is that leaders usually have more power or a different kind of power and influence than followers. The power can come from a leader's position, expertise, personality or charisma. Leaders influence others with persuasion, personal or political network, coercion or rewards. Power has the potential for all sorts of ethical difficulties that stem from what one uses it for to how it is exercised. The more power the leaders have, the greater their responsibility for what they do and do not do. The empirical evidence for moral problems of power is quite old and documented in history books, religious texts, literature and newspapers. Consider, for example, Plato's 'Ring of Gyges'.<sup>16</sup> In the story, a shepherd boy discovers a ring that makes him invisible. The story literally and figuratively raises the transparency question: would you be moral if you had the power to be invisible? Would you be moral if no

one was watching? Leadership is slightly like having the ring of Gyges. Leaders oversee more people and have fewer people overseeing them. Leaders also have the power to conceal what they do (at least for a while).

One of the oldest themes concerning the ethics of leaders is the ability of a leader to have the personal resources to have and exercise power. Philosophers such as Plato, Confucius and Lao Tzu wrote extensively on this. As a matter of fact, some of the finest literature on the personal morality of leaders comes from the ancients. I think the best contemporary book on leadership and the ethics of power is Paul Woodruff's, *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue*. Woodruff, a philosopher and distinguished classics scholar, tells us that reverence is a virtue that both the ancient Greeks and followers of Confucius wanted in their leaders. He defines reverence as follows:

Reverence begins in a deep understanding of human limitations; from this grows the capacity to be in awe of whatever we believe lies outside our control – God, truth, justice, nature, even death. The capacity for awe, as it grows, brings with it the capacity for respecting fellow human beings, flaws and all. This in turn fosters the ability to be ashamed when we show moral flaws exceeding the normal human allotment.<sup>17</sup>

As a virtue, reverence entails traditional moral principles, but it also has a specific relevance for leaders. Reverence is the virtue that keeps leaders from trying to act like Gods. Using numerous examples from ancient literature and contemporary life, Woodruff discusses one of the greatest ethical challenges of leadership. Power often makes leaders forget their human limitations.

J. French and B.H. Raven include referent power, or power based on the personality of the leader, in their taxonomy of power.<sup>18</sup> Yet, very little has been written about the power that comes from the morality of a leader. Scholars sometimes incorporate moral power into descriptions of charismatic leaders. Moral power may not sound very ethical. Yet, few would deny the power that leaders have when they are trusted by followers and other stakeholders. Robert C. Solomon

believes that leadership scholars should spend more time understanding the dynamics of trust, because trust is always about both leaders and followers. When we study trust, we are not studying the leader as a gift from God or a dazzling personality. We are studying a two-way transaction between leaders and followers. Solomon notes that the most important element of trust is not how to gain it, but how to give it.<sup>19</sup>

Somewhere in between the proposition that power is one source of immorality for leaders and morality is one source of power for leaders, there is room for quite a bit of work by scholars. Alejo Sisson explores the question of power and virtue in his book *The Moral Capital of Leaders: Why Virtue Matters*. Using Aristotle's ethics as a framework, Sisson argues that moral capital is a value and currency for getting things done in business and society. He uses recent case studies from business to illustrate how the virtues of leaders create moral capital and how their vices destroy it. Sisson presents a convincing argument for why ethical leadership pays at work and at home. Sisson concludes that, 'managing moral capital amounts to practicing the virtues of justice, temperance, fortitude and prudence, not the least in the exercise of one's work and in the course of one's life.'<sup>20</sup>

### Altruism and self-interest

There is something unnatural about the job description of a leader in that it, by definition, requires a person to go against his or her moral inclination to care for family and friends first.<sup>21</sup> There is nothing wrong with this if you are not in a leadership position. As a matter of fact, one might argue that there is something wrong with a person who does not put the interests of his or her family before the interests of strangers. It would be absurd to write a job description for a leader that read: 'Wanted: someone who is committed to looking after the interests of him or herself, friends, and family before looking after those of the organization or state.' In a sense, moral leaders have to be super-Kantians who put duty over inclination. History is littered with leaders

who serve the interests of themselves, their families, clan, cronies, ethnic or religious groups, over the needs of, or to the detriment of, the rest of their constituents. Such leaders are unethical, but they are also not doing their job. Howard Gardner is well known for his description of leaders as great storytellers.<sup>22</sup> However, Gardner also notices that some of the greatest leaders in history are those who tell the most inclusive stories. Probably some of the worst leaders are those who excluded large numbers of people from their story.

Some leadership scholars use altruism as the moral gold standard for ethical leadership. In their book *Ethical Dimensions of Leadership*, Rabindra Kanungo and Manuel Mendonca write, '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.'<sup>23</sup> They call this altruism, when it actually sounds more like the Kantian idea of a good will. When people talk about altruism, they usually contrast altruism with selfishness, or behavior that benefits oneself at a cost to others.<sup>24</sup>

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. Edwin Locke brings out this extreme side of altruism in a dialogue with Bruce Avolio. Locke argues that if altruism is about self-sacrifice, then leaders who wish 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 wonders, 'Would anyone want to be a leader under such circumstances?'<sup>25</sup> One might also ask: 'Would we even want such a person as a leader?' While 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 for altruistic leaders is based on equally extreme cases. He draws on his work at West Point, where a central moral principle is the

willingness to make the ultimate sacrifice for the good of the group. Avolio also uses Mother Teresa as an example of an altruistic leader. 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. Locke's and Avolio's 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 with 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.<sup>26</sup> 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.<sup>27</sup> 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 non-violent resistance is morally good leadership.

Plato offers one of the most provocative ways of thinking about leadership as a kind of enlightened self-interest. In Book II of the *Republic*, Plato writes,

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.<sup>28</sup>

Rather than requiring altruistic motives, Plato argues that it is against your self-interest to be a leader. He understands the stress, hard work and (sometimes thankless) task of being a morally good leader. If you are a just person, leadership will take a toll on you and your life. It is better to live under a just ruler than to be one. Plato then goes on to say that the only reason a just person will take on a leadership role is out of fear of punishment. He writes, '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.'<sup>29</sup> 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. We think reluctant people understand the moral burdens of leadership. Fortunately, responsible people do too.

### Leaders as super-utilitarians

A leader's job description is distinctively utilitarian. It is interesting to note how the objections that John Stuart Mill entertains at the beginning of 'What utilitarianism is' apply to leadership.<sup>30</sup> One objection is that most people cannot or do not know what the greatest good is for the greatest number of people. Mill points out that, usually, we do not make utilitarian judgments that concern everyone in the world. We know from our own experiences what other people want and usually we make choices based on what is good for a specific group of people, not the whole world. Yet, it is the case that some leaders do make choices that have an impact on large numbers of people, many of whom they never know about or meet. Another objection to Mill's theory is that the utilitarian calculation concerning how to determine what will bring about the greatest happiness or serve the common good is too cold and calculating and does not consider individual relationships. Mill replies that morality is about objective ideas and the minute you start

molding your idea of the good to the relationship you have with particular individuals, you lose it.

Mill's emphasis is on moral consistency and does not make exceptions for family and friends. Again, consider the absurdity of this job description: 'Wanted: leaders who will make exceptions to laws, policies, and procedures for friends, family, ethnic and religious groups, and all others that they like better than their other constituents.' While there are leaders who behave this way (it is descriptively true), we would not consider this part of what it means to lead (so in this sense it is descriptively false) and we would consider them unethical. Notice how I appear to be falling into the descriptive and prescriptive problem. I will get back to this later.

From a moral point of view, leadership is distinctive because of its range. When people are in positions of leadership, their moral failures have an impact on the lives of a larger number and/or variety of people (sometimes for a longer amount of time) than when they do not hold leadership positions. Because of this, leadership is morality and immorality magnified. Every ethical or unethical thing that a leader does can have a ripple effect. This does not mean that leaders should have higher ethical standards than everyone else. Most of the time, leaders do not get into trouble because they failed to live up to higher standards of morality, but because they did not live up to the same standards of morality as the rest of us. What we hope for in leaders is a higher rate of success at being moral because the failures are so costly.

### Followers and dangerous leaders

If you accept the proposition that leadership is a relationship, then you cannot study the ethics of leaders without including the ethics of followers. Justice, fairness, duties and the greatest collective good are more than a leader's values and beliefs. They are the currency of all human relationships. All too often, people forget that followers have power and hence responsibility. After all, without followers, leaders simply do not exist. Scholars such as Robert Kelly have argued that good

followers have most of the same qualities as good leaders. Good followers accept some responsibility for their leaders.<sup>31</sup> This is easier to see in a democracy than in a business. Nonetheless, the leader/follower relationship is one of mutual influence, regardless of disparities in the amount or type of power held by each side. The relationship can be fluid – sometimes leaders become the followers and followers become the leaders. History has taught us that the idea of 'just following orders' does not take followers off of the moral hook. The ethics of followers and followership is one of the most complex and fertile areas for research in leadership ethics.

Jean Lipman-Blumen analyzes the relationship of followers with unethical leaders in her recent book *The Allure of Toxic Leaders*.<sup>32</sup> Drawing on the work of Sigmund Freud, Otto Rank, Ernest Becker and a score of others, she considers the question of why people need leaders and why people follow unethical leaders. She provides a rich existential explanation of the leader/follower relationship. Lipman-Blumen's discussion of this question examines everything from the need to resolve childhood problems with authority, to fear of death and desire for meaning. Lipman-Blumen uses the word toxic to describe bad leaders because toxic means, 'acting or having the affect of poison.' In other words, some leaders will either kill you and/or make you sick. The book goes a long way in explaining the often overblown ideas that people have of leaders. From it, there emerges a picture of why followers follow and enable unethical leaders.

Manfred Kets de Vries has written a fascinating case study of Shaka Zulu that he uses to explore the question: Why are some leaders brutal? His book, *Lessons in Leadership by Terror: Finding Shaka Zulu in the Attic*, serves as a good complement to Lipman-Blumen's book.<sup>33</sup> Sometimes, people follow bad leaders because they are very bad followers. Other times, as in the case of Shaka Zulu, leaders are just evil beyond belief and the followers are too frightened and intimidated to do anything. Both books offer psychological explanations, but leave open the question: When does the follower, as a bundle of psychological wants, needs and fears become a morally accountable agent?

## Moral mistakes

Not all unethical leaders are evil; some simply make bad decisions or moral mistakes. Terry L. Price has carried out some excellent work on leaders who make moral mistakes. He focuses on 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. 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 wish to cut them some slack if they lived in a society or a 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 – e.g. 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 why inclusion is 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 beyond the scope of morality by which the rest of the 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.<sup>34</sup> 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 ways in which people socially construct the meaning and contexts of leadership.

## History and ethics

Another peculiarity of formal leadership roles is that leaders often have to accept responsibility (praise or blame) for things that they did not know about or do. Researchers such as Jim Meindl and others have found that people like to attribute events and control to individual senior leaders. They call this ‘The romance of leadership.’<sup>35</sup> It is irrelevant whether these leaders actually have control over events. People simply like to believe that the heroic single leader changes the world. It seems that Thomas Carlyle’s concept of the ‘great man,’ who is born to change the course of history, is still popular. Carlyle’s theory represents more than simply a longing to have someone in control. It also stems from a desire for justice and accountability, and a person who can be held responsible for events. Nonetheless, this raises another set of key questions. To what extent do leaders cause change?

James MacGregor Burns has thought quite a bit about leadership and historical causation. In his latest book, *Transforming Leadership*, he begins with a comment in Blaise Pascal’s *Pensées* in which Pascal says the whole history of the world had turned on Cleopatra’s nose, which was evidently rather long. Had her nose been shorter (and presumably more attractive), things might have turned out differently. Burns wonders, ‘Could humankind ever control the course of events or even understand it? Can the laws of historical causation be drawn from the story of humanity? Can humans plan change or must

they simply react?'<sup>36</sup> He goes on to say that because of these questions, he has come to see 'leadership not only as a field of study, but master discipline that illuminates some of the toughest problems of human needs and social change, and in the process exploits the findings of political science, history, sociology, philosophy theology, literature and psychology.'<sup>37</sup>

People outside of America are usually more familiar with Bernard Bass's work on transformational leadership than Burns' work on this. One reason for this is that his book *Leadership* is 530 pages long and consists largely of American political history.<sup>38</sup> Burns' work is also frequently misquoted or confused with other literature on transformational leadership. Burns and I have been discussing his theory and its ethical implications for many years. The first thing Burns always says about his own work is that he is a conflict theorist. As a historian and biographer, he does not embrace the great man theory. He believes that transforming leaders engage followers in a dialogue about values and through this process they come to a consensus on what is important. He does not think that transforming leaders come along and elevate people's values to their own (presumably superior) values, but rather that leaders and followers elevate each other's values. By this, Burns does not mean that moral values are whatever people agree they are. The agreed-upon values then have to measure up to what Burns called in his first book the 'end values' of liberty, justice and equality.

Burns' discussion of ethics in his book *Leadership* is confusing, in part because he makes up his own categories and terms for ethical concepts and discusses most aspects of ethics in terms of values. Burns and I have been debating the language used to talk about ethics and leadership for many years. As an ordinary language philosopher, I prefer to use moral language that gains its meaning from use. Burns' prefers to stipulate his own definitions of moral terms. Nonetheless, he is right about the importance of distinctions. In one of our exchanges, Burns writes:

I do think, though, that we can and should define *specific* terms more clearly. We (writers on leader-

ship) variously use the terms ethics, values, moral dimensions, moral virtue, and end-goals, substantive values (justice, equality, etc.), and others. I tend to use the term 'end-values,' but it may not be quite right. But at least we should, I suggest, sharply discriminate in our definition (and concept) between norms of behavior or codes of conduct on the one hand, and the palpable, substantial collective goals of justice and the like, or equality, on the other.<sup>39</sup>

Many of the distinctions that Burns mentions here are well established in the philosophy literature.

I strongly recommend Burns' recent book, *Transforming Leadership*, to anyone interested in leadership ethics. His discussion of ethics is much clearer than in his earlier work and the book provides a concise and more circumspect description of his theory. In his new book, Burns reflects on his earlier work, and on the problems of history and morality. The book consists of a wide variety of historical cases about different kinds of leaders from different countries and periods of history. After reading Burns, one can see why history is fundamental to our understanding of ethics and leadership.

### Assessing good leaders

The subject matter of leadership ethics is about the activity of leading and what leaders actually do. It is about what leaders should be like, their responsibilities and relationships with constituents as leaders, how they lead, and where they lead people. In my own work, I capture much of what Burns wants to cover in his analysis of ethics, but in a simpler way. There are two central questions one might ask about the ethics of a leader and his or her leadership. Does a leader do the right thing, the right way and for the right reason? And, what standards do we use for determining these things? The second question encompasses what Burns calls end values.

In my earlier work, I took my cue on end values from Aristotle, who said that the ultimate end, for which there is no other end, is eudaimonia or happiness.<sup>40</sup> Aristotle describes eudaimonia as a combination of 'living well or faring well with

being happy.<sup>41</sup> I found happiness more satisfactory than liberty, equality, and justice as an answer to the question: What is the end of leadership? I still think that eudaimonia works, but we need the full range of moral philosophy and human values to understand what 'living well or faring well' mean. Questions about justice, respect for persons and liberty are all part of the picture. So, Burns and I have recently converged in that Burns now includes happiness in his list of end values and I now include justice, liberty and equality along with a number of other considerations. Unlike Burns, I do not think we need to break moral philosophy into new categories, but rather that we need to break leadership into parts for moral analysis.

This leads us to three general, obvious and completely interlocking categories for the moral assessment of leadership:

1. The ethics of leaders themselves – the intentions of leaders and the personal ethics of leaders;
2. the ethics of how a leader leads (or the process of leadership) – the means that a leader uses to lead (the ethics of the relationship between leaders and all those affected by his or her actions); and
3. the ethics of what a leader does – the ends of leadership.

These three parts encompass virtue theory, and deontological and teleological approaches to ethics. They also run parallel to some of the major areas of social science research on leadership. For example, research on traits and the psychology apply to how the leader behaves. Theories such as leader member exchange, transactional and transformational leadership apply to the leader/follower relationship, whereas contingency theories consider the relationship between leaders' behavior and context.<sup>42</sup> The ethics of the ends of leadership require an understanding of decision-making, history, culture and a variety of other factors.

One reason why public discussions about the ethics of leaders are confusing is because leaders are sometimes ethical in one respect but not in others. Some leaders have good intentions, but

bad outcomes. Others have good results, but use questionable means to achieve them, etc. A good illustration of this problem is the recent debate about the ethics of President George Bush's decision to go to war in Iraq. The public debate over the ethics of this decision centered on the intention of the leader, the means that he chose to address the problem and the end that he expected to achieve. Did Bush intend to deceive the public about the threat that Iraq posed to his country or was he simply mistaken? If Bush actually believed that the USA was in danger, then that belief would justify the intention to protect the country, which would morally justify the end – getting rid of the threat posed by weapons of mass destruction. Yet, there was still a third question in this debate and that was: What is the best way to combat this threat or reach the desired end – by using UN weapons inspectors or by going to war? When it seemed clear that there were no weapons of mass destruction or plans to use them, the ends of the action changed. Bush then had a new end, which was to rid Iraq of the evil Saddam Hussein and bring democracy to Iraq.

It will be very interesting to see how historians write about Bush and the war 50 years from now. What will they say about Bush's actions? Did he do the right thing, the right way, for the right reason? If Iraq becomes a peaceful democracy with a vibrant economy 50 years from now, will people regard George Bush as a great leader? Will it matter if he lied or got the information about Iraq's weapons wrong? Will the many years of insurgency and suffering that followed the invasion matter in the assessment of this leader? We never know whether other alternatives would have worked just as well or better to achieve these ends, but will that matter? While today it is difficult to imagine that, 50 years from now, there will be a statue commemorating George Bush in Baghdad, stranger things have happened to the reputations of leaders over time.

History often judges leaders by results and not the means or process of getting to them. In the present, a leader's intent and the means that he or she uses to get things done are morally important for earning the trust and cooperation of followers. We regard some leaders differently after 50 years

because we see the long-term results of their actions. This disparity between the way that we regard a leader as a historical figure and the way that we regard a leader in the present is significant. History, even when written by the most meticulous historians, has the tendency to magnify the ethical importance of a leader's long-term impact, while shrinking the ethical importance of the leader's intention and the means he or she used to get things done. In doing so, it minimizes the ethics of leaders, the ethics of the leader/follower relationship and the ethics of the leadership process. The present has a way of making some aspects of leadership seem more important than others.

### The ethics/effectiveness framework

This disparity between the way we regard leaders in the past and in the present is provocative. I still have not sorted it out to my satisfaction, but here is where I am so far. To assess the ethics of leaders and leadership, you have to start with the obvious proposition that a good leader is ethical and effective.<sup>43</sup> Here, I neatly separate the normative from the descriptive because I see the task of leadership ethics as understanding how the two are related. I use the ethics/effectiveness dichotomy to frame leadership ethics around questions such as: How is being a competent leader related to being an ethical leader and how is being an ethical leader related to being a competent leader? Barbara Kellerman uses the ethics/effectiveness framework to create categories for case studies of bad leaders in her new book, *Bad Leadership: What It Is, How It Happens, Why It Matters (Leadership for the Common Good)*.<sup>44</sup> From her cases, one can see how intertwined questions of competence are with questions about ethics.

Aristotle offers some insight into the ethics/effectiveness question. For Aristotle, moral and technical excellences are intertwined. He writes

... 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.<sup>45</sup>

Knowledge about how to do something entails knowledge about how to do it the right way and the desire to do it the right way. Hence, in theory, the morally virtuous leader will also be a competent leader and a competent leader will be a morally virtuous one, but we know this is not always the case. Here is where a cynic would throw in the towel and quit, but leadership ethics is not for cynics.

Ethics and effectiveness converge around this question: What does it mean for a person to do something the right way? For example, what would we say about an incompetent surgeon who continues to practice surgery, despite the fact that he keeps killing his patients? Is such a person behaving ethically? There is a sense in which it is unethical to be incompetent, which is why self-reflection is such an important part of ethics. Professions such as medicine and law have professional standards of behavior, but what constitutes a competent and an incompetent leader? The usual answer is a leader who knows how to get results, make profits, etc. What would we say about a CEO who makes profits, but uses deceptive accounting practices to do so? Would we consider such a person competent? Unethical behavior is sometimes the result of incompetence and vice versa. If a person knows how to do something well, he or she is less likely to cheat at doing it. But leaders also behave unethically when they are very competent and successful. As mentioned earlier, in some cases successful leaders start to believe that they are Gods or exceptions to the rules. In these cases, we might say that leaders are morally incompetent at being successful.

### Conclusion

As you can see, this paper raises far more questions than it answers. I do, however, believe that the relationship between ethics and effectiveness (or technical and moral excellence) is at the core of leadership ethics and, for that matter, all areas of professional ethics. The question of how

ethics is related to effectiveness lurks behind the problems with studying leadership that I mentioned earlier – the problems of language and definition, descriptive and normative confusions, the discussions about altruism and self-interest and the question of causation and history. Ethical assumptions are deeply embedded in the leadership literature and the way that people think about leadership. Leadership ethics requires scholars to first critically read the leadership literature, separate the normative ideas from the descriptive and then put the two back together again. Like most philosophical endeavors, digging for the questions is the most difficult part. Once the questions are unearthed, the task becomes slightly easier. For thousands of years, moral philosophers have wrestled with questions about the relationship between knowledge and morality, free will and determinism, etc. In our libraries reside the works of some of the greatest minds in history to help us with these questions. We should use them.

When we consider the horrendous problems caused by leaders today and in the past, it is extraordinary that there are not more scholars working in the area of ethics and leadership. Most people agree that leaders should be ethical, but few have delved into what this means. How do we prepare leaders who have the capacity to responsibly use power, to carry out moral obligations to followers, make sound moral decisions and serve their organizations and constituents well, etc.? And, how do we develop followers, organizations, systems and institutions that support good leadership and do not tolerate bad leadership? These are questions faced by people everywhere and we will need the help of scholars around the world to answer them.

## Notes

1. In the spirit of full disclosure, I warn the reader of my bias. A number of these articles and books are either in my books or in my book series 'New Horizons of Leadership,' published by Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd. So, of course I like them, but I also think that others will too.

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