

## ETHICS AND LEADERSHIP: HOW LONG HAVE THEY BEEN TOGETHER?...THEY'RE SUCH A LOVELY COUPLE, BUT CAN IT LAST?\*

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“Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things.”

Peter F. Drucker

I should start with a word or two by way of anticipation. Twice in the recent past I have been invited to give a talk about leadership. The venues differed in ways one would expect them to—different places, different audiences, for example. They differed in another way as well. In one case, what I had to say about ethics and leadership—specifically, that there is an ethical dimension to leadership—met with some resistance. This surprised me. Dealing with it was a bit of a challenge and I have been thinking about it since then. In particular, I've been thinking about what might explain it and what its implications are for those of us working on the ethics across the curriculum front.

Here, then, I will tell the story of the troublesome case, discuss some plausible explanations of the resistance I encountered, and consider some of the implications for EAC work. My aim in doing this, and in discussing briefly how long ethics and leadership have been together (did they meet recently?) and the character of their relationship (is it serious and sustainable?) is to prompt discussion of across the curriculum initiatives that involve what most will agree is a lovely couple.

So, again, twice in the recent past I have given invited talks on leadership. In one case the talk was part of a summer institute put on by Clemson University's College of Health, Education and Human Development; the participants were new faculty in the college and student affairs professionals. (Not coincidentally, the Eugene T. Moore School of Education, which is housed in this college, has programs leading to advanced degrees that are commonly sought by student affairs profes-

sionals.) The other talk was for an annual day long leadership workshop for college and university students in South Carolina. In this case, my audience was primarily students, though some faculty and student affairs professionals were present as well. I am fairly certain that I was invited to do the second talk because one of the student affairs people involved with the organization of the summer institute mentioned me to the student organizers of the second event as someone who might agree to talk about ethics and leadership.

As I indicated earlier, the reason I am talking about the two venues is that in one but not the other, what I had to say about ethics and leadership, in particular, that leadership has an ethical dimension, met with some resistance, which surprised me. What might explain such resistance? And what are the implications, if any, for ethics across the curriculum work? I hope the story I've started to tell, and will return to in a moment, will prompt discussion of these matters. But before I return to the story, please take a moment to entertain and answer this question: Where do you suppose I encountered resistance; was it with the new faculty and student affairs professionals who attended the summer institute or the students who attended the day long leadership workshop?

The resistance I encountered took me by surprise. One reason I was surprised is that outside of the academy talking about ethics and leadership is something like the path of least resistance; that is to say, it is a way to avoid difficulties associated with talk of business ethics, for example, which many see as an oxymoron. Business ethics is not, in fact, an oxymoron; evidence that it isn't is ready to hand in the form of robust ethical critiques of the activities that led up to our current economic crisis, for example. If business ethics were an oxymoron, these critiques would be utter nonsense, but, of course, they make perfectly good sense. There's more to say about this canard, but that's for another occasion. My point is that outside of the academy the coupling of ethics and leadership is not problematic; indeed it's a way of avoiding some difficulties. In this respect it is similar to another ploy in practical and professional ethics, namely, avoiding the word 'ethics' altogether, speaking instead of values - based leadership.

The second reason for my surprise gets to the heart of the matter. The topic of the summer institute was leadership development. Its purpose was to prepare the participants to contribute to the attainment of a college goal that cuts across its curricula (which includes nursing and education, for example), namely, educating young women and men to be effective, creative "agents of change;" in a word, leaders. I was there to

talk about the place of ethics in this undertaking. I took it for granted that this goal is not value neutral, that, to put the point baldly, the college would not count it a success if its students graduated believing that Attila the Hun—who, as Robert Solomon points out, was known as the scourge of God<sup>1</sup>—would be someone who, as a “creative and effective agent of change,” ought to be emulated. What I discovered is that, at least among the faculty, there were several people who were quite sure that leadership is a value neutral concept, or more precisely, that properly understood, ethics is extrinsic to leadership and optional, much as satellite radio is an option when one buys a new automobile. They were surprised that I didn’t know this. Surprises all the way around!

Having cut my teeth, as it were, in legal philosophy, I was reminded of the legal positivist’s thesis of separability—the claim that there is no necessary connection between law and morality—which is what distinguishes legal positivism from legal naturalism (a.k.a. natural law theory). One of my teachers, Jules Coleman, and Jeffrie Murphy put the point very well in a chapter on the nature of law in their book, *The Philosophy of Law*: what distinguishes the two positions is that according to the naturalist, “the connection between ‘law’ and ‘morality’ is more like the connection between ‘puppy’ and ‘young’...than the connection between ‘puppy’ and ‘difficult to [housebreak]’.”<sup>2</sup> A legal positivist denies the claim of a logical, conceptual, or necessary connection between law and morality, insisting that the connection between them is contingent; sticking with the puppy analogy, a legal positivist might say, just as puppies are often difficult to housebreak, very often there is a clear connection between law and morality, but the link in both cases is not necessary; it could be absent altogether. In both cases, what we’re talking about is a contingent matter of fact. I mention this bit of legal philosophy by way of anticipation. I will return to it.

So, to pick up where we left off in this story, I had come to the summer institute to talk about the ethical dimension of leadership. After some preliminary discussion about what ethics is and isn’t (distinguishing it from law and religion, for example), its connection to academic integrity, and a basic framework that is well suited to the task of working one’s way to the other side of an ethical problem in a systematic, reflective and responsible way, all of which are elements of the distributed competency in ethical judgment that is part of general education at Clemson, I turned to the task of exploring the connection between ethics and leadership.

My strategy was to ask a couple of questions and consider some answers that come readily to mind, but simply won’t do. Suppose you

were asked, I said, “What is a leader?” Or, alternatively, “What is leadership?”

I suggested an answer for each question that comes more or less readily to mind (these are, in fact, answers I have received when, in a variety of settings, I have put these questions to a group):

For the first question the answer was, “A leader is a person who can get others to do what he or she wants them to do.” The answer to the second question, which is about leadership, was “Leadership is directing the behavior of others to achieve one’s goals.” Although these answers seem acceptable at first, I said, reflection reveals that they won’t do; I invited the institute participants to identify and discuss reasons for saying, rightly, I (still) think, that they miss their mark.

What happened? Well, for one thing, I learned again—yes, I’ve learned this lesson before—that asking questions and inviting interaction can be perilous. It can be perilous because you cannot be sure what will happen: you might get something very different from what you were expecting. And that’s true even if the setup has worked well many times in the past. The good news is that they were very much engaged in the session. The unhappy thing was that the first speaker directed attention to a leader’s goals in an effort to refute what he, wrongly, took my thesis to be, roughly, that someone is a leader if and only if the goal she is pursuing and directing others to achieve is morally acceptable. The discussion had taken a wrong turn; and it was, for a while, an echo of the jurisprudential skirmish over the separability thesis that I mentioned earlier.

Though no one put it quite this way, what I surmised from what was being said sounded quite like John Austin’s assertion contra natural law thinking. The natural law approach in legal philosophy is one with which he, like his friend Jeremy Bentham, had no patience. Austin wrote:

The existence of law is one thing; its merit or demerit is another. Whether it be or be not is one enquiry; whether it be or be not conformable to an assumed standard, is a different enquiry. A law, which actually exists, is a law, though we happen to dislike it, or though it vary from the text, by which we regulate our approbation and disapprobation.<sup>3</sup>

So, with apologies to Austin, what they seemed to be saying is this:

The existence of leadership is one thing; its merit or demerit is another. Whether it be or be not is one enquiry; whether it be or be not conformable to an assumed standard, is a different enquiry. Leadership which actually exists, is leadership, though we happen to dislike it, or

though it vary from the text, by which we regulate our approbation and disapprobation.

No one in the institute invoked Austin, of course. The point was made more directly: The speaker I referred to earlier said in effect, “Although, as an ethicist you might not like it, it is nevertheless true that Adolph Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Idi Amin, and Pol Pot were leaders.”...full stop.

After a pregnant pause I said, okay...There is no reason to quarrel with your classifying them as leaders. I’m assuming, however, that at this juncture all we have done is label them, as we might label some men fathers and some women mothers. Surely we’ll agree that whether we should take as a role model a member of a set such as these turns on criteria other than those employed in determining membership. If our concern is leadership development (i.e., helping our students become leaders) it is those criteria that we need to think about carefully.

Let’s pause the story for a moment. It’s time to say a bit about what might explain the difficulty I encountered and the implications for work on the ethics across the curriculum front. I think that three sources of difficulty in this story can be put in general terms. They are, I believe, things that deserve our attention as advocates and teachers of ethics across the curriculum.

First, it seems that problems such as this arise when ethicists try to do the across the curriculum thing with faculty in a discipline that guards its borders (that is, its autonomy/sovereignty) with great care; put another way, what I have in mind are departments that are extremely sensitive about turf, having struggled hard to gain control of the territory that they now occupy. These are folks who, if they had an “immigration policy,” would be guests on Lou Dobbs’ program; he would have them on the program to show America how it should be done; their exuberance and vehemence would make him smile broadly. So, one question is how to make it clear that what we’ve got is a temporary work visa and that we understand what that means.

In some measure, a problem like the one I encountered can be attributed to the fact that the faculty we are working with are in a discipline that has its own theory or theories (that’s certainly true with the study of leadership) and because that’s where they are coming from, any perceived incursion into their theoretical territory is likely to be met with an assertion of sovereignty in the field. Another possibility is that there is some hostility to ethics, which might arise from a discipline - specific weltanschauung or have theoretical roots. I have encountered the latter

most frequently with faculty in business and in economics. In some such cases the hostility rests on a misconception, that ethics is or must be religious, is merely a matter of convention, or is incompatible with market principles, for example.

Such resistance can arise from still another source: the assumption, which I think is quite mistaken, that ethics is about ends, agents, and actions. Beginning with this assumption, we are far less likely to consider and engage with the ethical dimensions of relationships and organizations, or to speak generally, the ethical dimensions of what might be called structures or platforms of human interaction. That should not come as a surprise; if the province of ethics is ends, agents and actions, it's hard to see why structures of human interaction would appear on an ethicist's list of items that deserve or require special attention.

I promised to return to the answers to the two questions I posed at the institute, which, you will recall, would not do (i.e., were unacceptable), as well as the criteria implicit in them. Here they are again: "A leader is a person who can get others to do what he or she wants them to do." The answer to the second question, which is about leadership, was "Leadership is directing the behavior of others to achieve one's goals."

The problem I was trying to get the participants in the institute to see emerges quickly when we apply the criterion implicit in these answers; using that criterion, we'd have to say that the bully on the playground, who gets other kids to give him their lunch money, is a leader. So too, the flim-flam man who gets the good folks of Red Granite Wisconsin to spend their savings to purchase oil drilling rights on a volcanic island; he would be a leader as well. Yet few, if any, would disagree when I say that neither is a leader; that neither is exhibiting leadership. It's important to see why these two cases are not cases of leadership, even though the criteria in the answers to the questions I posed are satisfied: the bully gets his way by means of coercion, while the flim-flam man gets others to do what he wants them to do with a mix of chicanery and charisma.

We are rightly pulled up here. To be sure, coercion, chicanery and charisma are morally suspect means to an end, but the critical point is that there is something quite unsavory about the relationships between (a) the bully and those he bullies and (b) the flim-flam man and those he cons.

Leadership is about relationships—logicians would say it is a relational concept; as Gary Wills noted in his fine book about leadership, *Certain Trumpets: The Call of Leaders* (1994), there are no leaders without

followers. There are no followers in these relationships. The other in each case is a victim - of coercion in the first case and chicanery in the second. If there are no followers, what we're looking at is not an instance of leadership. That is why the answers we started with won't do.

In answering the question "what is leadership?" we need to think carefully about what Wills and others call followership. As you know, a large amount of ink has been put to paper discussing followership; there are, in fact, several competing typologies. I won't be talking about them today, and you should feel free to think of that as good news.

For my purposes two things are important. First, leadership is a relational concept—like being taller or owning—and the parties to leadership relations are persons, human beings. Second, leaders are out front in activities that can and do significantly affect people's lives: the lives of the people who are being led as well as the other stakeholders in the activities, that is, the stakeholders who are not followers.

These two points can be put more concisely as follows, leadership is about relationships between and among persons that involve the potential for significant impact on human well being. Since the clearest mark of a situation's having an ethical dimension is that acting within it can have a significant impact on human well being, it should be clear that leadership has an ethical dimension.

I may be setting myself up for a fall, but making a strong claim that fails to withstand scrutiny can have value, particularly if in showing where things go wrong one's critics can do something more than defeat a rival's claim. Here H.L.A. Hart's critique of John Austin's command theory of law<sup>4</sup> is a wonderful example, since that critique was rather like a defibrillator for legal philosophy in the mid 20th century, and quite a lot of good work has been done in the field since then.

So, that said, I'll repeat a point made a moment ago and then stick my neck out. Leadership is about relationships between and among persons that involve the potential for significant impact on human well-being. Since the clearest mark of a situation's having an ethical dimension is that acting within it can have a significant impact on human well being, it should be clear that leadership has an ethical dimension. I think that this claim is not likely to meet with much resistance. I've been wrong about such things before, however; indeed, this talk started with an example. A stronger claim is that this is not a contingent matter of fact like the fact that some puppies are difficult to housebreak; it's a conceptual or logical point about leadership, that is to say, it emerges from a proper understanding of what leadership is. If that is true, that leadership

has an ethical dimension would be as controversial as the claim that a bachelor is unmarried. And the question about how long this couple, ethics and leadership, has been together is easy to answer: from the very beginning. So too, the question whether the relationship is serious is easily answered: it most certainly is. The sustainability question, which I posed in conjunction with the question about seriousness, is different. It's an "on-the-ground question" that depends on how leaders lead, which brings us back, I think, to the task we have as educators.

There is more to say about the ethical dimension of leadership, in particular, about its connection to genuine success. Cutting to the chase one might say, look, whether leaders are successful or not depends on what their followers do (how well and how much they produce, for example) and there is little doubt that the best results emerge from relationships between leaders and followers that are sustained by trust and respect. Trust and respect are interlocking values that contribute to, if they are not in fact necessary for the sustainability of such relationships. I can't make the full dress case for this now, but I would argue that their sustainability (and that of organizations, which are, in large measure, networks of relationships) depends on these values and, consequently, there is a very strong connection between ethics and successful leadership.

The literature in leadership theory is vast and there is a good bit of empirical research on effective techniques or models of leadership. But, for the most part, this work starts from a different place—its perspective is different; perhaps it would be better to say that it lacks an appreciation of the ethical charge in what is being said. That may go some distance in explaining the resistance I encountered, since the people who were resistant were brought up on these theories. What's missing, I think, is a recognition of the fact that leadership is a matrix of interlocking ethical responsibilities: there are, first, the responsibilities that leaders have to those who are being led; in addition, there are responsibilities to those on whose behalf one is leading, as well as responsibilities to external stakeholders who are affected by a leader's decisions and actions.

As a leader charts a course for an organization her aim will be to choose wisely and rightly, which is another way of saying that she will endeavor to fulfill the responsibilities that attach to her role as a leader; proceeding in this way is the best hope a leader has of genuine success in her mission.

While this view of leadership as a matrix of interlocking responsibilities may have no place in leadership theory,<sup>5</sup> I submit that understanding the ethical dimension of leadership is crucial for success in the task of



grooming the leaders of tomorrow in business, government and the professions, and that for this reason, among others, it is linked in an integral way to our efforts to integrate ethics across the curriculum.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Robert Solomon, *A Better Way to Think About Business* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989) 6. In this widely used book about business ethics, Robert Solomon discusses several ways that business people have, unfortunately, been encouraged to think of business. They have been encouraged to think of business as war, a money making machine, or a game; to believe that Machiavelli or Attila the Hun are good managerial role models; and to think that all business people should be entrepreneurs, for example. Discussing these ways of thinking about business, each of which must be rejected, because (first) they *misrepresent* business, Solomon states the key point straightforwardly: “How we talk reflects how we think, and how we think affects how we act and the nature of the organizations and institutions we create for ourselves. If we talk like brutes and we think like brutes, we will act like brutes and build organizations suitable only for brutes. To be sure, even in such organizations, some people will prosper, but life for most of them will be nasty, brutish and short.” *Op. cit.*12.

<sup>2</sup> Jeffrie G. Murphy and Jules L. Coleman, *The Philosophy of Law* (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman and Allanheld, 1984) 13.

<sup>3</sup> . John Austin, *The Province of Jurisprudence Determined and the Uses of the Study of Jurisprudence*, H.L.A. Hart, ed. (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1954) 184 (Lecture V).

<sup>4</sup> See H.L.A. Hart, “Positivism and the Separation of Law and Morals,” 71 *Harvard Law Review* 593 (1958) and *The Concept of Law* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961). The HLR article was the Oliver Wendell Holmes Lecture at the Harvard Law School, 1957. Lon Fuller, then Carter Professor of Jurisprudence at Harvard, composed a response to Hart’s defense of the separability thesis, among other things, which was published in the same place: “Positivism and Fidelity to Law—A Reply to Professor Hart” 71 *Harvard Law Review* 630 (1958). These were the first rounds, as it were, in a debate that continued for roughly ten years in books and articles, including Fuller’s book *The Morality of Law*, revised edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), in which he replied to Hart’s review of the 1964 edition of the book (*Harvard Law Review* 1281 (1965).) Fuller’s work has influenced my thinking here.

<sup>5</sup> I believe the interlocking - responsibilities conception of leadership I have sketched here fits comfortably alongside work by leadership theorists such as Joanne Ciulla and Terry Price. See for example, Joanne B. Ciulla, ed. *Ethics, the Heart of Leadership*, Westport Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 1998; Terry Price, *Understanding Ethical Failures in Leadership*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

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