

IS MORAL LEADERSHIP POSSIBLE?

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We were uneasy. In fact, we were downright worried. Couldn't quite put our finger on it, yet we knew something *had to be done!* So we hitched up our bandwagon and invited everyone to ride with us down to *Dr. Sophisto's Emporium of Final Cures*. What a place it was! Some of the older stock provoked waves of nostalgia. Who could forget *Points of Light*, or *Supply-Side*? Remember the good, old *Back-to-Basics* and *Decentralization*? Ah, fond memories of *National Competitiveness*, *Moral Re-armament* and *Great Society!* Actually, they didn't work out quite so well as we had hoped, but they gave us lots to write and talk about. Anyway, it was always fun, not to mention uplifting, to go rummaging around *Dr. Sophisto's*, and *this time* we would be a lot more careful about the merchandise before we bought it.

“Stuck in a rut? Congress gridlocked? So-called “school reform” just giving you more of the same?” called out Dr. Sophisto. “Why what you need is Leadership! Leadership in the Presidency! Leadership in Congress, in the cities, on school boards, in the superintendency, in the principalship, in the classroom! The Power to Get Things Done! Leadership! Let me repeat it! Leadership! Leadership! Leadership!” Caught in the vise of his logic, seduced by the sweet reason of his argument, yet we wriggled, protesting like uncomprehending children. “But what about Hitler and Stalin? Or Napoleon? Or David Duke? Or Spiro Agnew? (Who? Never Mind!) What about Joseph McCarthy, then? Or Lex Luthor, or The Penguin?” “Now, now!” remonstrated Dr. Sophisto. He smiled broadly. “Don't worry. What you need is not just any old kind of leadership. What you need is our new model, Moral Leadership!” “Moral Leadership!” It was tempting. Some rushed up to acquire the whole package. The more parsimonious sought merely to obtain a moral faculty or a course in ethics, to graft onto the body of their present program in educational leadership. *We* decided to think it over a bit first.

INTRODUCTION

Is moral leadership possible? It is not clear what is meant here by “moral leadership.” One interpretation of “moral leadership” is to denote persons, generally well known, who call others to some well-defined standard of morality — for example, Billy Graham, Menachim Schneerson or Pope Paul. “Moral leadership” here means — more or less — “moral authority.” This moral authority is a matter of having a followership that recognizes it as such. It need have little to do with any personal power to “get things done.” The important point here is to realize that the existence of this kind of moral leadership, i.e., moral authority, is no evidence that Dr. Sophisto's product is any good.

The sense of “moral leadership” that Dr. Sophisto offers us is some notion that people can be “real leaders” of organizations, as opposed to “mere” administrators, officials, authorities or managers. In addition, to distinguish themselves from Stalin and company, such leaders will conduct themselves in a “moral” manner. This has a particular appeal to those dismayed by the present state of our educational systems. We want to get things done, but we want no scandals created in the process. Such “leaders” manifest what — for reasons to be discussed below — we will call “heroic

leadership.” In contrast to moral authority, heroic leadership assumes causal efficacy. Power is essential. The quest for “moral leadership” is thus very much the quest of reconciling power with moral authority.

What we will consider is whether heroic leadership presumes certain standards of judgment that are in conflict with common notions of morality. The question could then be recast, *Can someone be a heroic leader and still be moral?* Clearly, a conceptual argument of sorts is in the offing. But we will be concerned not only with a possible conflict in standards of judgment, but also conflicts in educational presuppositions. It is not merely a matter, so to speak, of whether the “definition” of *heroic leadership* contradicts the “definition” of *morality*. It is also a matter of whether one can learn to be a heroic leader, given the constraints of acting morally. Or vice versa, whether one can learn to be a moral person in the contexts of being called to heroic leadership.

By way of parallel, many of us would like to see children grow up to be tolerant of people racially and socially different from them and to be critical thinkers to boot. Due to the nature of human mental and emotional development, however, it is far from obvious that one best cultivates civil tolerance and critical thinking by suppressing in children intolerant or uncritical behavior at early stages of their development.

It is commonly recognized that a person may be a good administrator, but no leader. Similarly, a person may be *an* authority, or *in* authority — i.e. the ranking official — but still be no leader. For this reason, leadership has acquired a special cachet, i.e., heroic leadership. (It is significant that the metaphor of heroism has come to attach itself recently to what has traditionally be perceived as a relatively risk-free profession.¹ Perhaps the shrinking length of tenure of school administrative positions requires stronger hyperbole to motivate aspirants to the field. But more on this below.)

Leaders attempt to act *through* organizations, that is, they avail themselves of organizational resources to support their action. Much of our concern with linking heroic leadership and morality is our worry that organizational action can be immoral, from this perspective we worry that organizational resources may be *abused*. We are not willing, in general, to relinquish the benefits of complex social organizations. We expect people in them to get things done, to go beyond just minimizing evils, and to surmount obstacles that would daunt others who lack leadership. Such expectations support the heroic metaphor. At the same time, we are disquieted by the thought that the actions attributable to such organizations may be unjust. Thus, we look to “moral leadership” — meaning “moral, heroic leadership” — to support the hope that those organizations we wish to maintain will generate more good than evil. But is “moral, heroic leadership” a real possibility? Or is the concept merely talismanic, warding off the recognition that broad social benefits may be unavoidably purchased by individual pain?

THE NATURE OF LEADERSHIP

What is the difference between leadership and outlawry? Often very small. If we look to two kinds of institutions that are explicitly concerned with developing “leadership,” the military and elite private education, we find some interesting practices that illustrate this point. The emphasis is definitely on heroic leadership, on acting through the organization to get the job done. Leadership is stimulated by providing incentives to rule-breaking. However, such rule-breaking must be done cleverly enough to avoid getting caught in the act. In addition, the rule-breaking must be justified as done to achieve a superordinate good, if only from the perspective of the immediate group to which one belongs.

For example, in the military, a bunch of new officer candidates may be told to clean up their barracks on pain of forced exercise or withdrawal of privileges, yet be given no implements to do the job. It is expected they will steal brooms or mops from somewhere else. Yet, if they are caught, they are not exempted from punishment. Junior officers must excel in even greater feats of chicanery and derring-do. I was told of a situation where junior officers set to stealing truck parts from another

unit then ransoming them back for materials needed to prepare for a command inspection.² The plots on the old Sergeant Bilko or McHale's Navy sitcoms were funny, but they were not sheer fabrication.

In many elite private boarding schools, those expelled because of some outrageously well-executed hoax are often warmly welcomed by other schools. Rule-breaking done with wit and style can become a mark of distinction. It is much less the discipline of private elite education that produces its sought after leadership, but rather the indulgence of affront to that discipline.³ In both cases, there is some sense that a "higher" good is served by the competition that often subverts rules that govern "ordinary" situations. Clearly, if "morality" is tied too tightly to some notion of "following the rules" that kind of leadership training accorded high status in our culture is only problematically related, if at all, to morality. If "breaking the rules" is justified by the consequences of the act, then, clearly, the presumption of effectiveness is critical.

In an interesting study entitled "The Romance of Leadership," the authors examined how, over a span of years, Wall Street Journal articles, doctoral dissertations and business periodicals dealt with the concept of leadership.⁴ They found that supporting a common image of a "leader" is a presumption of effectiveness. In addition, only if the outcomes were serious, was the management of them characterized as "leadership." Leadership is the management of the important, even the near cataclysmic. Leadership is heroic.

Heroic leadership presumes causation. No administrator is acclaimed to be a "real leader" unless some accomplishment can be ascribed to him or her. I say, "ascribed to" for a reason. An administrator may, in fact, have no causal connection to certain organizational outcomes, yet be called "a leader." The heroic myth permits quite tenuous and often obviously mythological connections of cause and effect to suffice for the ascription of leadership. The failed leader is often scapegoated. So it is, for example, that baseball coaches are hired and fired on the basis of actions with which they have minor, if any, causal connection. The realities of control may be quite otherwise. Whitey Herzog, widely recognized by fans as one of the top-ranking field coaches in baseball, once estimated that his skills made a difference in six to eight ball games out of the hundred and fifty or so his team played each season.

I will belabor the point that Herzog *believed* his skills made such a difference. This is not to say that they did. It is common to confuse lucky managers with effective managers. If the rebuff is offered that no one can be so lucky year in and year out, the counter is obvious: yes, they can. Statistically rare events happen, even if we have a general cultural bias that forecloses on their possibility. Our subjective feelings of certainty are seldom reasonable measures of probability.⁵

The basic risk of leadership is encountering interference with one's effectiveness. The leader is expected to "break the rules" from time to time to achieve greater goods. But only success justifies this "outlawry."⁶ Even then, whether a "greater good" has been achieved may be a matter of substantial controversy. It is difficult to be a leader, especially in a pluralistic society.

RESPONSIBILITY, MERITOCRACY AND CAUSATION

There is a meta-ethical need for the assumption of causation. Without this assumption firmly in place, the scope of moral vulnerability shrinks from responsibility down to mere accountability, thus making of every would-be leader a hostage to fortune. Another consideration which tends to support a heroic concept of leadership is this: without an assumption of causation, meritocracy withers. If it is the case that those who enjoy the scarcer benefits of society have not earned them by their acts, and if these benefits are not merited on a purely ascriptive basis, e.g., social class rank, then the social arrangements that distribute them unequally are not just. So it is that we can discern a secondary ideological support for the assumption of causation in leadership: the need to protect the

doctrine of meritocracy. But clearly, whether the assumption is true or false is independent of anyone's ideological need for it.

THE NATURE OF THE ORGANIZATION

The mythology of heroic leadership seems to require that a "real leader" be the cause or author of the organizational act. This leads to an interesting dilemma. One kind of morally defective organization is one which prevents moral veto power by individuals over organizational acts. Individuals other than the leader become mere functionaries, instruments of the leader's will. An administrator can only be a cause or an author of a organizational act, that is, a "heroic leader," if his action cannot be vetoed by his subordinates, i.e., if the organization is morally defective. Thus, leadership presumes a morally defective environment of action.⁷

Any action performed by one constrained from the exercise of moral choice is *ceteris paribus* morally defective. So, even if the administrator's command is morally correct, the organizational action will necessarily be morally defective. But if the organization is not morally defective, i.e., each actor within it may veto the administrator's cause or command on moral grounds, then the administrator is not the author of the organizational act. The organizational act in a morally non-defective organization is substantially the act of those moral agents who execute it. Thus, the administrator's act, even if moral in such circumstances, is not heroic leadership.

What is particularly disturbing about discussion of "moral, heroic leadership" is the presumption of simplicity it rests on. Real organizations are not like Plato's Republic, nor could they be, because the lower orders in that "ideal" state are essentially morally passive. (And philosopher kings are assumed to be generally infallible.) Real organizations have characteristics which tend to muddle assessments of moral worth. James G. March⁸ specifies some of them:

1. decision-making in organizations involves multiple actors with inconsistent preferences.
2. information exchange is strategic, rather than neutrally informative, i.e. done with "ulterior" purposes in mind; misrepresentation is assumed.
3. time and attention are scarce resources.
4. the squeaky wheel gets the grease.
5. trust and reputation play a role in strategy.

Common "perversions" in organizations are that solutions in one place create problems in other places; policies are not implemented; inconsistency is tolerated; there is duplication of effort. March makes an important point: *apparent organizational perversions cannot be trivially eliminated*. The very viability of the organization may require tolerance of deviance from what some may consider to be the "ideal." Moral leadership in real organizations is much more problematic than it appears at even third glance.

THE EXCULPATORY USES OF LEADERSHIP

For every high-ranking member of the Nazi Party hanged at Nuremberg, there were probably a million other people, who, having freely chosen to implement their policies, deserved hanging also. But it is not intelligent social management to attempt to punish large numbers of people. Better to select a few "leaders" and make an example of them. Leave the rest with their guilt and the strong likelihood that their own children will abjure them. This is clever social management. But it is moral? Or is a "higher" moral principle to be appealed to here?

Clearly, the circumstances of the developing Cold War dictated something less than a moral response to Nazi crimes. The West's wartime collaboration with Stalin's regime had been a matter of expediency, not moral union. But even if there had been no Cold War and no taint of association with Stalinism, who would have wanted to put several million defeated Nazi collaborators to death,

or to have supported a penal system capable of incarcerating them all? It might have been moral, but it would also have been stupid organizational management.

Given the basically pluralistic nature of any modern society, too much “morality” is probably counterproductive in terms of social control.⁹ Too strict an enforcement of rules — moral or legal — might cause the kind of resistance which eventually might bring the legitimacy of those rules into question.¹⁰ It is interesting to consider that morality and social stability may compete with one another. Fervent moralists, as we have long suspected, are closet revolutionaries.

WHY LEADERSHIP?

Why then is “leadership” in the heroic sense so much in vogue? Some indication of what is going on here can be gotten by considering a school board meeting that took place in Springfield Township, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, in 1991.¹¹ The affluent, well-educated residents of this school district drew up a list of qualities they wanted their new superintendent to possess. What was desired was that the prospective superintendent:

1. be a team-builder who includes community participation;
2. possess a “we-can-do-it” attitude;
3. be focused on and responsive to the needs of the children;
4. have a proven track record;
5. take responsibility for staff failures;
6. be visionary, leading the district into the future;
7. recognize students as individuals that require undivided attention;
8. possess the quality of morality and the ability to know right from wrong;
9. take strong positions against racism and sexual harassment.

There was clearly no sense among the meeting participants that these criteria are conflicting, much less that their incarnation in one individual might be at best a remote possibility.

Administration is, very often, a thankless job. It takes a good deal of skill and energy to do it well. But it is only noticeable by non-administrators when it is done poorly. As an administrator, one must put up with arrogant comments from non-administrators such as, “What do you people do all day besides push papers around?”

Secondly, administrative positions tend to be the locus of competing interests. Working out a good compromise takes, again, skill and effort, but is often not appreciated by either side to the dispute each of which takes the attitude that they have lost something by being brought to compromise. (The present much-bemoaned “gridlock” in Congress is an example of misapprehension of such a situation on a national scale.)

Thirdly, as the description of the wished-for superintendent above shows, the heroic myth is well-nigh universal. When something goes wrong, people run to their administrator and demand that something be done. So it is that would-be administrators are seduced into the field with visions of heroic leadership. And other people who see such heroes as threats, are placated with the thought that with a few courses in ethics, those would-be dragon-slayers won’t slay them for practice. The slogan, “moral leadership” supports the aspirations of both groups.

THE PROBLEM WITH MORALITY

It commonly happens — especially in education — that directives are issued or objectives proposed in circumstances where those called to implement them believe they lack sufficient resources to carry out their task. *America 2000* comes easily to mind as an example. In such situations “real leadership” is ascribed to those who promise to make a silk purse from a sow’s ear. Recently, praises were given *Teach for America* volunteers by a school principal¹² because the “teacher” was willing

to work, lacking a classroom, under the stairs at “teaching.” But why is willingness to accept a bad situation praiseworthy? Even if we concede “leadership” here, we may still question the morality of it.

The most interesting moral dilemmas are those where good competes with good. For example, Weatherly and Lipsky¹³ report how school people directed to implement Chapter 766, a special education law in Massachusetts, coped with the conflicts generated by a comprehensive mandate and limited resources. Those who had to work with the directive on the front lines: rationed the number of assessments performed; placed limits on children held for the program; took behavior problems first; favored group over individual treatment; used trainees, where possible, rather than experienced teachers; and short-circuited time-consuming procedures aimed at securing the rights of parents. Such conflicts tend to be overlooked or miscast into a simplistic good-vs.-evil mold. But what if legitimate claims compete? What is “moral leadership” to do here?

FIXING THE BLAME: THE MYTHOLOGY OF FAULT

Who is at fault when organizations cause evil? It depends. For the purposes of simple analysis, we can understand the relationship between leadership action and organization act in terms of the following train of events:

1. The leadership acts, following moral rules, or not, to direct his or her staff.
2. The staff acts, following moral rules, or not.
3. Organizational structures constrain and direct staff acts.
4. Uncontrollable factors intervene to some extent.

The outcome of these four factors constitute the organizational act. How do we judge moral responsibility, now, if the organizational act is judged to be morally wrong? (We restrict our attention to this case, because the issue of morality is generally not brought up if the organizational act is not objectionable.)

Clearly, if both leadership and staff have stayed within moral guidelines, we blame chance factors or organizational structure. If staff retain the power of moral veto and have violated moral guidelines, we find the major fault with them, although we might take it to be evidence of “weak leadership” that such behavior was not prevented or detected before it could have effect. (This is the ancient “If-only-the-King-knew-how-his-ministers-behaved” theory of exculpation.) Only when the leader disregards moral constraints and his staff do not possess veto power do we lay the blame on him, even if chance factors may have been no weaker than in earlier cases. The mythology of leader causation requires sacrifice.

A professional football coach was asked if he minded that his first-string quarterback disregarded his signals on the line. “It’s O.K. with me, as long as he makes the play!” said the coach.

MORALITY AND SOCIAL CONTROL

There is a common confusion that morality is a form of social control. Clearly, there are forms of social control that do not involve morality (e.g., any particular set of moral precepts or intentions). But morality involves more than just social control, and people may be said to have moral commitments even when their behavior deviates quite strongly from them, as, for example, when they understand that they err or sin. Morality is a matter of how our conduct and our ways of talking about it interrelate. Thus, morality and social control are “orthogonal,” as statisticians might say; that is, they are conceptually independent. With this realization, we can begin to discern a serious role for someone who would be a moral, heroic leader.

Let us return to the consideration that social control need not be moral. Indeed, we can set up systems of incentives and sanctions which make certain ways of behaving rational although not

moral, i.e., not necessarily either moral or immoral. Given a morally pluralistic community maintained — as in the United States — by little if any inquiry into the reasons for socially prescribed conduct, the role of the moral, heroic leader might be to devise systems of social control that also provide the rationales which enable rational, socially appropriate action to be interpreted as moral conduct. In this manner, the moral, heroic leader gets things done yet works within the framework of a set of moral precepts which honor compliant behavior as something more than habitual, coerced, or opportunistic. However, such a concept of leadership may portend a far greater risk of tragedy than departments of educational leadership would find prudent to acknowledge.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Leadership is a concept by which we attempt to reattribute individual responsibility to actions which may have ultimately emerged from a rather labyrinthine process of social decision. *Leadership* is commonly understood to be a heroic concept which tends to be invoked normally not for run of the mill events but for disasters or stunning achievements. “Morality” is most practically a concern when claims of unjust harm are raised. It is a common belief that moral acts flow from moral character. Moral education, so our hopes continue, is the means for forming moral character. The problem of unjust harm resulting from social action thus becomes seen as solvable by the moral education of the crucial social agent, the leadership. Moral training for leadership, however, may be much less a matter of learning a technique than constructing an ideology by which we inspire ourselves that we can solve that most nettlesome and basic problem: redressing the personal costs of social action.

Leadership is an attempt to put the face of a hero or villain on a twisted skein of human interaction. We understand what it is for people to be fulfilling their duty, following procedure, or just doing their job. We know that what they do is often not a matter of their personal desire or intent, and that their moral responsibility for their actions is somehow diminished by their role as representatives or agents. Yet when harm results, whom do we hold accountable? It is emotionally more satisfying — not to mention often politically more expedient — to seek to punish villains, rather than to reorganize social groups.

Finally, the role of the moral, heroic leader, though conflicted, and, even, ultimately, tragic, may best be understood as that of a teacher who provides us with common understandings of the moral basis of social action.

¹ Philip Selznick in *Leadership in Administration: a Sociological Interpretation* (Evanston, Illinois: Row, Peterson, 1957), calls administrators to transform themselves from administrative managers to institutional leaders, which he characterizes as “statesmen.” Statesmen are not necessarily heroes.

² From conversations with ex-Army personnel.

³ Cf. Peter W. Cookson, Jr. and Caroline Hodges Persell, *Preparing for Power: America’s Elite Boarding Schools* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 138.

⁴ Cf. James R. Meindl, Sanford B. Ehrlich and Janet M. Dukerich, “The Romance of Leadership,” *Administrative Science Quarterly* 30 (1985): 78-102.

⁵ See for example Daniel Kahnemann and Amos Tversky, “Subjective Probability: A Judgment of Representativeness,” in *Judgment Under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases*, ed. Daniel Kahnemann, Paul Slovic and Amos Tversky (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 32-47.

⁶ Cf. Joseph Berger, “New York’s Principals Tell Why They ‘Break the Rules,’” *New York Times*, (February 21, 1989), B1.

⁷ Cf. John Ladd, "Morality and the Ideal of Rationality in Formal Organizations," *The Monist* 4 (1970): 488-516. By invoking a "formal organization" Ladd argues that all organizational environments — regardless of the leadership issue — are morally defective. But "formal organizations" don't exist. Ladd misconceives them as "idealizations." I take them to be hypotheses about environments lacking certain constraints on action. The lack of such constraints is an empirical proposition.

⁸ See James G. March, "The Allocation of Attention," in *Decisions and Organizations* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1989), 3-12.

⁹ See John Keegan, *The Mask of Command* (New York: Viking, 1987), 234, on the restrictions on coercive leadership for the sake of maintaining command.

¹⁰ Cf. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. (New York: Vintage, 1970). Foucault argues that it was concern for social control rather than increasing humaneness that led to the disuse of public execution.

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