

MORAL LEADERSHIP: TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING?

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On his way toward answering the question of whether moral leadership is possible, Edward G. Rozycki says much that is interesting and much that is true. However, that which is interesting is not true, and that which is true is not interesting.

My response to Rozycki's paper will be restricted to three areas: Rozycki's notion of moral rules; his analysis of leadership; and his failure to address the fundamental issue of whether we are better off with moral leaders.

Rozycki uses the classic distinction between authority and power to clarify what is essential to his notion of heroic leadership. Added to this is Rozycki's insistence that while leaders attempt to act through organizations, organizational actions can be immoral. Furthermore, much is made of the apparent need for leaders to break organizational rules in order to be effective or successful. And here we are instructed that if morality is tied too tightly to following the rules, then there can't be moral, heroic leaders.

Two critical observations can be made of Rozycki's analysis of productive leaders. First, the relationship between breaking rules and being effective is not clear. More exactly, it is not evident why Rozycki conceives organizational rules as absolute, unconditional obligations, with the only option being to fulfill one's duty or be immoral. After all, very few, if any, civil laws are absolute and unconditional, and most admit exceptions (for example, police vehicles exceeding the speed limit are not taken as evidence that one has to break the law in order to be a good cop). So, Rozycki's concern with morality being too tightly tied to rule following to allow for effective, moral leadership assumes that organizational rules are absolute — which is an unwarranted assumption. The challenge of moral leadership does not arise from the tension between following organizational rules and being moral, nor does a leader need to choose between effective and moral actions. Rather, the possibility for effective, moral leadership is proportionally related to and contingent on the presence of wise, moral organizational rules that are conditional and discriminatory.

The second point pertains to Rozycki holding that one can be a heroic leader only if one's decisions cannot be vetoed by subordinates — though this being the case, we are told, entails that the organization is morally defective. Here again, I believe that Rozycki has mischaracterized organizations. Specifically, if one's subordinates could override the decisions of their leaders, then not only do they lack a heroic leader, they have no need for a leader, heroic or otherwise. Furthermore, it is not clear why any organization that disallows subordinates vetoing the decisions of their leaders is a morally defective organization. Granted, Rozycki asserts that “any action performed by one constrained from the exercise of moral choice is *ceteris paribus* morally defective.” But such a claim only compounds the obscurity. For what is most vital to understanding the relationship between a leader and subordinates is that they do not share the same rights and privileges, or have the same obligations. In other words, Rozycki's formula for a moral action denies or eliminates the very characteristics that essentially make for a leader-subordinate relationship.

Finally, it would seem that Rozycki has a narrow and peculiar notion of morality: “Morality is a matter of how our conduct and our ways of talking about it interrelate.” How this notion of morality

applies to adjudicating unjust harm — which Rozycki says is the most practical concern of morality — is far from clear. According to Rozycki, we use the concept of leadership to describe attempts at reassigning individual responsibility for actions that arise from social decisions; and we use the concept of morality to concentrate our concern on unfair distribution of social benefits. Together emerges Rozycki's moral, heroic leader, with conflicting, if not tragic, characteristics.

It should be enlightening to contrast Rozycki's image of moral leaders with that which takes form from a six-year study by Anne Colby and William Damon.¹ They found moral leaders to be exceptional people who play crucial roles in attacking the critical problems of human welfare. More specifically, moral leaders are to be understood in terms of five criteria:

1. they have a long-term commitment to moral ideals, including a general respect for humanity;
2. they are scrupulous in their effort to use morally justifiable means to pursue their moral goals;
3. they demonstrate a willingness to risk their own self-interest for the sake of their moral goals;
4. they tend to inspire others;
5. they possess a sense of perspective about themselves, centering on being humble.

In addition, Colby and Damon found that despite the diverse lives of their subjects, they exhibited an “impervious sense of certainty about their moral beliefs and, paradoxically...receptivity to new ideas and goals; they disclaimed being courageous; they had positive attitudes toward hardship and challenge; they developed a lifelong capacity to learn from others; and they credited faith and spirituality as having a major role in their lives.”² Finally, moral leaders “see the place of their moral goals in their lives — in the relation of their goals to their sense of who they are.”³ It should be evident that Rozycki's heroic, moral leaders, and the characteristics associated with such tragic souls, are not to be found within the ranks of those studied by Colby and Damon. The question is whether they are anywhere to be found.

Everything discussed thus far has assumed that organizational benefit is the predominant consequence of moral leadership, that we are really better off because of morality. But is that true? Should we strive to make our society as morally good as possible? Ought individuals try to be as morally good as possible? Susan Wolf holds that there is “a limit to how much morality we can stand” and that it is not always “better to be morally better.”⁴ Robert Adams echoes Wolf's concern by claiming that “maximal devotion” to the interests of morality is not desirable.⁵ Finally, as if anticipating Rozycki's notion of unconditional rules, Bernard Williams is very critical of those ethical systems that emphasize absolute duties and responsibilities, concluding that “we would be better off without” such morality.⁶

In Rozycki's concerted effort to address the issue of whether moral leadership is possible, he fails to take seriously the more fundamental question of whether it is really good to have moral leaders. Given Rozycki's characterization of heroic, moral leaders, I, for one, sincerely doubt that we would be better off with the likes of them.

¹ Anne Colby and William Damon, *Some Do Care: Contemporary Lives of Moral Commitment* (New York: The Free Press, 1992).

² Anne Colby and William Damon, “Gaining Insight Into the Lives of Moral Leaders,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (January 20, 1993): B3.

³ Colby and Damon, B4.

⁴ Susan Wolf, “Moral Saints,” in *The Virtues*, ed. Robert B. Kruschwitz and Robert C. Roberts (Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 1987), 140, 151.

⁵ Robert Adams, *The Virtue of Faith and Other Essays in Philosophical Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 171-73.

⁶ Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 174.

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