# Part III - The Morality of Leaders: Motives and Deeds

## 6 - Why Leaders Need Not Be Moral Saints

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Few would disagree with the claim that we want our leaders to be moral. But just how moral do we want them to be? Here, my focus is not the issue of “dirty hands,” which prompts some thinkers to suggest that our leaders must sometimes be willing to do the wrong thing—in effect, to get their hands dirty.1 Rather, the question I want to address is whether our leaders should be as moral as possible. Do we want them to be, as Susan Wolf famously put it, “moral saints”?2 There is significant support for this kind of expectation both in our everyday discourse about leadership and in the leadership literature. We frequently hear, in response to bad behavior by leaders, that our standards should be higher for people in power than they are for everyone else. According to this view, we look to our leaders to set the moral example for the rest of us. Leadership theories—from transforming and servant leadership to authentic and ethical leadership—point in the same general direction.3 Leaders who live up to the tenets of these theories stand out morally from followers, as well as from other leaders, especially with respect to how they are motivated. It is no overstatement to say that the current orthodoxy in the leadership literature holds that leaders ought to pursue the good of followers (and others), not their own good.4

Such other-regarding commitments are central to Wolf’s notion of the moral saint. Wolf defines a moral saint as “a person whose every action is as morally good as possible, a person, that is, who is as morally worthy as can be” (419). What makes the saint’s action morally good is its causal origin in a “concern for others” (420). This other-regarding focus similarly characterizes the maximally morally worthy person. According to Wolf, “A necessary condition of moral sainthood would be that one’s life be dominated by a commitment to improving the welfare of others or of society as a whole” (420). Wolf’s moral saint thus differs from the religious saint, whose “powerful humanitarian concern” must be understood “in the context of a more comprehensive devotion to God.”5 Rather than being driven by religious commitment, the moral saint is motivated by genuine altruism or a sense that it is a person’s moral duty to make others better off (420). Wolf gives the names “Loving Saint” to the altruist and “Rational Saint” to the person who acts to advance the well-being of others “out of ... intellectual appreciation and recognition of moral principles” (420).

As we shall see, Wolf rejects moral sainthood. Her basic point is that it represents a failed ideal in personal life (419). As Vanessa Carbonell describes Wolf’s view, “[A] saint is someone we want neither to be nor to be around.”6 For the purposes of this chapter, I am not primarily interested in whether moral saints can pursue their individual purposes or whether we find them attractive partners in our personal or social relationships. What I want to consider is whether moral sainthood is the right leadership ideal.7 I have elsewhere argued that leaders are not justified in being morally worse than the rest of us.8 The moral rules apply equally to leaders and followers. Here, I defend a companion claim: we cannot rightly expect leaders to be morally better than the rest of us. So my thesis is in keeping with a more general, fundamental view of leadership ethics—namely, that leaders are not morally exceptional. Ethics is neither easier nor harder on leaders. Because it makes room for leaders to pursue the many and varied ends that the rest of us pursue, they need not be moral saints.

My argument against moral exceptionalism is ultimately a Kantian one. Immanuel Kant’s ethics are characterized by their strictness and their minimalism. The strictness of the theory means that leaders cannot use consequences (the ends) or considerations of partiality (the good that could be achieved for self or others) to break the moral rules.9 The theory’s minimalism is in the fact that it appeals primarily to negative duties (e.g., duties “not to” lie, cheat, break promises, etc.), leaving it to the individual to decide when and how to discharge positive duties (e.g., duties “to” help others, etc.).10 The strictness of the theory keeps leaders within the moral rules, whereas its minimalism calls for something well short of saintliness. This reading of Kant contrasts with Wolf’s reading, which attributes much greater demandingness to Kant’s views.11 Her criticism of the Rational Saint is a serious one, and in the course of this chapter, I defend Kantianism against it.

### THE PRACTICE AND CONCEPT OF LEADERSHIP

Wolf presents both “practical” and “logical” reasons for thinking that moral sainthood is ultimately a bad ideal in personal life (421). The practical reasons derive from contingent facts about the world in which we live. Simply put, it is impossible for people to pursue most of the personal endeavors that occupy them and, at the same time, to commit themselves fully to the welfare of other people:

[I]f the moral saint is devoting all his time to feeding the hungry or healing the sick or raising money for Oxfam, then necessarily he is not reading Victorian novels, playing the oboe, or improving his backhand.... An interest in something like gourmet cooking will be ... difficult for a moral saint to rest easy with. For it seems to me that no plausible argument can justify the use of human resources involved in producing a pate´ de canard en croute against possible alternative beneficent ends to which these resources might be put.... Presumably, an interest in high fashion or interior design will fare much the same, as will, very possibly, a cultivation of the finer arts as well. (421, 422)

Wolf’s point is that an overriding commitment to the good of others will not leave room even for dabbling in personal hobbies or diversions.

That is to say nothing of becoming captivated by one of these activities, let alone trying to become good at one of them.12 Just to attain academic, musical, or athletic competence, one must make a significant commitment to the activity in which one wants to become competent often at the expense of the good that one might do for others. Expertise comes at even greater expense. Malcolm Glad well cites research supporting the claim that being an expert demands ten thousand hours of practice.13 Of course, if there were more time in the day or more days in a life, more resources, or—even better—fewer problems, we might save the world and also become Yo-Yo Ma. With all our good work completed (or at least all that could be done for the time being), we could dedicate ourselves to perfection at the cello. But the two goals are practically inconsistent. Unfortunately, our world is not one of unlimited time or resources, and its problems are many. Here, the trade-off is no less necessary than the trade-off experts ordinarily make between two equally demanding personal pursuits. We cannot expect Yo-Yo Ma to be Tiger Wood, or vice versa.

When we combine this condition of necessity with real-world facts about the business of leadership, the practical reasons against moral sainthood apply with even greater force in leadership contexts. For one thing, leadership is closer to a kind of expertise than it is to dilettantism. Typically, the long hours required to get in a position of leadership are surpassed only by the hours of single-minded dedication required once in the position. Leaders whose lives are “dominated by a commitment to improving the welfare of others or of society as a whole” (420) will not have the time and resources necessary for building luxury cars, designing sleek computers, and developing winning football teams. There is another way in which the contrast between ordinary project pursuit and efforts to increase the general welfare is even starker in the leadership case than it is in our personal lives. If I decide to devote my personal time to serious marathon training, there are definite opportunity costs. In addition to precluding many alternative personal hobbies I might take up instead, my training will also compete with all kinds of efforts to do good for others, which likely means less overall welfare than there might otherwise be. But when a person exercising leadership devotes his energies to a project, we can expect that (some) followers will do so as well. If the project ultimately has little to do with the good of others, the leader will have taken up followers’ time and directed their resources away from more beneficent ends that might have been pursued.

This is not to deny the increased welfare often associated with consumer goods and sporting events. Fancy cars and computers give some people pleasure, perhaps making them happy or happier than they would have been. So do winning football teams—at least for half the fans. And it is also true that the production of material goods means jobs, either here or abroad, thus allowing us to talk about the contribution these goods make to well-being throughout society. However, even if we admit that there is a sense in which creators, producers, and consumers of nonessential goods may all be better off, sometimes benefitting indirectly as part of the larger economy, the good of others hardly stands out as a practical motivational driver for leaders. Claims by business leaders that “it’s really about the consumer” or by professional coaches that “it’s really about the fans” (or even “the players”) do not ring true in most cases. It is also worth noting that when leaders decide to step down, it is often to live a more balanced life, to spend more time with their families, or to take up public service. Sometimes these explanations do not ring entirely true either, but no one questions the fact that resigning from a high-profile leadership position is often practically necessary for increased other-regarding activity—even if we doubt whether newfound altruism has anything to do with the departure.

In contrast with the practical reasons against moral sainthood, the logical reasons for thinking it is a poor personal ideal point to a conceptual conflict between the character traits associated with a prioritized concern for others and their feelings, on the one hand, and the rougher, edgier, even wicked qualities we sometimes admire in people, on the other (421–422, 426).14 Wolf writes,

[A] moral saint must have and cultivate those qualities which are apt to allow him to treat others as justly and kindly as possible. He will have the standard virtues to a nonstandard degree. He will be patient, considerate, even-tempered, hospitable, charitable in thought as well as in deed. He will be very reluctant to make negative judgments of other people. He will be careful not to favor some people over others on the basis of properties they could not help but have.... A moral saint will have to be very, very nice. It is important that he not be offensive. (421, 422)

Is there a problem with having this kind of saintly character? According to Wolf, the logical deficiency of moral sainthood is that it does not leave room for “a cynical or sarcastic wit, or a sense of humor that appreciates this kind of wit in others” (422). The person with the devilish sense of humor is funny precisely because he is so unsaintly. For him to be a moral saint, he would have to stop being a devil. Wolf concludes, “[A]s a result, he will have to be dull-witted or humorless or bland” (422).

Concerns about sense of humor do not ground the conceptual conflict between leadership and moral saintliness. But there is a related worry about the disposition of the saint. The moral saint simply sounds too nice for what we understand as leadership. Leadership is rarely careful and conservative; it is about risk and change and creation.15 In fact, the work of leadership scholars such as Ed Hollander gives us reason to think that doing things in new and different ways is central to what leadership is.16 So there is a logical point here too. An unyielding commitment to innovation and deviation can bring with it the risk of being impatient, judging people, and perhaps offending them. Sometimes, it simply means not caring very much about what others think. In this respect, the behavior of leaders contrasts sharply with that of people who are merely following. The best way to get along in the system is to stick closely to social expectations. This kind of conformity—nice and inoffensive though it may be—is a real impediment to change. Indeed, because of the high costs of imposing social rules from the outside, the internalization of social expectations is a necessary—and perhaps the most important—ingredient in a recipe for keeping things just the way they are.

Recognizing the value of unsaintliness in leadership contexts cannot mean that we must give leaders a moral pass and allow them to behave unethically to achieve their ends.17 Generally accepted moral requirements apply to leaders no less than they apply to the rest of us.18 For example, getting things done does not give leaders a justification for mistreating people or intentionally hurting their feelings whether followers or outsiders. Nor do pressures toward goal achievement that leaders face make it permissible for them to lie, cheat, or break promises. Ethical leadership can take only so much “going against the moral grain” (422) and “develop[ing] ... traits that are necessary to abandon or challenge societal norms and traditions.”19 But people do not have rights to unlimited patience, charity, hospitality, kindness, and consideration. Moreover, they do not have rights never to be judged or offended. Basic morality, then, is a perfectly good ethical aspiration for leaders, although it is well short of moral saintliness. Even if we accept that leaders serve as role models, living up to the fundamental standards of morality is all that we can rightly expect of them in their roles. It is certainly all we can expect if we also want them to have any chance of achieving the ends of leadership.

This strategy for adjudicating between leadership and moral saintliness suggests that we embrace leadership at the expense of saintliness. An alternative way to reduce the conflict between the two is to take a different view of moral saints—that is, to draw on a different view of what the ethical ideal would look like. Edward Lawry, for example, writes, “I have a sense that [Wolf] is not talking about real moral saints.”20 This line of objection draws on the moral theory of virtue ethics.21 According to the virtue ethicist, we cannot look to a set of moral behaviors that would be good in all circumstances; rather, the right action is the action that would be done by the virtuous person in particular circumstances.22 Practical wisdom, built on years of experience, makes it possible for this individual to determine what behavior would be fitting for the situation at hand.23 Drawing on this general approach, Lawry points out that “the inoffensive niceness of a person seems surely to be an objectionable moral trait when righteous indignation is called for.”24 Like traditional understandings of virtue ethics, Lawry’s view of moral sainthood prioritizes the good of individual actors. “[T]he best moral life,” he writes, “has to be a good human life.”25 Lawry’s moral saint therefore avoids some of the unattractiveness of Wolf’s moral saint by returning the focus of ethical theory to personal good, not social good. This focus, because of the rich variety it allows, would also make greater room for moral saints in leadership contexts.

Like Lawry, Vanessa Carbonell recommends sensitivity to the situation in her criticism of Wolf: “Patience ... seems virtuous only when it is warranted.”26 For example, Carbonell’s paradigm case of a moral saint, international healthcare leader Paul Farmer, is rightly “an incredibly inpatient person”27 because he knows firsthand that lives are at stake. Carbonell adds that blind charity is “downright naive and certainly inimical to the project of benefitting others” and that “making negative judgments when they are warranted is an essential component in the project of benefitting others.”28 Notice, however, that Carbonell’s defense of moral saints maintains Wolf’s more common characterization of the saint—at least in modern times—as someone who is primarily concerned about the well-being of others. For Carbonell, acts that do not look nice, when properly understood in terms of social benefit, are nice after all. In this respect, the argument bears significant resemblance to Machiavelli’s claim that some acts of apparent cruelty are actually acts of kindness and that some seemingly stingy behaviors prove generous in the end.29

To make this kind of contextual approach to moral saintliness work, its advocates would need to show that social benefit is somehow the aim of ethical behavior. As we have seen, this claim is not universally true in virtue ethics. The virtuous person aims not at social benefit but at virtuousness itself. Admittedly, virtuous leaders may have special reasons to make the good of others their foremost aim. These reasons would point to the nature of the activity and, in particular, to leaders’ relationships with followers. One might say that it is the main job of leaders to look out for their welfare. Such a view would be in keeping with the claims of contemporary virtue theorists, which hold that what is right is determined not only by the situation but also by the role of the person in that situation.30 However, I think we should be skeptical of the claim that leadership can be understood in terms of a fundamental commitment to well-being, whether the wellbeing of followers or of society as a whole. Not even a normative conception of leadership can bear the weight of this kind of commitment. To justify my skepticism, I turn to a consideration of the Loving Saintly Leader.

THE LOVING SAINTLY LEADER

To ask whether leaders ought to be moral saints is really to ask a question about the ends of leadership. At its heart, this question is normative: what ends ought leaders to pursue. As I pointed out in the previous section, it is false that all (or most) leaders in fact pursue the good of others. In many cases, when their activities end up benefitting others, the leaders are not actually aiming at this result. But this point is a descriptive one. It says something about the way the world is specifically, how leaders behave in it. As such, the point is consistent with all kinds of normative claims about how leaders should be motivated. In particular, it is consistent with the claim that leaders should be altruistically motivated—in effect, that they should be moral saints. To challenge this claim, I will develop the argument that this kind of moral sainthood is too narrow to serve as a normative ideal for leadership. By saying that it is too narrow, in contrast with Wolf, I am not arguing that it is a bad ideal. I want to leave open the very real possibility that a leader could rightly aim at the good of others. But this end is only one valuable end among many that might justifiably be pursued by leaders.

The Loving Saintly Leader is the leadership equivalent of Wolf’s Loving Saint. Like the Loving Saint, the Loving Saintly Leader is genuinely motivated by altruism (420). She thus takes the good of others to be the primary end of her behavior. Historically, the moral theory that has maintained a direct focus on social benefit is utilitarianism, not virtue ethics.31 In its simplest form, utilitarianism holds that the right action produces the greatest overall well-being. According to utilitarianism, the happiness of one person counts no more or less than that of anyone else in the overall utility calculations that determine right actions. In many ways, the Loving Saintly Leader looks like a utilitarian (428)—indeed, much more like a utilitarian than a virtue theorist. For the utilitarian, there is a clear focus on particular actions as the objects of moral assessment, and there is a distinct sense in which a person’s well-being can be set against, and sometimes sacrificed for, the good of others—what we might expect of a saint. In contrast, because of its roots in Ancient Greek society, virtue ethics makes less room for distinguishing personal well-being—a life well lived—and the good of the society and its members. The individual cannot be properly understood outside of his community and place within it.32

A leader whose main commitment was overall utility in society would normally qualify as a Loving Saintly Leader. Acting in ways that maximize societal well-being would seem to involve rigorous discrimination among possible choices, and the most straightforward way for a utilitarian to do this would be to incorporate a fundamental concern for others in his decision rule. Earl Spurgin, for example, implicitly suggests that one unattractive feature of moral saints in business is their underlying commitment to utilitarianism. He writes,

The resources that pharmaceutical companies devote to developing and marketing erectile dysfunction medications could save many thousands of lives if they were devoted to other life-threatening illnesses. No doubt, saintly businesses would be moved by such an argument. It is hard to imagine how saintly businesses could be comfortable using their resources to help older men have sex when those same resources could be used to save lives, often the lives of children.... Such saintliness by businesses, however, would come at societal costs, both those of continued silence about erectile dysfunction and those from the loss of sex lives for men so afflicted.33

In Spurgin’s example, the pharmaceutical company is clearly doing social good by addressing a problem that causes significant reductions in well-being. Yet the company could be doing even greater good by redirecting its efforts toward those with greater need and, perhaps because of their youth, a greater claim on resources generally.34 Spurgin’s complaint against this kind of utilitarian saintliness is that it cannot condone businesses that produce nonoptimal, but nonetheless, very socially beneficial products.

There is intuitive appeal to the utilitarian idea that societal wellbeing ought to be maximized, especially on the saintly view that the good of others is the central moral value. But notice that the leader who is focused on making particular people better off—or improving the lives of people with particular needs—still lives up to Wolf’s main criterion for sainthood. Wolf suggests that saints are “dominated by a commitment to improving the welfare of others or of society as a whole” (420, emphasis added). The disjunction is there for good reason. This broad characterization of sainthood reflects the fact the altruism, unlike utilitarianism, is often “more heartfelt than efficient.”35 A person can do good (or aim to do good) without doing the most good (or aiming to do the most good). Another reason to avoid identifying utilitarianism with loving saintliness is that self-focused action can be utilitarian without being altruistic. A person who is able to maximize overall utility by caring for himself—say, because he is in great need would hardly be acting in a saintly or altruistic matter. Here, utilitarianism requires self-centeredness, not altruism. For both these reasons, we should reject accounts of altruism that understand it in terms of utilitarian considerations about overall well-being. The Loving Saintly Leader must focus on others, not the self, but this focus can be on particular individuals or groups of individuals (e.g., followers)—that is, not necessarily on the collective as a whole.

If the Loving Saintly Leader does not have to be a utilitarian, it largely misses the point to note that moral saints need not “suffer from the obsessive maximizing that makes Wolf’s saint so unattractive.”36 The Loving Saintly Leader may be less attractive than the mindless utility maximizer, but he still has what Wolf takes to be the main defect of all moral saints. By tying the ultimate value of our projects to the good of others, the expectation of moral saintliness threatens the notion “of an identifiable, personal self” (424). According to Wolf, that is, sainthood essentially crowds out the desires that characterize us as humans: “The normal person’s direct and specific desires for objects, activities, and events that conflict with moral perfection are not simply sacrificed but removed, suppressed, or subsumed” (424). Her critique certainly signals one of the dangers faced by the moral saint, utilitarian or not—namely, that he is probably “too good for his own well-being” (421). But I do not think that the distinction between self-interest and the interests of others is sufficient to capture what is wrong with saintliness in leadership contexts. The main problem with the Loving Saintly Leader is not that the happiness of others overrides the leader’s own happiness or even his “personal excellence” (423, 426). It is rather that privileging this kind of leadership—because of its single-minded focus on well-being—ignores the value of other morally worthy leadership pursuits that are neither welfarist nor properly characterized as personal. Or so I shall argue in the remainder of this section.

The ideal of the Loving Saintly Leader rests on a morally impoverished view of motivation. Increasing welfare is not the only ethical reason for leaders to set their projects in motion and to dedicate much of their lives to making these projects successful. Other, equally good ethical reasons for project pursuit include the value leaders see in the activity of creation or in the thing ultimately produced. Great musical conductors, we might assume, justifiably lead concerts because of their commitment to the music itself—or for the value of producing excellent music—not necessarily (or even likely) because of their love for anyone, including orchestral players or audience members. Religious leaders, like religious saints, work primarily for their God.37 Even political leaders, often thought to be a paradigm case of leadership with an other-oriented focus, need not see the welfare of others as their primary commitment. Plato was wrong to claim that because crafts such as leadership are “complete,” leadership cannot be exercised for the sake of the craft.38 Working for something does not always mean helping that thing. For example, a life devoted to simplicity would not be completing or helping simplicity but living according to its value. Likewise, a person might pursue political leadership because of the intrinsic value of the craft, or simply an “intellectual appreciation” (420) of the science of effective governance. Love of country or commitments to political ideals such as freedom are also ethically admirable motivations for entering political life. In other words, the great variety of projects to which people attach value makes it normatively implausible to expect leaders always to act only on the welfarist commitments of moral saints.

It is equally hard to see the ends of leadership as being mainly personal or, in many cases, personal at all—in the way that, say, becoming a great guitarist might be a form of personal excellence. Leadership is not a personal activity; it is a group enterprise. People do not lead alone but, rather, work in concert with others to achieve collective goals. Leadership’s necessarily collectivist nature may well be the root of our misguided attraction to the Loving Saintly Leader. The word collective is ambiguous. To talk about a collective goal can mean either that we are aiming at something good for all of us or, simply, that it is something at which we are collectively aiming. When the ultimate end of a group’s effort is the welfare of its members, leadership is collective in the former sense, as when a labor union strikes to get better pay. But collective goals need not focus on the group that has those goals. For example, a group’s efforts to dedicate a monument to victims of terrorism can hardly be understood as based on the welfare of group members. Although the goal is their goal, it does not mean that goal achievement is ultimately for them—or, for that matter, for the victims (instead, it is to them), for people outside the group, or for people who make up society as a whole.

Leadership conflicts with moral saintliness, then, not because the leader’s self-interest or personal good is in tension with societal good. It is because leaders are rightly driven by all kinds of ends, many of which are not focused on well-being at all, whether personal or societal. Instead, the collective project pursuit that characterizes leadership is sometimes aimed at ends that are considered worthy for their own sake. People rightly work together to achieve ends that are not really for anyone. To be sure, leaders and the groups they lead want to achieve what they find to be valuable. And when they achieve what they find to be valuable, there is a sense in which they got what they wanted. But this does not mean that the value of their ends must be understood in terms of the wants or desires of the group.39 Determination of value can be based on judgment, which in many cases precedes desire. In other words, people sometimes want things because these things are thought valuable, rather than valuing these things simply because they are desired.

The same goes for leaders who are focused on the good of others. Although humanitarians get what they want when they save lives, the value of what these Loving Saintly Leaders achieve is not derived from their own desires. Hopefully, the Loving Saintly Leader desires what is good for others rather than fooling himself into thinking that something is good for others just because he desires it. In the best cases, he will have his own ethical view of what has supreme value, a view that defines the ends of his leadership in terms of the welfare of followers or society as a whole. My conclusion in this section, however, is that the Loving Saintly Leader’s end—namely, the good of others—is only one value among many. Morality certainly makes room for pursuit of this end, but it also makes room for leaders to pursue all kinds of other things that are valuable in themselves: great music or art, religious and political ideals, and so on. Social benefit is therefore an end of ethical leadership, but it is not the only end.

### THE RATIONAL SAINTLY LEADER

The Rational Saintly Leader is the leadership equivalent of Wolf’s Rational Saint. Like the Rational Saint, the Rational Saintly Leader is motivated by moral duty, not by altruism (420). He thus takes conformity to the principles of morality to be the primary aim of his behavior. Historically, the moral theory most closely connected to this kind of behavioral conformity is the view of Immanuel Kant.40 Roughly, Kantianism holds that right actions respect the demands of reason.41 Actions are unreasonable, first, when they cannot be universalized.42 It is unreasonable for a person to think that he should be able to use means that he cannot conceive of everyone else similarly using to achieve their ends—behaviors such as lying, cheating, and promise breaking.43 Other people’s ends are just as important in their own eyes. Second, and much more concretely, unethical behaviors disrespect the reason of particular thinking beings by treating these individuals as mere means to an end.44 We can therefore equally explain why lying, cheating, and promise breaking are wrong by appealing to the fact that these behaviors bypass the reason of autonomous individuals, treating these people as though they were nothing more than “things.”45 Insofar as the Rational Saintly Leader’s duties are derived from Kantian moral theory, he would take these principles seriously indeed, making them his predominant source of motivation. In this final section, I consider the extent to which Kantianism demands this kind of saintliness of our leaders. Are the demands of Kantian moral theory so great—in effect, that leaders should aspire to become Rational Saintly Leaders—that the theory is ultimately incompatible with leadership as we know it?

Initially at least, the Kantian does not look all that much like a moral saint. The moral saint has a central “commitment to improving the welfare of others or of society as a whole” (420), whereas the Kantian gives little weight to the value of happiness or well-being.46 Kant’s theory is committed to the value of reason, and—as Wolf concedes commitments to happiness and reason can come apart: “On one interpretation of Kantian doctrine ... moral perfection would be achieved simply by unerring obedience to a limited set of side constraints. On this interpretation, Kantian theory simply does not yield an ideal conception of a person of any fullness comparable to that of the moral saints I have so far been portraying” (430). Nevertheless, Wolf is able to motivate a Kantian argument for saintliness by highlighting Kant’s insistence that we have not only negative duties to refrain from unreasonable behavior but also positive duties (similarly grounded in reason) to advance the ends of others (430–431) or—as Kant puts it—to make their ends, “as far as possible, my ends.”47 According to Kant, it is unreasonable to expect others to help us pursue our ends when we are unwilling to help them.48 In addition, failing to offer assistance contradicts the fact that people in need are themselves rational individuals just like us, each with his or her own plans and projects. So, within Kantianism, there is enough beneficence to get an argument for sainthood off the ground.

Still, we can challenge Wolf’s claim that “[positive] duties are unlimited in the degree to which they may dominate a life” (430, emphasis in original). For Kant, our negative duties (duties not to do things such as lying, cheating, and promise breaking) differ greatly from our positive, other-regarding duties.49 Negative duties must be discharged at all times and in all circumstances, whereas positive duties—because of their “wider” nature—can be discharged in some circumstances but not in others.50 There are good practical reasons for this distinction. For one thing, positive duties come with higher costs: discharging them requires positive action (e.g., if I want to help someone, I need to stop typing and engage in an alternative behavior). Unlike negative duties, they cannot be discharged when we are occupied with other things (e.g., I am not lying as I type) or doing nothing at all. Kant’s reasoning for this distinction is that making positive duties as demanding as negative duties undermines the basis for the claim that we have positive duties to help in the first place. Our duty to help others in need depends on the fact that we sometimes need (or have needed, or will need) help from others.51 That is why we cannot reasonably expect others to help us when we are unwilling similarly to help them.

But neither can others expect that we engage in helping behavior all of the time. As Kant puts it, “a maxim of promoting others’ happiness at the sacrifice of one’s own happiness, one’s true needs, would conflict with itself if it were made a universal law.”52 What is the morally correct amount of sacrifice? It will be determined by a person’s own “true needs”—the more a person needs from others, the more (on pain of contradiction) others can expect of him.53 Notice, though, that there must be limits even here and that these limits will ultimately be based on the person’s interests, not the interests of others. Ironically, the needier the person is, the less he will be able to do for others without undermining his ability to take care of himself. Of course, leaders are dependent on others in a different way. Their goals can be achieved only by collective action—that is, with the help of others. But, here too, the corresponding duty that leaders have to help followers (or anyone else) will be necessarily limited by leaders’ commitments to the goals that undergird their other-regarding duties. This means that the advocate of Kantian ethics simply cannot endorse the Rational Saintly Leader or Wolf’s Rational Saint, who “pays little or no attention to his own happiness ... [and] sacrifices his own interests to the interests of others” (420).

Another potential way of tying Kantianism to moral sainthood focuses on the notion of moral worth. Wolf claims that the moral saint is “a person whose every action is as morally good as possible, a person, that is, who is as morally worthy as can be” (419). The closest Kant comes to privileging this kind of commitment to morality is in his claim that only actions done “from duty” have moral worth.54 The person who does an action from duty does the right thing for the right reason namely, because it was his duty to do it. In contrast, when a person’s action merely “accords with duty,” he does the right thing but acts as he does for some reason besides duty—for example, out of desire, natural disposition, or self-interest.55 Regardless of motive, the person has discharged his duty. However, for purposes of assigning “moral worth” or “esteem,” actions that accord with duty come up short:

I maintain that in such a case an action of this kind, however right and however amiable it may be, has still no genuinely moral worth. It stands on the same footing as other inclinations—for example, the inclination for honour, which if fortunate enough to hit on something beneficial and right and consequently honourable, deserves praise and encouragement, but not esteem; for its maxim lacks moral content, namely, the performance of such actions, not from inclination, but from duty.56

According to Kant, then, it does not make sense to give people moral credit for what they would have done anyway. It just so happens that what they were bound to do by duty turned about to be what they were already inclined to do, disposed by character to do, or egoistically tempted to do.

The Rational Saintly Leader, it seems, would aim for his actions to be from duty, not merely to be in accord with duty. Because he is “dominated by the motivation to be moral” (431), the actions of this leader, like the actions of Wolf’s Rational Saint, would not be determined by desire, natural disposition, or self-interest. Yet it is a mistake to think that Kantian ethics demands this kind of motivational commitment of leaders or anyone else. Kant argues that there are some things that we must not do and some things that we have a duty to do. Between what is prohibited and what is required are actions that we can do or not do as we please. Within these limits, that is, there is a kind of moral free space. For example, the leader who has an idea for a new dietary supplement may or may not decide to pursue its development, assuming he is bound by no promises and that the supplement is not harmful. Morality cannot tell him what he ought to do because he has neither a duty to develop the product nor a duty to refrain from doing so. So, in this case, it is impossible for him to act from duty. To expect all of a leader’s actions be motivated by duty misses the central Kantian point that we are free to pursue all kinds of projects, as long as they are within the limits of morality. Morality itself need not be a leader’s only project.

Kant also overstates the case against giving moral credit for actions motivated by considerations other than morality. If I do an action that only accords with duty and I would have done the action even if I had a duty not to do it, then clearly my action has no moral worth. But if I would not have done the action had it been against duty, then it is unclear why my action—motivated though it is by desire or something else—does not have moral worth. Imagine that the leader who develops the dietary supplement does so out of self-interest. Although the behavior has an egoistic source, if he would not have developed the product were there a duty not to develop it (say, because of associated health risks), then it seems that there is something morally worthy about his behavior after all. He is consciously pursuing his projects albeit nonmoral ones—within the limits set by morality.

Despite the weakness of efforts to associate the Rational Saintly Leader with Kant’s moral theory, I want to concede that there is something to the charge that this moral theory does have its “saintly” features and that these features are in tension with leadership. The tension is not related to the positive duties the theory generates or to the notion of moral worth. Its source is rather that Kantianism seems to bring with it extreme moral caution. Although there is great freedom within the bounds of morality, one has to be very careful not to go outside these bounds, especially when it comes to discharging one’s negative duties. As we have seen, these duties—for example, not to cheat or lie—do not have the discretionary nature of our positive duties. We ought never to fail to discharge them. The problem, however, is that the lines between fair play and cheating, as well as between truth and deception, are not always bright for leaders. The most obvious way to deal with this kind of ambiguity, if a leader absolutely wants to avoid immorality, is to stay far away from where the lines might be. Wolf gets close to identifying this feature of Kantianism when she notes the Rational Saint’s “pathological fear of damnation” (424). Damnation is not quite what the Kantian fears, but there is a sense in which Kant’s theory lends itself to the charge that it engenders a pathological fear of doing the wrong thing (or failing to do the right thing).

Extreme caution can be an impediment to leadership. A paralyzing aversion to doing the wrong thing hardly lends itself to the deviation and innovation expected of many leaders. Across leadership contexts, leaders adopt means that are not explicitly prohibited to be more productive or successful. We see this phenomenon in business (think of the added efficiency of assembly lines and, more recently, outsourcing), and it is true in sports (think of what the Fosbury Flop did for high jumping and how drivers such as Junior Johnson came up with ingenious ways of increasing speed and safety in NASCAR).57 What might initially look like an unfair competitive advantage (when it truly conduces to success) gets adopted by others within that particular context. Leaders who are overly concerned about maintaining the status quo or an even playing field will be too conservative for this kind of innovation. It will be similarly difficult for leaders who are preoccupied with the rationality of followers to influence them to achieve group goals. Followers are motivated by all kinds of things that fall somewhere between straightforward appeals to their rationality and straight-out deception. Showing complete respect for follower autonomy lets them do things, whereas deceiving followers effectively makes them do things. However, a lot of leadership is about “getting people to act,” which is somewhere between the two.58 We would therefore be rightly skeptical of leadership efforts that indifferently approach followers with claims such as “You might not want to do this, and I want to engage your rational faculties to the fullest extent when I ask.” The methods leaders are expected to use—methods that hardly serve an ideal of follower autonomy—do not comport well the extreme moral caution that might seem to characterize Kantianism.

I am not the first to recognize this particular tension between saintliness and leadership. Spurgin writes, “The very concept of moral sainthood discourages the cultivation of [traits that] lead individuals to ‘push the envelope’ in ways that are beneficial. People with such traits often challenge societal norms and traditions, thereby becoming the vanguard of positive social change.”59 In fact, he goes so far as to say that a good leader sometimes “breaks ethical norms and standards of his profession and society.”60 The Kantian, of course, cannot resolve the tension between ethics and leadership this way. Actions that a leader knows to be wrong—determined not by profession or society but, rather, by reason—ought not be done. Nevertheless, I want to argue that the advocate of Kant’s ethics can get around this tension and, thus, avoid embracing the Rational Saintly Leader. The Kantian has at her disposal two lines of argument. First, the “pathological fear” of morality that characterizes the Rational Saintly Leader looks much more like a heteronomous influence, than an autonomous influence, of behavior.61 But moral behavior, Kant believes, is necessarily autonomous, not heteronomous. Second, a pathological fear of doing the wrong thing would undermine the ability of leaders to will projects that they can rightly pursue on Kant’s moral theory.

For Kant, when we use reason to govern ourselves, we act autonomously, as self-determining individuals.62 Acting on our own reason thus contrasts with acting on influences other than our rational nature. To signify this sense of otherness, Kant refers to these nonautonomous influences in terms of “heteronomy.”63 Heteronomous influences include religion, tradition, society, upbringing, or everyday peer pressure. Oddly enough, they also include many things that we would not be initially inclined to consider as being “other”—for example, our own desires and other psychological states. Despite its initial oddness, this Kantian point actually has strong intuitive appeal, especially if we think about the ways in which we can be controlled by our desires (the extreme case being addiction), as well as by other psychological states (our fears and obsessions). In leadership contexts, we might think of a person’s unhealthy desire to please a particularly charismatic leader.64 Even though these psychological states are necessarily internal to the person who has them, it still makes sense to talk about them as motivational sources that move him away from the ideal of autonomy. Addictions and obsessions prevent us from doing what we want and, more importantly, what we think we really ought to do.65 The follower who has an overpowering desire to please a leader would find it particularly difficult, maybe impossible, to stand up for what he thinks is right, even if that is what he really wants to do.

There is something similarly deficient about a leader who is primarily driven by the fear of doing what may be wrong. Of course, according to Kant, we should all do what our reason tells us is right and avoid engaging in actions that our reason tells us are wrong. That is what it means to be a self-determining individual. Reason does its job of directing the will,66 and when necessary, leaders should act on its influence rather than on the influence of nonmoral considerations, regardless of whether these considerations have an internal or external source. But the expectation that leaders act on their own reason is importantly weaker than a requirement that they be “dominated by the motivation to be moral” (431). Morality, important as it is, does not require this kind of motivational preoccupation of leaders. In fact, there is a sense in which the person who is “dominated” in this way—motivated, that is, by the chance that he has moved in the direction of the moral line actually goes against the ideal of autonomy. Autonomous individuals should not be dominated by anything. Their actions derive from their own reason, not from subservience to fears and obsessions, even fears and obsessions about morality. Because the leader with a pathological fear of doing the wrong thing acts from a kind of moral neurosis, he is better described as acting heteronomously.

A pathological fear of doing the wrong thing would also make it very difficult for a leader to carry out his projects, so difficult—I think—that he cannot will extreme moral caution. The leader who wants to guarantee that he never breaks a promise would have to cut himself off from all human interaction and avoid contracting with others. Admittedly, like the hermit or someone banished from society, he would have a failsafe plan for discharging his negative duty never to break a promise. The problem, however, is that social isolation gets the leader moral safety at the expense of all project pursuit, indeed, at the expense of leadership. As we have seen, Kant holds that we depend on others to pursue our projects—whatever these projects are.67 Our dependence on others is especially important in leadership contexts. Collective effort is a necessary means for leaders to achieve their ends, and to will these ends is to will the means for achieving them.68 Why, then, are leaders unable to will extreme moral caution? As Kant puts it, “[S]uch a will would contradict itself.”69 All this is to say that moral risk is a necessary part of social life and, so too, of leadership. The only way to eradicate moral risk, to guarantee moral safety, is to avoid leadership altogether.

We should therefore reject the claim that the Rational Saintly Leader, any more than the Loving Saintly Leader, represents the moral ideal for leadership. Whereas the Loving Saintly Leader’s single-minded commitment to welfarist ends makes him too morally narrow to serve as the ideal, the Rational Saintly Leader’s obsession with moral safety is not consistent with autonomous project pursuit by leaders, which is necessary to get things done in a social world. Properly understood, the demands of Kant’s ethics are significantly more minimal than the moral commitments adopted by the Rational Saintly Leader. We can expect leaders to work within the bounds of morality, but we cannot expect them to do all that is within their power never to approach morality’s limits. This is not to say that they have a license for “dirty hands.” However, we should acknowledge that leaders—as they approach these limits—will sometimes get things wrong. This minimalism is as it should be. It is hard enough to be ethical, which is why it is the most that we expect of ourselves. Being ethical, not saintly, is also all that we should expect of our leaders.

### NOTES

1. Michael Walzer, “Political Action and the Problem of Dirty Hands,” Philosophy and Public Affairs 2 (1973): 160–80. Notice that even these leaders are expected to be moral in some meaningful way. For example, Walzer claims that it is a test of a leader’s morality that he feels guilty when he has to do wrong; it shows “both that he is not too good for politics and that he is good enough” (167–8).
2. Susan Wolf, “Moral Saints,” Journal of Philosophy 79 (1982): 419–39. All internal page references in the remainder of the text are to Wolf’s article.
3. See, for example, James MacGregor Burns, Leadership (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1978); Robert K. Greenleaf, Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness (New York: Paulist Press, 1977); Michael E. Brown and Linda K. Trivińo, “Ethical Leadership: A Review and Future Directions,” Leadership Quarterly 17 (2006): 595– 616; and Bruce J. Avolio and William L. Gardner, “Authentic Leadership Development: Getting to the Root of Positive Forms of Leadership,” Leadership Quarterly 16 (2005): 315–38.
4. See Brown and Trivińo’s catalog of the similarities among various leadership theories (“Ethical Leadership,” 598).
5. Robert Merrihew Adams, “Saints,” Journal of Philosophy 81 (1984): 392–401, at 395.
6. Vanessa Carbonell, “What Moral Saints Look Like?” Canadian Journal of Philosophy 39 (2009): 371–98, at 372.
7. Earl Spurgin draws out the implications of Wolf’s argument for business contexts in his “Can Businesses Be Too Good? Applying Susan Wolf’s ‘Moral Saints’ to Businesses,” Business and Society Review 116 (2011): 355–73. I take up Spurgin’s view below.
8. Terry L. Price, Leadership Ethics: An Introduction (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
9. Immanuel Kant, Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals, trans. H. J. Paton (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1964), 82–4.
10. Ibid., 91.
11. As Wolf points out, “A quick, breezy reading of utilitarian and Kantian writings will suggest the images, respectively, of the Loving Saint and the Rational Saint” (427).
12. See Wolf’s discussion of “the dominance an aspiration to become an Olympic swimmer or a [concert] pianist might have” (423).
13. See his discussion of “The 10,000-Hour Rule” in Malcolm Gladwell, Outliers: The Story of Success (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2008), 37–42.
14. Also see Spurgin, “Can Businesses Be Too Good?” 358.
15. In his critique of saintliness in business, Spurgin notes that “[s]ociety often benefits when businesses are at the forefront of challenges to norms and traditions” (“Can Businesses Be Too Good?” 362).
16. See Ed P. Hollander, Leaders, Groups, and Influence (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964); and Terry L. Price, Leadership Ethics.
17. Spurgin, in “Can Businesses Be Too Good?,” sides with Wolf in his defense of “ethical standards and restraints,” but—as I shall argue in the section The Rational Saintly Leader—the examples he gives of justified deviance contradict this position.
18. Price, Leadership Ethics.
19. Spurgin, “Can Businesses Be Too Good?” 361.
20. Edward Lawry, “In Praise of Moral Saints,” Southwest Philosophy Review 18 (2002): 1–11, at 1.
21. Ibid., 2.
22. Aristotle, Nichomachean Ethics, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1985), 44 [1106b20].
23. Ibid., 160 [1142a15].
24. Lawry, “In Praise of Moral Saints,” 4.
25. Ibid.
26. Carbonell, “What Moral Saints Look Like?” 381.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
29. Niccoló Machiavelli, The Prince, eds. Quentin Skinner and Russell Price (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 55–61.
30. Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory, 2nd edition (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).
31. See the works of thinkers such as John Stuart Mill, Utilitarianism, ed. George Sher (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1979).
32. See MacIntyre, After Virtue.
33. Spurgin, “Can Businesses Be Too Good?” 363–4.
34. Redistributing resources to the young typically means greater impact in terms of overall utility because of the longer expected life span over which to experience well-being. See Robert M. Veatch, “How Age Should Matter: Justice as the Basis for Limiting Care to the Elderly,” in Helga Kuhse and Peter Singer, Bioethics: An Anthology, 2nd edition (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 437–47, for a discussion of these issues.
35. Carbonell, “What Moral Saints Look Like?” 378.
36. Ibid. For this reason, Spurgin’s counterexample above also fails.
37. See Adams, “Saints.” Whatever concern they have for human well-being is mediated through their conception of God’s love or God’s commands. Although mediated concern for others sometimes looks very close to the real thing, as when it draws on language about God being “within” us all, we can expect that the human element is—indeed, for most theologies, has to be—secondary.
38. Plato, Republic, trans. G. M. A. Grube and rev. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1992), 17ff [341c].
39. See Joel Feinberg, “Psychological Egoism,” Reason and Responsibility: Readings in Some Basic Problems of Philosophy, eds. Joel Feinberg and Russ Shafer-Landau, 10th edition, 493–505 (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1999), at 504.
40. Wolf, in “Moral Saints,” defends connections between the Rational Saint and Kantianism, 430ff.
41. Kant, Groundwork, 62–64, 88–89.
42. Ibid., 70.
43. Ibid., 91.
44. Ibid., 95–96.
45. Ibid., 96.
46. Ibid., 63, 67.
47. Ibid., 98.
48. Ibid., 91.
49. Ibid.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid.
52. Kant, “The Metaphysics of Morals,” in Practical Philosophy, trans. and ed. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 524.
53. Ibid.
54. Kant, Groundwork, 65.
55. Ibid.
56. Ibid., 66.
57. I thank Thomas Hudson, Sandra Peart, and Jeff Pollack for a discussion of this phenomenon and for their suggestions. For an excellent account of innovation in racing, see Nascar Race Hub: The Gray Area, Fox Sports (2013), <http://msn.foxsports.com/topics/m/video/79515551/nascar-race> -hub-the-gray-area-part-2-2013.htm (accessed September 20, 2013).
58. Joel Feinberg, Doing and Deserving: Essays in the Theory of Responsibility (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970), 160, emphasis added.
59. Spurgin, “Can Businesses Be Too Good?” 357.
60. Ibid., 359. Spurgin uses the notoriously deceptive lead character in the television show House to make his point.
61. Kant, Groundwork, 108ff.
62. Ibid., 108.
63. Ibid.
64. See, for example, Andrew Young, The Politician: An Insider’s Account of John Edwards’s Pursuit of the Presidency and the Scandal That Brought Him Down (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2010).
65. Harry Frankfurt, “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person,” Journal of Philosophy 68 (1971): 5–20.
66. Kant, Groundwork, 62.
67. Ibid., 91.
68. Ibid., 90.
69. Ibid., 91.

## 7 - Democratic Leadership and Dirty Hands

Nannerl O. Keohane

This chapter is a revised version of a paper by the same name presented at the American Political Science Association meetings in September 2010; a second version, “The Responsibilities of Leadership and the Problem of Dirty Hands,” was delivered as the Cal Turner Lecture at Vanderbilt University on October 6, 2011. I am grateful to Chuck Beitz, Corey Brettschneider, Bob Keohane, Melissa Lane, Steve Macedo, James Stoner, and Lucas Swaine for comments on earlier drafts.

Must a political leader who wants to govern effectively be prepared to behave immorally? And does it make a difference if the leader is chosen by and governs on behalf of other citizens?

These questions are often discussed under the rubric “dirty hands,” from Jean-Paul Sartre’s play Les Mains sales, evoked by Michael Walzer in a particularly influential essay.1 We sometimes associate the issue specifically with authoritarian leaders, power-holders who have few constraints on their behavior. But the ethical problems that may face democratically elected leaders are intriguing and pressing, too.

This chapter makes several points. First, I claim that the phrase dirty hands captures a significant problem in ethics and governance. This point is not obvious; several thoughtful philosophers have concluded that the notion of dirty hands names an illusory problem.2 I argue that this concept identifies a significant dilemma that cannot be resolved by a simple yes/no answer. Instead, we are better served by the more complex and nuanced approach exemplified by Max Weber’s “ethic of responsibility.” To clarify the issue, I ask why dirty hands questions are most frequently associated with political life, even though analogous dilemmas sometimes arise in other contexts.

Next I explore the concept of responsibility by identifying a number of different types of situations in which persons may be held to be responsible for or to some other persons, institutions, or causes. Then I turn to the distinctive dimensions of ethical leadership in a democracy, asking how the ethic of responsibility applies in this kind of governance. I show how the answers must differ for participatory and representative democracy, and emphasize the importance of institutions of accountability. Representative democracies rest on a set of reciprocal responsibilities between leaders and citizens; nonetheless, I argue that, in the last analysis, the decision-making leader must bear the primary responsibility for her actions and their consequences.

In discussing this topic, it is important to be clear what we mean by the word leader. This term is often used without definition, which can lead to obscurities and misunderstandings. In an earlier discussion I offered this definition, which I will follow in this chapter: “Leaders determine or clarify goals for a group of individuals and bring together the energies of members of that group to accomplish those goals.”3

Another point to keep in mind is that, as C. A. J. Coady puts it, “[t]he idealized conditions invoked by the philosophers of dirty hands are often comically remote from the reasoning and psychology of the spooks and politicians that actually get their hands, arms and shoulders dirty.”4 The characters in Sartre’s play display some of this distasteful reasoning and psychology. They engage in violence routinely in the service of their ideological beliefs and goals. Consideration of the possible implications of moral impurity attendant on their actions is one background theme, but conflicting strategic choices, desire for personal advancement, potential dangers to one’s person, and the irony of unforeseen outcomes are much more prominent in the play than the tragic struggles over moral dilemmas discussed by those of us who philosophize about dirty hands.

Against this background, it is easy to see how the problem of dirty hands is related to the potentially corrupting effects of power, most

famously captured in Lord Acton’s maxim.5 But the topics are not the same, and it is important to distinguish them. Lord Acton claimed that power always tends to corrupt, no matter what the context. The dirty hands dilemma refers to a specific situation in which any leader confronts a choice of policy or strategy in performing her duties, a choice that inescapably includes courses of action that will harm others. Dennis Thompson puts it this way: “The problem of dirty hands concerns the political leader who for the sake of public purposes violates moral principles.”6 This is a more complex situation, fraught with far tougher choices, than the straightforward claim that power tends to corrupt.

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TWO ANSWERS TO OUR BASIC QUESTION

One direct answer to the question, Must political leaders behave immorally to govern effectively?, is no. On this account, political leaders are just as much bound by moral precepts as ordinary citizens or subjects—perhaps more so, because leaders have broader duties and larger responsibilities. Leaders are also in positions where their behavior will be taken as exemplary, and thus their ethical decisions have widespread implications. The negative answer sometimes rests on the conviction that even if immoral behavior brings short-term political advantages, in the long run it will inevitably damage the community as well as the individual leader.

This was the position taken by Cicero, who held that honorable behavior is always beneficial for a leader and dishonorable behavior never pays off.7 A parallel but somewhat different version of this response was given by Renaissance humanists and incorporated in the mirror of princes literature. On this account, a leader who violates moral principles by abusing his power, particularly if he attends primarily to his own advancement or the narrow interests of a few, does not deserve the office. Erasmus firmly stated: “Only those who dedicate themselves to the state, and not the state to themselves, deserve the title ‘prince’. For if someone rules to suit himself and assesses everything by how it affects his own convenience, then it does not matters what titles he bears: in practice he is certainly a tyrant, not a prince.”8 This assertion echoes Aristotle’s familiar distinction between monarchy and tyranny in Book IV of the Politics. The same claim has been put forward more recently by James MacGregor Burns. He argues that someone who harms or diminishes his followers does not deserve to be called a leader, but a dictator or power-wielder.9

Yet however well intentioned and conscientious leaders may be, most of them will at some point confront moral dilemmas to which there is no right or easy answer, and whatever they do will be immoral by someone’s definition. The awareness of these pressing and complex dilemmas has prompted the opposite reaction to our basic question: the widespread conviction that a political leader cannot succeed unless he is willing to engage in shady or even downright immoral behavior. Because of the power a political leader wields, his scope of unconstrained action is generally broader than that of private actors, and most leaders will at some point be tempted to choose measures of dubious morality. Indeed, such measures may at times be the only ones that make it possible to achieve worthy goals. Thus, the second answer to the question “Must leaders be willing to behave immorally to govern effectively?” is yes.

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In his treatise The Prince, Machiavelli was the primary proponent in the history of political thought for this response. He was famously clear in that treatise that princes who wish to be successful cannot always behave according to the moral standards that govern private behavior, including integrity, truth-telling, and compassion. He asserted bluntly that leaders sometimes have to act wickedly to maintain their power and accomplish their goals. This is because “how men live is so different from how they should live that a ruler who does not do what is generally done, but persists in doing what ought to be done, will undermine his power rather than maintain it. If a ruler who wants always to act honorably is surrounded by many unscrupulous men, his downfall is inevitable. Therefore, a ruler who wishes to maintain his power must be prepared to act immorally when this becomes necessary.”10 A more familiar translation of this passage is the prince must “learn how not to be good.”11

Machiavelli defends his counsel of immorality in this context by the observation that because everybody else is acting badly, if you want to succeed you have to behave similarly or be outrun by those who are less scrupulous. Politicians may be shady, but all the people they work with and rule over are also shady, so why single the leaders out for blame? This is a cynical statement about human nature rather than a particular insight about politics. However, Machiavelli goes on to assert in that same brief chapter of The Prince that princes must sometimes behave immorally even if most or all of their subjects are placidly doing the right thing. He acknowledges that it would be “praiseworthy” for rulers to be loyal, sober, pious, generous, and

merciful. But because no leader can actually have all these virtues and hope to succeed, “one should not be troubled about becoming notorious for those vices without which it is difficult to preserve one’s power because ... doing some things that seem virtuous may result in one’s ruin, whereas doing other things that seem vicious may strengthen one’s position and cause one to flourish.”

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Machiavelli focuses on the prince’s goals rather than the character of the measures he chooses to pursue them. To found a state, maintain his power, and bring security to his people, the prince must be prepared to do what is necessary. As Machiavelli says in The Discourses: “A wise mind will never censure any one for having employed any extraordinary means for the purpose of establishing a kingdom or constituting a republic. It is well that, when the act accuses him, the result will excuse him; and when the result is good, as in the case of Romulus, it will always absolve him from blame.”12

ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN OTHER CONTEXTS

Machiavelli voiced with some relish a position that has been held, often less explicitly, by many others across the centuries. For some observers, including several in the Christian tradition, this supposedly inexorable connection between politics and immorality is grounds for distancing oneself from political action, eschewing positions of worldly authority. Before we link politics inexorably with dirty hands, however, we should note that thorny ethical dilemmas are not faced only by political leaders in official positions of power. We can find analogues for many aspects of the dirty hands challenges in private life or in dilemmas faced by leaders in other areas.

The need to deceive in pursuit of a worthy political goal is often used as a prime example of dirty hands. Leaders may feel compelled to lie to allies and even their subjects about diplomatic or military strategy to keep that information from their adversaries. But recall the familiar story of the German citizen giving shelter to a Jewish family who lies to the Nazi inspectors who have come to search his home. “Jews?” he says. “No, I haven’t seen any Jews.” A Kantian perspective that gives a very high priority to truth-telling would have dictated a different outcome. Most observers today would be more likely to condemn this man’s immorality if he had lost his courage and surrendered his guests to the Nazis. My point is this: whatever he does will be regarded by some observers as immoral. We generally pose such

questions as paradigmatic ethical dilemmas rather than invoking the concept of dirty hands, but there are similarities nonetheless.

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Even more salient to our question, disadvantaging or harming some individuals in pursuit of a collective purpose is a familiar challenge for leaders in many fields. Yet we do not usually encompass all kinds of leaders in the sweeping charge of dirty hands. Corporate executives make decisions to downsize a company or outsource work to a subsidiary abroad for financial reasons, thus weakening a community dependent on this industry and creating grave hardship for many families. Cathy Davidson has written a thought-provoking book about plant closings and how they can eviscerate a hitherto healthy community.13 The “business case” may be quite clear, in terms of the bottom line, but what about the men and women who have worked for a company for generations? How will they reassemble their shattered lives? In the long run, people will move somewhere else or a new industry will come in or the town will become a ghost town. But there are serious hardships in the “short run,” which may last for decades. There are real ethical dilemmas here, even though they rarely come to the fore in such decisions.

Academic leaders must address campus protests calling for divestment from certain kinds of industries or protesting the use of sweatshop labor in some distant country to make baseball caps or sweatshirts that say “Duke” or “Harvard” or “Wisconsin.” These are thorny ethical issues on which different members of the campus community are bound to hold quite disparate views. University leaders must also deal with issues about fair wages on campus and labor negotiations that have a strong ethical dimension for some constituents.

These examples are intended to show that leaders in many different fields, including corporate life and higher education, face complex moral dilemmas. Nonetheless, we usually think of the problem of dirty hands as particularly relevant to political leaders. Dennis Thompson notes: “Although similar conflicts arise in other activities, they are likely to be more intense or more frequent in politics.”14 Why should this be true? How is the political leader’s situation different from that of any of us facing complicated moral dilemmas in ordinary life? And how might we frame a response to our initial basic question that responds helpfully to the situation of honorable men and women in politics?

As we approach this question, we should keep in mind the importance of distinguishing among several types of actions by political leaders: actions that are undertaken by an ethically insensitive leader

without significant political purpose and are clearly immoral by any definition (e.g., genocide); decisions that have unfortunate consequences but are simply obtuse or unthinking, and were not undertaken as the result of any moral decision-making process; and unavoidable but morally unpalatable outcomes that are thoughtfully weighed to advance an important political goal for the community one leads. Only the latter situation invokes the particular challenges of dirty hands.15

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WEBER’S POLITICAL ETHIC

Machiavelli’s The Prince has had countless followers across the centuries, both acknowledged and hidden under professions of conventional morality. The cold clarity of his answer, however, belies the actual experiences of many morally sensitive and thoughtful persons in positions of political power. To those men and women, behaving as ethically as possible while nonetheless accomplishing the pressing purposes of governance is a sustained and important goal. “You are going to have to behave immorally, so get used to it and don’t let it bother you” does not ring true to their own values or to reality as they experience it.

In his essay “Politics as a Vocation,” Max Weber provides a third answer to our basic question, an answer that is likely to be more relevant to such conscientious leaders than a simple yes or no.16 On this account, if a political leader wants to fulfill his responsibilities, he will sometimes have to use measures of “dubious morality” with “evil ramifications,” and be aware of the “diabolic forces” that lurk within some of the choices he may have to make. But Weber does not just say, “[Y]ou are going to have to get your hands dirty, so be prepared to live with that.” Instead, he explores a distinctive political ethic that he calls the “ethic of responsibility” that should govern the behavior of political leaders, which he distinguishes from an “ethic of ultimate ends” that guides some individuals in their personal moral choices.17

Like Machiavelli, Weber emphasized the deployment of violence as the factor that makes ethical issues facing political leaders especially complex and thorny. In Weber’s view, “[I]t is the specific means of legitimate violence as such in the hand of human associations which determines the peculiarity of all ethical problems of politics.”18 Because Weber defines the state as having a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence, he sees controlling instruments of violence as part of a leader’s job. Here we have one compelling explanation for the

particular connections between political leadership and dirty hands. And for this reason, as Stephen Garrett points out, leadership in times of war “may rightly be regarded as the most severe and complicated test of the political morality of powerful individuals.”19

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In the passage cited just above, Weber also notes: “Whosoever contracts with violent means for whatever ends—and every politician does—is exposed to its specific consequences.” Using violence often involves ethical as well as strategic choices with implications that can reverberate well down the line, for the leader’s character as well as for the organization that he leads.20 The saint who follows the “ethic of ultimate ends” is concerned only with the purity of the goal: saving his own soul. The purity of the end must not be sullied by the use of dubious means, including harm to other individuals. Truthfulness is also an absolute requirement for the saint, whereas the political leader must consider the consequences of revealing sensitive information that may endanger the community. Such leaders may sometimes have to withhold information or deceive others. Anyone primarily concerned with saving his soul should go in for some other line of work.

Weber’s “ethic of responsibility” presents its own difficult demands, and brings little comfort for the politician. Weber notes that “no ethics in the world can dodge the fact that in numerous instances the attainment of ‘good’ ends is bound to the fact that one must be willing to pay the price of using morally dubious means or at least dangerous ones—and facing the possibility or even the probability of evil ramifications.”21 But “using morally dubious means” or dangerous ones and risking “evil ramifications” is not the same as asserting (as Machiavelli does) that leaders must be prepared, regularly and somewhat blithely, to behave “immorally.” Weber’s point is that behaving according to the saintly standard of strict morality would be inappropriate and ineffective, so that relying on the “ethic of responsibility,” even though it may sometimes involve dubious measures, is the most moral course a leader can follow.

In the essay I cited at the outset, Walzer asserts that “a particular act of government ... may be exactly the right thing to do in utilitarian terms and yet leave the man who does it guilty of a moral wrong... . If, on the other hand he remains innocent ... he not only fails to do the right thing (in utilitarian terms) but he may also fail to measure up to the duties of his office (which imposes on him a considerable responsibility for consequences and outcomes).” Walzer notes that

adhering to a rigorous standard of morality can have disastrous consequences for the community; in fact, “we would not want to be governed by men who consistently adopted that position.” Yet he believes that politicians who use these dubious means incur inescapable moral guilt, even though the achievement of good political ends will sometimes require such an accommodation.22 There is a catch-22 here that seems inescapable; Walzer’s politician is condemned either to feckless dereliction of duty or to serious moral culpability.

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Unlike Walzer, Weber makes no reference to the “guilt” of a leader who attempts to follow the ethic he has outlined. The ethic of responsibility does not excuse anything a leader may choose to do. Weber never says we should refrain from blaming or criticizing a leader who cavalierly violates moral dictates to advance her own career, savors cruelty or humiliating others, or obtusely ignores less dubious ways to achieve her goals. A leader who lacks either passion for a cause or a thoughtful, conscientious perspective on the situation she confronts should certainly be condemned. But a leader who scrupulously follows the ethic of responsibility has done the best she can, and that is where the matter ends. There is no sense that people who do not have to face such terrible dilemmas should condemn her for her choices on the grounds of immorality. As Kai Nielsen puts it, in choosing the lesser of two evils in a dirty hands dilemma, “we do what, everything considered, is the right thing to do: the thing we ought—through and through ought—in this circumstance, to do.”23

This does not mean that the political leader blithely accepts wrongdoing without a second thought. A conscientious leader who follows the precepts of the ethic of responsibility wrestles with the ambiguity of the dilemmas she faces within her own soul. In language that has no parallel in The Prince, Weber says that “whoever wants to engage in politics at all, and especially in politics as a vocation ... must know that he is responsible for what may become of himself under the impact of these [ethical] paradoxes. I repeat, he lets himself in for the diabolic forces lurking in all violence.” A thoughtful, ethical human being must recognize that engaging in morally dubious measures is likely to have some impact on her character, and do the best she can to maintain her moral compass. Remorse about harm done to other individuals is a reaction that we would usually praise in a leader who has made a difficult decision on our behalf. But remorse is not the same as guilt. There is tragic dimension here that has quite a different tone from Machiavelli’s Prince.24

The Ethic of Responsibility

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In explaining the “ethic of responsibility” especially appropriate to political leadership, Weber asserts that “three pre-eminent qualities are decisive for the politician,” to ensure that he can do his job well and protect himself against some of the consequences of using violence: “passion, a feeling of responsibility, and a sense of proportion.” Passion is defined not as “sterile excitation” but as a matter-of-fact devotion to a cause, a steady commitment to some higher end, not just one’s own advancement. Weber insists that “the serving of a cause must not be absent if action is to have inner strength.” A number of types of causes can do the work here. But there must be something of this kind; otherwise, “the curse of the creature’s worthlessness overshadows even the externally strongest political success.”25

This commitment to a worthy cause is the main factor that legitimates a leader’s behavior. As with Machiavelli, the end is more important than the means, but for Weber, not just any end will do. Neither advancing your personal glory nor maintaining your power for its own sake is consistent with this ethic. There must be some kind of “cause” beyond your own direct interests. Weber also insists that leaders need a sense of proportion or perspective, a “distance to things and men,” including distance from oneself. This distance enables a leader to consider matters coolly and thoughtfully rather than being moved by narrow self-interest, empathy for the individual circumstances of some followers, or other factors irrelevant to the cause she serves. And this unlikely conjunction of passion for a cause and a distance from oneself helps explain why great leaders are so rare.26

Max Weber is not the only theorist who has focused on responsibility as the most salient dimension of the ethical issues that confront political leaders. Discussions of dirty hands often invoke the concept of responsibility, either casually or as a more prominent feature of the argument. John Parrish is particularly clear about the centrality of the concept in discussions of this sort. “To refuse to get one’s hands dirty on grounds of absolute principle,” he says, “is to abandon the central place that the notion of responsibility for others must invariably hold at the heart of our moral conceptions.”27

Stuart Hampshire makes a claim similar to Weber’s in his essay entitled “Public and Private Morality.” Although Hampshire insists that he is not developing an alternative kind of ethic specific to politics, he asserts that the person who moves from private to public life

crosses “a moral threshold,” on the other side of which “a new responsibility, and even a new kind of responsibility, and new moral conflicts, present themselves.” In his view, this “new kind of responsibility... entails, first, accountability to one’s followers, secondly, policies that are to be justified principally by their eventual consequences, and thirdly, a withholding of some of the scruples that in private life would prohibit one from using people as a means to an end and also from using force and deceit.”28

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It is illuminating to ponder examples of the new kind of responsibility that arises when one takes on the duties of political leadership. When France was defeated in June 1940, Winston Churchill was concerned about the French fleet (one of the finest in the world) falling into German or Italian hands. A large contingent of that fleet was stationed in Oran, Algiers. Churchill instructed the British admiral in the Mediterranean to offer the French naval commander four choices for immediate action: continue to fight against the Axis powers; sail to a British port, so that the ships could be commandeered by the British and the sailors could return home; sail to a French port in the West Indies not yet under Nazi control, where the ships could be disarmed and perhaps entrusted to U.S. care; or scuttle the ships. Otherwise, the ships (and their men, who had been Britain’s staunch allies only a week before) would be destroyed by the British. And, in the end, that was what happened. Almost 3,000 French sailors were killed in the bombardment and 350 wounded. Despite the difficulty of this choice, Churchill never wavered.29

Churchill’s decision can be condemned or praised, but avoiding the issue would have been as vulnerable to criticism as the course he chose to pursue, in terms of its consequences for the war, for the British people for whom Churchill was responsible, and indeed for the people of all the world’s democracies. As the leader of Great Britain, the only major power standing up to the Fascists at that point, Churchill could not just decide to ignore the problem and retreat to his country house until everything blew over.

In concluding “Politics as a Vocation,” Weber notes that a political leader following the “ethic of responsibility” may somewhere reach the point where he says, with Martin Luther: “Here I stand; I can do no other.” And “insofar as this is true, an ethic of ultimate ends and an ethic of responsibility are not absolute contrasts but rather supplements, which only in unison constitute a genuine man—a man who can have a ‘calling for politics.’ ”30 Weber thus allows for the possibility

that a political leader may reach a point where he is unwilling to engage in a particular form of dubiously moral behavior. One thinks of political leaders who have resigned their offices rather than undertake assignments they regarded as beyond the pale. It is not true that “anything goes” according to the ethic of responsibility.

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WHAT DO WE MEAN BY RESPONSIBILITY?

To understand the particular responsibilities of the political leader, it is helpful to distinguish among four different kinds of moral situations, involving purely individual action, having personal responsibilities for other individuals, having institutional responsibilities, and having the special kinds of institutional responsibilities associated with political leadership.

First, consider individuals making decisions about their own behavior as individuals. Morals and ethics by definition are about how we relate to other human beings (or, for some philosophers, to all sentient beings). When I travel on the subway I am morally obliged not to steal from other passengers, or assault or lie to them, but I have no further connection with any of them. We might, using the term loosely, speak of my having the responsibility to behave morally in this situation, but this is a very broad usage. I have no special responsibility to or for any of these individuals. I am responsible only for myself.

The second category involves persons who have responsibilities for other individuals. Suppose there is an electrical outage on the subway and the train stops in the dark tunnel. If I am traveling with a small child, I have a responsibility to help that child to safety, and it would clearly be immoral for me to abandon the child to make sure I got out myself. If I am traveling alone, I am not formally responsible for any of my fellow passengers, but I might decide, on moral or intuitively empathetic grounds, to help a fellow passenger to safety—an older person with a cane, or a child who has lost her mother in the dark. By embarking on such a course I assume new obligations to the person for whom I have temporarily made myself responsible. I would face a moral dilemma if, to honor a pressing obligation to someone else outside the subway, I needed to leave quickly and this meant abandoning the other person, given that I had initially offered help and taken on a new responsibility.

Parents or caretakers confront moral dilemmas that would not arise if we were each responsible only for ourselves. The mother of several children may have to determine how to allocate scarce resources,

treating each child fairly but not identically. A husband whose wife is dying for want of a drug they cannot afford may decide to steal the drug for her although he would not do so for himself.31 Having responsibilities for other human beings creates moral dilemmas more complex than those that involve only our individual behavior. This complexity is at the core of the ethic of responsibility, which in this way is applicable not only to politicians but to anyone who has responsibility for other people.

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The third category includes leaders in other walks of life, apart from politics, whether in business, universities, religious institutions, or volunteer activities. If the leadership is institutionalized in a formal group or organization, the leader is responsible to other individuals (followers, employees, colleagues) to do the best job he can to further the joint purposes of members of the group. In some situations the leader is also responsible for these persons. Leadership of any kind may present ethical dilemmas more complex than those that confront an individual acting for himself alone, or one who holds no institutional office and is responsible for a smaller number of other persons.

When we move from leaders in general to members of our fourth category—political leaders—a number of factors make the dirty hands dilemma particularly salient. We immediately see the relevance of control of the legitimate means of violence, which both Weber and Machiavelli emphasize. Decisions about the morally appropriate use of violence occasionally come up for private individuals, including issues of self-defense, a teacher protecting students against a gunman in a school or a parent shielding a family against a violent intruder. But such occasions are much less frequent in private life than they are for those who control “the legitimate means of violence,” which includes political leaders from mayors of cities and military officers to heads of nation-states.

Psychologist Amos Tversky described his experience as the commander of an Israeli mobile army unit moving through a desert when his troop captured some enemy soldiers. The laws of war dictated that these soldiers should be taken prisoner, fed and sheltered, and safely delivered to justice. But the enemy soldiers had a clear interest in undermining or killing the capturers and thus had to be watched and guarded closely. All this required time, attention, and scarce resources. Diverting some of these resources to the supervision and provisioning of the prisoners endangered Tversky’s own troops in this situation of great scarcity. Tversky’s decision to take care of the prisoners rather than shooting or abandoning them was resented by some of his own

men, and could even be criticized as immoral in this context because it endangered those for whom he was most directly responsible. Nonetheless, it was clearly required by international conventions governing treatment of prisoners, and mandated also, I would argue, by the precepts of human dignity.32

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In addition to needing to grapple with the ethical implications of the legitimate control of violence, most political leaders are also responsible for (and to) more people than a private actor. This creates unique layers of complexity that enhance the kinds of moral dilemmas leaders face. One’s responsibilities as a political leader are not to one homogeneous set of constituents. The interests of citizens in different circumstances, opponents in various kinds of competitions, even parts of one’s own government, can create ethical dilemmas that have no counterpart for those who are responsible only for themselves or a small number of family members and friends.

The political leader also has a larger scope of responsibility than leaders in other walks of life because of the distinctiveness of political life in human experience. Aristotle argued that politics is the “central organizing principle of any community,” the grounding of everything else. Social, domestic, and economic life have as their framework the political system that people share, and other dimensions of a community take on characteristics that the political system embodies and represents.33 In this same vein, in delineating the “moral threshold” between public and private life, Hampshire says: “public policy is a greater thing, as Aristotle remarked, and an agent in the public domain normally has responsibility for greater and more enduring consequences and consequences that change more men’s lives.”34

We can sum up these points by noting that political leaders generally occupy an office, in the specialized meaning of this term having to do with the structures and purposes of government. They fulfill a designated role that sets them apart from private individuals as well as other leaders, a role that brings with it significant opportunities—and also the distinctive ethical dilemmas that we associate with dirty hands.35

DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF RESPONSIBILITY IN A DEMOCRACY

So far I have discussed ethical dilemmas confronting political leaders as though their situations—the political systems in which they work—were all the same. What difference does it make if the leader

works within a democracy rather than a monarchy, autocracy, or oligarchy? What are the implications for a leader’s responsibilities if he or she is chosen by and governs on behalf of other citizens? As Parrish reminds us, “we need to ask not only what it is to have dirty hands, but also precisely whose hands we think are dirty.”36

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It may seem that (to use Stuart Hampshire’s term) the “moral threshold” democratic leaders face should be higher than that for other leaders, so that acts of “dubious morality” that might be excused in an absolutist monarch are off-limits for a democratic leader. Bernard Williams asserts that “democracy has a tendency to impose higher expectations with regard even to means, since under democracy control of politicians is supposed to be a function of the expectations of the electorate.”37 But the expectations of electorates may sometimes be as low as those of subjects in any other form of government—think of the Athenian citizens in the worst stages of the Peloponnesian War. One can find occasional parallels to this in the behavior and expectations of citizens in most democracies today. As Garrett puts it, only an exceptionally optimistic or foolhardy person “would assume that the morals of the ‘people’ are always such that they constitute pressure on their leaders to behave in exemplary ways.”38

Most discussions of this issue focus not on the leader per se but instead on the citizens in a democracy, exploring the ways in which we may (or may not) share in responsibility for dubious moral outcomes. Dennis Thompson has posed this issue in a particularly compelling way. He refuses to allow democratic citizens to stand back and judge their leaders as though the citizens were not implicated in the leaders’ decisions and policies. Such distancing, he says, ignores the fact “that the bad that the official does, he does not only for us, but with our consent—not only in our name, but on our principles. It is not clear, therefore that we as citizens have any grounds” for blaming him.39 Michael Walzer makes a different point when he asserts that the fact that our leader “acts on our behalf, even in our name” means that when he “hustles, lies or intrigues” he is doing so for us, and that this heightens the moral dimensions of the action taken.40 Walzer makes this point without in any way suggesting that we as citizens are therefore partially responsible for these actions.

In a direct participatory democracy, a group of citizens who have collectively decided on a dubiously moral policy all have dirty hands, not just those who proposed or who have been charged with implementing the decision. Responsibility in this situation is clearly shared

by all the citizens, or at least by those who have voted for or been willing to implement the chosen course of action. In representative democracies, on the other hand, the most salient function of the citizens is choosing among potential leaders and deciding when to replace them. Although citizens hold ultimate sovereignty, in a representative system citizens collectively do not often make major policy decisions for the whole political system. This makes the question of the responsibility of the democratic citizen in such systems especially complex.

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Eric Beerbohm’s thought-provoking book In Our Name makes the strong claim that “the office of citizenship” in a representative democracy engages us in the activities of our government regardless of our attitudes toward the policies of our leaders. “Public officials claim to govern, act, and speak in our name. Because our primary mode of political agency is mediated, we are vulnerable to the charge of participating in the wrongdoing of another.”41 Beerbohm is quite clear that electors in a representative system cannot simply offload responsibility on others and, like a collective Pilot, wash their hands.

Discussions of what it means to act “in our name” sometimes focus on the question of differential responsibility for a decision depending on whether a citizen has actually voted for the representative who made that decision and whether the citizen knew (or could have known) that such a policy was likely to be chosen. In recent comments on Beerbohm’s book, Anna Stilz has raised some thoughtful questions about this issue. She distinguished among three hypothetical citizens: Amy, who voted for George Bush in 2000 as a supporter of his “compassionate conservatism,” could not have known how he would respond to 9/11 and strongly opposed the decision to invade Iraq; Bob, who voted for Gore and made his choice on purely economic grounds; and Carmen, who was out of the country and did not vote in the election but was a vigorous supporter of the Iraq War. How, asked Stilz, would we decide among these citizens in terms of degrees of responsibility for the war in Iraq?42 Political issues involving complex moral decisions often come up unforeseen and no one, including the leader, could have known in advance that such a decision would have to be made. In such conditions, holding individual voters in a representative democracy responsible for a specific policy involves a number of argumentative steps that can each be questioned along the way.

Taking a firm position in this debate, Thomas Nagel distinguishes between two forms of democratic legitimation relevant for dirty

hands: first, the “periodic answerability” of the leader to the electorate, and second, the specific consent of the citizens. For Nagel, consent cannot be assumed just because the leader has been duly elected.43 On this account, the devices of election and representation cannot create a form of responsibility in which the citizens must share some of the burden. The pathways of assigning blame or credit are too diffuse to make such a relationship meaningful.

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INSTITUTIONS OF ACCOUNTABILITY

Given the complexity of assigning responsibility for specific policy decisions to individual voters in a representative democracy, I would argue that a better way to approach this question is to ask about the vibrancy and strength of the political institutions of the representative polity being discussed, and especially the quality of its institutions of democratic accountability. Accountability, as defined by Ruth Grant and Robert O. Keohane, “implies that some actors have the right to hold other actors to a set of standards, to judge whether they have fulfilled their responsibilities in light of these standards, and to impose sanctions if they determine that these responsibilities have not been met.”44

Effective accountability in this sense depends on effective monitoring. Citizens must take this obligation seriously, and leaders must recognize the legitimate interest and ultimate control of the citizens and provide regular reports on their performance. Thompson notes that responsibility to citizens “requires that legislators explain their actions to the citizens they represent. Giving reasons is part of what being responsible means, and part of what being reelected requires.” He goes on to point out that publicity is essential to this giving of reasons.45 If the institutions that give force to this accountability in any polity including elections, the court system, freedom of speech and press, and well-crafted systems of administrative law—are effective and resilient, then it could make sense to assert that the citizens of that democracy share some responsibility with their leaders.

However, in complex nation-states the institutions of accountability are often diffuse, unwieldy, or corrupted. Elections are about many different things, and rarely yield a clear mandate on any particular vexed question. Events move quickly, and dilemmas arise that could not have been foreseen either by electors or by their representatives. In such situations, it is hard to argue that citizens share responsibility

for choices they could not have foreseen from information previously available to them. For example, critics of the current electoral process in the United States often zero in on the muddling effect of “negative campaigns” dedicated solely to impugning the intelligence or character or loyalties of the opposing candidate rather than defining and defending one’s own record or proposals. Such campaigns may be effective in garnering votes, but they do nothing to advance meaningful responsibility by the leaders to the citizens for their decisions. These kinds of strategies make it harder to connect the election of representatives and the policies that they pursue and implement, so democratic accountability is significantly undermined.

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There is also the problem of multiple leaders having dirty hands. Dennis Thompson notes: “The portrait that dominates discussions of the moral dilemmas of officials presents a solitary figure, agonizing alone when making moral choices, and acting alone when executing them.” But this portrait does not jibe with the way in which many decisions are made in government.46 Not just democratic citizens, but democratic leaders in any hierarchical government face the question of how to determine responsibility for joint decisions. It is not always clear exactly whom we should hold accountable, unless one assumes that the chief executive is always responsible for whatever may happen in his administration.47

Democratic accountability sometimes involves seeking specific consent in advance. As Thompson points out, if a democratic leader gains the consent of the citizens for his course of action, he is “not uniquely guilty in the way that the problem [of dirty hands] in its traditional form presumes.” If he does not gain that consent, he commits a further wrong, by violating the democratic process.48 Yet the kinds of actions that we normally think of in connection with dirty hands are rarely aired in advance. They often involve secrecy or deception, and securing advance consent would be impossible. Citizens may be asked to approve a vague general policy in advance, even if they are not made aware of specific actions, or they may delegate responsibility for oversight to another representative. But such measures are often quite ineffective in allowing citizens to have meaningful awareness of decisions being made “in our name.”

An obvious example is the controversy in the United States about the National Security Agency gaining access to the phone and e-mail messages of millions of U.S. citizens and foreign nationals to forestall terrorist attacks, or spying on allies around the world to gain an

advantage in negotiations. The outrage expressed by many citizens when these matters became public was not assuaged by the fact that the National Security Agency was acting on its interpretation of the Patriot Act, which was passed by Congress in the wake of 9/11 and renewed under President Obama. Nor were concerned citizens reassured that some members of Congress (as our representatives) had been privy to these developments, especially when it became clear that several of these representatives strongly opposed the activities but were precluded by laws governing secrecy from making their opposition public. This situation makes clear that the concepts of prior authorization and representative oversight are clumsy tools for enforcing accountability in a complex modern democracy.

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Institutions designed to assure accountability of elected officials in a democracy most frequently involve the responsibility of a democratic leader to explain and justify her actions after the fact. As Nielsen puts it, the political leader must be prepared “to publicly justify” what he has done, “at least in the fullness of time.”49 The “fullness of time” may be quite an extended period, however, and the damage involved will long ago have already been done. In such a situation, the concept of shared responsibility becomes rather hollow.

EFFECTIVE ACCOUNTABILITY

Alex Zakaras refers to “the central normative premise of modern democracy: that citizens are themselves responsible for their government.”50 With this in mind, we can agree that if the mechanisms for accountability and oversight are in good working order, and if citizens either deliberately approve of the actions that raise ethical dilemmas or fail to avail themselves of these mechanisms for monitoring their representatives, it makes sense that the citizens should share some of the responsibility for actions that they have explicitly or implicitly condoned. In that situation, it is plausible to claim that the dirty hands are partly theirs.

However, as we have seen, it is difficult to trace a causal pathway for this responsibility through the circuitous workings of governance in large nation-states. And if the mechanisms for monitoring and accountability are not in good order, it seems unfair to blame the citizens alone for actions by their leaders. In that same passage, Zakaras argues that “if our institutions have grown corrupt, democracy’s logic says that we are the ones responsible for their reform.” But surely our

leaders share some responsibility for allowing the mechanisms of accountability to become dysfunctional. At most, one could blame the citizens and their leaders together for not taking more vigorous steps to improve and repair their institutions of accountability.

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Responsibility—ethical and otherwise—is more broadly shared in an effectively functioning democracy than in monarchies or oligarchies, which to some extent alleviates the burden on the democratic leader. But the principal attribution of responsibility is nonetheless to the elected leaders. Even in the healthiest representative democratic system, the leader is ultimately responsible for her decisions and their consequences. She must be held accountable for those decisions, but enforcing accountability is not the same as making the crucial judgment call. Citizens in general are seldom in a position to make and implement such choices. This is the job of the leader. Therefore, on a daily basis, the issue comes back to the potentially dirty hands of those individuals who hold positions of leadership in the polity. In Harry Truman’s immortal words, the buck stops somewhere, and with the buck comes final ethical responsibility for the activities of political leadership.

WEBER ON RESPONSIBILITY AND DEMOCRATIC LEADERSHIP

This final ethical responsibility of the leader is very clear in Weber’s “Politics as a Vocation.” Although the essay is not focused specifically on democratic leadership, Weber’s examples from contemporary politics are almost all drawn from democratic political systems, referring to elections, associations, political parties, parliaments, and other aspects of democratic governance. It is in that context that Weber insists that, in contrast to bureaucrats or civil servants, “the honor of the political leader, of the leading statesman ... lies precisely in an exclusive personal responsibility for what he does, a responsibility he cannot and must not reject or transfer.”51 This makes the essay a particularly useful source for democratic politicians considering how to fulfill their individual responsibilities as leaders.

One might question this claim given, as Nick O’Donovan has recently pointed out, that Weber’s emphasis on the politician’s primary devotion to a cause about which he is passionate may get in the way of a democratic leader’s responsibility to those who have elected him. It is true that Weber’s essay does not deal directly with the desires

and aspirations of the citizens, and his conception of democracy was hardly participatory. O’Donovan quotes a passage from the biography of Weber written by his wife, Marianne, in which Weber discusses the subject of democracy in a conversation with former German general Ludendorff. In response to Ludendorff’s question, “What do you mean by democracy?,” Weber replies: “In a democracy, the people selects a leader in whom they trust. Then the chosen leader says: ‘now shut up and obey me’. People and parties are no longer allowed to interfere.... Afterwards the people can sit in judgment—if the leader has made mistakes, to the gallows with him!”52

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Yet despite this rather undemocratic conception of democratic government, Weber’s clear focus on the individual leader allows us to think more deeply about what it means for any leader, including leaders in democracies, to exercise responsibility. Weber’s definition of “an ethic of responsibility” entails specifically that “one has to give an account of the foreseeable results of one’s actions.”53 This emphasis on outcomes, in the sense of responsibility for the foreseeable results of one’s actions, has important implications for a system of accountability. As democratic citizens, we should expect our leaders to take thought for the future and consider the foreseeable results of their actions, rather than going off halfcocked or focusing only on the short-term challenges they face.

One of the reasons John F. Kennedy’s stance in dealing with the Cuban Missile Crisis was both exemplary and successful was that he deliberately considered the hugely important foreseeable results of his decision for the nation and the world. Richard Neustadt and Ernest May’s account of the decision-making process in this crisis makes clear that although the initial reactions of those involved in the debates were focused on the immediate situation, by the end of the first day some of these men had “lifted their sights.” McGeorge Bundy noted that “our principal problem is to try and imaginatively to think what the world would be like if we do this and what it will be like if we don’t.” Kennedy himself, referring to Barbara Tuchman’s book Guns of August, said to his brother Bobby: “I am not going to follow a course which will allow anyone to write a comparable book about this time, The Missiles of October. If anybody is around to write after this, they are going to understand that we made every effort to find peace and every effort to give our adversary room to move.”54

Such insights are particularly poignant in light of Weber’s further insight that “the final result of political action often, no, even regularly, stands in completely inadequate and often even paradoxical relation

to its original meaning.”55 Even the most thoughtful leader, conscientiously attempting to fulfill his responsibilities in light of foreseeable outcomes, must recognize that the end result depends on multiple factors and will very probably turn out to be quite different from anything he could have planned or foreseen. In the Cuban Missile Crisis, as Neustadt and May point out, even though the decision-making in the White House was as deep and careful as it could have been in the urgent situation our leaders faced, the outcome could well have been very different. Decisions made in Moscow independent of those made in Washington, the timing of the discovery of the missiles, and the willingness of the press to maintain secrecy even when some reporters got wind of the situation, all these factors and many more were not within Kennedy’s control, and small changes in any of them could have skewed the outcome in a very negative direction.

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In his discussion of Weber’s ethical theory, Nicholas Gane notes that politics is “a sphere of human conduct that retains an element of irrationality. This is demonstrated by the fact that political means, ends, and consequences very often do not either correspond as intended or ethically justify one another.”56 With this in mind, one can understand why Weber asserts that ethical decision-making in political contexts has tragic dimensions, and why he calls politics “the strong and slow boring of hard boards.” He concludes his essay by saying that “only he has the calling for politics who is sure that he shall not crumble when the world from his point of view is too stupid or too base for what he wants to offer. Only he who in the face of all this can say ‘In spite of all!’ has the calling for politics.”57

CONCLUSION

As this chapter has attempted to demonstrate, the questions involved in the specific issue of dirty hands are complex and subtle. The question whether a political leader must behave immorally to do her job cannot be answered with a simple yes or no. The answer rests on a particular understanding of the responsibilities political leaders must face, the systems of accountability within which they work, and the factors that may be held to justify their decisions. And this, in turn, requires that we explore the concept of responsibility more fully than is often the case in discussions of this sort.

Despite the complex challenges leaders and citizens face, successful democratic governance, governance that is both ethical and productive

of healthful consequences for a community, is one of the finest achievements of the human spirit. We should be grateful for leaders who manage to navigate successfully through the shoals of ethical dilemmas that the rest of us do not have to face, and sympathetic to the distinctive complexities these dilemmas may entail. We should not be too quick to call them morally guilty for undertaking a course of action chosen in good faith to advance the goals of the polity they lead. But as democratic citizens, we should also hold leaders rigorously accountable when they engage in morally dubious behavior that involves ducking their responsibilities, advancing their own narrow selfish purposes, or choosing a course of action that undermines the integrity of the political system they are charged with helping to preserve.

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NOTES

1. Michael Walzer, “The Problem of Dirty Hands,” Philosophy and Public Affairs II:2 (Winter 1973), 160–80. Jean Paul Sartre, Dirty Hands, included in No Exit and Three Other Plays (New York: Vintage, 1989).
2. In his entry on “Dirty Hands” for Blackwell’s Companion to Applied Ethics, ed. R. G. Frey and Christopher Heath Wellman (2005) #13 (online), Gerald F. Gaus explores “five different conceptions of dirty hands” and concludes that “none of these formulations presents an analysis of morality and rationality that is both compelling and establishes an interesting moral problem of dirty hands.”
3. This definition is taken from N. Keohane, Thinking about Leadership (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 23.
4. C. A. J. Coady, Messy Morality: The Challenge of Politics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 78.
5. Lord Acton, Essays on Freedom and Power, ed. Gertrude Himmelfarb (Boston: Beacon Press, 1948), 364, from a letter to Mandell Creighton in 1887. Keohane, Thinking about Leadership, 208–11, discusses some of the implications of Acton’s claim.
6. Dennis Thompson, Political Ethics and Public Office (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 11.
7. Marcus Tullius Cicero, On Duties, ed. M. T. Griffin and E. M. Atkins (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1991), book III: sections 17–19, 46.
8. Desiderio Erasmus, The Education of a Christian Prince, ed. Lisa Jardine (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 25.
9. James MacGregor Burns, Leadership (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 2–4.
10. Niccoló Machiavelli, The Prince, ed. Quentin Skinner and Russell Price (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press), XV, 54.
11. This choice is made by Max Lerner in The Prince and the Discourses (New York, NY: Modern Library edition, 1940) , XV, 56.
12. Machiavelli, The Discourses, Max Lerner, ed. The Prince and the Discourses, IX, 139.
13. Cathy Davidson, Closing: The Life and Death of an American Factory (Boston: W. W. Norton, 1998).

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1. Thompson, Political Ethics and Public Office, 2.
2. I am indebted to Corey Brettschneider for clarifying this point.
3. Paul Rynard and David Shugarman’s edited volume entitled Cruelty and Deception: The Controversy over Dirty Hands in Politics (Toronto: Broadview Press, 2000) focuses specifically on the “third view” type of answer to our basic dilemma; see especially Shugarman’s thoughtful introductory essay. Max Weber is only an occasional focus of the discussion in that book, but the goal of offering an alternative to simple yes/no answers to the dilemma of dirty hands is similar to the purpose of my chapter.
4. Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology, translated and edited by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), 120.
5. Ibid., 124–5. Emphasis added.
6. Stephen A. Garrett, Conscience and Power: An Examination of Dirty Hands and Political Leadership (New York: St. Martin’s, 1996), v.
7. In his essay “Politics and Moral Character,” Bernard Williams explores a number of ways in which making political decisions can affect the character of a leader; he is particularly interested in the question of what “sorts of persons” would be likely to be willing to engage in such behavior, what moral dispositions they may have (or lack). Stuart Hampshire, ed., Public and Private Morality (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 160–80.
8. Weber, 121.
9. Walzer, 161, 167–68.
10. Kai Nielsen, “There Is No Dilemma of Dirty Hands,” in P. Rynard and D. Shugarman, Cruelty and Deception, 140–41.
11. In this discussion, Weber, 117, specifically draws on the concept of “tragedy” when he makes clear his disdain for a “mere ‘power politician’ ” whose “shoddy and superficially blase´ attitude towards the meaning of human conduct ... has no relation whatsoever to the knowledge of tragedy with which all action, but especially political action, is truly interwoven.”
12. Weber, 115–17.
13. As Weber puts it, “the problem is simply how can warm passion and a cool sense of proportion be forged together in one and the same soul?” 115.
14. John Parrish, Paradoxes of Political Ethics: From Dirty Hands to the Invisible Hand (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 8. Emphasis in the original.
15. Stuart Hampshire, “Foreword” to Public and Private Morality, ix; Hampshire, “Public and Private Morality,” essay in the same volume by this name, 52.
16. Roy Jenkins, Churchill: A Biography (New York: Plume, 2002), 623–24.
17. Weber, 127. Emphasis in the original.
18. Lawrence Kohlberg (following Piaget), “The Development of Children’s Orientation toward a Moral Order,” Human Development 51, no. 1 (February 2008): 12.
19. Personal conversation, Amos Tversky, Stanford, California.
20. Aristotle, Politics, ed. Ernest Barker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), I:1, 1252a. On this same point, see Keohane, Thinking about Leadership, ch. 5.
21. Hampshire, “Public and Private Morality,” 49.

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1. Thomas Nagel, “Ruthlessness in Public Life,” explores the relevance of the concept of “office” in discussing this topic. Hampshire, Public and Private Morality, 75–91.
2. Parrish, Paradoxes of Political Ethics, 15–16.
3. Williams, “Politics and Moral Character,” 62.
4. Garrett, Conscience and Power, 10.
5. Thompson, Political Ethics and Public Policy, 18.
6. Walzer, 162–63.
7. Eric Beerbohm, In Our Name: The Ethics of Democracy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 1–2.
8. American Political Science Association, August 31, 2013, panel on Eric Beerbohm’s In Our Name, comments by Anna Stilz.
9. Nagel, “Ruthlessness in Public Life,” 87.
10. Ruth W. Grant and Robert O. Keohane, “Accountability and Abuses of Power in World Politics,” American Political Science Review 99(1) (February 2005): 29.
11. Dennis Thompson, Restoring Responsibility: Ethics in Government, Business and Healthcare (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 99, 117.
12. Thompson, Political Ethics and Public Office, 40; this sentence introduces Thompson’s chapter “The Moral Responsibility of Many Hands.”
13. Garrett, Conscience and Power, 13–17, has a particularly good discussion of this problem, which he calls “the imprint of many hands.”
14. Thompson, Political Ethics and Public Office, 11.
15. Nielsen, “There Is No Dilemma of Dirty Hands,” 149.
16. Alex Zakaras, Individuality and Mass Democracy: Mill, Emerson, and the Burdens of Citizenship (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 4.
17. Weber, 95.
18. Nick O’Donovan, “Causes and Consequences: Responsibility in the Political Thought of Max Weber,” Polity 43, no. 1 (January 2011), 84–105.
19. Weber, 120.
20. Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision Makers (New York: Simon and Schuster, The Free Press, 1986), 14–15.
21. Weber, 117.
22. Nicholas Gane, “Max Weber on the Ethical Irrationality of Political Leadership,” Sociology 31, no. 3 (August 1997), 550.
23. Weber, 128.

Part IV

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The Ethical Influence

of Leaders

8

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The Trouble with

Transformational Leadership:

Toward a Federalist Ethic

for Organizations

Michael Keeley

Following the American War of Independence, a variety of local conflicts broke out within the loosely united states. New York taxed ships bound for New Jersey, which retaliated by levying lighthouse fees. Maryland fishermen fought Virginians over oysters taken from the Chesapeake Bay. Moneyless farmers in Massachusetts banded together to stop courts from convening and sending debtors to prison. Such events brought state delegates to Philadelphia in the summer of 1787 to plan a new organization: a federal government to coordinate their joint affairs and protect their individual rights. The resulting plan, the Constitution of the United States, was shaped in large part by James Madison, who set the stage for the Philadelphia convention with a speech about a classic organizational problem.

Madison told the delegates that all societies were divided into different interest groups, or factions: “rich and poor, debtors and creditors,

the landed, the manufacturing, the commercial interests, the inhabitants of this district, or that district, the followers of this political leader or that political leader, the disciples of this religious sect or that religious sect (June 6, 1787).”1 He went on to observe that throughout history different factions have tried to take advantage of one another: “In Greece and Rome the rich and poor, the creditors and debtors, as well as the patricians and plebeians alternately oppressed each other with equal unmercifulness.... We have seen the mere distinction of color made in the most enlightened period of time, a ground of the most oppressive dominion ever exercised by man over man.” Madison concluded that a key problem in designing a system of government was how to manage factional tensions, given the readiness of groups to pursue their own interests at others’ expense.

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Over 200 years later, this is still a key problem in the management of governments, corporations, and organizations of all sorts. The general issue is how to deal with the diverse interests that are prevalent in any complex social system: How, for example, to reconcile the expectations of various lobbies, lawmakers, taxpayers, and other constituents of public agencies; how to satisfy the frequently competing claims of investors, employees, customers, dealers, and other stakeholders of private firms; how, more specifically, to control in-fighting among corporate divisions, to gain union cooperation in meeting foreign competition, to contain executive salaries and perks, to keep insiders from exploiting privileged information, and so on.

Lately, management writers have voiced real concern about such things. In both popular and academic reports, a common complaint is that many of our organizations are going to ruin because those in charge have let private interests (their own included) run amok. Zaleznik, for instance, contends that “business in America has lost its way” because of mediocre management whose major fault has been complicity in self-serving organizational politics as opposed to productive work.2 John Gardner adopts a Madisonian perspective and sees “the mischiefs of faction” throughout the fabric of American society, which is at best “loosely knit, at worst completely unraveled”; to Gardner, “it is a mystery that [this society] works at all,” as group after group pursues parochial aims and grievances in a “war of the parts against the whole.”3 From a global standpoint, Bennis and Nanus argue “a chronic crisis of governance—that is, the pervasive incapacity of organizations to cope with the expectations of their constituents—is now an overwhelming factor worldwide.”4

What is interesting about recent attempts to deal with the problem of faction is that these writers, and many others, offer a cure that Madison in 1787 considered worse than the disease. The suggested remedy is a type of leadership that transforms self-interest and unites social systems around common purposes (often termed transformational leadership). So opposed was Madison to this prescription that he insisted on constitutional devices to counteract it in the American system of government. The American experiment was to be a government of laws, not of men or women or charismatic leaders.

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Perhaps Madison was shortsighted; perhaps his concerns have little applicability to nongovernmental organizations; perhaps they are no longer relevant at all. But possibly he recognized something important that has been overlooked by modern leadership theorists. The purpose of this chapter is to compare Madison’s views and emerging theories of leadership, especially as these bear on the problem of controlling self-interested organizational behavior.

TRANSFORMATIONAL VERSUS TRANSACTIONAL LEADERSHIP

Much of the current interest in transformational leadership stems from a study of governmental leaders by political scientist-historian James MacGregor Burns.5 Burns differentiates two sorts of leadership: transactional and transforming. The more common, he notes, is transactional leadership. This involves the exchange of incentives by leaders for support from followers—in politics, for instance, jobs for votes or subsidies for campaign contributions. The object of such leadership is agreement on a course of action that satisfies the immediate, separate purposes of both leaders and followers.

Transforming leadership, in contrast, aims beyond the satisfaction of immediate needs. According to Burns, “the transforming leader looks for potential motives in followers, seeks to satisfy higher needs, and engages the full person of the follower.”6 Here, the object is to turn individuals’ attention toward larger causes (political reform, revolution, national defense, etc.), thereby converting self-interest into collective concerns. The distinguishing feature of transforming leadership is a common goal; the purposes of the leader and followers, “which might have started out as separate but related, as in the case of transactional leadership, become fused.”7

Burns goes on to develop the basic normative theme of the paradigm: Transforming leadership is generally superior to transactional indeed, the latter is hardly leadership at all. For Burns, transforming leadership is motivating, uplifting, and ultimately “moral in that it raises the level of human conduct and ethical aspiration of both leader and led.”8 A textbook example is Gandhi’s elevation of the aspirations and life chances of millions of Indians who followed him toward independence. Transactional leadership, on the other hand, is characterized as immobilizing, self-absorbing, and eventually manipulative in that it seeks control over followers by catering to their lowest needs. Burns’s examples of transactional figures include Tammany Hall bosses bent on trading political favors for preservation of the status quo. In Burns’s view, transactional politicians are questionable leaders because they focus on mutually tolerable behavior, rather than jointly held goals—on means, rather than ends—and “leadership is nothing if not linked to collective purpose.”9

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This line of analysis has been extended to organizations by a number of theorists. Bass finds elements of transactional leadership at the root of popular organizational theories (such as exchange, expectancy, and path-goal models) and common management practices (such as contingent reinforcement and management-by-exception).10 These theories and practices imply that organizations consist of agreements between managers and subordinates to fulfill specific obligations for mutual advantage; they further imply that leaders should make these agreements even more specific to increase subordinates’ satisfaction and performance. Bass argues, however, that any satisfaction or performance gains from transactional leadership are apt to be small. He claims that transformational leaders produce much larger effects on followers.

THE VISION THING

Bass builds on Burns’s framework by identifying three main components of transformational leadership. The first and most important component, charisma, is displayed by leaders “to whom followers form deep emotional attachments and who in turn inspire their followers to transcend their own interests for superordinate goals.”11 The second component, individualized consideration, is shown by leaders who mentor and enhance the confidence of followers. The final component, intellectual stimulation, occurs as leaders arouse awareness of shared problems and foster visions of new possibilities.

Bass associates these three aspects of transforming leadership with extraordinary levels of effort and high degrees of organizational effectiveness. Although he stops short of insisting that transformational administrators are always more moral than transactional types, he follows Burns in portraying the former as true leaders who raise attitudes and behavior to a “higher plane” of maturity, and the latter as mere managers mired in “compromise, intrigue, and control.” According to Bass, transactional managers act like “everyone has a price; it is just a matter of establishing it,” whereas transformational leaders motivate individuals to put aside selfish aims for the sake of some greater, common good.12

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Other theorists have concentrated on particular features of transformational leadership. Conger and Kanungo, for instance, try to give a more precise account of charisma as a dimension of leader behavior.13 The authors describe charismatic transformation as a three-stage process in which leaders, first, identify deficiencies in the status quo; second, formulate and articulate a vision of ideal goals that highlight present deficiencies; and third, devise innovative means of achieving the vision. Throughout this process, charismatic leaders exhibit a variety of distinctive behaviors: They actively search out existing or potential needs for change, set bold (even utopian) goals, and employ unconventional or countercultural tactics. They build enthusiasm for their vision through symbols, rhetoric, and other forms of impression management. Finally, they set examples by performing heroic deeds involving self-sacrifice and personal risk. Conger and Kanungo hypothesize that these charismatic behaviors result in high emotional attachment of followers to leaders, high commitment to shared goals, and high task performance.

ADMINISTRATIVE IMPLICATIONS

Among students of transformational leadership, there is hardly consensus on all issues, but there does seem to be broad agreement on the following basic ideas: It is a fact of organizational life that participants get preoccupied with their own aims and interests. This has certain negative consequences, such as unproductive conflict and depletion of resources. To avoid these consequences, it is necessary to unify organizational members by refocusing their attention on collective goals. This is no job for the faint of heart. Extraordinary leaders are required to transform members’ self-interested tendencies leaders who can create exciting visions, communicate these in

compelling ways, and energize others to achieve them, despite personal costs. Bass summarizes the administrative ideal:

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Superior leadership performance—transformational leadership occurs when leaders broaden and elevate the interests of their employees, when they generate awareness and acceptance of the purposes and mission of the group, and when they stir their employees to look beyond their own self-interest for the good of the group.14

The policy implication is that “transformational leadership should be encouraged.” 5 Bass supplies examples. At the individual level, factors associated with transformational leadership “should be incorporated into managerial assessment, selection, placement, and guidance programs.” At the organizational level, institutional constraints on managerial behavior should be reduced to allow transformational leaders more freedom of action: “Organizational policy needs to support an understanding and appreciation of the maverick who is willing to take unpopular positions, who knows when to reject the conventional wisdom, and who takes reasonable risks.”16

Proponents of transformational leadership suggest that, without it, organizations are just marketplaces for self-serving transactions, subject to drift and disintegration. With no leaders to transform them, corporations become disabled by bureaucracy and mediocrity, since positions of authority fall to transactional managers who simply muddle through, much like their governmental counterparts described by Burns:

[They] grope along, operating “by feel and by feedback.” They concentrate on method, technique, and mechanisms rather than on broader ends or purposes. They protect, sometimes at heavy cost to overall goals, the maintenance and survival of their organization because they are exposed daily to the claims of persons immediately sheltered by that organization. They extrude red tape even as they struggle with it. They transact more than they administer, compromise more than they command, institutionalize more than they initiate. They fragment and morselize policy issues in order to better cope with them, seeking to limit their alternatives, to delegate thorny problems “down the line,” to accept vague and inconsistent goals, to adapt and survive. Thus they exemplify the “satisficing” model, as economists call it, far more than the “maximizing” one.17

Who would want to settle for leaders of this type? Who would not find transformational leadership more interesting to study and more deserving of encouragement? Possibly, James Madison.

THE FRAMERS’ VISION AND THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE OF THE CONVENTION

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Many of the governmental practices that bother leadership theorists such as James MacGregor Burns are the legacy of Madison and the other framers of the U.S. Constitution. Burns, in particular, has very grudging respect for this legacy. In an earlier work, he characterized the American political process as The Deadlock of Democracy, an allusion to “the system of checks and balances and interlocked gears of government that requires the consensus of many groups and leaders before the nation can act.”18 Burns states that this system exacts a “heavy price of delay and devitalization” and that it was “designed for deadlock and inaction” from the start—by Madison and those delegates to the Constitutional Convention who shared his fear of strong leadership.

The framers’ implicit theories of leadership, however, were far from naive, and their explicit plan of government, with all its interlocking checks and balances, was not irrational. The framers were people of practical affairs—planters, lawyers, traders, above all politicians and so, perhaps, transactional leaders in Burns’s terms. Yet they were also educated people, who were aware of the heights to which leaders could aspire in the ideal world of political theory. They obviously never read John Gardner, or used the jargon of transformational leadership. But they read similarly inclined writers, like Plato; they knew of related protagonists, like philosopher-kings. And they rejected the lot.

What’s more, the framers shied away from transformational leadership knowing, firsthand, maybe the finest example of it. At their meeting in Philadelphia, they drafted their plan of divided government under the supervision of one of the most revered leaders in history. Look for a moment at the background of the convention’s chief executive.

The unanimous choice to preside over the Constitutional Convention was George Washington—father of the country, symbol of virtue, and a larger-than-life monument even in 1787.19 Much of Washington’s fame stemmed from his ability to transform a fractious lot of rebels into a victorious army in the American War of Independence. No small feat: Rank-and-file U.S. citizens were not eager to risk their lives and fortunes fighting for the sacred honor of Congress. Volunteers from some states wanted nothing to do with

militia from others. Farmers and merchants were reluctant to take Continental currency and provide food or supplies to Washington’s forces. Washington’s staff included quarrelsome, treasonous, and just useless officers. (While short of good officers, for instance, Washington had a surplus of unemployed European officers sent by friends abroad; Morison notes that “since Americans disliked serving under foreigners, there was nothing for most of them to do except serve on Washington’s staff, and tell him in French, German, or Polish as the case might be, that his army was lousy.”)20

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Washington’s army lost most of the battles, yet somehow won the war. Flexner’s account of Washington’s behavior as commander in chief describes a transformational leader in every sense of the term.21 From the outset, Washington displayed heroic acts. Upon accepting command of the Continental Army, he informed Congress that he would take no salary, a selfless and inspiring gesture in an age when it was customary for military officers to enrich themselves at public expense. Throughout the war, shortages of money and equipment drove Washington to devise unconventional means of motivating his troops. British and other professional soldiers of the time were paid to carry out orders without concern for what the struggle was all about. European kings and generals did not want their armies thinking about which way to point their weapons! Lacking the funds to employ such compliant professionals, Washington united and motivated a bunch of rugged individualists by refocusing their attention on higher ends: “Washington labored to inspire his soldiery with confidence in the value and the nobility of the cause.”22 This military innovation—encouragement of combat by appeals to nationalism—transformed not only the Continental Army but also the very nature of modern warfare.23

Such was the man selected to serve as president of the Constitutional Convention. If ever there existed a role model of transformational leadership, here it was right in the midst of the delegates as they went about designing a system of government.

What is interesting is that the framers recognized and appreciated individual greatness—but they refused to count on it. Despite the pressing social problems that brought them together, they decided not to bet their future, and ours, on model leaders like George Washington. Rather, they chose to protect us from the misdeeds of scoundrels and the frailties of ordinary men and women. The fates of nations whose political systems are more open to strong leadership (say, China or the former Soviet Union) suggest that the choice was a

fortunate one. The historical record suggests it was also an informed choice.

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MADISON’S PLAN

Madison’s analysis of the issues is the most famous. Recall his opening point that all societies are divided into different interest groups or factions: rich and poor, debtors and creditors, inhabitants of various regions, disciples of one religion or another, followers of this leader or that, and parties to all sorts of commercial dealings. These factions tend to pursue their own welfare at others’ expense, resulting in conflict. Unless managed in some way, conflicts get settled by force: Policies are made by those with the most power at the time. This leads, ultimately, to injustice and instability. How, then, to manage factional conflict and minimize its potential for harm?

In Federalist No. 10, Madison examines alternative strategies. According to Madison, there are two ways of curing the mischiefs of faction: one, by removing its causes; the other, by controlling its effects. There are, in turn, two ways of removing the causes of faction: the first, by suppressing the freedom of persons to advance their own interests; the second, by persuading persons to share the same interests.

Madison questions both methods of avoiding the causes of faction. He considers the first, denying personal freedom, unwise. It stifles initiative, destroys political life, and is even worse for individuals than the condition it is meant to remedy. Madison considers the second, inducing common interests, impractical. Although some people may share some interests for some time (for instance, the coalition of militants who waged the American War of Independence), commonality of purpose is fragile at best (as shown after the war, when those who fought and wound up impoverished turned against those who profited). Madison argues that, if nothing else, the varying abilities and fortunes of individuals will divide them into haves and have-nots, whose interests diverge in matters of social policy. He adds that “different leaders ambitiously contending for pre-eminence and power” will be more apt to inflame and exploit such societal divisions than to reconcile them. Madison, therefore, opts to control the effects of faction, instead of its causes. He proposes to use government to help factions check and balance one another, thus limiting the capacity of the strong to take advantage of the weak.

In sum, the framers’ task was to “enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself.”24 The

trick was to preclude tyranny, which Madison equates with the accumulation of power in the same hands—whether few or many, whether self-designated or elected. Consolidation of power or tyranny, he says, cannot be prevented by formal, legal restrictions, by mere “parchment barriers,” but only by “rival and opposite interests.” So the framers set about dividing power, devising checks and balances. Power was first divided between “two distinct governments,” state and federal, which vie to control each other. Within each government, power was then subdivided among “distinct and separate departments,” which have wills of their own, stemming from the desires of member-officials to maintain or enlarge their personal authority. Madison comments,

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Ambition must be made to counteract ambition. The interest of the man must be connected with the constitutional rights of the place. It may be a reflection on human nature that such devices should be necessary to control the abuses of government. But what is government itself but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary.25

Further divisions were created, Madison continues, since “it is not possible to give each department an equal power of self-defense” against encroachments by others. (Because Congress was considered likely to dominate, for example, federal legislative power was divided again between two houses.) Still other checks and balances, such as an executive veto, were added as backup devices for preserving, in practice, the departmental independence prescribed on paper.

This compounding of separations has seemed excessive to some critics, who complain that it weakens national resolve, hampers unified action, or thwarts majority wishes.26 But Madison and the framers accepted consequences of this sort to avoid more serious ones. Their constitutional system was arranged to protect individuals in minority factions from being bulldozed by members of majority factions bent on pursuing some alleged common goal. In this regard, the framers and Madison especially showed insights into social behavior and ethics that elude modern advocates of transformational leadership.

MADISONIAN AND TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP MODELS COMPARED

To better appreciate Madison’s approach, compare his views of human nature with the motivational assumptions of transformational

leadership as outlined by Burns. Like Madison, Burns begins with conflict, which provides the seedbed of leadership: “Every person, group, and society has latent tension and hostility.... Leadership acts as an inciting and triggering force in the conversion of conflicting demands, values, and goals into significant behavior.”27 In this process, leaders can appeal to a variety of motives for cooperation. The type of motive triggered is critical, argues Burns. Here he invokes a theory of psychological development borrowed, in part, from Freud, Maslow, Kohlberg, and others—which, all together, looks a lot like Herzberg’s two-factor theory of motivation.28

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Burns differentiates lower needs, such as physical survival and economic security (similar to Herzberg’s hygiene factors), from higher needs, such as moral purpose and “participation in a collective life larger than one’s personal existence” (similar to Herzberg’s motivators). The lower needs are addressed by transactional leaders, who may at best defuse conflict by meeting the parochial demands of their different constituents. The higher, more authentic needs are engaged by transforming leaders who can refocus attention—with much greater effect—on common goals that have transcendent value. The greater the goal, the greater the energizing force: “the leader who commands compelling causes has an extraordinary potential influence over followers. Followers armed by moral inspiration, mobilized and purposeful, become zealots and leaders in their own right.29”

Madison could have accepted most of this; he was certainly not ignorant of the transforming potential of leadership. But he thought beyond it, to the problems that zealots—armed by moral inspiration, mobilized and purposeful—might create for persons who disagreed with them. Madison concentrated on a fact about human motivation that proves troublesome for transformational-leadership theories: Not everyone is attracted to the same goals or leaders. This fact has been well established by research on both motivation and leadership. Not all workers, for example, are motivated as Herzberg and Burns suggest; some (especially academics and other professionals) do appear to be driven by higher needs and transcendent goals, but others seem to prefer fulfillment of the bread-and-butter flavor.30 With respect to leadership, even champions of the transformational approach acknowledge the fact of individual differences; “some employees may not react well to a leader even though most view the leader in a positive way and as transformational.”31 To Madison, such individual differences make all the difference in the world.

Madison reminds us that, because people differ, minority ideas about the value of particular goals and interests are likely to exist within large social groups—even where leaders are able to transform many individual views into a majority vision. In a letter to Thomas Jefferson dated October 24, 1787, soon after the Constitutional Convention, Madison wrote that popular theories supposed “that the people composing the Society enjoy not only an equality of political rights; but that they have all precisely the same interests, and the same feelings in every respect.” Were this really the case, Madison noted, “[T]he interest of the majority would be that of the minority also; [public policy] decisions could only turn on mere opinion concerning the good of the whole, of which the major voice would be the safest criterion.” But, he points out to Jefferson, “no society ever did or can consist of so homogeneous a mass of Citizens.” Madison cites his famous examples of different economic interests (rich and poor, farmers and merchants, etc.) and differences of belief (political, religious, etc.), emphasizing that these persistent distinctions matter very much to ordinary people if not to social theorists. “However erroneous or ridiculous these grounds of dissension and faction may appear to the enlightened Statesman or the benevolent philosopher,” Madison says, “the bulk of mankind who are neither Statesmen nor Philosophers, will continue to view them in a different light. It remains then to be enquired whether a majority having any common interest, or feeling any common passion, will find sufficient motives to restrain them from oppressing the minority.”32

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Here we come to the crux of things. If not all social participants have the same goals, if transformational leaders are not able to persuade everyone to voluntarily accept a common vision, what is the likely status of people who prefer their own goals and visions? Judging from the rhetoric of management experts like Bennis—who complain of individuals marching stubbornly to their own drummers—or communitarian writers like Etzioni—who sound alarms about persons selfishly asserting their rights against society—it may be perilous indeed.33 Leadership theorists have been targeted nonconformists for criticism since Plato (see his Republic), and historical leaders with single-minded majorities on their side subjected minorities to real injury. (A brutal illustration is the persecution of Chinese dissidents in the Cultural Revolution inspired by Mao Zedong, one of James MacGregor Burns’s transforming heroes.)

Madison posed the question to Jefferson: What if two persons share an interest that is disagreeable to a third; would the rights of the third

be secure if decisions were left to a majority of the group? “Will two thousand individuals be less apt to oppress one thousand or two hundred thousand one hundred thousand?” (October 24, 1787).34 What, after all, will stop majorities from taking advantage of anyone who opposes them? Madison considers possible restraints, such as concern for the public good, fear of negative public opinion, and personal moral standards. He rejects each as ineffective: The public good is no use, because majorities (and their leaders) define it for themselves. Similarly, public opinion supports their actions, by definition. And personal morality falls victim to groupthink.

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The conduct of every popular Assembly, acting on oath, the strongest of religious ties, shews that individuals join without remorse in acts against which their consciences would revolt, if proposed to them separately in their closets.35

The conclusion drawn by Madison is a flat-out repudiation of transformational leadership. He reasons that, if differences in individual interests exist within society, and if a majority united by a common interest cannot be restrained from harming minorities, then the only way to prevent harm is to keep majorities from uniting around common interests—the reverse of what transformational leaders are supposed to do. In other words, unless leaders are able to transform everyone and create absolute unanimity of interests (a very special case), transformational leadership produces simply a majority will that represents the interests of the strongest faction. Sometimes this will is on the side of good—as in Gandhi’s case. Sometimes it is on the side of evil—as in Hitler’s case. In any case, might is an arbitrary guide to right, as Madison clearly understood.

This, then, is why the Madisonian system of government divides power and purpose, why it frustrates majority wishes, and why it checks leadership in the pursuit of collective goals. It was designed to work this way to protect the basic interests of the weak from the self-interest of the strong. Without such protection, any response to the problem of faction is no solution: Social life can remain as imagined by Burns and others who would transform it—dog-eat-dog.

ORGANIZATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

Warren Bennis, a veteran observer of organizational leadership, sounds a familiar theme. Asking Why Leaders Can’t Lead, Bennis points

to increasing selfishness in American society and organizations. He notes that “everyone insists on having his or her own way now,” from young urban professionals, to corporate executives, to the president of the United States. The trouble is that there is no agreement or commitment to the public good, no common vision, no mutual purpose:

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As the world has divided into factions, so has America, and so consensus is harder and harder to come by. Each faction marches stubbornly to its own drummer, has its own priorities and agenda, and has nothing in common with any other faction—except the unbridled desire to triumph over all the others. The Peruvians call this arribismo. It means, “You’ve got yours, Jack, and now I’m going to get mine.” It means “making it,” carried to the nth power. This fragmentation and fracturing of the common accord occurred for good reason, because, in America, those on top have traditionally tried to keep everyone else down, but it makes leadership a chancy undertaking at any level.36

Bennis’s solution: “People in authority must develop the vision and authority to call the shots.”37

Huh? Entrust those greedy individuals on top with even greater power to pursue “the common good” as they envision it? In fairness to Bennis, there’s a bit more to his argument, but it is difficult, in theory, to get from selfish public and corporate officials to selfless transformational leadership—perhaps even harder, in practice. Madison foresaw this. Moreover, his view is just as applicable to private organizations as to governmental ones, since the same problems arise in their design. Among the most fundamental are problems of controlling factions and ambitious leaders.

THREATS POSED BY LEADERS

Madison suggests to us that, in any kind of social system, inspired leadership can do as much harm as good. Lately, journalists and insiders have documented ample damage done by corporate folk-heroes once hailed as transformational leaders. Some advocates of transformational leadership allow that there is dark side, that the risks can be as large as the promises.38 Yukl remarks that history is full of charismatic leaders who caused death, destruction, and misery or who ruled over firms like tyrants and egomaniacs.39 However, Madison remains exceptional in taking the matter seriously.

In proposing social structures that would impact people’s daily lives, Madison recognized a responsibility to build in protections

against abuses of power. Contemporary leadership theorists are more inclined to shrug off the issue—and to depict protective devices (i.e., checks and balances and right-conferring rules) as bureaucratic hindrances that reduce the autonomy and transforming potential of leaders. Bass, for example, grants that some transformational leaders have “authoritarian tendencies,” that “some fulfill grandiose dreams at the expense of their followers,” yet he still prescribes more “flexible” organizational structures to encourage determined leadership.40 Others offer timid advice to treat transformational leadership with caution. Roberts and Bradley compare charisma to an unpredictable genie in a bottle; they ask whether it should be set free to transform organizations; then, they leave the question hanging.41 Howell and Avolio go a bit further and urge top managers to screen corporate leaders more carefully to weed out unethical charismatics, but they fail to indicate just what to screen for, how to control those doing the screening, or what to do about opportunists who slip through the net. Howell and Avolio hold out a lot of hope for voluntary ethical codes and executives who function as positive role models.42 Although such things are not necessarily worthless, Madison knew enough not to rely on them. He felt that flesh-and-blood persons who might suffer from misconduct by public officials deserved better than parchment barriers and hypothetical defenses. Persons vulnerable to corporate officials do, too.

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But Madison’s challenge goes far beyond showing the dangers of charismatic leaders or the moral obligation to control them. It cuts to the very heart of transformational leadership theories, to the value of collective goals. Individuals are at risk, Madison argues, not only from self-interested leaders but also from self-interested majorities acting in the name of some “common purpose.” In modern organizations, no less than in the colonial assemblies of Madison’s experiences, focused groups can act in ways that their members would not dream of, alone in their closets.

THREATS POSED BY FACTIONS

Grenier tells a relevant story of a company named (really) Ethicon. A suture-making subsidiary of Johnson & Johnson, Ethicon built an innovative plant in New Mexico that was designed to de-bureaucratize the work environment: Jobs were organized around teams—quality circles—in a flexible, participative organizational structure. “The designers of the Ethicon work environment were trying to present a

new vision of work in contemporary America, a vision of unity, cooperation, purpose, and inspiration.”43

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Grenier studied teams in operation and found some grim facts behind the vision. In Ethicon’s explanation of quality circles to employees, “the concept was likened to a sports team, where all participants worked together for a common goal and had a voice in how that goal would be reached.”44 In theory, company supervisors (the team coaches) served as facilitators of communication, whereas workers discussed means of achieving production goals, including decisions about hiring, firing, evaluating, and disciplining other team members. In reality, “many workers referred to the team system as the ‘rat system,’ ” because it pitted workers against one another to root out “counterproductive behavior.” Counterproductive behavior turned out to be any expression of discontent with Ethicon or support for the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union, which began an organizing campaign soon after the plant opened. A key issue among union supporters was their low wage in New Mexico, compared to company workers elsewhere. For Ethicon, the lower wage was a reason for locating in New Mexico in the first place, and a reason for trying to stay nonunion.

From the start, Grenier reports, management carefully screened employees to select “team players” and exclude union sympathizers. A subsequent strategy used teams to control workers who developed pro-union attitudes. The team strategy relied on peer pressure, in the words of the Ethicon psychologist, “to deprive the pro-union employees of status and identify them as losers.”45 Facilitators were trained not only to bring “negative attitudes” to the group’s attention in team meetings but also to encourage the anti-union majority to denounce their pro-union colleagues (with remarks like “If you’re not happy with the company, why don’t you resign? If it were up to me I’d fire you”).46 Workers singled out for public censure compared the feeling to being attacked by a pack of wolves, and some union activists were, indeed, fired. According to Grenier, such things went on because facilitators won approval from management, team members in turn won recognition from facilitators, and new hires won acceptance from the group by showing support for the company. Seeing the fate of “losers,” the majority of workers just conformed. “The issue was who had the power to do more for the workers, and management had convinced most of the workers that management could do more, good and bad, than the union.”47

In the end, the pro-union minority lost the election (141 to 71). The victors gloated. And their opponents filed unfair-labor-practice charges (some of which were later settled in favor of union supporters discharged or denied jobs during the campaign).

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The moral of the story is that Ethicon’s efforts to achieve unity of purpose produced, instead, a sharply divided workforce motivated by fear. Ethicon’s approach was to eliminate the causes of faction (1) by enlisting persons to share the same interests and (2) by suppressing dissent among those who failed to go along—the very cures that Madison said were worse than the disease. And the result, as Madison might have predicted, was not the peaceful absence of conflict, but a bitter truce between the victorious majority and a resentful, powerless minority.

RIGHTS VERSUS GOALS IN ORGANIZATIONAL THEORY

Many ordinary people might agree wholeheartedly with proposals to secure basic individual interests and freedoms against infringement in the workplace. Many might welcome, for example, guarantees of rights to due process in termination decisions (rights that tenured faculty members, of both public and private institutions, take for granted). Leadership theorists, on the other hand, express much less enthusiasm about protecting individual rights that could conflict with organizational goals. Things like freedom in the factory, unions, and constitutional checks on corporate policies are not generally what theorists have in mind when speaking of worker empowerment. In the leadership literature, the meaning of the term is more like the interpretation at Ethicon-New Mexico: a Hegelian notion of freedom to serve the goals of the organization.48 Charles A. Reich’s idea of empowering workers to seek their own goals in organizations is apt to seem a little too, well, free.49 In such ethical matters, however, the opinions of Reich, Madison, and ordinary people may be better guides than traditional theories of organization.

Organizational theorists have historically found individual rights and freedoms less appealing than collective goals, not only in organizations but in society at large. On the heels of the American and French Revolutions, a pioneering organizational theorist, Henri de Saint-Simon, criticized Madisonian tendencies in the French Constitution:

[Lack of collective purpose] is the great gap in the Charter. It begins, as do all the constitutions dreamed up since 1789, by putting forward the

rights of Frenchmen, which can only be clearly determined when the purpose of society is established in a positive way, since the rights of every associate can only be based upon the abilities which he possesses and which contribute toward the common goal.50

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It cannot too often be repeated that society needs an active goal, for without this there would be no political system.... The maintenance of individual freedom cannot be the goal.... People do not band together to be free. Savages join together to hunt, to wage war, but certainly not to win liberty.51

Saint-Simon was wrong—and Madisonian thinking prevailed in the reformation of many Western governments. More than 200 years of political history have shown that people do join together in societies to advance personal freedom and individual rights. People have joined organizations (especially labor organizations) for similar reasons.

Social theorists have remained uncomfortable about all this. Auguste Comte, Saint-Simon’s disciple and the founder of modern sociology, challenged workers to consider themselves servants of society and its goals rather than “insisting on the possession of what metaphysicians call political rights, and engaging in useless discussions about the distribution of power.”52 Later, Henri Fayol, who laid much of the groundwork for a theory of management, expressed dismay that individuals refused to subordinate their interests to a common goal, either of business or of nation: “ignorance, ambition, selfishness, laziness, weakness and all human passions tend to cause the general interest to be lost sight of in favor of individual interest and a perpetual struggle has to be waged against them.”53 More recently, Henry Mintzberg, a prominent organizational theorist, has likened organizations without common goals to “a bucket of crabs, each clawing at the others to come out on top,” just as in society at large, where pulling toward private ends (a pluralist “political arena”) “will be found in the breakdown of any form of government, under conditions typically described as anarchy or revolution.”54

Some have tried to argue that “organization[s] would not exist if it were not for some common purpose.”55 Since they do exist, organizations must have the glue—or goals. This “goal paradigm” is still found in mainstream textbooks on organization,56 but it has prompted growing criticism in more analytical works.57 The main objection is that it is easy to talk about common, organizational goals in the abstract, yet difficult to find them in the real world. Certainly, organizations

produce real, objective consequences (e.g., profits, deficits, wages, pollutants, all kinds of goods and costs). However, participants frequently disagree about the value of these consequences, about which of them are actual goals of the organization. In a firm, for instance, owners might view profits as goals, and wages as costs; workers might view wages as goals, and profits as costs; others might view both profits and wages as goals (say, top managers) or costs (say, consumers). It seems that people participate in organizations for a variety of purposes. It seems arbitrary to take some participants’ purposes, or goals for an organization, to represent goals of the organization as a whole. And, for the most part, it seems that organizations look little like the organic, goal-seeking entities of management folklore.

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Operational difficulties in identifying organizational goals are disappointing but not quite fatal for the goal paradigm. Theorists have developed a second line of defense, which interprets goal diversity not as evidence of a bad paradigm but bad organizations. In other words, if organizations do not, in fact, have common goals, then they lack the glue that holds social systems together. And thus, of course, they do not resemble functionally integrated organisms but, rather, disintegrating “buckets of crabs” or “houses divided against themselves,”58 wars of parts against the whole,59 fragmented and fractured communities of you’ve-got-yours-now-where’s-mine egoists,60 and so forth. As we have seen, the implication of these images is that social systems without common goals are falling apart and need something, like a transformational leader or spirit of community, to supply the missing glue of collective purpose.

What we can learn from Madison, on the other hand, is that no such purpose or glue is necessary. For two centuries, his system of competitive federalism has held together, as a system of laws not of leaders or public purposes. To this day, it works better than suggested by the disparaging images of transformational-leadership theorists. For instance, Burns’s depiction of pluralist public agencies as pork barrels tended by transactional bureaucrats—who muddle along, spewing red tape, passing the buck, and dragging the system down with them—just does not square with the facts.61 Despite sensational reports of government waste, public bureaucracies such as the Social Security Administration have served clients with fairness and efficiency relative to its resources.62 Despite media criticism of governmental gridlock, divided government has enacted decent legislation, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and the Civil

Rights Act of 1991. As Charles E. Lindblom has stressed, Madisonian government works not because participants agree on goals, but because they can agree on specific activities (as in acts of legislation) that address their different goals.63 So, too, in private organizations, like corporations, the glue that holds them together need not be consensus on ends but can be simply consent to means—agreement on rules, rights, and responsibilities that serve the separate interests of their participants.

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Some organizational theorists have appreciated the point and concluded that organizations generally look like neither social organisms nor asocial free-for-alls, but more like political coalitions64 or markets,65 sets of contracts,66 or stakeholders.67 Empirically, models of this sort more fairly reflect the possibility that in organizations, as in society, participants may be less concerned with collective goals than with individual rights (e.g., contractual rights to a paycheck or return on investment, legal rights to equal opportunity or workers’ compensation, moral rights to information about the risks of products or services). Madison’s model indicates why these participant concerns are appropriate ethically.

The fundamental issue is that notions of a common goal, general interest, public good, and so forth are theoretical concepts (every bit as metaphysical as natural rights). Any real social consequence used to operationalize these theoretical terms is apt to impact persons in different, often arbitrary, ways. That is why participants find it hard to agree on organizational goals. Collective consequences like profits, wages, even organizational survival may greatly benefit some participants (say, employees of tobacco firms) but ultimately disadvantage others (say, tobacco customers who develop smoking-related illnesses). Even participants who share an interest in a particular organizational consequence may be affected very differently by it: Employees with a joint interest in higher wages may care less about an organization’s overall salary pool—which could be distributed capriciously—than about who gets what?

Organizations and their leaders can deal with distributional concerns either by seeking fairness of outcomes to individuals (a Madisonian strategy) or by changing the subject. In the tradition of Saint-Simon, transformational leadership aims to get people’s thoughts off distributional questions and refocus them on common goals, or communal interests. This may sound moral to James MacGregor Burns and like-minded theorists as well as some critics such as Joseph Rost.68 But the ethical justification for diverting

attention from individual to communal interests is unclear, given the hypothetical nature of the latter. If the operational consequences taken to represent collective ends are, in fact, weighted in favor of some persons’ interests, it seems deceptive to win other persons’ support by calling these weighted—perhaps biased—consequences common goals, goods, interests, and so on. Many people are quick to perceive such deception (as demonstrated in public ridicule of trickle-down economics). Other people are more trusting and vulnerable (as shown by supporters of televangelists’ visions). In any event, reliance on extraordinary leaders to define collective purposes just papers over the problem of faction and, as Madison saw, puts participants at risk of manipulation, or worse.

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In sum, contrary to the claims of theorists like Burns, common goals are no more imperative ethically than they are empirically. As Madison realized, people can still care for one another, if not for some alleged common good. As he explained in Federalist No. 10, factional mischief does not follow directly from diversity of interests; rather, it occurs when some people try to impose their interests on others. In other words, the problem of faction is not that individuals pursue separate interests, but that some are stronger, smarter, or richer than the rest and may use their power to take unfair advantage of other persons. Thus, Madison proposed a safer way to prevent factional mischief than transforming individuals and eliminating diversity of interests. His solution was to deter advantage-taking: to devise an impartial system of rules, checks, and balances that can accommodate personal ambitions while protecting each person’s basic interests from impairment by others—especially leaders who function in the name of the community.

CONCLUSION

Let me conclude by illustrating what difference a Madisonian perspective might make in a familiar kind of organization. The views of Saint-Simon, Mintzberg, Burns, and later leadership theorists are typified by Bennis in a classic article about his experiences as president of the University of Cincinnati. Wondering “Where have all the leaders gone?” Bennis sees factional misbehavior all about him. The university, he writes, “has blunted and diffused its main purposes” through a proliferation of interest groups.69 It is besieged by “external” constituencies such as alumni, parents, and lawmakers. It is “fragmented” by internal pressure groups of all sorts:

We have a coalition of women’s groups, a gay society, black organizations for both students and faculty, a veterans’ group, a continuing education group for women, a handicapped group, a faculty council on Jewish affairs, a faculty union organized by the American Association of University Professors, an organization for those staff members who are neither faculty nor administrators, an organization of middle-management staff members, an association of women administrators, a small, elite group of graduate fellows.70

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These groups, Bennis complains, go their own separate ways marking the end of community.

Like Bennis, many of us work in complex universities with diverse aims, interest groups, and external dependencies. However, unlike Bennis, few might find such diversity objectionable. What, exactly, is wrong with women’s groups or black groups or disabled groups or staff associations or other groups that flourish on our campuses?

Why do differences among these groups—in viewpoints, interests, and goals for the university—make us less a community, or just a bucket of crabs?

By invoking the ritual formula that organizations should have common purposes—and by painting organizations without them as snake pits—theorists perpetuate the illusion that there is something perverse about people who behave differently. Bennis, for example, portrays participants who assert their legal rights in universities as “bellyachers” who take advantage of the system, waste the organization’s time and money in court, and prevent the proper authorities (especially presidents, like himself) from exercising real leadership. He is critical of persons who bring suits for injuries, malpractice, civil rights violations, or who are just “fed up with being ignored, neglected, excluded, denied, subordinated.”71 To counter those who might be tempted to file complaints under consumer protection laws, he adds:

At my own and many other universities..., we are now in the process of rewriting our catalogs so carefully that it will be virtually impossible for any student (read: consumer) to claim that we haven’t fulfilled our end of the bargain. At the same time, because we have to be so careful, we can never express our hopes, our dreams, and our bold ideas of what a university could provide for the prospective student.72

This is the rub, then. Leaders cannot do what they want, because constituents have bold ideas of their own about what the organization

should provide in return for their cooperation, and because “the courts are substituting their judgments for the expertise of the institution.”73 “Time was,” Bennis says wistfully, “when the leader could decide period. A Henry Ford, an Andrew Carnegie, a Nicholas Murray Butler, could issue a ukase—and all would automatically obey.”74 (But no longer. Thanks to government, unions, lawyers, and their recalcitrant clients.)

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Thanks, also, to Madison and the framers. Were it not for the system of law they set in motion, individuals in harm’s way of organizations might have little recourse at all. Bennis evokes a timeless undercurrent of leadership theory that Madison struggled against in 1787: a longing for “the philosophical race of kings wished for by Plato.”75 Leaders, in this view, are to fabricate a vision of collective purpose—if necessary, a unifying myth. Followers are to put aside personal interests in its pursuit. (Madison, no doubt, read Plato’s parable of the poor carpenter who fell ill and was advised by a doctor to look after himself for a time before carrying out his assigned duties to the community; Plato remarks that the worker must be inspired to ignore such advice, to “go back to his normal routine, and either regain his health and get on with his job, or, if his constitution won’t stand it, die and be rid of his troubles.”)76 Modern theorists are more sensitive to personal entitlements than the ancient Greeks, but the very concept of transformational leadership implies that individual interests are less legitimate than collective ends. Why else would they require transformation? Accordingly, participants who do not subordinate their interests to organizational goals—as envisioned by leaders or majorities—are disparaged, even when their expectations seem quite reasonable. In a university, for instance, what is so unreasonable about students expecting to be treated like consumers? Or expecting accurate information in a college catalog? Or expecting the university to fulfill its end of the bargain? It is nonsense to suggest that leaders cannot meet such basic expectations and still express their hopes and dreams. And it is presumptuous to suppose that these expectations are less valid than the visions of people in power.

In a recent study of academic leadership, Birnbaum responds appropriately to Bennis’s plaintive question, Where have all the great leaders of the past gone? “They are dead,” says Birnbaum, “along with the simpler times in which formal leaders could wield unbridled power to get what they wanted. In today’s world of greater participation, shared influence, conflicting constituencies, and assorted other

complexities, heeding the current vogue of calls for charismatic presidents who can transform their institutions would be more likely to lead to campus disruption than to constructive change.”77 Birnbaum’s conclusions are based on a five-year longitudinal study of how college and university presidents exercise leadership. His research challenges a number of myths about effective leaders.

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Myth 1—Presidents need to create a vision for their organization that transcends individual interests. Birnbaum found otherwise. Successful leaders and acceptable visions reflected the diverse interests of constituents rather than the leader’s goals for the institution. One effective president advised: “[D]o a lot of listening. And when you do that, solicit the dreams and hopes from the people. Tell the people the good things you are finding. And in three to six months, take these things and report them as the things you would like to see happen.”78

Myth 2—Presidents should be transformational leaders. Birnbaum discovered that transformational leadership, which changes participants’ values and goals for the organization, is abnormal in universities. “Good leaders,” he reports, “help change their institutions, not through transformation and the articulation of new goals or values, but through transactions that emphasize values already in place and move the institution toward attaining them.”79 Transformational efforts to initiate grand schemes “inflict leadership” on constituencies and cause more factional strife than they resolve.

Myth 3—Charisma is an important aspect of leadership. Birnbaum found only a few institutions where presidential charisma helped rather than hindered the organization. He proposes that charisma has more to do with impression management than the hard work of running an institution. It allows presidents to substitute glitz for substance, and it encourages both leaders and followers to act on faith, as opposed to an understanding of the situation. Most importantly, reliance on presidential charisma tends to diminish the authority of other decision-makers and weakens the formal administrative structure of the university. The focus on a leader’s persona diverts attention from the long-term job of building an “institutional infrastructure” of mutually accepted practices, rights, and responsibilities.

Birnbaum (a former college president himself) views the support of multiple constituencies as central to presidential effectiveness. His data indicate that the kind of imperial presidency suggested by Bennis is not effective. Among institutions studied, a primary cause of presidential failure was unilateral action that furthered presidential goals but was perceived to violate constituents’ (particularly faculty) rights. In contrast, effective academic leaders in Birnbaum’s sample seem downright Madisonian. The president of one successful institution described his college as “a political system: a ‘pluralistic democracy,’ with himself as a ‘governor,’ ” which meant treating faculty, union leaders, and other administrators as colleagues, instead of subordinates.80 In general, successful academic leaders respected diversity (appreciating, not deprecating, different values). They respected participants’ own goals for the institution (building on them, versus correcting them). They respected individuals’ right-claims (placing the needs of people before system requirements). And they respected shared leadership (dispersing power, not just decentralizing it)—all clearly Madisonian priorities.

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There is a final point. I suspect that most of us work in universities with some Madisonian characteristics, whether top administrators encourage them or not. It is interesting that academic professionals create and seek employment in organizations with such institutionalized checks and balances as self-supporting departments, faculty senates, unions, tenure policies, grievance processes, and committees representing every interest imaginable. If this sort of federalist system is what we choose for ourselves, if we claim academic freedom as our right, why should we prescribe any less freedom for others.

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The officers stirred impatiently in their seats, and then suddenly every heart missed a beat. Something was the matter with His Excellency. He seemed unable to read the paper. He paused in bewilderment. He fumbled in his waistcoat pocket. And then he pulled out something that only his intimates had seen him wear. A pair of glasses. With infinite sweetness and melancholy, he explained, “Gentlemen, you will permit me to put on my spectacles, for I have not only grown grey but almost blind in the service of my country.”

With tough veterans moved to tears, Washington read the letter and left. Passions cooled, officers drifted off, and plans for insurrection were abandoned.

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8. Padover, Complete Madison, 40–1.
9. Warren Bennis, Why Leaders Can’t Lead (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1989). Amitai Etzioni, The Moral Dimension (New York: Free Press, 1988).
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11. Ibid., 42.
12. Bennis, Why Leaders Can’t Lead, 144.
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14. Jane M. Howell and Bruce J. Avolio, “The Ethics of Charismatic Leadership: Submission or Liberation?” Academy of Management Executive 6 (1992): 43–54.
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17. Nancy C. Roberts and Raymond Trevor Bradley, “Limits of Charisma,” Charismatic Leadership, edited by Jay A. Conger, Rabindra N. Kanungo, and Associates (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1988), 253–75.
18. Howell and Avolio, “The Ethics of Charismatic Leadership.”
19. Guillermo J. Grenier, Inhuman Relations (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), xiii.
20. Ibid., 26.
21. Ibid., 90.
22. Ibid., 77.
23. Ibid., 147.
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work behavior.” See Philip Selznick, Leadership in Administration (Evanston, IL: Row Peterson, 1957).

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What Is Ethical Foreign

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Policy Leadership?

Joseph S. Nye, Jr.

In the book Just War, Charles Guthrie and Michael Quinlan write, “[M]oral accountability is a central part of what it means to be a human being.”1 While this description applies to everyone no matter what role the person plays in life, it takes on a special poignancy when we examine the ethics of how leaders formulate and implement foreign policy. Their decisions and behavior potentially influence the well-being of people at home and abroad. Leaders may draw nations into war, establish peace, create famine, or ensure survival of people. That is why ethical leaders and leadership are fundamental to the conduct of foreign policy.

ETHICAL STANDARDS FOR JUDGING LEADERS

In practice, we usually judge ethics in three dimensions: ends, means, and consequences. By ends I refer to intentions (as in his ends were just). Good goals have to meet our moral standards, as well as a feasibility

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test. Effective means are those that achieve the goals, but ethical means depend on the quality, not just the efficacy, of the approaches employed. When it comes to means, leaders must decide whether they will use hard power—inducements or threats—or soft power—values, culture, and policies that attract people to their goals.2 Using hard power when soft power will do or using soft power when hard power is necessary raises serious ethical questions about a leader’s approach to a foreign policy issue. As for consequences, a leader’s effectiveness involves achieving the group’s goals, but ethical consequences mean good results not just for the in-group but for outsiders as well. Of course in practice, effectiveness and ethics are often closely related. A leader who pursues unrealistic goals or uses ineffective means can produce terrible moral consequences for followers. For example, even if we attribute good intentions to George W. Bush’s invasion of Iraq, unrealistic goals and inadequate means had immoral consequences. Thus, inadequate contextual intelligence and reckless reality-testing that produced bad consequences can result in ethical failure. Conversely, a leader’s good intentions are not the only proof of what is sometimes misleadingly called moral clarity.

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Should leaders be judged by the same moral standard as ordinary citizens? Take the Biblical injunction “thou shalt not kill.” In choosing a roommate or a spouse, that commandment would rank high on the list of desired moral values. At the same time, most people would not vote for an absolute pacifist to become president of their country. Presidents and prime ministers have a fiduciary obligation to protect the people who elected them, and under certain circumstances, that may involve ordering troops into battle to take lives. Sometimes leaders must have dirty hands, meaning that they must take actions they would otherwise regard as immoral.

Max Weber famously distinguished an ethic of ultimate ends from an ethic of responsibility. In the former, absolute moral imperatives must not be violated for the sake of good consequences, but an ethic of responsibility must focus on the results. Weber warns that “[w]hoever seeks the salvation of his own soul and the rescue of souls, does not do so by means of politics.”3 In the philosophical traditions of the Western Enlightenment, ethicists distinguish a deontological or rule-based approach associated with Immanuel Kant from a consequentialist approach associated with utilitarians such as Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill.4 The two traditions provide important strands of contemporary moral reasoning in the West today, but they are often difficult to reconcile.

Take Harry Truman’s decision to drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima in an effort to end World War II. Although millions of lives had already been lost in the war, Truman was told that he could save hundreds of thousands of American and Japanese lives by avoiding a land invasion of the Japanese home islands. Moreover, the numbers killed at Hiroshima (and Nagasaki) were fewer than those who had been killed in the conventional firebombing of Tokyo or Dresden. Was Truman’s act morally justified? Strict deontologists and just war theorists would answer that two wrongs do not make a right and that the deliberate destruction of so many innocent civilians can never be justified. Some consequentialists could reply that nuclear deterrence helped prevent World War III and that Truman later redeemed himself by refusing to use nuclear weapons when General McArthur urged him to do so in the Korean War. That taboo against nuclear use has lasted for nearly seven decades.

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Moreover, if Truman had refused to drop the bomb because of his personal moral beliefs, at what price does a leader’s concern about personal integrity translate into selfishness and a violation of followers’ trust? There are no easy answers to such problems, and recent scientific discoveries suggest that evolution may have hardwired the dilemma into the human brain. Kenneth Winston argues that in daily practice, people’s sense of moral obligation tends to come from three sources. One is a sense of conscience that is personally or religiously informed and leads individuals to try to achieve a sense of moral integrity. A second involves rules of common morality that society treats as obligations for all individuals, and a third includes codes of professional ethics and conventional expectations that might be considered the duties of one’s role.5 Leaders are subject to all three, and these different sources of moral obligation are frequently in tension with each other. Often there is no single solution. As Isaiah Berlin once noted, since “the ends of men are many, and not all of them are in principle compatible with each other, then the possibility of conflict—and tragedy—can never wholly be eliminated from human life, either personal or social.”6

Many societies have ethical systems that stress impartiality and have an analogue to the golden rule—“do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Your interests and my interests should be treated the same way. John Rawls used the wonderful metaphor of an imaginary veil of ignorance about our initial relative positions to illustrate justice as fairness.7 However, appealing to an intuitive sense

of fairness—treating others as you would want to be treated, not playing favorites, and being sensible to individual needs—does not always provide a solution. Amartya Sen invites us to imagine a parent with a flute and three children, each of whom wants it. The first child says, “I made it”; the second says, “I am the only one who can play it”; and the third says, “I have no other toys.”8 Even with a thought experiment about deciding behind a veil of ignorance in which none of the children knows which one is which, the principle of justice as fairness remains unclear in some cases. In such instances, the parent (or leader) may find it more appropriate to turn to a procedural or institutional solution in which the children bargain with each other or agree on a lottery or on a neutral figure to decide how time with the flute will be allocated or shared. The parent can also teach or coach the children about sharing, which is a different image of leadership as persuasion and education rather than exercise of command authority. Teaching followers about processes and institutions—helping a group decide how to decide—is often one of the most important moral roles that leaders (and parents) play.

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ETHICAL DESIGN AND MAINTENANCE OF INSTITUTIONS

One of the most important skills of good leaders is to design and maintain systems and institutions. This relates both to effectiveness and to ethics. Poorly designed institutions are those that fail to achieve a group’s purpose not in each particular instance, but over the long term. Well-designed institutions include means for self-correction as well as ways of constraining the failures of leaders. Poorly designed or led institutions can also lead people astray. Obedience to institutional authority can be bad at times. In 1963 Yale professor Stanley Milgram devised a now famous experiment to test obedience to authority. The experiment encouraged students to administer what they thought were brutal electric shocks to their colleagues.9 Stanford psychologist Philip Zimbardo conducted a simulated prison experiment in 1971 that also demonstrated the capacity of intelligent people to blindly submit to authority.10 Both experiments and the violence and humiliation of prisoners at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq remind us of both the importance and the danger of poorly designed institutions. The Abu Ghraib guards were reservists without special training who lacked supervision and were given the task of softening up detainees. It is not surprising that the result was various forms of

torture. The moral flaws were not simply in the prison guards but also in the higher level leaders who created and failed to monitor a flawed institutional framework. Good leadership is not merely inspiring people with a noble vision, but involves creating and maintaining the systems and institutions that allow effective and moral implementation.

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DUTIES BEYOND BORDERS

Not only are ethical standards for judging leaders more complicated than those we use for judging fellow citizens in daily life, but the domain of foreign policy adds an additional level of complexity. To what extent should leaders pay attention to the rights, institutions, and welfare of those who are not their fellow citizens? Skeptics argue that where there is no sense of community, there are no moral rights and duties, and that the classic statement about ethics in international politics was the Athenians’ response to the conquered Melians’ plea for mercy “that the weak must give in to the strong.”11

If international relations were simply the realm of kill or be killed, then presumably there is no choice, and there would be no role for morality. But international politics consists of more than mere survival, and pretending choices do not exist is merely a disguised form of choice. A degree of international human community does exist, although it is weak. The leader who says, “I had no choice,” often did have a choice, albeit not a pleasant one.

International politics is often called anarchic. Anarchy means without government, but international anarchy does not necessarily mean chaos or total disorder. International affairs lack the discipline of a domestic leviathan, but there are rudimentary practices and institutions that provide enough order to allow some important choices: balance of power, international law and norms, and international organizations. Even in the extreme circumstances of war, law and morality sometimes play a role. The just war doctrine originated in the early Christian church as Augustine and others wrestled with the dilemma that if the good did not fight back, they would perish and only the bad would survive. It became secularized after the seventeenth century, and today provides a broad normative structure that considers all three dimensions of good ends, discriminating proportional means, and the probability of successful consequences.

Nonetheless, different perceptions affect the way leaders and followers frame their moral choices. Realists see a world composed primarily of states; liberals see a world of peoples with rights, and

cosmopolitans stress the importance of individuals. However, these simple categories are not exclusive, and in practice, leaders sometimes mix these views in inconsistent ways when they formulate foreign policies. As a result there is no single view on what duties citizens owe to foreigners, or when and what types of intervention are moral or not. An insular leader thinks only of the concerns of his own group, but a moral leader also considers the types and degree of consequences for those who are not members of the group. The image of a community of humankind may be a weak outer circle in a set of concentric circles of identity, but it still involves some degree of moral duties beyond borders.

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The leadership theorist Barbara Kellerman accuses Bill Clinton of insular leadership in failing to respond to the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, and Clinton himself has criticized his reactions.12 Yet had Clinton tried to send American troops, he would have encountered stiff resistance in parts of his administration, the Congress, and public opinion. Particularly after the death of American soldiers in an earlier humanitarian intervention in Somalia, his followers were not ready for another intervention. Clinton has acknowledged that he could have done more to help the United Nations and other nations to save some of the lives that were lost in Rwanda, but good leaders today are often caught between their cosmopolitan inclinations and their more traditional obligations to the followers who elected them. We may admire leaders who make efforts to increase their followers’ concern for the consequences of their actions on the out-group, but it does little good to hold them to an impossible standard whose pursuit could undercut their capacity to remain leaders.

PRUDENCE AS A VIRTUE

How then should we judge the ethics of leaders in foreign policy? They act not in an amoral world but clearly in Max Weber’s world of non-perfectionist ethics. Arnold Wolfers has argued that in international affairs, where presidents and prime ministers can have such destructive effects, leaders cannot always follow moral rules. The best one can hope for in judging the ethics of leaders in foreign policy is that they made “the best moral choices that circumstances permit.”13 This is a necessary standard but certainly not a sufficient one.

Such a broad rule of prudence can easily be abused. At the same time, it does not imply amorality. What are some of the ways we can reason about whether leaders did indeed make the best moral choices

under the circumstances? When we look at the goals that leaders seek, we do not expect them to pursue justice similar to their domestic policies. After all, John Rawls believed that the conditions for his theory of justice applied only to domestic society.14 Nonetheless, he argued that duties beyond borders for a liberal society should include mutual aid, and respect for rights and institutions that insure basic human rights while allowing people in a diverse world to determine their own affairs as much as possible. Thus, the criteria I suggest for judging leaders’ goals include a vision that expresses widely attractive values at home and abroad, but prudently balances those values and assesses risks so that there is a reasonable prospect of their success. This means we judge a leader not only on his or her character and intentions but also on his or her contextual intelligence when it comes to assessing ends and goals.

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Regarding ethical means, I include criteria borrowed from Just War theory, such as proportional and discriminate use of force as well as Rawls’s liberal concern for minimal degrees of intervention to respect the rights and institutions of others. As for ethical consequences, I would judge whether leaders succeeded in promoting long-term national interests, whether they respected cosmopolitan values by avoiding extreme insularity, and whether they educated their followers to try to create and broaden moral standards at home and abroad. While such a list is modest and by no means complete, it at least provides some basic guidance that goes beyond simple generalities about prudence when we look for answers case by case. Let me illustrate with two recent American presidents: Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush.

Ronald Reagan

Ronald Reagan is often cited as the exemplar of a moral foreign policy leader par excellence. A movement conservative, he is remembered for speeches that issued a strong call for moral clarity. As the Economist put it, his appeal rested on “knowing that mere reason, essential though it is, is only half of the business of reaching momentous decisions. You also need solid-based instincts, feelings, whatever the word is for the other part of the mind. ‘I have a gut feeling’, Reagan said over and over again, when he was working out what to do and say.”15

Like Franklin D. Roosevelt, Reagan lacked a first-class intellect, but made up for it with a first-class temperament. He radiated optimism,

and illustrated the point that style can influence substance. As my colleague David Gergen observes, Reagan changed how we think about ourselves. At the same time, he could be “so dreamy and inattentive to detail that he allowed dramatic mistakes to occur.”16 When people today call for a Reaganite foreign policy, they tend to mean the moral clarity that went with Reagan’s simplification of complex issues and his effective rhetoric in presentation of values. Not only is this inadequate moral reasoning for reasons explained earlier, but it also mistakes the success of Reagan’s moral leadership, which included the ability to bargain and compromise as he pursued his policy.

Nonetheless, clear and clearly stated objectives can educate and motivate the public. The key question is whether Reagan was prudent in balancing aspirations and risks of his goals and objectives. Some people have argued that his initial rhetoric in his first term not only created a dangerous degree of tension and distrust in U.S.-Soviet relations that increased the prospect of a miscalculation or an accident leading to war, but also created incentives to bargain, which Reagan put to good advantage when Gorbachev came to power in Reagan’s second term. As for insularity, Reagan expressed his values in universal terms, though he was sometimes accused of hypocrisy for focusing on Soviet violations of human rights while ignoring the violations perpetrated by a number of American Third World client regimes. He was quite prepared to live with apartheid in South Africa, and it took two years after the first protests before he reduced his support for the Marcos regime in the Philippines.

With regard to means, Reagan had a mixed record. The circumvention of legal means during the Iran/Contra affair set a bad precedent in terms of domestic as well as international norms and institutions. And the Reagan Doctrine of using covert action to fight wars against leftist regimes in Central America not only raised legal issues with Congress, but also included the mining of harbors in Nicaragua, a country with which the United States was officially at peace. Whether these transgressions of autonomy and institutional restraints were justified by realist necessity is debatable, but the damage was real.

In terms of consequences, Reagan undoubtedly advanced the national interests of the United States, though most of the credit for ending the Cold War and the Soviet Union belongs to Gorbachev. In any event, Reagan took good advantage of the opportunity in a manner that was not limited just to insular American interests. Reagan’s rhetoric broadened moral discourse at home and abroad, but it was

sometimes subverted by actions (such as support for apartheid in South Africa) that appeared hypocritical in terms of the values that Reagan proclaimed for himself and for his country. By and large, he had an ethical foreign policy in the goals he set and most of the larger consequences to which he contributed, but not always in terms of the means he used.

George H. W. Bush

George H. W. Bush’s long career in various government positions equipped him with the best contextual intelligence about international affairs since Eisenhower. As Nicholas Burns, who served under Bush, argued, “Bush’s accomplishments in ending the Cold War, unifying Germany, amassing the Gulf War coalition that defeated Saddam Hussein in that same year, and in then pivoting to start Israeli-Palestinian negotiations at Madrid make him arguably the most successful foreign policy presidents of the last 50 years.”17 Or as Bush himself summed it up (with Brent Scowcroft), “[w]hat Harry Truman’s containment policy and succeeding administrations had cultivated, we were able to bring to final fruition. Did we see what was coming when we entered office? No, we did not, nor could we have planned it.... The long-run framework of Bush foreign policy was very deliberate: encouraging, guiding, and managing change without provoking backlash and crackdown. In the short run, the practical effort included as well a certain amount of seat of the pants planning and diplomacy.... We eluded the shadow of another Versailles.”18

As his own account describes, Bush did not have transformational objectives (with some exceptions like the unification of Germany). Instead, he was interested in avoiding disaster in a world that was changing dramatically. As he and his team responded to the forces that were largely outside of his control, he set goals and objectives that balanced opportunities and realism in a prudent manner. For example, some critics have faulted him for not being more forthcoming in supporting the national aspiration of Soviet republics like Ukraine in 1990, or for failing to go all the way to Baghdad to unseat Saddam Hussein in the Gulf War, or for sending Brent Scowcroft to Beijing to maintain relations with China after the Tiananmen massacre of 1989, but in each instance, Bush was limiting his short-run objectives to pursue long-term stability as a goal. Critics have complained that Bush did not set more transformational objectives in relation to Russian

democracy, or the Middle East, or nuclear nonproliferation at a time when world politics seemed fluid, but again he remained focused on questions of stability more than of new visions. In ethical terms, although Bush did not express a strong moral vision, it is difficult to make the case that he should have been less prudent and taken more risks.

As for means, Bush was respectful of institutions and norms at home and abroad, going to Congress for authorization of the Gulf War and to the United Nations for a resolution under Chapter 7 of the Charter. Although a realist in his thinking, he could be Wilsonian in his tactics. In terms of proportionate and discriminate use of force, Bush’s termination of the ground war in Iraq after only four days was motivated in part by humanitarian reactions to the slaughter of Iraqi troops as well as the concern that Iraq not be so weakened that it could not balance the threatening power of its neighbor Iran. While his invasion of Panama to capture (and later try) Manuel Noriega may have violated Panamanian sovereignty, it had a degree of de facto legitimacy given Noriega’s notorious behavior. And when Bush organized his coalition to prosecute the Gulf War, he not only worked with the United Nations but also included a number of Arab countries who were needed, not for military purposes, but for the legitimacy that they added to the coalition. With his careful combination of hard and soft power, Bush established a policy that raised moral standards at home and abroad and was capable of being sustainable in the future.

In terms of consequences, Bush was a worthy fiduciary in accomplishing national goals and managed to do so in a manner that was not unduly insular and that caused minimal damage to the interests of foreigners. He was careful not to humiliate Gorbachev and to manage the transition to Yeltsin in Russia. At the same time, not all foreigners were adequately protected, for example, when Bush assigned a lower priority to Kurds in northern Iraq, to dissidents in China, or to Bosnians who were embroiled in a civil war in the former Yugoslavia. In that sense, Bush’s realism set limits to his cosmopolitanism.

Could Bush have done more under the circumstances? Possibly, or perhaps, he might have done more in the second term, and losing that opportunity was an instance of bad moral luck. And with a better set of communications skills, Bush might have been able to do more to educate the American public about the changing nature of world they faced after the Cold War. But given the uncertainties of history, I am tempted to agree with Nicholas Burns that Bush had one of the best

foreign policies of the past century in both the effective and the ethical meaning of the term.

WHAT IS GOOD FOREIGN POLICY?

Contrary to the assumptions of leadership theory, there is little evidence to conclude that leaders with transformational objectives or inspirational styles are better in the sense of more effective, or better in its ethical meaning. The best record goes to the incremental and transactional George H. W. Bush (Bush 41), and the poorest records belong to the transformational and inspirational leaders like his son, George W. Bush (Bush 43).

September 11, 2001, led to a transformation in American foreign policy. George W. Bush started as a limited realist with little interest in foreign policy, but his objectives became transformational after the crisis. Like Wilson, FDR, and Truman, Bush 43 turned to the rhetoric of democracy to rally his followers in a time of crisis. Bush’s 2002 National Security Strategy, which came to be called the Bush Doctrine, proclaimed that the United States would “identify and eliminate terrorists wherever they are, together with the regimes that sustain them.” In this new game there were no rules. The solution to the roots of terrorism was to spread democracy everywhere. In the words of historian John Gaddis, “[i]t is ‘Fukuyama plus force’, and designed to make terrorism as obsolete as slavery or piracy. Iraq was the most feasible place to strike the next blow.”19

Bush invaded Iraq ostensibly to change the regime and to remove Saddam Hussein’s capacity to use weapons of mass destruction. Bush cannot be blamed for the intelligence failure that attributed such weapons to Saddam, since such estimates were widely shared by many other countries. While no weapons were found, American forces quickly overthrew Saddam. But the removal of Saddam did not accomplish the mission, and inadequate understanding of the context plus poor planning and management undercut Bush’s transformational objectives. While some Bush administration apologists try to trace the causes of the 2011 Tunisian, Egyptian, and other Arab revolutions to American policies in Iraq, such arguments are not convincing and are denied by the primary Arab participants. While it is still too early for a definitive historical judgment on the Iraq War, what is clear at this point is that the twenty-first century opened with a crisis that led to a very costly transformational policy.

Despite the shared genes, the policy of George W. Bush could not have been more different from that of his father. Members of the younger Bush’s administration often compared him to Ronald Reagan or Harry Truman. But the twentieth-century president he most resembled was Woodrow Wilson. There are uncanny similarities between Wilson and George W. Bush. Both were highly religious and moralistic men who were elected with less than a majority of the popular vote, and initially focused on domestic issues without any vision of foreign policy. Both were initially successful with their transformational domestic agendas in the Congress. Both tended to portray the world in black and white rather than shades of gray. Both projected self-confidence, responded to a crisis with a bold vision, and stuck to it.

Although George W. Bush possessed a master’s degree in business administration, he displayed some of the same organizational deficiencies as Wilson in managing the government and sorting out the conflicting information he received in making his decisions. Again this was in contrast to the successful management style of his father. But strength of character is not an adequate substitute for organizational competence (that which Bush’s father possessed). Information flows were limited. The younger Bush was decisive and persistent, but like Wilson not very receptive to new information once his mind was made up.

Though Wilson started as an idealist and Bush as a realist, both wound up stressing the promotion of democracy and freedom in the rest of the world as their transformative vision. And both defined visions that had a large gap between expressed ideals and national capacities. Many of Bush’s speeches, particularly his second inaugural address about a freedom agenda, sounded like they could have been uttered by Wilson, though Wilson was the better rhetorician. Fortunately for Bush, there were also important differences between the two men. Bush had an emotional intelligence and self-mastery that failed Wilson at crucial moments. He was also more personable, whereas Wilson was often stiff and aloof.

Both Wilson and Bush tried to educate the public to accept their transformational visions. But good teachers need to be good learners, and Bush’s impatience hindered his learning. The impatient temperament also contributed to the organizational process Bush put in place that discouraged learning. In his second term, Bush made some efforts to change the debate on Iraq by publicly acknowledging new facts, and he successfully pressed for a surge of additional troops in 2006 that helped to prevent a total defeat. Wilson succeeded initially in

educating a majority of the American people about his League of Nations, but he failed because he refused to make compromises with the Senate. Similarly, Bush was initially able to persuade the American people of his proposed transformation of American strategy, and he was reelected in 2004, but he lost support (and the Congress) by 2006. The comparison illustrates that the prospects for transformational leadership in foreign policy are greatest in the context of a crisis, because people see the need for change and the potential costs of not doing so. But even then, success requires a combination of soft power skills to attract people at home and abroad with a feasible vision and hard organizational and political skills to implement the vision. Presidents like Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman had the combination. Woodrow Wilson did not. Similarly, George W. Bush articulated transformational objectives, but did not develop a successful strategy to accomplish them.

THE COMPLEXITY OF CONTEXT

As I said earlier, there is little evidence to support the general assumptions of leadership theory and public discourse that transformational foreign policy leaders are better in either ethics or effectiveness. For one thing, the concept of transformational leadership is too ambiguously defined to be useful unless it is more carefully specified. But even with objectives distinguished from style, the evidence does not support the view that leaders with transformational objectives or inspirational style are better. Other leadership skills outlined in my book The Powers to Lead are more important than the usual distinction between transformational and transactional leaders. Here it is useful to compare Woodrow Wilson with the first Bush. In the long term, Wilson’s vision was partially vindicated, but he lacked the leadership skills needed for its execution and implementation in his own time. With Bush 41, the vision thing and his educational impact were very limited, but his execution and management were very good. Perhaps the facetious moral of the story is that at some mythical day in the future, genetic engineering will be able to produce leaders equally endowed with both sets of skills. Comparing the two Bushes, who shared half their genes, makes it is clear that nature has not yet solved the problem. This is not an argument against transformational leaders. Nor is this an argument against transformational leaders in foreign policy. But in judging leaders we need to pay attention to both acts of

omission and acts of commission, both things that happened and things that did not happen, dogs that barked and those that did not.

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A big problem in foreign policy is the complexity of the context. We live in a world of diverse cultures and still know very little about social engineering and how to build nations. When we cannot be sure how to improve the world, prudence becomes an important virtue, and hubristic visions can pose a grave danger. In foreign policy as in medicine, it is important to remember the Hippocratic oath: First, do no harm. For these reasons, the virtues of transactional leaders with good contextual intelligence are very important. A Bush 41 without the ability to articulate a vision but who is able to steer successfully through crises turns out to be a better leader than a Bush 43 with a powerful vision but little contextual intelligence. In trying to explain the role of secretary of state, George Shultz once compared it to gardening: “the constant nurturing of a complex array of actors, interests and goals.” But Derek Chollet points out that Shultz’s Stanford colleague Condoleezza Rice wanted a more transformational diplomacy “not accepting the world as it is, but trying to change it. Rice’s ambition is not just to be a gardener—she wants to be a landscape architect.”20

There is a role for both, depending on the context, but we should avoid the common mistake of automatically thinking that the transformational landscape architect is a better foreign policy leader—in terms of both effectiveness and ethics—than the careful gardener. For leaders, prudence is often the key virtue necessary for good foreign policy.

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