5

Ethical Failure and Leadership: Treatment and Selection

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Leadership is a modern-day *Ring of Gyges* (Ludwig and Longenecker 1993). Plato speculated that the wearers of the Ring of Gyges, which brought the power of invisibility, would commit injustice because they could get away with it. So too, contemporary leadership scholars speculate that leaders act unethically because they can get away with it. For example, in Ludwig and Longenecker's (1993) influential analysis of the Bathsheba syndrome, they argue that modern-day leaders, like the Biblical King David or the wearers of the Ring of Gyges, are subject to ethical failure because they think they can get away with it. Moreover, Ludwig and Longenecker (1993) argue that leaders also lose professional focus and develop an inflated sense of their agency once they are successful, which compounds the risk of ethical failure.

Or, maybe leadership is more like a blindfold, which makes even well-meaning leaders blind to the demands of morality. Terry Price (2000)

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pursues this explanation when he argues that leaders are disposed to ethical failure, not because of their intrinsic immorality or weakness of will, but because they develop false beliefs about the scope of moral requirements. Namely, leaders begin to believe that the rules do not apply to them or that they are above the law. Leaders are especially vulnerable to this sort of ethical failure because, in many ways, they are exceptional, so it can be difficult to tell when they are permitted to hold themselves to distinctive moral standards and when they aren't.

A third explanation of ethical failure in leadership is that the stakes are simply higher, so ethical failure is more spectacular and harmful when it inevitably occurs. Everyone messes up sometimes, but when political and business leaders make mistakes, entire communities and organizations bear the costs. The higher the stakes, the higher is the moral risk, and leadership is also morally risky because it can be unclear which moral reasons a leader should consider when they're making decisions that affect everyone. These three explanations for ethical failure in leadership diagnose the problem of ethical failure as a problem with the leadership role. I call these treatment-based explanations.

In this chapter, I offer an alternative, though complementary, diagnosis of ethical failure in leadership: leadership is a filter, and it selects for people who are prone to ethical failure. My argument for this diagnosis goes like this. First, leadership always involves some form of relational inequality. People who are comfortable with assuming unequal relationships with people may display this disposition more robustly. In other words, the seeming correlation between leadership and ethical failure is often a result of selection effects for leadership positions rather than exposure effects related to the demands of leadership. Though my analysis is primarily aimed at enriching our existing understanding of ethical leadership, I also propose that this argument yields useful hypotheses for further social scientific research about failure and leadership more generally.

In the first three sections, I describe the treatment-based explanations for leaders' ethical failure in more detail. While there is some truth to these explanations, they also fail to fully explain the phenomenon and they have morally troubling implications with respect to leaders' blameworthiness. I then propose a selection-based explanation for ethical failure that further explains why leaders act unethically. In this section, I

sketch a philosophical argument that people who pursue leadership positions may make a moral mistake just through the act of self-selection for leadership. Next, I show that there is social scientific support for the selection-based explanation. In the last substantive section, I discuss potential institutional remedies to the moral problems of self-selection and areas for further research.

Ethical Failure and Willpower

The Biblical story of King David is a paradigmatic example of leaders' ethical failure. As a young Shepard, David gains fame and influence after he kills Goliath. He ultimately becomes a successful King until he commits adultery with his soldier Uriah's wife, causing him to arrange for Uriah to die in battle. Because of David's infidelity, he then suffers a series of personal misfortunes and political losses.

In a seminal paper about ethical failure in leadership, Ludwig and Longenecker (1993) argue that David's story illustrates a deeper problem with leadership and how people prepare for leadership. Namely, leaders are not equipped to deal with professional success. David only encountered Bathsheba because he was home during the springtime rather than fighting a defensive war. Many of his moral mistakes were a consequence of his success—he only killed Uriah because he had military authority that enabled him to. He had few constraints on his resources too, which made him think he was more in control over outcomes than he actually was. They point out that leaders' immoral behavior is often unambiguously wrong, and it's not committed in the face of any particular competitive pressures. Instead, successful leadership seems to be an impediment to ethical leadership.

Ludwig and Longenecker (1993) then offer a causal story that explains why professional success and leadership can cause ethical failure. First, leadership can be psychologically costly, not just because it is stressful to be in charge but also because it is isolating and lonely. Second, successful leaders may be "emotionally expansive" after working to achieve a position of authority, meaning that they require evermore risk and achievement in order to feel emotionally satisfied. Third, leaders may also lose

touch with reality if they only interact with subordinates in their organizations. Finally, leaders may develop big egos after experiencing so much praise and accomplishment. All of these ingredients combine to make a recipe for ethical failure.

To remedy these hazards of leadership, Ludwig and Longenecker suggest that either leaders constrain themselves or other people in an institution constrain a leader preemptively, subjecting even a leader to monitoring and questioning from other people in the organization. This can be difficult to achieve in some contexts because not all good leaders are receptive to monitoring and transparency, and in some cases, excessive oversight and feedback in an organization can impede efficiency. On the other hand, a proponent of Ludwig and Longenecker's (1993) view may reply that even if it is inefficient to monitor and constrain an effective leader, ethical failure can be catastrophically costly to an organization. Therefore, putting some limits on leaders' ability to do or get what they want could be a sensible insurance policy against ethical failure.

Ethical Failure and Moral Knowledge

An alternative explanation of ethical failure in leadership diagnoses bad leadership as a failure of understanding, rather than a failure of willpower.[1] Terry Price advances this explanation as an alternative to Ludwig and Longenecker's (1993) diagnosis of leaders' shortcomings (Price 2000). In Price's view, at least some ethical failures in leadership arise because leaders have distinctive epistemic challenges associated with their role as leaders. Returning to the example of Bathsheba, Price points out that David realized his ethical failure through an argument by analogy. When the prophet Nathan describes someone who stole from a man who was comparatively worse off, David recognizes the injustice in the story. Nathan then suggests that the crime of the man in the story is the same as David's mistreatment of Uriah.

Price (2000) argues that the fact that David was surprised that Nathan's argument applied to him indicates that David was not aware of his ethical failure beforehand. A proponent of Ludwig and Longenecker's position may reply that David did know he was acting wrongly because he

attempted to conceal his misconduct. But Price responds that this observation only establishes that David was aware that other people would think he was acting wrongly, not that he was acting wrongly. On Prices' diagnosis, David must have thought that he was exempt from moral requirements in virtue of his role as a leader.

This argument generalizes to other contexts as well. It is not necessary that leaders develop mistaken views about the content of moral requirements. Rather, they overlook the fact that they are subject to moral requirements. Leaders are especially vulnerable to making these kinds of mistakes about the scope, rather than the content, of morality because they are often exempt from other requirements, such as legal requirements or institutional norms, in virtue of their role as a leader. As Price (2000, p. 182) writes, "leadership begins with the justification that the leader is permitted to do myriad things that others are not permitted to do," which can stir up an attitude of moral exceptionalism.

Price's (2000) analysis is, in some ways, sympathetic to leaders who make moral mistakes. As Price argues, it can be difficult for a leader or a bystander to tell when leaders' exceptional status is justified. In general, if it is difficult for someone to know the morally relevant information in a situation, then they are less blameworthy for making a mistake than they would be if they knew all morally relevant information and acted otherwise. To the extent that blameless ignorance can mitigate blame for wrongdoing, leaders may be less blameworthy for their unethical behavior in light of the cognitive challenges they face.

On the other hand, it is not always clear that leaders' ignorance about the scope of moral requirements is blameless. After all, people are rarely born leaders, so they have an opportunity to scrutinize the ethics of leadership before they become leaders. And knowing the moral risks of leadership, people who become leaders may have a duty to take steps to ensure that they do not lose sight of their moral obligations when they occupy a role that enables them to make exceptions for themselves. For example, leaders may have a duty to surround themselves with people who will hold them accountable and to openly seek scrutiny and criticism. Just as David gained relevant moral knowledge from Nathan's council, modern-day leaders can look to subordinates as well as external critics to scrutinize leaders' claims of moral exceptionalism.

Ethical Failure and Moral Risk

A third reason that leaders may be prone to ethical failure relates to the nature of leadership itself. Whether morality requires that leaders promote good consequences or avoid violating people's rights, leaders are at a greater risk of ethical failure in virtue of their role because, in both business and government, leaders occupy a position of responsibility for an organization. This means that in addition to personal responsibility for their own conduct, leaders may reasonably be held responsible for other people's behavior if they failed to prevent wrongdoing or if they tolerated unethical practices. Leaders' ethical mistakes are also potentially costlier or worse in other ways, simply because their decisions affect more people.

Consider first the idea that people are morally required to promote good consequences. People who occupy leadership roles make decisions that are more consequential than everyday choices because they affect more people. The norms for moral deliberation that can be helpful in interpersonal cases may also not be as helpful when people are deciding for an entire organization or political community. For example, the philosopher Robert Goodin argues that while respecting people's presumptive rights against interference may be required for people acting in an individual capacity, it is impossible for political leaders to comply with a moral requirement to refrain from interference (Goodin 1995). Instead, Goodin argues that political leaders should aim to promote the best consequences. Yet it is often difficult to know whether a course of action will have good consequences on balance, in addition to the difficulty leaders face in knowing whether and to what extent consequentialism is warranted.

Alternatively, many ethicists believe that people should respect others' rights, rather than bringing about the best state of affairs. But on this ethical theory as well, leaders are more at risk of ethical failure because leadership typically involves hierarchical relationships that could potentially violate followers' rights. In political contexts, citizens do not consent to leaders' interference, and many political philosophers have therefore argued that a lot of government action violates people's rights. In economic contexts, political philosophers have argued that managers

and bosses violate employees' entitlements to be given a voice and treated with respect. Even if these views of leadership ethics are false, they are at least plausible. And the mere risk that political or economic leadership violates people's rights or fails to respect them means that leadership is associated with a heightened degree of moral risk.

Ethical Failure and Self-selection

The previous three explanations for leaders' ethical failure, leaders' lack of willpower, leaders' lack of relevant moral knowledge, and the moral risks of leadership depicted ethical failure as a consequence of the leadership role. An alternative explanation for leaders' ethical failure identifies it as a consequence of how leaders are selected. Namely, leaders may be prone to ethical failure because people who self-select into leadership roles are more likely to make moral mistakes and because people who are selected by others may be more prone to moral mistakes. I will describe these two mechanisms in the next two sections.

People who become leaders are generally more ambitious than average. On its own, ambition needn't be inconsistent with ethical behavior. For example, a morally ambitious person may be distinctively committed to promoting justice or achieving a social good. A creatively ambitious person who is exceptionally devoted to making great art may not be prone to ethical failure. In contrast, there is evidence that people who have ambitions to become leaders are more likely to have other traits that make them prone to ethical failure.

Psychologists have identified three distinct personality traits—Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy—which are consistently linked to malevolent behavior, such as crime, conflict, dishonesty, and causing organizational dysfunction (Spain et al. 2014; LeBreton et al. 2018). These three traits, known as the "dark triad," are correlated with a lower incidence of positive or pro-social traits, such as agreeableness, empathy, and compassion (Furnham et al. 2013).

Within workplaces, people who possess dark triad personality traits are more likely to acquire leadership positions or other influential roles (Furnham 2016). In a meta-analysis, researchers find that people with

dark triad personality traits are often charming and conducive to success (Jonason et al. 2012). Elsewhere, researchers find that people with these personality traits are potentially overrepresented among upper management and CEOs of firms (Boddy et al. 2010a,b). In some estimates, rates of psychopathy are three times higher on corporate boards than in the general population (Chamorro-Premuzic 2015). More generally, there are more people with psychopathic tendencies among the ranks of top executives and political leaders than in the general population (Ronson 2012). People with these traits are also paid more (Spurk et al. 2016). Other studies contradict this finding about psychopathy, but find that Machiavellianism is positively correlated with attaining a leadership position (Spurk et al. 2016). Other aberrant personality traits are correlated with leadership at work as well (Wille et al. 2013).

Dark triad personality traits are also correlated with political leadership. In general, people who are politically ambitious are more likely to be Machiavellian, narcissistic, or psychopathic (Peterson and Palmer 2019). Narcissism is especially overrepresented among political leaders (Post 2014). More extreme political leaders are more likely to display dark triad personality traits (Duspara and Greitemeyer 2017).

In addition to dark personality traits, the gendered dimensions of self-selection for leadership also align with leaders' potential for ethical failure. There is a substantial body of evidence that women are less prone to a range of ethical failures (Casal 2013). In leadership contexts, organizations are very plausibly harmed by the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles (Zenger and Folkman 2019; Eagly and Johnson 1990). There is some evidence suggesting that women are more likely to be effective political leaders, though they do not perceive themselves in that way (Fox and Lawless 2010). There is also evidence suggesting that female leaders will focus more on providing public goods (Duflo and Topalova 2004; Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004).

Yet women are less likely to decide to pursue leadership positions in organizations, for a variety of reasons (see, e.g., Bierema 2016; Brands and Fernandez-Mateo 2017; Ryan et al. 2016; Fernandez-Mateo and Fernandez 2016). In political contexts, women are less likely to run for office, partly because they perceive themselves as being unqualified whereas men are not deterred by a lack of qualifications (Kanthak and

Woon 2014). Men may also be more likely to self-select into leadership roles in politics for reasons of personal ambition rather than for policy-related reasons (Schneider et al. 2016). Taken together, these considerations suggest that while women may have some advantages in avoiding ethical failure as leaders, self-selection factors prevent women from occupying leadership positions in workplaces or in government.

Ethical Failure and Other-selection

In addition to self-selection factors, the ways that followers and elites select leaders also exacerbates the risk of ethical failure. For example, in political contexts, party elites have institutional incentives to promote polarization even though polarization makes voters less capable of evaluating leaders and policies on the basis of the relevant evidence (Druckman et al. 2013; Bisgaard and Slothuus 2018). For this reason, elites are more likely to support more ideologically extreme leaders because voters select leaders who respond to appeals to the partisan ideologies of their subgroup rather than selecting centrists who may better advance the interests of the whole constituency (Broockman et al. 2019). These selection pressures may also partly explain why political leaders are more likely to be politically extreme and partisan. This dynamic is a problem for ethical leadership, however, because people who reason on the basis of a broadly partisan ideology are more likely to unfairly discount other points of view and to engage in motivated reasoning about contested moral issues (Anson 2018).

More generally, there is a growing body of evidence that suggests that people select leaders on the basis of considerations that potentially set leaders up for ethical failure. For one thing, people typically do not select leaders on the basis of moral considerations but rather on the basis of partisan identities and in-group loyalties (Mason 2018). For example, Achen, Larry, and Bartels (2017) argue that voters make decisions on the basis of their political identities and not on the basis of policy or political effectiveness. As a result, leaders are selected on the basis of their ideological purity, their ability to express a particular identity or group's values,

the appearance of loyalty, or what they signify, rather than on the basis of their credentials or capacities as leaders.

Even when leaders seem to quite obviously violate moral requirements, such as the requirement of truth-telling, followers may nevertheless select unethical leaders if they perceive the broader system as illegitimate (Hahl et al. 2018). Followers are also unlikely to punish leaders or change their feelings toward them (Swire-Thompson et al. 2020). And voters across party lines who are themselves high in dark personality traits favor leaders with dark personalities, which could further contribute to the selection of leaders who are prone to ethical failure (Hart et al. 2018).

More generally, people select leaders on the basis of factors like social similarity, nepotism, and charisma, even though these considerations are generally not the best predictors of a person's capacity to lead ethically and effectively. In any organization, it is difficult to effectively screen out leaders who are prone to ethical failure partly because people who are prone to ethical failure can successfully deceive people (Boddy et al. 2010b).

Mitigating Selection Problems

The foregoing analysis of ethical failure in leadership paints a somewhat grim picture for leaders' moral prospects. In response to the crises that result from ethical failure, scholars have proposed remedies such as leadership education, increased transparency, and oversight through corporate boards (see, e.g., Chen 2018; Taştan and Davoudi 2019; Vollmer 2018). These remedies address some of the treatment-based causes of ethical failure, but they are insufficient remedies for the selection-based sources of ethical failure. In this section, I will describe three mechanisms that could potentially address selection-based reasons for ethical failure in leadership. These include selection procedures that limit the role of personality-based qualifications, reducing partisans' or constituents' influence, and making leadership less prestigious relative to other roles.

The first selection-based mechanism for reducing leaders' tendency toward ethical failure is broadly consistent with calls for more oversight and training. In addition to oversight during a leaders' tenure, people

who are engaged in a selection process should aim to emphasize performance over personality. People are more likely to focus on traits like charisma when a leaders' performance or the relevant performance outcomes are unclear (Jacquart and Antonakis 2015). And structured interviews and work sample tests can ensure that all potential leaders receive equal treatment, and thereby serve as a potential corrective to partisan influences or biases that motivate people to de-emphasize qualifications or the content of what a leader is saying (see Bateson et al. 2013; Bohnet 2016). Even better, if possible, selecting leaders on the basis of criteria that are as de-personalized and adopting clear and transparent benchmark-based performance standards would result in finding leaders who excel in their role, rather than selecting people who have a desire to take on a leadership role.

Second, procedures that automate or externalize the selection of leaders can mitigate self-selection and other-selection effects. For example, where possible, organizations can adopt procedures that require people to opt out of consideration for a leadership role rather than opt-in procedures that reward people who desire a leadership role even if they aren't the most qualified. Or, in some industries, it may be feasible to outsource recruitment of leaders to search firms or external committees. Of course, search firms and external committees are susceptible to many of the selection-based challenges that members of an organization face; they have stronger reputational incentives to find leaders on the basis of performance-based traits.

Third, I have argued that democratic selection procedures do not effectively deter ethical failure and they may contribute to ethical failure in some cases. Yet organizations and political communities can adopt alternative democratic procedures that avoid some of these problems. For example, changes to voting procedures can mitigate polarization and so discourage the demagoguery and open deception associated with partisan voting.[2] In response to concerns about polarization, some political philosophers have also advocated for lotteries as a way of fairly selecting leaders (Stone 2011; Guerrero 2014). Others support using small, randomly selected deliberative communities to avoid selecting leaders on the basis of partisan or motivated leaders (Landemore 2018). These

institutional alternatives can potentially diminish the selection effects that contribute to leaders' ethical failure.

Conclusion

Leadership development professionals and commentators sometimes write about leadership and ethical failure as if they can avoid it through better training, job descriptions, oversight, or institutional incentives. To some extent, this may be true. Yet the problem runs deeper, as I've argued in this chapter. Leadership attracts people who are prone to ethical failure. Perhaps this is because leadership itself is morally fraught. Because leadership involves power, hierarchy, status, and prestige, it attracts people who are comfortable with inegalitarian, potentially subordinating relationships that aim to advantage a particular group. But freedom, equality, and the consideration of all interests are fundamental principles of ethics. In this way, the norms that structure contemporary leadership may select for leaders who are less sensitive to ethical considerations than most people, even when leaders take themselves to be morally motivated. And as leadership scholars have argued, once a person becomes a leader, it becomes even more challenging to avoid ethical failure.

By drawing attention to the selection effects at play in bad leadership, I am not denying the fact that holding a leadership role can also contribute to a person's ethical failure. I also acknowledge that all leadership roles are morally risky. But selection effects make a dangerous situation worse, morally speaking, because the kinds of people who are likely to succeed at obtaining a leadership position may, for the same reasons, be those more likely to make moral mistakes as well. Acknowledging this dynamic as a contributing factor for bad leadership does not discount the value of moral education for leaders or programs that aim to constrain the moral risks of leaders once they are selected. Rather, an acknowledgment of selection effects highlights the need for leadership ethics before a person's experience as a leader even begins.

Notes

1. Ludwig and Longenecker (1993) also develop a version of this explanation when they speculate that leaders who make serious moral mistakes may do so because they come to overidentify with their institutional role or their status as leaders, which causes them to overlook their moral obligations.
2. For example, organizations could adopt ranked-choice voting or approval voting, which some speculate could reduce polarization. On the other hand, the evidence is mixed with respect to whether voting procedure reforms would effectively reduce polarization and partisanship in selecting leaders. For an overview of some of these issues, see Livni (2019).

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