



# Leadership, the American Academy of Management, and President Trump's Travel Ban: A Case Study in Moral Imagination

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## Abstract

In this essay, I focus on the initial reaction of the then leadership of the Academy of Management (AOM) to President Trump's travel ban issued in January 2017. By viewing the travel ban in purely administrative terms, AOM leadership framed it as an example of "political speech", on which they were organizationally barred to take a public stand. I subject this view to critical assessment, arguing that the travel ban had a distinct moral character, which was antithetical to scholarly values. The travel ban, I suggest, should be viewed as a non-prototypical case of political speech, which required AOM leadership to flexibly adapt existing rules in situ: to imaginatively frame the travel ban in order to undertake responsible action. Accordingly, the early 2017 AOM rules about political speech should be seen not as recipes-for-action but as reminders-for-action, thus allowing an imaginative reframing. Finally, exploring the notion of moral imagination, I distinguish between "disclosive" and "incremental" moral imagination and responsibility, and suggest that AOM leadership engaged mainly in the latter.

**Keywords** Leadership agency · Moral imagination · Framing

Soon after taking office early in 2017, US President Trump signed an Executive Order to ban entry into the United States of citizens from seven Muslim-majority countries. The unequivocal condemnation of the travel ban came from multiple directions in the US, including several scholarly associations and universities. However, the stand of the American Academy of Management (hereafter: AOM) was more complicated. Initially, through a letter to its members from the then President Professor Anita McGahan, AOM affirmed the scholarly values of inclusion and academic freedom, and offered affected scholars the technical means to be included in the conference program and participate virtually to the sessions they would be presenting their work. However, unlike other US-based scholarly associations, AOM refrained from condemning the Executive Order on

the grounds that to do so would amount to taking a political stand, which was explicitly barred by its binding policies.

Later, in April 2017, following several reactions by members to the Academy's initial response, and instigated by Professor McGahan as well as past Academy Presidents, AOM amended its policy on taking political stands. The new policy, while repeating that AOM leaders are barred from stating political views "in the name of AOM or through use of AOM resources", it allows for "exceptional circumstances" in which a broadly political stand is permissible to be taken by AOM leaders, under certain conditions.<sup>1</sup> The shift was completed in October 2017, when the new AOM President Professor Mary Ann Glynn wrote officially to President Trump to "condemn" the travel ban, "as a threat to science and scholarship" (although her letter referred not to the original Executive Order but to the September 24, 2017 White House proclamation on visas and immigration), especially since "it fundamentally thwarts the Academy's ability to fulfil its mission".<sup>2</sup>

It was an interesting trajectory for AOM: from avoiding to condemn the travel ban (January 2017), through changing

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://aom.org/About-AOM/Governance/AOM-Policy-on-Taking-Stands.aspx>.

<sup>2</sup> See [http://aom.org/uploadedFiles/About\\_AOM/Governance/White\\_House\\_Letter\\_10-16-17\\_FINAL.pdf](http://aom.org/uploadedFiles/About_AOM/Governance/White_House_Letter_10-16-17_FINAL.pdf).

its policies on taking political stands (April 2017), to explicitly condemning the travel ban (October 2017). Contrary to its initial response, AOM eventually came to implicitly accept that threats to scholarly values and activities are not narrowly political and, consequently, AOM leaders taking a public stand on such issues is not narrowly political either. This represents a shift in how AOM sees itself positioned in public debates: its original policy of political neutrality in all circumstances has given way to a more nuanced approach. Such a shift is an implicit admission that its initial reaction to the travel ban was inadequate.

The official AOM leadership line was that, given the AOM policy on taking political stands in early 2017, condemning the travel ban would have amounted to violating AOM rules. AOM leadership did what AOM rules had allowed it to do. What makes this case particularly interesting is that AOM President McGahan was, as an engaged citizen, passionately against the travel ban and, after the incident, took the lead to change the AOM policy on taking political stands. However, as an AOM leader at the time, she found herself unable to act on her beliefs, insofar as AOM policies on political speech remained unchanged. The broader question is: what understanding of leadership agency is manifested when leaders, confronted with controversial situations and pulled in different directions by personal beliefs and perceived public responsibilities, stick to the script of their roles when enacting currently operative organizational rules? What conceptions of moral responsibility emerge when, while tackling controversial situations, leaders both play by the existing rules and, subsequently, try to change the rules they had followed?

In this essay, I will explore these questions by focusing mainly on AOM's initial response to the travel ban. It will be insightful to do so since initial responses reflect organizational leaders' "spontaneous response[s] not mediated by mental representations" (Yanow and Tsoukas 2009, p. 1350), which disclose leaders' framing of particular awkward situations, thus revealing leaders' self-understandings of their roles at a point in time. While framing is a process and, therefore, as the AOM course of action shows, evolves as it becomes more deliberately performative (i.e. edited and scripted) (Thompson 1995) and/or dialogical (i.e. responds to other voices) (Sawyer 2003), focusing on the initial framing (the opening linguistic move) in response to a situation enables us to get as close as possible to leaders' 'raw' assumptions underlying their framing of a difficult issue (Markova 2003; Gioia 1992).

Drawing on a variety of conceptual resources (i.e. ethical decision making, a social-systems conception of politics, and theories of moral imagination), I will argue that, early in 2017, AOM leadership had more options available than they realized, had they not been bound by a bureaucratic image of leadership, whereby leaders rigidly follow organizational

rules. Leaders are charged, I will suggest, not only with making rules but, also, with taking the risk to adapt existing rules in situ and, by doing so, exercise disclosive moral imagination (i.e. they disclose new possibilities). I will suggest an alternative image of leadership that preserves a strong conception of agency and moral responsibility.

### **Persona Non Grata: President Trump's Travel Ban and the Responses to it by Academic Organizations, Especially the Academy of Management**

On January 27th, President Trump signed an Executive Order, temporarily stopping all refugee admissions and barring citizens from seven Muslim-majority countries (Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen) from entering the United States. This travel ban triggered several protests in the US and worldwide, and met with legal challenges in the US. Referring to past and potential terrorist incidents, President Trump justified his order as follows:

In order to protect Americans, the United States must ensure that those admitted to this country do not bear hostile attitudes toward it and its founding principles. The United States cannot, and should not, admit those who do not support the Constitution, or those who would place violent ideologies over American law. In addition, the United States should not admit those who engage in acts of bigotry or hatred (including "honor" killings, other forms of violence against women, or the persecution of those who practice religions different from their own) or those who would oppress Americans of any race, gender, or sexual orientation. [...] It is the policy of the United States to protect its citizens from foreign nationals who intend to commit terrorist attacks in the United States; and to prevent the admission of foreign nationals who intend to exploit United States immigration laws for malevolent purposes.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> For the full text, see <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/executive-order-protecting-nation-foreign-terrorist-entry-united-states/>. It should be noted that this travel ban faced legal challenges in US courts and was revised in March 2017. A new travel ban, in the form of a Proclamation (No. 9645), was issued by President Trump in September 2017, which was more far-reaching than the original ban, imposing permanent restrictions on travel and including non-Muslim countries as well (see *New York Times*, 24/9/2017). The Proclamation was legally challenged by, among others, the state of Hawaii but was upheld by the US Supreme Court (*New York Times*, 26/6/2018). Specifically, the Supreme Court ruled that "The President has lawfully exercised the broad discretion granted to him under § 1182(f) to suspend the entry of aliens into the United States (see [https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/17pdf/17-965\\_h315.pdf](https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/17pdf/17-965_h315.pdf)).

Several US-based universities and scholarly associations clearly and vocally condemned the travel ban. For example, the senior leadership of Boston College issued, on 29 January 2017, a statement to the members of the university community, stressing among other things:<sup>4</sup>

We write as senior leaders at Boston College to object to this directive, which has already had disturbing effects on individuals and families. This Order undermines a key strength of our higher education system, as it turns away talented faculty and students who seek to immigrate to the United States. [...] The Order is also contrary to American understandings of this nation's role as a refuge and its place as a society that does not discriminate on the basis of religion or national origin. This decision also conflicts with the religious and educational heritage, beliefs, and values of Boston College.

In a similar spirit, forty-eight US university presidents and chancellors sent a letter to President Trump, on 2 February 2017, calling him to rescind the Executive Order, since, "if left in place, the order threatens both American higher education and the defining principles of our country" (*New York Review of Books*, 9 March 2017). The Society for Social Studies of Science issued a statement affirming its "support for the protection of academic freedom and human rights and to register our condemnation of this Order, and of other unjust and unlawful developments as they may arise".<sup>5</sup> The American Psychological Association "reaffirmed its opposition to President Trump's executive order banning travel to the United States by people from six majority-Muslim countries".<sup>6</sup> The American Philosophical Association made a similar announcement:<sup>7</sup>

APA's mission is to foster open dialogue and the free exchange of ideas. Inclusion and respect for diverse people, religions, cultures, and ideas are at the very core of our work. This order goes against these values—values on which the United States itself was founded. [...] We stand with learned societies, colleges and universities, and others around the world in calling on the President and Congress to reverse this executive order and to denounce religious intolerance in all its forms.

<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.bc.edu/bc-web/bcnews/campus-community/announcements/statement-1-29-17.html>.

<sup>5</sup> See [http://www.4sonline.org/item/position\\_statement\\_on\\_u.s.\\_political\\_situation](http://www.4sonline.org/item/position_statement_on_u.s._political_situation).

<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2017/06/travel-ban.aspx>.

<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.apaonline.org/page/immigrationeo>.

However, the initial response of the Academy of Management to the travel ban was markedly different in tone. On 1 February 2017, the then AOM President, Professor Anita McGahan, made an announcement to its members, explaining the position of the Academy<sup>8</sup> (the full text is provided in the Online Appendix). The following four features are noteworthy.

First, the message draws attention to the range of different views on matters of public policy, which membership diversity naturally brings about ("Our members hold a range of views on the public policies that have recently been implemented"). Thus, on the travel ban, "many members" expressed concern about travelling to the Academy's annual meeting; "many" viewed the travel ban as a direct attack on scholarship; and some (not many—"a number of you") urged AOM to condemn the travel ban. The range of views prepares discursively the reader to accept what comes next: sticking to the 'no-politics' rules is the optimal strategy (i.e. provides a truce) when a professional, diverse body is confronted with politically charged issues. It also tallies with the mainstream view that management scholarship is value-free (Fougere et al. 2014; Simon 1976, p. 250; see also; Freeman et al. 2004; Tsoukas 2018).

Secondly, while diversity was earlier praised, it is now presented as a limiting condition on leadership action: "*Yet because of our very diversity, the AOM has long had a binding policy that restricts any officer from taking a stand on any political issue in the name of the AOM*" (my italics). The reader is reminded that such a binding policy is justified precisely because AOM is a diverse organization and, as a result, no particular political views should be asserted in the name of AOM. To put it differently, it is as if the AOM President says: 'even if (or although) I personally want to condemn the travel ban, my role as a leader of AOM prevents me from doing it'. Notice that the role of the AOM President is seen as already formed, so much so that there is no scope for an alternative interpretation and, hence, action—leadership agency is thought to be minimal.

Thirdly, the message implicitly opposes the values behind the Executive Order by reiterating the Academy's values: "we are committed to inclusion, supportive communities, and social and academic freedom as fundamental and undeniable tenets of scholarly association. Our values emphasize the full diversity of member backgrounds and experiences". In other words, no matter what the US President says and does, we, as a scholarly association, value all our members, irrespective of nationality and religion.

Fourthly, the message outlines the technical measures the Academy pledges to take to "enact [its] values": (a)

<sup>8</sup> See <http://aom.org/About-AOM/Governance/AOM-President-s-Message-on-Executive-Order-on-Immigration---Refugees.aspx>.

“suspend the requirement of attendance as a condition of inclusion in the program at the Annual Meeting for those affected by the travel restrictions”; and (b) “share with you, via our website, the best information that we have about Visa application processes for those who want to attend”.

In other words, the AOM President’s initial response to the travel ban amounts to the following (my rendition): ‘in the aftermath of the travel ban, we as AOM will do anything technically possible to facilitate our members’ participation in the Annual Meeting in Atlanta. Beyond that, however, irrespectively of what each one of us individually feels about it, and despite the travel ban opposing our scholarly values, there is nothing else really we, as the current AOM leaders, can do, since our policies restrict officers from taking a stand on any political issue in the name of AOM’.

### On Leadership Agency: Framing, Politics, and Values

What is most revealing in the AOM President’s message is the framing of the challenges confronted. Although the travel ban threatens some of the foundational values on which scholarly organizations are grounded (especially those based in the US, a country with a long tradition of free and uninhibited inquiry), AOM leadership chose to view this challenge in narrow administrative terms: to lay out technical steps AOM needs to take to counter the adverse effects of the travel ban on some AOM members. Notice that the US President’s direct challenge to, among others, scholarly values is never explicitly addressed. What is addressed are its effects, which are sought to be ameliorated through technical means. What, therefore, is revealing is the substitution of a concern with *ends* (the scholarly mission of the Academy—“to build a vibrant and supportive community of scholars by markedly expanding opportunities to connect and explore ideas”) for a concern with *means* (how to technically overcome some of the adverse effects). Tools supersede values.

To be sure, the AOM President’s message does state the Academy’s values: “We respect each of our members’ voices and seek to amplify their ideas”. However, it does not, explicitly defend them when they are challenged by the executive power; it rather turns its attention to operational matters. The question surely arises: how does AOM manifest its respect of each of its members’ voice when the US President, *a priori*, declares some of its members *persona non gratae*? To put it differently, when some of your members receive a hostile treatment, don’t you have a moral duty to join your voice with that of others to defend them publicly? When the values on which your very existence is based are under attack, shouldn’t you stand up and, through reasoned argument, oppose the attacker? (Chappel 2009, pp. 104–105). While taking technical steps to ameliorate the

ban is operationally useful and commendable, limiting your reactions to them amounts to missing the point—it is your *values* that are under attack, and it is at this level you should seek to have the debate.

To use an analogy, it is as if African Americans or gay people in the 1960s had sought to fight discrimination not at the level of values and, therefore, the ensuing law and public policy (equality of rights), but at the level of technically finding ways to avoid the effects of discrimination. That would have shown fatalism, submission, and lack of self-respect. Or, to use another analogy, if you were a director of Harvey Weinstein’s company, and you knew about Weinstein’s alleged sexual predatory habits, would you have a moral duty to inform the board or even blow the whistle, or would you rather merely admonish prospective female employees to find ways of avoiding being alone with him in his hotel room? While offering pragmatic advice would be useful, surely something more important would be at stake: human dignity at work.

In other words, when problematic decisions or practices emerge or have long been in place (be they an offensive Executive Order, institutionalized discrimination, or habitual sexual assaults), what is at stake is not merely how to operationally ameliorate their awful effects but, more importantly, to articulate your principled opposition to their very existence. Morally disgraceful acts should be primarily opposed for what they are, rather than merely seeking ways to circumvent their awful effects.

The critical assumption underlying the AOM President’s message is to view the travel ban as a *political* issue. In her capacity as the AOM leader, Professor McGahan consistently defended this view. Responding to a Facebook post (1.2.2017),<sup>9</sup> which argued that the issue is primarily *moral*, not political, she wrote: “I have [...] been restricted by the policy that binds all AOM Officers at the level of the Academy and in the Divisions: I cannot represent my personal views as those of the AOM. Because the AOM has this policy, it has no process by which the organization as a whole can develop a coherent organizational view”. In a subsequent comment, she added: “Officers cannot take stands on political policies, *even when those policies also are moral in character*. There are two interrelated issues here. The first is that *the restriction on political speech is constraining all speech in this situation*. The second is that there is no process for achieving an organizational view” (my italics). I find this claim problematic.

The literature on behavioural ethics has persistently stressed the importance of “frames” (Gioia 1992; Tenbrunsel and Smith-Crowe 2008, pp. 561–565; Palazzo et al. 2012;

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=1764877427163760&id=100009245605843](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=1764877427163760&id=100009245605843).

Schwartz 2016; Trevino et al. 2014) individuals apply to decision making. Frames are mental structures that filter what individuals see. They simultaneously enable and disable: without the mental boundaries frames impose, perception and understanding would be impossible. At the same time, the same mental boundaries, when rigidly followed, tend to lead to mental blind spots (Palazzo et al. 2012). Thus, while an “ethical frame” prompts “moral awareness”, leading to “moral decision making”, by contrast, when a “business” or “legal frame” dominates, moral considerations are ignored or brushed aside, and “amoral decision making” ensues (Tenbrunsel and Smith-Crowe 2008, p. 553).

Behavioural ethics literature has been insightful in accounting for “ethical blindness”, namely for the “temporary inability of a decision maker to see the ethical dimension of a decision at stake” (Palazzo 2012, p. 325). It is only partially helpful, however, in shedding light on our case here. Professor McGahan was certainly not plagued by ethical blindness, far from it. An important feature of ethical blindness is that it is “unconscious” (Palazzo et al. 2012, p. 325): decision makers are not aware of deviating from the values they hold. However, this is not the case here. In her personal communication, Professor McGahan is very much aware of both her personal values and the official restrictions she is bound by. She commented on a Facebook post: “I’ve been quite clear where I stand on this as an individual: I abhor the Trump policy. I’ve signed petitions, given to the ACLU, and am reaching out to my colleagues and friends to offer support”. Moreover, after this incident, she was the driving force for making the case that AOM should reconsider its policy on political speech (which it did at its Board of Governors’ regular meeting on 21 April 2017). One can plausibly guess how conflicted she must have been in formulating her official response to the Executive Order. Clearly, in her case, private preferences collided with perceived public responsibility (Nelson 2008, p. 473).

However, although the AOM President does not appear to be ethically blind, she does come across as “rigidly” applying a particular frame (Palazzo et al. 2012, p. 326)—the bureaucratic frame (Jackal 1988; Anteby 2013). The latter consists of a mental structure that highlights the importance of rules and rule following (Zimbardo 2007). In our case, the bureaucratic frame dictates that all public statements and decisions made by politicians (especially government leaders and members of Congress) are necessarily political and, therefore, AOM leaders “[cannot] take a stand on any political issue in the name of the AOM”—“restriction on political speech is constraining all speech in this situation”.

“Rigid framing” (Palazzo et al. 2012, p. 326) involves individuals locked in a particular frame, unable to make substantial use of alternative frames. When the bureaucratic frame is rigidly applied, one’s role is seen as *already* defined, its boundaries pre-determined, and its performance

strictly governed by set rules. Personal beliefs and emotions, as well as job crafting, are brushed aside (Hirschhorn 1997; Wrzesniewski and Dutton 2001): the role strictly circumscribes personal agency. In the case at hand, although the AOM President does not dismiss the moral nuances of the travel ban, she insists that they are subsumed under the category “political speech” (“Officers cannot take stands on political policies, *even when those policies also are moral in character*”, my italics), which prevents her from condemning the travel ban. This rigid framing shows a restricted understanding of politics and a narrow conception of what ethical leadership is about. Let me explain.

Like all concepts, “politics” is a radially structured conceptual category (Lakoff 1987, 1996; Lakoff and Johnson 1999): some of its members are more centrally placed—namely they are more representative—than others. To put it more generally, conceptual categories are “not definable in terms of some list of properties shared by every member of the category. Instead, they are characterized by variations on a central model” (Lakoff 1996, pp. 7–8). Specifically, conceptual categories are structured in terms of “prototypical” (i.e. central) and “non-prototypical” (i.e. peripheral) members, with the latter radiating at various conceptual distances from the former. For example, a sparrow is a more prototypical member of the concept “bird” than an ostrich is (Lakoff 1987, p. 83; Johnson 1993). “Harm” is radially structured too: physical harm lies at its prototypical core, while other types of harm (political, financial, psychological, etc.) are non-prototypical variations on it. Similarly, President Trump’s legislation for tax reform (including tax cuts for the well-off) or his executive orders to dismantle Obamacare are prototypical members of “politics” as understood in the modern party-based political system. However, issues related to abortions, euthanasia, same-sex marriage, or scholarly communication are not narrowly (that is, prototypically) “political”; they are non-prototypical instances of politics.

Notice that there is nothing inherent in concepts that will separate the prototypical core from the non-prototypical periphery—concepts have no essence (Lakoff 1996, p. 9). It is how concepts are embedded into a community’s form of life that enables its members to make distinctions of representativeness in concepts. For example, insofar as we share the same form of life, we know what “lying” is, namely we know what are characteristic (i.e. prototypical, representative) cases of “lying”, just as we know what non-prototypical cases of “lying” are (white lies, official lies, social lies, economical with the truth, etc.) (Johnson 1993, p. 99). When we encounter an actual case of lying, we exercise our interpretive agency to understand what sort of lying it is.

Likewise, when we encounter a decision by a government leader, we exercise our “moral imagination” (Arendt 1982; Johnson 1993; Werhane 1998) to make sense of it. In the

modern, liberal-democratic form of life that is characteristic of the US polity, a law about tax cuts or health care provision is plausibly thought to fall within the conventional bounds of government activity, and hence it is prototypically political. However, President Trump's travel ban is not: it arbitrarily (i.e. without providing evidence and calibrating real risks, as the 48 senior US university leaders noted in their letter) extends politics into, among others, the scholarly realm, which, in our form of life, does not ordinarily belong to it.

Politics involves the legitimate exercise of power for the implementation of collectively binding decisions (Luhmann 2013). However, in our form of life (i.e. in highly differentiated modern liberal democracies, Luhmann 2013), most issues do not require, in the first place, collectively binding decisions (King and Thornhill 2005, p. 70; Moeller 2012, p. 91), since they originate in systems different from the political system. For example, issues like generating knowledge, treating illnesses, or the aesthetic worth of paintings are not *directly* political but originate in non-political systems such as, respectively, science, medicine, and art. The political system may be called upon to regulate these other systems (and, thus, produce collectively binding decisions) as, for example, when a particular method of knowledge production may violate human dignity or animal welfare, but the application of political power is "residual" (King and Thornhill 2005, p. 71)—non-political systems retain their relatively independent codes of operation and, thus, the issues to be regulated originate outside the political system (Luhmann 2013).

Thus, an important condition (which, in the course of time, has become a central value) for the operation of the science system, in the liberal-democratic form of life at least, has historically been freedom of speech and uninhibited communication among scientists. When the executive power arbitrarily intervenes to regulate such a condition, it threatens to politicize an issue that originates in a system different from politics (i.e. scholarly communication). The travel ban threatens to turn scholarly communication (a residually/non-prototypically political issue) into a prototypical political issue (i.e. who is/is not entitled to cross our border), without offering clear and convincing evidence for doing so. Scholarly values are trampled by narrowly political aims, for no superior reason. Producing a collectively binding decision like the travel ban might have been a superior reason if the US was, say, at war with any of the countries included in the travel ban, but this is not the case. Holding a passport of any of the seven Muslim-majority countries does not turn one to a potential terrorist, nor does it make one "bear hostile attitudes toward [USA] and its founding principles",<sup>10</sup> nor does it instil intentions in one "to commit

terrorist attacks in the United States".<sup>11</sup> The Executive Order makes a host of unwarranted assumptions that do not stand to rational scrutiny.

To better appreciate this, consider the following two cases. First, The World Academy of Sciences (TWAS) interim Executive Director Professor Mohamed Hassan, a Sudanese mathematician, commented on how the travel ban prevented him from travelling to the US. He wrote:<sup>12</sup>

I am a citizen of Sudan, and I have joint citizenship in Italy. I have lived and worked in Italy for more than 30 years, and I work with scientists and policymakers at very high levels in the United States and worldwide. There is constant travel, a constant exchange between international scientists. We meet, we hear presentations, we debate, and from this process flow ideas about new research, or new policy to support research. Now, following this order, I have cancelled my arrangements to attend the annual meeting next week of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Why? Because I am Sudanese, and I am barred from traveling to the United States. The American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) meeting is major event in the scientific calendar, and AAAS is a very close partner to TWAS.

Look now at another similar case, which is even more revealing of the personal circumstances of the scholar involved, thus, enabling us to better understand the effect of the travel ban on scholarly activities and lives. A leading US-based academic who did not hold American citizenship at the time had committed to attend an important academic meeting at a European university in March 2017. I was due to take part in that meeting too. Three days after the travel ban was announced, he withdrew. In his letter to his hosts, he wrote:<sup>13</sup>

I am still an Egyptian citizen, living in the US on a green card (permanent resident), and going through naturalization to become a US citizen. Even through Egypt is not covered by President Trump's recent ban, I talked to our [university's] international office. They cautioned me not to travel unless it is "really a matter of life and death". There have been several cases where green card holders from countries not covered by the ban were not admitted into the US. From all we know they are Muslim, which I am. So I feel really awkward as I have been looking [forward] to attending [the meeting]. Now my wife is also strongly objecting

<sup>10</sup> See <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/executive-order-protecting-nation-foreign-terrorist-entry-united-states/>.

<sup>11</sup> See <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/executive-order-protecting-nation-foreign-terrorist-entry-united-states/>.

<sup>12</sup> <https://twas.org/article/twas-us-travel-order-profoundly-disruptive>.

<sup>13</sup> Personal communication. Permission granted.

to me travelling. Under the circumstances and given the short time between now and [the meeting], is it possible for me to participate by video or skype? I know it is not ideal.

Notice how, in both cases, scholarly communication is seriously disrupted and, following the ban, purely scholarly visits turned out to have been impossible to make, for no reason whatsoever related to the individuals at hand. Moreover, as it is clear in the second case, the travel ban instils fear in the lives of those potentially affected (including their families), thus further inhibiting scholarly work and communication. Notice also that, in the circumstances, the professor in the second case offered to participate in the meeting by video or skype. This was a morally appropriate suggestion for him (i.e. at the individual level), in the sense that he wanted to honour his promise and, thus, discharge his obligation to his hosts to participate in the meeting, in the most feasible manner available.

However, a similar technical suggestion, which, as seen earlier, had also been made by AOM was, in moral terms, an inadequate response. AOM's primary moral obligation as an organization is to defend the values that define the *telos* of the scholarly "practice world" (Spinosa et al. 1997, p. 17) its members inhabit, since it is those values that make scholarly activity and communication possible, in the first place. To put it more generally, for a scholarly organization to enact its particular *telos* (i.e. a scholarly purpose), it would involve not merely finding the most effective means to facilitate its members' communication, but also honouring the "value commitment" (Selznick 1984, p. 55) its *telos* constitutes (Selznick 1992; Sayer 2011).

## Leadership, Moral Imagination, and Undecidability

The key question for AOM leadership early in 2017 was whether the travel ban constituted a prototypical case of "political speech" or not. The view prevailed that it did. However, the then AOM President seemed to nurture some doubts, as she allowed for the possibility that the travel ban might have a "moral character" and, hence, it might not be a prototypical case of political speech. Still, however, the view adopted by AOM leadership was that even morally loaded issues, when part of the public debate, are necessarily "political" ("the restriction on political speech is constraining all speech in this situation"). It is important to stress that this is an *interpretative* act, by no means the only one conceivable.

Had the AOM leadership opposed the travel ban, they would not, I suggest, have done so on narrowly political grounds, but would have opposed the arbitrary politicization of scholarly communication on grounds of moral

values that are *internal* to the practice world of AOM and the science system at large (MacIntyre 1985; Moore 2017; Tsoukas 2018). When AOM restricts its officials from taking a political stand (as it rightly should), it is the *prototypical* instances—the prototypical image—of politics it implicitly refers to. To denounce the travel ban, the AOM leaders would need to exercise their "moral imagination" (Arendt 1982; Johnson 1993) to frame it as a non-prototypically political issue.

Imagination, writes Arendt (2003, p. 139) "designates my ability to have an image in my mind of something that is not present". When I look at a "slum dwelling", for example, I imagine what is not exhibited directly, namely "poverty and misery" (Arendt 2003, p. 140). When something becomes an object of thought, it is always a "re-presentation" (Arendt 2003, p. 165) of something or somebody which, by virtue of imagination, becomes "present in the form of an image" (op. cit.). A rigidly bureaucratic framing provides the prototypical image of organizational rules that need to be faithfully followed. Thus, in our case, the travel ban is seen as a narrowly political decision, since an external political authority (the US President) had issued it. A less rigid framing, however, would have viewed it as an attempt by executive power to, among others, arbitrarily politicize a scholarly issue, which would need to be resisted on the grounds of scholarly values.

The situations in which leaders find themselves do not come with descriptions attached—they are framed in order to be acted upon (Palazzo et al. 2012). Leadership agency comes with interpretative agency: the ability to review one's role and envision possibilities for the organization. This is particularly the case when non-prototypical situations are encountered, since they are the most open-ended. Thus, insofar as a political decision has a distinct "moral character", it particularly lends itself to multiple interpretations, since it deviates from prototypically political decisions. As Johnson (1993:203) insightfully remarks, "the envisioning of possibilities for fruitful, meaningful, and constructive action requires moral imagination. [...] We must be able to imagine new dimensions for our character, new directions for our relationships with others, and even new forms of social organization". Moral imagination, thus conceived, is "disclosive" (Lara 2007, p. 66; Spinosa et al. 1997, p. 22): it is especially manifested in action when leaders exercise their perceptive capacity for envisioning new possibilities (Nussbaum 1999) through re-examining dominant metaphors, prototypes, and narratives (Johnson 1993, p. 198). Insofar as rules are inherently unable to tackle non-prototypical cases, leaders need to imaginatively extend rules, thus refining the meaning of the prototypes they historically refer to. Metaphorical re-description is usually the most important vehicle for doing this (Lakoff and Johnson 1999).

The AOM leadership's initial response not to condemn the travel ban is intelligible relative to the background idealized cognitive model (Lakoff 1987) AOM has adopted about non-political speech by its officials. However, the in-built indeterminacy of radially structured concepts implies that there is always scope for imaginatively projecting beyond the prototypical cases that define the background idealized cognitive model to non-prototypical ones, even those that originally were not part of the concept (Johnson 1993, p. 98). The metaphor underlying AOM leadership's early action is that of rules-as-recipes-for-action. An alternative metaphor might be rules-as-reminders.

For the rules-as-recipes-for-action metaphor, rules prescribe conduct (Dewey 1960). Particular cases are approached from the standpoint of the prototypical members of the conceptual category included in the rules—the particular case is adapted to the rule, not vice versa (Toulmin 2001). Thus seen, the Executive Order (i.e. the particular case), issued by a political authority, falls into the prototypical core of “political speech” (conceptual category), about which AOM has a rule. However, change the metaphor and you obtain a different frame.

The AOM rule barring political speech should be seen, I suggest, not so much as a recipe for action as a “reminder” (Johnson 1993, p. 105; Tsoukas 2016, p. 169) of what is thought to be important—political impartiality. Rules understood as reminders are “crystallizations of the insights that emerge out of people's ongoing experience. As such, they provide ideals that establish standpoints from which to view and evaluate our experience and our proposed actions” (Johnson 1993, p. 105). Thus seen, the Executive Order is a non-prototypical case of political speech—it has a distinct moral penumbra, as rightly acknowledged by the AOM President. Accordingly, the AOM rule for “non-political speech” may be seen as a standpoint from which to evaluate the particular case at hand. Seeing the Executive Order as a non-prototypical case of political speech, the leader is enabled to imaginatively refine (rather than merely ‘apply’) the rule—the particular case provides an occasion for further specifying what the rule is about (Tsoukas 2016, pp. 168–169). In flexibly framing the case at hand, the leader not only handles it imaginatively, but he/she refines the scope of the rule as well (Shotter and Tsoukas 2014a, b).

Refining the scope of a rule in situ is an act of disclosive moral responsibility, which goes beyond rules or analysis. For Derrida the agent is truly *responsible* insofar as he/she moves beyond calculative reasoning (Reynolds 2004, p. 51; Edward 2016, pp. 356–357). If one makes a decision by simply applying a rule, responsibility is removed from the agent (Fagan 2016, p. 73; Derrida 2002b, pp. 252–256)—the decision is made by the rule, not the agent. As von Foerster (1991, p. 64) aptly notes, “all decidable questions are already decided by the choice of the relational framework within

which these questions have been posed, together with the rules that connect any proposition (say, ‘the question’), with any other proposition (say, ‘the answer’) within that framework”. A decision does not follow from calculating pros and cons—that would be a mere intellectual exercise. A decision that is the outcome of mere calculations (even if those calculations include the effects on others), or flows logically from certain premises, is not genuinely a decision—an algorithm could have reached it (Lynch 2016, pp. 163–167; Christian and Griffiths 2017). What makes it a genuine decision is that “it must invoke that which is outside of the subject's control” (Reynolds 2004, p. 48)—the instant of decision is a non-rational commitment. In Derrida's words: “a decision that would not go through the test and ordeal of the undecidable would not be a free decision; it would only be the programmable application or the continuous unfolding of a calculable process” (Derrida 2002b, p. 252). *Taking* the decision requires a *leap of faith* from the agent.

Undecidability—the space between sensing what one needs to do and doing it—is an ineliminable part of decision making, inviting the agent to undertake a leap of faith (Caputo 2004). As Derrida (2002a, p. 232) notes, “if there is no “experience” of the undecidable at the moment of decision, then the decision will be nothing but the mechanical application of a rule”. Note that undecidability does not mean indecision, apathy or wavering between alternatives, nor does it indicate “a moment to be overcome by the occurrence of the decision” (Derrida 1996, p. 87). The opposite of undecidability “is not decisiveness but programmability” (Caputo 2004, p. 17), “calculability” and “formalizability” (Caputo 1997, p. 137). Undecidability is “the ongoing condition of possibility of decision demanding the constant renewal of decision” (Caputo 2004, p. 17).

Derrida offers some interesting reflections on undecidability. He writes: “[A] decision, if there is one, cannot take place without the undecidable, it cannot be resolved through knowledge. [...] If I know what is to be done, if my theoretical analysis of the situation shows me what is to be done [...] then there is no moment of decision, simply the application of a body of knowledge, or, at the very least, a rule of norm. [...] One must know as much as possible, one must deliberate, reflect, let things mature. But, however long this process lasts, however careful one is in the theoretical preparation of the decision, the instant of the decision, if there is to be a decision, must be heterogeneous to this accumulation of knowledge. Otherwise, there is no responsibility” (Derrida 2002a, p. 231). Whatever rule governing a decision, when applied, it would need to both conserve the rule and “suspend it enough to have to reinvent it enough in each case” (Derrida 1992, p. 26). In short, in taking a decision, a rule is both confirmed and reinstated.

On this view, leadership becomes *disclosively responsible*, insofar as the leader, in making a decision, goes beyond



the 'rules', makes the unauthorized move, and momentarily breaks undecidability through a leap of faith. Disclosively responsible leadership both experiences *and* breaks undecidability. Insofar as leadership is a continuing process, responsibility is ongoing—it is, in Derrida's (2002a, p. 232) word, "infinite". One never dispenses with one's responsibility (Caputo 2004). Thus, to invoke the absence of rules for authorizing a leader to make a "political" statement, in the face of the travel ban, as a justification for treating the latter as a merely technical matter, is to sweep undecidability under the carpet, not break it. It is when current rules are imaginatively applied to particular situations that makes those rules *reinstated*—*refined*, *revised*, *reinvented*. The normative spirit of the rule is preserved not by leader's conformity to its prototypical core but by taking the risk to extend it, in particular circumstances.

Having said all this, seeing the entire trajectory of AOM's response to the travel ban, enables us to see moral imagination and responsibility in more nuanced terms. Although, judged by the criterion of disclosive moral imagination, the AOM President shows a restricted understanding of leadership agency, the picture is more complex, since she subsequently took the lead to change the organization from within, namely change AOM's policy on taking political stands. While in her initial official response to the travel ban she fails to disclosively respond to the undecidable or "ineffable" (Lara 2007, p. 66), through her subsequent initiative to change AOM policy she succeeds to envision a different AOM, namely an organization whose leadership does not hesitate to take a public stand when core Academy values are under threat.<sup>14</sup> In the first case, we have moral imagination as disclosive power (i.e. by imaginatively extending current rules in situ, the leader discloses new possibilities); in the second case, we encounter moral imagination as incremental force (i.e. the leader draws on hitherto experience and seeks alliances to realize a new possibility for the future). Moral imagination as disclosive power is value-rational, politically risky, procedurally controversial, and potentially transformational. Moral imagination as incremental force is instrumentally rational, politically safer, procedurally compliant, and incremental. AOM President McGahan scores low in moral imagination as disclosive power and high in moral imagination as incremental force.

## Concluding Remarks

AOM's new policy on taking political stands, for which Professor McGahan deserves credit in pushing through, states that "under exceptional circumstances, and with the consensual support of the Executive Committee and approval of the Board of Governors, the President is authorized to issue a statement on behalf of the AOM when a public policy action threatens the existence, purpose, or functioning of the AOM as an organization".<sup>15</sup> I hope this essay has provided a robust rationale for justifying the new policy: in the language used here, the revised policy allows AOM to both bar prototypically political stands *and* take a stand on AOM-relevant public policy issues.

However, it should be noted that while the revised policy helps clarify that occasions may arise in the public sphere in which the AOM President may need to take a stand on behalf of the Academy, deciding what these "exceptional circumstances" are remains the responsibility of its leaders, for which no rules will ever be complete, nor will anything spare leaders from the experience (and the burden) of undecidability (Caputo 2000). The moral responsibility of the AOM President remains "infinite" (Derrida 2002a, p. 232) even (or especially) in those occasions in which the Executive Committee and the Board of Governors may refuse to authorize his/her public stand on a particular issue. In other words, no matter how refined the rules may be or how explicit the authorization procedures are, *taking* a responsible decision will always involve a leap of faith and the assumption of personal risk. The spectre of disclosive moral imagination will haunt leaders. No one can relieve a leader's burden, it comes with the territory: he/she must decide those questions that are undecidable. As von Foerster wisely observed "only *those* questions that are in principle undecidable, *we* can decide" (1991, p. 64, italics in the original).

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## Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of interest** Haridimos Tsoukas declares that he/she has no conflict of interest.

**Ethical Approval** This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

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<sup>15</sup> See <https://aom.org/About-AOM/Governance/AOM-Policy-on-Taking-Stands.aspx>.

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