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MORALITY AND LEADERSHIP: EXAMINING THE ETHICS OF TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP

ABSTRACT. Morality is a critical factor in leadership that its absence could turn an otherwise powerful leadership model (i.e. transformational leadership) into a disastrous outcome. The importance of morality for leaders is self-evident in light of the far-reaching effects of leaders' actions or inaction on other people. Such proposition necessitates the discourse in the objectivity of universal moral principles as the legitimate basis of a sound understanding of moral leadership. Examining transformational leadership from a moral-laden perspective, this paper argues that morality is a necessary component of leadership and that deontological moral reasoning provides a sufficient ground for morally attractive leadership theories.

KEY WORDS: ethics, leadership, morality

The morality of leadership is often a neglected element in leadership studies. This phenomenon is not unsurprising given the fixation and preoccupation on leadership effectiveness in leadership studies. To a certain extent, the insatiable quest to achieve higher quarterly profits in the corporate world dictates many leadership researchers in the academic settings to dedicate their studies answering a crucial question of how leadership improves corporate performance. Following this logic, one can easily overlook the negative effects that the absence of morality in leadership theories or models can have on the performance.

Ciulla (1995) maintains that for leadership to be superior, it has to include both technical competencies and moral capacities. It is insufficient for leaders to be effective but unethical. Unfortunately, cases of technically capable but morally disappointing corporate leaders abound. The more corrupt they are, the greater our yearning for morally sound or ethical leaders. Sergiovanni (1992) describes moral leadership as a new kind of leadership practice that is rooted in moral authority. Despite the importance of morality in leadership, there has been little systematic treatment of the subject by leadership scholars (Ciulla, 1995), with some notable exceptions (Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999; Burns, 1978; Graham, 1988, 1991, 1995; Greenleaf, 1977; Howell, 1988; Howell and Avolio, 1992; Price, 2003; Rost, 1993, 1995; Turner, Barling, Epitropaki, Butcher and Milner, 2002). In the

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current postmodern business context where relativism reigns, the greatest battle cry of leadership ever is the need for, to use Burns' (1978, p. 452) phrase, "moral, uplifting, transcending leadership."

Arguments for and Against Moral Leadership

Grenz (1997) argues that human beings, including leaders, are all ethicists in the sense that each day of our lives we make decisions about how we should live. Further, we have an inherent system of moral values that guide our behaviors. Every person possesses a set of personal ethical values that will serve as the standards one employs in making decisions and evaluations (Learned, Dooley and Katz, 1989), particularly as they are confronted with ethical challenges. Hollander (1995) noted that the exercise of authority and power always entails ethical challenges. This internal system of moral values in every individual necessitates the inclusion of morality in any leadership concepts which presuppose a dyadic relation between leader and follower. Therefore, to say that inserting morality into the concept of leadership is unacceptable is a denial of this universal fact of human nature. As a matter of fact, there is no leadership apart from morality since all forms of leadership is value-laden (Gini, 1995).

Nevertheless, leadership scholars vary in their views on moral leadership. Burns (1978), for example, consider morality as a crucial component of transforming leadership. Burns based his notion of transforming leaders on two moral issues: The morality of the means and ends and the public and private morality of a leader (Ciulla, 1995). In transforming leadership interaction, leaders and followers "raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality" (Burns, 1978, p. 20). According to this concept, real leadership takes place only when leaders' and followers' ethical aspirations are enhanced as a result of their interactions. Only those who appeal to higher ideals, moral values, and higher-order needs of followers can be called transforming leaders (Yukl, 1990, p. 210).

Other researchers such as Rost (1993, 1995), however, takes a squarely opposite view. Using abortion and capital punishment as comparative cases, Rost (1993) rejected morality as a leadership requirement simply because it is impossible for everyone to come to agreement as to what a high moral standard is. He criticized Burn's understanding of transforming leadership and argued that different worldviews and beliefs that people hold make a common understanding of what constitutes morality unattainable. Further, Rost (1993, p. 126) argued that Burn's flawed conceptualization of leadership "is scientifically impossible to accept because it does not account for many human relationships that practically everyone labels leadership."

At the heart of Rost's arguments is his refusal of the objectivity of moral values. The subjectivity of each individual's beliefs led him to believe that moral value is a limiting factor in the understanding of leadership. Given the irrefutable facts of ethical pluralism and moral relativism across different individuals or cultures, it is inappropriate for ethics or morality to be attached to leadership. Therefore, Rost reasoned that Burns' moral criteria cannot be used as a consistent parameter to analyze any two leadership phenomena.

Critics, however, agree that Rost's treatment on the morality of leadership is poorly sufficient. The following two comments, in particular, highlight the weaknesses of his approach:

> [Rost] condemned all ethical theories as useless, using only two books . . . [he] does not really tell us what will take the place of all the theories he has dismissed, but rather he assures us that a new system of ethics will emerge . . . he spends most of his time throwing [the literature on ethics] and then runs out of steam when it comes to offering anything concrete in regard to leadership, except for some form of communitarianism (Ciulla, 1995, pp. 6–7).

> What Rost has offered us is an enriched version of a democratically based, sociologically sensitive, ecologically holistic, and communitarian relativism. Such a collective/communal description of ethics may be internally consistent, but it remains substantively insufficient, lacking both an ontological core and a clear directive principle. (Gini, 1995, p. 153)

MORALITY IN THE TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP THEORY

Since Bass' concept of transformational leadership is built largely on the charismatic leadership construct which is "emotional, irrational, and thus risky" (Beyer, 1999, p. 321), transformational leaders' effects are more emotional than rational. Citing Lee Iacocca as an example of a transformational leader whose inspiring, powerful, engaging, and confident style enabled him to articulate a vision to turn Chrysler Corporation around and make that vision into a reality, Giampetro-Meyer et al. (1998) questioned Iacocca's willingness to promote ethical organizational decision-making. A more specific instance given by Giampetro-Meyer et al. (1998) is Iacocca's vision to manufacture and market the Ford Pinto whose weight was no more than 2000 pounds and cost no more than US$2000 dollars. This grand vision was solely implemented to achieve higher short-term profits. Attracted by his inspiring $2000/2000 pound vision, Chrysler employees designed and manufactured the car despite their awareness of its serious defect. Major flaws in safety requirements which could lead to death from burning were identified in the process design process. However,

the decision to proceed to the manufacturing stage was made following a disgraceful cost-benefit analysis which revealed that, in effect, it was cheaper to pay for burn injuries and deaths than to alter the design of the car (Giampetro-Meyer et al., 1998).

While Bass (1985) argued that transformational leaders seek to empower and elevate followers rather than keep followers weak and dependent, the effects of that increased motivation and commitment on the part of followers, however, will not necessarily benefit followers. "There is nothing in the transformational leadership model that says leaders should serve followers for the good of followers" (Graham, 1991, p. 110). Yukl (1990) even presumed that Bass would include leaders such as Adolph Hitler and Reverend Jim Jones in his list of transformational leaders despite their negative effects on followers. Indeed, Bass (1985, pp. 20–21) did include Hitler and therefore, put himself in the position of reconciling transformational and yet immoral leaders.

> Burns saw the transformation as one that was necessarily elevating, furthering what was good rather than evil for the person and the polity. For Burns, Hitler was not a transformational leader, despite his sharp upward energization and mobilization of Germany for paranoid aggression at the expense of personal freedom, and persecution of dissenters and minorities. For us, Germany was still transformed, although the leadership itself was immoral, brutal, and extremely costly in life . . . [W]hat matters is that followers' attitudes and behaviors were transformed by the leader's performance . . . [which includes] movement *downward* on Maslow's hierarchy of needs" [Italics original] (Bass, 1985, p. 20–21).

There is certainly no doubt that Hitler and Jones have made significant changes in people's lives. However, whether those changes were positive or negative is a critical issue that is left undiscussed. An average normal person has every right to ask whether it makes sense to call Jim Jones, who led a mass suicide of his 912 cult followers by voluntarily drinking a flavored drink containing cyanide (Conway and Siegelman, 1979 as quoted in Yukl, 1990), a transformational leader.

The extent to which leaders bring about positive and negative changes in followers is the crux of the matter here. The breadth and depth of the changes they orchestrated might be as wide and deep as, or even greater than, other leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa, or Mahatma Gandhi. The former group of leaders might share certain similarities in capability and personality with the latter, which explained why they both had a highly cohesive relationship with their followers. The contrasting difference then did not lie in their ability and personality. What differentiated the latter band of leaders from the former one were their internal moral value systems.

Of utmost importance to our discussion in this section is the fact that the notion of "transformational but immoral, brutal leadership" is an oxy-

moron. While it is true that transformational leadership is not necessarily immoral or brutal, immoral and brutal leader arguably cannot be transformational. To the extent we believe that there is no good leadership apart from morality and that objective morality exists, putting leaders such as Hitler in the list transformational leaders is incoherent and erroneous. Ciulla (1995, p. 13) is aware of this rather obnoxious fact when she squarely asserts that "under morally attractive theories, Hitler is not a leader at all. He is a bully or tyrant or simply the head of Germany." With its inherent charisma construct, transformational leadership is likely to engage followers in preconventional moral reasoning characterized by their blind faith to the leader (Graham, 1995).

For that very reason it should come as no surprise that Bass admitted his serious theoretical blunder (Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999) after the publication of his *Leadership and Performance Beyond Expectations in* 1985.

> Bass originally argued that transformational leaders could wear the black hats of villains or the white hats of heroes depending on their values. This is mistaken; only those who wear white hats are seen as truly transformational. Those in black hats are now seen as *pseudo*-transformational leaders. (Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999, p. 187)

While this revised version of transformational leadership theory distinguishes authentic or inauthentic transformational leaders, it does not outline how we can accurately tell which one is which. Their article says nothing about how one can ascertain beyond reasonable doubts that a leader is an authentic or pseudo transformational leader. Bass and Steidlmeier (1999) merely contended that identifying authentic transformational leaders involves examining the culture of the followers and the person who does the judging. But the judgment of the authentic transformational leaders may still include some personal biases which reflect their idiosyncratic personal moral tastes.

This phenomenon is illustrated in a popular adage surrounding the issue of terrorism: One person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter. In a similar vein, Hitler can be an authentic transformational leader to one person and a pseudo transformational leader to another. Interestingly, Bass and Stedlmeier (1999) themselves hold the ethical relativist' view that objective morality does not exist, which implies that they cannot label "self-aggrandizing, fantasizing, pseudo-transformational leaders" as immoral (1999, p. 211) since doing so is nothing but a harsh judgmental comment that violates particular moral taste of an individual or community. Hence, Hitler can be both authentic and inauthentic leaders as the judgment is in the eyes of the beholder, and both judgments should be considered equally valid however absurd that logic is.

At the heart of this epistemological discrepancy is the question whether objective morality exists. To say that morality is the *sine qua non* of leadership would be useless if one renders it impossible to agree on what constitutes morality. Without objective morality everybody can make any claims about moral judgements according to his or her subjective moral taste, and no one has the rights to refute it. There are no common frameworks for resolving moral disputes or for reaching agreement on ethical matters. In the absence of objective moral truth, the issue whether Hitler is a noble leader or a tyrant becomes meaningless since there is nothing objective to argue about and no good reason to believe one thing over another. Every judgment, therefore, is all a matter of opinion because everything is relative.

THE OBJECTIVITY OF MORAL PRINCIPLES

Our discussion of morality as an essential component of leadership concept points us back into a deeper issue raised by Rost on the objectivity of moral standards, or in the words of Graham (1991), "universal moral principles." Is there such a thing called objective morality that constrains everyone? Is there a universal ethic to which all people have access through reason (without a metaphysical instrument such as religious faith)? Unless there are universal moral principles that everyone can agree with, it is hard to build a sound understanding of moral leadership.

The rest of this paper explores the objectivity of moral principles, and argues that objective, universal moral values on which sound leadership theories should be built do exist. To put things in a proper perspective, theories of moral philosophies will be briefly delineated in the following paragraphs. It was Socrates who delineated two fundamental approaches to ethical decision making, the deontological and teleological approach (Grenz, 1997). The former approach seeks only for the intrinsic rightness or wrongness of an act regardless of the consequences, and is focused on adherence to independent moral rules or duties. The deontological pattern of moral reasoning requires one to perform the acts which are intrinsically right out of moral obligation. Kant (1964, p. 11) argues that

> To be beneficent when we can is a duty; and besides this, there are many minds so sympathetically constituted that, without any other motive of vanity or self-interest, they find a pleasure in spreading joy around them, and can take delight in the satisfaction of others so far as it is their own work. But I maintain that in such a case an action of this kind, however proper, however amiable it may be, has nevertheless no true moral worth, but is on a level with other inclinations . . . For the maxim lacks the moral import, namely, that such actions be done *from duty*, not from inclination.

On the other hand, the teleological ethics maintains that the moral worth of actions is determined solely by the consequences of the actions. In the words of Mill (1969, p. 7), "Actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain and the privation of pleasure." This utilitarian approach compels one to perform the acts which will bring about the greatest amount of good and the least amount of evil for the greatest number of people. Both theories serve as an important basis for making ethical judgements. Geisler (1989, p. 24) outlined the distinction between the two approaches as follows:

Deontological approach	Teleological approach
Rule determines result	Result determines the rule
Rule is the basis of acts	Result is the basis of acts
Result is always calculated within the rule	Result is sometimes used to break the rule

Figure 1. The difference between deontological and teleological approach.

The task at hand is to determine whether it is possible to employ both approaches to arrive at a system of objective morality. Since the main premise of the teleological approach to moral reasoning states that the outcome of certain acts determines the rightness of wrongness of those acts, the acts therefore must produce the greatest balance of good over evil (Grenz, 1997). This logic begs the questions: The greatest balance of good over evil for whom? It is obvious that a leader's moral obligation is not to advance her or his own well-being (Price, 2003), since that assumption, as earlier examples indicate, could prompt the leader to use people as the means to her or his own ends. Mill (1969) argued that the amount of good or happiness is not to be determined by the agent's own greatest happiness, but the greatest amount of happiness altogether. But who will determine what is considered to be the communal good? Mill (1969) maintained that the superiority of the higher good is decided by the "verdict of the only competent judges . . . who are qualified by the knowledge" to decide how to maximize pleasure and minimize pain, which in this context would be the leader.

In attempting to maximize the good to for the greatest number of followers, a leader might perform Bentham's (1988) hedonic calculus assuming that he or she is able to accurately derive the values of one pleasure and pain and compare it to others and across various individuals. However,

in utilitarianism the good is defined independently from the right, which implies that one can recognize and rank the good (e.g. pleasure or happiness) in value by criteria that do not presuppose any standards of right (Rawls, 1988). There is nothing intrinsic to the theory that stops a leader from inflicting pain on others as long as the happiness generated by the act exceed the misery created by the act. If enslaving a minority of people generates happiness for the majority of people, then oppressing a minority can be justified, as in the case of Hitler.

The perceived difficulties of consequential ethics in constructing a universal moral principle lead us to the second pattern to moral reasoning, namely deontological ethics. This approach rests on the premise that the morality of an act lies entirely in the act. Morally right actions are precisely those in which an individual agent's determination to act in accordance with a sense duty overcomes his or her evident self-interest and obvious desire to do otherwise. Kant (1964) argued that only pure reason can provide a source of universal validity for practical principles of morality. Therefore, the moral value of an action is determined not by how effective the action is in achieving its object, but by the principle of volition according to which it is performed.

In his seminal work entitled *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, Kant (1964, p. 70) outlined the principle of universality: "Act as if the maxim of thy action were to become by thy will a universal law of nature," implying that one ought to act in such a way that the principle according to which the action is performed can be accepted as a universal law of morality. In other words, an act is morally right if one is willing to universalize the rule of action which generates that particular act (Guyer, 2002). Sergiovanni (1992), who based his concept of moral leadership upon deontological ethics, echoed Kant's argument that any acts are justified as moral acts only if they are done "in the belief and because of the belief that it is right – from duty, not because of personal inclination, gain, or love" (Sergiovanni, 1992, p. 20). Even enlightened management techniques or leadership methods which are seemingly empowering would not be morally worthy if they were done solely to increase the shareholder value, and not out of a sense of duty (Bowie, 2000).

Building on the first principle, Kant proposed the principle of humanity which provides an even stronger basis for moral leadership: "Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end" (Kant, 1964, pp. 75–76). This formulation implies that other people are not merely the stepping stones for leaders' own personal fulfilment. Instead they are legitimate ends in themselves and are valuable

for their own sakes. Therefore, leaders must always treat their followers as such and never merely as means toward advancing their own preconceived needs. Bowie (2000) asserted that the extent to which leaders respect and foster the autonomy of their followers characterizes a Kantian perspective of leadership. Deontological ethics therefore stands in contrast to the popular adage. 'The end justifies the means' rooted in a Machiavellian code of morality. The means and the ends are of the same importance and both must be ethical. Every act born out of the desire for pleasure, power and respects from others is deemed by Kant to be morally worthless.

Believing in subjective morality and applying it to leadership (as Rost did) is problematic. To believe that morality is subjective essentially means that each of us is free, morally speaking, to choose whichever moral point of view we find most appealing and worthwhile. In the context of leadership, this would mean that the choice of becoming Mother Teresa or Saddam Hussein would be roughly the same as to become a football player or a basketball player.

If morality is entirely subjective, it follows that Hitler's holocaust or Jones' mass suicide are not really wrong, that is they are not wrong in any objective sense that would be binding on anyone else. At best, such atrocities simply offend our personal moral taste or violate our preconceived worldview. In other words, we dislike them because we find them unappealing. That is about all that can be said. Hence, if we believe that there is a moral difference between the conducts of Hitler or Jones and those of Mother Teresa, and that "value is a source of attitudes . . . [and] attitudes are manifestations of values (Hodgkinson, 1991, p. 95), it follows that not all moral judgements or values are equally right. At the very least, this is true according to the moral reasoning behind the deontological ethics. To put it differently, the deontological pattern of moral reasoning provides a strong indication of the existence of objective moral values on which moral leadership is based.

Implications for University Education and Leadership

As reports of unethical corporate practices abound in the media, we are increasingly exposed to morally disappointing leaders. The Enron disaster is just the latest scandal of corporate executives whose unethical practices put thousands of people who work in the company on the line. Given the enormous span of control and circles of influence that business leaders have, the magnitude of their unethical decisions and actions (or inactions) on corporate stakeholders is substantial, and has fatal implications on the organization's constituents and customers. The inclusion of ethics

and morality in any formal or informal leadership programs is therefore needed much more than ever. Instructors of leadership in the higher education sectors must be aware of and believe in the necessity of morality in transformational leadership or any leadership theories. Teaching theories of leadership without reference to morality will still help business students to be effective leaders of the future organizations, but their success will typically require many unethical compromises. The ultimate goal of leadership education is to create good leaders who are both effective and ethical, strategically equipped with technical and moral proficiencies.

On the other hand, academic administrators, in particular higher education department chairs, often are promoted to their roles with little leadership preparation (Pounder, 2001). Brown and Moshavi (2002) suggested that the selection of department chairs must be made on the basis of their transformational leadership behaviors. This emphasis on transformational leadership is necessary but insufficient. Academic administrators also need to be equipped with ethical safeguard so that they become *authentic* transformational leaders who can lead education institutions effectively and responsibly.

CONCLUSION

This paper suggests that good leadership is impossible without the presence of morality. Therefore, a sound understanding of leadership necessitates the inclusion of objective moral values. A brief analysis of transformational leadership as conceptualized by Bass and others indicates that it fails to acknowledge the necessity of morality in its operationalization of the concept. On the other hands, transforming leadership as conceptualized by Burns ensures that both the ends they seek and the means they employ can be morally legitimized, thoughtfully reasoned and ethically justified. This is critical to the leader-follower relationship as the exercise of authority and power always entails ethical challenges.

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