Leadership, Ethics, and the Centrality of Character

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Scandals in business (such as Volkswagen’s dieselgate and, earlier, the Enron scandal), politics and the public sector (the Petrobas affair in Brazil, for instance), sports (think of the corruption charges against FIFA’s Sepp Blatter) and the military (Abu Ghraib springs to mind) have brought the matter of ethical leadership to the forefront. But although this increased attention has had the collateral benefit that most handbooks on leadership now pay more attention to the importance of leading ethically, this will generally still be in a separate chapter. To make thing worse, that chapter on leadership is more often than not one the last chapters of the book, perhaps followed by a chapter on, say, diversity. This all testifies to the fact that leadership and ethics are habitually treated as related though separate spheres. It would be much better, of course, if leadership and ethics were treated as belonging to a single domain. Ethics is clearly an aspect of leadership, and not a separate approach that exists alongside other approaches to leadership such as the trait approach, the situational approach, etc.. Interestingly, this thinking and writing about ethical leadership as just one approach among many other leadership styles appears to be a relatively recent invention. In the works of Plato, Plutarch, Machiavelli and Locke, for example, we see (political) leadership and ethics dealt with as a single subject. It was not before the twentieth century that we saw the rise of a separate leadership industry. Its results are largely unimpressive; it has not made leaders necessarily more effective, let alone more ethical.1

Yet, on a more positive note, over the last few decades (say since the publication of James MacGregor Burns’ classic Leadership in 1978)2 we have also witnessed an increasing attention for leadership theories that profess to be

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1 See Barbara Kellerman, The End of Leadership (HarperCollins 2012). Other examples involving failing leadership are the extravagant bonuses and the selling of subprime mortgages in the banking sector, and endemic corruption in the public sector in most of the world’s countries. It seems that many leaders today do not so much struggle with moral dilemmas, as it is their integrity that is tested: it is clear what is the right thing to do, yet there are temptations to choose the wrong course of action. See for the distinction between tests of integrity and moral dilemmas: Stephen Coleman, ‘The Problems of Duty and Loyalty’ (2009) 8 (2) Journal of Military Ethics 105–106.

ethical, such as transformational, authentic, spiritual and servant leadership. But it is not always clear, to say the least, what exactly the ethical component of these theories consists of. As for instance Ciulla points out, ethics in leadership theories is often rather different from what ethicists consider important.

... philosophers who specialize in ethics see their subject differently than do social scientists. Studies of charismatic, transformational, and visionary leadership often talk about ethics. In these studies, ethics is part of the social scientist’s description of types or qualities of leaders and/or leader behaviors. From a philosopher’s point of view, these studies offer useful empirical descriptions, but they do not offer detailed critical analysis of the ethics of leadership.3

It is very much the question to what extent paying lip service to the importance of values really makes these modern leadership theories more ethical. The argument for leading ethically that underlies transformational leadership (the leading theory today) is, for instance, mainly functional: leaders who appeal to the values of their followers are thought to be more effective, and to have followers who are more satisfied with their leader, than leaders who fail to do so (while unethical transformational leadership is explained away as pseudo-transformational leadership). Clearly, such a functional line of reasoning does not amount to a moral argument. The obvious flip side of a functional argument for leading ethically is that it loses its force as soon as a leader finds a way to be more effective, and perhaps even to have more satisfied followers, without being ethical – military history is replete with leaders who were absolutely effective but not ethical at all.

So it is perhaps a good thing, then, that the chapters in this volume are written more from an ethical perspective than from an effective leadership point of view, by either ethicists or military practitioners with an interest in ethics. It is perhaps telling that none of the contributors to this volume on leadership and military ethics refers to modern leadership theories; all contributors rightly consider themselves to be quite capable of writing on military leadership

3 Also, ‘the study of ethics and the history of ideas help us understand two overarching and overlapping questions that drive most leadership research. They are: What is leadership? And what is good leadership? One is about what leadership is, or a descriptive question. The other is about what leadership ought to be, or a normative question. These two questions are sometimes confused in the literature.’ Joanne B. Ciulla, ‘Ethics and Leadership Effectiveness’ in John Antonakis, Anna T. Cianciolo, and Robert J. Sternberg (eds), The Nature of Leadership (Sage 2004) 302–327.