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Being a Part of Something Bigger:
How Leaders Affect Morality

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Abstract:

If a person is in a position of leadership then is he or she also responsible to uphold the moral values of the group? This paper argues that people, they are not responsible for morality, rather they become the voice of morality. This is to say that leaders should not develop a new morality on behalf of their group. When leaders do create their own version of morality instead of adhering to an inherent and objective truth such as the golden rule, then their actions ultimately become immoral. Not all leaders actually have this responsibility however. For example, there are leaders who hold the name badge and point fingers. These people may get the job done, but they do not change hearts or represent the needs of the people. Those who do such things are called transformational leaders and are associated with being the moral authority of the group.
MORAL AUTHORITY AND LEADERSHIP

Anyone could be a leader if they have someone to follow them. While this definition is sufficient in communicating the basic structure of leadership, it does not adequately describe the distinct difference between those leaders who effectively influence the thoughts and/or motivations of a group and those leaders who simply sit at the top of the hierarchy to get the job done. These two types of leaders make the difference between those who truly transform people and those who force others to conformity through threat, intimidation, or simply out of the necessity to finish an agenda. Another concept that must be defined is that of authority and moral authority specifically. Although authority often carries a negative connotation, realistically authority and leadership are much more interconnected than separated. This paper explores the relationship between moral authority and leadership and argue that the truly transformational leaders become the moral authority because they influence the moral climate of whatever group they serve.

BASIC DISCUSSION ON TERMS

Although there is not a be all end all saying that can identify the difference between morality and immorality, there is an idea that has been as close to universally accepted as anything else. It is echoed through all of the main world religions and is generally agreed upon as being morally good. This nearly universalized moral code is a call to think outside of one’s self and on the behalf of another. Commonly referred to as the “golden rule,” the Christian tradition refers to this verse time and time again as one of its keystones. One of the most famous parables of Jesus, the Good Samaritan, echoes the theme of caring for the other. This idea of treating others as one would like to be treated is also found in Kantian ethics. Kant does not teach the golden rule in the way that Jesus does, but he does emphasize the importance of not using
another person as a means simply to an end. Instead of using someone in order for a personal
gain, Kant demands that all people be treated as if they are ends in themselves. Jesus and Kant
alike can agree that is is better to think of the other than to be self focused and dependent on
making oneself happy in order to truly be a good person. Making room for other people is the
goal of many moral frameworks and religions and because of its near universality, it will serve as
the objective moral rule throughout this essay.

When a person is in a position of authority, it is assumed that this person is in a place
where he or she can give orders and expect results. Having authority is associated with the idea
that others look to you to delegate. If it comes down to it, the authority makes the judgment call.
Often times, the word carries a negative connotation, and the first words associated with
authority are words like power, force, or even tyranny. Theorist Hannah Arendt argues that
authority is more than just being the loudest in the chain of command, and she calls for a
redefinition of the word. Instead of authority acting out in a violent or strictly persuasive manner,
it should be known solely as the means by which there is obedience and order. An authority
should speak on behalf of the whole, and remaining members should be moved to action. The
motivation to be moved to action comes no longer from force; instead, the followers are moved
to action because of the invitation of the authority.

We look for leaders with the hope that they will provide some stable and secure
foundation from which we can develop. Furthermore, if we are not at the top of the food chain,
then we do not have to take the blame if everything falls apart. We almost seek authority because
we want to know who is in charge and what to do. It is our human tendency to long to be apart of
something greater than ourselves. Those who are in charge of whatever this “greater than self” is
hold a great responsibility because they have an effect on the understanding of morality. This is
why moral authority is so important in particular; the moral authority distinguishes what is truly right and good from the contrary. If those in positions of authority are the source of invitation, they have the ability to influence people’s views, moralities, and actions whether for better or worse. The term “moral authority” can be read with the assumption that the term encompasses both moral and immoral actions. With this all-encompassing definition being used, Adolf Hitler could be considered an example of a moral authority. Although his instruction and action was entirely evil and resulted in mass genocide, Hitler controlled the morality of the time for many and influenced the idea of what it meant to be moral for countless people. While Hitler may be a negative example, he represents the power that a single moral authority can have; whether a moral authority has any merit however depends on the motives and intentions of the authority.

Ethical leadership also carries a number of assumptions and is often understood to be telling people what they ought to do or how they ought to behave. To some extent this is what ultimately is the result of ethical leadership, but leaders do not come to have influence because they hand out rule books and hope that everyone makes it all the way through. While “most individuals look outside themselves to other individuals for ethical guidance,” leaders tend to possess a sort of authority out of a need for someone to take charge. Those who demonstrate care and concern for others, who are self-aware, and who are credible tend to be more attractive leaders, but these characteristics are not essential for a leader to be vastly influential. The only thing that can be said universally about leadership in general is that a leader is someone who is looked to by others. Beyond that, saying that a leader is one who takes charge, commands, or is an example for his or her followers imply more specific types of leadership whether it is a leadership position that is coercive or inviting.
Leadership can be separated into two categories: those who want to serve and those who want to be served. The first of these two types of leaders is commonly referred to as a servant leader, but for the sake of this discussion, the different types of leadership will be known as transformational and utilitarian leadership. The latter of the two types of leaders is fueled usually by a desire of domination. Utilitarian leaders are concerned with self and instead of developing community or walking in solidarity, they rule from above and take into account merely their own needs. They look for what can be useful to themselves and their communities. Often these are the tyrants and the dictators, but sometimes this type of leadership even includes a head of a business who is only concerned with his or her own success and the checklist that needs to be taken care of. Any type of leader who is exclusively self serving is considered utilitarian, and by nature the transformational leader is oppositely focused on upholding truth and letting that guide their motivation. The transformational leader is able to measure success by noting whether or not his or her followers are flourishing. They are concerned with the success and happiness of others rather than with self. A leader might be effective and successful in accomplishing whatever task he or she had in mind, but to be truly transformational is to influence a person’s motivation and action. This happens through a process of honesty and humility. Philosopher Stephen Dunne uses the contrast of magisters and ministers to represent the difference:

“To give is to show one’s superiority, to be higher in rank, *magister*. To accept without giving in return, or without giving more back, is to become client and servant, to become small, to fall lower (*minister*).”

This ministering to others, this smallness of the self, and this type of service to others is what makes a successful leader and these types of people are those who truly transform their followers
and have a lasting effect. They are the types of leaders we will be concerned with for the remainder of the paper.

Leadership comes with the ability to walk with a purpose and in such a manner that others are drawn to walk with the leader. Simon Sinek, modern day author and speaker concerning leadership, points out that all of the greatest leaders follow a similar structure. Furthermore, he argues, that this pattern and structure is the opposite of what we automatically tend to do as human beings. While we tend to explain to others what we’re doing, leading production companies, influential thinkers, and innovators all begin with a purpose and then discover the means and details needed to reach that end. The process begins with the *why* with the intention that the purpose will be defined immediately. The second step is the figuring out *how* the purpose could be acted upon, and the final step is to ask *what* to do and follow through with all the good intentions. Sinek’s discussion helps to outline how to be a truly transformative leader as opposed to an oppressive one because it includes involving the other in the process instead of assuming that whatever idea was offered was the ultimate and only idea.

Gary Yukl, a psychologist at the University of Albany explains, “only those who appeal to higher ideals, moral values, and higher-order needs of followers can be called transforming leaders.” This is what truly separates a moral leader from an immoral one. A leader who appeals to something greater than him or herself will become a moral leader. In contrast, if the transformational leader appeals to his or her *own* desires and idea of good or bad, then ultimately he or she becomes an immoral leader. As one conducts his or her group according to an external morality that is understood to be morally good, then he or she becomes in turn a moral leader and brings truth and goodness into the world. This morality is the one discussed over and over but has never been concretely defined. If there was a definition of goodness that could be settled on,
we would not even be having a conversation of morality because there would be a universal
definition. However, there is not an indisputable definition. No one really has a good handle on
what it means to be morally good. We can look at Martin Luther King Jr. and Adolf Hitler, know
that they were both hugely influential leaders. We can can point to one and say, “good,” and to
the other and say, “bad,” but it is harder for us to develop language about which ethical theories
they supported and what makes one sort of theory better than the other. This explains how a
leader (e.g. Hitler) can be effective but not good (he appealed to the rules of leadership but did
not appeal to the rules of morality and therefore had a negative impact on history). While we
may not have an absolute framework of morality, there is clearly something universal that makes
us understand what the difference is between the good and bad.

The distinction between the morality of Martin Luther King Jr. and the immorality of
Hitler lies in their objectives as leaders. King set out to proclaim truth on behalf of a voiceless
people. He was motivated by the objective truth which has already been established as treating
others with love, and he sought to bring justice not only for himself but for the sake of all people.
Through means of non violent protest, he fought for recognition of life and justice for the black
people of America. Because he appealed to a cause that was not of himself and grounded in
truth, King was not only an effective leader but also a moral one. Although it appeared that
Hitler was also motivated for the sake of a greater cause, this cause was rooted in a desire for
superiority. His idea of justice resulted in the destruction of a people and culture. His actions and
beliefs were immoral because they were self centered. Both King and Hitler were effective
leaders in that they were able to rally and lead a group with a purpose, but King was
transformational and his efforts were lasting because what he believed in was lasting. Hitler’s
efforts failed to persist against truth as he lost the war and the Nazi Regime ceased to exist despite his initial successes early in his leadership.

If one becomes a transformational leader, he or she becomes the moral authority and therefore is in a position that determines the moral climate of a group. Because the person has already gotten to a place where they have influence, it is easy for them to develop and influence other people’s thoughts. Transformational leaders have a great responsibility to represent and teach morality whether or not their actions do so intentionally. The first aspect is that their selfless actions make for successful leadership, but being concerned with something greater than self also is the first movement that a transformational leader makes to establish a group morality.

A morally good leader communicates and acknowledges another person’s humanity. In the same manner, there can be a form of recognition of the other’s humanity that draws one to acknowledge the other as a leader. In leading through service and in leading as an example with a purpose, a person becomes a good leader. This does not necessarily mean morally good, as will be demonstrated throughout this paper, but this type of leader is successful and effective in whatever they intend to do.

Two of the major critiques that arise when saying that moral authority and leadership are inseparable are in regards to whether one is obligated to be a moral authority as a leader and whether one must be a leader in order to have any moral influence. The first question, *do all people in places of leadership have the ability and responsibility to be a moral authority?* It is hard to say that all people who are leaders have the responsibility specifically to be moral leaders, but I would argue that it is not even a question of whether they have the option not to. In reality, as someone becomes the transformational leader of a group, his or her moral influence on the group is inevitable. This is a direct result of becoming a transformational leader and, to some
degree, becoming a servant. This entails being a listener, finding consensus, and nurturing the community to name only a few of the most prominent characteristics. As these characteristics show and as “servant hood” implies, the most important thing about leadership is that is externally oriented. This is what makes leadership and morality work. As one is drawn outside of themselves and living for something greater than his or her own ideas, thoughts, and opinions, he or she begins to have a greater impact on those who walk with them. These people who are able to articulate what is important outside of their own minds and become the innovators are truly transformative. Great leaders “have a vision to achieve large scale ideas that they dream of accomplishing, and they have the personal power to enact it.” These leaders can have positive impacts on their followers as they lead missions to space, the generation into the newest technological advancement, or introduce the newest philosophy. It is the dream and position that result in achieving the goal.

This leads to the second critique: does a person need to be in a leadership position in order to have moral authority? This issue comes back to the problem of defining leadership. “Leader” is a term used for anything from politics to team captains to the first violin in an orchestra. In order to have a voice and effect on the moral understanding of a group, the discussion has been limited to the idea that a leader is someone who holds a title of some sort or has had a great impact on history. However, the people who are acknowledged as leaders are not the only ones who end up serving as transformational leaders. Of course those who have the CEO or boss title act as leaders, and it would be silly to pretend that someone high in a hierarchy would not have a great deal of power. Being the President of the United States or the head of a company makes it much easier to have lasting influence, because these types of people do not have to jump through other people’s hoops and can to some extent demand that their influence be
listened to. While the title itself may help someone become authoritative, it does not automatically determine whether they are a transformational or tyrannical leaders. This distinction is made simply through their intentions and actions. A person does not necessarily need to have a specific job title in order to influence others. Lunenburg says it well, “experts have power even when they rank low in the organization’s hierarchy.” Although these influential people may be technically lower on the payroll, they can still be considered leaders because they do have an affect on the ethics and thoughts of others. It is the influence itself that leads them to be moral authorities and therefore leaders. In fact, in the primary resources on servant leadership, it is essential that one begins as a servant.

**THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LEADERSHIP AND MORAL AUTHORITY**

Hitler is known to be a leader and authority because he commanded so many, but he is infamous for acting as a moral authority who only acted immorally because of the terrible injustice he lead. At the time however, he did not have thousands of followers who all were dedicated to a project of mass genocide for the sake of it being evil. The reason Hitler had so many behind him is because he restructured the truth of morality in order to fit his desires, and his influence as a leader was so powerful that his redefinition of morality resulted in the mass genocide of millions of people. At the time, Germany was a hurting country marked by the defeat of the first World War, and many people were looking for someone to blame. As he began to take advantage of the feelings and desires of many within the country, he began to gather followers. Hitler did not change the natural law which already accepted murder as being evil; he challenged it by offering a reward that was greater than the consequences of killing. He restructured morality by making pride and success the greatest moral standard and letting all other decisions stem from that priority even if it meant eliminating any true morality. Moral
Hitler’s main concern was his own superiority.

Hitler redefined morality by saying that humans were unequal and unworthy to a right of life. He had no respect or obligation to the golden rule and made no room for “the other” to exist. Only 20 years later, Martin Luther King after the end of World War II did the exact opposite and is renowned for his contribution to the country as a moral authority. Famous for his speeches and zeal to change the ideas of a nation, King set out to change the world by demanding equality in a time when he was arrested and his house was bombed for doing so. Within in the first few years of declaring his cause, it grew from preaching at his church to a lifestyle of traveling the country to speak endlessly on behalf of what he believed in. This ministry lasted for more than a decade, and King reached hundreds of thousands during his lifetime and continued to have a lasting effect on the Civil Rights movement even after he was assassinated. The story of Martin Luther King Jr. is familiar, and his influence lasts even to this day. There is no argument that he was a great leader, but the fact of the matter is that Martin Luther King is not the reason the Civil Rights Act exists. He himself did not singlehandedly solve the issue of segregation, nor did he fuel the fire of the civil rights movement. More than 250,000 people gathered to listen to him give his most memorable speech, but they did not go just to see him. The people went to hear what he had to say because he was speaking about what he believed and they believed in what he stood for. He seized the opportunity to address what was morally wrong and put words to the injustice that was occurring. The people he led left equipped with language and with the passion to change the world, but these people were not his followers; it wasn’t about him as a person but him as a leader and a voice to something greater than himself. As he grew to identify what needed to be said aloud and appealed to the truth, people began to listen to what he had to say,
and they followed him for their own sake and for the sake of the greater objective morality. Naturally, King was propelled into a leadership position.

King appealed to an external truth but one that was the desire of the people to be heard. They needed to find a voice, so they found a leader. He was a transformational leader because he did not seek out his own gain, rather he knew goodness and pursued it. This is why he is known as moral. While it was in his interest to speak on behalf of what was good and true, he did not act selfishly but for the sake of justice itself. Appealing to the external morality and becoming a voice on behalf of rather than a voice of force and domination therefore resulted in King becoming a moral and transformational leader rather than a utilitarian type leader. Such leaders sometimes become historic heroes, but as explained in the definition of transformational leadership, appealing to some objective truth is not the key to making history but the key to being a good moral leader.

I had a youth leader in high school who believed in developing great leaders among the youth of our church so that we could together bring faith to all of the youth in the state. He was a great speaker and a greater leader himself. Every time he spoke, all were drawn to listen, whether it be the junior high students attending a youth rally, the high schoolers at a convention, or the young adults and other ministers who all gathered together to help this youth team. We all listened to him because he spoke with great confidence but more so because he called us to action. After being a part of this group for a few years, I began to catch on to the reason why his speeches were so appealing. He had a way of calling us to be a part of something greater than ourselves. We were offered the challenge to be great leaders by counter-culturally seeking to be the servants of everyone we encountered. While our schools, jobs, ever-present media, and peers
were telling us to be better than everyone else, this youth minister was reminding us that this lifestyle of domination was the opposite of what we are called to in Christianity.

Our purpose became to walk with those whom we served as opposed to walking in front of them hoping that we would somehow inspire them as we dragged them along. In our own youth ministry, this meant what this particular leader called “being the first among the last.” By saying this, he meant that first of all, we would be the ones who reached out to absolutely everyone—especially those on the sidelines, and second of all, that we would be eating last every single time we helped at a fundraiser or ran a banquet. This motto was the foundation of what our group sought to do; it was what the board was built upon. The youth leaders of the board were called presidents, but instead of sitting in offices separate from all of the other high schoolers, getting to eat at a fancy table, or having the power to veto any group decisions, these presidents were called to be the servants of the servants. They really were the ones to leave gatherings after everyone else to make sure everything was finished, and they were ones who took it upon themselves to check in personally with all who were involved in their respective departments. Although they were not the ultimate authority in the system, they were clearly leaders and the servants of those who served. This in turn drew people to follow them, and because they got out of the way of truth and pointed toward it, they had a lasting influence on what the others understood morality to be.

Both Martin Luther King and this youth leader understood that they were not the center of the universe. By setting aside themselves and realizing that morality should be objectively focused on others, they became great channels of reason and guidance for those who followed them. It is not just a coincidence that what I needed as a high schooler and what hundreds of thousands of people needed 50 years ago in order to act was a great leader. Although I may have
already desired to serve other people and share the love of God with others, and the countless people who participated in the civil rights movement already were in a pursuit of justice, we all needed a voice to remind us of our direction. It is so important to appeal to the external morality because that is what can unify people in a lasting way. Though the idea of an external or objective morality is hard to define, it is what ultimately distinguishes moral and immoral leadership. Hitler’s redefinition and restructuring or morality caused a huge destruction of humanity and him to become the most infamous leader of the last century. He, like many who come to be in a position of transformational leadership, prioritized his own agenda. This reprioritization of morals is something that is also very present today. A glaring example is the way that politicians come to use their power today. On a local level, there is a greater possibility that the elected politician represents the needs of the people, but as the stakes get higher and the power of the position corrupts the person that holds it, wealth and status control more say in who gets elected than the needs and wants of the people. As a result of a corrupt system of government, many who have the greatest influence in politics are those who are self serving. Many are closer to practicing totalitarian and utilitarian rather than transformational leadership.

Having an agenda drastically affects the way in which one leads. By constructing the morality of a group based off a single person’s needs, the morality is entirely construed and the sole focus is on the objective of a single person or isolated group of people. However, this is not an uncommon occurrence. Often we see leaders do this in politics, but this can even be displayed in the way that parents live vicariously through their children. In an oversimplified example, it is shown through the way that parents can sometimes exhaust their children’s love of a sport for the sake of the parents’ desire for success. Parents typically always want what is best for the children, but every now and again there are those parents who prioritize their own desires above
the child’s. Instead of listening to the hopes and passions that the child may have, the child could be signed up and shipped off to some basketball camp and then forced to dedicate all of his or her free time to the sport. This is not seen as good parenting, and it certainly is not seen as good leadership. To some extent it is good to be encouraged to do things that are not necessarily comfortable but will ultimately be fruitful, but there is a fine line between working through the fear of the unknown and pure manipulation of a person for selfish desires.

People prioritize their own needs and agendas for many different reasons, but they are all to some degree selfish. Some of the biggest reasons why people have agendas are because of a need to feel personally achieved, a need for affection, a desire to limit the effectiveness of a group, a desire to use a group setting for personal, social, or professional therapy, a need to demonstrate competence, or simply a need to exercise power. Of these reasons, there is a general theme of self gain and an overall overlooking of care for the other people affected. This is what makes those who strictly operate from their agendas non transformative. They may be “successful” to the point where they achieve what they were hoping to, but they are not successful in fostering a good group dynamic. In the parenting example, it may be a dramatized version of the need for therapy or a sort of need for personal achievement. Though it is an example of parent and child, this sort of authority dynamic also reflects the way that a person who we few as being more powerful can have control over what we say, do, and believe. Often it has been found that in the workplace, those in the lower levels of the hierarchy of the organization “felt more pressure to compromise their personal values” for the sake of the goals of the company. This and the parenting example are demonstrations of the ways in which we can tend to be intimidated by those above us who we feel as if we cannot relate to comfortably. If we cannot trust that our own voice will be heard, then we tend not to share our true voice at all.
Rather, we conform for the sake of pleasing the threatening power, or we silently object but do nothing to support our internal struggle. This is why transformational leadership is so important. If there is an objective truth that becomes the root for why we do what we do, and if there are people leading us to that objective truth, then there is no harm in conforming. If however we are lead to conform to the invented ideals of a selfish leader who is constructing morality, then there are lasting consequences that harm our relationships with each other and our relationships with truth.

**IN BRIEF SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION:**

In conclusion there are two types of leaders; there are those who wish to serve and those who wish to be served. Those who wish to be served are the utilitarians who are effective often in a tyrannical sort of way where they demand results. They are not truly effective leaders because they do not have any influence on their followers beside their threat. On the other hand there are leaders who are able to walk with their followers and in doing so, have a lasting effect on those who they walk with instead of a forced one, therefore they are transformative. These two types of leaders have a real influence not only on the characteristics and movement of the group, but on the group's understanding of what is good and bad. This causes these leaders to become the group’s moral authority. Whether the leader was intending to or not, he or she becomes the voice of morality. Whether they intentionally set the moral standards or lead through example of moral action, being a transformational leader is inseparable from the responsibility to be a moral leader. Through history these moral authoritative leaders have had both positive and negative influences because of their positions of power. Those who have appealed to objective truths have been those who have contributed positively to morality while those who have invented their own versions of morality have had negative influence.
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