

Introduction

BETWEEN THE VILLAIN AND THE HERO

Students of leadership ethics, whatever the particular context of study, face no shortage of examples. Politics offers bad leaders such as Richard Nixon. It also brings us murderous leaders such as Hitler and Stalin, each of whom was responsible for the deaths of millions of innocent people. From religion come not only charlatans such as Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, but also destructive prophets such as Jim Jones and David Koresh, two leaders who ultimately led their followers to suicidal showdowns with the outside world. In business, the stakes are usually lower,¹ but this context has its fair share of villains, too, with newcomers joining the list almost by the day: WorldCom's Bernie Ebbers, Tyco's Dennis Kozlowski, and Enron's Jeff Skilling.

Negative exemplars from politics, religion, and business make for frequent contrasts with leaders on the positive side of the ethical divide. Although there are sometimes disagreements about the real heroes of the moral story, Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt are regularly cited for their moral accomplishments as presidents, and Martin Luther King Jr. has a central place in our understanding of ethical leadership for social change. All of these examples – the bad and the good – are standard fare in our day-to-day discussions of ethical

¹ This is not to trivialize the moral importance of death or suffering from dangerous products, unjust working conditions, and corporate theft.

leadership. But is working from villainous and heroic leadership the best way to think about leadership ethics in everyday life?²

Advocates of this approach to leadership ethics – what we might call *the ethics of the extreme case* – charge everyday leaders to be less like the Nixons and Kozlowskis of the world and more like the Lincolns and Kings. What this approach misses, however, is the fact that villainous and heroic leaders have something in common, and the commonality proves to be more important for everyday leadership ethics than any differences between them. The commonality is that both villainous and heroic leaders sometimes have to break – or, at least, *think* they have to break – the rules to achieve their ends. We readily acknowledge this fact about villainous leaders. Watergate, which exposed the political “dirty tricks” of the Nixon administration, now serves as a paradigm of bad leadership. Tyco’s Kozlowski, once the poster child for corporate immorality, allegedly misused Tyco money to support a very lavish lifestyle – including, among other things, a million-dollar birthday party for his wife.

However, the heroic Lincoln broke the rules as well – for example, suspending habeas corpus during the Civil War. Other presidents have similarly used wartime as a pretext for breaking the rules.³ Historians generally agree that Franklin Roosevelt systematically deceived the American public in order to lead the country into World War II, yet Roosevelt’s role in this war remains a central part of the story of his heroism. Finally, rule breaking constituted a critical piece of King’s heroic leadership in the civil rights movement. To achieve the ends of equality, King advocated breaking not only the unjust law

² In an introductory section called “Of Heroes and Villains,” Craig Johnson suggests that we should focus less on the heroes of leadership and more on the villains of leadership (Craig E. Johnson, *Meeting the Ethical Challenges of Leadership: Casting Light or Shadow* [Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2001], 3–5). For other views of leadership ethics that work from examples of either villainous or heroic leadership, see James MacGregor Burns, *Leadership* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1978); Bernard M. Bass and Paul Steidlmeier, “Ethics, Character, and Authentic Transformational Leadership Behavior,” *Leadership Quarterly* 10 (1999): 181–217; James MacGregor Burns, *Transforming Leadership: A New Pursuit of Happiness* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2003); Barbara Kellerman, *Bad Leadership: What It Is, How It Happens, Why It Matters* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2004); and Jean Lipman-Blumen, *The Allure of Toxic Leaders: Why We Follow Destructive Bosses and Corrupt Politicians – and How We Can Survive Them* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

³ It may be too soon to tell whether George W. Bush has done so in his war on terrorism and, if he did, whether this makes him a hero or a villain.

but also the law that was “just on its face and unjust in its application.”⁴

Part of the appeal of thinking about leadership in terms of villains and heroes is its simplicity. Whereas villains use their leadership positions to feed desires for excessive power and luxury, heroes exercise leadership to achieve group ends and, sometimes, the ends of society more broadly.⁵ The simplicity of this approach can find its way into our thinking about everyday leadership. Given the nature of the wrongs committed by villainous leaders, it is quite easy for everyday leaders to distance themselves from their own immorality.

Equally problematic is the ease with which everyday leaders identify with heroic leaders. After all, everyday leaders – like heroic leaders – are typically committed to the importance of the group ends they seek to achieve. As a result of what seems to be a straightforward distinction between villainous and heroic leadership, the ethics of everyday leadership can also seem straightforward. An everyday leader can rationalize this way: “Unlike the behavior exhibited by villainous leaders, my rule-breaking behavior is part of a long tradition of heroic leadership.”

There are thus two general risks of thinking about everyday leadership ethics in terms of the sharp line often drawn between villainous and heroic leadership. On the one hand, working from examples of villainous leadership demands too little of the student of leadership ethics. For instance, inordinate attention in business school classes to the Kozlowskis of the world may lead students to see the daily behavior of many leaders as morally acceptable because it does not cross the line that leaders such as Kozlowski crossed. By focusing on wrongs that are rare in everyday leadership, villainous leadership turns our attention away from other, more common ethical failures in leadership.⁶ On the other hand, the risk of working from examples of heroic

⁴ King, “Letter from Birmingham City Jail,” in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.* ed. James Melvin Washington (San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, 1986), 294.

⁵ See Bass and Steidlmeier, “Ethics, Character, and Authentic Transformational Leadership Behavior.” For a critique of this view, see Terry L. Price, “The Ethics of Authentic Transformational Leadership,” *Leadership Quarterly* 14 (2003): 67–81.

⁶ One implication of using villainous leadership as a pedagogical tool in applied ethics is a preoccupation with the incentive structures necessary to get people to behave morally. This preoccupation is evident in business school classes that mistake business law for business ethics. The law sets only a bare minimum that we can expect of people, promising extrinsic costs for people who do not live up to it.

leadership is that students of leadership will model their behavior on these exemplars, even though everyday leaders do not face relevantly similar crises.

When we put these two points together, it turns out that avoiding the moral failures of very bad leaders is not sufficient for ethical leadership in everyday life, and making the hard choices that some good leaders have had to make may not be necessary for it. The subject of everyday leadership ethics falls somewhere between the moral problems of the villain and the hero.

THE MORAL PSYCHOLOGY OF LEADERSHIP

If the immorality of everyday leaders is hardly so grievous, and the moral demands on them hardly so grand, what then do these leaders have in common with villainous and heroic leaders? This book assumes that what is common to all leaders is the *moral psychology of leadership*. A central component of the moral psychology of leadership is a belief about justification – namely, that leaders are sometimes justified in doing what others are not allowed to do. As we have seen, even the leaders we hold in the highest esteem sometimes break the rules in the service of group ends. Still, not even heroic leaders have a moral license to break whatever rules they want to break. They must be able to justify their behavior.

Leadership ethics thus brings with it a distinctive demand for justification. If ethical leadership is consistent with rule breaking, then there must be a convincing reason or set of reasons for leaders to behave in ways that are proscribed for the rest of us. This makes the ethics of everyday leadership particularly complicated. Everyday leaders are engaged in a social activity closely associated with assumptions about rule breaking; however, when such leaders act on these assumptions, their behavior rarely falls neatly into categories of “villainous” and “heroic.” The student of everyday leadership ethics therefore has the much more difficult task of sorting and weighing different claims of justification.

What reasons might everyday leaders use to justify their behavior? In the chapters to follow, I consider several lines of justification, most of which are variations on the reasons any person might give for breaking rules that apply more generally to others. The morally relevant difference is that leaders who appeal to these reasons seem to be in a

relatively better position to build a special case for their rule-breaking behavior. Consider, for example, the leader who lies to followers. What might the response be to questions about why the leader behaved this way? Some plausible responses include the following: the leader did it . . .

- because he has his own morality.
- because she does not care about morality.
- because he could.
- because she is special.
- because we said he could.
- because she had to.
- because he has special obligations to his group.
- because it was for a higher cause.

Again, any of these responses could be similarly applied by one of the rest of us in an attempt to justify our own behavior. What distinguishes an appeal to these reasons in the leadership context, however, is that the rule breaker's standing as a leader generally gives (at least the impression of) greater substance to the justification. More so than the rest of us, leaders may well be in a position to develop a convincing argument based on one or more of these reasons.

First, the defense of the leader who acts as he does "because he has his own morality" points to the fact that leadership seems to function with its own set of norms. One team of leadership consultants conveys this idea on its website gutsyleaders.com by selling T-shirts with the logo "We Ain't No . . . Face Savin', Excuse Makin', Rule Followin', Fun Squelchin', Permission Seekin', Status Quo Protectin' Clock Punchers." A more sophisticated way to make this point is to say that leadership is *normatively differentiating*. Different norms for leaders and followers evolve out of the process of leader emergence within groups.⁷ In virtue of this feature of leadership, we might say that leaders have their own code of ethics.

As we will see, normative differentiation is driven by another commonly accepted feature of leadership – namely, that leadership is *instrumentalist*. Leadership aims to achieve something considered to be valuable and worth achieving, and the success of leaders depends to

⁷ See E. P. Hollander, *Leaders, Groups, and Influence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).

a large extent on actual achievement of these ends.⁸ Accordingly, leaders attribute significant priority to their goals, and the value of their goals can compete with morality. We should not be surprised, then, if a leader sometimes acts as she does “because she does not care about morality.” This possibility leaves us with an important moral question. Can morality rein in the behavior of everyday leaders if it fails to generate reasons for people who do not care – or do not care *enough* – about morality? Put another way, does the strong commitment of everyday leaders to their ends justify their acting against morality’s demands?

A second set of reasons from the list of potential justifications focuses on the resources that leaders have at their disposal or – at least – that others have only to a lesser extent. Leadership is *power conferring*. Because leadership is a relationship of influence between people, leaders are able to exercise power over others in ways that make it possible for leaders to get away with doing what others cannot do. So, when a leader uses his power to break a rule that applies to the rest of us, there may be some truth to the claim that he did it “because he could.” For example, President Bill Clinton famously said of his affair with Monica Lewinsky that he did it “just because [he] could.”⁹

There is also a respectable intellectual tradition committed to the idea that leaders are endowed with personal qualities that make them different from followers. According to this way of thinking about leadership, leaders acquire and maintain their positions because of characteristics that contribute to effectiveness. This view thus holds that leadership *depends on traits*. If the trait view of leadership is correct, then we may be able to say that the leader – unlike the rest of us – acts as she does “because she is special.” For this justification to work, it would have to show both that the trait view is correct in its claims that there are actual differences between leaders and followers and that these differences are relevant to moral evaluation.

A third set of reasons from the list of potential justifications looks to notions such as consent and necessity. These notions play important roles in common understandings of justification. For example, a boxer has no legitimate moral complaint against the opponent who breaks his nose with a fairly laid punch. Nor can the boxer make a moral

⁸ See, for example, Burns, *Leadership*, 22.

⁹ Howard Kurtz, “Bill Clinton’s very personal reflections: In ‘60 Minutes’ interview, ex-president calls affair ‘terrible moral error,’” *Washington Post* (June 17, 2004).

charge against the doctor who causes him some degree of pain in an effort to treat the broken nose. In this case, we say that any “harm” done to the boxer is justified by either consent or necessity. Similarly, one might suggest that consent and necessity justify rule-breaking behavior by leaders. As leadership is to some extent *consensual*, this justification holds that followers can hardly complain when their leader does what he can to achieve the ends to which he has consistently pledged commitment. Ultimately, the leader acts as he does “because we said he could.”

A leader can also believe that the goals of the group are so important that, as Michael Walzer puts it, he must do “within rational limits whatever is necessary” to achieve them.¹⁰ Here, we should notice that even everyday leaders appeal to necessity for justification. For instance, after learning that a supervisor in Chesterfield County, Virginia, had been arrested, another county official spent more than \$18,000 to charter a jet to return from a vacation. The official and his champions defended his behavior this way:

“My judgment was I needed to get back there immediately, to use whatever resources I could to get back . . . [I]f you consider the circumstances – we had just had our board chairman arrested and had no idea what was going on, and I need to get back to the county.”

“You had a crisis in the county and the man had to get back to be the administrator and be in control. You can’t do that from far away.”

“It was a unique situation, the first time that anybody had been in this predicament before.”¹¹

In this situation and others like it, defenders of a leader’s behavior say that leadership must be *responsive to necessity*. Advancing group goals in the face of necessity sometimes requires a leader to do what the rest of us cannot do. When she does it, we say that she did it “because she had to.”

A fourth and final set of reasons from the list of potential justifications moves away from the claim that rule breaking is justified by

¹⁰ Michael Walzer, “Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 2 (1973): 165.

¹¹ Julian Walker, “Chesterfield official paid \$18,000 for flight,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch* (February 21, 2006).

the importance of a particular group's goals. We can admit that the goals of any particular group do not stand out as sufficiently special – and, so, cannot alone justify rule breaking – without denying that a leader ought nevertheless to do what he can to achieve the group's goals. According to this view, leadership is necessarily *partial*. Leaders are expected to put the goals of their group, organization, or society ahead of the goals of others. But this is not because group ends somehow lend themselves to validation by disinterested third parties. Rather the importance of a leader's ends is grounded in the moral relationship between the leader and his group. Because he is the leader of this collective body rather than some different group of people, some say that he ought to do what he can to achieve his group's goals and not the goals of others. The justificatory version of this claim implies that the leader sometimes has to break the rules “because he has special obligations to his group.”

An opposing view of leadership suggests that we should adopt a more inclusive understanding of what constitutes the group as a whole. We are all members of particular groups – for example, families, churches, corporations, civic associations, and countries. But we are also members of humanity or the global society. According to this view, leadership must be significantly *impartial*. Impartiality also makes room for the argument that rule breaking can be justified. Leaders can have a justification for rule-breaking behavior when the exception serves society at large or the common good, not the partisan interests of their particular groups. In these cases, we might be inclined to say that the leader did what she did “because it was for a higher cause.”

THE PLAN OF THE BOOK

The reasons just described are simply *potential* justifications for rule breaking. All of them may fail to provide *actual* justifications for rule-breaking behavior by everyday leaders. Determining whether they constitute successful justifications is the primary task of this book. To carry out this task, I devote a chapter to each potential justification. Each potential justification also links up with a particular moral theory.

Part I, “Leader-Centric Approaches,” focuses on moral theories that give particular weight to the beliefs, desires, ends, and characteristics of leaders. Chapter 1 uses the theory of *moral relativism* to articulate

the leader's belief that he is justified in his behavior "because he has his own morality." Moral relativism captures the idea that a leader's rule-breaking behavior might be justified by his own moral beliefs or those of his society.

Chapter 2 investigates whether *amoralism* characterizes the moral psychology of the everyday leader. The amoral leader breaks the rules "because she does not care about morality." Amoralism comes up as a response to the claim that the demands of morality are categorical in nature. The primary historical advocate of the categorical nature of moral demands is Immanuel Kant, who holds that morality applies to individuals independently of their particular desires and ends.¹² This chapter's discussion of Kantian ethics and the moral psychology of everyday ethical failure serves as the theoretical foundation for the remainder of the book. Kantian ethics also plays a prominent role in Chapter 7, and in Chapter 9, which serves as the conclusion of the book.

Chapter 3 takes up the argument that leaders should conform their behavior to the demands of *egoism*. This view privileges the desires and ends of the everyday leader, essentially encouraging him to use his power as a leader to break the rules "because he can."

Chapter 4 considers the moral theory most closely identified with the idea that a leader acts as she does "because she is special" – namely, *virtue ethics*. According to this view, because morality is more about *being* than *doing*, a person can be virtuous without an unyielding commitment to the moral rules. Indeed, morality may require rule breaking.

Part II, "Group-Centric Approaches," gives greater attention to the ways in which a leader's moral psychology is shaped by the collective nature of leadership. Chapter 5 appeals to *contractarianism* to examine the idea that a leader sometimes breaks the rules "because we said he could." Because this moral theory sees consent as central to justification, it proves to be a particularly good candidate for thinking about the ethical relationship between leaders and followers in the organizations and institutions that comprise modern, democratic society.

Chapter 6 evaluates the everyday leader's claim that she broke the rules "because she had to." In so doing, it exposes beliefs leaders have

¹² Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. H. J. Paton (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1964).

about the objective importance of group goals. These beliefs support the *moral situationism* that sometimes characterizes leadership behavior. If everyday leadership cannot sustain the relevant attributions of importance to group goals, we must reject moral situationism.

Chapter 7 examines an alternative to the idea that the ends of a leader's group are special because of their objective importance. *Communitarianism* makes sense of the leader's claim that he broke the rules "because he has special obligations to his group." Drawing on this moral theory, we can see a leader's commitment to group ends as being justified by reasons that are internal to the community of which he is the leader.

Chapter 8 revives the argument that a leader's ends can be justified by reasons that apply to rational actors more broadly. *Cosmopolitanism* refers to a cluster of moral theories that denies that groups – for example, nation-states – can justifiably privilege their own particular ends. It replaces these particular ends with more general ends such as the welfare of humanity. In so doing, cosmopolitan moral theory serves as perhaps the best way to understand the claims of a leader who says she broke the rules "because it was for a higher cause."

In coverage, then, the book constitutes an introduction to the moral theories that are relevant to everyday leadership ethics. But there are three main respects in which this book is different from other introductory texts in applied moral philosophy. First, the discussion of the moral theories covered in the book is motivated by the central problem of this applied context. The rule-breaking behavior associated with leadership cries out for justification, so moral theory is needed to determine the appropriate response. In other words, the moral theories come up as answers to a particular question, which is different from their being introduced and then *applied* to the list of moral problems that leaders face.

Second, the book defends a particular answer to the basic question it raises. My analysis of the potential justifications for rule breaking relies heavily on the Kantian view of morality introduced in Chapter 2, and I conclude in Chapter 9 that everyday leaders are not justified in breaking the rules. So the text is not neutral in the way that some introductions simply acquaint the reader with different ways of thinking about ethics, ultimately leaving all conclusions up for grabs. It is rather a *guided* introduction to leadership ethics.