Introduction

I. THE MAIN ARGUMENT

This book articulates the intuition behind the charge that leaders think that they are special, that ordinary rules do not apply to them, and that followers should be expected to do as the leader says, not as the leader does. My central thesis is that ethical failures in leadership are fundamentally cognitive, not volitional. In arguing for this thesis, I reject the standard view that leaders behave unethically simply because they are selfish. Leader immorality is more a matter of belief and knowledge than a matter of desire and will. As such, the unethical behavior of leaders cannot be fully understood in terms of self-interest and the choices leaders make to put self-interest ahead of what they know to be the requirements of morality. So, for example, leadership ethics is not just about adjudicating between the interests of leaders and followers. An account of ethical failures in leadership must assign a primary role to mistaken moral beliefs.

The argument for the cognitive account of ethical failures in leadership appeals directly to the beliefs leaders hold about the importance of their ends. Of course, we all believe that our ends are important; otherwise we would not have them as ends. Leaders are no different in this respect, but the collective nature of the ends to which leaders are committed gives added justification to these ends. This is what makes leadership ethics distinctive. Leaders can believe, based on the importance of the collective ends they seek to achieve, that they are justified in making exceptions of themselves and in excluding others from the protections of morality. On the account offered in this book, ethical failure is a straightforward consequence of the

way we think about leadership and the way leaders think about themselves.[1]

It might be expected that a book on ethical failures in leadership would begin with a moral theory to work from. Relying on an explicit statement of the requirements of morality, I could then infer what constitutes an ethical failure in leadership, thereby putting myself in a position to discern its causes. It is not my aim, however, to offer a direct specification of moral leadership, let alone to begin with one. In fact, this book is better characterized as an analysis of the challenges to determining what morality demands of leaders, especially as this determination is made from the distinctive perspective of leaders. If I am right, such cognitive challenges to morality preclude any kind of foundationalist analysis of ethical failures in leadership. Ultimately, the book seeks to address the question of how leaders ought to act given that they do not always know what morality requires of them. To this end, I offer practical normative responses to the fact that justification is not always transparent to leaders.[2] Leaders should, among other responses, restrict the exceptions they make of themselves to the pursuit of inclusive ends, and publicize their reasons for deviating from the requirements of morality.

In the chapters that follow, I show why, given the nature of leadership itself, leaders are especially likely to face cognitive challenges to ethical behavior. For now, it is enough to point out that leadership is not only goal oriented but privileges the goals of the parties to the relationship. In other words, leadership is characterized by both consequentialism and partiality. Accordingly, it encourages preoccupation with collective ends, sometimes to the neglect of other important moral considerations.

[1] My approach is consistent with that of Howard Gardner, who writes, "Our understanding of the nature and processes of leadership is most likely to be enhanced as we come to understand better the arena in which leadership necessarily occurs – namely, the *human mind*. Perhaps this characterization should be pluralized as *human minds*, since I am concerned equally with the mind of the leader and the minds of the followers . . . By focusing on the mind and invoking the word *cognitive*, I make deliberate contact with an approach to the study of mind that has developed rapidly in the last few decades. In contrast to the behaviorists, who have focused only on overt actions, and the psychoanalysts, whose interest has been directed chiefly at personality and motivation, cognitive psychologists examine how ideas (or thoughts or images or mental representations) develop and how they are stored, accessed, combined, remembered, and (all too often) rearranged or distorted by the operations of the human mental apparatus" (*Leading Minds: An Anatomy of Leadership* [New York: BasicBooks, 1995], pp. 15–16).

[2] See Allen E. Buchanan, "Social Moral Epistemology," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 19 (2002): 126–152.

First among these considerations is that there are ethical constraints on the means used to achieve group, organizational, or societal goals, even when goal achievement is in the interests of followers.[3] Second, there are other parties in the moral universe besides those individuals in the leader-follower relationship. So, even if it is true that leaders should always put their interests second to the interests of followers, we cannot conclude that so doing is sufficient for ethical success in leadership. Given these two considerations, volitional pressures on leaders to privilege self-interest are a much smaller part of the story than cognitive pressures on leaders to put the interests of the group ahead of the interests of individual followers and the interests of outsiders.

II. THE "HITLER PROBLEM"

One approach to ethics in leadership has been to use normative considerations to delimit the subject matter itself. On this approach, since leadership is moral by definition, unethical behavior by those in power must be something other than leadership. The temptation to resort to definitions has been particularly strong in leadership studies, in part because of basic epistemological commitments that characterize standard social scientific research in this field.[4] But the definitional approach to ethics in leadership goes back at least to Plato, who argues that "every kind of rule, insofar as it rules, doesn't seek anything other than what is best for the things it rules and cares for, and this is true both of public and private kinds of rule."[5] Plato's view that *true* leadership is concerned with the good of the led, not the good of the leader himself, finds twentieth-century expression in the work of James MacGregor

[3] For example, adherents of Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy would hardly be impressed by deception and manipulation by a leader whose goal was to advance the interests of followers. Though this kind of behavior can be perfectly altruistic, it can nevertheless fail to show morally appropriate respect for follower agency. In other words, the claim that a leader's deceptive and manipulative behavior was for the good of followers does not answer the charge that he did not engage properly their rational agency.

[4] Given the empiricist assumption that, as David Hume puts it, all knowledge is about "relations of ideas" or "existence and matter of fact," ethics quickly becomes a matter of definition for social scientists (*A Treatise of Human Nature*, 2nd edition, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978], p. 458). After all, no amount of empirical data will give us the ethical facts, as opposed to people's ethical perceptions.

[5] Plato, *Republic*, trans. G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1992), p. 21 [345d–e].

Burns, who goes so far as to deny that Adolf Hitler was a leader because "[l]eadership, unlike naked power-wielding, is . . . inseparable from followers' needs and goals," and Hitler was "an absolute wielder of brutal power."[6]

Must leadership be ethical to be leadership at all? This question is important to consider at the beginning of a book on understanding ethical failures in leadership. If the definitional approach to leadership is defensible, then there would seem to be no ethical failures in *leadership* for us to understand! I think we can admit that normative considerations help to mark off the domain of inquiry in leadership studies without undermining the book's purpose. Consider, for instance, that completely coercive relationships hardly count as leadership. Because the behavior of coerced agents is involuntary, the relationship between the coercer and the coerced is closer to the relationship between master and slave than that between leader and follower. Still, there is a large gap in reasoning between recognition of this conceptual point and the conclusion that behavior that deviates from morality is not leadership at all. Even if we assume that the relationship of leadership implies minimal agency on the part of followers, it would not follow that leadership always shows sufficient respect for the agency of followers or, for that matter, their well-being. Nor would it follow that leadership always puts the agency of followers to work in the service of ethical ends. Accordingly, we are left with many important moral problems that cannot be easily assumed away.

Joanne Ciulla contends that definitional approaches to leadership conceal particular normative commitments regarding the nature of the relationship between leaders and followers.[7] In effect, the definitions are misguided attempts to specify what constitutes good leadership, where *good* means both "morally good and technically good or effective."[8] This

[6] James MacGregor Burns, *Leadership* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1978), pp. 19, 27.

[7] This paragraph and the one that follows it draw from Terry L. Price, "Ethics," in George R. Goethals, Georgia Sorenson, James MacGregor Burns, eds., *Encyclopedia of Leadership* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2004), pp. 462–470, copyright © 2004 Berkshire Publishing Group. Reprinted with permission of Berkshire Publishing Group.

[8] Joanne B. Ciulla, "Leadership Ethics: Mapping the Territory," in Joanne B. Ciulla, ed., *Ethics, the Heart of Leadership* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998), p. 13. See also James O'Toole, *Leading Change: The Argument for Values-Based Leadership* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996); and John W. Gardner, *On Leadership* (New York: Free Press, 1990), ch. 7. O'Toole writes, "But that necessary factor of effectiveness turns out to be

distinction helps us understand what Ciulla calls the "Hitler problem."[9] Burns and others who contend that Hitler was not a leader exploit the ambiguity in the question of whether he was a *good* leader. Since Hitler was at most technically good or effective, he can have been a good leader in only one sense of the term. Understanding the Hitler problem is therefore a prerequisite to beginning work in leadership ethics. Articulating particular normative commitments about leadership is the real task ethicists have faced all along. Simply calling some individuals *leaders* and others by a different name does not get around the fact that people in power sometimes engage in unethical behavior. Regardless of what we call these people, we want to be able to understand their behavior and help them to avoid it.

Commentators who make their normative commitments explicit by offering recommendations for how leaders ought to behave most often identify morally good leadership with what the definitional approach holds is necessary for leadership itself – namely, concern for the good of followers. It is on these grounds that thinkers from Aristotle to Machiavelli separate good and bad rule.[10] Contemporary observers of leadership have been no less inclined to make the opposition between concern for self and concern for others the defining distinction in

insufficient . . . The values-based leadership advocated in these pages is different, therefore, from the prevailing modes in that its calculus includes the factors of *morality*"(p. xii).

[9] Ciulla, "Mapping the Territory," p. 12. According to John Gardner, "We say that we want effective leadership; but Hitler was effective. Criteria beyond effectiveness are needed" (*On Leadership*, p. 67).

[10] Aristotle distinguishes correct from deviated constitutions, claiming that "[w]henever the one, the few, or the many rule with a view to the common good, these constitutions must be correct; but if they look to the private advantage, be it of the one or the few or the mass, they are deviations" (*The Politics*, trans. T. A. Sinclair [New York: Penguin Books, 1981], pp. 189–190 [1279a28–1279a30]). Aquinas, appealing to God's exhortation in Ezekiel 34:2, "Woe to the shepherds of Israel who have fed themselves," similarly makes concern for the good of followers both sufficient and necessary for good leadership: "[I]f a ruler should direct a community of free persons for the common good of the people, there will be a right and just regime, as befits free persons. And if the governance of a ruler be ordained for the private good of the ruler and not for the common good of the people, there will be an unjust and wicked regime" (*On Kingship, To the King of Cyprus*, in Michael L. Morgan, ed., *Classics of Moral and Political Theory*, 3rd edition [Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2001], p. 398). Even Machiavelli, who is known for the amoralism of *The Prince*, defends a historical cycling between good and bad leadership in his *Discourses*, with the former being characterized by leaders who "[put] their own interests second and the public good first" (*The Prince*, eds. Quentin Skinner and Russell Price

leadership ethics.[11] This commitment to a volitional understanding of ethical failures in leadership makes for a sharp contrast with the cognitive account. Although it is not my aim to offer a direct specification of what morality requires of leaders, my argument for the cognitive account of ethical failures in leadership directly challenges the ascendancy of the view that it is enough that leaders forgo the claims of self-interest so that they might serve group, organizational, or societal goals. Service to these goals can promote mistaken beliefs by leaders that they are justified in making exceptions of themselves and in excluding others from the protection of morality's requirements. In these cases, their ethical failures are primarily cognitive, not volitional, in nature.

III. THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

Chapter 1 introduces the cognitive account of ethical failures in leadership as a viable alternative to the volitional account, and identifies what I argue is the conceptual source of the cognitive limitations to which leaders are particularly susceptible. I suggest that ready acceptance of the volitional account of ethical failure misses an important distinction

[Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988]; and *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titius Livius*, in Michael L.Morgan, ed., *Classics of Moral and Political Theory*, 3rd edition [Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2001], p. 472.)

[11] Robert K. Greenleaf recommends a form of leadership on which the leader "*is* servant first . . . That person is sharply different from one who is *leader* first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions" (*Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* [New York: Paulist Press, 1977] p. 13). Jane Howell and Bruce Avolio come to this same conclusion about the ethical use of power by way of an appeal to David McClelland's distinction between *personalized* and *socialized* power motives, suggesting that leaders should be motivated by a concern for the common good. (See Jane M. Howell and Bruce J. Avolio, "The Ethics of Charismatic Leadership: Submission or Liberation?" *Academy of Management Executive* 6, 2 [1992]: 43–54; and David C. McClelland, *Human Motivation* [Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1985].) Indeed, some leadership scholars believe that altruism makes a leader's behavior both ethical and effective and thus that the Hitler problem is not so problematic after all. According to Rabindra N. Kanungo and Manuel Mendonca, "Because the 'other' – that is, the organization and its members – is the raison d'être of the leader's efforts, the altruistic motive becomes the only consistent motive for the leader's role" (*Ethical Dimensions of Leadership* [Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1996], p. 35). On this view, "[L]eadership effectiveness is ensured only by altruistic acts that reflect the leader's incessant desire and concern to benefit others despite the risk of personal cost inherent in such acts" (Kanungo and Mendonca, *Ethical Dimensions of Leadership*, p. 35).

between two different kinds of moral mistakes. Although mistakes about the *content* of morality are certainly important in their own right, mistakes about the *scope* of moral requirements lend themselves better to an understanding of ethical failures in leadership. Given this distinction, a leader can know that a particular behavior is generally required by morality and, nevertheless, be mistaken as to whether the relevant requirement applies to him and as to whether particular individuals merit the protection of this requirement. Second, I contend that these mistaken beliefs about the scope of morality are bound up with the way we think about leadership and, specifically, its normative force. My main contention is that a conceptual link between leadership and the notion of *justification* structures the moral psychology of leaders, often with ethical failure as a result. If this contention is correct, then it should come as no surprise to us that leaders sometimes mistakenly think they are justified in making exceptions of themselves and excluding others from the protections of morality.

Chapter 2 provides an analysis of the notion of exception making. In so doing, it defends the normative framework to which I appeal in the remainder of the book. The most important claim this chapter makes is that commonplace volitional understandings of the exceptions leaders make of themselves must draw on fundamentally cognitive impediments to moral behavior, not only on factual mistakes, but also on moral mistakes. Because desires and commitments are closely connected to beliefs about value,[12] immoral behavior that serves desires and commitments can normally be attributed to mistaken beliefs about the relative importance of doing what morality requires. I argue that mistaken beliefs of this kind are necessary for an explanation of the behavior of leaders who believe that they can get away with violating what they take to be the requirements of morality. In these cases, the fact that they do not expect significant costs to be associated with their behavior means that they do not believe that it falls under a binding moral prohibition in their particular circumstances.

Why would leaders mistakenly believe they are justified in making exceptions of themselves? In answering this question, Chapter 3 examines three general ways of thinking about effective leadership: trait approaches, situational approaches, and transactional approaches. I argue that each of these approaches embodies an understanding

[12] Joseph Raz, *Engaging Reason: On the Theory of Value and Action* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), ch. 3.

of leadership that can promote the kind of exception making that characterizes ethical failures in leadership. By isolating potentially justifying features of leadership behavior, these most basic ways of understanding what makes leaders effective give rise to mistaken beliefs about the scope of morality. On this argument, then, there is something unique about the cognitive conditions under which leaders act, even though the details of these conditions vary according to different approaches to leadership. As a consequence, leaders might well be more inclined than the rest of us to think about their behavior in ways that purportedly ground deviations from generally applicable moral requirements. Whether leaders understand their behavior as being distinctive by virtue of personal characteristics, the extraordinary situations they face, or the special norms to which they are subject, they can appeal to these potentially justifying features to ground the exceptions they make of themselves.

Chapter 4 considers the claim that leaders might be justified in deviating from the requirements of morality, that there is something to be said for the justificatory force of leadership after all. I look specifically at what we might call the *reconciliation view*, which holds that the exceptions leaders make of themselves are compatible with actual moral demands on leadership behavior. Those who promote reconciliation between exception making by leaders and the actual demands of morality point to the variable authority of moral requirements to argue that, in some circumstances, these requirements fail to apply to the behavior of leaders, or else that they apply with insignificant normative force. I also take up what we might call the *realist view*, which holds that these exceptions ultimately need not be reconciled – possibly because they cannot be reconciled – with the demands of morality. According to advocates of the realist view, there is a weaker, but equally important, sense in which it is meaningful to say that leaders can be justified in doing what is morally wrong. In this chapter, I first show why the reconciliation view is an incomplete normative response to the moral fallibility of leaders, even if we assume that leaders are sometimes justified in making exceptions of themselves. Second, I argue that since leaders cannot know whether they are in genuine "dirty hands" cases, they can hardly appeal to the realist view for limited justification of the exceptions they make of themselves. Both of these arguments generate epistemic reasons for leaders to adhere to generally applicable moral requirements.

Chapter 5 defends my account of ethical failures in leadership by way of a critique of Bernard Bass and Paul Steidlmeier's theory of authentic transformational leadership.[13] The theory of authentic transformational leadership builds on Bass's earlier work and on Burns's conception of *transforming leadership*, the most influential normative conception of leadership in the literature.[14] My analysis of this theory challenges the assumption that we need only worry about the ethics of transformational leadership when self-interest competes with what a leader knows he morally ought to do. As with all theories that lean heavily on the volitional account of ethical failure, the theory of transformational leadership underestimates the complexity of the moral psychology of leaders. Even transformational leaders can come to believe that they are justified in violating generally applicable moral requirements. Such leaders fail to do what they should do, not because of self-interest, but because they think that these requirements are overridden by the other-regarding values to which they are committed. It follows that transformational leadership can be morally troublesome regardless of whether leaders who exercise it are true to the altruistic motives that Bass and Steidlmeier put forward as characterizing authenticity.

Chapter 6 lays out the normative responses to the cognitive challenges of leadership. Since there are moral costs associated with failing to make exceptions for leaders when these exceptions really are justified, the central ethical problem of leadership is ultimately one of action in the face of moral fallibility. One important question raised by this characterization of leadership ethics is whether we can still hold leaders responsible in cases in which they unjustifiably make exceptions of themselves. If the problems they face really are rooted in unavoidable challenges of cognition, as opposed to avoidable challenges of volition, how then can we fault them when they get things wrong? In this chapter, I argue that leaders can be held responsible for the ways in which they come to terms with their moral fallibility. I claim that the appropriate normative responses, which take the form of behavioral checks on the exceptions leaders make of themselves, are justified on epistemic grounds.

[13] Bernard M. Bass and Paul Steidlmeier, "Ethics, Character, and Authentic Transformational Leadership Behavior," *Leadership Quarterly* 10 (1999): 181–217.
[14] See Bernard M. Bass, *Leadership and Performance Beyond Expectations* (New York: Free Press, 1985); and Burns, *Leadership*.

Chapter 7 addresses larger issues about moral membership. I argue that recognizing central features of our historical immorality has important implications for how leaders should think about some of the most important moral problems we currently face. My reasoning is that contemporary leaders have something that past leaders lacked. They have a robust awareness of their own fallibility as moral agents and a good sense of the specific inclinations behind immoral social practices. Historically, the limits of moral evaluation get played out in our social practices against the backdrop of a remarkable tendency to deny and underestimate the position of individuals at the margins of moral community. Morality ultimately requires, then, that our leaders draw upon normative prescriptions that accommodate, rather than lament, their epistemic limitations, and that they do so in anticipation of judgments of responsibility from future generations. In effect, recognizing their own epistemic limitations makes them more responsible for our current practices, not less. With this consideration in mind, I contend that there are good epistemic reasons for contemporary leaders to adopt a principle of inclusiveness at the margins of moral community, even though this principle is in direct conflict with many of our most common presuppositions about the nature of leadership.

Although this book is primarily an exercise in applied philosophical ethics, it is designed to be readable across disciplines. My hope is that it will be of interest to philosophers working in applied and theoretical ethics, to social scientists doing leadership research, and to instructors teaching in business schools and in leadership programs. Still, some chapters give more attention to disciplinary "conversations" than do others. For example, the first half of Chapter 2 focuses on more general philosophical questions about the nature of immorality. Accordingly, readers from fields such as leadership studies may want to move directly from Chapter 1 to Section IV of Chapter 2. The arguments developed in Chapters 3, 4, and 5, which take up familiar leadership theories, should be particularly accessible to these readers. Another consideration of readability is that I have chosen to use masculine pronouns for leaders throughout the book, unless – of course – feminine pronouns are required by context. This is not to imply that women cannot be leaders or that they are not susceptible to ethical failures in leadership. In fact, Chapter 1 highlights one such case of ethical failure, and Chapter 6 addresses the role of gender in its discussion of transformational leadership. However, given that a greater number of ethical failures in