How (Not) To Answer the Question, “What Should a Leader Do?”

A manager notices that his best sales representative makes sexist remarks to female coworkers. A CEO discovers a manufacturing defect that could potentially harm customers, but the defect would be prohibitively expensive to correct. A state senator receives campaign contributions from a business that has also submitted a bid for a government contract. A furniture company moves its factory to a rural area where it destroys the environment but also creates jobs and raises the standard of living for local residents. A president decides to go to war.

Leaders face unique ethical challenges because they wield influence and occupy positions of authority, so their decisions have broader ramifications than most people's everyday choices. It is the task of leadership ethics to make some progress at figuring out what a person should do in these situations. How should we proceed?

Within leadership studies, there are many scholars who address these questions by describing particular leaders who behaved ethically or unethically. Some prominent leadership scholars offer an analysis of definitions of the word 'leader' on the theory that knowledge about a paradigmatic leader can tell us how all leaders should behave. In a similar vein, historians describe effective leaders who aligned behind good causes, megalomaniacal tyrants who used coercion and threats to commit atrocities, and bumbling inefficient CEOs who abused their power out of weakness of will. In leadership journals, there is also extensive research by psychologists about the conditions that make people more likely to lie or cheat or coerce someone. The way that unconscious biases, such as racism and sexism, inform our perceptions of leaders is also an important ethical dimension of leadership that social psychologists have thoroughly addressed. Additionally, leadership scholars present surveys of employees and managers about perceptions of a leader's personality and ethical behavior.

These approaches all have tremendous value at answering questions such as, “how have people handled difficult challenges in the past?” or “what conditions are expected to make a leader
lie or cheat” or “does sexism explain the absence of female leaders” or “are charismatic leaders more likely to be perceived as ethical?” However, these approaches do not tell us what a leader should do. Moral reasoning is necessary to answer the question “what should a leader do?” It is striking, then, that moral philosophy remains at the periphery of research that addresses ethics of leadership.

I suspect there are several explanations for the dearth of philosophical argument in research on the ethics of leadership. Social scientists and business scholars have led the field, and moral philosophy is a very different methodological approach from the tools they use. In addition, social scientists in leadership studies may be skeptical that moral philosophy amounts to much more than opinion. Others may be skeptical that moral truths exist that philosophers can uncover. At the same time, moral philosophers, including business ethicists, have not made their case to leadership scholars that a philosophical approach is necessary to settle ethical questions.

My goal in this essay is twofold. First, I aim to make the case that rival approaches to leadership ethics, such as conceptual analysis, case studies, survey research, and lab experiments, cannot tell us what a leader ought to do when he faces a morally difficult circumstance. Second, I hope to show that the question “what should a leader do” can be answered. Though philosophers disagree about the nature of morality, most would agree that there are truths about morality and that we can make progress in learning about them.

It is true that an ethicist’s conclusion is an opinion, but that doesn’t invalidate the value of an ethicist’s considered judgment. A medical recommendation is in some sense only the physician’s opinion, but sick patients nevertheless ought to defer to their physicians. Similarly, an ethical judgment is in this sense a philosopher’s opinion, but epistemically responsible researchers in leadership studies nevertheless ought to take those judgments seriously. Even if one is unconvinced about the value of a philosophical approach, I will also suggest that no other method is better suited to answer moral questions.
1. How Can We Know What a Leader Should Do?

Imagine that you face an ethical dilemma. How would you approach it? You would probably think about the moral considerations in favor of and against each option. You might apply your most closely held ethical commitments to the dilemma by asking what your religion or political ideology can tell you about the question you face. You might talk to friends, clergy, colleagues, or family about your choice. And then, after introspection and reflection, you would choose what to do. You might be wrong. You might later regret your decision. On reflection, you might identify factors you wished you had considered, or look back on your choice with knowledge you could not have had while making it.

What you probably would not do is take a survey. You wouldn’t design an experiment to see how people would act if they were in your shoes. You probably wouldn’t look at your job description in the hope that it will give you some insight about what to do. Surveys, experiments, and definitional analyses are not generally fruitful paths to moral knowledge. We do not teach our children that the right thing to do can be learned by an empirical study of managers in Fortune 500 companies. We do not condemn criminals and cads on the grounds that the best description of their jobs would have required that they acted differently. Why, then, do we so often approach questions about ethical leadership in these ways?

To get a sense of the trends I am identifying, some concrete examples may be helpful. Leadership scholars Michael Brown and Linda Trevino write,

Philosophers have answered the question “what is ethical leadership” from a normative perspective, specifying how leaders “ought” to behave (e.g. Ciulla 2004). By contrast, our social scientific approach to the topic is focused more on describing ethical leadership as well as identifying its antecedents and consequents (Brown and Treviño 2006). Social-scientific approaches to ethical leadership prevail in leadership studies while there is a
significant lack of philosophical approaches. The social-scientific approach defines “ethical leadership” as a construct that is intended to measure whether a person demonstrates normatively appropriate conduct in his actions and relationships, and whether he encourages other people to demonstrate normatively appropriate conduct as well, through his communication and management style (Brown, Treviño, and Harrison 2005).

To that end, these leadership scholars develop instruments such as the Ethical Leadership Scale (ELS) that identify traits that are potentially related to ethical leadership. They then write questionnaires to measure these traits, and interpret the survey results to determine whether people perceive a leader as ethical, and whether having a leader that is perceived as ethical changes how people perceive themselves (e.g. Neubert et al. 2009). Or, leadership scholars seek to identify whether leaders with certain personality traits are perceived as more ethical, and they find unsurprisingly that agreeable and conscientious people score higher on ethical leadership constructs, while neurotic, self-aggrandizing people do not (Rubin, Munz, and Bommer 2005; Bono and Judge 2004). Other surveys study how people’s decision making changes in response to a leadership or subordinate role, or other situational factors (e.g. Stenmark and Mumford 2011).

Often, these social-scientific approaches are justified on the grounds that “organizations want to know how to select, develop, and retain ethical leaders,” and “business schools want to know how best to teach their students to become ethical leaders” (Brown and Treviño 2006). These scholars argue that the constructs and measures they developed can make some progress toward that end. They write, “From a moral standpoint academic researchers have the opportunity to conduct research that can improve the ethical performance of leaders” (Brown and Treviño 2006)

Yet seeming ethical is not the same as being ethical. This approach is seriously misguided, however, insofar as it aims to promote ethical leadership or answer questions about what a leader morally ought to do. Surveys and measures of a whether a leader is perceived as ethical advance our understanding of leaders’ and followers’ psychology, but they do not tell us how a leader can be
more ethical. Rather, they tell us how a leader can be *perceived* as ethical. People may perceive a leader as ethical when he is not. People may mistakenly perceive an ethical leader as unethical. Rather than answering questions about what is ethical, surveys and social scientific constructs assume that we already know what it is for a leader to demonstrate normatively appropriate conduct. They assume that a manager who makes people act with ethics in mind is leading people to the right ends. But a survey cannot tell us whether a leader who is perceived as ethical, or someone who perceives himself as ethical, is in fact on the right track.

A similar critique applies to experimental researchers who tackle ethical questions. For example, the famous Stanford prison experiment found that people are more likely to commit acts of cruelty and violence if they are assigned a leadership role (Haney and Zimbardo 1998). Another famous experiment found that people are more likely to inflict pain on others if an authority figure tells them to (Milgram 1963). In that tradition, leadership scholars have further confirmed that confronting leaders or assuming a leadership role changes how people behave, and may make people behave less ethically (e.g. Harvey and Sims 1979). Computer simulations also highlight the challenges that leaders can face in certain institutional climates and the way that institutions can potentially encourage a cycle of unethical behavior (e.g. Chen 2010).

Another trend in leadership studies is to simply define leadership in a normative way. These leadership scholars seem to think that *if only* we could define leadership in the right way, we would know how a leader should act. For example, James MacGregor Burns contrasts leadership with “naked power wielding” and asserts that true leaders will act within some intuitively ethical constraints (Burns 1998). Similarly, Robert Greenleaf suggests that we can glean normative guidance by learning how he defines a true servant leader (Greenleaf 2002). Other scholars debate the merits of these definitions on normative terms (Stone, Russell, and Patterson 2004). Yet as Joanne Ciulla points out, even if we developed a perfect definition of leadership, that definition wouldn’t tell someone in a position of power what he should do (Ciulla 1995).
Leadership scholars from other disciplines address normative questions as well. Some endeavor simply to describe historical examples and case studies of ethical and unethical leaders. This is a worthwhile project, because there are surely important lessons from history about the challenges that people faced when they tried to do the right thing. And many of the ethical challenges that leaders faced in the past or in different circumstances are surely relevant to today's leaders. Yet, in some cases, leadership scholars invite readers to infer further that we should look to history's great men and women for the answers about what a leader should do (Wills 1995; Gardner et al. 2011). Or, some leadership scholars infer best practices from case studies of unethical leaders, without explaining first why those leaders were unethical (Kellerman 2004; Lipman-Blumen 2006).

Finally, some scholars in the humanities may look to literature and the history of ideas for insight about leadership ethics (Wren 1995). For example, Frank Shushok and Scott Moore suggest looking to Great Texts, such as Macbeth, because through those texts students will learn to answer questions such as “How hard should one try to get the top job?” and can learn practical guidance about the ethics of deception, virtue, and the common good (Shushok and Moore 2010, 77). Historiography and literary analysis might demonstrate how authors and public intellectuals thought about leadership and ethics throughout history. This kind of criticism can also give us a sense of which ethical principles are possible, and can demonstrate the possibility of moral progress over time. But like the survey analyses just described, these approaches explicate perceptions of ethics; they do not settle the question of what leaders ought to do.

My claim is not that these approaches do not have merit for understanding important aspects of ethical leadership. Surveys and personality studies can show us how people perceive leaders and how leaders understand themselves. Understanding how institutions or personalities affect perceptions of ethical behavior can explain ethical failures in leadership, and hopefully contribute to our understanding of how to make leaders more ethical. It is also important to think
about the definition of leadership, if only because so many people attribute normative significance to that term. Similarly, historical investigations into leadership gives us a sense of what is possible, and can alert us to the challenges that leaders might face whether they are ethical or unethical. The history of ideas is also important because it illustrates how people thought about leadership ethics in the past, and can helpfully frame normative debates today.

However, despite their merits, these approaches will fall short insofar as they attempt to explain what a leader (morally) ought to do. The following taxonomy illustrates the way each approach can inform our understanding of ethical leadership:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Method</th>
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<tr>
<td>How do ethical commitments affect an organization’s effectiveness?</td>
<td>An analysis of whether corporate social responsibility hurts profits.</td>
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<tr>
<td>What factors influence perceptions of ethical leadership?</td>
<td>A survey of how managers perceive leaders with different personality traits.</td>
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<tr>
<td>What considerations influence the likelihood of ethical conduct?</td>
<td>An experiment that assesses whether the leadership context affects prosocial behavior.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do our judgments and behavior reflect our ethical commitments?</td>
<td>A resume study that tests whether people think that men are better leaders.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do definitions of the word ‘leader’ rely on normative assessments?</td>
<td>A conceptual analysis of the word ‘leader’ or definitions of that word.</td>
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<tr>
<td>How have leaders handled ethical challenges in the past?</td>
<td>An historical case study of how a leader handled an ethical challenge.</td>
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<tr>
<td>How did historical context inform an author’s understanding of ethical leadership (or not)?</td>
<td>A literary analysis of a fictional leader who makes moral mistakes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What did people used to think about the ethics of leadership?</td>
<td>An analysis of how a philosopher in the past talked about the ethics of leadership.</td>
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<tr>
<td>What should a leader do?</td>
<td>A philosophical analysis of what a leader should do.</td>
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My thesis is that a philosophical approach is the best way to learn what a leader ought to do. Insofar as empirical researchers explicitly aim to advise organizations about how to select and develop ethical leaders, or to tell business schools how to teach people to be ethical, they are on the wrong track when they approach these problems with surveys, experiments, and case studies. If academic leadership scholars aim to conduct research that helps leaders act more ethically, the first
thing they must know is what a leader ought to do. Too often, the answers to the most fundamental question of leadership ethics—what should a leader do—are assumed but unanswered.

Perhaps this is because it is assumed that moral principles are straightforward, as when people assert that leaders should be compassionate, honest, and humble. Or some leadership scholars may suspect that moral principles are unknowable, and thus casually conflate perceptions of ethics with ethics, as if all we can know is what psychology undergraduates and middle managers think about morality. Both beliefs are seriously mistaken. Ironically, unethical leadership is often characterized by these scholars as an indifference to ethics or a reluctance to genuinely deliberate about morality. Yet empirical scholars who assume ethical principles themselves without argument demonstrate the very indifference to morality and lack of reflection that they warn leaders against.

2. An Argument Against Empirical Approaches

So far I have only pointed out that the methods that have heretofore dominated studies of ethical leadership do not answer the question of what a leader should do. One may attempt to defend descriptive and empirical methods on the grounds that morality just is what people perceive it to be. This view faces several serious objections. First, equivocation between perceptions of ethics and the truth about what one should do entrenches our own moral biases. More generally, if moral reasons were the kinds of things that could be uncovered by a survey or a computer simulation, it would imply that moral reasons are very different than we thought. This implication would call into question whether moral reasons should have any authority at all.

This is not to say that moral reasons have no basis in our psychology or our attitudes. Many philosophers will agree that moral reasons depend on attitudes or the nature of human psychology. Nevertheless, not all views about what is moral have equal merit. A survey that measures how members of an organization perceive their leaders, for example, is an especially poor guide to
knowing what a leader ought to do, even if we accept that moral reasons depend on attitudes in some way.

The Ethical Leadership Scale (ELS) is an example of how empirical methods are a poor guide. Imagine a totalitarian society that is founded on a racist, genocidal ideology, such as Nazi Germany. In such a society, people who are included in organizations are likely to subscribe to the dominant ideology of racism and genocide. Members of organizations may also affirm principles like honesty, integrity, and fidelity that are measured by the ELS. If researchers distributed surveys to measure ethical leadership in such a society, they may find that some leaders who were genuinely committed to racism and genocide were deemed ethical leaders because they were honest friends and faithful husbands, and as managers they inspired others to commit to racism and genocide as well.

This thought experiment illustrates that the ELS cannot measure whether a person demonstrates normatively appropriate conduct and encourages others to do the same, as proponents of the construct suggest, because it does not take a stand on what is normatively appropriate. While we would all agree that genocidal racism is not normatively appropriate, in an organization where everyone is committed to genocidal racism the ELS cannot find fault with leaders who promote genocide. Paradoxically, leaders who fail to fully encourage racism and genocide may score lower on an ethical leadership scale in a society where their action deviated from their organization’s moral commitments.

More generally, people’s unreflective views about ethics are influenced by potentially unjustified cognitive biases. For example, people tend to express a preference for the current state of affairs and perceive deviations from the status quo as more morally risky than maintaining the status quo. Evidence of status quo bias is robust, such as research that finds that even when the consequences of two proposals are identical, survey respondents oppose policies that are framed in terms of lives lost rather than lives saved (Bostrom and Ord 2006).
Survey respondents and participants in psychology experiments are also racially biased, which can further compromise their ability to make moral judgments about others (see e.g. Smith and Levinson 2011). Respondents are also more prone to give moral consideration to attractive people, or to members of their ethnic group or nation (Bloom 2014). People are also biased to accept the legitimacy of authority figures—which is especially troubling for researchers who are interested in leadership ethics because the very fact that a person is a leader may systematically distort perceptions of whether the leader is ethical (Huemer 2012).

The presence of confirmation bias is especially problematic for empirical studies of leadership ethics that limit their sample to a single organization. Confirmation bias refers to people’s tendency to adopt beliefs that justify their other beliefs or behaviors (Nickerson 1998). In light of the substantial body of evidence that confirmation bias influences people’s perceptions, we should expect that members of an organization are strongly susceptible to the psychological pressure to justify the conduct of their co-workers and organization. Even if measuring perceptions of ethics had some value for knowing what leaders should do, focusing exclusively on how members of an organization perceive their leaders entrenches a set of biases that systematically obscures people’s capacity to critically reason about the ethics of their group.

These considerations illustrate that people’s perceptions of ethics are not a reliable guide to what is ethical, and that empirical approaches to leadership ethics are therefore a poor guide to knowing how a leader should act. As an analogy, say a researcher is interested in evolution. To many survey respondents, evolution is very counterintuitive—33 percent of Americans believe that humans existed on earth since the beginning of time. Yet this frightening statistic has nothing to do with whether the theory of evolution is true. It is surely worthwhile for researchers to know what people think about evolution. Still, these results do not undermine the claim that humans are an evolved species that has not existed on earth since the beginning of time.
Proponents of empirical approaches to ethics may balk at this analogy, arguing that evolution is a matter of science whereas moral reasons depend on our attitudes, so empirical investigations into people's attitudes are the best way to better understand morality. Yet even if moral reasons depend on our attitudes, that would not imply that surveys and other empirical approaches will advance our understanding of leadership ethics. The assertion that moral reasons are expressions of people's attitudes or beliefs is a metaethical claim about the nature of moral reasons. Metaethics is the study of the nature of moral judgments. Philosophers who study metaethics ask questions such as, “are moral reasons beliefs about natural facts?” and “do moral reasons express beliefs?”

Some metaethicists think that moral reasons express beliefs about attitudes, and that moral requirements depend on facts about people's psychologies (e.g. Railton 1986; Velleman 2013). Yet even the claim that moral principles are reducible to psychological facts does not imply that we should conduct a survey to discover what we morally ought to do. Otherwise, such a moral theory would not be able to explain why morality is normative, why it is instructive at all in telling us what to do. If moral reasons were just whatever a survey respondent said they were, then we could not explain how people can act wrongly when they believe their actions are ethical.

Perhaps proponents of empirical approaches to leadership ethics do not think that each person's individual perceptions of ethics are authoritative, but rather that a group's perceptions carry some weight. But such a moral theory would be unable to explain why we think of the abolition of slavery and the political enfranchisement of women as moral progress. Even though a survey in the eighteenth century would have revealed that many people thought owning people was permissible, slavery was nevertheless wrong in the eighteenth century just as it is today. ¹

¹ It is possible that slaveholders, if not in the eighteenth century then at least in Ancient Egypt, were not blameworthy for owning slaves because they did not have access to the relevant moral knowledge that slavery was wrong (Rosen 2004). This claim about blameworthiness is controversial (Harman 2011). What is not controversial is the claim that slavery is wrong even if most people don’t realize that it is wrong.
Proponents of empirical approaches to leadership ethics sometimes seem to imply that empirical evidence challenges moral philosophy—for example, when researchers point out that most people think that it is sometimes permissible to lie or that people reliably miscalculate the hedonic consequences of their actions (see e.g. Greenberg and Bies 1992). Yet one of the leading proponents of the ELS acknowledges that empirical evidence does not undermine a moral theory any more than normative argument undermines the validity of an empirical study (Weaver and Trevino 1994). The two different methods are addressing two different questions.

3. Philosophical Methodology

Proponents of a philosophical approach to leadership ethics rely on intuitions to answer moral questions. Some people call this kind of reasoning “from the armchair” because one can use introspection and arguments to answer moral questions without leaving one’s chair, whereas experimental evidence and surveys require data collection. Reasoning from the armchair is a better way to answer the question “what should a leader do?” than descriptive and experimental methods.

Before I continue, an example of this type of reasoning may be helpful. We may be interested in the question, “Should business leaders use company funds to contribute to philanthropic causes?” To answer this question, one might consider a famous case posed by Peter Singer (Singer 1972):

*Drowning Child:* You are waking past a shallow pond and you see a child drowning. You could easily save the child but doing so would ruin your expensive clothes. Singer argues that you ought to save the drowning child because if you can prevent something bad from happening without sacrificing something of comparable moral importance then you should. He then argues that if you agree with him that you morally ought to save the child in this case then you ought to also think you should sacrifice some of your income to save children who are dying of famine in other countries, because it is not morally relevant if a desperately needy child is in front
of us or far away. We can state his argument like this (where P1 and P2 are premises and C is the conclusion):

P1: You ought to save a drowning child if doing so does not compromise anything of comparable moral importance.

P2: It is morally irrelevant if a needy child is close or far away.

C: You ought to assist needy children who are far away (e.g. donating to famine relief) if doing so does not compromise anything of comparable moral importance.

Those who are interested in ethical leadership in business may then read this argument as a justification for corporate philanthropy, on the grounds that businesses are bound by the same moral principles as the rest of us. This case also raises interesting questions about the ethics of political leadership such as, “Is it true that distance is morally irrelevant?” “Should leaders be partial to needy people in their jurisdictions” and “Do the global poor have a claim to the resources in rich countries?”

For our purposes it is important to note that Singer’s argument in favor of giving to famine relief does not rely on any research about what people think about famine relief or experiments about the conditions that make people inclined to give. Empirical approaches that look to perceptions of ethics for guidance about what a leader should do seemingly affirm the mistaken view that moral principles, such as the principle that one ought to give money to famine relief, depend on whether people agree with the principles. But if people should give to famine relief it is not because survey respondents agree with the claim “people should give to famine relief,” it is because the principle that one ought to give is supported by moral reasons. And if the principle is supported by moral reasons, one would still be justified in believing it even if others disagreed.

Moreover, normative arguments have potentially revisionary implications for our understanding of ethical leadership whether leaders and leadership scholars agree with their conclusions or not. To continue with Singer’s example, his argument will only succeed if each
premise is true, and he argues for each premise by appealing to our intuitions about the moral irrelevance of distance and the drowning child case. It also relies on intuitions about validity, the intuition that if his premises are true then the conclusion must be true as well. Singer’s argument is a classic example of how philosophers rely on intuitions when making ethical arguments. Even if you do not accept Singer’s conclusion, the argument can contribute to your understanding of ethical leadership by prompting you to identify which premise you reject, or the reasons you think his argument is valid. And if you accept that Singer’s argument is valid, even if you reject one or both premises, you may still be interested in what those premises would entail. Singer’s argument advances our understanding of ethical leadership even if it fails to convince because we can still debate whether his conclusion would be true if the premises were true (Harman 2014).

Philosophers call the process of weighing moral judgments in particular cases against our beliefs about other similar cases and our broader moral theories the process of seeking reflective equilibrium. Reflective equilibrium is achieved when our moral judgments cohere, or at least when none of them conflict with independently justified foundational beliefs (McMahan 2000). For example, if you find Singer’s premises plausible but do not accept his conclusion, then you might be prompted to rethink your belief that his premises are true or to revise your belief that his conclusion is false. In its particulars, reflective equilibrium is controversial because some philosophers worry that it is unjustifiably biased against revisionary beliefs or that it cannot reliably make moral progress without starting from rationally defensible premises (Kelly and McGrath 2010). Another challenge to this method comes from experimental philosophers, who point out that people’s moral intuitions vary widely, even among philosophers, and are seemingly influenced by arbitrary or irrelevant considerations (Prinz 2008). Nevertheless, some intuitions are better than others, and the lesson from experimental philosophy is not that armchair intuitions should be roundly discarded but rather that philosophers should take the factors that potentially distort their moral intuitions seriously (Levy 2013). Despite these challenges, however, moral
philosophers generally agree that some process of evaluating moral judgments in light of their implications for our other moral intuitions is the best way to answer “What should a leader do?”

4. Leadership and Moral Authority

One objection to the approach to moral problems that I am suggesting for leadership scholars is that it is wrong for leaders to impose controversial moral views on those who disagree. Critics of my approach to leadership ethics may accuse me of advocating for philosopher kings who impose their views of ethics on people who have no reasons of their own to endorse those views. Some philosophers, following John Rawls, have developed the idea that leaders should lead based on mutually acceptable rules rather than their own opinions (Rawls 2005; Gaus 2012; Quong 2011). This objection does not rely on the claim that morality is difficult to discern and that leaders are likely to be wrong. After all, even if leaders are likely to be wrong so are the masses. The terrible history of man-made atrocities is testament to the idea that leaders and followers alike can reflectively support abhorrent and immoral views. Rather, the objection is that leaders are uniquely bound not to do the right thing, but to do the thing that their followers can reasonably accept.

If this objection were successful, then empirical studies of followers’ perceptions of leaders would potentially have a place in answering the question, “What should a leader do?” because it would be necessary to know what followers could reasonably endorse. Yet this objection is not successful for several reasons. First, some followers hold views that are clearly immoral and which any plausibly ethical leader should obviously disregard. For example, leaders in the American South are under no obligation to rule on the basis of the views of the KKK, even if many of their constituents are Klansmen. To say otherwise would be to say that leaders should at least consider using their position to further unjust policies merely because some of their followers are mistaken about what justice requires. We wouldn’t accept this reasoning in other domains, however. That some people do not believe in climate change is not a reason for a leader to ignore global warming.
Similarly, for moral reasoning, even if people do not believe that racism is wrong, racism is wrong.

So it seems appropriate to set some limits on which views merit consideration by leaders. Yet once we exclude views that are patently unreasonably and immoral, the same reasons in favor of excluding those positions also justify a leader's decision to disregard other moral mistakes by followers. Leaders must then judge which positions on particular issues are morally justified. In other words, leaders must use moral philosophy to decide what to do.

One may reply that there is no reason to believe a moral philosopher about what a leader ought to be because even moral philosophers disagree about ethical questions. For some topics it may even appear that moral philosophers disagree about ethics more than most people, which may undermine their credibility as moral experts. I am not arguing that leadership scholars should view philosophers as moral experts. Instead, I am arguing that leadership scholars should approach ethical questions the way that philosophers do, by relying on intuitions, considering thought experiments, and making arguments on behalf of a considered judgment. The fact that people will disagree in their judgments about what one ought to do is no threat to this methodological claim. A person's belief about what to do should be justified on the basis of moral reasons. If other people have different beliefs, this doesn't undermine the legitimacy of philosophical methodology as a way of approaching moral questions. If anything, disagreement illustrates the value of a normative approach because when people disagree about ethics they are then prompted to consider new arguments and reconsider whether their own views are justified.

Another concern about disagreement is that it may seem to undermine our faith that there is an answer to the question, “What should a leader do?” If well-informed, clever philosophers disagree about the answers to moral questions then perhaps we should rethink whether answers exist at all, so the line of thinking goes. Yet as the example of climate science illustrated, the presence of disagreement should not undermine our belief that there is a right answer. Also, the claim that disagreement should undermine our belief in the objectivity of morality is itself a very
controversial claim that is the subject of deep disagreement. If disagreement is grounds for skepticism about morality, then it is also a reason to be skeptical of the claim that disagreement is grounds for skepticism about morality (Shafer-Landau 2014, 330).

In any case, empirical approaches to leadership ethics that equivocate between what people think a leader should do and what a leader should do are no more respectful to followers or morally neutral than the philosophical approach that I am proposing. Instead, they rely on the moral premise that a leader should lead in a way that is responsive the ethical beliefs to followers and observers. This is also a moral position that requires further argument in favor of it. Once we interrogate the idea that leaders ought to consult a survey to understand leadership ethics, the normative premise behind that idea does not survive further scrutiny for the reasons listed. A leader who falls short of doing the right thing is not justified in acting unethically, even if social scientific evidence suggests that his unethical conduct motivated others to do the same or that people in his organization approved of the unethical things he did. Moreover, those who suggest that it is somehow unfair or inappropriate for leadership scholars and leaders to support potentially controversial moral principles in the face of disagreement minimize the importance of moral inquiry (Enoch 2013). Moral principles are deeply felt and important to people on both sides of any moral debate, and leaders should take people’s views seriously and make their case, rather than appealing to surveys and experiments that obscure the normative dimensions of leadership and do not engage with or respond to anyone’s deeply felt commitments.

5. Conclusion

My aim in this essay is not to discount the important work of leadership scholars who approach ethics in a different way. It is important to study perceptions of ethics as well as ethics. It is valuable to know what people think about the true nature of leadership, and how people thought about leadership in the past. But non-normative approaches cannot tell us how a leader should act
when he faces a moral problem. This is not an objection to these approaches. Rather, I am simply arguing that a normative approach is the best way to settle normative debates. Normative philosophical approaches are also limited. Philosophical methodology cannot tell us how leaders in the past thought about ethical challenges. Nor can it tell us how perceptions of ethics are influenced by a leader’s personality or message. There are many ways to approach the topic of ethical leadership, but the best way to approach the question “what should a leader do?” is by developing arguments and exploring our intuitions.

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