Philosophical Methodology and Leadership Ethics

A manager notices that his strongest sales representative makes sexist remarks to his 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, you are likely to find scholars who address these questions by describing leaders in particular cases. Some prominent leadership scholars offer a conceptual analysis of the word ‘leader’ on the theory that knowledge about a paradigmatic leader can give moral guidance to all leaders. 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 CEO’s who abused their power out of weakness of will. In leadership journals, you will also find extensive research from 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. Leadership scholars also 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 make leaders 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 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 studies 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 ethicists’ conclusion is an opinion, but that doesn’t invalidate the value of an ethicists’ considered judgment. A medical recommendation is in some sense only the physicians’ 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.

In order to advance a criticism of the traditional approaches to leadership ethics, I will first sketch a characterization of the discipline as it currently stands in section 1. My target views are studies of leadership that deploy descriptive or empirical methods to establish normative conclusions, or those that assume normative conclusions without argument. There, I also discuss the role of descriptive and empirical studies in normative debates, and the way that the existing literature in leadership ethics can inform our judgments about what leaders should do.

In section 2, I note that descriptive and empirical studies of leadership ethics, insofar as they purport to advance our understanding of what leaders should do, rely on extremely controversial assumptions about the nature of morality. The view that moral truths can be discovered with survey or experimental methods requires either that we adopt a very implausible view of morality or a fantastic faith in the power of organizational psychology.

I then argue in section 3 that descriptive and empirical methods of ethical inquiry are also problematic because they cannot explain the intuitions that moral progress is possible and that it happens in some cases. More generally, these methods risk affirming people’s existing unreflective attitudes about ethics and foreclose the possibility for moral learning. Insofar as leadership scholars hold groups to moral standards that are not affirmed by the group, those scholars presuppose a normative theory that requires further defense.

I describe an alternative methodology in section 4. Moral philosophers use arguments, thought experiments, and ethical reasoning to gain a better understanding of what people should do. To be sure, there is considerable disagreement about whether moral philosophy should rely on theoretical frameworks or intuitions about specific cases, about which kinds of intuitions should be trusted, about the proper role of experience and emotion in moral reasoning, and about whether moral truths are facts about the world or facts about our opinions. Still, one thing is clear. Moral reasoning is the best way to advance our understanding of morality.

In section 5 I reply to a specific concern about my approach to leadership ethics. One might object that leaders should not engage in moral reasoning to decide what to do because it is wrong for leaders to impose their controversial moral views on others, especially if followers do not agree. This objection mirrors a debate in political philosophy about whether leaders must justify their conduct to followers. I argue that the relevant consideration for a leader’s legitimacy is whether the leader is in fact morally justified, not whether followers perceive the as morally justified. This does leave us in the position of arguing about what is morally justified, but that is exactly the conversation that morally conscientious leaders and leadership scholars should be having.