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The ethics of authentic transformational leadership

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Abstract

In response to worries about the morality of transformational leadership, Bass and Steidlmeier [Leadersh. Q. 10 (1999) 181] distinguish between *authentic* transformational leadership and *inauthentic* or *pseudo*-transformational leadership. The present article analyzes the conception of authenticity at the core of this normative account of leadership. I argue that the distinction between authentic transformational leadership and pseudo-transformational leadership fails to ground a sufficient response to ethical concerns about transformational leadership. To the extent that this theory holds that altruism suffices for ethical success, it misses the fact that leaders sometimes behave immorally precisely because they are blinded by their own values. In the end, we can expect that this kind of blindness will come to bear importantly on the moral psychology of leadership and, in some cases, encourage transformational leaders to believe that they are justified in making exceptions of themselves on the grounds that their leadership behavior is authentic.

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1. Introduction

In Act 1, Scene 3 of Shakespeare's (1987) *Hamlet*, Polonius counsels Laertes: "This above all, to thine own self be true . . ." (p. 837 [78]). Polonius's endorsement of authenticity is certainly no stranger to the leadership literature. Bennis and Nanus (1985), for example, tell us that "[l]eaders acquire and wear their visions like clothes. Accordingly, they seem to enroll themselves (and then others) in the belief of their ideals as attainable, and their behavior exemplifies the ideas in action" (p. 46). Similarly, Fairholm (1998) claims that "[t]he leader's task is to integrate behavior with values" (p. 57), and Heifetz (1994) encourages "[a]daptive

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work . . . to diminish the gap between the values people stand for and the reality they face” (p. 22). Gardner (1990), in his book *On Leadership*, articulates the ethic behind the Shakespearean dictum this way: “One of the tasks of leadership—at all levels—is to revitalize those shared beliefs and values, and to draw on them as sources of motivation for the exertions required of the group” (p. 191). On each of these views, leadership puts behavior in line with values so that we might be true to ourselves.

Even the most influential moral treatise in the field, Burns’s (1978) *Leadership*, can be read as an argument about the kinds of selves to which leaders should be true. “That people can be *lifted* into their better selves,” he says, “is the secret of transforming leadership . . .” (p. 462). In fact, Burns thinks that it is the possibility of this kind of transformation that gives leadership its moral purpose. On this normative account of leadership, “The leader’s fundamental act is to induce people to be aware or conscious of what they feel—to feel their true needs so strongly, to define their values so meaningfully, that they can be moved to purposeful action” (Burns, 1978, p. 44). In essence, this form of leadership transforms people from the selves that they are into the selves that they should be. As a result of the transformation, people are poised to be true to their better selves.

In its characterization of the selves to which we should be true, *transforming leadership* contrasts sharply with *transactional leadership*. Whereas transforming leadership raises leaders and followers to “higher levels of motivation and morality” (Burns, 1978, p. 20), transactional leadership takes the selves to which we should be true simply as given. The transactional leader “recognizes the other [party to the exchange] as a *person*. Their purposes are related, at least to the extent that the purposes stand within the bargaining process and can be advanced by maintaining that process. But beyond this the relationship does not go” (Burns, 1978, pp. 19–20). In other words, transactional leadership adopts a markedly uncritical view of the selves engaged in these exchanges. This form of leadership appeals to us simply as we are, whatever our desires and preferences might be and regardless of their perhaps questionable normative force. In comparison with transforming leadership, then, transactional leadership fares poorly on what Burns (1978) calls “the ultimate test of moral leadership” (p. 46). Leadership must have the “capacity to transcend the claims of the multiplicity of everyday wants and needs and expectations” (p. 46).

This means that the selves to which we should be true must be identified with something higher than mere desires and preferences. In response to this challenge, advocates of transforming leadership offer a view of the self on which we might understand the distinctively *moral* agenda of leadership. According to Burns, for example, our better selves are identified with values that lead to the satisfaction of real need, and transformational leaders work from the perspective of these values to get us to act in accord with our better selves. Or, as Bass (1985) puts it, they achieve the requisite transformation “[b]y raising our level of awareness, our level of consciousness about the importance and value of designated outcomes, and ways of reaching them” (p. 20). When this transformation is complete, value congruence within the group, organization, or society gives rise to behavior that is itself congruent with these values. Transformed followers can now act on the values they have come collectively to accept.

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