

# Moral Openness and Leadership: Reducing Normative Equivocality through Discourse

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# “Ethical leadership” can be understood two ways

- It can pertain to the ethics of leadership, and mean “leading in an ethical manner” . . .
  - Virtuously
  - Authentically
  - With consideration for, or for the benefit of, subordinates
  - In the service of a good cause
- It can also pertain to the leadership of ethics, and mean “leading the resolution of ethical problems” . . .
  - Making decisions ethically
  - Cultivating ethical culture / climate

# Reduction of moral equivocality<sup>1</sup> is important for the leadership of ethics

- Some circumstances are difficult to make moral sense of:
  - Unfolding crises
  - Cultural changes
  - Applications of new technology
- These present a different problem of leadership than situations in which compliance with known norms needs to be encouraged
- Leaders must facilitate the resolution of these situations in a way that is morally defensible

# Equivocality reduction can be one of the “burdens of judgment<sup>2</sup>” borne by the leader

- A leader may reduce the equivocality of a moral problem by making a command decision: “cutting the Gordian knot”
- Moral imagination<sup>3</sup> can help to further reduce equivocality by considering the alternative moral valueings that might be applied to an action

# Equivocality reduction can also be accomplished socially

- A monological response has important drawbacks
  - It doesn't reduce equivocality as well as multiple cycles of sensemaking & sensegiving<sup>4</sup>
  - It privileges the values and methods of the decision-maker over those of the other people affected by the decision<sup>5</sup>
- These can be addressed through discourse!

# Discourse ethics<sup>6</sup> establishes the moral validity of a social consensus

- When someone wants to convince another of the rightness of an action, they refer to a reason or principle external to the parties in the conversation
  - A purely subjective statement, howsoever truthful, is not compelling
  - A purely empirical statement, howsoever true, is not moral
- The reasons offered for the rightness of an action or norm are then subject to critique
- A given moral problem is provisionally resolved when all reasons have been heard, and all critiques answered

Any attempt to reach a reasoned moral agreement presupposes procedural conditions that together comprise moral openness:

- That anyone may participate
- That no statements are barred from consideration, and no assertions are exempt from critique
- That participants' assertions are logically and linguistically consistent
- That digressions must be justified, and that unopposed assertions are deemed valid

# Consider what sort of agreement is reached if these principles are violated:

- If people or their arguments are excluded without being refuted, the conclusions reached have not demonstrated their validity
- If arguments are logically inconsistent or linguistically vague, the conclusions share the same weaknesses
- If unjustified digressions are permitted, the discourse could enter a procedural “neverending loop,” terminating arbitrarily when time runs out

## Most importantly:

- Consistently treating other persons as instruments toward one’s own ends is pathological



- Sometimes certain parties are not committed to a reasoned agreement, but may instead prefer a confrontational battle of wills

# Because of the practical limitations of actual discourse, the leader has an important role in fostering moral openness<sup>7</sup>

- The leader bears some of the “burdens of judgment”:
  - Taking responsibility for a risky decision when others will not
  - Resolving impasses in discourse when time or confusion do not permit their consensual resolution
- The leader also bears responsibility for upholding the norms of valid discourse:
  - Clarifying those norms to participants
  - Sanctioning violators of those norms
- The leader finally should frame the discourse in such a way that the problem at hand can be resolved:
  - Defining the salient aspects of the problem
  - Eliciting participation and elucidation from relevant parties

# The leader's role in reducing moral equivocality amounts to a form of sensegiving

- The leader's guidance helps to prevent intentional subversion, unintentional dissolution, or careless domination of the discourse
- In this sense, the leader does not determine the outcome of the conversation, but does narrow the set of possible outcomes so that it is feasible to pursue the discourse<sup>8</sup>
- The leader therefore exercises enabling control<sup>9</sup> over moral decision-making, and facilitates development of follower judgment

# Repeated enactment of moral openness forms a climate

- The leader ought to respond to various moral problems with varying degrees of openness
  - Less time, less capability for discourse on the part of subordinates, and less moral intensity of the problem will tend to result in less openness in a given discourse
  - Less capability for managing the discourse on the part of the leader will tend to result in less openness across discourses
- More openness across discourses will tend to increase the readiness of both subordinates and the leader for engaging in moral discourse, and increase the effective reduction of moral equivocality

# Implications

- Provides a normative basis for the definition of “normatively appropriate conduct” required for ethical leadership
- Theorizes the leader’s role in reducing moral equivocality, when the “right thing” is unclear

# Backup: The Model

