

Humanism and Leadership

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Introduction

It is remarkable how little the subject of leadership is studied today among philosophers. To be sure, areas of political philosophy, ethics, and epistemology have important implications for theorizing about leadership, but so does metaphysics. In this essay, I will argue that humanism is an approach to philosophy that is fruitful for the development of a democratic theory of leadership, one grounded on mutually supporting ethical, political, epistemological, and metaphysical theories. In short, humanism is a kind of systematic philosophy that addresses myriad concerns necessary for theorizing about leadership. For my purposes, I will draw from the work of humanist Paul Kurtz to show the rich resources that his work has to offer. My attention to metaphysics in the paper will not be my primary concern, but it is worth noting that the subject of metaphysics all too rarely is applied to the study of leadership.

Humanism starts with ethics, with the motivation for inquiry into the problems of human beings, a crucial matter for leadership. This is where I will begin also. But to study ethics depends upon the kinds of things there are to study and the kinds of things that do the studying and acting in question in ethics. Humanism offers a way of thinking about what it means to be human that I believe overcomes difficulties encountered in the essentialist tradition as well as in the postmodern movement against essences. I will address both of these traditions briefly to show how humanism differs from them and avoids their pitfalls, such as racism and speciesism on the one hand and naïve relativism or nihilism on the other. The humanism on which I will draw builds on the pragmatist, empirical tradition of William James and John Dewey, which for

my purposes has helpful similarities with some of Sartre's contributions on humanism. The key factor in each of these scholars' work is the fact that human beings contribute substantially to their own making. Humanism's ideals in this sense are not preexistent absolutes, but are malleable aspirations to be refined in the light of newer and richer experience and science. The second section of the paper will address the metaphysical concerns about humanity, therefore, as they relate to the moral tasks of leadership. Finally, I will address the epistemological position of Kurtz's humanism to show how leaders can seek compromise despite difference given human beings' inherent limitations vis-à-vis knowledge.

The conclusion of the paper will explain in summation the central reasons why I believe that future philosophical work on leadership should be systematic, unifying theories of knowledge, reality, and ethics, since all are involved in public political justification.

I. Ethics, Democratic Leadership, and Humanism

Where one begins an inquiry can have a remarkable effect on how it proceeds. Humanists can come to the subject from a variety of directions, but in general, I suspect that they will often agree that the heart of humanism is ethics. I say this in the broad context of seeing philosophy generally as the three areas: value fields (ethics), metaphysics, and epistemology. My paper will follow this progression in making my case that a total philosophy is necessary for leadership. But after all, why do we need to study leadership? As I see it, leadership is an incredibly important moral ideal, and ethics is at bottom a crucial place to start in philosophy.

Some, such as Simon Critchley,¹ will say that curiosity is the starting point for philosophy or that philosophy is and should be useless, since uses are like convictions, which can

¹ I heard Dr. Critchley make this point in a paper he gave in Barbados in 2005 at the Cave Hill Philosophy Symposium at the University of the West Indies, Cave Hill, Barbados.

mislead in the search for truth and knowledge. The latter view is sometimes associated with Phenomenologists like Husserl and is the explicit view of analytic philosophers like Gerald Gaus.² At the same time, even Husserl writes with a pressing title about *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*³ – which sounds to me as though it has directive implications for human action. Gerald Gaus, who thinks we should not apply philosophy, contributed to *A Companion to Applied Ethics* on the subject of “Dirty Hands.”⁴ Even for Critchley and others who see philosophy as developing out of curiosity, consider that curiosity is a feeling, an inclination, which develops out of discomfort and the pursuit of greater satisfaction about that about which we are curious. As I have argued elsewhere, the claim that a philosophy is necessary for a life worth living appears to me to be a decidedly moral claim.

When we look to empirical studies about ethics today, we find startling results. According to Joseph Nye, author of *The Powers to Lead*, “In each of eleven different fields, no more than 40 percent [of people] said they had a great deal of confidence in their leaders.”⁵ It is safe to say, in other words, that people in the United States, and according to Nye’s research abroad as well, believe that there is a dearth of quality leadership. It may be fair to wonder how many times in history people have not felt this way. My point, however, is that there are many fields that are working on this problem, including scholars in psychology, education, business, and history, but there are very few philosophers who directly study leadership. The highest concentration of them is at the University of Richmond, which is truly an anomaly in this regard.

² Gerald Gaus, “Should Philosophers ‘Apply Ethics’?” *Think* Spring (2005): 63-67.

³ Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1970.

⁴ Gerald Gaus, “Dirty Hands,” *A Companion to Applied Ethics*, edited by R. G. Frey and Christopher Heath Wellman, Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell Publishers, 2003, p. 169-79.

⁵ Joseph S. Nye, *The Powers to Lead*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. ix.

The present essay is an early draft of a paper that will serve as a chapter of a book on democratic leadership. In this project, I explain some very simple ideas about leadership, such as that it requires a context and set of values, information gathering, creative problem framing or reframing, deliberation, communication, and ultimately courage and initiative to act on the right ideas. What makes leadership democratic concerns the ways in which leaders consider the constituencies involved in their decision-making and actions, how they include all people as best as they can as fruitful sources of insight about how to think about and resolve problems, to mention only a few relevant qualities. But at the heart of the matter here is the fact that we want great leaders for the good that they can help facilitate and inspire. In short, leadership is essentially a moral matter.

As a systematic approach to philosophy, humanism has a clear moral initiative. Scholars like Paul Kurtz refute critics like Tim LaHaye,⁶ who believe that humanism is amoralist. Kurtz offers clear ideas about how to think about ethics. For instance, in his essay, “On Human Values,” Kurtz lists four key virtues that are empirically observable in all societies, namely integrity, trustworthiness, benevolence, and fairness.⁷ He lays out many more values that he believes humanism embraces in his *Humanist Manifesto 2000*.⁸ Kurtz and the humanism he defends share important benefits for thinking about leadership. First, they are empirical in an important sense. They avoid, for instance, the essentialism of modernity’s approaches to thinking about human beings and other animals, while also escaping the troubles and excesses of postmodernity’s overstated relativism. Empiricism as we find it in humanist philosophies is a compelling response to the history of ethical metaphysics, since we can witness actual values and draw lessons from various societies about how we wish to live in our own.

⁶ Tim LaHaye, “Godless Society,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 30, no. 4 (2007): 44-46.

⁷ Paul Kurtz, “On Human Values,” *Science and Spirit* July-August (2006): 35-37.

⁸ Paul Kurtz, *Humanist Manifesto 2000*. Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2000.

Humanism has a friend in existentialists on this point, furthermore. Both begin with the concrete world of experience. Both see the centerpiece of philosophical inquiry as the fact of human beings' choices and the need to make them, irreversible though they are. Plus, existentialists also see that human beings create themselves through their actions and embody their values through what they do. Humanism and existentialism too, perhaps, offer ways of thinking about a central task of leadership. Leaders frequently must contribute to how their groups identify themselves. They must offer important contributions to the process of self-creation for their societies, through the actions they perform, drawing more inclusively, if democratic, on the greatest variety of sources of insight for living well.

II. Metaphysical Concerns for Leadership

When we think about ethics and leadership, it is crucial to have a sense of whom one is leading and toward what kind of end. These are metaphysical questions, while they are also about ethics. Philosophers think a great deal about issues of personal identity, but less often focus on culture. Culture is one of those vague terms that has many senses, but which appears at once to be of minor importance in particular matters, while in another sense supremely important. Leaders are often people who must significantly shape a culture through the ways they communicate, interact with members of their communities, and help to form the ways in which their fellow citizens think about themselves. This set of ideas may not sound like a traditional set of issues we associate with metaphysics, yet we can ask what seems to me to be a profound metaphysical question: what is culture and how can it be shaped?

Humanism as a term has many senses and often aggravates scholars given its many meanings, yet it is a name given to an identity and a set of beliefs. As such, when Kurtz

presented in 2000 an update to the *Humanist Manifesto* (I and II, 1933 and 1973, respectively), he was making a cultural contribution to enlarge society's options for identity. As he states the matter, humanism is "a philosophical, scientific, and ethical outlook," which combines "a method of inquiry, a cosmic world view, a life stance, and a set of social values."⁹

Humanists have sought to shape cultures in a variety of ways, and Kurtz's manifesto is one. In a sense, it is arguable that cultural contributions to identity formation are practical applications of metaphysical ideas, undertaken for moral goals. Consider another kind of cultural contribution that was attempted, even if unsuccessfully. The language known as *Esperanto* was meant to combine a number of languages together in order to fight the hegemony of a single culture's dominant linguistic and thus ideological influence.¹⁰

I also like to remind scholars in my background field of pragmatic philosophy, that Dewey said he would in retrospect prefer the term culture over experience in his book, *Experience and Nature*. What makes a word like experience limiting is the singularity of the term, how it therefore seems to lend itself to a Cartesian interpretation, whereas "culture" is decidedly social and rooted in a context.

In Mississippi, I am developing work on the problems of poverty and educational failure. I have found that so many ideas address possible forces which aggravate each concern, yet little if anything addresses what I take to be a root cause of both problems: which I diagnose to include a cultural acceptance and advancement of self-fulfilling prophecies of failure. What it is a leader is to address, then, in fighting poverty and educational failure, if I am right, must include cultural beliefs and practices which contribute to the more direct causes of Mississippi's problems. As a philosopher and defender of humanism, I see profound challenges in addressing

⁹ Kurtz, *Humanist Manifesto 2000*, p. 169.

¹⁰ See Peter G. Forster, *The Esperanto Movement*, The Hague, Netherlands: Mouton Publishers, 1982.

the twin questions I raised moments ago: “What is culture?” and “How can culture be influenced or redirected?”

Humanism as a contributing theory for democratic leadership would approach questions like these empirically and constructively, and would look to anthropologists, historians, sociologists, and the like, to find available tools for understanding and influencing cultures. Humanism is a philosophical outlook which sees potential in humanity’s efforts to reform itself and to shape its future. The nature of humanity, therefore, as a metaphysical question, is one that humanists can address, though they would not see the matter as finished, but rather as continually in need of consideration and improvement on past problems. Leadership theory can be guided with the help of a philosophical tradition that suggests ways for thinking about human beings, the practices and areas of study to refer to in seeking tools for this effort, and in maintaining the optimism necessary for achieving social change.

III. Epistemological Concerns for Leadership

Humanism includes an outlook on science and knowledge, as well as on metaphysics and ethics. Humanists are generally fallibilists, believing that at any given time what human beings call knowledge may be revised or refined in the future, but nonetheless is taken to be knowledge given the best of our abilities. Several considerations emerge from humanism’s epistemological stance, especially for a theory of democratic leadership. First, leaders ought always to be ready to learn when they are wrong. This is not the same as having a person mired in self-doubt, who never gets anything done as a result. A good pragmatist and humanist realizes that achieving anything requires acting on imperfect knowledge, fallible knowledge, especially since we seem to have such imperfect knowledge as our only option. This first lesson, of fallibilism, however,

can inspire leaders to see the value of insight that different people bring to debates. This follows the democratic spirit of Kurtz's humanism.

The second issue that humanism addresses in epistemology for leadership concerns a double-barreled moral limitation. In the sciences and medicine we see a parallel to the problem I have in mind. It may be the case that in order to study certain diseases, it would be preferable to have perfectly controlled studies in which proven treatments for diseases are withheld. The trouble here, of course, is that in treating patients, doctors have duties to the patients themselves that are typically thought to override the importance of the study. This was the kind of problem at issue in the infamous Tuskegee syphilis experiments, in which treatment was withheld from African American men without their knowledge.¹¹ Similarly, when it comes to issues in public policy, social scientists and leaders may wish to test the effects of possible policies that can be predicted to harm students in public schools, for instance. Or, they may wish to withhold solutions from some areas to have a control group in a study. Either way, we end up with a problem of knowledge-seeking that can conflict with the imperative of treatment or beneficence.

A humanist can accept limitations to study, given his or her prior recognition of fallibilism. At the same time, humanists believe in the power of the sciences, and might hold optimism for the possibility that studies could be designed differently in the future to avoid the moral problems while shedding light on the matter to be studied. In short, a humanist's view on fallibilism, while maintaining goals of beneficence and justice, can be ready for the necessary limitations on knowledge that leaders have to accept as they do their best to make judgments about how organizations or governments ought to act.

¹¹ James H. Jones, *Bad Blood: The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment, New and Expanded Edition*, New York: The Free Press, 1993.

Finally, as I have said, humanists can be found of the pragmatist sort, like Paul Kurtz, John Dewey, or William James. Pragmatism, also the humanisms that identify with it, navigates between the hard line modernists in moral theory and the total relativists on the other hand. While they accept that there is no view from nowhere in epistemology, nonetheless, not just any story of the world can make sense and be considered equally valuable with all others. Pragmatists' and humanists in some cases overlap in their recognition of, to paraphrase Hilary Putnam, objectivity without ontological objects.¹² That is, the world and human experience can object to certain ways of living and thinking, while at the same time allowing a plurality of ways of thinking about shared problems or conflicts between different groups. Leaders are people, therefore who must stand up against ways of thinking about knowledge of the world that cannot stand, while on the other hand remaining open to a variety of what Rawls called competing and conflicting doctrines that are each nonetheless reasonable.¹³

Fallibilism as I see it in humanist writings, like those of Paul Kurtz, brings with it an important skeptical outlook. This is important because leaders who act brashly are likely to make many mistakes. At the same time, fallibilism need not be cynicism. We see in Kurtz's writings a profound optimism and joyfulness, such as in his book, *Affirmations: Joyful and Creative Exuberance*.¹⁴ Leaders commonly need both skepticism and at least a modicum of optimism. After all, if one sees problems everywhere, it must be that things could be better than they are now.

¹² Hilary Putnam, *Ethics without Ontology*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005.

¹³ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*,

¹⁴ Paul Kurtz, *Affirmations: Joyful and Creative Exuberance*, Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2004.

Conclusion: Why systematic philosophy for a theory of leadership?

Ultimately, leaders must achieve a variety of tasks. They must exhibit what Kurtz has called “eupraxsophy,” which combines the three notions of the good or beneficence, practice, and the guidance of wisdom. Leaders must be moral, know their own and their community’s identity and virtuous practices, and must seek wisdom in information gathering and intelligent judgment as they choose their actions and create their visions for the future.

A leader who neglects ethics is worrisome from the start. One who has little sense of his own and his communities’ identities, as well as the tools available to him for contributing to the resolution of problems or the pursuit of shared goals, is likely to be ineffective. Finally, the leader who is poorly informed about his or her society’s problems and intelligent processes of inquiry is unlikely to be aware of the wisest choices available for action. In this context, therefore, I hope that I have made a strong case for thinking that leadership is best considered with a systematic philosophical outlook and that humanism as a form of systematic philosophy has much to offer for thinking about democratic moral leadership.