

# Book Review

## Leadership Ethics: An Introduction.

Price, Terry. 2008. Cambridge MA: Cambridge University Press

Reviewed by **Nathan Harter**

Students of leadership – and especially of leadership ethics – have noticed the increasing importance of the philosopher Terry Price, who teaches at the Jepson School of Leadership Studies at the University of Richmond, Virginia. In 2005, he published *Understanding Ethical Failures in Leadership*, a volume in the Cambridge Studies in Philosophy and Public Policy. Recently, he produced an accessible and inexpensive introduction to leadership ethics that is as philosophically credible as his earlier work. The book, published by the Cambridge University Press in 2008, goes by the title of *Leadership Ethics: An Introduction*.

Price's contribution is a penetrating look at justifications for leaders to break the moral rules. What he does is make what lawyers call the *prima facie* case that there are indeed moral rules. At that point, the burden then shifts to the person hoping to justify a leader's behavior in apparent violation of these moral rules. (Price frequently uses lying or the breaking of promises as typical examples.) The book lists likely arguments attempting to justify these behaviors, and Price's treatment is altogether fair to each argument before explaining why they ultimately fail. Thus, the book concludes that ordinary leaders in everyday circumstances cannot justify violating the moral rules; if anything they have a *higher* duty to observe the moral rules.

One can detect a grudging acknowledgement at times in this book that extraordinary circumstances might be enough to justify breaking some moral rules, but Price is careful to hedge these around with caution and warn readers not to think their circumstances are all that dire. Most of us do not face homicidal evil and devastation. As his studies with psychologist Crystal Hoyt demonstrate, leaders and their followers are far too likely to think of their cause as extraordinary when in fact they are simply pursuing the same goods and welfare that most folks are pursuing every day of the week.

One could call into question the Kantian ethics on which the book is based. One could dispute whether there really are moral rules, for example, or whether anyone can know for sure in a given situation what they are. One could join Soren Kierkegaard in taking a position in favor of what has been called the Teleological Suspension of the Ethical, just as Abraham was commanded by YHWH to slay his own son. Abraham knew this was morally wrong, but he relented. Alternatively, one could join Max Scheler, the twentieth century phenomenologist, who alleged that ethics is less about rules and more about imitating the values embodied in extraordinary lives, persons whom Scheler called Exemplars.

In response to these lines of critique, let it be said that Professor Price did not set out to defend Kantian ethics. His purpose was to address the real world predicament when leaders justify breaking the moral rules they acknowledge would be binding on everyone else. How does



one resolve the apparent contradiction? The book considers claims surrounding the specialness of the person who is the leader, the specialness of the role of leader, the specialness of the particular circumstances, and so forth. In the course of doing so, Price exposes the reader to popular ethical theories such as utilitarianism, communitarianism, and virtue ethics.

Rather than attempt to refute the book's conclusion, I would rather raise questions in order to see how the argument cuts. In a fashion typical of philosophers, I would use extreme situations to test just how far one can go in defense of the moral rules. One might wish to adhere to the moral rules at all times, yet the pressures of leadership affect one's judgment.

Take for instance the domestic terror undertaken by John Brown on behalf of abolition in the United States during the mid-1800's. He led a small band of insurrectionists for the sake of an ideal shared by many persons today, yet he engaged in gruesome, belligerent acts. I suppose Kant would say the ends were noble, though the means were ignoble, yet Abraham Lincoln and his military commanders chose violence on a larger scale, including unprecedented savagery during General Sherman's so-called March to the Sea. Today, those men are considered heroes for the cause of emancipation.

Another puzzle. Partly due to his elite training and patrician demeanor, Alger Hiss rose to a position in the U.S. government of considerable importance during the first half of the twentieth century, yet the evidence shows that he was a spy for a foreign power.<sup>1</sup> Suppose Hiss had not taken the position that he was innocent. Suppose instead he had protested that a higher moral duty to the workers of the world demanded that he commit treason against his country. How would that fit Kantian ethics? The reason I ask is that plenty of leaders derive their authority from moral claims of this sort. And Price even writes that "morality may require the sacrifice of group goals."

Looking back, today's reader might take for granted the culpability of a John Brown or an Alger Hiss, yet at the time they lived, there was considerable disagreement about what exactly was right and wrong. It is not always clear what the moral rules dictate. Often, it is precisely because leaders dispel the moral confusion for their followers that leadership occurs.

Of particular interest to me was the book's treatment of consent as a justification. Parties to a contract consent to all sorts of things they were not obliged to undergo. They relent in exchange for some consideration in return. Once concluded, the contract embodies a promise, and as we all know there is a moral rule against breaking one's promise. The odd thing is that lawyers anticipate breach. They include provisions within the terms of the contract in the event one party or the other fails to perform. When breach occurs, the party in breach must do something or other to make the aggrieved party whole. In other words, the parties consent to having their promises broken so long as everyone's interests are accommodated. Capitalism itself would not work without this feature.

President Lincoln, having practiced law before entering politics, understood this. He understood that sometimes you have to renege. Carl Sandburg (1954) quoted him as saying in a

---

<sup>1</sup> The guilt or innocence of Alger Hiss has been debated for decades. See, for example, Klehr (2004); *contra* Lowenthal (2000).

speech, late in his presidency, that, “as bad promises are better broken than kept, I shall treat this [a particular deal he had made for Louisiana’s return to the Union] as a bad promise, and break it, whenever I shall be convinced that keeping it is adverse to the public interest.” The irony of this position, of course, is that the representatives of the states in secession held to a similar position when they withdrew from the compact that led to the Constitution of the United States. They were in breach.

One could quarrel about the relative merits of bygone disputations in the nineteenth century, but the question remains whether consent on the part of followers justifies a leader in breaking the moral rules they all acknowledge. How often do followers excuse being lied to, even misdemeanors in office? It might offend our sensibilities, looking from the outside in, yet we could also let the parties negotiate these things for themselves – at least up to the point at which the leader’s behavior starts to imperil consent itself.

*Leadership Ethics: An Introduction* has many such “jumping off points” for classroom discussion. For this reason and more, one can conclude that Terry Price has written a book that could serve as an introduction to leadership ethics at the graduate level, even though it does not fit everyone’s paradigm for a classroom textbook. It contains no study aids. It is by no means neutral on the question it raises. And it offers no formula or recipe for becoming an ethical leader. But then, as the smart aleck once observed, “Philosophy books can’t be any good, since the answers aren’t in the back.” Instead, *Leadership Ethics* is a deliberate work that is fair to alternate theories and invites the student to contemplate strenuously the ethics implications of leadership.

## References

- Klehr, H. (2004). Distorting the past. *Academic Questions*, 17(3),15-20.  
Lowenthal, J. (2000). Venona and Alger Hiss. *Intelligence and National Security*, 15(3), 98–130.  
Sandburg, C. (1954). *Abraham Lincoln: The prairie years and the war years*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company.

*Twenty years ago, Nathan Harter quit the practice of law in order to teach Organizational Leadership for Purdue University's College of Technology, where he was recently promoted to full professor. A former chair of the scholarship section of the International Leadership Association, Harter is teaching a new course on the Leadership Lessons of Abraham Lincoln for the bicentennial of the president's birth.*

Email: [nharter@purdue.edu](mailto:nharter@purdue.edu)