Scaling Toward Virtue: Moral Leadership and Organizational Growth

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Authority Reveals the Man: Leadership and Complete Justice

"[T]he best man," Aristotle tells us, "is not one who practices virtue toward himself, but who practices it toward others, for that is a hard thing to achieve" (NE, 1130a). This observation comes in Book V of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, just on the heels of a discussion about absolute justice in which, as the proverb of Theognis suggests, "every virtue is summed up" (1129b). For Aristotle, justice is only complete when "he who possesses it can make use of his virtue not only by himself but also in his relations with his fellow men" (1129b). After all, many of us are capable of exercising our virtues to our own benefit. We know (or learn over time) how to cultivate the strengths and dispositions that further us toward our ambitions and propel us toward the indicators we view as the marks of success. Think, for instance, of the years of education, training, and personal growth that have gone into making you the professional you are today. There is no doubt that in order to advance to whatever stage of your career you currently occupy you had to utilize various virtues and learn which to apply in what situations to accomplish your desired ends. Yet, as Aristotle notes, none of those virtues employed for one's own betterment constitute justice in the fullest sense. For, "justice alone of all the virtues is thought to be the good of another." Indeed, it is the virtue of doing "what is of advantage to others" (1130a).

Such an understanding of justice not only counters the solipsistic view advanced by people like Thrasymachus in Plato's *Republic* that "the just is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger" (338c)—a notion which Aristotle appears to echo, albeit in a qualified sense, at 1129b12 where he equates the "just" with the "lawful" and then goes on to identify law as that which often secures "the good of those who hold power" (1129b13)—it also underscores the fundamentally relational nature of human beings by making a concern for the wellbeing of others the culmination of every other virtue. Alterity, it suggests, is the perfection of virtue itself. Justice is only complete when it turns its orientation outward toward the benefit of one's friends and neighbors—hence Aristotle's definition of "friendship in the truest sense" as wishing for the good of one's friend for one's friend's sake (1156b).

This is a possible reading of what it means to see a concern for the advantage of others as the pinnacle of justice. And it is a reading we find particularly compelling given the example Aristotle uses to demonstrate what complete justice is. The man of authority (ἀρχὴ ἄνδρα), he tells us, is in a position to realize justice in its fullest sense because being a leader "already implies acting in relation to one's fellow men and within society" (1130a). Citing the wisdom of Bias of Priene that "Authority reveals the man" (our translation), Aristotle argues that those in leadership roles are uniquely situated to affect the wellbeing of others. To lead with justice, this implies, is to concern oneself with the advantage of those around you: your employees, your colleagues, even your higher ups. And while all leaders possess some virtues, only the best understand how to foster the flourishing of others, particularly those over whom they have authority.

This perhaps does not come as news to those of us who have been put in charge of organizations or who have had to work under the leadership of others. We all recognize that

good leadership has to do with more than theoretical knowledge. One must have "the capacity of deliberating well about what is good and advantageous"—that is, the practical wisdom (*phronesis*) to be able to cultivate the good of oneself and others (1140a). This becomes increasingly difficult, however, as organizations grow and their leaders are expected to oversee not tight knit teams living and working in close proximity to one another, but large, diverse, and at times amorphous groups of colleagues, consultants, and workers.

To put it simply, as organizations scale, their plans, operations, and structures become more complex. And the more complex the organization, the more challenges it will inevitably face that threaten its principles and moral center. This is where good leadership becomes not only important but indispensable. Good leaders help to preserve their organizations' moral core in the midst of such challenges by living intentionally and relationally, with a concern not only for the flourishing of themselves but, importantly, their neighbors (colleagues, subordinates, employees, friends). As Aristotle notes, "complete virtue and excellence in the fullest sense" can only be "exhibited in relation to others" (1129b-1130a); that is, for justice to be realized, it must be practiced in and through our various associations. And the more trying the situation, the more need there is for just leaders who can rightly orient their organizations and the persons around them to the good of each individually and the community as a whole.

But how can one accomplish this noble goal when the outlay of processes, procedures, protocols, and technologies increases the risk that what we have called "ethical distancing" (Goodman & Clemente, 2021) develops and multiples, supplanting moral reasoning with managerial excess? To begin with, one must understand what one's responsibility is for those around him. What are our fundamental moral commitments and how must good leaders comport themselves toward those with whom they work? In this paper, we will consider how virtuous

leaders can help their organizations to scale while at the same time remaining true to the ethical imperative to care for the needs of one's neighbor, the individual person who must not be subsumed or forgotten on the way to organizational growth.

The Primacy of the Other: Levinas and the Ethics of Alterity

Aristotle's relational orientation and his recognition that other people provide us with the means of manifesting our virtues, especially when we are in positions of authority, pair well with the ethical phenomenology of Emmanuel Levinas, whose philosophy takes up considerations we believe to be essential to the cultivation of good leadership. Levinas, like Aristotle, views relationality—the fundamental human link between self and other—as the starting point of justice. Unlike Aristotle, however, Levinas's ethics begin not with the self or even with the self's relation to another, but with a prioritization of the other human being above the self. Indeed, according to Levinas, ethics demands something more than desiring the good of another for the other's sake (NE, 1156b). That kind of friendship, which confers benefits on self and other alike (1156b14) and which is predicated on the other's demonstration that he is "worthy of affection" (1156b22), places one squarely in "an 'interpersonal commerce' of customs," as Levinas calls it (1999, p. 101). And while such relations can be useful and advantageous, they "tend to suppress the 'astonishing alterity' beneath the façade of social niceties that make collective life possible" (Ruti, 2015, p. 9). This, in turn, opens the possibility that the relationship will become sanitized, alleviating the self of its responsibility for the wellbeing

of the other person and reducing the dyadic relation to "a simple exchange of courtesies" (Levinas, 1999, p. 101).

For Levinas, even thinkers who seem to offer ethical frameworks proximal to his own—for instance, someone like Martin Buber who also extolls reciprocity, the social contract, and mutually beneficial relationships—inadvertently bypass the responsibility others ask us to see

and the need to which we are called to respond. Indeed, Levinas's approach to the moral is often described as a "radical ethics" in part because of the asymmetry he posits between self and other. He sees this asymmetry, however, as a necessary corrective for the asymmetry operative in the solipsistic egotism characteristic of our typical disposition, or, as he calls it, our fundamental "egology."

The problem that Levinas identifies is that for him, ethics demands sacrifice and he worries that getting caught up in the façade of social custom rather than focusing on real, flesh and blood human beings will only delude us into thinking we have fulfilled our ethical obligations when in truth we have not begun to approach them. Emphasizing the "inimitable singularity, the 'semelfactive' uniqueness of each soul" (Levinas, 1998, p. 229), Levinas insists that ethics begins when the self hears the call of another utterly unrepeatable human being and recognizes that it is implicated by that call. Each of us, he says, is "responsible for the being of the other" (p. xiii); so responsible, in fact, that "the fellow human being's existential adventure matters to the *I* more than its own" (p. xii-xiii).

Whereas for Aristotle the basis of friendship is self-love (1166a-1167a), for Levinas ethics always entails "the possibility of dying for the other" (Levinas, 1998, p. 202). Self-effacement for the sake of another human being represents a breaking up of our normal mode of existing in the world and awakens us to "the order of the human, of grace, and of sacrifice" (p. 202)—an order that transcends the transactional nature of human affairs. For Levinas, there can be no meaning and thus flourishing if one is unwilling to lose oneself in the service of another. Human beings, he argues, have a vocation for "intersubjective generosity" (Ruti, 2015, p.5), a call to exist for one another and not for themselves alone. He famously characterizes ethics as that which is "otherwise than being," meaning that ethics stands in opposition to the brute force

of life, the solipsism and survival mentality bred into us by nature which pits man against man in a never-ending competition for supremacy and power.

In his celebrated commencement address "This Is Water" (2009), David Foster Wallace characterizes our normal subjective experience—"our default setting, hard-wired into our boards at birth"—as one of self-interested tunnel vision, a myopic preoccupation with our individual wants, needs, and desires.

Think about it: there is no experience you have had that you are not the absolute center of. The world as you experience it is there in front of *you* or behind *you*, to the left or right of *you*, on *your TV* or *your* monitor. And so on. Other people's thoughts and feelings have to be communicated to you somehow, but your own are so immediate, urgent, real . . . [This is our] natural, hard-wired default setting which is to be deeply and literally self-centered and to see and interpret everything through this lens of self (p. 40).

Ethics, Levinas contends, is a vital corrective for this mode of existence. Whereas we tend to think primarily about ourselves, ethics demands that we think of others first and then act for the sake of their wellbeing instead of our own. "In this manner," Mari Ruti writes, "ethics . . . shatters the

subject's preoccupation with itself, its struggle for survival, its solipsistic obsession with its 'perseverance,' and replaces these by a devotion to the other" (2015, p. 5).

But if the foundation and pinnacle of the ethical life is a devoted service to one's neighbor in need, and if the call of the neighbor is ever before us, what prevents us from adopting the kind of sacrificial disposition Levinas calls forth? In our recent scholarship (Goodman & Clemente, 2021), we have attempted to articulate the perils of *ethical distancing*, the perennial tendency among human beings to not only neglect the needs of others but also build systems that justify that neglect, to create space and build walls in order to diminish the

fact that we are always implicated, ever tied to the needs of others. Ethical distancing, we have argued, is the pernicious assumption that distance absolves us, that if only we shelter ourselves from others, then we will remain impervious to their cries for help, immune to their need for our understanding, our labor, and our care.

An example will help to illustrate the point. In the Gospel of Luke, we are given a parable that does not appear in the other Gospels. There was, we are told, a rich man who lived in decadence and comfort, eating sumptuous meals, dressing in fine clothing, sleeping in the softest linens. Lying on his doorstep was a poor beggar named Lazarus, covered in sores, wanting nothing more than to eat the scraps that fell from the rich man's table. Both died. Lazarus was carried by angels to "the bosom of Abraham" (16:22). The rich man was put in the ground. Looking up from the underworld and seeing Lazarus in paradise,

[the rich man] cried out, "Father Abraham, have pity on me. Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am suffering torment in these flames." Abraham replied, "My child, remember that you received what was good during your lifetime while Lazarus likewise received what was bad; but now he is comforted here, whereas you are tormented. Moreover, between us and you a great chasm is established to prevent anyone from crossing who might wish to go from our side to yours or from your side to ours" (Luke 16:24-26).

What at first glance appears to be a parable about the afterlife is, upon further reflection, a keen portrait of life as we live it. For, as with all the parables of Jesus, the image used shines a light upon the shadow world in which we live and reveals to us the nature of our daily sins.

Like the rich man, each of us prioritizes his own wants over the needs of those around him. Like the rich man, we all build walls to keep the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of others

out of sight while we rest comfortably within, basking in the "freedom to be lords of our tiny skull-sized kingdoms, alone at the center of all creation" (Foster Wallace, 2009, p. 117). Yet, as the parable makes clear, the walls we construct to protect ourselves from one another are also doorways. The want and suffering of our neighbor in need is always right there, waiting just outside the protective shields we have built around our self-inclosed kingdoms. Lazarus is ever calling us to open the door and welcome him in.

What the rich man misses—what all of us miss—is that Lazarus is his salvation. Sacrificing one's own desire for the dyadic relation with one's neighbor is the only way to overcome the "chasm" that exists between man and man. And that chasm is the cause of our torment, a gulf constructed by us to keep our own salvation at bay. The demonic, Kierkegaard (1980) writes, is "an unfreedom that wants to close itself off," a self that "closes itself up within itself" (p. 123-124), that "closes itself off more and more from communication" with friend and neighbor (p. 129). It is the sickness unto death, the torment of being cut off from others by an unbridgeable chasm. That chasm, note, is the

byproduct of one's own decision to close oneself off from others. While the rich man thought he was caring for his own wellbeing by remaining safely within the comfort of his own home, he was actually alienating himself from the relationship that would have freed him. The flourishing of self too, the Gospel makes clear, is rooted in the care of one's neighbor.

If I Myself Were Righteous: Orienting Leadership Toward the Other

Levinas's analysis of ethical responsibility may come across as primarily concerned with the dyadic relationship—ethics is about the self's face-to-face encounter with another human being—but, as we shall see, his considerations do not end there. As a phenomenologist, he is methodologically committed to analyzing experience devoid of abstraction and thus he grounds

the moral life in the claims made upon the self by the ever-present need of the other. His next move, however, takes us beyond the dyad and it is here that we see the implications his philosophy has for those of us concerned with what virtuous leadership looks like, especially as organizations begin to scale. For, while it is true that for Levinas the dyad is the place where one finds oneself beholden to a primordial and inexhaustible responsibility for the other, it is also true that no one exists in a world populated by just a one solitary other; experience is oriented toward navigating relations with multiple others who are themselves oriented toward their relations with others in turn. And it is when the "third party" arrives, Levinas suggests, that one's relations shift from being narrowly focused on responsibility to having to employ logic, calculation, and formulation.

For Levinas, consciousness and rationality emerge when one begins *thinking* about how to avoid exhausting all of one's resources on a single other. The advent of the third means that one must reason about how to distribute one's goods and energy to multiple others. Ethics gives way to justice, relations broaden into systems. This, Levinas thinks, is a necessary shift. To go from feeding the individual in front of me to developing a complex system of agriculture capable of feeding countless others is to move from relation to society. And yet, the transition poses significant risks. For, when we develop such systems, the temptation to absolve the *I* of its responsibility—the temptation to build systems that allow us to lose sight of and thus ratify our *ethical distances*— becomes ubiquitous. We forget about the self's responsibility for the other that called us to create of the system in the first place. We lose sight of ethics in our pursuit of justice. This forgetfulness, of course, contributes to the development of systems that continue to expand without remaining rooted in a concern for human need. Alterity is domesticated. Vulnerability is dismissed. The ethical dyad is rendered inert.

What does this have to do with leadership and moral character in the face of organizational growth? Toward the end of the parable in the Gospel of Luke, Abraham makes a startling assertion. Asked by the rich man to send Lazarus back from the dead in order to warn his brothers not to make the same mistake as him, Abraham replies, "They have Moses and the prophets. Let them listen to them . . . If they will not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone should rise from the dead" (Luke 16:29-31). The rich man, habituated as he is to his comfortable way of living, still expects that an easy solution can be attained without sacrifice. His request amounts to an admission that he believes—and has believed for some time—that his responsibility can be foisted onto another. After all, he has gotten used to paying others to take care of life's unpleasantries for him.

But just as he was called to love Lazarus, his neighbor, as himself (Mark 12:31)—and here it is worth noting the overlap with Aristotle's understanding of friendship as rooted in self-love—so too was he

called to be his brothers' keeper (see, Goodman & Clemente, 2021, for a Levinasian reading of Genesis 4: 1-9). He shirked those responsibilities, however, and now has the gall to expect Lazarus, whom he let die in destitution, to bear the responsibility of looking after his brothers for him. "The fact is," Foster Wallace observes, "that in the day to day trenches of adult existence, banal platitudes can have a life or death importance" (2009, p. 9). This, the parable of the rich man suggests, is abundantly true in the case of the platitude that one must "lead by example." For, while his brothers will not be moved by the miraculous resurrection of Lazarus from the dead, they may have been persuaded to live differently had their brother offered them the image of his own life as a guide, had he heeded the words of Moses and the prophets himself and cared for those in need.

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, a work that had a profound impact on Levinas's development of his ethics of alterity, Fr. Zosima admonishes his listeners to "Keep company with yourself and look to yourself every day and hour, every minute, that your image be ever gracious" (Dostoevsky, 2002, p. 319). Giving the hypothetical example of a child overhearing you, in a moment of anger, offering a curse, he warns, "you perhaps did not notice the child, but he saw you, and your unsightly and impious image has remained in his defenseless heart. You did not know it, but you may thereby have planted a bad seed in him, and it may grow, and all because you did not restrain yourself before the child, because you did not nurture in yourself a heedful, active love" (p. 319). It is up to each of us, he suggests, to ensure that we are righteous, not for our own sake but for the sake of others. For, were we to take up this charge and lead by our example, then perhaps "your light would have lighted the way for others, and the one who did wickedness would not have done so in your light" (p. 321-322).

This insight is particularly important for those of us who find ourselves in leadership roles, especially as the organizations of which we are in charge seek to have a greater impact on the populations we serve and society more broadly. The necessity to scale is known to everyone who desires to see real change enacted in the world, everyone who believes the work they do will be beneficial to others. Often overlooked, however, are the risks that scaling poses in its emphasis on expansion, growth, and the deployment of needed procedures, technologies, and hierarchies. Fraught with the potential to construct systems that distance us from the people we are in closest proximity to, plans for organizational growth must be carefully assessed with an eye toward retaining the moral principles upon which an organization was founded in the first place, the dyadic responsibility for the suffering other in our midst.

To ensure that this happens, leaders must create organizational habits that call us to remember the fundamental need of each individual and help us to recognize how imperative it is to remain tethered to the dyadic relation. (Note: we would really welcome feedback here—perhaps this can happen during audience discussion—about organizational habits, leadership activities, etc. that engender this is type of ethical remembering). Put simply, even as organizations grow, the animating power of ethical responsibility must be given the space to hold sway. What is more, when leaders maintain an ethic of sacrificial responsibility for those around them as the basis of their leadership style, the very persons whom they serve will go on to serve others with more fervor and generosity than they otherwise would have. Like the Aristotelian *phronimos* who is skilled at exercising his virtues and thus stands as a model for others wanting to know how to orient themselves in the world, just leaders can provide their organizations with an image of complete justice and inspire others to cultivate the habits that lead to it as well. And that, in turn, can help organizations to remain rooted in their commitment to the good of individuals even as they set their eyes on the good of larger communities.

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