THERE ARE NO LEADERSHIP VIRTUES

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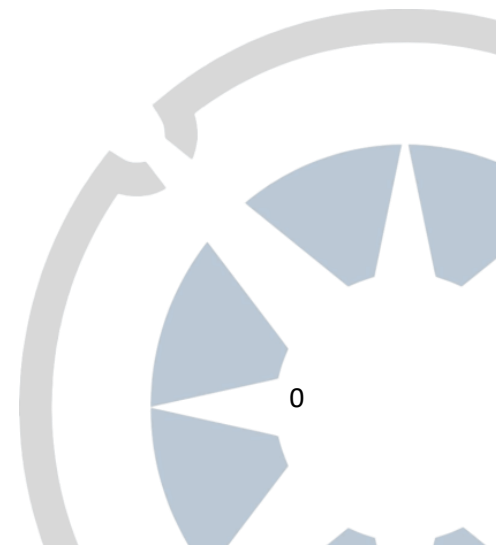
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INTRODUCTION

The 19th century cult of genius has been replaced by the 21st century cult of leadership. Good leaders of institutions are desperately sought, breathlessly celebrated, well-compensated, and widely considered crucial to success. Good leaders are thought to be able to move smoothly from head of one sort of institution to head of another institution because the virtues of leadership (the character traits that make a person a good leader, the traits that are good for any leader to have, *qua* leader) are the same for all sorts of institutions. It is lonely at the top. Good leaders of different institutions are thought to be able to understand and sympathize with each other because they face the same sorts of problems, while mere followers just don't get it. Everyone wants to be a good leader – to have the virtue of a leader. Thus, leadership training is ubiquitous.

But are there really leadership virtues? There are certainly leadership skills. Perhaps the similarities between virtues and skills support the view that there are leadership virtues. However, I shall argue that there are no leadership virtues because institutions are so different from each other. There are CEO virtues, head clergy virtues, army general virtues, prime minister virtues, and school principal virtues, but no leadership virtues that fit leaders across all, or even most institutions of different sorts. The quest for leadership virtues is doomed for a deeper reason, too. I shall argue that, on the usual understanding of "leader," there are no leaders at all. And no followers, either.

NO LEADERSHIP VIRTUES

A natural starting point is the following picture. Leaders and followers are defined in terms of their relationship to each other. Leaders are people who lead followers; followers are people who are led by leaders. Leaders make decisions and issue instructions; followers implement these decisions by carrying out these instructions. Doubtless, there are people whose relationship to each other is just this simple leader-follower relationship. However, in this paper I shall ignore them.

Instead, I shall focus on a currently more common, and considerably more complicated relationship. In the modern world, leaders and followers are typically embedded within institutions. They don't relate directly to each other. Instead, their relationship is mediated and structured by their institutions. *I shall treat leadership virtues as institutional role virtues.* Now I assume that the role virtues of role R are character traits that are conducive to achieving the goals of role R, and that the goals of a role within an institution are means to, or components of the goals of the institution, itself. Thus, leadership virtues are traits that are directly or indirectly conducive to achieving the goals of their institution. Furthermore, these are not just traits which would be nice for the occupier of role R to have. They are what it *takes* to be good at role R, and what will *make* a person good at role R. The role virtues of role R are necessary and sufficient conditions for being good at R.

Aristotle explains his theory of political role virtue through an analogy to the crew of a ship. He says,

> Though sailors are dissimilar in their capacities (for one is an oarsman, another is a captain, another a lookout, and others have other sorts of titles), it is clear both that the most exact account of virtue of each sort of sailor will be special to him and that there will also be some common account that fits them

all alike. For the preservation of the ship while sailing is a function of all of them. (1276b21-27)[i]

A ship's crew is a small institution. Oarsman, captain, and lookout are roles within that institution. They all share the goal and role of sailors. Thus, good oarsmen, captains, and lookouts must share the role virtues that make people good sailors. In addition to their role as sailors, all have specialized sub-roles. Because they have different sub-roles, and therefore sub-goals, each must possess additional, specialized role virtues which differ from those of the others. A good lookout is not necessarily a good captain, for example.

Note that by asserting that a good lookout can possess some virtues without possessing the role virtues of a captain Aristotle is here rejecting not only the unity of virtue doctrine, but also the reciprocity of virtue doctrine with respect to role virtues. Indeed, although it is less explicit, I take Aristotle to be rejecting broad definitions of virtues such as the one Socrates suggests in the *Laches*. Socrates says that he seeks,

> what constitutes courage for … those who are courageous in warfare but also those who are brave in dangers at sea, and the ones who show courage in illness and poverty and affairs of state … and those who are brave in the face of pain and fear but also those who are clever at fighting desire and pleasure. (*Laches* 191d)[ii]

By contrast, Aristotle takes courage at the personal level to govern only situations in which there is risk of serious physical harm. Neither personal courage nor the courage which is part of the role virtue of an oarsman includes the courage to tackle "illness and poverty and affairs of state." Indeed, Aristotle must define all of the virtues much more narrowly than Socrates in order to distinguish the virtues of different roles. Following Aristotle, I shall adopt a rather fine-grained division of the virtues.

Aristotle continues,

> In the same way, then, the citizens too, even though they are dissimilar, have the preservation of the community as their function, and the constitution is the community. That is why the virtue of a citizen must be relative to the constitution. If, then, there are indeed several kinds of constitutions, it is clear that there cannot be one virtue that is the virtue of an excellent citizen, namely, complete virtue. But the good man, we say, is such in accord with one virtue, namely, the complete one. It is evident then, that it is possible for someone to be an excellent citizen without having acquired the virtue in accord with which someone is an excellent man. (*Politics* 1276b27-34)

The virtues of a citizen – the character traits that make a person a good citizen – are the character traits conducive to forwarding the state's goals. Different sorts of states have different goals. For example, oligarchies aim at enriching the ruling class while aristocracies aim at facilitating the flourishing of their citizens. Since the goals of different states differ, the character traits that forward those goals also differ. Thus, a person who is a good citizen in one state might be a poor citizen in another.

Different goals, different roles, different role virtues

I shall generalize Aristotle's account of role virtues in ships and ships-of-state to other institutions. Just as the roles and therefore the role virtues of citizens differ significantly in different "species" of states, so the roles and role virtues of leaders (and followers) differ significantly in different "species" of institutions. If institutions differ in small ways, the role virtues do not differ. Two ships might differ in various ways, but the role virtues of their sailors are the same. By contrast, the role virtue of a sailor and a lawyer are different because these roles have different goals.

Different sorts of institutions have quite varied goals. For example, the goals of businesses, churches, armies, states, and schools are different.[iii] (There is also much variety within each of these "species." Universities and junior highs are both schools, for example.) Unsurprisingly, the goals of leaders within different sorts of institutions are different. Because the goals of these roles are different, the role virtues of these roles turn out to differ. The sets of character trait that make people good CEOs, head clergy, generals, prime ministers, and principals are all different. (see table 1) Clergy and principals need no ruthlessness; CEOs and prime ministers need no benevolence; principals and CEOs need no physical courage; generals and prime ministers need no theoretical wisdom; and so on.[iv] To characterize CEOs, head clergy, generals, politicians, simply as leaders is to ignore the differences among them by ignoring the fact that they are embedded within different sorts of institutions.

Table 1

Types of institution	Some leaders	Some goals	Some role virtues
Business	CEO	Profit, increased market share for company	Ruthlessness, reliability
House of worship	Head clergy	Salvation, psychological well-being of flock	Faith, benevolence
Military unit	General, admiral	Victory, security of the state	Physical courage, honor
State	Prime minister, president	Flourishing, expansion of influence of the state	Justice, flexibility
School	Principal, university president	Education of students, research	Theoretical wisdom, patience

Moreover, although some of these different sets of role virtues for different leadership roles might partially overlap with others, the goals of all of these roles are so different that no role virtue will be common to all. No trait is a role virtue for every leadership role.

One might expect that glancing at the literatures on leadership within companies, militaries, religious institutions, government, and education would settle the question of whether there are virtues common to all five domains. For almost every virtue, one can find papers in all five domains listing that virtue as a leadership virtue. Doesn't that show that there are many common leadership virtues?

Unfortunately, the question cannot be resolved so straightforwardly. A great deal has been written about leadership in each of these domains, but there is no consensus on a leadership virtue list within the literature of these domains.

Moreover, there is much disagreement about what is meant by most virtue terms. For example, as mentioned above, to some people, courage means dealing well with situations involving physical risk; to others, it means dealing well with situations of all sorts of risk. To some it means fearlessness; to others it means fearing moderately. To some, it means attending to and being guided by one's fear; to others it means ignoring or overcoming one's fear. In many articles, the meaning of courage is not spelled out. So even if "courage" did appear on everyone's list for a domain, it would not show that there was consensus on a virtue within that domain, let alone between domains.[v]

Thus, to support my claim, I must fall back on common sense. Perhaps Table 1 will be uncontroversial. If not, apply common sense in a different way, imagine the heads of these institutions all in one room. You are tasked with giving a talk on virtue ethics to them. This is

a nightmare scenario. There are skills that would be of use to all of them, but is there any character trait that you could recommend to all?[vi] I think not.

Candidates

Why are leaders thought to be necessary? The need for leaders stems from a low opinion of humanity. It might be thought that without leaders, most folks wouldn't be motivated enough, cooperative enough, or clever enough to carry out big projects. Therefore, all leaders need virtues enabling them to motivate, organize, and direct their followers. Leaders need to get their followers to work together harmoniously and efficiently on common projects. Aren't the character traits conducive to inducing people to cooperate harmoniously and efficiently leadership virtues?

Furthermore, it might be thought that most folks are not equipped to make tough choices. Therefore, leaders must pick up the slack. Hard choices cluster at the tippy-tops of institutions, and everyone else just implements these decisions. Dilemmas and dominion go together.[vii] Thus, leaders need the virtues of good decision-making. The ability to make good decisions includes practical wisdom. In moral dilemmas, good decision-making also requires toughness (the disposition to perform morally required, but morally repugnant acts – dirty hands acts).[viii] So aren't practical wisdom and toughness leadership virtues?

Reply: Harmonious, efficient cooperation?

While there are clearly some *skills* conducive to getting people to work together harmoniously and efficiently across different domains, it is not obvious that there are *virtues* which are similarly conducive. Different character traits produce harmony and efficiency in different contexts. The methods of an army drill sergeant or corporate manager would not work in a church or school, for example.

Furthermore, some leaders' goals do not include getting their followers to work together harmoniously and efficiently. For example, although every company needs some cooperation to function, at certain levels of certain corporations, cutthroat competitiveness is in; cooperativeness is out. The leaders at those levels do not aim to produce harmony among their followers.

Companies need to make products and/or provide services, and armies need to win battles and/or defend territory. However, the goals of many institutions are not to produce something, but rather to transform the followers in certain ways. The followers are not working on a common project; instead, they *are* the common project. For example, houses of worship aim to modify the character and states of mind of their worshipers, and the worshipers include the followers. Making these people efficient collaborators is not their goal, or even a means to their goal. Instead, stopping to smell and be grateful for the flowers is the goal; the trait of efficiency is the problem. In certain institutions involving individual competitions (e.g. chess clubs) the goal is not to work on a common project at all, but rather to pit everyone against each other.

Decision-making?

To explain why toughness is not a role virtue, I must start further back, as Aristotle might say. Some difficult decisions are *pseudo-dilemmas*. That is, they pit moral duty against profit, pleasure, promotion, etc. It can be surprisingly difficult to see these situations as what they are. They tend to present themselves to the agents as tough moral choices when, in fact, they are only tough-to-implement choices between a self-interested option and a morally required one. The difficulty is that the simple truth is disguised by self-deception and rationalization. In addition to these pseudo-dilemmas, there are situations in which agents must choose between morally admirable desires. Should Perry the professor punish a needy

plagiarist justly, or show mercy? From a VE perspective, such dilemmas can be understood as arising from the conflicting injunctions of different virtues. They are *virtue-v-virtue dilemmas*. Other dilemmas arise from conflicts between the injunctions of virtues and the requirements of duty. These *virtue-v-duty dilemmas* occur when duty requires agents to perform acts that are paradigmatically vicious, but required in the atypical situation at hand. For example, Annabelle can prevent her mother from making a terrible mistake (e.g. sending her life savings to a scammer) only by telling her a lie. Annabelle's habits of honesty[ix] collide with what her practical wisdom tells her is morally required. Thinkers disagree about this, but I assume that there is at least one morally right choice in every situation. The lesser evil is not evil. If it is a real dilemma, the morally right choice is an act which, from the perspective of some virtue, is a paradigmatically vicious act. Now when a good person performs a paradigmatically vicious act, it hurts. Thus, in both virtue-v-virtue and virtue-v-duty dilemmas the right choice feels wrong and painful. However, one should still do it.

When agents do the right thing in dilemmas, they act with dirty hands.[x] When they do the wrong thing, their acts are, by definition, immoral. However, they are admirable (in a way), for they are acting upon the injunctions of a virtue.

From this account of dilemmas, dirty hands, and admirable immorality, it follows that toughness is not a separate virtue. The disposition to do the right thing despite various sorts of temptations (including the temptation to dodge morally troubling, but morally required decisions) is necessary for leaders, but also for everyone else. To call it a leadership virtue is vacuous because it is a part of every virtue.

Similarly, to call practical wisdom a leadership virtue is vacuous, since practical wisdom is part of (or accompanies) every virtue.

A more interesting reason why practical wisdom is not a leadership virtue will take a bit of explanation. The main reason to reject the unity of virtue thesis is the prevalence of counterexamples – people who obviously possess some personal virtues, but not others. For example, as Aristotle says, "Some who in the dangers of war are cowards are liberal and are confident in face of the loss of money" (1115a20-22).[xi] The same line of reasoning leads me to reject the unity of practical wisdom. For example, many people are knowledgeable about money management, but not about physical risk. Thus, "practical wisdom" does not name a single character trait, but rather a collection of traits. There is no all-encompassing practical wisdom, but only *practical wisdoms* (plural). If the character virtues are divided in a fine-grained way, and each practical wisdom corresponds to one or more of the character virtues, then a fine-grained division of practical wisdom is necessary. A good grasp of risk/benefit calculation plus a certain fund of knowledge corresponds to courage; knowledge of nutrition and sexuality plus mastery of certain techniques of gaining and declining sensual pleasures corresponds to temperance; and so on.[xii]

Table 2

Virtues	Components of practical wisdom
Courage	Risk/benefit calculation
Temperance	Knowledge of nutrition and sexuality
Liberality	Knowledge of budgeting
Social virtues (friendliness, truthfulness, wit)	Social intelligence

From these assumptions, I conclude that there is no single practical wisdom that appropriately resolves all of the different sorts of virtue-v-virtue dilemmas and virtue-v-duty dilemmas. Instead, resolving them requires different practical wisdoms. For example, justice-v-generosity dilemmas such as the one faced by Barry above require the practical wisdom

corresponding to justice and the practical wisdom corresponding to generosity, but not the practical wisdom corresponding to temperance.

Now leaders of different sorts of institutions encounter different sorts of dilemmas. Moreover, mid-levels as well as the people at the top face dilemmas of many sorts. How to deal with problematic choices is important not only for the top people, but for lots of people. Thus, the dilemmas encountered by leaders are very diverse. None of the practical wisdoms is right for all of the characteristic conflicts of each "species" of institution.

NO LEADERS

So far, I have been implicitly assuming an oversimplified picture of institutions. This has led to an overly limited list of leaders in these five domains. In institutions of significant size, it is not the case that a single leader sits at the top of the institution making decisions and issuing orders while a flock of followers scurry around merely carrying out orders at the bottom of the institution. Between leaders at the tippy-tops of large institutions and their followers at the lowest level of these institutions dwell lots of people at intermediate levels. On the one hand, these *mid-levels* (I am appropriating a term from the medical world) are required to carry out the orders of those above them. They must do what they are told, which makes them *followers*. On the other hand, they have significant latitude in implementing the orders they receive from above, and in framing the orders they pass on to those below. They do not just relay orders. They make decisions and give their own instructions to their subordinates which makes them *leaders*. They are *both* followers of those above them in the hierarchy, and leaders of those below them in the hierarchy.

If mid-levels are included among the ranks of leaders, the roles of leaders become even more diverse. Leaders within corporations now include everyone from CEOs to managers of small retail outlets. Leaders within the military now include everyone from generals to corporals. Leaders within a school now include everyone from assistant principals to lead teachers. And so on. Mid-levels occupy a very large range of roles, even within a single institution.

Since these roles are different, the character traits necessary and sufficient for achieving the goals of those roles are also different.[xiii] The goals and therefore the role virtues linked to these diverse mid-level roles are quite different. As the collection of leadership roles becomes even more diverse, it becomes even more quixotic to seek a common leadership virtue across all of them.

Are mid-levels leaders?

Must mid-levels be included among the leaders? Can't one just redescribe the project of hunting for leadership virtues, exclude mid-levels, and focus on the people at the tippy-tops of institutional hierarchies? Can't one simply seek the virtues common to those leaders who are not also followers?

Identifying the tippy-tops of institutional hierarchies is not so easy as one might think. Many institutions are contained within larger institutions. Companies are sometimes subsidiaries of (or owned by) larger companies; churches exist within denominations; armies are branches of armed services; states are members of alliances (or client states within empires); schools and universities are parts of school systems. So the leader of a subordinate or component company, church, army, state, or school is also a follower of the leadership of the uber-institution. That is, these leaders are mid-levels. If mid-levels are excluded from consideration, the leadership virtues will, at best, be applicable only to a very small set of leaders of uber-institutions.

Are tippy-tippy-toppers leaders?

Could one focus on people at the tippy-tippy-top of the organizational chart (tippy-tippy-toppers)? Are the leadership virtues really the virtues of *ultimate* management, the heads of the highest level institutions?

A common view is that an institution's organizational chart is a pyramid with The Doughty Leader at the apex. However, in many institutions, the top of the chart consists of a large group of people, often represented by a committee, rather than a single person. Some single person seems to be at the top of the institution, and may nominally be at the top, but functionally answers to an even higher authority which sets general policy, general objectives, and general constraints. Some CEOs answer to boards of directors representing and answering to shareholders; some head clergy answer to boards of directors representing and answering to congregations; some politicians answer to voters; some principals answer to parents represented by school boards; and so on.[xiv] One person may seem to have decision-making power, but answers to a board, cabinet, team, council, etc. Surprisingly, the highest level leaders of institutions often turn out to be groups rather than individuals. The organizational chart is a top-heavy hourglass.
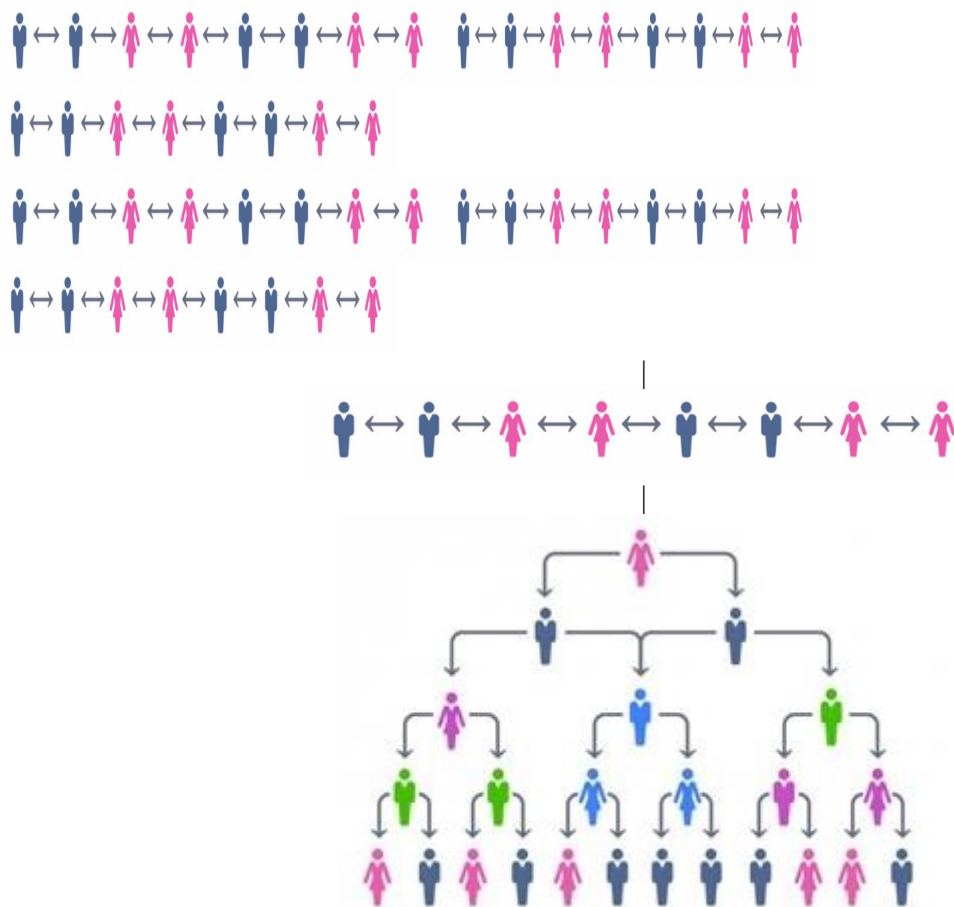
Thus, even tippy-tippy-toppers take orders. They have a great deal of flexibility in their decision-making, but they don't have absolute authority. They too must do what they are told to do. Because they are directed and constrained by even higher authorities, tippy-tippy-toppers are followers as well as leaders. They are actually mid-levels.

Aren't the people above the tippy-tippy-toppers engaging in oversight and/or formulating policy rather than exercising leadership? They issue guidelines, goals, and guardrails rather than orders. They are not leaders. And if the people above the tippy-tippy-toppers are not leaders, then how can the tippy-tippy-toppers be followers?

The difference between orders and oversight is a matter of degree. And the higher one rises on the organizational chart, the more general orders become, and the more latitude underlings have in following these orders. One might draw an arbitrary line at some level of the hierarchy and stipulate that those people above the line exercise oversight and formulate policy; those at the level directly below the line are leaders; and those on levels even further below are followers. But that move seems to yield the wrong answer, for in large institutions, CEO's, head clergy, generals, presidents, and principals don't issue orders; they exercise oversight and formulate policy. Almost all decision-making is done at lower levels. The heads of uber-institutions will turn out to be overseers and policy wonks rather than leaders, or even mid-levels.

More plausibly, one might insist that guidelines, goals, and guardrails *are* orders, and people who follow them (including tippy-tippy-toppers) are followers, or mid-levels. Are the groups of people leaders?

It would be bizarre to claim that shareholders, congregants, voters, and parents are leaders of companies, churches, nations, and schools. While they, or rather the boards that

represent them, make the tippy-tippy-toppers into mid-levels, the boards, themselves, are neither leaders nor mid-levels. Paradoxically, if a leader is defined as a person who gives orders, but doesn't take orders (i.e. if mid-levels are not considered leaders), then there are no leaders, but only mid-levels, oversight and policy committees, and followers.

Table 3

Types of institutions	Some leaders	Some mid-levels	Some higher authorities
Business	CEO	Vice president, district manager, store manager, department head	Shareholders
House of worship	Head clergy		Congregants
Military unit	General, admiral	Colonel, major, captain, lieutenant, sergeant	
State	Prime minister, president	Cabinet member, undersecretary	Voters
School	Principal, university president	Vice principal, department chair, lead teacher	Parents

NO FOLLOWERS

Although I have complexified the picture of institutions by pointing out that they nest, and that organizational charts get fuzzy at the top, the picture of institutions that I have been assuming is still too simple. I have been talking as though each institution consists of a single hourglass. This is, indeed, the *formal* structure of most institutions. However, many institutions actually contain additional hierarchies whose structure is, to varying degrees, informal, vaguely defined, and independent of the formal structure. In some cases, these additional hierarchies are ancillary to the formal structures of their institutions, working toward some or all of the same goals. In other cases, the formal and informal hierarchies operate independently, but without interference, working toward skew goals. In yet other cases they are at cross purposes, working toward conflicting goals. A common set of leadership virtues would have to include the decision-making, order-issuing roles in these additional hierarchies.

Table 4

Types of institutions	Some leaders	Some additional hierarchies
Business	CEO	Unions
House of worship	Head clergy	Big donor networks
Military unit	General, admiral	Military clergy
State	Prime minister, president	Political parties
School	Principal, university president	Faculty governance

Tippy-tippy-toppers are also constrained by their followers. If their orders are sufficiently objectionable, their followers won't carry them out. They may even overthrow the tippy-tippy-toppers. This is particularly true of military organizations, as many absolute monarchs have discovered, for the followers are numerous and possess tools of force. But although they use non-lethal tools such as votes and protests, followers within other organizations can also revolt against their leadership. Thus, these followers are decision-makers and issue orders, or at least guidelines to their leaders.

Thus, in different ways, tippy-tippy-toppers do not simply lead institutions. They must work within constraints set by collectives, and watch as their orders are carried out in ways they did not sanction by their subordinates. They must cooperate, compromise, negotiate, and compete with heads of different hierarchies within their own institutions. Tippy-tippy-toppers must share decision-making authority with people nominally below, above, and alongside them.

ENDNOTES

i Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2017).

ii Plato, *Laches*, trans. Rosamond Kent Sprague (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1973).

iii Admittedly, unlike species boundaries of organisms, "species" boundaries of artifacts such as states and institutions are fuzzy. I shall assume that businesses, churches, armies, states, and schools are different "species" even though there are certainly examples of religious institutions with armies, schools that are businesses, etc.

iv Of course, some clergy need ruthlessness because they are dealing with underminers in their congregations; some teachers need courage because they are teaching in dangerous circumstances; and so on. But these are exceptional rather than typical cases.

v Some virtues generate even more disagreement. Some people take integrity to be close to honesty; others to lack of a sort of coherence among one's values, yet others to uncompromising commitment to certain principles; disdaining to hide one's views; others to all of virtue.

vi I shall discuss and dismiss some candidates below.

vii This fawning picture of wise, benevolent, paternal leaders directing their ignorant, lazy, brutish follower is problematic in many ways that I shall not address here. I shall focus on the implications for leadership virtue.

viii William Galston, "Toughness as a Political Virtue," *Social Theory and Practice*, 17 (1991), 175-197.

ix Not just her habits of action, but also her habits of perception, passion, and principled thought incline Annabelle to tell the truth. From one perspective, she *sees* the situation as calling for truth-telling. Lying *feels* repugnant. And the *moral rule* that insistently thrusts into her consciousness is, "Do not lie."

x Since they face high-stakes moral dilemmas, leaders need quandary-ethics training, and soap for their dirty hands.

xi Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross and Lesley Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

xii Sophie Grace Chappell, "The disunity of practical wisdom," in Jennifer Frey ed. *Practical Wisdom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming); Howard J. Curzer, *Difficult Virtues* (Routledge, forthcoming).

xiii The labels of mid-levels may differ for just this reason. For example, many mid-levels in businesses are called "middle managers," but this appellation doesn't fit mid-levels in houses of worship. Mid-levels in educational institutions include department chairs, but this appellation doesn't fit mid-levels in the military. And so on.

xiv Military leaders are a different story. In some cases, they answer to civilian authorities; in other cases, they are the civil authorities.