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An Argument for Kantian Leadership

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Few people would disagree with the significance of trust, whether in interpersonal relationships, in work and civic organizations, or in society more generally. Indeed, in many ways, trust seems to be the bedrock on which all human relationships are built. It is thus quite worrying that trust appears to be on the decline in many places. In his landmark 2000 book, *Bowling Alone,* sociologist Robert Putnam made the case that the United States was suffering from declining levels of what he described as social capital, exemplified by weaker social networks and reduced participation in civic organizations.1 People kept bowling, but they stopped joining bowling leagues (hence, the title of the book). Perhaps unsurprisingly, low levels of social capital are associated with low levels of social trust. More recently, the Pew Forum has documented sinking levels of trust among Americans in both government and each other.2 The trend seems likely to continue, since each generation is, overall, less trusting than the generations that came before them.3 Happily, things look rosier in the United Kingdom, where social trust levels have been rising since 2005.4 Alas, the UK experiences the same generational trust gap present in the United States. While 56% of the Pre-War generation agreed that "most people can be trusted," only 34% of Gen Z Britons feel the same.5

1 Putnam, Robert. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.

2 The Pew Forum, *Trust and Distrust in America,* 2019.

3 See chart on p. 5 of the Pew Forum report.

4 World Values Survey, "The State of Social Trust: How the UK Compares Internationally." The Policy Institute, Kings College London, 2023.

5 World Values Survey, p. 5. 2

One of the crucial features of trust is that it often functions in the background, so to speak. In her influential paper, "Trust and Antitrust," philosopher Annette Baier points out that trust becomes salient primarily when it is betrayed or disrupted in some way. Baier says, "We inhabit a climate of trust as we inhabit an atmosphere and notice it as we notice air, only when it becomes scarce or polluted."6 When social trust levels are high, we often take for granted that other people will be trustworthy, whether strangers or friends. Our interactions with the world are characterized by what Trudy Govier calls scatter trust: "We trust in a whole range of people, most of whom we do not know and never encounter. Our trust is, as it were, scattered over these various people whom we assume are performing their designated function in a competent and honest way."7 Declining levels of overall trust, of course, have a negative effect on scatter trust. The less reason we have to think other people trustworthy, the less faith we have not just in them, but on the institutions and practices that depend on scatter trust for their functionality.

6 "Trust and Antitrust" *Ethics* 96, no. 2 (January 1986): 231-260. The quote appears on p. 234.

7 *Social Trust and Human Communities,* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997), p. 112.

8 For an excellent concise overview of the philosophical issues, see Katherine Hawley, *Trust: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. See also Paul Faulkner and Thomas Simpson, eds. *The Philosophy of Trust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017)

Given the importance of trust for thriving communities and healthy interpersonal relationships, it stands to reason that building, sustaining, and (when necessary) restoring trust must be a central goal for any group or organization. It also stands to reason that in order for an organization to build trust, it is necessary for the members of that organization to cultivate the virtue of trustworthiness. After all, trust is only possible when people can be trusted. Building trust thus means building trustworthiness.

A great deal has been written about trust and trustworthiness by scholars in a wide array of disciplines.8 I cannot possibly hope to survey all of it here, so I will instead narrow my focus to trustworthiness understood as a moral virtue. I grant that a person could be described as trustworthy 3

in certain respects without being virtuous, but I will set those cases aside so as to focus on what virtuous trustworthiness is like. In this paper, I will further narrow the discussion to the question of what the virtue of trustworthiness requires of leaders of organizations.

I focus on leaders both because it is obviously particularly important for the leader of an organization to be trustworthy, and also because, as will become clear shortly, I think that trustworthiness operates somewhat differently for leaders than it does for other members of an organization. Leaders must be especially trustworthy and what is more, they must also appear trustworthy. In emphasizing the appearance of trust, I do not mean to suggest that a trustworthy appearance is at the heart of the virtue of trustworthiness. Clearly it is beneficial for even the sleaziest of leaders to put on the appearance of trustworthiness, whether to employees, stockholders, parents, or the press. The appearance of virtue is not the same as virtue. And yet, I will suggest that appearances do matter when it comes to trustworthiness. A leader who can in fact be trusted, but who seems to others as though she cannot, is at a significant disadvantage. In order to be trustworthy, we have to be able to instill confidence in other people. We cannot do that unless we know what trustworthiness "looks like" in interpersonal interactions.

Now there is an immediate problem with the idea that trustworthiness is partly about appearances. Whether a given individual seems trustworthy to others is affected by factors unrelated to her actual trustworthiness, such as her race, gender, perceived social class, and so forth. This is hardly news, but it does pose particular challenges for leaders who belong to social groups less likely to be given the benefit of the doubt when it comes to their trustworthiness. For reasons that are clearly unjust, some people will have to work harder than others to appear trustworthy in the eyes of others. I take this to be an unfortunate fact about the world, and not an objection to my claim that trustworthiness is partly a matter of outward performance. I will return to this issue at the end of the paper. 4

Before I turn to the question of what trustworthiness consists in, I want to say something about why I take it to be an especially important virtue for leaders. In making this claim, I am not denying that trustworthiness is also important for all the other members of an organization. Rather, my claim is that the significance of trustworthiness is different when it comes to leaders, in terms of both is importance and its nature. This is not simply because leaders who are trustworthy are likely to be more effective in their roles. No doubt that is true, but effectiveness doesn't capture the aspects of trustworthiness that make it a moral virtue and not simply part of a leader's skill set. The moral importance of trustworthiness in a leader derives from the way in which trust is tied to vulnerability and social power. Let me explain.

To trust someone is to make yourself vulnerable to them in some way, shape, or form. Indeed, if we weren't vulnerable, trust would be much less important. It is because I am vulnerable to food poisoning by E. coli that I need to be able to trust the grocery store at which I buy my lettuce and the producers who supply it to them. The more vulnerable I am, the more important it is that those on whom I am depending are trustworthy. To take another example, imagine that I am desperately ill, and that I can be healed only through the highly specialized expertise of a particular surgeon, who is one of the few people in the world with the skills to perform this procedure. I have no other options, no one from whom I could even seek a second opinion. My vulnerability requires that I place a great deal of trust in this surgeon, hoping that she will prove worthy of that trust. Indeed, the vulnerability of patients is one of the primary reasons why we think that health care providers must adhere to high standards of trustworthiness. The same applies to teachers, particularly those responsible for young students. The vulnerability of the students has implications for the requisite trustworthiness of those in whose care they have been placed. We can make similar claims about those responsible for caring for the elderly, or overseeing their finances. 5

Vulnerability is complex. I am vulnerable not just to bodily or economic harm, but to what we might call social harm. If I am a newly hired junior employee at a contentious meeting with my entire department, I am vulnerable to all kinds of harm, including professional and social exclusion. What makes me

vulnerable is the fact that others hold power over me in some way. Generally speaking, the more power someone has over me, the more important it is for me to be able to trust them. This is why although trustworthiness is a virtue that everyone needs, it is an especially important virtue for anyone who holds power over others. The more powerful I am, the more vulnerable others are to me, and the more they risk in trusting me. The fact that leaders standardly hold power over others, making those others vulnerable to them in morally significant ways, is a key part of why trustworthiness is especially important in a leader. But there is, of course, much more to be said about what the virtue of trustworthiness actually involves.

One thing that seems true of trustworthiness is that it is surprisingly hard to pin down its key features. Consider reliability. Probably it is impossible to be trustworthy without also being reliable in crucial respects. Still, being reliable does not by itself make a person trustworthy. After all, an awful boss may be reliably awful. And while trustworthy people follow through on their promises and commitments, surely a villain who follows through on his promise to kidnap and rob you is not thereby rendered trustworthy in the moral sense. A virtuously trustworthy person's promises and commitments have to be oriented in a certain way, not just reliably kept.9

9 For an account of trustworthiness that relies heavily on the connection with commitments, see Katherine Hawley, *How to Be Trustworthy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

10 Karen Jones defends an account of trustworthiness that emphasizes the significance of doing what others are counting on you to do. See Jones, "Trustworthiness" *Ethics* 123 (October 2012): 61-85.

Trustworthiness seems to be in part about meeting other people's reasonable expectations.10 I have a reasonable expectation of the villain that he *not* kidnap and rob me, so although he follows through on his promise to do otherwise, he is nevertheless failing to meet a more fundamental 6

expectation that he not treat me unjustly. This suggests that in order to make sense of trustworthiness, we have to delve into the question of what we can reasonably expect from each other. Doing so will also help with the task of explaining how the virtue of trustworthiness operates in leadership contexts. But before

we explore the link between trust and reasonable expectations, let us note one more very important feature of trustworthiness, which is its connection to honesty.

I will take it for granted that honesty and trustworthiness are distinguishable virtues, but there is little doubt that they are closely connected.11 It is hard to imagine a dishonest person being regarded as trustworthy and indeed, truth-telling seems to be a central part of trustworthiness. This, however, doesn't clarify much, since what it means to tell the truth is itself quite complicated. If truth-telling is crucial to trustworthiness as I am supposing it to be, then it is important to try to get clearer on what truth-telling is and how it fosters trust. For this task, I will draw on Immanuel Kant.

11 For a highly readable account of the virtue of honesty, see Christian Miller, Honesty: The Philosophy and Psychology of a Neglected Virtue (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023).

12 Much has been written about Kant's account of lying. My own thinking has been especially influenced by Christine Korsgaard, "The Right to Lie: Kant on Dealing with Evil" in *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 133-158, James Mahon, "Kant on the Perfect Duty to Others Not to Lie" *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 14:4 (2006): 652-685, and Mahon, "Lies, Candor, and Reticence" *Kantian Review* 7 (2003): 102-133. I also take up Kant on lying in *Choosing Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020) 176-184.

Kant is famous (in some quarters, infamous) for his absolute insistence on the moral wrongness of lying.12 In an essay with the very clunky title, "On a Supposed Right to Lie for Philanthropic Concerns," Kant apparently goes so far as to say that we cannot even lie to a would-be murderer, who appears at our door and asks us for the whereabouts of a friend who has just taken shelter inside. This, of course, defies common sense and makes Kant seem either absurdly out of touch or else a terrible friend, since he seems to prize truth-telling more than his friend's life. Fortunately for Kant, his actual view is more nuanced and also far more plausible than this. It is true that Kant prizes truth-telling very highly and his reasons are instructive for understanding the role that truth-telling plays in the virtue of trustworthiness. 7

Kant does indeed think that it is wrong to lie to people. There are different ways of framing his reasons, depending on which formulation of his primary moral principle, the categorical imperative, we want to use. For purposes of this paper, I will use what is standardly called the humanity formulation, which instructs us to always act in such a way that we treat humanity (whether in ourselves or in others) as an end, and never as a mere means. In less technical terms, this principle tells us that we must always respect others as rational beings, capable of making their own decisions in light of their own priorities and goals. This, Kant thinks, rules out manipulating them or otherwise using them for my own purposes, regardless of what those purposes are. When I lie to you, I am presenting you with a false view of reality with the goal of getting you to act as I want you to act. For example, suppose that I am a manufacturer of mattresses. In order to get you to purchase one of my expensive new mattresses, I create an advertising campaign that makes numerous sophisticated, but unsubstantiated scientific claims about the relationship between my fancy mattress and the quality of sleep. If I present those claims to you as the evidence of conclusive, impartial research, you will have a false picture of the value of my mattress, a false picture which leads you to buy a mattress that you probably would not buy if you knew the truth. This, for Kant, is straightforwardly manipulative, and also straightforwardly wrong. I am using you as a mere means to achieve my end of making money, and I do so by thwarting your rational capacities. Kant thinks I have no right to do this.

Now we all know the difference between a sales pitch and a scientific paper presentation. Most of us in the market for a mattress aren't necessarily expecting to get a truthful answer from the salesperson. That doesn't mean that the salesperson isn't acting wrongly in trying to manipulate us, but Kant thinks it matters whether the person on the receiving end of the false information is (a) expecting a truthful answer and (b) being reasonable in that expectation. Let us take up (a) first. We say many things over the course of a day that are not, strictly speaking, true, but also don't seem to 8

count as lies. For instance, it is convention in the United States to offer "How's it going?" as a casual greeting when encountering acquaintances. It is also a convention to answer that question with something to the effect of "Fine, thanks." This is generally the correct answer whether or not you happen to be fine

at the moment you say it. But it isn't a lie because the person asking you "how's it going?" as he walks by isn't really asking you a serious question with the expectation of getting a truthful answer. The same would be true if that conversation were being held on stage as part of a play. Not everything that comes out of our mouth purports to be the truth. When that is the case, a false statement is not a lie, even by Kant's standards.

Turning to (b), we should also notice that people do not automatically have a right to every piece of information that they seek. I may ask you for your bank account number or personal details about your dinner date last night, but that hardly means that you owe me the answer. Truth-telling does not require saying everything you know to be true. (Indeed, Kant himself noted that that total candor would be sheer madness.) What it does mean, for Kant, is that when you are saying something that you purport to be true and that your listener reasonably expects to be true, it does need to be true.

This may not seem to help much with the murderer at the door, since presumably he doesn't have a reasonable claim to have his question about your friend's whereabouts answered. What is odd (and often missed) about Kant's example is that this particular murderer seems to have some sort of official authority to demand an answer from you about your friend's whereabouts. He is not just some random murderous fellow. This is why Kant thinks you are required to answer him, and moreover, required to answer him truthfully. If he were just some random murderer, you'd have more options, including punching him or slamming the door in his face.

Another key detail about this example is that although Kant does say that you have to answer the officially asked question truthfully, you don't owe it to the murderous fellow doing the 9

asking. The duty you owe is a duty to what Kant calls "humanity as such," which we might just describe as the moral community more generally. The would-be murderer has forfeited his rightful personal claim to a truthful answer from you. But for Kant, truth-telling is something that we owe to the community more generally. This is because Kant thinks that truth-telling is foundational to the mere possibility of social organization.

For Kant, truth-telling is central to our relationships with others in two ways. First, it is crucial for interpersonal relationships. Telling others the truth in response to their reasonable questions, for Kant, is a way of interacting respectfully with them as fellow rational agents. Indeed, Kant's account of lying even rules out so-called white lies, where the aim of lying is to bring some benefit or prevent some harm to the person on the other end of the lie. White lies, on this Kantian picture, may be well-intended, but they are paternalistic in a morally troubling way. They presume that the other person is incapable of handling truthful information and that we are in a better position to know and act on their interests than they are. This, for Kant, is a deeply disrespectful way of dealing with other people, even if we mean well.

Second, truth-telling is also crucial for the broader kind of background trust that I described earlier in the paper. In order to be able to move through the world in any kind of functional way, I have to be able to trust that other people are representing the world as they believe it to be, that the bridge across which I am walking is indeed safe, that the news headlines I skim in the morning are indeed at least somewhat reflective of what is happening elsewhere in the world, that the medicine I take with my lunch is what the pharmacist has said it is and will do what my physician has said it will do. This is impossible if people are constantly mispresenting their thoughts and opinions. I need to be able to trust that the construction engineers and journalists and health care providers are in fact telling the truth as best they know it. Otherwise, it is hard to see how I can function in the world. Kant points out that we have only two ways of increasing our understanding of the world: our own 10

experiences and what philosophers call the testimony of others.13 Needless to say, my own experiences are limited, meaning that much of what I know depends on testimony. I need other people to be truthful in their testimony about the world, and equally, they need me to be truthful in mine. I have to be able to act on what they tell me is true, and they need to be able to act on what I tell them is true. In this sense, truth-telling can be understood as a kind of social practice. It is something we do (or fail to do) together.

13 "Ethical Duties Concerning Truthfulness" *Lectures on Ethics,* trans. Louis Infield (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1963), p. 227.

This strongly suggests that a culture of truth-telling is fundamental for any organization. Insofar as members of an organization need to be able to act on information that others give them, it is obviously paramount that the information be true. But of course, not everyone occupies the same position with respect to information. Some people know more than others, some people know things that are especially important to the functioning of the group or the health and welfare of its members. The engineer who signs off on the safety of the bridge, the federal official who signs off on the safety of a medication—these are roles that require an especially scrupulous attention to truth, particularly when the information in question is difficult for others to find for themselves. A philosopher who does not tell the truth is morally reprehensible, but unlikely to cause injury or death through her lies. The construction manager for a bridge and the maintenance supervisor for a fleet of commercial aircraft are in a different position.

I said earlier that it is because leaders wield power that trustworthiness is an especially important virtue for them. A leader's failure to be a truth-teller standardly does greater damage to an organization than similar failures on the part of others. But there is more to it than that. Truth-telling in interpersonal relationships is an expression of respect for the other person's capacities and prerogatives for action. In that sense, telling someone the truth is a way of demonstrating trust in them, as well as exhibiting trustworthiness oneself. It is a mutually reinforcing process, confirming 11

each party's commitment to treating the other as they deserve to be treated. In situations where there are power differentials in play, truth-telling on the part of the leader expresses a kind of confidence in the rational and moral capacities of the other members of the organization. This is important for treating them as moral equals, even if they are not equals within the organization. Truth-telling on the part of a leader is a way of acknowledging that the leader's position of power does not imply any kind of moral superiority over the other members of the organization. Everyone has a reasonable expectation of truth from each other, but power differentials mean that truth-telling carries different significance, depending on who is undertaking it. The easier it is for a person to get away with lying, the more that an explicit commitment to truth-telling signifies, not just about their moral characters but about the way they are prepared to relate to other people. We feel respected when people are straight with us. We feel even more

respected when people who have power over us are straight with us because it tells us that they take us seriously.

Leaders, thus, need to be truth-tellers if they are to relate properly to the people over whom they have power, on the grounds that doing so is essential to engaging with them respectfully. The more power that a leader exercises, the more it matters that they can be counted on to provide truthful answers to reasonable questions. But there is a further claim to be made, which is that trustworthiness requires more of leaders than answering questions truthfully. Leaders are, of course, often in possession of information that other members of the organization are not, meaning that they have to decide what they will and will not share. The moral virtue of trustworthiness also involves what we might describe as moral skill at transparency. A good leader must be able to make wise decisions about the appropriate type and degree of transparency about the information in their possession.

Needless to say, complete transparency is an unreasonable expectation of anyone, if nothing else because we are not always at liberty to share information that we have in our possession. 12

Suppose you know that a third party has told me something in confidence. You would like to know what it is, and so you ask me to reveal it. Obviously, it would be wrong for me to do so. You have no right to the information, and I have an obligation to keep it confidential. Even if I am free to share the information, as I might be if it is just about myself, the mere fact that you want to know something does not automatically mean that you are entitled to have your question answered. This is the difference between an expectation that someone tell you the truth and a *reasonable* expectation that someone tell you the truth.

What kind of transparency people can reasonably expect from the leader of an organization will, of course, depend on the organization and the positions of people within it. A boss or department chair knows things that they do not have the legal or moral authority to share with other members of the group. But beyond that, there is a great deal of gray area about how leaders should treat the voluntary disclosure of information. How transparent should a virtuously trustworthy leader be?

The Kantian considerations that I have been employing thus far seem to suggest that leaders should err on the side of transparency. This is because in general, being transparent promotes respectful relationships with other people. When other people understand our motives and our decisions, they are in a better position to act on the information that we give them. Lying to someone restricts their agency by limiting their options for action. The liar manipulates the target's conception of the world, so that the target will act as the liar desires. Reticence, or a lack of transparency, need not be manipulative in this way (although it can be). But reticence about information can also restrict a person's capacity for action. This is obvious to us in interpersonal contexts. Suppose I learn that my friend's significant other is having an affair, but I keep that information to myself. We might disagree over whether or not this is the sort of thing that a friend is morally obligated to disclose to another friend, but it is clear that in not sharing the information, I 13

block certain courses of action that my friend might be otherwise inclined to take. This, I take it, is always a morally significant consideration. Other people's capacity for agency should matter to us, even if we decide that in a given situation, it is better to keep information to ourselves.

What does this mean for leaders? I have already said that it cannot mean an obligation to be completely transparent, but I think that it does generate compelling reasons for leaders to be as transparent as possible with the other members in their organization. In doing so, they make it possible for all members of the organization to employ their own judgment as fully as they can. It thus enhances the moral agency of each member of the organization. A leader who trusts other people with information enables them to act differently and more reflectively than they might otherwise have done. It acknowledges their standing as fellow rational beings, capable of using information well in their decisions. It expresses a willingness to trust them to use the information for the good of the organization.

Needless to say, transparency carries risks. People do not always live up to our trust in them. Some members of the organization may misuse the information that they are given. Avoiding this risk by keeping a tight hold on information may seem like the safer course of action. And yet, there are also risks to a lack of transparency. As with the case of the friend, blocking off courses of action can prevent agents

from realizing their full capacities. And just as the friend who wasn't told about the affair may later feel betrayed not just by their partner but by the person who failed to tell them what they knew, so an employee may come to feel betrayed by a leader who failed to tell them something that, had they known it, would have altered their course of action.

Not all leadership roles permit widespread transparency. In such cases, a trustworthy leader will ensure that the other members of the organization understand why the leader cannot be as free with information as they might like. Even when transparency about a particular piece of information 14

isn't an option, it is often possible to explain *why* transparency isn't an option, thereby increasing transparency about the processes involved with such decision-making.

Both truth-telling and transparency can be uncomfortable at times, even painful. And yet, they are crucial for our ability to engage in shared projects, whether that is at the level of a university department or at the level of a sovereign nation. We can only cooperate effectively if we can trust each other, and we can trust each other only if we make ourselves worthy of that trust. Leaders, I have suggested, have a particular obligation to make themselves worthy of the trust of the other members of their organization. I will conclude with some remarks about the importance for leaders of putting their trustworthiness on display.

In Jane Austen's novel, *Pride and Prejudice,* Elizabeth Bennet says of the honorable Fitzwilliam Darcy and the unscrupulous George Wickham: "There certainly was some mismanagement in the education of those two young men. One has got all the goodness, and the other all the appearance of it."14 Although her more charitable sister Jane responds by remarking that she never thought Darcy's manners to be all that bad, Elizabeth has a point. Darcy is trustworthy, but his arrogant manners toward Elizabeth and her neighbors in the town of Meryton hardly encourage others to give him the benefit of the doubt. It is not that Austen prioritizes manners over moral character; she clearly does not. Wickham is indeed a scoundrel. But that doesn't mean that Darcy is flawless. It *is* a failing in him that his social interactions with strangers do not reflect his inner character, and Elizabeth is correct to criticize him for it.

14 Chapter 27.

As I pointed out earlier, a leader who is in fact trustworthy but who does not appear trustworthy will be at a disadvantage in that leadership role. Darcy's arrogant manners prevent him from forming relationships with the people of Meryton, relationships that would benefit them all. Notably, Darcy does not behave this way with his staff and with his tenants. He engages with them 15

respectfully, taking seriously their roles in keeping his estate functioning. It is clear in the novel that he trusts his staff and he expresses that trust in his day-to-day interactions with him. They, in turn, regard him as trustworthy in ways that the residents of Meryton do not and indeed, cannot, given his detached and even hostile manners. He does not appear to be someone in whom they can place their trust, and so they do not even try. Darcy may indeed be trustworthy, but if no one is willing to risk placing their trust in him, his trustworthiness can hardly be called a virtue at all. Trust, of course, is built over time, after repeated interactions that enable the parties to understand what they are risking by making themselves vulnerable to each other. Darcy's reserve makes it impossible for others to start this process, thereby making it impossible for him to be trustworthy in their eyes.

What lesson can a leader who aspires to be trustworthy draw from this? Not, I hope, the lesson that trustworthiness is entirely about appearances. Rather, the lesson is that trustworthiness begins with appearances. A leader who wishes to become trustworthy in the eyes of others must invite that trust through their actions and behaviors. Like Darcy, they must make efforts to engage in respectful relationships with the people whose trust they hope to have. Trust, as we know, must be earned. The more people have to lose by trusting us, the more work we have to do to earn that trust. In this paper, I have argued that truth-telling and transparency are crucial to being trustworthy. This is because they are fundamental to the respectful relationships necessary for trust to be built. We build trust in others by doing the hard work to become worthy of it ourselves.