
Magnitudes: Leadership for Something Greater than Yourself

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I wonder about the presuppositions when voices are raised concerning the fragmentation of society and problems of disconnectedness.¹ At the heart of these concerns is a philosophical anthropology, i.e., one's beliefs about what it means to be human. What is it exactly that is fragmented or disconnected? It is probably incumbent on me to disclose my own beliefs before proposing a response.

I subscribe to the belief (not original with me) that human beings are already disconnected or fragmented at birth. (See, e.g., Schaeffer, 1982, 1–114, especially at 69 ff.; Bonhoeffer, 1937/1959, 77–85; Buber, 1938/1972, 118–205, at 177ff.; von Rad, 1972, 96 and 101.) Each of us is born broken along four dimensions: we are born broken from the natural world (red in tooth and claw), from other human beings, within our own minds, and from the divine ground of being. In other words, we are broken physically, socially, psychologically, and spiritually. This is one way for me to understand the doctrine of original sin—not as something anyone did, but as a condition of being separated or fundamentally disconnected.

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Which is not to say that humans are incapable of closing

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these fissures. For instance, we find ways to engage in collaborative, cooperative, and coordinated activities all the time, when we agree on common goals and work together to achieve them. In fact, it is cooperative activities such as these that interest those of us in leadership studies.

The field of leadership studies exists in part to examine the processes of influence behind episodes of coordinated, collective behavior. Only in the last thirty or forty years has this examination become conscious of itself as a separate academic enterprise. Before then, of course, many writers noticed leadership and tried to make sense of what was happening. Sadly, those who engage in leadership studies today often neglect the rich heritage that is available. I am not convinced there is a leadership book published in the last twenty years to surpass Aristotle's *Politics*. I ensure that my students read and discuss Niccolò Machiavelli's short book *The Prince*.

In any case, the literature on leadership in the twentieth century quickly incorporated the fact that leadership comprises not only what the leader is (i.e., a leader's "traits") or what the leader does (i.e., a leader's "behaviors"), but leadership also includes a relationship with the one we call the follower. Leader and follower find themselves participating in what Georg Simmel called a sociological form (1971), a relationship which can serve as its own object of investigation. Beyond this, of course, the participants in leadership belong to a tangled network of mutual influences, including rival leaders, out-groups, and beneficiaries who may not belong to the relationship directly. Still, the unit of analysis is the leader and the follower together—a relationship of mutual regard, mutual dependence, and mutual influence.

Here we find a unification between two separate individuals, two social actors who adopt a common plan of action. They close the gap, as it were, for the sake of shared purpose or *homonoia*—a like-mindedness closely akin to what lawyers used to call "a meeting of the minds." So here, in episodes of leadership, we see the attempt by social actors to overcome their disconnectedness and join together to do something. Often, there can be said to be a charisma of purpose, in which the course of action is the "purpose" and leadership is simply the means for accomplishing that end. We find in leadership the

rudiments of human effort to connect with one another and achieve something in the world.

This sounds very nice. But I happen to agree with Barbara Kellerman (2004) who has written that leadership itself can be destructive. It can bring people together in order to harm outsiders, as in war, but it can also ruin the participants themselves, even when the ostensible purpose is benign. Not all leadership is wholesome. But then humans often seek to repair our inherent brokenness in ways that do not work—and even sometimes in ways that make matters worse. We rightly feel the existential homelessness or alienation, though our attempts at repair often go awry. I would contend that certain forms of Gnosticism (as Eric Voegelin used the term) were unsuccessful attempts to overcome anxieties and the sense of alienation. Because human beings do get things wrong, we could learn about leadership in the same way that physicians learn about health, namely, by examining injury and disease. Those of us in leadership studies could take a closer look at mob psychology, cults, toxic leadership, sclerotic elites, tyranny, demagogues, organized crime, and so forth.

Leadership can be harmful.

When I mention that I teach leadership studies, people often interpret this to mean that we are training students to become leaders. It sounds quite vocational. Students often think this is our mission. Donors often think this is our mission. I would refine this characterization a bit and say that leadership studies is not just about training the next generation of leaders, although development of leaders is a part of what we do; it is also in part about learning how to participate in leadership by following productively or choosing one's leader or resisting a leader gone bad. To this extent, we do address the *technê* of leadership, i.e., how to participate.

For some time, however, voices have been raised asking of leadership studies that they address the *telos* as well, weighing the question of "leadership for what?" (see, e.g., Bennis, 2007, 3). Shouldn't we involve ourselves in coming to understand the purposes of leadership? Without that understanding, people like me stand accused of being fixated on techniques of persuasion, as though the purposes of leadership do not matter. Bill George once wrote: "To become a leader, it is essential that you first answer the question, 'Leadership

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for what purpose?’ If you lack purpose and direction in leading, why would anyone want to follow you?” (2004, 31). That seems to be a reasonable question. These voices argue that you wouldn’t teach a child karate without trying to explain when and where it would be appropriate to use those skills. So why not also in leadership studies?

In response, I assign the two Platonic dialogues named for Alcibiades. Many scholars know it. In *Alcibiades I*, the author depicts the first encounter between Socrates and a young Alcibiades, whose ambition to dominate others knows no limit. He would rule the world. And he would happily begin by seducing your wife. In a familiar manner, Socrates quickly establishes that Alcibiades doesn’t know much about governing. And it seems as though he doesn’t much care. Or, more precisely, he trusts himself to figure it out as he goes along. Socrates even accuses the young man of being wedded to stupidity (Plato, 2003, 26).

So what does Socrates advise? He urges Alcibiades to do at least these two things: (1) care for his soul and (2) exercise due piety to the gods. In other words, begin the process of interknitting yourself, bringing some coherence to your life and then bringing yourself into attunement with the *cosmos*. You belong to something larger than yourself. Seek guidance as you embed yourself in the world.

When he finally took command during the Peloponnesian War, Alcibiades, as we know, fled to the other side (i.e., Sparta). Then he had to flee Sparta. Thucydides goes so far as to blame him for the defeat of Athens in the Peloponnesian War (Waterfield, 2009, 67) At the very least, Alcibiades personifies imperial Athens, so that his rootlessness and loose living are a kind of metaphor.

What interests me most appears in the dialogue known as *Alcibiades II*. Here, Socrates encounters the young man again, not long after their first conversation and still a long time before he ever assumes a leadership position. Alcibiades is heading toward the temple in order to propitiate the gods to do his bidding. “See, Socrates, I am becoming pious!” We can imagine the philosopher shaking his head in dismay. “No, no, no—you have it backwards: the whole point was to bring yourself into alignment with the wishes of the gods. Not the

other way around.” The prospective leader has to come to realize that there is something, in the words of Richard Weaver (1948), anterior, exterior, and superior to oneself.

One way I invite undergraduates to reflect on their purposes is a brief lesson I call “magnitudes,” and it goes something like this. In the literature on leadership, there is already plenty of advice for a leader to serve the followers and mind their development (e.g., Greenleaf, 2002). So of course the leader has to think beyond the self, not only tactically when forming bonds of *homonoia*, but also generally, for the sake of the followers’ well-being. Beyond this, however, each of us belongs to certain other relationships, such as families, professions, organizations, and communities, and they make claims on us as well. They should. As we undertake leadership, we ought to be serving each of these collectives in some fashion.

No matter how broad the sociological magnitude our leadership serves, we belong to an even larger magnitude. St. Augustine and Karl Jaspers (1949/1953) wrote about humanity as a whole, humankind, the human race—not only everyone around the world, but throughout time, the past and the future, in one shared purpose. And so I ask students: how does your leadership advance the cause of human flourishing?

But wait, humans have also constructed for ourselves a prosthetic world, a “smartworld,” a *nöosphere* (Vernadsky, 1945) composed of houses and roads and wires and libraries and DaVinci’s *Mona Lisa*. We owe something to the civilization we have built up around ourselves. What are we going to do for that?

Take it a step further: we also belong to the biosphere, the living planet, as one species among many, and it is at the very least in our interest to live in some kind of harmony with our surroundings. One need not accept the Gaia hypothesis to see that we belong to a vast, intricate, and bountiful system. Due respect is required—for sustainability, if nothing else (see Redekop, 2011).

We don’t have to stop there. We could talk about the infosphere which forms us physiologically and psychologically—selfish genes and memes, coding and data, the *logos* that orders the universe (Floridi, 2006). Eventually, we open out onto Arthur Lovejoy’s *Great Chain of Being* (1936/2009), every-

The central question: how one's leadership will advance the rest of creation?

thing seen and unseen, but by this point we probably exceed most powers of imagination. The point is that I would like my students to reflect on the ways in which their participation in leadership fits into the rest of creation. What is anterior, exterior, and superior to yourself that your leadership will serve?

If the truth is true and if my students seek the truth, I have faith that it will find them and bring them opportunities to heal a broken world in ways that will surprise and astonish them.

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