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The Selfishness of a Good Leader

In the many studies of humanity, there is a relatively common idea that people are inherently selfish. However, there are multiple ways in which one can be selfish rather than it always having a negative connotation. It is the people that are able to realize the differences in this selfishness that are able to create quality relationships that thrive off of mutual agreement. A leader is no different here. In order for someone to lead effectively, everyone must have the maximum amount of impact and gain on the groups involved. Additionally, in order to be considered a good leader, the actions of your leadership must be considered ethical as well. Any leader that can inspire their followers to do their best work is a major bonus to these previous criteria. A leader is someone who is able to utilize the drive of selfishness in others in order further their own personal ideals or goals.

The definition of a good leader is a rather fluent idea. Characteristics that one person may look for in a leader can be completely different from another person, and as such, this argument relies heavily on having a well-defined idea of what a good leader is. For example, someone may want a leader who is actively involved in processes while others want someone to be hands off and leave them to their work. But in order to be a truly good leader, these differences must be recognized, and adjustments must be made in order to provide each person with their ideal experience. A good leader is one that is able to adjust their own practices that enable the highest productivity from their followers. A good leader is also one that makes decisions based on what benefits the group most, including the decision on whether a solution is viable or not.

In order to properly discuss the idea that all people are inherently selfish requires a look into some psychology and even sociology. The common idea of Social Darwinism by Charles Darwin is “survival of the fittest”, or that those who are the best fit for the job will be the ones to prosper. In order for someone to survive, they must rely on their ability to provide a good or service to others. A common theme in today’s world is those that do not want to work toward providing a good or service, but simply do so in order to sustain or increase their way of life. The individual does not typically draw inspiration from outside sources, but rather an internal need for sustenance. As said by Adam Smith in *The Wealth of a Nation*, “It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves not to their humanity but to their self-love and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages” (Warsh). This further drives home the idea that people’s main goal is self-sustenance or improvement, rather than contributing the overall good of humanity. However, in completing tasks such as the butcher, brewer, and baker, the overall good of humanity is actually increased along with the individual’s situation. This would be a prime example of a two-way trade, or symbiotic relationship where one relies on the other which relies on another in order to achieve the maximum output possible for the group or community.

Selfishness can typically be divided into three different categories: positive, negative, and neutral selfishness. These categories can be described as such. Positive selfishness is typically found in mutual agreements or two-sided transactions. A good example of these sorts of selfishness is bartering, where both parties would prefer to have what the other party has, thus resulting in a net positive trade. In this situation, each person values the other’s object higher than their own, resulting in a growth of happiness overall. This still falls under selfishness as it does not necessarily negate the fact that one thing is preferred by a party, and they are doing what they can to achieve that object or goal. Secondly is negative selfishness, which is the most common use of the word. Negative selfishness is associated with a one-sided deal. That is to say that one party does not value the object or service at the given price and tries to give lower offers. Similarly, negative selfishness is commonly seen in social interactions where one party attempts to manipulate the other into giving them what they want rather than finding a compromise that benefits both sides. This idea of negative selfishness is typically categorized as beneficial to one and harmful to another, with one significant caveat. It is normal for negative selfishness to build over time resulting in guilt or regret, in this case the negative aspect of the selfishness grows even more as the acts are no longer benefitting either party, but negatively impacting both sides. Then there is neutral selfishness. Neutral selfishness is the middle ground where one person benefits and no one is directly impacted positively or negatively. This can be simple things like brushing your teeth in the morning, working out to improve overall health, practicing hobbies in their free time, etc... The individual that practices these sorts of activities or transactions benefits as a result of how they spend their time meanwhile no other person is directly impacted as a result.

These ideas are very relevant to someone who is looking to be a high-quality leader. As previously discussed, a good leader is someone that is able to adjust their own thinking and techniques to provide the most mutually beneficial environment possible. Unfortunately, some leaders will go the route of negative selfishness and manipulation in order to achieve their goals, but the most effective techniques reside in those that use a mixture of positive and neutral selfishness. Similar to the butcher, brewer, and baker example, there can be a situation where everyone mutually benefits from an arrangement. This can be difficult to arrange in a Westernized society as so many people have different priorities, but it can essentially come down to a common denominator of trading some sort of good or service for currency. Using the workplace as an example here, an employee will only work for a company if they deem their time as being worth the wage that is supplied. This relationship causes both the leader and the employee to be heavily reliant on each other for success. Should an employee not see the tradeoffs for their time as being beneficial to them, they will not produce any product. This then impacts the owner or leader by lowering their output, and ultimately their profit margins. In doing so, it can be seen that providing a high-quality work experience for the employees or giving plenty of compensation will result in both higher quality output and lead to increased income as well.

Altruistic leadership is the idea that a leader should guide others towards the goal of improving their own personal well-being. In a strictly theoretical world, this would be the ideal method of leadership, however in practice it tends to fall apart. Altruism is the idea that an action can be entirely selfless, or a service where the provider gains nothing and the receiver gains everything. One of the most widely thought of examples of this would be food drives or soup kitchen volunteering. While it should be clear that the argument is not that soup kitchens are bad, it should be analyzed as to why people volunteer their time. A common reasoning to volunteering time is because it makes the individual feel good about giving back to the community or providing a necessary service to those that are struggling. It is very simple to say that this act results a net positive in happiness as both the server and the recipient are gaining something, it feels inevitable to argue that volunteering is not altruistic. The volunteer gains the satisfaction of helping others, which is by definition, not selfless as they are gaining something from the interaction. This type of reasoning for doing deeds that seem selfless is often the motivation for doing such actions. As a result, it can be further argued that altruism does not exist in its purist form. Coming back to leading in an altruistic way, however, has its merits to attempt to recreate. Separation of personal gain and progress of another individual would allow for the ideal combination of involved management and hands-off leading styles.

A good leader is also one that utilizes charisma to their advantage. A charismatic leader according to Robert Solomon has many different ingredients that contribute toward being a good charismatic leader. These ingredients are that they must have a message with rhetorical persuasiveness, be able to play to the hopes, fears, and wishes of their following or audience, maintain a certain degree of enthusiasm with charm, intelligence, or sincerity, they must promote some sort of change, and somewhat resemble their predecessor (Solomon). These ingredients essentially boil down to one’s ability to motivate a group of people behind an idea or a cause. By being a charismatic leader, one is able to quickly adjust to the new position of leadership by taking general form from their predecessor and slightly altering some aspects in order to achieve the change that they wish to introduce. A great example of this would be the president of the United States, as they all follow precedents set by their predecessors while still trying to put their desired changes into practice. While a leader with charisma can be very effective in rallying people behind a cause, it can often times lead to a decrease in morale over time. This decrease is due to the reliance that the leader may have on their own charisma as the driving force for followers, rather than the combination of charisma and reaching milestones towards the goal or setting a seemingly unobtainable goal. The trust and rapport that is gained from being a charismatic leader is often not enough to solely drive the cause. Once a charismatic leader that may or may not have good intentions starts to run low on support, it is common to see them back down or step away from their role as a leader. This decrease in support causes the followers to no longer trust the leader and trends toward revolution and a change in leadership. While the leader may not want to give up yet, they must be able to make the appropriate decision or be negatively selfish.

When being a leader that relies heavily on their likability, it can often be a fine line between those who use their selfishness to their advantage or disadvantage. This is where the different aspects of selfishness come in to play. A leader that favors positive or neutral selfishness will very often find themselves trending toward the liking of their followers. This is because the amount of rapport between the two groups will grow in relation to how much each group benefits based on the decisions made amongst them. This type of leader is able to acknowledge that people are not purely driven by the want to complete a task, but rather by what that individual can receive in compensation for it. In admitting this disconnect between leader and follower or worker, a common ground is easily achieved where both parties can benefit. For this example, a worker that is compensated fairly for what they produce and is offered potential increases is far more likely to produce higher quality work than one that is undercompensated. Meanwhile a leader that inspires their followers or workers through these means will be able to reap the benefits of a higher quality project, thus increasing the profit margin or expanding to newer customers. In building this mutually beneficial relationship, other opportunities can grow as well, such as promotions, new projects, and increased responsibility. On the reverse, a leader that tends toward negative selfishness will very quickly become disadvantaged in their community. Negative selfishness leads to mistrust, lack of close connection, and very low morale. All of these are going to result in the followers no longer caring about what the goals are while motivation and productivity towards those goals plummets. This is not a healthy relationship between leader and followers, and ultimately shows the tropes of a failing leader.

Selfishness can have its positives and negatives, as most things do in life. But whether or not it is immoral to be selfish is a separate question. Like with most moral dilemmas, the answer is rarely ever a clear yes or no. This results in an analysis required of every single situation as they may arise. However, it is possible to argue in general terms. As described before, types of selfishness have a large impact on the reasoning for actions and the results that the participants receive. Negative selfishness can almost always be categorized as immoral due to its manipulative tendencies. These acts are designed to impact one party negatively, without providing any sort of compensation for that impact. Positive selfishness can similarly be categorized as moral as it increases the net happiness of all parties involved. These are designed to benefit everyone, and as such is universally considered the right thing to do based in almost all ethical theories. Neutral selfishness similarly has a net positive impact on the happiness of the group. This is because it typically restrains itself to only impacting one individual or party rather than having to account for the positive versus negative impacts on the other parties. Ideals like utilitarianism, virtue ethics, and social contract theory would all agree that these acts of selfishness are generally moral actions. However, a large category of ethical analysis disagrees with these actions and argues that they are inherently immoral.

Deontological, or Kantian ethics, argues against the main premise of this idea that selfishness can be a moral action. In order for a selfish act to be a positive or neutral action, the persons involved must be essentially seen as pawns used to get what is desired. Despite both parties benefitting here, Emmanuel Kant disagrees with this premise. Kant says that people should never be treated as a means to an end, but rather that people are the end in and of themselves. “He who has it in mind to make a false promise to others sees at once that he wants to make use of another human being merely as a means, without the other at the same time containing in himself the end. For, he whom I want to use for my purposes by such a promise cannot possibly agree to my way of behaving toward him, and so himself contain the end of this action.” (Kerstein). This excerpt explains that someone who makes a false promise inherently uses the other party involved as a means to the end that the promiser has in mind, rather than the moral action of treating the other party as the end themselves. In the case of a manager and employee, we see that despite Kant’s thoughts, it is an everyday occurrence. Sticking with this example, a manager does not necessarily care which employee does the assigned task, but just that it gets done. This action would be using the employee as a means to an end, and therefore registered immoral. In order for this situation to be considered moral by Kantian ethics, it must be that a specific employee completes the assigned task for the benefit of that employee rather than the benefit of the manager. While in an ideal world, this would be the case that tasks are assigned for the reason of personal growth, but realistically, this rarely happens. Kantian ethic perspectives often tend to neglect other potential causes for decisions and only take into account the intent behind the action. As a result of this, this angle on analyzing real world issues is typically dismissive of multiple reasons behind decisions. The dismissal of other factors leads to a less than accurate analysis of cause and effect, especially when looking at the ethical analysis of actions.

As discussed before, acts of selfishness do not always require a negative result. The different types of selfishness can help determine whether or not an action can be classified as good or bad. Both positive and neutral selfishness can always tend to be seen as good actions while negative selfishness can mostly be classified as bad. When thinking of these different types of selfishness in application to leadership, it becomes clear that these almost directly align with the ethical idea of utilitarianism. Utilitarianism says that in order for an action to be ethical, it should increase the net happiness of society. This is essentially the same definition as positive selfishness, as in this type of selfishness, we see both sides benefitting from a trade, agreement, or actions. By these implications, it can easily be said that positive and neutral selfishness are ethical actions. Also, by extension, acting as a leader in these senses would be considered ethical as well due to the impacts played out on both parties. The leader would benefit by creating a supportive environment and the followers benefit by committing to the goal that is set forth by the leader.

Leaders can have many different styles. A relatively selfish leader, however, is not always a bad leader. What makes a leader good is their ability to form connections with their followers and drive their goals to success. This of course relies on the goals falling under a positive ethical analysis. These leaders are ones that are able to recognize that not every one of their followers is acting as a result of the leader’s innate abilities, but rather that these actions benefit the follower in some way. This acknowledgement allows for the mutual agreement that both parties can act together in benefit of both sides. Leaders that follow this idea are able to find what truly motivates their followers and use that to the advantage of the entire group.

Sources

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