

Ethics of Leadership

Corrupting Influences of Power

As you read the material for the next class, keep the questions below in mind. To answer these questions you will have to reflect critically on what you have read and possibly re-read important passages. Keep in mind that there are two basic kinds of information that you need to look for in the readings:

1. What are the main points or conclusions that an author accepts with respect to a particular issue?
2. What are the reasons, important considerations, and evidence that lead the author to accept that conclusion?

For our purposes, *it is information of the second sort that will be our primary concern* since our most basic task is to *evaluate the reasons and evidence* that are offered to support accepting one possible conclusion about an issue, rather than another.

Although I strongly suggest that you write out brief answers to these questions, you do not have to turn in written responses. You do, however, need to be prepared to speak intelligently to these issues in the next class meeting.

Reading

- Dean Ludwig & Clinton Longenecker, “The Bathsheba Syndrome: The Ethical Failure of Successful Leaders”, pp. 70–81.
- Plato, “The Ring of Gyges”, pp. 28–30.
- Howard Kurtz, with Michael Powell, “Bill Clinton’s Very Personal Reflections” (PDF on webpage).

Background

As we have seen, there appears to be a real need for persons to occupy positions of power and influence within a group. However, this immediately raises a concern about how they ought to use that power and influence. The readings here all show concern for how power and success can corrupt even the most admirable of leaders, leading them to pursue their own personal self-interest at the expense of the interests of the group and others in it. First, Dean Ludwig and Clinton Longenecker argue that the real source of corruption is that good people are typically not prepared to handle the increases in power associated with successful leadership. Meanwhile, the character Glaucon from Plato’s *Republic* tells the story of the “Ring of Gyges”, which provides an account of why corruption (including that discussed by Ludwig and Longenecker) occurs amongst the powerful. Finally, the case of former U.S. President Bill Clinton provides a well-known account of how power can lead to corrupt behavior. (Notice the unstated assumption in all these readings is that pursuit of self-interest is inappropriate for a leader. Next class, we will see an argument for why this is perfectly appropriate.)

Questions

1. According to Ludwig and Longenecker, what are the three areas that professional ethics focuses upon to explain corrupt behavior? Why do Ludwig and Longenecker believe that focus on these three is generally mistaken? What is the “Bathsheba Syndrome”, and why do they believe it provides the real explanation for corruption? Does the case of Bill Clinton illustrate this syndrome? If so, how? If not, why not?
2. What claims about human motivation does the story of “The Ring of Gyges” try to illustrate? (Hint: this should be familiar from our reading of Thomas Hobbes.) According to this story, why does corruption increase as power increases? Do you agree with its claims about human motivation and the corrupting influences of power?