ETHICS OF LEADERSHIP

Ethical Conventionalism

As you read the material for our 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 reading:

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 about these issues at our next class meeting.

Reading

- Ruth Benedict, "Anthropology and the Abnormal".
- Mary Midgley, "Trying Out One's New Sword".

Background

Recall that according to **ethical relativism** there are no objective and universal moral values, norms, and principles that apply to all people everywhere. Instead, this position affirms that whether it is morally right or wrong for a person to act in a certain way depends on (is relative to) either individual or cultural acceptance. So far, we have examined **ethical subjectivism** (morality is a matter of individual acceptance) and contrasted it with **"ethical cognitivism"** (morality is a matter of reasoned argument). This set of readings now considers the second form of moral relativism: **ethical conventionalism**. Ethical conventionalism argues that morality is a matter of social/cultural acceptance because morality is solely determined by the customs and laws of one's society/culture.

In these readings, Ruth Benedict presents data from her anthropological research on Native American tribal customs from which she draws her conclusion that ethical conventionalism is correct. Mary Midgley, meanwhile, rejects ethical conventionalism (which she disparagingly renames "moral isolationism") because it entails some unappealing consequences.

Questions

1. What does Benedict mean by saying that "morality differs in every society, and is a convenient term for socially approved habits" (p. 73)? How does she justify this claim? If Benedict is correct, how is a leader supposed to justify her actions to others?
2. Midgley claims that "moral isolationism would lay down a general ban on moral reasoning" (p. 83). How does she justify this claim? Why does Midgley believe that this is sufficient reason for rejecting moral isolationism?
3. According to Benedict, why can't I, as an American, criticize the bereavement traditions of the Kwakiutl or the *tsujigiri* of the feudal Japanese Samurai? Why does Midgley believe it is neither intolerant nor disrespectful for me, as an American, to criticize these foreign practices? On Midgley's account, what is needed for such criticism to show that I took the Kwakiutl and Samurai quite seriously without prejudice? (To answer this last question, consider how Midgley describes a conversation between a critic of *tsujigiri* and a possible defender of that practice.)