

ETHICS of LEADERSHIP

Conceptions of the Common Good

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

- Alex John London, "Threats to the Common Good: Biochemical Weapons and Human Subjects Research".

Background

Utilitarianism appears to rest on the assumption that the utility of the group should be distinguished from the utility of each of its individual members. One consequence of this view is that certain actions, typically regarded as immoral (e.g., torturing innocents), are permissible during emergencies if done to promote the greater good of the group. Michael Walzer's response to this problem was to treat it as an instance of a moral dilemma, where a leader must dirty their hands by sacrificing the interests of the few for the interests of the group. Alex John London presents a different approach to this issue, arguing that the conception of the common good endorsed by utilitarianism (and seemingly by Walzer) is problematic and that a more promising alternative exists. Do not let London's focus on the ethics of medical research during times of crises fool you. The application of his views to the general decision making of a leader during any emergency should quickly become apparent.

Questions

1. London argues that appeals to the common good necessarily involve three sorts of claims: a normative claim, a triggering condition, and a practical constraint. What are these and how do they come together to provide "very specific parameters on the kind of information that is relevant" (p. 18) in an appeal to the common good?
2. What is the corporate conception of the common good? What are the two types of interests that it contrasts? Why does this conception put a lot of emphasis on the triggering conditions and less emphasis on the practical constraints? Why does London believe this conception is both too broad and too narrow? Why does utilitarianism seem to endorse the corporate conception (hint: see endnote 18 on page 25)?
3. What is the generic interests conception of the common good? What are the two types of interests that it contrasts? Why does this conception put a lot of emphasis on the practical constraints and less emphasis on the triggering conditions? Would this conception of the common good permit torturing an innocent person to resolve a crisis?
4. London suggests that the corporate conception tends to encourage zero-sum thinking encouraging conflict whereas the generic interests conception favors non-zero sum problem solving for "integrative solutions" (p. 21). Why is that?