

“Leadership: A Provisional Definition”

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A leader, like an institution or culture, is typically understood in its instantiated rather than its essential form. We are reasonably confident that Congress, marriage, and the stock market are institutions, even though we are not especially sure what, exactly, defines an institution. Hip hop, Coco Chanel, and Dada all find expressions in culture, while culture itself remains elusive. And so it is with leaders. We are confident that Adolf Hitler, Martin Luther King, and Mao Tse Tung count in the category. Though we may not admire them all, we recognize that each indisputably was a leader. Still, as a purely conceptual matter, we know very little about what distinguishes these three men from other agents of social change.

There exists, of course, a massive body of work on leadership. The vast preponderance of such scholarship, however, focuses on what leaders do, what traits they exhibit, and what modes of persuasion they employ. We see them in motion, fully formed, exercising influence and attracting plaudits. The expressed purpose of this scholarship is to unearth the personal qualities and styles of leadership (Greenstein 2004; George and George 1998); assess the capacity of leaders to refashion the environments in which they work (Burns 2004; Edwards 2013; Hargrove 1989); fit leaders within broader theories of democratic representation by distinguishing, for instance, delegates from trustees (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000); catalogue the biographies of individuals we all would consider leaders (highlights include Robert Caro’s magisterial works on Lyndon Johnson and Edmund Morris’s on Theodore Roosevelt); and identify the structural conditions under which leaders exercise more or less influence (Skowronek 1997).

Rarely, though, does this research pause and define its terms. It speaks elliptically about leadership, making the class of individuals it wishes to call “leaders” opaque and undifferentiated. As Morris Fiorina and Kenneth Shepsle (1989, 17) recognized a quarter century ago, most studies of leadership are, from a theoretical standpoint, “neither precise nor reliable,” and the overall literature on the topic is sufficiently fragmented that “few formal deductive treatments of the subject have emerged.” Or as John Alquist and Margaret Levi argue in a recent literature review (2011, 3), “the theoretical understanding of the causal importance of leadership is still fairly impoverished,” in no small part because the concept of leadership itself is “vague” and “contested.” Our definitions of leaders are akin to definitions dogs as animals with four legs. They are accurate, as far as they go, but they do not go nearly far enough.

In this chapter, we try to add some conceptual clarity to the discussion. We do so in two steps. First, we characterize, rather axiomatically, basic criteria that any definition of leadership must satisfy. After illustrating some of the deficiencies of existing definitions, we then present our own. In it, we suggest that a leader distinguishes herself by: the objectives that she extols; the followers who not only revere her, but who willingly take actions that advance these objectives; and the ways in which she comes to personify these objectives. To be a leader, all of these conditions must be met. Should

¹ A paper for presentation at the University of Virginia conference on “Leadership in American Politics,” June 2-3, 2014. If our definition of leadership is provisional, so is this draft. Comments welcome!

any one of these criteria not be satisfied, an individual, no matter how influential, relinquishes her status as leader.

From the outset, we want to be clear about our own objectives for this chapter. We do not endeavor to explain how one can reliably identify leaders in the material world. We have little to say about the very real challenges of detection, except insofar as we distill a minimal understanding of what one ought to look for.² We also do not evaluate the impacts of leaders on the real world. We do not argue that leadership is indispensable for the realization of social order, nor do we require that the actions of leaders and their followers are in any sense “good.” Our objectives are more circumscribed than all of this. We hope to provide some conceptual clarity about the meaning of leadership, and to characterize what it requires both of those who exercise it and those who stand enthralled by it. If we can accomplish this much, we think, we will have done some good.

I. Definitional Criteria

Given the pervasive lack of conceptual clarity about leadership along with the pervasive sense, which we share, that leaders constitute vital—though not unique—agents of social change, it is worth pausing for a moment before offering a formal definition. In this section, we distill some basic criteria that any definition, very much including our own, must satisfy. We offer five, three of which are conceptual in nature, two of which concern their empirical regularities, and all of which are listed in Table 1. All, though, are deliberately cast in very general terms in order to allow for the possibility that leaders inhabit diverse areas of life.

Table 1: Definitional Criteria

Conceptual Criteria	Empirical Criteria
Relationality	Exceptionality
Normative Distinction	Publicity
Exclusivity	

We begin with the conceptual criteria, which appear in the left column of Table 1. The first requires that leadership be understood in relational terms. As Eric Beerbohm (2014, 2) notes, leadership is a “relational property between one agent and a set of agents.” Leaders are not leaders for the traits that they exhibit or the authority—formal or otherwise—that they possess. People are not born leaders. Nor do they become leaders through some training regimen or by studying the habits of past leaders. Nor do they acquire the status of leader simply by virtue of their election or assignment to some post. Rather, leaders become leaders because of the relationships that they foster and maintain with followers. It is through the relationships with followers that they cultivate,

² To be sure, the well-meaning empiricist who is equipped with a conceptual definition may fail to identify the true leaders who live among us. Corroborating evidence of leadership simply may not exist, while leaders and followers deliberately misrepresent their true intentions and relationships, making it impossible, as an observational matter, to sort leadership from the many other forces that order our social, economic, and political lives.

and the unique opportunities of influence that subsequently arise, that leadership arises. Any definition of leadership, as such, must recognize and then characterize the relationships between leaders and followers.

Second, a definition of leader must allow for normative distinctions about the publicly expressed ends that leaders seek. Rather than accepting any and all ends and focusing exclusively on means, a definition of leadership must have something to say about the purposes to which it is put. It need not distinguish “good” from “bad” ends (though it may). Nor need it require that leaders pursue “moral” objectives rather than “immoral” ones (though it might). All that we require is that the definition eschew agnosticism and embrace partiality. Hardwired in the definition itself must be some bounds on the variable goals that intermittently motivate leaders and that find their translation into action through the actions of followers.

Third, a definition of leadership must distinguish leaders from other agents of change, such as statesmen, martyrs, tyrants, or organizers. Too often, leaders represent anyone who advances social change. And leadership—the essential task of leaders—becomes synonymous with power or influence or office holding. But to meet this criterion, a definition of leadership cannot be so capacious as to apply to anyone who exercises influence, captures public attention, or sits in a position of authority. Rather, it must identify a subset of such people operating in a subset of contexts and times.³ Conceptually, the definition must isolate those individuals nurturing those relationships (see criterion #1 above) that uniquely apply to leaders—that manifest as leadership.

The final two criteria, which appear in the second column of Table 1, reference empirical regularities about leadership. The first follows from the third conceptual criterion and concerns the exceptional nature of leadership. Leaders are rare, just as leadership is precarious. Few individuals ever become leaders; and even among those who do, the status of leader is never assured. Definitions that seek to democratize the incidence of leadership—insisting that we all have the potential to be leaders; or that we all, in one domain of life or another, exercise leadership—invariably miss what sets Lincoln, King, and Mao apart not only from the rest of humanity but from the subset of individuals who expressly seek to change the world we inhabit. Similarly, definitions that cast individuals as perennial leaders overlook leadership’s fleeting nature.

Finally, leaders are known. Rather than skulking in the shadows or organizing behind closed doors, leaders, whether anointed or ordained, stand before their public. They do not merely facilitate change. They come to embody change, and they do so for all to see. There are no hidden leaders, no unrecognized leadership. Leadership is not exercised “behind the scenes.” Rather, leaders perform in the light of day. And followers, for their part, beckon and laud not just the chosen ends of leadership, but the leaders themselves. Leaders not only speak to a public. They themselves are public.

These five criteria establish what we expect of any definition of leadership. To be sure, an insistence that leaders be understood in relational terms, accommodate specific

³ To say that a definition of leadership must distinguish leaders from other agents of social change, however, is not to say that an individual cannot be both a leader and another type of agent of social change, such as a statesman. Rather, it means that the exercise of leadership is not coterminous with the exercise of statesmanship. For in a particular moment and domain, an individual can only exercise one method of social change, even if, as an empirical matter, an individual operates as a leader in one moment or domain and a statesman (or other type of ruler) in another.

kinds of ends, differ conceptually from other agents of change, and, as an empirical matter, be rare and public leaves ample room for competing definitions. But fail any one, as plenty do, and a definition of leadership itself runs aground.

II. Existing Definitions

Without pausing to clarify that they mean by leadership, scholars often proceed straight to delineating the qualities that individual leaders supposedly exhibit. Still, the literature is not entirely bereft of definitions. Broadly speaking, such definitions tend to fall into one of three categories: consequentialist, functionalist, and essentialist. While definitions within all categories have their strengths, many of which are suited for particular purposes, most, though not all, fail at least one of our evaluative criteria.

1. Consequentialist Definitions

Scholars often define leaders by the extraordinary actions that they take. Leaders see a higher purpose or possibility that is lost upon others, and they then take actions, often a great risk and sacrifice, in order to realize that purpose. Consequences, then, function as a sort of litmus test for leadership, separating true from faux leaders. While plenty of people claim to be leaders, and plenty more resemble leaders, genuine leaders brandish their credentials by doing—and, more accurately, instigating the doing of—extraordinary things.⁴

James Read and Ian Shapiro (2014) provide a recent example of such work. Read and Shapiro celebrate the work of leaders who see conflicts as positive sum, where others see only zero-sum outcomes, and then take the rather extraordinary step of strengthening the bargaining position of their adversary in order to demonstrate “hope for a positive future,” albeit at great personal risk. Leaders distinguish themselves by realizing outcomes that, under standard norms and protocols of political engagement, would seem impossible. By defying normal principles of bargaining arrangements, Read and Shapiro’s leaders break through impasses and realize mutually beneficial outcomes.

Leadership, by this definition, clearly satisfies both of the empirical criteria: exceptionality and publicity. The empathy and self-sacrifice required of Read and Shapiro’s leaders certainly make them exceptional; and the “performative ingredient” of their labors puts them squarely in the public spotlight. Moreover, to the extent that it focuses on the mutual gains to be realized between warring states, their definition also satisfies the second conceptual criterion: the distinction between objectives.

It is on the first and third conceptual criteria that this definition, like so many others, founders. Leaders are not intrinsically defined by the relations that they hold with followers. Rather, “successful” leaders are ones who cultivate certain kinds of relations with their adversaries. Moreover, leaders under this definition are not obviously different from other individuals—statesmen or organizers, for instance—who also settle conflict. The word “leader” operates as a generic type of ruler, while the specifics are intended to identify what such an individual can do in order to advance the public good.

⁴ Of course, empiricists who employ this formulation regularly fall into the trap of sampling on the dependent variable. Who is a leader? Answer: one who accomplishes great things. How do we identify leaders? Answer: by spotting the individual responsible for great things.

2. *Functionalist Definitions*

Whereas consequentialist definitions emphasize the things that leaders accomplish, functionalist definitions focus on things that leaders do. The two, obviously, are linked, for it is by doing that consequences arise. The distinction, then, concerns matters of emphasis. Whereas consequentialist definitions establish standards for what leaders must accomplish, functionalist focus primarily on the specific role performed by leaders and the actions that they take within a political or social ecosystem.

In this regard, several recent papers in formal theory are particularly instructive (especially, Dewan and Myatt 2008; Dewan and Myatt 2012; Bolton et al. 2013). Leaders, within this literature, perform the task of orienting and coordinating the actions of followers in view of a common goal. The great advance of this literature is to take seriously *how* a leader induces followers to act. Followers want to take correct actions, but they also want to act in common purpose. As such, tensions may arise between direction and coordination. Followers prefer a leader who indicates clearly the direction to follow (either because she speaks clearly or because she believes strongly in a cause) to a leader who exhibits good judgment. Contrary to the intuition of many scholars (e.g., Keohane 2010, discussed further below), good judgment is not the most essential quality for leaders. The definition advanced in this literature, however, applies as much to individuals we recognize as leaders as to any person in charge of a team.

In no small part because of its analytic clarity, the definition of leadership that emerges from this literature clearly satisfies the first and third conceptual criteria—the first, by denoting a clear relationship between leaders and would-be followers; and the third, by identifying the precise functions that leaders, and only leaders, perform. In a purely technical sense, the definition also satisfied the second empirical criterion. In all of the models, the identity of leaders and the possible actions that they can take are known to the other players. Nothing about this definition, however, requires that leaders be rare, the first empirical criterion. Furthermore, this definition does not distinguish among the many objectives that a leader may pursue. The cause advanced by a leader can be anything from a mundane objective such as winning the election (a leading example in Dewan and Myatt (2008)) to the most grandiose goal (such as coordinating a march on Washington, D.C. for racial justice). This definition, as such, fails our second conceptual criterion.

3. *Essentialist Definitions*

Rather than characterize what leaders accomplish or do, essentialist definitions try to make sense of what leaders are. A considerable body of scholarship seeks to discern the core values that leaders hold, the skills that they employ, the postures that they assume. And in so doing, some of these studies tend rather self consciously—and, from our vantage point, misguidedly—embark on a pedagogical project intended to counsel us, their audience, on how we too might become leaders.

The paradigmatic such example is Weber's definition of the charismatic leader. According to Weber (1947), the charismatic leader exhibits a "certain quality of an individual personality, by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is

treated as a leader.” It is the qualities that charismatic leaders have, much more than the specific acts they perform or the accomplishments they achieve, that make them leaders.

Endowed with “supernatural” and “superhuman” powers, charismatic leaders plainly are exceptional. Moreover, Weber recognizes, the retention of charisma can be fleeting, making charismatic leadership itself not only precarious but, as he puts it, “unstable.” Weber’s definition, as such, plainly satisfies our first empirical criterion of leadership. It definitively satisfies the second in insisting that charismatic cultivate and retain a followership that recognizes the unique qualities of a charismatic leader. Recognition, in Weber’s formulation, requires publicity, for the leader’s “charismatic claim breaks down if his mission is not recognized by those to whom he feels he has been sent” (1948[1946], 20). The simple fact that charismatic leaders, by definition, have followers also satisfies the relational criterion, while the attention paid to the unique skills and qualities of leadership distinguish charismatic leaders from Weber’s “legal” and “traditional” authority figures.

Least developed, though not entirely missing, in Weber’s definition is any recognition of the various ends of leadership. Treatment of the subject, to the extent that it exists, appears in the larger corpus of Weber’s work. For Weber, charisma is a great deal more than just style or panache. Leaders are “regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary” because they themselves communicate “divine” and “exemplary ends.” To establish their status as charismatic leaders, therefore, they must perform “miracles” and “heroic deeds.” Such acts, then, must support ends that will evoke the requisite awe and inspiration among followers. The qualities leaders exhibit, in this sense, are linked to the ends they serve. Charismatic leaders, according to this reading of Weber, distinguish themselves by their unique capacity to translate distinctly charismatic ends.

Reading Weber more narrowly, however, it is possible to come to the opposite conclusion. Formally, Weber does not require charismatic leaders to pursue certain kinds of objectives and eschew others. Indeed, for the purposes of definition, Weber expresses general indifference towards the objectives that charismatic leaders pursue. Again, all that is required is the evocation of awe and a followership’s recognition. It is precisely for this reason that Weber casts his attention nearly exclusively on the attributes of charismatic leaders, the spell that they cast upon their followers and the devotion that follows. The main purpose of followers, in Weber’s sociology, is to legitimate charismatic leaders and the formal authority that they exercise. Followers, in this construction, are largely passive, and the relationship between followers and the leader is limited and nearly always one-sided.

Depending on which reading one finds more persuasive—and scholars of Weber differ on this account—one draws very different conclusions about whether his definition satisfies the normative distinction criterion of leadership. The consequences of this judgment, as we discuss at greater length in the conclusion, relate to the population of definitions that speak to the essential meanings of leadership.

4. Hybrid Definitions

Distinctions among consequentialist, functionalist, and essentialist definition are usually ones of emphasis rather than omission. In any one, we often find elements of the others. And what sets a definition apart is what its author chooses to place its center.

Even so, not all definitions permit such categorization. Consider, for instance, Nannerl Keohane's observation (2010, p. 19) that leaders "provid[e] solutions to common problems or offer[] ideas about to how accomplish collective purposes, and mobiliz[e] the energies of others to follow these courses of action."⁵ In this definition, we understand leaders by reference to both the things that they accomplish (collective purposes) and the functions that they serve (mobilize energies of others). Moreover, Keohane goes on to emphasize the particular qualities that leaders, both on the basis of her study as a political theorist and her experience as a university president, tend to exhibit, above all judgment.

Keohane's definition clearly satisfies the relational criteria, as leaders are understood by reference to their relationship with followers. While she does not explicitly carve out a well-defined subset of possible objectives that leaders might serve, in her examples Keohane also has in mind purposes that are, in some sense, worthy of public emulation. As a definition of leadership, however, Keohane's plainly fails on both empirical criteria and the third conceptual criterion. Under her definition, nearly anyone can be a leader. And so in her treatment of the subject, she intermittently recognizes the leadership qualities of everyone from presidents to friends to university administrators as being leaders. Moreover, her definition does not insist upon a certain measure of publicity to accompany her leaders. Mid-level managers and community organizers each find their place under this definition. Finally, and relatedly, the definition is so capacious that it does not permit distinctions between leaders from the many other agents of change. In her efforts to recognize the pervasive need for leadership Keohane misses what is conspicuous, exceptional, and distinctive about leaders.

III. A New Definition

Having briefly surveyed some existing definitions of leadership, we now offer our own:

A leader publicly defines, extols, and eventually personifies high objectives, thereby orienting and coordinating the efforts of followers who seek to advance such objectives.

The definition, you'll notice, is cast in very general terms. It makes no mention of the specific feats that leaders must accomplish and hence does not join company with other consequentialist definitions. Nor does it stipulate the specific traits that leaders have and thereby eschews essentialist understandings. In identifying things that leaders and their followers do, the definition most closely resembles functionalist arguments. But even so, it offers no mention of the exact acts that leaders take, the precise appeals they make, the powers they exercise, or the styles they adopt.

⁵ Keohane's definition has more than a passing resemblance to Bill Clinton's, which stipulates that "Leadership means bringing people together in pursuit of a common cause, developing a plan to achieve it, and staying with it until the goal is achieved."

Still, the definition has real content. The character of leadership, thus stipulated, is revealed in three parts. The first identifies the class of objectives that a leader defines, the second characterizes the leader's dependence upon followers to advance those objectives, and the third recognizes the leader's personification of those objectives. Each warrants some elaboration.

1. Objectives.

As pure types, we consider two classes of objectives that agents of change may pursue. The first, which we call "lower ends," concern an individual's immediate and often material self-interests—personal enrichment, fame, political survival, and the like. The second type, which we call "higher ends," concern larger principles and entities that stand apart from any individual—justice, nationalism, country, and the like. These are ends that persist, even flourish, in the absence of any single individual. Such ends, as Weber (2004, 30) puts it, contribute "something of enduring value to a suprapersonal realm." Whereas lower ends are person specific, higher ends are impersonal. And it is higher ends that leaders define, extol, and personify.

Higher ends may satisfy what G.A. Cohen (1991, p. 280) calls the "impersonal test," but they need not. Such a test is expressly intended to evaluate the robustness of an argument on behalf of a particular policy by different combinations of speakers and audiences. If the perceived merits of the policy depend upon the identity of either the speaker or audience, then, says Cohen, it fails the impersonal test. To be sure, arguments about lower ends necessarily fail such a test, for the very meaning of such ends depends upon the identity of its sponsor. One can imagine ends, though, that fail the impersonal test but that nonetheless count among higher ends. Arguments about the greatness of country, of course, assume very different hues depending upon the country discussed and the citizenship of the sponsor and her audience. Such arguments, therefore, plainly fail the impersonal test. The fact that such arguments have meaning and integrity quite apart from the sponsor, though, is all that is required in order for them to count among higher ends.

Likewise, higher ends may count among the charismatic qualities that, according to Weber, leaders exhibit. Such qualities, for Weber, are largely irreducible in form and, as Edward Shils (1965, 199) notes, reveal "some *very central* feature of man's existence and the cosmos in which he lives" (emphasis in original). But as with Cohen's impersonal test, Shils' interpretation of Weber may set too high a benchmark for leadership qualities, excluding more distant and material objectives that nonetheless count among higher ends—the elimination of malaria or the practice of female genital mutilation, for instance. Higher ends may reveal something essential about the human condition or its principled aspirations, but they need not. All that matters is that the ends reside, and hence can be understood, outside of the leader who espouses them.

Likewise, Weber's own insistence (1948[1946], 24) that charismatic leaders eschew "rationalist deductions from abstract principles" may rule out other sorts of higher ends. Leaders, under our definition, may channel the divine, but they need not. In the service of higher ends, leaders may espouse and extol distinctly rational principles that bear no resemblance to Weber's charismatic qualities.

A leader also may derive personal pleasure and fulfillment in the pursuit of higher ends. A leader's commitment to higher ends need not be selfless. Leaders, like all of us,

have egos; and their egos surely influence both their selection and understanding of objectives. Further still, leaders may materially benefit from the realization of higher ends. The leader's wealth, status, or power may be enhanced through the work of followers who work steadily on behalf of higher ends. Once again, though, the distinction that matters is that higher ends can be understood on their own terms, quite apart from the person who advocates them, whereas lower ends necessarily and unavoidably implicate their sponsor.

To illustrate the point, consider Martin Luther King's professed commitment to racial justice and the welfare of African Americans and other minorities. The "promised land" that King spoke of shone just as brightly whether he himself made it there. And as he presciently told his followers, he expected not to do so. But it is precisely for this reason that King's objectives counted among higher ends. King's higher ends could be understood apart from himself. They had integrity and meaning in his absence.

In no way is the distinction between higher and lower ends, however, meant to connote any sort of normative endorsement. It is perfectly possible that an individual's lower ends warrant plaudits when a leader's higher ends elicit justified abhorrence. The dominance of the Aryan race or the glory of nation qualify as higher objectives, just as a family's efforts to pull themselves out of poverty or a wife's interest in fleeing an abusive husband count among lower ends. What matters, instead, is the relationship between the objective and its sponsor. Objectives that can be understood without reference to the needs, wants, or egoistic aspirations of the sponsor constitute higher ends. Lower ends, by contrast, cannot be understood except by reference to the individual who holds them.

Our characterization of higher ends, as such, is quite capacious. While ruling out strictly personal—read, egoistic and self-serving—objectives, it keeps in play many objectives that would not satisfy normative standards, very much including consciously impersonal ones such as Rawls's difference principle.

2. Followers.

Subjects cannot be leaders unless they have followers. Whereas the larger class of "rulers," including statesmen and tyrants, may exercise power that immediately translates into outcomes that may (or may not) accord with their objectives (whether high or low), leaders are among the larger class of "entrepreneurs" who depend upon followers to do their bidding. The leader cannot simply assert her will, exercise her power, issue a command, and expect the world to change. Rather, she must look to her followers to take actions that realize outcomes corresponding with her higher ends.

What is it that followers do? They do not merely applaud, celebrate, or worship their leader. The entertainer who returns to the stage for a third standing ovation is not exercising leadership. Nor is the celebrity whose every move is meticulously tracked and documented by a roving paparazzi. Nor is the public figure whose twitter feed has millions of "followers." That others are interested in what you say or do, in itself, does not make you a leader.

Followers do not merely track their leader. Though they may monitor their leader, draw insight and inspiration from her, come to understand their purposes through her, followers subsequently must pivot and take actions of their own that accord with their leader's directives. Having sat before their leader, they then must stand and do something that advances a leader's expressed objectives. Fans become followers when

they commit private resources—time, energy, money, and the like—that are consonant with their leader’s directions. To follow a leader is to give of one’s resources in order to advance higher objectives that are expressly understood through the leader.

Followers, as a consequence, stand between a leader and her goals. It is through the collective activities of followers that a leader makes a difference in the world. It is through followers that a leader’s objective is advanced. And without followers, nothing is accomplished that can be meaningfully attributed to leadership.⁶

In this regard, our definition differs rather dramatically from Weber’s. Weber, to be sure, recognizes a role for followers, seeing their existence as a prerequisite for the exercise of leadership. But that is about as far as he goes. For Weber, the relationship between charismatic leaders and followers is decidedly one-sided. The bulk of Weber’s sociology, after all, is devoted to examining how charismatic leadership becomes routinized into an organizational apparatus; how, that is, essentialist qualities of an individual leader become essentialist qualities of a state. Ours, by contrast, recognizes both the dependency and agency and followers. Followers depend on leaders to define and extol higher ends. And when such leaders vanish, as we shall soon see, the relationship between followers and these higher ends is deeply disrupted. But by our definition, followers are not passive. Rather, they retain genuine agency. Followers, by our definition, are responsible for anointing leaders who, by turn, depend on followers in order to accomplish anything of consequence.

In their work to advance higher ends, however, followers must follow. They must abide their leader’s instructions. We would not call someone a leader if her “followers” disregard her, even if they subsequently act in ways that do in fact advance her higher ends. Such a person amounts to a mere figurehead. A leader, by contrast, has followers who recognize and abide the content of her appeals; and who subsequently behave in ways that are consistent with her directions, no matter how misguided or harmful. Followers must “bow to the greater man,” to paraphrase Joseph Goebbels’ yearning soon after meeting Hitler in 1926 (Toland 1976, 217). When enough followers break ranks, openly disobey their leader’s commands, and commit themselves to new pathways to realize the very higher ends that initially brought them together, the leader’s status as leader is imperiled. And when her followers cease to listen to her instructions, she ceases to be a leader at all.

A leader’s instructions and a follower’s actions need not be identical. What we must insist upon, however, is that the leader holds her followers in rapt attention, and that these followers take their guidance from their leader. An impartial observer ought to be able to see some fidelity between a leader’s instructions and a follower’s action. Such an observer may be appalled by the actions, just as she may be convinced that the leader is a fraud. What matters, though, is whether such an observer witnesses followers taking actions that broadly comport with the leader’s instructions. For the leader who has lost all control over her followers has ceased to exercise leadership.

⁶ As an empirical matter, of course, leaders often take actions that translate directly into the realization of objectives. For as an empirical matter, leaders often hold power that enables them to intervene into and reshape the material world as they see fit. When they do so, however, they are not acting as leaders. Being a leader does not preclude the opportunity to take direct actions. It simply means that when leaders take such actions, they are not behaving as leaders per se. In their capacity as leaders, subjects depend upon followers to advance—in any meaningful capacity—their stated higher objectives.

By extension, however, leadership does not presuppose the existence of followers. Indeed, leadership is revealed through the demonstrated willingness of followers to abide instructions from someone who does not exercise formal control over them. The class of followers must include individuals who freely and independently devote their own resources in the service of a leader's objectives. The manager who dictates orders about how employees are to spend their time during work hours is not exercising leadership. Nor is the tyrant who threatens his subjects, on pain of death, to obey his commands. Nor is the slave master whose slaves, as his property, are formally bound to his indiscriminate intentions.

Leadership, as expressed through the communications between leaders and followers, can be manipulative, minacious, and ugly—*just so long as followers retain some free will, and the actions they take on behalf of their leader is based upon that free will*. The leader's relationship with her followers, as such, may have more to do with emotion than rationality. When in her presence, followers may become spellbound. But when they turn to act, followers must recover their senses, and with them the commitment to exercise their own free will. Followers are neither dupes nor stooges. They work consciously and deliberately on behalf of their leader and the higher ends she embodies. And when doing so, followers enjoy a certain measure of freedom. Followers are not merely the arm or instrument of leaders. Rather, they have independent autonomy, and thus the capacity to abandon their leader—or even to work against her—without formal sanction.⁷

What keeps followers from exercising such options? It is here that higher ends come into play. Again to cite Goebbels (Toland 1976, 233), higher ends instill in followers a sense of purpose and place in the universe. If followers freely abide a leader's instructions, they do so primarily out of commitment to the high ends that a leader publicly defines, extols, and, as we shall soon see, personifies.

A leader's higher ends therefore must resonate with her followers. It will not suffice for followers to follow instructions without any regard for the higher ends involved. Nor will it suffice for a leader to declare higher ends with a wink and a nod, while her followers embark on a project that all recognize as serving low objectives. The leader's public expression of higher ends must be accompanied by the follower's belief in higher ends. The leader may be engaging in a charade. But for followers, the commitment—no matter how misguided—must be genuine.⁸

⁷ Here again we see differences between our definition of leadership and Weber's. Weber does not take nearly as hard a line as we do on with respect to the free will of followers. Indeed, as Weber traces the institutionalization of charisma into the state, he not only allows for the possibility that leaders exercise formal authority over their followers, but he demands as much. In their efforts to "prove" their worthiness to followers, as Weber insists they must do, charismatic leaders also can wield the various forms of formal authority that, by our schema, are available to the larger class of rulers but not entrepreneurs, of which leaders are a part.

⁸ Roving bandits and marauding armies who carefully whose sole purpose is self-enrichment do not establish the basis for leadership, even if their commanders regularly and devoutly pay homage to high ends. Nonetheless, followers may behave in ways that, to an impartial outsider, appear to be entirely self-serving as long as the followers themselves believe that they are advancing a higher end. If bandits and armies act out of their commitment to tribe or country, which their commander, their leader, defines and extols, then the first principle of leadership is satisfied—even if the actions that followers take are abhorrent, and even if the leader's commitment to the higher end is not true.

3. Personification.

While leaders depend upon followers for their higher objectives to be realized, so too do followers depend upon their leader to understand these objectives. As followers stand between a leader and the actualization of her goals, so does the leader stand between followers and the expression of a higher goal. It is through a leader that followers identify with and come to understand their purpose.

Leaders, as a consequence, come to embody higher objectives. In Martin Luther King followers see racial justice, just as in Jesus followers see God's Word. Adolf Hitler became "the personalization of flag, freedom, and racial purity" (Toland 1976, 203). Mao was the "Red Sun in Our Hearts" guiding the masses during the Cultural Revolution (Short 2000, 543). And by personifying higher ends, all leaders imbue in their followers a sense of existential meaning, purpose, and common regard for the stakes involved in their shared work.

We are agnostic about the particular ways in which this personification comes about. For some leaders, charisma may be the key. For others, it may be fear, carefully calibrated and selectively employed. Fervor, inspiration, or treachery all may play a part. Still others may come to personify higher aims through tireless work, self-sacrifice, wisdom, or enlightenment. What matters is not how the leader comes to personify higher ends, but that she does.

By personifying higher ends, however she comes to do so, the leader distinguishes herself from the organizer. While the organizer also depends upon followers, the organizer remains anonymous, working discretely behind the scenes, offering guidance and support without attracting the public spotlight. While some organizers may be especially adept, all organizers are interchangeable. While the work that organizers perform may be indispensable, the individuals who serve as organizers are not. For what organizers do, in essence, is coordinate the actions of others who independently understand their higher ends. They facilitate change without themselves representing change. Followers do not cede judgment to organizers, nor do they see organizers as the living embodiment of higher ends. There are no monuments to organizers. The image of organizers does not emblazon the national conscious.

Not so with leaders. Leaders do not merely speak of higher ends. Leaders personify higher ends. In leaders, followers not only understand what action they should take, they also draw existential meaning and sustenance. They believe a higher objective because they come to believe in the leader who personifies it. And when this leader dies and no one stands to replace her, followers do not merely mourn. They appear lost, reeling, unsure of what to do, nor, crucially, of what to believe.

In this sense, exactly what makes leaders loom so large is also what makes followers so dependent. Anointed by their followers, leaders not only articulate and defend grand tasks; in their biography, their imagery, their voice, leaders also come to represent these tasks and the higher purposes to which they are put. But in anointing their leader, followers abandon their independent judgment, their critical faculties, their capacity to not only see what is right, but also to determine what is required to make right. Prospective followers may choose their leader with cause, selecting an individual

worthy of their adulation and doing so for clear instrumental reason. But once chosen, when prospective followers become actual followers, dependence seeps in.⁹

It is for precisely this reason that leaders are best evaluated one at a time. Each leader is understood on her own terms, through her own relationships, via her own objectives and followers. Individuals who on their own would not qualify as leaders cannot bind together and collectively assume the status of leader. An individual is recognized as a leader singularly or not at all. For it is only a single individual who can come to personify a higher objective.

IV. Qualifiers

As we have seen, a leader is not the same as an organizer or statesman or manager. But to say that someone is a leader, under our definition, may not say enough. And for this reason, a variety of qualifiers can be productively invoked.

“Good”

The first, and perhaps the most urgently needed, are “good” and “bad.” These particular qualifiers relate to the higher ends that a leader commends to her followers. A “good” leader pursues higher ends that are not only recognizable apart from the individual who espouses them, but higher ends that have clear moral content. A “bad” leader, by contrast, pursues objectives that are depraved, unethical, or immoral. Good and bad, as such, relate to the distinctions we make about different higher ends. And with these qualifiers, we can most easily distinguish Adolf Hitler from Martin Luther King. Both, irrefutably, were leaders. But only one would we call good.

Notice that the qualifiers good and bad do not relate the leader herself. It is possible, likely even, that a good leader is not good, herself. As long as she extols higher ends that are moral and just, a leader is free to wantonly abuse her partner, her children, and her dog and still remain “good.” The fact that Martin Luther King was a philanderer or that Hitler remain faithful to Eva Braun does not in any way force us to reconsider our evaluations of these leaders as good and bad, respectively.

“Authentic”

While deliberately allowing leaders to pursue a wide range of higher objectives, our definition also establishes rather lax standards regarding authenticity. To qualify as a leader, an individual must commit herself to one or more higher ends. But of course, there may be instances when leaders express high objectives when, at heart, they are more truly dedicated to lower objectives. The pastor who calls upon his flock to follow God’s Word may, in truth, merely want to increase his coffers. The politician who rhapsodizes about the glory of country or the imperatives of equality may mask a baser interest in his individual and his party’s hold on power. Our definition of leadership, however, does not demand any fidelity between expressed and true objectives. Leadership can accommodate insincerity, even duplicity. All that matters is that the leader publicly define, extol, and personify higher ends.

⁹ This dependence might itself be rational. For example, it might help coordinate followers’ actions towards the objectives personified by the leader.

To be an “authentic” leader, however, the higher aims that an individual professes must be the true source of her motivation, the true content of her beliefs. For the authentic leader, higher aims do not stand in for lower aims. The authentic leader preaches the Word of God because she believes it, not because she sees their instrumental value. Higher aims are not delivery mechanisms for personal enrichment. When an authentic leader speaks of higher aims, he is being candid and true.

Both King and Hitler were authentic. Though their higher aims could not differ more from one another, King and Hitler each held his own dearly. For each of these authentic leaders, what they said was a fair representation of what they believed. And as a result, though their followers might subsequently complain about their lack of effectiveness, they could not reasonably argue that they were ever duped. These were not charlatans.

Not so with Mao Tse Tung, the quintessential inauthentic leader. While extolling collectivism, the worker’s welfare, and the birth of a proletarian culture, Mao, historians nearly universally recognize (e.g., Short 2000, 523-583), was principally concerned about his own hold on power and his own glory. For Mao, higher ends were important only insofar as they were useful, allowing him to conduct a carefully orchestrated ruse. Unable to carry out a campaign of terror against his political opponents, Mao launched a cultural revolution, one that in expression held forth higher ends but that in execution yielded a “stultifying shallowness” (Short 2000, 583), the direct product of Mao’s lower ends. Mao may have been great and effective, but he was neither good nor authentic.

“democratic”

Under our formulation, the only restriction on a leader’s chosen objective is that it be counted among all possible higher ends. Whether good or bad, the specific higher end a leader defines and extols need not correspond with either the prior or latent moral commitments of followers. For the “democratic” leader, however, such a correspondence exists, while for the “undemocratic” leader it does not, even though followers freely take actions on behalf of the leader’s chosen higher ends.

A great deal of scholarship on democratic theory is devoted to the particular mechanisms that intermittently encourage and impel leaders to pursue objectives that represent, in any meaningful sense, their constituents.¹⁰ And many of these democratic theorists seek criteria that leaders must satisfy not only in their selection of chosen objectives, but also in how they communicate with their followers about such objectives and the inherent rights that followers retain in their pursuit. The details of these debates are beyond the scope of this chapter. For here, we need only recognize the stakes of such debates, which center on the appropriateness of the “democratic” qualifier and not the status of leader itself.

“Great”

A “great” leader distinguishes herself by the followers she keeps. A great leader attracts many followers who wholly commit themselves, often at great sacrifice to

¹⁰ To be sure, the literature on democratic theory focuses on more than just this specific correspondence. And according to some definitions, e.g. Beerbohm’s, a democratic leader must do more than just advance objectives shared by a larger public. Her expressed objectives must also correspond with her true objectives, which in our parlance signifies authenticity.

themselves, to her chosen cause. The more followers a leader has and the harder these followers work on behalf of a leader's higher ends, the greater she becomes. The "modest" leader, by contrast, garners merely respect and admiration. Her followers, however, are not especially plentiful, and their devotion to her objectives, as measured by the actions that they take, generally underwhelm. They speak fondly of their leader and dutifully purchase overpriced and overcooked cupcakes at her fundraisers, but little more. Modest leaders do not have followers who fervently seek out opportunities to take actions on behalf of the leader's ends—actions that disrupt their daily routines, invite personal risk, and even lead to their death.

The greatness of Martin Luther King, as such, is not to be seen in King himself, in the soaring rhetoric he delivered or the brilliance of his mind. Rather, King's greatness is seen in the devoted actions of his followers—marchers being attacked by police dogs in Selma, protesters at segregated lunch counters being hauled off to jail in Nashville, freedom riders being ambushed by a white mob in Montgomery, lawyers abandoning their northern practices in order to fight prejudice in the South, strikers who would rather lose their jobs than perpetrate perceived injustice. These actions, taken by so many people at such great personal sacrifice, constitute the true testimony to King's greatness.

To be great, meanwhile, is not to be good. And so, too, can we find greatness in Hitler's leadership. Indeed, it is precisely the great lengths to which so many under his rule went in order to perpetrate what we know recognize as unconscionable evil that we know that Hitler was great. The steadfast commitment of so many Germans to fight the Allied powers while committing genocide at home speaks to Hitler's greatness. Indeed, Hitler could not have left so much carnage in his wake had he not been great.

"Effective"

The effectiveness of a leader is determined by the actions that followers take. To be a leader, an individual's followers must take actions that accord with her instructions. But to be an "effective" leader, these actions must meaningfully promote the higher ends that she extols. Followers must do things that are not merely consistent with a higher end. They must take actions that in fact promote these higher ends. And by virtue of these actions, the higher ends must appear a less removed, and more entrenched, in the lives that we live.

There is, of course, a temporal dimension to effectiveness. In one moment a leader may appear effective, while in the next, she may not. In his quest to promote the glory of Germany, Hitler appeared extraordinarily effective as he built the NSDAP and won elections only eight years after his failed putsch, as he annexed Poland in 1939. Six years later, though, with his troops in retreat and his nation in ruin, our judgment of Hitler's effectiveness takes a dramatic turn for the worse.

Our judgments of a leader's effectiveness also depend upon the standards we employ. Insofar as his follower's actions paved the way for the 1964 and 1965 Civil Rights Acts, altered the racial attitudes of millions of Americans, and brought the racial and class injustices into the full light of day, Martin Luther King was undoubtedly effective. But his followers' actions—extraordinary though they were—did not realize outcomes that met King's own aspirations. Racism, class disparities, segregation, and a great deal more besides all persist. And depending upon the stringency of our standards, we might argue that King was a distinctly ineffective leader.

V. In Summary

In this chapter, we offer a new definition of leadership. Leaders, we argue, distinguish themselves by the objectives they extol, the followers whose actions they orient and coordinate, and the ways in which they personify higher aims. Only when specific conditions are met is leadership possible. Relax any one and leadership promptly dissipates, just as leaders become something else entirely.

Ours is not the only definition of leadership. But unlike many other prominent definitions, ours satisfies each of the criteria we laid out at the beginning of this chapter. For starters, it recognizes the relational nature of leadership. Leadership is not realized through the mere execution of power. It is not about status, employment, or the collection of personality traits that constitute an individual. Rather, leadership is defined through the mutual dependencies of leaders and followers. It is through followers that leaders can effect change, just as it is through leaders that followers come to understand higher aims.

Built into our definition is a distinction between higher and lower ends. What distinguishes the two is not their moral content or normative appeal. Rather, it concerns the relationship between the objective and the individual who espouses it. When leaders espouse higher aims, they point towards principles and imagined states of the world that are larger than themselves, that in no way depend upon the leader's participation or support. Lower ends, by contrast, cannot be understood except by reference to the individual who pursues them: personal wealth, glory, or fame attain meaning only through the life of the individual who pursues them.

Higher ends have integrity and meaning quite apart from leaders. It would be a mistake, though, to conclude that the leaders who extol them are dispensable. They are not. Indeed, it is precisely because leaders come to personify higher ends that actions in the service of such higher ends so crucially depend upon leadership. Take away the leader and the intrinsic meanings of higher ends remain undisturbed. But take away the leader and the meanings of higher ends for followers become more remote. The immediate reactions of followers may differ. In some instances, they may see fit to honor the legacy of their leader and work with renewed fervor to fulfill his stated objectives. They tend to do so, though, in highly disorganized fashion, as difficult factions of followers vie with one another as the true spokespersons of a leader's heritage.¹¹ Moreover, it is just as likely that with the loss of the individual who connected them to their higher ends that followers will become alienated from the very objectives that once kept them in common purpose. The tragedy of leadership is found in its personification.

Crucially, our definition also establishes a template for distinguishing leaders from organizers, statesmen, and everyday politicians. The constellation of relationships and commitments of leaders and organizers are exactly the same save one: the personification of higher ends. Whereas organizers coordinate and orient followers toward higher objectives, they do not come to personify these objectives; and as a result, organizers are anonymous and interchangeable, whereas leaders are public and indispensable. The differences between leaders and statesmen and everyday politicians,

¹¹ For illustration, one need not look any further than the persistent infighting among the familial heirs to Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King.

meanwhile, are more pronounced. These latter two groups, after all, do not depend upon followers to do their bidding. Rather, both are capable of exercising powers of their in order to advance either higher ends (in the case of the statesman) or lower ends (in the case of the everyday politician).

As an empirical matter, of course, individuals intermittently behave as all sorts of agents of social change. In one moment, they may take independent actions that directly advances their cause; and in the next they rely upon followers to do so. With some, they commend higher ends; with others, they admit their interest in lower ends. The challenge before us, however, is not to identify who, as a matter of course, is a leader, but instead to make sense of the constellation of facts that characterize when an individual stands in a position of leadership. No person is a leader all of the time. The notion of the born leader, as such, is utterly nonsensical. But depending upon the ends they pursue and the relationships they cultivate, all persons have the capacity to exercise leadership.

Our definition also comports with the two empirical criteria outlined early, first by clarifying why leadership is exceptional. It is exceptional, first, because it is rare. Individuals may extol higher aims, other individuals may act in the service of these aims, and other individuals may come to personify these higher aims. The joint probability that these individuals will be found together as leader and followers, each fulfilling their prescribed roles and all connected with one another, is, if nothing else, uncommon. But leadership is exceptional, also, because it is precarious. Should leaders abandon their higher aims, should followers refuse to act, and should neither recognize the personification of higher aims, then the preconditions of leadership—no matter how robust they once might have seemed—promptly disappear.

And finally, our definition not only recognizes the fact of leaders' publicity. It also identifies the mechanism by which this publicity is sustained: namely, the personification of higher ends. We keep images of our leaders not out of reverence to the persons themselves, but because of what such images signify. In their image we see the higher ends to which we devote our energies and resources. As result, in their image, we find existential meaning and sustenance in our daily lives. We know our leaders not merely for the instructions and guidance that they offer but for the relevance they impart.

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