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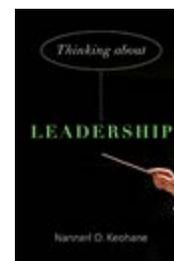
On leadership

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Nannerl O. Keohane *Thinking About Leadership*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2010 (312 pp). ISBN 9-7806911-420-74 (hard cover) RRP \$39.95.

Leaders fascinate us. We celebrate the words and deeds of great leaders and seek to emulate their achievements. Yet recalling the grim historical record of the destruction wreaked by powerful, charismatic leaders, we above all long for good leaders. Loved or hated, leaders seem to demand we pay attention to them. Whether we are thinking of top political leaders, CEOs of global corporations, chairs of NGOs or neighbourhood committees, leadership matters because it seems to promise a solution to our most intractable problems. There is nothing, it seems, that we hope cannot be solved by the actions or example of a strong and decisive leader. As a corollary, we seem to attribute most of our problems to poor leadership—whether of the self-aggrandising type, the morally bankrupt or conniving, or even the grey but harmfully incompetent.

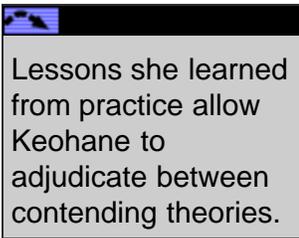
Yet even as leadership holds an important place in popular imagination, students of leadership are not sure exactly what it means, or how to study it. True, modern leadership studies, especially in business and education, appear confident in promoting the ‘10 Secrets’ of good leaders, or advising on the merits of being the ‘strategic’ leader, the ‘open’ leader, the ‘consultative’ leader, the ‘enabling’ leader and so on. For other students of leadership, however, even the obvious and essential starting question, ‘Who is a leader?’ remains frustratingly elusive. It is not just the usual academic tendency to view all important terms as ‘contested concepts’. More problematically, there seems to be a curiously mirage-like aspect to leadership—the more we take our bearings by it, the more likely we are to lose our way. Thus a close focus and attention on leadership is soon diverted to a related but different question. Inevitably, it seems, the study of leadership becomes an examination of the nature of individuals, their virtues or vices, their gender, their ambitions or goals, their ‘authenticity’ and ‘transformative’ or ‘transactional’ dispositions. Or it becomes an examination of the place or context of leadership—the historical, political, cultural, religious and institutional factors that shape and influence leaders. Perhaps the most telling sign of the chameleonic nature of leadership is that if you gaze on it for too long it disappears altogether, revealing—followers. After all, we cannot understand leadership unless we appreciate the complex character, needs and dispositions of followers. Hence the extensive new scholarship on ‘followership’ that argues leadership studies has neglected the important ways followers empower and limit leaders.



A LEADER ON LEADERSHIP

This lack of clarity about leadership makes welcome Nannerl O. Keohane's new book *Thinking About Leadership*, which had its origins in a lecture she presented at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University in 2005. Keohane has been a leader in higher education over almost three decades (as president of Wellesley College from 1981 to 1993, and of Duke University from 1993 to 2004) as well as director of multinational corporations and of non-profit organisations. She is also a political scientist who has taught political philosophy for 25 years (pp. ix–x). In *Thinking About Leadership* she wants to bring together both aspects of her life and career, active leadership and philosophising about politics, 'to capture aspects of leadership that might not be noticed by someone who lacks either sort of background' (pp. 4–5). The book is structured around six questions: 'What is Leadership?' (chapter one); 'How and Why Do Followers Matter?' (chapter two); 'What determines Who Becomes a Leader and Which Leaders Will Succeed?' (chapter three); 'Does Gender Make a Difference?' (chapter four); 'How Does Leadership Work in a Democracy?' (chapter five); 'How Do Character, Ethics, and Leadership Interact?' (chapter six). It concludes by asking whether leadership can be taught and by outlining particularly promising questions for further research.

Does Keohane's diverse background as a leader and political philosopher yield new insights into leadership? Throughout her book we often see how the lessons learned from practice give her the means to adjudicate between contending theories. In the chapter on the meaning of leadership she reflects on her experience on the board of directors of IBM to distinguish between public leadership and leadership in modern business corporations: 'I never saw the IBM example as relevant for Duke. But I did think wistfully about how much easier it is for a leader in a corporate setting who just wants to get something done' (p. 40). In her discussion of followership she cites her inaugural presidential speech at Duke, where she compared the university not so much to a ship of state that is 'big and cumbersome and hard to move even when one knows the direction which one wants to go', but more like a 'flotilla made up several schools of different sizes, all generally agreed on the destination, each with its own resources and some degree of independence in charting the course' (p. 58). In this context Keohane is frank in her assessment of the strengths and limitations of her favoured 'seminar' model of leadership, where 'ideas are put on the table freely', resulting in the empowerment of participants and accumulation of ideas, but with the risk of not revealing conflicts in possible solutions and diffuse outcomes (p. 65).

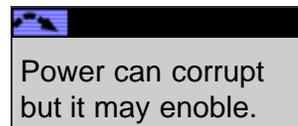


Lessons she learned from practice allow Keohane to adjudicate between contending theories.

Keohane's experiences are particularly useful for her exploration of women and leadership. In a poll of four dozen classmates of the Wellesley Class of 1961, women who 'reached maturity during the "second wave of feminism" in the 1970s, and lived through several decades of women's liberation and "post-feminism"', all responded that women lead differently from men (p. 127). Women leaders, it seems, place more emphasis on collaboration, concern for colleagues and subordinates and display less ambition for status (p. 127). Keohane takes this as the starting point to explore the extent to which women are, in terms of Carol Gilligan's 'ethics of care', more caring, and whether such disposition is 'socialized' and therefore imposes on women leaders a 'double bind'. For example, during the US presidential campaign in 2007, 'Hillary Rodham Clinton was excoriated as overly male when she demonstrated strength and boldness but dismissed as too womanish to be commander in chief if she showed nurturing tendencies' (p. 130). Keohane provides amusing and insightful accounts of her own experience of this double bind at Stanford, Swarthmore College and later at Wellesley College and Duke (p. 153).

Keohane's exploration of the unique demands placed on all leaders, both men and women, in democracies is especially interesting. Her experiences as a feminist in Stanford in the mid-1970s, committed to participatory and deliberative methods of reaching decisions, made her 'suspicious of leadership because we were uneasy about any one of us having a special edge over the rest' (p. 153). Yet she realised that some kind of leadership soon emerges and eventually becomes institutionalised (pp. 153, 167). Keohane correctly notes that the connection between equality and democracy makes all leadership questionable in democracies. As she notes: 'Directing or managing other people has a dimension of inequality from the outset. Asymmetry of influence between leaders and followers is itself a kind of inequality. And, thus, in a very real sense leaders and followers are, by definition, unequal' (pp. 174–175).

But this democratic 'conundrum of leadership' is not an irresolvable problem of democracy for Keohane, who argues that the problem of oligarchic corruption or abuse of power, can be alleviated by tackling the perpetuation of power, curbing the gaining of privileges, and enhancing public participation (pp. 175, 187ff). Her experience with leadership proves to be useful in understanding the moral dimensions of leadership. She notes the attraction of power and its tendency to corrupt, but also accepts that power may ennoble. She therefore argues that '*Power reveals*', though the dangers of vanity and flatterers are obvious, as is the importance and difficulty of upholding the duties of an office, evident in her decision to arrest protesting students at Wellesley College who were blocking the exits to the University (p. 218).



Keohane's rich personal experiences and her deep engagement with political theory (informed by literature and the arts) therefore provide important insights into leadership. Nevertheless many of her observations seem unremarkable or obvious. Consider some of her conclusions in the first chapter, 'What is Leadership':

As we have seen, leadership involves setting or clarifying goals for a group and mobilizing energies of others to pursue them. Leaders engage in a number of different kinds of activities to accomplish this work, including making decisions, devising and implementing strategies, and assembling resources. Leaders deploy power, yet not all power holders are leaders (p. 47).

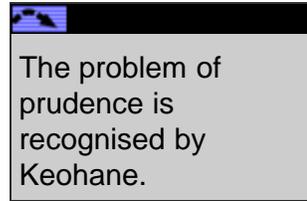
These seemingly incontestable observations are perhaps the unavoidable consequence of evaluating scholarly categories and analytical insights in the light of the contingency and complexity of practice. But they also appear to confirm, once more, the chameleonic nature of leadership. Why *is* leadership so chameleonic?

LEADERSHIP AND JUDGMENT

In spite of considerable and increasing attention to leadership, modern students of politics do not think the concept provides a particularly helpful insight to larger questions, whether moral or political. In his famous *Lives of Noble Greeks and Romans*, Plutarch compares preeminent Greeks and Romans, to understand the character of each and, importantly, to reveal something about the merits of the Greek and Roman regimes. It is difficult to imagine any modern scholar taking such a 'methodology' seriously, especially one that at best employs limited quantitative survey data. Yet Plutarch was drawing on a classical tradition founded by Socrates, Plato, Xenophon and Aristotle, a tradition that argued that there was a close relationship between the foremost men and women in politics and the character of the regime. Leaders set the

tone, were the model for the just and unjust, praiseworthy or shameful, and therefore defined the regime. Athenian democracy was moderated and thereby elevated by a Pericles or could be debased by succumbing to the entreaties of a demagogue like Cleon. But the regime also influenced who became a leader. For example, timocracy favoured and elevated the honour-loving, while oligarchy held up the wealthy or the money-makers as the best citizens.

Still, as the Platonic dialogues demonstrate, individuals, as exemplars, can be extraordinarily influential, whether they are Homer's Achilles, the political philosopher Socrates, or the promising *politikos*, the handsome, rich and well-connected nephew of Pericles, Alcibiades. The Platonic dialogues are about individuals, who, in conversation or action, reveal much about themselves and, according to Plato, allow us to judge the promise and contending favours of political and philosophical life. They reveal the nature of virtues, pose the problem of whether virtue can be taught and, in depicting the lives of the most promising citizens, show the importance of practical judgment or prudence. Thus, for classical political philosophy, the highest form of leadership is revealed in the prudence demanded on those most important occasions, where virtue of character and discernment confront the seemingly intractable exigencies of time and place. History was therefore a thoughtful reflection on, and a record of, leadership, and consequently a considered judgment on both the prudence of individuals and the merits of the authoritative claims of different and inevitably contending regimes.



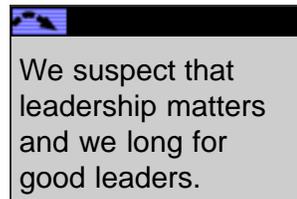
This classical understanding of prudence (and so of leadership) was transformed when it confronted revealed religion. Of course the Church Fathers, such as Augustine and Aquinas, appreciated the need for prudence. Recall that the cardinal Christian virtues, derived from classical political philosophy, are justice, temperance, fortitude, and prudence. But these virtues were not enough for salvation, which also demanded the great theological virtues of faith, hope and charity. Though this ambiguity about the importance of leadership persists in theology, it was resolved in the thoughts of modern political philosophers who were willing to completely repudiate prudence and leadership. True, Machiavelli preserves a truncated notion of *virtù*, but the moderns generally, in emphasising 'will' rather than wisdom, inevitably turn to institutions (and not to leaders) for their definite solutions to political problems. Hobbes, in his democratic flattery, claims that 'A plain husband-man is more Prudent in affaires of his own house, then a Privy Counsellor in the affaires of another man' (*Leviathan*, chapter 8). Prudence is something invented by the classical philosophers to fool the people. The modern *Leviathan* state, of which Hobbes is one of the main architects, does not appear to need 'prudent' leadership. Indeed, as Bentham would suggest subsequently, it may not need any leaders—the Panopticon works equally if there is no one to observe the inmates.

By the time we confront modern ideas of historicism, dialectical materialism, scientific determinism, the arid 'structure vs agency' debates of social science, not to mention the curiously amoral moralism of modern scepticism, evident in the post-structural fascination with bodies, cruelty and the 'capillary' nature of power and the violence of language games, discussions about leadership and prudence seem to be, at best, embarrassing reminders of a more naive and innocent past. Thus the depreciation of prudence or practical judgment in modern political thought, aided by the liberal endorsement of individual judgment and the democratic assertion of fundamental political (and implicitly moral) equality, completed the hollowing-out of the classical conception of leadership. Still we suspect that leadership matters and we long for good

leaders. But in searching for the meaning of leadership we are no longer permitted to pose questions that go to the heart of the phenomenon. Therefore the elusiveness of leadership is due not only to our suspicion of 'heroic' leaders (Carlyle's Hero or Weber's 'charismatic' leader now overshadowed by our grim experience of *Führerprinzip* and Schmitt's 'exception'), but also, in part, to modern philosophy's abandonment of the classical conception of prudence or practical judgment.

THINKING ABOUT JUDGMENT

It is a testament to her good judgment that the problem of prudence is recognised by Keohane. 'The most valuable attribute leaders can possess in any context', according to Keohane, 'is good judgment' (p. 87). In her treatment of the subject in chapter two, she discusses Aristotle's understanding of *phronesis*, and notes Arendt's view that as a capacity of mind it is not simply a form of logical operation (induction or deduction). Judgment relies on reasoning but seems to also encompass intuition and the ability to take into account diversity in situations. Indeed, a distinctive component of judgment is foresight, according to Keohane (p. 93). Importantly, in her conclusion, she singles out good judgment as a challenge for political philosophers and a problem that is neglected by contemporary political theorists. Not only do we need a deeper understanding of this faculty, according to Keohane, but:



In particular, it would be helpful to agree on a set of indicators of good judgment, so that we could identify persons who display such characteristics in advance rather than being able to determine the quality of judgment only after the fact, by assessing outcomes' (pp. 231–233).

In a way the entire book, in trying to combine theory and practice, is in search of judgment; prudence is a significant but relatively unexamined theme that weaves its way through the fabric of *Thinking About Leadership*.

The great merit of Keohane's approach, the attempt to understand leadership in the light of her extensive experience as a leader, is that it has sufficiently liberated her from contemporary theories of leadership to appreciate the need for good judgment in practice. But the larger research question this poses, which she admits remains unresolved in *Thinking About Leadership*, is what constitutes good judgment, whether it can be taught and, importantly, how to recognise it amid the necessarily noisy and clamorous circumstances of modern democratic politics.

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