

Looking for leadership guidance in classic philosophy



Some people contend that authentic leadership is more ethical and compelling. Authenticity depends on aligning what you do and say on the outside with who you are on the inside. They recommend looking inward to find your true self and core beliefs. Experts offer to help leaders bring to the surface what they find deep down.

Oddly, three celebrated philosophers in Western history recommended an alternative to looking inward: by conducting a thought experiment, imagining that you are not you. Instead, they suggested getting outside of yourself. In a brief article for *Leadership and the Humanities*, I summarized what Plato, Immanuel Kant, and John Rawls had to say about becoming

- o No one,
- o Everyone, and
- o Anyone.

Trying to locate the “self” has proven to be far from easy. Some believe there is no such thing. Even if there is a self, it changes over time and hides, mired in contradictions and wrapped in symbolic languages irreducible to simple propositions. At best, the image of your self is a cloth draped over a complex reality. When you go in search of your authentic self, what exactly are you looking for?

Suppose you were no one

In *The Republic*, Plato tells the fable of an ancestor of Gyges, a lowly shepherd who discovers a ring enabling him to disappear at will. What would he do with this unique power? In the fable, according to a character named Glaucon, this shepherd connives to steal money, displace the king, and seduce the queen. Any person able to evade detection, says Glaucon, would do the same.

Socrates replies that such a fantasy does raise the question of how you behave when nobody is looking. If as a leader you could get away with impropriety, would you do it? That is, if you were nobody – beyond scrutiny, certain you wouldn't be caught – would you maintain the same ethical standards? Or would the temptation be too great? How you answer this question speaks to your character.

We know that people alter their behavior once they become aware that somebody is watching. They are no longer “nobody”. And that seems to influence the choices they make. As Socrates points out, you may think you have cloaked your secrets, but you might be mistaken. Obviously, you cannot hide your foibles from yourself.

Sometimes, leaders justify their improprieties simply because they are the leader. Thus, even if detected, the leader’s misdeeds are supposedly excused. Here too one should ask the wayward leader: could you do that if you were in fact a nobody? If you were **not** the leader? That test reveals a lot about a leader’s morals.

Suppose you were everyone

Much later, Immanuel Kant explained that judgment about anything depends on seeing it from multiple points of view. Even if what you see is a *true* image, it would not be a *complete* image. You must consider more than one perspective in order to arrive at sound conclusions.

In ethics, for example, Kant argued that you must try to consider the impact you have on the other person. Think of all the people who might be influenced by what you are about to do. How does this look to them? The more of these perspectives you can assemble, the more thorough your understanding. And this includes pondering the consequences for those who cannot speak for themselves. Each has a stake in your leadership, no matter how slight.

Kant claimed that you can suspend your own opinion. Often, you should. You would be advised to consult other people, but frequently you can simply imagine what others might say. It takes practice, but some combination of listening and imagining will flesh out your viewpoint.

With all of this input, you do have to put it together in a coherent fashion and make a decision that not everybody will like. You cannot please everybody. Nevertheless, whatever you decide will be richer and more nuanced once you have been circumspect.

Suppose you were anyone

John Rawls published *A Theory of Justice* in 1971, where he encouraged a leader to slip behind “the veil of ignorance.”

If you don’t know ahead of time which person you would be in a situation, you are likely to seek fairness. It stands to reason you would prefer outcomes that harm you least. In effect, Rawls encourages a leader to consider a proposed course of action as though you could be anyone.

When debating a new policy at work, for example, pretend you were the line worker or the staff personnel or the security guard: it doesn’t matter. If you did not know which of these persons you might be once the policy is enacted, would you still go through with it? Obviously you *do* know which person you would be, but the exercise is meant to render you disinterested.

Voters often complain when political leaders make decisions to serve themselves. We cry out against self-dealing and feathering their nests. This device of the veil of ignorance gives the leader a tool to assess whether a proposed course of action might avoid this criticism.

The veil of ignorance not only aids in judging the merits of a proposal, it also helps a leader critique the process by which such decisions are made. Is the process fair? We know that people accept manifestly unfair outcomes so long as they perceive that the process was fair. A leader can deploy this veil of ignorance to make that determination, before going forward.

In conclusion, authenticity can be served by getting out of yourself and adopting one of these impersonal pronouns. How would things look if I were no one? How would this look if I could see it from everyone’s perspective? And would I agree to this course of action, no matter who I was? I concluded my article by saying that by gaining some critical distance, you actually gain a clearer perspective on who you are – and on what kind of leader you promise to become.

**Notes:**

- This blog post is based on the author's paper [No one, everyone, anyone](#). *Leadership and the Humanities*, June 2017.
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