

Leadership Ethics LDST 450, Section 5

Fall 2026

Course Syllabus

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Meeting Requests: Please contact me via email to set up a meeting. I may be slow to respond evenings and weekends.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

In this course, we will analyze and construct arguments about what leadership behaviors are morally right, what ends of leadership are morally good, and what aspects of a leader's character are morally virtuous. In this respect, the course is similar to other courses in ethics—in that it too seeks to answer the basic question: what matters **morally**? However, this question takes on a particular guise in leadership contexts. Do the same things matter morally in leadership, and do they matter in the same way or to the same extent? So, this course is different from other courses in ethics in that it uses philosophy to investigate the moral distinctiveness of leadership. Our main goal will be to identify and understand the peculiar moral challenges faced by leaders, as well as potential responses and solutions.

We begin the course by framing traditional ethical questions in leadership contexts. Some examples are the following: Are leaders **special**? Do they have their **own morality**? What **motivates** them to lead? Does anything count morally aside from a leader's **self-interest**—a leader's wants, plans, and projects? Is it possible for leaders to act against self-interest if morality asks that they do so? Is **character** the focus of the ethical analysis of leaders, or should we look instead to particular **actions**? If ethics is concerned primarily with the actions of leaders, should our assessments of their behavior consider the **intentions** behind the actions—what was **willed**—or the **consequences** in which leaders' actions result? What **should** be the basis of a leader's motivation? Do consequences other than **well-being** and **happiness** matter morally?

As we work through these questions, we will pay special attention to the **moral psychology** of leadership. Moral psychology is a subfield of ethics dedicated to the study of the relationships among belief, motivation, and action. Throughout the course, we will use my book *Leadership Ethics: An Introduction* to consider a central component of the moral psychology of leadership: a belief about **justification**—namely, that leaders are sometimes justified in doing what others are not allowed to do. If leaders have a convincing reason or set of reasons to behave in ways that are proscribed for the rest of us, then ethical leadership may be consistent with breaking the moral rules. We must therefore ask whether leaders are distinctive in terms of their ability to meet demands for justification.

Rule breaking is a central theme—perhaps *the* central theme—in the course. **What are the rules and who gets to break them?** But there are many other, often related, themes at the core of discussions in leadership ethics. These topics also raise questions about the moral distinctiveness of leadership. We will take up *doing vs. allowing*, *negative and positive duties*, *egoism*, *self-defense and defense of others*, *authenticity*, *moral luck*, *dirty hands*, *the role of feelings*, and *role responsibilities*. All are topics worthy of examination on their own merits, but our work on them will allow us to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the main theories of moral leadership covered in the course.

In the final sessions of the course, we will turn to the *ethics of influence* and issues that fall under what we might call *ethics broadly construed*—what constitutes a good, moral life as a leader and/or follower.

All my courses are designed for rigorous discussion of the issues, which means that students bear an equal burden in explaining, critiquing, and developing the ideas conveyed in the readings. To facilitate this kind of engagement, I use assigned seating. I regularly call on people and ask them to answer specific questions about the readings so they can demonstrate **Preparation and Engagement**. For each class, you should be prepared to answer the following questions **and point to passages in the text to support your answers**:

1. What is the author's main conclusion? (Example of evidence: the author's thesis statement.) How did the author get there? (Evidence: examples, assumptions, arguments.)
2. Given the central questions of the course, what is the author's most important, provocative, or controversial claim? (Example: "Unlike Kant, she argues that lying is permissible in some circumstances." Evidence: the passage where she makes this claim.)
3. What part of the author's argument is most susceptible to critique? Can the argument be saved?

Each student is also required to write at least one **Short Paper**. Short papers are 500-800 words, and they engage critically with readings identified as "short paper opportunities." Short papers take the following form:

1. Introductory paragraph (125-200 words). This paragraph introduces us to the problem and briefly sets the context for the rest of the paper. It should mention the account or argument you'll be analyzing and include a thesis statement.
2. Summary paragraph (125-200 words). This paragraph should summarize the account or argument you'll be analyzing.
3. Analysis paragraph (125-200 words). This paragraph should develop a critique or defense of that account or argument.
4. Synthesis paragraph (125-200 words). This paragraph should respond to an objection to your critique or defense. It should conclude by indicating where your short paper leaves

us. Does your critique hold up, or should we move to a position between yours and the author's? Does your defense hold up, or should we move further away from the author's position?

Because these papers are supposed to convey your own understanding and analysis of the readings, **outside sources and AI tools are prohibited and will be considered unauthorized assistance in the completion of the assignment.** If write your own paper, carefully follow the rubric (including word count guidelines), and incorporate my feedback to improve over the semester, you will receive full credit. I *strongly* recommend that you write more than one short paper. Each additional short paper that you write increases your grade on this assignment—up to four total short papers, including your assigned short paper. You should spread short papers out over the semester. **I will count maximum of two papers submitted after fall break.**

I will often use these papers to structure class and ask that they be read aloud, so they are due to me via email the day before class—with a grace period until 9 a.m. on Wednesday for my *receipt* of the paper. You may choose *once* to write on a reading from the class just previous. Assuming you haven't already taken advantage of this option, you can use it to get credit for a paper *received* after 9 a.m. on Wednesday. This option does not apply to your assigned short paper or the final reading of the course. **Please do not ask me to accept a late paper that does not meet these conditions.**

There will be two **Readings Tests**. These tests serve several functions. They give you extra incentive to read carefully and to retain what you've read. They also give me a sense of your understanding of the course basics. Careful reading, retention, and understanding are necessary for achieving the main goals of the course: engaging with the material at a sophisticated level in class discussions and written work. *The tests are therefore means to an end, not ends in themselves.*

Attendance affects your **Preparation and Engagement** grade, your **Short Papers** grade (in-person attendance for the entire class is required for your paper to count), and—in all likelihood—your **Readings Tests** grades. Please email me in advance if you are unable to attend class.

Please note that **we begin and end on time** and that students are expected to remain in class for the entire class period. We will take a break! I will deduct points from your **Preparation and Engagement** grade if you are late or leave class in non-emergency situations.

ELECTRONIC DEVICES

Computers, tablets, phones, and similar devices are not permitted in class. In my experience, their costs outweigh their benefits because electronic devices are distracting for all students and make it harder for them to stay engaged in class exercises and discussions. Any such devices brought into the classroom must be silenced and placed out of view during class. Students should minimize all other distractions and respect the rules of standard classroom etiquette.

Recording class sessions or meetings is also prohibited. There is no need to record class sessions (or to worry about getting complete notes) because I provide comprehensive class notes after each session. Learning in this class occurs primarily through discussion and by developing philosophical habits of mind through practice. My classroom is set up for students to make, and learn from, mistakes. Lots of mistakes. Knowing that there is a recording of one's efforts impedes the intellectual risk-taking I expect of students. Finally, I aim to create an environment in which students feel free to express controversial and unpopular opinions. Recording class discussions has a chilling effect on this kind of expression and, therefore, is at odds with one of the primary goals of the course.

INTERIM HONOR PROCESS AND USE OF AI

As a student at the University of Richmond, you are prohibited from using unauthorized assistance in the completion of coursework. For this course, the use of text-generating artificial intelligence tools (such as, but not limited to, ChatGPT) will be considered a form of unauthorized assistance. I will follow the Interim Honor Process and work with the Director of Student Conduct to investigate and address any potential violations. This prohibition includes the use of generative AI for any stage of your work from conception to completion.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

- The student should understand the relationship between leadership and rule breaking.
- The student should be able to catalog the strengths and weaknesses of competing theories of moral leadership.
- Drawing on philosophical ethics, the student should become a keen moral observer of leadership and, in particular, the moral psychology of leadership.
- The student should learn how to critique moral arguments and how to present original moral arguments.
- The student should be able to recognize and respond to peculiar challenges to our moral assessments of leadership: leader exceptionalism, moral luck, dirty hands cases, role responsibilities, and so on.
- The student should be able to provide an ethically informed reading of leadership theory.

GENERAL EDUCATION LEARNING OBJECTIVES—WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

- Students will produce written work that reflects disciplinary conventions and attention to audience and situation.
- Students will produce written work with a clear perspective and, where appropriate, forward claims supported by evidence, and cite sources responsibly.
- Students will produce written work undergoing an iterative process, where content evolves (creation, drafting, and revision) and improves based on feedback from the faculty member.
- Students will compose written work with clarity, cohesion, concision, and minimal error.

REQUIRED TEXTS

Course pack (available in the bookstore)

Terry L. Price, *Leadership Ethics: An Introduction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

REQUIREMENTS AND GRADING¹

Your final grade will be determined as follows:

1. Preparation and Engagement	25%
2. Short Papers (1: B-, 2: B, 3: B+, 4: A-/A)	15%
3. Readings Test 1	15%
4. Readings Test 2	20%
5. Final Exam	25%

I take deadlines and scheduled exams seriously. In fairness to your classmates, any emergencies that arise should be brought to my attention as soon as possible before scheduled tests or the final paper. **Otherwise, I do not accept late work.** I will accept and grade unfinished work. There are no extensions for short papers, and they must meet the 500-word minimum to count. I do not give “extra credit.”

I will round final grades. For example, 92.5 is sufficient for an A in this course.

Grading legend:

A+	97-100
A	93-96
A-	90-92
B+	87-89
B	83-86
B-	80-82
C+	77-79
C	73-76
C-	70-72
D+	67-69
D	63-66
D-	60-62
F	50-59

¹ I reserve the right the refuse to accept any work submitted without the honor pledge.

HOW TO DO WELL IN THIS COURSE

Pretty much failsafe in my experience!

1. Attend all classes. You should focus on staying engaged in the discussion, not on notetaking. I will provide all necessary notes.
2. Carefully complete all readings in advance of class meetings. Don't be tempted to read only one article (or part of an article!) just so you can write a short paper. When reading, identify passages to which you can easily refer to answer the three sets of questions above. (A lot of material will require re-reading.)
3. Use the whole week to prepare for our one-day-per-week class. Do the after-class readings and spread your work out over shorter, focused blocks. Do not save this course for Tuesday night!
4. Write the maximum number of short papers (4).
5. Be an informed participant in discussions by drawing directly on the texts. (See 2 above.)
6. Write a final exam that incorporates the feedback you've received over the semester.

SCHEDULE (subject to change as the semester progresses)

*** Short Paper Opportunity**

I. The distinctive challenge of leadership ethics

Wednesday, August 26

Before Class:

Hollander, "Conformity, Status, and Idiosyncrasy Credit," 120-121

Hollander, "Competence and Conformity in the Acceptance of Influence"

Price, "Leader Exceptionalism"

After Class:

Price, *Leadership Ethics*, 1-8

II. What is the nature of the rules, and why do people do people break them?

Wednesday, September 2

Philippa Foot, "The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of Double Effect"*

G. E. M. Anscombe, "Who is Wronged?—Philippa Foot on Double Effect: One Point"

Judith Jarvis Thomson, "Killing, Letting Die, and the Trolley Problem"*

Wednesday, September 9*Before Class:*Plato, *Republic*, 12-40

Ludwig and Longenecker, "The Bathsheba Syndrome: The Ethical Failure of Successful Leaders"*

*After Class:*Price, *Leadership Ethics*, 73-81**III. What are the moral rules? (Or is that even the right way to think about ethics?)****Wednesday, September 16***Before Class:*Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, 61-73, 88-92

Korsgaard, "The Right to Lie: Kant on Dealing with Evil," 325-341*

*After Class:*Price, *Leadership Ethics*, 38-43**Wednesday, September 23***Before Class:*Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, 95-98, 100-102, 108-109

Flanigan, "The Ethics of Authentic Leadership"*

*After Class:*Price, *Leadership Ethics*, 44-51**Wednesday, September 30****READINGS TEST 1***Before or After Class:*Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 185-202Price, *Leadership Ethics*, 192-204**Wednesday, October 7***Before Class:*

Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality"*

Williams, *Critique of Utilitarianism*, 93-118***Wednesday, October 14***Before Class:*Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 33-53

Annas, "Being Virtuous and Doing the Right Thing"*

After Class:

Price, "The Virtue of Leadership"

IV. When necessity and bad luck get in the way...

Wednesday, October 21

Before Class:

Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 54-63

Nagel, "Moral Luck"*

Williams, "Moral Luck," 35-46*

After Class:

Price, *Leadership Ethics*, 145-151

Wednesday, October 28

Before Class:

Walzer, "Political Action: The Dilemma of Dirty Hands"*

Thalos, "Dirty Hands: The Phenomenology of Acting As an Authorized Agent"*

V. What are the moral limits on motivating others?

Wednesday, November 4

Before Class:

Baron, "Manipulativeness"*

Noggle, "Manipulative Actions"*

Wednesday, November 11

TBD*

Wednesday, November 18

READINGS TEST 2

Wednesday, November 24

THANKSGIVING WEEK

Wednesday, December 2

WRITING WORKSHOP

Wednesday, December 16

FINAL EXAM—in class (7:00-10:00 p.m.)