Leader Self-Serving Behavior: Bad Apples Competing in a Bad Barrel

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Abstract

Corporate environments are fiercely competitive ecosystems that are both fueled and plagued, at least in part, by an innate desire to promote personal gain (i.e., self-interest). While self-interest isn't inherently negative, it has a way of tempting individuals to oblige their self-serving impulses with little to no consideration for how their actions might adversely impact another. As such, the purpose of this study is to explore the theories of egoism and moral development to expand upon what causes leaders to engage in self-serving behavior to supplement their individual career advancement. Depending on perspective, leader self-serving behavior might be attributed to a handful of so-called "bad apples," whose moral identities have been distorted by the dark tetrad. Conversely, the culprit could instead be a "bad barrel" that was created with good intention but spoiled by corruption. Nevertheless, leaders are faced with moral decisions found at the crossroads between logic and intuition, subjective and objective pressures, and the promotion of one's preferences against social norms. Corporate reward systems emphasize results over execution, effectively ignoring the repercussions of self-serving behavior so long as productivity and performance are optimized. Self-serving leaders who capitalize on the latter create an environment in which their subordinates likely feel stifled in terms of employee engagement and job satisfaction, culminating in the forms of voluntary resignation, retaliation, or perhaps worse. All hope is not lost, however, because when a leader is held accountable for their actions, their propensity to self-serve seems to diminish.

Keywords: leader self-serving behavior, professional ethics, organizational behavior, self-interest, human behavior

Table of Contents

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Introduction

Benevolence is a social norm of sorts. Meaning, human beings are generally, at least to some extent, expected to do right by others or as the Golden Rule suggests, to treat others the way they wish to be treated, which is sometimes easier said than done. This common morality is the lifeblood of human existence and creates an environment in which groups of people with differing worldviews can coexist. "Without a common morality, humans belong to groups whose relationships are vague, competitive, and even dangerous: trust is absent" (Stivers, 2023, p. viii). Sounds like a dystopian nightmare, doesn't it? Whichever the case, a world devoid of morality is no place to live.

Daily, we're faced with moral conundrums in all aspects of life. Sometimes, we decide to pursue socially acceptable ends and on other occasions, we instead humor our innate desires that perhaps benefit only the self or a minority perspective. People are fallible beings influenced by visceral impulses (Scott, 2000). Such impulses are found at the intersections of right versus wrong, good versus evil, and altruism versus egoism, although egoism isn't intrinsically negative. Nevertheless, we are, for the most part, as equally capable of engaging in both moral and immoral behavior.

Life is full of choices and while the following is inherently subjective, there are "good" choices and there are "bad" choices, depending on one's viewpoint. In any case, one's choices often determine the life one leads. Like choices, there are both "good" and "bad" people in this world. No matter the circumstance, individuals are capable of operating outside of their innate

"goodness" and innate "badness." Regardless of their actions, people tend to be pessimistic by nature (Rozin & Royzman, 2001). In fact, Jordan (1965) suggests that "a positive attitude or positive affect does not have an effect on measured behavior oppositely equivalent to the effect of a negative attitude or negative affect" (p. 315). As such, we seem to be hardwired to fixate on the negative aspects of people and of everyday life. Perhaps this negativity bias one holds is nothing more than a matter of projection, influenced by a diluted self-image (Baumeister et al., 1998). On the other hand, the negativity experienced by one can sometimes be attributed to another's overemphasis of the self. Unfortunately, many of us have been wronged in this life, especially in the workplace. With that in mind, this study aims to explore the theory that all human behavior is driven by an innate self-interest, especially that which is pursued irrespective of how one's actions might negatively impact another.

Problem Statement

Leaders, who are not only pressured to perform, but to also promote organizational efficiencies and effectiveness, while leading teams of people, aren't excluded from the list of those allured by one or all the cardinal sins. Disregarding the pervasive prevalence of cancel culture, we enable a so-called unrestrained ambition to influence our behaviors, without considering the consequences of our actions. And somehow, a leader's self-serving behavior seems to fly under the radar, concealed by productivity, performance, and positive impacts to an organization's financial metrics. "Of all the causes which conspire to blind man's erring judgment, and misguide the mind, what the weak head with strongest bias rules, is pride, the never-failing vice of fools" (Pope, 1716, p. 13).

While advantageous for the individual, leader self-serving behavior can pose as a detriment to the interpersonal leader-employee relationship, as well as a deterrent to organizational cohesion and success (Wisse et al., 2019). Like any meaningful relationship, that of one between a leader and their subordinates is built upon a foundation of mutual trust, among other things. Trust, or lack thereof, can develop or lead to the demise of any relationship (Simpson, 2007). Kramer and Carnevale (2001) suggest that the very trust of which we speak may have an impact on a leader's individual interests. Meaning, it's imperative for leaders to gain the trust of their followers to the point in which they believe that the actions of their leaders are always in good faith and with their followers' best interests in mind. Doubling down, it's of paramount importance that such an unwavering trust is formed, especially from the perspective of the leader, because without the help of their employees, leaders may fail to deliver, impeding their subsequent success. Success, in this case, refers to the leader's ability to progress within their organization in support of their individual career advancement.

Recalling our discussion of negativity bias, one can presume that there are instances in which a leader's effort(s) to foster trust between their people and themself is an act of self-serving behavior. Efforts to mitigate such masquerades of deceit (i.e., a leader's manipulation of their employees' emotions) may be, in part, supplemented by one's feelings of empathy as they relate to altruistic intentions and the promotion of a common good. Empathy, in this case, is defined as one's ability to perceive the emotional stimuli and triggers of not only oneself but also of another (Keen, 2007). Stadler (2017) confirms that empathy isn't exactly an emotion, while Nussbaum (2003) discusses its role in the development of an individual's moral identity. Our moral identity serves as our North Star which guides us through life and affords us the ability to

navigate through internal struggles related to moral dilemmas, especially those in which one's decision(s) directly impacts the lives of others.

One might presume that it may be rather difficult to correctly distinguish between the behaviors in which a leader might engage to promote self-centered ends compared to those deemed other-centered. To that point, studies have shown that the predictors of leader self-serving behavior are not wholly understood and like any enigma, require substantial empirical research (Barelds et al., 2018). Such is at the heart of this study, to understand the why, in terms of what causes leaders to engage in self-serving behavior. Rus et al. (2012) suggests that if we were to further expand upon the current research to develop a more holistic understanding of the source of leader self-serving behavior, it may be possible to prevent such exploitations, now and in the future. Thus, the importance of this study and those like it, as they provide further context and considerations to the study of professional ethics, organizational behavior, and leadership at large.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to explore the theories of egoism and moral development to expand upon what causes leaders to engage in self-serving behavior to supplement their individual career advancement. At this stage in the research, leader self-serving behavior will be generally defined as a leader's indulgence of self-centered impulse to promote individual career advancement, in relation to how one ought act, as per society's view of a "common morality."

Regarding the latter, the researcher presumes that those who're intently motivated to grow professionally (i.e., career advancement) may possess a deep-seated proclivity to engage in self-serving behavior. Is it a character trait, one's response to the competitive nature of the

system in which one operates, or is it something completely different? For this demographic their career may be at the center of their identity or perhaps their sole priority. To that end, one might suppose that certain leaders would stop at nothing to achieve whatever it is they perceive to be rightfully theirs. Thus, the goal of this study is to consider the likely causes of leader self-serving behavior from multiple perspectives. Moreover, the researcher will aim to develop potential strategies to thwart such behavior, even incrementally or on a small scale, to promote a common morality and acts of genuine benevolence not only in corporate settings but among the masses.

Literature Review

Hoping to gain insight into the potential causes of leader self-serving behavior, this study is underpinned, at least in part, by theories and concepts found in business and professional ethics research. Ferrell and Fraedrich (2021) define business ethics as "organizational principles, values, and norms that may originate from individual, organizational statements, or from the legal system that primarily guide individual and group behavior in business" (p. 4). Business ethics refers to the acknowledgement of and adherence to a universal set of standards (i.e., code of conduct) that governs the world of business (Crane et al., 2019). Furthermore, business ethics could also be considered as a sort of rules of engagement, in terms of how professionals ought to conduct business, morally and ethically speaking. Conversely, Collins (1994) comments on the belief held by some that the term "business ethics" is nothing but a mere oxymoron, which is to say that most, if not all business activities are either unethical, immoral, or both. On the contrary, not all self-interested behavior is inherently malevolent (Mansbridge, 1990). In fact, some self-interested acts are done in the spirit of altruism (Schenk, 1987). Similarly, not all behavior in the workplace is innately self-serving or malign, thus not all businesspeople are criminals who act in

such a way that's devoid of prior consideration of the repercussions of their actions, at the very least. Nevertheless, "by understanding human behavior in an organizational context, we can better understand and manage our own and other's ethical conduct" (Trevino & Nelson, 2021, p. 19).

Competing Interests in Corporate Environments

Human behavior is driven by self-interest albeit interests that aren't necessarily in support of the common good. Schön (1987) likens professional environments akin to that of a swamp, to which many would likely attest. Due to the overly competitive and seemingly cutthroat nature of corporate environments, one might presume that it's rather difficult for leaders to align their allegiances to both their employer and subordinates alike, both in practical and ethical terms. As such, competing interests between two or more individuals is likely to spark interpersonal conflicts which, as Losada-Otalora et al. (2020) would likely suggest, can lead to unethical behavior. The latter is especially true for individuals (i.e., leaders) who are egocentric (De Clercq et al., 2022). While difficult, a leader's success is predicated on their understanding of how best to exercise "professional judgment" (McDavid et al., 2018, p. 441).

Leader Morality Through an Egoist Lens

Central to this study is the ethical theory of egoism as it relates to the study of human behavior. Presumably, many (leaders) engage in self-interested – or worse – self-serving behavior to promote personal and/or professional growth. The latter competes with that of the common good, or the commonly held interests of their colleagues, subordinates, or greater organization. For that reason, this study will consider the causes of leader self-serving behavior

from a psychological perspective to link innate self-serving internalizations with the tangible outcomes we see in daily life, but more specifically, within the workplace.

Psychological Egoism. Psychological egoism is an ethical theory which asserts that human behavior is driven by self-interest (Sober, 2013). It is concerned with rationalizing and describing the motivation behind one's actions, especially those that are ascribed to the self. Turner (1976) claims that humans are compelled by intrinsic desires (i.e., self-interest). Again, such notions aren't meant to suggest that self-interested behavior is inherently negative because one might promote one's self-interest to serve another and with benevolent intentions. Granted, such goodwill may be manufactured or lacking sincerity, but the recipient of such behavior would be none the wiser and nevertheless bear the benefits. When a psychological egoist engages in other-centered behavior, "they determine the appropriateness of helping from instrumental reasoning starting from egoistic first principles" (Piccinini & Schulz, 2019, p. 62). As in, leaders might disingenuously befriend their superiors and/or subordinates to support their career advancement. Morally speaking, is that right or wrong? Those of us with a developed moral identity would likely conclude that such behavior is not morally justified because the career-driven leader is simply manipulating the emotions of those around them (i.e., obliging the dark side of emotional intelligence) (Grant, 2014).

From a psychological egoist's perspective, self-interest is the foremost motivation behind all human behavior (Miller, 1999). Presumably, it could be argued that self-interest is one of, if not the sole contributor to the successful evolution of mankind. Without self-interest, would we think to take care of ourselves in terms of eating food, drinking water, and seeking shelter or would we instead be driven by selfless acts of altruism that might inevitably lead us to our

collective demise? The latter rhetorical question is of course an exaggeration, but the sentiment remains the same. Devoid of a looming self-interest, one might assume that we, as a people, would have evolved at a much slower rate. Sure, people commit their life's work to eradicating diseases or ending world hunger, but might one presume that both the latter and the former may have at least some to do with ego or perhaps the promotion of one's legacy?

Rational Egoism. Rational egoism is a "virtue-based set of ethical beliefs" which claims that it's appropriate for one to promote one's welfare if such behavior is reasonable and promotes one's self-interest (Overall & Gedeon, 2022, para. 10). Essentially, rational egoism justifies selfishness, so long as the latter improves one's overall wellbeing. However, rational thought, as Lindenberg (2013) would argue, is subjective and a matter of self-regulation. From a rational egoist's perspective, seemingly wicked acts, like firing one's competition without cause, could be justified because doing so would increase a self-serving leader's chances of promotion. Furthermore, such behavior would also be considered "rational" because it maximizes the benefit to the self (Sharaf et al., 2015; Bazerman, 2014), although the morality of such behavior hinges upon one's beliefs.

Ethical Egoism. An ethical egoist would contend that "the sole ethical criterion is self-interest; that is, it is man's ethical duty to maximize his own benefits in any given situation" (Sharaf & Eslami Ardakani, 2015, p. 31). From this perspective, it's one's moral obligation to serve oneself, no matter the implications of their behavior (Regis, 1980). At times, humans pursue ends that manifest themselves in the form of short-term pleasures (e.g., larceny, alcohol abuse, or a leader's exploitation of their direct reports) that will not only result in the harm of others but also future harm to the actor. Regarding the latter, Rachels (2012) discusses an

interesting notion that ethical egoism "endorses selfishness, but it doesn't endorse foolishness" (p. 194). On one hand, the selfishness involved with leader self-serving behavior could be rationalized because it leads to a legitimate end (i.e., one's individual career advancement). On another, such behavior might also be considered foolish as it is the result of seemingly misguided judgment and senselessly harms another. In any case, ethical decisions tend to be subjective and depend on the moral identity of the individual (Rothstein, 2022). Thus, Crocker et al. (2017) recommends proceeding with caution when considering one's self-centered motivation(s) as doing so could lead to strained personal and/or professional relationships.

The Effects of the Dark Tetrad in the Workplace

Current literature on the topic, as noted by Sauer et al. (2018), discusses the link between organizational goal setting and behaviors associated with the concept that is the Dark Tetrad (Mead et al., 2009). Paulhus and Williams (2002) first brought to light the precursor to the latter, the "Dark Triad," which is a theory comprised of three relatively notable and even more negative personality traits: Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy (p. 1). In recent years, the Dark Triad transformed, gaining a fourth personality trait, sadism (Book et al., 2016). Personality traits in this category tempt those who harbor them to engage in antisocial behaviors to achieve their goals.

Machiavellianism. Two of the most preeminent thought leaders on the topic, Christie and Geis (1970), define Machiavellianism as: "a strategy of social conduct that involves manipulating others for personal gain" (p. 285). Machiavellians are calculated when it comes to engaged in unethical behavior, only when the time is just right or perhaps somewhat loosely condoned (Jones & Mueller, 2021). People who behave in such a way lack a defined moral

identity. Their interests are top priority and to a fault, much like the leader who's fixated on career progression with a willingness to stop at nothing to reach the highest rung on the corporate ladder (Jones, 2020). Machiavellians have trust issues and are intoxicated by power, control, and status, to name a few (Dahling et al., 2009). Such leaders are the puppeteers of the business world, abusing their power to manipulate the emotions and behaviors of their subordinates, colleagues, and superiors to support their selfish causes. Case in point, Machiavellians are experts in the dark art of manipulation (Paulhus, 2014). Like any proverbial snake in the grass, their main objective is to rise to power, and they don't much care about who they need to exploit along the way.

Narcissism. For the purposes of this discussion, the researcher will focus on behaviors associated with subclinical narcissism, which differs from clinically diagnosed narcissistic personality disorder (NPD). As such, Raskin & Hall (1979) would categorize (sub-clinical) narcissistic leaders as having an aggrandized view of themselves, especially in terms of their knowledge, skills, and abilities. Furthermore, their attention is focused on themselves and themselves only. Self-serving leaders who harbor narcissistic tendencies not only exploit the hollow relationships held with their employees, colleagues, and superiors for personal gain but to also be the recipients of their acquaintances' admiration (LeBreton et al., 2018). With that in mind, it's presumable that the narcissistic leader might wish to be put on a pedestal, like that of a king or queen, for the opportunity to look down on their seemingly unworthy subjects. Harboring this "larger than life" persona, it's expected that narcissistic (self-serving) leaders would hold no qualms with exploiting their colleagues, subordinates, or superiors to support their efforts in promoting their individual interests (Ramos-Villagrasa et al., 2020).

Psychopathy. Much like with our discussion of subclinical narcissism, the researcher will use the term "psychopathy" in the subclinical sense. According to Hare (1993), psychopaths are "social predators who charm, manipulate and ruthlessly plow their way through life, leaving a broad trail of broken hearts, shattered expectations, and empty wallets" (p. ix). Luckily for the psychopathic leader, we're captivated by charisma (Ciulla, 2004). They are daring, exhibit antisocial behavior, and seemingly incapable of exercising restraint (Patrick, 2022). Fooled by their magnetism, naïve employees and the like might be easily manipulated by the apathetic psychopath who sacrifices them like a disposable pawn in their wicked game of chess. Lacking impulse control, it's likely that the psychopathic leader will stop at nothing to achieve whatever it is they desire, with little to no remorse for their actions, no matter how unethical or immoral (Hare, 1993; LeBreton et al., 2018).

Sadism. Like our discussion of subclinical narcissism and psychopathy, the following discourse about sadism should not be considered in a clinical capacity; but rather, everyday life. Paulhus (2014) describes the "everyday sadist" as someone who finds pleasure in inflicting harm on others (p. 422). Unsurprisingly, there's a link between psychopathy and sadism in terms of the antisocial behaviors associated with each personality trait (Reidy et al., 2011). Per the latter, psychopathic (self-serving) leaders wouldn't think twice about inflating their numbers to hit their quarterly bonus, taking credit for their team's work when they shared none of the workload, or even throwing their colleague under the bus to eliminate any sort of competition for the promotion with the corner office. They could do several psychopathic or sadistic things for the betterment of their cause without even batting an eye. Frankly, it would bring them joy to simply witness the suffering as the result of the chaos they created. Much to the self-serving leader's

chagrin, engaging in such behavior can be counterproductive to the cause as it can impede their career advancement (De Brito et al., 2021).

The Dark Side of Emotional Intelligence

Before delving deeper into the innerworkings of the dark side of emotional intelligence, it might be beneficial to first discuss emotional intelligence even if only at face value. We all have likely heard of the intelligence quotient (IQ). In a similar fashion, emotional intelligence is supported by one's emotional quotient (EQ). Consequently, emotional intelligence is one's acknowledgement and recognition of his or her feelings and emotions, as well as the feelings and emotions of those around them (Salovey & Mayer, 2004). It enables people to characterize their emotions relative to their feelings associated with a person, place, or thing (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). That said, one's capacity to regulate one's emotions transcends during interactions with others. Consequently, emotionally intelligent individuals tend to be more successful in both their educational and professional pursuits, among other things (MacCann et al., 2020).

Although purveyors of the dark arts (i.e., the Dark Tetrad) tend to lack empathy they may still be incredibly emotionally intelligent. Emotional intelligence is what makes us sentient beings but that doesn't mean the apathetic psychopath necessarily *feels* their emotions (Mayer et al., 1990). Like self-interest and selfishness, it's presumable that people tend to confuse or perhaps use the terms "empathy" and "sympathy" synonymously. While they may be similar, they're in fact mutually exclusive. Empathy refers to how one understands the feelings of another (empathize) but doesn't necessarily have to feel them oneself. Sympathy, on the other hand, involves sharing the emotional burden of another's feelings. Yet again, one does not necessarily need to have the ability to feel empathy to be emotionally intelligent. Instead, they

(self-serving leaders) just need to understand how to best use the emotions of another against them or to the benefit of the perpetrator. Meaning, an emotionally intelligent person can easily persuade or worse: manipulate another simply by regulating their emotions, especially in such a way to elicit positive emotions toward the actor. In fact, having a heightened emotional intelligence equips leaders with the ability to manipulate the emotions of their followers and colleagues for their personal gain. Nevertheless, emotionally intelligent individuals tend to be more successful in both their educational and professional pursuits, among other things (MacCann et al., 2020). Per the late business tycoon, J.P. Morgan, "A man always has two reasons for doing anything. A good reason and a real reason" (Forbes, 2015). While emotional intelligence is an incredibly useful skill to have, especially in instances in which it's wielded for good, as the previous statement suggests, those who possess it aren't always benevolent creatures.

Goffman (1959) suggests that perpetrators of the dark side of emotional intelligence deliberately weave elaborate webs to both regulate and manipulate the emotions of others. Going one step further, self-serving leaders are likely to manipulate the perceptions of their superiors, as well as their colleagues and subordinates alike to ensure their viewed in the best positive light, especially those who are obsessed with vanity and an insatiable desire to be admired.

Schlenker (1980) defines impression management as an "attempt to control images that are projected in real or imagined social interactions" (p. 6). Whether it's used for good or bad, impression management is vital to the success of such efforts. When used correctly, it is quite effective in subduing connotations of the negative variety that may otherwise be associated with those who aim to posture themselves as competent and successful leaders. If not, it's possible

that the career aspirations of a self-serving leader might be stifled, which to them is completely unacceptable.

Adherence to and Defiance of Moral Obligations in Leadership

As has been discussed, corporate environments are hyper-competitive ecosystems burdened by "irresistible pressures" (McDowell, 1994, p. 161). As markets become increasingly saturated, companies must find ways to remain competitive to uphold their share or increase their influence. The same could be said for the individuals who lead organizations, especially those in volatile industries. Some might argue that the former triggers one's fight-or-flight response to simply maintain employment, let alone progress within the organization. Furthermore, it could influence a leader's self-serving behavior in terms of keeping oneself relevant and at top of mind to those who hold the keys to promotional opportunities and the like. However, "business decisions are not made in a vacuum, but are embedded in normative forces that are stronger than the organizations themselves" (Gonin at al., 2012, p. 3). As such, one might presume that a leader's self-serving behavior is catalyzed by the moral inconsistencies among members within our society. To that end, the researcher will also assess leader self-serving behavior from that of a moral or ethical perspective to attempt to understand the possible justifications of such behavior.

To confirm, self-serving behavior refers to the promotion of one's interests, while lacking any sort of forethought regarding how one's efforts might affect the lives of others (Rus et al., 2010). Theoretically, then, a leader's self-serving bias would influence their decision(s) to engage in self-serving behavior, would it not? "We struggle along with such thick layers of bias and rationalization, compartmentalization and denial, that our choices suffer immeasurably"

(Bok, 2011, p. 71). Think about yourself, how often do you struggle to rationalize your moral decisions? Each day, we're subjected to and consume information that likely differs from our core beliefs. Thus, challenging the fine tuning of one's moral compass that may leave one questioning the validity of reason, in terms of what one might perceive, relative to the concept of a common morality. The latter is what Tenbrunsel and Messick (2004) deem to be "ethical fading," which they describe as "the process by which the moral colors of an ethical decision fade into bleached hues that are void of moral implications" (p. 224). This concept is founded on the dichotomy of competing interests (Messick & Bazerman, 1996). In the workplace, leaders are forced to grapple with the repercussions of their actions, whether they're willing to acknowledge them. To support their professional development, they must balance the promotion of personal interests while keeping a pulse on how their behaviors and decisions might negatively impact the organization's bottom line, as well as the livelihoods of their colleagues and subordinates alike.

Ethical Leadership

Brown et al. (2005) defines ethical leadership as the "demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making" (p. 120). In this context, ethical leadership aligns with normative theory, in terms of how one should or ought to act, which differs from descriptive theory, which refers to the reality of one's actions (Over, 2004). While much of this study is based on normative ethics, which attempts to create a delineation between right and wrong (Kagan, 2018), the goal of the researcher is to add to descriptive theories relative to the concept of leader self-serving behavior.

Ethical leaders "shape and affect corporate culture" in a positive way (Asif et al., 2019, p. 4). Conversely, leaders who manipulate the emotions of their superiors, colleagues, and subordinates do so to support their personal agendas (Côté et al., 2011). All things considered; people tend to approach things sensibly (Scott, 2000). As previously stated, a rational person would likely find exploitative behavior immoral and unethical. In fact, "morality requires that we balance our own interests against the interests of others" (Rachels, 2012, p. 193). With that in mind, could it be argued that leader self-serving behavior is an ethical issue and moral dilemma? According to an ethical egoist, it is a person's moral obligation to serve oneself above all else, irrespective of how those actions impact another (Regis, 1980). With respect to a common morality, the tail-end of the latter statement is concerning. From a moral leadership perspective, it's a leader's obligation to both promote a culture of accountability that enforces ethical behavior (Solinger et al., 2020).

Leader Self-Serving Behavior

Are self-serving leaders an anomaly or perhaps a handful of "bad apples," or is the corporate ecosystem (i.e., "bad barrel") at fault? Either way, self-serving leaders tend to engage in unethical behavior that's destructive and deteriorates the moral fabric of the institutions in which they work (Peng et al., 2019; Liu et al. 2022). Krasikova et al. (2013) defines destructive leadership as:

Volitional behavior by a leader that can harm or intends to harm a leader's organization and/or followers by (a) encouraging followers to pursue goals that contravene the legitimate interests of the organization and/or (b) employing a leadership style that

involves the use of harmful methods of influence with followers, regardless of

justifications for such behavior. (p. 1310)

Destructive leaders, who are coerced by innate impulses to self-serve, use their positions of

power for personal gain (Northouse, 2021). In a general sense, self-serving behavior refers to the

promotion of one's interests, irrespective of how the latter might negatively impact another (Rus

et al., 2012). Presumably, self-serving leaders feel as if they're holier than thou, thou being their

unworthy subjects or followers (Decoster et al., 2014). Furthermore, leaders who self-serve may

also believe that their interests take precedence above all else, whether that's their employer,

colleagues, or subordinates (Camps et al., 2012). After all, they can't let the competition get the

better of them because one false step could cost them their next promotion, completely derailing

their self-absorbed quest for loneliness. An unhealthy fear of failure relative to a lack of

emotional security in one's professional life is likely to cause leader self-serving behavior

(Babalola et al., 2023). In the same sentiment, Wisse et al. (2019) claim that leaders engage in

self-serving behavior to combat losses in influence. Conversely, Camps et al. suggests that self-

serving leaders can behave ethically and/or morally, depending on the situation and what's at

stake. Thus, confirming the notion that not all self-interested behavior is totally negative,

although it can certainly drive people to perpetuate negativity through selfish means.

Based on the concept of a common morality, there should be no excuse for lapses in

ethical judgement, especially for those working in a professional capacity. That said, efforts

should be centralized around identifying and understanding the "justifiable" alibis that correlate

to such wrongdoings (McDowell, 1994, p. 158). While it's true that individuals should be held

accountable for their actions, one might also suggest that there should be reasonable exceptions

for simple human limitation. After all, no one's perfect and depending on perspective, people

tend to deserve second chances, within reason, of course. Nevertheless, Kantian ethics would

contend that one should always consider others as ends and never means (Beauchamp &

Childress, 2001). Although, it's implausible to believe that people can go through life without a

mishap, mistake, or seemingly (innocent) unethical decision. Due to the unfathomable number of

situations one might encounter over the course of a lifetime, such happenings are inevitable

because of our insatiable drives to self-serve (Downs, 1957).

The Unexpected Drawbacks of Corporate Reward Systems

Corporate reward systems are leveraged by organizations to motivate employees in such

a way that increases productivity and elicits desired outputs (Armstrong & Stephens, 2005).

Additionally, Kerr and Slocum (2005) claim that reward systems, focused on two key

components: "performance and rewards," help to align an organization and its employees in

terms of corporate culture (p. 130). From their perspective, performance is measured by way of

evaluation and assessment, whereas rewards are typically comprised of monetary incentives or

any compensation that is awarded in addition to an employee's base salary, both of which are

leveraged to reinforce desired behaviors in staff. If implemented appropriately, reward systems

incentivize employees to perform at a heightened level but also support employee engagement,

"job satisfaction" and devotion to the organization (Coccia & Igor, 2018, p. 2). Employee

satisfaction tends to translate to a greater sense of loyalty to one's employer which ultimately

leads to improvements in individual and organizational performance (Matzler & Renzl, 2006).

Although the aim of reward systems is to promote positive outcomes, sometimes such initiatives

18

lead to grave repercussions. As such, the researcher explores leader self-serving behavior from an institutional perspective, vis-à-vis the unexpected drawbacks of corporate reward systems.

While reward systems can boost employee performance and spark friendly competition, the latter can also lead to friction. If left unresolved, said friction may advance to interpersonal conflict, manifesting as unethical behavior (Piezunka et al., 2018; Treviño et al., 2014). Seo and Lee (2017) explore leader-member exchange (LMX) theory in terms of how social exchanges impact the dynamic between leaders and their followers (i.e., dyadic relationships). Leaders exploit their followers and colleagues alike for their personal gain (i.e., to *earn* their year-end bonus or to solidify the big promotion), ultimately toxifying the environment in which they operate, thus eroding any semblance of a positive or productive organizational culture to the Wild West. Consequently, when leaders manipulate the emotions of their followers to supplement their individual interests, their dyadic relationships are impacted for the worse (Cropanzano et al., 2017; Vasquez et al., 2021).

Sauer et al. (2018) comments on the interplay between corporate culture and organizational behavior in terms of how this connection may cause individuals to act unethically. Conventional wisdom would suggest in such cases the individual is solely at fault; however, the way in which reward systems are structured in corporate environments happens to entice leaders to behave immorally and to promote their personal interests (Gürlek, 2021). In which case, is it a matter of one or two "bad apples" or rather a "bad barrel" all together? Niven and Healy (2016) suggest that goal setting may have an adverse effect on the actions of employees. Their study found that participants with a clearly defined objective were more apt to engage in unethical behavior, or at the very least, condone such activity. Nonetheless, as productivity increases and

both individual and organizational performance is on the rise, individual codes of ethics seem to diminish, at least to an extent (Barsky, 2008). Feeling the pressure to perform, leaders are likely tempted to succeed by any means necessary and at the expense of their subordinates and colleagues alike. In fact, according to KPMG's 2013 Integrity Survey, which called on the individual experiences of more than 3,500 people working in the United States, participants asserted that unethical behavior in the workplace is a biproduct of "systems that rewarded results over means" (Forensic, 2013, p. 1). Consequently, the organization or "bad barrel" may hold the lion share of the blame.

Analysis

Smith (1863) likens self-interest to that of "self-love," which in modern day terms, aligns with that of selfishness. While acts of this so-called self-love may not always cause harm to others, as we've discussed, there are certainly instances in which individuals pursue their interests with little to no regard for how their actions might negatively impact those around them. Consequently, the term self-interest is often misconstrued as it is frequently used interchangeably or synonymously with selfishness. In social contexts, selfishness applies to one's explicit concern with oneself and a blatant disregard of others (Caporael et al., 1989). Selfishness, within the context of this study, is a precursor to self-serving behavior as those who act selfishly do so to promote personal gain with little to no consideration of the repercussions of their actions.

People supplement their personal interests by way of benevolence or malevolence, depending on the individual or situation at hand (May, 2011). Sometimes, individuals are driven by the need to promote the welfare of others and although altruism is the antithesis of both selfishness and egoism, in some cases it's in one's best interest to act with benevolent intention

20

or in such a way that benefits another (Kerr et al., 2004). Conversely, people can also be tempted by visceral impulses of innate wickedness, that if not swiftly squandered, may inevitably lead to undue harm. In essence, self-interest isn't in and of itself inherently negative. On the contrary, self-interest refers to the promotion of one's well-being, which according to Miller (1999) poses as a distinct influence on how someone leads their life. Nevertheless, while self-interest isn't the root of all evil, one might consider it as one of the driving forces of leader self-serving behavior.

According to Heider (1958), self-serving bias leads individuals to revel in their successes and attribute such positive outcomes to their competency, whereas their failures are the result of external forces outside their control. Unlike the theory of psychological egoism, which suggests that people are simply driven by self-interest as an inherent human characteristic, ethical egoism claims that to act in one's self-interest is one's moral obligation to the self (Gert, 1998). If that were to be true, our sole prerogative as human beings would be to put ourselves first, discounting the need to help others. Of course, at its core, ethical egoism suggests that human beings should act in their self-interest, irrespective of how those actions might affect another (Shaver, 2002). Presumably, the average person would deem such behavior immoral. From a Kantian perspective, however, if one were to act in accordance with one's obligation (i.e., to promote one's self-interest above all else), self-serving behavior would be considered moral and just (Beck, 1956). With that in mind, the same principles would dictate that people must be used exclusively as ends and not as mere means, leading to a moral conundrum. Depending on one's definition of morality, the end may at least, in part, justify one's means. Thus, perpetuating one's self-serving bias that's supported by a dose of moral hypocrisy (Batson et al., 1999).

As we have come to find through our discussion of human behavior, the actions of self-serving leaders are likely the result of a proclivity to elevate one's career which is catalyzed by the structure of corporate reward systems. That, and the individualistic nature of Western society (Lukes, 2006). To their credit, leaders who abuse their power shouldn't bear the full brunt of the blame. After all, they are simply leveraging the resources they've been afforded, while attempting to navigate the complexities and politics of corporate environments. Leaders compete for scarce resources and growth opportunities, which is perhaps one of the many sources of self-serving behavior in the workplace. Such rivalries likely stem from the unexpected drawbacks of corporate reward systems, which force leaders to navigate through and compete within a so-called "bad barrel."

The Impacts of Moral Development and Moral Judgment on Moral Behavior

The overarching theme found in the preceding review of literature has got to be that the human quotient is likely the most impactful catalyst to leader self-serving behavior, whether the latter is founded in legitimate or otherwise immoral stimuli. Sadly, not everyone on this earth is driven by beneficence or acts with benevolent intention. Some leaders subscribe to the self-serving faction of egoist doctrine, while the rest are more other-centered by nature. When the environments in which leaders operate lack accountability measures, they're more likely to abuse their power for personal gain (Northouse, 2021). Based on the concept of a common morality, lapses in moral judgment should be scarce. Although people should be held accountable for their actions, especially those which cause harm, might it be beneficial to allow for reasonable exceptions due to human limitation? Humans are fickle beings conflicted by prosocial and antisocial stimuli. Sometimes, leaders decide to oblige the latter to suit their needs, which to

them might be justifiable in terms of ethical egoism. In that case, McDowell (1994) would argue that measures should be taken to identify and discern the "justifiable" defenses of self-serving behavior to better understand the potential causes (p. 158).

Due to the seemingly capricious nature of human beings, it's difficult to anticipate how one might respond when presented with an opportunity to self-serve. Because no two people are alike, moral development varies from person to person (Kohlberg, 1984). Nevertheless, we enter this world on a relatively level playing field in terms of moral identity and the ability to perceive right from wrong. "We are naturally kind to others…but we possess ugly instincts as well, and these can metastasize into evil" (Bloom, 2014, p. 8). In the context of leadership ethics and organizational behavior, a leader's behavior is proportionate to the development of their moral identity and regulated by an intrinsic value system individual to the self (Kwon et al., 2023). Depending on the person, this intrinsic motivation could manifest itself in the form of prosocial or antisocial behavior (Gibbs, 2019).

Dual-Process Theory

With regards to moral decision-making, dual-process theory illuminates the interplay between rational thought and intuition (Evans & Stanovich, 2013). Rational thought requires the actor to regulate their emotions and to apply conscious effort to drive conclusions. Conversely, (moral) intuition is instinctual and bases decisions partly on a person's immediate emotional responses (Singer, 2005). "Like rational information processing, the intuitive process includes problem definition, analysis, and synthesis, but these stages occur faster and are mostly non-conscious and deeply intertwined" (Calabretta et al., 2017, p. 366). Although visceral, intuitive decisions are supplemented by rudimentary cost-benefit analyses of external data to quickly draw

conclusions or to promote unencumbered action. Nevertheless, dual-process decision making is supported by the power of choice, which may or may not tempt one's compulsion to self-serve (Padilla et al., 2018).

This dichotomy between deliberate and automatic responses influences the complexity of moral decision-making, especially for those with an underdeveloped moral identity (Calabretta et al., 2017). Consequently, leaders with advanced moral identities are more apt to behave ethically and to pursue prosocial ends instead of those that may inflict harm to another. Having said that, rational decisions are conceptualized through analyses of experiential data (Hogarth, 2014). Often, moral decisions leave individuals feeling conflicted as the line between pragmatic rational thought and visceral intuition blur. Fuzzy logic is the result of "imprecise input" that's influenced by an internal conflict driven by external temptations (Velasquez & Hester, 2013, p. 59). Coupling an internal conflict with extrinsic pressures is likely to entice leaders to act outside of their character and moral identity. As such, they may feel as if there's no other option than to self-serve due to how corporate reward systems emphasize performance, by any means necessary (Gürlek, 2021; Barsky, 2008; Forensic, 2013).

Rational Choice Theory

Rational choice theory explores the subjective and objective pressures one experiences when faced with moral decisions (Friedman & Hechter, 1988). In the context of leader self-serving behavior, subjective pressures manifest as one's internal conflict that involves the maximization of one's personal utility against that of objective societal norms (i.e., a common morality). From this perspective, Sato (2013) would likely contend that self-serving leaders succumb to the subjective pressures of such internal conflicts in the pursuit of "an alternative that

he/she believes brings about a social outcome that maximizes his/her utility (payoff) under subjectively conceived constraints" (p. 1). Using similar verbiage, Chustecki (2023) echoes this sentiment with his claim that "when making a decision, the individual is aware of all available alternatives and is able to estimate which one will prove to be the most profitable" (p. 9). The latter is supplemented by the actor's analysis and ranking of the alternatives in terms expected utility or benefit to the actor (Krstić, 2022). Based on the principles of rational egoism, such behavior would be morally justifiable as it aligns with one's moral obligation to the self (i.e., promote personal gain). Like corporate reward systems, an overemphasis of the end(s) seems to justify the means. But what about the self-serving leader's followers? Cut to the aspiring senior leader who's reached a crossroads in their career. They're up for promotion but their team's been struggling to hit their fourth-quarter targets. Who's to blame, the leader or their followers? If the leader steps forward to accept fault in the matter, their competence will likely be questioned, impeding their chance(s) to enter the upper echelon of the organization. After all, companies don't reward employees who underperform. With that in mind, how do they proceed, exploit their team to save face or do the "right" thing?

Even if we, as a collective, were to subscribe to the concept of a common morality, it's difficult to administer moral judgment from a binary perspective. To some, Robin Hood was a burglarious outlaw and to others, a rational philanthropist. The situational dependence of rational decision-making adds yet another layer of complexity to moral decisions (Wheeler, 2018). Wheeler discusses how Weber's theory of substantiative rationality pulls from Kantian rhetoric to make sense of whether the ends justify the means (Wheeler, 2018). At times, it may be more worthwhile or self-serving to pursue matters that provide a benefit for all or perhaps most, to stack the deck in one's self-interested favor, for future use. Substantive rationality applies a

method to such madness (Kalberg, 1980). This theory helps the mind's eye to both see and understand the motivation behind one's ends, as well as the means to accomplish one's goals, both in political and economic contexts. It helps individuals to not only understand the gravity, but to also confront the reality of the situation at hand, attempting to make sense of the intersection of practicality and morality as each relates to human behavior. In turn, is it always practical or even possible to be ethical in all aspects of life? More simply, are we as human beings capable of always behaving morally? If not, what's our breaking point? Is it when one's actions become purely altruistic or perhaps when one's participation doesn't beget a tangible benefit to oneself? Either way, rational decision-making mediates one's choice to pursue ends that promote their individual interests versus those that are mutually beneficial, in which case the "mutual benefit requires individual constraint" (Stout, 2022, p. 227).

Game Theory

Game theory considers rational decision-making in terms of the coexistence between an actor's personal preferences and social norms (Gintis, 2014). While one's preferences may not be innately selfish, the fact that humans harbor a natural temptation to self-serve shouldn't be ignored. Be that as it may, not everyone shares the same beliefs, interests, or preferences, nor do they always act on self-serving urges. That said, people sometimes struggle to find common ground or at the very least, cooperate. Life is a game of choice that's influenced by competing interests, interests derived from both the self, as well as external stimuli (Riar et al., 2023). The choices we make have consequences and directly impact the paths we take. One false step and the course of one's life could change dramatically. Take former Tyco Electronics CEO, Dennis Kozlowski, for instance. Due to greed, he made the conscious decision to misappropriate

millions of corporate funds which led to the untimely demise of his career and worse, a prison sentence (Neal, 2014). How about the Enron scandal? Because a select group of individuals were plagued by the dark tetrad, tens of thousands of people were stripped of their livelihoods and hard-earned retirement funds (Currall et. al., 2003). Such is at the foundation of game theory, or the "multiplayer decision theory where the choices of each player affect the payoffs to other players, and the players take this into account in their choice behavior" (Peters, 2015, p. 45).

Game theory is concerned with the dichotomy of self-centered versus other-centered behavior. In the context of self-interested behavior, Peters (2015) might redefine the latter as "self-regarding" behavior since "an other-regarding individual is still acting to maximize utility and so can be described as self-interested" (p. 46). Thus, reverting to the assertion that not all self-interested pursuits are malicious because there may be times in which it serves one's interests to behave altruistically (Leyton-Brown & Shoham, 2022). That said, a leader's decision to engage in self-serving behavior is a "game" of choice relative to their moral principles. One's "moral judgment is influenced by both automatic emotional responses (automatic settings) and controlled, conscious reasoning (manual mode)" (Greene, 2014, p. 698), which assumes that one's behavior is based on rational thought. For the psychopathic self-serving leader, however, such may not be the case. Nevertheless, Greene would likely suggest that this exchange between automatic and manual responses is akin to the division between deontology and utilitarianism.

Deontology

Deontology is a moral philosophy that's concerned with human behavior based on one's conformity to an established set of moral norms (Rawling, 2023; Gawronski & Beer, 2017). These moral norms manifest in the form of one's duty or obligation to behave in such a way that

is in accordance with the concept of a common morality, or as Immanuel Kant would call it, the

Categorical Imperative (Brenkert & Beauchamp, 2012). The Categorical Imperative aims to

create a central or universal code of ethics by which we should all abide. Namely, that people

should exclusively be considered ends and never simply as a means (Beauchamp & Childress,

2019). In the case of a leader attempting to climb the corporate ladder, the Categorical

Imperative would forbid the exploitation of one's followers and the like progress in one's career.

Agent-based virtue ethics contends that one's motives determine whether one's actions are

morally just (Slote, 2020). Motive, in such cases, distinguishes between moral and immoral

behavior. It aids one's discernment of prosocial versus antisocial behavior, which considers

one's "intentions and motives, costs and benefits, and societal context" (Pfattheicher et al., 2021,

p. 125). Thus, a leader's self-serving motivations would be deemed immoral and contradictory to

that of the theory of deontology.

Utilitarianism

Derived from consequentialism, utilitarianism suggests that moral behavior aligns with

the promotion of "the greatest good for the greatest number" (Northouse, 2021, p. 426). As such,

utilitarians aim to maximize utility by minimizing so-called pain with pursuits of so-called

pleasure (Mill, 2016). The trouble with converging on a universal acceptance of utilitarianism is

that not everyone shares the same values. What brings one pleasure may bring another pain and

vice versa. Beauchamp and Childress (2019) mention that hedonistic utilitarians determine value

(utility) based on the pleasure experienced relative to the action, which differs from the basis of

utilitarianism. All that to say, utilitarians themselves struggle to find common ground on how to

both define and garner utility (Scarre, 2020; Woodard, 2019).

Lewin (1991) would liken such decisions as derivatizations of "rational choice" guided by self-interested motives (p. 3). As we've already discussed, self-interested behavior isn't inherently negative, especially when one's actions are legitimate and pursued in good faith. Ipso facto, not all decisions made to enter leadership positions are supplemented by greed or irrespective of how one's actions might negatively impact another. However, one's environment tends to influence one's behavior. Operating in a system that rewards results above all else is a breeding ground for self-serving leaders whose sole focus is personal gain, no matter the cost. Their interests are in constant competition with their colleagues and subordinates alike, thus perpetuating the toxicity of corporate environments. Nevertheless, this demographic would likely reject utilitarian ideals and subscribe to the doctrine of ethical egoism that supports the maximization of utility relative to oneself and oneself only as a rite or moral obligation (Österberg, 1988).

Ethical Implications

The purpose of leadership is (or should be), in some capacity at the very least, to support and inspire others, not tear them down. However, there seems to be a demographic of individuals who'd disagree with the latter assertion (i.e., self-serving leaders). If it hasn't already become abundantly clear, leader self-serving behavior influences a combination of ethical and moral issues that plague the organizations in which many of us work. Much to society's chagrin, immoral and unethical behavior begets just that: immoral and unethical behavior. To that end, the colleagues and subordinates of self-serving leaders may feel the need to "play ball" to keep up. Furthermore, they may believe that such behavior is the only way to get ahead in business or everyday life, for that matter. Should that be the case, it's presumable that more and more people

would engage in similar, morally inept behavior, thus perpetuating the problem. Nevertheless, the goal of corporate reward systems isn't to incentivize people to underperform; but rather, to pin them against one another in a battle of wits. Although the latter remark was made tongue-in-cheek, one might suppose there's at least some validity to the statement. After all, those flagged internally as "underperformers" are held back when promotional opportunities arise, if they haven't already been terminated for poor performance. Instead, the institutional inefficiencies of

From that of a rational or ethical egoist's perspective, self-serving leaders may feel as if their actions are reasonable or morally justified simply because they're fulfilling their moral obligation to themselves. Either way, the (subclinical) psychopath wouldn't much care so long as their needs are met. Regardless, one's self-serving bias influences one's inability to overcome one's "ethical blind spots" when faced with an ethical dilemma (Bazerman, 2014; Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2011). These supposed "self-serving justifications" vindicate perpetrators with self-identified "reasons for questionable behaviors and making them appear less unethical" (Shalvi et al., 2015, p. 125). To an extent, that'd be like a neurotypical serial killer claiming insanity to avoid criminal punishment. Because organizations place more of an emphasis on ends (productivity and performance) rather than means (self-serving behavior), why would anything change? Corporate reward systems are exploited by self-serving leaders to promote a culture of corruption fueled by moral disengagement (Gao et al., 2022). By failing to intervene, such exploitative behaviors will persist unnecessarily, thus prolonging and attributing to a never-ending vicious cycle of undue harm. Hochschild (1983) would likely contend that leaders engage in behaviors to manage the impressions of their superiors and respective Human Resources representatives alike to prevent investigations into "how the sausage is made." However, the latter would supplement both the interests of the individual as well as those of the organization.

"Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely" (Rabin, 1974, p. 905). As such, both parties might turn a blind eye because self-serving leaders drive performance, thus increasing profitability and putting money in the pockets of the powers that be. corporate reward systems are exploited by self-serving leaders to promote a culture of corruption fueled by moral disengagement (Gao et al., 2022).

When self-serving leaders aren't held accountable for their actions, their subordinates and the like don't exactly respond in a positive manner, at least from the perspective of the organization (Schyns & Schilling, 2013). On the contrary, it's quite the opposite. Tepper (2000) discusses the impact of leader self-serving behavior on their subordinate's mental health and the like. Those affected by self-serving leadership harbor feelings of resentment toward their leaders, as well as the employer at large, which reduces engagement, one's allegiance to the cause, job satisfaction, among other things (Decoster et al., 2014). In the name of social exchange theory, subordinates will either voluntarily resign or worse, retaliate, thus sustaining an even more toxic and hostile work environment (Blau, 1964; Gouldner, 1960; Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007; Decoster et al., 2021). What organizations and leaders alike must acknowledge and understand is that "regardless of whether the direct and immediate impact of leaders' behaviors on others is positive, negative, or neutral, leaders who regularly prioritize their own needs and goals ultimately will have a negative long-term net impact on their organization" (Williams, 2014, p. 1366).

Policy Recommendations

According to the theory of egoism, so long as human beings inhabit this earth, their actions will be influenced by intrinsic desires to promote their personal interests. It's simply a

fact of life. After all, how would we have come this far or continue to survive as a species? Self-interest is the very lifeblood of the human story. It's the driving force behind our collective ability to endure. However, as an egoist would likely suggest, self-interested impulses aren't always negative or steeped in malevolence, nor must they lead to repercussions for the actor or bystander. In fact, self-interest can manifest itself in the form of either benevolence or beneficence (Schenk, 1987). Yet, self-interested behavior becomes concerning when it toes the line with self-serving behavior. Depending on the situation and the stakes at hand, self-interest can tempt and awaken the beast in all of us. It doesn't discriminate. While some can tame such beasts, others defy their consciences, falling prey to the allure of possibility. Although it's nearly impossible to fully eradicate self-serving behavior at a societal level or even in corporate environments, such behavior could certainly be subdued.

To prevent or at least discourage such misconduct, we would first have to develop an understanding of what causes leader self-serving behavior. Hence the importance of this study and others like it. We've come to find that leaders self-serve (i.e., pursue their interests irrespective of how their actions might harm another) to promote both personal and professional gain, among other things. To expand upon a previous thought, might self-serving behavior be the result of "bad apples" *rotting* in a "bad barrel." Due to the inherent competition found in the workplace and the structure of corporate reward systems, leaders may feel compelled to oblige self-interested desires to get ahead (Gürlek, 2021). Noval and Hernandez (2019) discuss how those who self-serve tend to rationalize their behavior through motivated reasoning and moral disengagement. Building on the work of Tenbrunsel et al. (2003), which suggests that we're amid an "ethical crisis" (p. 303), Einarsen et al. (2017) discusses the importance of creating an "ethical infrastructure" to counteract unethical conduct like that of leader self-serving behavior

(p. 38). Ethical infrastructures "communicate and reinforce the ethical principles to which organizational members will be held" (Tenbrunsel et. al., 2003, p. 286), although codes of conduct only go so far. Sure, Human Resources departments and ombudsmen alike can intervene to thwart immoral acts of so-called "leadership," but it depends on the individual and their willingness to comply with the conditions of the ethical infrastructure. To combat potential resistance, Pitesa and Thau (2013) would advocate for the use of "procedural accountability" as a possible starting point (p. 17-18).

De Cremer and van Knippenberg (2004) agree that as leaders self-serve, their followers tend to be the unhappy recipients of unconsidered implications. Because power corrupts power, the more powerful the leader, the more self-serving they can become. With that in mind, Rus et al. (2012) discusses how one's position of power, coupled with a lack of accountability, whether internal or external, creates an environment in which self-serving behaviors flourish. To rid leaders of their Machiavellian impulses, Wasserstrom (1975) would recommend that we "'deproffesionalize' the professions; not do away with the professions entirely, but weaken or eliminate those features of professionalism that produce these kinds of defective, interpersonal relationships" (p. 19). While that may be difficult, "taming our drive to justify our behavior may be the path to ethical conduct" (Shalvi et al., 2015, p. 129). Overall, accountability measures tend to be influenced by outcome-based considerations (Merchant & Van der Stede, 2007; Rynes et al., 2005), requiring a paradigm shift in perspective and procedure. That said, organizations could unite reward systems with accountability measures to drive performance through ethical means. An acknowledgement of and adherence to both individual and collective accountability might fortify the foundation on which ethical infrastructures are built, aligning purpose with

action. All in all, each of these studies share the same belief that accountability measures would serve as a formidable opponent to that of leader self-serving behavior.

In turn, interested organizations and the like could employ the services of a team of industrial-organizational psychologists and board-certified behavior analysts who may be able to, at the very least, begin to understand a potential root cause of such behavior-related issues. Presumably, such efforts would have to be supplemented by evaluations at the micro-level consisting of a representative sample due to the complexities of the corporate landscape. The intent of this exercise would be to determine the best course of action in terms of modifying said behaviors. Nevertheless, it would do us all some good to retrain ourselves to emphasize the means at least in a similar capacity to the ends. Of course, organizational performance and employee productivity are vitally important, but so is the way people are treated.

Summary

Studies of human behavior are interesting because no two people are alike by comparison (Harris, 2010). People not only perceive things differently, but they also approach situations from diverse perspectives. Similarly, not everyone shares the same values, nor do they find the same things valuable. To some, status or power might supersede all else, while others are moved by relationships and community. Both the former and the latter are matters of priority or even preference, one might suppose. No matter the case, to progress as a society, something has got to give. We have got to find common ground or at the very least, try, in terms of committing to the promotion of a common morality. That said, is a "common morality" even attainable when we're all servants to our innate desires, for better or worse? If what we all have in "common" is the drive to selfishly promote personal gain, how could society possibly progress? One's career

success and monetary gain shouldn't take precedence over the welfare of another human being, but how might we change the minds of those who think otherwise?

Are humans, as a collective, capable of fundamental change, especially when doing so might negatively impact one's ability to climb the corporate ladder or supplement one's professional growth? To some, there may be a belief that the corporate system is perfect as is because they've identified a way to navigate through the corruption to promote their individual interests. Conversely, Armstrong (1994) states that "at the heart of every profession is a service ideal, or promise to use the special knowledge and monopoly to benefit, not harm society" (p. 71). As such, leaders should wield their power for good and not evil (e.g., to support rather than exploit their followers). The latter is by no means a novel idea but suffice it to say that leaders are often tempted to oblige their self-serving impulses to promote personal interests, rather than corroborating with the common good. Sadly, some leaders might find it difficult to act accordingly since corporate environments have been corrupted by the fallibility of human beings. We've done it to ourselves, really. Due to greed, vanity, or any one of the other cardinal sins, leaders find themselves competing against one another in the proverbial rat race. Not only are we the ones who created this flawed system, we perpetuate it with our unscrupulous behavior. To mitigate such corruption would require a joint effort of acknowledging and accepting fault, along with a commitment to fostering a culture of beneficence. Such is the need for effective accountability measures as they would counteract, at least in part, the drive to engage in leader self-serving behavior. Overall, we must relent in the endless pursuit of our self-serving desires to spark change.

As previously discussed, people tend to consider self-interest as something negative. Oftentimes, it's used synonymously with selfishness which isn't exactly fair because many who pursue self-interested impulses do so for noble reasons. To be self-interested is to simply have "a concern for one's own advantage and well-being" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). While one's self-interest can lead to pursuits of selfish desires, that doesn't mean it is and of itself a negative way to approach life. All who are self-centered are self-interested but not all who are self-interested harbor moral identities contaminated by the dark tetrad. Plenty of people engage in behavior that promotes personal gain without negatively impacting another. To want what's best for oneself and to act on such desires isn't a bad thing, so long as one's motives are morally just (Slote, 2020; Pfattheicher et al., 2021).

Due to a combination of external pressures and an internal conflict, it's presumable that we often find ourselves at a moral crossroads, struggling to decide how best to proceed. What's the answer; to exercise logic or oblige intuition? How does one promote personal gain while appeasing social norms? Lewin (1991) discusses how both public and social choice coexist within our delicate ecosystem. Public choice being the idea that human behavior is the biproduct of self-interested desire, whereas social choice, on the other hand, stems from collectivist doctrine. Nonetheless, it's to be understood that both schools of thought are rooted in rational choice theory (i.e., that it's perfectly acceptable for one to hold aspirations of attaining a predetermined objective). However, the latter doesn't suggest that one should or must partake in unethical behavior to get ahead. Immorality should in no way condoned in professional settings, nor everyday life, for that matter. Nevertheless, it's undeniable that the possibility of collateral damage is ever-present even when people act with the best of intentions. Yet again, the motives behind people's self-interested behavior are what deems their actions as moral or immoral.

In part, self-interest supports our will to live (Turner, 1976). The concern with self-interest is that it can be a precursor to selfishness (Carlson et al., 2022). When one becomes self-absorbed to the point in which one acts solely on impulse devoid of any consideration for how their actions might negatively impact another is when a moral issue is present. That said, it should be acknowledged that it's possible for others to feel the adverse effects of another's self-serving actions, no matter if there'd been forethought to aid in the prevention of said harm. Sometimes, the latter is inevitable and much like self-interest itself, can't be stopped. The attention to and concern for how one's actions might affect another is what differentiates between a reasonable person and one who's seemingly been afflicted by the dark tetrad. What's bothersome is the manipulation and deception that may ensue from such individuals. If they don't care how their actions might affect another, why would they be against the exploitation of the very same people?

"We want to believe that right-minded men are moved by valid principles even though we are willing to regard wrong-minded men as victims of erroneous propaganda" (Skinner, 1965, p. 9). The latter exemplifies the duality of good versus evil in all aspects of life, professional ethics included. Based on the theory of egoism and general human behavior alike, one can presume that there will always be leaders who pursue their personal interests above all else, which is simply a reality of life. Unfortunately, people do bad things, however, people also do good things. While the latter doesn't quite nullify the former, it certainly mitigates at least some of the suffering. At the end of the day, self-interest shouldn't be condemned, especially since most, if not everyone, is driven by it. It's neither innately good nor innately bad, although depending on how it's internalized, it can certainly be a catalyst for harm.

Presumably, we all have something to prove; either to ourselves, friends, colleagues, families, or perhaps even the world. To that end, each of us wants to be somebody or to do something with our lives, but some are more driven than others. Lewis (1966) claims that we all have "inner rings" to which we desire access. Like self-interest, these rings aren't inherently evil, but they have a way of tempting one's impulsivity. To some, the temptation to gain entrance into said rings is so powerful that it leads them to engage in self-serving behavior. McDowell (1994) suggests that "problematic excuses" stem from a fundamentally flawed system and not innate wickedness. Corporate reward systems are flawed because those who created them, too, are flawed. As a result, leaders are confronted with moral dilemmas with respect to the maximization of personal gain and the means taken to promote such ends. As imperfect beings, we don't always do what's right or socially accepted. Consequently, Damon Horowitz would likely recommend a much-needed update to our collective "moral operating system" (Ted-Ed, 2011). In turn, we should *all* hold ourselves accountable to act in good faith, aligning with an unseen code of ethics by which we all should abide. It won't happen overnight, but if we strive to promote a "common morality" the world in which we live may very well just improve.

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