



Ethical Followership Through Kantianism and Social Contract Theory

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Abstract:

Ethical leadership is important, but so is ethical followership. Followership can be viewed as an ethical relationship between followers and leaders. Through a conceptual analysis, this commentary argues that Kantian duty and social contract obligations provide a foundation for ethical followership. When followers work in a cooperative relationship with leadership and toward a common organizational purpose, followership can be seen as a social contract. While ethical followership requires that followers develop values and morals, it does not require a specific ethical perspective. However, a Kantian sense of duty and application of a categorical imperative may make it easy to be an ethical follower. While Kantianism and Social Contract theory are not the only ethical perspectives that can apply to followership, they work synergistically with followership. This framework advances ethical leadership studies by positioning followership as a moral practice essential to organizational integrity.

Keywords: Followership, Kantianism, Social Contract Theory, Ethics, Leadership

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All individuals have the responsibility to know the influence they have on others (Okonedo, 2024). Ethical leadership is important, but so is ethical followership. Perceived ethical leadership has significantly strong positive relationships with trust and psychological well-being (Huang et al., 2021). This perception of ethics must be grounded in an understanding of ethics. But what are the ethics of followership? This timely and relevant conceptual commentary seeks to frame followership as a distinct moral practice by exploring the ethical underpinnings of followership and its intersection with Kantianism and social contract theory.

Followership

Followership is about recognizing the influence that all contributing members of an organization have. Public attention is often guided to the leader as the indicator of progress or success, yet there are so many

involved in this work. Followership as a theoretical concept gives power, responsibility, ownership, and purpose to the follower, in contrast to many different leadership approaches. Focusing on the follower rather than the leader in a “reversing the lens” approach accounts for a vast majority of the followership research (Uhl-Bien et al., 2026).

Followers can be viewed from rank-based, role-based, and relationship-based perspectives (Linville & Rennaker, 2024). Though often determined by rank, most individuals fall into followership by role within a hierarchy. However, in specific roles, individuals can lead and follow at different points in the day or even within the same meeting. The relationship-based view regards leaders and followers working together toward a common purpose (Chaleff, 2009). The various typologies of followers help to define what effective followership looks like. These descriptions of followers help provide ethical implications, which will be discussed later.

Social Contract Theory

According to social contract theory, a social contract is a voluntary agreement of obligations between individuals and the government of a society (Sequeria & Ward, 2023). For example, citizens are expected to pay taxes and abide by laws, and government entities are expected to provide safety and health services in emergencies (Knox et al., 2025). Ultimately though, the social contract can only exist between the individuals upholding the contract, even while representing an organization or government as an entity. Much like how in a learning organization, the organization can only learn through the representative individuals learning and progressing the processes and knowledge base. Though, social contract theory could be applied to any level of situation in which individuals (and entities) are beholden to each other for certain wants and needs fulfillment.

It is the social contract, the surrender of some control to receive benefits, that provides for the existence of leadership and followership in any organization or society (Thom-Otuya, 2012). Social contracts are generally considered normatively "good" in that they help provide clarity, structure, and even help uphold fairness and justice (Loewe et al., 2020). Thus, it's important to note that leaders and followers must make their expectations clear when entering a social contract (Sequeria & Ward, 2023). This theory also highlights the ethical principle of respect for persons in terms of the autonomy granted in the assumed voluntary nature of the social contract.

While the idea of the social contract seems simple, there are many different approaches to a social contract that rely upon one's perspective of humanity in general. Much like McGregor's (1960) management philosophies of “theory X” and “theory Y,” various thinkers on social contract theory from Socrates to Rawls have viewed humanity as capable of freewill to incapable of decision making and excessively self-interested (Sequeria & Ward, 2023). Two criticisms of social contract theory are that it is unclear whether a contract is valid if individual members have not explicitly consented and it is unclear whether followers need to uphold the contract if the leader or entity does not uphold its obligations (Sequeria & Ward, 2023). However, the concept provided for in social contract theory are still helpful in understanding a range of relationships where parties are interdependent.

Kantianism

Kantianism is a form of deontology and normative ethics. Kantianism is an ethical philosophy based on moral reason and was a product of the enlightenment era, which was known for an emergence of reason (Macpherson, 2024). Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) argued that only actions that come from a sense of duty are considered moral and good (Macpherson, 2024; Udofia, 2019). To determine if this duty was moral and good, he suggested a categorical imperative that promoted fairness and justice by evaluating if the duty could and should be upheld by all (Cervantez, 2023). Kant also emphasized the autonomy of individuals in providing them the respect to be able to make their own decisions (Macpherson, 2024). This relies upon the teaching of Saint Thomas Aquinas in that all humans have the moral capacity to determine right from wrong (Macpherson, 2024).

While Kantianism stresses respect for humanity, there are some criticisms of the perspective (Cervantez, 2023; Tushar et al., 2022). Two major criticisms are the disregard of consequences in determining if an action is moral right and the absolutism of the categorical imperative. Kantianism is often contrasted with utilitarianism because of its lack of focus on the outcome of an action (Cervantez, 2023; Perry, 2023; Macpherson, 2024). Further, the categorical imperative's lack of exception in different contexts or situations could lead to moral conflict if the moral duty led to hurtful outcomes (Cervantez, 2023). However, Kantianism is still a useful ethical principle in moral decision making, particularly when being tasked to uphold duty.

The Ethics of Followership

Ethical followers do not blindly follow, but use their own moral standards to determine what action should be taken (Tushar et al., 2022). The typologies of followership help to categorize followers; however, the practitioners of these typologies have also shared some value-based judgements on what is considered the "good" or "ethical" follower and what is not. Kelley's (1992) designation of exemplary recognizes the follower who is an independent critical thinker and active in the organization's work. By having the courage to support or to challenge implies that a follower is ethical because they possess the virtue of courage to act ethically in situations that call for either action (Chaleff, 2009). Kellerman (2008) has clear normative designations for followers based on if they are engaged enough to support ethical and effective leaders or resist/challenge unethical and ineffective leaders. In her view, "isolate" and "bystander" follower types are considered bad for their lack of engagement or potential to support or resist, depending on the circumstance. Thus, it can be determined that followers can be considered ethical if they are engaged, think critically for themselves, and use that thinking to support ethical leaders and redirect/resist ineffective or unethical ones.

Tushar et al. (2022) finds that follower moral philosophy may be based on a number of influences from family to culture, religious beliefs to education, and code of conducts to human resource business practices. Though it's intuitive to believe that ethical leaders will have a strong effect on the ethical behaviors of followers and be perceived as ethical role models to be emulated, this is not always the case. Wang et al. (2021) found that "ethical leaders are viewed as being role models only amongst followers higher in moral identity and leader identification" (p. 449). So, followers determine if the leader is worth emulating based on how they view ethics

and how they identify with the leader. Additionally, this perception was made possible when follower unethical behavior was impacted by the leader's ethical actions (Wang et al., 2021).

Followers can be active and effective with any type of ethical perspective (Ward, 2023). From the common good, to deontology, to utilitarianism, to care ethics, to social contract theory—all can help followers promote ethical behavior in organizations by empowering or reminding their leaders to consider good choices with good intent and the calculation of good outcomes. The ethical perspectives of followers will influence how followers participate by showing support or challenge (Ward, 2023). However, there are two ethical perspectives that fit nicely within the key elements of followership as a concept, model, and emerging theory include social contract theory and Kantianism. These relationships will be explored next.

Followership and Social Contract Theory

Followership may be viewed as a type of social contract. Activity, interaction, and engagement are included across the most prominent followership typologies (Chaleff, 2009; Kellerman, 2008; Kelley, 1992). Thus, followership is a social activity that cannot occur without interaction with leadership. Further, a shared commitment toward a common purpose specifically calls for accountability and, in some ways, a social contract of reciprocity (Chaleff, 2009). Dixon and Westbrook (2003) argue that Chaleff's (1995) introduction of the courageous follower created a new social contract for employers and employees.

Followership is viewed as a “willing agreement” (Ward, 2023, p. 288). Similarly, social contract theory assumes that social contracts are voluntary due to the strong moral underpinning of individual autonomy (Sequeria & Ward, 2023). This comes down to respect, which must be exhibited in order for effective followership to work. Leaders must respect the value of followers and be willing to relinquish some level of power to rely upon the followers. Followers must also respect the leaders and take responsibility for elements of the social contract that are due to them. This relationship is symbiotic. Though this interdependency represents an implied social contract, Parker (2024) posits that the emergence of effective followership may call for a re-defined social contract between leaders and followers. If leaders and followers do not have a clear understanding of expectations, the social contract of followership may not be effective. Chaleff's (1995, 2009) followership behaviors include: assuming responsibility, serving, challenging, participating in transformation, and taking moral action. Dixon and Westbrook (2003) note that recruiting, rewarding, and developing for these followership behaviors is required of leadership for effective followership to work. Thus, followership can only be a social contract when all parties are on the same page.

Followership and Kantianism

Kantian ethics requires that respect be provided to all individuals, which includes followers (Tushar et al., 2022). Followership as a leadership model elevates the status of individuals to be worthy contributors and aligns with this requirement of Kantian ethics. Udofia (2019) posits that, per Kant, leadership deals with the oughtness of behavior because it has to do with morality or practical reasoning. Thus, because Kantian ethics

relies upon universal appeal and application and followership yields responsibility to all followers, the oughtness of behavior would apply to all, inclusive of the followership.

To be ethical, followers need the resources to develop their own set of values and ethics or be willing to adopt those of the organization in which they are a part (Ward, 2023). Supporting this, Jeong et al (2025) found that moral emotions of followers are based on follower ethics and interpretation of alignment with organizational ethical norms. While Jeong et al (2025) focused on positive moral emotions like gratitude and pride, both positive and negative moral emotions have to come from somewhere. When a follower responds emotionally to a leader's ethical or unethical behavior, it requires some foundational level of normative ethics or deontology, of which Kantian ethics can provide the groundwork for. These moral emotions can then lead to cognitive evaluation and behavioral reaction, but they must be based upon some ethical perspective.

A follower's ethical perspective may come from their sense of duty to do what's right, which aligns with Kantianism. Kant specifically states that moral actions come from a sense of duty of obligation, which is considered a priori (Udofia, 2019). Yet, a follower may also be willing to follow the ethics of an organization to ensure their leader makes moral decisions. Actions stemming from influence by "sense of utility, inclination, incentive, inducement or consequence" would be considered a posteriori and not necessarily moral from a Kantian perspective (Udofia, 2019, p. 3). However, if a follower truly adopts the ethical standards of an organization in their own ethical development, then following an organization's standards comes from duty and not only compliance. Followership and Kantian ethics can be complimentary, but not all ethical followership requires a Kantian ethical perspective.

Conclusion

Followership can be viewed as an ethical relationship between followers and leaders. When followers work in a cooperative relationship with leadership and toward a common organizational purpose, followership can be seen as a social contract. This ethical followership requires that followers develop values and morals, but does not require a specific ethical perspective. However, a Kantian sense of duty and application of a categorical imperative may make it easy to be an ethical follower. Further, ethical influences such as an organization's code of ethics must be adopted and embraced as one's own duty to uphold to be considered Kantian. Thus, Kantianism and social contract theory provide a strong framework for ethical followership.

This conceptual commentary advances ethical leadership studies by positioning followership as a moral practice essential to organizational integrity, providing a deeper theoretical basis for understanding the ethics of followership. While Kantianism and social contract theory are not the only ethical perspectives that can apply to followership, they work synergistically with followership. Future research could investigate ethical followership by grounding it in other ethical perspectives such as virtue ethics, care ethics, or cultural relativism.

Future research is also needed to consider how ethical followership is distinctly different from effective followership, which may require the development and validation of scales on ethical followership. Though, research and instruments on effective followers exist, with critical thinking, courageous dissent, and active engagement as representations for ethical followership behaviors. Using the conceptual framework presented

here, dimensions of sense of duty, moral agency, autonomy, engagement, and accountability could be used to develop an ethical followership scale. Ultimately, ethical followership should continue to be studied, especially in a time when ethical leadership is not always present.

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