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# Charting the Future for Moral Leadership-- Interview with Craig Johnson

Duane M. Covrig

Craig E. Johnson

George Fox University, [cjohnson@georgefox.edu](mailto:cjohnson@georgefox.edu)

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INTERVIEW WITH CRAIG E. JOHNSON

## CHARTING THE FUTURE FOR MORAL LEADERSHIP

*Craig E. Johnson is director of the Doctor of Business Administration Program and Professor of Leadership Studies at George Fox University in Newberg, Oregon. He is author of several books, including the popular moral leadership textbook, Meeting the Ethical Challenges of Leadership: Casting Light or Shadow, now in its fourth edition, from Sage Publications. His Organizational Ethics is in its second edition, also with Sage. He is co-author with Michael Hackman of the popular textbook on leadership, Leadership: A Communication Perspective. Duane M. Covrig, Professor of Leadership and Ethics at Andrews University, interviewed Dr. Johnson.*

**DUANE M. COVRIG:** How did you get into teaching and writing on ethics?

**CRAIG E. JOHNSON:** I've had a non-traditional path to teaching ethics and leadership. I'm not sure that I would recommend it to everyone. But it kind of goes back to my initial interest in leadership. A friend of mine in graduate school wanted to write a book about leadership. Since we were studying management, my very first question was "how does leadership differ from management?" So I got more interested in leadership theory. But out of that came the realization of just how important leadership ethics was. I came to see that leaders could literally mean the difference between life and death for followers. This realization came to a head right around the turn of the millennium. In the year 2000 there was a lot of celebration of where we were moving in the next century, and it got me thinking about the past. Others were talking of the accomplishments, but for me it was "good riddance." The last century was full of bad leadership and bad experiences. Depending on the figures you look at, 125 million people were killed in wars, and to me that just demonstrated how critical leadership ethics was.

This got me interested in writing about leadership ethics; that was when the metaphor of "light and shadow" (see Johnson's *Meeting the*

*Ethical Challenges of Leadership: Casting Light or Shadow*) gave me a focus and I started to focus on applied ethics. I do not have a philosophy background, so I came at it from a leadership perspective, from writing about management, leadership and communication. It became a cause I felt was very important. At the time I didn't see many people writing about leadership ethics, at least not in a textbook style. Later, I taught and wrote more on organizational ethics. And now I work, consult and teach in this area.

**DC:** What researchers have most influenced your growth and thinking on ethical leadership?

**CJ:** Well, I give credit to Parker Palmer for his metaphor of a leader casting "light" or "shadow."<sup>1</sup> It really encapsulated the role of the leader in influencing others' lives and the ethical experience of the group. Parker, a Quaker educator, does a lot of speaking and traveling. And he says that leaders have the power to cast a light or shadow. While I recognize there are gray areas in many cases, what he noted is very true about ethical leadership. With a good leader, you feel like you are standing in light. With a bad leader you feel like you are standing in darkness. I want to give credit to him for that metaphor that has guided much of my work.

I have been influenced significantly in my more recent work by Brown, Treviño and Harrison<sup>2</sup> and their work on the ethical leadership scale. I think their social learning and attempt to create a scale for evaluating ethical leadership is a breakthrough. With a scale, we are able to do more empirical research. Many recent articles are using their scale. The interesting thing about studying ethical leadership is that it is really the central concern ever since we've talked about leaders. There hasn't been much done socio-scientifically until recently. So I think that their scale is very much of a breakthrough. Ethical leaders are effective leaders. The research I and other researchers have done shows this. Having a scale will further this and other research, linking ethical leadership to other work on leadership. If you think your leader is ethical, you tend to trust your organization, and you tend to think it's effective. So there are just a lot of positives with ethical leadership. It makes a much stronger case for ethics and ethical leadership when we can link it to other issues researchers on leadership are looking at.

<sup>1</sup>Palmer, P. J. (1994). Leading from within: Out of the shadow, into the light. In J. A. Conger (Ed.), *Spirit at work* (pp. 19-40). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

<sup>2</sup>See Brown, M. E., Treviño, L. K., & Harrison, D. A. (2005). Ethical leadership: A social learning perspective for construct development and testing. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 97(2), 117-134. doi:10.1016/j.obhdp.2005.03.002. Available at <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0749597805000397>

There are other classic writers who have influenced me in terms of moral development. Kohlberg, James Rest, and one of Rest's colleagues, Darcia Narvaez, who is now at University of Notre Dame.<sup>3</sup> Another writer who has influenced me lately is Jonathan Haidt, who has written on business ethics and political issues and has a recent book entitled *Righteous Mind*.<sup>4</sup> His argument is that oftentimes when we make ethical decisions, we do it intuitively, and then we justify our choices. There is a big debate about his ideas, but what is evident is that he has helped to open up a door to realize that when we make ethical choices it's not only cognitive rationale. Emotions are involved. In fact, that's what the brain scientists are finding out. If they ask people, if they do brain imaging, both the emotional and the rational parts of the brain light up. The other thing that Haidt does is to help to show that we are each wired for certain values, like compassion, security, purity, and others. Depending on the culture that we are in, that will help determine the amount of emphasis we put on each of these. I think that explains a lot of ethics I see. It's another approach to cross-cultural ethics. I really like it. It helps explain, for example, responses in the Middle East to purity issues. It helps explain political

It has been documented that people with damage to the emotional parts of the brain can keep their same IQ, but these individuals tend to make really terrible decisions.

differences in terms of what a person or group values highly. For example, if you put a high amount of value on compassion, you're probably a Democrat. If you put more emphasis on tradition, you're probably Republican. And it helped me understand many challenging ideas about diversity in ethics. For example, to say to someone who has a strong respect for authority that you're "against the war but you support the soldier" makes no sense to that person. That was good for me to understand. Because that's what I would probably say to that person. I don't support the war, but I support the soldier. His work helps us think about the role of emotion and rational justifications in ethics.

<sup>3</sup>See her extensive work at <http://www.nd.edu/~dnarvaez/>

<sup>4</sup>Haidt, J. (2012). *The righteous mind: Why good people are divided by politics and religion*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books. See the New York Times review of this book at <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/25/books/review/the-righteous-mind-by-jonathan-haidt.html?pagewanted=all>

**DC:** Issues of war do bring out different responses from Quakers and those who are more non-combatant or even pacifists. I'm sure this creates confusion and discontinuity in some of our moral arguments.

**CJ:** Because we are coming from different places, we don't get very far in our shared dialogue and decisions. For example, most of us in the Western world only focus on the compassion and the autonomy. In a lot of the world, that just doesn't make any sense.

**DC:** Are there any journals that you keep up to date on to inform your ethics?

**CJ:** *Journal of Business Ethics* is the key one. There is also the *Business Ethics Quarterly*, and also *Business and Society*, which also are good journals. But you know, more and more, I'm finding more ethics articles in the main leadership and management journals, like the *Academy of Management Journal (AMJ)*. I think this is a good time for people to study and to talk about ethical leadership.

**DC:** Yes, I think so. And your books have been helpful in raising that awareness. Your top seller I think has been the *Ethical Challenges* book.

**CJ:** It's the one that sold the most.

**DC:** It is now in its fourth edition, which shows that it has been well received.

**CJ:** Yes. I'm working on the fifth.

**DC:** What are some of the changes or new additions you are adding to that book?

**CJ:** That's a good question; I'm in the midst of it. Well, what we just talked about, the dual-processing model that Haidt talked about: the way we make ethical choices. I'm trying to include that material. I tell my students, "When you make a decision, why don't you just first of all write down your initial reaction, and then come back to it later." I'm trying to incorporate that material. Also, to stress the fact that we need to listen to the reason side but also the emotion side in trying to live ethically. It is the observation that individuals can't really make good

decisions without emotions, as Haidt noted. It has been documented that people with damage to the emotional parts of the brain can keep their same IQ, but these individuals tend to make really terrible decisions. They seem to be unable to contextualize issues. These individuals do not interact socially well with people, and so forth. This is the type of material I am adding to my materials.

I'm also adding material on aesthetic leadership, which is looking at ethics from a tradition that goes back to the Greeks. There is a new journal called *Organizational Aesthetics*, and this material works with the notion of beautiful performances by leaders, that beauty is ethical and ethics is beautiful. When a leader puts on a beautiful performance, it can be viewed as an ethical performance that serves moral purposes.

So that's been some new material. I want to include some new material on group ethics and morale. I put it in my *Organizational Ethics*, but I need to add more here to this *Ethical Challenges* fifth edition. I am also adding something on moral exclusion: for example, where we draw the line and say certain people don't deserve justice, and how we need to be aware of that.

I am also changing a lot of case studies as well, probably the majority of them. I have retrieved new ones from some of the news in the last couple of years, issues like drone warfare, Bradley Manning, the young man who released all that information that WikiLeaks released. I have several non-military ones as well, such as the Penn State football issues related to the Paterno and Sandusky cases.

As I update these issues, I realize these things go in waves, it seems like. For a while there we had a lot of accounting issues, and then stellar characters that fail us. I probably will add something about General Petraus. I am also adding more self-assessments for people to use.

**DC:** Where do you think some of the next research is going in moral leadership?

**CJ:** Well, I think, back to the issue of the ethical leadership scale, that researchers will be looking at connections between ethical leadership and other areas of leadership and organizations. That scale will facilitate such research. It will help us correlate ethical leaders with other aspects of leadership behavior and follower perceptions.

At the recent International Leadership Association (ILA 2012 meetings in Denver), several people presented on bad followership. I think followership will continue to be an area of focus,<sup>5</sup> and it makes

<sup>5</sup>JACL is currently working on an issue devoted to followership.

sense that individuals will be examining the ethical aspects of that. On this issue more is needed. You asked me earlier about influential people: I would also say on followership the work of Barbara Kellerman and Dean Levin come to mind because they specifically focus on bad leadership. That transitions into what followers need to do in response to bad leadership. Focus on bad leadership over the last 10 to 15 years will probably now turn to bad followership issues. I hope to make my focus on the followership side of the equation a look at ethical following. Those are a couple of trends that are emerging.

**DC:** Is there any area of the field that you think it should go into? Are there areas we haven't paid attention to that you think we should?

**CJ:** Bad followership is really wide open. We don't have a lot of research that is empirical. I think we need to go more into this area. In my presentation at ILA, I gave a lot of category systems as to what makes a good or a bad follower, but very few of these have really been researched. They have just been reviewed anecdotally. I would love for somebody to develop a scale. Now there is somebody developing a destructive leadership scale, so we could imagine a bad followership scale. We also still need more working in or through character and ethical development.

Let me jump to a more challenging issue about ethical training and guiding others. I appreciate Darcia Narveaz' approach to ethics (I put it in both of my books), which basically says that you learn to become more ethical, just like you learn to play the piano or get some other skill. It is basically the same process. You have to have some theory, and know the field to a certain extent. Then you just have to practice like crazy doing it. You need teachers and coaches, and you need a safe environment to do it in. I think that's what I'm trying to shoot for when I teach ethics, or if I'm with a group, that's how I try to operate.

In my work and writing I am trying to drive that home. So it is resourcing individuals to give them the theory and ideas for practice. You need concepts and we need to practice, so we need to talk about case studies and then you need to do some self-assessments. We each need coaches, at least occasionally, to help us grow morally. What I try to do is introduce individuals to these authors, coaches, and people who have wrestled with these problems before. It presents some major theorists. And then they practice with cases and decisions. We are not going to be experts in one day, or in one class. But we can make a little

bit of progress towards becoming more ethical experts and less novices. It's a model that I think works pretty well.

**DC:** Our readers are mostly Christian leaders. George Fox University has its Friend and Quaker roots. What observations do you have on the role of religious ideas, practices, or convictions or a religious community in the whole aspect of trying to teach ethics and moral leadership?

**CJ:** Well, it's certainly foundational. I haven't talked much about it to this point. But even from a secular viewpoint, I keep running across studies of moral example, of people who perform heroic moral actions, and I see that they had deep religious reasons. Consider those rescuing Jews during the Holocaust, for example. Almost all of them had a strong religious background. And it keeps popping up when I look at the spirituality in leadership literature. Even with a secular publisher we have been able to talk about spiritual issues. There has been research that demonstrates that having deep spiritual values very much relates to our ethical behavior. Even from a secular standpoint I see it in the research and literature.

I generally like to start with students looking at their own values in my ethics class. We connect that with faith in the work place. We look at Christian leadership, leadership ethics, and leadership communication. Then from those foundational experiences, the dialog that we have is usually richer and more meaningful to them and me.

This is an exciting time, from a Christian perspective: there's a lot of interest in spirituality, in management, in leadership.

It's obviously not all Christian interest. But I tell my students that it's an open door. And when I recruit students for our Doctor of Business Administration program, I say, "yes, we have a worldview; we are interested in spirituality." But it is not only our mission. It is also one of the hottest topics in management. We're not out of the mainstream; we're actually quite mainstream.

The mainstream came to us and to you, too. So I think it's a good time in that respect. Students just have to be aware that not everybody is not going to share their Christian perspective—or even have a spiritual perspective. But that is an opportunity for dialog that has not always been there.

**DC:** What may be drawbacks as we think of Christian convictions and practices that we should be careful with when coming to the ethical

marketplace? Are there any potential pitfalls or drawbacks from our religious language?

**CJ:** Yeah, I think so. In one of my books I try to acknowledge that. You have to be careful not to force, and that's easy to do if you are a Christian leader in a secular environment. A strongly Christian person has to remember that people may be going to your Bible study because you are the boss. So I think we have to be really careful, and respect boundaries.

We need to remember that people aren't always comfortable even talking about ethics, especially when we use the words "moral" and "morality." These words often have a negative connotation for some people because they think you're imposing your values on them. That can be a downside. I use the terms interchangeably but try to be sensitive to the way individuals hear me when I use phrases that might feel intrusive to them.

**DC:** What advice would you give to the leaders who are reading this and are trying to figure out ways to help their congregations or schools or businesses, to help their parishioners or members grow in their moral functions, ethical thinking and actions?

**CJ:** I think I would go back to what I was talking about, how we develop. I think in the church we're really good at laying out and even laying down some of "the principles." But maybe we need to work on getting people help, practicing with them, and discussing with them and so forth. We have to wrestle with some of the issues. We need to be honest, too, that there are some situations that are just very difficult, even in the faith. Lying is a good example of this: there are liars in Scripture that sometimes are rewarded, not punished.

People need opportunities and a safe place for these discussions. I think it's so easy in Christian circles to just be laying it out, saying "this is the way it is," and not making people feel comfortable and giving them support.

Let me give you an example of how my pastor did a really nice job this weekend on a topic that could really put people off. He was preaching out of Ephesians 5 about mutual submission, the "wives submit to husbands" kind of teaching. That's a hot subject, of course. He admitted that there is more than one opinion on it. He said that none of the couples he counsels when they are getting married ever

choose those verses for their wedding. I think he did a really nice job. And then he shared how he personally applies it to his own life, admitting that he could be a better listener and that he needs to speak the love language of his wife. I thought how different that probably was from the way a lot of people handle that passage. It made it easier to apply to one's own life. Instead of saying, "Here it is, wives: you need to submit!" it was about one's role in submission.

I guess that is what I'm trying to get at. I think we are sometimes hearing the principles. There are gray areas. There are things that we disagree with. Making a place where we can talk about that is where ethics grows. I hope we can do that in an academic setting. We don't always do a good job of it, but it is still very important to keep trying. Ethics is not about being condemning. There will be a difference of opinion. It is about giving other people a chance to discuss and practice their thinking so it can grow. Too much of the time we ask "What would Jesus do?" Sometimes I don't know what Jesus would do. I need to talk it through with people.

**DC:** I have a colleague who helped me understand this better. She told her experience in England where she was raising her small children. A large guy came to her door one time. The guy wanted to clean her windows, which she allowed. However, one time he came to clean the windows and wanted to come in to get a drink of water. She wasn't about to let him in, but she was thinking of this phrase, what would Jesus do? Well, I know Jesus might let him in, she thought, but Jesus had more muscles and skill than I do and He didn't have little kids in the house. So, instead of WWJD, she felt it was better to ask, "What would Jesus advise me to do?"

**CJ:** Yes, I try to help students move beyond "What would Jesus do?" I don't know, but we can think about it.

**DC:** Thanks for sharing your ethical thinking and expertise with our readers.