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## Transformative Ethics and Moving Toward “Greatness” – Problems and Realities

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# Transformative Ethics and Moving Toward “Greatness” – *Problems and Realities*



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## **Abstract**

*The purpose of this paper is to emphasize the role of Transformative Ethics as leaders and organizations move toward the achievement of greatness. It is a conceptual paper that explains the key importance of the pursuit of greatness and the role of Transformative Ethics in that pursuit. The paper suggests that each of the twelve perspectives that comprise Transformative Ethics supports the pursuit of greatness and that the pursuit of excellence is necessary for individuals and firms in today’s global marketplace. The research implications from this study support the importance of Transformative Ethics as a contributing ethical perspective for leaders and organizations. As leaders and organizations interact with others, the need for ethical leadership is critical for establishing trust and earning follower commitment. This paper is one of the first to address the practical implications of Transformative Ethics for leaders and organizations.*

## **Introduction**

In the best-selling business text, *Good to Great* (2001), author Jim Collins begins the book with the six compelling words, “Good is the enemy of great.” Collins’ book is among *Time* magazine’s 25 most influential business management books ever written (*Time*, 2016) and *Good to Great* has been called one of the ten best management books to enable managers to improve their skills (Reh, 2017). Collins’ emphasis on the importance of becoming great is critical to maintaining a competitive advantage in today’s global marketplace (Caldwell & Anderson, 2018).

The purpose of this paper is to address the importance of moving toward greatness, focusing on a new “Transformative Ethics” perspective that also raises the standards of expectations for managers and leaders. We begin by briefly explaining the derivation and importance of Collins’ perspective about greatness and then describe Transformative Ethics (TE), a newly developed ethical standard that mirrors greatness as related to moral behaviors. Following that introduction, we then identify five important problems and realities associated with effectively adopting TE as an ethical standard accompanied by five propositions about the application of TE in today’s business environment. We conclude the paper with a summary of the contributions of this paper for practitioners and scholars.

## **Competitive Advantage and Being Great**

Both the best evidence from the scholarly literature and the practitioners’ world confirm that being simply as good as “best practice” is no longer good enough to survive in today’s incredibly challenging global marketplace (Collins, 2001; Collins & Hansen, 2011; Anderson & Caldwell, 2017a). Organizations today face the constant threat of disruptive innovation – a term introduced in 1995 (Bower & Christensen, 1995) but originally developed more than ninety years ago by Joseph Schumpeter (1906), a Germany economist who wrote about “creative destruction.”

Christensen, Raynor, and McDonald (2015, p. 46) defined disruptive innovation as “a process whereby a smaller company with fewer resources is able to successfully challenge established incumbent businesses.” By providing a less costly alternative with fewer features, smaller companies are able to successfully create a new group of customers not served by established incumbents – and then proceed to invade the markets of those incumbents by increasing the features of these less costly alternatives to erode the customer base of established businesses (Christensen, 2016).

Collins and Hansen (2011) confirmed that the quickly evolving nature of the world market place demands that companies become constant risk-takers, agents of change, and willing innovators. Products and services that had once been “world class” and the leaders in their market are no longer able to survive against worldwide competitors who are more flexible, faster at adapting, and more skilled and applying knowledge about customer requirements (Christensen, 2016). Thus, companies that were “best in class” must constantly strive just to keep pace with competitors who strive to put them out of business and take away their market position. Like the dinosaur and the Model T Ford, businesses that cannot successfully evolve quickly find themselves struggling just to survive – even when they make incremental improvements of their products and/or are able to achieve economies of scale (Christensen, Raynor, & McDonald, 2015).

## **The Challenge of Transformative Ethics**

Transformative Ethics (TE) is an integrated ethical perspective that combines key elements of twelve distinct but often-cited ethical perspectives (Caldwell & Anderson, 2018). As an example of “ethical stewardship,” TE pursues the creation of high trust with others by honoring ethical duties commonly held and seeking optimal wealth creation that benefits all stakeholders long-term (Caldwell, Hayes, & Long, 2010; Hernandez, 2012). *Diagram 1*, provided below, is a portrayal of the twelve ethical perspectives which make up TE, as well as the contribution made by each of those twelve perspectives to creating greatness in people and organizations.

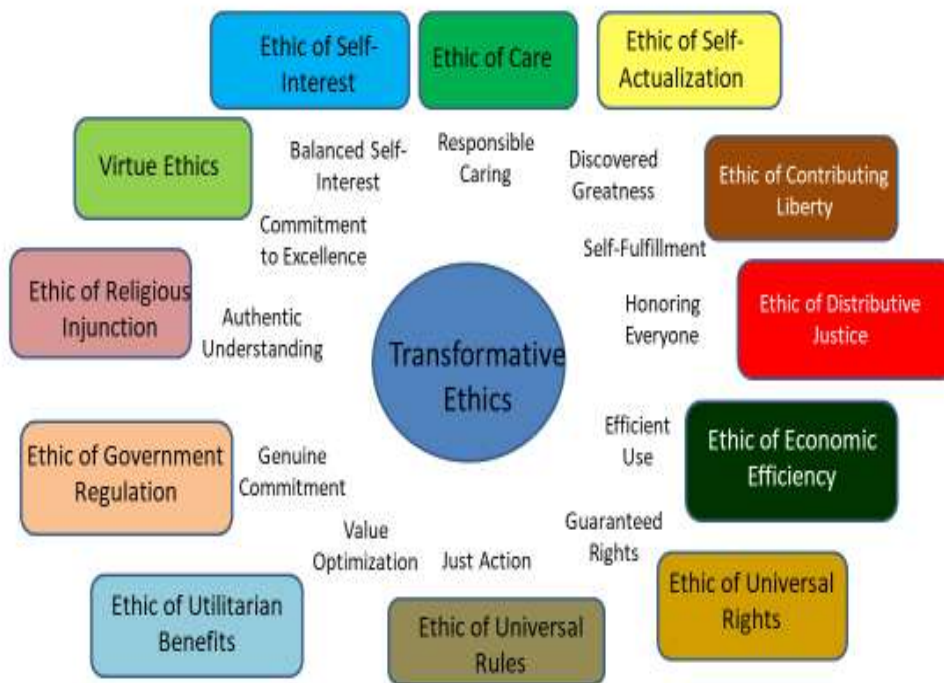


Diagram 1: Twelve Ethical Perspectives Comprising TE

Each of the twelve ethical perspectives of TE is briefly described in *Table 1*, which also identifies the contributing qualities of each ethical perspective to TE and a summary of how each ethical perspective enables organizations to achieve competitive advantage.

**Table 1: Contributing Perspectives to Greatness and TE**

Ethical Perspective	Contributing Ideal	Ethical Virtue	Contribution to Greatness
<b>Ethic of Self-Interest</b>	“Pursue outcomes which have the greatest positive benefit for oneself and one’s organization without infringing upon the rights of others.”	Balanced Self-Interest	Insists that value creation is vital, but that others have rights that must also be honored.
<b>Virtue Ethics</b>	“Constantly pursue excellence, make that pursuit a habit, and treat others with integrity.”	Commitment to Excellence	Requires that to be honorable and to develop habits of excellence are fundamental personal standards.
<b>Ethic of Religious Injunction</b>	“Always treat others with dignity, respect, and kindness – as valued ‘Yous’ and never as anonymous ‘Its.’”	Authentic Understanding	Demands that others be treated with kindness, compassion, and empathy at all times.
<b>Ethic of Government Regulation</b>	“Live by both the letter and the spirit of the law in honoring duties owed to others, but remember that the law by itself is a minimal moral standard.”	Genuine Compliance	Insists that the purpose of rules must always be taken into account and that the intent of those rules is as critical as or more important than the letter of the law.
<b>Utilitarian Ethics</b>	“No actions should be engaged in which do not result in the greatest good for that community of which you are a part.”	Value Optimization	Affirms that this greatest good is both outcome-oriented and rights-oriented in creating value – with an obligation to minimize any possible harm.
<b>Ethic of Universal Rules</b>	“Act according to universal principles and rules which you would have others apply if they	Just Action	Treats others as they wish to be treated and complies with universally-

	were in your similar situation and your positions were reversed.”		understood principles that benefit mankind.
<b>Ethic of Universal Rights</b>	“No one, including governments, may take action that infringes upon the legitimate rights of any other individual.”	Guaranteed Rights	Honors basic human rights and ensures that those rights may not be infringed upon – even under color of claim for a public benefit.
<b>Ethic of Economic Efficiency</b>	“Achieving an efficient use of resources to create value for society is a virtuous goal.”	Efficient Use	Conserves and efficiently uses scarce resources and acknowledges that efficient and effective value creation must be achieved to benefit society.
<b>Ethic of Distributive Justice</b>	“Act only in ways that acknowledge the rights, liberty, and equality of all and take no actions that harm the least among us.”	Honor Everyone	Recognizes that, though justice is a multi-faceted construct, no actions should be taken that harm those who are disadvantaged in society.
<b>Ethic of Contributing Liberty</b>	“Take no actions which impede the self-development or self-fulfillment of others.”	Self-fulfillment	Promotes the liberty which allows all individuals to pursue self-development and self-fulfillment and affirms that society benefits thereby.
<b>Ethic of Self-Actualization</b>	“Seek to discover your innate greatness and fulfill that potential to create a better world.”	Discovered Greatness	Emphasizes the innate talents, gifts, and highest potential of individuals and their responsibility to use those talents productively to make a better world.
<b>Ethic of Care</b>	“Respect others as valued individuals, share concern for their welfare, and honor the responsibility to treat each person with empathy and compassion.”	Care Authentically	Advocates the moral possibility to care for others’ best interests and to treat them with love and with demonstrated concern for their welfare, growth, and wholeness.

As indicated by the duties articulated in *Table 1*, TE is a demanding standard that supports the attainment of greatness in both individuals and organizations.

The twelve contributions of TE for leaders addresses the subjective ethical filters which are so critical in the development of trust (Hosmer, 1995; Gullett, Canuto-Carranco, Brister, Turner & Caldwell, 2009) and in determining that a leader is trustworthy (Caldwell, Hayes, & Long, 2010). Trust has consistently been recognized as a subjective decision at both the individual and the organizational levels (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; Schoorman, Mayer, & Davis, 2007) and is the glue that holds organizations and relationships together (Covey, 2004).

**TE Problems and Realities**

In his summary of the importance of leadership and its accompanying ethical obligations Max DePree (2004, Chapter 1) has described the leader’s role as a sacred trust and a responsibility to honor the duties owed by organizations to employees. DePree viewed the leader’s obligations as “defining reality” – calling that obligation the first responsibility or first task of a leader. Similarly, Block (2013) described the leader’s responsibility as encompassing treating employees as informed, engaged, and-supported “owners and partners” of the steward leader. In this section, we address the importance of understanding the practical realities and problems of TE as a leader’s ethical standard and included five propositions related to an equal number of those realities and problems.

- 1) **The Importance of Purpose** – According to Kouzes and Posner’s (2017) best-selling book about effective leadership, one of the five critical behaviors of a leader is to “define a shared vision.” Framing a clear vision of an organization’s purpose has long

been identified as a condition precedent to success and was identified by Chester Barnard (1938) as a fundamental requirement for any leader to obtain follower commitment or “authority.” In *Built to Last* (2004) Collins and Porras also identified the fundamental nature of organizational purpose – explaining that companies with a customer-focused virtuous purpose as the driving focus of their organization were inevitably more successful financially than companies that emphasized creating profits as their driving objective. Motivation theories confirm that individuals committed to a noble ideal are more committed to achieving excellence than people who are extrinsically motivated to earn money for tasks accomplished (Caldwell & Hasan, 2016).

As noted in *Table 1*, the philosophies of all twelve ethical perspectives of TE are associated with a purpose-driven objective. Consistent with this review of the purpose-related nature of TE, we present our first proposition.

**P<sub>1</sub> Leaders who adopt the complex ethical objectives of TE create organizations that are more focused on a purpose-driven culture than leaders who do not adopt TE as the foundation of their ethical framework.**

## 2) The Threat of Virtue

Although TE requires the optimum in its commitment to ethical virtuousness (cf. Cameron, 2011; Caldwell, Hasan, & Smith, 2015), the very fact that its ethical standards are so very high can actually make others uncomfortable. Similar to insights from the Hawthorne Study conducted nearly a century ago in the Western Electric bank wiring experiment in Hawthorne, Illinois, individuals with higher standards than others are often viewed as a threat to those whose personal standards are lower. (Wren, 2004). History reminds us that virtuous men, such as Nelson Mandela and Mahatma Gandhi, have not always been well received and their high standards often intimidated political leaders by their unflinching integrity and virtuousness (Schrier, 2012). Similarly, Bergeron (2007) has explained that Organizational Citizenship Behavior, or the extra-mile efforts, of subordinates are sometimes perceived as unwelcome – despite the fact that extra-mile effort is also acknowledged to be the key to competitive advantage (Pfeffer, 1998; Beer, 2009).

Vroom’s expectancy theory offers a subtle insight into why employees may be threatened by leaders who adopt a TE perspective (Parajat & Bagga, 2014). Vroom (1994) explained that individuals who do not believe that they can realistically achieve a result rarely made the effort to pursue that goal. TE sets an ethical standard that for many people will seem to be overwhelmingly challenging – sometimes causing those same people to be dissatisfied as a result of their inability to perform as expected by others. Incorporating the tendency of some people to actually be threatened by the high standards of others, we present our second proposition.

**P<sub>2</sub> Leaders who adopt the comprehensive ethical standards of TE may actually struggle to create positive relationships with others who adopt a far lower ethical standard for themselves.**

## 3) The Value of Caring and Trust



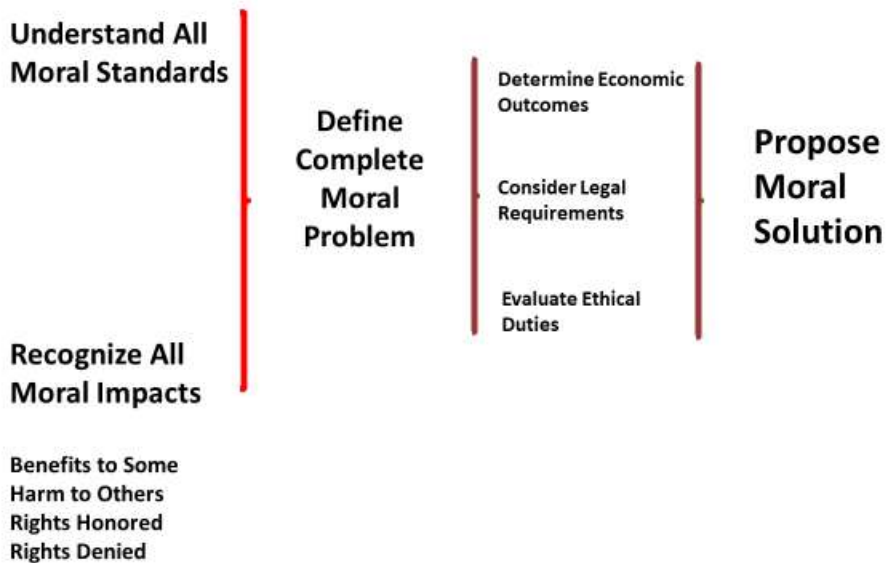
TE includes several fundamental ethical elements that demonstrate a strong commitment to helping others to pursue personal excellence. The Ethic of Contributing Liberty, the Ethic of Care, and the Ethic of Self-Actualization each contributes to the TE emphasis on the leader's duty to help others to become their best version of themselves (Caldwell & Anderson, 2017). Covey (2004, p. 98) defined leadership as "treating others so well that they come to recognize their greatness and strive to achieve it. Similarly, he articulated the moral obligation of organizations to help people to become their best and noted that it is by helping employees to excel that organizations also become great (Covey, 2004, p. 99). Caring, kindness, and beneficence have all been described as necessary elements of competitive advantage (Barney & Hansen, 1994; Caldwell, Floyd, Woodard, & Taylor, 2014; Caldwell & Ndalamba, 2017). TE's commitment to ethical stewardship is fundamentally an acknowledgement of the ethical pursuit of others' welfare, growth, and wholeness (Caldwell, Bischoff, & Karri, 2002) and is founded in a leader's genuine love for those whom (s)he serves (Peck, 2002). Aligned with this research about the leader's committed caring, we present our third proposition about TE.

**P<sub>3</sub> Leaders who adopt TE's commitment to the welfare, growth, and wholeness of others create organizations in which their employees are more committed than organizations with leaders who do not adopt a TE perspective.**

**4) Explaining Economic, Legal, and Ethical Consequences**

Leaders and organizations are constantly involved in affecting stakeholder lives, the environment, future citizens, and economic stability (Friedman, 2009). In developing a model of a leader's moral and ethical responsibilities, Hosmer (2010) created the following framework for ethical decision-making that reflects the high standards of TE and the obligation of leaders to explain the moral justification for their actions. This framework is shown as *Diagram 2*.

*Diagram 2: Hosmer Model of Moral Decision-making*



As indicated in the Hosmer model, leaders have an obligation to ascertain the costs and benefits of alternative choices to the stakeholders affected by their decisions and to then explain the ethical rationale for their final decision. Although every decision involves a varying degree of short-term and long-term consequences that may have varying impacts on stakeholders, the ethical stewardship standard seeks to optimize the long-term value or wealth creation benefits of decisions without infringing on the rights of any single stakeholder (Caldwell, Hayes, Karri, & Bernal, 2008) – consistent with the implicit responsibilities of Hosmer’s framework.

TE demands that leaders carefully assess those ethical consequences – as well as legal and economic factors – by incorporating the high standards of all twelve ethical perspectives. Incorporating this review of Hosmer’s model in the evaluation of the impacts of TE, we present our fourth proposition.

**P<sub>4</sub> Leaders who adopt TE’s stringent ethical standards by explaining the consequences and rationale of their decisions are trusted by stakeholders more than leaders who do not adopt TE’s ethical standards.**

#### **5) *Integrating Both Feminine and Masculine Moral Perspectives.***

The moral development literature has expanded extensively and it has been widely acknowledged that men and women perceive ethical duties in distinctly different ways. Carol Gilligan (2016) has explained that women have an ethical perspective fundamentally based upon establishing relationships and honoring responsibilities. Because TE incorporates the Ethic of Care its moral foundation includes the important priorities of feminine ethics.

At the same time, Lawrence Kohlberg’s (1981) six-stage theory of moral development is a masculine ethical perspective centered around the purposes achieved through compliance with law, justice, and rules. In both feminine and masculine perspectives, ethical behaviors are clearly purpose-driven and outcome-based – although, clearly, the underlying purpose of relationships and the outcomes sought may vary. Because TE incorporates a commitment to justice, it also meshes with Kohlberg’s justice- and rule-based moral perspective as well as Gilligan’s relationship- and responsibility-based ethic. Integrating both masculine and feminine moral and ethical perspectives associated with TE, we present our fifth proposition.

**P<sub>5</sub> Leaders who adopt TE’s moral perspective are viewed as more ethical by both men and women than leaders who have not adopted TE as their moral standard.**

## **Applications of the Paper**

This assessment of the practical problems and realities associate with leaders adopting TE as an ethical standard addresses four significant issues that have profound applications and that affirm the validity of TE as an ethical framework.

- 1) ***Affirms the importance of greatness for survival.*** We endorse the growing body of evidence that confirms and reinforces the absolute obligation of organizations to continually learn, improve, innovate, and empower employees. Although Collins borrowed a concept initially recognized by the French philosopher, Voltaire, more than two centuries ago (Citation Needed), both Voltaire and Collins recognized the reality



that being simply good is not good enough in life . . . and perhaps it never really has been.

- 2) ***Supports the practical application and validity of Transformative Ethics.*** Although TE is virtually a brand new ethical perspective, the model aligns with a broad variety of ethical perspectives held by disparate individuals with varying subjective perceptions about ethical values (Anderson & Caldwell, 2017b). By satisfying the duty-related ethical obligations implicit as a part of perceived trustworthiness, TE is a valuable model for increasing trust.
- 3) ***Identifies five reality-based factors.*** This paper looks closely at five important factors potentially impacting leaders and organizations as they seek to create the high trust cultures so critical for success in today's global environment (Beer, 2009). Understanding each of those five factors is essential for a wise leader seeking to apply TE as a model for relationships.
- 4) ***Develops five testable TE-based propositions.*** By proposing five testable propositions and linking those propositions to the established ethical leadership literature, this paper contributes to the scholarly academic world in addition to providing practical evidence for would-be leaders who are contemplating how to build trust and assessing the implications of ethics and leadership.

Both practitioners and academic scholars have the opportunity to share information and develop practical experiments to assess the implications of TE in the context of organizational leadership.

## **Conclusion**

In 1862, Abraham Lincoln wrote in his message to Congress that "(t)he dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate for the stormy present" (Tulloch, 1999, p. 174). New paradigms must be adopted for organizations to meet the disruption of today's complex world. Highly regarded management scholars have declared that successful organizations must create high trust cultures by being ethical and honorable (Quinn, 1996; Pfeffer, 1998; Paine, 2002; Beer, 2009; Hosmer, 2010; Christensen, 2016). TE provides an ethical framework by which leaders and organizations can create cultures of high trust that are so key to extra-mile behavior and high employee commitment (Beer, 2009; Caldwell & Floyd, 2014).

As leaders reflect on the ethical assumptions that they adopt and the many and varied ethical perspectives that are common to human relationships, understanding the implications of TE has profound practical value in the quest to obtain the commitment and extra effort of employees that enables organizations to evolve from merely good to extraordinarily great. Stephen R. Covey (2004, p. 99) has emphasized the critical importance of organizations pursuing true greatness. But the task of creating great organizations begins with great leaders – leaders who honor the broad array of ethical duties implicit in the twelve ethical perspectives that make up TE.

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