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Kermit and Leadership: Belief in the Dream

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Imagine a community of individuals who don't share a common geographic history, ancestry, or even the same language. They have a broad range of talents and interests, incredibly diverse ideological views, and a wide range of individual needs. Moreover, most are, shall we say, "unresponsive," to authority, unmotivated by power, uninterested in rules, and unstructured by any hierarchy. In many ways, this group represents both the anarchist ideal and the liberal challenge. Since at least the writings of John Stuart Mill (1806-73), liberal political theory has sought a way to accommodate diverse ideological views while avoiding enforcing any particular way of life. Conversely, anarchists have struggled to find a way to achieve solidarity and accomplish collective goals without resorting to problematic hierarchies or power structures.¹ Organizing and directing pluralistic actors under such conditions is definitely a challenge, to say the least.

The problem is how we might achieve collective aims while avoiding hierarchy. How can such a diverse group be motivated without force, coercion, subterfuge or illusion? More generally, we can see this challenge as asking whether one can be a leader, in the sense needed for a shared direction and focus, without authority or hierarchy. This marks a deep and ideologically-charged problem and one that Jim Henson's Muppets, and Kermit the Frog in particular, have answered nicely.

Kermit is clearly the voice of the Muppets. In both *The Muppet Show* and the various Muppet movies, Kermit often plays a sort of leadership role. Equally clear is that the Muppets are a prime example of the above wildly diverse and unruly group that poses a particular problem for political philosophers. There are, however, two features of Kermit's leadership that make it uniquely suitable for this challenging group, and therefore of interest for political theorists. First, I will discuss how Kermit's position as "leader" is determined, not because he possesses any special qualities or skills, but rather because his leadership is derived from his having a dream and his openness to sharing it with others. The Muppets come together, stay together, and work together because they each also "believe in the dream". Second, because of Kermit's reluctance to lead in the traditional sense, he resists imposing "solutions." Frequently, when the going gets tough for the Muppets, Kermit is just as much at sea as everyone else – he does not know what to do, and is uncomfortable with everyone looking to him to sort it out. Then, because Kermit doesn't simply solve their problems, this makes the Muppets turn to each other, thereby pulling them together and reaffirming their shared dream. Together, these two features allow Kermit to realize the liberal aim of retaining the diversity of the Muppets and the anarchist aim of providing some modicum of guidance while avoiding hierarchy and authority.

Is Kermit the Leader?

Kermit the Frog isn't your traditional leader, and I don't mean in virtue of his being made of felt and foam rubber. For one, there's no recognizable mechanism by which he became leader; there

are no Muppet-elections, Muppets do not compete with each other for leadership positions, and Kermit has no real power, in theory or in practice, over group members. His attempts to give rousing speeches to rally the troops nearly always fail, and are treated by Henson more as an opportunity for a joke.² In the common understanding of the term, therefore, Kermit isn't a true leader.

Despite these limitations, Kermit is often considered to be the "leader" of the Muppets. He often speaks for the group, is the one the others turn to when deciding what to do, and often is the one that has to offer suggestions or solutions to various problems. Some of this portrayal as "leader" comes from his role as emcee of *The Muppet Show*. While he is not administratively in charge -- Scooter is the manager, after all --³ he sets the tone of the show and is often responsible for rescuing it when something (inevitably) misfires (sometimes literally). This role as leader continues through the various Muppet movies. Kermit becomes the voice for the group, proposing realistic plans for action -- realistic compared to some of the others on offer-- and focusing the Muppets' various efforts. For all intents and purposes, Kermit *is* the leader.

One might think that this distinctly non-leadership role that Kermit plays is appropriate because the Muppets are really just a group of friends. While it is true that the Muppets are not a political entity, they are an acting troupe trying to accomplish something. Whether it's getting to Hollywood to become movie stars, producing a variety show, or catching a thief, there is always an effort to pull off collective action toward a common goal.⁴ And as anyone who has ever tried to accomplish something with her group of friends knows, some sort of leadership role is often required. Therefore, Kermit can be viewed as the leader of the Muppets. It is the unique way in which he is the leader warrants a closer look, particularly because of his humble and unassuming style which belies a substantial political view.⁵

Making People Happy

An important feature of Kermit's leadership is how he came to acquire his 'position', a topic that is addressed in the 1979 film, *The Muppet Movie*. Following a series of setbacks, the Muppets find themselves stranded on the side of a lonely road, and are camped out under the desert night sky. It seems clear that they will fail in their attempt to reach Hollywood by the following day to audition for the chance to make movies. Kermit wanders off on his own and, via a conversation with himself, is reminded of why he embarked on this journey, what is important, and, ultimately, what ties the Muppets together. The scene unfolds as a 'dialogue' between Kermit and his conscience (KC). As he walks away from the campfire, Kermit both denies that he made any promises, but also considers the situation to be his fault. KC reminds him, as he is now faced with failure, that Kermit would be just as miserable if he hadn't left the swamp to pursue his dream. Kermit agrees, but worries that this pursuit has made the others miserable too, and that they only came along because of him. We then get the following dialogue:

KC. Still, whether you promised them something or not, you gotta remember, they wanted to come.

KERMIT. But, that's because they believed in me.

KC. No, they believed in the dream.

KERMIT. Well, so do I...

KC. You do?

KERMIT. Yah, of course I do!

KC. Well then?

KERMIT. I guess I was wrong when I said I never promised anyone, I promised me.⁶

There are several points to discuss regarding this scene. The first is the role of Kermit's dream, both in motivating and driving Kermit's decisions and in explaining why the group forms in the first place. The scene reminds us (and Kermit), that Kermit's obligation to pursue the dream is one he has to himself, rather than as a consequence of any promise he made to the others. Further, as KC points out, a shared belief in the dream is the reason why the Muppets find themselves together. It wasn't Kermit's personal charisma or ability to convince the others, nor any promises of a better life if they come along. Instead, Kermit simply shares his dream with others and invites them to join him. And in doing so, the dream grows, becoming bigger than just Kermit.

The Lovers, the Dreamers, and Me

This is a good place to say a few words about the nature of the dream itself, as its content is important for explaining Kermit's unique leadership role. First, simply having a dream is not enough. Some dreams are better suited than others for serving as the basis for Muppet-style solidarity. To see this, note that, later in *The Muppet Movie*, Kermit confronts the movie's villain, Doc Hopper, who has a 'dream' of owning a thousand frog-leg restaurants (and believes having Kermit as the chain mascot is the key to realizing that dream). In response, Kermit offers the following:

Well I've got a dream too, but it's about singing and dancing and making people happy, the kind of dream that gets better the more people you share it with. And well, I've found a whole bunch of friends, who have the same dream, and that kind of makes us like a family. You have anyone like that Hopper? I mean once you get all those restaurants, who are you going to share it with? Who are your friends Doc? Those guys?⁷

The implication is that Kermit's dream is one directed at making other people happy, while Hopper's is selfish, and about making only himself happy. Selfish dreams, by their nature, cannot be *shared*; others can only be used instrumentally in pursuit of such a dream. Meanwhile, Kermit's dream of making people happy is the kind of dream that, as he says, gets better with sharing. It isn't about making Kermit or the other Muppets happy, but instead about making other people happy.⁸ And such an other-directed dream *needs* to be shared, because that's the only way it can be realized.

Secondly, Kermit suggests that the realization of selfish dreams (which requires instrumental use of others, rather than building of friendships), is hollow or unfulfilling. This

suggests that we cannot think of Kermit as being a merely representational figure, having been tasked with pursuing the desires of his group members. Kermit is not the means by which the Muppets will realize their own individual ends. He is merely the catalyst, actively pursuing his dream and inviting others to share in it. He inspires and enables the others to share in this dream, and, relevant to our broader concerns, to do so *together*.

Returning to the campfire scene, this also reveals the relationship between Kermit's personal commitment to the dream and his role as leader. His conscience reminds Kermit that the others are there *because of the dream*, not because of him, and that as a believer it is his own commitment to the dream that really matters. The scene comes to us in a moment of crisis, when things are looking particularly bleak for the Muppets. What does Henson do at this point? He takes a moment out to reaffirm Kermit's belief in the dream, and to remind him (and us) that his commitment is fundamentally important. And why is it important that Kermit believe? Belief in the dream is essential to belonging to the group; it defines the Muppets and unites them in collective action. It is not a belief based on blind faith or unquestioned acceptance, but a quiet confidence, optimism, and belief in each other. Once Kermit has re-established his belief, he can again function as a contributing, supportive, and leading member of the group.

Reluctance to Lead

The second key feature of Kermit's leadership is his *reluctance* and what might even appear as his occasional *failure* to lead in the traditional sense. Unlike the campfire scene discussed above where Kermit explicitly and directly considers his role and responsibilities, this feature of Kermit's leadership is illustrated indirectly through his responses and behavior. Frequently, when things are going badly, the troupe turns to Kermit as the tension builds, usually ending with Kermit boiling over in an outburst, loudly rejecting their attempts to put the responsibility on him. In such cases, Kermit is precisely *not* the stereotypical strong leader who remains focused on the goal and calmly resolves the matter. Instead, these are times when Kermit simply doesn't know what to do and he doesn't pretend otherwise by telling the others not to worry, that he will figure things out. No, in these crises, Kermit is as much at a loss as the others. He openly expresses his own flaws, almost hostilely lashing out at his friends in his rejection of responsibility. While he apologizes later for behaving badly, such apologies shouldn't be read as taking on the mantle of responsibility. The other Muppets (and friends) are often taken aback by these outbursts, and by their normally calm and optimistic friend buckling under the weight. Such outbursts help them realize they were placing too much responsibility on Kermit – he isn't alone responsible for realizing their dreams. They all are.

One such crisis occurs in the film *The Muppets Take Manhattan* (1984), where, after a stream of rejections to produce their musical, the Muppets find themselves out of money. Walking down the street, the group is following Kermit, each asking him what they should do. These demands for guidance gather into a combined sea of sound that eventually overwhelms Kermit, who turns to face them and explodes, shouting: "I don't know! How should I know! Why are you always asking me anyway? Can't you take care of yourselves!? I don't know what

to do next. We failed okay. We tried and we failed”.⁹ A few minutes later, while Kermit is away trying to procure some soup for the group, the Muppets agree with each other that Kermit feels too responsible, and that they’ve been relying on him too much. As such, they decide it would be best if they each tried to fend for themselves for a while (telling Kermit that they all got job offers), though they stress that they still believe in the show. Importantly, they remain connected as a group, and in their aims, though temporarily not located in the same place.

Interestingly, Kermit’s apparent failure to lead doesn’t dissolve the group. His refusal to shoulder the whole of the responsibility prompted the others to take some of the reins. Further, their doing so reinvigorates Kermit’s own belief in the dream, as he then renews his efforts to sell the show, thereby bringing everyone back together. It is clear that Kermit is as dependent on the group as they are on him: he needs them to believe as much as they need him to, and their action to leave town and take care of themselves for a while helps Kermit to see what he needs to do. Though it flies in the face of leadership as it is commonly understood, Kermit’s abdication of responsibility helped to empower the group to pursue their collective ends. He led without leading. Kermit is uncomfortable when the others rely on him too much, he doesn’t want them to be so dependent on him. He doesn’t want to make all the decisions, nor does he want others to always be looking to him for solutions. It’s unclear if Kermit is aware of the radically subversive and anarchic meaning of his outburst; probably not. It is unlikely that Kermit, or Henson- for that matter, was trying to demonstrate good leadership in such moments, only that Kermit is a good person (err... good frog). And, part of being a good frog is not being perfect, so one will occasionally behave badly. Also, it is to be uncomfortable when others are too dependent on you, when you’ve too much power over others’ agency. So then, a good leader is someone who isn’t *trying* to be a good *leader*, but is only a good frog.

The Leadership Connection

The question remains as to how these features of Kermit’s leadership represent an answer to the philosophical dilemma of how to reconcile the diverse interests and needs of a rag-tag group of Muppets who will devour authority figures --sometimes literally -- or to the question of how to focus the efforts and activities of a diverse group without hierarchy, power, or even order. Ultimately, Kermit’s position of leadership derives from his belief in a selfless dream, which reveals the means by which he provides a direction and a focus for the Muppets, in a way that does not try to subsume or overwrite the dreams or aims of others. Kermit’s dream provides the focus without demanding allegiance or asking others to sacrifice their views. Most importantly, while each member may play a particular role according to her talents or interests, none are used *instrumentally* in pursuit of the dream’s end. To do so would be counterproductive given the nature of the dream.

Second, a good leader in these conditions is a reluctant leader. Kermit avoids establishing hierarchy or power structures, which might otherwise become entrenched. Kermit’s refusal to lead is at times shocking for the Muppets, but serves to make problematic dependence visible and therefore able to be dealt with. Furthermore, Kermit is not only a reluctant leader, but

leadership is likely the furthest thing from his mind, reminding us that a good leader is someone who is most interested in simply being a good frog. Together, these features allow Kermit to encourage, inspire, and share his dreams with the Muppets, providing the optimism and focus around which the others can perform and create. They also prevent him from relying on or endorsing any hierarchical structures or dangerous power relations. And while I won't go so far as to say this model completely satisfies the worries of our anarchist and liberal philosophers, I will say that either hallowed and esteemed tradition would do well to take a closer look at the frog with a dream.

Notes

¹ Philosophical and Political Anarchism can refer to a range of views, but generally denotes skepticism of political authority and a rejection of hierarchical power structures. Many anarchists believe society can be organized in ways that do not require the use of force, formal law, or traditional government. Furthermore, they suggest that these familiar institutions of the state are the tools by which the privileged exploit, coerce, and dominate others. Famous philosophical anarchists include William Godwin (*An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, 1793), Max Stirner (*The Ego and Its Own*, 1844), Leo Tolstoy (*The Kingdom of God is Within You*, 1894), and Emma Goldman (*Anarchism and Other Essays*, 1910). Similarly, the term 'Liberalism' describes a diverse set of views, though can be understood as referring to a tradition of thought that values individual freedoms and liberties, but unlike Anarchism, considers some form of state (complete with a system of law, hierarchy, and enforcement) essential to the protection of these liberties. Liberals therefore believe in at least the possibility of legitimate political authority and in the necessity of government. While Liberals share the Anarchist worry that hierarchical political power can threaten individuals' freedom and become oppressive, they believe that the ideal Liberal state (for example, a democratic state with political institutions that are governed by a code of equal rights and a commitment to equality) will be able to contain this threat. Famous liberal political philosophers include Thomas Hobbes (*Leviathan*, 1651), John Stuart Mill (*On Liberty*, 1859) and John Rawls (*A Theory of Justice*, 1971).

² In *The Great Muppet Caper*, Kermit tries to get the group to join him in the attempt to catch the thieves "red-handed". After warning them that it may be dangerous, nearly every member backs out, offering a variety of made-up excuses. It is Fozzie who then gives the inspirational speech, complete with mocking emotional soundtrack, that regains the group support. See *The Great Muppet Caper*, prod. David Lazer, Frank Oz, Bruce Sharman, Martin Starger, dir. Jim Henson, 94 min., Henson Associates and ITC Entertainment, 2005[1981], DVD, "Piggy's Fantasy".

³ Though only because his dad owns the theatre.

⁴ Various goals driving the plots of *The Muppet Movie* (1979), the *Muppet Show* (1976-1981), and *The Great Muppet Caper* (1981).

⁵ In his biography of Jim Henson, Brian Jay Jones notes that Henson was a fan of the comic *Pogo* because of its ability to voice opinions or commentary on serious issues while remaining entertaining. He writes, "[w]hat it taught Jim Henson is that, done right, you can have it both ways. You can entertain younger audiences while still playing to adult viewers [...] When done right, it's possible to be silly and subversive at the same time" (Brian Jones, *Jim Henson: The Biography* (London: Virgin Books, 2013), 29.).

⁶ *The Muppet Movie*, prod. Jim Henson, David Lazar, Lew Grade, Martin Starger, dir. James Frawley, 97 min., Henson Associates and ITC Entertainment, 2005 [1979], DVD, "So Much for Hollywood".

⁷ *The Muppet Movie*, "Man-to-Frog Showdown".

⁸ While there is mention throughout the movie that Kermit and the others are traveling to Hollywood so that they can become 'rich and famous', I think this characterization of their aims is more for a laugh than a genuine description. Importantly, Kermit and the others never worry that by including more and more Muppets along the way they will cut into the 'profits' to be made. The attitude is always, 'the more, the merrier', a motto that jars with

any selfish interpretation of the Muppets' aims.

⁹ *The Muppets Take Manhattan*, prod. David Lazer, dir. Frank Oz, 94 min., Henson Associates, 2001[1984], DVD, "You Can't Take No For An Answer".