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Ethical Leadership in Education

June 24, 2024

# « THE MORAL ENTREPRENEUR »

The conversation around ethical leadership has taken on new urgency in our present moment. Across sectors; government, business, higher education, civil society the gap between what institutions say about their values and what they do in practice has become increasingly difficult to ignore. As a doctoral student in Interprofessional Leadership and Educational Technology, and as a practitioner whose career has been spent at the intersection of higher education and policy, I have come to view ethical leadership not as an aspiration but as a working requirement. It is neither optional nor decorative. It is the condition under which trust, legitimacy, and meaningful institutional action are built. With this in mind, Kaptein's (2019) framing of "the moral entrepreneur" as a distinct and necessary dimension of ethical leadership has been one of the more useful conceptual tools I have encountered in recent reading. The paper that follows is my engagement with Kaptein's framework, what it argues, where it draws from, what it adds to existing scholarship on ethical leadership, and how it informs the kind of leadership I am working to practice in higher education.

## Defining Ethical Leadership

Before turning to moral entrepreneurship specifically, it is worth pausing on what ethical leadership actually names. The definition I find most workable comes from Kirk (2024), who describes ethical leadership as "leaders and managers making decisions based on the right thing to do for the common good, not just based on what is best for themselves or for the bottom line." Six principles are commonly associated with this orientation: respect, accountability, service, honesty, justice, and community. None of these is novel. What is more interesting is how they function together not as a checklist a leader can satisfy in sequence, but as a set of dispositions that must be present simultaneously and visibly enough that others can rely upon them. Respect without accountability becomes politeness. Service without honesty becomes performance. Justice without community becomes ideology. These principles depend on one another, and their

integration is what makes ethical leadership recognizable in practice rather than only in language.

This integration matters particularly in higher education, where the distance between stated institutional values and lived organizational behavior can be especially stark. Mission statements emphasize equity, access, and global engagement; institutional practice often remains shaped by older assumptions about who deserves what level of education and on what terms. For leaders working at this intersection, ethical leadership is not a matter of personal virtue alone. It is also the work of pushing institutions to act on their stated values, and where necessary, of helping institutions name new values they have not yet articulated. This is where the concept of moral entrepreneurship becomes important.

**The Concept of Moral Entrepreneurship**

The term "moral entrepreneur" did not originate in business ethics. It first appears in Howard Becker's (1963) sociological study of deviance, where Becker described moral entrepreneurs as those who actively work to define what counts as deviant behavior either by creating new rules of conduct (rule-creators) or by enforcing existing rules with new vigor (rule-enforcers). Becker captured something subtle and important: norms do not enforce themselves. Behind every shift in what a society considers acceptable, there are people doing the patient work of persuasion making arguments, building coalitions, mobilizing institutions toward new standards. The moral entrepreneur, in Becker's account, is the human engine behind normative change.

McGrady (2022) revisits this sociological lineage and clarifies what the concept is and is not. A moral entrepreneur, McGrady writes, is "an individual person, a group, an organization or a movement that attempts to persuade society to adopt and enforce community standards consistent with their own set of ardently held moral beliefs and ideal social order." This formulation is broader than social entrepreneurship which is generally oriented toward solving a defined social problem through enterprise and broader than ethical innovation, which focuses on producing new ethical practices rather than new ethical norms. Moral entrepreneurship is, fundamentally, about norm creation. As McGrady (2011) emphasized in an earlier articulation, the moral entrepreneur is neither a social entrepreneur nor an ethical innovator; they are leaders

who in my reading are revolutionary and transformational in character willing to argue that what currently counts as acceptable is in fact insufficient.

This distinction matters for how we understand leadership. A leader who is committed to existing ethical norms and works hard to implement them within their institution is doing important work but it is a different kind of work than identifying a place where existing norms are inadequate and building a case for new ones. The latter is more difficult, more contested, and more transformative. It is also less rewarded in the short term. Norm enforcement tends to be visible and measurable; norm creation tends to be slow, ambiguous, and politically costly. The framework Kaptein offers gives this difficult work its proper conceptual place within the broader architecture of ethical leadership.

**Kaptein's Tripartite Model**

Kaptein's (2019) central contribution is to argue that the existing literature on ethical leadership has focused on two of the three components that ethical leadership requires, but has largely overlooked the third. The first component is the moral person, the leader as someone whose own character is shaped by ethical values. This is the question of who the leader is. The second component is the moral manager, the leader as someone who actively influences others to behave ethically, through example, communication, and structures of accountability. This is the question of how the leader operates. What Kaptein argues is missing is a third component: the moral entrepreneur, who is focused on what ethical norms should govern the work of the institution and the community it serves. This is the question of what the leader is building toward.

The three components are not interchangeable, but they are interdependent. Kaptein argues that "the plea to include moral entrepreneurship as a third component to the current approach on ethical leadership implies that all the three components should be considered as jointly necessary conditions for ethical leadership" (p. 1141). This is a strong claim. It says that a leader who is morally upright in their personal life and who effectively gets others to comply with existing ethical standards is still only doing part of the work if the existing standards are themselves insufficient or unjust. Without the willingness to identify where current norms fail and to advocate for new ones, ethical leadership remains incomplete.

At the same time, Kaptein is careful to acknowledge that the relationship among these three components is not strictly linear. One can be a moral person without being a moral manager there are individuals whose private integrity does not translate into the systematic influence of others. One can be a moral manager without being a moral entrepreneur, what Becker (1963) calls the norm enforcer; there are highly effective enforcers of existing standards who have no interest in questioning whether those standards are sufficient. But moral entrepreneurship, Kaptein argues, requires both moral values (otherwise it is just entrepreneurship) and managerial capacity (otherwise it is just opinion). It sits at the intersection of who the leader is, how the leader influences others, and what the leader believes ought to be different. Considering that a moral entrepreneur is, by definition, norm specific, moral entrepreneurship is always exercised with regard to a particular issue rather than as a general posture toward the world.

**Moral Awareness and Moral Identity**

Two further concepts are central to Kaptein's framework: moral awareness and moral identity. Moral awareness refers to the capacity to recognize that a given situation has ethical dimensions, that values are at stake in ways that are not always obvious. Moral entrepreneurship begins with moral awareness because, before a leader can argue for a new norm, they have to be able to see the moral void that the existing norms leave open. This is not a trivial capacity. Many situations in institutional life are framed in technical, financial, or operational terms in ways that obscure their ethical dimensions. The leader who can see through this framing and name what is actually at stake is doing the foundational work of moral entrepreneurship.

Moral identity, in turn, shapes which moral voids a leader will choose to act upon. Kaptein argues that "specific traits of a person's identity may be related to the specific issues with regard to which they will choose to demonstrate moral entrepreneurship" (p. 1142). This is an important and somewhat humbling claim. It suggests that moral entrepreneurship is not a generic capacity that can be applied to any issue equally, it is shaped by who the leader is, what they have lived through, what their personal history has made them attentive to. Two leaders with equally strong ethical formation may choose to focus their norm-creating energy on entirely different issues, not because one is more ethical than the other, but because their moral identities have made them sensitive to different things.

It is not enough to believe in a cause. It is imperative to make the belief actionable  whether the catalyst is a moral void perceived through moral awareness, or a moral identity formed through personal history. The two often operate together. Moral identity primes a leader to notice particular voids; moral awareness, once activated, then sustains the inquiry. This is the point at which Kaptein's framework becomes most directly relevant to my own work. The moral voids I am most attentive to — the inequities in how higher education is structured for learners in East Africa, the historical patterns of underinvestment, the geographic exclusions that shape who can access transformative educational experiences are not abstract concerns. They are the concerns that my personal formation has made me unable to ignore. Moral identity, in Kaptein's framing, is not a substitute for moral analysis. It is the source of the questions one chooses to ask in the first place.

**The Capability for Moral Entrepreneurship**

Recognizing a moral void is not the same as being able to do something about it. Kaptein draws careful attention to the capabilities that moral entrepreneurship requires beyond moral awareness and identity. Two are central: the drive toward transition and the capability to gain and apply power. The drive toward transition refers to the willingness to operate outside the safety of established norms to advocate for change before there is institutional cover for that advocacy. This is psychologically demanding work. It requires tolerance for ambiguity, willingness to be wrong, and the capacity to sustain effort over long periods of time with limited reinforcement.

The capability to gain and apply power is more practical. Moral entrepreneurship, Kaptein argues, is not just persuasion, it is the work of building the structural conditions under which a new norm can be adopted and enforced. This requires forming coalitions, identifying allies, securing resources, and operating skillfully within existing institutional politics, all while keeping the moral substance of the work intact. What Kaptein highlights as decisive is the extent to which moral entrepreneurs are capable of building their power and applying it in a manner that gets others to adopt the new ethical norm. The risk is well known: the work of gaining power can corrupt the moral substance it was meant to serve. Many would-be moral entrepreneurs have either burned out from the demands of advocacy or compromised the original norm in pursuit of the influence required to implement it.

For moral entrepreneurship to succeed, then, leaders also need followers who support and trust the call to action long enough for the new norm to become institutionally embedded. The moral entrepreneurship approach for understanding ethical leadership recognizes that leaders contribute to the development of society at a level different from either personal example or managerial influence. What I take from Kaptein's analysis is that the leader who hopes to function as a moral entrepreneur must develop both the inner resources to sustain the work and the outer skills to make it institutionally legible. Neither alone is sufficient. Moral courage without organizational competence produces marginalized activists. Organizational competence without moral courage produces effective managers of unchanged systems. The integration of the two is what moral entrepreneurship asks of leaders.

**Applications: Corporate Social Responsibility and Beyond**

The clearest applied example of moral entrepreneurship in contemporary scholarship comes from the corporate social responsibility (CSR) literature. Kaptein himself uses CSR as a case in point, arguing that organizations that adopt CSR as a proactive strategy are engaged in a form of norm creation contributing to "solving social problems, improving social welfare, promoting social progress, and creating new social value" (p. 1145). Pfajfar et al. (2022) extend this analysis, noting that CSR has emerged as a strategic imperative compelling organizations to integrate ethical, social, and environmental considerations into business practices that are rapidly changing. Their work foregrounds the relational dimension of CSR, the way it depends on sustained engagement with multiple stakeholders, each of whom has legitimate claims on how the organization operates. Reading through Kaptein's framework, CSR can be understood as a corporate attempt to fill moral voids linked to a company's mission, values, and overall objectives voids that earlier generations of corporate practice were content to leave open.

CSR, however, is only one application of moral entrepreneurship, and arguably not the most consequential one. The same logic applies perhaps more powerfully in the public sector and in higher education. When a government agency identifies a policy gap and builds the case for a new regulatory standard, this is moral entrepreneurship in the public domain. When a university recognizes that its existing structures of access systematically exclude certain populations and commits to changing those structures, this is moral entrepreneurship in higher education. The framework is not domain-specific. What is consistent across domains is the underlying pattern: a

leader or coalition identifies a moral void, builds the case for a new norm, accumulates the institutional power to make the new norm operational, and sustains the work long enough for the new norm to become embedded in practice. The framework also helps us recognize moral entrepreneurship where it might otherwise be overlooked in the slow work of policy reform, in the painstaking redesign of institutional structures, in the quiet advocacy that long precedes any visible institutional change.

**Implications for Practice**

Engaging with Kaptein's framework has reframed something I have been doing for a long time without naming. During my tenure as Chief Skills Officer at the Rwanda Development Board, I led the design and implementation of a National Skills Development and Employment Promotion Strategy. The work required identifying gaps in how skills development was being conceptualized across sectors and building cross-institutional partnerships that did not previously exist. Looking back, I can now see that the most consequential parts of that work were not the technical components of the strategy important as they were but the norm-creating components: the slow, careful work of getting different sectors to accept that workforce development required a different model of collaboration than they had previously been operating with. That work was, in Kaptein's terms, moral entrepreneurship. I did not have the language for it then.

The framework has also clarified the work I am building toward now. The internationalization of higher education in East Africa is, at its core, a question of moral norms. Whose access to transformative education counts as central, and whose access is permitted to remain marginal? When institutions describe themselves as "global" while structuring their partnership models in ways that systematically exclude learners in low-resource contexts, this is a moral void that existing norms have failed to address. The work of designing alternative partnership models through holographic immersive learning, through cross-institutional design that takes equity seriously as a design requirement rather than an aspiration is, in Kaptein's terms, the work of moral entrepreneurship in higher education. It requires moral awareness to see the void, moral identity to choose it as the issue worth attention, moral courage to act before there is institutional cover, and managerial capability to translate the new norm into sustained practice.

**Conclusion**

Kaptein's framework does not solve any of the practical problems that moral entrepreneurship in higher education presents. What it does is give those problems a recognizable shape. By naming moral entrepreneurship as a distinct and necessary dimension of ethical leadership alongside but not subsumed by the moral person and the moral manager Kaptein makes visible a kind of leadership work that has often been treated as secondary or peripheral. The three components must be considered jointly necessary conditions for ethical leadership. Without moral entrepreneurship, ethical leadership produces excellent compliance with existing norms but leaves untouched the question of whether those norms are sufficient. Without the moral person, moral entrepreneurship can degenerate into ideological advocacy. Without the moral manager, moral entrepreneurship lacks the institutional architecture to translate new norms into sustained practice. Being an ethical leader through this work enables a well-reasoned transparency, a lucid use of power, and a smooth transition. It can also be genuinely transformational when the moral entrepreneur is driven by development, awareness, and outcomes that serve the common good.

For me, the most useful aspect of the framework is its insistence that moral entrepreneurship is shaped by moral identity. The voids I am attentive to are the voids my own history has made me unable to ignore. Recognizing this is not an exemption from rigor, it is a discipline. It requires being honest about why one is pursuing the particular work one is pursuing, accepting that other leaders may be attentive to different voids, and remaining open to the possibility that one's own framing is incomplete. Ethical leadership, in Kaptein's framework, is not a single fixed standard. It is a continuous and collective effort to identify what should be different, who is willing to do the work of changing it, and what new norms might better serve the common good.

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