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Review of Paul J. Olscamp's *Moral Leadership: Ethics and the College Presidency*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003

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On the surface, Machiavelli's *The Prince* appears to be a medieval how-to guide for monarchs. As such, it recommends the judicious use of deception and violence while disregarding anything we might recognize as a legitimate moral principle. But it is also possible to see the book's target audience as the prince's *subjects*, rather than the fledgling monarch himself. Machiavelli's point, then, is not to instruct rulers on how to preserve, consolidate, and expand their power—something they probably learn in other ways—but rather to inform the ruled about the lengths to which monarchs will go to retain control. On such a reading, *The Prince* offers the governed a window into the otherwise inaccessible machinations of their ruling class. Far from promoting “Machiavellian” tactics, the work may be subversively educating readers about how to recognize such procedures.

If *The Prince* has outraged many readers because of what it seems to be recommending, we can only speculate as to its author's motivations. On the other hand, I see no reason to doubt Paul J. Olscamp's self-stated motive for writing *Moral Leadership*: “to provide an overview of the presidency and the sorts of problems that confront a president, together with reasons and justifications that [he knows] have been given for reaching certain critical decisions” (x). Yet Olscamp's work, like that of Machiavelli, opens a window into a world usually off limits to outsiders: the upper-level administration of a university. For example, Olscamp relates how he once purposely fed misinformation to a potential chair of the board of trustees of the university at which he was president—this in order to test the candidate's trustworthiness. When the misinformation made its way back to Olscamp, the board decided not to vote the trustee to the chairship (20-21). Elsewhere, Olscamp recounts how a university president removed a troublesome trustee from a board on a technicality which was brought to the attention of the attorney general “[t]hrough very indirect means” (22). Most of us who work at universities—students, teachers, and staff—never learn of such plots, but in Olscamp's book we encounter many stories about trustees abusing their positions, faculty pursuing vendettas, and figures across campus behaving greedily and negligently.

As his title would appear to suggest, Olscamp would like to treat the conflicts he analyzes as involving *moral* decisions, since he assumes that “virtually all the activities

we take in our universities are value laden” (119). The conflicts Olscamp addresses are case studies “using actual examples to bring out the factual contexts as well as the ethical dilemmas, particularly as they concern presidents” (115). Throughout his analyses, Olscamp is guided by dozens of moral principles. Some of these are basic, like the duties to avoid causing unnecessary suffering, to contribute to general well-being, and to keep promises—which he subsequently specifies to include in both explicit and implicit permutations (67). Other of Olscamp’s principles are derivative. For example, that “it was wrong to place unsubstantiated, anonymous, and unprovable accusations in an employee’s file without giving her a chance to defend herself” derives from the principle that it is wrong to do unjustified harm to another (29).

It may be unfair to point out that Olscamp explains neither where these principles originate nor how the subsidiary are derived from the basic. This is a book of applied ethics, after all, not an exercise in ethical theory. I was, however, rarely persuaded that such ethical principles actually guided—or were helpful in analyzing—the decision-making Olscamp discusses. Consider his story about a professor (Olscamp calls her Sally Morse) standing for tenure. In most other departments at her university she would have readily been tenured, but Morse teaches in a “niche” department—one that the university hopes to develop as a major contributor within the state’s research agenda. Thus, this department has higher than average standards for scholarly production. As a result, while her department and dean voted to grant Morse tenure, the committees at the college and university levels denied her, even though she was deemed a “superstar” teacher.

There are three moral principles, according to Olscamp, that entail tenuring Morse: the obligation to treat people “honestly, fairly, and with dignity”; the “obligation to ensure that the process by which [a professor is] given or denied tenure [is] fair and worthy of respect and trust on the part of the university’s constituencies” (47); and the obligation to keep promises—in this case, the implicit promise about the quality of the school’s teaching. The problem is that these principles seem quite malleable in Olscamp’s hands. For example, shouldn’t the obligation to treat people honestly, fairly, and with dignity dictate that one not resort to subterfuge like slipping a trustee juicy misinformation? Also, one presumes Professor Morse was given a reduced teaching load and additional financial resources to pursue research. Would it be fair to instructors with greater teaching responsibilities and less support for research that Morse not be held to higher standards for research? After all, Morse’s department did *promise* her that she would be held to higher standards. If Morse is awarded tenure without reaching significant research goals, then wouldn’t fairness dictate that other instructors be given reduced teaching loads as well? Our obligation to keep all *implicit* promises, not just explicit ones, seems particularly slippery to me. Reading Olscamp’s examples, I often felt that the moral justifications given were *ad hoc*. Often it appeared to me that decisions could have been—and perhaps were—justified on prudential grounds (like the desire to avoid the lawsuit that would have ensued if Morse had been denied tenure).

In his final chapter, Olscamp draws some general conclusions about the moral responsibilities of a university president. In his eyes, presidents have an obligation to ensure that controversial topics—like whether religions do more to prevent or cause unnecessary human death, pain, and suffering—be explored in the curricula of their colleges, even if that means other courses have to be dropped (118-119). He even thinks presidents have a moral obligation to address such topics “through speeches and writings

targeted at faculty, students and the general public” and by testifying before government committees (119). However, these more general (and hence more substantial) claims do not in any obvious way follow from his analyses of specific cases, and he does little to justify them on grounds beyond the usual platitudes like the predictable “tomorrow’s leaders will mostly be developed [in universities]” (120).

In the end, I thought the kinds of university-related conflicts facing a president were interesting, but not because they provided particularly fertile ground for moral reasoning. The basic moral principles Olscamp identifies are just the same principles that apply to all of us in our everyday lives. No, what I found particularly worthwhile was the way the range of his examples afforded a glimpse into the inner workings of the university at its highest levels. And much like Machiavelli’s contemporaries reading *The Prince*, you might be troubled—if not surprised or outraged—at what you see going on there.