

Teaching Caselettes

Teaching Notes

MAYOR CARCETTI

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In Season Four of HBO's *The Wire*, Mayor Tommy Carcetti must choose between his long-term political ambitions and the short-term needs of his city. An overview of the “Understanding Hypocrisy and Integrity” framework accompanies these teaching notes.

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(Note: Please refer to the “Understanding Hypocrisy and Integrity” overview at the end of these teaching notes to familiarize yourself with the general ethical framework these cases were created to illustrate.)

Issues: This case helps participants understand the moralist/moderate paradigm, while focusing on the advantages and dangers of the moderate perspective. This case explores the complexity of behaving ethically in contexts, such as business or politics, where overly conscientious individuals may be less likely to realize their goals. Because they are willing to compromise, moderates are more likely to achieve a just outcome in such contexts; however, as this case illustrates, it is not always easy to distinguish between principled compromise and moral complacency.

Ideally, participants will be able to identify their own approach to similar dilemmas and gain some insight into the benefits and dangers of their approach. Participants may also gain some appreciation for alternative approaches.

1. *What should Carcetti do? Is his integrity at stake?*

There is no wrong answer to this question. Some participants may argue that Carcetti can maintain his integrity regardless of what choice he makes. Other participants may believe that Carcetti only has one ethical option. In order to help participants understand the moralist/moderate paradigm, the discussion leader can ask participants how moderates and moralists would evaluate Carcetti’s decision. Even if they come to similar conclusions about what Carcetti should do, moderates and moralists will base their decisions on different factors.

The moderate is more concerned with the impact of Carcetti’s decision than his motivations, and her response to this situation hinges on her assessment of what action would ensure the best outcome for Baltimore’s schoolchildren. She might encourage Carcetti to take the money, calculating that the budget shortfall will certainly hurt the schools, whereas Carcetti’s ability to help the schools as governor is uncertain. Or the moderate might counsel Carcetti to refuse the money, but only if she believes that Carcetti actually will make education a priority when he is elected governor.

It is less likely that the moralist will experience ambiguity about this decision. Because the moralist values principled action, she will encourage Carcetti not to allow his principles to be compromised by expediency or self-interest. The moralist would likely advise Carcetti to take the money, as this action is clearly performed on behalf of Baltimore’s children and is untainted by personal ambition.

2. *In evaluating Carcetti’s decision, how much does the fact that one choice coincides with his ambition for higher office matter?*

This question helps participants identify their own moral intuitions. Are they primarily concerned with the motivations behind Carcetti’s behavior, or are they concerned with its consequences? This is also an opportunity to discuss why some people believe that motives are important and why others find them less relevant.

While moderates are less concerned with motives than with outcomes, moralists will insist that purity of motivation is what makes an action ethical. Furthermore, the moralist will warn that individuals who fail to pay attention to their motives risk becoming complacent hypocrites. Without considering their underlying intent, actors can end up accepting short-term costs by anticipating long-term gains, and in doing so, deceive themselves about their own motives and about the nature of the supposed long-term gain. In Carcetti’s case, as in many real world situations, it is difficult to determine the difference between principled compromises that

are intended to achieve just outcomes and compromises that are entirely self-serving. Moralists believe that complacent hypocrisy can be avoided if individuals make a greater effort to maintain purity of motives. When in doubt, some moralists will argue, actors should choose the outcome that does not coincide with their self-interest.

At the same time, there are problems with placing too much emphasis upon motives. First, motives are often hard to determine. For example, even if Carcetti takes the money, he may be motivated by a desire to prove to his advisers that he is a good person, rather than a desire to do what is right for Baltimore's school children. Second, individuals may fixate upon motives at the expense of just outcomes, particularly when just outcomes coincide with self-interest. Finally, human beings may not be capable of completely pure motivations.

3. *Machiavelli wrote that "a man who wants to make a profession of good in all regards must come to ruin among so many who are not good."¹ In other words, because most people are corrupt, those who attempt to be good all the time will be unable to thrive or accomplish their objectives.*
 - a. *Do you agree with Machiavelli? Do you think this observation is particularly accurate in certain contexts, such as politics or business?*

This question encourages participants to identify their worldviews. Do they believe that morally scrupulous people fail to achieve their objectives? Is this particularly true in business or politics, both considered to be competitive environments in which immediate results are rewarded and most actors are primarily looking out for their own self-interest? Is it that morally scrupulous people are unable to achieve personal success, or do moral scruples also make it difficult for them to achieve just outcomes?

- b. *Does your opinion about the extent to which people who do not protect their own interest can succeed in politics shape your evaluation of Carcetti's decision? How?*

Often, our ethical decisions are shaped by our understanding of how the world works. This is particularly true of moderates, whose pursuit of just outcomes is shaped by their understanding of what outcomes are possible and what is necessary to achieve those outcomes in particular circumstances. In responding to this question, participants should consider if and how their beliefs about whether "nice guys finish last" affect their approach to ethical dilemmas

Once again it might be useful to explain how stereotypical moderates and moralists might answer this question and encourage participants to evaluate these approaches. Obviously, moderates will always be more willing to accept moral compromises, but they are particularly willing to accept such compromises in the political arena or in other situations where overly conscientious people are unlikely to achieve their goals. If politicians who genuinely care about the public interest are not willing to occasionally make compromises in order to get ahead, the moderate believes, government is likely to end up in the hands of those who are completely self-interested. Additionally, the moderate would warn that if being good *always* requires martyrdom, very few people will strive to be good.

The moralist, on the other hand, is unlikely to encourage moral compromise, even in situations where compromise is necessary in order to achieve just outcomes. Indeed, she would argue that individuals who find themselves in contexts that encourage moral compromise must be particularly rigid in obeying

¹ Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Harvey Mansfield (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 61.

principles, lest self-serving behavior becomes a habit. In Carcetti's case, the moralist is likely to worry that Carcetti will get into the habit of falsely equating his own political ambition with the public good. If as mayor Carcetti is unwilling to put the interests of the children first, the moralist would argue, there is no reason to expect him to do so as governor.

4. *Do you consider yourself a moralist or a moderate? Does your approach to ethics depend upon the context in which you are acting?*

Participants should be encouraged to consider their responses to previous questions in deciding whether they consider themselves moderates or moralists. Those who are more concerned about the motivations behind Carcetti's actions are moralists, whereas those who are primarily concerned about the consequences are moderates. Some participants will find that they are neither strict moderates nor strict moralists and that their approach to ethical dilemmas depends upon the context.

For those who say that their approach to ethical dilemmas depends upon context, it might be useful to identify how context affects their approach. Are they more sympathetic to moderates in situations where moral scruples are a barrier to success? Are they more likely to be moderates when they believe that the cost of the moralist's understanding of integrity is excessively high?

Conclusion: The discussion leader can wrap up by summarizing the discussion and by emphasizing that there are pluses and minuses to both the moderate and moralist perspectives, even in competitive "cut-throat" environments like politics and business. For example, moralists have a tendency to sacrifice just outcomes because they refuse to compromise their principles. While moderates are often more likely to achieve good outcomes in cut-throat environments, their willingness to compromise makes them more susceptible to complacency, failing to recognize or respond to injustice. Moderates also run the risk of unconscious hypocrisy, convincing themselves that they are compromising for the greater good, when they are really pursuing their own interest. These problems might be avoided by greater awareness of the spectrum of ethical actions and the dangers of particular approaches to ethics.

Understanding Hypocrisy and Integrity

Often ethical action is depicted as a continuum, with cynicism on one end, moral fanaticism on the other and integrity as the perfect mean. The problem with viewing ethical action as a continuum, Ruth Grant explains, is that it obscures the fact that there are multiple forms of integrity and hypocrisy. Grant is Professor of Political Science and Philosophy and Senior Fellow in the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University.

She identifies two different forms of integrity: the integrity of the moderate and the integrity of the moralist. The moderate focuses upon the consequences of her actions and is willing to “be a little bad” in order to ensure a just outcome. The moralist, on the other hand, evaluates actions by the motivations that guide them and is inclined to obey her conscience, regardless of the consequences.

The moralist is unwilling to compromise her principles because she associates integrity with purity. Purity, she believes, is achieved by ensuring that her motives are not tainted by self-interest and her actions are not corrupted by compromise. The moderate finds this struggle for purity unproductive. Moral actors are unlikely to achieve complete purity of motivation, the moderate argues, as humans are complicated and conflicted creatures. While she believes that individuals should strive to ensure that selfish motivations do not prevent them from pursuing just outcomes, the moderate emphasizes that an obsession with the purity of one’s motives and deeds can hinder the pursuit of such outcomes.

Just as there are different kinds of integrity, there are different kinds of hypocrisy. The most obvious is the cynical hypocrite, who deliberately uses the pretence of virtue to obtain selfish and ignoble ends. However, most hypocrites are not consciously aware of their hypocrisy, and both moderates and moralists may be self-deceiving hypocrites. The moderate engages in hypocrisy by telling herself that she is compromising for the greater good, when she is really pursuing her own interests. Or, she is simply complacent, failing to recognize injustice rather than disturb her own comfortable position. The moralist engages in hypocrisy when she tells herself that she is standing on principle, despite when her actions are motivated less by the justness of the principle and more by a desire to feel and appear morally superior.

	<i>Moderation</i>	<i>Moralism</i>
<i>Integrity</i>	<i>Statesman</i>	<i>Moralist</i>
<i>Hypocrisy</i>	<i>Complacent Hypocrite</i>	<i>Righteous Hypocrite</i>

Moralists and moderates have difficulty understanding each other, because each believes that their form of integrity is the only form of integrity. As a result, each sees only hypocrisy in the other. Whereas the moderate believes that all moralists are self-righteous hypocrites willing to sacrifice a just outcome for selfish reasons, the moralist regards the moderate’s willingness to compromise as a lack of conviction. Perhaps moralists and moderates would understand each other better if they recognized that there are multiple forms of hypocrisy and integrity.

See Ruth Grant, Hypocrisy and Integrity: Machiavelli, Rousseau and the Ethics of Politics (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), pages 62-8 and 171-2