

# **Bringing the Ugly Back: A Dialogic Exploration of Ethics in Leadership through an Ethno-narrative Re-reading of the Enron Case**

## **Abstract**

In this paper we adopt a dialogic approach to examining narratives on ethics in leadership. We do this through an ethno-narrative re-reading of writing on the Enron case informed by Bakhtin's ideas on dialogue. Employing concepts such as beautyism, aesthetic craving and recent writing around disgust and abjection in organisations helps us to develop a deeper relational interpretation of written accounts of leadership and ethics in organisations. We identify two underlying and interrelated social tensions exemplified in existing narratives on this popular example of 'unethical' leadership practice. Both tensions, we conclude, are linked to denigrating the ugly in favour of the beautiful and we have labelled them 'suppressing the ugly' and a fetish for 'looking good'. We go on to suggest that these two tensions then combine in the stories about this case to ultimately beautify a toxic masculinised persona. We suggest therefore that our dialogic perspective on ethical leadership narratives helps to uncover how accounts about Enron are developed through an intricate interplay between seeking to 'look good' and the suppression of moral judgment by leaders of the organisation.

**Keywords:** Leadership, Ethics, Dialogism, Beauty, Ugliness, Bakhtin

## **Introduction**

Corporate scandals and the financial crisis are increasingly becoming the foci of the business and management literature (Issa and Pick, 2010; Neves et al., 2014). Some of the literature portrays these scandals as a failing of ethics in leadership (see Knights and

O’Leary, 2006 for a critique) which, in turn, speaks to the increased interest in ‘ethical leadership’ over recent years (e.g. Brown and Mitchell, 2010; Ciulla, 2009; Treviño et al., 2003). Critical commentary, however, suggests that leadership theory is too dualist, relying ‘...upon over-simplified binaries’ (Collinson, 2005: 1421), and too focused on the positive (Collinson, 2012). We observe that these issues also apply to the ethical leadership literature, which has further been criticised for being too individualised, decontextualized and power neutral (e.g. Kersten, 2008; Knights and O’Leary, 2006; Liu, 2015a). We therefore challenge authorial voices in the leadership literature that polarise debates on ‘good’ and ‘bad leadership. Instead we call for more complexity in how these leadership acts are given voice, and associated with notions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’, through differing narratives and stories on these crises. Our purpose therefore is to explore the ethical dimension of leadership as a narratively constructed phenomenon and our contribution is to show how, when doing so, an aesthetic element to this ethical dimension of leadership is uncovered – the importance of ‘looking good’. This aesthetic element is wrapped up and intertwined with narratives of being a seemingly ‘ethical’ leader. We go on to suggest, however, that because notions of ‘looking good’ and ‘being good’ are woven together in narrative, it is difficult to pull them apart. This helps us develop our understanding of the dialogical and relational nature of leadership’s ethical dimension.

We apply a dialogic perspective (Bakhtin, 1981; 1984) to research, writing and reporting on the 2001 Enron case - an event that saw members of the organisation charged with offences linked to accounting and corporate fraud and corruption. Through an ethno-narrative (Hansen, 2006) re-reading of texts on Enron we show how perceptions of ‘good’ or ‘bad’ leadership are constructed through narratives on leaders. We also contribute to theory by showing how narratives about ‘good (ethical) leadership’ are rendered in dialogue with interpretations about ‘looking good’. Doing so helps to deepen the understanding of how

leadership is enacted relationally and how this is connected to notions of ethics in organisations (e.g. Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011; Knights and O’Leary, 2006; Rhodes, 2012). Our view on relationality here, however, also includes the interaction with texts and narratives on the ethics of leadership practice in the Enron case. We therefore widen understandings of how leadership is constructed relationally (Cunliffe and Eriksen 2011), moving beyond the relationships between leaders and followers to explore relationality in interpretations about organizations, and the authorial voices that shape and fix notions of ‘good’ or ‘bad’ in leadership.

Our arguments are significant given the largely positive characterisation of leadership (Collinson, 2012) and the romanticisation of the ‘beauty’ of leadership (e.g. Adler, 2011; Ladkin, 2008) in popular culture, the Western media and leadership literature more generally. Leadership has been recognised as an act that seeks to demonstrate individual mastery (e.g. Ladkin, 2008) over the environment, but, significantly for us, these performances of mastery are never fully accomplished: they are always in the process of becoming unravelled and undone (Hawkins, 2015). In addressing these issues, we develop arguments advocating a dialectical evaluation of leadership (Collinson, 2005, Spicer et al., 2016), by introducing Bakhtin’s (1981, 1984) dialogical perspective, rooted within the relational dialectics tradition (Putnam et al., 2016). This helps to situate ethics in leadership amongst other ‘unfinished’ organizational voices and narratives which are continuously emerging.

In doing so, our dialogic perspective also helps to problematize issues of ‘looking good’ and ‘being good’ in organisations (see Rhodes et al., 2017). We believe our paper helps to unpick the preoccupation with ‘looking good’ by paying particular attention to beautyism (Synnott, 1990), aesthetic craving (Kateb, 2000; Kersten, 2008) and discussions around disgust in organisations (Pelzer 2002) and abjection (Kristeva 1982). We suggest that the multi-voiced narratives relating to ethics and leadership are evidenced in two co-occurring

social tensions of suppressing the ugly and a fetish for looking good which are evident in our review of the case material. These tensions entwine in this particular case to beautify and promote a toxic masculine persona, an embodiment of assumptions about masculinity in organizations (Collinson and Hearn, 1994; Knights, 2015; McCabe and Knights, 2016). We argue that the interpretive stories on the case of Enron then portray this persona as impacting on the moral judgement of leaders in the organisation. We therefore contribute further by proposing that ‘bringing the ugly back’ through such dialogical investigation of narratives within organizational practice and in the written accounts of this practice helps to further unravel the moral complexities of leading in organisations. We conclude by providing suggestions for further research on how narratives and written accounts inform understandings of leadership practice.

We start, however, by reviewing Bakhtin’s (1981, 1984) work on dialogism and its implications for how leadership ethics is enacted in relation to other narratives.

### **Dialogics and ethical leadership**

Our dialogic discussion about narratives of ethics in leadership practice draws on Cunliffe and Eriksen’s (2011) work on relational leadership as a starting point. Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) argue that a Bakhtinian approach can offer insights into the ‘intersubjective shaping of social circumstances and surroundings’. Here, we develop this approach by articulating how dialogue applies not just to leader-follower relationships, but also the narratives through which morality and appearance in organizational leadership are co-enacted or, using Wegerif’s (2008: 348) term, ‘inter-animated’. The Bakhtinian (Bakhtin, 1981, 1984) concept of dialogue, formed through his analysis of Russian literature, develops dialectics in two ways. Firstly, Bakhtin rejects Marx’s (1961) dialectical account by suggesting that the interplay of oppositions in social reality is too complex to be reduced to a single binary

(grounded in class antagonism). In contrast, Bakhtin's account of social reality implies a perpetual state of becoming, constituted by an ongoing interplay of fusion and separation of utterances or 'dialogics' (Wegerif, 2008) through centripetal (movement towards) and centrifugal forces (movement away), which can only be played out through social interaction or 'dialogue' (Bakhtin, 1981). Through dialogic encounters, many voices are positioned within, on top of, and against one another to create an interwoven and unfinished polyphonic narrative, which is processual in nature (Bakhtin, 1984: 208, Putnam et al., 2016; Rankin, 2002, Wegerif, 2008). Such narrative emerges through 'articulated language, spoken or written, fixed or moving images, gestures, and the ordered mixture of all these substances; narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting...stained glass windows, cinema, comics, news items, conversation.' (Barthes, 1987: 89 in Rankin, 2002: 3).

Whilst some have explored dialogic processes within dyadic, interpersonal relationships (e.g. Baxter and Montgomery, 1996), Bakhtin himself also applied the juxtaposition of dialogics within narrative to social realities, writing that 'Life by its very nature is dialogical' (1984: 293). Here, Bakhtin recognizes that social reality is, as he writes elsewhere, '...a dialogically agitated and tension filled environment of alien words, value judgements and accents, that weaves in and out of complex interrelationships, merges with some, recoils from others, intersects with yet a third group' (1986a: 276), in ways that layer meanings together. This is one reason why Bakhtin speaks of 'dialogues' rather than dialectics: dialogics are not necessarily always oppositional, but are 'inter-animated' (Wegerif, 2008: 348) or brought to life through and within one another. Wegerif's term 'inter-animation' draws attention to the performative function of dialogics – in that dialogics emerge together, relationally, rather than being connected once 'finished'. This allows for the

possibility that dialogics embedded in social reality can be entwined with dialogics found in written narratives.

Secondly, whilst dialectics are informed by opposing tendencies and eventually brought together via reasoning to achieve synthesis, Bakhtin’s approach indicates that organizational dialogics can be inter-animated in dialogue (here, constructing what is ‘right/wrong’ alongside what is ‘beautiful/ugly’), but never finalized through combination (Putnam et al., 2016; Wegerif, 2008). Instead, they may merge, separate, diminish or become amplified at different points as a ‘multiplicity of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses ... each with equal rights and its own world [that] combine, but do not merge, into the unity of an event’ (Bakhtin, 1984: 208). The implication for interpretations of ethical leadership therefore is that what counts as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ leadership in practice never exists in isolation, but emerges in context through unending dialogue with other organizational and researcher narratives, stories and interpretations. It is these interpretive accounts of the Enron case that form the basis of our own exploration. In table 1, we summarise and contrast differing approaches to understanding modes of relating within organizational narratives, including monologism, dualism, dialectics and dialogue.

Table 1: Approaches to Oppositional Relationships

Form of narrative:	Monologism	Dualism	Dialectics	Dialogue
Oppositional arrangement:	Hegemonic narrative	‘Binary relationship or bipolar oppositions’ (Putnam et al 2016: 73) often leading to conflict or the	Oppositions have the promise of ‘synthesis’	Both/And ‘polyphonous’ relationships, not necessarily opposed

		production of a hierarchy when one opposition is prioritized in the social order (Knights and Kerfoot 2004).		
Boundaries between relational tendencies/oppositions	Invisible (because no opposition is made available or opposition is successfully banished)	Fixed, static boundary between oppositions: 'well defined boundary, and no overlap (Putnam et al 2016: 73).	Fluid boundary between opposing tendencies (see Collinson, 2005; 2014) shifting until synthesis, when boundary is dissolved as oppositions are reconciled	Continuously fluid, permeable boundary: Polyvalent voices are threaded into and emerge from one another over time
Self-other relationship	The 'other' is banished	Hierarchical ordering of oppositions results in one tendency emerging as a suppressed, subordinated or marginalized 'other'	The other is incorporated into the self via synthesis	The 'other' is never finalised, always emerging in relation to the self
Implications for ethics/aesthetics in leadership	Ethics and aesthetic narratives are taken for granted so that alternatives are 'invisible or 'un-thinkable'	Good vs bad and 'beautiful vs ugly' leadership narratives are hierarchized	Marx (1961): Dominated by class antagonism  Ethics and aesthetics eventually synthesised into a single coherent leadership 'metanarrative'	Narratives about leadership ethics are read through and entwined with narratives about the aesthetics of leadership and vice versa – but these are never finalised. Attempts to fix, banish or completely subvert are futile, but power continues to shape the way that the interactions happen and ensures that some voices are louder than others

The dialogic perspective offered by Bakhtin (1981) therefore evolves dialectics so that social life emerges out of ‘both/and’ qualities of relating, as opposed to ‘either/or’ qualities of relating. Such a method requires us to recognise that the opposing tendencies of organizational life are not necessarily grounded foremost or only in class resentment, and are never reconciled (Ramsay, 2008) which distinguishes this view of dialectics from that of Hegel (1969) (Putnam et al., 2016).

Organization Studies scholars have employed Bakhtin’s dialogical approach to explore *inter alia* the construction of identities (Beech, 2008) and the unfinalized nature of learning in executive education (Ramsay, 2008). Here, we show that dialogue is central to the complex weave of moral and ethical judgements unfolding within leadership narratives. Narratives and interpretations show how members of organisations such as Enron can become distracted from the nuances of moral decision-making, as they gravitate towards an ‘either/or’ interpretation so that leaders are ultimately interpreted as ‘good’ *or* ‘bad’, rather than morally complex characters. Moreover, drawing on Bakhtin’s (1981) point that dialogics are polyvalent, cross-referencing and interacting through dialogue with each other, our interpretation suggests that this either/or distraction in written interpretations of ethical leadership may be partly aesthetic in nature. Therefore, taking a dialogic approach helps to recognise the threading of moral narratives within interpretations and stories of leadership, showing how ‘looking good’ with ‘being good’ can be conflated. Dialogism enables us to develop the promise of ‘dialectical reasoning’ through acknowledging the multiple, fractured sources of opposition, and the un-finalised nature of organizational reality. In the next section, we position our dialogical perspective within the literature on leadership ethics. We note how this literature might shape understandings about how appearances of ‘being good’ is inter-animated with and through narratives around ‘looking good’.



### *Narratives on Ethics and Leadership*

Informed by Eisenbeiss and Broadbeck's (2014) discussion of the leadership ethics scholarship, we note that this literature is itself multi-voiced in character. Firstly, the 'empirical-descriptive' approach (Eisenbeiss and Broadbeck 2014) identifies generaliseable qualities or definitions of ethical leadership, grounded in 'normatively appropriate behavior' and the promotion of such conduct to followers (Brown et al., 2005, 120, Eisenbeiss 2012). Similarly, 'unethical' leadership is widely recognized as 'behaviors conducted and decisions made by organizational leaders that are illegal and/or violate moral standards, and those that impose processes and structures that promote unethical conduct by followers' (Brown and Mitchell, 2010:11, Frost 2004).

Relatedly the 'conceptual normative' narrative (Eisenbeiss and Broadbeck, 2014) seeks to define what leaders 'should do or should be'. Leadership's 'moral dimension' (Gardner, 1993), is implicitly incorporated into other models such as servant leadership (Van Dierendonck, 2011), authentic leadership (Avolio and Gardner, 2005) and transformational leadership, which 'must be grounded in moral foundations' (Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999: 181). Voices here call for more ethical leaders and leadership (Liden et al., 2008, Ciulla 1995), often justified 'by reference to a recent catastrophe of some kind or other' (Levine and Boaks, 2014: 226), such as the collapse of Enron in 2001 (our focus here), or the 2012 Deepwater Horizon oil spill. These two narratives are based on oppositional 'either/or' perspectives, which by and large either identify leadership practice as 'good' or 'bad', and or as existing on a spectrum between the two so that leaders can become 'better' or 'worse' through the application or rejection of certain moral norms.

In addition, we identify a third set of voices, which we term the 'relational-contextual' narrative. These scholars question the abstraction of business ethics into universal principles

and codes of practice (Cummings, 2000) with its emphasis on ‘objectification, rationality, and the pursuit of meta-narratives unaffected by context’ (Ladkin, 2006: 89, see also Dibben et al., 2017; Knights and O’Leary, 2006; Levine and Boaks 2014; Liu, 2015a, 2015b; Price, 2006). For example, Collinson’s (2005) work on the relational dialectics of leadership identifies how universal principles of ‘ethical’ or ‘toxic’ leadership risks separating leaders and leadership into simplistic opposites such as ‘good and bad, which as Edwards et al. (2015) point out, obviates the fluid and socially constructed nature of these concepts. This, Ladkin (2006) argues, can be unproductive for leaders seeking solutions to ethical dilemmas: ‘such approaches do not adequately account for the reality of leadership practice: its contextual and contingent nature, along with the relational dynamic which lies at its heart’ (Ladkin, 2006: 87). Given that modern organizations are recognized as sites of multiple, nested meanings, which shift over time and are re-invoked, altered, voiced and changed in different contexts (Dailey and Browning, 2014), this perspective calls scholars to offer more multi-layered explanations of how morality plays out in leadership practice.

Collinson notes that fraud and corruption cases like that of Enron can reinforce polarised views of leadership practice by fuelling romanticised perceptions of heroes and villains in leadership (2005: 1419-1420, Meindl, 1995). Hence, we see the Enron case as a suitable choice from which to develop conceptual contributions about the relationships between ethics and aesthetics in interpretations of leadership. We extend understanding by considering morality as it is enacted alongside other narratives that merge, extend and shape how leadership practice was seen within Enron. This enables us to show how leadership practices or norms seen as unethical by some literatures are misplaced or hidden from view through the merging of voices in ways that may support choices to ‘seem ethical’ over ‘being ethical’. We also opted to use the Enron collapse as a case study because as an example of so-called ‘creative accounting’, it reveals the emphasis on what ‘seems’, the façade, the keeping up the

aesthetic appearance of being ‘ethical’, through which other (no more or less ‘real’) voices become overridden. We suggest that this ‘overriding’ is explained through the connected concepts of beautyism (Synnott, 1990) and aesthetic craving (Kateb, 2000; Kersten, 2008). However, we also wish at this point of our paper, to stay true to our title and bring into conversation ‘the ugly’. We do this by drawing on Pelzer’s (2002) framing of disgust in organizations and Kristeva’s (1982) discussion on ‘the abject’.

## **Problematizing Ethics in Leadership: Beautyism, Aesthetic Craving, Disgust and Abjection**

### *Beautyism*

As Morrison (1989: 360) highlights, to ‘... judge that something is beautiful or ugly means to believe that it is useful or harmful to us’. Synnott (1990: 407) traces this observation back to ancient Graeco-Roman times when ‘physical beauty’ was identified ‘as a symbol of moral beauty and goodness. Ever Since Plato, the good and the beautiful have been a unified conception.’ He notes that the English language, through phrases such as ‘divinely beautiful’, ‘looking angelic’ ‘looking good’ and conversely ‘ugly as sin’ or ‘looking like hell’, continues to associate beauty with goodness. Importantly, Synnott (1990: 407) describes these connections as semiotically reciprocal – the signifier and the signified are one – ‘...which reflects and reinforces both the physicality of moral beauty and the morality of physical beauty.’ This reciprocity, Synnott (1990) suggests, leads to a pervasive ideology of ‘beautyism’, which reinforces and promotes the primacy of the beautiful over the ugly in society. Synnott (1990) identifies the presence of beautyism in popular culture, noting that popular heroes, such as James Bond are described as good looking, handsome and beautiful, whereas the villains possess defects in their looks that render them grotesque and ugly.

Whilst Synnott (1990) identifies how beauty and ugliness are linked to notions of good (ethical) and bad (toxic), his approach seems largely dualistic and binary, positioning beauty alongside ethical leadership in opposition to badness/ugliness. In contrast, we are more interested in the dialogic underpinning of these constructs and the inherent contradictions and complexities of interrelated dialogics in the ethical leadership literature. A dialogical account indicates that relational tendencies are not pre-existing entities which interact, but are made possible through ‘inter-animation’, facilitating each other’s emergence into the world (Wegerif 2008, Bakhtin, 1981). There are implications for how interpretive accounts of organizational practice also contribute to beautyism in leadership ethics, because ‘doing good’ or ‘doing bad’ always materializes in organizations, and accounts of organizations, in reference to understandings of ‘looking good’ and ‘looking bad’. We attend this co-emergence, by drawing on Kersten’s (2008) notion of aesthetic craving. This helps us to unravel some of the nuances associated with ugliness and beauty within ethical leadership.

#### *Aesthetic Craving: The Desire for Beauty in Leadership*

Kersten (2008)’s aesthetic craving enables us to apply the dialogically related oppositions of good/bad, and beauty/ugliness more closely to organizational and cultural life. A craving is understood to be a desire that consumes, overrides or silences other thoughts or actions. Informed by Guillen (1997), Kersten shows how a desire for beauty becomes an unconscious craving, a problematic part of our social reality which is ‘...satisfied only when we are convinced that the world is...beautiful rather than not’ (Kateb, 2000: 16). In attempts to satisfy this craving, ends justify means because we insist that the world ‘... must be changed to fit our ideal of beauty, often at any cost’ (Kersten 2008: 192). The result is that an unconscious yearning for beauty is represented and justified not as a desire for aesthetic

coherence, but as ‘...something else, be that tradition, the common good, the search for truth, the will of God or the mandates of nature.’ (Kersten 2008: 192).

The concept of aesthetic craving helps us understand how yearning for beauty can become dialogically associated with the search for ‘good-ness’ or ethicality. It also offers insights into how the performance of ‘beautiful’ leadership (e.g. Adler, 2011; Ladkin, 2008) (the search for ‘looking good’) in organizations, is equated with, or substituted for performances of ethical leadership (the search for ‘doing good’). Therefore it is timely to look back upon the literature on ethics in leadership through the lens of aesthetic craving. A dialogical interpretation of ethical leadership narratives can shed light on how a desire for beauty can inform unethical leadership practice.

### *Bringing Back the Ugly*

Pelzer's (2002) reading of ugliness and beauty challenges further fixed oppositional interpretations. He suggests that the focus on ‘beautiful’ leadership at the neglect of its more unpleasant characteristics or counterparts arises not because this ugliness is poisonous to us, because it interferes with our need to seek out what is beautiful. Pelzer (2002: 852) clarifies that ‘...the beautiful is defined by the exclusion of the ugly or disgusting. It is the exclusion that does not only make the disgusting invisible but aims at its non-existence.’ Pelzer’s argument evokes Kristeva’s (1982) notion of the abject, that which is recognised as unclean, repulsive, and which threatens the social order and must be expelled. The abject has often been associated with femininity and motherhood (Kristeva 1982). Creed advances this by her analysis of horror film, showing that the disquieting feminine risks contaminating otherwise ‘pure’ environments and must be controlled, often by male heroic figures (Creed 1993). Perhaps this is why, as Bouilloud and Deslandes (2015) point out, studies of aesthetics in organizations tend to address only the beautiful or attractive elements. However, avoidance of

the ugly or disgusting can mean that we make decisions based on false preconceptions (Pelzer 2002). Hence our call is for a closer nuanced examination of what have been categorised as the darker, uglier aspects of organisational action to provide a multi-voiced interpretation of ethics in leadership.

Bringing back the ugly and exposing it as the dialogical negation of entwined assumptions about not just beauty, but also goodness enables us to explore conceptually how accounts of leadership ethics are represented in aesthetic terms and to develop understandings of the implications of this for writing about leadership ethics. Furthermore, by conceptually acknowledging the dialogical interplay and unfinished nature of ugly/beauty and good/bad juxtapositions, we might build a perspective that unpicks in greater detail the way leadership is constructed through these opposites within narratives and interpretations of leadership, and to call their separateness, fixedness and consistency into question. In this way, we might develop existing conversations in this journal and elsewhere about how narratives of ethics in leadership are enacted in relation to other phenomena (Cunliffe and Eriksen 2011). We do this by extending attention on relationality beyond leader-follower relations, but towards relational dialogue between ethical and aesthetic narratives of leadership.

As a case that has been explored by other authors (e.g. Boje et al., 2004; Gini, 2004; Knights and O'Leary, 2006; Sims and Brinkman, 2003; Tourish and Vatcha, 2005) the Enron collapse also offers us an opportunity to explore how ethics in leadership has been treated by other scholars. From a Bakhtinian (1986) sense we analyse the renewed dialogue (Folch-Serra, 1990) from these works to uncover co-occurring, multiple tensions. In particular, we show how placing ethical issues at the centre of the Enron case analysis serves to isolate these from other interrelating narratives, which helped to obscure, blur and reinforce 'bad' (unethical) leadership. Therefore we explore how a multi-voiced reading of the practices of Enron might inform new practical understandings of leadership's ethical dimension (Ciulla

1995), and also how we can inform written accounts on leadership ethics and corporate scandals.

## **Methodology**

Our approach to reviewing the Enron case is ethno-narrative (Hansen, 2006) in nature, taking a hermeneutic reading of both published biographical and media texts describing organisational events (e.g. Cruver, 2003; McLean and Elkind, 2003; Peraino et al., 2002; Swartz and Watkins 2003;) and research papers analysing these events (e.g. Boje and Rosile, 2002; Boje et al., 2004; Gini, 2004; Knights and O’Leary, 2006; Sims and Brinkman, 2003; Tourish and Vatcha, 2005). An ethno-narrative approach accepts multiple materials that construct narrative and attempts to demonstrate how this informs meaning making (Hansen, 2006). Following Boje (1995) we accept that narratives do not possess meaning but that ‘...meanings are supported and contested through the continuous production of texts’ (Hansen, 2006: 1052). We also follow Hansen’s (2006: 1060) suggestion that text can stand alone as a construction material that ‘...points to a context that is out there informing textual interpretation’. This is how we see the material we have analysed - as standalone texts that point to contextual meaning. Hence, through re-reading relevant texts we were particularly interested in looking for juxtapositions ‘within’ that were dialogical in nature and hence produce and re-produce meaning. In essence our ethno-narrative approach errs towards what Heracleous and Barrett (2001) term a ‘rhetorical-hermeneutic discourse analysis’ where we are re-considering texts within the wider whole whilst the whole is also manifested in the materials we consider. What develops this towards a deeper ethno-narrative approach, however, is our push towards the interpretation of text and context through Bakhtin’s dialogism where we are encouraged towards looking across, between and within texts and contexts which signifies the endosymbiotic relationship (Hansen, 2006).

Our method involved the primary reading of the case material being conducted by one of the authors and relaying and discussing this with the other two authors to enable us to identify the themed juxtapositions that became apparent within the texts. As a research group we wanted to try and stay true to the method and hence we were not seeking truth behind the multi-voiced narratives we highlighted, but we were looking for some insight into the rationale for actions and enactments. Our cyclic discussions of the texts, therefore, were reflexive in nature whereby we worked with the narrative, our understanding of the context and the conceptual aspects of a dialogical view, as discussed above. We believe that this method and methodology were merited given the amount of publications devoted to the case of Enron, and that a secondary review of this material provides fresh insights from between and across these texts. In methodological terms we are therefore giving voice to different narratives and listening for utterances that inter-animate one another. We were particularly interested in aesthetic representation and felt-sensory meaning within the texts that would highlight dialogical themes. This brought to the fore endosymbiotic relationships between texts and context as suggested by Hansen as a core assumption of the ethno-narrative approach. Coding these narratives, felt senses and contextual observations we arrived at three core themes within our re-reading and analysis.

### **Re-reading the Enron Case through a Dialogic Perspective**

‘The story of Enron sounds smart and stupid at the same time.’

(Sims and Brinkman, 2003: 252)

Enron was a US-based energy, commodities and services company founded in 1985 from a merger between two small regional companies and filed for bankruptcy in 2001. The organisation employed approximately 20,000 employees and claimed to have revenue of \$200 billion in the year 2000. Scandal, however, broke in 2001 that saw members of the



organisation charged with offences linked to accounting and corporate fraud and corruption and the case of Enron has been promoted as the main example of business ethics failure around this time (e.g. Boje et al., 2004; Gini, 2004; Knights and O’Leary, 2006; Sims and Brinkman, 2003; Tourish and Vatcha, 2005). Whilst there has been a wealth of attention on and interpretation of Enron as a case study of business, organisational and leadership ethics, we believe another analysis grounded in dialogic understandings of ethics, informed by the literature above, is justified to surface and problematize the inter-animation of juxtaposed utterances about beauty/ugliness and good/bad. This is particularly important because Kersten (2008) highlights Enron as a particular example of aesthetic craving.

The Enron case material and existing research on the subject draws attention to a binary within the narrative of ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ (Swartz and Watkins, 2003) at Enron. For example, Sherron Watkins (the Enron vice-president who first blew the whistle on what was going on at Enron) talks early on in her account of events of being ‘...caught with a bunch of losers, far, far away from (Jeff) Skilling’s winning team’ (Swartz and Watkins, 2003: 2). This was referring to her being within the ‘wrong’ group event at a company management conference. Our re-reading of writings on the case examines this narrative and investigates links to the aesthetic. By doing so we draw on three dialogical processes through which beauty/ugliness became linked to ethical/toxic judgements within writings on the case of Enron. These are: suppressing the ugly, a fetish for ‘looking good’ and the intertwined confluence of both – ‘beautifying the toxic masculine’.

### *Suppressing the Ugly*

Existing scholarship on the Enron case reveals examples of aesthetic suppression. For example, in their dramaturgical analysis Boje et al. (2004) highlight how from the very beginning of the company’s existence, there was an explicit attempt to suppress the ugly. As

Boje and colleagues illustrate, Enron was originally named 'Enteron' – a Greek word meaning a pipeline system transmitting nourishment. Boje et al.'s account draws attention to how a counter narrative emerged, in which this company name was linked to intestines (Boje et al., 2004 refer to various US news articles on this issue, also see Swartz and Watkins, 2003), and from this 'ante-narrative' the company decided to change its name to Enron (Boje et al., 2004). Applying a dialogic lens, we see the emergence of an inter-animated narrative around ugliness and beauty, specifically the decision to 'look good' (the affirmation) and avoid and suppress the disgusting. This is also a direct playing out of Kristeva's (1982) concept of 'abjection', in which that which is repulsive or capable of causing horror, must be repelled and kept out in order to protect and purify what is within. Abjection originated within the discipline of psychology, but as others (e.g. Arya, 2014) have noted, it functions as a cultural code, reinforcing cultural beliefs about what is valuable, and what must be expelled. Bodily excretions and related body parts – such as intestines – are cited by Kristeva as manifestations of the abject (Kristeva, 1982). This exclusion of 'ugly' and 'unclean' imagery (utterances) from Enron's corporate sphere recalls Pelzer's (2002) argument that the beautiful aims at the exclusion and non-existence of the ugly. However, as Kristeva (1982) points out, that which has been abjected is always threatening to return: it cannot be excluded because identities and understandings of the self are relationally dependent on it and emerge in part through its continued existence. Therefore, our aesthetic reading of Boje et al.'s (2004) interpretive account sees Enron's name emerging from an ongoing dialogue in which 'ugly' dialogics or contributions to dialogue were forcibly suppressed.

This is particularly significant when we consider accounts of how Enron's 'no bad news' rule precluded any fora where employees could communicate their concerns about company practice (Cruver, 2003: 176, in Tourish and Vatcha, 2005). Here we see how the aesthetic craving that Kersten (2008) has highlighted is so strong and the desire so great to

purify the organization of potentially ‘disgusting’ associations that any opportunities for debate have been removed. Reading this through an aesthetic craving lens, we could suggest that ‘bad news’ is understood as making the organization appear ugly, and therefore must be prevented or smothered. It makes visible both organisational attempts to create a monological narrative and the Enron’s team unsuccessfulness in banishing ugliness. Suppressing ‘ugly talk’ in Enron was entangled in, and helped to enable, what writers have suggested is ‘ugly’ behaviour: it resulted in (and was perhaps designed to ensure) a failure to raise, critique or address unethical practice. In the interplay of dialogics, this inter-animated narrative demonstrates how a series of unifying (centripetal) tendencies works to build the illusion that ‘morality’ is associated with ‘beauty’. However, the centrifugal forces (where beauty and morality diverge) simultaneously work to undo this illusion. The stories and interpretations we have analysed suggest that Enron’s endeavours to enact beauty have (un)ethical consequences – enabling continued bad practice that eventually led to the organization’s downfall. We add that by suppressing the ugly, narratives within Enron itself were attempting to cause a specific interplay between ‘looking good’ and ‘acting ethically’ by removing any potential for ugliness. In turn, focusing on the organization’s reputation and appearance led in these organisational narratives to a fetish for ‘looking good’, an aspect of the case study we explore further below.

### *A Fetish for Looking Good*

Boje et al. (2004) draw attention to Enron gala events that ‘...were suitably imperial demonstrations of power, with Tiffany glassware as door prizes and waiters standing by at all times with flutes of champagne’ (Peraino et al., 2002: 27). In addition there is reference to keeping ‘...Dom Pérignon and caviar in the office refrigerator for afternoon toasts’ (McLean and Elkind, 2003: 17). A further example is the ‘Car Day’ highlighted by Broughton (2002)

(in Sims and Brinkman, 2003), on which lavish sports cars were provided for the most successful employees. In one additional instance, the \$7.1 million penthouse of Kenneth Lay (the Enron CEO and Chairman) was transformed into a Venetian palace (Swartz and Watkins, 2003, cited in Tourish and Vatcha, 2005). Boje and colleagues also refer to how ‘outrageous stage settings (executive mansions and opulent headquarters) distracted the Enron cast, including stockholders, from truth seeking’ (2004: 763). This is an important point which surfaces the multi-voiced interplay between dialogics of ugliness, beauty, good and bad. Activities like those that have been documented here constitute the centripetal forces within narratives to produce an organization’s beautiful ‘façade’, which is not an indication of a hidden reality but which implies a synecdochic function, coming to represent the ‘whole’ of Enron’s ethical practice by hiding or drowning out other dialogic utterances. The façade described by this literature hides more questionable activities going on in the organisation, and distracts those that might be searching for these acts by drawing silently on ancient western connections between goodness/morality and beauty (Synnott, 1990). As Boje et al (2004: 765) point out ‘The strategy of spectacle allowed Enron to make its façade believable...’ Sims and Brinkman also pick up on the aspect of façade from the literature on Enron and suggest that executives in the organisation became adept at preserving this smokescreen of success through a ‘culture of cleverness’ and leads to ‘...window-dressing ethics’ (2003: 254).

Here our dialogic re-reading enables us to see an intertwined aesthetic element which enables a deeper interpretation of these original analyses. Through a performance of spectacular aesthetics, an illusion of ‘ethical perfection’ is maintained, because the Cartesian binary (reinforced as we explain above, over hundreds of years of history) positions ‘beauty’ and ‘success’ in line with ‘good-ness’ in line with notions of aesthetic craving (Kersten, 2008). Furthermore, these narratives foreclose discussion about their dialogic juxtapositions,

rendering them fundamental opposites, so that by maintaining an appearance of beauty as the affirming dialogic, acts contradicting the beautiful norms are marginalised, rendered invisible or even apparently un-thinkable. The connections and interplay between the converging (centripetal) and diverging (centrifugal) tendencies of ‘good/bad’, beautiful/ugly’ seem to be purposefully hidden, with the aim of reinforcing and reifying dualistic binary assumptions that what looks good is good. Our Bakhtinian approach therefore enables us to see an intertwined aesthetic element which enables a further (deeper) interpretation of the original analyses. This leads us towards our third observation from the ethno-narrative analysis, and a category that seems to epitomise the façade discussed above - beautifying a toxic masculine.

### *Beautifying the Toxic Masculine*

Existing accounts of the Enron case document the emphasis on masculinity within the organization (Knights, 2015). The ‘no bad news’ agenda noted above recalls authoritarian approaches to corporate culture, informed by masculinist discourses that minimise collaboration and participation (Collinson and Hearn, 1994; McCabe and Knights, 2016). Elsewhere, the literature on abjection illustrates how this process recalls a never-finished banishing/returning dialogue between masculinity and femininity (Creed, 1993). That which is seen as horrible and that threatens to return is repellent and simultaneously ‘monstrously feminine’ (Creed, 1993). Our dialogic re-reading of interpretive material on Enron suggests therefore that femininity is threatening in its difference from the masculine norm and is therefore excluded from organisational narratives.

A further example emerges in the nicknames given to female Enron executives. Rebecca Mark – as ‘Mark the Shark’ (see Boje et al., 2004) and Sherron Watkins - as ‘The Buzzsaw’ (Swartz and Watkins, 2003: 9), both received nicknames which not only conceal their femininity, but attribute so-called ‘masculine’ characteristics to them, evoking savagery

and 'bite'. This speaks to the masculinisation of organisational leadership (and of female executives) (Kerfoot and Knights, 1998; Knights, 2015; McCabe and Knights, 2016) and, in turn, the masculinisation of leadership ethics (Liu, 2015b). McCabe and Knights (2016), for example, have illustrated recently the masculine nature of organisational leader communications through corporate videos. They conclude that these videos draw on comparisons to sport and the military, heightening masculine discourses typified with aggression, competition, conquest and control (Kerfoot and Knights, 1998). Similarly, Liu argues that (2015b) aesthetic (media) representations of banking sector organizations emphasise that what it means to be ethical in these organizations is connected to assumptions about masculinity. The example of female Enron executives being given mobster type names also supports the notion that women (as well as men) are often expected to perform masculinities, through an encouragement to be 'one of the boys' (e.g. Knights and Tullberg, 2012; McCabe and Knights, 2016). This is also wrapped up in a multi-layered ethical/toxic dialogue whereby women are encouraged to become 'one of the toxic boys' or a 'heroic villain' (Parker, 2008). The intertwining of these dialogues within the organisation accomplishes 'beautyism' (Synnott, 1990) or the 'beautification' of the toxic.

We see beautification and masculinization connected, in these accounts, to the expression of the toxic (e.g. Parker, 2008) in ways that heroicise the unethical desire to win at all costs, with the result that mobster type names are promoted as a valuable thing with which to be associated. Other examples pervade business narratives - 'Fred the Shred' for Fred Goodwin (CEO of the Royal Bank of Scotland at the time of the financial crisis around 2008), 'Neutron Jack' for Jack Welch and Anna 'Nuclear Wintour', as well as in Enron itself - Vic 'The Prick' (Cruver, 2003). As Tourish and Vatcha (2005) highlight, these types of names have overtones of (masculinist) aggression. We suggest that they also beautify what has been termed as toxic behaviour, leading to the idea that you can lie and you can cheat but

as long as you are making money, you are beautiful and hence ‘good’, and vice versa – as long as you are beautiful, you are making money, as in the case of Enron (Schwarz, 2002, cited in Sims and Brinkman, 2003).

The beautification of questionable organizational endeavours is recognised in accounts describing internal references to Enron as the ‘Crooked E’: invoking not just Enron’s logo (an ‘E’ at 45 degrees), but also to the culture of the organisation (Cruver, 2003). The ‘crookedness’ of Enron is lauded, perhaps heroicised - once again connecting to assumptions about heroic/villainous masculinity. Evoking further aesthetic references to the toxic masculine, Enron’s office complex was nicknamed the ‘Death Star’, the residence of the evil Darth Vader (an image which was often used to describe Jeff Skilling, CEO of Enron) and Emperor (employed by Enron employees in reference to Ken Lay) characters in the Star Wars movies (Cruver, 2003). References to the ‘Death Star’ and the ‘Crooked E’ point to how ‘crooked’ activities in Enron were attributed a seductive aesthetic quality. By associating ethics in dialogue with beauty, narratives about Enron (in practice and in the literature) perpetuate impassioned understandings of good and bad, in relation to masculinist notions of heroism and villainy. At the same time, Enron was beautified in the media as a ‘...media darling’ and as one of the best companies to work for...’ (Swartz and Watkins, 2003: 3). Here we see a particular kind of aesthetic craving (c.f. Kersten, 2008), which is a craving for a beautified toxic image produced through countless dialogics or ‘utterances’ which evoke beauty, toxicity, ethicality and crookedness.

This dialogic analysis advances research exploring how the overriding emphasis given to masculinity in organisational narratives that leads to the pursuit of goals over and above other relationships (e.g. Knights and Kerfoot, 2004; McCabe and Knights, 2016). We show how this is also wrapped up within aesthetic dialogues that hide more nuanced, dynamic accounts of leadership’s ethical dimension by fixing ‘good/beautiful’ against ‘bad/ugly’. In

highlighting these issues we believe we have responded, in a small way, to a call by McCabe and Knights (2016) for further reflection on the ethical dimension of masculine leadership narratives by showing how these are inter-animated with other dialogics such as good/bad and beautiful/ugly.

Through our analysis, these examples draw attention to the way apparent leadership oppositions relating to aesthetics (beautiful/ugly), ethics (good/bad), and masculinity (in relation to banished femininity) are matrixed, reinforced and undone through dialogue, constituted together and through one another. The implication, to recall Bakhtin (1981, 1984), is that no leadership dialectic can be understood by itself but only through the multi-voicing of tendencies through which it is constituted and uncovered through a dialogic interpretation.

## **Discussion**

This paper offers insights into how we might view, and subsequently research and write about ethical leadership in organisations through a dialogic lens. Our first contribution is to the ‘relational-contextual’ literature on leadership ethics and lies in our use of Bakhtin’s notion of dialogue to advance understandings of ethics in leadership narratives. This enables us to present an analysis of such interpretations as in connection with other organisational narratives. As a result, we contribute by illustrating how written accounts form part of the fabric of social reality through which understandings of leadership, including leadership ethics, emerge (Bakhtin 1984).

We thus extend this relational-contextual approach, which seeks to uncover the situated and relational enactment of ethics. We do this by illustrating that notions of ‘ethicality’ and ‘being good’ are inter-animated (Wegerif, 2008) through dialogics. This, in turn extends understandings of relationality in leadership (Cunliffe and Eriskin 2011) by advancing the



relational quality of leadership beyond the inter-personal. Whilst other authors have focused on leader-follower relationships, our relational endeavours have been at the level of enacted and written organizational narratives on ethics and aesthetics, and their inter-animation within dialogue.

A related contribution of this paper helps to unpick the preoccupation with ‘looking good’ in organisations (Rhodes et al., 2017) by interpreting the dialogical relationship between ethics and leadership through Kersten’s (2008) aesthetic craving. This contribution demonstrates that a search for beauty can underpin not just the performance of, but also the written accounts of leadership in organizations, linked to our desire for coherence and mastery in a context that is always becoming (Clegg Kornberger and Rhodes 2005), and always becoming unravelled (Hawkins 2015). By equating ‘beauty’ with ‘goodness’, an aesthetic craving can lead to misrepresentations of leadership practice as wholly and perfectly ‘ethical’ (or entirely the opposite) and serve to conceal or obviate the more complex and multi-faceted moralities within leadership. This further evidences that attending to the multi-voiced nature of organizational narratives, juxtaposed in unending dialogue, can offer new insights into how leadership ethics is situated, understood, and narratively performed within organizations and re-performed within written accounts.

Simultaneously, a dialogical approach may advance discussions around ‘dialectical reasoning’ (Spicer et al., 2016) in the analysis of organizations. A dialogical approach allows for the possibility that organizational tendencies are not necessarily constructed through opposition as binary notions suggest, nor in an interdependent way as dualistic notions would suggest (Putnam et al., 2016). We show that they may emerge alongside, promote, subvert, cut through and cross-reference one another in co-occurring tensions in dialogues. Furthermore, a dialogical account offers a way of appreciating the un-finalised nature of organizational reality (Ramsay, 2008). Returning to leadership ethics, this enables us to

conceptualise Ladkin's (2006) argument that what is 'right' and 'wrong' in organizations is not permanently fixed and that the multi-voiced dialogue pervasive in, around and of Enron, and perhaps other organizations, may produce a more muted, less definitive sense for leaders and writers about leadership of what is 'ethical'.

By attending to narratives and interpretations, scholars may generate more complex awareness of the entwined nature of organizational dialogues. We also encourage researchers to search for hidden and/or competing narratives produced or obscured by aesthetic cravings in their analysis of leadership in organisations. We invite scholars to consider attending to leadership's moral dimension by exploring how narratives are woven in dialogue together. This weave is evident in the literature on leadership ethics as well as in our evaluation of work addressing Enron's story. How might scholars from relational-contextual, empirical-descriptive and conceptual-normative narratives on leadership ethics work across these strands of literature to amplify and bring other, dialogically opposing narratives on leadership ethics to bear on their own work? How, for example, might embodiment and aesthetics contribute, in specific contexts, to the enactment of ethical leadership behaviours as they are understood within the empirical-descriptive literature? From the perspective of the conceptual-normative literature, what strategies could/should ethical leaders employ to address the aesthetic craving tendencies in their organizations? And how else might scholars avoid treating leadership ethics as a spectrum with poles that describe 'good' or 'bad' leadership? This is something in which we have only partially succeeded here, as we have not fully eliminated references to 'ethical' and 'unethical' practice in our own work.

The gendered angle that emerged through our analysis (in relation to the toxic masculine) also deserves more space than can be given in this article. We are curious about what additional understandings around gender and embodiment (Knights 2015, Ladkin 2008) are implicated in multi-voiced dialogue with leadership ethics in practice. Perhaps too, there is

more to discover about the role of toxic masculinity specifically in producing or confirming understandings of what counts as ‘good’ and ‘bad’ in organizations. We wonder: to what extent are aesthetic cravings implicated in the production of gendered phenomena elsewhere?

### **Limitations and conclusions**

Whilst our interpretation is bound to the case of Enron and cannot be generalised, the conceptual contributions set out above may be useful in investigating the subtleties of leadership ethics in other contexts and organisations. Having examined the narrated links between beauty/ugliness, masculinity/femininity, and good/evil, we have only ‘scratched the surface’ of oppositions that are represented by dialogics in social life (Bahktin, 1981; 1984). Here, we have tried to draw attention to the multiplicity of centrifugal and centripetal forces embedded in dialogic interplay within interpretive accounts of Enron. One challenge for us, and perhaps other researchers exploring through ‘dialogical reasoning’ is the need to bring together apparently disparate concepts which are each the focus of vast literature strands. For us, space has meant that we have inevitably had to ‘silence’ some narratives in the literature in order to bring out or give space to others. One of the challenges therefore of attempting to explore the multi-voiced nature of dialogics is that inevitably, some voices are excluded or marginalised. Like other scholars, we have bounded this article by drawing attention primarily to accounts of Enron as a case of failure and un-ethicality, in order to explore connections with beautyism, aesthetic craving, and disgust. This leaves us with a question; where are the ‘ethical’ voices in Enron? How have subsequent narratives about Enron’s toxicity silenced these? Future scholarship might explore this within Enron and other organizations. Our point is that capturing the fluidity of a Bakhtin-based perspective is challenging: there is always a risk of returning to a more linear Hegelian view, which Bakhtin

criticises for being too mechanistic in its thesis-antithesis-synthesis orientation (Baxter and Montgomery, 1996).

Questions remain as to how far dialectical – or dialogical – interpretations of ethics can enable binaries like ‘good/bad’ and ‘beautiful/ugly’ to be reconciled or broken down. Certainly, critiques of the ‘masculinities’ literature argue that avoiding the conflation of gender with biological sex by focusing on discursive constructions of masculine/feminine, do not do away with binaries even as they problematize accounts of gender as ‘natural’ (Fournier and Smith, 2006). It may be that a dialectical account is only ever partially successful in this regard, and indeed, our aim has not been to do away with or deny the existence of binaries in social orders, but to reveal the complexities of their emergence, amplification and the processes by which they might become taken for granted or alternatively ‘shattered’ (Knights 2015). By illustrating how these dialectics are polyvalent through a dialogical interpretation, in that they interpenetrate one another in ways that support the illusion of their ‘given-ness’, we can draw attention to the way they can be ‘un-done’. If binaries emerge through intra-action as Knights (2015) suggests, they are never fixed, but are produced relationally. Their relational co-production (for Bakhtin, through dialogue) is what fixes them as ‘entities’, so that ontologically, ‘beauty’ is not separate from, and can never exist without ‘ugliness’, ‘goodness’, ‘badness’ and vice versa. Each ‘side’ of these dialectics embodies the conditions of the other side’s possibility, and as we show, they are also embedded in the emergence of other binaries and dualisms (Hargrave and Van der Ven, 2016). It is not possible to perform ‘beauty’ in leadership (Adler, 2011; Ladkin, 2008), without also referring to ugliness by ensuring its suppression. Furthermore, drawing on Bakhtin’s dialogic perspective (1981) illustrates that aesthetic tendencies are entwined in the constitution of other evolving binaries and dualisms. So it is perhaps not possible to perform ‘beauty’ in leadership without evoking assumptions about ‘goodness’ or even ‘masculinity’. This accounts for the construction of a

wall of silence through the enforcement of Enron's 'no bad news' rules, which seeks to prevent the return of the horrible. We show how, in interpretive accounts of Enron's practices, views on unethical leadership are masked through the narrated maintenance of an illusion of 'beauty,' to serve the aesthetic craving (Kersten, 2008).

The writings on the Enron case therefore exhibit the dangers of simplistic, reified binary views of ethicality whilst also showing how these views are entwined with the need to 'look good'. What emerges in our account is a complex matrix of intra-actions, evoking and unravelling relationally generated, but seemingly separate notions of good, bad, ugly, beautiful, masculine and feminine. Understanding leadership as a 'nexus of dialectical relationships' (Tourish, 2013) requires us to pay further attention to how these dialectics are ordered together in different contexts. We also call for further research to explore the apparent asymmetry of dialogue, which is present in our own case study, but which we have not had space to explore in depth here. We therefore invite scholars to pay further attention to this in future works to explore where and how some voices become louder, more coherent and more long-lasting than others. This will offer further nuances regarding how they co-produce, unravel, silence and transform one another in practice.

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