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## **Philosophy of Leadership**

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# Philosophy of Leadership

Case, French and Simpson

## Introduction: Parameters and Problematics

In a significant sense there is no philosophy of leadership. Such a statement may seem strange as the opening gambit of a chapter that is ostensibly concerned with ‘philosophy of leadership’ but the provocation is not without purpose. Indeed, the assertion may be defended on a number of counts and from a variety of perspectives. In the first place, it would be foolish to claim there to be but *one*, singular, philosophy of leadership. Common sense dictates that there are, at the very least, multiple *philosophies* of leadership populating, and coexisting in, the contemporary organizational world. In a post-modern or post-industrial age characterized by fragmentation and individualism it is perhaps unsurprising that philosophies of leadership proliferate. At the limit, it could be argued that there are as many ‘philosophies’ as there are individuals who think of themselves, or are thought of by others, as ‘leaders’ or as occupying leadership roles. We live in an epoch where there are strong Romantic and heroic imperatives to ‘be one’s own person’, to ‘make one’s mark in one’s job or career’ and thus to give expression to one’s individual ‘philosophy’. Much, of course, depends on the precise (or imprecise) semantic boundaries that one places around the terms ‘philosophy’ and ‘leadership’ and with that in mind we intend to give careful attention to possible meanings of these terms. Accordingly, a consideration of the semantic force that *philosophy* carries in *leadership* contexts will be central to our concerns in this chapter. In a related but slightly more normative vein, we shall also be asking what semantic force philosophy *should* carry in relationship to leadership practice.

We do not intend this chapter to be simply a dry chronicle or catalogue of leadership philosophies. For one thing, even were such an audacious project pursued, it would doubtless prove to be more than anyone could possibly accomplish in a lifetime and, for certain, could not be confined to an eight-thousand word chapter. More productive, we suggest, is the task of *doing* philosophy of leadership. But what exactly might that ‘doing’ entail? At least four strategies of enquiry suggest themselves: (1) to consider the explicit and implicit philosophies informing contemporary leadership studies; (2) to examine the semantics and meaning-in-use of the terms ‘lead’, ‘leader’, ‘leadership’ and their putative relationship to ‘philosophy’; (3) to consider the explicit and implicit philosophies of leadership that may be discovered through an examination of the history of ideas pertaining broadly to ‘leadership’; and, (4) to suggest ways in which ‘leadership philosophy’, in contrast to ‘philosophy of leadership’, might be developed. Each of these four strategies, moreover, reveals a set of problematics and enables the establishment of some general parameters for the philosophical study and practice of leadership.

## 1. Philosophy of Leadership in Leadership Studies

Leadership studies, as presently constituted, is a relatively new invention. While historians have, since the beginning of recorded history, been attracted to the study of

leaders and governance wherever they have been found in human communities and civilizations, as a distinct discipline leadership has been around for barely sixty years or so. It is associated intimately with the growth of the science of organizational behaviour – being something of an offshoot – which developed primarily in the United States from the middle of the twentieth century onward. As a subject discipline, it sought to provide answers to questions concerning how best to lead and govern in the context of mid-twentieth century US institutional and business organizational life. The fashion of the time was to look to science for direction and, accordingly, leadership studies positioned itself as a putative science of individual conduct informed predominantly by psychological and economic theory. Early studies were concerned with exploration of individual ontology whereby various personality traits and characteristics of effective leaders could be established and, most importantly, measured (e.g., Stogdill 1948, 1974). The dominant epistemology of the discipline was positivism and this is a philosophical inheritance that still holds great sway to this day.

Trait theory has largely given way to studies which seek to correlate attributes of the individual leader (qualities, styles or skills) with attributes of a social or organizational context (Tannenbaum & Schmidt 1958, Likert 1961, Fiedler 1967, Hersey & Blanchard 1988). The positivist emphasis, however, still persists and there is much concern within mainstream leadership studies to produce models that hold out the possibility of control and predictability or that represent generalizable principles and can be studied using replicable methods.

A philosophy of leadership applied reflexively to the discipline of leadership studies might seek to expose the epistemological, ontological, methodological and ethical assumptions embedded within the discipline. The project would be to understand the field as relatively positioned in time and space and thus to understand better the social and political processes that have shaped it and given rise to certain types of question that demand certain structures of explanation in response. It might also go further in terms of examining the construction of subjects – ‘leaders’, ‘followers’ - within leadership studies discourses and thereby expose, through a systematic archaeological examination of the literary record, the philosophies of leadership explicitly or implicitly purveyed within it. From a post-structural viewpoint, for example, such an analysis would be certain to reveal ruptures, occlusions and silences *produced* by the discourse.

Although, as we have suggested, positivism still dominates the language of leadership studies (particularly in the US), alternative epistemologies are beginning to emerge and receive greater attention. Post-structural approaches to the interpretation of history promote a questioning of the individualistic premises of mainstream accounts and also invite an exploration of the various lacunae created by heroic narratives. In the field of leadership studies, the work of Hosking (1988, 2001) and Gemmill and Oakley (1992) has been important in questioning these ‘mythical’ assumptions from a process theory perspective. The challenge has also been taken up by Martin Wood (Wood 2005, 2008) and Donna Ladkin (Wood & Ladkin 2008) who adopt a particularly radical line in their critique of leadership, arguing that our common sense conceptions of leader-follower relationships are fundamentally ‘misplaced’ and require over turning,

Within post-structural philosophy more generally, the role and force of individual *action* has been challenged by Foucault (1970, 1977) in his analysis of the modern subject. According to Foucault (1977), the subject should be understood not so much as a locus or wielder of powerful resources but as *an effect* of the sinuous and all pervasive presence of power within social institutions. From a deconstructive standpoint, moreover, mainstream accounts of leadership say as much about the historical genealogy that inform them as they do about an external historical reality. Such narratives leave out at least as much as they include. For example, mainstream positivist studies understand leadership exclusively from a western standpoint and, by definition, neglect alternative traditions and milieu. The historical and anthropological record increasingly draws attention to legacies and approaches to leading and governance that are rooted in non-western philosophies. Another important parameter for the study of leadership philosophy, therefore, relates to approaches, modes of understanding and enactment that find their origins in communities and societies that differ from those of the west. To redress the imbalance requires a concerted effort to embrace wider anthropological (Jones 2005, 2006), post-colonial (Banerjee 2004, Banerjee & Linstead 2001, 2004) and non-western studies of leadership phenomena (Chia 2003, Jullien 2004, Warner & Grint 2006).

Closer to home, as it were, is the relative occlusion within leadership discourses of others who do not meet the stereotype of the white, middle class, male. A more inclusive philosophy of leadership would attend to the marginalization that results from the gendering of discourse and seek to reintroduce the voices of those who are underrepresented in mainstream theories and practices of leadership. While there is a growing body of literature that attends to a leadership problematic with respect to gender (Blackmore 1999, Blackmore & Sachs 2007, Ford 2005, 2006, Ford & Harding 2007, Sinclair 2005, Swan 2006) and diversity more generally (Puwar, 2004), these domains of critical leadership philosophy remain ripe for further development.

## **2. A Language Philosophy of Leadership**

Another approach to the *doing* of philosophy of leadership would be to pay close attention to language use, ‘conscious of the words as elements of the problems’ (Williams, 1983, p. 16). In contrast to ‘*barber or barley or bean*’, *philosophy* and *leadership* are what Williams (1983) calls ‘words of a different kind’, embodying as they do ‘ideas and values’ (p. 17). Our intention in this regard is to consider the etymology and history of these two terms, thereby exposing some unexpected meanings and connotations that are, as it were, archaeologically embedded within the discourse. Adopting a broadly Wittgensteinian method of enquiry, we seek to analyse the contextual meaning-in-use of the terms (Wittgenstein, 1972 [1953]). Our purpose is to demonstrate the variety of meanings that accrue to these words in ordinary language use, as opposed to more technically defined applications of the words.

The phrase ‘philosophy of leadership’ brings together words separated by well over two millennia, *philosophia* first appearing around the fifth century B.C.E. (Hadot, 2002, p.15) and *leadership* in 1821 (*OED*). It is inevitable that over a span of so many years the meaning of ‘philosophy’ in the western tradition has ebbed and flowed with the changing tides of culture and belief so that despite an apparent continuity of

meaning the term has, in fact, expressed radically different meanings at different times. The ‘problem’ with leadership, by contrast, may be that it emerged at a particular moment in the history of the West and that, as a result, its meaning has in some ways become fixed. The enormous energy that has gone into exploring what else leadership might mean may, paradoxically, have emptied it of meaning.

The word leadership is notably lacking from Williams’ *Keywords*, even from the revised and updated, 1983 edition. More surprisingly, it does not appear either in the radically revised *New Keywords* (Bennett et al., 2005), despite what has amounted in that period to an obsession with leadership roles, whether in politics, business, sport, or entertainment – ‘celebrities’ as leaders. The growth of the literature on leadership in the academic world has been exponential (see Table 1): ‘The hunger and quest for leadership knowledge appears to be insatiable’ (Jackson and Parry, 2008, p. 9.). Equally striking, however, is the fact that whereas Williams saw fit to include an entry on philosophy in both editions of his work, it has simply been removed without comment from the 2005 *New Keywords*. It is as if neither leadership nor philosophy any longer plays a significant role in the *Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, the subtitle of both books.

Here we find that the classical meaning of philosophy has been diluted significantly, becoming little more than a synonym for ‘personal attitude’ or ‘preferred approach’. Williams ends his entry on philosophy (1983, pp. 235-6) by noting its increasing use ‘in managerial and bureaucratic talk’, where he observes that it can mean ‘general policy’ but that just as often it simply indicates ‘the internal assumptions or even the internal procedures of a business or institution’. He offers entertaining but telling examples: ‘the *philosophy of selling* through the *philosophy of motorways* to the *philosophy of supermarkets*’ (p.236, original emphases). Since Williams wrote this in 1983, meaning has continued to drain from the word, as reflected, for example, in statements by business leaders and politicians, who use the phrase ‘my philosophy of leadership’ as little more than a grandiose way of saying, ‘what I do’.

While philosophy has always been an ‘essentially contested concept’ (Gallie 1955/56), the schools representing the philosophical tradition have also always been linked by a ‘golden string’ (Blake 1979, p.345 - *Jerusalem*, Plate 77). Far from merely describing ‘what I do’, Hadot suggests that ‘what the philosopher profoundly wants, what interests him [*sic*] in the strongest sense of the term [*is*] the answer to the question “How should I live?”’ (2002, p. 273). The philosopher’s underlying intention was ‘not to develop a discourse which had its end in itself but *to act upon souls*’ (p. 274, emphasis added).

What has been lost, therefore – and it is this which is of fundamental importance to the philosophy of leadership – is the fact that traditionally philosophy was not just a discourse, not just an intellectual exercise of words, concepts and definitions, but *a way of life* (Hadot, 1995.) In this sense, while currently there may be no *philosophy* of leadership in this sense beyond largely empty posturing, Hadot’s notion opens up its potentially fundamental significance, by returning us to the essentially ethical roots of *both philosophy and leadership*.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

A key dimension of the ‘problem’ of leadership may lie in what one might call the ‘slippage’ from verb to concrete role to abstract noun. Where Latin, for example, had both the verb and the role – *duco* and *dux* – it did not develop the abstract notion of leader-*ship*, captured in the English suffix. In English, the verb came first by many centuries. The original, Old English verb *lædan* is an ancient word, pre-dating written English. Its origins have been traced to an Indo-European (Sanskrit) root, meaning to go, go away or die. *Lædan*, meaning ‘to cause [someone] to go with oneself’ (*OED*), describes the way in which we human beings will show one another the way – and allow ourselves to be shown or guided.

After several centuries in which ‘lead’ was used as a verb, the *noun* ‘leader’ appeared in written English for the first time around 1300. This is not to suggest that the notion of a leader – that is, a person who leads – had not existed. The word does represent a significant change, however, from leadership as a (gendered) attribute of a role – such as king, queen, noble, bishop, abbot, abbess, elder, father (in family or church), alderman, mayor, teacher, general, captain, and so on – to a separate role defined simply by the activity of leading.

Four centuries later, however, another, most significant shift occurred, first recorded in 1821: from the word ‘leader’ a second noun, ‘leader-*ship*’, was created. In purely linguistic terms, the shift from ‘lead’ to ‘leadership’ appears unremarkable, a simple sequential development, similar to work → workman → workmanship. However, it may be the historical context which adds real significance to this shift. Although space does not allow for a detailed analysis, it is clear that certain conditions at the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the word first appears, may have contributed to the impact it has had on our thinking. The British Empire was approaching its zenith, slavery had not yet been abolished, the industrial revolution was in full swing, Dickens was about to publish the first of his ‘reforming novels’, *Oliver Twist* (1837). In other words, the traditional structures of society and leading roles, locally, nationally and internationally, were in disarray.

Specifically in relation to leadership, the impact of the notion of the hero is of significance. It had undergone a major transformation in the Romantic period in art and literature through the establishment of the notion of the artist as hero. For example, the concept of ‘creator’, which had only ever been attributed to God, was now used of the – God-like – artist. The notion was then significantly expanded in 1840 - only nineteen years after the first recorded use of the word leadership – when Thomas Carlyle gave his famous lectures *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, in which he gave the notion of the ‘Great Man’ its first, fully worked expression (Carlyle 1904). The very first paragraph of Carlyle’s first lecture sets out an image which, one might say, replaced any *philosophy* of leadership with a simple, all-encompassing *template*:

For, as I take it, Universal History, the history of what man [*sic*] has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here. They were the leaders of men, these great ones; the modellers, patterns, and in a wide sense creators, of whatsoever the general mass of men contrived to do or to attain; all things that we see standing accomplished in the world are properly the outer material result, the practical realisation and embodiment, of Thoughts that dwelt in the Great Men sent into

the world: the soul of the whole world's history, it may justly be considered, were the history of these (1904, p.1).

From the reception given to the lectures by the large and distinguished audience, it is clear that Carlyle was articulating ideas whose time had come: 'bishops and all kinds of people had appeared; they heard something new and seemed greatly astonished and greatly pleased. They laughed and applauded' (Carlyle in Cassirer, 1946, p.189.) In relation to leadership, the key element of his thinking was the direct and explicit description of these 'great ones' – 'the modellers, patterns ... creators, ... the soul of the whole world's history' – precisely as '*leaders*'. No wonder Cassirer, writing in the aftermath of the Second World War, talks of Carlyle's ideas as 'a dangerous explosive' and 'the beginning of a new revolution' (1946, pp. 189-190).

The continuing power of the imagery generated by Carlyle's lecture means that it is now nigh on impossible for us to see present or past except through the lens of Carlyle's heroic, male, great 'leaders'. As a result, the notion of the 'leader', as a separate figure, and of 'leadership' as the characteristic of this figure, have become so fixed in our minds that it is almost impossible to read history or the present without seeing leaders and leadership everywhere. That said, as we have noted above in section 2, certain post-structural, process theory and feminist writers are alert to the problem of 'common sense' understandings with respect to the words leader and leadership, being at pains to problematise, deconstruct and generally denaturalise their usage. This is not merely a semantic exercise since, from a Wittgensteinian viewpoint, language is constitutive of forms or life and, arguably, the wider social order. By interrogating meaning-in-practice, emerging trends in leadership studies have been concerned to shift the discourse away from one dominated exclusively by the 'masculine hero' toward more relational, distributed, and gender-aware understandings. As we have tried to indicate in outline here, an understanding of the etymology and semantics of leadership-related concepts assists greatly in surfacing the problematic inheritance we have with regard to thinking about, studying and enacting leadership.

### **3. Philosophies of Leadership Past and Present**

According to Collingwood (1994) any history of the past is a history of the present. Applied to the domain of leadership studies, this implies that our understanding of leadership in the past will inevitably be mediated by the present supporting conditions and purposes which our account is intended to address. In other words, the way we understand, for example, the writings of Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli or Montaigne that have a bearing on what we, in the contemporary west, currently designate as leadership must inescapably be coloured by our present time- and culture-specific use of that term. As Jepson (2009) has shown in her linguistic study of differences in meaning between leadership in the UK and Germany, language plays a crucial constitutive role in the creation of leadership phenomena. If there are marked differences to be found in the meaning of leadership between the comparatively closely related languages of English and German, how much more so must this be true of the meanings attributed to authors working in languages that are non Indo-European in origin, geographically remote, or separated from the present time by hundreds, if not thousands, or years. For most the ideas of 'great thinkers' or 'great

leaders' are accessible only through acts of translation, which are historically and socio-politically situated. Nonetheless, in our efforts to understand current leadership and governance dilemmas we naturally turn to the past in a search for insight however faulty and inadequate the equipment we deploy to this end. It is not that we necessarily *learn* from the past but, rather, that we *rediscover* questions, problems and resolutions in the present that seem to have resonance with our contemporary reconstruction of the past.

Accordingly, one dimension of doing philosophy of leadership entails exploring and cataloguing a history of leadership ideas as understood from the present and from an inescapably ethnocentric standpoint. Some authors have attempted to interrogate history in this way with a greater or lesser degree of self-knowingness or reflexivity (compare, for example, Adair (1989) and Grint (2000) in this regard). While we cannot possibly offer a comprehensive account of leadership philosophy chronicled in historical writing we can, at least, suggest some parameters for this kind of project. There exists a more or less mainstream study of leadership history which draws out philosophies from the past, most often in the form of examining and foregrounding the part played by heroic figures (usually men) at key historical moments; the actions of those who are considered to have embodied admirable leadership traits and talents. We have in mind studies of Xenophon, Achilles, King David (from pre-history), or, slightly closer to our own time, those of Wilberforce, Napoleon, Nelson, Scott, Shackleton, Churchill, Hitler, Stalin, Martin Luther King and the like. Often, though not always, these leadership histories are premised on a philosophy of heroic individualism which assumes high degrees of agency and self-determination, such that the actions of the subject can be construed to have decisive effects on the direction of wider socio-political affairs.

For the purposes of the argument pursued here we shall trace a particular line through history that focuses, not so much on the isolated instances of heroic leadership, as on the rise of instrumentality in relation to leadership philosophy. This is important since many recent developments in the field are, at root, a response to such instrumentality. Certain forms of argument, for example, promulgate a view of leadership philosophy that is essentially amoral and concerned only to highlight 'responsibilities' that accompany the pursuit of profit or material gain. In line with the (in)famous statement of Milton Friedman (1970) that 'the only social responsibility of business is to make a profit' it is not uncommon to find approaches to leadership that espouse a limited range of duties which serve this end exclusively. This is most clearly seen in the notion of *homo economicus* or 'economic man', which is characterised by rationality, self-interest, and the pursuit of wealth. According to Huehn (2008) poor organizational leadership and governance frequently has its roots in the 'unenlightened economism' of Hobbes' seventeenth century political philosophy. From this perspective the social process of leadership is simplified to become little more than following a 'quasimathematical model' without the need to make 'difficult value-judgements' (2008, p.831). Such a philosophy of leadership engenders a practice that gives primacy to a narrow view of reason based upon 'hard facts' and the utilisation of quantitative techniques to provide measurements appropriate to support decision making.

Emerging in the same period as economism, utilitarian or consequentialist philosophy shares some similar characteristics. Approaches rooted in this tradition not only



espouse the importance of ‘scientific’ and ‘value free’ attitudes to decision making, they also reduce ethics to a matter of quantitative calculation. Perhaps even more significant is the influence of utilitarianism in equating leadership with that influence which makes a *useful* contribution through coordinating the pursuit and attainment of a valued goal or vision. This has become the *sine qua non* of ‘good’ leadership in the modern era. As a consequence ‘progress’ and ‘growth’ are required of leaders even where there is clear evidence of the need for other strategies (consider, for example, the expectations of political and business leaders to continue strategies detrimental to the environment). When combined with economism leaders will operate under a broad guiding principle – the maximization of shareholder value – which from within the utilitarian matrix of reasoning remains unchallenged and unchallengeable. It is a simple case of the ends justifying the means or, in Weberian terms, the dominance of *Zweckrationalität*, formal rationality, over *Wertrationalität*, ‘substantive’ or subjective value rationality (Weber 1970 [1948]).

Whilst it can be argued that utilitarian attitudes are pervasive, or at least commonly observable, in leadership practice they do not appear to have developed to the level of what might be called a philosophy of leadership. If they did then there would be greater attention to problematising some of the taken-for-granted aspects of utilitarian economics. For example, it is not possible to focus only upon ‘hard facts’ in pursuit of a scientific, value free, evaluation: a value judgement is being made in giving primacy only to things that are amenable to measurement. To suggest that it is better for a leader to be freed from ‘difficult value judgements’ is a simplification that just does not bear close intellectual scrutiny.

An interesting contrast is with Enlightenment philosophy, which also came to prominence during the eighteenth century but places greater emphasis upon social responsibility, including the responsibility of each and every individual to think for himself or herself and to make appropriate moral judgements. As a precursor to utilitarian philosophy, the Age of Enlightenment prioritised reason but specifically as a source of authority and self-determination set against the authority of the state or religion. In itself this is an interesting aspect of a philosophy of leadership that we will not pursue in detail here. It is, however, important to mention by way of historical connection the emergence during this epoch of a decentralised constitution in the newly formed United States of America. This was a philosophy that changed the understanding of political leadership in a fundamental manner and resulted in new forms of practice and governance.

Of greater significance for our purposes is the emphasis upon ‘reason’ as the guiding authority within Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment philosophical movements. As the basis for a philosophy of leadership we do not challenge this idea, *per se*, but do raise some questions about the definition of reason that is being employed. For instance, Pieper (1999 [1952]) draws our attention to a shift that occurred in the common understanding of reason following the Middle Ages and, consequently, in the development of Enlightenment science and utilitarian philosophy. He argues that,

The Middle Ages drew a distinction between the understanding as *ratio* and the understanding as *intellectus*. *Ratio* is the power of discursive, logical thought, of searching and of examination, of abstraction, of definition and drawing conclusions. *Intellectus*, on the other hand, is the name for the

understanding in so far as it is the capacity of *simplex intuitus*, of that simple vision to which truth offers itself like a landscape to the eye. The faculty of mind, man's knowledge, is both these things in one, according to antiquity and the Middle Ages, simultaneously *ratio* and *intellectus*; and the process of knowing is the action of the two together. The mode of discursive thought is accompanied and impregnated by an effortless awareness, the contemplative vision of the *intellectus*, which is not active but passive, or rather receptive, the activity of the soul in which it conceives that which it sees. (1999 [1952], p.9).

Brient (2001) contends that this transition in the definition of reason is directly paralleled by an increased emphasis upon a work ethic. In other words, 'what one does', and the consequences of this, serves to define our sense of identity. As she argues,

In this transition human self-understanding gradually shifted from that of the spectators and admirers of divine creation to that of (as Descartes put it) 'lords and masters of nature'. If knowledge of the world is gained passively by contemplation in the Middle Ages – spelled out in terms of either divine illumination or abstraction from sense perception – it is won through active reconstruction in the modern age. (2001, p.20).

In further illustration, Brient suggests that following the Middle Ages, *theoria*<sup>1</sup> changed in meaning from the contemplation of truth, which necessarily carried divine connotations, to become the modern scientific notion of hypothesis; something to be tested through empirical experimentation and applied for the betterment of humankind. This process of self-assertion, as humans are no longer at the mercy of the gods – or of any other authority figures - led to the emergence of an Enlightenment culture dominated by the work ethic and the pre-eminence of the utility of measurable activity.

Our purpose in offering a very brief genealogy of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment emphasis on *reason* is twofold: (1) it enables us to understand the instrumental disposition of mainstream approaches to studying leadership that developed from the mid-twentieth century (discussed briefly in section 1, above); and, (2) we develop an argument below for *doing* leadership philosophy in a way that contrasts quite markedly with approaches that give exclusive emphasis to instrumental reason. In considering the development of what we would contend is a genuine *philosophy* of leadership based upon virtue ethics we recognise the requirement to return to contemplative and mystical as well as rational dimensions of knowing (Case & Gosling 2007).

#### **4. Leadership Philosophy as a Way of Life**

In making this transition from *discourse* to *practice* and *being* we must, by necessity, engage with a leadership ethics. For us, ethics is coextensive with human organization

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<sup>1</sup> *Theoria* is one of Aristotle's four intellectual virtues, the others being *episteme* (intellectual knowledge), *techné* (embodied knowledge) and *phronesis* (circumspection and practical wisdom). See Aristotle (1953).

to such an extent that it becomes difficult to disentangle or parcel out questions of ontology, epistemology and aesthetics from those of ethics in the manner that has become characteristic of post-Medieval philosophy. To inform our argument, therefore, we have sought inspiration in classical philosophy and associated schemes of ‘virtue ethics’; systems of praxis that differ markedly from the utilitarianism that so dominates the contemporary world of business and management.

### *Virtue Ethics*

Ethics is concerned not only with the conduct of a person but whether that conduct may be deemed ‘good’ or ‘bad’. Virtue ethics, which in the Western tradition may be traced back to roots in philosophies of Ancient Greece (particularly the Hellenistic Scholae), places an emphasis upon *being* rather than *doing* in terms of the consequences or utility of actions (Hadot 2002). Critical to our argument here is working with the notion of ‘the good’ and the differences in meaning of this central philosophical notion in different eras and philosophies. The higher level term within Greek philosophy is ‘truth’, which is even more unknowable than the higher level ‘good’ that guides conduct through a focus on virtue ethics. Pieper (2007 [1966]), for example, claims that, ‘Being precedes Truth, and that Truth precedes the Good’ (p.4). Virtue ethics is concerned with ‘right action’, that is, action in pursuit of the good. As Nikolaus has pointed out:

The good (Gk. *agathon*, Lat. *bonum*) is that which contributes to the perfection of something or constitutes it. Distinction is made between the absolute good and the relative good. The former involves the actualizing of every innate possibility of perfection (Gk. *entelecheia*, Lat. *bonum honestum*). The latter, along the lines of utility (*bonum utile*) or satisfaction (*bonum delicabile*), contributes to the fulfilment of another and produces a hierarchy of goods, at the head of which is the supreme good (*summum bonum*). (2001, p.445).

Virtue ethics thus emphasises the pursuit of the absolute good and a leadership philosophy based upon this principle will be concerned with the actualizing of perfection. Of course, in practice this proves to be an impossible ideal with which to conform. Our contention, however, is that this does not make it meaningless. We adopt this position on the basis that the contested nature of ‘the good’ can be argued to be a significant feature in the history of philosophical discourse. For example, Plato placed the highest possible value on ‘The Good’ (*Republic* 508e) but Hadot (2002) suggests that this definition of ‘The Good’ was not even agreed upon by Plato’s friends and supporters:

Speusippus, Xenocrates, Eudoxus, and Aristotle professed theories which were by no means in accord with those of Plato, especially not the subject of Ideas. They even disagreed about the definition of the good, since we know that Eudoxus thought the supreme good was pleasure. Such intense controversies among the members of the school left traces not only within Plato’s dialogues and in Aristotle, but throughout Hellenistic philosophy, if not throughout the entire history of philosophy (p.64).

Aristotle gives similar prominence to the notion of ‘the Good’, defining it as that potentiality which everything strives to become (Aristotle 1953). Epicurus linked the good to desire and hedonism (Hadot 2002) while, within the early Christian tradition, Augustine (2003, Book 8) and Aquinas (2007, Question 6, Article 2) equated the supreme Good with God, who was the essence of Good with which all creation could, in principle, commune. Kant (1993 [1785]) was later to move away from a material definition of ‘good’ but retained in his central notion of the ‘categorical imperative’ a focus on good will, expressed in the recognition of moral duty. Commenting on the idea of the good, G.E. Moore (1903) suggested that: “‘good’ is a simple notion, just as ‘yellow’ is a simple notion; that, just as you cannot, by any manner of means, explain to any one who does not already know it, what yellow is, so you cannot explain what good is’ (§7). He argued for the philosophical value of the notion of ‘good’ in ethics in terms of a more experiential engagement with it. Whilst Ayer was originally influenced by Moore’s arguments he later (2001 [1936]), in a similar manner to Russell (see Pidgen, 1999), suggested that the unverifiability of the concept renders it meaningless.

An engagement with the contested nature of ‘the good’ is an excellent starting point for a philosophical engagement with the equally contested notion of ‘leadership’. To encourage dialogue and debate in relation to the nature of leadership, and particularly whether it is ‘good’ or ‘bad’, is to practice leadership philosophy. In this way leaders, and those who wish to study leadership, will inevitably take their practice and study to a deeper level.

Plato believed that the best ‘leaders’ (rulers<sup>2</sup>) were those who were philosopher-kings who, by definition, understood the eternal Good. However, for Plato the philosopher-kings understood the eternal Good, which required a strong mystical dimension to their practice, which required a combination of intellectual and moral discipline. Such an engagement with the Good involved the more mystical, contemplative knowledge, understanding and wisdom arising from, and being embodied in, *lived experience* (*intellectus*) rather than purely cognitive understanding (*ratio* as ‘pure’ rationality and reason). This balance between *intellectus* and *ratio* can be seen in the ancient philosophy but only with greater difficulty in the majority of philosophy after the Middle Ages. It is in a similar manner that we saw above the shift in understanding of the notion of ‘the good’ from Kant onwards.

Essential to our approach to *leadership philosophy as a way of life* is an appreciation of the potential value of *intellectus* as well as *ratio*, of the contemplative and mystical as well as the active and practical. But what of the role of ‘virtue’ in this nexus? According to Pieper:

Virtue is a “perfected ability” of man [*sic*] as a spiritual person; and justice, fortitude, and temperance, as abilities of the whole man [*sic*], achieve their

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<sup>2</sup> Our thanks to Kurt Lampe of Bristol University for reinforcing our suspicion that the Greek words *arche* and *hegemonia* leave out a great deal of what the modern term ‘leadership’ connotes, based as they are on the presumption of an absolute criterion of excellence in every arena. The position of rulers in classical Greek society was concerned not so much with ‘giving direction where otherwise direction [was] lacking’ [email correspondence, 19.02.09] than to ‘orientate others in the direction [they] had discovered, not created’.

“perfection” only when they are founded upon prudence, that is to say upon the perfected ability to make right decisions (2007 [1966], p.6).

A leadership philosophy that draws upon virtue ethics will consider the nature of ‘perfect’ and ‘imperfect’ leadership. Whilst problematic, these notions have a certain resonance with the everyday experience of leaders. We often know experientially when leadership is imperfect – when ‘wrong decisions’ have been made, when there has been a lack of justice, courage or balance (Price 2005, Frost & Robinson 1999, Maccoby 2004, Tourish & Pinnington 2002). It is, of course, harder to conceive of or recollect examples of ‘perfect’ leadership, but it is clear that the underlying philosophical questions problematise leadership in a manner that has value and meaning. A consideration of virtue at the very least *sensitises* us to the idea of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ leadership in ways that differ qualitatively from a utilitarian analysis and discourse.

Debate in the field of leadership studies has, to an extent, already alighted upon the potential inherent in a closer consideration and re-examination of virtue. Keith Grint, for example, has considered how the first three elements of Aristotle’s fourfold typology of *intellectual virtue* might be mobilized to improve our understanding of leadership practice (Grint 2007). He takes the divisions of *technē* (know how), *episteme* (intellectual knowledge) and *phronesis* (practical wisdom) and demonstrates how these offer mutually complimentary dimensions of assessing problems and dilemmas faced by leaders. While this is a commendable contribution in many respects, it nonetheless overlooks certain important aspects of Aristotle’s philosophy. As Morrell (2007) has pointed out, for instance, Grint takes no account of the *aesthetic* dimension of Aristotle’s thinking but, perhaps more importantly, the fourth and final element of the typology set out in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, namely, *theoria* (contemplation), gets no mention at all (Aristotle 1953).

*Phronesis* requires, according to Aristotle, the power of deliberation or circumspection, beyond scientific deduction, because it has to accommodate and enable responses to events and contingencies whose causal complexity is far too extensive to attenuate or contain. The primary function of *phronesis* is to discern ‘what matters’ in a given situation, something which can only be accomplished through the collective *deliberation* of those whose shared concern is the welfare of the polity. Moving beyond the secular confines of the first three intellectual virtues, however, Aristotle posits *theoria* as the fourth, describing it as, ‘the only [intellectual virtue] that is praised on its own account, because nothing comes of it beyond the act of contemplation... yet such a life will be too high for *human* attainment. It will not be lived by us in our merely human capacity, but in virtue of something divine within us...’ (1953, 304-305, original emphasis). The significance of *theoria* in Aristotle’s typology is readily overlooked or deliberately ignored in the contemporary world because it is taken to be too numinous and ‘unreasonable’ to have any implications for secular leadership practice (e.g. Grint 2007; Stamp et al. 2007). However, this may be too hasty a response, particularly in the light of the growing interest in, or rediscovery of, *sacred* dimensions of workplace interaction (Case & Gosling 2007). The plethora of research in the field of leadership ‘spirituality’, although all too often lamentably

instrumental and crudely utilitarian in nature<sup>3</sup>, in principle opens up a doorway to re-enchanted conceptualization of the continuity between the human and divine *in seemingly mundane contexts*. For us, any such reversal of the disenchanting proclivities of modern and, indeed, post-modern leadership strategies is a refreshing and welcome possibility.

While space requires us to elide much of the complexity of philosophical debate with respect to virtue ethics and the diversity of approaches to the subject, it is perhaps worth introducing one further schema that combines the sacred and seemingly profane into a highly pragmatic way of being-in-the-world. We refer to the classical philosophy of Stoicism, which, of all the doctrines originating from Hellenistic Greece, perhaps offers a most pragmatic set of lessons for that phenomenon we term ‘leadership’ and whose tenets seem to traverse the translational and cultural boundaries of time and space.

### *Stoic Virtues*

The Stoic school, founded by Zeno toward the end of the fourth century B.C., was given further impetus under the influence of Chrysippus in the third century and, following a sectarian split, continued to flourish during the Roman period until the second century A.D. (Hadot 2002, 126-39). Important protagonists and practitioners of Stoicism during the Roman era were Seneca, Musonius, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius (Hadot 2004) and, as little remains of the founding texts of Zeno and Chrysippus, it is in these Greco-Roman writings that the principles of Stoical philosophy have been preserved. In this philosophy one discovers a practical and gentle approach to the art of living which, we suggest, has much to offer those occupying contemporary leadership roles.

Hadot (1995) points out that it is crucial to understand the difference between Stoical conceptions of *philosophical discourse* and *philosophy as a way of life* in order to understand this tradition. To the extent that love of wisdom has to be taught by those that live philosophically to those who aspire to do so, the Stoics developed abstract *theories* of knowledge with respect to the three core virtues of physics, logic and ethics. The true *purpose* of such discourse, however, was to enable aspirants to enter into a philosophical life within which all the virtues combined to produce a way of *being in the world*. That way of being, moreover, was governed by an overarching principle that required philosophers to pursue the good, which, in turn, entailed directing their actions toward the benefit of others. The pursuit of the good and avoidance of evil instantiated in Stoical ethics followed inexorably and necessarily from the need to act in accordance with universal Reason. Stoics strove to live in harmony with Nature; a concept that represented the myriad complex processes of the cosmos including, of course, human consciousness, thought and action. Stoicism was predicated on an axiomatic truth of the cosmic interconnection between human and non-human realms such that the world was understood to be ‘one single living being which [was] likewise in tune with itself and self-coherent’ (Hadot 2002, 128-9). The spiritual practices which were central to living the Stoical life were all directed toward helping individuals realize this truth by way of abandoning the conceit of

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Duchon and Plowman (2005), Fairholm (1997, 1998, 2001), Fry (2003, 2004), Fry et al. (2005).

‘individuality’ and, through a form of personal surrender, bringing intentions, thoughts and actions into line with Nature.

Thus, for the Stoics, wisdom is to be realized by refraining from thinking, speaking or acting in ways that contradict Reality. Epictetus, for example, offers the following sagely advice: ‘Do not try to make things happen the way you want, but want what happens to happen the way it happens and you will be happy’ (cited in Hadot 2002, 133). The route to happiness, he insists, lies in not wanting things to be different than they actually are. The philosophical discourse and spiritual exercises of Stoicism are all directed at bringing about a transformation in consciousness that will lead to such wisdom. Far from being a manifesto for political quietism, fatalism or inaction, however, this understanding derives from a threefold set of principles associated with physics, ethics and logic.

With respect to physics, for example, it is necessary to understand the sphere of one’s own action and influence. There are many aspects of Nature over which mere human will has no power whatsoever. In the last analysis, we have no control over the metabolism of the bodies we conventionally consider to be ‘our own’. No individual can anticipate or control the precise circumstances of their own death (even, ultimately, that of the suicide), or will not to suffer from illness, loss of loved ones and so forth. Similarly, we neither have ultimate control of the thoughts, decisions and actions of others nor over the more macro supporting conditions of our lives, such as, the parents we are born to and the society that we grow up in and so forth. Everything from the weather to current geopolitics are totally out of our hands and, from a Stoical viewpoint, we are like so much flotsam and jetsam in the great ocean of life. For the Stoic, such exogenous conditions result from the workings of Fate. The wise way to respond to any causally conditioned circumstances over which we have no control, moreover, is to accept them with equanimity. The idea of *volitional response* implicit in this attitude brings us to the second Stoic virtue, namely, ethics.

Within Stoic philosophical discourse, the fact that Nature is in large measure determined by an unfathomably complex set of causal conditions does not mean that there is no possibility for free will and moral action. On the contrary, the cultivation of good intention and good action is central to Stoic philosophy as a way of life. Accordingly, the Stoics - Epictetus in particular - developed a detailed and elaborate theory of *duty*. Fate may well dictate the circumstances of our lives but, unlike the Skeptics who resigned themselves to worldly indifference, or the Epicureans who chose to withdraw from the world of suffering in order to find happiness, Stoics sought wisdom through engagement with the *polis*. Stoicism does not provide an excuse for ‘indifference’, in a pejorative sense, and a commensurate backing down from responsibility to oneself and others. The Stoic is quite likely to lead a family life, have children, work, pursue a career and engage fully in the political life of the city. But all this needs to be done *ethically*, that is, with a mind to the welfare of others; both those near to one and those within the wider community. Such attitudes and obligations are dictated by Nature and universal Reason themselves which have, in effect, endowed humans with moral choice and determined that it is *good* to care for oneself and others.

This brings us to a consideration of logic, the third and final Stoic virtue. As with physics and ethics, there is a philosophical discourse which supports the spiritual

exercises of logic in the form of training in uses of dialectic and syllogism, but it is the *practice* of logic that distinguishes Stoicism from other Hellenic schools of philosophy. Logic as spiritual exercise entails paying close attention (*prosokē*) to physical sense perception and mental representations in order to become skilful in judgement of, or assent to, the Real. Our senses and mental representations are real enough in themselves and are, in large measure, conditioned by physics or Fate. Responses to those perceptions, however, involve choices which involve skilful or unskilful judgements. Logic entails the development of awareness and reasoned response to the world which pre-empts or ‘defuses’ actions based on passionate responses.

Our tentative suggestion is that the Stoic schema provides an extremely helpful *philosophy*, in the classical sense, with which to approach the many practical demands faced by those occupying leadership roles. It contains advice on how to develop mental attitudes, such as fortitude and equanimity, which enable individuals to discriminate more clearly between what they can and cannot influence in the world. Moreover, its theory of duty offers an art of living whereby the person remains focussed on the pursuit of the virtuous in their daily interactions and dealings; an imperative which, we would argue, is often sorely lacking in the contemporary organizational world.

By way of conclusion, we consider some of the practical educational implications of taking virtue ethics seriously in a leadership development context and summarise the philosophical strategies introduced in this chapter.

## **Conclusion**

Many contemporary scholars of organization, management and leadership studies have openly lamented the limitations of the conventional business school curriculum on a variety of grounds. Some claim that management education and research fails to connect practically with its intended audiences (Pfeffer & Fong 2002, 2004) while others question its pedagogical or practical relevance (Bennis & O’Toole 2005, Drucker 2001, French & Gery 1996, Kelemen & Bansal 2002, Knights 2008, Mintzberg 2004). To these critical voices we would add that the entire field is dominated, in the main, by a proclivity for scientism and instrumental thinking that does not address the rounded cognitive and affective needs of organizational practitioners. This general criticism applies with as much force to the specialist field of leadership studies as it does to the general business school syllabus.

It is within this context that we suggest a *leadership philosophy*, based on virtue ethics, might have a great deal to offer. The enormous challenge presented by this prospect will be to integrate ‘leadership philosophy as a way of life’ within a business and management curriculum that is overwhelmingly characterized by instrumental forms of teaching and learning. There is an ever present risk that any attempt to introduce, say, virtue ethics or Stoic philosophy into a leadership development programme would be appropriated or co-opted and simply become another resource to be turned toward instrumental ends. One can all too easily imagine such unfortunate initiatives as a Stoic ‘competency framework’, a ‘seven steps to virtuous leadership’ model and the like. The implications of the argument we present regarding



leadership philosophy as a way of life would be considerably more far reaching than any form of superficial cognitive modelling, and would require development of an *educational* engagement which would be commensurate with, and adequate to, the pursuit of virtue in leadership and management roles. Clearly, such a radical agenda would not be to everyone's taste and would almost certainly meet with institutional resistance in the current HE climate.

What we propose, then, is not a general panacea for leadership development so much as one possible micronarrative (Lyotard 1984) strategy, historically rooted within a western tradition, that could assist in approaching the perennial questions that face leaders: 'how should I act?', 'am I acting efficaciously?', and so forth. We have argued that while attention to philosophical questions of ontology and epistemology taken in isolation may be important, the third classical domain of philosophy – namely, ethics – is by far the most central to leadership study and practice. There are no arrangements of the social which do not involve ethical relationships (whether judged 'good' or 'bad') of one sort or another. A close examination of Stoical philosophy and practical spiritual exercises reveals, furthermore, that the ontological and epistemological cannot be readily parcelled out from ethics. From a Stoical perspective, the privileging of ethics simultaneously brings ontology and epistemology to the fore.

This contribution to the *Sage Handbook of Leadership* has been concerned with identifying some of problematics and parameters that might inform the *doing* of leadership philosophy. Some of that 'doing' takes the form of traditional scholastic research and analysis. We sought, for example, in section 1 to outline extant work and a potential research programme that takes as its focus the history of ideas pertaining to leadership. Section 2 proposed another philosophical research strategy that would entail *deconstructing* the field of leadership studies by analysing the explicit and implicit philosophies that inform current theory and practice. Yet another fruitful approach, we suggested, would be to examine the semantics and meaning-in-use of the leadership discourse insofar as it variously engages with something called 'philosophy'. To this extent, section 3 (along with the previous two sections) was concerned with the analytical study of 'philosophy of leadership', demonstrating that we cannot properly speak of a 'philosophy' in singular terms but must admit of multiple and highly diverse 'philosophies'. In the final section we were concerned to propose a move from 'philosophy of leadership' to 'leadership philosophy'; a relationship between these two terms that places value on a more authentic (in classical terms) appreciation of 'philosophy' and which acknowledges the centrality of ethical questions within leadership roles and relationships. As we asserted at the outset, for the various reasons discussed in this chapter there may be no philosophy of leadership but this in no way discounts or detracts from the challenge of establishing such a philosophy or philosophies.

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TABLE 1

Table 1 – **Number of references to ‘leadership’ (by year of publication) appearing in leading texts**

Decade of publication	Yukl (2002)	Grint (2000)	Grint (2005)	Jackson & Parry (2008)
	<b>N u m b e r o f r e f e r e n c e s [%]</b>			
Pre-1960	4	3	2	1
1960s	7	3	1	3
1970s	16	8	7	6
1980s	33	17	9	12
1990s	39	69	31	35
2000+	1	0	50	44

Notes:

1. Despite the dates of publication, we have placed Yukl (2002) before Grint (2000), because this is the 5<sup>th</sup> edition of the Yukl volume and so, to some extent, represents an earlier set of references.
2. These figures do not reflect the fact that some of the works referenced, such as Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, were written many years before the date given in the reference section.
3. The bias in the table above is also reflected in the seven leadership journals listed as ‘worth monitoring’ by Jackson and Parry. Of these, two were established since 2000 and three in the 1990s.