**Getting rid of the L-word: Are our best aspirations for ‘leadership’ not leadership at all?**

Marian Iszatt-White, Lancaster University Management School, Lancaster, LA1 4YX.

[m.iszattwhite@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:m.iszattwhite@lancaster.ac.uk)

reviewer feedback:

Thank you for submitting this well-written paper to this stream, where we think it could contribute much. You open with a promise to naïvely dispose of leadership, but most of the short paper is taken up with a (very competent) review of the main themes of recent critical leadership studies. All that ground-clearing done, it is only the final sentences that you bring us back to the provocative question: within Gaia, what does leadership mean? Is hope for a leader, or the very idea of leadership, a conceptual and spiritual mis-fit in a cosmology characterised by the life-force of Gaia? I hope that in the full paper you will concentrate on this question, which is original and enticing. There is little need to elaborate further on alienating effects of enlightenment thinking, capitalism and so forth. The new territory is (as you say) finding ourselves within Gaia, and what role is there here for agency, morality and moral hazard; and whether stewardship can be positioned as the successor to leadership.

You might want to look at a couple of papers published in in (I think) 2020 by James Lovelock and Tim Lenton, and one by Lenton and Latour, examining these issues from an ‘earth stewardship’ perspective. Tim Lenton is a climate scientist most associated with the analysis of ‘tipping points’, was co-author on the 2018 ‘Hothouse Earth’ paper that advocated earth stewardship and has made an attempt to invite Lovelock back into the scientific fold. There is something here that echoes your opening section in which you suggest we ‘bring Gaia in’ – when more properly it’s the other way around … we recognise our in-Giai-ness.

We look forward to seeing how this develops and encourage boldness in your naivety!

Introduction

The sub-theme 37 call for papers invites ‘naïve incursions’ into one another’s fields in order to explore as broadly as possible leadership’s role in solving (or creating) a range of current environment-related crises (<https://www.egos.org/2022_Vienna/SUB-THEMES_Call_for_Short-Papers> - accessed 09/12/21). Taking this opportunity (almost) at face value, this paper takes a semi-naïve incursion into my own discipline of leadership by proposing that we abandon the L-word as an ‘empty signifier’ (Kelly, 2014) that is now too full, and considering a possible alternative signifier for our ‘leadership’ aspirations. This proposal comes as a reaction to the obsession of both academia and the media with leadership as a phenomenon, and our attribution (rightly or wrongly) of so many of our successes and failures to the influence of its perpetrators. This issue appears increasingly salient as the human race struggles – ineffectually, it seems – to address the consequences of 200 years of ‘progress’ kick-started by the Enlightenment. As Banerjee and Arjaliès (2021) note, it is questionable whether Enlightenment thinking – including leadership’s harnessing of the human-nature dualism to claim control over resources and production capabilities in the name of shareholders - can really be a sound basis for solutions to the very ecological problems to which it - and its step-child, science – have contributed. Taking the ethical aspects of leadership posited by some leadership theories as a point of departure, the paper considers notions of stewardship, associated with the conserving of assets and the inclusion of Gaia as a stakeholder in human activities, as a future home for our ‘leadership’ aspirations.

Ethics are simple, right?

With a few notable (and usually pathological) exceptions, we all think we know right from wrong and understand there to be clear distinctions between the two. There is a tendency to see the *understanding* of ethics in terms of absolutes, even if their *application* can be a more nuanced issue. So what do we actually mean when we talk about something being ethical? From the perspective of Western tradition, ethical theory has its roots in the Greek word ‘ethos’ – meaning customs, conduct or character - and is concerned with values at both the individual and societal level. Ethical theories to do with *conduct* are either concerned with the consequences of our actions (i.e. teleological theories) or with duty and the rules which govern our actions (i.e. deontological theories). The ‘consequence’ theories range from ethical egoism (acting to create the greatest good for oneself without damaging anyone else), through utilitarianism (acting to create the greatest good for the greatest number), to altruism (acting to create the greatest good for others). Virtue-based theories – the primary *character*-based approach to ethics – are about who we are *as people*. In the main, they would hold that virtues are acquired rather than innate, and can be learned through practice and passed on within families and communities. Some suggestions as to what might constitute appropriate virtues include courage, temperance, generosity, self-control, honesty, modesty, fairness and justice (Velasquez, 1992). In relation to leadership, Velasquez suggested perseverance, public-spiritedness, integrity, truthfulness, fidelity, benevolence and humility as necessary virtues.

A further nuance is the difference between what is *moral* and what is *ethical* – taking morals to refer to an individual’s own principles and ethics to refer to external standards provided by institutions, groups, or cultures to which an individual belongs and which provide a social system or framework for acceptable behaviour. Morals are also influenced by culture or society, but they are personal principles created and upheld by individuals themselves. Whilst ethical standards tend to be consistent within a certain context but can vary between contexts (e.g. the medical and legal professions each have their own distinct code of conduct), an individual’s moral code is usually unchanging and consistent across all contexts. Complications arise when the dictates of ethics and morals are in conflict. For example, the Hippocratic Oath requires doctors to ‘do no harm’ – hence precluding the practice of euthanasia – but a doctor may be drawn to go against this edict as a consequence of their own moral beliefs concerning the reduction of suffering and the right to personal dignity. The inclusion of ethical principles in the practice of leadership is equally challenging.

Leaders behaving ethically?

Ethical leadership, or the ethics of leadership, has a long history in the leadership literature. As such, it is not a theory of leadership but a recognition of some of the issues that arise in leadership situations, and the importance of doing the right thing, not just doing things right (Ciulla, 2004). Writing in this area has examined how leadership theory and practice could be used to build a more caring and just society (Ciulla, 1996), although no easy answers have been offered concerning what constitutes a ‘good’ set of moral values, or who gets to decide. So how has leadership theorizing treated the notion of ethics, and how does this align with our aspirations for leadership as a construct? Recent trends have seen a re-emergence of the moral/ethical aspects of leadership, together with a range of related ideas, as a focus for leadership scholarship, but it perhaps has its origins (in modern, organizational contexts, at least) in Burns (1978) conception of ‘transforming’ leadership as ‘… a relationship of mutual stimulation and elevation that converts followers into leaders and may convert leaders into moral agents’. As subsequently developed by Bass and Avolio (1994: 3) ‘the goal of transformational leadership is to “transform” people and organizations in a literal sense – to change them in heart and mind; enlarge vision, insight and understanding; clarify purposes; make behaviour congruent with beliefs, principles or values; and bring about changes that are permanent, self-perpetuating, and momentum-building’. Burns sought to appeal to the moral values of followers in an attempt to raise their consciousness about ethical issues and to mobilize their energy and resources to reform societal institutions. In organizational contexts, this translates into building on the individual’s need for meaning and to transcend the day-to-day trials of organisational life. It was a fundamental argument of Burns’ work that transforming leadership is a process that changes leaders and followers, and that through this process of seeking the highest levels of morality they consider ‘not only what is good for themselves, but also what will benefit larger collectivities such as their organization, community, and nation’ (Yukl, 2006: 419). Notwithstanding the recent rise in calls for more sustainable (Avery and Bergsteiner, 2011) and/or responsible (Pless and Maak, 2011) leadership – leadership that considers the widest possible range of stakeholders - the extent to which both transformational leaders and their followers have historically looked beyond the goals and rewards of organizations and shareholders, is markedly limited. Instead, the capitalist narrative of ‘progress’ – an unintended offshoot of Enlightenment’s goal of moving us away from religious superstition and towards scientific understanding – has resulted in a major rift between humans and the most fundamental ‘stakeholder’ in their activities, namely planet earth. Strike one, then, for leadership as a force for good and as a guiding light in determining organizational choices between what they *can* do and what they *should* do.

A number of other leadership theories have also attempted to incorporate ethical components, either explicitly or implicitly. For example, authentic leadership (AL) (Iszatt-White and Kempster, 2019) has been described as ‘a pattern of leader behaviour that draws upon and promotes both positive psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate, to foster greater self-awareness, an internalised moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency on the part of leaders working with followers, fostering positive self-development’ (Walumbwa et al, 2008: 94). Deriving from idealised normative and functionalist aims of delineating a style of leadership capable of producing measurable organisational outcomes (Avolio et al, 2004; Gardner and Schermerhorn, 2004), authentic leaders are said to be ‘transparent about their intentions and [to] strive to maintain a seamless link between espoused values, behaviours and actions’ (Luthans and Avolio, 2003: 242). This positioning carries with it the implication that their ‘espoused values’ are ethically positive. Later and more critical conceptualisations of authentic leadership, often deriving from existentialist (Algera and Lips-Wiersma, 2012; Lawler and Ashman, 2012) or psychoanalytic (Ford and Harding, 2011; Costas and Taheri, 2012) traditions, and thus grounded in a more complex, political and contested understanding of authenticity, problematized both the supposed moral underpinnings of the AL construct and the notion of a ‘self’ to which an authentic leader can be ‘true’ (Ladkin and Taylor, 2010). Equally problematic, is the fundamental paradox (Iszatt-White et al, 2021) exposed by examining AL through the lens of emotional labour (EL): i.e. that the *in*authenticity of performing EL is accepted by practicing leaders as an integral part of presenting themselves as authentic leaders. The problem here – as with other ‘positive’ (Avolio and Gardner, 2005) forms of leadership for which it is claimed to be the root construct – is that the ethical components are simultaneously under-specified and contradictory. Small wonder, then, that their enactment is problematic for practicing leaders seeking to navigate the competing claims of their everyday leadership roles. Strike two, then, for leadership as a force for good and for leadership scholarship as a source of guidance on how leadership should be enacted in everyday practice.

There have also been a number of attempts to steer attention towards the higher order goals that leadership may be utilised to achieve, rather than prescriptions for how to do it. An early attempt was Greenleaf’s (1977) servant leadership, based on the idea that leaders should do what they do to serve others rather than for their own glory. Russell and Stone (2002: 1450) stated that the ‘prime motivation for leadership should be the desire to serve … Self-interest should not motivate servant leadership: rather it should ascend to a higher plane of motivation that focuses on the needs of others.’ They suggested that the functional attributes of the servant leader include honesty, integrity, trust, service and empowerment and that accompanying attributes include stewardship, influence, persuasion and teaching. Thus servant leadership involves ‘standing for what is good and right even when it is not in the financial interest of the organization’ (Yukl, 2006: 420). Also addressing the wider responsibilities of business activities, Bolden et al (2011) link the notion of leading responsibly to issues of sustainability and suggest an agenda for leadership that requires leaders to instil a sense of responsibility for the environment into followers, and to thereby challenge existing business models based solely on generating profit for shareholders. This form of leadership looks beyond wealth creation to consider the needs of a wide range of stakeholders and to balance return on capital with a wider range of possible costs and benefits to be derived from business activity.

Another strand of writing within this genre espouses the notion of purpose or calling as a motivation for leadership. Whilst noting that purpose is arguably axiomatic within leadership discourses that emphasize vision and mission, Kempster et al (2011) problematize the manifestation of purpose in everyday organizational leadership practices through the work of the moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre and his notions of purpose as ‘internal goods’ associated with well-being that are central to a good human life. MacIntyre (2004) argues that, following the mis-directed good intentions of the Enlightenment, we are now living in a ‘post-virtuous era’, in which we have lost ‘the binding discourse of ethical practice in our dealings with others’ (Kempster et al, 2011: 322) – along with our traditional anchors (including religion) to the importance of striving for internal goods - and are subject to increasing pressure to strive for ‘external goods’. MacIntyre sees managers as organizational agents for extending this orientation towards external goods and, as such, suggests they are poor moral representatives for the institutions in which they work. Kempster et al (2011) build on this position to suggest that societal purposes will be entirely driven out of the discourses within organizations unless addressed through conscious intervention encapsulated within ‘leadership as purpose’. It is their aim to steer leadership studies towards a better balance between external and internal goods and corporate and social purposes. As a starting point, they note that leaders as ‘managers of meaning’ (Smircich and Morgan, 1982) have tended to focus on shaping meaning for employees around existing corporate goals, rather than shifting corporate goals towards broader meaning-related activities and ends. They propose redressing this balance by combining the ideas of MacIntyre and Smircich and Morgan:

‘If Smircich and Morgan’s (1982) notion that the primary task of leadership is making sense of the flow of organizational experience is connected to MacIntyre’s (1997, 2004) philosophy that incorporates virtues, ‘telos’ and ‘internal goods’, we can construct a normative leadership process that seeks to manage the meaning of follower experiences towards sustaining virtues to develop internal goods of personal excellence in order to achieve telos – a good for humans.’ (Kempster et al, 2011:325)

They argue that purpose requires greater attention if it is to become manifest in both the corporate and the societal orientations of leaders in organizations, rather than in one to the exclusion of the other. Redressing the balance in this way will require ‘personal moral agency’ by managers to challenge the purposes of corporate employers: this presupposes the ‘right’ moral values are already help by managers and leaders.

Whilst Kempster and colleagues have done much to clothe leadership for purpose in the trappings of practical reality, this strand of leadership writing more generally is still long on conceptual pronouncements on what leadership should be for, but short on empirical examination of how this translates into practice. Arguably, this should be the work of ethicists and philosophers rather than leadership scholars. This shift towards advocacy rather than inquiry is, perhaps, symptomatic of the ever-increasing burden of responsibility we place on leadership as a construct, and its ‘romaniticization’ (Meindl, Ehrlich and Dukerich, 1985) as the source of all possible good (and bad) in the generation of organizational and societal outcomes. On this basis, should we call strike three for leadership as a force for good on the grounds that guidance on what constitutes ‘goodness’ is not the preserve of leadership and its scholars at all?

‘Post-leadership’ leadership: Ethical stewardship as a new aspirational hook?

Whilst the preceding discussion was clearly selective in its exploration of leadership theories and their potential to position leadership as a force for good, it does highlight a number of recurring shortcomings within the discipline. Transformational leadership illustrates the triumph of capitalist shareholder-driven goals over the ‘hearts and minds’ aspirations for mobilizing energy and resources behind the reformation of societal institutions. Authentic leadership exemplifies the paradox of ‘positive’ forms of aspirational leadership that advocate normative, values-based components that are often contradictory and/or impossible to enact in practice. And over-colonization of the leadership construct by the advocacy of moral purpose highlights both the increasing burden leadership now carries and its struggles to move beyond this cultural straight-jacket. Given the shortcomings of these and other previous leadership forms purporting to build on ethical components to produce positive outcomes, how might we decolonize the leadership construct to arrive at something more fit for purpose for the 21st century? And what might we want to keep as we contemplate getting rid of the L-word?

If we accept the notion that Enlightenment thinking and the ‘progress’ it has delivered has been a significant contributor to the environmental and sustainability crises we now find ourselves facing, then how might we keep some of the ethical touchpoints of leadership at the same time as shedding some of its more capitalist baggage? And how might we redress the human-nature dualism which the capitalist claim to own and control natural resources has spawned? The upsurge in appreciation of indigenous (Spiller, 2021) – and hence pre-Enlightenment – understandings of the world is one manifestation of the attention now being paid to the toxic effects of this dualism, and one which is gaining momentum within the leadership discipline. Helpfully, Banerjee and Arjaliès (2021) draw attention to the obligation of stewardship which a return to the relational ontologies of indigenous cultures, with their profound connections between humans and nature, suggests as fundamental. First surfacing in the leadership literature as an attribute of servant leaders (Greenleaf, 1977), this notion of stewardship could be a fruitful area of exploration as a successor to our aspirations for leadership, and is already receiving renewed attention in an environment-specific format (Siddiquei, Asmi, Asadullah and Mir, 2021). Understandings of stewardship currently range from the localised conservation of family business assets for future generations (Discua Cruz, Howarth and Hamilton, 2013) to the troubled trajectory of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) (Cherry and Sneirson, 2011) in prominent international businesses, but the potential for a cross-over into conservation of the environment and other, broader issues of stewardship seems promising. One practical initiative already deriving from this perspective is the Integrated Thinking and Reporting (ITR) model of business accountability (Di Vaio et al, 2021), which suggests that businesses should be concerned with producing a return on six different ‘capitals’ (financial, manufactured, intellectual, human, social & relationship, and natural) at the same time as focusing on the longer-term health of the planet rather than merely short-term gains. This position represents a shift away from the current focus on growth fuelled by consumerism, and – in its most hard-line form – challenges the ability of Western, Enlightenment-based thinking to solve global issues created by that same Western, Enlightenment thinking (Banerjee and Arjaliès, 2021).

*Quo vadis*, Leadership?

This brings us back to the aim of the sub-theme and the need to ask ‘whither goest’ leadership in the context of climate and other global crises? What is the value/purpose of leadership in addressing the major issues currently faced by the world and its peoples and would something else - a new focus on stewardship, grounded in ideas of accountability and ITR (Di Vaio et al, 2020) perhaps – usefully replace the now debased currency of leadership across a range of stakeholders, from academics to executive education participants, and from research funders to policy makers. The cultural baggage now being hefted around by ‘leadership’ as a discourse is inescapably capitalist and Enlightenment-based, notwithstanding important attempts to redress the balance in favour of more traditional, indigenous (Spiller, 2021) - and hence ‘pre-Enlightenment’ - or Gaia-based understandings. If we can’t decolonize leadership as a signifier – if the ‘empty signifier’ (Kelly, 2014) has become too full – then maybe it is time to shift towards a new signifier that is already full of more sustainability-driven meanings. And whilst there is clearly work to be done to explore the different meanings which ‘stewardship’ might have across different domains, there is also the potential that where these meanings are shared they could offer a better signifier for our future aspirations of ‘leadership’ than leadership itself. The shift in signifier may also offer hope for a shift in practices, through the increased salience of the need to preserve (= stewardship) as well as to change (= leadership), and a (re)recognition that not all change is progress. Just because we *can* do a thing, that doesn’t mean we *should*. As Banerjee and Arjaliès (2021) suggest, a return to the relational ontologies of indigenous cultures, with their profound connections between humans and nature and the consequent obligation of stewardship – in contrast to Enlightenment beliefs in the ability to dominate nature for our own purposes – may be our best hope in addressing the ecological crises we have brought upon ourselves.

References

Algera, PM and Lips-Wiesma, M (2012) Radical authentic leadership: Co-creating the conditions under which all members of the organization can be authentic. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 23(1): 118-131.

Avery, GC and Bergsteiner H (2011) Sustainable leadership practices for enhancing business resilience and performance. *Strategy and Leadership*, 39(3): 5-15.

Avolio, BJ and Gardner, WL (2005) Authentic leadership development: Getting to the root of positive forms of leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 16(3): 315-338.

Avolio, BJ, Gardner, WL, Walumbwa, FO, Luthans, F and May, DR (2004) Unlocking the mask: A look at the process by which authentic leaders impact follower attitudes and behaviours. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 15(6): 801-823.

Banerjee, SB and Arjaliès, D-L (2021) Celebrating the end of Enlightenment: Organization theory in the age of the Anthropocene and Gaia (and why neither is a solution to our ecological crisis). *Organization Theory*, 2, 1-24.

Bass, BM and Avolio, BJ (1994) (Eds). *Improving organizational effectiveness through transformational leadership.* Sage.

Bolden, R (2011) Distributed leadership in organizations: A review of theory and research. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 13(3): 251-269.

Burns, JM (1978) *Leadership*. New York: Harper & Row.

Ciulla, JB (2004) Ethics and leadership effectiveness. In J Antoniakis, AT Cianciolo and RJ Sternberg (Eds.), *The Nature of Leadership*: 302–327. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Ciulla, JB (1996) Ethics, chaos, and the demand for good leaders. In *Teaching Leadership: Essays in Theory and Practice.* New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1996

Conger J and Kanungo R (1987) Toward a behavioural theory of charismatic leadership in organizational settings. *Academy of Management Review,* 12, 637–647.

Costas, J and Taheri, A (2012) ‘The return of the primal father’ in Postmodernity? A Lacanian analysis of authentic leadership. *Organization Studies*, 33(9): 1195-1216.

Cherry, MA and Sneirson, JF (2011) Chevron, greenwashing, and the myth of 'green oil companies'. *Journal of Energy, Climate, and the Environment*, 3, 133-153.

Discua Cruz, A, Howorth, C and Hamilton, E (2013) Intrafamily entrepreneurship: The formation and membership of family entrepreneurial teams. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, 37(1): 17-46.

Di Vaio, A, Syriopoulos, T, Alvino, F and Palladino, R (2020) ‘Integrated thinking and reporting’ towards sustainable business models: A concise bibliometric analysis. *Meditari Accountancy Research*, 29(4): 691-719.

Ford, J and Harding, N (2011) The impossibility of the ‘true self’ of authentic leadership. *Leadership*, 7(4): 463-479.

Gardner, WL and Schermerhorn Jr, JR (2004) Performance gains through positive organizational behaviour and authentic leadership. *Organizational Dynamics*, 33(3): 270-281.

Greenleaf, RK (2002 – originally 1977) *Servant Leadership: A journey into the nature of legitimate power and greatness. 25th Anniversary edition*. Mahwah, NJ. Paulist Press.

Iszatt-White, M and Kempster, S (2019) Authentic Leadership: Getting back to the roots of the ‘root construct’? *International Journal of Management Reviews,* 21(3): 356-369.

Iszatt-White, M, Stead, V and Elliott, C (2021) Impossible or just irrelevant? Unravelling the ‘authentic leadership’ paradox through the lens of emotional labour. *Leadership*, 17(4): 464-482.

Kelly, S (2014) Towards a negative ontology of leadership. *Human Relations*, 67(8): 905–

922.

Kempster, S, Jackson, B and Conroy, M (2011) Leadership as purpose: Exploring the role of purpose in leadership practice. *Leadership*, 7(3): 317–334.

Ladkin, D and Taylor, SS (2010) Enacting the ‘true self’: Towards a theory of embodied authentic leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 21(1): 64-74.

Lawler, J and Ashman, I (2012) Theorizing leadership authenticity: A Sartrean perspective. *Leadership*, 8(4): 327-344.

Luthans, F and Avolio, B (2003) Authentic leadership: A positive development approach. In KS Cameron, JE Dutton and RE Quinn (Eds), *Positive organizational scholarship*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler (pp241-258).

MacIntyre A (1997) *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. London: Duckworth.

MacIntyre A (2004) Virtue ethics. In: Genster HJ, Spurgin EW and Swindal JC (eds) *Ethics: Contemporary Readings*. London: Routledge, 249–256.

Meindl, JR, Ehrlich, SB and Dukerich, JM (1985) The romance of leadership. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 30, 78-102.

Pless, NM and Maak, T (2011) Responsible leadership: Pathways to the future. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 98, 3-13.

Russell, RF and Stone, AG (2002) A review of servant leadership attributes: developing a practical model. *Leadership and Organisational Development Journal*, 23 (3/4): 145-157.

Siddiquei, A, Asmi, F, Asadullah, MA and Mir, F (2021) Environmental-specific servant leadership as a strategic tool to accomplish environmental performance: a case of China. *International Journal of Manpower*, DOI 10.1108/IJM-07-2020-0350.

Smircich C and Morgan G (1982) Leadership: ‘The management of meaning’. *The Journal of Applied Behavioural Science* 18(3): 257–273.

Spiller, C (2021) ‘I AM’: Indigenous consciousness for authenticity and leadership. *Leadership*, 17, 491-496.

Walumbwa, FO, Avolio, BJ, Gardner, WL, Wernsing, TS and Peterson, SJ (2008) Authentic Leadership: Development and validation of a theory-based measure. *Journal of Management*, 34(1): 89-126.

Yukl G (2006) *Leadership in Organizations*, 6th edn. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall