Leadership as Phenomenon: Reassessing the Philosophical Ground of Leadership Studies

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to contribute to a more robust theory of leadership that shifts the frame of reference from leadership as exclusively facilitated through a single inspired leader to one that includes the view of leadership as an emergent and complex social phenomenon. The article begins with a review of the leader-centric approaches that dominated much of twentieth century leadership studies then moves on to present contemporary critiques of leader-centric approaches leading to an alternative perspective of leadership as an emergent and complex social phenomenon. Viewing leadership as an emergent and complex social phenomenon changes our attitude regarding the roles that leaders and others play in the creation of leadership. A central theme of this article is the impact that the concept of emergence has on leadership theory. In response to this changing attitude, the article then moves to return to and reassess the ontological, epistemological and ethical grounds of leadership and concludes that there is an underlying philosophy that supports viewing leadership as an emergent social phenomenon and further suggests that recent work in virtue epistemology along with Calvin Schrag's theory of communicative praxis and transversal rationality, can facilitate a better understanding of leadership as an emergent social phenomenon.

Keywords Philosophy of leadership · Leadership phenomenon · Social complexity · Business ethics · Leadership-as-practice

Introduction: Leaders, Leading and Leadership

> Without a powerful modern philosophical tradition, without theoretical and empirical cumulation, without guiding concepts, and without considered practical experiences, we lack the very foundations for knowledge of a phenomenon— leadership in the arts, the academy, science, politics, the professions, war— that touches and shapes our lives. Burns (1978, 2)

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As we observe the organizational lifeworld, how do we know if what we observe is in fact leadership? The three terms—leaders, leading and leadership—are frequently described as having a mutually dependent relationship. However, defining leadership is problematic. We can consult any dictionary and read a leadership definition along the lines of 'that which is done by a leader', which directs us to "leader—one who leads" and ends with "lead—to be in charge of". Leader-centric[1] definitions too often assume that there is a single best solution to the question what a leader is or what she does; and, as a result, many definitions are reduced to descriptions of the traits or behaviors of good leaders leading to the assumption that leadership is the end result of these behaviors. In our struggles to discover the philosophers stone that turns base humans into high functioning authentic leaders, history has bound leadership to the singular efforts of a leader. Efforts to create a more precise body of knowledge and best practices from which we can create great *leaders* has caused us to lose sight of both the collective effort that is required in order for leadership to flourish as well as the basic philosophical ground of *leadership*.

Why Leadership and Not Management?

Joseph Rost suggested that for much of the twentieth century leadership was seen as a necessary component of good management (1993). The relationship between management and leadership is an extensive and ongoing research topic and while managing and leading are not mutually exclusive occupations, there are significant distinctions that are relevant to the consideration of leadership as phenomenon.

Management and leadership share responsibility for ensuring organizational performance and, as a result both—management and leadership—can be seen as distinctive but complementary systems (Hannah et al. 2014; Kotter 2000; Yukl 2013). These distinctions can be broadly stated as differences of function and differences of power.[2] From the perspective of organizational hierarchy, the positions commonly referred to a "leadership" (executive management, directors, officers) assume increasing levels of legitimate power. With increased power comes an increased potential to influence group or organizational performance (Kaiser et al. 2008; Schminke et al. 2002).

Functionally, Kotter characterizes the role of management as "coping with complexity" while leadership's role is "coping with change" (Kotter 2000). Toor and Ofori study the functional differences between management and leadership and point out that management works to minimize change, provide stability and control processes in order to "realize organizational efficiency along with effectiveness within the parameters of the organization's mission". Leadership on the other hand embraces change and leaders "provide vision and inspiration" (Toor and Ofori 2008, 65). Management is mission driven, leadership is vision—consistency versus change. This apparently dichotomous relationship between consistency and

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[1] Michela Betta describes leader-centric as follows: "Leader-centric research is a compact research cluster in which individual agents (leaders) are perceived to play a major role in shaping the future of organisations and in executing complex tasks based on their skills. This is understandable because the individual is the bearer of experience (Dewey 1922: 292). The question, however, is whether this provides sufficient justification to claim that some people have extraordinary abilities and skills that justify their request for special status" (Betta 2017, 5–6).

[2] Refer to French and Raven's *Bases of Social Power* (French and Raven 1959) in which legitimate power is described as being based on role or assigned authority

change speaks in a large part to the distinction between management and leadership. Although the need to change is an issue that both management and leadership must deal with, it is the nature of the change that distinguishes the two.

The types of change that organizations address range from incremental changes—such as tuning and adaptation—to strategic changes—such as reorientation and re-creation (Nadler and Tushman 1989). Incremental changes are an ongoing and significant responsibility for operations managers; however, strategic change—both the envisioning and execution—is typically reserved for upper management and organizational leadership (Bass and Bass 2008). As we move from incremental change to strategic change there is marked shift in the "intensity" and an increased potential for an increase in "the degree of shock, trauma, or discontinuity created throughout the organization" (Nadler and Tushman 1989, 196) and as a result, increased risk.

The disciplines we refer to as management and leadership historically are seen as having their origin in the distinct activities of managers and leaders—mission vs. vision, stability vs. change, incremental vs. transformation change. However, the move from certainty to uncertainty along with the volatile and often ambiguous nature of strategic or transformational change creates an additional opportunity for alternative origins of leadership; one in which leadership emerges through complex social interaction.

The purpose of this article is to contribute to a more robust theory of leadership that shifts the frame of reference from leadership as exclusively facilitated through a single inspired leader to one that includes the view of leadership as an emergent and complex social phenomenon. The article begins with a review of the leader-centric approaches that dominated much of twentieth century leadership studies then moves on to present contemporary critiques of leader-centric approaches leading to an alternative perspective of leadership as an emergent and complex social phenomenon.

Viewing leadership as an emergent and complex social phenomenon changes our attitude regarding the roles that leaders and others play in the creation of leadership. A central theme of this article is the impact that the concept of emergence has on leadership theory. In response to this changing attitude, the article then moves to return to and reassess the ontological, epistemological and ethical grounds of leadership and concludes that there is an underlying philosophy that supports viewing leadership as an emergent social phenomenon and further suggests that recent work in virtue epistemology along with Calvin Schrag's theory of communicative praxis and transversal rationality, can facilitate a better understanding of leadership as an emergent social phenomenon.

Leader-Centric Theories: Review and Critique

Throughout history dominant leaders have shaped the narrative of states, nations and continents. Stories of wise or heroic women and men leading society to moments of greatness punctuate our entire written history. Unfortunately, that same history is also punctuated with stories of diabolic women and men who have led society to moments of tragedy and shame. History is dotted with examples of civilizations that have suffered at the hands of tyrannical, brutal, psychotic or sociopathic rulers. Caligula, Nero, Queen Mary I, Adolph Hitler, Joseph Stalin and Pol Pot are a few examples of how one powerful or charismatic individual can provoke horrific and tragic events. The history of leadership has been well documented spanning millennia of philosophical thought (Bass and Bass 2008; Burns 2003; Northouse

2016; Bolden et al. 2003; Day and Antonakis 2012; Yammarino 2013; Antonakis and Day 2018) and philosophers of many ages have realized that a full understanding of what makes a good or great ruler is in the best interest of all.

The rise of the industrial revolution, the migration from rural agriculture to urban industry and the need to coordinate the activities of increasing numbers of workers created a growing administrative burden on business. Existing theories of political and military leadership became the foundations for early theories of business administration viewing leadership through a heroic lens similar to that of ancient Greeks philosophers. The "great man" theories studied verified leaders and identified the traits that they manifest. "The history of the world is but the biography of great men" stated Thomas Carlyle in the mid-1800s (1883). Beginning with the great man theories, trait-based leadership theory dominated political, military and industrial leadership studies for several decades until the rise of behavioral theories in the early 1940s. There has been a steady march of leadership theories from great man to trait through to transactional and transformational (Bolden et al. 2003). Each school is remembered in a genealogical recitation and the passing on of some of its genetic material to the next generation of leadership theory.

Joseph Rost (1993) analyzed 221 definitions of leadership during the period from 1900 to 1990 and provided concise summaries by decade. These summaries provide an interesting glimpse into the evolving field of contemporary leadership studies. Although there were scholars who as early as the 1920s recognize the important role that social interaction plays in leadership (Rost 1993), the leader's ability to influence groups of people—or leader-centric perspective—remained a dominant theme throughout most of the twentieth century. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, Rost saw the need to thoroughly review the academic state of leadership studies.

For Rost the leadership studies discipline lacked discipline. Reviews of literature led one to believe that there were many different "leaderships"—political, educational, non-profit or business leadership, transactional, transformational, strategic, and authentic—and that leadership was more populist meme than philosophically grounded discipline. Rost saw a traditional school of leadership thought that relied too heavily on two conceptual arenas that he referred to as "periphery and content syndrome" (1993, 3). Periphery leadership topics are those focusing on the observable and measurable characteristics and behaviors of effective leaders such as "… traits, personality characteristics, 'born or made' issues, greatness, group facilitation, goal attainment, effectiveness, contingencies, situations, goodness, style, and, above all, the management of organizations—public and private" (1993, 3). Content topics focus on the discipline—industry, demographic group, profession—and the specific knowledge needed to lead effectively. Unfortunately, while periphery and content perspectives contribute to our understanding of the qualities and characteristics of leaders, they say little about the underlying nature of leadership itself. Rost's project in *Leadership for the twenty-first century* was to collect, analyze and critique existing theories and definitions of leadership in an effort to "define leadership with precision, accuracy, and conciseness so that people are able to label it correctly when they see it happening or when they engage in it" (1993, 6).

What it means to be a leader has a legitimately complex history. The industrial age migration from field to factory forced merchants to focus not only on making and selling their products but also on how to coordinate and direct the activities of a rapidly growing workforce. The emergence of administrative science, defining of bureaucracy and the evolution into managerial and ultimately leadership studies is a modern pursuit (Rost 1993). On the first page of his 1978 book *Leadership* James MacGregor Burns wrote "[i]f we know all too

much about our leaders, we know far too little about leadership. We fail to grasp the essence of leadership that is relevant to the modern age and hence we cannot agree even on the standards by which to measure, recruit, and reject it" (1978, 1). Similarly, an issue for Rost is the prevalence of books or articles that address the subject of leadership without first providing a clear understanding or definition of the "nature" of leadership (Rost 1993). One of Rost's arguments against periphery and content syndrome is that there is little progress made toward the philosophical grounding of leadership. For Rost this grounding begins with a definition. Rost is writing at a time in which the "new leadership"[3] theories are in the ascendency. Various forms of charismatic leadership leading to transformational leadership theories, framed leaders as inspirational visionaries who were both intellectual and pragmatic (Burns 1978, 2003; Bass and Bass 2008). Even though Rost recognized a paradigmatic shift beginning with Burns' (1993, 90) notion of transformational leadership, in which he defines leadership as "leaders inducing followers to act for certain goals that represent the values and the motivations—the wants and needs, the aspirations and expectations—of both leaders and followers", he finds no definition that adequately addresses the post-industrial environment of the twenty-first century.

After considering the nature of leadership, historic precedent and the ongoing post-modern/post-industrial paradigm, Rost (1993) concludes that there are "four essential elements that must be present if leadership exists or is occurring": 1) the relationship is based on influence, 2) leaders and followers are the people in this relationship, 3) leaders and followers intend real changes[4] and 4) leaders and followers develop mutual purposes (1993). Concisely stated: "Leadership is an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes" (Rost 1993, 102). Rost sees his project as a philosophical turn that challenges modernity's "industrial school of leadership" theories (1993). While earlier definitions cast leadership as a role performed by a qualified individual (Horner 1997; Day and Antonakis 2012; Dinh et al. 2014), Rost describes leadership as an event that evolves through social engagement.

Rost provides a more succinct definition for the nature of leadership in the twenty-first century; however, the leader-follower language implies that leadership is still an actor-based definition or what might me more accurately referred to as a "leader" theory rather than "leadership" theory (Hibbert et al. 2017). Rost himself later addresses the idea that the leader-follower is somehow a more egalitarian relationship than boss-subordinate, "[f]ollowership is an outmoded concept that is dysfunctional and even destructive in a postindustrial world" (Rost 2008, 54). Rost's revision defines the relationship as between leaders and collaborators. The evolution of Rost's definition is important in that it shifts away from a focus on transactions between leaders and followers and allows for the possibility of a leadership that emerges through social interaction.

It is appropriate to work toward an understanding of the practices, traits and behaviors needed to succeed in traditional roles of authority and legitimate power—a *leadership* role. Leadership and leading are critical for the flourishing of business and society; however, there is increasing evidence and building belief that heroic views of the leader do not effectively define leadership. Leader-centric definitions such as Burns (1978), Rost (1993), Northouse (2016)

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[3] New leadership styles or new genre leadership is described as emerging theories that "emphasized symbolic leader behavior; visionary, inspirational messages; emotional feelings; ideological and moral values; individualized attention; and intellectual stimulation" (Bryman 1992) in (Avolio et al. 2009)

[4] Rost is drawing on Burns definition or "real change". Burns describes real change as "a transformation to a marked degree in the attitudes, norms, institutions, and behaviors that structure our daily lives" and "substantive results" (Burns 1978).

and others include the role of leader as a necessary condition of leadership and are examples of a "tripod" ontology of leadership in which leadership's being is defined by leaders, followers and common goals (Bennis 2007; Drath et al. 2008). Tripod type definitions—although more inclusive than earlier definitions based on the traits of the individual—continue to lead to an overemphasis of leader-centric theories.

Critiques of Leader-Centric Theories

> Man's world is manifold, and his attitudes are manifold. What is manifold is often frightening because it is not neat and simple. Men prefer to forget how many possibilities are open to them. (Buber 1970, 9).

A large source of criticism toward leader-centric theories comes from an understanding of organizations as open and complex social systems. These views draw from both Kenneth Boulding's (1956) General Systems Theory (GST) as well as research in Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) (Schneider and Somers 2006). In 1956 Kenneth Boulding stated that it is "the content and meaning of messages, the nature and dimensions of value systems, the transcription of images into a historical record, the subtle symbolizations of art, music, and poetry, and the complex gamut of human emotion" that contribute so much to the complexity of organizations (Boulding 1956, 205). Framing leadership as a social engagement of diverse participants acknowledges that businesses are social organizations and as such some of the most highly complex systems (Boulding 1956; Barker 2001) and that "social systems are not static systems and are not likely to remain stable for long periods of time" (Barker 2001, 485). Open systems, such as businesses, refers to the fact that businesses do not exist in a vacuum but rather are subject to outside influences such as market dynamics, governmental regulations or political upheaval. Additionally, open systems frequently exhibit equifinality by having multiple options that lead to the same outcome (Katz 1978).

How to address the complexity of large organizations has been a central theme throughout the history of organizational theory. Max Weber's (1968) bureaucratic model provided the industrial age with a rational framework to efficiently and effectively administer increasingly complex organizations that continued, throughout the twenty-first century, to inform much of leadership theory (Uhl-Bien et al. 2007). However, there is a growing belief that while the bureaucratic model to a large degree addresses issues of procedural or "algorithmic" complexity, it has failed to address the contextual issues arising from complex social interactions (Vasconcelos and Ramirez 2011). Complex Adaptive Systems can be seen as being paradoxical. Organizations contain both linear relationships such as hierarchical chain of command as well as non-linear relationships. As complex systems, organizations can be expected to exhibit times of stability, cyclical variation or chaos (Schneider and Somers 2006). Throughout this variation however successful organizations are able to learn and adapt. The leader-centric approach to leadership research has focused on providing business and society with high performing leaders by providing individuals with well researched and thoughtfully presented lists of best practices. Leader-follower and other leader-centric models of leadership preference a hierarchical downward-directed phenomenon of leadership that does not fully address the diverse contingencies of organizations as Complex Adaptive Systems (Hooijberg 1996; Uhl-Bien et al. 2007).

There is also complexity surrounding the definition of leadership itself. Rost in his critique of twentieth-century leadership studies, suggested that too many studies begin with a musing

on the sheer volume of attention and number of theories surrounding leadership but, having made that observation fail to consider why (Rost 1993). Simon Kelly does consider this point and concludes "that leadership does not exist within a person, or even within a relationship between bounded figures called leaders and followers. Instead, leadership represents a kind of epiphenomenon that organizes and determines our experience of social reality and our experience of ourselves" (Kelly 2014, 908). As a result of the complexity of social interaction, leadership takes on an ever changing Herecletian aspect leading Kelly to suggest that "… leadership requires a fundamental shift away from treating the phenomenon of leadership as a discrete object of analysis" (2014, 913).

Leadership exists. The world sees leadership, or the lack of leadership and perceives it through the context of the historic moment and individual experiences. This is true in the day to day lives of individuals, the workweek lives of employers and employees and the academic life of scholars.

> "As a linguistic term, 'leadership' occupies a curious position in everyday talk in that it is a signifier that has multiple possible signifieds. Likewise the term can slip and slide along a sign system to also become either signifier or signified – to exist as both means and end; cause and effect." (Kelly 2014, 914)

This variation in our use and understanding of leadership leads Kelly to suggest that as an empty signifier leadership occupies "a space through which possible meanings can be negotiated and navigated" (2014, 914). Contrasting to a positive ontology of leadership in which leadership is a "discrete object of analysis", Kelly proposes a negative ontology from which leadership has the potential to emerge. While leadership as an empty signifier does not fit well into the paradigm of leadership studies as a positive scientific pursuit, Kelly's suggestion for a negative ontology of leadership might be viewed as a bracketing of the ambiguity caused by an overabundance of leader-centric theories and popular perceptions of leadership.

Leadership as a concept, particularly in the leader-centric schools of thought, is highly ambiguous; however, that ambiguity stems not from a lack of definitions but rather from an overabundance of definitions and popular understanding. Blom and Alvesson refer to this ambiguity as having a "hegemonic" quality that is broad, inescapable and essentially embodying all that is necessary and good in an organization (Blom and Alvesson 2015). Culturally, leadership represents the pinnacle of one's career and "good leadership" takes on a panacea like quality with good results attributed to good leadership and bad results attributed to bad leadership. This "strong cultural domination of the idea and prospect of leadership" creates a "hegemonic ambiguity" (Blom and Alvesson 2015, 486).

Martin Wood (2005) similarly challenges the certainty of leader-centric theories and turns to Alfred North Whitehead and his perspectives on process metaphysics. Wood likens an infatuation with leaders and followers and the "discrete relations" between "individual social actors" to Whitehead's fallacy of concreteness. The fallacy of concreteness arises when we mistakenly apply concrete or finite attributes to a phenomenon that is abstract or infinite. Wood points to concepts such as "charismatic, effective, visionary and transformational leadership" as examples of leader-centric theories that attribute individual agency to leadership (Wood 2005, 1106) .

Post-Heroic Alternatives to Leader-Centric Theories

Far from the straight-line chain of command theories of scientific management or the proscribed relationships of tripod ontologies, leadership is a "complex interaction between

people and their social and organizational environments" (Day et al. 2014, 65–66). Earliest theories of leadership focused on the heroic abilities of a leader suggesting that leadership emerged fully formed from the minds of "great men". In contrast, there are a growing body of post-heroic leadership theories challenging leader-centric orthodoxy. Joyce Fletcher states that there are three characteristics that distinguish post-heroic theories: 1) leadership is viewed as shared and distributed, 2) leadership is grounded in social interactions—viewed more as "an emergent process more than an achieved state" and 3) leadership results in "learning and growth for the organization as well as the people involved" (Fletcher 2004). Drath et al. (2008, 639) propose "…that the further development of leadership theory calls for a corresponding development in leadership ontology" stating "[w]e believe that an ontology of leaders, followers, and their shared goals is too narrow to support emergent theory in the directions of development already underway within the field". There are three emergent theories that illustrate the shortcomings of the "tripod ontologies" of leader-centric theories: "(1) shared and distributed leadership; (2) applications of complexity science; and (3) relational approaches" (Drath et al. 2008, 639). Their DAC (Direction, Alignment and Commitment) ontology removes the interpersonal hierarchies implicit in theories involving leader-follower relationships, de-emphasizes power relationships and emphasizes the collective nature of leadership. Direction addresses the needs for a collective understanding of "aim, mission, vision, or goal of the collective's shared work" as well as a shared understanding of the value of the direction (Drath et al. 2008, 647). Alignment addresses informational, structural and procedural aspects such as "such as planning, budgeting, supervisory controls, performance management, and reward systems" (Drath et al. 2008, 647). Finally, commitment is willingness of individuals to privilege the needs of the group over personal desires. For Drath et al., if there is direction, alignment and commitment then there is leadership. The DAC ontology clearly situates leadership as a response to or call for change, albeit a change with a defined course (direction and alignment). DAC shifts the agency of leadership from, in Kelly's words, the bounded figures of leaders and followers and emphasizes a more distributed and collective nature of leadership. Similarly acknowledging the shared and distributed nature of leadership, Kaiser, Hogan and Craig see leadership as "… a solution to the problem of collective effort…" (2008, 96) and are part of a growing turn toward the *practice* rather than *practices* of leadership.

Leader-centric theories focus on the best practices of successful leaders. Leadership as practice acknowledges the social phenomenon of leadership as a collective process relying not on leaders but on the "leaderful" engagement of diverse participants (Raelin 2011). Leadership as practice (L-A-P) presents a Heideggerian concept of leadership emerging and unfolding "through coping in day-to-day experience" with an "effort among participants who choose through their own rules to achieve a distinctive outcome" (Raelin 2011, 196) In leader-centric theory, the primary agent of leadership is the leader; however, in L-A-P agency is distributed among participants with each participant accorded the opportunity to influence the other in the form of "collaborative agency" (Raelin 2016).

Joseph Raelin's (2016) edited volume *Leadership-As-Practice: Theory and Practice* brings together a number of perspectives connected through a common, post-heroic, view of leadership as an emergent phenomenon. Framing leadership as a phenomenon shifts the perspective away from a granular empirical analysis of individual cause-effect relationship or personal character traits and instead calls on us to consider leadership as a result of complex and diverse experiences. A phenomenological perspective of leadership means that leadership cannot be separated from the context in which it is embedded (Cunliffe and Hibbert 2016). This context is a robust environment that forms through the interaction of processes that evolve and emerge

over time, interpersonal interactions and material structures such as document policies and procedures and the physical environment (Sergi 2016). While leader-centric theories address both the processes and procedures of effective leaders, L-A-P theories emphasize the processual nature of leadership in which leadership is evolving and "always happening in situ, unfolding over time" (Simpson 2016, 113). The interpersonal communication that informs the processual elements of the as-practice environment is similarly reframed as an emergent phenomenon between "trans-actors" who engage dialogically in a "process of meaning-making that continuously generates something new" (Simpson 2016, 168).

Throughout history—indeed even during the lifetimes of individual philosophers and scholars—leadership has continued to be unsettled and controversial. The complexity and ambiguity of organizations, and as a result leadership, points to an ongoing philosophical problem, how do we reconcile the theoretical with the lived experience of the organizational lifeworld. Post-heroic views toward leadership, such as the growing movement of L-A-P challenge leader-centric orthodoxy and, in turn, call for a reassessment of leadership's philosophical ground.

Reassessing leadership's Philosophical Ground

> Philosophy attempts to clarify and illuminate unsettled, controversial issues that are so generic that no scientific discipline is equipped to deal with them. (Lipman 2010, 19)

The prior review and critique of leader-centric forms of leadership along with emerging research into post-heroic leadership points to a discipline that continues to be unsettled and controversial. The significance of leadership to society as a whole as well as individual organizations is clear, but this clarity takes many forms. Leader-centric perspectives assign responsibility for and results of leadership to the individual whereas L-A-P and other post-heroic theories propose a more distributed form of agency. This review is not meant to categorize theories of leadership as right or wrong, good or bad, but rather to emphasize diverse and alternative perspectives. Having done so we now move on to reassess the philosophical ground of leadership from these emerging alternative perspectives.

Why and how does leadership exist; how is leadership informed and how does it proceed once informed; and how *ought* leadership proceed? These basic questions guide our reassessment of the ontological, epistemological and ethical grounds of leadership.

Ontological

Consider two fundamental questions regarding leadership's being—*why* does leadership exist and *how* does leadership exist. Kan and Parry (2004) identify four common characteristics of the leadership phenomenon: the notion of change, influencing others, group context and goal attainment. These four characteristics are similar to three of Rost's essential elements: real change, influence relationships and mutual purposes (goals). If we accept leader-follower or similar leader-centric language as an acknowledgement of leadership's need for engaged groups of people, then it can be argued that there is a definitional common ground between heroic and post-heroic theories of leadership. That common ground is groups of people coming together to affect real change.

However, there is a significant difference in the agent-agency perspective of leadership. While leader-centric approaches define a procedural relationship of leader-follower or leader-collaborators (Simpson 2016; Kempster 2009), Kan and Parry position leadership as emerging through an evolving process of group context and interaction, in other words leadership does not have a material or concrete presence but rather exists *in potentiâ* awaiting a call to manifest itself. This call is not a demand for specific action but rather an appeal for attention with multiple possibilities for understanding (Heidegger 1962). The evolving process of group context and interactions is one that resists a part-whole reductionism in which leadership is viewed as the result of individual actions and instead ontologically emerges through collective engagement and collaboration.[5]

The perceived need for real change, however, does not in and of itself lead to the manifestation of leadership. Case in point, mergers, acquisitions or the outright sale of a business would fall into the category of real change. If I as the CEO and owner of a business however independently decide and follow through with the sale of the business then, based on the definition above, leadership has not occurred. My intention to take unilateral action precludes a call for leadership. In a similar vein, organizations rely increasingly on teams or workgroups to make decisions and take action; and yet, teamwork or group decision making alone are not calls for leadership. Rearranging a production schedule, defining policies and procedures or coordinating a complex project require group collaboration and their outcomes can have a significant impact on operational efficiency. In most cases however the goal of such collaboration is not organizational transformation but rather operational efficiency and likewise does not form a call for leadership.

In addition to change and social engagement, Kan and Parry identified the notion of influence and need to achieve goals as two additional characteristics of leadership, which can be seen as addressing the question of how leadership exists. Unlike the leader-centric perspectives of leaders influencing followers, the emergent phenomenon of leadership relies on a social and reciprocal influence process in order to ultimately achieve their mutually desired outcome (Kan and Parry 2004).

As mentioned, although there is a definitional common ground between the language of leader-centric and post-heroic leadership ontologies—change, influence, group interaction and outcomes—the theories are significantly different. When we attribute the existence of leadership to traits and behavioral characteristics of an individual leader the focus becomes one of providing procedures for effective leadership. Rather than procedural, post-heroic theories such as L-A-P see the emergence of leadership as an evolving processual ontology (Simpson 2016; Kempster 2009). This distinction between procedural and processual and the understanding of leadership as ontologically emergent in turn calls for a similarly emergent epistemology.

Epistemological

The question of how knowledge is acquired and what constitutes knowledge has been debated for millennia. Business and the ability to effectively run a business relies on our ability to make and then execute effective decisions (Blackman et al. 2005). These decisions in turn rely on

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[5] For a more in depth analysis of emergence, both ontological and epistemological see Silberstein and McGeever (1999)

our ability to acquire and apply relevant knowledge. L-A-P and other post-heroic theories require an epistemology that is responsive to socially emergent phenomena.

The epistemology of much of early leadership theory was grounded in social-scientific positivism which generally viewed the underlying reality of human behavior as being reducible to quantifiably objective units of measurement (Case et al. 2011; Barker 2001; Kempster 2009; Kempster and Parry 2011). The application of positivist epistemologies to leadership focused on developing a body of scientific/systemic knowledge in order to create precise leadership procedures. However, increasing concerns grew over what appeared to be a disconnect between positive theories of what was real (incontrovertible truth) and what was really happening in the lived world of human behavior. When leadership emerges through a process of social interaction the knowledge that informs the actions of leadership is likewise socially constructed; it is an emerging and ongoing process of learning.

The need to provide an epistemology that is responsive to socially emergent phenomena is reflected in the work of Steve Kempster who proposes an epistemology of leadership that arises from a process in which personal learning (knowledge acquisition and application) is informed through an interrelationship of cognition, situated learning and social learning that transforms experiences into knowledge (2009). Kempster provides an approach in which understanding is built through cycles of acquiring new experiences (social and situated learning) and reassessing prior understanding (identity development). The degree to which a learning model such as this would support the epistemological needs of leadership as a socially emergent phenomenon would depend in part on the its availability to employees. If Kempster's model were culturally embedded, forming the basis for all organizational learning, it would more thoroughly address the need for diverse communities of leaderful practice expressed by Raelin (Raelin 2011). If, on the other hand, an organization implemented this training on a selective basis to individuals who are deemed as having leadership potential then it would fall more into the category of *leader* development rather than *leadership* development (Denyer and James 2016).

Ethical

Ethics in much of leadership's early history was constrained by what R. Edward Freeman described as "separation thesis". Freeman defined separation thesis as a proposition that: "The discourse of business and the discourse of ethics can be separated so that sentences like, 'x is a business decision' have no moral content, and 'x is a moral decision' have no business content" (2010, 222). Alasdair MacIntyre tells us that "moral concepts change as social life changes" (1998, 1). Business ethics, and by extension leadership ethics, arose primarily from society's response to what appeared to be increasing levels of corporate malfeasance (Tsalikis and Fritzsche 1989; De George 1987; May et al. 2007). The ethics surrounding leader-centric theories have relied heavily on appeals to duty and utility. Deontological and utilitarian approaches may be appealing to procedural views of leadership in that they are codifiable and measurable, however do not fully address the complexities of a socially emergent phenomenon.

If "[m]oral concepts are embodied in and are partially constitutive of forms of social life" as MacIntyre states (1998, 1) then the social engagement of diverse others, advocated by post-heroic leadership theories, suggests that ethics is inescapably bound to leadership. When contemplating leadership, we contemplate the existence and purpose of a group as it relates to facilitating real change. Socially emergent leadership requires us to build an ethical

relationship between self and multiple others. Because leadership only exists through others, it always already has responsibility to the other. Jen Jones suggests a close tie between the social nature of leadership and French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, stating "When ethics is first philosophy, ethics cannot be separated from leadership and leaders' responsibility to Others" (Jones 2014, 52). Levinas' use of the expression "first philosophy" is an interesting one. Using a construction (as in building a house) metaphor, Micheal Dahnke describes Levinas' first philosophy not as a foundation but rather the values that lead to choosing materials that build the house, foundation and all (Dahnke 2001). For Levinas our values (ethics) are always present and as such always influence our engagement with others and the world around us. This means that the leadership phenomenon will never be non-ethical or "nothing personal just business".

The complex social interaction of leadership announces to us that "leadership is inextricably tied to the human condition, which includes the values, needs, and aspirations of human beings who live and work together" (Ciulla 2018, 440). Ethics-based theories of leadership—such as servant leadership (Greenleaf 2002), transformational leadership (Burns 2003), authentic leadership (George 2003), ethical leadership (Brown et al. 2005) and responsible leadership (Maak and Pless 2006)—emphasize the fact that the phenomenon of leadership only exists through collective action and social interaction and is always already axiologically engaged both aesthetically and ethically. Those engaged in leadership have an ethical responsibility not only to each other but also to those who will be effected by the resulting real change. Responsible leadership theory situates leadership as "a relational and ethical phenomenon, which occurs in social processes of interaction with those who affect or are affected by leadership and have a stake in the purpose and vision of the leadership relationship" (Maak and Pless 2006, 103). Responsible leadership expands leadership's ethical ground which historically was heavily influenced by studies of character and traits (Knights and O'Leary 2006). Reflecting on Levinas' ethic of responsibility, Knights states "the self is not autonomous for it is constituted through face-to-face relationships and always in line with the expectations of the Other" (Knights and O'Leary 2006, 133). For Jen Jones, a Levinasian perspective when applied to the collective action of leadership means that "ethics cannot be separated from leadership" and "leadership is responsibility to Others" (Jones 2014, 44). In the words of Hannah Arendt our world is inhabited "men, not Man" and it is this "plurality" that defines the human condition (1998, 7). Not unlike leadership, the human condition is a social one relying on interaction with and a responsibility to others. For Arendt, communities are formed and bound together by a power that:

> … is actualized only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds are not brutal, where words are not used to veil intentions but to disclose realities, and deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities. (Arendt 1998, 200)

However, earlier in *The Human Condition* Arendt warns:

> History is full of examples of the impotence of the strong and superior man who does not know how to enlist the help, the co-acting of his fellow men. His failure is frequently blamed upon the fatal inferiority of the many and the resentment every outstanding person inspires in those who are mediocre. (Arendt 1998, 188–189)

Collectively, these theories address our individual ethical responsibilities to others, and as such are not unique to post-heroic views of leadership as a social phenomenon. However, in the case of leader-centric theories, this approach is voluntary and at the discretion of the leader.

However, for socially post-heroic emergent theories of leadership, a responsibility to others is seen as a necessary precondition to emergence. An emphasis on the social nature of the human condition provides a necessary shift from the perspective of leader-centric individual agency to one of collective responsibility to others leading Rita Gardiner to posit "[i]f there is an essential Arendtian view of leadership, it is to view leadership as collective action. Such action emerges from the heart of life in all its expansive and messy disarray, not as consensus, but as a comingling of viewpoints" (2017, 46).

Implications

Joseph Raelin describes Leadership-As-Practice as a movement in that there is an emergent "collective identity" that "incorporates a number of closely related traditions, such as collective, shared, distributed, and relational leadership, all of which push for a line of inquiry … that differentiates from a focus on traits, behaviors, abilities, or competencies" (2017, 215). L-A-P recognizes that leaders—those in a position of authority—regardless of their depth of knowledge, legitimate authority, or preponderance of data, do not always achieve the success that they hope for. Leadership requires group collaboration and cooperation; employee resistance can undermine the best intentions of leaders. In the early days of integrated enterprise resource planning (ERP) it was more common to hear news about multi-million-dollar implementation failures than it was to hear about implementation successes. In 1998 it was estimated that 70% of all ERP projects failed to reach full implementation (Gargeya and Brady 2005). Although there were multiple reasons for these failures, common among them was a failure to fully understand the needs, fears and concerns of end users and how that ultimately impacted the success or failure of these leadership initiatives (Ahmed et al. 2006; Gargeya and Brady 2005). While *leaders* were well prepared with cost-benefit analyses, *leadership* itself was ultimately a failure.

An as-practice approach would suggest that leadership success would be facilitated through the engagement of diverse stakeholders in a "dialogically structured process" (Shotter 2016, 132), and in fact a 2011 study of successful ERP implementations suggested just such an approach stating that one of the critical success factors is to "use communication to explain and justify their actions" adding "[w]hat is important is how the business justification for the ERP system is translated to lower level employees so that they feel motivated to go along with the implementation and not resist the changes that will occur" (Dezdar and Ainin 2011, 921).

What will distinguish L-A-P as a movement rather than an informative cluster of research will be the degree to which L-A-P can translate the intellectual accomplishment of academic research with the technical expertise and practical wisdom necessary to meet organizational needs. Framing leadership as emerging through social interaction calls for a more in-depth reassessment of the epistemological and ethical needs of L-A-P and other post-heroic theories of leadership. Further exploration into intellectual virtue and the more recent study of virtue epistemology could provide valuable insights into an epistemology supportive of post-heroic theories of leadership.

Future Direction

Aristotle recognized that our ability to acquire knowledge (to learn) was a process relying on multiple forms of inquiry combined with the wisdom to discern the truth. In *Nicomachean*

Ethics Aristotle describes three ways in which we acquire knowledge: intellectual accomplishment (*sophia*), technical expertise (*technê*) and wisdom (*phronēsis*) (Aristotle 2002; Broadie 2002). Intellectual accomplishment in turn is achieved through systematic knowledge (*epistēmē*), which Aristotle (1998) refers to as incontrovertible truth that can be acquired empirically or deductively and intelligence (*nous*), which is the ability to reason inductively and reach beyond observable facts. Aristotle's presentation of knowledge is relevant to post-heroic theories of leadership for two reasons. First, Aristotle is most concerned with the application of knowledge as a means of achieving good results. The guiding question in *Nicomachean Ethics* is how do we conduct our lives in ways that lead to happiness (*eudaimonia*)? In this way Aristotle's epistemology focuses on knowledge as a means to an end. This is reflected in the emphasis that Aristotle places on wisdom (*phronesis*) which can be broadly described as the ability to understand what is practical and to apply the theoretical knowledge of intellectual accomplishment along with technical expertise to achieve a desired outcome.[6] Second, Aristotle defines knowledge and its multiple dimensions (theoretical, applied and practical) as emerging from an interrelated process that interactively engages both the subjectivity of lived experience and the objectivity of formal reasoning (Kodish 2006).

Engaging Aristotle in the conversation on leadership as an emergent phenomenon is important for two reasons. First, Aristotle describes knowledge as an ongoing emergent phenomenon that—as with leadership as phenomenon—relies on a multiplicity of contexts and perspectives. Intellectual accomplishment relies on observation and interpretation in order to find meaning. Our ability to codify intellectual or theoretical knowledge into practice leads to productive knowledge or technical expertise which in turn, depending on the success or failure of these practices further informs our theories. Wisdom is the ability to understand the needs of the organizational lifeworld and apply intellectual and technical knowledge in order to meet those needs. The interaction of theoretical knowledge, productive knowledge and practical wisdom plays out in businesses on a daily basis and supports the view of leadership as phenomenon.

Second, Aristotle viewed knowledge—in its multiple forms—as a virtue.

"Aristotle's inherently holistic philosophy brings to the fore the complexity of human action and deliberation and of human life in general. Aristotle's worldview reflects the idiosyncrasies of human life, rich with paradox and meaning – a perspective we have been increasingly disregarding in an era of absorption with image and a simplistic understanding of metaphors." (Kodish 2006, 459)

Aristotle's doctrine of the mean saw virtues not as rigidly fixed concepts but rather as excellent behaviors that are acquired processually through ongoing teaching and practice (Aristotle 2002) making it particularly relevant to as-practice theories of leadership. The doctrine of the mean is not an arithmetic mean but rather a mean of appropriateness that is situated between excess and deficiency. Our understanding of whether a behavior is virtuous or vicious is contextually dependent on the right behavior at the right time and for the right reasons. Consider the virtue of courage, which is situated between the excessive behavior of rashness and the deficient behavior of cowardice. If out of impatience I dash across a busy intersection barely missing being hit by a crosstown bus there are few who would consider my rash actions courageous. If, however, we rewind to the same time, same busy intersection and same

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[6] See Aristotle (2002) VI.5–11

crosstown bus but my dash is scoop up a child who has wandered away from their parent, the same behavior would be an act of courage.

Moral virtue theories of ethical leadership have been on the rise since the latter twentieth century (Ferrero and Sison 2014; De Bruin 2013; Rawwas et al. 2013); however, Aristotelian virtue theory is an integrative theory of both moral and intellectual virtue. Currently, however, there is little research into intellectual virtue as it relates to leadership.

Reason, rationality, knowledge, problem solving, and decision making are essential to healthy organizations. Epistemologically, leadership requires theories of knowledge, reason and rationality that are responsive to the socially constructed and emergent nature of the leadership phenomenon. From an individual perspective, decision making is a complex process of inquiry drawing on multiple dimension such as "observing, imagining, reading, interpreting, reflecting, analyzing, assessing, formulating and articulating" (Baehr 2011, 1). Envisioning leadership as emerging through social engagement further complicates the process of inquiry by multiplying the voices engaged and introducing the need for group consensus. Although intellectual virtue is not a new topic—both Aristotle and later Thomas Aquinas expounded on the important relationship between virtue and knowledge—virtue theory in general was eclipsed by deontological and consequential ethical theories for most of the 19th and 20th centuries. Contemporary theories of virtue epistemology did not return until the late twentieth century with the faculty based "virtue reliabilist" theories of Ernest Sosa (Baehr 2011; DePaul and Zagzebski 2003). Virtue reliabilists focused on "faculties or abilities like memory, vision, hearing, reason and introspection" as "truth-conducive" or virtues leading to "good" knowledge (Baehr 2011). While categorized as intellectual *virtues*, they do not represent a virtuous mean but rather virtuous capacity, you either have it or you do not. However, building on the theme of virtue epistemology, Lorraine Code (1984) proposed a character-based approach to epistemological virtue, grounded in personal responsibility (virtue responsibilism) rather than innate faculties (Baehr 2011; DePaul and Zagzebski 2003). Virtue responsibilism focuses on the behavioral characteristics such as intellectual courage and open-mindedness (Baehr 2011), intellectual humility (Roberts and Wood 2003) and intellectual firmness, autonomy and generosity (Roberts and Wood 2007), which, as with moral virtues, reflect a measure of appropriate behavior.

Although the contemporary field of virtue epistemology is still in its early stages, leadership research in this area could contribute to a better understanding of the as-practice needs of leadership. The collaborative social engagement of emergent leadership brings with it diverse perspectives and individual interpretations. While intellectual virtue is a valuable concern for individual leaders and their interaction with others, its significance is enhanced by the epistemologically emergent nature of leadership as a social phenomenon.

The social phenomenon of leadership and in particular the understanding of leadership as socially constructed reflects a linguistic turn in organizational theory as a whole (Fairhurst 2009; Werhane 2018; Alvesson and Kärreman 2000) that in turn calls into question the modernist view of autonomous reason in which reason stands alone in its ability to objectively produce "clear and distinct ideas" (Jung 2011). Casting leadership as socially emerging suggests that reasoning, rather than based on universal claims of logic, is likewise a social process, and, in this context, calls for a philosophical reassessment of reason and rationality. Calvin Schrag's (1986, 1992) theory of communicative praxis and in particular his concept of transversal rationality provides insights into the role of reason and rationality in a socially engaged and complex world. Schrag describes communicative praxis as "a process of making something manifest through the hermeneutical displays of word and deed" (2003, 184). The

concept of hermeneutical displays of words and deeds is one that is particularly relevant to the complex social environment from which leadership emerges. Schrag's project is one of shifting the focus of human interaction away from the need for the attainment of certainty and rather toward a desire for a "fitting response" leading to actions that are proper or appropriate (2003).

From Schrag's perspective, understanding is the result of a transversal rationality that emerges through the interaction of observation, interpretation, conversation and behavior, which "makes manifest the world of thought and action" (2003, 184). Transversal rationality avoids the pitfalls of leader-centric approaches through "dialectical enrichment" and a heightened "self-understanding in each of the involved groups through a mutual acknowledgement and sets the requirement for adjustments and accommodations in recognition of the contributions of several groups" (Schrag 1992, 152). Furthermore, Schrag aligns communicative praxis with Aristotle's concept of wisdom (phronesis) and in doing so can be viewed as supportive of the organizational need for action and practical accomplishment. Further research into communicative praxis and transversal rationality can contribute to a more informed understanding of the socially emergent phenomenon of leadership.

While epistemic virtue, communicative praxis and the theory of transversal rationality can add value to an individual or leader-centric philosophy of leadership, the demands of complex social interaction and the uncertainty associated with leadership as an emergent phenomenon require a more robust philosophical ground that such theories can provide.

Conclusion

As the review of literature points out, until recently the dominant paradigm in leadership studies as well as the popular press continued to be leader-centric and emphasize a leadership perspective of "one person getting other people to do something" (Ciulla 2003). Leader-follower language is not without merit. Our ever-changing world—social conflicts, shifting demographics, disruptive technologies—reminds us that organizations need leadership. Heroic stories of individual leaders rising from obscurity and leading society out of some dark crisis or propelling an organization toward future greatness are inspirational, however they are an incomplete view of leadership. This article suggests that there exist other, significantly different, routes to leadership. Rather than a defined quantity or a step-by-step procedure to be followed, post-heroic theories of leadership such as L-A-P reframe leadership as an emergent social phenomenon.

It is the view of this article that post-heroic theories of leadership as a socially emergent phenomenon more effectively portray the as-lived experience of leadership. By paying attention to the lived experience of achieving real change we see interactions between diverse others and the emergence of knowledge and understanding that is facilitated through an ethic of mutual responsibility. Understanding leadership as a complex social phenomenon suggests that to study leadership theory with the hope of choosing the one person that will propel you or your organization to greatness is akin to timing the market. Just as modern portfolio theory suggests a strategy of diversity to combat market complexity and volatility in order to maximize return, the of understanding leadership as a socially emergent phenomenon similarly leverages diverse and complex social interactions to achieve real change. When leadership is framed as a phenomenon, the agency of historic leader-centric models is called into question, which in turn dramatically changes what we perceive to be the function of leaders. Shifting our view of leadership in this way implies that the role of leaders

likewise shifts from an elite position of authority to an accountability for helping to ensure that the necessary conditions for leadership to occur exist.

Defining leadership as an emergent social phenomenon led to a reassessment of its philosophical underpinnings. This article suggests that ontologically, leadership begins with a call based on the perceived need for real change that can only be realized through effective social engagement that leads to the collectively desired real change before leading to ontological emergence. Similarly, epistemological emergence is the result of a hermeneutic of acquiring new experiences and reassessing prior understanding. Ethically, as a social phenomenon, leadership is not only grounded but reliant upon a responsibility to the diverse others and cannot be separated from ethics. The notion of emergence has a profound impact on how we philosophically engage leadership. Future research is needed on the ethical and epistemological implications of leadership as a socially emergent phenomenon and might be found by engaging the growing field of virtue epistemology and connect that to existing theories of communicative praxis and transversal rationality.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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