

Guest Editors' Introduction

**Philosophical Approaches to Leadership Ethics:
Perspectives on the Self and Responsibility to Others**

Joanne B. Ciulla
Rutgers University
jciulla@business.rutgers.edu

David Knights
Lancaster University
d.knights@lancaster.ac.uk

Chris Mabey
Middlesex University
C.Mabey@mdx.ac.uk

Leah Tomkins
The Open University
Leah.tomkins@open.ac.uk

ABSTRACT: This article introduces the second of two special issues on philosophical approaches to leadership ethics. In this issue the articles draw on the works of Plato, Niccolò Machiavelli, Michel Foucault, and Jürgen Habermas to explore questions in leadership ethics concerning leaders' self-knowledge and self-constitution and their responsibilities to their followers. The articles in this issue demonstrate the potential of philosophy to deepen our understanding of leadership and ethics.

KEY WORDS: leadership ethics, ethical leadership, leadership and philosophy, self-knowledge, Plato, Machiavelli, Foucault, Habermas

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As we noted in the introduction to the first of our two special issues, we embarked on this project because we wanted to encourage a more philosophical approach to the study of ethics in leadership studies.¹ We argued that ethics and leadership are intimately intertwined; ethical action in groups, organizations, and society is difficult unless leadership of some collective or communal shape or form is exercised, and it is often precisely the ethics, rather than the efficacy, of action that generates the greatest problems. For the field of leadership ethics to flourish, it must develop a stronger philosophical foundation to balance and complement the growing empirical literature in this area.² Hence, we hope to encourage philosophers to write about key issues of leading and leaders, and leadership scholars to engage more with philosophical concepts and literature.

In our previous introduction, we discussed some of the ethical challenges that have confronted leadership throughout the ages. These included problems related to conflicts between a leader's self-interest and the interests of followers, the dirty hands problem, and the tension between the need for leaders to be both effective and ethical. Our first introduction also explored the nature of responsible leadership, and how ethics may not necessarily be the outcome of conscious intentions but sometimes just happenstance or moral luck. In addition to these topics, we examined the ethical conundrums and potentialities of power and we noted the problems faced by women and others that can arise from masculinized, white, heterosexual, concepts of leadership. Lastly, while we did not publish any articles on spirituality, we acknowledged the burgeoning literature on religion, spirituality, and leadership, and the growing number of organizational scholars who question secular ethics as the prevailing norm in the study of leadership and management.³

The papers in this issue zero in on some of the themes discussed in the first introduction that are related to the self, dirty hands, and leaders' responsibilities to followers. Plato writes about the importance of self-knowledge and self-development for understanding

the nature of the ‘good’ or anything else for that matter. For example, in the *Phaedrus* (230-230b) Socrates says, “I can’t as yet ‘know myself,’ as the inscription at Delphi enjoins, and so as long as ignorance remains, it seems to me ridiculous to inquire into extraneous matters.”⁴ Foucault too is interested in the relationship between the self and ethics, engaging with Socrates and Plato to place self-knowledge within a broader ethical project of self-care. Foucault, like many other philosophers, argues that we must gain mastery over ourselves and reject all domination including enslavement to our own desires and this can engender not only a philosophical, but also a spiritual, mode of being.⁵ In a similar vein, Confucius writes: “If a man (the ruler) can for one day master himself and return to propriety, all under heaven will return to humanity. To practice humanity depends on oneself.”⁶

Machiavelli also understands the challenges that the obligations of leadership create for the morality of leaders. He takes us into the heart of the dirty hands problem because he understands that sometimes there is a personal ethical cost that leaders pay to carry out their obligations to followers—they must learn how not to be good.⁷ When leaders fail to do this in dirty hands situations, people in organizations and societies pay the price. We often regard the idea that the ends justify the means as a recipe for bad behavior, but Machiavelli compels us to consider the alternative to this when people’s lives are on the line.

Habermas’s work also focuses on the responsibilities of leadership and the social order of a different kind—one that is based on consensus. His extensive work on discourse and communicative reasoning offers a means for acknowledging and tolerating people’s differences, building consensus, and bringing them together.⁸ Habermas’s approach offers leaders a way to minimize or prevent some types of dirty hands problems. Leaders can avoid harming one group to help another by bringing different groups and interests together. These

are just a few examples of how philosophical literature can shed light on our understanding of ethics in leadership.

THE ARTICLES IN THIS ISSUE

Drawing on the works of Plato, Niccolò Machiavelli, Michel Foucault, and Jürgen Habermas, the authors of the four articles in this issue use the work of these philosophers to offer new insights into some key issues in leadership ethics. It seems apt to begin with Plato, since so much of Western ethics defines itself in relation to Plato, whether by developing his ideas for contemporary application or challenging them to offer a contrasting view. In our first paper, David Bauman presents an analysis of five leadership types, based on Plato's virtue ethics in the *Republic*.⁹ The optimal model for leadership is the philosopher-king, whose primary motivation is wisdom. The philosopher king is followed by four progressively less virtuous types: The timocrat, who is motivated by honour and victory; the oligarch, who is focused on wealth; the democrat, for whom freedom is the highest good; and finally, the tyrant, who is driven by power, lust and luxury. This taxonomy of leadership is set against the backdrop of the Platonic notion of the ideal state and, by extension, the ideal organization, in which the task of ethics is to discover the essence of virtue. As Bauman argues, "a philosopher-leader could ask, 'what is the *true* good, as opposed to the CFO's opinion of what is good?' Seeking the true nature of 'good' is what philosopher-leaders do."¹⁰ From the Platonic perspective, people have different natures, which make them more or less suitable for leadership; albeit that this true nature is nurtured, developed and honed through years of experience, training and reflection. An emphasis on self-discovery is thus at the core of leadership ethics, creating a foundation for development and selection programmes for current and future leaders. In this view, the key questions for leaders are: Who am I?; whom do I want to become?; and how do I become that person?

In our next paper, Christopher Cosans and Christopher Reina take us to the heart of the dirty hands problem, suggesting that the challenge for leaders is to try to find the least bad of several bad options.¹¹ Their analysis is explicitly contrasted with the Platonic view, and it insists that we must focus on what actually happens in the real world, rather than in the sphere of abstract idealism. In this real world, leaders are faced with constraints, threats, and quandaries, which require an ethics of compromise, rather than of excellence or perfection. The authors seek to rehabilitate Machiavellian philosophy from its misleading associations with evil and psychopathy. Indeed, they offer us a mischievous assessment of how poorly Machiavelli himself would have scored on the Mach IV personality scale, highlighting the distortions that have crept into both popular and psychological operationalizations of his work. Machiavelli's *The Prince* offers "not a rejection of morality altogether, but a moral theory that accounts for moral dilemmas, where something bad happens no matter what one does."¹² The choice, therefore, is not between good and bad, but between two bads; and the leadership challenge is to evaluate a situation realistically and pragmatically before deciding upon the lesser of two evils. Echoes of these ideas are traced in contemporary notions of distributed, contingent, and situational leadership, and in the dynamics of 'soft' and 'hard' power. From this perspective, leadership ethics is grounded contextually, socially, and historically, permitting a reevaluation of Machiavelli in terms of *his* understanding of social duty and the moral imperative to defend the social order against lawlessness and corruption. This emphasis on Machiavelli's subtlety, nuance, and irony suggests a leadership ethics which is guided by a pragmatic assessment of the possibilities, priorities, and limitations of leaders' real-world experiences.

An emphasis on limitations is also a central feature of our next paper, where Donna Ladkin draws on Foucault to propose that ethical leadership requires a process of self-constitution.¹³ She argues that the relationship between power, knowledge, resistance, and

freedom is crucial for our understanding of leadership ethics. This is not power in the traditional hierarchical sense; instead, Foucauldian disciplinary power is one that controls behaviour, attitudes, and identities through practices of surveillance and normalisation. From this perspective, we are all embedded in disciplinary regimes, which limit our capacity to act with full autonomy over our actions. The challenge, accordingly, is one of self-constitution, that is, of fashioning oneself into an ethical subject in order to embrace the freedom to act ethically. This involves striving to loosen the stranglehold of prevailing orthodoxies and things we just take for granted —those “invisible cages which hold expectations in place and which can limit manoeuvrability.”¹⁴ It requires critical self-reflection to expose one’s own instincts, tendencies, and blind-spots - in other words, to overcome oneself through self-mastery. And finally, it demands an understanding of the networks of power, within which power and resistance are inextricably interwoven. In this view, the ethical endeavour involves anticipating resistance and limitations; and challenging the way such constraints initially seem inevitable. Notwithstanding its critical tenor, this is a vision of hope. As Ladkin concludes, “through the process of self-constitution and the type of alertness it fosters, the fissures, the cracks, the loosening of what is self-evident can be grasped and grappled with. And it is this grappling, this unwillingness to accept ‘what is’ without interrogating its claims to correctness, which fosters the freedom essential to ethical agency on the part of not just leaders, but of us all.”¹⁵

Our final paper sees the responsible leader as someone who fosters relationships and facilitates dialogue with and between stakeholders. Moritz Patzer, Christian Voegtlin, and Andreas Georg Scherer draw on Habermas to reconfigure the scope of business ethics and urge reconciliation between corporate and societal interests.¹⁶ They invoke philosophy to tackle the challenges of our age, which is characterized by increased globalization, multiculturalism, mass migration, and diversity, alongside a hardening of national and

religious ideologies and identities. They explore the practice of stakeholder relations as a crucial element of leadership that offers the possibility of greater social integration based on the articulation and understanding of the values of a shared lifeworld. The lifeworld is the domain of informal, lived experience—unregulated by the market—wherein the values of family, culture, relationships, and meaning guide our attitudes and actions, often unconsciously. As the authors suggest, “the more an issue touches upon aspects of a shared lifeworld, the more it requires a communicative action orientation and a higher degree of participative decision making.”¹⁷ Stakeholder engagement thereby becomes more than the superficial seeking of sign-off on programs which are already formulated; it is the attempt to solicit genuinely participative decision making, deliberation, and debate. Leadership ethics is thus a profoundly communicative endeavor wherein “responsible leaders become conscious initiators and moderators of stakeholder dialogues.”¹⁸ Communicative reasoning encourages a greater tolerance of difference than strategic reasoning, with its narrower focus on specific goals and outcomes. It moves towards the possibility of consensus and a sense of collective ownership of decisions. At the heart of this proposition is the notion of values, not as some homogenizing corporate initiative, but as a means of acknowledging the interests, concerns and sources of meaning that bring us together as human beings, rather than those which drive us apart.

CONCLUSION

~~The philosophical works that inform the articles in this special issue prompt us to take a deeper look at the nature of ethics in leadership.~~ The philosophical works that underpin the articles in this special issue prompt further inquiry into the nature of ethics in leadership, with powerful implications for the question of where ethical leadership comes from and why leaders fail to be ethical. With Plato, we have an emphasis on self-discovery, which focuses

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our attention on the basic psychologies of different leadership types. This stands in contrast to Foucault, who emphasises the more dynamic and social notion of self-formation rather than self-discovery, and encourages us to consider the processes of critical self-reflection through which one can fashion oneself into the sort of person who takes ethical decisions and ethical action. Self-constitution also informs Habermas' philosophy, which suggests that ethical leadership can be talked into existence, and that the responsible leader is first and foremost a communicator. And with Machiavelli, we see the ethical agent as one who is able and willing to compromise and make pragmatic assessments of the real-world challenges that arise.

~~The critical and philosophical articles in this special issue demonstrate the potential of philosophy to deepen our understanding of leadership and ethics.~~ The articles in this issue evidence the potential of philosophy to deepen our understanding of leadership and ethics.

Along with those in our first special issue,¹⁹ they offer researchers and scholars a richer understanding of the complex ethical challenges of leadership. One of the great ironies of leadership is that when a country, a business, or an organization runs smoothly, we pay little attention to the ethics of its leaders; however, when things go wrong, we are compelled to do so. With these two special issues, we call for leadership to be interrogated from an ethical point of view, regardless of whether things are going well or badly. Leadership ethics is a relatively new area of applied ethics that promises to offer insights into leadership that will be useful for understanding how to better promote ethical leadership and prevent unethical leadership.

~~We hope that these articles stimulate the interest of *Business Ethics Quarterly* readers and inspire them to contribute their own work to the literature of this important emerging field of study.~~ We hope that the articles in both issues expand the interest of the journal's readers, catalyzing new contributions that draw on philosophical perspectives from a variety of academic and cultural traditions.²⁰

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received a large number of submissions for the special issues and most could not be published, but we are grateful to all who submitted, as well as to the many reviewers who offered their assistance, criticism, and encouragement to a wide range of authors. We also appreciate the advice provided by the journal's editors that helped us bring these two issues to fruition.

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NOTES

1 Joanne B. Ciulla, David Knights, Chris Mabey, and Leah Tomkins (2018). “Guest Editors’ Introduction: Philosophical Contributions to Leadership Ethics,” *Business Ethics Quarterly* 28, no. 1 (January 2018): 1-14.

2 Joanne B. Ciulla, “Leadership Ethics: Mapping the Territory,” *Business Ethics Quarterly* 5, no. 1 (January, 1995): 5–24.

3 Kent D. Miller, “Organizational Research as Practical Theology,” *Organizational Research Methods* 18, no. 2 (2015): 276-299.

4 Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. R. Hackforth, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato, Including the Letters*, ed. Edith Hamilton & Huntington Cairns (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971), 478.

5 Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984*, ed. Paul Rabinow, vol. 1 (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1997).

6 Confucius, “Selections from the *Analects*,” in *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Wing-Tsit Chan (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), 38.

7 Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Quenton Skinner and Russell Price (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

8 Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, trans. T. McCarth, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987).

9 David C. Bauman, “Plato on Virtuous Leadership: An Ancient Model for Modern Business,” *Business Ethics Quarterly* 28 no. 3 (July 2018): XXX-XXX.

[NOTE TO COPYEDITOR AND TYPESETTER: These XXX entries are page numbers for articles appearing in same print issue of the journal; correct page numbers to be added at issue proof stage.]

10 Bauman, XXX.

11 Christopher E. Cosans and Christopher S. Reina, “The Leadership Ethics of Machiavelli’s *Prince*,” *Business Ethics Quarterly* 28 no. 3 (July 2018): XXX-XXX.

12 Cosans and Reina, XXX.

13 Donna Ladkin, “Self-Constitution as the Foundation for Leading Ethically: A Foucauldian Possibility,” *Business Ethics Quarterly* 28 no. 3 (July 2018): XXX-XXX.

14 Ladkin, XXX.

15 Ladkin, XXX.

16 Moritz Patzer, Christian Voegtlin, and Andreas Georg Scherer, "The Normative Justification of Integrative Stakeholder Engagement: A Habermasian View on Responsible Leadership," *Business Ethics Quarterly* 28 no. 3 (July 2018): XXX-XXX.

17 Patzer, Voegtlin, and Scherer, XXX.

18 Patzer, Voegtlin, and Scherer, XXX

19 *Business Ethics Quarterly*, vol. 28, no. 1 (January 2018).

20 For a three-volume reference work with a number of primary sources in this area, see Joanne B. Ciulla, Mary Uhl-Bien, and Patricia H. Werhane, eds., *Leadership Ethics* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2013).

AUTHOR BIOS

JOANNE B. CIULLA is professor of leadership ethics and director of the Institute for Ethical Leadership at Rutgers Business School. Prior to joining Rutgers, she was a founding faculty member of the Jepson School of Leadership Studies at the University of Richmond. She has published extensively on leadership ethics and her edited and coedited collections have contributed to the development of the field of leadership ethics. A philosopher by training, her own work explores the philosophically distinctive aspects of leadership. She also publishes on business ethics, with a special interest in questions related to meaningful work and the ethics of work. Ciulla serves on the editorial boards of the *Business Ethics Quarterly*, *The Leadership Quarterly*, *Leadership*, and *Leadership and the Humanities*. She is series editor of the "New Horizons in Leadership Studies" series, which is one of the largest series of humanities-based books on leadership studies.

DAVID KNIGHTS is Professor at the Lancaster University Management School, UK. His research is in the fields of leadership, power and identity, gender and diversity, the body, and ethics. His most recent publication is "Pushing the Boundaries of Amnesia and Myopia: A Critical Review of the Literature on Identity in *Management and Organization Studies*," (with C. Clarke, 2017) in the *International Journal of Management Reviews*.

CHRIS MABEY is professor in leadership at Middlesex University Business School, UK and a chartered psychologist with the British Psychology Society. Mabey has held a career-long interest in leadership development, first as a student counsellor for a Christian charity, then as an occupational psychologist with British Telecom and in leadership training with Rank Xerox (UK) plc. He has worked in a variety of sectors as a management consultant, with a focus on executive coaching, team-based development and leadership development of top teams. Recent books include *Developing Leadership: Questions Business Schools Don't Ask* (edited with W. Mayrhofer, Sage, 2015) and *Management and Leadership Development* (with T. Finch-Lees, Sage, 2008). Mabey recently led an ESRC-funded seminar series on "Ethical Leadership: Philosophical and Spiritual Approaches."

LEAH TOMKINS is senior lecturer in organisation and leadership studies at the Open University, UK. Her research focuses on the lived experience of work and working

relationships, drawing mainly on existentialist and phenomenological philosophies to interpret the meaning, ethics, and felt sense of organisational life. Prior to entering academia, Tomkins held senior leadership positions in industry, specialising in large-scale transformational change, including for the UK's civil service. Much of her focus today is on exploring the complexities of these leadership experiences which were not discussed in the textbooks, methodologies, coaching sessions, and leadership development programmes that were available to her at the time. Her work has appeared in a range of leading journals, including *Organization Studies*, *Organization*, *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, *Management Learning*, *The Humanistic Psychologist*, and *Greece and Rome*.