

# **Challenging Humanist Leadership: Towards an embodied, ethical, and effective neo-humanist, enlightenment approach**

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## **Introduction**

There has been a proliferation of new directions in research on leadership over recent years (Tourish, 2013; Collinson, 2014; Jones, 2014; Gardner et al., 2010; Dinh et al., 2014; Hawkins, 2015; Raelin, 2016a; b; Wilson, 2016; Wilson et al., 2018; Carroll et al., 2019). While comprising innovative and refreshing ideas, few if any of these new directions have identified humanism as a potential constraint on thinking differently about the theory and practice of leadership. The contribution of this article is to outline some possibilities in which a neo-humanist approach – one that resists the imperative of humans to realize their individual potential – might stimulate developments towards a theory of leadership that embraces a more embodied and ethical sense of its practice (Pullen and Rhodes, 2014). The connection between embodiment and ethics relates to Levinas's (1998) view of an ethics of responsibility preceding social existence yet encapsulated in the embodied face-to-face relation with the Other<sup>i</sup>. Practices that are principally cognitive tend to be disembodied and sufficiently distant from the other in social relations *not* to care or feel an ethics of responsibility. However, while embodiment may be necessary, it is not a sufficient condition for the ethical leader has also to want others to be as embodied and engaged in the leadership process as they are themselves. The problem is that leaders, like Trump, can be embodied and engage other embodied subjects in their leadership practices through demagoguery and unethical strategies of developing cults of exclusivity and the demonisation of outsiders as enemies. By contrast, I want to encourage leadership of collective, embodied engagement where, as in mycelium polyphony, 'streams of embodiment ... commingle' (Sheldrake, 2020: 61) in ways that embrace inclusion and

unification rather than exclusion and division. This may be raising rather grandiose expectations but then I am inspired by the argument that we should refrain from asking ‘smaller and smaller questions about fewer and fewer issues of genuine significance, producing statements of the blindingly obvious, the completely irrelevant or the palpably absurd’ (Tourish, 2015: 137).

The paper aims to develop a neo-humanist Enlightenment deconstruction of the authoritarian and totalising strains within contemporary perceptions of, and prescriptions for, leadership. Simultaneously, this will involve showing how democratic and humanistic mystifications of leadership can conceal or create a ‘smoke and mirrors’ imagery to camouflage or disguise the autocratic legacies that remain within its practice. The problematic of the paper revolves around the relationship between Enlightenment reasoning and the philosophy of humanism that legitimizes individualistic and often heroic theories and practices of leadership. It focuses on the research question as to whether or not it is possible to disassociate Enlightenment reasoning from humanistic concerns to treat the self as autonomous and “caught up” in an intractable search for some ‘unrealisable’ potential. Presuming this possibility, the paper pursues a neo-humanist enlightenment approach that might advance both a more embodied and ethical form of leadership but also one that encourages an engagement with, rather than resistance or indifference to, its practice. Partly, as a result of democratic, educational and media developments, populations are tending to expect more involvement in decisions that affect their lives. They not only are inclined to resist coercive, but also false participative, forms of leadership and this leaves a very large door open for ways of thinking beyond a humanist approach. This would involve recognising that leadership is not the exclusive possession or right of a single individual so much as a practice that is the more effective the more, we all engage in it. Moreover, this engagement should not just revolve around a cognitive evaluation

of options but entail a fully embodied and ethical involvement in the nuances as well as the broader issues of any problem. Also, the direction this takes cannot, and should not, be legislated for in advance of people exploring the possibilities of their embodied engagement in collective and communal leadership as a process of commingling. It means departing from liberal and humanistic forms of leadership that tend only to normalize hierarchies of inequality through a self-discipline in which individuals participate in the reproduction of their own disadvantages (Learmonth and Morrell, 2019).

After this brief introduction, the paper begins by distinguishing leadership as less what it *is* than what it *does*, and this is followed by an analysis of its performative effects. This is followed, in the second section, with a limited examination of the ideas concerning the tacit assumptions of humanism within the theory and practice of leadership and this is illustrated through the example of authentic leadership. The third section seeks to demonstrate some of the repressive features of humanism followed by critical reflections on the autonomous self in studying leadership. Finally, in the fourth section, I provide my attempts to develop a neo-humanist enlightenment framework for studying leadership before a brief conclusion that identifies certain weaknesses as well as the contributions and implications of the paper especially concerning the crises of climate change and zoonotic disease-driven, health pandemics.

### **Doing Leadership as a Performative Experience**

Leadership has always carried with it considerable ambiguity not least because of the diversity and multiplicity of definitions – almost as many as the number of authors writing about it (Stodgill, 1974; Yukl, 1989 [2006]). It is also quite repetitive in claiming direction, influence, common goals, and inspiration as its key features. A more theoretically sophisticated definition

has been provided where, drawing on Aristotelian virtue ethics, leadership is seen as ‘a master virtue that serves human flourishing’ (Levine and Boaks, 2014: 240). While here there is an element of collective responsibility built into the definition, it merely deflects the problems of reaching any consensus onto a concept of human flourishing that is equally as contentious as leadership itself. More importantly, these definitions are problematic not least because they foreclose on the issue of whether or not we can decide what leadership is independent of its practice. Instead, a consensus on the aims and objectives of leadership is often presumed in advance of any investigation (e.g., Silva, 2018). In addition to these criticisms, there is a tendency for definitions of leadership to be individualistic due partly to the colonization of the subject matter by academic psychologists (Fairhurst and Connaughton, 2014) and treatments of it as the property of persons (Wray-Bliss, 2013; Knights, 2021). This may also reflect the pervasive trajectories of individualizing discourses of pastoral and disciplinary power constituting subjectivity through governmentality and biopower (Foucault, 1991b: 54) within modern liberal democracies. However, this should not make us overly pessimistic for there is not a ‘single, uniform technology of translation through which governmentality universally operates’ (Martin and Waring, 2018: 1306). Consequently, while it is true that individualization ties us to our own ‘identity by a conscience or self-knowledge’ (Foucault, 1982: 212), there is always space for ‘refusing to be what one has become’ (ibid.) through different often inconsistent regimes of governmentality.

Because of the difficulty of reaching any consensus, some authors dispense with providing definitions of leadership altogether (Ciulla, 1995; Grint, 2000; Crevani, 2018). Ciulla claims that we should concentrate attention on ethical leadership as this reflects certain fundamental shared social values (1995, 17), but while ethics is of the utmost importance, it is hardly less contested than questions of defining leadership. Grint avoids the problems of definition simply

by contrasting four approaches in a 4X4 model along the 2 dimensions of individual versus collective and essentialist versus non-essentialist and claiming that a social constructionist perspective that is collective and non-essentialist is beginning to be favoured by theorists (2000: 2). By contrast, Crevani subscribes to a process ontology (Langley et al., 2013) that is more concerned with what leadership *does* rather than what it is and, in particular, the sense *not* of what individuals do so much as what leadership *processes* do to organizational ‘practices’ (Crevani, 2018:84).

I agree with these approaches of abandoning the direct pursuit of defining leadership in terms of what it *is* rather than on what it *does*, for performative understandings of concepts escape the static and universalising implications of definitions (Wood, 2005; Crevani et al., 2010). They also avoid the essentialism underlying a ‘metaphysics of presence’ (Kelly, 2014: 906) where leadership is treated as a concrete entity rather than merely a political claim for power, privilege and proficiency (Learmonth and Morrell, 2019). Performative understandings can also direct our attention to the way that leadership changes dramatically depending on the context in which it is performed. This context is both historical and contemporary for it varies over time and space, is affected by cultural, economic, political and social conditions and is different when leadership is exercised in one kind of an organization in contrast to another. Although not accepting any consensus on the ethics of leadership simply because it connects with universal moral values (Ciulla, 1995), performative approaches draw us to ethical matters in ways that do not require us to focus simply or exclusively on the moral character of the so-called leader. Instead, we can examine the communal and collective sense in which leadership unfolds in different contexts and circumstances (Wilson; 2016; Wilson et al ., 2018).

Performativity has at least two distinct meanings both of which have some relevance for studies of leadership. The first was developed by Lyotard's (1979) discussions of performativity denoting increased labour productivity as a result of work intensification (Fournier and Grey, 2000). In a sense, this is more linked to the notion of performance so that perhaps performativity is better regarded as a theoretical construct; it is deployed to imply processual enactments that have intended as well as unintended effects both for the agents and their audience (Butler, 2011). It has its genesis in the linguistic deliberations of Austin (1962) who contrasted constative utterances as mere descriptions with performatives that anticipate or seek to bring about the very events, they claim merely to describe. Also, performativity 'cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms' (Butler, 1993: 93). This 'forced reiteration of norms' serves to constrain the conditions within which subjects are involved in any kind of action (Butler, *ibid*: 194).

In relation to a number of leadership studies, this 'compulsory constraint' (*ibid.*) involves a range of norms whereby compliance, if not consent, is materialized through 'directions, alignments and commitments' (Drath et al., 2008). Prevalent and often dominant within this framework are humanist norms enabling or compelling subjects to maximize their human potential. Focusing on a realization of each individual's human potential, leaders can readily *align* this with the *directions* and *commitments* of the organization. By so doing, a self-discipline is generated on the basis that it would seem churlish to withhold compliance or consent from leadership that is intent on advancing the employee's self-development. However, as I shall seek to argue, leadership informed by a humanist mantra can be softly repressive in its demands on individuals to discipline themselves in pursuit of ever-receding goals of self-realized potential.

Many critical management theorists have taken an anti-or non-performative stance (Lyotard, 1979) that rejects the means-ends rationality of leadership (Fournier and Grey, 2000) and seeks to replace it with the ideals of labour liberation and participation. Some critical performative theorists have claimed that this negativity in regard to leadership is naïve since, in practice, effective and efficient organizations depend upon leadership and management and neither employees nor consumers would want to sacrifice this for some idealized conception of liberty (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012, 369). However, it has been claimed that this approach to critical performativity obscures a number of important distinctions, for example, between performativity as an intensification of labour and productivity and its linguistic usage whereby it creates the very behaviour it speaks about (Austin, 1962) as well as its sociomaterial network manifestations (Callon, 2010; Cabantous et al., 2016). Spicer et al (2016) have responded to this critique by arguing that rather than being locked into internal intellectual debates and an authoritarian policing of our discipline, critical performativity should be demanding that academic research is relevant in relation to public issues<sup>ii</sup> (Spicer, Alvesson & Kärreman, 2016). It is difficult to see how their demand for public relevance is not also a form of policing but, leaving that aside, is it not necessary for academics to draw on their intellectual expertise in offering distinctive solutions to practical or political problems otherwise how could they (we) compete with journalists?

The difference between these two sets of theorists is that while Spicer et al are concerned to be eclectic in their use and development of critical performativity in pursuit of *interventions* around issues of practical and political concern, Cabantous et al (2016) feel this weakens its potential as a tool for critical theory and practice. While these cannot be seen as mutually exclusive approaches, the bigger problem is how to achieve the interventions. Spicer et al (2016: 242) mention the Financial Institutions Forum<sup>iii</sup> that I and a colleague instigated in 1994

as a vehicle for critical management interventions into business leadership and management practice. Amongst other issues, this Forum aimed to challenge the masculine design of financial products and alert the industry to the problems of limited financial literacy among consumer. It also raised the dangers of hyperbole surrounding IT prior to the dot.com bubble burst and the treatment of new financial instruments as panaceas for the sector or even the economy more generally<sup>iv</sup> prior to the global financial crisis (GFC). I agree with Spicer et al's view that this was only a partial experimentation in creating forums for deliberation on issues that might otherwise be marginalized and that there was some tension between the speedy delivering of interesting research materials for the members and the longer-term interests of the academics in publishing in scholarly journals. The greater problem, however, was that of leadership within the organizations on whom the academics in the Forum sought to have some impact. For while at the outset senior leaders attended the Forum meetings, they withdrew because the majority were middle managers. This delegation to the middle ranks of the hierarchy meant that our critical insights and observations only occasionally reached key policy makers and thus had a limited political impact, although we would have no way of assessing its indirect effects.

Other theorists of critical performativity might criticise this analysis as focusing too much on agency when what is important are the conditions of its possibility. Combining a linguistic approach with Foucault's view that power/knowledge relations constitute subjectivity, Butler (1993) focuses specifically on the construction of identity which, because of its transient, impermanent and precarious condition is unendingly in a state of performativity. In relation to critical performativity, she argues that this precarity around what she calls a 'liveable life' has been significant in the proliferation of protest movements around the world (Butler, 2015) that



clearly have been organized through collective or communal leadership or without individual leaders (Munro and Thanem, 2019).

Butler (2015:15) argues that the conditions of possibility of the proliferation of protest assemblies is the increasing ‘precaritization’ of human life that stems from the neo-liberal, and it can be argued, the humanistic demand that every subject be personally responsible for their own wellbeing as entrepreneurial selves seeking to attain and sustain a secure and ‘successful’ life. A significant source of precarity is this ‘individualizing morality that makes a moral norm out of economic self-sufficiency precisely under conditions when self-sufficiency is becoming increasingly unrealizable’ (ibid: 18).

Of course, there have been several approaches that equally reject the individualistic, heroic, and prescriptive perspectives, the positivist epistemologies and the objectivist ontologies of mainstream leadership studies. So, for example, process and practice theorists (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Crevani et al., 2010; Crevani, 2018; Raelin, 2016b) eschew proprietary understandings of leadership as an attribute of individuals and distance themselves from causal-linear analyses of variables as representations that capture rather than construct reality. Instead, paralleling performative perspectives, they see leadership processes or practices doing the work of constituting leaders, those they profess to lead and the organizations that are their condition and consequence. These leadership processes or practices involve reiterated norms that constrain (Butler, 1993: 194) how leaders as individuals, groups or organized collectives act within the context of different sociomaterial conditions (Ropo and Salovaara, 2018).

These studies are extremely innovative in providing strong theoretical and practical challenges to mainstream leadership studies for their neglect of inequalities and ethical sensibilities.

However, few authors seemed to have traced the prior neglect of these issues to a taken for granted humanism which pervades the mainstream. The contribution of this paper is, then, to suggest that some of the limitations of leadership studies have resulted from an implicit, if not explicit, endorsement of the humanism handed down by enlightenment thinking. For, it feeds the individualism and imposition of personal responsibility for our own economic self-sufficiency that is one of the greatest dangers of our age. If there is anything of value to have arisen from the Coronavirus pandemic it is that our leaders have been forced into violating this individualizing morality with the state assuming the responsibility for its citizens. Whether this new-found collective morality will continue once the virus is contained is, of course, another question.

### **Leadership Theory and Practice**

It is perhaps quite rare for leadership theorists or practitioners to make explicit their humanism for, in contemporary society, it is much like the air we breathe – simply taken for granted. Of course, much of our humanism in the form of caring for others, a sense of community, an endorsement of human dignity and the demand for democratic participation is to be celebrated (Braidotti, 2013). Certainly, a posthumanism must not abandon what has historically been achieved; rather, its concern is the conflation of freedom with autonomy and how this ties the individual to a self that has few escapes from the fantasy of realizing its own limitless potential (Glynos, 2008). This humanist fantasy ‘is a perfect fusion of free-market ideals’ ... of economic growth and the myth of ... ‘limitless self-realization’ (Ekman, 2012: 1178) – an illusion that fuels the actions of leaders every bit as much as those of the led.

These humanistic values are evident in the way that mainstream leadership studies valorise individual autonomy both of the leader and those who are anticipated to benefit from leadership

practices. Wherever individual autonomy is elevated, invariably there is a belief that subjects must be provided with the conditions to realise their full human potential. It may then be necessary to treat a focus on individuals as a proxy for what can be seen as a metaphysical faith in humanistic ideals and here we do not merely have to refer to the mainstream since even critical theorists occasionally subscribe to such a view. For example, Alvesson et al frame their book around the term ‘high influential person’ (2017: 20) which, apart from deploying the individualistically derived concept of influence, focuses on the individual leader. Similarly, others also tend to focus on leadership as occurring ‘when *individuals* use influence to create change’ (Uhl-Bien, 2003:133, my emphasis).

A more direct humanistic intervention is manifest in claims that ‘there are many ways to develop your full leadership potential’ (Avioli, 2008: 8) and that by ‘realizing their potential, they develop a constellation of mental and emotional capacities that happen to be the very capacities for agile leadership’ (Joiner, 2008: 96). For those who are led, Llopis (2014: 1) argues that ‘the best leaders know how to get the most out of people; they enable the full potential in others’. Some practitioners have also endorsed the idea of human potential, although recognising that it may have limits dependent on inherited capacities (Cowper, 2016), whereas the Center for Advancing Leadership and Human Potential ‘envisions a world in which high-performing, fulfilled, and impactful leaders are the norm—not the exception’<sup>v</sup>. At a broader level, the Human Potential Movement (HPM) claimed that through the ‘development of "human potential", humans can experience an exceptional quality of *life* filled with *happiness, creativity, and fulfilment*’ and this frequently results in them ‘assisting others to release their *potential*’<sup>vi</sup>.

### *Authentic Leadership*

Another indirect identification of humanism is to be found in the increasing popularity of authentic leadership over recent years. Although problems deriving from the absence of authentic leadership had been noted for some time (Caza and Jackson, 2011: 352-3), it only became popular in 2003 as a response to the number of corporate scandals (Tourish and Vatcha, 2005) such as Poly Peck, 1990; BCCI, 1991; Enron, 2001; and Worldcom, 2002 (Knights and O'Leary, 2006). Theoretically, however, authentic leadership arose out of critiques of the manipulative elements often present in transformational approaches as well as resonating with a disillusionment concerning the morally dubious ways in which, despite their charisma, many leaders behaved in practice. This could be seen also to have anticipated the later concern to study leadership from an ethical and philosophical, and not just a performative and productivist, perspective (Ciulla, 2005; Ciulla et al., 2018).

Current research tends to focus on the leader becoming authentic through discovering a core sense of self and maintaining it through a diversity of temporal and spatial contexts (Kernis and Goldman, 2006). Here is revealed its individualistic and, it might be argued, narcissistic credentials (Lasch, 1979) as exemplified by many leaders throughout recent scandals as well as among those heading up nation-state governments. Nonetheless, drawing on the traditions of humanism, defenders suggest that knowing yourself and authenticity is a liberating force (Taylor, 2003) that could help to release followers (and perhaps society at large) from the toxic impact of the egotistic power of leaders. However, the notion of authenticity can do the reverse insofar as invariably it is grounded in an instrumentalism that is contradictory to its professed values (Alvesson and Einola, 2019) for it seems constrained by the demand to generate a more productive, profitable or efficient workforce (Avolio and Gardner, 2005). An appropriate authenticity has been described as not sharing everything but only what is expected to be effective in terms of success for the organization<sup>vii</sup>. Often it can be little more than a

‘secularized theological’ response to the terrible ‘sins’ of much organizational practice – a claim to redemption from the corruption, dishonour and scandal that has often prevailed (Delaney and Spoelstra, 2019: 105).

Yet, others have claimed that authentic leadership reinforces the tendency for much research to be ‘ill-defined, tautological, ideological and resist rigorous study’ (Alvesson and Einola, 2019: 394). While this is an indictment that perhaps few would dare to deliver, it fails to identify the most serious limitation of the authentic, or any other of the charismatic or transformational, approaches which are that they fail to question the attribution of leadership to an individual. In effect, authenticity becomes just one other way of solidifying a leader's identity by gaining devoted followers (Knights, 2021).

There is little question that similarly to how leadership theory and practice has subscribed to a strong sense of individualism, it has also tended to display humanistic values, and this has partly been stimulated because of the close associations between these movements advocating and campaigning for an ideology of human potential, the discipline of psychology and leadership theory and practice. So, for example, ‘the emergence of HPM is linked to *humanistic psychology*. The movement is strongly influenced by *Abraham Maslow's* theory of *self-actualization*’ (Puttick, 2004: 399) and, in its early days, was supported by an ex-journalist George Leonard whose book “Education and Ecstasy” (Leonard, 1969) was one of the most popular manifestoes, thereby helping to define the human potential movement. While the idea of knowing yourself extends back as far as Socrates in Ancient Greece, it was the Renaissance of the Middle Ages whereupon a humanism with its belief in honour, no longer legitimized by a transcendental God, drove the secularization of society (Carroll, 1993:14). However, within leadership, the impact of humanism was most likely a result of Maslow's (1943) appealing

theory of a hierarchy of individual needs with the self-realization of human potential at its pinnacle.

Although Maslow's hierarchy has been heavily criticized (Geller, 1982), the notion of potential has been less so yet 'potentiality is, in essence, the exhortation that every individual ought to see itself as always capable of "more" ... and this involves ... a series of ethical dangers deriving from the impossible promise it is making' (Costea et al., 2012: 26). Impossible because at every point of such a realization, the goalposts are moved and the subject is in a perpetual state of anxiety seeking to achieve an ever-receding 'limitless potential' (Glynos, 2008; Ekman, 2012: 1161). This leads me to consider the potentially repressive nature of humanism.

### **Authoritarian repression within humanism**

Since it is ordinarily understood as a liberating and democratic movement, it may be difficult to be convincing when claiming that humanism has authoritarian and repressive features that are reflected and reproduced within leadership theory and practice. Although there are numerous definitions of humanism, in general, they include a reference to rationality and reason, individual freedom, and a mantra of individuals realizing their own human potential. There is also an emphasis on human values such as art and culture, creativity, democracy, and science and, in most versions, a rejection of the dogmatic and universal beliefs of religion (for a full range of definitions see "The Amsterdam Declaration 2002"<sup>viii</sup>). How then with such a list of virtues can humanism be seen as facilitating authoritarian and repressive leadership?

As I have argued, within the workplace humanistic ideals can be traced back to the human relations movement of Elton Mayo (1933) but, as with recent developments in authentic or transformational leadership, the underlying concern was very much about control whereby the employee was treated humanely simply as a means of securing 'productivity precisely through personal involvement, autonomy, and individualization' (Ekman, 2012:1160).

Humanism has been seductive partly because of the fantasy of autonomy, 'free-will', reason, and the idea that we can all strive to realize our human potential that it promises (Fowler, 1999: 10-15). However, the notion of an autonomous individual is a contradiction in terms since not only are we dependent on one another for our very biological survival but also any sense of an individual self is constituted through our relations with others. Still leaders often adhere to this wholly contradictory conception of the self as an autonomous, rational and discrete entity not only for themselves but also for those they lead, partly because it can be a driver of human endeavour that obscures its negative costs. Moreover, when autonomy is combined with the legacy of the will to power and especially the imperative to realize our human potential in an ever-receding target and an unattainable ideal of perfection (Clarke and Knights, 2015), leadership is not only self-contradictory but also incredibly dangerous. For, leaders drive both themselves and others to the pursuit of achievement, self-realization and perfection that can be a debilitating burden, and even 'life-threatening' (Hyde, 2010: 4), given that there is no endpoint either logically or practically. There is a vast range of examples of humans sacrificing health or wellbeing in pursuit of some idealized image of perfection from anorexia among teenagers striving for what they may believe is the perfect body image, through athletes neglecting their bodies to achieve super-human performances to the long hours' culture and workaholism in employment in pursuing success (Di Stefano and Gaudiino, 2019; Thomson, 2019). These pursuits, of course, are not independent of pressures from culture, family, the

media, trainers and leaders all who contribute to the oppressive regime of humanism (Opdebeeck, 2017). The self-defeating nature of striving for unattainable ideals can only leave us all frustrated, resulting in us filling the inevitable vacuum of meaning, often by over-indulgence in consuming the material and symbolic world. No wonder that mental and physical malfunctioning, obesity, suicide, nationalism, inequality and environmental pollution are increasingly seen as dominant dangers for both civilization and the planet in the 21<sup>st</sup> century<sup>ix</sup>.

Humanism has tended to replace a faith in a supernatural God with an equivalent universalising and totalizing commitment to human autonomy, reason, and rationality as well as a repressive demand on individuals to pursue their human potential 'in an idealised future perfect identity' (Clarke and Knights, 2020: 813). Despite claims to eschew the dogmatic and universal faiths of religion, humanism acts like a secular faith in humans as 'masters of our own destiny to the point of being able to control our environment and be free of the limits experienced by animals (Gray, 2002: 4). Nowadays, however, we seem to be in a period of transition where the excesses of human supremacy are pitched against the intransigent forces of the natural world and indeed the whole planet and, in this era of health pandemics and climate change, we should need little reminding of the errors of our ways although, as Cicero remarked, while we are all inclined to errors, it takes a fool to keep repeating them.

Can all this then be laid at the feet of an authoritarian and repressive humanism? I believe it can and seek to demonstrate this by developing Foucault's posthumanism into a neo-humanist enlightenment approach to the study of leadership in the next section.

*Reflections on the autonomous self in studying leadership*



While arguing that autonomy is a central feature of leadership theory and practice, I have not yet interrogated it in relation to the humanist enlightenment philosophy in which it is embedded. There is little question that the literature on leadership is grounded in an individualistic conception of what it is to be human. On the other hand, the collective reaction against this, where the individual is understood to be a mere reflection of social forces, is equally problematic for it has been the foundation of totalitarian leadership from both extremes of the political spectrum – fascism and state communism. One solution is to develop Foucault's (1973: xiv) claim concerning the death of the subject or what has been better described as a 'political philosophy without human content' since this enables us to give equal weight to the individual and collective life without elevating one over the other (Bearn, 2019). The advantage of such a philosophy is that it discredits discriminatory ideas whereby some see themselves as entitled to an intersectional range of privileges based on their residence, race or ethnicity, class, religion or sex to give them some claim to authenticity that is denied to the other (Bearn, 2019: 106-7). In this era, the opposite trend has given rise to a resurgence of authoritarian, autocratic and populist, political leaders (e.g., Bolsonaro, Orban and Trump) some of whom have eradicated democracy in their countries (e.g., Chávez, Erdogan, Pinochet, and Putin). We need to be aware of how these leaders are often paranoid egocentrics (Ben-Ghiat, 2020) who demonize all their critics and surround themselves with subordinates who are obsequious and sycophantic, thus ensuring that decisions tend to reflect prejudice rather than collective and reasoned, embodied arguments (Knights, 2021).

These approaches to leadership have taken us far from a subjectless discourse that would allow us to de-centre the pre-eminence of the human subject as the legacy of humanism to acknowledge our human and non-human entanglements within the sociomaterial world (Barad, 2007). Such a discourse might enable us to interrogate identity so as to recognise that our

attachment to it is invariably unsustainable and often self-defeating. Here we can return to Foucault's (1961:23) earlier work on *Madness and Civilization* where he argued that 'self-attachment is the first sign of madness'. This was a theme that, despite what is seen as fundamental breaks in his thinking, Foucault continued throughout his writings. It was present in his argument that we have to refuse to be what we have become (our identity) through multiple exercises of power and knowledge (Foucault, 1982: 216) and in his concern for the self in body and soul, which is not just about individual wellbeing but also a way of caring for others (Foucault, 1997: 230; Ladkin, 2018). This care of the self (Foucault, 1988) is not the same as contemporary preoccupations with identity and the humanist realization of potential that confines and oppresses us for it involves a 'permanent critique of ourselves [that] must avoid the always too facile confusions between humanism and the enlightenment' (Foucault, 1997: 313). For leadership to become ethical it has to transcend humanistic preoccupations with the endless pursuit of realizing individual human potential, as this tends to reflect, reinforce or reproduce the egocentric self.

Ethical leadership, however, 'demands skilful alliance-building, sensitivity to shifting power dynamics, and a commitment to constant critique of oneself as well as the situation' (Ladkin, 2018: 318). It is not about complying with rules and regulations for this implies no risk and, indeed, removes what it is to be ethical where because of the contingencies of constraint, context, competencies and consequences, there is always a question of uncertainty and 'undecidability' (Derrida, 1992). 'Acting ethically differs from acting morally in that doing so, demands one aligning one's actions with one's beliefs about what is right *beyond the social mores* of the group' (Foucault, 1984a quoted in Ladkin, 2018: 311, my emphasis).

This leads me to an associated concern which is to explore the concept of 'contingency' which has been a major focus of leadership studies that sought to bring an end to the dominance of universalistic, essentialist and 'one best way', trait theories. First popularized by Fiedler (1967), contingency theory tended to replace unitary with an agency-context dualism where individual leaders were expected to take full account of any contingencies that formed the context of their leadership (Wilson et al., 2018). Overall, the concern was for leaders to control the contingency of the context and, in this sense, we can see how it was an agency-driven theory that feeds the attachment to individual autonomy and the preoccupation with identity as a way of overcoming the precarious contingencies that leadership confronts. By contrast, the thesis I am seeking to explore is one where leadership involves a detachment from self, human autonomy and the preoccupation with identity. As Foucault (1997) intimates in his reflections on the enlightenment, we can begin using autonomy against itself, in particular, to reject the normative legacy that is its humanistic framework. Much of that legacy is a preoccupation with order, harmony and stability or a concern to eradicate rather than embrace, the contingent self and context in both theory and practice. Part of this preoccupation with control or eradicating the contingent is an attachment to masculine identities which seek linear-rational control over anything outside the self and is heavily critiqued by feminists in leadership studies (e.g., Sinclair, 2005a; Pullen and Rhodes, 2008) and in social theory (Game, 1990; Clough, 1992; Braidotti, 2011). By contrast, a Foucauldian approach is irretrievably contingent since in embracing the precariousness of contingency, his genealogy eschews all sense of causality and determinacy (Kendall and Wickham, 1999). For ultimately, criticism 'will separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think' (Foucault, 1991a: 45-6). In other words, we can challenge the identity bequeathed to us by power, but this involves a departure from the desire to

eliminate, rather than to acknowledge and embrace, contingency so as to recognize it as a condition of organizational creativity and innovation (Knights, 2021).

At the same time as refusing to support the idea of an autonomous self because it fails to escape an individualistic sense of subjectivity that humanism seeks to sustain, it is nonetheless dangerous to be against autonomy per se. For some degree of autonomy (i.e. freethinking) is required to criticise the discursive practices of autonomy that have an individualistic effect on subjects. Paradoxically, then, autonomy is itself one of the necessary conditions of an auto-critique of the individualistic consequences of our humanistic preoccupation with the autonomous self. Auto-critique involves the deployment of the very idea or practice that is the object of criticism as a resource in advancing such a critique (Foucault, 1991a). For, to critique an increasingly individualised society, there has to be a degree of critical self-reflection that involves some degree of autonomy. Its absence would render us unable to stand apart from what we have become since the 18<sup>th</sup> century of humanistic discursive power that projects on to us an autonomy, which separates us from each other through its individualizing self-disciplinary and totalizing governmental effects (Foucault, 1982). This is why Foucault retained an ambivalent relationship to Enlightenment reason, arguing that ‘we must free ourselves from the intellectual blackmail of “being for or against the enlightenment”’ (Foucault, 1991a: 45); equally, we should be neither for nor against autonomy, but retain a position that remains in between the polarities of individualism and collectivism or individualizing and totalizing. Consequently, it is the preoccupation with the autonomous self or, to be more precise, an attachment to identity that is dangerous not the individual or identity per se since the latter could no more be eliminated than the society we inhabit.

It has frequently been argued that our conventional understanding of leadership is fundamentally problematic not least because it is a contingent construction, open to continuous change that our representations could never claim to accommodate (Wilson, 2013: 10). Its problematic nature may also be attributed to the heroic status of the individual who is seen as a leader and this is a ‘confusion that cloaks the modern definition of man [sic] himself’. For this ‘figure of man’ as a discrete individual that *only* emerged in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century ‘is the major obstacle to an adequate thinking of contemporary experience’ (Foucault, 1982; Bernauer, 1993: 64-5).

This is because it prevents us from thinking beyond the idea that individuals possess attributes such as personal traits, styles, transactional or transformational skills, charisma or power that are the medium and outcome of their leadership. It is also the kind of thinking that can readily turn into moral demagoguery, which involves a ‘self-glorification of the individual combined with the moral condemnation of opposition’ (Spector, 2019: 127) of a kind that is increasingly common in a society where, no matter how fake, if it is repeated endlessly with power and conviction, it is in danger of entering the realms of truth. Another serious problem is that, as a result of common sense, we are all prone to focus on individual leaders and this ‘absolves the collective from its responsibility in creating ethically dubious outcomes’ (Ladkin, 2018: 317). Other contemporary studies seek to extend the idea of leadership beyond the individual to some kind of distribution that incorporates the followers, the community or simply practice (Crevani et al., 2010) but these radical conceptions struggle to secure a foothold in the absence of, but perhaps do anticipate, what Foucault describes as the ‘death of man’ [sic] in an aspiration that is ‘beyond life and death’ (Spector, 2019: 182) and would, in an instant, remove our attachments to and preoccupations with identity.

While this analysis draws heavily on Foucault's deliberations in reaching out for an ethical way of life, it recognises how his lack of sympathy with phenomenology meant that his discourse skirted around any *direct* challenge to human attachments to identity (Knights and Clarke, 2017). He was not oblivious of such attachments, but his focus was more on how humanism forces upon us an individualism that undermines an ethics of responsibility to the other. His ethics fell short of squaring the circle by interrogating how attachments to identity not only divert subjects from an ethical life but are in themselves self-contradictory or self-defeating (Knights and Clarke, 2017).

### **Towards a neo-humanist enlightenment approach to leadership**

Before launching into the analysis, it is perhaps appropriate to elaborate on this subtitle for why would neo-humanism be used rather than the more common posthumanism and, given the critique above, is not the inclusion of enlightenment self-contradictory? Concerning the first point, while many of my arguments are drawn from posthuman feminist critiques of humanism, neo-humanism is a more appropriate designation for what is not a denial or discounting of those humanistic values of respect for life and community and the health and well-being that sustain civil culture (Braidotti, 2013). For humanism is only challenged because it tends to individualize, totalize, and universalize ideas of individual human autonomy that fuels and foments the preoccupation with and attachment to identity (Knights and Clarke, 2017).

With the second, it is not appropriate to dismiss the enlightenment for that would be to throw out the embodied baby with the disembodied bathwater. Embodiment does not abandon reason any more than enlightenment rationality can dispense with the body. The mentalist and rationalist metaphysics and methodology of Descartes did generate disembodied 'truths' that

have been rejected by posthuman philosophers such as Grosz (1994; 2005), Foucault (2005; 201) and Deleuze & Guattari (1988) as well as by posthumanist feminists such as Gatens (1996), and Braidotti (1991; 2011; 2013). But this does not imply discarding the enlightenment simply because it endorses humanism. For, combined, humanism and the enlightenment have facilitated a global commitment to human rights as established by the United Nations in 1948<sup>x</sup> through which the defence of human life and liberty is enshrined in international law, if not always upheld in every single nation state. However, human rights have no mandate to defend against what may appear as the less oppressive tendencies to confine us to an autonomous individualized existence; indeed, their principles often subscribe to the humanism that valorises ideas of realizing individual human potential. These normalize prevailing beliefs that leadership is an attribute of individuals and as long as leaders facilitate the conditions where others can realize their potential, consent is likely to prevail. Human rights provide a framework that can protect humans from the worst kind of physical atrocities but not necessarily those that are hidden behind a metaphysics of autonomy and the imperative to realize individual potential. Of course, it would be valuable to turn the human rights programme against itself to free humans from the oppression of seeking the ‘perfection’ of self-realization, but this would be difficult given that it is so steeped in the humanism from which these values derive. Also, it is crucial not to give licence to undermining the protections human rights provide for the vulnerable and so our critical attention should be directed not at human rights so much as the humanism within which they are packaged.

Consequently, we should not be *for* humanism but alert to its dangers in assigning us to a lifetime of self-indulgence – struggling to realise an elusive human potential, as if this were the ultimate ideal of freedom. The message here, of course, is not to reject humanism but to turn it against itself in the kind of auto-critique that enables resistance to cut with the grain

rather than oppose it for, while disrupting what is taken for granted, we and leaders especially always have to work with the constraints to advance beyond them (Ladkin, 2018: 311). Also, there is more to humanism than its preoccupation with autonomy, the self and human potential in that it has also promoted charitable values and the treatment of one another humanely, if often at the expense of other species and the planet (Wolfe, 2012; Clarke and Knights, 2021). However, the control mentality reflecting the domination of nature and the external world often linked to prevailing anthropocentric masculinities within humanism has sometimes spilt over from animal oppression into a parallel ‘repression of other humans’ (ibid: 94).

Even though humanism often extends its care and respect for humans to other sentient species, the masculine and the human-centric preoccupation with self tends toward control more generally, and this could be partly why it is attractive to leadership. Feminists have attempted to reverse this anthropocentric and speciesist tendency to treat humans as at the centre of the universe (Haraway, 1991; 2008) by acknowledging the performative entanglement of humans, animals and matter in complex mutual engagements of internally related yet unbounded elements whose form only unfolds through their intra-action<sup>xi</sup> (Barad, 2007).

In terms of leadership, however, it is the disembodied nature of most studies and the masculine mastery of the body that, in practice, is celebrated through images of fitness, strength and sporting competitiveness (Sinclair, 2005a; b; McCabe and Knights, 2016) from which a neo-humanist enlightenment approach seeks to depart. Neo-humanists argue that embodiment is one of the necessary conditions of the kinds of engagement that is essential to ethical leadership (Pullen and Rhodes, 2015). It supports a kind of leadership that is shared as advocated by relational, process and practice theorists (Crevani, 2018; Uhl-Bien, 2006; Raelin, 2016b) rather than colonized by an individual. However, the ethics demand that we all engage with one



another in an embodied manner that does not mask an underlying preoccupation with securing, or being attached to, a particular identity. It involves painstaking reflexive work on the self of the kind that Foucault, in his later work, insists is essential to ethics. Moreover, without intent, it also facilitates effective leadership insofar as it renders leaders (and to some extent, this means us all) less preoccupied with themselves and their own identities, and thereby capable of greater responsibility (Ziarek, 2001; Braidotti, 2013). Consequently, we can re-imagine leaders as being effective not despite their bodies, but because they are more embodied and thus able to feel, as well as think, their way through problems. For, what is seen as the ‘absent presence’ of the body (Leder, 1990) often leaves studies of leadership bereft of some of the most important features of its reproduction. Sometimes described as a ‘new spirituality’, neo-humanist research traces the neglect of the body to masculine modes of power and offers insights into the ambiguity, doubt and insecurity that befall us when the myth of certainty surrounding ‘scientific’ approaches to leadership is exposed (Braidotti, 2011; 2013). It also rejects prescriptive rule and norm-based approaches to focus on embodied engagement as part of what it means to practice ethical leadership (Knights, 2015) as a renewal of repressed leadership matters.

Unfortunately, human repression can be as much self-inflicted as externally imposed, since when distant, the preoccupation with realising the self and identity is often lived vicariously through celebrity worship, and no more is this so than in the field of leadership, as we witness particularly in the blind loyalty to a President in the US and, to a lesser extent, a Prime Minister in the UK who are renowned for their loose relationship to the truth. So, the *promise* of “success” inspires mass populations to continue participating in the “realising our potential” merry-go-round and the seduction cannot be reversed without fundamental self-reflection upon the myth of, and our attachments to, identity. It is not that humanism needs to be dismissed as

such but simply that we should remain alert to its dangers of it solidifying a self that invariably melts into air insofar as identity is only as substantial as the most recent social interaction, which is readily and recursively undermined by each succeeding one.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has numerous limitations and not just those of authorial imagination but also in terms of it advocating embodiment while remaining theoretical and, therefore, at one step removed from a sensuous as well as a cognitive engagement. However, it has sought to contribute to both the theory and practice of leadership by offering a way of moving toward a neo-humanist enlightenment approach to advance embodied and ethical practices in engaging people's commitment more effectively to its practice. It has drawn on philosophical and feminist theory to challenge normalizing universals relating to human autonomy and the preoccupation with, and attachments to, identity. These, it has been argued, divert thinking and feeling about leadership back onto the individual leader rather than toward broader concerns with a more social and ethical concern with human communities, institutions and organizations. While undoubtedly there are exceptions to these tendencies within the theory and practice of leadership despite our dominant humanist culture, it does not seem to have generated a movement that might be transformational. Because humanism is human-centric, it reflects and reproduces a tendency to take identity for granted, rather than to interrogate it. This has major implications for studies that seek to undermine proprietary, individualistic understandings of leadership, as I have attempted to demonstrate. Yet, amid global warming and the aftermath of the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic driven by newly emerging zoonotic diseases, we may be more in need of challenges to the conventions of contemporary leadership theory and practice that is confronted, perhaps, by a world in permanent crisis (Tourish, 2020). Only

future research can illuminate how a neo-humanist approach to leadership may facilitate our capacity and competence to meet these challenges.

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## Notes

- <sup>i</sup> Other is capitalized in order to convey that the other can never be known in its infinity of possibilities.
- <sup>ii</sup> While I agree that we academics should engage more with business and, for many years, I did so when running an academic-practitioner forum. However, although mentioning this in their article, they ignore the literature that built up around such activities and the difficulties they face. Of course, academics can secure media attention especially if they are willing to be outrageous but, in my experience, advancing ethics within capitalist or bureaucratic organizations only is effective when it appears to facilitate more profit or efficiency.
- <sup>iii</sup> This Forum was formed in the Manchester Management School in 1994 with a membership of 25 leading corporations that funded research, much of which was informed by CMS to seek to challenge senior management in banks and insurance companies to rethink their practices. In 1997, it continued at Nottingham University Business School until 2010, when it was disbanded because its financial model was no longer sustainable.
- <sup>iv</sup> It may be recalled how the UK Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown was convinced that the financial sector had discovered a way in which the trade cycle of booms and slumps could be avoided prior to the Global financial crisis (Knights, 2021: 196-7).
- <sup>v</sup> <https://www.leadershipandhumanpotential.com>, consulted 15.10.20
- <sup>vi</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human\\_Potential\\_Movement#cite\\_note-1](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_Potential_Movement#cite_note-1) consulted 15.10.20
- <sup>vii</sup> <https://commsmasters.com/2019/02/the-dark-side-of-authentic-leadership/> consulted 15.10.20
- <sup>viii</sup> <https://humanists.international/what-is-humanism/the-amsterdam-declaration/> consulted 19.10.20
- <sup>ix</sup> <https://www.businessinsider.com/world-economic-forum-world-biggest-problems-concerning-millennials-2016-8?r=US&IR=T> consulted 19.10.20

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<sup>x</sup> [https://www.amnesty.org.uk/universal-declaration-human-rights-UDHR?utm\\_source=google&utm\\_medium=grant&utm\\_campaign=AWA\\_GEN\\_udhr&utm\\_content=united%20nations%20human%20rights](https://www.amnesty.org.uk/universal-declaration-human-rights-UDHR?utm_source=google&utm_medium=grant&utm_campaign=AWA_GEN_udhr&utm_content=united%20nations%20human%20rights) consulted 15.10.20

<sup>xi</sup> Intra-action is distinct insofar as it does not presume a prior separation of bounded entities in advance of their interaction

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