

RETHINKING LEADERSHIP

CALL FOR PAPERS: SPECIAL ISSUE OF *PHILOSOPHY OF MANAGEMENT*

OVERVIEW

You are invited to submit a paper to the *Philosophy of Management* for our special issue on the topic of the philosophy of leadership.

The topic fits well with this journal's scope, in two ways. First, with respect to *management*: leadership can be an important function of management, just as management can be an important function of leadership. So, their areas of conceptual and normative interest overlap. And, second, with respect to *philosophy*: there are important philosophical dimensions to leadership, touched upon both in political philosophy and in business ethics. But, otherwise, philosophy journals tend to neglect the philosophy of leadership in favor of the philosophy of other socially consequential areas, such as political, moral, and economic philosophy, while leadership journals tend to neglect the philosophy of leadership in favor of the social science of leadership. Ergo, *Philosophy of Management* proposes to dedicate a special issue to the philosophy of leadership.

Leadership scholars regularly complain that the academic literature on their subject is so permissive that both everything and nothing can count as leadership (Blom and Alvesson 2015, 480). This is because, they say, there is no agreed-upon definition of leadership. This lament has been voiced for many decades (Browne and Cohen 1958, iii; Rost. 1991; Levine and Boaks 2014; D. Wilson, 2023a). We find before us, then, an array of literature that can be both interesting and baffling in equal measure.

There is, for example, a standard way of framing the history of leadership theories: it begins in the nineteenth century with the great man theory of leadership, followed by trait theory, behavioral theory, contingency theory, and finally transformational leadership, which is often grouped with a handful of related "new leadership" theories such as servant, authentic, leader-member exchange, and path-goal theories (S. Wilson, 2016; Spector, 2016). These are presented and studied as the theories of leadership. But what is it about leadership that they

theorize? What question about leadership is each of them trying to answer? This is rarely addressed. Although the literature is often interpreted as presenting these theories as competitors, they may in fact provide answers to different questions (e.g. what are the ideal traits? what are the ideal behaviors? how are these affected by contingencies?); or they may address questions that allow for multiple answers (e.g. what types of leadership behaviors are likely to be successful under various specified circumstances?). So, maybe only one of them is true. But also – they may all be true. Or none (D. Wilson, 2018).

Furthermore, at least three assertions that are simultaneously made by many leadership scholars— and held to be true whether or not we have a definition in hand. First, it is almost unanimously asserted that leadership is necessarily about influence (see, for example, Antonakis, et.al 2018, Yukl, et. al. 2020, Northouse, 2016). If you wonder whether you are a leader, you only need to look back and see if you have followers. But, at the same time, a second assertion is that leadership is a function (Antonakis, 2018, p. 7), meaning that it is best understood not according to what the leader actually does (i.e., influencing), but according to what the leader ought to do, which may or may not include influencing. Leadership is, on this account, a matter of having responsibilities and rights with respect to a group’s direction. So, on this account, merely possessing leadership responsibilities and rights makes one a leader, and carrying them out well makes one a good leader. This conceptual distinction clearly entails more than just whether influence is, or is not, dressed up in a business suit (D. Wilson, 2023a). As if this were not problematic enough, a third statement regularly made is that leadership is a process in which everyone is equally able to wield influence or to carry out responsibilities (Northouse, 2016, p. 6). Thus, leadership allows for symmetry among group members of a sort that entails neither actual influence nor functional responsibility. Why, on this account, would it be helpful--or even meaningful--to count as leadership a process in which no particular individual has the influence or the responsibility?

Leadership studies, in short, is a field of inquiry that is ready and waiting for careful conceptual analysis. In its window is a help-wanted sign: “philosophers needed.” Therefore, this is not only a call for submissions on the topic of philosophy of leadership to *Philosophy of*

Management. It is general call for philosophers to direct toward the realm of leadership studies their very specific skills of conceptual analysis and synthesis.

TOPICS OF INTEREST

Definition. This is the foundation. Since Rost's classic work in the 1990s, very little attention has been paid to questions about defining the core concept of the field of leadership studies (Rost, 1991). There are at least two such questions: one is about the proper criteria, the other about the actual result. A few have tried (Kort, 2008; Barker, 2007; D. Wilson, 2023a). Others have dismissed it as either not worth it, or impossible (Kellerman, 2012; Grint, 2005). And then there are textbook writers, who must provide comprehensive coverage of the field and thus must include definitions; each of them typically provides a survey—with an almost unavoidable hint of irony—of the many varying definitions that have been offered over the last century (Antonakis et. al, 2018; Northouse, 2016; Yukl et. al. 2020; D. Wilson, 2023a). Can we make progress towards a definition that provides necessary and sufficient conditions for the concept, or concepts, as used by both practitioners and scholars?

Theories of leadership. As already mentioned, theories of leadership—legacy theories as well as those that are trending—await more careful philosophical analysis. What is each of them, actually, a theory of? Are they definitions of the concept? If so, is the concept thus defined the one that is actually used by practitioners and scholars? Or are these definitions more like accounts of conceptions of how the concept might be actualized? Or are they theories of something else altogether? If it can be established what the respective leadership theory is a theory of—what question it is answering—another philosophical question is whether it lends itself to scientific inquiry, and, if so, what the inquiry, properly conducted, would look like. Or, if the concept or the theory about it is normative, then to what extent could it lend itself at all to scientific inquiry?

Science and leadership. The preponderance of the scholarly leadership literature is assigned to the domain of the social sciences—especially psychology, sociology, organizational theory, political science, history, and economics. It has even been suggested that the natural sciences should explore the genetic basis of leadership, with one paper declaring, “We are quite

sure that this school will be making major contributions in understanding the sociobiology of leadership” (Antonakis et. al, 2018, p. 13). It is not uncommon for scholars to describe their field as leadership science. If we understand science as empirical inquiry into the laws that promote our ability to understand and predict the natural world (see D. Wilson, 2023b), what can philosophers say about our reasonable expectations for understanding and predicting leadership by means of inquiry into natural laws?

The social ontology of leadership. There is a normative concept of leadership, which has to do with the behaviors of the person who is given the rights and responsibilities to move an organization in the right direction. So, this concept—socially constructed itself--relies heavily upon other socially constructed concepts such as organizations, rights, responsibilities, roles, and resources. How can the work in the burgeoning field of social ontology (Searle, 2009; Gilbert, 1989; Tuomela, 2013; Bratman, 2022) enable us to better understand the social construction of these entities in a way that enables us to thereby better understand leadership?

Ethics and leadership. There is much valuable and important work in leadership ethics which focuses upon the particular sorts of challenges, opportunities, and dilemmas that are faced by leaders (Ciulla, 2002; Bachmann, 2017; Boaks and Levine, 2017). If moral good is human good, and moral obligation is human obligation, then there are at least two ways in which morality is conceptually baked into leadership so deeply that there is no need to even mention the terms “morality” or “ethics” in this context.

First, leadership has partly to do with the management of human resources. For every type of resource—whether it is a bank account, a bridge, or a brand—there is a way of managing it that is appropriate to that resource. And, so, is there not a way of managing humans that is appropriate to their humanity?

Second, leadership is not merely a matter of effectiveness in achieving a goal. Leadership is no good if it effectively leads the organization in the wrong direction—over a cliff, for example, or exclusively toward the glory and gain of the leader. If a human organization is situated among other humans (sometimes known as stakeholders), is using their resources, and is affecting them for good or ill with its outputs, does not the rest of society have something to

say about what constitutes the organization's right direction? In short, normative questions about these goals and the good are unavoidable (Boaks, 2014). Leadership, then, is conceptually inextricable from both the morality of means—the human use of human resources—and the morality of ends—the effect of the organization on human society.

And more. Philosophers, we suggest, have much more to say about many other related topics as well. What can we learn about leadership by considering recent work on power, authority, and legitimacy, as well as the rich philosophical traditions in these areas (Christiano, et. al., 2017; Audi, 2009; Estlund, 2008; Nagel, 1978; Mittiga, 2021; Coady, 2008)? Is there a distinctively feminine standpoint that has been unduly neglected in the study of leadership (Held, 2006; Okin, 2013; Iannello, 1992)? How much difference does it make to leadership if the organization exists exclusively to serve its members, as does the state, rather than to serve some external purpose, as do corporations (Philips et. al., 1999)? How much sense does it make to insist upon the academic study of followership, as though every member of an organization is *ipso facto* a follower of a leader (Anderson, 2019)?

Every question we have raised here gives rise to more questions that, if detailed, would push far beyond the limits of a simple call for papers. We are eager to receive submissions that address those unstated questions as well.

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DEADLINES AND SUBMISSION PROCESS

- Manuscripts should adhere to the *Philosophy of Management* journal's aims and scope, as well as to contributor guidelines for submitting a paper. The manuscript length should be 8,000-12,000 words (for a standard original article).
- Submissions must be original and unpublished works that are not concurrently under review for publication elsewhere.
- Papers should be submitted to the *Philosophy of Management* online system, with reference to this special issue: <https://www.editorialmanager.com/phom/default2.aspx>.
- Deadline has been extended to November 30, 2024.
- Please send any questions about this special issue to **David Carl Wilson**, wilson@webster.edu or **Jacqueline Boaks**, Jacqueline.boaks@curtin.edu.au.