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Are ethical theories relevant for ethical leadership?

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Abstract

Purpose – The aim of this study is to know if ethical theories could be connected to some leadership approaches.

Design/methodology/approach – In the paper eight leadership approaches are selected: directive leadership, self-leadership, authentic leadership, transactional leadership, shared leadership, charismatic leadership, servant leadership, transformational leadership. Five western ethical theories (philosophical egoism, utilitarianism, Kantianism, ethics of virtue, ethics of responsibility) are analyzed to see to what extent their basic concepts could be connected to one or the other leadership approach.

Findings – A given ethical theory (such as philosophical egoism) could be suitable to the components of various leadership approaches. Ethical leadership does not imply that a given leadership approach is reflecting only one ethical theory. Rather, ethical leadership implies that for different reasons, various leadership approaches could agree with the same ethical theory. This is what we could call the “moral flexibility of leadership approaches”.

Research limitations/implications – This study focuses on western ethical theories. A similar study should be undertaken for Eastern ethical theories coming from Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, or Daoism.

Practical implications – Some dualisms (such as Kantianism-transformational leadership, philosophical egoism-transactional leadership) do not reflect the philosophical connections between ethical theories and leadership approaches. Thus, the notion of ethical leadership would have to be redefined. In doing so, the paper reveals how a given ethical theory could be used by different kinds of leaders, and for very different reasons.

Originality/value – This study will contribute to make ethical theories and ethical leadership more interconnected, in spite of the different (parallel) “conceptual universes” in which they have evolved until now.

Keywords Ethical theories, Ethical leadership, Professional ethics, Leadership, Management styles

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Most of the time, researchers do not try to elaborate a philosophical link between ethical theories, and ethical leadership. Some authors try to combine different ethical theories within the same leadership approach. Knights and O’Leary (2006) said that ethical leadership is indeed “ethical” since it reflects one ethical theory or the other: philosophical egoism (Hobbes, Spinoza), utilitarianism (Bentham, Mill, Ross), Kantian theory, or ethics of responsibility (Sartre, Lévinas, Habermas). Authors prefer a mix between virtue ethics (MacIntyre) and ethics of responsibility (Lévinas). The basic problem of their approach is that we cannot assess to what extent a given ethical theory could be connected with ethical leadership. Ncube and Washburn (2006) suggested that ethical leadership should combine deontology (Kant), virtue ethics (Aristotle) and utilitarianism (Bentham, Mill). Such an approach will imply to take into account the needs of all organizational members, in order to maximize harmonious relationships within the organization. Authors did not explain how Kantianism could coexist with



utilitarian principles. Although we could agree that a mix of various ethical theories could be an attractive alternative, we must reveal the pitfalls and limitations of such an eclectic approach. We must always keep in mind that the way we will define a leadership style (such as servant leadership) will reduce the number of ethical theories we could adhere to. In other words, depending on the way we define a given leadership style, not all ethical theories could be closely linked to such leadership style. Some ethical theories are not compatible with one another. Other schools of thought (virtue ethics, ethics of responsibility) could be mixed together, or used separately. The choice of ethical theories actually reveals the meaning of “ethics” when it is connected with leadership.

We will analyze some basic (philosophical) ethical theories and see to what extent their main concepts could be connected to some leadership approaches. We have selected eight leadership approaches: directive leadership, self-leadership, authentic leadership, transactional leadership, shared leadership, servant leadership, charismatic leadership and transformational leadership. We will see how each of them could be connected with one ethical theory or another. We have selected five ethical theories that could be relevant for leadership approaches: philosophical egoism, utilitarianism, deontology, ethics of virtue, ethics of responsibility. In every case, a given leadership approach could have a very different meaning in various cultures or religions. The cross-cultural or inter-religious approach is required, since ethics does not have a universal meaning. Rather, ethics is closely linked to cultural practices or to religious/spiritual beliefs. What is the meaning of “ethical leadership” if we cannot define what we consider as “ethical”? The deep challenge is to connect ethical theories with current leadership approaches. In doing so, we could unveil how given ethical theories could be applied to various leadership styles.

Leadership approaches

Mackenzie and Barnes (2007) analyzed eleven leadership approaches and showed that most of them lack comprehensiveness. In our study, we have selected eight leadership approaches. We would like to see to what extent they could successfully convey aspects of ethical theories. Of course, many other leadership approaches could be added. But the eight approaches we have selected represent a large spectrum of leadership approaches that could integrate ethical theories. Those approaches tend to make connections between the leader’s self and the others (followers). Some of them focus much more on relationships with followers, while other approaches emphasize the leader’s self:

- (1) *Directive leadership*: Flamholz (1990) defined the basic types of directive leadership. Although the typology includes non-directive (laissez-faire) leadership – that is, an inner contradiction, those types reflect a large spectrum of leaders’ directive style:
 - autocratic (“I decide”);
 - benevolent-autocratic (“I take care of you, because I know what is best for you”);
 - consultative (“I decide, but I will consult you”);
 - participative (“We decide, but my vote is more decisive than the others”); and
 - consensual (“We reach a consensus before going ahead with any project”).

The way authority and leadership, are understood is culturally (and sometimes religiously, or spiritually) induced. Any form of directive leadership will then

depend on the cultural, religious or spiritual context in which it is perceived and developed. In China, social harmony is closely linked with Confucianism, while in Japan, it follows from Buddhist beliefs and values. In Indonesia, social harmony is part of the Islamic value systems. So, although we could observe directive leadership in those three countries, its ground (social harmony) could have various meanings and implications.

- (2) *Self-leadership*: Yun *et al.* (2006) defined self-leadership as “both thoughts and actions that people use to influence themselves”. It implies that individuals will receive their motivation and control from their inner self. The authors identified self-leadership as being closely linked to a latent trait (need for autonomy). Self-leadership could then be connected with this trait’s leadership theories. The basic objective of self-leadership strategies is to enhance the perception of self-efficacy. However, cross-cultural and international aspects of self-leadership have not been explored in the leadership literature. According to Neck and Houghton (2006), self-leadership is a concept that is used in the US.
- (3) *Authentic leadership*: most of the time, the authentic leadership approach does not define authenticity itself. Authors could look at authenticity as being closely connected to visionary companies (Collins and Porras, 1996), without saying anything about the nature of authenticity. According to Duignan and Bhindi (1997), authentic leaders get the allegiance of others by building trusting relationships. Authors believed that authentic leaders are aware of their limitations and tolerant of imperfection in others. Authentic leadership seem to be deeply concerned with ethics. Jensen and Luthans (2006) defined authentic leaders as leaders “who are perceived as striving to create a transparent, future-oriented, and associate-building organization”. The basic weakness of such a leadership approach is its vague definition of authenticity. The philosophical notion of authenticity has a long history (Buckley, 1993; Taylor, 1991, 1992). There needs to be philosophical grounds for authenticity; otherwise, we will not be able to apply it to any leadership style that is integrating ethical (philosophical) theories. Zhu *et al.* (2004) said that to be authentic, leaders must transcend their own interest and focus on the common good. Authors revealed that authentic leaders must behave consistently with their moral principles and respect the rights of all stakeholders. Authenticity seems to be closely linked with truth and transparency. But again, the notion of authenticity remains unclear. Taylor (1992) rightly said that authenticity should never be confused with the will to do whatever we want to do. The ideal of authenticity has been distorted in such narcissistic (hyper-individualistic) forms that have nothing to do with authenticity. The basic notion of authenticity refers to the need to be sincere, that is, to know what it means to be, “for me”. Taylor thus adopted an Heideggerian viewpoint. According to Heidegger (1962), what it means to be is the basic quest for meaning that characterizes human existence. But what does it mean to be sincere? Taylor said that it mainly reflects the will to be consistent with our originality (what makes us different from others). Insofar as we are dialogical beings, our own identity cannot be defined out of our relationships with others. The basic weakness of the authentic leadership approach is its inability to unveil the meaning of authenticity itself. Again, various cultures, religions or spiritualities could interpret authenticity in a very different way. Sincerity is a basic Confucian value. It has

an important place in Buddhist ethics, but for different reasons. Unlike Buddhism, Confucianism acknowledges the existence of the (independent) self. Such belief can make the notion of sincerity qualitatively different.

- (4) *Transactional leadership*: transactional leadership is based on the leader-member exchange leadership theory. Pastor and Mayo (2008) said that transactional leadership is characterized by leader-follower exchange. It implies that rewards and incentives are provided when followers make the required effort and comply with the organizational norms and objectives. Odom and Green (2003) mentioned that transactional leadership is focused on the bottom-line. In other words, transactional leaders put the emphasis on achieving results through organizational processes, including reward practices and implementation of organizational policies and procedures (Sarros and Santora, 2001). It does not imply that transactional leaders cannot adopt an ethical behavior. Kanungo (2001) even said that transactional leaders believed that “the ends justify the means”. In other words, transactional leaders would adopt a Machiavelian view of organizational life. If we look carefully at the basic rules of leadership conveyed in Machiavelli’s “The Prince”, it is striking to see that they have nothing to do with the way transactional leadership is usually defined. Transactional leaders do not necessarily consider peoples as means. Otherwise, any leader-member exchange would imply a kind of dehumanization.
- (5) *Shared leadership*: Lee-Davies *et al.* (2007) said that shared leadership implies helping others to achieve their potential and that trust is found in collaborative engagement. According to Bligh *et al.* (2006), shared leadership implies that behaviors are enacted by multiple individuals, regardless of their hierarchical position. Authors asserted that shared leadership put the emphasis on the capacity to connect with others where we are achieving group objectives. Shared leadership could give birth to “temporary leaders”. Shared leadership means that everybody is choosing the leadership tasks for which he (she) feels ready to accomplish. Authors conclude that the greater the complexity of the task, the greater the importance of shared leadership. According to Waldersee and Eagleson (2002), one of the reasons why shared leadership is so popular is that shared leadership “may allow to compensate for weaknesses in their leadership capabilities”. As it was the case with self-leadership there needs to be cross-cultural and international aspects of shared leadership, in order to see to what extent its characteristics could be culturally (religiously, or spiritually) induced.
- (6) *Servant leadership*: Han *et al.* (2010) have defined the basic dimensions of servant leadership in North American literature. The authors are thus quite aware that servant leadership could be interpreted very differently in Confucian, Buddhist or Muslim countries. They identified the most important dimensions of servant leadership in China: putting people first, ethical behavior, moral love, conceptual skills, building relationships, humility, being dutiful, devotion to Party policies and state laws, and listening. The last three dimensions characterized the Chinese cultural and political context. Authors showed how components of Confucianism, Daoism and Communist ideology actually influenced the expression of servant leadership in China. Joseph and Winston (2005) explained that servant leaders build trust by genuinely

empowering workers, honoring commitments and being consistent, developing coaching skills and fostering risk taking, and emphasizing trustworthiness that is grounded on integrity and competence. In others words, servant leadership is an antecedent of leader and organizational trust. According to Stone *et al.* (2004), the main difference between servant leadership and transformational leadership is the focus of the leader. Servant leaders focus on service to their followers (concern for people), while transformational leaders tend to get followers supporting organizational objectives (emphasis on production). Servant leaders rely on service, while transformational leaders rely on their charismatic abilities.

- (7) *Charismatic leadership*: Politis (2002) said that charismatic leeaders provides the vision and energy for knowledge sharing within the organization. However, Jayakody (2008) mentioned that some conditions (such as a crisis) could cause charisma to emerge. However, Politis suggested that we should take the surrounding culture into account. In Sri Lanka, he said, the attitude of caring is an integral part of daily life, so that no leader could become a hero because of his (her) sensitivity to the organizational members. It would be different in individualistic societies, such as the USA. In their study of Taiwenese companies, Huang *et al.* (2005) found that charismatic leadership actually has significant impact on employee outcomes. What is at stake is the difference between effects following from various cultural conditionings. Aaltio-Marjosola and Takala (2000) looked at charismatic leadership as a species of transformational leadership. Moreover, they believed that ethics play a “guardian’s role” in evaluating the outcomes of the charismatic leadership processes. They put the emphasis on the need to take the various cultural contexts into account.
- (8) *Transformational leadership*: most of the time, authors (Bass, 1995; Avolio *et al.*, 1991) refer to the four “Is” of transformational leadership: idealized influence (charisma), inspiration, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Pastor and Mayo (2008) believed that transformational leaders exert strong influence on followers by giving them individualized consideration, discussing about possibilities in the future, and acting with self-sacrifice. Transformational leaders help their followers to perform beyond organizational expectations (Sarros and Santora, 2001). According to Odom and Green (2003), transformational leadership focuses on the moral development of followers. Indeed, transformational leaders try to transform their followers into ethical leaders. That is why some authors asserted that ethical leadership derives from transformational leadership models (Sama and Shoaf, 2008). Kanungo (2001) believed that transformational leaders are characterized by a deontological orientation (Kantianism): acting with a sense of duty towards others. But it does not imply that transformational leaders are necessarily ethical (Banerji and Krishnan, 2000). Other authors (Bowie, 2000) believed that a Kantian leader enhances the autonomy of their followers and teaches them to be leaders. It is another way to reach the same conclusion: transformational leadership seems to be identified to Kantian leadership.

Some of those eight leadership approaches put the emphasis on the moral issue, thus unveiling the basic link between a given leadership style and what could be considered as “ethical leadership”. Moreover, each of those eight leadership approaches could be perceived very differently in various cultures. Cheung and Chan (2008) showed how Confucianism and Daoism could influence the way leadership is understood and applied in China. Even in quite similar countries (Ireland, USA), there could be important variations in the components of leadership that are actually emphasized (Keating *et al.*, 2007). In given countries, immigrants could have a very different view on leadership and share expectations that do not reflect social expectations about leadership (Popper and Druyan, 2001). As Hofstede (1984) said, a key to leadership is the kind of subordinate expectations we actually find in given countries. So, in one way or another, each of those eight leadership approaches reveals the need to be connected with ethical questioning and cultural conditionings.

Ethical theories

Consequentialist theories include both philosophical egoism and utilitarianism. In both cases, the emphasis is put on the consequences of given actions. What makes an action moral is the fact that my personal interest is satisfied (philosophical egoism), or the fact that the greater happiness is provided to the largest number of persons who are affected by a given decision (utilitarianism). Deontology (Kant), ethics of virtue (Aristotle) and ethics of responsibility (Sartre, Lévinas, Habermas) are also quite influential. We will present here some authors who belong to one or the other philosophical theory. Other authors could be added. The aim of this section was to present ethical theories that could be connected with current leadership approaches.

Philosophical egoism

According to Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), the desire to dominate (to get more power over other people) and the desire to avoid death (self-preservation) are the main human motives for action. In the Hobbesian perspective, leadership would always imply obeying social rules for three reasons:

- (1) Because social rules are reinforced by the Sovereign.
- (2) Because people have multiple kinds of self-interested (potentially conflicting) desires that they prefer to obey social rules, in order to avoid death.
- (3) Because those rules tell us how to get what we want (domination) and how to avoid what we do not want (death).

Leadership would then be a way to control our inner trend for domination and to avoid our own (physical or psychical) death. Hobbes (1960) believed that there is no disinterested behavior. So, in the Hobbesian context, leaders, as everybody else, would be continuously searching for their self-interest. Even altruistic leaders would be indeed egoistic, since they will get positive effects (social recognition, prestige) from their altruistic behavior. Hobbes (1960) believed that altruistic motives are, in fact, egoistic motives. From a Hobbesian perspective, leadership is socially accepted for two reasons:

- (1) People are afraid of consequences that could follow if they would reject such leadership.
- (2) People are afraid of sanctions imposed by the leader.

Dobel (1998) rightly said that for Hobbes (1960, pp. 146-72), prudence is a form of extended rational self-interest. In the Hobbesian perspective, leaders are prudent in the way they exert power (in order to avoid domination) and in the way they would safeguard their own (physical and psychological) life.

Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) adopted a different approach to philosophical egoism. He tried to liberate human beings from a state of human subjection, that is, the state in which we are slaves of our passions, instincts and impulses (Spinoza, 1954, pp. 311-18). We all wish for a society in which citizens are free. Everyone would share the same desire. Spinoza's ideas about a free human being can easily be applied to leaders. According to Spinoza, a "free" leader is never the slave of his (her) passions and instincts. Although a "free" human being searches for the perfection of everybody, he (she) is searching for his (her) own perfection as an end. A "free" human being wishes the perfection of the other's existence as a means to get his (her) own.

David Hume's philosophy is often neglected in any presentation of ethical theories. However, it reveals a deep understanding of human action and its basic conditionings. The consequentialist dimensions of Hume's philosophy are quite different from those of Hobbes' or Spinoza's philosophical system. According to David Hume (1711-1776), the good is not defined in terms of ordinary feelings, but rather in terms of inner feelings of (social) approval/disapproval. The good is what every informed and impartial spectator would approve. Feelings are then the basis of any moral judgment, he said. Unlike Kant, Hume (1962) believed that moral judgments cannot be judgments of reason, since reason cannot put us into action. In his "Treatise on Human Nature", Hume (1962), pp. 5-7, 127-30) said that reason is nothing but the slave of passions. According to Hume (1983, pp. 42-51), we are virtuous because we are aware of the potential damages that could follow from the transgression of moral rules. Saying that a given action is morally right is the same thing than saying that if we would consider such action, its nature would generally imply an emotion of social approval (for most of the people). Saying that a given action is morally wrong is the same thing than saying that if we would consider such action, its nature would generally imply an emotion of social disapproval (for most of the people). Hume (1983) asserted that in given circumstances, we generally like to feel the same emotion as most other people. The emotion of approval is stimulated by what we "believe" spectators would feel as being immediately pleasant or useful. The emotion of disapproval is excited by what we "believe" spectators would feel as being painful or useless. Approval and disapproval are moral feelings and influence our modes of action. Hume was explaining moral behavior through the beliefs we have about reality. He focused on the beliefs about the social acceptability of some behaviors. In doing so, Hume is presupposing that knowing the social acceptability of given conducts could help us to take enlightened decisions.

Utilitarianism

According to Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), a given action actually promotes the interests of an individual when it adds something to the total level of pleasure for him (her), or when it reduces the total level of pain for him (her). Bentham (1982, p. 100) said that pleasure is in itself a good, while pain is in itself an evil. A given action increases the level of happiness within the community insofar as it increases the total level of happiness. According to Bentham (1982, pp. 11-16), the utilitarian principle reveals that the action is morally right when it promotes the greatest wellbeing (or happiness) for as much people

as possible. Utility implies the trend to produce benefits, advantages, pleasures or happiness (rather than pain and unhappiness), for the majority of people who are affected by a given decision. According to Bentham, we could measure the quantitative aspects of individual happiness (pleasure/benefits) or unhappiness (pain/damages), so that it could be possible to identify the resulting (net) level of happiness/unhappiness. Such principle presupposes that every pleasure can be quantified and thus measured.

Bentham provides the basic principle of utilitarianism: favouring the highest level of happiness for the greatest number of people who are affected by a given decision. But such a principle is quite difficult to apply in real life. Although we define happiness as including more pleasure than pain, the problem lies in the assessment of such pleasure and pain. Most of the time, we will only reach a qualitative (rather than quantitative) evaluation of the effects of such pleasure and pain on those who are affected by a given decision. So, how could we get a final “net and global” result, if we cannot precisely identify the quantity of pleasures and pains that are at stake in a given situation? Although utilitarianism enhances a somewhat “objective” assessment of pleasures and pains, it cannot guarantee such pure objectivity. Utilitarianism implies a much more “subjective” assessment of pleasures and pains than what Bentham was dreaming about. On the other hand, the greatest number of people affected by the decision is not a self-evident criterion: a given decision could have impact on millions of people, in various countries. How could we take their pleasures and pains into account? How could we ensure that our decision will give them some pleasures rather than pains? Decision-makers must identify the positive and negative impact of their decisions on millions of people. How could they make such a huge and precise assessment? Two principles must be taken for granted. First, decision-makers will try to know how such people would perceive a given alternative of action, in terms of pleasures and pains they would feel. Decision-makers should never believe they are able to perceive such feelings by themselves. People affected by the decision are those who should say how they would feel about it. Second, decision-makers should gather people by sub-groups in order to have a specific idea of the pleasures and pains some groups would feel in comparison with others. Those two principles would make the utilitarian assessment morally acceptable. But they make the assessment itself much more complex than what Bentham had in mind.

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) said that the utilitarian principle is useful for considering the relative quality of pleasure and pain. Mill (1956, pp. 3-19, 91-113) agreed that the good and the right are subjected to preferences and differ from one individual to another. However, there are some basic virtues, such as truth, beauty, love, justice, freedom and friendship that are always good, although some individuals cannot desire them, he said. Such virtues contribute to human happiness in the long run. The principle of utility is required to decide which alternative of action should be preferred to others. In human existence, we can identify some pleasures, which are qualitatively better than others. As Mill (1962, p. 9) ironically said, “it is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied, better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. If the fool, or the pig, are of different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question”. On the other hand, Mill (1956) knew that a principle of utility could justify lying or stealing in given situations. Although a given lie could be partially beneficial, Mill (1956) believed that we cannot adopt the principle that “lying is morally acceptable when it is in our self-interest to lie”. The consequences of such a

principle would be disastrous. Mill (1956) tried to take into account all effects of a given alternative of action: direct and indirect (side) effects, short-term and long run impact. That's why he reviewed utilitarianism in adding that the notions of pleasure and pain could be classified according to their quality and quantity.

Mill (1956) disagreed with Bentham that all pleasures are equal. According to Mill (1956), some pleasures are more desirable than others. The highest pleasures included intelligence, education, sensitiveness, sense of morality, and physical health. Mill (1956) said that inferior pleasures are sensuality, indolence, egoism and ignorance. So, given the equality of pleasure following from those two alternatives of action, how could we choose to favour the largest quantity of inferior pleasures or the little quantity of higher pleasures? Insofar as a given action includes higher pleasures, the action should be considered as morally right, said Mill (1956). So, even when the pleasure would be equal in those two different alternatives of action, we should favour that which implies higher pleasures. Decision-makers who agree with Mill's perspective would then always prefer intelligence, education, sensitiveness, sense of morality and physical health to sensuality, egoism and ignorance. Although most of the inferior pleasures that Mill took into account (egoism, ignorance, indolence) have clear negative impact on wellbeing, we believe that Mill's perspective is problematic for two reasons. On the one hand, the higher pleasures seem to share the same level of importance or relevance: for instance, physical health is just as important as education, intelligence; sense of morality seems to be as valuable as sensitiveness. Mill did not present any principle that could explain this "a priori" perception of those higher pleasures. On the other hand, could we guarantee that sensuality has a lower worth than physical health? Could they even be closely linked to one another? Any distinction between higher and inferior pleasures is ideologically induced. We should remain critical about any hierarchical view about pleasures and pains, since such a view could be culturally or religiously (or spiritually) induced. Moreover, behind any such hierarchy, we could find out "a priori beliefs" that have not been unveiled.

According to W.D. Ross (1877-1971), we usually see ourselves under moral obligations, which cannot be reduced to the simple duty to maximize our happiness. Some moral obligations arise from our interactions and relationships with people. In other cases, we must, for instance, morally treat people with justice, get rid of injustices and promote human wellbeing. However, in given situations, few moral duties can be conflicting with one another. Ross (1930) said that most of moral duties are "prima facie obligations". A "prima facie obligation" is a duty which can be overridden by a more important moral obligation. Unlike Kant, Ross (1930) believed that there are no absolute (or categorical) imperatives. Every moral obligation must always be outweighed by other moral duties. Ross (1930) referred to the morality of common sense: we should consider all aspects of the problem, and then exert our moral judgment, particularly when two or many moral duties are conflicting. There are some basic moral obligations, such as helping those in need, exploiting our talents, treating each other with fairness and respect. Ross (1930) talked about a "prima facie" obligation to help the poor and the needy, to respect our promises, to increase others' wellbeing. There is no hierarchy between all prima facie duties, said Ross (1930, p. 19). An action is a proper duty if it is what we should do, given all aspects of the problem. We are always sure of the nature of our prima facie duties, but we do not have the certainty of our proper duty, that is, of the most important prima facie duty under

given circumstances. According to Ross (1930), we must recognize general prima facie duties and judge what is our proper duty under given circumstances. Such judgment follows from the identification of properties, which make the difference. A prima facie duty must always be accomplished, except when it is conflicting with an equal or stronger prima facie duty. The proper duty is then determined by studying the respective weight of conflicting prima facie duties (for instance, delivering our promises vs protecting innocent people).

Deontology

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) tried to define actions, which are inherently right or wrong, without taking their consequences into account. In order to define the rightness or wrongness of a given alternative of action, we do not have to know its probable outcomes. The foundation of moral duty is an “a priori” belief. Reason can reveal the basic moral principles. In order to define what I should do, I must consider what all rational beings must do. Moral laws are valid for all rational beings. According to Kant (1959), an action is morally right if its principles can be applied to all rational beings in a consistent way. Kant (1959, p. 39) said that nothing is good in itself, except a good will. The only motive of our goodwill is to act by duty (because it is my duty to do something). The rightness or wrongness of a given alternative of action depends on the nature of motive, and not on its actual consequences.

According to Kant (1959, p. 40), an absolute moral truth must be logically consistent. The principle, which is at the basis of the action itself, should be generalized, so that everybody could ground his (her) action into such a principle. Some could argue that everybody should search for his (her) own happiness, without considering others' happiness, except when it could decrease his (her) own happiness. But is that principle morally acceptable? Such an egoistic principle could not be universalized. According to Kant (1959), if others would accept that principle of egoism, my own happiness would be reduced accordingly. So, my desire that everybody would accept such principle would be inconsistent with my desire to get the greatest (personal) happiness. Kant (1959) believed that there is a “categorical imperative”: an action that is necessary by itself, without considering the circumstances or the effects of that action. The way we act implies that the principle of our action must be a universal law. What then makes an action a “moral action” is that we could set it up as a universal law. According to Kant (1959), a moral law must be universally recognized. Nothing could be considered as a moral principle if it is not a principle for all people. Moral rules are categorical imperatives, not hypothetical imperatives. A hypothetical imperative says what we should do if we wish to get a specific result. The categorical imperative unconditionally requires a given behavior, without taking circumstances into account. Our actions must be done by duty (towards ourselves or towards the others).

The second principle of Kantian ethics presupposed that everybody must always be treated as having autonomously determined his (her) own objectives. Nobody must ever be treated purely as a means (an object, a tool) to reach the personal aims of other people. According to Kant, those actions, which are consistent with the basic dignity and autonomy of moral agents are intrinsically (and morally) right. Treating others only as a means (something we can use for reaching our own objectives) without their free consent, is intrinsically (and morally) wrong. According to Kant (1959, pp. 40, 48), “using someone” against his (her) own will, as means for my own objectives, is

equivalent to violating his (her) basic freedom and autonomy, as an individual. We have rights because we are free and rational beings, said Kant (1959). Such rights reflect basic characteristics of human beings (our own nature): for instance, the right to fairness and equality, the right to justice, the right to be respected in our dignity. Treating a person as a means is neglecting his (her) own personality in exploiting him (her) and not taking into account his (her) interests, needs and concerns. It is equivalent to negating his (her) freedom to act and judge reality in an autonomous way. Treating others as ends reveals our deep respect for their decisions, values and actions. This Kantian principle could easily be applied in the daily life, since it reflects our concern for basic human rights.

Virtue ethics

According to Dobel (1998), when understood as dispositions without any judgment, virtues can be blind and fall prey to Aristotle's principle of virtue. Aristotle presupposed that all aspects of human life carried to an extreme could become vices. MacIntyre (1981, p. 148) rightly said that "virtues are those qualities the possession of which will enable an individual to achieve eudaimonia and the lack of which will frustrate his movement toward that telos". Eudaimonia is sometimes understood as happiness, sometimes as wealth. Aristotle defined a virtue as "a settled disposition of the mind determining the choice of actions and emotions, consisting essentially in the observance of the mean relative to us, this being determined by principle, that is, as the prudent man would determine it" (*Nicomachean Ethics*, II, 1106b24-1107a21). But who is that "prudent man"? Aristotle said the mark of a prudent man is the ability to deliberate well about what is good for himself, as a means to the good life in general (*Nicomachean Ethics*, VI, 1140a24-b19). Prudence is thus concerned with things that could give birth to deliberation. Prudence is basically concerned with action, and action actually deals with specific things or facts (*Nicomachean Ethics*, VI, 1141b7-32). Prudence helps us to ensure the rightness of the means we adopt to reach a given end, said Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics*, VI, 1144a7-9). Aristotle asserted that we cannot be prudent without being good. The supreme good only appears good to the good man. We cannot acquire prudence with possessing virtue, he said (*Nicomachean Ethics*, VI, 1144a37).

Ethics of responsibility

Ethics of responsibility is a sub-product of post-modernism. It has been mainly expressed through philosophy of otherness (Buber, Sartre, Lévinas) as well as Habermas' ethics of discussion. According to Sartre (1943, 1970), we are responsible for ourselves, and all human beings as well. We are always choosing what we are. Simultaneously, we are choosing the becoming of the whole humanity. What I am is nothing but a given set of open possibilities. The way that "existentialist decision makers" use their freedom is by revealing the type of human (existential) condition that they favour and building up from there. The problem with Sartrean existentialism is that the individual is creator of his (her) own values. Our freedom makes us elaborate on our own value systems. There is no list of universal values we should refer to. We thus have the whole responsibility for what we are and what we become. Sartre did not take conditioning factors into account. Every human being is always creating his (her) own self, and is thus responsible for his (her) whole life.

Unlike Sartre, Lévinas (1974, 1982) believes that we are responsible for our responsibility. I must assume my own responsibility. I must ensure that life conditions will make possible for others to rightly assume their own responsibilities. I am thus responsible for others' being. Humanity is responsibility-for-others. Assuming our own responsibility is the way to be oneself. Responsibility-for-others presupposes my involvement towards the Good, although the concept of Good has not been chosen through a rational deliberation. Habermas tried to deepen the way ethical deliberation should be conducted. Habermas (1987, 1992) said that responsibility means we can guide our action. The "guide" is the set of claims to validity that could be subjected to a rational deliberation with other people. Moreover, Habermas put the emphasis on the necessity, for every partner of the dialogue, to recognize each other as a responsible subject who could orientate his (her) conduct. A responsible subject is using his (her) claims of validity as parameters of truth. Some duties (such as the duty to say the truth) are drawn from the respect we have (and should have) towards the capacity to be responsible for others, through "communicational processes". According to Habermas, said Schnebel (2000), within communicational processes, individual values are articulated as units of meaning.

A critical view on ethical leadership

We will see here to what extent the eight leadership approaches we had selected could reflect one or more of the ethical theories, without creating any conceptual distortion.

Directive leadership. According to Aronson (2001), directive leadership is influenced by social and cultural expectations. In given countries (particularly in Asia), directive leadership is the kind of leadership that is expected by most of the people. However, the fact that a large majority of people expect directive leadership styles does not morally justify that style of leadership, or make it an "ethical leadership style". Insofar as directive leaders respect the basic human rights, their authoritative style could be considered as being ethical. It is not the case when the basic human rights, are neglected by an authoritarian leader. Of course, such an "a priori" principle presupposes that basic human rights (mentioned in the "UN 1948 Declaration of Human Rights") are seen as "hyper-norms" that overcome any set of cultural, social or religious norms. In some (western) countries, directive leaders are inclined to adopt a perspective of philosophical egoism. But it is not a general rule. In Asian countries, the ideal of social order and harmony actually discourages any egoistic attitude. But for directive leaders who live in more individualistic societies, their philosophical egoism could reflect a Hobbesian viewpoint. A Hobbesian leader would exert his (her) power with prudence. Some authors open the way to empowerment of subordinates. Hobbesian leaders are quite cautious towards empowerment, because human beings basically search for power and domination. Autocratic leadership could then be differently perceived in various social, cultural and even religious contexts.

Self-leadership. Self-leadership seems to have connections with a need to receive social approval. That is why it could certainly reflect Humean philosophy. The fact I believe, as business leader, that most of people (whether they are my employees, shareholders, suppliers and consumers) feel approval in considering a given action can make it possible for me to feel the same emotion when I am looking at the same action. As a business leader, I would not have felt that emotion if this belief (of social approval) would have not been present in my consciousness. Indeed, said Hume (1983), there

would be nothing morally right/wrong if people would not feel emotions of (social) approval/disapproval. According to Hume (1983), there are some actions, qualities and characters, which are generally approved by most of people. A business leader who would accept this Humean perspective would strongly believe that those actions (which are socially approved):

- are immediately pleasant for those who have such qualities or characters, or who are acting in a given way (social agents); and
- are useful: such actions can produce pleasure either for those who have such qualities/characters or for those who are acting, or for the others.

In such Humean perspective, leaders would not consider facts as being relevant. What is decisive for leaders is the influence of their beliefs. They approve what they see as being generally beneficial, and disapprove what they perceive as being considered as generally harmful. Humean leaders would say that being intrinsically good means being subjected to social approval. Self-leadership is generally defined in relation to those traits that could provide social approval for leaders' decisions and actions.

Authentic leadership. Although authentic leadership is not explicitly defined in connection with the ethics of virtue, authenticity refers to the whole integrity of the self and a basic attitude of sincerity. That's why authentic leaders could be very much comfortable with an ethics of virtue. However, as we see with the philosophical notion of authenticity (Taylor, 1991, 1992), authenticity could give birth to various kinds of behavior, particularly in its distorted (narcissistic) forms. Ethical education should be centered on virtues. What is at stake in virtue ethics, if not the whole meaning of life? Actualizing such virtues actually give sense to our own existence.

Transactional leaders. Aronson (2001) said that ethical leadership could be actualized in various ways. He asserted that transactional leadership actually mirrors a utilitarian perspective. Kanungo (2001) saw transactional leaders as protecting their self-interest and treating others only as means to reach their own ends. According to Sama and Shoaf (2008), transformational leadership presupposed that corporate social responsibility is enhanced in the organization, while transactional leadership is only focusing on the bottom line and business transactions (and is thus seen as much less "ethical" than transformational leadership). Such antagonistic perspective on transactional and transformational leadership does not reflect the complexity of leadership styles. This bottom line is probably a basic concern for both transactional and transformational leaders. Looking at transactional leadership as a way to treat others purely as a means (to reach our own ends) can distort transactional leadership as such. Using others as a means (that is, as objects or tools) dehumanizes both the victims (those who are used as tools) and the attackers (those who are using others as objects). Such an attitude seems to borrow Machiavelian notions of power (see Machiavelli's *The Prince*). Transactional leadership is far from being Machiavelian. Although it is a leadership style that focuses on exchange relationships, it does not follow that it reflects Machiavelian principles. Sarros and Santora (2001) believed that transformational leadership stimulates caring, autonomy, creativity and self-esteem, while transactional leadership is more focused on results through the implementation of organizational policies and procedures. Does it imply that transactional leaders could never be good "humanist persons" and that transformational leaders would never be results-focused? Pastor and Mayo (2008) concluded that leaders who are

focusing of performance actually show a transactional leadership style. The performance-focused attitude is not typical of a transactional leader. Transformational leadership could also be focused on both performance and self-realization of their followers. Pastor's and Mayo's viewpoint is actually distorting the reality. Organizational realities are much more complex and flexible than that. Awamleh and Gardner (1999) believed that transformational leaders could use corporate social responsibility (CSR) norms and root them into strategies of empowerment. But, why could it not also be the case for transactional leaders? Empowerment is certainly not a component of directive leadership styles. But, it can characterize either transactional or transformational leadership styles.

Shared leadership. Shared leadership seems to have deep connections with utilitarianism. Its aim is to share leadership tasks between people, so that the common good could be reached. Utilitarian leaders would believe that something is morally right if it produces a greater (net) pleasure for the greatest number of people affected by this action. Utilitarian leaders believe that utility means promoting pleasure and avoiding pain. So, he (she) deeply understands that nobody, including himself (herself) as leader, is more important than the others. Utilitarian leaders would then undertake a cautious and fair study of the people who are affected by their decisions. A leader who would assume Mill's perspective would be convinced that a little quantity of a higher pleasure (for instance, sense of morality) could be chosen to the detriment of many inferior pleasures (egoism, wealth). However, he (she) would know that large quantity of pains could follow from little quantity of higher pleasures. In other words, it could be very troublesome for leaders to prefer the sense of morality to the increasing of corporate profitability. Leaders who would agree with Mill's philosophy should share two basic attitudes:

- (1) They will try to ground their decisions on clear and objective principles.
- (2) They will avoid any "a priori" perception of higher and inferior pleasures/pains.

The way shared leadership is defined in the literature presupposes that leadership is shared between all people, depending of their strengths and weaknesses. The aim is to favour self-realization (short-term perspective). Shared leadership thus implies to assess pleasures and pains that could follow from the fact that some people undertake leadership tasks.

Charismatic leadership. Charismatic leaders put their charisma at the front of their leadership style. In doing so, they could have to use their charisma in a way they will solve ethical dilemmas, or to launch a dialogue about ethical issues within their organization. The components of charismatic leadership seem to be consistent with Ross' prima facie duties theory. Any leader would never know in advance which of those prima facie duties he (she) must accomplish in given circumstances. Leaders must rather look at the situation itself, in order to decide which one has to be prioritized. A given action can be a prima facie duty, in virtue of a given aspect ("I must respect my promises"), or a second aspect ("I must help my neighbour"). Leaders only have to reach an equilibrium between the various dimensions of the situation. They cannot know in all cases whether it is better to help those in need than to accomplish their promises. Such priority is never absolute and ultimately depends on circumstances. Charismatic leaders thus have limited knowledge of their principles. They cannot know in advance what they should do in all situations. Their life experiences reveal the truth of general principles

underlying their prima facie duties. In their moral judgment, charismatic leaders must recognize the properties of duties, which can make the difference between prima facie duties, and proper duties. They must then find out the greatest duty, that is, a duty, which creates the greatest equilibrium between right and wrong, good and bad in a specific context. Charismatic leaders are thus calculating the “net/global” right and wrong effects of their decisions. They consider the short-term and long-term consequences of their decisions, as well as their implications for all stakeholders. Ross’ theory of prima facie duties is quite relevant in our globalized world. Leaders are actually subjected to very strong conditioning factors, whether they are cultural, social, economic, political or even religious. Ross’ theory of prima facie duties is a utilitarian philosophy that clearly opens the way to ethical relativism. Its basic anomaly, is that there are never any universal moral principle. Even the basic human rights are not considered as being universal norms (or “hyper-norms”). Leaders could decide not to safeguard them in given situations. That is certainly a strong limitation of Ross’ theory of prima facie duties.

Transformational leadership and servant leadership

We believe that transformational as well as servant leadership could be connected with one of the following ethical theories:

- (1) *Deontology (Kantianism)*: Kanungo (2001) believed that transformational leaders tend to protect group interests and are focusing on common good. Transformational leaders would then consider that others are “ends in themselves”. They would try to transform their attitudes, values and behaviors through strategies of empowerment. Odom and Green (2003) are negating that transformational leadership could be a panacea. Authors suggested that true transformational leaders could have positive impact on their followers’ moral development. They admitted that transformational leaders are not always able to reach such objective. In some situations, transformational leaders are simply unable to do what they should do or what they would like to do. Authors explained that sometimes there are “pseudo-transformational leaders”, that is, some leaders who do not want to help others to go ahead in the path of self-realization. Although such leaders believe they are transformational, how could we include them in the so-called category “transformational leadership”? Pseudo-transformational leadership is a distortion of transformational leadership. It is a deep mistake to confuse a given ethical leadership style and its distortion. On the other hand, when leaders act (for instance, say the truth) by their feelings, inner dispositions, or interest, their action has no moral worth, although it could be identical to the action that is undertaken by moral duty. They could say the truth only because they have an inner predisposition to say the truth. From a Kantian viewpoint, such action would not be morally right, since an inner disposition could be modified in the long run. If leaders undertake the same action by moral duty, they are sure that they would choose the same action in the same circumstances, although they have modified their personal value system, or their paradigmatic perception of reality. Leaders will have some difficulty to put the Kantian categorical imperative into practice. Globalized markets make us aware that there are deep frontiers between peoples: societal cultures, spiritualities/religions. Universal laws could be

enacted. But indeed they could result from an international (historically-induced) consensus (like the “Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948”). In the other cases, how could we enact a universal law that can be applied everywhere in the world, in spite of the variety of cultures and religions? How could some moral duties (such as “say the truth in all circumstances” or “always deliver your promises”) be moral universal laws? Kantianism does not allow exceptions to the universal rules (such as half-truths), except if such rules are themselves considered as being universal. So, leaders will be perplexed about the possibility to put the first Kantian principle into practice. The second principle (prohibition of dehumanization) can largely applied in the business milieu. It reflects the concern for equal work opportunities. It implies the strict prohibition of any kind of discrimination/harassment. Everybody must always be considered as an end (as a subject). Resick *et al.* (2006) said that Kantian ethics focus on the intrinsic nature of a person or action. Treating others as ends requires, to look at them as autonomous beings. Individuals are considered as beings who can master their own destiny and who must then never be deluded or manipulated.

- (2) *Philosophical egoism (Spinoza)*: a free leader (Spinoza) who want to facilitate the perfection of other’s existence (common good) and who is focusing on self-accomplishment for everybody expresses a kind of leadership that is quite close to “transformational leadership”. Philosophical egoism presupposes that every human behavior is always motivated by self-interest. But Spinoza has a different view on ethical behavior than Bentham or Mill actually have. He put the emphasis on the free human being, and is thus more open to others’ interests. Indeed, transformational leaders could feel comfortable with Spinoza’s ideal of a free human being.
- (3) *Ethics of responsibility*: the notion of cross-cultural and/or inter-religious dialogue is much more convenient with the ethics of responsibility, since the notion of the otherness and the various communicational processes are then really taken into account. Transformational leadership could be much more influenced by Lévinas’ or Habermas’ philosophy than by Kantianism. Indeed, if we carefully look at the contents of Kantian philosophy, we cannot identify any characteristic of transformational leaders. The reinforcement of self-transcendence (personal transformation) and of the deep transformation of organizational culture has nothing to do with Kantianism. The principle for universalizing any action (the premise of the action could be universalized) is not really what transformational leaders have in mind. Transformational leaders are much more concerned with dialogue with all people, whether they are managers, employees, suppliers, business partners. In that sense, they are much closer to Habermas’ philosophy than to Kantianism. Transformational leaders are deeply responsible for others’ freedom. The “otherness-focused leaders” must contribute to create existential conditions in which everybody will be free and able to assume his (her) own responsibilities. Lévinas’ view of responsibility is much more suitable to ethical leadership than Sartrean philosophy. Lévinas’ notion of responsibility could enrich the way organizational life is planned and managed. His “responsibility-for-others” could make leaders more aware that every organizational member is closely linked to the others. For Habermas, every

opinion is nothing but personal opinion. Such attitude defines “communicational leaders”. Communicational leaders insist on deliberation about various parameters of truth. Leaders could benefit of the ethical deliberation processes Habermas have tried to define. However, it is not self-evident that rational deliberation could always occur between foreign partners. The deep differences of cultural and religious values and beliefs will put the dialogue to an “acid test”. Is it possible to talk about ethical/unethical practices without deeply understanding the values and beliefs of every foreign partner and thus without comparing all such values and beliefs from an objective viewpoint? What could an “objective perspective” imply? Would it be a set of rational principles we could use to reconcile some opposing values or beliefs? If not, how could we go ahead in the ethical deliberation processes?

When we look at the eight leadership approaches in connection with given ethical theories, it is striking to observe that a given ethical theory (such as philosophical egoism, utilitarianism or Kantianism) could be suitable to the components of various leadership approaches. This is what we could call the “moral flexibility of leadership approaches”.

Conclusion

Any culture of leadership cannot be built without a basic link between given ethical theories and specific representations of reality. Some authors believed that a combination of ethical theories could be the most relevant perspective for defining ethical leadership (Knights and O’Leary, 2006; Ncube and Washburn, 2006). We have seen how the eight leadership approaches are connected with one of the ethical theories. But above all, what we have suggested is that a given ethical theory (such as philosophical egoism) could be suited to the components of various leadership approaches. Ethical leadership does not imply that a given leadership approach reflects only one ethical theory. For different reasons, various leadership approaches could agree with the same ethical theory.

Future research should emphasize cultural and religious conditionings that are behind social expectations of ethical leadership. Indeed, very little research has been carried out about the spiritual and religious background (for instance, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam) that is closely linked to various ethical leadership styles. If we do not take into account spiritual and religious beliefs/values (and even the philosophical and theological concepts which are involved in such beliefs systems), we will distort the way ethical leadership could be practiced in many parts of the world.

Limitations of study

This study is focusing on western ethical theories. A similar study should be undertaken for Eastern ethical theories coming from Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, or Daoism. We should also see to what extent Judaism, Christianity and Islam presuppose different values and beliefs that could influence the leadership styles (believers) leaders should adopt. This theoretical study did not put the emphasis on such cultural or religious differences. It is possible that western ethical theories could be more or less relevant for specific world religions or spiritualities.

Implications

This study could help to circumscribe the frontiers between some leadership approaches. Some dualisms (such as Kantianism-transformational leadership, Philosophical egoism-transactional leadership) do not reflect the connections between ethical theories and leadership approaches. The notion of ethical leadership would have to be redefined. In doing so, we would reveal how a given ethical theory could be used by different kinds of leaders, and for very different reasons.

Are ethical
theories
relevant?

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