

Leadership, Management, and the History of Ideas

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Robert Spillane and Jean-Etienne Joullié co-authored two books in 2015: *Philosophy of Leadership*, with Palgrave Macmillan; and *The Philosophical Foundations of Management*, with Lexington. Two books at once on such consequential topics are reason for great expectations on the part of the readers of *Philosophy of Management*. I recommend that readers curb their expectations.

The books are structured identically: there is an introductory section in which the plan is laid out; then a series of chapters (constituting about 90% of each book) surveying the history of western thought (several of the chapters have similar names, such as “Heroic Individualism” and “German Romanticism”); and a concluding section that ties it all together. Neither book refers to its twin volume. A third book was also published in 2015, authored solely by Spillane. It, too, has the same structure and many similar or identical chapter titles. That book, *An Eye for an I: Philosophies of Personal Power* (published with GOKO) is not included in this review.

The aims of the two books are similar. Our notions of both leadership and management have roots, say the authors, which reach all the way back to ancient philosophy. By providing a detailed history of western thought, they intend to expose those roots and thereby to deepen our understanding. In addition to this shared goal, each book has its own goal. The leadership book aims to develop a conceptual analysis of leadership. The management book aims to reform the teaching and study of management in academia.

What is the distinction between leadership and management that the authors rely upon to justify and guide the two volumes? The question is never directly addressed, and it is not easy to construct an answer. They come closest to addressing it in the leadership book. Darkly describing leadership’s “consistent history of mystical propaganda, widespread corruption, arrant stupidity, and mass homicide,” (ix) they suggest that the attribution of otherworldly powers or, at least, special personality traits to leaders made leadership “far more impressive than the mere practice of . . . managing.” Thus “the concept of leadership was eagerly embraced by managers,” even though “studies have shown and general observation confirms that senior managers . . . have bad tempers, do not like their colleagues, and do not care about their

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anxieties or aspirations.” (x) This identifies, at most, a perceived difference between the two concepts. The last sentence of the book provides us, however, with a more substantial difference. They argue briefly that “noble rhetoric” is essential for effective leadership, and conclude the book thus: “If there is a road from management to leadership, noble rhetoric will be the vehicle to create the necessary authority” (222).

So, leadership equals management plus noble rhetoric? Not so fast. The management book, which never discusses leadership, states unequivocally: “Rhetoric is the most important skill of managers; everything else comes distant second, if it comes at all.” (318) We find, then, that good managers, like good leaders, do possess noble rhetoric. Perhaps that makes them leaders, too? That would mean, however, that we are still looking for a distinction, and thus for a reason for two books.

A more fundamental distinction between management and leadership, one that the authors do not acknowledge, emerges only from a reading of both books. In the management book, the authors harshly criticize management education for assuming that there is a specialized body of knowledge that managers need to master. It comes as a surprise, then, to find that a central tenet of the leadership book is that “in social organizations control is dependent on the accumulation of knowledge.” For this reason, the leader “possesses special knowledge,” and, for the leader, “the basis of authority is technical expertise....” (221) If the authors want to encourage managers to take the road to becoming leaders, it would be helpful to understand why specialized knowledge is useless to the manager, yet essential to the leader. Perhaps the explanation is that it is *not* useless to the manager; maybe they mean to imply, rather, that it is a type of special knowledge that cannot be taught. If that is their unstated point, however, we are once again looking for the distinction, and for the reason for two books.

Setting this unanswered question aside, let us consider the contribution made by each book to its particular goal, and then turn to examining their common goal. Each book is a series of loosely related stand-alone essays, most of them pertaining to some era of intellectual history, and most chapters including a few reflections upon the title topic. Successive essays do not build upon, and rarely mention, prior ones. There is no argumentative arc, nor is there much assistance to the reader in sifting among the essential and the accidental. This makes for dense and difficult reading.

With patience, an analysis of leadership can be discovered in the leadership book. Central to it is the tenet that leadership is “grounded in authority and it is through a process of authorisation that leaders get their powers.” (xi) That is, followers must concede certain rights to the leader. This makes the power of the leader social power, power that flows from the society of authorizers. There are at the same time, however, would-be followers who prefer their own autonomy to someone else’s authority. So, they choose to retain their personal power rather than throwing in with the social power, thereby making no concession of their rights to a leader. So, leaders “have to deal with the tension between individuality and followership.” (xi) And why should any would-be followers authorize a leader? Because the leader, as noted, has special knowledge, and uses this socially acquired power to increase that knowledge and to benefit the group. Rhetoric, classically understood as persuasive reasoning, is the essential tool of the leader, for it is by rhetoric that leaders effectively communicate their knowledge and gain authorization. “...The basis of authority is technical expertise supplemented by rhetorical skill; leaders have to impart knowledge to and inspire followers. As this is accomplished through language, leaders reinforce the classical tradition of noble rhetoric” (221).

There is not much more to say about their theory of leadership, although there is much to question. Given that so little of *The Philosophy of Leadership* is devoted to the philosophy of

leadership, we have meager ground for gaining traction. The authors are clearly on the right track to prioritize social authorization as a source of formal organizational leadership. But there are problems. They baldly claim, for example, that “there can be no leadership without authority.” (xiii) But there are widely acknowledged cases of leadership—which Ronald Heifetz designates “leading without authority”¹ and which we could alternatively designate “leadership as mere influence”—in which an emergent leader, who has no acknowledged leadership rights or responsibilities, plays a major group role. The authors rightly argue that not just any sort of influence can count as leadership (207); but these cases of influence count as leadership because they significantly influence the direction of the group. Followers do not abdicate their autonomy in favor of authority; instances of such leadership, in principle, need not even be intentional or recognized. This is an important category of leadership, one that sometimes does result in the eventual authorization of the leader.

Their account, furthermore, underestimates the teleological essence of leadership. The authors discuss only an epistemic teleology: the only goals which the leader takes the group toward, they say, are greater knowledge, and the application of this knowledge for the group’s benefit. But a group can have any number of different goals—from safety, to wealth creation, to public service, to fun. Knowledge is always of pragmatic value, but it is seldom the primary goal, except in the cases of educational and research organizations. In most cases, the leader’s knowledge is strictly of instrumental value in advancing the chief goal.

Finally, their account does not include one of the most important aspects of leadership. Followers are not first and foremost looking for someone upon whom they can bestow authority, or power, or rights; they are looking for someone who will take on responsibility—in particular, the responsibility for envisioning and advancing the group goal. It turns out, then, that it is a good idea for them also to authorize rights for the leader, but only because it is hard to carry out responsibilities without affiliated rights. Conceptually, the rights flow from the responsibilities. This is of fundamental importance, because it fixes, as the first principle for being a good leader, this: focus first on carrying out your responsibility, not on amassing and wielding your authority.

Let us turn to the management book. The introduction says, “This is a book exploring how philosophy has informed management thought, not how it should inform it” (p. xii). Nevertheless, many stretches of the book are prophetic in tone, calling down fire and brimstone upon the purveyors of modern management education and preaching salvation in the name of philosophy alone. “It is the overall contention of this book,” they declare, “that...business schools...should demand that their faculty and graduates study Western philosophy” (309). If that happens, then perhaps “we will see management schools as the place where philosophy is reborn from its postmodernist grave and applied philosophy thrives” (320). Otherwise, we will “only produce robotic executants unable to understand what they do and why they do it” (317). I suggest that, *pace* their disclaimer, this falls under the heading of exploring how philosophy should inform management thought.

Why is there such a desperate need for more philosophy in the management curriculum? It is a calamitous mistake, the authors claim, to believe that management is a science that requires the mastery of a special body of knowledge. It is a mistake because it is false, and because it promotes arrogance, corruption, and failure. This problem can be traced all the way back to Plato, whose Academy was, in effect, the first management school. Plato begins the fateful tradition of holding that there is a “body of knowledge without which the practice of

¹ Ronald Heifetz, *Leadership without Easy Answers* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1994).

management is defective” (126). His ideal “is a regime that is morally and intellectually corrupt to the core” (34). So, “there can be no doubt” that someone following Plato’s training “would quickly become a self-righteous autocrat..., organising the smallest aspects of his employees’ endeavours and removing anyone who would dare to dissent...” (36). Machiavelli’s realism could have perhaps served as a necessary tonic (60); yet it was overshadowed by the rationalism of Descartes (82), which has, regrettably, given us Taylorism and Michael Porter. After Descartes things went from bad to worse, as British Empiricism, with Hume as the main culprit, laid the groundwork for positivism. And it is at the feet of positivism that we can lay the blame for the scientific woes of the current management curriculum. Positivism encourages us to love science to the exclusion of all else. But, “If management academia has achieved scientific rigour,” the authors write, “it has come at the expense of relevance, coherence, and moral integrity” (307).

This is as tight as their argument gets. If the authors were on the search committee for the dean of a management school, they clearly would oppose the candidacy of such philosophical eminences as Plato, Descartes, Hume, Dewey, or the *Tractatus*-era Wittgenstein. Their philosophies, after all, have contributed to the downfall of management education. Yet philosophy, they declaim, must be its savior! We would benefit from a more nuanced diagnosis of the ills of management education, and a less oracular remedy. Management is a practice that we want done well—so much so that we devote significant resources to that end. We identify knowledge produced by the disciplines of the arts & sciences—including philosophy—and apply it to real life—whether it be to management or to another valued practice such as medicine, law, education, or social work. In each case, we know that a good professional education is a bridge that requires a solid foundation on both sides—one set of pylons in the relevant arts & sciences disciplines (usually as an undergraduate), the other set in real life experience (usually as an intern). Each professional discipline has developed a set of principles that helps students cross the bridge. It is an evolving set of principles, and benefits from informed and reflective criticism. I do not find anything informed or reflective in the philippics of these authors.

Let us now turn to the goal that is shared by the two books—that of illuminating the intellectual roots of the two practices by surveying the history of western philosophy. It would be fairer to say that they have surveyed not the history of western philosophy but a selective history of white European male thought. Significant portions of both books are devoted to Homeric pre-philosophical thought; additional chunks are assigned to Freud and various other psychologists and psychoanalysts; and there are takes on an array of other thinkers who are similarly outside the normal philosophical canon—Weber, Durkheim, Parsons, Lukes, plus a cast of less-expected figures such as Frazer, Novalis, Heine, Calvin, and Bierce. (And not to be forgotten—both books have sections on General George Patton.) This is perhaps less a flaw of the project than of its self-description.

More of a flaw is that hardly any North American philosopher is discussed—no James or Dewey, in particular, each of whom, as a seminal pragmatist, has been influential in the development of professional education, and each of whom has written on leadership. The authors offer an excuse: the American pragmatists, we are told, can easily be swept away with the same broom they use on postmodernism. (*Management*, xiii) Quine, Kuhn, and Rorty are mentioned at just enough length—a paragraph or so each—to dismiss them as either obviously wrong or dangerous. And Rawls, the towering figure of twentieth century political and moral thought, merits not even a footnote.

There is no discussion in either book of the ideas of any female in the history of philosophy—no Arendt, Nussbaum, de Beauvoir (mentioned, twice, but merely as Sartre’s companion), O’Neill, Foot, or Rand. The most notable reference to women is in the authors’ breathtaking excuse of Machiavelli’s arrant misogyny (*Management*, 59).

Among white European male thinkers, the choices are inexplicable. The management book explains that it will ignore Aristotle, Kant, Mill, and Moore “because they have already received significant attention in the management literature” (xiii). But this does not prevent them from giving Aristotle and Kant significant attention in the leadership book. The leadership book, for its part, edits Plato down to a page and a half (his rich and important notion of philosopher-kings is briskly banished on the grounds that “they must tell lies” (27), but devotes some one-fifth of its pages to Cynicism and Stoicism—neither of which is mentioned in the management book. Comte and Popper do receive extensive coverage in the management book, but none in leadership. Wittgenstein, perhaps the most important philosopher of the twentieth century, is brushed aside in one paragraph in the management book, and gets a footnote in leadership. And Mill never makes the cut. These choices may have made more sense if we had been provided with criteria for distinguishing between leadership and management, or if we had been provided with a clear sense of which roots the authors were aiming to uncover. As it is, the choices are baffling.

Their survey of western thought could, nevertheless, deepen our understanding of the conceptual roots of leadership and management. But it does not. Their project, in each case, is both ill-conceived and ill-executed. Intellectual history can be gripping and illuminating when the author explains the ideas of interest and then tracks them through history as they are shaped by thinkers, cultures, and events. Neither of these books takes that approach. Each historical chapter is, in effect, an idiosyncratic encyclopedia article, long on sweeping accounts of the thinker’s life and works, short on references to the topic of the book. The authors often go into detail regarding historical information that only remotely bears on the book’s topic. I do not know why we need a description of the Brazilian national flag, a plot summary of Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, reference to the adulteries of Marcus Aurelius’s wife, or speculation that Sumantra Ghoshal died out of his anguish over the state of management academia. Everything is ultimately connected to everything, of course; but we are all free to choose to read everything, if we wish, on our own.

As for the philosophical aspects of the survey, the authors provide us with page after page of ponderous prose about views of thinkers, major and minor, that can only be connected to the book’s topic by the slenderest of threads. Too often, these expositions include abrupt and sometimes mocking dismissals of their subject’s errors, confusions, or lies, in a style best described as overweening woolliness. When a direct connection is made, it sometimes works. There is an interesting section in the leadership book about Albert Ellis’s rational-emotive behavior therapy, including his autobiographical nod to Epictetus’s view that “we are not upset by the unfortunate events that happen to us, but by our views of these events.” (80). I am not sure which root of modern leadership thought is thereby uncovered, but it is interesting to see how a modern who thinks about leadership has been influenced by an ancient who was thinking about the meaning of life.

More often, however, the connections are of the “this reminds me of that” variety. They connect Peter Drucker to Achilles, not because there is any reason to think that Drucker’s ideas were inspired by Homer, but because Drucker and Achilles both focus on getting the job done instead of the inner life. But elsewhere they connect Drucker to the existentialists, who are famous for prioritizing the inner life. Similarly, in the management book, Taylorism is blamed

on positivism. But in the leadership book, Taylorism is blamed on Descartes, whose rationalism is antithetical to positivism. Any river of ideas can have multiple tributaries; but pointing out that a river and a higher stream both contain water does not prove that the one feeds the other. Superficial resemblances are best explored when a project is being brainstormed and researched. The reader should not be asked to take it from there.

I shall take as an example the Cynicism chapter of the leadership book. The first pages read like a competent introductory philosophy textbook, tracing the life and thought of Antisthenes, Diogenes, and Crates. Many familiar stories about these principled social rogues are retold, with no mention of leadership or its related concepts. The next few pages jump to the Renaissance, linking Rousseau and Voltaire to the ancient Cynics via a passage in which Rousseau says that as a young man he “became cynical and sarcastic out of awkwardness.” There follows a section about the postmodernists, whom the authors accuse of being cynical yet insufficiently true to the principles of the Cynics.

Some fifteen pages into the chapter we are told: “After mild resistance, postmodernism infected management.” (58) This, they say, led to an unfortunate emphasis on political correctness and thus “management by personality,” (58) which values feminine qualities as much as masculine and has spawned “self-destructive” (61) tools such as the 360-degree feedback and “oxymoronic ideas” (64) like emotional intelligence. The final section of the chapter quotes extensively from a modern-day version of *The Devil’s Dictionary*, co-authored by our own co-author Spillane (which I discovered only by digging into the footnotes in the back of the book). Here the authors serve up two pages of cynical definitions intended to skewer cynical, but insufficiently Cynical, postmodern managers. I still cannot figure out why postmodernism belongs in the chapter. If it is because the postmodernists are cynical, that would make as much sense as attributing to the ancient Skeptics my own tendency towards skepticism. And, anyway, the authors take the postmodernists to task for not following the ancient Cynics. It appears that they have excavated, have come up empty, but wish nevertheless to share some things that the adventure reminds them of.

As I reread the Cynicism chapter in search of a better argument for connecting postmodernism to Cynicism, my bewilderment became consternation. I was reading the book on *leadership*...yet in this chapter the sole mention of leadership is in the title, “Cynicism: Confronting Managerial Leadership.” The authors’ application, such as it is, is exclusively to *management*. Was this chapter originally written for the other, much longer book?

The authors have a sincere fascination with the history of ideas, and an undeniable eagerness to share it with others. But it is unsettling that they exhibit so little discrimination about their offerings, and it is disturbing that their pattern is to gleefully denigrate thinkers and their ideas even as they extol the glory of ideas. The experience of reading these books is comparable to visiting the shop of an earnest hobbyist who has scoured Europe for art objects. The sign in front says SCULPTURE. You enter to behold a store chockablock with every manner of curio and trinket, the wonderful with the negligible, offering scant room to maneuver and little discernible order. The proprietor explains that this display choice is designed to maximize the customer’s understanding and appreciation of the rarely stocked sculpture. You check out a few price tags, and notice that every item seems to be valued the same. You inspect a few items, and the proprietor disdainfully recites all that is wrong with each. Most customers would not linger long before deciding that there are better places to shop.

In the introduction to the leadership volume, the authors write, “We have written this book to arouse philosophical curiosity, not to satisfy it.” In both books, they abundantly achieve the second part of that goal, but not the first.

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