



The Philosophy of Leadership: Foundations and Frontiers

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Abstract

We show that in ancient times, in both West and East, philosophers thought deeply and systematically about leadership—as exemplified in both the ruling of states and in the management of households. Scholarly interest then lessened (with some notable exceptions), only to revive in the late 19th century. That interest, however, has largely been on the part of applied social scientists and management theorists. There is a need for trained philosophers to bring their specialized skills to the field. Indeed, there is a need for a revived philosophical subfield in the philosophy of leadership. We offer a list of particularly pressing questions pertaining to leadership that would benefit from philosophical attention. We then highlight the way that the contributions to this Special Issue contribute to answering some of these questions.

Keywords Philosophy of leadership · leadership ethics · leadership definition · ancient philosophy of leadership · leadership and management · leadership meaning · theories of leadership

This special issue on the philosophy of leadership grows out of a themed track at the Philosophy of Management conference in Oxford in 2024, with an additional boost from the first Vienna Workshop on the Philosophy of Leadership in 2025. The co-editors of this volume served as co-organizers of both activities.

The topic is particularly salient—both for this journal, given its scope and purpose, and also for this moment, marked by geopolitical instability and the extraordinary influence exercised by a small number of powerful actors in both political and corporate domains. Few subjects are more central to this journal’s commitment to contemporary management theory and practice. Leadership, which lies at the intersection of political, moral, social, and economic

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inquiry, has only rarely been treated as a distinct object of sustained philosophical inquiry. Some 30 years after Joanne Ciulla began “mapping the territory” of leadership ethics (Ciulla 1995), only a few philosophers are engaging with the ethical and other conceptual elements of leadership. It remains a field of inquiry that needs more careful conceptual analysis.

There was a time when philosophers took a deep and systematic interest in leadership. The *Analects* of Confucius and the *Dao De Jing*, attributed to Laozi, are centrally concerned throughout with articulating general—if very different—conceptions of how the state should be led. Plato addresses the topic in several of his major dialogues and letters; Xenophon develops his own detailed account, most notably in *Cyropedia*; and Kautilya, in ancient India, offers an extensive theory in the *Arthashastra*.

Nor was their interest confined to state leadership. All of them are to some extent also interested in household or estate management, which is the closest ancient analog we have to modern corporate management. Confucius and Xenophon see state leadership as, in effect, a scaled-up version of estate management, different chiefly in degree, not in kind. Kautilya integrates detailed discussion of estate management into his broader account of leadership. Even the Daoists share this structural continuity—although they otherwise differ dramatically, given their general position that, to adapt Thoreau, all leadership is best that leads least. Only Plato insists on a sharp difference in kind between estate management and political rule (as does Aristotle, although he does not pay much attention to leadership per se.)

In the subsequent centuries, theoretical interest in leadership waned, even as practical mirrors for princes and handbooks on estate management proliferated. Aquinas and Machiavelli stand out as major exceptions, along with a handful of notable contributors in the Muslim, Chinese, and medieval European worlds. But interest began to increase in the late 19th century. Inherited authority over states diminished, corporations grew, and bureaucracy came to dominate both. Thinkers in management and the applied social sciences saw that the problems of both domains were similar, and saw that an understanding of good leadership could be one of the solutions.

Leadership studies thus emerged as a distinct field. Its scholars, with the notable exception of the political historian James MacGregor Burns (1978), have tended to focus primarily upon the corporate context—even while drawing liberally, and often uncritically, upon the political ideas of Plato and Machiavelli. The field is dominated by scholars trained in management, organizational theory, and the social sciences. But leadership has yet to become an established subfield within philosophy. When philosophers do engage in it, they tend to be categorized as business ethicists. This is a reputable category but a poor fit; leadership is not necessarily about either business or ethics.

Partly owing to philosophical neglect, leadership scholars themselves complain that the academic literature on their subject is so permissive that both everything and nothing can count as leadership (Blom and Alvesson 2015). The problem, they suggest, is the absence of an agreed-upon definition. This complaint has been voiced for many decades (Browne and Cohn 1959; Rost. 1993; Boaks and Levine 2014; Wilson 2023 a). We find before us, then, an array of literature that can be in equal measure both interesting and baffling. There is, accordingly, a need to rethink leadership. Indeed, there is a need for—again, after some two millennia—a distinct philosophical subdiscipline in the philosophy of leadership.

Where, specifically, do philosophers need to turn their attention?

It begins with definition. As Aristotle observed, one thing that distinguished Socrates from those who came before was that he “was the first to fix his thought on definitions” (1984, 987b1–4). Leadership scholars did seek definitional clarity some fifty years ago (Rost 1993); but without the engagement of trained philosophers, the results were so unsatisfactory that the effort was largely abandoned. More recently, however, renewed work—indeed, within the pages of this journal (Wilson 2023 a)—has argued for a definition that recognizes that the most consequential leaders of states and corporations occupy functional roles. These roles are defined by organizational rights (including authority) and responsibilities, both of which pertain to moving organizations in the right direction—where “right” is used in a deliberately thin and open-ended sense. Even if this is correct, however, this is not enough. Consider these questions that also bear on definition:

- How is leadership to be defined when we take it to be a mere socially descriptive role, independent of socially created rights and responsibilities?
- How is leadership to be defined when we take it to be an individual quality, virtue, or characteristic, rather than either a social function or description?
- Are followers a necessary reciprocal to any of these concepts of leadership (the functional role, the descriptive role, the individual quality)?
- How can we be sure that the concept of leadership is being applied univocally when applied across times and cultures?
- What is the conceptual difference between leadership and management?

Another major area of philosophical inquiry concerns the connection between leadership and ethics. Significant questions remain:

- What is the conceptual relationship between good leadership, effective leadership, and ethical leadership?
- What are the ethical implications of a leader’s efforts to occupy the leadership role, as opposed to executing it?
- How do we distinguish between the leader’s organizational responsibility to advance the group’s purpose and the leader’s moral responsibility to benefit humankind?
- To what extent is the leader, as the agent of the principals (whether shareholders, citizens, or other constituencies), ethically bound to advance the interests of those principals?
- Is respect for human dignity essential to the concept of good leadership, or is it—at most—an instrumental means to organizational success?
- Does leadership necessarily introduce limitations upon the autonomy of organization members, or can the leadership function be carried out even while enhancing their capacity and autonomy?

Beyond definition and ethics lie further questions:

- What does it mean to say that an organization has a purpose, and that the leader should advance it? In what sense is there a purpose, and why only one? Is it something other than what the members want, what the principals want, or what society wants?
- Is there any deep way in which leadership of a state differs from leadership of a corporation?

- How can the subfield of social ontology help us to better understand the social construction of leadership? For example, if leadership includes both authority and responsibility, how can we determine if one is ontologically prior?
- How does the familiar history of “theories of leadership” fit into any philosophically satisfactory account of what leadership actually is?
- How do we reliably judge the extent to which a leader is to be credited, or blamed, with the success, or failure, of the organization?
- To what extent can leadership studies be understood as a science?
- Is there a distinctively feminine standpoint that has been unduly neglected in the study of leadership?
- What is the relevance of answers to these questions upon the practice of leadership development?
- Can models of leadership be justified by appeals to the self-organization of nature?

The papers in this special issue take on many of these challenges.

One highlight of this issue is the dialogue between Patricia Werhane (2026) and David Carl Wilson (2026), in which they further develop their competing views of leadership. They agree that there is an important conceptual distinction between formal and informal leadership—that is, between leadership defined as a functional role and leadership defined descriptively, merely as having influence or having followers. Werhane, however, follows up her earlier work on “embedded leadership” (2019) by arguing that decentralized leadership is better under all conditions. Drawing from complex adaptive systems theory, she concludes that organizations are always better off when their leaders avoid the use of authority and situate themselves where they have both immediate operational experience and also direct contact with members. Wilson, appealing to some of his earlier work (2023), questions whether this is always desirable or even possible, and wonders whether what she describes can count as leadership. Teleology, he insists, is essential to the leadership function, and he shows how the lack of a synoptic perspective can sometimes impair the leader and, thereby, the organization. Their follow up responses continue this dialogue further, taking on topics such as followership, naturalism, and the Hitler problem.

Another highlight is Joanne Ciulla’s keynote address at the 2024 Philosophy of Management annual conference, in which she examines how visual images and emotional responses shape our ideas about leadership (2026). Judgments about leaders, she shows, are often formed at the level of appearance rather than reason. Drawing on Plato’s cave and Friedrich Nietzsche’s account of resentment, she raises the philosophical question whether leadership is partly constituted by intentionally distorted perceptions that are then sustained by organization members. The address concludes with an extended audience Q&A that situates these issues in a contemporary democratic context.

It may seem surprising, in an issue devoted to rethinking a topic, that half of the articles deal with thinkers from more than 500 years ago. It turns out, however, that Aquinas and Machiavelli have provided us with a wealth of insights that are well worth rethinking. Elisabeth Kincaid (2026) and Jorge López González (2026) both write on Aquinas, with Kincaid focusing on Aquinas’s *Summa* and López González on his *De Regno*. They find that the emphases of the two works differ, but they find in each of them a stress on teleology and on the common good. López González, dealing with what is, after all, Aquinas’s contribution to the mirror for princes genre, notes the range of metaphors and analogies which Aquinas

employs in the illumination of leadership. He highlights, in particular, the metaphor of the leader as the pilot of a ship, a pilot who steers the metaphorical ship—the state and its members—into the common good, represented by the safe harbour. Even those only passingly familiar with the leadership literature will recognize the similarity to Plato’s familiar parable of the ship of fools and the true navigator. López González also takes up the question of the univocality of the concept of leadership, arguing that, despite the gulf between his world and ours, “Thomas Aquinas can be regarded as a pioneering theorist of leadership, *avant la lettre*, whose ideas provide valuable insights into the conceptualization of leadership.”

Kincaid finds a more theoretically complex account of leadership in the *Summa*, as might be expected in a document which, far from being any mirror for princes, is Aquinas’s theological magnum opus. She finds that the teleology of the *Summa* closely parallels the teleology of Greenleaf’s well-known model of servant leadership—that is, the aim of the leader of the state must be towards the well-being of its members. In order to achieve this, she notes, Aquinas calls for magnanimity and humility on the part of the leader; and she considers in detail how Aquinas understands each of these leadership virtues. In addition, she recognizes that Aquinas is not unaware that leadership sometimes applies to commercial enterprises, and she observes that this raises questions about whether the leader is, in such cases, really expected to be the servant of the members or, rather, the servant of the group’s external purpose.

And then we have an article on a mirror for princes of very different type—and one that is far more famous. David Shaw (2026) takes on Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, itself a piece of philosophy of leadership that today is *de rigueur* in the MBA curriculum. Shaw argues that insufficient attention has been given to Machiavelli’s contention that leaders are never entirely in control of outcomes, being subject to the forces of circumstances and Fortune. Accordingly, he says, we should revise downwards our reverence for formal leaders. Shaw further notes the importance of *kairos*—the moment of opportunity that the leader must seize; both occupying and executing the leadership role, he infers, can be legitimate requirements of leaders. These realities, however, can enormously complicate the problem of understanding how to attribute credit or blame to a leader.

Emily Kelahan (2026), finally, brings us back to the 21st century with a focus on one toxic form of managerial leadership, micromanagement. She objects strongly to calling it a leadership *style*, as though it is merely a choice that leaders might wish to make. It is not only counterproductive, nor merely a matter of respecting human autonomy; but it is also a form of hermeneutical injustice. And that, of course, brings us back around to where the modern era of the philosophy of leadership began—back to thinking deeply about how leadership is related to ethics.

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