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5. Handmaiden and queen: what philosophers find in the question: "what is a leader?"

Joanne B. Ciulla

The word "philosophy" was born when the Greek philosopher and mathematician Pythagoras of Samos (572-497 BC) was asked if he thought he was a wise man. He answered no, he was merely a lover of wisdom – a *phileo sophia*.[1] The philosophers who came after him were not as humble. Since philosophy was the study of just about everything, they dubbed it the "queen of the sciences". Philosophy reigned supreme until Christian times when the theologian Clement of Alexandria (150–215?AD) demoted philosophy from the "queen" of the sciences to the "handmaid of theology".[2,3] The Enlightenment philosopher John Locke (1632–1704) also regarded philosophy as a "handmaid" – but to the sciences. He said that the job of philosophy is to clarify assumptions, concepts and definitions, and interpret, analyze and synthesize the results of the sciences (Locke, 1961). Locke clearly describes what it means to *do* philosophy; however, he did not think that philosophy consisted of a distinctive body of truth.

Most philosophers agree that philosophy is a handmaiden, yet there are areas in which it still holds claim to the throne, most notably in logic and (despite the best efforts of theologians) ethics.[4] The other classical divisions of philosophy are metaphysics, which is concerned with the character of reality; epistemology, or the study of the nature, origins, and extent of knowledge; and aesthetics, which is about the assumptions behind our judgments about the arts. In addition to traditional philosophic divisions, we now have the "philosophy of" areas, which are obviously interdisciplinary. They include philosophy of law, science, social science, psychology, history, and so on.

In this chapter, we look at how philosophy serves leadership studies as both a handmaid and a queen. Throughout history, philosophers have written about leaders and leadership, yet only a handful of philosophers today identify themselves as writing about leadership in the context of leadership studies. After a brief discussion of the subject matter of philosophy, I will discuss my work and the contributions of philosophers Eva D. Kort and Antonio Marturano on a question about language and leadership: "what is the definition of a leader?"

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY AND WHAT DOES IT DO?

In ordinary language, we use the word "philosophy" to talk about a person's beliefs, opinions and assumptions about the world. Anyone can have *a* philosophy about anything, but *having* a philosophy differs from *doing* philosophy. Philosopher Mark Woodhouse explains the difference with the question: "are gurus philosophers?" (Woodhouse, 1975: 30). He defines a guru as someone who helps people find enlightenment and serenity. This question is relevant to the study of leadership because the popular literature is replete with books by "leadership gurus." These gurus are usually consultants or leaders who describe what they have learned from their experiences and offer advice to others on how they too can become enlightened. At times these books are motivational – sometimes they make the reader feel good.

According to Woodhouse, there are three ways that philosophers differ from gurus:

1. Gurus seek truth as a means to achieve a state of mind such as serenity. Philosophers seek truth as an end in itself, not as a means to some psychological state such as serenity or happiness. (Philosophy is just as likely to lead to agitation and despair.)
2. Many of the so-called philosophical insights that Gurus express are psychological generalizations about human nature.
3. Gurus often *assert* philosophically interesting themes, but "to join the club" of philosophers, they must *do* philosophy. Philosophers *do* philosophy, which means they develop and defend their claims of truth based on rational arguments (Woodhouse, 1975: 31).

Philosophy consists of a variety of traditions, each with its own emphasis and style of inquiry. Ancient Greek philosophy offers a treasure trove of insights on leadership. For example, Plato and Aristotle both worked with and taught leaders in their lifetimes, so their philosophic insights about leadership are informed by first-hand experience (see Ciulla, 2004a, 2004b). Unlike the sciences, philosophic works tend to have a very long shelf-life. For example, a 4400-year-old philosophic text written on papyrus can be as relevant today is it was in its own time. Consider, some of the maxims about leadership from the Egyptian philosopher and vizier Ptahhotep (2450–2300? BCE). He writes:

> If you are a man who leads,
> Who controls the affairs of the many,
> Seek out every beneficent deed,
> That your conduct may be blameless...
> If you are among the people,
> Gain supporters through being trusted;
> The trusted man who does not vent his belly's speech,
> He will himself become a leader.[5]

Today, two traditions dominate contemporary Western philosophy, Anglo-American analytic philosophy and continental philosophy. Analytic philosophers see themselves as handmaidens. They focus on exposing conceptual confusions, clarifying concepts, and examining the meaning of terms. Their job is to logically sort things out. They pull ideas apart and then put them together with other ideas – an important service for interdisciplinary fields like leadership studies. Since their aim is conceptual clarity and logical soundness, analytic philosophers write in ordinary language, meaning that they try not to create their own terms to talk about concepts. Those who study analytic philosophy tend to say that they are "trained" as analytic philosophers, since the emphasis is on learning how to *do* philosophy.

The continental European philosophers regard philosophy more as a queen than a handmaiden. Instead of focusing primarily on logic and language, they concern themselves with understanding the human condition and the nature of being itself or metaphysics. Philosophers from the continental tradition are not shy about tackling life's big questions about love, death and God, and psychological questions about how the self is related to others. In some ways the subject matter of continental philosophy is more interesting than analytic philosophy, but it also tends to be more difficult to read. Nevertheless, continental philosophy offers a rich body of ideas for leadership scholars. For example, Martin Heidegger's work has entered discussions about authentic leadership[6] in papers by Bruce J. Avolio and William Gardner (2005). One of the most influential continental philosophers today is Jürgen Habermas. Leadership scholars in Europe have taken a particular interest in his theory of communicative action and rationality, which examines how people coordinate what they do through dialogue and how they reach rational agreement on goals and actions (Habermas, 1981; see also Schnebel, 2000).

Postmodernism also hails from continental Europe. It consists of a combination of elements from the analytic and continental traditions. There is no simple way to describe postmodernism except as a critical theory that attempts to reveal or "unmask" how modern ideas of certain knowledge, historical progress, unified notions of meaning, reality and identity are not what they seem. Postmodernists share with analytic philosophers an interest in the nature of meaning and a wariness of positivism (especially in the social sciences). As members of the continental tradition, postmodernists also seek to understand the ways in which humans construct narratives of history, identity and reality.

Scholars have employed some of the ideas in postmodernist literature to leadership studies. In 1988, Marta Calas and Linda Smircich (1988) wrote a postmodernist critique of the field in which they questioned the way that research was done based on who did the research. More recently, Sonia Ospina and Georgia Sorenson (2006) used a postmodernist theory to examine leadership as a social construction in their article "A constructivist lens on leader-

ship: charting new territory". There is plenty of room for postmodern critiques and approaches to the study of leadership, but scholars who take this approach will have to frame their work in language that is accessible to academics from the various disciplines that comprise leadership studies.

One thing that all philosophic traditions have in common is that they all do ethics. The ethics literature is open to a wide range of interpretation. As philosopher Terry L. Price points out (2004), leaders sometimes misuse philosophic texts to rationalize or support their own unethical behavior. What distinguishes philosophic ethics from ethics done in other disciplines is that *doing* ethics requires a solid grasp of other areas of philosophy, such as logic and epistemology (see Fisher and Kirchin, 2006). Another thing that most philosophic traditions possess is an interest in language, because in many ways, our language *is* our world. Hence, it is not surprising that some of the work done by philosophers in leadership studies focuses on the problem of defining leaders and leadership. As we will see, sorting out this kind of conceptual problem sets the stage for work in leadership ethics.

THE DEFINITION PROBLEM

While trained as an analytic philosopher, my approach to doing philosophy is a bricolage of philosophic traditions. When I began reading the leadership literature in 1991, I was struck by the fact that some authors went to great lengths to define the word "leader" (see Ciulla, 1995, 2002). I found this a bit odd. On the one hand, I could understand defining "leader" for the purpose of a particular study – scientists do it so that they can limit the variables in their research. This sort of definition is called a stipulative definition (see Kripke, 1980). Stipulative definitions are similar to, but not the same as, our everyday use of terms. On the other hand, I noticed that writers, most notably the late Joseph Rost, wanted to define the word "leader" for all scholars (and perhaps for everyone else too) (Rost, 1991). This was problematic on two levels. First, it seemed to demonstrate a desire to control the way that leadership scholars work – if you control the definitions, you control the field. Second, Rost's assertion that leadership studies could not progress if leadership scholars failed to agree on one definition seemed at odds with the way that language works.

I began my analysis of the definition problem by turning to the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein observed that the meaning of a word comes from how we use it. While people may use a word in a slightly different way – meaning they have slightly different definitions of it – we still understand what they are talking about. This is because the use of a term by one person has a family resemblance to the use of the term by another person

speaking the same language (Wittgenstein, 1991). I decided to look for the family resemblance in the 221 definitions of the word "leader" that Rost had collected (1991: 47–102). Since Rost claimed that his definition was the new post-industrial definition, I decided to examine the "industrial" definitions in their historical context. I noted the similarities and differences between definitions and considered how the social and historical context influenced these definitions.

By doing a linguistic analysis of the term "leader" I gained two insights. First, the differences between definitions of the English word "leader" were implicitly or explicitly normative. As a social construction, the American usage of the word "leader" reflected what people in a certain place and at a certain time thought leaders should be. When scholars said things like: "leaders inspire followers toward common goals", they did not mean that all leaders really did this, they meant that leaders ought to do this. The statement also seemed to mean that the writer only wanted to attribute the word "leader" to a person who inspired followers toward a common goal. I was surprised to see how often leadership scholars wrote as if they were *describing* leaders when they were actually *prescribing* what they thought leaders should be like. Describing what leaders should *be like* seemed to beg the question of what they actually *were*. Was this confusion simply a careless use of language or was something else going on in terms of how we understand the word "leader"?

My second related insight was simply that the question "what is a leader?" was really the question, "what is a good leader?" This relationship between what a thing is and what it ought to be has always intrigued philosophers. Plato argued that reality consists of the physical world and the world of forms or ideas, which might also be understood as ideals since they are perfect. The form of a table is like the paradigm of a table. When we judge the quality of a table, we do so against this ideal (Plato, 1961a). We see a similar inclination in leadership scholars who sometimes feel the need to differentiate between people who are called leaders and "real leaders", or "true leaders", or what Kort will call a "leader proper". They write as if some leaders fit the ideal and others are mere shadows of it. For instance, Bernie Bass's distinction between transformational and pseudo-transformational leaders is really an attempt to eliminate leaders who might fit the description of a transformational leader but are not ethical. Such leaders fall short of the ideal transformational leader who transforms people and is ethical. Scholars from Ptahhotep to Bass have an ideal of a leader. Almost all of them either implicitly or explicitly include ethics as part of that ideal. A philosophic examination of the language of leadership yields insights that are similar to those found in attribution and implicit leadership theories of leadership (Yukl, 2006). We all walk around with slightly different ideal leaders in our minds, even if we all use the same word for them.

When I looked at how other scholars talked about good leaders, I discovered a dichotomy between leaders who are morally good and leaders who are effective at exercising leadership. I called this "the Hitler problem" (Ciulla, 1995). This dichotomy is a vestige of the old positivist notion that the social sciences should be untainted by value judgments. Some historians think Hitler was a good leader, but only in the sense of being an effective one, not in the sense of being an ethical one. I used this dichotomy between ethics and effectiveness as a framework for mapping out the ethically distinctive aspects of leadership (Ciulla, 2004a). My first analysis of the definition problem was by no means complete, but I knew that the end goal was to expose the fact that ethics/effectiveness was in part a false dichotomy. The more that I worked on understanding the relationship between ethics and effectiveness, the more I could see the normative complexities behind the very concept of a leader. That is why I was so pleased when Kort and Marturano took up the challenge.

LEADERSHIP AND PLURAL ACTION

Eva D. Kort critiques and builds on my discussion of the definition problem. Kort argues that the best way to understand what the word "leader" means is to analyze the nature of plural actions or the coordinated actions of people in a group (Kort, 2008). She challenges the assertion in Rost's definition that leadership is a mutual influence relationship by showing that it is circular. She shows the circularity in the following statements:

1. "Leadership" means a relationship between leaders and followers.
2. "Leaders" and "followers" mean anyone who is in a leadership relation.

Using a favorite tool for doing philosophy – the thought experiment[7] – Kort explains why acts, not relationships, reveal the features that identify leadership "proper" from other cases of "purported" leadership. Notice how she contrasts the real person who is supposed to be the leader with an ideal leader. She poses two questions: "what kind or kinds of events would result in a social relation in which some people are leaders and others are followers?" and "which objects or people are involved in such events, and what is the nature of that involvement?" (Kort, 2008: 414). Kort provides a number of simple examples to derive a set of defining characteristics for what constitutes a leader and a follower in a particular situation. She says first, members of a group must intend to perform an action and intend to do it in conjunction with other members of the group. And second, in a particular context, a person is only a leader if he or she makes suggestions for initiatives that the group members find worthy of endorsement. For example, a concertmaster holds a formal

leadership position. If he conducts the orchestra with instructions that the musicians know are bad, they will follow him because of his position. In this case, Kort says the concertmaster is merely a purported leader, not a leader proper. She writes: "It is only when the concertmaster does lead – participate in the plural action in (generally) the right sort of way – that the concert-master is the leader in the proper sense" (ibid. 422). She sums up her criteria for the definition of leadership proper taking place in an event this way:

(1) A and M participate in a plural action, Φ;
(2) A and B intend to perform Φ;
(3) A and B cooperate in performing Φ;
  (4) A makes suggestions for proceeding either spontaneously or as a matter of course, which are worthy of endorsement in displaying general competence and being ethically neutral or positive;
  (5) A's suggestions are endorsed by A and M, acted upon by M, and thus influence M's contribution;
(6) Φ is endorsed by A and M;
(7) Φ is ethically neutral or positive (ibid. 423).

Notice how Kort's definition includes unavoidable judgments. Leaders are people whom we recognize as competent and, where relevant, ethical. Kort disagrees with my observation that one of the central features of the leader/follower relationship is power and/or influence, mainly because of the coercive implications of these terms. For Kort, leaders are people whose ideas are voluntarily endorsed and acted on by others in various situations. Power is not central to her ideal of leadership. Whether we can say this endorsement is simply the result of being influenced or a defining characteristic of influence or, as Kort claims, something altogether different from influence, is open to discussion. Her analysis demonstrates how a person can lead without necessarily intending to do so, simply because others endorse his or her ideas. Her analysis of actions and events explains how the rational and voluntary consent of followers distinguishes a leader proper from someone who either holds a leadership position and/or someone who simply coordinates activities.[8]

Kort's focus on plural actions also helps us understand the Hitler problem. Once we raise the question of whether Hitler was a good leader in the context of the particular things Hitler did, we end up with statements Kort says are "almost oxymoronic" such as, "Hitler was a leader of the German people in their killing of over six million innocents" (ibid. 424). While one might still argue that Kort's definition is not about what leaders are but what they should be like, she provides compelling argument for why the description of what a leader is cannot and perhaps should not be purely descriptive.

LOGIC AND SEMIOTICS

Italian philosopher Antonio Marturano (2008) applies logic and semiotics, or the *interpretation of signs and symbols*, to the definition problem. He believes that the definition problem stems from the fact that most leadership scholars are psychologists who approach leadership as a description of psychological processes and relationships. The problem with this is that the language used to describe a relationship is different from the language we use to name an object such as "chair" or a person's title such as "president".

Marturano begins his analysis with the philosopher and mathematician Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's work on identity. Leibniz's Law, or "the identity of indiscernibles", states that for two things to be the same, they have to have all of the same properties. Marturano uses the following example to illustrate Leibniz's Law:

1. Silvio Berlusconi is the owner of Mediaset.
2. Silvio Berlusconi is the Italian Prime Minister.

We could logically add a third sentence that states: "The Owner of Mediaset is the Prime Minister of Italy" because the Owner of Mediaset and the Italian Prime Minister refer to the same person. Marturano then shows us a peculiarity of logic when one introduces propositional attitudes (which are words that refer to people's mental states, such as opinions, value judgments, beliefs, etc.) into language. Consider the following sound argument:

A. The Italian Prime Minister is the owner of Mediaset.
B. The owner of Mediaset is a successful leader.
C. The Italian Prime Minister is a successful leader.

According to Leibniz's Law, the property of *being a successful leader* has to be identical in the case of the prime minster and the owner of Mediaset. But in this case we discover that B and C are referentially opaque – meaning we cannot tell if the property of *being a successful leader* applies identically to the Prime Minister and owner of Mediaset, even though they refer to the same person. Marturano shows us that it is possible to draw two contradictory true statements from the argument.

D. Tony believes that the Italian Prime Minister is a successful leader.
E. Tony believes that the Owner of Mediaset is not a successful leader.

This referential opacity of evaluative terms like "successful" also explains why the statements "Hitler was a good leader" and "Hitler was not a good

leader" can both be true because we cannot see the properties of the word "good". In the first case, the properties of the word "good" refer to skills and effectiveness. In the second case, the properties of the word "good" refer to moral qualities. While this is a simple distinction, the really interesting question for leadership scholars is how ethics informs our concept of what constitutes success or effectiveness (Ciulla, 2005).

Arguing that culture and history shape what people mean by the word "leader", Marturano draws on Umberto Eco's semiotics to elaborate on how this works. Eco says that the meaning of a word or a symbol in any culture comes from "textual cooperation" between speakers. People derive their understanding of words from a cultural "dictionary" and "encyclopedia" that provide the rules and assumptions for how to use a word. Marturano explains: "in order for a follower to decode the system of meanings a leader is embodying, she needs not only a linguistic competence but also a capacity to manage anything about her culture that enables her to trigger a series of presuppositions, repressing idiosyncrasies, etc."[9] The encyclopedia and dictionary that we use to decode the meaning of the word "leader" is not written by academics or leaders, but by followers in the context of their society's construction of leadership. Marturano suggests that the meaning of leader is and ought to be fluid. Leaders have to give followers latitude to add meaning to their leadership, and followers must do the same for leaders. Marturano's paper illustrates the logical problem with defining leadership and reformulates the question "what is leadership?" into a question about how leaders and followers jointly shape the meaning of the term. Marturano and Kort use different methods of analysis, but ultimately come out with similar positions in regard to the definition of leadership.

CONCLUSION

Kort's and Marturano's analyses of the word "leadership" explain why there are prescriptive definitions of leaders in leadership literature. There is a sense in which "what is a leader?" and "what is a good leader?" are the same question. The words "leader", "lead", and "leadership" cannot be adequately defined without normative criteria. A *one-size-fits-all* definition of leadership is not possible because, as Marturano shows us, the properties of normative terms are referentially opaque. Hence, it makes more sense for leadership scholars to focus on revealing the moral, social and psychological properties of leaders than on trying to come up with the ultimate definition of a leader.

We have been looking at how three philosophers *do* philosophy and analyze the question, "what is the definition of leadership?" This chapter began with the simple idea that the meaning of the word "leader" comes from the way

people use it. Kort analyzed various ways that people use the term in the context of a variety of particular actions by groups. For her, a leader is someone who has ideas that people voluntarily endorse and act upon. Marturano then looked at the kind of fluid cultural values, presuppositions and agreements between leaders and followers that determine what people mean when they use the word "leader".

Two conclusions emerge from this discussion. First, to put it glibly, you are only a leader if rational people think you are, and how they identify you as a leader depends on their cultural and historical assumptions. Second, the word "leader" has a built-in normative aspect to it. A leader only leads if he or she meets certain technical and ethical standards of followers. Hence, leadership is not simply about having and using power. These conclusions are compelling precisely because they are not new. Philosophers throughout history have been reiterating similar ethical values in their ideas about leaders, whether it is Plato's (1961b) definition of the philosopher king who is wise and virtuous or Ptahhotep's maxim that leaders should "gain supporters through being trusted". The philosophic literature chronicles the history of human ideals and aspirations. These ideals and aspirations are embedded in the language that we use to make sense of the world around us, which is why leadership studies cannot do without the handmaiden or the queen.

NOTES

1. Johnstone (1965). It is also worth noting that mathematics was also called the queen of the sciences.
2. Titus Flavius Clemens (AD 150–215) *The Stromata* (n.d.). Chapter 5 of the book is titled "Philosophy the handmaid of theology". Other scholars attribute the saying "handmaiden of theology" to St Peter Damian (1007–72) who was an adversary of the liberal arts. In both cases, the term was meant to make philosophy subservient to theological truths. See Toke (1911).
3. The images used to describe philosophy are markedly female. In Plato's *Theaetetus* (150 c–d) Socrates says: "God compels me to be a midwife, but has prevented me from giving birth" (Plato, 1977: 113). Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) made famous the Owl of Minerva. The goddess Minverva was the Roman version of the Greek Athena, goddess of wisdom, craft and war. Minerva is associated with an owl, which is also a symbol of wisdom. Hegel writes, "The owl of Minerva takes flight only when the shades of night are gathering". (Hegel, 2001: 20).
4. I realize that this is a very contentious assumption.
5. Lichtheim (1973: 61–82) The passages quoted from this book are available online at: http://www.humanistictexts.org/ptahhotep.htm.
6. Heidegger is cited but it looks as if it is because of his influence on the psychologist Erick Erickson. From what I have seen there is still no serious treatment of his work, in part because it would be at odds with some of the work in this area. Jean Paul Sartre also writes extensively on authenticity in a fashion that may be somewhat closer to the authentic leadership literature.
7. A thought experiment is a series of vignettes or examples that help make some common sense conceptual distinctions.
8. Kort also discusses the distinction between leaders and managers in her paper. She depicts

managers as people who coordinate activities. They are in a position to lead, but they don't necessarily do so unless they meet the conditions that she outlines.
9. Here Marturano cites Eco (1979: 42).

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