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Caring Leadership as Nietzschean Slave Morality

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Leadership

Caring leadership as Nietzschean slave morality

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Abstract
In this paper, I respond to calls for more critical reflection on the power dynamics of caring leadership. I consider how a combination of care and impotence might unfold as Nietzsche's 'slave morality', crystallised in the phenomenon of *ressentiment*. At the heart of slave morality is an inversion of values in which everything represented by the Other is denigrated so that the slave can find meaning and solace in his own place in the world. The Nietzschean inversion transforms impotence, inferiority and submission into virtue, identity and accomplishment. In contrast to recent elaborations of *ressentiment* in followers, I argue that slave morality is something to which leaders, especially caring leaders, are also vulnerable. When caring leadership awakens or exposes the slave-within, we are unable to take charge of – or responsibility for – ourselves, because we have ceded control of the self to forces beyond the self. This is the risk of 'care ethics' as a systemic inversion of values which constructs an ideology out of letting others define who and what we are. It creates a breeding ground for *ressentiment*, feeding off unspoken and unspeakable grievances about the injustices of one's lot, especially those involving a clash between the rhetoric of empowerment and the experience of impotence. The Nietzschean warning is: Be wary of leadership models which might look and even feel nice, but which turn self-sacrifice into virtue and silence into necessity.

Care ethics in contemporary life

In a world of heightened connectivity, networking and coalition, any ethical framework with relationship at its heart is bound to appeal. One such framework that has been attracting great interest in leadership studies is the 'ethics of care'. In many sectors, leaders increasingly deal with multiple stakeholders – internal and external, local and remote – including those over whom they have no

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formal, direct authority. This often means trying to connect, inspire and reassure without the levers of positional power. In such a context, leadership involves precisely those relationship skills that care seems to comprise, such as empathy, responsiveness and the ability to understand other people's needs, aspirations and points of view.

The origins of contemporary care ethics lie in the domestic sphere, with strong links between care and parenthood, usually the maternal relationship (Bubeck, 1995; Kittay, 2013). Within this domestic setting, care is usually conceived as attentiveness and concern in concrete relationships and attachments where one person has the resources to attend to another person's needs. However, care's domestic roots do not mean that this is the only domain that care ethics can illuminate and inform (Held, 2006; Noddings, 2002). Increasingly, scholars in the care ethics movement see care as a broader social and institutional framework, i.e. as a general moral theory of obligation which is 'equally accessible to both men and women and universally obligatory for all capable human beings' (Engster, 2007: 13).

In an era of environmental crisis, care seems particularly appropriate as an ethical framework. Tronto defines care as 'a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our "world" so that we may live in it as well as possible' (Tronto, 1993: 103). Connecting with this emphasis on world-nurturing and sustainability, there is a burgeoning business ethics literature which expands care's emphasis on concrete relations in the here-and-now to encompass our responsibilities towards future generations, i.e. towards people whom we do not, and may never, know personally (Nicholson and Kurucz, 2019; Sander-Staudt and Hamington, 2011; Simola, 2012). From this perspective, acting with care means not depriving future generations of resources that are available to us now.

So, care may be a general theory of moral, political and environmental obligation as much as the practice of looking after a particular person in need. Across these various elaborations, Tronto (1993) summarises common themes of attentiveness, responsibility, competence and responsiveness in our encounters with, and attitudes towards, others. Thus, when we care for someone, we are sensitive to his needs and wishes; when we decide to respond to these needs and wishes, we exercise moral agency; we must also be capable of helping, otherwise our efforts may be inappropriate, even harmful; and finally, the responsiveness of care means monitoring whether, not just assuming that, our actions have had a beneficial effect. In short, our care-giving efforts may not be experienced *as* care unless we engage with people on *their* terms, not ours (Ladkin, 2020; Tronto, 1993).

Caring leadership

The notion of caring leadership has been garnering increasing attention in recent years. It is an attractive idea, because it triggers associations with closeness, belonging and mattering to one another, and seems to prioritise human beings over inhuman performance indicators. Caring leadership has been linked to increased organisational commitment (Lilius et al., 2012), heightened workplace self-esteem (McAllister and Bigley, 2002), improved organisational performance (Cameron et al., 2003), and a strengthening of the moral foundations of transformational leadership (Simola et al., 2012). Such a positive view of care tallies with arguments for leaders' emotional intelligence and relationship management skills, and with a 'common sense' view of care as involving good emotions of empathy and compassion, rather than bad emotions, such as envy or hostility.

Philosophical elaborations of caring leadership have drawn on Foucauldian ethics (Ladkin, 2018), Jungian archetypes (Gabriel, 2015), Heideggerian ontology (Tomkins and Simpson, 2015), evolutionary theory (Abreu Pederzini, 2020), and Classical understandings of the relationship

between care and democracy (Atack, 2020) and care and national security (Lowrie, 2020). These have traced some of the power dynamics of caring leadership, focusing principally on the suggestion that care can be infantilising. There is much more to explore, however, in relation to the conditions and effects of such power (Ladkin, 2020; Tomkins, 2020). It is to this debate that the current paper seeks to make its main contribution.

When we talk about the intersection of leadership and care, we usually position leaders as care-givers and followers as care-recipients. This allows us to draw parallels between the power asymmetry in leader/follower relations and an equivalent power asymmetry in care-giver/care-recipient relations. The asymmetry is usually depicted as one of relative power and influence for leaders/care-givers and relative powerlessness and disadvantage for followers/care-recipients. Explorations of the power dynamics of caring leadership have, therefore, tended to position asymmetry as a particular risk for followers.

This risk revolves around a loss of autonomy and agency. For instance, Atack (2020) explores caring leadership in Classical Greece, where the analogy of the shepherd king and his flock exposes the crucial significance of distinguishing between followers' assumed versus articulated needs, for the assumption of needs is seen as a potential abuse of power. Drawing on the more recent framing of psychoanalysis, Gabriel (2015: 329) highlights similarities between the overly caring parent and the overly caring leader: 'As every caring parent knows, excessive caring can seriously inhibit the autonomy of followers, instilling dependence and inertia…At what point does caring turn into overprotection and cosseting?'

Rarely, however, has the power asymmetry of caring leadership been approached from the opposite direction, i.e. from the perspective of the powerlessness of the caring leader (Abreu Pederzini, 2020, is a notable exception). Here, leadership scholars have much to gain from the vibrant sociological, political and feminist literatures on care ethics, where the impotence, indeed, potential abuse, of care-*givers* has long been a crucial concern.[1]

In her ground-breaking work, *In a Different Voice*, Gilligan (1982) highlights differences between a *feminine* care ethics and a *feminist* care ethics. The former equates moral goodness with self-sacrifice, i.e. with engaging with others solely on their terms and in the service solely of their needs. It casts commitment to others as the opposite of moral maturity and stability. A *feminist* ethics, on the other hand, sees all human lives as interconnected and interdependent within a social, political and moral web of relationship. The risk for *all* relationships of care is that they lapse into the self-sacrifice of the former rather than the radical intersubjectivity of the latter.

As a *feminine* ethics, then, care can get distorted into subservience and self-sacrifice (Gilligan, 1982; Sander-Staudt and Hamington, 2011). Those who care are confronted with two potential dependencies – the real and/or feared dependency of the care-recipient and a secondary dependency for the care-giver via often all-consuming responsibilities. On the surface, care relations seem to represent the best of what humans can do and be for one another. Beneath the surface, however, such 'dependency work' can make care-givers vulnerable to care-recipients manufacturing false or inconsistent needs and exploiting the care-giver's commitment to the relationship and attachment to the care identity (Kittay, 2013). This is an exploitation of care both at an interpersonal level and at the level of society at large, which insists on valuing care morally whilst devaluing it economically.

Seen in terms of self-sacrifice to a relationship, the idea that care-giving involves such attunement to another person that we can see the world through his eyes – and thence not only react to, but actually *predict*, his needs and wants – does not feel like the sign of healthy empathy or generosity. Rather, it alerts us that:

'We can take up the perspective of others out of sheer necessity for survival, the necessity to anticipate others' needs in order to be a good servant or slave, for example. Women learn well to do this with men; slaves have learned well to do it with masters.' (Card, 1990: 106)

Therefore, when we extrapolate care from domestic/familial relations into the sphere of organisation, we should challenge the assumption that the power dynamics of care automatically privilege leaders/care-givers and disadvantage followers/care-recipients. Just like the domestic care-giver, the caring leader risks being disempowered through a relationship which equates attunement to other people's needs with the shelving of one's own. The irony of this, of course, is that the caring leaders who *look* like organisational 'masters' may in fact be enslaved by the moral and emotional dynamics of care.

Drawing these threads together, this paper explores and unsettles the power dynamics of caring leadership. It deploys ideas from the philosopher Nietzsche to consider how a combination of care, impotence and self-sacrifice might unfold as Nietzschean 'slave morality'. Nietzsche is associated first and foremost with the 'will to power' as humanity's most fundamental instinct – our 'basic transformative urge' (Ridley, 1998: 91) through which we construct and reconstruct our experiences and understandings of both self and world. Nietzsche has inspired recent work on the power relations of leadership (Capriles, 2012; Ciulla, 2020) and the power relations of care (Biley, 2010; Paley, 2002). When we bring these two together to examine the power relations of caring leadership, Nietzsche offers startling insight into how our 'transformative urge' might be implicated in the constitution and subjugation of leaders and leadership.

My working definition of leadership here is somewhere between the two extremes of the singular person-at-the-top depiction and a fully distributed perspective (both of which I see as conceptually useful but rarely realised). In contemporary Western organisations, especially those of the 'knowledge economy' where work is organised by project and matrix as much as by hierarchy, aspects of leadership feature in many people's working lives. Leadership is entailed, for instance, in defining a project's scope; mobilising and motivating others; assuming responsibility for outcomes; setting and facilitating meeting agendas; etc. In many encounters, different people represent different aspects of leadership, such as a project leader and a departmental leader coming together to negotiate resources. I wish to move away from role-based distinctions between 'leaders' and 'followers' to suggest that many of us have aspects of 'leadership' and 'followership' in our day-to-day organisational experiences. My working assumption is that some people do 'leadership' most of the time, and most people do 'leadership' some of the time. These Nietzschean provocations are not, therefore, designed to differentiate between the 'gifted few' and the 'ordinary many'. Rather, they have relevance for all of us who enact and experience leadership.

Nietzsche, slave morality and *ressentiment*

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) is amongst the most invigorating and disturbing of modern philosophers. He has had an enormous influence on philosophers more familiar – and possibly more palatable – to contemporary critical scholars, such as Foucault, Heidegger, Kafka and Sartre. Nietzsche's reputation was done enormous damage by his sister, who assumed control of his work after his collapse into insanity. She edited his work to simplify and emphasise those ideas which would be claimed by the Nazis as legitimising genocide for the sake of the Aryan 'master race'. That said, one can see why such an appropriation was possible, for there is a great deal in his work that makes for uncomfortable reading, to say the least. But, as Foot (1994: 13) suggests, even those who are repelled by his ideas and their implications should pay attention to Nietzsche, not least because

'his teaching has been sadly seductive in the past. Who can promise that it will never be seductive again?'

Even aside from the ethics and politics of his perspective, Nietzsche does not make for easy reading. His notorious inconsistencies make tracking his arguments hard, and force his interpreters into a battle of wits. Ridley (1998: 12) urges us to be especially cautious 'when he appears to be offering a ready-made navigation kit in the shape of a fairly simple set of dichotomies and oppositions. Good/bad, noble/slave, strong/weak, natural/unnatural'. These pairings lure us towards binary thinking, which is precisely the trap into which the Nietzschean slave is prone to fall. As Jaspers (1936: 420) suggests, 'the seemingly easy availability of Nietzsche's conceptual formulations…explains why his thoughts are at once extensively disseminated and eminently capable of being misunderstood'.

Nietzsche's main elaboration of slave morality appears in *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887/2017), and 'for shock value no other modern text on the human condition rivals it' (Ansell-Pearson, 2017: ix). Here Nietzsche talks about slaves, nobles and priests, and their respective roles in the development of morality. A genealogical reading of this work emphasises different character types in a historical trajectory running from ancient Greece through the advent of Christianity and towards the modern era. However, the *Genealogy* also invites an experiential-psychological reading, so that notions of slavery, nobility and priestliness are seen as aspects of experience – or fragments of identity – with which we *all* tussle in our relations with self, society and institution (Solomon, 1994; White, 1988).

For Nietzsche, slave morality is what most of us now embody and enact most of the time. The contemporary Western self may not have his freedom curtailed like the slaves of antiquity, but he is enslaved in the sense of having his instincts repressed and his self-expression frustrated. This breeds anger and resentment, and since there is no acceptable external outlet for these emotions, they are turned inwards. All the cruelty and vengeance that we would like to vent on others – especially those whom we hold responsible for our condition – is now vented internally, in a mode of subjectivity that is constituted precisely in order to contain and make sense of this hostility and pain. Because the slave must cultivate inner resources for coping with existence, he now becomes more ingenious and inventive than his foes. It is through this cultivation of an inner reflective life – born of impotence – that bitterness and rage are put to work.

Slave morality is crystallised in what Nietzsche calls *ressentiment* – a 'rancorous, impotent sense that one is on the receiving end of life, that one is a reactor, not an actor' (Ridley, 1998: 24–25).[2] Those who fare well in life are able to say 'yes!' to themselves and to the world. In contrast:

'Slave morality says "no" on principle to everything that is "outside", "other", "non-self": and this "no" is its creative deed.' (1887/2017, 1.10: 20)

The bitterness of *ressentiment's* 'no!' is directed not just against concrete others, but against everything that is constructed as Other. Bittner (1994) highlights how the French word *ressentiment* would have resonated as something inherently *dodgy*, i.e. *foreign*, to Nietzsche's German readers.[3]

Ressentiment can afflict all of humanity, but in the nobles (and the nobility aspects of self) it finds a healthy way to burn itself out (1887/2017, 1.10). In contrast, for those who are not noble, or not able to draw on nobility resources, *ressentiment* has no detoxification mechanism, so it festers within. Such festering culminates in what Nietzsche calls 'the slave uprising in morals' ('*der Sklavenaufstand in der Moral*'). This involves an overthrow of the existing moral order – an inversion of values ('*diese Umkehrung des werthesetzenden Blicks*', 1887/2017, 1.10: 20), so that

what was previously valued as good (and associated with the Other) now becomes evil, freeing up space for the slave to claim goodness for himself:

> 'The oppressed, the downtrodden, the violated say to each other with the vindictive cunning of powerlessness: Let us be different from evil people, let us be good!' (1887/2017, 1.13: 27)

Nietzsche's slave uprising is thus a transformation in self-understanding, which turns the one who suffers into one who makes sense of suffering by fashioning it into a valid and valuable identity. Even in his uprising, however, the slave is still repressed in the sense of not being truly free to be or express himself. The slave uprising is no triumphant seizing of real power nor a basking in the liberty of self-realisation. Rather, it is an imaginary revenge through which the disempowered self seeks compensation for the hell of being himself. It is the consolation of being able to invent a version of events in which one's own lot becomes more meaningful, more commendable and more bearable. In this new version, experiences of suffering and frustration become a self-affirming, self-validating achievement:

> 'Thanks to the counterfeiting and self-deception of powerlessness, [slave morality has] clothed itself in the finery of self-denying, quiet, patient virtue, as though the weakness of the weak were itself - I mean its essence, its effect, its whole unique, unavoidable, irredeemable reality - a voluntary achievement, something wanted, chosen, a *deed*, an *accomplishment*.' (1887/2017, 1.13: 27)

So far, I have emphasised the slave's own sense-making efforts in the inversion of values. However, the morality of the modern self needs one further component to unleash the full force of *ressentiment*, and this is where the figure of the priest comes in. The Nietzschean priest sees the slave's development of inner resources as an opportunity for power. He taps into the slave's grievances, persuading him both that his suffering is ultimately his own fault (thus engendering guilt and sin) and that there is some external authority – traditionally God – who will eventually restore justice by venerating the lowly and punishing the proud. This, for Nietzsche, is the legacy of Christianity, which pushes the prospect of meaning and reward from this world to the next, whilst positioning the priest as spokesperson for this process.[4] It is through the priest/priestliness that man hones the reflective capacity to transform rage and impotence into virtue and accomplishment:

> 'Man first became an *interesting animal* on the foundation of this *essentially dangerous* form of human existence, the priest, and…the human soul became *deep* in the higher sense and turned *evil* for the first time.' (1887/2017, 1.6: 16)

Nietzsche thus depicts a truly vicious circle for humanity. Our very yearning for freedom deepens and instates our incarceration. Our very push for power through transformation condemns us to impotence because we transform ourselves into selves whose very essence entrenches our powerlessness. Through the lens of slave morality, the power most accessible to us is the power to moralise, ontologise and legitimise our powerlessness. As White (1988: 691) explains, 'the Priest directs us to use our power to destroy our power; he explains the "meaning" of our unhappy suffering (when the latter is just the impotence of the Slave and his basic physiological depression); and his "ministry" is to make us forget this pain, by forgetting ourselves'.

   In sum, slave morality entails the development of a vivid inner life to compensate for the fact that we cannot find a healthy outlet for our passions and frustrations. We deploy these sense-making resources to build an ethical and ontological system within which our humility and inferiority

become a virtue and a subject-position. We remain resentful, impotent creatures, but at least our resentment and impotence now have a reason, a purpose and a target. This view of slavery's power – a striking foreshadowing of Foucault's elaboration of power/knowledge – is the power to shape the moral agenda and define oneself positively according to it. The rewards of the slave uprising are virtue, meaning and the affirmation of a (self-sacrificing) self.

Mitleid and 'care ethics'

Core to the inversion of values which turns self-sacrifice into virtue is Nietzsche's hostility towards *Mitleid*. As Nussbaum (1994: 139) suggests, 'no fact about his critique of morality is so widely known - or so variously understood'. A significant part of this variability stems from how we choose to interpret and translate *Mitleid*. The noun *Mitleid* (verb *mitleiden*) can be traced back to Middle High German's *mitelīden*, and its most literal translation is 'fellow suffering' (*Mit* = with, *Leid* = suffering).

The best way to translate *Mitleid* into English is contested.[5] The main contenders have traditionally been compassion and pity (although sympathy and empathy have also been tried). Compassion and pity both invoke emotional relations which revolve around suffering, whether this suffering is by the recipient, the agent or both. Nietzsche's best-known 20th-century translators, Kaufmann and Hollingdale, tend towards pity over compassion. More recent translators, such as Diethe, prefer compassion. In the realm of Nietzschean commentary on *Mitleid*, Nussbaum (1994), for instance, selects pity, whilst Frazer (2006), for example, opts for compassion.

There are differences between compassion and pity. Compassion seems to have a wholly warm and positive salience, whereas pity can carry connotations of coldness and condescension (Frazer, 2006). Compassion usually desires the elimination of another person's suffering, whereas pity's motivations can be complex, with one possible aim or by-product being 'the enhancement of the pitier's own feelings of superiority' (Cartwright, 1988: 560). The idea of being compassionate towards oneself feels quite quirky, and self-compassion does not (yet) feature in idiomatic English, whereas self-pity is a firmly established, self-directed variant of the emotion (Cartwright, 1988). And for thinking about leadership, compassionate leadership and pitying leadership conjure up very different connotations; indeed, the latter is barely conceivable.

Debates over pity versus compassion both shape and reflect broader interpretations of Nietzschean philosophy. The former is more likely to reinforce what Nussbaum (1994: 139) calls the 'boot-in-the-face' view of Nietzsche as someone callously indifferent to the fate of his fellow human beings, and able to direct only scorn and contempt in their direction. The latter is more likely to appeal to those who read his attacks as directed not towards *Mitleid* per se, but rather, *Mitleid* when insincere or inauthentic (Kaufmann, 1950).

I wish to offer an alternative translation and interpretation of *Mitleid* as *care*, specifically in relation to 'care ethics'. Of course, care is not precisely the same as either compassion or pity, but it does not have to be. The question is whether it has a strong enough correspondence with *Mitleid*, specifically the way Nietzsche uses *Mitleid*. I believe it does, and that approaching Nietzsche through the prism of care yields insights that compassion and pity do not.[6]

My case for the correspondence of *Mitleid* and care is based on semantics, syntax and ideology. Semantically, *Mitleid's* grounding in suffering (*Leid*) echoes care's meaning as trouble or worry (Latin *cura*). Syntactically, both care and *Mitleid/mitleiden* are available as both noun and verb, and their meaning shifts somewhat depending on which form is used.[7] The semantic link between care and suffering is strongest when care is used as a noun (as in 'he has many cares'), rather than a verb,

where it often appears as 'to care for' or 'to care about', neither of which necessarily involves suffering.[8]

The decision to use a noun instead of a verb, or to create a noun from a verb, is broadly referred to as nominalisation. Nominalisation involves abstraction and generalisation, making it an effective tool for technical and academic work (Fairclough, 2003). Science uses nominalisation to distil and define; the humanities use it to scaffold and construct (Halliday and Martin, 2003). Nominalisation can have powerful ideological effects, including removing or downplaying both agency and particularity (Billig, 2008; Fairclough, 2003). Consider, for instance, the difference between care as a noun, as in 'duty of care', where it is unclear who, *if anyone*, is giving/receiving care; and care as a verb, where 'to care for someone' gives a more concrete sense of the relationship between care-giver and care-recipient, and 'to care about something' gives a sense of what really matters to the individual concerned.

Many of Nietzsche's most strident passages focus on *Mitleid*, a noun, and on *Mitleids-Moral*, a compound noun which organises *Mitleid* into a system of morality. I propose that the effects of this are similar to those made possible in the nominalisation of care/caring into an 'ethics of care' (which can then be juxtaposed with an 'ethics of justice'). Both *Mitleids-Moral* and 'care ethics' emphasise abstraction and generalisation over the agency and particularity that are expressed and expressable in their verbal counterparts.

In short, care is as good a translation for *Mitleid* as compassion and pity in its grounding in suffering, especially when nominalised. It is as good as pity (and better than compassion) in that neither care nor pity necessarily requires feelings of warmth, and both have currency as self-directed emotions. The significance of self-direction reflects Nussbaum's (1994) reading of Nietzsche's *Mitleid* as an attempt to revive the Stoic qualities of self-control and self-constitution, for which later (and indeed earlier) philosophers – notably Foucault (1986) – would find a more palatable register with the 'care of the self', further supporting a semantic resonance between *Mitleid* and care. And we constitute ourselves as Nietzschean or Foucauldian subjects through self-care, not self-pity.

Care retains the paradox of *Mitleid* that compassion and, to a lesser extent, pity, resolve. Care has a light and a dark side. It can be both nurturing and infantilising (Gabriel, 2015). It can involve both the resolution and the persistence of anxiety, and both the desire for and impossibility of security (Lowrie, 2020). Approaching *Mitleid* through the paradoxes of care connects with the central theme of paradox in Nietzschean philosophy, where the task of the philosopher is to free himself and us from the rigidity and the sloppiness that result from avoiding or resolving ambiguity (Jaspers, 1936).

Having made a case for *Mitleid*/care and *Mitleids-Moral*/'care ethics', we can turn to their relation to *ressentiment*, slave morality and Nietzsche's deep suspicion of:

> 'The value of the "unegoistic", the instincts of compassion, self-denial, self-sacrifice… precisely here I saw the great danger to mankind, its most sublime temptation and seduction.' (1887/2017, Prologue: 7)

Nietzsche's critique of *Mitleid*/care has several strands (Cartwright, 1988; Nussbaum, 1994). Firstly, *Mitleid*/care is an acknowledgement, even construction, of impotence in the person to whom this concern is directed (1881/1911, 2:135). By offering *Mitleid*/care, one may be implying that the other person's own efforts are insufficient, and/or acclimatising that person to receiving support before (and hence instead of) trying to work things out for themselves. These arguments are extremely familiar in care ethics and caring leadership, i.e. that care risks diminishing the agency of the care-recipient.

More provocatively, *Mitleid*/care is an acknowledgement and/or construction of the impotence of the person who offers it (1881/1911, 2:132). *Mitleid*/care's relational pull compromises the

constitution of the self as one of autonomy and self-mastery, leading to both self-loathing and loathing of the world for fostering the conditions in which *ressentiment* is the only consolation for one's impotence. Nietzsche's brand of Stoicism pits the universal codification of morality against the personal responsibility for self-constitution, suggesting that it is the siren-sweetness of *Mitleid*/care that lures us towards the former and away from the latter (1887/2017, 3:14).

Far from being a pure expression of love, therefore, *Mitleid*/care tips precariously towards hatred – of others, of self and of life itself. For Nietzsche, to feel *Mitleid*/care is also to feel contempt (1881/1911, 2:135). Moreover, *Mitleid*/care is not true altruism, but rather, an attempt to displace one's own suffering onto others and shore up one's own defences against the hostility of the world (1881/1911, 2:133). And even when love might conceivably be involved, *Mitleid*/care is not really a force for good, because being attuned to another person's troubles does not remove these troubles, but merely adds one's own on top of them:

> '[*Mitleid*] actually gives rise to suffering…it increases the amount of suffering in the world.' (1881/1911, 2:134: 61)

Scholars who resist the 'boot-in-the-face' depiction of Nietzsche argue that his attacks on *Mitleid*/care are an attempt to rescue, not reject, individual acts of kindness (Chamberlain, 1998; Frazer, 2006). These can indeed be demonstrations of strength, including the strength to care, and mastery, including self-mastery. Nietzsche's criticism of *Mitleid*/care is when it unfolds as an ideological values-inversion, i.e. when it muddies our efforts at self-constitution in terms of agency and freedom by reformulating weakness as virtue and self-subjugation as self-affirmation.

This is why the correspondence between *Mitleid* and care is at its most striking and illuminating when seen in terms of *Mitleids-Moral* and 'care ethics', i.e. as a general theory of morality rather than individual acts or experiences of empathy, concern or love. In their nominalisation, *Mitleid* and its compound *Mitleids-Moral* reduce agency and particularity (Billig, 2008; Fairclough, 2003); and this is, I believe, the Nietzschean point. Nietzsche's critique of *Mitleid*/care is thus his challenge to us to overcome – or at least not be overpowered by – the slave-within, and to take charge of, and be fully responsible for, who we are. *Mitleid*/care makes us vulnerable to *ressentiment*, because its self-subjugation involves a critical threat to one's centre of gravity ('*der Verlust an Schwergewicht*') (1908/1979: 97). Through this Nietzschean lens, therefore, 'care ethics' compromises authentic caring, both for others *and* for oneself. It gestures towards slave morality, which masks bitterness and frustration behind a façade of virtue and apparent concern for others.

Slave morality in action

Ciulla (2020) has recently traced Nietzschean slave morality in followers, whose *ressentiment* can be nurtured strategically by unethical leaders. In the case of US President Donald Trump, she suggests that Nietzsche's values-inversion helps to explain how and why Trump's supporters construct a moral framework in which his misdeeds and miswords do not matter, as long as he feeds their sense of grudge and boosts their own dignity. Trump's denigrated Other is a mix of foreigners, liberals and the Washington Establishment, and he 'inverts the value of experience by making his inexperience, and the inexperience of those around him, a virtue' (Ciulla, 2020: 34). The things that characterise his enemies are distorted into things to be disparaged – in much the same way as UK Brexiteers once declared: 'We have had enough of experts'.[9]

Capriles (2012) uses Nietzschean slave morality to explore how Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez systematically cultivated *ressentiment* in his people, resulting in Venezuelans *voluntarily*

sacrificing their freedom in support of policies that seriously disadvantaged and disenfranchised them. She proposes that care is enmeshed and distorted in such leadership by *ressentiment*, because an unscrupulous leader convinces followers that he really cares about them and truly understands their aspirations and frustrations. This kind of leadership exploits followers' need and/or desire for care, and reinforces and makes strategic use of their dependency.

My analysis, of course, twists this aperture to suggest an interplay of *ressentiment*, impotence and *Mitleid*/care from the perspective of the care-*giver*. Supporting this twist is Paley's (2002) suggestion from healthcare that 'care ethics' may be enslaving nurses – paradigmatic care-givers – in the power relations of the Nietzschean slave/noble/priest interaction and the dynamics of *ressentiment*. Nurses are traditionally disadvantaged within systems and structures of healthcare, and undervalued in comparison with more highly educated, remunerated and celebrated doctors. Paley's Nietzschean analysis involves an ethical reversal which recasts the Other – doctors – as bad in order to construct nurses as good. In this inversion, nurses-*qua*-slaves take their imaginary revenge on the medical profession by decrying its values as dehumanising:

> 'Scientific method becomes "positivist", the biological stratum is "reductionist", and clinical dispassion is rejected as "mechanistic", the symptom of a lack of concern for the "person" behind the patient… a cold, insensitive, white-coated, morally reprehensible belief system.' (Paley, 2002: 29)

Nursing 'care ethics' is then extolled as precisely the opposite, namely intuitive, holistic, embodied and engaged. For Paley, this inversion entails three Nietzschean 'no's!': A 'no!' to science in favour of phenomenology; a 'no!' to focus in favour of holism; and a 'no!' to clinical detachment in favour of embodied care.

Paley's work is thought-provoking, not least because he sees care ethicists and academics as Nietzschean priests, who fuel the slave uprising by developing models which theorise, valorise and institutionalise the inversion of impotence-into-virtue. We recall that priests, whilst apparently providing spiritual and intellectual guidance, are in fact engaging in their own Nietzschean 'will to power', directing the disadvantaged to use their power to destroy themselves and channel their search for freedom towards a permanent self-incarceration (White, 1988).

Such a co-construction of slave morality and selflessness connects with care ethicists who see the care-giving experience as potentially one of self-sacrifice, where one brackets or denies one's own needs in order to attend to the needs of others (Card, 1990; Sander-Staudt and Hamington, 2011; Van Nistelrooij, 2014). This leaves scholars of leadership with a highly uncomfortable question: If showing care and concern for other people exposes and/or invokes the *ressentiment* of slave morality, what does this mean for caring leadership? Surely, leaders are expected to have more agency, presence and stature than *slaves*, even in those models which promote service and relationship? It is one thing to be one of Greenleaf's (1970) servant leaders, but surely quite another to be one of Nietzsche's seething, resentful *slaves*? What might we take from the shock value of this proposition to explore and unnerve the power relations of leadership?

The power dynamics of caring leadership

Drawing on Nietzsche, I posit an inversion of values in caring leadership, fostered by the ideological appeal of 'care ethics'. Through this prism, the qualities associated with care, namely attentiveness and responsiveness to other people's needs, desires and perspectives, are now seen as a transformation of impotence into virtue, meaning and/or self-defence. Elements of such a transformation may be involved in other approaches which prioritise relationship and/or collective empowerment,

such as relational leadership (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011), 'leaderful practice' (Raelin, 2011: 195) and various forms of 'leadership in the plural' (Denis et al., 2012: 211). Through its connection with *Mitleids-Moral*, however, I see caring leadership as especially vulnerable to the *ressentiment* of such an inversion.

Caring leadership's emphasis on relationship places its centre of gravity somewhere in the dynamic between self and others. This, for Nietzsche, involves the determination of self by forces beyond the self, and the subjugation of self to an ethical system which is defined, managed and monitored by others. It reflects Nietzschean slavery as the expression of heteronomy, as opposed to nobility's expression of autonomy (White, 1988). Therefore, if caring leadership entails 'doing unto others as they themselves would want to be treated', rather than 'doing unto others as you would have them do unto you' (Ladkin, 2020), the Nietzschean warning is that such heteronomy may arise from, fuel and camouflage *ressentiment*, for:

> 'To look upon the experiences of others and adopt them as if they were our own – which is called for by the philosophy of *Mitleid* – would ruin us in a very short time.' (1881/1911, 2:137: 62)

In this respect, Nietzsche foreshadows elaborations of authenticity (and hence authentic leadership) as an ethical stance which involves trying to be true to oneself and resist being swept along as life's flotsam and jetsam. For instance, Heidegger's (1962) philosophy of authenticity is a critique of the suppression of self in favour of 'the one' or 'the They' (*das Man*). Doing what 'one' does means being led by an abstract, anonymous sense of how things are supposed to be in general, as opposed to how they actually are, or could be, anywhere in particular. Nietzsche and Heidegger thus warn of the dangers of a world in which we are evaluated and affirmed solely according to how well we comply with the metrics, demands and needs of others. Nietzsche's loss of the centre of gravity is Heidegger's threat to authenticity. Both involve ceding control over, and responsibility for, the self to forces beyond the self. Scheler (1915/1961), one of Nietzsche's liveliest interpreters, summarises this stance:

> 'He turns away from his personal quest for the good and seeks support in the question: What do you think? What do all people think? What is the "general" tendency of man as a species? Or what is the trend of "evolution" so that I may recognize it and place myself in its "current"?' (Scheler, 1915/1961: 104)

Because care appears to be an unimpeachable force for good, it is hard to swim against its current, not least because everyday meanings and discourses-in-use often equate care with kindness, niceness, appreciation, warmth, etc. But some of Nietzsche's most vibrant objections are towards those aspects of experience which are 'sugar-coated', for these are often suppressed rage masquerading as sweetness in a 'sugared, slimy, humble humility' (1887/2017, 3.14: 91) ('*zuckrige, schleimige, demüthige Ergebung*'). The word '*Ergebung*' means surrender as well as humility.

Sugar-coating over the cracks in leadership leaves its difficulties, tensions and many of its choices unsayable and unsaid. As Scheler (1915/1961) suggests, just as Nietzsche's genealogy emphasises a healthy physiological release and self-expression as the way to shake off *ressentiment*, so we find that *ressentiment* burns itself out once its power asymmetries become *sayable*. If we can vent our spleen somewhere, somehow, we may be spared the full onslaught of *ressentiment* and the values-inversion through which we transform ourselves into selves whose very essence entrenches our impotence.

For Scheler (1915/1961), the combination of rage, duty and silence is an especially toxic mix, particularly when it involves a discrepancy between supposed and actual power. Drawing on both

Nietzsche and Scheler, Ciulla (2020) argues that nothing fuels *ressentiment* more than the juxta-position of the supposed right to equality and the fact of inequality. Ciulla examines this from the perspective of followers, who are told that they have equal rights in society but know from experience that this is not true. I think it is also pertinent to leadership, where discourses of collective empowerment and engagement jostle with ultimate leadership responsibility. As Scheler (1915/1961) emphasises, it is not only the socially or politically disadvantaged who suffer from *ressentiment*; it festers in any kind of disconnect between the rhetoric and the reality of empowerment.

Such arguments remind us not to oversimplify the asymmetry of leadership by constructing all-powerful leaders and all-powerless followers (Collinson, 2020). Privilege and disadvantage do not necessarily reflect a structural divide between those who wield and those who yield. Rather, the asymmetry of leadership can manifest as 'constellations of incongruity, imbalance and unevenness which circumscribe leaders' actions, choices, relationships and feelings about their work' (Tomkins et al., 2020: 87). The Nietzschean contribution here is that over-stating leaders' power whilst making it impossible or unacceptable for them to express their feelings of impotence may ignite slavery's *ressentiment*.

Wilson (2016) considers enslavement as a leit-motif throughout the history of leadership studies. Its manifestations have included being enslaved to discourses of what is 'good for the people' and to divine will as God's instrument. Within 20th- and 21st-century formulations, she traces new variants of leader enslavement, including to both situational and followers' needs in contingency theories, and to expectations of follower self-actualisation in the 'new leadership theories' of Burns, Bass and others. Her analysis suggests an eternal interplay between self-expression and self-denial in leadership experience. Impotence and its effects may be especially exposed in caring leadership; but they are also present, if less overt, even in the more robust, agentic variants of transformational leadership, where a psychological co-dependency may induce leaders and followers to sacrifice their own projects of selfhood to help the Other to realise theirs (Wilson, 2016).

By challenging the linear, progressive narrative of leadership, Wilson (2016) opens up space for Nietzschean possibilities. She traces a Foucauldian genealogy in which each new wave of leadership theory is seen as a reaction to, and corrective of, what has gone before. From a Nietzschean perspective, this genealogy can be seen as a series of values-inversions, i.e. a series of ideological manoeuvres in which each new model is distilled, framed and promoted by creating a virtue and subject-position out of whatever is deemed wanting in its predecessor. We reconstruct a previously admired value-proposition as bad so that what we experience or offer can be constructed as good by being not-bad. To my mind, this suggests a trajectory of impossible attempts to come to terms with impotence, anxiety and fear, rather than any sort of straightforward intellectual or ethical progress.

One of the most significant axes in such a genealogy is singularity-plurality. We rediscover and reconstitute the value of singularity (whether singular-individual or singular-special) when democracy is perceived to be failing, and the value of plurality when tyranny rears its ugly head (Wilson, 2016). Within such a cyclical trajectory, caring leadership makes a virtue out of relationality and plurality as a direct reaction to, and Othering of, the singularity of the models it resists, such as the highly agentic, masculinised variants of transformational leadership. The Nietzschean warning, of course, is that relationality and plurality risk the loss of one's centre of gravity, especially when formalised into a general model, framework or code.

In suggesting that caring leadership might both involve and camouflage impotence, I connect with elaborations of care as a matter of survival, rather than moral virtue or genuine concern for others. Abreu Pederzini (2020) sees caring leadership in evolutionary terms, whereby the leader – based on the archetypal care-giver, the parent – cares for his followers/offspring not because it is a loving or honorable thing to do, but because care-giving is a behavioural trait selected for

its strategic evolutionary usefulness. Through an evolutionary lens, of course, this survival instinct is not conscious, but merely the operation of the gene. I suggest that some of this survival instinct might be conscious, too. The gene may not have feelings – whether of fear, frustration, love or kindness – but the human beings who carry it certainly do.

By emphasising the theme of self-sacrifice in the intersection of leadership and care, I do not refer to the glorious self-sacrifice extolled in some of the transformational leadership literature (Singh and Krishnan, 2008). There self-sacrifice for the sake of the mission can boost leaders' charisma in their followers' eyes, thereby inspiring them to sacrifice themselves in return (Choi and Mai-Dalton, 1999). That is not the kind of transformation through self-sacrifice which Nietzsche's slave morality suggests to me. Rather, the leader who loses his own needs, his own voice and his own centre of gravity is closer to Card's (1990) depiction of the domestic abuse that can go on behind closed doors, where the care-giver becomes merely the tool or extension of others, and:

> 'Is in danger of dissolving into a variety of personalities, changing one's colors (or values) like a chameleon in changing environments. Women know this danger intimately, as does anyone whose personal safety has regularly depended upon how well they were able to "receive others into themselves".' (Card, 1990: 107)

Reconnecting with the distinction between feminine and feminist ethics, if a *feminist* care ethics is to inform and inspire leadership without exposing, triggering or exacerbating slave morality, what might it comprise? Gilligan (1982) suggests that a *feminist* care ethics is one in which our decisions are not a binary choice between being selfish and selfless, but rather, an engagement with the responsibilities we all have towards both self and others, viewed as different but connected. Drawing on Gilligan, Robinson (2019: 11) argues that a critical care ethics is one that 'resists all binaries that divide people into categories and separate them from others, and, indeed, from themselves'.

Perhaps surprisingly, given his reputation for misogyny, a Nietzschean view is not so far removed from such an ethics.[10] Resisting binaries is precisely what the Nietzschean slave cannot do. So if we want care *not* to invoke *ressentiment*, we must surely surface the visceral tensions in the jostling and jarring of our responsibilities towards ourselves and each other, rather than splitting, moralising or wishing them away. In the *Mitleids-Moral* that Nietzsche rejects, the complexity, anguish and frustration of experience are unsayable: They are sugar-coated in idealised models of what one is supposed to be, do and say, often unfolding in a mawkish sentimentality. We may try to persuade ourselves that a commitment to relationship constitutes care, but if this involves a disconnect between assumed power and experienced powerlessness, or denies that care-givers and caring leaders also have needs, such 'care' may veil slavery's mute, festering rage. If we end up with unethical or unsatisfying organisational relationships, it may be because we give inadequate space to the resentments we feel unable to express. If we are to realise the promise of a feminist ethics, Nietzsche's urging of personal responsibility over a sugar-coated morality of self-sacrifice has much to contribute.

In relation to the 'care ethics' movement, the Nietzschean warning is that too strong a tilt towards care as a general theory of moral, political and environmental obligation takes us away from authentic experiences of giving and receiving care, and risks provoking the dynamics of *ressentiment*. This is a very difficult proposition, for the move towards such a general theory – applicable to all genders, both inside and outside the home (Engster, 2007; Held, 2006) – is motivated, in part, by a desire to loosen historical associations between care and women's unpaid 'labour of love' (Finch and Groves, 1983; Kittay, 2013). When we try to address one power inequity, others may emerge in its stead.

Final reflections

In this paper, I have argued for the value of approaching leadership through the prism of Nietzsche's slave morality, with its interplay of impotence, care and *ressentiment*. I have suggested that this exposes a usually unspoken aspect of leadership experience and is fuelled by tensions between the rhetoric of empowerment and the experience of powerlessness. I am not arguing that leaders are slaves in any simplistic, essentialist sense; rather, that when we practise leadership, we may be vulnerable to *ressentiment* and the slave-within. As Burns (1978: 15) says, we should not suppose that leaders' actual power equals their reputed power, for 'power wielders are not free agents. They are subject – even slaves – to pressures working on them and in them'.

I accept that it might be a stretch for readers to see business or political leaders as susceptible to slave morality. Leaders are not an economically or politically disadvantaged group in the same way that women have historically been oppressed through care as unrecognised and/or unpaid labour. But there are other power dynamics in play in leadership relations based on care, and these do not always privilege leaders and disempower followers. The relations of leadership in general, and caring leadership in particular, involve a complex web of give and take; obligation and need; strength and vulnerability; and candour and silence. In such a web, power is never one-dimensional, settled or stable. If we are really to draw out the power implications of care, we have as much to learn from care ethicists concerned about abuse for care-givers as from those who highlight this risk for care-recipients.

Nietzsche offers us warnings and provocations, not recipes or cosy reassurances. He dares us to confront the possibility that, under certain conditions, care and caring leadership might produce and reproduce some ugly relationship dynamics, some meaningless virtue-signalling, and some painful leadership experiences. We may be investing energy and hope in promoting and identifying with care as an inversion of values which differentiates us from being *un*caring or care*less*. The Nietzschean paradox is that such self-constitution can unfold as self-effacement, even when – perhaps especially when – it feels like virtue, duty, consolation or even love. For Nietzsche, *Mitleids-Moral* compromises the search for authentic relations with both self and others, because it inspires a 'transformation' – that 'creative deed' (1887/2017, 1.10: 20) – through the desiccation and destabilisation of ourselves as human beings.

As I write this, the COVID-19 pandemic rages on. During this period, the risks of *Mitleids-Moral* have been writ large. We can all do the weekly 'clap for carers' to show how much *we* care about *them*. Initially, this was a relatively spontaneous expression of gratitude, relief and desire to reach out to one another. Rapidly, however, it became routinised, moralised and used as a benchmark to monitor each other's behaviour and displace some of our own anxiety and aggression.[11] At the same time, we continue to allow care-home and other healthcare workers to be denied the personal protective equipment (PPE) that might save their and their charges' lives. Nietzsche would have a field-day.

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Notes

1. I focus here on the potential abuse of care-*givers* (literal and metaphorical), because this side of the dynamic has been relatively under-investigated. This is not to deny or downplay the issue of abuse in the other direction, namely by care-givers towards care-recipients in both domestic and care-home settings.
2. Nietzsche manoeuvres between *ressentiment as* the slave uprising and it being its trigger or source (Ridley, 1998); and between impotence as the cause versus the substance of *ressentiment* (Solomon, 1994). Ridley (1998) advises that there is more to be gained by grasping the gist and force of these concepts than by trying to unpack their precise mechanics.
3. This 'no!' to what is foreign recalls the Brexit slogan, 'take back control'. Nietzsche's warning to Brexiteers is that this is a sign of slavery, not majesty.
4. I do not have space to do justice to the role of Christianity in Nietzsche. See Scheler (1915/1961), whose own analysis of *ressentiment* maintains that Nietzsche has fundamentally misunderstood Christianity.
5. I have wondered whether to leave *Mitleid* untranslated, like *Schadenfreude* (and indeed *ressentiment*). The problem is that whereas *Schadenfreude* is widely understood by English speakers, *Mitleid* is not. My use of *Mitleid*/care and *Mitleids-Moral*/'care ethics' is an awkward compromise, prioritising meaning over elegance.
6. Critics might object: But if Nietzsche wanted to write about care, why did he not choose the more obvious word for care, *Sorge*? My rejoinder is that Nietzsche's critique was explicitly directed towards two ethical traditions with which he wanted to engage head-on. The first was Christianity – the career originally intended for him – which he called 'the religion of *Mitleid*' (*Der Religion des Mitleids*) (Nietzsche, 1887/2017, 3.25: 117). The second was Schopenhauer's moral philosophy of *Mitleidsethik*, which held that *Mitleid* was the basis of morality, rather than reason or the word of God. *Mitleid* was thus the currency with which to enter into philosophical dialogue with both these traditions. As Jaspers (1936) highlights, an important element of Nietzsche's technique was to use the same terminology as other philosophers and then up-end it to show how a word could come to mean something significantly different.
7. It is more obvious in German, an inflected language, whether words are being deployed as nouns or verbs. *Mitleid* is instantly recognisable as a noun, whereas care is not. (When Nietzsche wants to use verbal variants of *mitleiden*, he does.)
8. Caring-for usually refers to the activities of tending to another person's needs. It does not necessarily have anything to do with feelings or principles, i.e. it can refer to domestic services (paid and unpaid). Caring-about, by contrast, takes us away from person-to-person encounters and into the broader social and political world. It is more clearly associated with feelings and principles, but not necessarily with either action or needs. See Dalley (1988) and Noddings (2002).
9. http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/06/10/michael-goves-guide-to-britains-greatest-enemy-the-experts/
10. Like most things with Nietzsche, his attitude towards women and feminism is complex and contested; and he has been both repudiated and worshipped by feminists. Helm (2004: 68) argues that 'the feminist reception of Nietzsche marked the first time women have participated actively and to a major extent in European philosophical discourse'. Along with his persistent inclination to provoke and shock, this contextualisation might help explain why feminist responses to Nietzsche have been both so passionate and so varied. For a fascinating collection on Nietzsche and feminism, see Oliver and Pearsall (2010).
11. https://news.sky.com/story/coronavirus-woman-named-and-shamed-by-neighbours-on-facebook-for-not-joining-clap-for-carers-11978192

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