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Leadership and the Consequences of Morality

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Abstract

This paper provides an extensive overview of the evolution of leadership throughout the twenty-first century. This is conducted in juxtaposition with developments in societal morality. The aim of this paper is to highlight the impact societal morality has had on shaping leadership theories, whilst simultaneously exploring the relationship between the two phenomena. This paper adopts a theoretical approach, considering leadership from the approach of societal relativist morality. It posits that morality is concerned with society as a whole, and that it is constantly evolving. This philosophy is then applied to the development of leadership. This paper finds that morality has been highly influential with regards to the evolution of leadership theory. It has impacted upon our changing interpretation of leadership over time. The paper additionally proposes that servant leadership is the most moral approach a leader may adopt and recommends potential areas for future research.

There is currently no study which exists concerning the impact of morality on the development of leadership, hence the original contribution of this paper. Its value exists in its ability to determine the moral attributes of different approaches to leadership. It allows for an overall deeper understanding of the moral approaches to leadership.

Keywords: Leadership, Morality, Moral, Leaders, Servant Leadership, Servant, Serving, Moral Relativism, Societal Morality

Track: Leadership and Leadership Development

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Leadership and the Consequences of Morality

Leadership has been identified as a prominent area of academic focus and research, over the course of the last century. Yet, it is important to note that its existence can be traced back throughout history, found within even the most ancient of societies (Bass et al., 2003). Leadership can be found within academia, business, politics, education, anthropology, and theology, to name but a few disciplines. In addition to its academic presence, leadership is found within all forms of organised societal groups. The actions and decisions of the leaders we find within our lives affect us in a plethora of ways, be it minimal or substantial. The inescapable nature of leadership could be said to have attributed to it becoming one of the most commonly researched, discussed and debated topics within the organisational sciences (Yammarino, 2013). As a result of its importance and increasing popularity, it can be described as both an intuitively appealing and necessary area of study. In essence, it would be fair to describe the research of leadership as essential, due to the way in which it permeates our society. Overall it can be said that leadership has previously been, and will continue to be, one of the most important areas of research within the social sciences.

The aim of this paper is to provide a comprehensive overview of leadership research throughout the 21st century, in conjunction with ongoing developments within societal morality. It will examine how the school of leadership thought has evolved, before recommending in which direction it should continue to advance. Whilst previous leadership studies have simply examined the evolution of leadership (Barr and Douding, 2016; Clark and Harrison, 2018; King, 1990), this paper also aims to examine how morality has impacted upon these changes and development. This research can be used as a learning aid by potential future leaders, practitioners and scholars aiming to conduct research in the domain of both leadership and morality.

Morality has often been taken into consideration with regard to leadership, with the relationship between the two deemed as ineludibly linked (Price, 2003). It is arguable that the effectiveness of a leader’s morality is of higher importance than those who are not in positions of leadership (Cuilla, 2003b). Morality impacts upon individuals, organisations, governments and indeed society as a whole, as is the case with leadership. It is therefore pertinent to explore the two phenomena simultaneously, in order to understand how one influences the other. Furthermore, Harris (2010) argues that morality can be used in order to determine our best possible future
well-being. It is therefore prudent to use morality in order to determine the best possible outcome for future leadership progression. It is important to highlight that there has been no research conducted which examines how these moral changes have impacted on developments and evolution within the field of leadership. This is a combined area of research which is acutely lacking due to the influencing nature and importance of both phenomena. Changes in societal morality have a far-reaching influence, and this paper aims to highlight the impact of this upon leadership theories and explore the relationship between the two concepts.

The paper will provide an overview of the concept of morality, rationalising the approaches it aims to take. The phenomenon of leadership will then be explored, taking into consideration the eras of leadership deemed prominent by scholars in the field. Furthermore, how these eras of leadership were influenced and impacted upon by morality will be contemplated. The paper will recommend potential future areas of leadership which would benefit from progression. This will be done in accordance with the morality surrounding the concept of leadership at present.

**Morality**

The concept of morality has been a prevalent area of research and discussion throughout the course of Western philosophy (Haidt, 2008). It is therefore unsurprising that many theories and opinions of morality have emerged, with its precise nature often a subject of debate. There are centuries of thinking and a plethora of definitions surrounding morality. To begin to explore them all at length would impede upon the focus of this paper. Therefore, this research will provide one of the most widely accepted definitions of morality, which states:

“Morality is the moral beliefs, views and attitudes of given individuals, societies and groups”

(Long and Sedley, 1987: page. 366)

Essentially, morality distinguishes between actions, intentions and decisions which are deemed to be either proper or improper. It is generally associated with that which is good or right, as opposed to ‘bad’ actions which are considered to be amoral or immoral.

Morality is generally viewed in two ways; societal or individual. Many researchers look at the impact of societal morality, which is the belief in a collective moral concept. This belief presupposes that our evolution and the culture surrounding us has dictated in which manner it
is most morally acceptable for us to behave (Harris, 2010). For example, that which may be considered moral behaviour in a European country may be considered immoral within an Asian culture and vice versa. This approach believes that what is generally considered morally acceptable by an individual is shaped by a wider conscious movement. Individual morality, on the other hand, hypothesises that one’s morality is private and unique to themselves. There are a number of different ways in which morality can develop or be influenced. It can be shaped by religion, culture, upbringing, society or the legal codes and practices of one’s country (Khatibi and Khormaei, 2016). It is shaped by an individual’s upbringing and influencing factors within their personal life rather than the result of a wider society. However, there are those who argue that individuals are inherently affected by the moral changes and development within their society (Simon, 1986). They argue that it is not possible for one’s wider environment not to have an impact upon their moral compass.

Therefore, for the purpose of this paper, when the concept of morality is referred to, it alludes to the wider societal sense rather than belonging to an individual. Individual morality is useful in examining how a person makes decisions or is influenced. However, it is not useful in exploring changes in general thought and societal movements. One individual’s morality cannot be said to be a valid representative of the larger population, as it is greatly impacted by their own personal influence. Additionally, leadership has an effect on the society in general, therefore it is important to view morality as societal in this instance. As a result, this paper is not concerned with individual views and opinions, but of the general moral consensus of the time period and its impact upon leadership.

Furthermore, there are two generally accepted schools of thought surrounding morality; moral absolutism and moral relativism (Rai and Holyoak, 2013). Moral absolutism posits that some moral beliefs are absolutely true, regardless of context, culture, or era. Moral absolutism believes that morals are unwavering and remain the same regardless of the situational context. Moral relativism, on the other hand, is the belief that a sense of morality is dependent on their traditions and cultures (Rai and Holyoak, 2013). In recent years, both psychologists and philosophers have begun adopting positions of moral relativism, believing that over time, and through cultural changes, morality is lymphatic (Flanagan et al. 2003; Rai and Holyoak, 2013; Rai and Fisk, 2011).
This paper adopts a moral relativist approach towards the evolution of leadership theory. Moral absolutism is not adjudged relevant to this paper as it is concerned with that which is fixed and believes actions are intrinsically either right or wrong. However, this fails to consider changes in society and how actions which were once moral are now considered immoral and vice versa. The same can be said for leadership, what was once considered appropriate may no longer be the case. A stationary take on morality such as absolutism cannot be applied to a fluid concept such as leadership. Relativism believes that morality is a fluid concept and can be examined in the terms of a frame of reference. For example, what may be deemed morally effective or correct within one situation or time period, may not be universal in others. As this paper will be exploring changes in leadership, it aligns with moral relativism’s philosophy of development in accordance with a situational context. Therefore, the general outlook of this paper is that morality is relative, and thus its societal development has impacted upon the evolution of leadership theory.

**Leadership**

There are as many as 650 different definitions of leadership at present, and the number only continues to grow (Bennis and Townsend, 1995). Similar to the case with morality, to discuss and explore all existing concepts of leadership would be ineffectual and would take away this paper’s intended focus. This research will thus summarise leadership as follows:

*Leaders are individuals who establish direction for a working group of individuals who gain commitment from this group of members to this direction and who then motivate these members to achieve the direction’s outcomes.*

(Conger, 1992:18)

Leaders are those who are able to inspire and direct others towards achieving a common goal (Kotter, 1990). They should have the ability to create direction, in order to generate common goals (Amanchukwu et al. 2015; Kotter, 1990).

According to Harrison (2018) the main approaches to leadership throughout the 21st century are as follows; Great Man theory, trait theory, skills, behavioural, leader member exchange theory (LMX), servant leadership, transactional, transformational, distributed, authentic and entrepreneurial leadership. This paper has chosen to categorise these approaches using an
adaptation of King (1990) and Clark and Harrison (2018) leadership categorisation. King (1990) originally developed this leadership categorisation in order to provide an overview of leadership evolution. Clark and Harrison (2018) also drew inspiration from King’s classification in their 2018 evaluation of leadership evolution. King’s (1990) work has been deemed highly influential within leadership research, particularly within leadership evolution (Boateng, 2012). Clark and Harrison’s (2018) use of the categorisation almost 20 years later solidifies its value as a tool of leadership categorisation, which is still relevant today.

This paper will therefore build upon the work of previous scholars in order to develop a categorisation of leadership theories, in accordance with those deemed most influential by Harrison (2018). The categorisation which has been adapted within this paper is as follows; personality era, influence era, behavioural era, transactional era, cultural era, skills era, and serving era. This is shown in table 1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personality Era</th>
<th>Influence Era</th>
<th>Behaviour Era</th>
<th>Transactional Era</th>
<th>Cultural Era</th>
<th>Skills Era</th>
<th>Serving Era</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Great Man Trait</td>
<td>Transformational</td>
<td>Behavioural</td>
<td>Transactional LMX</td>
<td>Distributed Authentic</td>
<td>Skills</td>
<td>Servant Leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trait</td>
<td>Entrepreneurial</td>
<td>Behavioural</td>
<td>LMX</td>
<td>Ethical</td>
<td>Skills</td>
<td>Leadership</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This paper will now expand upon the aforementioned eras of leadership, exploring each concept in synchronicity with morality.

**Personality Era**

According to Clark and Harrison (2018), the emergence of the personality era was the beginning of empirical leadership research. The personality era is generally considered to consist of both the Great Man theory and trait theory (Clark and Harrison, 2018; King, 1990).

*The Great Man Theory*
The Great Man theory was the focus of 19th and early 20th century leadership research. Developed by Carlyle in 1841, the Great Man theory remained a largely accepted and uncontested approach to leadership for an extensive period of time, due to the overall infancy of leadership research as a whole (Spector, 2016).

The Great Man theory was generally concerned with the notion that leaders were superior to their followers, and that rather than leadership being developed or nurtured, leaders were in fact born, rather than made (Cowthan, 1996). Therefore, Great Man theory tends to focus solely upon the intrinsic traits of an individual as opposed to anything else (Spector, 2016). According to Harrison (2018), The Great Man theory believes fundamentally that only those who are deemed ‘great’ individuals possess the traits necessary for successful leadership (Bass, 1990; Marquis and Huston, 2009).

Within today’s society, the concept of cultural pluralism is one which is often accepted and even celebrated. It is therefore arguable that on this basis, the Great Man theory no longer aligns with our moral ideals. There is now a general consensus that men and women are equal, yet, Great Man theory only manages to take male leaders into consideration (O’Connor, 2010; Spector, 2016). This theory fails to consider female leaders and therefore, as a leadership approach, it lacks the moral sense of equality which is considered valuable within today’s society (Vincent, 2014).

Overall, the Great Man theory fails to consider that women can be just as effective as men within leadership roles, and for this reason, from a moral standing it is no longer widely acceptable (Kolb, 1999; Jenkins, 1991). Furthermore, it is important to note that the men mentioned within the Carlyle’s Great Man theory are white Anglican males, rendering the theory inapplicable within today’s society (Coppola, 2011). This is because today’s society promotes equal opportunities and access, theoretically allowing people of all backgrounds access to leadership. It has also been argued that the Great Man theory is not relevant as it practises elitism, due to its suggestion that only a chosen few have the ability to lead (Outcalt et al., 2001). Moral relativism has led to a cultural shift which promotes inclusivity and acceptance, rather than the exclusivity promoted by the Great Man theory at the turn of the century. Therefore, it can be said, that due to its exclusivity, Great Man theory fails at a basic scientific and moral level to include diverse groups in research.
Due to moral relativism, a shift in perspective occurred which saw a need for leadership theory to expand to include people of different ethnicities and religions than those included within the Great Man theory (Bass and Bass, 2008). There was also a rising change in ideology with a growing consensus emerging that leadership should be examined from the lens of current organisational leaders rather than historical figures (Judge et al., 2002). Thus, the trait theory was developed, and remained prominent throughout the 20th century, with some going as far as stating that it is the only leadership theory which needs to be researched (Cowley, 1931). Trait theory examines the traits of a leader, rather than assuming their position was justified as the result of divinity (Bass, 1990). The basis of the trait theory suggests that an individual’s personality traits and characteristics can influence their effectiveness as a leader (Colbert et al., 2012; Zaccaro et al., 2004). It was more inclusive and thus of a higher moral disposition than the Great Man theory, asserting that leadership traits exist regardless of one’s social status (Curlee and Gordon, 2014).

Many other studies have emerged throughout the past century concerning the trait approach to leadership (Colbert et al., 2012). Traits such as neuroticism, dominance and masculinity have been determined as the necessary traits for leaders (Novikova, 2013). However, such traits can be argued to be somewhat controversial as they are largely focused upon the male leader. This posits the same moral dilemma of exclusivity as presented within the Great Man theory; the exclusion of females. It is arguable that to exclude females makes the assumption that they lack the necessary traits for leadership, a mindset which due to moral relativism is no longer deemed appropriate. In recent years it is important to note that an increasing number of traits and values which were once typically considered feminine have been introduced within trait theory, thus increasing its status as a moral approach to leadership (Claes, 1999). Additionally, similar to the Great Man theory, trait theory asserts that leaders’ traits are different to those of non-leaders. Overall it can be said that trait theory faces the same moral dilemma of exclusivity as Great Man theory.

**Influence Era**
It is important for the influence era of leadership to be examined from a moral perspective due to its link with coercive power. The influence era aims to explore the nature of leadership in accordance with power dynamics (Clarke and Harrison, 2018; King, 1990). Rather than focus on the individual like the personality era, the influence era recognises that leadership is more than the study of a solitary individual. The influence era therefore examines the relationship between the individual leader and their subordinates. According to Harrison (2018) the most influential leadership theories are transformational leadership and entrepreneurial leadership.

*Transformational Leadership*

Transformational leadership was initially proposed by Burns in 1978 and then expanded upon by Bass and Avolio (1990). Within this approach, the leader identifies the changes necessary within an organisation and recruits followers to assist them in executing these changes (Burns, 2004). It is essentially concerned with creating an organisational vision and persuading those within the organisation to share in and implement that vision. There are five main personality traits which are often taken into consideration when implementing transformational leadership. They are as follows; extraversion, neuroticism, openness to experience, agreeableness and conscientiousness (Bass and Bass, 2008). In addition to this, transformational leadership proposes four main behaviours; idealised influence, inspirational motivation individualised consideration and intellectual stimulation (Bass and Avolio, 1990).

The morality of transformational leadership has often been called into question, due to the methods which a leader may use to convince others to share in their organisational vision (Sendjaya, 2005). One must question the extent to which a leader will go to recruit others, and whether or not they are willing to use amoral methods to do so. It also raises an issue regarding how important the followers within an organisation are. It is worth considering that if the leader’s sole focus is on implementing organisational change, then they may be willing to achieve this at the cost of their employees. It has also resulted in leader’s elevated perceptions of personal power, which, in turn can lead to misuse and abuse of power (Barth-Farkas et al., 2014). It is important to note that from transformational leadership a facet of leadership has emerged known as pseudo-transformational leadership. This facet does not recognise ethics within transformational leadership and accepts that the approach is altruistic and concerned with self-serving purposes (Howell and Avolio, 1992). The potential for amorality within
transformational leadership even resulted in the development of a new form of leadership; authentic leadership, which will be discussed at a later point in this paper.

Entrepreneurial leadership

Entrepreneurial leadership is an approach to leadership which emerged as the result of a combination of entrepreneurship and leadership. Entrepreneurial leaders combine the skills of entrepreneurs with their positions of leadership. They tend to focus upon creating value for society, stakeholders and businesses and pursue opportunities out-with the resources currently available to them or their organisation (Harrison et al., 2016; 2018). Entrepreneurial leaders are also concerned with implementing change and innovation for the benefit of their organisation (Van Zyl and Mathur-Helm, 2007) Overall, they are tasked with creating a vision which is shared with and implemented by their followers (Harrison et al., 2016; 2018).

Entrepreneurial leaders generally have a higher risk tolerance in comparison to most types of leaders. They are constantly concerned with risk when identifying or undertaking new opportunities. The result of the risks that they take can often be detrimental to their organisation or employees. For example, a risk could fail and cost the organisation resources or employees their employment. Additionally, it is important to point out that entrepreneurial leaders are often accused of setting aside morality in order to focus upon goals and achievements within their organisations (Surie and Ashley, 2007). Furthermore, entrepreneurial leaders generally ask their followers to abandon their safer and more secure jobs to join them in a venture into the unknown (Bagheri and Harrison, 2020; Harrison et al., 2016; 2018).

However, it is important here to acknowledge the concept of social entrepreneurship. Social entrepreneurship is the use of start-up companies to proffer solutions to cultural, social and economic issues. It can be applied in accordance with an organisation’s aims and beliefs. It is important to note that the ethical and moral benefits of social entrepreneurship remain largely unexplored and unvalidated (Zahra et al., 2009). Overall, the entrepreneurial leader is arguably too focused on their own gain, often to the detriment of others. This calls into question the standing of entrepreneurial leadership as a moral approach to leadership.

Behavioural Era
The behavioural era takes into consideration the actions of leaders, a shift in focus from the leaders themselves (King, 1990). The behavioural era marked a shift from the focus on traits and characteristics, to the way in which leaders act. This was due to a lack of consistency within trait theory and a lack of underpinning empirical evidence. Behavioural theory focuses on the way that leaders treat their followers according to the context (Yukl et al., 2013). It examines the different ways in which the behaviour of a leader affects both follower and organisational outcomes.

There is no doubt that the behavioural approach to leadership is important as it is concerned with the actions of a leader and the impact on their effectiveness. As well as being useful to scholars, the behavioural approach is also valuable to leaders as it allows them to learn and evaluate areas for improvement or change (Northouse, 2015). However, it is difficult to determine the morality of the behavioural theory. For example, Rost (1993) posits that there is no universal agreement as to which behaviours are moral and amoral. Furthermore, it is argued that each individual has their own sense of ethical behaviour and therefore it is relative as to what leadership behaviours could be considered ethical (Appelbaum et al., 2003). It fails to take into account that the behaviour demonstrated by the leader may differ, according to follower perception.

The potential negative psychological aspects of the power given to those in leadership positions has resulted in unethical behaviours (Maner and Mead, 2010). Leaders often feel more justified in engaging in unethical behaviours, as long as it is done in order to meet group goals (Hoyt and Price et al., 2010). Overall, in terms of morality, the behavioural era of leadership can be said to be a grey area. Due to a lack of cohesive agreement within the field, it is difficult to determine which behaviours should be measured with regards to leadership (Bass and Bass, 2008). It is therefore difficult to determine which leadership behaviours can be categorised as immoral and moral. Additionally, as previously mentioned, leaders also have the opportunity to adopt immoral behaviours in order to suit certain agendas.

**Transactional Era**
The transactional era is a further expansion upon the influence era. Unlike the influence era, the transactional era recognises the reciprocal nature of the leader-follower relationship (Clark and Harrison, 2018). According to Harrison (2018) the most influential transactional approaches to leadership are Leader member exchange and transactional leadership, which will now be discussed.

**Leader Member Exchange Theory**

The emergence of Leader-member exchange theory (LMX) saw a shift from the earlier leadership theories which tended mainly to focus upon the traits of an individual, to a focus upon the relationship between a leader and their followers. The leader member exchange approach to leadership posits that a follower’s performance, the decisions they make, and their sense of responsibility are influenced and strengthened by the relationship with their leader.

LMX has been described as both a transactional and process approach to leadership, as the leader and the followers are both active in the process, and stress is placed on these interactions (Van Breukelen et al., 2006). Prior to the emergence of LMX theories, it was widely accepted that the different existing perceptions of a leader were due to inconsistencies in followers’ views and opinions, rather than inconsistencies with a leader (Van Breukelen et al., 2006).

LMX generally divides its followers into two distinct categories; in groups and out groups. They are allocated in accordance with how the leader perceives the behaviour of each follower. Those viewed as being in the in-group tend to have strong relationships with their leaders and are highly productive (Northouse, 2015). In this instance, when a leader displays moral behaviour, it is reciprocated by the follower, and the relationship is mutually beneficial (Giessner et al., 2005). On the other hand, followers within the out-group tend to do only that which is required of them, only exceeding this when it is deemed to be beneficial to them (Northouse, 2015). Those in the out-group generally have poorer relationships with their leaders, if any at all, as they are generally only bound to them via employment contracts.

It is arguable that LMX is a concept which is difficult both to determine and to measure. It is influenced and affected by numerous factors, such as contributions, characteristics, group size and demographics etc. There is further debate as to whether LMX should be measured on an organisational, group or dyadic level (Van Breukelen et al., 2006). Additionally, Harrison
(2018) highlights a difficulty in measuring the effects of LMX as there has been no robust scale developed to date, which measures the phenomenon.

The morality of this approach to leadership has been criticised for different reasons. For example, the practice of organising followers into different groups could be considered amoral on the grounds that it practises favouritism and could cause divides and resentment between employees (Scandura, 1999). It could also allow for workplace discrimination, with employees being treated better, or worse, in accordance with their group status, particularly with those in the in-group tending to be treated more favourably. A further moral consideration is that low quality relationships within LMX has been found to increase perceptions of abusive supervision (Klaussner, 2014). Therefore, it could be argued that LMX may provide an amoral approach to leadership as it may result in an abusive working relationship. Overall, it is clear that within the LMX approach to leadership, there is a wide scope for immoral behaviours from leaders.

**Transactional Leadership**

Transactional leadership theory was first developed by Burns in 1978 and is based upon the use of contingent rewards in order to motivate followers. The transactional leader generally adopts some form of ‘reward’ in order to incentivise or motivate subordinates (Harrison, 2018). Coercive steps can also be taken to ensure that followers do not make ‘mistakes’ and instead behave in a manner which is beneficial to the leader (Yukl, 2013).

Transaction leadership has been described as a poor attempt at leadership in terms of moral reasoning (Felix et al., 2015). The morality of transactional leadership is considered debatable, not least because of the potential scope for bribery when adopting such an approach. It further promotes a fear-based work environment with employees only maintaining their leader’s status quo through fear of punishment, rather than of their own volition. Additionally, it leaves room for corruption from leaders, who are able to use rewards to get employees to do as they wish. Today’s society is one which is morally averse to corruption and bribery, and for these reasons transactional leadership may be considered as an approach to leadership which has the potential for amorality.
Cultural Era

The cultural era considers the nature of organisational culture and its relationship with leadership (Clark and Harrison, 2018). Both organisational culture and leadership research are vast areas of study with a plethora of research streams, theories and concepts surrounding both concepts (Yukl, 2013). In accordance with the leadership theories highlighted by Harrison (2018) both distributed and authentic leadership are categorised under the cultural era of leadership.

Distributed Leadership

Distributed leadership is concerned with the interaction between people and the situations in which they find themselves. Rather than focusing on a single individual, distributed leadership focuses on the collective effort of a group. Distributed leadership proposes that it is not possible for a leader to possess all the skills and traits necessary for leadership across all situations, rather how leaders interact with their followers should be taken into consideration (Harris, 2010). It is also concerned with roles and responsibilities being distributed across a team.

Distributed leadership has been criticised as it allows for the potential development of immorality. There have been concerns raised as to the potential for a hegemonic nature emerging within a team-based ideology (Sinclair, 1992). This could lead to the silencing or ignoring of colleagues whose contributions may go unheard above their more vocal, or prominent counterparts (Sugure, 2009). Additionally, it has the potential for gendered interpretations of work within the team, which may leave some team-members work and ideas rendered invisible (Rippin, 2007). Overall, whilst on the surface, distributed leadership may seem to promote a democratic and moral approach to leadership, it leaves the potential for an immoral dismissal of less visible members of a team.

Authentic Leadership

Authentic leadership can be considered a relatively new concept, which is still largely in the throes of a generally accepted comprehensive definition (Northouse, 2015). As mentioned
earlier, authentic leadership was developed in an attempt to address the shortcomings of transformational leadership. It should be noted that authentic leadership theoretically insists upon integrity and morality, whereas transformational leaders does not. Authentic leaders are self-aware and act in a way which acknowledges their abilities. They also have an internalised moral perspective, balanced processing, and relational transparency (Walumbwa et al., 2008).

However, it is important to note that the insistence upon morality in authentic leadership could be seen as superficial. In actuality, there is no moral dimension or framework included within authentic leadership. This calls into question to what extent it is actually of greater moral standing than transformational leadership (Gardiner, 2017).

*Ethical Leadership*

Although not discussed within Harrison’s (2018) approaches to leadership, it is important to consider ethical leadership when examining the relationship between morality and leadership. Ethical leadership entails a leader factoring in the potential implications of any decision or action they may need to take, with regards to the employees of their organisation (Mihelic et al., 2010). Whilst it is often criticised for being a vague concept, it is generally considered to be the act of enabling people to do the right thing. Ethical leaders’ question what is right or wrong and as a result are able to develop a code of conduct for their followers.

Leadership is judged on outcomes, whereas ethics is judged on intentions. Therefore, though the leader may have ethical intentions, the outcomes produced may be amoral (Trevino and Brown, 2000). It is often the leaders lack guidance on how to be ethical. In fact, research has found that a large majority of adults are not fully formed with regards to ethics and lack the ability to act morally autonomously, the same can be said for leaders (Rest, 1986). It can also be argued that a leader cannot be entirely ethical due to their loyalties to numerous stakeholders, which present them with conflicting ethical ideologies. Furthermore, it is difficult to determine what makes an ethical leader, as what is considered ethical in one culture, may not be seen to be so in another. The difference in these ethical values can lead to ethical conflicts within the leader, and indeed within the employees. Also, whilst leaders may strive to be ethical, they can be influenced and corrupted by the unethical behaviours of those around them. Furthermore, ethical leadership uses a reward and punishment system, leaving it open to the same potential amoral elements as transformational leadership (Yasir and Mohamad 2016).
Whilst on the surface ethical leadership may appear moral, it can be argued that just because a leader is perceived as ethical does not necessarily mean that they are (Ciulla, 2003). Additionally, due to the ambiguity of the concept it is difficult in fact to even define what constitutes ethical leadership and therefore consider it a moral form of leadership.

**Skills Era**

The skills era focuses upon the skills and capabilities that a leader utilises in order to influence their followers (Mumford et al., 2000). Whilst they are mentioned within previous leadership eras, the skills era views them as an entire approach to leadership, rather than an aid to leaders. Katz (1955) was one of the leading proponents of the notion that leadership can be learned and therefore there should be more focus on leader’s skills rather than traits (Northouse, 2015). Skills within leadership are concerned with the knowledge and abilities which are necessary for effectiveness (Northouse, 2015). It has been suggested that by continually developing their skills, leaders are able to increase their own competence and thus become better leaders (Mumford et al., 2000).

Whilst skills can be developed by a leader for moral purposes, it is also the case that a leader is able to develop amoral skills. A leader may advance skills such as manipulation and deception, or others for their own benefit, which is to the detriment of their followers. Furthermore, the skills theory purports to be descriptive rather than prescriptive. It does not offer advice to leaders as to what to do when moral dilemmas arise, leaving the leaders without guidance on how to act in a moral fashion. Furthermore, this theory proposes that leadership can be learned (Katz, 1955). Ethics, cannot be learned, it is innate, and thus the two concepts are at odds with each other on a fundamental level (Haq, 2011).

**Serving Era**

It should be highlighted that this era is not recognised by Clark and Harrison (2018) or King (1990). However, this study believes it necessary to recognise the era which saw a change in leadership from leaders being self-serving to serving those around them. In accordance with
Harrison (2018) most prominent approaches to leadership, servant leadership will now be discussed with reference to the serving era.

*Servant Leadership*

The emergence of servant leadership highlighted a new concept of leadership whereby leaders act like servants rather than all-knowing individuals (Harrison, 2018). Servant leadership is an inclusive approach to leadership which encourages the growth and development of employees (Andersen, 2009). It is a form of leadership which aims to put the needs of followers before the leader. The servant leader aims to provide support and guidance wherever possible in order to promote employee empowerment and development. Servant leaders encourage power sharing and share both responsibilities and decision making with their followers (Mcquade et al., 2020).

It has been argued that what differentiates servant leadership from other approaches to leadership is its innate element of morality (Keith, 2015). Additionally, it is an approach which is based upon virtue (Patterson, 2003). It should be noted however, that similar to pseudo-transformational leadership, there have been arguments made which suggest that pseudo-servant leadership is also possible (Bass and Steidlmeier, 2004). Such leaders only adopt servant leadership, when it suits them and seek power at the expense of those they are ‘serving.’ This can be stated to be inauthentic servant leadership, as true servant leadership can only be reached when leaders place the needs of the led over their own. It also has the potential for followers to take advantage of the servant leaders and behave immorally.

**Further Recommendations**

Recent business scandals have caused both practitioners and academics to question the morality of those in leadership today. High profile companies have crumbled due to a lack of moral reasoning in leadership such as those within Enron and the banking sector (Felix et al., 2015). As a result, the search for a moral approach to leadership has continued to gain importance.
The majority of the leadership eras and approaches discussed within this paper have highlighted the moral difficulties which emerge. Whilst on the surface, ethical leadership may appear the obvious moral choice, as previously explained, it is arguably superficial in nature. Servant leadership, on the other hand, can be described as moral by its very nature: to serve. It is not based upon any kind of transaction, like other approaches to leadership, which may initially be considered moral. Whilst amoral elements were present within servant leadership, they were outweighed by the potential for morality within the approach. Therefore, with reference to this paper’s aim to determine the morality of leadership, it is recommended that servant leadership is an area which should be considered for further research. By its very nature, it can be deemed moral, and further research into such form of leadership could have substantial benefits (Keith, 2015). It could inspire future research and development of theory. Furthermore, servant leadership can be used as a learning tool by practitioners, potential future leaders, and as a training aid for employees within the workplace.

It is important to note that this study is limited due to its lack of empirical research. This paper therefore recommends that empirical studies should be conducted in order to investigate the morality of this approach. It is important to verify that it is indeed a moral approach to leadership, which we can learn from and build upon.

**Conclusion**

Morality has had a great influence on the evolution of leadership over the past century. It has shaped the development of the phenomenon and has brought us to where we are in leadership research at present. However, as highlighted throughout this paper, there are many shortcomings morally within each of the eras of leadership. It is important that societies which are increasingly concerned with developing moral consciousness investigate further into leadership. This paper therefore makes a clarion call that future studies and research should be conducted into servant leadership as a potential answer to the dilemma of moral leadership.
References


