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# THE CHALLENGE OF RIVAL VERSIONS OF MORAL ENQUIRY WITHIN LEAD- ERSHIP-AS-PRACTICE

Kirk Mensch<sup>1</sup>

AN INVITED RESPONSE TO Joe Raelin (2020), “The Genealogical Ethics of Leadership-as-Practice”, *Bus Ethics J Rev* 8(5): 27–31,  
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## ABSTRACT

Herein, I clarify my concern regarding Raelin’s Leadership-as-Practice (L-A-P) and argue that inconsistent moral philosophies undermine the veracity of leadership theory, especially more recent democratic, shared, collective, and practice oriented theories; that this problem seems to be proliferating in the social sciences, and that this is especially concerning in socio-psychologically oriented theories. I contend that the moral foundations of L-A-P remain philosophically disquieting, unless it is understood as excluding moral agents other than those of a genealogical tradition, and that such exclusionary consequences in practice may lead to moral disengagement, which might then lead to cognitive dissonance and even self-harm.

IN AN ATTEMPT to address my concerns regarding the inconsistent moral foundations of L-A-P, Raelin appeals to a reductive interpretation of MacIntyre’s (1990) *Genealogical Tradition* by minimizing the individual moral agent and transforming the traditional notions of leader-follower relationships, as well as the definition of leadership as is commonly understood. I have previously argued that leadership in any form requires consistent moral foundations as an agentive concern (Mensch 2016; Mensch and Barge 2019). I argue that Raelin’s (2016,

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<sup>1</sup> Email: [kmensch1@gmail.com](mailto:kmensch1@gmail.com)

2019, 2020) L-A-P, as well as other democratic, shared, distributed and collective forms of leadership concepts, cannot avoid philosophical moral inconsistency by appealing to a modified genealogical tradition. I further contend that such an attempt may, in practice, alienate moral agents who stand in other MacIntyrean traditions.

The first notable point in Raelin's (2020) response is his clear affirmation that L-A-P, in its current form, certainly maintains characteristics that are generally consistent with MacIntyre's (1990, 2016) account of a genealogical tradition. However, he appears to focus on my disquieting concern with L-A-P's dependence on moral relativity and ethical subjectivism under the guise of a form of co-created collective wisdom (Raelin 2020). His solution seems to be summed up as "L-A-P observes a philosophy of co-development in which people discover and unfold from within themselves" (Raelin 2020: 30–31). He continues with a discussion on the positive aspects of dialogue and forms of co-created learning couched in the context of leadership, which involves diminished relational influence. He further states that this relational engagement arises from a philosophy that recognizes an innate capacity for moral agency beyond a reliance on rules, and that L-A-P is really aimed at a collective wisdom, that seems to assume a democratic or shared form of leadership (Raelin 2020).

Collective wisdom is a noble endeavour; however, the fundamental philosophical problem with L-A-P should be evident to those familiar with MacIntyre's (1990) argument regarding the incommensurability of moral traditions and his contention that moral relativism and ethical subjectivism is genealogically oriented and not limited to Nietzsche nor solved by more recent phenomenologically oriented philosophers such as Foucault, who's moral philosophies generally conflict with such things as moral realism and moral absolutism. This conundrum is not simply a consequence of an appeal to a genealogical tradition, but rather a result of attempting to amalgamate various moral traditions within pluralistic organizations. Furthermore, organizational adoption of such morally inconsistent theories or concepts may increase the propensity for agents to disengage from their own moral self-sanctions (Mensch 2016). For individuals who stand in opposing moral traditions and who are influenced by those of other traditions, there is an elevated risk of agents disengaging from their own moral self-sanctions, which can lead to self-destructive behav-

iours, including suicide (Mensch 2016). Raelin notes that MacIntyre focuses on three incommensurable moral traditions as if others do not exist. I argue that MacIntyre utilizes three historically and clearly established moral traditions for concise clarity, whilst recognizing that there are many incommensurable traditions. Raelin points to a problem of definition, as if MacIntyre's genealogical tradition is inconsiderate of Foucault's work. However, MacIntyre does not limit his genealogical view to Nietzsche's notion of power and authority, but instead utilizes Nietzsche's work as a sort of genealogical historical start point.

MacIntyre proffers the *end* of discourse in his *Genealogical Tradition* is to locate a sort of common truth by considering a number of legitimate truths, which, in the aggregate, produces winners and losers, where the losers ultimately conform to the winners notion of truth. This highlights my agentively oriented concern and the incommensurability between MacIntyre's moral traditions. An appeal to Foucault's more inclusive form of genealogy does not solve the philosophical challenge of L-A-P in the context of the morally pluralistic organization. While Raelin's response may offer a greater voice to marginalized organizational members and help mitigate possible consequences to an agent who stands as part of an incommensurate moral tradition, an elevated risk of long term cognitive dissonance leading to self-destructive behaviours on the part of the moral agent remains. Therefore, my concern regarding the long term psychological risk to the individual L-A-P participant cannot be fully addressed by this appeal.

MacIntyre (2016: 77) offers some clarity on the problem I am trying to bring to the fore. He states that,

. . . contemporary philosophical theorizing about morality is flawed, insofar as it concerns itself not with the range of moralities that we encounter in different cultures, but with only one of them, 'Morality', the presently dominant moral system in advanced societies, which it presents as morality as such.

Although MacIntyre (2016) is focused on a broader argument about theory, practice, and social context, he illuminates the challenge I am trying to offer in a pluralistic organization embracing L-A-P.

Utilizing Waterman's (2013) contrasts in the philosophical foundations of psychology, I point out a similar underlying moral problem

in the social sciences by further explicating the divide between humanistic psychology and positive psychology where Waterman states “proponents of humanistic and positive psychology start with different premises about human nature” (Waterman 2013: 124). Raelin (2019: 1) states that the preferred method for studying L-A-P is by, “endorsing discursive, narrative, ethnographic, aesthetic, and multimodal methods to attempt to capture concurrent, collective, and dialogical social practices.” Raelin’s argument may seem to be simply descriptive in nature, but in the context of leadership, this “endorsing” seems ultimately prescriptive, as Raelin (2019: 2) alludes when pointing out that L-A-P is more about the “collective orientation” and less about “what one person thinks.”

Those involved in academic research should understand the basic reasons for the divide between the use of quantitative and qualitative methods and why *mixed methods* are often utilized in social science research and yet fail as *proof*. This is a reason social scientists utilize the term *support* as opposed to the term *prove* in their research, as the methods are based in probability theory often aimed at generalizability to larger populations. My point here is that there are assumptions about morality often not presented clearly in the social sciences that are problematic due to differences in fundamental moral belief systems. Conclusions based in social science research are *supported*, not *proven*, and underlying moral assumptions are rarely discussed with clarity, a well-known and highly debated philosophic problem (Mensch 2016; Waterman 2013). Foucault’s critique of modernity, which “problematizes modern forms of knowledge, rationality, social institutions, and subjectivity . . .” fails to offer a solution in the context of moral leadership but does confirm that we are in an era of “subjectivity” that is “contingent sociohistorical constructs of power and domination.” A euphemistic attempt to minimize Foucault’s scorn for any form of “domination” to something like democratic influence (Best and Kellner 1991: 35) fails to offer a solution to the autonomous moral agent. However, I concede that such an appeal might allow for one to better understand their own moral schema by way of understanding the moral schema of others through social discourse.

This problem is related to the philosophy of science, and should be relevant in any attempt to reconcile rival versions of moral enquiry within the social sciences. The use of universal moral principles is not

a solution to this moral problem as it is based in cultural relativism, although I do acknowledge that there are *common* moral principles (Mensch 2016). This may offer a possible conduit for a solution to my challenge to the application and understanding of what L-A-P might offer, although the issue of leadership and influence relative to the follower remains. The presence of influence or authority in the leader-follower relationship where leaders and followers subscribe to different moral traditions is not resolved by a type of utilitarian attempt at a common or universal morality, despite attempts to mitigate this issue by way of democratic, shared, or collective forms of leadership.

We have thus established that L-A-P is grounded in a genealogical moral tradition in both study and application. Now, what does L-A-P mean to the moral agent who belongs to a pluralistic organization yet feels compelled to subscribe to decisions based in contradictory traditions when the moral dilemma arises? How does L-A-P deal with the moral agent in an organization that has members that subscribe, for example, to a morally absolutist tradition, whilst others may subscribe to a genealogical moral tradition? My question is intended to be sympathetic perhaps to those we might call organizational outliers, or agents who find themselves in a marginalized moral tradition. This dilemma seems consistent with arguments against other forms of democratic or distributed leadership theories that minimize moral agency for the collective and emphasize a more shared system of leadership. MacIntyre (2016: 77) speaks to this issue of majority rule extensively and states, “To propose utility maximization as such as the measure of right action must therefore be a mistake,” and here he means to suggest this is regardless of how one might conceptualize things like utility, goodness, and rightness. This is one reason why many social science theorists appeal, somewhat surprisingly, to virtue ethics as a solution to finding a common, more generalized moral tradition, which I argue is not only misplaced but could also cause more confusion in understanding the fundamental moral questions I am attempting to investigate.

The answer to the ultimate question at hand remains elusive. How do we reconcile rival moral traditions within a pluralistic organization, whilst maintaining the integrity of the individual moral agent thereby reducing the propensity for the disengagement of moral self-sanctions and cognitive dissonance, which has been shown to produce

a greater risk of self-harm by the moral agent (Mensch 2016)? MacIntyre's *Three Rival Versions* exposes the problem but does not seem to offer a satisfying answer to this question within the context of leadership in pluralistic organizations (MacIntyre 1981, 1990, 2015). A foremost concern is that the quest for morally consistent and transparent philosophical assumptions in the presentation and application of social science concepts under the current trend to pluralize morality unabated will be unappealing to many theorists, as resulting philosophical investigations may expose questionable moral assumptions of numerous theories developed over the past century.

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