Personalism and moral leadership: the servant leader with a transforming vision

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Introduction

This article seeks to identify the leadership approach that best fits with the moral philosophy of personalism, a position which views persons and personal relationships as the starting point of social theory and practice. Because moral philosophy and social science intersect in the human person, any proper synthesis of these must agree as to anthropology (Gronbacher 1998). For instance, a normative leadership theory grounded in personalism should consider each human person as a spiritual and a material creature. After beginning with a brief explanation of personalism, this article describes and assesses each of three normative leadership paradigms in terms of the major themes of personalism. It explains why servant leadership as conceptualized by Robert K. Greenleaf (1977) fits with personalism more satisfactorily, even if imperfectly, than do the paradigms of transformational leadership (Burns 1978, Bass 1990, 1995) and postindustrial leadership (Rost 1991, 1993). The article concludes by suggesting that a composite approach, which combines the significant strengths of servant leadership with successful behavioral practices of transformational leadership, would be superior to either paradigm alone.

Personalism

Personalism has many forms, each generally viewing persons and personal relationships as the starting point of theory and practice. However, there is no dogma or unified doctrine that delineates a personalist ideology much beyond this starting point. Many personalists are theists (Copleston 1974: 311), but some are atheists. No general agreement exists as to methods or definitions, even concerning the complex subject of personhood itself. This article follows the interpretation of Polish personalism offered by the emerging school of economic personalism at the Acton Institute (Gronbacher 1998, Sirico 1998). Developed by Karol Wojtyla (now Pope John Paul II) and others, Polish personalism is grounded in the methodology of phenomenological realism developed by Edmund Husserl and draws on the writings of Emmanuel Mounier.

In personalism there is reaction to the intellectual and social political tendencies that appear to treat man (male and female) simply as an object of scientific study or reduce her to an economic or socio-political function: it thus rejects both materialist and instrumentalist views. For Mounier (1951: 152), personalism is closely related to existentialism, reacting against positivism, materialism, and behaviorism (the philosophy of things) and against systems such as those of Spinoza and Hegel (the philosophy of abstract ideas). Personalism is not a system, but a perspective, a method, an exigency (Mounier 1951: 150). Man belongs to nature, but he can also transcend nature by progressively mastering it and subduing it. Every person has his or her vocation in life in response to subjectively recognized values, but this vocation recognizes the objective world of other persons and relations among and between them.
The fundamental themes of phenomenological analysis of human action include centrality of the person, subjectivity and autonomy, human dignity, the person within community, and participation and solidarity (Gronbacher 1998). Each is summarized below as the basis for assessing several normative leadership theories.

Theme 1: centrality of the person

The dignity and value of the human person is at the center of personalist philosophy. Various personalists offer differing explanations of the source of human value, but all start with a firm sense of the existence and vital importance of human dignity.

Theme 2: subjectivity and autonomy

Personalism understands human nature as combining subjectivity and autonomy. Each person is self-aware, consciously experiencing himself from within. However, the human is also an objectively real ‘I,’ one conscious of his own existence and actions. It is through subjectivity that the person recognizes the particularity of his own objective existence, the autonomy of his being. A person is characterized by both subjectivity and a sense of autonomy, created with a free will to respond to needs with responsible self-mastery.

Theme 3: human dignity

For the Christian personalist, each person is a unique, though incomplete and imperfect, refraction of the divine image. As such, each person possesses and is due immense dignity, being ontologically and axiologically superior to all non-human creatures. Men, women, and children bathing at the seashore are of higher value than the sharks, even those of endangered species.

The dignity of the human person is displayed in his human capacity to love sacrificially and in his faculties such as intelligence, creativity, language, and freedom of will. Some animals express these faculties to an extent. For example, a dog can love sacrificially, can learn from experience, can communicate, and can choose based upon natural instinct. However, the value of a human is not derived from his capacities, functions, social role, or deeds, but from his ontological status as God-imager. Personalism goes beyond Kant’s categorical imperative that people should be treated as ends, never as means to an end. It adds the positive obligation that every person is due love, respect, and affirmation.

Theme 4: the person within community

A human person flourishes only in relation with other human persons. The Christian view is that a human person, as a God-imager, is to join in genuine community with others, based on the commandments to love God and neighbor. Personalism does not imply individualism. It calls for community, not just as a collection of individuals, but as a unity of persons who relate consciously and experientially. Some critics (e.g. Zwick and Zwick 1999) object that economic personalists who promote the free market confuse personalism with individualism. However, true personalists, even those favoring capitalism, distinguish individualism from individuality (Gronbacher 1998: 9). Individualism isolates, setting people against each other. While the individual is the building block of the social order and has freedom of action, he does not have unrestricted liberty to act immorally, regardless of consequences for the common good (Wojtyla 1981).

Theme 5: participation and solidarity

Human social order requires love of neighbor, striving to bring good to the lives of others. This requires affirmation of the right of participation by all in society. Alienation results when the opportunity for participation in social life is denied (Wojtyla 1981: 28–29): it is thus the opposite and the outcome of such participation (Gronbacher 1998: 10). While alienation does occur due to realities of social discrimination, economic deprivation, and lack of social skills, personalism works to promote solidarity in which all persons have full opportunity for participation.

Is personalism realistic? Is the standard it sets too high for imperfect humans who exist in a
world that is far from perfect? The difficulty of applying personalism in today’s business world is obvious. But if one accepts the aim of personalism as worthwhile, is there a leadership paradigm that might help people engaged in productive work to approach its perspective? The remainder of this article assesses several normative leadership paradigms and how they relate to the themes of personalism.

Transformational leadership

Burns (1978) contrasts transforming leadership with the traditional forms of transactional leadership. Instead of motivating by appealing to Maslow’s (1943) lower level needs (food, shelter, safety, and affiliation), transformational leaders focus on the higher levels of follower needs (esteem, self-fulfillment, and self-actualization). Exemplary leaders such as Winston Churchill, Mahatma Gandhi, and Aung Suu Kyi transform the lives and characters of their followers and societies. Such transformational leaders influence with their charisma and inspirational motivation, challenging followers to be creative in problem solving and provide a learning environment tailored to each individual (Bartol and Martin 1998).

In theory, a transformational leader has the goal of raising the level of morality of her followers and the organization, creating a more moral climate, fostering independent action, and serving the greater good. However, Johnson (2001) observes that the popularity of the transformational paradigm is due to the pragmatic finding that it actually works, in the sense of increasing the economic performance of subordinates: it is not due to the ethical advantages claimed for it by Burns.

The pragmatic effectiveness of this approach can undermine its moral aims. Transformational leaders can ignore or downplay the contributions of followers in order to promote their own interests (Kelley 1992). Moreover, followers tend to become too dependent on the transformational leader as charismatic hero (Johnson 2001). Transformational leadership thus can be applied in a manner that Ciulla (1998) calls “bogus empowerment”; i.e. it claims to give employees or followers power without changing the moral relationship between leaders and followers. This produces alienation.

Indeed, transformational leadership can lead to the reality, or at least the suspicion, of manipulation, of the leader using his followers for his own purposes rather than respecting them as worthy ends. Motivations are difficult to discern, but transformational leadership proponents Gary Becker and Richard Posner of the Chicago School subscribe to the presupposition that all the world is driven by self-interested economic rationality (Nelson 1998: 146). People do things because these actions offer them greater positive benefits than the costs incurred (Becker 1976) – an instrumentalist philosophy of utilitarian individualism rather than personalism. Recognizing these problems, Bass (1995) distinguishes between transformational and pseudotransformational leaders. Whereas pseudo-transformational leaders are self-centered, he claims that genuine transformational leaders are motivated by altruism.

However, the most serious weakness of transformational leadership theory, and the danger of its practice, is that it can be so effectively used for immoral ends. Napoleon Bonaparte, Adolf Hitler, and Attila the Hun (Roberts 1987) were effective transformational leaders. The more successful the leader is at being transformational, the more dangerous he can become. While this kind of leadership emphasizes the development of character within followers toward a teleological vision, that visionary end may well be bad rather than good (Whetstone 2001), and its adherents may lack principled constraints as to how that vision is pursued. Combining pragmatism with enculturation of moral (or immoral) vision, this paradigm places inadequate stress on individual rights and moral duties required to guide behaviors toward genuine communal good (Keeley 1995).

Is Bass’s clarified ideal good enough, considering the power afforded the leader who is effective at transforming others? The dynamics of leadership, the vision, values and staying power, are ultimately spiritual concerns. Nothing happens without a dream, a vision. “Without a vision, the people perish” (Proverbs 29:18a) is frequently
quoted to support the vital importance of leaders being visionary. But the vision needs to be a right and a good vision as indicated by the second half of the verse, “But happy is he who keeps the [moral] law” (Proverbs 29:18b). A transformational leader can be effective in instilling a vision, molding the character and vision of followers to achieve that vision. But if the vision is flawed or if the leader neglects to stress principled behaviors toward the vision, the results can be tragic (Rasmussen 1995: 297).

The anthropological presuppositions of personalism, acknowledging the dignity and value of every person while recognizing the implications of sin on human nature and the world, suggest that even Bass’s theoretical qualifications are insufficient. Because transformational leaders can realize the power to achieve results so effectively, and because inadequately constrained power can be abused, further safeguards are needed to withstand and overcome internal temptations and external pressures to compromise and to manipulate. Otherwise, a resulting lack of genuine participation can foster alienation. In summary, transformational leadership in practice and in theory falls short of the requirements of the philosophy of personalism calling for the leader to be, first of all, committed to honoring the dignity of his followers and their freedom to participate fully in a true community of solidarity.

Postindustrial leadership

Rost (1991, 1993) claims that postindustrial leadership is superior to transformational leadership because it focuses on the relationship between leader and followers, avoiding any tendency to exalt the leader over followers. Rost (1991, 1993) sees the essential nature of leadership as a relationship between leaders and followers, a process that enables them together to get things done. He objects that transformational leadership and other modernist theories inadequately appreciate interrelationship, instead requiring leaders to use followers instrumentally to achieve measurable goals (such as profits, service, and growth) that the leaders themselves set (Johnson 2001). In contrast, postindustrial leadership emphasizes relationship and the process of leadership, avoiding the tendency to exalt the leader above the followers. The leader-follower relationship is based on persuasion rather than coercion; influence flows both from leader to followers and from followers to leaders. Postindustrial leadership is communitarian; leaders and followers combine to define and then pursue the common good of shared values in a process of mutual influence. Goals of the process are established jointly through discussion and argument. In line with other postmodernist theorists, Rost rejects the traditional ethical theories of utilitarianism and Kant’s categorical imperative as too individualistic (Rost 1995). Ethical standards are jointly developed in the process of interrelationship and are thus constructed socially.

But if there is no right or wrong, no standard of correctness or truth, then no one has need to repent or to accept any responsibility for what happens. Nietzsche’s (1966) will to power can become dominant. Allan Bloom (1987) observes that this indeed occurs on American university campuses where postmodernism prevails. The ‘correctly-thinking’ majority can appropriately use any and all means to convince those with minority beliefs of their politically incorrect error. Without principled ethics, postindustrial leadership may likewise result in a contest for power, in spite of its communitarian ideals of mutual trust, tolerance, and participation.

Postindustrial leadership emphasizes a system of relationships over the worth of the individual people, who are not considered central, whereas personalism starts with a central focus on the inherent dignity of persons who interrelate responsibly. As Hirsch (1991: 165) warns, “purveyors of postmodern ideologies must consider whether it is possible to diminish human beings in theory, without at the same time making individual human lives worthless in the real world”. Furthermore, to maintain genuine community wherein all persons are able freely to exercise their own subjectivity and autonomy, personal liberty must be constrained by moral responsibility. With its focus on the process of interrelationship rather than on the inherent value and
dignity of persons who are themselves morally responsible, postindustrial leadership is inconsistent with the philosophy of personalism.

Servant leadership

Servant leadership (Greenleaf 1977, Spears 1995) is a more appropriate paradigm for implementing personalism within the business organization. Robert Greenleaf’s model of servant leadership puts primary emphasis on the needs and desires of the followers before the needs of the leader. Greenleaf developed his concept of the ‘servant as leader’ from reading Herman Hesse’s *Journey to the East*, an account of a mythical journey in which a man named Leo, a servant who performs menial chores for the group of travellers, sustains them with his spirit and song. All goes well until Leo suddenly disappears. The group then falls apart and the journey is abandoned. The narrator of the story years later encounters Leo, whom he finds to be the great and noble leader of the Order that had actually sponsored the journey. Greenleaf (1977: 7) interprets the story as teaching that the great leader is seen as servant first, and that fact is the key to his greatness.

There is no unique formula for the servant leader, although persuasion and example are preferred methods. The servant leader needs to abandon his own preconceptions of how best to serve, then wait and listen until others define their own needs and can state them clearly. A leader builds people through service when he genuinely puts people first, viewing them as humans worthy of dignity and respect. The process of change starts within the servant who, while belonging to Nature, also believes he can subdue Nature. When a problem appears, the servant leader first addresses in what manner it may have originated within himself, then invents and develops solutions without ideological bias or preconception. Success is measured by growth in the people served and the positive effects on the least privileged in society.

According to Johnson (2001: 136), the advantages of the servant leadership model are its altruism, simplicity, and self-awareness. It emphasizes the moral sense of concern for others, reducing the complexity engendered by putting personal desires in conflict with those of followers. It requires reflective thinking, or moral imagination (Werhane 1999), grounded in sensitive awareness of oneself and of the followers who interact in a continuous process of mutual influence. The leader talks, listens to others, and from the ongoing conversation (a *dia-logus*, not the cacophony of voices that is a discussion) emerges a shared vision, and a better one (Kiechel 1995: 125).

However, servant leadership is also criticized for seeming unrealistic, encouraging passivity, not working in every context, sometimes serving the wrong cause, and being associated with the negative connotation of the term *servant* (or *slave*) (Johnson 2001: 136). Johnson suggests remedying the latter by changing the name of this paradigm to reflect its more positive attributes such as altruism and compassion. But, more substantially, servant leadership does seem out-of-place in some situations, such as that faced by a prison guard. Followers often will try to take advantage of what they deem weakness. More generally, Bowie (2000: 13) objects that a servant leader can be too subject to manipulation by followers.

Any leadership approach is flawed if it seeks the wrong teleological aim. Normative paradigms, including servant leadership, that can effectively direct the vision of followers toward misplaced aims, are especially dangerous. However, a servant leader understands himself as called to serve others. She strives to love her neighbor as her first priority in business and all other spheres of life. If she is genuinely concerned for people first, and listens, cultivates trust, and promotes her vision through persuasion and example, there is less likelihood that an evil vision will prevail. Rabbi Wayne Dosick notes, “if we uplift the human spirit, we can bring meaning and value to the modern marketplace” (Iwata 1995: 128).

Servant leadership does require a paradigm shift. This is why some object that it is unrealistic. It is dismissed as a paradigm of weakness, not fitting with our egocentric natures, our assertiveness, or our will to power. It is not only different, but also threatening to those wielding or seeking power in hierarchical structures (DiStefano 1995:
Changing to servant leadership involves seeing and embracing the power of responsible relationships, those with oneself and others, and those within teams, areas, departments, and divisions within organizations, and those that occur among organizations within society (Smith 1995: 213).

Is servant leadership unrealistically optimistic, ‘too good to be true’? This is a question for empirical analysis, best answered by observing leaders genuinely adopting servant leadership. Servant leaders do exist. Greenleaf (1977) identifies several exemplars, including John Woolman, who in the eighteenth century adopted the visionary goal of abolishing slave holding by American Quakers. He invested his adulthood in traveling up and down the American East Coast, asking slave owners to consider the moral implications of this practice upon themselves and their children. Woolman never condemned the slave owners, but gently persisted in his persuasions. After 30 years, every American Quaker had given up slave ownership and the Society of Friends had voted to forbid its practice – the first religious denomination in America to do so. However, whereas such exemplary servant leaders can be found, saints in business are rare indeed.

Nevertheless, genuine servant leadership is consistent with the five themes of the philosophy of personalism. The servant leader focuses on himself as a person and how he can beneficially serve others, whom he values for their dignity as persons, helping them to exercise freely their personal subjectivity and autonomy in a morally responsible manner. He seeks to build true community, one involving full participation and solidarity.

Conclusions

This paper analyzes three normative leadership paradigms in terms of the philosophy of personalism. Table 1 summarizes the conclusions in relation to the themes of personalism, indicating with an X those areas where each leadership paradigm is weakest, in theory or in practice.
A transformational leader can be too instrumentalist, focusing too much on realizing his personal vision to the neglect of respecting the dignity of his followers. Transformational leadership is effective in communicating and convincing followers to achieve a vision, but without principled constraint and full and genuine participation in defining the communal good, its very power can result in exalting the leader and, in the extreme, supporting a tyrant. Postindustrial leadership instead focuses on the interrelationship of leaders and followers who are to participate genuinely in creating a community of shared values. While theoretically opposed to instrumentalism in its communitarian ideal of mutual trust and participation, its relativistic, even nihilistic, rejection of principle-based ethics and objective values can lead in practice to power seeking at the expense of those unprotected by minority rights. Further, by stressing a system of interrelationship instead of the inherent dignity and value of participants who interrelate responsibly, it is inconsistent with the basic tenet of personalism.

Of the three paradigms, servant leadership is most consistent with the basic themes of personalism. The servant leader sees himself called first as a servant, seeking not only to treat each follower with dignity as a person, but also to serve each beneficially while building a community of participation and solidarity. His motivation is to create value for the group of which he is a member; this is the extreme opposite of a leader who seeks first his own power and wealth. She listens with sincere openness and empathy, but has the phronesis and will to persist in her sincere vision. He must have the moral toughness to reprove and discipline as required, manifesting a well-honed moral character that allows him to patiently persist and persuade, not being diverted from his central vision or basic principles. This is a difficult balance to maintain, even for the greatest heroes. The true servant leaders, such as John Woolman in eighteenth-century America, Nikolai Grundtvig in nineteenth-century Denmark, and Aung Suu Kyi today in Burma, nevertheless do so. Servant leadership thus offers an approach for managing and leading business and other contemporary organizations in line with the personalist view of human nature.

However, a weakness of some who would be servant leaders, is that they are susceptible to manipulation by less naïve followers. On the other hand, transformational leadership, when too successful, has a tendency to enable and even promote the manipulation of followers by expert leaders, anathema to servant leadership and personalism. A theoretically superior approach is a combination in which a morally tough servant leader adopts certain behaviors of Bass’s altruistic transformational leader. To inspire followers with the strength and sensitivity of a transforming vision, the servant leader would use proven transforming techniques such as developing a vision, enlisting others, fostering collaboration, strengthening others, planning small wins, linking rewards to performance, and celebrating accomplishments (Kouzes and Posner 1995). The leader and the follower would focus on the vision jointly formulated and refined, avoiding manipulation by any party through a mutual commitment to participation, solidarity of community, and respect for each person grounded in the philosophy of personalism. The potential benefits of this combination suggest a need for further analysis and testing by those business practitioners who, as true personalists, are willing and able to subdue Nature for the good of mankind.

References