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THE GENEALOGICAL ETHICS OF LEADERSHIP-AS-PRACTICE

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A COMMENTARY ON K. Mensch and J. Barge (2019), "Understanding Challenges to Leadership-as-Practice by Way of MacIntyre's Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry," ***Bus & Prof Ethics J*** 38(1): 1–16,
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ABSTRACT

Mensch and Barge in their interpretation of Alasdair MacIntyre's critique of genealogical ethics as a basis of ethical weakness in the emerging field of "leadership-as-practice," suggest that L-A-P is lacking in ethical grounding especially because of its relativist philosophy. I address this valid ethical concern in L-A-P theory by arguing that there is a form of realism in Nietzchean axiology and that the dialogic potentialities in material-social interactions may offer a greater capacity for ethical reflexivity than a reliance on rules.

IN A RECENT article in the *Business & Professional Ethics Journal*, Kirk Mensch and James Barge (2019) presented a moral enquiry into the fabric of Leadership-as-Practice (L-A-P) theory, in so doing addressing an important gap in L-A-P regarding its ethical stance. In particular, they linked L-A-P with the genealogical approach to history and ethics based on Alasdair MacIntyre's views, especially his oft-referenced *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*. Mensch and Barge trace the roots of genealogy to the work of Nietzsche and thereafter proceed to the philosophical traditions of social constructionism and phenomenology. Accordingly, as per Nietzsche's genealogy, L-A-P cannot be based on any ultimate moral truth because it sees the

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world through multiple lenses. Indeed, from Bakhtin (1984), it is not interested in truth per se but in inquiring about and with those who are looking for their own local truths. In the phenomenological tradition, L-A-P can be said to search for meaning through social interaction and from knowledge emanating from our social reality. Accordingly, practice is continually unfolding in what appears to be a continuously shifting and evolving dynamic. And from social constructionism, there is no reality "out there" to be discovered but rather that realty is constructed, that is, created, institutionalized, and made into tradition by humans and their social interactions.

Having established this ethical architecture, I wish to comment and embellish on two critical points in Mensch and Barge's essay that require a resolution if L-A-P is to occupy space in business and professional ethics. First, they assert, following Nietzsche and MacIntyre, that it is the individual's perspective of truth that is paramount to the genealogist. If this were so, the focus on practice in L-A-P would become contradictory because practice as an embodied and processual performance precedes and operates outside the subject. Second, if the role of the individual were to be significantly reduced as per the "flat ontology" within particular practice accounts, where does that leave the opportunity for ethical critique within the L-A-P field? As Mensch and Barge offer, if L-A-P were not to adhere to an authoritative view on leadership based on tradition, would it devolve to a stance where all interpretations are valid, in which case, as an emerging theory, would it hold no ethical grounding?

First, with regard to the role of the individual in genealogy, my reading of it as updated by Foucault (e.g., 1977) is that it seeks to uncover the role of power in defining individuals' identities; thus, its nature is not a feature of persons but is based on relational discourses between them. The role of genealogy is to break down these discourses to reveal the systems of intelligibility over which govern a "regime of truth." A genealogical enquiry, then, must go beyond the individual to uncover the interpretation that led to a given truth because, at times, these truths produce "winners" who can stifle the dissent of "losers," in an unconscious tournament of complicity and conformity.

We need to turn to a more extensive discussion of whether L-A-P has or, more critically, should have normative intent. In considering

this question, in line with Mensch and Barge's critique, I first wish to review whether MacIntyre's interpretation of Nietzsche's genealogy leads to a natural conclusion that it produces a relativist philosophy. Then, I will turn to the issue of whether L-A-P has ethical foundations. MacIntyre's alarm about modernist morality appears to be based on his interpretation of Nietzsche as an emotivist stipulating that moral judgments are considered to be expressions of preference, attitudes, or feelings (MacIntyre 1984). Moral judgment does not require reason, it just becomes a choice by the moral self. It is this reading of genealogy by MacIntyre that leads him to decry the relativity of its ethics. There is no authority nor tradition undergirding the individual's ethical stance since it can be changed by the context of the practices in which he or she participates. Might there be any form of realism in the Nietzschean axiology?

For Nietzsche (1973), individuals can adopt ethical values that can be life-affirming, such as honesty, courage, generosity, insight, solitude, and sympathy. This might constitute a realist accounting, and in the pursuit of the good life, one can rank order these and other values as an inter-subjective moral exercise. Since these values may differ from one context to another, it can also be said that Nietzsche is also a relativist (Korkut 2012). Does this also mean that there can be no foundations upon which to evaluate practices? In fact, Nietzsche was just as averse as MacIntyre to moral judgment based on subjective will. It's just that in his culturally and historically contingent ethics, he sees moral acts as irreducible, and that, in his famous phrase, "there are no such things as moral phenomena, only moral interpretation of phenomena" (Nietzsche 1973: 108).

Returning to L-A-P, the question regarding foundations can be addressed in a number of ways. Initially, I will need to consider whether practice theory as a whole incorporates foundational rules. It can also be addressed by considering the role of discourse and power in L-A-P. Lastly, we would need to discern whether L-A-P is descriptive or normative with respect to its ethical orientation.

The notion of foundations in practice theory, given the obstacle of even finding a common definition of practice theory, is ambiguous. Bourdieu (1990: 12), for example, rejects any consideration of rules that shape behavior and instead points to practical schemes that are indeed "opaque to their possessors." Bourdieu's schemes may occur

after the fact when identified as patterns that are formed as interconnections among embodied activities. Reckwitz (2002) suggests that these activities are coordinated by processes that may be explicit or tacit, physical or mental, and material or immaterial.

If there is to be ethical content, it appears that it may emerge from these processes, among which would be the discursive construction known as dialogue. Through dialogue we may learn the meaning of particular social interactions. Dialogue carries with it the nomination of particular values in which case dialogue is normative and not merely descriptive. To be noted, however, contra MacIntyre, is that these values emerge from material-social interactions and their context rather than from individuals and their virtues. Any call to executives to establish ethical guidelines to compel individual employees to observe particular behaviors may run astray because social relations are ever evolving and often penetrate into contexts that are unanticipated. But even worse, such objective ethical guidelines may end up requiring a conformity that may unwittingly undermine the free expression, creativity, and dignity of the very individuals whose humanity we wish to preserve.

An ideological aspiration of L-A-P, then, would be to derive an ethical stance through a creative interaction among multiple and contradictory voices that would come to terms with adversarial differences (Lyotard 1984). Although some actors within the practice might attempt to exploit their power through subtle or direct domestication and domination, the hope is that participants would be given an opportunity to find their own voice, develop their own identity, and discover their human dignity as part of their search for livelihood and meaning. Attempts to realign power distributions within a community would be made transparent and non-illusory.

In considering the issue whether L-A-P is merely a descriptive rather than a normative approach, I turn to an explanation offered by Philip Woods (2016). He believes that people's inter-connectedness requires a normative stance in practice because of the assumption that in sharing their know-how, they look to make sense of their world in order to achieve something of consequence. Unlike directive models of leadership, L-A-P cannot be based on a philosophy of dependence in which followers without discretion follow the "right" leader who is assumed to be the beacon of moral rectitude. Rather L-A-P observes a

philosophy of co-development in which people discover and unfold from within themselves. It seeks to engage people in critical dialogue in which they endeavor to question and learn from one another. It arises from a tradition that recognizes an innate capacity for ethical agency beyond a reliance on rules. In sum, the descriptive ethics of L-A-P processes becomes subject to normative accountability. L-A-P accordingly strives to achieve a collective wisdom where there would be joint learning based upon alternative frames of time and space, appreciation for the need to either make choices or transcend them in the deliberative decision-making process, and deep exploration of moral dilemmas from collective and concurrent reflection in practice.

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