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Article

Sustainable Leadership and Hegelian Self-Awareness

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Abstract: The contribution of businesses to sustainability, captured in the concept of the triple bottom line (people, profit, planet), has been given a lot of attention. One line of argument is to make sustainability mandatory via regulation, while another is to create a consciousness for questions of sustainability in the minds of managers, that is, to make managers agents of sustainability. Thus, there is debate about what behaviors, practices, and skills leaders need for positive sustainability. In recent years, scholars have attempted to develop leadership approaches (e.g., sustainable leadership, sustainability leadership) that contribute to the implementation of sustainability and positively influence sustainability practices, filling a perceived gap in the current literature. Here, connections to popular relationship-based approaches such as ethical leadership, transformational leadership, authentic leadership, and responsible leadership are also discussed. In this paper, we debate to what extent a specific leadership type is necessary to successfully lead a company into a sustainable future or whether, regardless of conceptualized behaviors, practices, and skills, it is not the core character and attitude of leaders that is crucial to changing the company culture to achieve the goal of sustainable business. This paper first outlines the existing literature on leadership approaches designed to lead to greater sustainability. It does not claim to be exhaustive but refers to the most prominent research findings. It then critically assesses these and raises questions. In the third section, we propose an alternative view of successful leadership toward positive sustainability.

Keywords: sustainable leadership; philosophical approaches; self-awareness

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1. Introduction

To avoid past mistakes, e.g., the environmental damage caused by the improper disposal of waste and the exploitation of natural resources, the pursuit of short-term profits without considering environmental and social impacts (Avery 2005), and the involvement in exploitative labor practices (Chen et al. 2022), and commit companies to implementing sustainable practices, policy makers are taking a range of measures. Numerous political initiatives, beginning with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), strive to strengthen the importance of sustainability in public life. Economic, environmental, and social aspects of development are taken into account (Kaumanns et al. 2016, p. 25). This conception of sustainability is based on the so-called Brundtland definition, which states that sustainable development involves meeting present needs without compromising the satisfaction of the needs of future generations (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987). In recent years, companies have increasingly been required to account for the economic, environmental, and social impacts of their organization in sustainability reports. Political measures aim to bring drastic transformation to the economy and society.

Scholars from different disciplines seem to agree that environmental and social goals can only be achieved if companies change the way they do business (Tideman et al. 2013). Corporations are seen as major contributors to environmental and social challenges but also as important problem solvers (Piwowar-Sulej et al. 2021). For a long time, companies

have considered it their primary goal to maximize individual income and financial wealth (Zsolnai 2018). Moreover, economic actors have been described as perfectly rational, self-interest-maximizing beings (Zsolnai 2002). Companies have been accused of not sufficiently fulfilling their responsibility to society. As early as 1953, Howard Bowen described in his work "Social Responsibilities of the Businessman" that every business decision has influence and sometimes far-reaching effects on different parts of society, and therefore the interests of these stakeholders must be taken into account. Building on this, Davis postulated in 1960 that a separation of economic and noneconomic aspects is impossible. He also criticized the purely functionalist view of human beings in economic theory.

Especially during the 2000s, economic publications have increasingly discussed the concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR), which deals with the responsibility of companies for their social impact. A common foundation of many interpretations of CSR is based on the concept of the "triple bottom line," which dates to the work of the Brundtland Commission in 1987 and the contribution by Elkington (1997). This approach is also referred to as the "3Ps" or "Three Pillars" (Księżak and Fischbach 2018). It calls for companies to simultaneously care about profits, people (employees and society), and the planet (environment) to pursue sustainable business practices. In other words, this idea emphasizes the existence of three dimensions of sustainability: economic, social, and environmental. To transform companies into sustainable organizations in which all three dimensions are considered, a special role is attributed to the leader (Gerard et al. 2017; Dalati et al. 2017; Piwowar-Sulej et al. 2021).

Within this context, discussions revolve around the specific behaviors, methods, and competencies that leaders have to have in order to promote a positive approach to sustainability. In recent years, researchers have made efforts to formulate leadership frameworks (e.g., sustainable leadership, sustainability leadership, and environmental leadership) aimed at advancing the integration of sustainability concerns and fostering positive sustainability practices, addressing what seems to be a gap in the existing literature (Boeske 2023). Additionally, there is an ongoing dialogue regarding the connections between these frameworks and well-established relationship-based leadership theories such as ethical leadership, transformational leadership, authentic leadership, and responsible leadership (Metcalf and Benn 2013; McCann and Sweet 2013).

This paper delves into the debate regarding the extent to which a specific leadership approach is beneficial for effectively guiding a company toward a sustainable future. While extant sustainable leadership approaches focus on predefined behaviors, practices, and skills, we propose that to be truly sustainable, good leadership rests on the character of the leader. Character is the combination of attitudes, ideally only virtues, that are stable over time (Hühn and Meyer 2023, p. 545), and thus, it is character that holds the key to transforming the corporate culture and achieving the goal of sustainable business. The initial section of this paper provides an overview of the existing literature concerning leadership approaches aimed at fostering greater sustainability. While we do not claim to provide an exhaustive review, we intend to reference the most prominent research findings. Subsequently, the paper critically evaluates these findings and suggests a research gap. In this context, the concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR) will also be critically discussed. In the third section, we introduce the *selbstbewußte* leader as an alternative perspective on successful leadership in the context of *promoting* sustainability. Finally, a concluding section summarizes the key points of the paper.

2. Leadership and Sustainability: What the Mainstream Says

The idea that leadership can contribute to sustainability is, in principle, not a new development and has its roots in various leadership approaches that have emerged over the past seventy years or so (Bowen 1953; Davis 1960). However, the focused exploration of leadership in the context of sustainability has only gained prominence in recent decades (Hargreaves and Fink 2006; Ferdig 2007; Crews 2010; Metcalf and Benn 2013; Hallinger and Suriyankietkaew 2018; Liao 2022). While the literature has grown since the 1990s (Hallinger

and Suriyankietkaew 2018), there is very little structure to it (Liao 2022). Waldman and Siegel (2008), for instance, criticize the fact that even within such a well-established research program as corporate social responsibility, the role of corporate leadership has been largely ignored. The basic principles of sustainable leadership can be traced back to research on the role of leadership in the context of "sustainable change" and the emphasis on ethical leadership and corporate social responsibility. For that reason, a variety of leadership behaviors have been directly or indirectly associated with CSR (Campbell 2006; Waldman and Siegel 2008; Angus-Leppan et al. 2010). Moreover, the emphasis on values that underlies many approaches to sustainable leadership clearly indicates an explicit link to leadership models such as transformational, authentic, and responsible leadership (Waldman and Siegel 2008; Metcalf and Benn 2013; McCann and Sweet 2013; Tideman et al. 2013; Hallinger and Suriyankietkaew 2018; Liao 2022). There is strong conceptual overlap among these research streams (Metcalf and Benn 2013). Before turning to the concept of the new leadership model of "sustainable leadership" (Avery 2005; Hargreaves and Fink 2006; Day and Schmidt 2007; Morsing and Oswald 2009; Avery and Bergsteiner 2011b; Kantabutra 2012) or "sustainability leadership" (Ferdig 2007; Galpin and Whittington 2012; Lourenço et al. 2014; Robinson et al. 2011; Shriberg and MacDonald 2013), we briefly outline the abovementioned concepts.

2.1. Ethical Leadership

The earliest research program linking ethics and leadership was ethical leadership, pioneered by Joanne B. Ciulla (1995, 2003). Ethical leadership means "the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision making" (Brown et al. 2005, p. 120). Ethical leaders are viewed as honest, trustworthy, fair, and principled. They demonstrate a strong commitment to ethical behavior in both their personal and professional lives and actively influence the ethical behavior of their employees through rewards and punishments (Brown and Treviño 2006).

2.2. Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership concepts, proposed for instance by Bernard Bass, are predicated on the assumption that leadership is based on a shared vision and ethical–moral principles and represents a process that changes or transforms both the leaders and the led (Bass 1985). Transformational leaders develop a meaningful, long-term vision for the entire organization based on fundamental values. Transformational leadership emphasizes empowering employees, who are actively involved in implementing the vision and are actively supported by the leader (Yukl 2013; Stippler et al. 2011). By involving those being led, sustainability can be achieved. Charisma and self-awareness represent central factors in transformational leadership and are central and necessary characteristics of the leader (Bass 1985, 1999).

2.3. Authentic Leadership

The essential aspect in the concept of authenticity is to recognize, accept, and remain true to oneself. A strong awareness of oneself is the necessary prerequisite. It is important to note that authenticity is not defined as a concrete blueprint or stable construct but rather as a continuum in which people become increasingly authentic as they remain true to their core values, ideals, preferences, and emotions (Avolio et al. 2004). Authentic leaders have a deep understanding of their values and core beliefs and are described as confident, sincere, reliable, and trustworthy (Avolio and Gardner 2005). Their high moral values enable them to assess difficult situations from different perspectives and consider different needs of different stakeholders (May et al. 2003). It is important to note, however, that authenticity is mediated by the usefulness of strategically disclosing and withholding certain aspects on one's self (Goffee and Jones 2005), as leaders see themselves and others as functions.

2.4. Responsible Leadership

The "Responsible Leadership" approach was developed by Thomas Maak and Nicola M. Pless in their paper "Responsible Leadership: A Relational Approach" in 2006. They emphasize the importance of ethical leadership, social responsibility, and shaping leadership in a way that focuses on the relationships between leaders and their stakeholders. Responsible leaders manage to get different people to follow a common and morally based vision. Responsible leadership emphasizes the responsibility of leaders not only for financial results but also for social and environmental impacts of business decisions. Thus, this approach is focused on the holistic and integrated role of leaders in a complex and stakeholder-oriented business environment (Maak and Pless 2006a; Székely and Knirsch 2005).

2.5. Sustainable Leadership

Complex phenomena surrounding organizations (Avery 2005; Dyllick and Hockerts 2002), such as climate change, resource scarcity, cultural conflicts, and many others, require a realignment of goals (Mebratu 1998; Boiral et al. 2014) and have led to the emergence of this new leadership model. The number of contributions to this research stream are still limited, and there is no consensus of scholars' views on connotation, delineation of dimensions, and measurement (Liao 2022; Boeske 2023) yet. While some researchers use sustainable leadership and sustainability leadership (or environmental leadership) largely synonymously (Hallinger and Suriyankietkaew 2018), Boeske (2023) elaborates on similarities and differences and combines them into one concept under the term "leadership toward sustainability". However, most scholars agree that sustainable leadership is multidimensional (Gerard et al. 2017). The strong overlap with prominent leadership concepts, such as ethical, transformational, authentic, and accountable leadership, makes it difficult to properly delineate the research from the older and wider research and thus complicates future efforts (Liao 2022). Nevertheless, Hallinger and Suriyankietkaew (2018), Liao (2022), and Boeske (2023) in particular have attempted to provide a systematic overview of the concept. In this paper, we use the term sustainable leadership superordinately.

Scholars postulate that leadership for sustainability places new demands on leaders and requires them to develop new and exceptional skills (Metcalf and Benn 2013; Boeske 2023). One of the earliest conceptual definitions of "sustainable leadership" is from 2004 by Hargreaves and Fink and is situated in educational organizations. They emphasize that sustainable leadership aims to meet the needs of today's society without compromising the opportunities of future generations. This approach stresses the responsibility of leaders to address sustainability issues and take action, regardless of their formal position.

Avery took this research further in 2005, shedding light on the concept of sustainable leadership in organizations. In his concept, sustainable leadership has its roots in what he calls "Rhenish management," which is based on the values of Rhenish capitalism. In contrast to American capitalism, Rhenish capitalism emphasizes the responsibility of organizations in society, long-term perspectives, balanced results, ethical behavior, and social responsibility. Avery and Bergsteiner (2011b) state that sustainable leadership in organizations involves long-term decision making, systematic innovation, cultivating a loyal employee team, providing high-quality products and services, and balancing people, profits, and the environment. Sustainable leadership is rooted in a social, cultural, and institutional context and is based on personal and organizational values (Albert 1992; Avery and Bergsteiner 2011a, 2011b; Kantabutra 2012). These values, such as moderation, prudence, mutual respect, and ethics (Visser and Courtice 2011; Avery and Bergsteiner 2011a; Ferdig 2007; Kantabutra and Suriyankietkaew 2011; Hind et al. 2009; Kantabutra and Avery 2011; Kantabutra and Avery 2013), influence the vision and nature of interactions between leaders and their followers (Kim and Brymer 2011; Visser and Courtice 2011; Ferdig 2007; Kantabutra and Avery 2011; Kantabutra and Avery 2013; Kantabutra and Avery 2007; Kantabutra and Siebenhüner 2011). Sustainable leadership requires a high level of self-awareness (Liao 2022). Sustainable leadership aims to engage a wide range of stakeholders inside and outside the organization (Maak and Pless 2006b; Robinson

et al. 2011; Albert 1992; Orlitzky et al. 2011; Kantabutra and Avery 2011) and defines success using indicators that go beyond traditional measures, such as the "triple bottom line" of economic, social, and environmental outcomes (Kantabutra 2012; Fry and Slocum 2008; Avery and Bergsteiner 2011a, 2011b; Kantabutra and Siebenhüner 2011). Finally, the sustainable leadership model aims at creating resilient organizations, communities, and societies that can withstand shocks and unforeseen events (Avery and Bergsteiner 2011b, 2012; Day and Schmidt 2007; Székely and Knirsch 2005; Petrick et al. 1999; Piboolsravut 2004; Youssef and Luthans 2007), which promotes a long-term perspective and resilience (Avery and Bergsteiner 2011a, 2011b, 2012; Ferdig 2007; Albert 1992; Kantabutra 2014; Youssef and Luthans 2007; Lipsey and Wilson 2001).

Boeske (2023) distills six central findings from the existing literature and summarizes them. The first key result identified by Boeske (2023) is social and environmental responsibility. Sustainable leadership is focused on protecting the environment, valuing people, and caring for society. It follows the "triple bottom line" perspective that considers people, the planet, and profits equally (Hargreaves and Fink 2006; Hallinger and Suriyankietkaew 2018; Suriyankietkaew 2022; Avery and Bergsteiner 2011b; McCann and Sweet 2013; Tideman et al. 2013). Furthermore, organizational preservation and sustainability are identified as important outcomes. Sustainable leadership aims to shape organizations for the long term and in a meaningful way, taking into account both short- and long-term goals. This includes planning for succession and creating a long-term perspective (Hargreaves and Fink 2006; Hallinger and Suriyankietkaew 2018; Tideman et al. 2013; Davies 2007; Nisha et al. 2022; Suriyankietkaew et al. 2022; McCann and Holt 2011; Avery and Bergsteiner 2011b; Kantabutra and Avery 2013). The third outcome (shared responsibility) emphasizes engaging diverse stakeholders and creating effective relationships. Both decentralized and transformational leadership are considered effective approaches to sustainability (Hargreaves and Fink 2006; Avery and Bergsteiner 2011b; Tideman et al. 2013; Piwowar-Sulej and Iqbal 2023; Nisha et al. 2022; Burawat 2019; Liao 2022). Moral and ethical behavior is mentioned as the fourth outcome. Sustainable leadership is based on moral considerations and requires ethical behavior. Being transparent and "doing the right thing" are important aspects (Hargreaves and Fink 2006; Svensson and Wood 2007; Suriyankietkaew et al. 2022; Kantabutra and Avery 2013; Avery and Bergsteiner 2011b; Hallinger and Suriyankietkaew 2018; Nisha et al. 2022). Boeske identifies continuous improvement and organizational change as the fifth key outcome. Sustainable leadership requires creativity, innovation, and a continuous, dynamic process to remain competitive (Iqbal et al. 2020; Nisha et al. 2022; Svensson and Wood 2007; Tideman et al. 2013; Avery and Bergsteiner 2011b; Dominguez-Escrig and Mallen-Broch 2023; Schein 2010). Finally, organizational culture is the sixth outcome: leaders' values and norms determine organizational culture, which is usually characterized by shared values and beliefs (Schein 2010; Kantabutra and Avery 2013; Hallinger and Suriyankietkaew 2018; Tideman et al. 2013; Svensson and Wood 2007).

Characteristics such as a long-term vision, innovativeness, inclusion of all stakeholders, social responsibility, and systemic change—but most importantly, the strong emphasis on values and the ethical and moral behavior necessary to achieve sustainability—suggest a link to the leadership models outlined above. Furthermore, it can be observed that self-awareness plays a central role. There are, however, researchers who suggest that greater sustainability cannot be achieved through moral decision making (Metcalf and Benn 2012; Waldman and Siegel 2008) but requires the strategic focus from and complex problem-solving skills of leaders. Therefore, exceptional skills, emotional intelligence, and the personality of the leader are critical to recognize and navigate complexity and engage diverse stakeholders in organizational change (Metcalf and Benn 2013). However, despite the stakeholder focus, it is widely believed that the leader's personal morality can be a driver of CSR (Hargreaves and Fink 2006; Svensson and Wood 2007; Suriyankietkaew et al. 2022; Kantabutra and Avery 2013; Avery and Bergsteiner 2011b; Hallinger and Suriyankietkaew 2018; Nisha et al. 2022), and ethical behavior leads to effectiveness as

measured by organizational financial and social success (Waldman and Siegel 2008; De Hoogh and Den Hartog 2008; Brown et al. 2005).

3. Moral Philosophical Critiques of Mainstream Approaches

As mentioned above, Waldman and Siegel (2008), among others, criticize the fact that the role of leadership has not been taken into account in the corporate social responsibility literature. Other critics go even further and postulate that the concept of responsibility, which originates from moral philosophy, is not used appropriately (Hühn 2023). In the CSR approach, responsibility is understood as collective or corporate moral responsibility, a concept that is shunned by moral philosophers (Rönnegard 2015; Hühn 2018). The idea of responsibility is rooted in the basic concept underlying the three respective approaches to ethics (duties, virtues, consequences) and deals with the bearers of responsibility, the things they are responsible for, their mutual relations, and the entities that make the judgment. This means that a person (subject) assumes responsibility in relation to a specific concern (object) and does so to a specific party (addressee) before an instance (evaluating body) within a specific framework and on the basis of evaluation criteria (Fetzer 2004). The classical definition of responsibility, in the sense of "bearing responsibility for a negative consequence of action", starts from the central social problem of attributing consequences to a specific action (Bayertz 1995). The person who causally brings about an event through his or her actions is considered responsible for that event. Responsibility can therefore only be attributed to the subject who has the ability to act intentionally and to reflect on the consequences of his actions (Bayertz 1995; Rönnegard 2023). Accordingly, a collective or a corporation cannot be understood as the bearer of responsibility—only persons act and therefore can have responsibility. The employees and especially the managers are responsible for the implementation of the mentioned requirements themselves. Corporate responsibility can therefore not be an ethical construct (Rönnegard 2015).

Considering the leader as a bearer of responsibility for the consideration of environmental and social dimensions in economic activity is thus essential. The outlined leadership models associated with a positive influence on corporate social responsibility are summarized by some researchers as "recent leadership theories" (Hannah et al. 2014) and others as "moral approaches" (Lemoine et al. 2019). All approaches are psychology-driven and have in common that an individual influences a group to achieve a common goal (Northouse 2007). The relationship and interaction between leader and follower are the focus of consideration (Northouse 2007; Bass 2008). While in all approaches, values and ethics play an important role, critics raise numerous problems regarding how these concepts are filled and then applied (Levine and Boaks 2014; Alvesson and Kärreman 2016; Spoelstra 2018; Van Knippenberg and Sitkin 2013; Yukl 1999; Alvesson and Einola 2019; Banks et al. 2016; Cooper et al. 2005; Gardner et al. 2011; Ford and Harding 2011; Ladkin and Spiller 2013). Concepts from moral philosophy such as virtue, duty, responsibility, respect, authenticity, etc., are filled with meaning that often is the opposite of the original concepts, according to critics (Rönnegard 2015; Alvesson and Einola 2019; Hühn 2018, 2023). Levine and Boaks (2014) criticize such leadership approaches for making a close connection between leadership and ethics, often simply declaring that leaders are automatically good and effective without specifying this in more detail. Some leadership scholars assume that the good leader is characterized by a fixed, stable, and fundamentally noncontradictory value system (Alvesson and Einola 2019). In practice, however, it is evident that it is difficult to work with clear and consistent values. Leaders point out that it is challenging to combine the natural role of the leader with other people's need for affirmation and recognition (Sveningsson and Alvesson 2016).

While Levine and Boaks (2014) also believe that leadership is intrinsically normative, they criticize the relevant approaches for often being insufficiently theoretically grounded. Leadership involves grappling with social norms and navigating complex and controversial moral territory (Jackall 1988), rather than merely possessing and expressing the appropriate personality traits (Alvesson and Einola 2019). However, the theories considered can hardly

do without the charisma of the leader—the leader-hero (Levine and Boaks 2014; Alvesson and Einola 2019). Leadership is again increasingly viewed from the leader's perspective, but the leader is not seen as a person but as a function in a hierarchy. In shaping transformational leadership, characteristics such as charisma, dominance, power-seeking, and self-awareness (House 1976) are not only relevant but also simply assumed to be present in an effective, i.e., functional, leader. Ciulla (1995) famously points out that if effectiveness is the only criterion or if ethicality is simply assumed to be included in effectiveness, leadership theory has a "Hitler problem". Transformational leaders present strong moral guiding principles and are declared role models qua function. They are declared to embody competence, courage, and clear ideological goals. They have a strong sense of self. Some critics, such as Solomon (1998), fault the strong focus on charisma and self-awareness in transformational leadership studies and consider it dangerous for leadership because charisma can, and indeed should, be used for manipulative purposes with a lack of moral direction. This amoral view has become entrenched in many psychology-based leadership approaches. Take, for instance, authenticity, which in the past ten or so years has been given a lot of scholarly attention. Psychologists hold that authenticity is achieved through a strong awareness of oneself and how one is perceived by others (Goleman 1998; Avolio and Gardner 2005). Alvesson and Einola (2019) point out that authenticity in the true sense requires an intense, critical, inward-looking examination of the self. However, very few, if any, people achieve authenticity in the moral philosophical sense. In particular, true authenticity cannot be achieved in the leadership approaches shaped by psychology and outlined above, as all these approaches see leaders and the led as mere functions in a given hierarchy and thus strip them of what Immanuel Kant considered the essence of humanity: dignity. Thus, the basic underlying questions that philosophers ask—Who am I? Who do I want to be?—are replaced by these questions: What am I tasked with and how can I use my knowledge about self and how others perceive myself? This means that a true understanding of the self is not part of psychological approaches to leadership (Sebastian and Hühn 2023). Leadership requires influencing others and is, thus, a social process—bot psychologists and philosophers agree on that. However, in psychology, leading authentically is seen as such a difficult endeavor that only heroes can accomplish it. For leaders to be considered authentic, they would need to have personal core values that cannot be questioned, which could be perceived as inflexibility and an unwillingness to compromise in a professional context. Rather, it is necessary to recognize organizations as places where many different moral ideals clash and leaders must reconcile people (Alvesson and Einola 2019; Jackall 1988). The sustainable leadership approach also attaches special importance to the leader's exceptional ability and personality (Metcalf and Benn 2013). He or she should be able to oversee and manage the complexity of sustainability; develop a strategy in which the three dimensions of people, planet, and profit are equally considered; and exemplify and implement a value system that is shared by all stakeholders in order to transform the corporate culture.

In the transformational and the authentic and sustainable leadership approaches, high self-awareness of the leader is a favorable characteristic. Self-awareness in these approaches means having a thorough understanding of one's own strengths, weaknesses, and values and of how others see oneself. The goal is to turn people into followers. Critics state that ethics is left out; that in this view of self-awareness, the basic moral concept of respect is missing; and that it can been as a manipulative process (Sebastian and Hühn 2023).

The heroic portrayal of the leader, with extraordinary abilities and impressive qualities, as well as the lack of a moral philosophical foundation on values, virtues, responsibility, respect, self-awareness, etc., in our view, all cast legitimate doubt on the suitability of these leadership approaches for achieving greater organizational sustainability.

4. The Selbstbewußte Leader

In the following, we will explain which traps are created by the abovementioned leadership theories and how they can prevent companies from developing leaders that

allow them to attain greater sustainability. We will do so with reference to the philosophical theory of self-consciousness/self-awareness by Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel (1770–1831). Because the two terms, self-consciousness and self-awareness, mean different things, we will be using Hegel's original selbstbewußt (self-conscious). Hegel's concept of Selbstbewußtsein (self-consciousness) includes others: we attain our Selbstbewußtsein in a process of social and ethical reflection that includes creating social relationships (Kojève 1975). Because we go back to how the self finds its ethical foundations, our description of the selbstbewußte leader does not need to include concrete traits, behaviors, and technical skills. Hegel's leader rests in himself/herself and thus is able to inspire, respect, educate, liberate, and unite his/her followers. Thus, s/he forms long-term relationships based on mutual recognition and trust. The selbstbewußte leader does not manipulate his/her followers and does not see them as mere means to achieve a certain end.

As shown in the previous chapter, the personality of the leader is of central importance in psychological leadership approaches. Especially in transformational leadership, dominance and striving for power are highlighted as important characteristics that, according to Hegel, inevitably lead to a highly undesirable master–servant relationship. "Self-Sufficiency and Non-Self-Sufficiency of Self-Consciousness; Mastery and Servitude" is one of the best-known and most interpreted chapters from Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Hegel posits that individual Selbstbewußtsein arises in the context of moral recognition by other individuals and is shaped or changed by interactions with those individuals (Hegel 2020; Kojève 1975; Tugendhat 1979; Marx 1986). In his view, Selbstbewußtsein is a product of interpersonal interactions that are interdependent. Hegel argues that all actions are due to moral principles. By performing ethical actions, individuals become aware of their own existence and subsequently develop mutual respect (Siep 1992). To understand what Hegel is trying to say, we need to backtrack a bit.

Recognition is for Hegel the telos, the highest life goal that a person wants to achieve (Siep 2000): recognition means another person sees one's dignity. Respect means seeing that the other has the same absolute moral worth as oneself. One respects (re specere: seeing again) and sees the other's recognition of one's own dignity reflected. In order to achieve the goal of being recognized by the other, desire is presupposed. One is driven to action by desire and wants to satisfy this desire to be recognized as a self at any cost. A person is even willing to sacrifice their life to be recognized and, thus, respected. A "fight for life and death" develops (Kojève 1975; Marx 1986). The counterpart is to be forced to confirm one's own self-image, that is, to acknowledge one's own conception of truth—or to acknowledge that one's own Selbstbewußtsein is the actual real reality. By the real death of the counterpart, the self is deprived of what the fight is supposed to prove. To be recognized as an independent self is only possible when the other is alive (Siep 2000; Tugendhat 1979). As a result, two forms of Selbstbewußtsein emerge: one for which pure Selbstbewußtsein is the highest good and one for which life, one's own self-preservation, is the most important thing. Translated into social relations, these two forms correspond to the Bewußtsein (consciousness) of the master and the servant (Siep 2000). If one of the individuals gives up the struggle prematurely in order to preserve herself, she must submit to the other, and the master–servant relationship emerges (Düsing 1986; Kojève 1975). Hegel apparently refers to the theory of slavery of antiquity but unites the two forms that Aristotle distinguished: slavery by fight and slavery by nature. For Hegel, servitude occurs when one of the combatants prefers his life (Siep 2000). After the master has decided the struggle for himself, he is first recognized and respected by the servant as independent. The servant suspends his independence and does what the master asks of him (Marx 1986). The relationship is unbalanced and not complete, as the master receives recognition from a person he himself does not recognize as an independent individual self. Consequently, the master recognizes that he himself is not truly recognized. His Bewußtsein (consciousness) is not independent. That means that, for Hegel, the formation of Selbstbewußtsein is not possible through the control of the free development of others. The servant, on the other hand, undergoes a reverse development of Bewußtsein. He considers himself dependent

as he follows the master's instructions and desires. Yet, because he creates and shapes objects as the result of his own labor, he acquires his own form of Selbstbewußtsein and gains the subjective certainty that he is an independent Bewußtsein (Kojève 1975; Düsing 1986). In the master–servant relationship, true mutual recognition does not occur (Düsing 1986). This only happens in social structures where there is an interplay of social relations and connections between people. In these, the individual is not only a subject but a free person. The individual Selbstbewußtsein knows itself to be respected in its freedom and independence by others and respects them as well. This duty of recognition is given from the quality of morality of individuals, e.g., as virtue (Düsing 1986). Virtue, according to Hegel, requires the inner freedom to do what is right, independent of external constraints or rewards. He also emphasizes the importance of community and social relations for the development of virtue. He believes that individual virtue is closely linked to the social and moral order of a society. Society and social norms therefore play a crucial role in the formation and development of virtue (Hegel 1955).

Hegel expresses his theory thus: act as a human being and respect the dignity of other human beings (Hegel 1955). In doing so, he summarizes what is considered by some to be Kant's most significant contribution to (economic) ethics: the humanity formulation of the categorical imperative: "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end" (Kant 2003). In Hegel, the mutual recognition of individuals leads to a moral society (Hartmann 1929). In this society, selbstbewußte moral individuals are aware that they all follow the same moral law. However, Hegel argues that each individual must find his or her personal morality. Moral Bewußtsein is concretized in conscience (Düsing 1986), and self-actualization occurs first through will and action (Hartmann 1929). Moral BewuSStsein judges whether actions are performed out of good intentions. In conscience, this question no longer arises, since all actions of selbstbewußte persons arise from the conviction that accompanies moral understanding. However, the recognition of actions is based on the premise that an individual's conscience is respected by others. Language gives reality to the conviction of conscience and receives recognition from other individuals (Siep 1979). If an action is not in accord with conscience, i.e., if word and deed do not agree, it is not recognized. Hegel argues that this can lead to reprehensibility and hypocrisy. When the violation is exposed, recognition can no longer be given (Wildt 1982). Hegel emphasizes that individuals are constantly reflecting on their strengths and weaknesses and questioning their actions, their abilities, and the scope of their actions. It is an ever-repeating process that forms the basis for the development of virtuous character.

The common notion of a leader who, by virtue of his position in a hierarchy, has the authority to make decisions and impose his will on others inevitably leads, according to Hegel, to a failed quest for recognition. More generally, in official hierarchies, it is assumed that *all members* accept master and servant relationships (leader–member) as a given. Thus, the leader who uses the power in that a position inevitably creates a master–servant relationship, as argued by Hegel, and causes the master to eventually realize that he is not truly independent and free. This sets in motion a destructive cycle in organizations, in which leaders at all levels of the hierarchy *fight* with others in order to control them instead of *respecting* them. This may lead to short-term corporate success, but long-term success seems unlikely under the force of the fights. Frederick Herzberg (1987, p. 110) pointed out that incentives ("positive KITA") are "infinitely worse" than being abused ("negative KITA") because a person who submits to become a servant to a master offering an incentive is becoming a party to their own downfall. Since there are leaders at all but the lowest levels of the hierarchy, most persons are masters and servants at the same time and therefore have no Selbstbewußtsein. Moreover, virtues and values cannot develop in these environments. We agree with the researchers that the ethos (character) of the leader is one of the most important drivers to more sustainability. In this context, it is important that a manager's ideas are not regarded as unchallengeable diktats, as this would end in a master–servant relationship, as described above. Shaping an organization in which

employees can develop into responsible personalities requires managers who have a basic moral understanding of respect and dignity. From the basic understanding, selbstbewußte leaders give employees the freedom to develop their own attitude (Sebastian and Hühn 2023). This happens in a continuous interpersonal process in which the members of an organization critically question their actions and the scope of their actions in relation to the dimensions of planet, people, and profit again and again. Considering the three dimensions is a complex task that cannot be accomplished by one (leader) person. Therefore, it is necessary that the manager recognizes her employees as independent, free individuals who can work on things on their own. Within this social interaction, mutual recognition develops trust in the employees' inner freedom to do the right thing and dissolves the harmful leader–led dichotomy. We believe that this type of leadership ends in employees who in turn recognize their leaders and are willing to achieve common goals and long-term success. This is all the more important as organizations have multiple hierarchical levels with leaders being led at the same time.

5. Conclusions

Recent research shows that leadership in the context of sustainability places special demands on leaders to manage complex problems and involve different stakeholders, yet mainstream leadership approaches are based on leaders acting like masters vis-à-vis servants. Emphasis on values and ethical behavior plays a critical role in promoting sustainability, yet at the most foundational level, that is, the *purpose* of a person endowed with dignity, ethics is replaced by a purely functional view of humanity. Criticisms of traditional approaches to CSR and popular leadership theories associated with sustainability point to the need for a more nuanced view of moral and ethical aspects. In particular, the heroic portrayal of leaders and the lack of moral grounding in many leadership approaches raise doubts about their suitability for promoting sustainability.

Overall, the challenge is to better link leadership and ethics, especially on the individual level, to help leaders make ethical decisions and act in a socially and environmentally responsible manner. This requires deep reflection on the moral foundations and values in leadership and CSR that can only be achieved by persons who have true self-consciousness, i.e., by persons who understand themselves and their connection to other free persons.

We believe that the philosophical theory of Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, particularly his concepts of Selbstbewußtsein and mutual recognition, can be used to highlight the problems and pitfalls of conventional leadership theories. These leadership theories often emphasize power, dominance, and self-awareness as important leadership traits that can systematically guide people into unhealthy behaviors in organizational hierarchies. Hegelian theory argues that recognition and respect for one another in social interactions are the basis for the development of moral Selbstbewußtsein. Hegel emphasizes that moral principles and ethical action emerge in interactions with other individuals. This mutual recognition leads to a moral society in which individual Selbstbewußtsein is built on, and at the same time creates, a shared moral foundation. In contrast, conventional leadership approaches demand that leaders and the led see their teloi as being means to given ends and not view themselves and others as ends, as Kant and Hegel propose. What is more, purpose for humans is limited to a specific organizational context, and that means that in traditional approaches, a split personality—one work personality and one private personality—is assumed to be necessary. Another rift between leaders and other people and the planet is baked into the cake. The result is leaders who systematically create unhealthy master–servant relationships in which recognition is one-sided. Or, to put it in more modern terms: the unreflected use of authority may achieve short-term success but hinder long-term success and sustainability.

The core message of our paper is that leadership built on Hegel's concept of mutual recognition and moral principles may be better suited to help organizations, understood as groups of persons endowed with equal dignity, move toward sustainability than theories based on power and dominance and a lack of ethical foundation. The way moral values and

individual responsibility are developed in an organization is critical to its long-term success and its contribution to sustainability. The main argument is that the social complexity inherent in sustainability and the balancing of the 3Ps and their conflicting goals cannot be mastered by a single person, who has certain skills and abilities and sees employees as means to achieve their ends. Sustainability can only be successful if leaders at all levels of an organization are encouraged to develop their own values on the basis of which they can make their own decisions, especially when conflicting goals, e.g., the economic and social dimensions, clash.

Therefore, we suggest that only a selbstbewußte leader, based on an understanding of respect and dignity, is able to shape an organization in which all members can grow into responsible individuals. Our ideas challenge the view that leadership is a dyadic relationship that occurs absent of a social context. One of the great research gaps in mainstream approaches is that they assume leadership to be tied to a position within an official hierarchy yet at the same time ignore that this means that leadership happens at all levels of the same hierarchy. Hegel's view of Selbstbewußtsein brings that paradox into a stark focus and also offers a solution because it stresses the sociality and morality of people in relationships and connects it to every person's reflected self. Truly great things, say, the building of the Acropolis or an organization that produces outcomes that benefit all stakeholders and the planet, can only be achieved through the cooperation of free and creative individuals. Hegel tells us that only leaders that see others as equals and not as servants can promote the individual development of employees and respects their freedom to develop their own attitudes and achieve sustainability for the organization as a whole. The respectful interaction between leaders and the led all throughout the organization is the conditio sine qua non for long-term success and sustainability.

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