

Between Great Men and Leadership: William James on the Importance of Individuals

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Abstract

In the 1880s, William James argued that individuals do make a difference in history, and that the study of influential people is a defensible academic pursuit. The literature on leadership today raises three distinct challenges to his position: (a) that everyone is a leader, (b) that no one is a leader, and (c) that leadership is self-leadership. To avoid confusion, educators should look closer at the arguments, not only for historical reasons. There are sound theoretical, conceptual, and psychological reasons, for teachers and students alike to look closer at his argument.

Introduction

Leadership studies rarely look back prior to 1900. For whatever reason, those remote deliberations seem irrelevant today. An exception has been made for historical studies of actual leaders, such as Attila the Hun, Abraham Lincoln, and Jesus. A few prominent writers such as Plato and Machiavelli appear in the literature, like museum pieces, presented more as curiosities than anything else. Contemporary writers will use their authority now and then to add a certain literary gilding, for an apt phrase or a clever quotation.

Closer inspection of prior deliberations reveals they were frequently embroiled in the very same issues that trouble us today. In many instances, their treatment turns out to be superior. Few scholars for example exceed Aristotle in rigor and breadth. Yet, even when there is no appreciable difference in quality, they deserve credit for having wrestled with the issues before contemporary scholars did. Perhaps by being reacquainted with their work, people can avoid reinventing the wheel, as they say, and instead build on their achievements (Wren, 1995; Clemens & Mayer, 1999).

In trying to build on their work, researchers tend to take for granted the deliberations that brought them to this moment. Even when people do rely on earlier work, they frequently take an uncritical view. Scholars see no reason to

revisit controversies that have long been settled. They are, in other words, building on foundations they see no reason to inspect.

As an exercise in reconstructing past deliberations, this paper examines two companion articles by the American pragmatist William James. These articles bear on issues of interest to leadership studies today. Bernard Bass (1990) said as much in his *Handbook of Leadership*, where he specifically cites James. What these two old articles were doing, it turns out, was laying the intellectual groundwork for what would become leadership studies. And in the hands of such a master, they excel.

The Context for His Remarks

In 1880, William James published a talk he gave to Harvard's Natural History Society. *Great Men and Their Environment* provoked a response that he saw fit to answer 10 years later in *The Importance of Individuals*. Together, they defend the notion that individual human beings can and do make a difference in the course of history, and that it is "good, right, and salutary" to study those who particularly stand out. It does not matter whether they are called genius, hero, or leader.

There would have been no reason for him to craft such an argument except in rebuttal. As it turns out, many writers were casting doubt on the usefulness and even the legitimacy of such studies. It was in response to their arguments that James spoke up.

Leadership studies presently takes for granted that individuals can and do make a difference. We are unlikely to question this, yet the matter remains unsettled. Not everyone agrees. Even within leadership studies, a number of writers are trying to get away from the importance of individual initiative, as we shall see. In the 1800s, the importance of individual initiative was hotly contested. Followers of Marx pointed instead to economic determinants. Followers of Darwin pointed to biological determinants. Whether Marx or Darwin would have drawn the same conclusions as their followers is immaterial. Wren (1995) excerpts a passage from Tolstoy's *War and Peace* to the effect that leaders are nothing more than history's slaves. Tolstoy is quoted as follows: "In historic events, the so-called great men are labels giving names to events, and like labels they have but the smallest connection to the event itself" (p. 59).

Standing lonely in the breach on behalf of the notion that individuals do make a difference had been Thomas Carlyle. Carlyle was a singularly unsympathetic champion, born in 1795. According to Bentley (1944, 1957), his particular brand of hero-worship was subsequently followed by Nietzsche, Wagner, Stefan George, and D.H. Lawrence. Bentley explicitly connects a century of hero-worship with the work of William James "above all" (pp. 80 & 158). But "hero-worship" sounds just as alien to us today as the so-called "great man" theory – both of which strike the wrong chord with egalitarians, women, and collectivists.

For that reason, those labels must be set aside. Nonetheless, the seeds of their argument have grown into leadership studies, whether scholars claim the affiliation or not. It is too facile to sneer at hero-worship and the great man theory and let it go at that.

Another theoretical thread winding its way toward leadership studies is Elite Theory. Elite theory holds that groups, organizations, societies, and all of history respond to the influence of a small, but powerful minority. They observed domination by the qualified few. They held that there will always be an elite. The elite can be understood as the class of genius, heroism, and leadership, assuming it is an approved class. Not infrequently, those who developed elite theory held the concomitant preference for aristocracy. In this tradition, Levine (1995) finds Italians such as Pareto, Mosca, Gramsci, Michels, and Bobbio. Wren (1995) also names Americans such as W. E. B. DuBois. The name of William James should be added to this group.

He stands at the confluence of two intellectual traditions that feed leadership studies today. One is hero-worship and the other is elite theory. What then did he argue?

The Argument

One could say that everything taken together contributes to bring about change, but such a vague and universal statement is distinctly unhelpful (James, 1880, 1884, 1890/1956). What interest most folks are the *proximate causes* of change.

If someone wants to build a birdhouse, for example, it might help to know about tools, materials, and design. It would be less helpful to find out how a person ever acquired an opposable thumb. That fact does make a difference, of course, since opposable thumbs enable individuals to use woodworking tools, but it is hardly a difference of any relevance to the immediate need of building a birdhouse. When asking for advice about the way to build a birdhouse, one does not expect someone to start explaining that among other things the builder needs two opposable thumbs. Nor would it be expected that the individual expound on the wiring of the human nervous system, the evolution of trees, or the conquest of Gaul. If everything taken together causes change, then nothing else really needs to be said. How does one build a birdhouse? “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth...” (NIV Bible, Genesis 1:1).

William James began with the fact that people are different. Some possess noticeable talents and gifts (1880, 1884, 1890/1956). How those differences originate is a legitimate question, going back through the womb to climate, race, divine will, and so forth. There are separate questions just as legitimate and for most purposes more useful. How did the environment affect those who are different? And, how did those differences affect the environment? These are questions leadership studies is likely to ask in other ways today. How does one

build an organizational culture to encourage and develop leaders? How does one build an organizational culture in the first place? Scholars want to know how leaders develop, and they want to know what leaders do. Ultimately, researchers want to know what leaders can do to increase and improve leadership. All of this is of interest professionally, and these are the kinds of questions William James was attempting to justify.

James (1880, 1884, 1890/1956) asserted that change can be attributed “in the main...to the acts or the example of individuals...” (p. 227). Whatever potential lies within the group, organization, or society, some individual brings it out, shapes it, and can be said to have led. He will not have led all by his lonesome, of course, since other individuals made their contributions along the way. Nevertheless, there is no reason to reject the idea of leadership just because there have been multiple leaders, any more than it makes sense to deny the importance of raindrops when so many are falling. The individual cannot completely *determine* change. It is not in the leader’s power to do so. Instead, the leader works within the context. The leader has to. For one thing, the times are not always ripe. Leadership then brings together the individual with circumstances. Both contribute to the form of the event (pp. 229f & 232).

Is this not the position leadership studies has since taken? One textbook on leadership admits “studying only leaders provides a limited view of the leadership process” (Hughes, Ginnett, & Curphy, 1996, p. 60). Another makes a similar claim:

Leaders and followers do not act in a vacuum. They are propelled, constrained, and buffeted by their environment. The effective leader must understand the nature of the leadership context, and how it affects the leadership process. Only then can he or she operate effectively in seeking to achieve the group’s objectives. (Wren, 1995, p. 243)

Robert Ezra Park, the noted American sociologist, characterized the role of the leader within his context in a similar fashion.

To the extent that leaders emerge from previously amorphous crowds, ephemeral and unreflective actions give way to more stable and permanent forms of organization. The leaders of emerging social movements or religious organizations impose social control on the previously unstructured collective behavior of the crowd, thereby transforming it into an audience. (cited in Coser, 1971, p. 362)

Bass (1990) asserts that such an approach influenced the theorization about leadership that has followed since 1948. In short, *leaders do make a difference*. We simply want to understand what difference they make.

When James (1880, 1884, 1890/1956) found it necessary to supplement his argument, he agreed that the distinction between leaders and followers is very slight indeed. He also agreed that a leader is on the whole led more than he leads. The cumulative effect of all interpersonal influence, throughout society and across time, makes the leadership episode seem puny by comparison. Nonetheless, he quotes an acquaintance of his in this way: “There is very little difference between one man and another; but what little there is, *is very important [emphasis supplied]*” (p. 256f).

Nothing prevents the sociologist from studying historical trends and vast collective movements. That is a perfectly legitimate topic. It is just not the only topic. James (1880, 1884, 1890/1956) was interested in the micro-phenomenon; sociologists are interested in the macro-phenomenon. These are not mutually exclusive. Instead, they are complementary, in what has come to be known as the hermeneutic circle. For his part, James regarded the disagreement as “merely a quarrel of emphasis...” (p. 259). In fact, most ordinary folks are interested in individual differences and in the importance of individuals. Leaders especially draw attention to themselves, even if only because of their effects. People want to understand what happens at the micro level.

Much that happens in human society is taken for granted. People tend to ignore patterns and processes they have seen before. After some time, they become commonplace. Not so leadership! Leadership occurs at the point where something new or interesting is taking place. There, the future takes shape. The sociologist’s trends and movements are, as often as not, formed out of moments of leadership (James, 1880, 1884, 1890/1956). If not, where then lies causation? Is the sociologist required also to be a fatalist, as though events depend on no individual initiative whatsoever? That would be an extreme and unnecessary claim (see *The Dilemma of Determinism* at 1880, 1884, 1890/1956, pp. 145-183).

James (1880, 1884, 1890/1956) uses an analogy. A tree’s inner rings bear witness to its past. Cut the trunk across, and you see its past in the rings. Taken together, they constitute the bulk of the tree. The tree lives, however, largely at the perimeter, the exterior, that narrow band of activity where this year it suffers and grows. Yes, the tree is mostly the product of its past, but each stage along the way, through that past, was a present. In the present, the outer ring is most alive. So also, leaders help to determine how the group, organization, or society will grow tomorrow, just as leaders did previously when it was their turn to make a difference. With time, the present becomes the past, and whatever it was that the leaders did will persist only as bulk. By then, new leaders will be doing their thing, so it matters a great deal what they are doing.

It would seem that the vitality of human societies would be of most interest. That vitality expresses itself most dramatically in the lives and influence of the genius, hero, and leader.

Challenges to His Argument Within Leadership Studies

Leadership studies today include many voices casting doubt on the position William James took in the 1800s. They ask us to move away from that paradigm of the importance of extraordinary individuals. James O'Toole, to cite one example, wrote in 2001, "Instead of leadership being a solo act, an aria sung by the CEO, in these organizations it is a shared responsibility, more like a chorus of diverse voices singing in unison" (O'Toole, 2001, p. 19f). He concluded that "in many successful companies *leadership is treated as an institutional capacity and not solely as an individual trait [emphasis supplied]*" (p. 21). "[These firms] may have developed the moral equivalent of great, individual leadership" (p. 28). Wilfred Drath (2001) agrees. He argues that in this day and age we are coming to view leadership as "the property of a social system. Individual people do not possess leadership; leadership happens when people participate in collaborative forms of thought and action" (p. 15). W. F. Foster has been cited for making similar claims about "leadership as community" (cited in Rost, 1993). Leadership as an institutional capacity, a property of the social system, a community? What gives? Daniel Born noticed this trend in 1996:

It has by now become a cliché of current leadership studies to throw out the notion of the Great Man Theory of Leadership (the individual being by definition a category of suspicion) and to substitute it with vaguely beneficent notions of group dynamics. Hierarchy is out, loosely-coupled organic networks are in. On the face of it, this decentered, non-hierarchical vision of leadership [is] a warm fuzzy that empties "leadership" of all its hard, hierarchical, and lordly overtones...." (p. 52)

What has fallen into dispute is a deep and widespread paradigm about the causation of social change. Scholars seem to be reexamining what R. M. MacIver (1942/1964) referred to as the "role of the precipitant." The field of leadership studies presupposes that an individual human being can serve as a precipitant, that is, as a factor "introduced from the outside, or else [emerging] from within, so that it evokes a series of repercussions or reactions significantly changing the total situation..." (p. 423). The object of these studies has been how individuals make that happen. If this old paradigm is set aside, the paradigm represented by William James, what then might the new paradigm look like? There are three dominant alternatives within leadership studies.

This new paradigm might hold that "anyone who wants to help at this time" is a leader (Wheatley, 2002). In other words, everyone is a leader. Leadership is not restricted to extraordinary individuals or extraordinary efforts. Leadership takes place all the time, large and small, in a vast, interconnected series of events. There is no reason to limit study to that of heroes and great men. In fact, such a limitation would distort the understanding of social change and discourage

ordinary folks from doing their part. McGill and Slocum (1997) note that in the literature on leadership one tends to read about large problems requiring dramatic effort by outsized characters and call it leadership. What is really needed, they argue, are usually little acts by ordinary people. It is called "little leadership." The authors concluded that a little leadership offers what followers want and what their leaders can do. They suggested leadership can be learned. Just as importantly "little leadership" is exactly the amount and kind of leadership needed in most organizations.

Along these lines, those who want to lead more effectively are presently being advised to cultivate the leadership capacity of their followers (Owen, 1999; McFarland, Senn, & Childress, 1995). Belasco and Stayer (1993) used the following image to make their point.

What I really wanted in the organization was a group of responsible, interdependent workers, similar to a flock of geese.... I could see the geese flying in their "V" formation, the leadership changing frequently, with different geese taking the lead. I saw every goose being responsible for getting itself to wherever the gaggle was going, changing roles whenever necessary, alternating as a leader, a follower, or a scout. And when the task changed, the geese would be responsible for changing the structure of the group to accommodate, similar to the geese that fly in a "V" but land in waves. I could see each goose being a leader.
(p. 18)

To summarize, the first new paradigm envisions more individuals within a group, organization, or society engaging in large and small leadership throughout the structure.

Pushed to extremes, this paradigm would hold that everything a person does can be construed as leadership. "They also serve who stand and wait." Under this rubric, leadership is no longer a distinct thing, an object of study in its own right. How exactly would leadership be taught prescriptively, for those who want to learn how to do it, when they already are leading in everything they do now? Such an inclusive understanding of leadership certainly contravenes ordinary usage of the term. James left room in his 1890 article for the changes brought about under the first new paradigm, yet he would have rejected the extreme form. From his point of view, some things are leadership and some are not.

In the alternative, then, a new replacement paradigm might hold that leadership is an outdated concept altogether. When all is said and done, no one is a leader. What has been known as leadership is in fact something else, something better understood as systems thinking, for example, where systems cause their own behavior (Senge, 1990). "In mastering systems thinking," Senge writes, "we give up the assumption that there must be an individual, or individual agent,

responsible” (p. 78). Instead, leadership is something of an optical illusion, namely the misplaced attribution of responsibility onto specific individuals.

These first two alternatives might seem indistinguishable, on the order of saying that when everyone leads, then no one does. Are they one and same thing? Is it the same thing to say that everyone leads and that no one leads? Despite a certain surface plausibility, however, they do remain conceptually distinct. You would not make the following assertion: When everyone eats, then no one does. Leadership can arise in a thousand contexts, at multiple levels of any group, organization, or society, and can change from task to task. The first alternative paradigm (that everyone can lead) holds that leadership is an activity or event that means something; it simply expands the number of people doing it. The second alternative denies that leadership ever happens. It is, instead, a misleading term for something explained better in other ways. What the first alternative wants to celebrate here, there, and everywhere, the other alternative denies as even happening. Rather than empower and encourage, the second alternative tries to change the object of inquiry and get away from the fantasy that free individuals make any difference.

Finally, the new paradigm might hold that leadership is something one does by himself, regardless whether he affects others or not. A leader does not need followers. He can do it in isolation (Manz & Sims, 1989).

In each of these three paradigms, leadership as a distinctive contribution to the course of change by extraordinary individuals does not necessarily exist. Each new paradigm challenges the dominant assumptions about leadership that James laboriously laid out over a century ago. In subsequent debates, while leadership studies tries to sort out the scope and purpose of its mission, scholars will have to return to his arguments and meet them directly. Do individuals make a difference? If not, then the term “leadership” is useless.

Implications for Educators

There are several concrete implications for leadership education. For one thing, James occupies an important place in the history of leadership studies, where hero-worship and elite theory come together. For another, the arguments he made then are still valid. It is important for educators to recognize the theoretical foundations of their discipline. For yet another implication, educators can now use a list to help students compartmentalize four different points of view.

- The dominant point of view: Leaders are distinct and important.
- The first alternative: Everyone is a leader.
- The second alternative: Leadership is meaningless.
- The third alternative: Leadership is something done alone.

The four-part list also helps the educator compartmentalize new readings and keep them straight in her own mind.

In other words, the argument of James has historical, theoretical, and conceptual implications. There are two more implications of greater importance, in the opinion of this writer, and they are psychological.

First, James bolsters the morale of educators. Teaching leadership really matters, because leadership really matters. It is okay to teach it. There is some psychological advantage to hearing once again why leadership educators do what they do.

Second, students are likelier to pay attention in class and internalize their lessons when they understand the significance their lives can have. James reminds us all that leaders do make a difference. Students of leadership who believe him will go confidently into the world to make a difference.

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