Recovering the Philosophical Anthropology of Max Scheler for Leadership Studies

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Abstract

During the first half of the twentieth century, a handful of German speaking scholars examined leadership through the lens of what came to be known as philosophical anthropology, a field of study inaugurated by Max Scheler. Not only do their contributions belong in the history of leadership studies, but the findings of philosophical anthropology can make contributions today. This paper introduces philosophical anthropology and more specifically what Scheler had to say about leadership. One of his primary insights distinguished leaders from what he referred to as exemplary persons, or what we call role models today. This distinction offers a basis for leading by example. Scheler found five universal ideal types that set the tone, so to speak, for any group or society.

Introduction

Leadership studies can be taught partly by telling its history. On occasion, that history must be revised in light of new information. This paper introduces a significant literature on leadership from the first quarter of the twentieth century that seems to have been overlooked. Under the influence of Max Scheler, a number of German-language scholars wrote explicitly about leadership, and they wrote from a perspective that would be helpful today. That perspective is known as philosophical anthropology.

Gaps in the Story

The conventional history of leadership studies occasionally identifies precursors in ancient texts by Plato and Machiavelli, but it usually begins in earnest with trait theory. Antonakis, Cianciolo, and Sternberg (2004), for example, opened their

story just as the "great man" assumptions prevalent at the time gave way to the more systematic search for dispositional characteristics. Heilbrunn (1996) claimed that "the scientific study of leadership itself can be divided into three phases [in the first of which] researchers set about identifying traits of leaders…" (p. 4).

In response to this version of the history of leadership studies, Joseph Rost (1993) found that this story tended to leave out work that could not be categorized as social psychology or management science. There were significant gaps. I have argued elsewhere, for example, that a significant influence on leadership studies was the literature of Italian sociologists on what is known as elite theory (Harter, 2004). The claim was that pockets of academic interest in leadership are being overlooked, especially from the early years of the twentieth century and especially from traditions outside the English-speaking world. A more accurate history of leadership studies would reach back to these "pockets" of interest, in part to give credit where credit is due, but also in part to enrich recent deliberations on leadership that somehow missed these unique contributions.

A significant pocket of academic interest that suffers this fate is the literature originally written in German on philosophical anthropology – a field of inquiry attributable largely to the efforts of one man, Max Scheler. He and many of his contemporaries wrote explicitly about leadership. For this reason alone they deserve to be integrated into the story of leadership studies. More significantly, their work in philosophical anthropology would make a contribution today.

This paper will explain what philosophical anthropology is, before giving a brief account of Scheler's treatment of leadership specifically and what he referred to as exemplary persons.

Philosophical Anthropology

At a conference in Indianapolis, Jean Bethke Elshtain (2006) spoke on "The Search for Humanistic Leadership." She expressed her concern "that many of the models of human beings and of leadership imparted today presume a radically flawed and altogether too narrow understanding of persons and what makes us tick." She continued (p. 10): "If you take away nothing else from my comments here today, I would hope you might call to mind the following questions: How are human beings understood in this model of leadership? What assumptions are being made?" Without naming it, Elshtain Bethke was asking that leadership studies make its philosophical anthropology explicit.

A. What is Philosophical Anthropology?

Philosophical anthropology has a distinct history and a distinct purpose. As with any field of study, it has its precursors going back for millennia. In its present form, it also exhibits disagreement as to purpose and method – not unlike leadership studies, come to think of it. One could access philosophical anthropology at any one of several points and with a little effort still get a sense of what it is trying to accomplish.

H.O. Pappé (1967) wrote the entry for "philosophical anthropology" in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. There he explained that it "seeks to elucidate the basic qualities that make man what he is and distinguish him from other beings" (p. 16). One might say that eventually philosophical anthropology *passes through* the question of what it is to be a human being and to live a human life.

To be sure, a number of disciplines separately address themselves in one way or another to this question. A partial list would include what are commonly referred to as the human sciences, such as psychology, sociology, political science, economics, and history, but it would also include the natural sciences, such as zoology, biology, and biochemistry, to the extent that they pertain to human organisms. Many of the sciences bear on the question of interest to us here.

With so many different approaches to considering the question of what it means to be human, we should be wary of reductionist thinking that forces us to choose only one. It is a false dilemma, for example, between biological explanations and socio-cultural understandings. Richard Schacht (1990) put it simply. "Human life, without any question, is both a biological and a socio-cultural affair" (p. 168; see Wilber, 1996/2000, p. 247). In any case, our purpose is to guard against reducing our investigation needlessly, *a priori*, rejecting alternatives at the outset.

The motto of philosophical anthropology comes from the playwright Terence (*Heauton Timorumenos* Act I: scene 1): *Homo sum; humani nil a me alienum puto* – which means "I am a human being; I consider nothing human alien to me."

How then does philosophical anthropology proceed? Chin-Tai Kim (1998) insists that anthropology in its strictest sense "must be philosophical [because] philosophy undeniably affects the way of understanding human nature…." This is in fact purported by Eric Voegelin (1943/1978) to be "the decisive problem of philosophy, 'the creation of an order of symbols by which the place of human beings in the world is to be understood'" (p. 35). Ulrich Müller (2001) has stated that "philosophical anthropology interprets and integrates the findings of different

empirical sciences … that deal with human beings" (p. 1). We might say that it is trans-disciplinary. Thus, to paraphrase Richard Schacht (1990), philosophical anthropology avails itself of what can be gathered from multiple perspectives without deferring entirely to them. He explained.

> [A]ll of these disciplines, by their very natures, are restricted to dealing with human reality from particular perspectives, and in ways limited further by the very methodologies which enable them to develop as disciplines. A philosophical anthropology, which would be locked into no such particular perspective and restricted to no such methodology, would for that very reason be better able to make collective sense of the human reality with which they all deal, drawing upon them and yet achieving a more comprehensive understanding than they severally can. (p. 158)

In brief, philosophical anthropology integrates and interprets the findings of various sciences and by means of reflection considers what it means to be human.

B. Benefits of Engaging in Philosophical Anthropology

The novelist Walker Percy (1991) suspected that most people already operate according to some theory about what it means to be human. He wrote:

> Indeed, it is hard to imagine how one can live one's life and work with other people day in and day out unless one has already made certain assumptions about one's own nature as well as other people's. It may be…impossible for us *not* to have a theory of man…(emphasis supplied). (p. 111)

The obvious question, then, would concern the adequacy of one's theory. Percy asked "whether the theories we more or less unconsciously profess make any sense, or are of any help to us as students of behavior" (p. 111). This question moves to the center for those who consider themselves scholars and educators regarding the human sciences, which consider arguments based in large part on these presuppositions. Long has the argument been made that the proper study of mankind is man – a good in its own right, whatever else it accomplishes. How then does an examination of one's presuppositions about the nature of humanity contribute to leadership studies?

Philosophical anthropology brings those presuppositions to the surface and suggests alternatives that would end up being more accurate and thus more useful. Critics

have done much the same thing as they challenge prejudices about race and gender, since a stereotype reflects presuppositions about what it means to be a certain kind of human being. Elshtain (2006) was especially leery of leadership models based on rational choice, in which participants are thought to be rational maximizers: *homo economicus* with perfect self-interest, perfect rationality, and perfect knowledge. So in a sense the entire effort of philosophical anthropology promises a more comprehensive examination of the premises from which we argue.

In his 2003 book titled *Transforming Leadership*, James MacGregor Burns wrote that "a theory of leadership will never be precise in its predictions because its raw material is the most enigmatic of phenomena" (p. 214) – namely, human nature. Simplistic presuppositions about what it means to be human threaten the richness of leadership theory. But let us leave the scholars aside for a moment.

For practitioners specifically, there would be a benefit to engaging in this type of inquiry, for at least three reasons.

One reason is for leaders to understand *themselves* better. At the dawn of Western philosophy, Socrates subscribed to the inscription at the temple of Apollo to "know thyself." Warren Bennis devoted an entire chapter in his book *On Becoming a Leader* (1989) to this same injunction. More recently, London and Maurer (2004) urged the prospective leader to gain what they list as self-insight (internal) and feedback orientation (external), *inter alia*, in order to get a better grasp of who they are and how they are perceived. (pp. 230-235) The literature on emotional intelligence makes a similar plea with regard to emotions. (e.g. George, 2000) When the conversation turns to leadership ethics, one hears two competing positions separated specifically on this question: Barb Kellerman (2004), for instance, attributes unethical leadership to self-interest, whereas Terry Price (2006) speculates that instead of self-interest, leaders who engage in unethical conduct simply think of themselves as somehow exempt from ordinary ethics, by virtue of their status as leader or by virtue of that which made it possible for them to become leader in the first place.

A second reason practitioners would benefit from engaging in philosophical anthropology is for leaders to understand *other people* better. Douglas McGregor (1958/1966) opened the way, trying to distinguish between two competing views of workers, known as Theory X and Theory Y. (One could go back further to Machiavelli whose low opinion of human nature justified a leadership that remains controversial to this day.) Years after McGregor, Bennis (1989) urged leaders to develop empathy. (pp. 155-157)

Consider a contemporary example of a leader whose policies derive from an espoused view of human nature. President George W. Bush declared in his second inaugural address (2005) the following:

> America's vital interests and our deepest beliefs are now one. From the day of our Founding, we have proclaimed that every man and woman on this earth has rights, and dignity, and matchless value, because they bear the image of the Maker of Heaven and earth. Across the generations we have proclaimed the imperative of self-government, because no one is fit to be a master, and no one deserves to be a slave. Advancing these ideals is the mission that created our Nation. It is the honorable achievement of our fathers. Now it is the urgent requirement of our nation's security, and the calling of our time.
>
> So it is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world….
>
> We will persistently clarify the choice before every ruler and every nation: The moral choice between oppression, which is always wrong, and freedom, which is eternally right. America will not pretend that jailed dissidents prefer their chains, or that women welcome humiliation and servitude, or that any human being aspires to live at the mercy of bullies.
>
> Some, I know, have questioned the global appeal of liberty - though this time in history, four decades defined by the swiftest advance of freedom ever seen, is an odd time for doubt. Americans, of all people, should never be surprised by the power of our ideals. Eventually, the call of freedom comes to every mind and every soul. We do not accept the existence of permanent tyranny because we do not accept the possibility of permanent slavery. Liberty will come to those who love it….
>
> The leaders of governments with long habits of control need to know: To serve your people you must learn to trust them. Start on this journey of progress and justice, and America will walk at your side. (http://www.whitehouse.gov/inaugural/)

With this rhetoric, we are reminded of a third benefit to practitioners in the real world, in addition to understanding themselves and others, and that benefit accrues to prospective followers who must decide whom to follow. They too operate according to some kind of presupposition about the nature of themselves and of candidates for leadership.

What Elshtain Bethke was saying in Indianapolis is that leadership studies as a whole would benefit from a more deliberate consideration of this question. In order to frame that deliberation, we should look to the acknowledged founder of philosophical anthropology, Max Scheler, to see what he had to say.

Max Scheler

Early in the twentieth century, there were many different ways to study what it means to be human, and they were all making impressive headway, but they had no theoretical framework to integrate them all. They were going off in different directions. Max Scheler decided to remedy that.

A. *Man's Place in Nature*

Scheler presented his mature conclusions in a book published in English as *Man's Place in Nature* (1928/1961). He devoted the first chapter to summarizing many of the features that humans share with animals – features such as impulse, instinct, habit (and tradition), and practical intelligence. These traits or powers are at work in us, supplying us with energy. He subsequently referred to them as "drives."

The issue with which he opened the second chapter is whether that which differentiates humanity from the rest of the animal kingdom is simply a matter of degree, such that we are smarter, for example, or are humans *qualitatively* different? And if we are qualitatively different, how so? (pp. 7 & 35f) Scheler claimed that there is a discontinuity. Humans are qualitatively different. In order to contrast what we share with animals from what we possess alone, he adopted the following terms. That which we share he called "life". That which distinguishes us he called "spirit".

Humans can detach themselves mentally, distancing themselves from the moment, and view life objectively, as an object of thought. Here's how.

- We conceive of *things*. We can take a range of sensations and in our minds arrive at the conceptualization of a "thing" (p. 43).

- We conceive a *world* of things. We can also draw the conclusion that we occupy a single, unified world, within which we live and move and have our being. Scheler called this our "world-space" (p. 44).
- We conceive *ourselves* in a world of things. We are able to conceive of ourselves within this world-space, as an actor moving around in relation with everything else (p. 46). But to reach this outcome, we have to have been able to view ourselves as objects. We are in that manner of speaking self-conscious (p. 40).

Animals apparently can't do all of this.

The only way we can "objectify" is to suspend the powers and drives we share with other living things. Temporarily, we have to deny our impulses, our instincts, our habits, and even stop registering perceptions. (I have to ignore the gorgeous weather outdoors if I am to write this paper.) Otherwise, we would never get the opportunity to objectify. In other words, we are able to *override* that which we share with the animals (p. 58). It is a process of abstracting from life, a turning aside, which Scheler referred to as a "tentative experimental suspension of reality" (p. 51). We can pretend that reality is not real (p. 54).

Once detached, we find ourselves free to develop ideas. We can envision alternate worlds, future worlds. The images we form in this way become so attractive or so repulsive that the energies of life can be diverted to deal with worlds that do not really exist, or at least do not yet exist (e.g. p. 62). We might say that the spirit *hijacks* the resources of life (p. 57). This process goes by names borrowed from ordinary language, i.e. "direction" and "guidance" (pp. 62 & 68) …and this process would play a key role in any explication of leadership attributable to Scheler.

None of this means that spirit *controls* life absolutely. We have to recognize the ongoing influence of appetite, desire, lust, and ambition (p. 84). Nevertheless, the spirit engages in a kind of deception, presenting to the mind such compelling images that it "acts as though". In this way, we can arrive at some ulterior purpose, or *telos*.

Scheler's philosophical anthropology is far more elaborate than this, but we now have enough features to move toward his views on leadership.

B Role Models

Scheler believed that individual human beings still participate in nature and they often use the basic instruments of animal life to respond to their environment – pursuing what attracts, for example, and fleeing what repulses. In this "animal" mode, individuals will respond to other human beings, drawing closer to people they like or admire and drawing away from people they do not. If a leader's purpose is to win compliance from others, then he or she would be advised to study and practice the means by which people – in animal mode – come to admire or fear. This would be the leadership of an alpha-animal. But it would be only one kind of leadership. It was Scheler's desire to contrast this basic mode of interpersonal influence – which is prevalent and real (and sometimes necessary) – with another mode that reflects the intervention of what he called spirit. Animal mode is not enough to explain history and culture – let alone ethics.

Spirit turns the world and oneself into objects for consideration, as we said. Spirit considers ideas. Ideas empower spirit to be attracted to a better world, a better life, and a better self – or, by the same token, repugnant ideas will empower spirit to be repulsed by the prospect of a worse world, a worse life, and a worse self. It works either way.

Leadership within the spirit relies on the follower's ideas of what constitutes a better world, a better life, and a better self. The follower can imagine the ideal and find himself (or herself) attracted to the ideal, attuned to its value (so to speak), such that the follower makes decisions to realize that ideal. The follower comes to seek a change from what would otherwise happen.

Now, it is true that the one we refer to as leader could try to implant this ideal by means of blandishments – pretty word-pictures and inspiring speeches. Blandishments can evoke the spirit such that the follower chooses to comply, but according to Scheler (1966/1973) there is a more original, immediate, and necessary method – more effective, in other words, and more permanent (p. 574). That method is for the person we refer to as leader to *embody* the pursuit of the ideal, to serve as a role model. To have a model in one's head is by definition to be influenced, for that is what a model does. It is the point of reference for what ought to be the case (p. 572). Thus, a role model is to the imagination an ideal for a person to pursue.

Here are some ways to distinguish between ordinary leadership and leading by example. Scheler (1987) explained that leaders must be real, concrete human beings. For exemplary persons or exemplars, this is not so (p. 130). Leaders must

intend to lead. Again, that is not so for exemplars, who might be surprised by their influence or who might already be dead…or who might be fictional (p. 130). Leadership is a matter of *doing* something; exemplariness is a way of *being* (p. 135). Leaders can be bad – inferior in important ways or unethical – whereas exemplars are by definition good, or they wouldn't be exemplary (p. 132).

At this stage in the explanation, Scheler insisted that by "following an exemplar" he did not mean simple imitation (1966/1973, pp. 574 & 579-580; 1987, pp. 143, 147f, & 161). It is not so much that the follower wants to copy the leader. Leadership in the spirit means that the follower wants to achieve an equivalent relationship with the good. The role model embodies value, and it is the *value* with which the follower hopes to align. In other words, the follower is not replacing who he is today with somebody else. Instead, he is growing toward an ideal that the role model allows him to see. To put this another way, the follower does *as* the model does and not so much *what* the model does (1966/1973, p. 580).

What one might say then is that the individual follower can be measured more or less as to the degree of fidelity to the ideal. (p. 574) And this ideal came to the imagination by way of a personification, a person modeling fidelity. Scheler wrote that we are set in motion by a person or by the idea of one (see 1966/1973, p. 575). When he wrote about these role models, what kind of person was he thinking about?

C. Pure Types

We know that leadership takes place within a certain milieu, a context that includes culture, law, power relations, and so forth. Scheler was not oblivious to this fact. He wrote, "in every factual social unit there are entire systems of exemplary, ideal types of social persons…(*emphasis omitted*)" (1966/1973, p. 576; 1987, p. 142). For a Franciscan order, the ideal types might differ from the ideal types for Napoleon's Imperial Guard, and one can presumably make an empirical study of the prevailing types in any given social unit, but Scheler asked a different, more penetrating question. He wondered if there are types that cut across all social units, all epochs, that seem to exist independently from their context (1966/1973, p. 580; 1987, p. 142). In actual experience, it might seem that your particular models depend on whom you happen to have met and how you reacted to them. (We can presume that adolescents on the Mongol steppes do not emulate Davy Crockett.) Scheler (1987) was not so sure. He thought that we do not really *choose* our exemplars (p. 141). They influence us indirectly through our heritage (e.g. market capitalism rewards the entrepreneur), directly through tradition (e.g. Washington chopping down the cherry tree), and only rarely

directly by personal experience (pp. 144-147). They exist in the imagination as a basis for comparison with the never-ending stream of real people we meet. When we experience other people, we tend to assess them, measure them, according certain universal values (p. 141). So, yes, there does seem to be a universal hierarchy of pure types which our role models approximate. Just as followers are more or less faithful to their models, the models are more or less faithful to these few "pure types" (1966/1973, p. 586).

Before looking at Scheler's list of pure types, we should acknowledge that the realization of an ideal is never perfect. Things go wrong. A follower can become confused or deceived, or the follower might understand perfectly well how to act in a given situation and for whatever reason (such as laziness) fail to do it. Everyone is a mixture of virtue and vice. All that is so (1966/1973, p. 583; 1987, p. 134). But the reality in no way diminishes the importance of ideal types to the imagination, any more than Max Weber's ideal types are discredited by reality.

There is, according to Scheler, a more interesting difficulty – a more radical problem – in that the attempt to realize one ideal might conflict with another ideal: the pure types we are about to list might seem to require incompatible actions. A hero might launch into an attack that a saint could very well shun, since the warrior destroys life whereas the saint affirms life.

The pure type is an ideal, a hope, and not a reality. One reason it can never become a reality is the difficulty in trying to reconcile the different ideals. Scheler (1966/1973) regarded this as elementally tragic (p. 590). Despite this difficulty, which appears to be intractable, Scheler could say of these pure types that they are all perspectives of the good, facets of a single thing (p. 590).

The five values that inspire followers in descending order are holiness, mental/creative powers, nobleness, usefulness, and pleasantness. Humans the world over recognize some version of these values, and according to Scheler (1987), they tend to rank them the same way (p. 133). They simply have their own local version of each, such that Japan had its samurai and Europe its chivalrous knights.

As Scheler moved from empirical examples, embodiments, toward the ideal(s) they represent, he differentiated types that would be contingently good – good only within the context – from pure types that would be good anytime, anywhere. These pure types he identified according to a hierarchy as the saint, the genius, the hero, the leading mind of civilization, and the master of the art of living (1966/1973, p. 585; 1987, p. 133). They are by definition good, so that the

Muslim honors a separate kind of saint from the Christian, and the trade unionist admires a different kind of hero from the college professor, and so forth (1966/1973, p. 587). Nevertheless, at a sufficient level of abstraction, each has its saint and genius and so forth.

Holiness	< >	Saint
Mental/creative powers	<>	Genius
Nobleness	<>	Hero
Usefulness	<>	Leading Mind of Civilization
Pleasantness	<>	Master of the Art of Living

Briefly, the **saint** (e.g. Buddha) loves God primarily, and his or her influence lives on in the lives of followers, not in particular artifacts (1987, pp. 148-162). What the saint achieves is the attunement of others with the divine. The **genius** (e.g. Mozart) loves the world or something particular about the world, and so he or she influences the world through works devoted to understanding or celebrating the world (pp. 164-189). The **hero** (e.g. Hector of Troy) loves a particular community or race, so that by means of sacrificial deeds he or she embodies the ideals of a people (pp. 190-193). The **leading mind of civilization** (e.g. Albert Einstein or Henry Ford) advances some existing process, contributing to its progress, for the betterment of humankind (pp. 194-195). The **master in the art of living** is a bon vivant, someone who loves enjoyment – not so much brute pleasures as refinements, luxuries (pp. 196-198). We might recognize these exemplars in celebrity. We say, "They really know how to live."

Conclusions

Scheler (1987) noted that many different forces bind followers to leaders, including trust and fear (p. 129). What determines which forces will work best in a given situation depends on the dominant exemplars in the minds and hearts of the followers (pp. 135 & 139). And exemplars dominate the imagination, the spiritual aspect. Leaders can achieve some success in what we have referred to as animal mode, frightening or enthralling followers, but that which makes us uniquely human and allows us to prevail over nature is the spirit. He wrote (1987) that although leadership affects the will, by definition, exemplars "determine the moral tenor beneath our will [*emphasis omitted*]" (p. 140). It was for this reason that Scheler (1987) took the position that a theory of exemplary persons "is much more important and fundamental than the question of leaders which is given so much one-sided attention today" (p. 135).

Regardless whether an educator is interested in philosophical anthropology for its historical interest or for its applicability to contemporary leadership studies, Max Scheler would be the place to begin. Like-minded writers included Helmuth Plessner, Arnold Gehlen, Martin Buber, Ernst Cassirer, José Ortega y Gasset, Alfred Schutz, Eric Voegelin, Karol Józef Wojtyła (later known as His Holiness John Paul II), and Jürgen Habermas.

Beneath most theories of leadership is an implicit theory about what it means to be human. Philosophical anthropology gives educators an opportunity to bring such an implicit theory to the surface. Max Scheler in particular explained why it would be theoretically sound to lead by example.

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Biography

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Author's Note

The author also wishes to note his general reliance on *The Oxford companion to philosophy*, edited by Ted Honderich. (1995). New York: Oxford University Press.