Article

Ann L. Cunliffe

University of Hull

The Philosopher Leader: On Relationalism, Ethics and Reflexivity—A Critical Perspective to Teaching Leadership

Abstract *The issue of teaching from a critical perspective is particularly important and challenging at the Executive MBA level, where students are senior managers in influential positions and often deeply enmeshed in prevailing managerial ideologies, structures of control and systems of power. Questioning taken-for-granted systems can be perceived as threatening and needless, especially when one's career is dependent on the current system. Therefore one of the major challenges of teaching leadership from a critical perspective lies in persuading students of the need to think differently about leadership, organizations and themselves as leaders. The challenge can become particularly acute if the EMBA programme is based on conventional pedagogical premises and as a result, students come into the course expecting to be given tools to simplify their lives in the form of leadership principles and techniques. I will offer one way of thinking about leadership, drawing on the philosophical themes of relationalism, ethics and reflexivity. I begin by setting the context of the article in my experience of teaching an Executive Leadership course on a conventionally taught Executive MBA programme. I go on to introduce the three themes, which emerge from my interests in phenomenological philosophy, and examine their relevance and value to leadership and CMS, before discussing how each theme relates to the idea of a philosopher leader. **Key Words:** critical management studies; ethics; leadership; phenomenology; reflexivity*

Introduction

> Every man reflecting upon his life does have the fundamental possibility of looking at it as a series of private states of consciousness . . . But he can do so only if he forgets experiences which bestride this everyday and serial time, or reconstitutes them in a way which caricatures them. (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 175)

For the last four years, I have taught an Executive Leadership course on an Executive MBA programme in the USA. This was the first leadership course I

have taught in over 20 years of teaching, not because I thought the topic was unimportant, but because there is so much written on the subject of leadership, much of which takes either a positivist or a prescriptive stance in the form of theories, principles and techniques of 'good' leadership. I felt uncomfortable about teaching leadership in this way—it did not fit with my view of the world, nor with my ideas about leadership. Plus, what gave *me* the right as an academic with no real leadership experience, to teach the topic? What could I say to senior managers with many years' experience about leading organizations? I finally agreed to teach an Executive Leadership course—the capstone course in a traditional two-year EMBA programme—when the Program Director agreed I could teach it from a 'critical' perspective. This, along with a few grey hairs, the confidence of having taught a few thousand students over the years, and combined with rethinking my academic role, helped change my mind. I also realized there are connections between being a leader and an academic talking about leadership. Both involve responding to challenges, thinking critically, seeing situations in new ways, being able to deal with uncertainty and ambiguity, learning from experience and mistakes, knowing yourself, and (especially when teaching/leading at this level) being passionate about what you do.

So I began to think that maybe I could contribute to the leadership development of mature students by designing the course around the theme of the *Philosopher Leader*—in which leadership becomes a process of thinking more critically and reflexively about ourselves, our actions, and the situations we find ourselves in. The questions, challenges and thoughts of the EMBA students in the programme have helped flesh out this way of thinking about leadership and develop the course. Because of this, and as a means of highlighting some of the issues and the practical applications of these ideas, I include verbatim comments from students throughout the article. These excerpts are italicized and woven into the text without introduction or comment because they are part of the fabric of the course. They are excerpts from final papers and are included with the permission of each student.

As a context, the EMBA course members are usually of diverse backgrounds varying from small nonprofit, government, private sector for-profit, and Native American owned organizations. A number of students have Bachelor degrees, some are PhD scientists from internationally renowned laboratories, and most have had no exposure to philosophy. The Executive Leadership course is the final course in a two-year programme. The goal of the course is to help students think more critically and reflexively about their own leadership skills, which means that 'rather than seeking definitions and moving to categorize, we should ask: what are we able to see or think about if we talk about it in this way rather than that?' (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000, p. 43). I expect students to have read the required books and journal articles prior to class. The course incorporates brief inputs from me, mainly discussion of readings and ideas, and input from guest speakers (local leaders). There is a final *Self As Leader* paper, a self-reflexive analysis designed to help students relate the themes of the course to their experience and to think about possibilities for change.

What does the notion of the 'philosopher leader' involve and what makes this a critical approach to teaching leadership?

Phenomenology, Leadership and Critical Management Studies

> Existentialism's first move is to make every man aware of what he is and to make the full responsibility of his existence rest on him. And when we say that a man is responsible for himself, we do not only mean that he is responsible for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men. (Sartre, 1965/1993: 36)

There are numerous books and articles about leadership, many of which focus on leadership principles, techniques, skills and competencies. Much of this is essentialist and positivist in nature (see Lawler's 2005 critique), and has been criticized for propagating 'ideologically inspired amoral theories' (Ghoshal, 2005: 76). This latter criticism lies at the heart of my interest in CMS—which is exploring different forms of knowledge and more reflexive ways of researching and teaching. And I believe at the core of this approach to CMS lies a philosophical understanding and a questioning of who we are and how we relate to others. Of course, this in itself is an ideologically inspired position that needs reflexive interrogation, but as Merleau-Ponty (1962) argues, all knowledge is from a particular viewpoint or gained from our experience of the world. I am up-front about this with students, I expect to be challenged—as Bakhtin states, *polyphonic dialogue is* 'a struggle of opinions and ideologies (of various epochs) an incomplete dialogue on ultimate questions' (1986/1996: 151)—and I am. As one student commented:

> I was a bit surprised that I actually enjoyed it. When I saw the syllabus, I was fairly certain it I wouldn't get much out of it. Don't get me wrong, I still dislike writing long academic essays and cramming a ton of difficult reading into a few short weeks. But I probably never would have read [*the course readings*] on my own—I really enjoyed it and it helped me through some rough times these past few months . . . I think you were the only professor in the program who actually encouraged open dissent . . . It was very refreshing.

Such dialogue, debate and discussion is crucial to the process of thinking critically and thinking differently.

Towards a Rejection of Essentialist Approaches to Leadership

Work connecting leadership and philosophy—particularly phenomenology—is still in its infancy. Yet over 40 years ago in a 1960 *Harvard Business Review* article, 'Existentialism for the Businessman', John Rice, a businessman himself, stated, 'All businessmen, whether or not we admit it, are philosophers in a sense. Philosophy provides a framework within which we interpret our experiences and judge ourselves and situations' (Rice, 1960: 135). Since then, a number of authors have suggested philosophy can enhance organization studies and management education (Ashman, 2007; Calori, 2003; Chatterjee, 1998; Chia and Morgan, 1996; Cooper and Burrell, 1988; Gosling, 1996; Grint, 2007; Hendry, 2006; Martin, 2006). It is this work I wish to contribute to, by offering a way of thinking about—and teaching—leadership through a philosophical lens.

Over the years I have become more interested in phenomenology, from both an existential and hermeneutical perspective, because of its concern with who we are in our everyday experience. Briefly, Husserl's work (e.g. 1913/1998) on

transcendental phenomenology was concerned with how things appear to us in our perception or imagination; with studying *essence* by *bracketing experience*, for example, examining the structure and properties of consciousness while suspending questions about the nature of the world. What this essentially means is that we take the issue we are studying out of its immediate context and study how it operates. So Husserl's phenomenology involved studying 'being' and 'consciousness' as processes separate from the world. His ideas provided inspiration for a number of scholars, who went on to develop various orientations of phenomenology. Sartre's work is often regarded as the cornerstone of existential phenomenology, both he and Merleau-Ponty rejected bracketing in favour of examining who we are *in lived experience*. While Ricoeur is particularly concerned with a hermeneutical perspective in which our lives and our selves are an 'unending work of interpretation' (1992: 179). I will expand on these ideas as a basis for examining their implications for leadership. What follows is an identification of some key themes in phenomenology, to help situate the philosopher leader metaphor. For a more general review of phenomenological thinking and leadership, see Ashman (2007) and Lawler (2005).

At the core of existential phenomenology lies the rejection of essentialism (albeit to varying degrees) and an examination of how we come to know the world and ourselves, the nature of our experience and what it means to *be* in the world. Sartre (1956/2001) suggests that *Being* is becoming, that human nature is not fixed: at first we are nothing and we make ourselves who we are by imagining who we will be. Thus, we are 'condemned to be free' (p. 529) because we are responsible for making choices about who we are and what to do—and in those choices lie both uncertainties and opportunities to realize our being. An awareness of these opportunities and possibilities constitutes one aspect of *being*, that is *being-for-itself*—a self-conscious reflective person. A second aspect*, being-in-itself,* Sartre claims just *is*—is our lives, who we are, non-conscious, and acting instinctively. A third aspect, *non-being* or *nothingness* (p. 21), is not just about our finitude, but also about an absence, a separation, a negation (in part saying no to something) in which the denial depends on the thing that is to be denied. Sartre (1956/2001: 31–2) captures the relationship between being and nothingness when he states that I am not the self I will be, because

- I am separated from that self by time,
- what I am now is not the foundation of what I will be, and
- there is nothing that can determine exactly what I will become.

In other words, the self *I am* depends on the self *I am not,* because I am defined both by what I am not and what I could be. But the self *I am not* does not depend on the self *I am,* because there are infinite possibilities and choices in between. What we can draw from this notion of being is that *who we are* is always open, emergent, imaginative, and that who we are is both self-reflectively as well as pre-reflectively embedded in the phenomenological moment of experience.

All of this personal history may seem excessive in a paper intended to analyse one's self as leader, but I have learned that all that we do is initially shaped and oriented by the powerful

experiences of our upbringing, and the questions we learn to ask. My upbringing, all that I rebelled against, and spent decades running from, in fact grounded me in qualities that I now consider to be fundamental to my unique leadership qualities . . . Having initially rejected many of the values that I grew up with, I had the great opportunity to explore my experiences and determine for myself what were those values that resonated with me. That search process involved asking myself questions and sitting in the silence until the answer revealed itself.

Relational Experience and Ethics

Hermeneutic phenomenology addresses the interpretive nature of experience, identity, and awareness. Early hermeneutics is methodologically-oriented, associated with the interpretation of texts. Heidegger, in a radical departure from Husserl's ideas of a transcendental ego, shifted the focus to an ontological concern for our mode of being: what it means to be human living in the world. He argued that, 'the first concern in the question of Being must be an analysis of *Dasein'* [my italics] (Heidegger, 1962/1993: 59), which is not an analysis through categories, but through interpretation of our *average everydayness*, our immersion in our world. Dasein also involves choices and possibilities for being ourselves or otherwise: for an authentic or inauthentic existence. Ricoeur (1992) later extended Heidegger's notion of Dasein, suggesting that *otherness* mediates between self and the world—not just an other person separate from us, but an other that is an integral part of who we are. Ricoeur suggests this takes the form of our bodily experience, our inseparableness from others, and the otherness of conscience—not a singular conscience of my own being but emerging as we are called to respond to others and attest to our accountability for our actions. Together, the existential focus on individual responsibility and the hermeneutic emphasis of self always in relation to other can offer a way of reframing leadership, as I will explain in the discussion of the philosopher leader.

This phenomenological way of understanding who we are, connects with leadership in two particular ways: First in the area of self and ethics. As the epigraph quotation from Sartre states, existentialism brings with it a need to accept responsibility for ourselves, for our actions, and for others. This shifts attention away from heroic, transactional, and transformational versions of leadership, which operate from managerialist and often ego-centric assumptions (Heifetz, 1994), to the notion of leadership as moral responsibility and ethical choices. Ashman and Winstanley claim existentialism is particularly relevant to business ethics because it emphasizes concrete experience, individual choice, and absence (what is not done) rather than a 'macrolevel justification of economic systems' and abstract, universal ethical doctrines (2006: 225). Because existential ethics places responsibility squarely on individuals for their actions, it is criticized as being relativist (because action is based on individual rather than universal norms) and ignoring any collective responsibility—a criticism also levied against Aristotelian-based virtue ethics, which emphasizes individual character traits. I suggest this is where hermeneutic phenomenology can add another dimension—particularly through the work of Merleau-Ponty (1962, 1964) and Ricoeur (1992). They suggest that we cannot put aside (*bracket*) our surroundings and focus

purely on the individual because we are intersubjective, embodied beings and, particularly for Ricoeur, moral selves embracing the ethical intention of living a good life with others. I will explore this further in the discussion of leadership as a moral activity.

Which leads me to the remaining leadership attribute that I embody, which is a basic liking for people, and a general idea of the good intentions of those I encounter. I like most people, and I am interested in them—how they think, what inspires them, what makes them tick. I have wide networks of relationships varying from intimate friendships to enjoyable community contacts that bring a great deal of delight to my life. I like bringing people together, and making connections between people. In that regard, I naturally express the relational aspects of leadership.

Reflexivity and the Critical Leader

The second phenomenological connection with leadership is reflection: Sartre's *being-for-itself* and Ricoeur's emphasis of the *primacy of reflective mediation* in self-understanding—is paralleled in the identification of self-reflection as integral to effective leadership (Drucker, 1999; Gosling and Mintzberg, 2006; Heifetz, 1994; Raelin, 2003). Many leadership programmes encourage self-reflection, usually based on personality and leadership instruments that provide generalized categories (introvert/extrovert, people or task oriented, transformative or transactional and so on) against which we can compare ourselves. And here lies a fundamental difference with phenomenology, because Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur suggest that thinking about ourselves purely in terms of external referents strips us of our humanness, turns us into objects, removes us from lived experience, and thus removes any sense of responsibility. Ricoeur, for example, sees reflection as self-interpretation not categorization. I suggest this self-interpretation involves talking from within, not categorizing from without. It means reflexively questioning my assumptions and actions.

I deeply believed that effective leaders had to think and act like the military commanders and sports heroes I saw on television. They were cultural management leaders . . . Being self-critical was dangerous and a path to failure I thought. I also expected my staff to act just like the supporting characters I saw in the movies. No matter what decision I made, my staff was expected to be loyal, trust my judgment, and carry out my wishes without question . . . In my view, strong leaders brought success (and glory) to their organization and to all their devoted followers and I sold that image to my staff . . . We were the heroic few against the overwhelming hordes bent on our destruction. How glorious our plight seemed to be! How blind we really were! . . . As a leader, I had fallen into a trap where I withdrew inwardly and began to rely more and more on my limited and skewed personal knowledge rather than opening up to the deteriorating conditions around me . . . I blamed the new manager for my leadership shortcomings. I failed to grasp that I was retreating into defensive reasoning and my own doom loop (Argyris, 1991). Nothing was my fault.

Self-reflection is also underscored in the notion of *authentic leadership*, which has gained popularity in the last five years or so (as evidenced by a special issue on

the topic in *Leadership Quarterly*, June 2005). In leadership studies, authenticity is seen as improving profits and sustainable growth through self-awareness, self-development, leading through values, being passionate about your purpose, leading with heart and head, and being yourself (George, 2003; George et al., 2007; Goffee and Jones, 2005). In this context, authenticity is rarely attributed to phenomenology (Jackson, 2005 and Sparrowe, 2005 being notable exceptions). From a phenomenological perspective, authenticity is about understanding, being responsible, and being true to ourselves in relation to the pressures and influences around us.

Does Phenomenology Offer a Critical Perspective?

What makes this a critical approach to teaching leadership? After all, there is no explicit critique of managerialism, there is even an underlying assumption that leadership—of some form—is OK. Phenomenology and relationally-responsive social constructionism are not part of critical theory, nor are they necessarily inherently critical. My start point is that an understanding of the issues and problems addressed by philosophy (and most managers in the USA have not been exposed to these) forms a basis for thinking differently about ourselves and our experience. It is this different way of thinking about social and organizational life as emergent, socially constructed, and inherently ideological and political, that encourages us to challenge taken-for-granted organizational realities, places upon us a responsibility for relationships with others, and forms the genesis for alternative realities. One of my main interests in CMS, and one that I believe is central to the notion of the philosopher leader, is that of reflexivity. As I will elaborate later in the article, I suggest this incorporates both *self-reflexivity* and *critical-reflexivity*. The former draws on philosophy to:

- question our ways of being and acting in the world
- question our ways of making sense of our lived experience, and
- examine the issues involved in acting responsibly and ethically.

Critical-reflexivity draws from critical theory, poststructural, and postmodern commitments to unsettle the assumptions underlying textual, theoretical and ideological positions as a basis for thinking more critically about social and organizational policies and practice.

In addition, I have always worked from the premise that being 'critical' and changing practices, structures, or systems, occurs from within, and not necessarily because of an external critique that I can easily rationalize as being irrelevant or mistaken. As Ashcraft and Allen argue in their article in this issue, most scholars (including ourselves) teach critical insights about power and organizations 'out there', without a critique of institutional politics 'in here', especially of politics at work in their own teaching labour. If, as academics, we are so reluctant to enact our own criticality, then why should we expect leaders and managers to respond to a confrontation by a 'comfortable academic' to challenge the very system they (and we) are part of? So what might a phenomenologically-inspired view of leadership look like?

The Philosopher Leader

> The basic practical-moral problem in life is not what *to do*, but *what kind of person* to be.
> (Shotter and Cunliffe, 2002: 20)

While I find the phenomenological notion of the *essence* of phenomena and the bracketing of existence problematic, an existential/hermeneutic orientation, tempered by what I have elsewhere outlined as relationally-responsive social constructionism (Cunliffe, 2008), offers a different way of thinking about leadership that resonates with managers on my courses. The quotation at the beginning of this section offers a useful start point because it raises a number of issues that can be explored in class. Knowing who we are means recognizing that we, with others, are the authors of our social and organizational realities, identities and sense of self. Therefore, more practical forms of understanding and of knowledge become relevant, rather than the abstracted empiricism typical of normative knowledge (Mills, 1940).

The central idea—that if we know *who to be,* then *what to do* falls into place— forms a basis for discussion about how we understand our world, how to *be* in the world, how we bring who we are to what we do, and how we can act in ethical ways. The notion of the *Philosopher Leader* provides a metaphor for pulling together such threads (see Figure 1). While the three threads of relationality, moral activity and reflexivity can be discussed separately, in this way of thinking about leadership they are inevitably and irrevocably entwined: *Ethical and moral action are embedded in a relational understanding, and enacted through self- and critical-reflexivity.*

Before moving on to explain the three threads, let me first raise my own reflexive concern about using the term 'philosopher leader'—and it is a concern for which I have no answer. I acknowledge that the term 'philosopher leader' can be criticized as potentially misleading, because it gives a false impression that this

Figure 1   Philosopher leader: the three threads
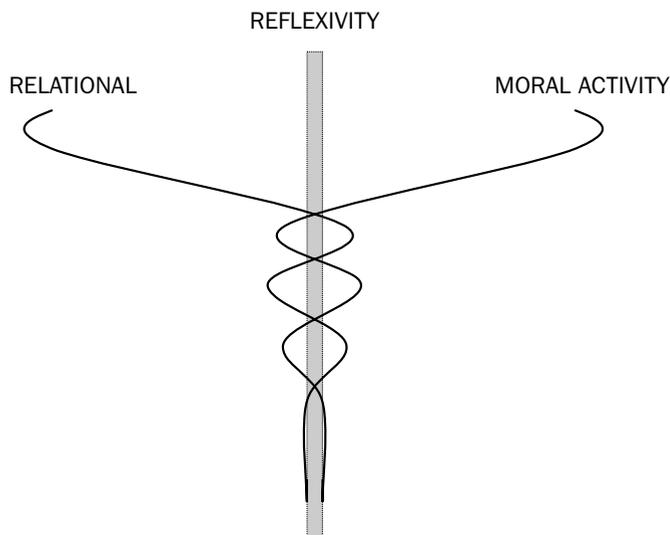
is an individualistic and objectified conceptualization of leadership. And while the phenomenological concern for self-reflection may exacerbate this impression, I would like to emphasize that I am advocating a relational, reflexive and situated approach in which self is always in-relation to, and ethically-responsible for, others. I am also uncomfortable with the connotations that the term 'leader' has in terms of legitimacies and power relationships. Because language is important to me, I have struggled with finding a more appropriate way of talking about this approach to leading organizations. In class we discuss issues of language, relationality and power as a means of unpacking conventional assumptions about leadership; but the problem still remains—what to call this approach? Relational leading? One of the article's reviewers came closest to encapsulating my intent by talking of the 'philosopher leader' as a metaphor 'for examining the interrelatedness of the emergent relational, ethical and reflexive' nature of this approach. I can live with that for the time being!—with the caveat that this reflexive concern be a central issue of any classroom discussion.

Leadership as Relational

> The solitude from which we emerge to intersubjective life is not that of the monad. It is only the haze of an anonymous life that separates us from being; and the barrier between us and others is impalpable . . . The constitution of others does not come after that of the body; others and my body are born together from the original ecstasy. (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 174)

While Figure 1 might give the impression that leadership is about an individual self, this is not so—we are always selves-in-relation-to-others. For a number of years I have been interested in what can broadly be termed a social constructionist approach to research (e.g. Cunliffe, 2001, 2003), and in exploring the implications for teaching (Cunliffe, 2002, 2004; Cunliffe and Jun, 2005). More recently I have refined my notion of social constructionism to embrace a more relational orientation (Cunliffe, 2008). We do not live in isolation: if we accept the notion that we create our social and organizational realities with others in our everyday interactions and conversations, then we are always a self-in-relation-to-others, living in, shaping and shaped by a web of relationships (Geertz, 1973).

I am an offspring of a very traditional Indian Tribe commonly known as ____ Pueblo. We engage in many traditions on a regular basis, individually and collectively . . . In the absence of lived experience, Chatterjee (1998) claims that traditions get reduced to empty shells of mindless rules. One basic human value that arises from the practice of these traditions is to provide for the well-being of all people, not just for the members of our tribe. This respect for the basic human value leads to what Chatterjee calls fostering unity in diversity. As a leader, one needs to foster unity in diversity, and I believe I can bring unity of spirit to an organization. I can accomplish this by recognizing the differences that other members in our organization have. Each one of us has different strengths that can be shared.

Merleau-Ponty (1964: 109) argues that such an understanding brings with it a new idea of truth, one that lies in relationships not in the situation. In other

words I cannot blame the situation as being at fault because I have a moral and social responsibility to understand what I can (and should) expect of myself and others. Thus, it is important for leaders to consider *how* they relate to others; what assumptions they hold about people; to understand how others may view the world; and to create opportunities for open dialogue. Escher's famous lithograph of two hands drawing each other is an apt analogy for this relational way of thinking about reality. If we accept the notion of relationality, then it brings a whole new understanding and awareness of how we participate with the world around us.

Leadership as a Moral Activity

> Ethical intention [is] aiming at the 'good life' with and for others, in just institutions. (Ricoeur, 1992: 172)

Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre suggests that as representatives of modern culture and its moral ideals, managers (and leaders) are 'characters' who legitimate a way of being and acting. For MacIntyre, the problem lies in the idea that managers are perceived as engaging in value-neutral activities that are concerned with means rather than ends, with rationality and efficiency. This is reinforced through language that frames people as assets, costs and benefits. As a result, human aspects are ignored as managers (knowingly or otherwise) manipulate others to achieve organizational goals. Executive and business school programmes focusing on knowledge and techniques as a means of offering more efficient ways of achieving goals, maintain this moral fiction. As Ghoshal states, 'By propagating ideologically inspired amoral theories, business schools have actively freed their students from any sense of moral responsibility' (2005: 76). Egocentric and heroic approaches to leadership contribute to this fiction by focusing on confident action rather than moral debate.

My initial role was that of an operations analysis manager. In simpler terms I performed statistical analysis and mathematical modeling to justify the assistant general manager's decisions to reduce workforce and require his management staff to do more with less. In this role I was the essence of bureaucratic rationality 'the rationality of matching means to ends economically and efficiently' (MacIntyre, 1981: 25). Further I can honestly confess that consistent to the character of a manager described by MacIntyre (p. 30) I was not 'engaged in moral debate'. My work was used directly in justifying over 300 layoffs and countless sleepless nights for other managers who had to figure out how to deliver on ever increasing service standards, with higher revenue and transactions while having less labor. While performing this I never concerned myself with the moral implications of such work, rather I took great pride in 'technique, with effectiveness in transforming . . . investment into profits' (MacIntyre, 1981: 30).

Leadership as a moral activity is *not* about business ethics, which tend to be interpreted as having a code of ethics or as training organizational members to act in ethical ways. These are externalized ethics: outside us, *what you do* (i.e. activities), rather than *who you are*. Nor is it just about moral intelligence (Lennick and

Kiel, 2005) or thinking ethically (Maturano, 2005). Rather, moral leadership is tied in with who we are in relation to others, our values, beliefs and 'the will and capacity to empathise with others' (Calori, 2003: 594).

Ricoeur's (1992) work on identity and selfhood offers a way of thinking through these issues. He has a lengthy discussion on the relationship between ethics and the moral norm: relevant because he is concerned with the relationship between self and social morality. Ethics is about self and being able to reflect upon and evaluate whether we are living a good life (i.e. are our actions good?), whereas morality is about social norms, rules, laws, and justice. While he believes ethics are primary, an ethical self is an intersubjective self and therefore we cannot be good in isolation; for Ricoeur, because we live with others, ethical intention passes through moral norms. He also situates ethics as interpersonal, suggesting this means being self-constant, solicitous, sincere, being open to, anticipating and respecting others. Thus ethical selfhood unfolds in a reflexive process of recognizing we are accountable for our self, our actions, and our relationships: That we are trustworthy and able to live a good life with others.

While accountability can be defined many ways, to me accountability is acting on a commitment. Simply put, if I say I am going to do something, I do it. Accountability is also a social contract that is a two-way street . . . As I attempted to fully understand why accountability is so prominent in my behavior, I quickly realized that it is due to its close tie to my personal values system. Fundamentally, I value trust. This includes the ability for others to trust me, as well as my ability to reciprocate and trust others. I believe that gaining and maintaining trust among relationships is the ultimate level for achieving healthy organizational balance. As I dissect the value that I place on trust, I soon realize that the most effective way to gain my trust is to follow through on commitments . . . I have found that my emphasis on it can inadvertently lead to a number of weaknesses . . . I tend to struggle immensely when the same level of accountability is not present in my peers and subordinates. I have difficulty dealing with team members that demonstrate lack of ability to deliver on committed tasks, or that accept tasks that are beyond their capability. I have found that my normal response to these weaknesses includes avoidance of individuals who have exhibited this behavior.

The notion of moral leadership also played through the presentations of a number of the guest speakers on the EMBA course, who talked about the need for integrity, transparency, and of giving back to the community. As one speaker commented:

> without trust, societies and economies fall apart . . . when leaders are not careful with or about the truth, organizations and communities tend towards cynicism, suspicion and a certain loss of morale, which leads to apathy and a loss of engagement in key community processes. (Duffy Swan, President and COO, class presentation 27 July 2007)

Of course Ricoeur's ideas are open to the same critique as virtue ethics, that they are ideals dependent on individual interpretation and enactment. But to reiterate both Duffy Swan's comments and a point made earlier, Ricoeur sees conscience as responding to the voice of the other, with ethical intention being about living well with others, 'I should like to retain only the ethics of reciprocity, of sharing,

of living together' (Ricoeur, 1992: 187). Thus, even though moral selfhood is crucially and primarily important to Ricoeur, it is also a relational and a social morality. And, if we do not recognize that we are first and foremost ethical selves with a moral responsibility for relationships with others, then what impact will universal ethical norms have?

Leadership: Self- and Critical-Reflexivity

Elsewhere (Cunliffe, 2003; Cunliffe and Jun, 2005) I have differentiated self- and critical-reflexivity, arguing that self-reflexivity finds its roots in both phenomenology and social constructionism and critical-reflexivity in critical theory and poststructuralism. Self-reflexivity means recognizing that we shape and are shaped by our social experience, and involves a dialogue-with-self about our fundamental assumptions, values, and ways of interacting: a questioning of our core beliefs, our understanding of particular events, and how these shape our own and others' responses. Through this self-reflexive process we may become responsive to others and open to the possibilities for new ways of being and acting.

Tuesday night, I didn't listen. I was too involved in defending my own position and intent on winning. I knew my pre-conceived notions were correct, it was his fault that he didn't understand them, and I intended to let him know how he had failed me . . . I believe myself to be extremely patient with others, not holding a grudge or blaming others for mistakes, but am confronted with an awful truth of my behavior being exactly the opposite of what I just proclaimed. There can be only one truth, and it is the one that is lived out in my actions and attitudes . . . One of the things that really struck me in the readings was the concept of words. 'All words can be reconverted into silence—they emerge from silence and merge into silence' (Chatterjee, 1998: 106). Words exist for a moment in time, then can never be reclaimed. 'Conversations involve unrepeatable moments which are intimately entwined in our ways of being and relating' (Cunliffe, 2001: 354). Yet, the impact of words can last a lifetime.

Critical-reflexivity means examining and unsettling our assumptions, actions and their impact and, from a broader perspective, what passes as good leadership and management practice. This way of thinking is important, recent corporate scandals have raised questions about the nature of ethical action and the pressures that leaders and managers face when trying to act in morally responsible ways. Critical-reflexivity offers a way of surfacing these pressures by encouraging us to do the following:

• To examine underlying assumptions that there is one rational way of managing organizations and that decisions can be justified solely on the basis of efficiency and profit.
• To examine 'normal' strategies, policies, programmes, and organizational practices as a basis for understanding how and why they might impact on people and exclude them from active participation in organizational life.

- To recognize the need to consider competing interests in decision making and governance processes, as a means of constructing more collaborative and inclusive forms of reality.
- To encourage organizational members to question their assumptions and actions and their impact on the organization and the community at large.
- To act in more responsive ways and engage in dialogue that is critical and open.

Conclusion

A philosophical understanding can form the basis for understanding and thinking about leadership from a different perspective, and it can also form the basis for leading organizations differently. This is not just about thinking outside the box, but engaging with the issues outlined in this article: questioning the nature of social and organizational realities, thinking about the type of institutions we want to create and be a part of, and seeing the future as one of infinite possibilities. The philosopher leader thinks differently, asking: What is important? What if we think about organizations, leadership, and ethics in this way rather than that? Where will it take us?

For most of us, open bodies of water are two dimensional, and the qualities we see in the water are reflections from the light source over our shoulder. The reflections of a lake's surface are aesthetically appealing and it is a good thing to take in the view. It is another thing to take that deep dive under the surface and swim to where it is dark.

One value of this course for me was reaching the understanding that if one intends to be seriously reflexive, the who must precede the what.

Returning to the lake for a moment, it is just like diving. When you first swim after a lay off you just cannot hold your breath well enough to stay down long, and it is difficult to stay oriented under the water. After some repeated attempts, and with some considerable effort, you can go deeper and stay there longer, and the orientation begins to come naturally. So I believe it is in practicing self and critically-reflexive thinking. Then there is the matter of bringing your own light with you, so that you can see more than just shapes in the dark. I have high hopes and few fears that my fresh investment in my personal beliefs and my understanding of psychology will pay off.

References

Alvesson, M. and Deetz, S. (2000) *Doing Critical Management Research.* London: SAGE.

Argyris, C. (1991) 'Teaching Smart People How to Learn', *Harvard Business Review* 69(3): 99–109.

Ashman, I. (2007) 'Existentialism and Leadership: A Response to John Lawler with Some Further Thoughts', *Leadership* 3(1): 91–106.

Ashman, I. and Winstanley, D. (2006) 'Business Ethics and Existentialism', *Business Ethics. A European Review* 15(3): 218–33.

Bakhtin, M. M. (1986/1996) *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (trans. V. W. McGee). Austin: University of Texas Press.

Calori, R. (2003) 'Learning from Diversity: Philosophical Perspectives', *International Review of Sociology* 13(3): 591–605.

Chatterjee, D. (1998) *Leading Consciously: A Pilgrimage Toward Self-Mastery*. Woburn, MA: Butterworth-Heinemann.

Chia, R. and Morgan, S. (1996) 'Educating the Philosopher-manager: De-signing the Times', *Management Learning* 27(1): 37–64.

Cooper, R. and Burrell, G. (1988) 'Modernism, Postmodernism and Organizational Analysis: An Introduction', *Organization Studies* 9(1): 91–112.

Cunliffe, A. L. (2001) 'Managers as Practical Authors: Reconstructing our Understanding of Management Practice', *Journal of Management Studies* 38(3): 351–71.

Cunliffe, A. L. (2002) 'Reflexive Dialogical Practice in Management Learning', *Management Learning* 33(1): 35–61.

Cunliffe, A. L. (2003) 'Reflexive Inquiry in Organization Research: Questions and Possibilities', *Human Relations* 56(8): 983–1003.

Cunliffe A. L. (2004) 'On Becoming a Critically Reflexive Practitioner', *Journal of Management Education* 28(4): 407–26.

Cunliffe, A. L. (2008) 'Orientations to Social Constructionism: Relationally-Responsive Social Constructionism and its Implications for Knowledge and Learning', *Management Learning* 39(2): 123–39.

Cunliffe, A. L. and Jun, J. (2005) 'The Need for Reflexivity in Public Administration', *Administration and Society* 37(2): 225–42.

Drucker, P. (1999) 'Managing Oneself', *Harvard Business Review* (March): 65–74.

Geertz, C. (1973) *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.

George, B. (2003) *Authentic Leadership: Rediscovering the Secrets to Creating Lasting Value*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

George, B., Sims, P., McLean, A. N. and Mayer, D. (2007) 'Discovering your Authentic Leadership', *Harvard Business Review* (February): 129–38.

Ghoshal, S. (2005) 'Bad Management Theories Are Destroying Good Management Practices', *Academy of Management Learning and Education* 4(1): 75–91.

Goffee, R. and Jones, G. (2005) 'Managing Authenticity: The Paradox of Great Leadership', *Harvard Business Review* (December): 87–94.

Gosling, J. (1996) 'Plato on the Education of Managers', in R. French and C. Grey (eds) *Rethinking Management Education*, pp. 152–71. London: SAGE.

Gosling, J. and Mintzberg, H. (2006) 'Management Education As If Both Matter', *Management Learning* 37(4): 419–28.

Grint, K. (2007) 'Learning to Lead: Can Aristotle Help Us Find the Road to Wisdom?', *Leadership* 3(2): 231–46.

Heidegger, M. (1962/1993) *Being and Time*. Reproduced in *Basic Writings: Martin Heidegger* (edited by D. Farrell Krell). London: Routledge.

Heifetz, R. A. (1994) *Leadership Without Easy Answers*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Hendry, J. (2006) 'Educating Managers for Post-bureaucracy: The Role of the Humanities', *Management Learning* 37(3): 267–81.

Husserl, E. (1913/1998) *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*. First Book (trans. F. Kersten). Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers (published 1998).

Jackson, K. T. (2005) 'Towards Authenticity: A Sartrean Perspective on Business Ethics', *Journal of Business Ethics* 58(4): 307–25.

Lawler, J. (2005) 'The Essence of Leadership? Existentialism and Leadership', *Leadership* 1(2): 215–31.

Lennick, D. and Kiel, F. (2005) *Moral Intelligence: Enhancing Business Performance and Leadership Success*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Wharton School Publishing.

MacIntyre, A. (1981) *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory.* Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

Martin, M. W. (2006) 'Moral Creativity', *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 20(1): 55–66.

Maturano, A. (2005) 'Executive Education: On Being A Moral Agent: Teaching Business Leaders to Think Ethically', *European Business Forum* 20 (Winter): 68.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962) *Phenomenology of Perception* (trans. C. Smith). London and New York: Routledge. (Reprinted 2004).

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1964) *Signs* (trans. R. C. McCleary). Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Mills, C. W. (1940) 'Situated Actions and Vocabularies of Motives', *American Sociological Review* 5(6): 904–13.

Raelin, J. (2003) *Creating Leaderful Organizations: How to Bring Out Leadership in Everyone.* New York: Berrett-Koehler.

Rice, J. H. (1960) 'Existentialism for the Businessman', *Harvard Business Review* 38(2): 135–43.

Ricoeur, P. (1992) *Oneself as Another* (trans. K. Blamey). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Sartre, J-P. (1956/2001) *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology.* New York, NY: Citadel Press, Kensington Publishing.

Sartre J-P. (1965/1993) *Essays in Existentialism.* New York, NY: Citadel Press, Kensington Publishing.

Shotter, J. and Cunliffe, A. L. (2002) 'Managers as Practical Authors: Everyday Conversations for Action', in D. Holman and R. Thorpe (eds) *Management and Language: The Manager as Practical Author,* pp. 15–37. London: SAGE.

Sparrowe, R. T. (2005) 'Authentic Leadership and the Narrative Self', *Leadership Quarterly* 16(3): 419–39.

Contact Address

Ann L. Cunliffe is at the Business School, University of Hull, Hull, HU6 7RX, UK. [email: a.cunliffe@hull.ac.uk]