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A critical evaluation of “paradoxical” leadership: (new) natural law theory, Aristotelian “heresy” and the mending of nominalist bifurcations

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, I evaluate the theory that leadership ought to be “paradoxical”, meaning that leaders should embrace contradictions and incoherent norms. The idea of a paradoxical practice is trending in both education leadership and policy studies (as well as in business leadership studies), but in fact the literature on education (in Singapore and elsewhere) suggests that this is not helpful for arresting the terrors of performativity, and that there are examples of high performing education systems flourishing better through being consistent with core values. I detail how paradoxical leadership makes it difficult for defending ethical practice and how their rejection and shaming of the Aristotelian principle of non-contradiction risks effecting a woke culture that represses criticality. I argue that all this is part of an ongoing nominalist trend (the bifurcation between nature and thinking) in the history of ideas, only that we are at a philosophical tipping point. I explore the alternative, which takes contradictions seriously and irons out inconsistencies, and pre-empt objections internal to the Aristotelian tradition, and also offer an interpretation of James March’s influential theory of leadership to show that if read carefully, the theory does not fit well with the paradoxes approach.

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Dialecticians say that contradictions are fruitful, or fertile, or productive of progress, and we have admitted that this is, in a sense, true. It is true, however, only so long as we are determined not to put up with contradictions, and to change any theory which involves contradictions; in other words never to accept a contradiction: it is solely due to this determination of ours that criticism, i.e., the pointing out of contradictions, induces us to change our theories, and thereby to progress.

–Karl Popper, *What is Dialectic?*

Ex Falso Quodlibet: one who affirms the self-contradictory false will say anything he wishes.

–*Principle of Scholastic Logic*

Introduction: “paradoxical leadership”

In this essay, I evaluate the theory that leadership ought to be “paradoxical”, meaning that leaders should embrace contradictions and incoherent norms. The idea of a paradoxical practice is trending in both education leadership and policy (as well as in business leadership studies), but in fact the literature on education (in Singapore and elsewhere) suggests that this is not helpful for arresting the terrors of performativity, and that there are examples of high performing education systems flourishing better through being consistent with core values. I detail how paradoxical leadership makes it difficult for defending ethical practice and how their rejection and shaming of the Aristotelian principle of non-contradiction risks effecting a woke culture that represses criticality. I argue that all this is part of an ongoing nominalist trend (the bifurcation between nature and thinking) in the history of ideas, only that we are at a philosophical tipping point. I explore the alternative, which takes contradictions seriously and irons out inconsistencies, and pre-empt objections internal to the Aristotelian tradition, and also offer an interpretation James March’s influential theory of leadership to show that if read carefully, the theory in its best interpretation does not fit well with the paradoxes approach.

The suggestion that good leadership is paradoxical has gained traction. A representative account of that is Smith, W et al., in *Harvard Business Review* (2016), which argues that good leadership welcomes and absorbs contradictions rather than seeks to realize a coherent account of practice by resolving these contradictions. Paradoxical leadership is also celebrated as the operating policy governing business practices in “successful” Chinese enterprises (Qiang et al., 2023).

Now it is one thing to say, as a matter of empirical fact, that most leaders are paradoxical – this leaves open the question whether that is a good thing. But the *evaluative* claim made here seems to be that paradoxical leadership is good and desirable. Again, a good leader can be said to be “paradoxical” in the sense that (a) when appearing to aim for *x*, he cleverly achieves *not-x*, and it turns out that *not-x* is a desirable outcome; there is no self-contradiction in this case and here it is more of an irony than it is a “paradox”. In an *equivocal* sense, one may speak of (b) good, paradoxical leadership as intending *y* and *not-y*, and welcoming that contradiction, and it is *this sense* that the literature promotes paradoxical leadership (see Ng, 2017; Smith et al., 2023). So, it is this latter sense (b) that we are discussing in this essay and I point out some issues with it.

Some of that fascination with paradoxes appears also to have fed into the educational policy field and has been deployed to characterize a normative policy framework for education policy thinking at the national level, and thus, for systemic educational leadership, say in Pak Tee Ng’s internationally best selling and (still) touring *The Power of Paradoxes: Learning from Singapore* (2017), although this has already been met with reservation by Jude Chua, Trivina Kang and Jose Clavel (in Ng & Chua, 2023). Ng’s “historical” narrative, in principle abstractable from the “paradoxes” framework, still is an interesting read. Once so abstracted, what remains is a rather select narrative of paradoxical pseudo-tensions that do not require resolution in the first instance, maybe because the adoption of and distraction by the “paradoxes” frame entails that one is fine with letting undiscovered contradictions lie, and hence, that one is not primarily concerned with *exhaustively* exposing truly problematic tensions in order to resolve them, and/or else possibly because, having downplayed contradictions, what follows is the failure to engage with educational policy literature that had recurrently highlighted the real risks of contradictory tensions between performativity and the achievement of a broad spectrum of desirable educational goals (for just a mere sample, see Appel, 2019; Ball, 2000, 2003, 2016; Chua, 2009b; Hardy & Lewis, 2016; Holloway & Brass, 2017; Jeffrey, 2002; Lingard & Sellar, 2013; Moore & Clarke, 2016; Open Letter to Andreas Schleicher, OECD, Paris, 2014; Perryman, 2006; Perryman & Calvert, 2019; Sullivan et al., 2020), and hence the narrative appears to have been blind-sighted of contradictory tensions between performative practices and desirable educational goals and states of affairs and consequently of important *responsive policy struggles ironing out such contradictions* internal to the high performing system (see Ng, 2017; contrast Chua, Kang and Clavel in Ng & Chua, 2023). This skirting gap, perhaps rather unwittingly steered by theoretical choices at

the level of first principles, as explained above, nevertheless gives the appearance of the corroboration of the “paradoxes framework” when the complete set of the data-narrative is vignettised and so colludes with the peddling of the “paradoxes” approach for international policy borrowing, and is worrying given especially the conceptual risks (see below) magnified by its international travel; it can nevertheless be easily rectified by the intelligent and discerning audiences’ reading of the complementary discussion by Jude Chua, Trivina Kang & Jose Clavel (in Ng & Chua, 2023) which seeks to offer a narrative in its greater entirety and to un-prevaricatingly address the glaring charge of the threat of neoliberal performativity in both the Singapore system and elsewhere, which the literature (esp. British and Australian education sociology) consistently worries cannot but be instantiated in (aspiring) high performing education systems, and which when uncritically replicated through international policy borrowing can lead to subterfuge and harms to children and the teaching profession throughout the education system, as their discussion of the case with the English system suggests. They point out: as a matter of historical fact, there was indeed a perceived and self-confessed performativity that was grasped to be in tension with the MOE’s policy desire to accommodate or effectively achieve a broader range of educational objectives, and so rightly repented of in a fitting and prudent policy “turn” as early as 2011 or before, preceding the similar English “turn” circa 2021 by a decade. This also appears to suggest that the Ministry’s policy *modus operandi* is not always the paradoxical embrace of contradictions, but rather one that decides to reject practices in conflict with valued principles, and *this* principled “policy prudence” (or else, “phronetic” leadership or policy deliberation) also seems rather admirable and imitable.

In their engagement with Ng’s deployment of the paradoxes framework, Chua, Kang and Clavel (in Ng & Chua, 2023) were willing to restrict their objections to the use of the paradoxes frame for *specific education* policy tensions – specifically in relation to the terrors of performativity and other non-performative goals – and to reserve judgement on the wider use of the paradoxes (leadership or policy) frame for other education policy phenomena. But I now think it is also possible and important to develop a more *general* objection to the utility of any “paradoxes leadership” approach, to expose its problematic deployment for any and every relevant professional scenario, thus for leadership and organizational theorizing more broadly.

To be fair, there is much to that suggestion that repays attention: quite often a leader is pulled in a handful of different directions, and many of these may seem to or actually conflict, and the dogged and dogmatic blinkering of one of the two conflicting intentions in the name of coherence can appear to be a kind of foolhardy failure to address a complex scenario and to engage with a plurality of important needs. At the same time, the talk of leadership as a “paradoxical” practice is not helpful. In the end, as I will suggest, there seems no benign way to interpret “paradoxical” leadership.

Against “leadership positivism”

Firstly, an account of paradoxical leadership leans in the direction of a kind of leadership “positivism” insofar as the discourse typically abstains from explicitly articulating what are practically reasonable and practically *unreasonable* precepts, and so is blind to practically unreasonable courses of leadership actions when it absorbs both practically reasonable *and* practically unreasonable precepts when welcoming mutually contradictory practical intentions or courses of actions. This absence of an account of what are practically reasonable and unreasonable intentions and courses of actions can be a serious problem; it entails that there is “no necessary connexion between leadership and morality”, to borrow a phrase in jurisprudence deployed by legal positivists (see H. L. A. Hart, 1961), and that some leadership intentions and precepts, welcomed as constitutive of good leadership actions, can in fact be immoral actions. As an account of what good leadership is, it would seem to lack criticality, because it will sanction ethical compromises a leader makes.

Of course, for the “paradoxes leadership theorist”, this issue might be quite unintelligible if he is a moral relativist, and so the distinction between the practically reasonable and *unreasonable* is for him not a distinction between the ethically right and the ethically wrong, but

a distinction between two different courses of actions both to be welcomed. But for those of us in the know, the identification of the practically un-reasonable entails an obligation to avoid these courses of actions, and the following through of these actions are in fact leadership failures, and hence are poorer instantiations of what we truly mean by “leadership”. Now, “leadership” failures instantiated by immoral decisions are still, of course, what one would refer to as “leadership”, and we are not so naïve as to say that these are not “leaders” in charge. Thus, Adolf Hitler was a “leader” even if he was clearly an evil man, “leading” an absolutely depraved, evil, Nazi regime; we would say, he was their “leader”. But we would use the phrase somewhat uncomfortably and would add that there are “leaders” and there are “leaders” – meaning that there are leaders of differing qualities along the spectrum of instantiations of that semiotic *representamen* (sign vehicle), and some are theoretically better, more befitting of the concept, more correct essentially, share more of the core meaning (*ratio*) of the idea ... than others (Chua, 2013). The parallel to this is of course the phrase “an unjust law is not a law” – obviously we are still referring to any immoral legal precept as a “law” albeit unjust but it is not “law” in its most important and defensible sense (see Finnis, 1980). Similarly, our theory of leadership would say, “an unjust leader is not a leader” – meaning that such a “leader” is not a leader in its most defensible sense.

But the point is to capture, deploy and be steered by a “truest” sense of leadership, which further differentiates the unethical leader from the ethical leader, and therefore, a discussion of leadership needs to be accompanied by a serious discussion of what ought and what *ought not* be done, sought, planned for, rallied towards, followed, determined into policy ...

“Leadership” that matters: the focal meaning

In other words, borrowing what the eminent natural law theorist John Finnis in *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (1980) had done for jurisprudence and applying it to “leadership studies” would be helpful. There, Finnis argues that we ought to develop a *focal meaning* or *central case* (what we had been calling a “truest”, most “fitting”, most “correct” ... account) of a concept that captures the meaning that most matters or is most important, even if the conventional understanding of that meaning can be much broader. In this regard, Finnis was influenced by Aquinas’ reception of Aristotle’s study of “friendship” and the manner in which Aristotle privileged some definitions insofar as these accorded better with the just disposition of a friend to always seek to do good to another, even though there were other (analogical) accounts of how “friends” might relate one with another, such as, in ways that are primarily self-interested or merely instrumental (Finnis, 1980, p. 11, 1998, p. 43). So, appropriated into the philosophy of law, Finnis suggested that although the word “law” may in some conventional circles broadly include rules or precepts that are in fact immoral precepts (as rightly pointed out by “legal positivism”), a focal meaning of “law” would include only those precepts that are consistent with moral principles assuming that what most matters are those values and behaviours that ethical principles prescribe or point to, and therefore, those laws that cohere with, relate with and enable coordination to secure and promote these important goals and behaviours would be included in such a focal meaning, and others that do not or frustrate the achievement of these important goods and behaviours will be excluded. Similarly, if we think that leaders who accord with ethical ideals are more important, and leaders who are complicit in unethical behaviours are less so perhaps because unethical behaviours actually corrupt, pervert or frustrate the protection and achievement of important goods and values in the organization, then we would include only the former in such a focal meaning of “leadership”. But if a focal meaning of leadership sets in the periphery unethical leaders, then immediately “paradoxical leadership” needs to be characterized as something in the corrupted periphery by saying that any focal meaning of leadership ought to exclude the paradoxical accommodation of the unethical, practically unreasonable.

The moral principles of practical reasonableness and their exclusions

Now, assuming there was such a focal meaning of “leadership” that would be *informed* by a “realist” ethical theory, what might it look like, more concretely? This entails asking: What are the moral or ethical principles and what in turn are opposed and hence to be excluded as immoral or unethical for a “leader” in the focal meaning? Or, fully synonymously: what are the principles of practical *reasonableness* that we can “prudently” (c.f. Latin: “*prudentia*”) or “phronetically” (c.f. Greek: “*phronesis*”) infer from the self-evident first principles of practical reasons, and what in turn are the practically *unreasonable* intentions inconsistent with the practically reasonable precepts and that must thus be *rejected* for “leadership” in its central case? It will not be possible to list every moral precept and its opposite, even less for every leadership context. However, it is possible to surface a sample as a point of departure for further discussion, deliberation and development. Of use, perhaps, is this a very tight reflection on the limitations of *and on* consequentialist (“neoliberal”, in that unhappy sense used in left leaning sociology, “market”) thinking by (several of) the principles of practical reasonableness in John Finnis’ *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (1980, pp. 111–112). I quote at length:

This sixth requirement, [viz., THE (LIMITED) RELEVANCE OF CONSEQUENCES: EFFICIENCY WITHIN REASON] . . . is the requirement that one bring about good in the world (in one’s own life and the life of others) by actions that are efficient for their (reasonable) purpose(s). One must not waste one’s opportunities by using inefficient methods. One’s actions should be judged by their effectiveness, by their fitness for their purpose, by their utility, their consequences . . . Where there is considering of objects or activities in which there is reasonably a market, the market provides a common denominator (currency) and enables a comparison to be made of prices, costs and profits. Where there are alternative techniques or facilities for achieving definite objectives, cost-benefit analysis will make possible a certain range of reasonable comparisons between techniques or facilities. Over a wide range of preferences or wants, it is reasonable for an individual or society to seek to maximize the satisfaction of preferences or wants. But this sixth requirement is only one requirement among a number. The first, second and third requirements require that in seeking to maximize the satisfaction of preferences one should discount the preferences of, for example, sadists (who follow the impulses of the moment, and/or do not respect the value of life, and/or do not universalise their principles of action with impartiality). The first, third, and . . . seventh and eight requirements require the cost benefit analysis be contained within a framework that excludes any project involving certain intentional killings, frauds, manipulations of personality, etc. And the second requirement requires that one recognize that each of the basic aspects of human well-being is equally basic, that none is objectively more important than any of the others, and thus that none can provide a common denominator or single yardstick for assessing the utility of all projects: they are incommensurable, and any calculus of consequences that pretends to commensurate them is irrational. (Finnis, 1980, pp. 111–112)

These rather “decontextualised” principles of practical reasonableness entailing what is unreasonable and thus to be avoided can be very usefully elaborated and developed for leadership contexts where one needs to be “efficient and effective” and be attentive and responsive to “market signals” but nevertheless must *morally* oppose or reject or refuse to . . . (1) conspire and cooperate with tyrannical (organizational or political) leaders serving only their own irrational desires, or those of an arbitrarily select group of preferred familiars . . . (2) participate in marketing fraud, misrepresentation of company data, manipulative abuse of employees in power relations . . . (3) prioritize the terroristic quest for certain “performative” (i.e., only apparently compelling but not truly valuable) proxies that displace – even destructively! – and devalue the relevance of other incommensurable but truly valuable basic goods unsignified or unsignifiable by these proxies, say, bottom-line numbers; all of these which are opposed and rejected (and thus not to be paradoxically accommodated!) are hence practically unreasonable courses of actions and intentions. Of course, further specifications of the practically reasonable to be done and unreasonable to be avoided are possible and, indeed, necessary, depending on what more we can know of the precise contextual considerations where the leaders function. The point is: there are identifiable, *immoral* courses of actions that leaders need to avoid.

Nominalism: Occam, Descartes and sheer madness

But supposing we are now agreed that we need to identify and reject the practically unreasonable in favour only of the practically reasonable, we are confronted with a second problem that frustrates any such identification: a theory of paradoxical leadership “represses” the interrogation of practical precepts for unreasonableness because it is tethered to a psychological theory which presents intuitions uneasy with *possible* and actual contradictions or practical oppositions as a kind of immature psychological state, thus as a kind of psychological dissonance that ought to be ignored (Smith et al., 2023). This means that any aspiration to interrogate decisions, policies and initiatives for unreasonableness is aborted or still born and not allowed to see its critical term.

It is obvious they have an axe to grind with the *Philosophus*, for whatever reason, and thinks Aristotle’s adherence to the principle of non-contradiction problematic. We could quickly point out here that although they explicitly reject only the principle of non-contradiction which governs speculative judgements about factual truths (perhaps a sign of their familiarity with the Aristotelian corpus or lack thereof), their desire to excise any opposition to oppositions, particularly in practical decision-making, must also include a rejection of the first principles of practical reasoning, which commends that we seek what is good and avoid its opposite (bad or evil) and not aim for both. So it is in both senses that we can take their paradoxical welcoming of “contradictions”, i.e., *qua* oppositions both in the speculative and the practical order.

Now none of this is entirely surprising. One recalls Servais Pinckaers OP’s instructive study in his *Sources of Christian Ethics* (1995) of the advent of nominalism, when William of Occam OFM elevated a conception of freedom that entailed how dimensions of our nature, such as our inclinations, would not interfere with the radically autonomous will. As this nominalism trailed into modern philosophy, we see the gradual bifurcation between thinking and nature, as is the case with Rene Descartes who in his *Meditations* (Descartes, 2017, originally 1641) divorced thinking from our bodily nature and from external, teleological, and natural reality. Even then, Descartes was not so boisterous as to reject the principles of reason – after the “deceiving demon” thought experiment in which he proposed the possibility that the basic principles of logic and reason could not be indubitably trusted, he had still sought, *using reason*, thus presupposing the very first principles of reason, to argue for the metaphysical guarantees for our rationality. Those who think he was guilty of a “Cartesian circle” would say he argued fallaciously, that he had deployed the very logical tools he had just de-commissioned. Perhaps. But in persisting fallaciously he had ironically remained committed to reasons; at least he still *wanted* to accord with reason, even if he was in principle not entitled to. But today we are dealing with something that is a new category of irrationality. We no longer even *want* to be rational. We are therefore at the tipping point of un-reason-able, wild, unruly, hyperbolic nominalist wilfulness, a kind of psychological descent into the embrace of *both good and evil*.

Organizational woke

It is well known that the rejection of the principle of non-contradiction presents some obvious difficulties for civil, intelligible discourse, because truth and falsehood are now both simultaneously affirmed of every statement – difficulties that we ought to assume our paradoxical leadership theorists to be familiar with. So clearly our paradoxes theorists are way past that; they are quite willing to entertain a kind of schizophrenia in the interest not of truth so much as for the sake of desirable consequences. There seems to be a post-modern attitude (better: *ultra*-modern attitude) for which what *works* in the midst of the many incommensurable truths – i.e., the performative – trumps. Being comfortable with schizophrenic incoherence works and doing what it takes to get the job done even if there is a little discomfort is precisely that much needed grown-up comportment, to “get on with it”. Thus, when so characterized, moral or logical intuitions experienced as a kind of

uneasiness about a complex practical scenario (i.e., one that is not yet obviously practically unreasonable) and thus inviting and sustaining a project to interrogate the practical reasonableness of a practical scenario are now “juvenile” attitudes unfit for mature leadership comportments, and thus any suspicion of a practical intention that wishes to discern its real ethical status rigorously is now discouraged, because shameful and to be shamed.

This psychological stance has an alarming epistemological consequence, because it appears to want to introduce a kind of “woke culture” into organizational discourse: any attempt to suggest or introduce arguments to shore up practical unreasonableness becomes inevitably offensive and shameful. This almost seems as if an organization in which paradoxical leadership thrives does so through a form of psychological intimidation that *a priori* dismisses critical thinking and discussion, just as any rational dissent is disapproved as a sign that the person is psychologically unfit for leadership.

Acrotres: A mountain summit between valleys

Effectively therefore, and taken together, a paradoxical leadership theory (1) does not identify and exclude the practically unreasonable (whilst it welcomes the practically reasonable), and (2) represses that interrogation of the practical aimed at identifying the practically unreasonable.

Why then the appeal, if any, of paradoxical leadership? A possible intuition, I guess, amongst these paradoxes fans, is the worry that once you do not embrace oppositions, you are deprived of half of the tools in the leadership or management tool box. And that seems, at first glance, to be true. But they forget that not all different tools are opposing tools. Different tools can be coherently deployed. They can be consistently deployed. Meaning, not all differences are oppositions! That leaves you still lots of tools in the box. But if so, then the defence of the paradoxical *qua* welcomed contradictions is an overkill. You do not need to go that far. Just defend the value of *differences*; there is no need to try to accommodate contradictions, which *ipso facto* accommodates both the practically reasonable and the practically unreasonable, the ethical and unethical. And practical contradictions are not just good’s and bad’s – there are such things as contradictory bads, as Aristotle was wont to point out, the excesses and defects between which stands the mean. An appetite for paradoxical contradictions might manifest as the simultaneous appropriation of the vicious extremes. Well, then one is really in trouble. That way you would not even get near the goods. One might wonder if two vices make one virtue, whether the defect sought together with the excess veers you to the mean, as if two hyperboles cancelling out each other and landing you right in the middle. It probably does not. The Aristotelian neo-scholastic, Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange OP compares the mean to a mountain between two valleys: “... the rational happy mean ... is also a summit, in the midst of and above every deviation that may be unreasonable through defect or excess ... Aristotle spoke of *mesotes* (the happy mean) and *acrotres* (the summit)” (Garrigou-Lagrange, 1947, pp. 81–82); if you persist in diving deeper into the valley, you would not end up at the top of the mountain that is for sure. The point is that for Aristotle and his commentator Aquinas, the virtuous mean is not mere “mediocrity”, and that virtue is not just the “watering down” of passionate commitment in both directions, but rather an elevated and thus different category of being. Whereas the mutual “watering down” ends up washed up.

Eutrapelian Phronesis

What about the Aristotelian alternative? Well, instead of embracing the paradoxical, suppose we just adopt the ethical, but exclude the unethical; you are still left with a whole box of tools. So, suppose we feature only the ethical, or what does not contradict the ethical: does it mean consistency? Yes, it does; it does mean you want to “iron out” the contradictory opposites, the bad that is opposed to the good, the practically unreasonable that is opposed to the reasonable. But does this mean that you are therefore stiff, stupid, and stifling? Not at all! It does not follow. You can be good, and *playful*,

fluid, dynamic, changing as needed and calibrating. Aristotle and his commentator Aquinas (1920; originally 1273) called this a virtue: *eutrapelia*. You are *playfully* prudent. You manage different things, and different needs. You avoid the boorish adherence to the status quo, and also the madness of reckless decisions. You aim towards the virtuous mean. But without having to “embrace contradictions”, without being paradoxical. So, after ruling out the wrong, there is still room and space to move: but you are choosing between coherent or incommensurable basic goods, i.e., *options* for free choice, not contradictions. You are also creatively imagining new ways to further the goods you seek – ways that are under-determined by the general precepts. Designers do this all the time, within (ethical) perimeters. Thus the administrative theorist Herbert A. Simon’s (2019) account of the “science of design” speaks of the legitimacy of “style”, given the need for free choice when confronted by incommensurable options for design (Chua, 2016; Simon, 2019). I believe the scholastics called this “*determinatio*”, and John Finnis (1998) has the helpful example of the design of the hospital door which must fulfil certain requirements in order to allow hospital beds to pass, even though the precise measurements are a matter of choice between plausible options. Also, you are realizing one intention at one time, and another intention at another, but you would be strange if you were to do two things that defeated each other, or and especially, directly (intentionally) attacked a basic good, which you ought rather to seek, or do or protect. You would instead cohere your plans – and your habits, your ethos, your principles – towards the final end(s). Is that really a psychologically immature, childish mindset, a residue of persons who had not cut off their apron strings? One would rather have thought that a child who sooner begins to think like that is coming into his own, realizing his nature as a *rational* animal.

“Things abound in significance”: Jacques Maritain et al.

There is one more reason why it is worthwhile to cling to Aristotle’s ideas when thinking about leadership – if anything to further interrogate nominalism’s hold on practical thinking, thus mending the remaining fracture between *thinking and nature*, of which “paradoxical” leadership is merely symptomatic. Even our most determined critic, Martin Heidegger, when guided by his earlier readings of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* (2016), had become attuned to the manifesting-presencing (*anwesen; phainesthai*) of all things. Though Heidegger persisted in blaming Aristotle for forgetting the dynamic presencing of beings and for viewing beings as thing-ly substances (*ousia*) with a kind of static, constant presence, arguably, Heidegger was sensitive to and acknowledged that the Philosopher’s culminating teaching in *Metaphysics, Theta 10*, was that “being is true”, not in the logical and propositional sense, not in the mind’s judgement, but on the side of things, in the metaphysical sense of “truth-ing”, of manifestation (see Capobianco, 2014). He called this the originary Greek experience – although it is certainly not exclusive to the Greeks, but is ongoingly experienced by all of us who are arrested and astonished by beautiful, natural landscapes, by dusk and dawn, by life, its becoming movedness (*kinesis*) and emergence and passing away, in the country and within the city.

Anecdotes abound. Such as: in Jacques Maritain’s *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (2023). After having explained that poetic intuition is to be distinguished from other forms of cognitive acts insofar as it is “non-conceptual” and thus does not grasp or think the “essence”, Maritain points out how this intuition grasps and attends to the “existence” of things, an “existence” that is not mere fact, but which abounds in significance:

Poetic intuition makes things which it grasps diaphanous and alive, and populated with infinite horizons. As grasped by poetic knowledge, *things abound in significance, and swarm with meanings*. Things are not only what they are. They ceaselessly pass beyond themselves, and give more than they have, because from all sides they are permeated by the activating influx of the Prime Cause. (Maritain, 2023, pp. 126–7; also see; Sweeney, 1997, pp. 590–591)

Now, not everyone may agree with Maritain's peculiar neo-Thomistic epistemology for which there are non-conceptual intuitions. And Heidegger will surely object to the reference to the "Prime Cause". Yet, what Maritain, we ourselves and others (including Heidegger and Aristotle possibly ...) experienced is the Greek experience, with its grounding empirical veracity, prior to theoretical interpretation. The point is: the panorama of the natural world around us, which includes ourselves, is never inert. The dynamic emergence and passing away of all that constitutes this panorama, the Greeks called *physis* (nature). Heidegger calls this *Being*, referring this to the presencing of beings, rather than the "being-ness" (in Heideggerian jargon) or what-ness of beings. Being-*physis* is relational; it truly addresses us. Most crucially, Being-*physis* addresses us as phenomena that "abounds with significance" – and this time, as said by Capobianco (2014, p. 49), without any reference to or knowledge of Maritain. And we, for our part, are not always unresponsive to its address, nor uncomported to think its significance: we are thus awed, astonished, or stunned. The Greeks called this comportment *thaumazein* or "wonder". Such wonder is an occasion for ethical consciousness raising.

A practical comportment: thinking of all that matters

Because: comportments and their ripple effects are fluid and do not stay easily within perimetered boundaries nor remain within the specific questions or themes marked out with analytic precision. As Being-*physis* presences as *itself* mattering, we are comported to think more generally of "mattering" itself, and in that mood, to enquire after what (else) it is that matters. It is akin to what happens when one views a piece of art of some import – how that view is able to invite the larger question of "importance" itself, and concomitantly, to enquire of what it is that is important, and conversely, of what is trivial, or else, to recall what one already knows of the important and the trivial in order thus to praise or blame oneself in relation to these. David Bentley D. B. Hart (2022) captures this moment so beautifully:

[There is] something all of us have experienced, even if only fleetingly, in moments of unanticipated grace, but that practically none of us knows how to translate in words: an almost instant of awareness that suddenly seizes us when we are in the presence of a truly inspired work of artistic imagination ... So long as it lasts, however, it addresses us as both a kind of invitation and a kind of accusation. In that ephemeral instant in which we become all at once acutely conscious of the enigma in any truly prodigious work of art ... we are also appraised of everything trivial and unfinished and thoughtless in ourselves, everything so complacently unexceptional ... (D. B. Hart, 2022, p. 43)

Put in another way: no "ought" from an "is" –as new natural law has maintained (see Finnis, 1980), and as Hart also reminds us (D. B. Hart, 2013a). All the same, that which "is" comports us to enquire after the "ought". And in that interrogation, we are thinking in the practical mode, and in answering to the question concerning what matters, the *first principles of practical reason* (as Aristotle calls them) and which the medieval Aristotelian tradition later came to call, the "natural law" avail themselves, to offer their practical insights into (incommensurable, basic) goods "that ought to be sought and done". No "ought" from an "is": true! There is just no getting across the naturalistic fallacy. Instead, the "ought" comes *after* the "is", which abounds with significance. What avails as "is" when described yields logically no "ought". Yet, the merely "is" abounds with such significance that the speculative inquiry is refracted into a practical one, and the "ought" is subsequently asked about and shown. Again!: *not* by way of inference or deduction, for there is no "ought" from an "is". Only: the "ought" showing *after* the "is".

Even if "nature loves to hide": a response to David Bentley Hart

Therefore, the plausibility of arriving at the "ought" *after* the "is" is not to be thought of as dubious or diminished on the basis that what *nature* "is" and entails is often obscure, and that "nature-*physis*

loves to hide" (D. B. Hart, 2013b), and therefore that it is quite unlikely for one to derive with any level of useful clarity the practical precepts of the natural law, even less any public policy directives, from so vague and even mysterious a notion as "nature". Speaking specifically with reference to the modern, scientific mindset, David Bentley Hart clarifies that his remarks about the obscurity of "nature" concern the way it holds, in reserve, *for these moderns*, the required notions of final causality and ends. Still, his self-restraint is quite unnecessary; even with a descriptive account of final causes and ends, the "is" of nature holds the "ought" in reserve, and any attempt to force the latter is *non-sequitur*. Even so, such accompanied hiddenness does not impair the arrival of the "ought" *after* nature's "is". After all, as has been emphasized, there is simply *no attempt on my part to deduce the "ought" from the "is"*, and hence there is no need for there to be a clear and distinct notion of *what "is", with or without its metaphysical descriptions of final causality*, that one wishes would give, deductively, in consequence, a clear and distinct sense of what "ought to be (done)". Meaning, our account of how one arrives at the natural law is completely immune to Hart's objections that aim to strike at the root of the neo-Aristotelian or neo-scholastic attempt to infer the precepts of the natural law and its further determinations for public policy from "nature". It also means that our natural law theory is immune to the charge that it is a nominalism that is disconnected from nature (compare Pinckaers, 1995); quite the contrary.

Even without "two-tier Thomism": another response to Hart

Even less is this account of the grasp of the natural law after the "is" of nature-*physis* defeated should the metaphysical edifice built by late neo-Aristotelian scholastics totter under siege (see D. B. Hart, 2013b). Not that it will and probably will not – Edward Feser's defence of the fort on behalf of Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange OP (and we would assume, Cajetan Thomas de Vio OP) is to be taken seriously. Plus, it is from our point of view beneficial if it does not. The metaphysical elaborations of any "pure nature" – even without affirming those final ends availed by supernatural grace – are poetic correspondences with a "wondrous" reality, saying its "dynamism", "manifestness", and "mystery" (see Chua, 2021a). Such poetizing scaffolds the Greek experience: they deflect any scrupulous scepticism of the manner in which nature "abounds in significance", by way of the "is" that precedes the "ought", as said above.

Nevertheless, *for the sake of argument*, assuming that it does totter, it is no matter. For, rather fortuitously, D. B. Hart's (2013b) alternative to (what he calls) the "two-tier Thomistic" neo-scholastic concept of "nature" may actually supply the very metaphysical paradigm for overcoming his own lamentations about the "is-ought" gap in natural law theory. Namely: if "nature" and its address is in fact a diminished *variant* of the supernatural and its grace, so that there is a seamless continuity between the sight of a rose and the mystic's vision of God, then, even if "nature" is obscure in relation to those premises involving final causality needed (or believed to be needed by the neo-scholastic) to sensibly deduce the precepts of the natural law, nature-*physis* must nevertheless not be in short supply with respect the presencing effervescence (*anwesen*) of the "is" that is able to shunt and steer thinking towards the "practical" in order to seek and "show" the natural law, as said above. (Created) nature-*physis* abounds in significance on the account that it shares of the (uncreated, divine) supernatural that must itself, being infinite, abound in unlimited significance; thus also, nature-*physis* abounds in significance even if, when filtered through the analogy of being, what nature can unconceal is a mere limitation of the received original, assuming all the important qualifications to avoid pantheism have been duly stated, including the "real distinction" between essence (*essentia*) and (some think Aquinas would say, created) existence (*esse*) in creaturely beings (*ens*) (see Aquinas, 1968). Here, we re-join Maritain and his musings about the permeation of the "activating influx of the Prime Cause" (see above). Here too we see that our Aristotelian theory of natural law is immune to the scandalizing controversies that trouble the late neo-Aristotelian tradition; in fact, it can leverage parasitically on *both* theories. And here also, we see that our natural law theory is immune to the

charge that it is a nominalism that is disconnected from the natural *and the supernatural* (compare Pinckaers, 1995); quite the contrary.

(Sur)naturel and ethics: whether Feser, Hart or Mullady

Now, notice that in this paper, *I take no sides on this question of nature and grace* – the question is raised and discussed only to pre-empt any attempt to undermine our theory by our Aristotelian peers who are committed to particular views on the question and who also grasp their unfriendly implications (if any) for new natural law ethics. Indeed to be exhaustive, I think it plausible to also defend a third position set out by Brian Mullady OP (Mullady, 2003) who, following Quintin Turiel OP, argues that the natural desire to see God, our supernatural end, is *in the intellect*, and not in the will, and this reading differs from both Cajetan OP and Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange OP's position which argues that there is no supernatural end in our (pure) nature unless elevated by grace (defended by Feser) as well as the position of Henri de Lubac SJ which argues for a supernatural end insofar as our natural will seeks to see God (defended by Hart). And even this position, one notes, coheres with our theory of natural law: any affirmation of the natural desire of the intellect (to see God in the face) derives from the way that the intellect of human nature has this thrust to wonder at reality and to want to enquire and to know, as affirmed by Aristotle (2016) in the opening lines of the *Metaphysics*, and this philosophical-anthropological companion piece on the side of the thinking subject, the man that by nature seeks to be informed, is bound only to enhance and even amplify rather than to detract from the complete experience of a showing reality that abounds with significance. Afterall, the "is" with its abundance of significance is met appreciatively by a deeply interested knower who can be receptive to its manifestness, and not wasted on a dull, impenetrable brute. Hence, *contra* the latter, this man of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* ought to be even more impressed by the "mattering" of all that exists and is hence more likely led to the practical and enquiring thought of what matters and "ought" to be done, thus showing the natural law and its prescription of that which "ought" to be sought and done, as said above. Hence, *wherever one stands on the question of "nature and grace"*, our theory remains friendly, although, to underscore again, this paper actually takes *no sides* on this question.

In short, *after* the "is" which abounds with significance, the natural law (as Aquinas calls them) *qua* the first principles of practical reason (as Aristotle calls them) show and identify, *per se nota*, goods to be sought and done. Many are not unfamiliar with these goods, which John Finnis (1980) lists as the ends identified by the natural law: life, friendship, aesthetic experience, skilful play, practical reasonableness and religion. These we grasp as important, as what truly matter, to be sought and done, for their own sakes, even if there is no further utility that may be gained from enjoying them. And it is from these foundational insights that further ethical norms are inferred, that *prudentia* becomes a reality, that the moral principles of practical reasonableness are discerned (also see above section, **The Moral Principles of Practical Reasonableness and their Exclusions**). In other words, Aristotle and Aristotelian (Thomistic) natural law theory point out for us a real relationship between the experience of a reality of existence that abounds with significance (nature-*physis*) and the kind of ethical consciousness raising that befits our nature as rational animals, and that is also relevant for leadership in its focal sense.

A need for Aristotelian "heresy": Re-thinking James G. March

A final note. Amongst leadership and management theorists, there towers James G March, and we cannot discuss leadership theory without addressing his thought. I think that March, whose work I much admire, and whose initial work appeared to endorse a kind of theory of paradoxical leadership, would not have necessarily disagreed with me. March was not an Aristotelian, let alone an Aristotelian-Thomist, but his studies of leadership and decision engineering are stimulating and deservedly influential. He helped to shape Herbert A. Simon's (2019) later, mature theory of decision-

making and “science of design-engineering”, and though Simon won the Nobel Memorial Prize for economics for his work on bounded rationality, administrative behaviour and decision-making, March’s engagements with Simon enabled the latter to further his thinking on “satisficing” in a way that saw in “satisficing” the openness to new incommensurable goals that emerge when the fixation to pre-determined final goals is relaxed (see Chua, 2009a, 2016). March (with Weil, *On Leadership*, March & Weil, 2009) was also willing, like a post-modern theorist, to draw on a variety of literary and philosophical sources – say from his reading of *Don Quixote* and *Saint Joan of Arc* – to inform leadership and organizational thinking and that led him to some important conclusions. March often encouraged organizational leaders – his students in the MBA courses he taught – to welcome a “logic of appropriateness”, which is a variant of deontology and which recommended adhering to principles entailed by an account of one’s identity or role (*Don Quixote*: “I am a knight, and these are my duties!”), alongside a “logic of consequence”. This seemed like an endorsement of a kind of paradoxical leadership – the accommodating pursuit of duties comes what may and also the drive to promote only the more desirable consequences without a regard for conflicting duties. But my thinking is that such a stance was inevitably unstable, and I suspect that in time he came to have a glimpse of that. He lamented what he perceived were the ethical failures that led to the 2008 financial crisis and thought that the dominance of the logic of consequence – a logic for which the ends justified the means – had to be restrained with a logic of appropriateness that *would have stuck foolhardily with moral duties* even if violating them led to desirable consequences for oneself. If so, then this was not the schizophrenic welcoming of both logics held to be of equal weight on a balance, but rather a kind of tuning down of the logic of consequence in the direction of favouring the logic of appropriateness.

Indeed, in a private correspondence years ago, he encouraged me to continue along this path when I highlighted to him my paper in *London Review of Education* arguing that we needed to “exorcise” or displace the dominant logic of consequence-finding expression as a terror of performativity in educational (or more generally, organizational) settings, in favour of the logic of appropriateness (Chua, 2009b). Such a “path” can mean an eventual displacement of one (deficient) logic at odds with the (preferred, favoured) other, and in that sense, clearly *contra* paradoxes. Or, even if one takes this “path” to mean merely the fracturing of the *dominance* of one logic, in which case there is still room for both logics to co-exist, this does not necessarily entail an endorsement of the paradoxical embrace of contradictions, because both logics may be reformulated in a way that can be inter-alia coherent. Thus, for example, there is no contradiction in affirming the rule that: “one ought to (1) take desirable (even performative) consequences into account and aim for these through our policies and actions (2) unless these acts are forbidden by some form of moral qualification, such as moral absolutes prescribing never to directly attack some goods or the moral objection to any arbitrary obsession with the achievement of only these performative goals (also see above, **The Moral Principles of Practical Reasonableness and their Exclusions**). This is not a paradoxical manner of thinking so much as the identification of the exceptions to the rule. A truly paradoxical approach would instead be (a) the welcoming of a logic of consequence without restraint ala “a terrors (i.e., *totalising territorialization*) of performativity” and (b) the affirmation that there are some moral absolutes forbidding certain actions or policies no matter the desirable consequences; here the affirmation that (a) there are no exceptions contradicts (b) the directive identifying some restraining exceptions.

Also, the paradoxes approach would not sit so well with the rest of March’s thinking. Elsewhere, March’s own ideas about technologies of foolishness – a welcoming of “heresy” in relation to conventional thinking or “orthodoxies” – seem to me to necessarily entail the displacement of contradictions, whether or not March was willing to admit this explicitly. Consider his claim that we should welcome “transitional hypocrisy”, that is, the leader’s inauthentic talk in favour of ethical attitudes because he believed there was a fighting chance that the leader might be experimenting with new moral identities and that this could lead ultimately to practices *consistent* with such ethically informed discourse. Here, the point is to facilitate the experimental *transition* to “being

good in other ways” (March, 2009, p. 263). Therefore, such incoherence is *temporary*, and *not a steady state*. Indeed, one might reasonably ask: having transited into the better “self”, should we not encourage the new self to act consistently, rather than let it revert incoherently to actions or behaviours of the older, morally defective self? It is not difficult to see what the answer to that ought to look like; our intuitive desire to see the leader *stay* good supposes that the engineered inconsistencies are best grasped as the straining towards the *preservation* of what is good and all that is in accord with it. In sum, the point is to discover and *retain* only the good and not have the good-*and-bad* permanently co-present. Only in this sense would I go along with March, because only in this sense is, I think, March’s ideas ultimately defensible. Meaning therefore, my appropriation of these Marchian themes would be accompanied by the qualification that the end is *not* some post-modern mixed soup, but a pruned vine of the true, the good and the beautiful: the sheep separated from the goats.

Now, I do not want to suggest that he *said* things he did not. Indeed, in the very last interview he gave, March (in Li, 2021) had explicitly recommended the Chinese philosophy of “yin-yang” (with which he confesses a superficial familiarity) and the sustained balance of contradictory tensions as healthy and beneficial for management studies, and this is undeniably a re-iteration of the promotion of “paradoxes” in the sense that I reject. Now, we might point out very briefly, for the convenience of the reader, that, contrasted with March’s romantic interpretation of the exotic oriental, actual Chinese commentarial readings of both the *Yi-Jing* and the *Laozi*, say by the *Xuanxue* scholar Wang Bi, nowhere aspires for leadership to effect both the good and the bad; rather, however confusing the semiotic layering of the *Laozi* and *Yi-Jing* Chinese texts, the underlying message – especially as understood by the Chinese literati themselves – was to promote what were judged under Daoism and Confucianism as desirable relations (say, of authentic fraternal feelings) and to diminish and displace deviant ones, say, the crooked instrumental (see Chua, 2005, 2010, 2021b). More to the point: when pressed by Peter Ping Li, his interviewer, March conceded that social relationships, such as marriage, are best explained and shaped by the logic of appropriateness, which does what is proper in that relationship regardless of the consequences. Meaning to say, March was able to grasp that a consequentialist, “returns-on-investment” form of thinking for social relationships, whether we are referring to fatherhood or marriage, may not support the long term good of the relationship; indeed, we can typically intuit with empathy the painfully hurting wrongfulness of such a conditional and manipulative manner of relating: of a father towards his child or a husband to his spouse. But if so, a person who had previously entered the relationship motivated by such a sickening consequentialist logic but through some deviant exploration has now assimilated and converted to the logic of appropriateness ought not back-slide and revert to that depressingly deficient logic of consequence. This suggests that when examined rigorously, any adoption of paradoxes is merely *temporary*, to stimulate the deviating search for something *better*, which when found, will replace its deficient contradiction and all that does not cohere, *contra* the perpetual adoption of a paradoxical stance.

Hence, my point is precisely that the talk of leadership as paradoxical is not well aligned with important pedigrees of leadership and management thinking *in their most charitable interpretations under close inspection*, and if it should become orthodoxy in leadership studies, then perhaps we need to make room also for foolhardy Aristotelian “heretics” (to borrow March), just so we can think this through a little more carefully, and entertain that mending of the above nominalist bifurcations between thinking and nature, and our rational, human nature.

Conclusion

Leaders may be paradoxical. And unprincipled, paradoxical leaders can be very “successful” in the sense that they effectively achieve desired targets. Peddlers of paradoxical leadership may in turn be very popular as prophets of “progress”. However, if the avoidance of practices that contradict the ethical, the right and the practically reasonable quest for the basic goods of human flourishing is important, then leadership in its truest, “focal” sense cannot be paradoxical. The prophesy, whatever it

promises when its prosperity gospel is being preached, is false. Meaning, the fact that there are leaders who either do wrong or are willing to do wrong or have adopted a framework that endorses wrongdoing cannot imply that leaders ought to. In this paper, I have detailed the things about paradoxical leadership that trouble me: the way it side-lines ethical consistency, its repression of (ethical) criticality, its unwitting promotion of a woke culture, and its general anti-Aristotelianism that impels it to reject basic first principles of rationality. I then suggested how the retrieval of the perennial Aristotelian tradition, especially in the form of New Natural Law Theory, can still offer a competing and compelling alternative for current leadership studies, and can also contribute to the mending of the nominalist severance between nature and thinking, thus stalling an irrationality that we, once having unthinkingly fallen into, may not be able to think ourselves out of. At the end of the day, what is at stake is not just a certain kind of thinking; what is at stake is whether there will be “thinking” at all.

Post-Script

Very briefly. Smith W. et al.’s (2016) essay in the *Harvard Business Review* ends with a line from Neils Bohr celebrating paradoxes. We need not be examples of physics envy. Nevertheless, this deserves a quick response: its insinuation that leading thinking represented by quantum physics has progressed by denouncing the principle of non-contradiction, is just plainly false. Quantum physics under its standard interpretation does not actually say that what is in “superposition” suffers two contradictory states, hence does *not* say, for example, that Schrödinger’s cat is both alive *and* dead. Rather, physicists typically mean that whatever state it is in, what is in superposition actually cannot be described in a narrative, and this is what is typically grasped as the “Copenhagen interpretation” before the collapse of the wave function, before “measurement”. Even in the Everettian “multi-verse” theory, the “contradiction” is not embraced but rather resolved by positing different branches of worlds into which opposing metaphysical realities are “thrown” after measurement, so that there is no contradiction within each possible world or branch. So neither the Copenhagen interpretation nor the Everettian theory is governed by nor inevitably entangled with the Bohrian denial of the principle of non-contradiction.

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