Ethical Irony and the Relational Leader: Grappling with the Infinity of Ethics and the Finitude of Practice

Carl Rhodes

University of Technology Sydney

Richard Badham

Macquarie Graduate School of Management

ABSTRACT: Relational leadership invokes an ethics involving a leader's affective engagement and genuine concern with the interests of others. This ethics faces practical difficulties given it implies a seemingly limitless responsibility to a set of incommensurable ethical demands. This article contributes to addressing the impasse this creates in three ways. First, it clarifies the nature of the tensions involved by theorising relational leadership as caught in an irreconcilable bind between an infinitely demanding ethics and the finite possibilities of a response to those demands. Second, it examines this ethical challenge in acknowledgement of the hierarchical discourses and power dynamics in which leadership relationships are constrained and enacted. Third, it proposes "ethical irony" as a way leaders can respond to the demand for ethics without resulting in either an escape from ethics, or being crushed by its burden. Three dimensions of ethical irony are examined: ironic perspective, ironic performance, and ironic predilection.

KEY WORDS: irony, Emmanuel Levinas, leadership ethics, relational ethics, relational leadership

INTRODUCTION

In an era in which corporate scandals and corruption are rife, it is widely held that "ethics" might provide a solution to the wrongdoing, irresponsibility, and selfishness that so often characterises the behaviour of organizational leaders (cf. Knights & O'Leary, 2005). Castigated as "bad apples" (Kish-Gephart, Harrison, & Trevino, 2010) it is hoped that if leaders would turn away from their errant ways and see the light of ethics then all would be well. Reflected here is an eschatological idea of ethics, one that sees it as having a messianic function such that once ethics arrives it will rid the corporate world of its errant and malfeasant ways. This eschatology draws on a "sacred" conception of leadership (cf. Grint, 2010) that imagines leaders as being able to pursue and achieve a form of perfection located above the moral quandaries and structural inequalities that otherwise characterise business and organizational life.

The idea that ethics might transform the behaviour of leaders towards an ideal-ised future is very much associated with a "heroic" model of leadership. This model imagines leaders along masculine ideals of mastery, identifying them metaphori-cally as being akin to stereotypes of military commanders, sporting champions (Cunliffe, 2009), or even saints (Grint, 2010). Such a focus on the character of the individual leader diverts attention from the reciprocal and relational processes by which leaders and followers influence each other (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Yukl, 1999). Relational leadership is an alternative approach that has attempted to move away from authoritative and individualist conceptions of the leader by considering leadership as being constituted through the relationships between members of an organization (Crevani, Lindgren, & Packendorff, 2010). This relational approach also promises a particular form of ethics, one based on moral accountability to others (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011).

A relational approach to leadership asserts that leadership is a socially constructed and dynamic process created between people as they interdependently interact with each other (Drath, McCauley, Palus, Van Velsor, O'Connor, & McGuire, 2008; Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012; Uhl-Bien, 2006). From a relational perspective ethical leadership is not an individual act of heroism, but an ongoing accomplishment framed within relationships between people (Painter-Morland, 2008) characterised by, for example, collaboration, cooperation (Maak & Pless, 2006), compassion, inclusivity, empowerment (Carifio, 2010), and reciprocity (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). A relational ethics for leadership has, more recently, been developed and troubled by research and theory that has drawn on the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas (1969; 1974) for inspiration (e.g. Grandy & Sliwa, 2017; Jones, 2014; Liu, 2015). This has proved valuable because his approach focuses specifically on "the ethical relation-ship between the self and the Other" (Knights & O'Leary, 2006: 134) that extends beyond the assumption that ethics is to be found in equal and reciprocal relationships (Rhodes & Westwood, 2016) as well as locating ethics in "the complexities of what might actually be involved when such an ethics is brought to bear on the social and political realities of the world" (Rhodes, 2012: 1321).

A Levinasian ethics of relational leadership is not restricted to the capacities of the people involved in a particular dyadic interaction. While relational leadership theory commonly elides issues of structural power inequality and authority relations, they are clearly relevant to the organizational character and the experience of leader-follower relations. As participants in a socially constructed relation, leaders at all levels of an organization are embedded within multiple webs of power and official hierarchies that give them more or less formal authority over other employees. We are thus concerned with relational ethics as it might be made relevant to the practical and lived experience of those people who find themselves in such positions. Levinas' (1969, 1974) philosophy is especially valuable here in that it enables us to formulate ethics phenomenologically in terms of the lived tension between an essentially infinite ethical meaning and demand, and its inevitably finite enactment in social structures and interpersonal contexts (Byers & Rhodes, 2007).

A common way of addressing the question of how ethics might be enacted by leaders is to view leadership ethics as a process of becoming and a practice of justice in which

leaders weigh the demands of different stakeholders so as to arrive at decisions which, while not necessarily satisfying everyone, are derived on the basis of their fairness (Knights & O'Leary, 2006; Rhodes, 2012). While attesting to fair distribution serves as a worthy conclusion to studies of a Levinasian inspired relational ethics for leadership, it falls short of addressing in any particularity how those in positions of leadership might take this up. It also fails to account explicitly for the inherently hierarchical nature of leadership and assumptions of the leader's power and authority to enact his or her ethical will. No matter how much relational leadership theory, and its ethics, might emphasise dialogic collaboration, this does not extinguish the presence of the hierarchies within which the relationship is practically, culturally, and historically embedded (Höpfl, 2006). This suggests the productive possibility of building on existing theorizations of relational leadership by further exploring the means through which leaders can undertake an ethical practice attuned to both the lived realities and embedded power structures in which that adoption is situated.

In this article we seek to extend existing theories of relational leadership ethics by developing a Levinasian inspired approach that has the virtue of being aware of, and responding to, the practical and ethical limitations present in the lived experience of leadership relations. We argue for a practical conception of ethics that would enable a person "to bear the excessive, indeed hyperbolic, burden of the ethical demand" (Critchley, 2007: 78) without seeking either to diminish or eradicate it. This leads us to consider that character of an ethical practice of relational leadership grounded in an ironic sensibility characterised by an ironic perspective, performance, and predilection. What we refer to as "ethical irony" is proposed as a theoretical and practical means to imagine ethical relational leadership.

We develop three interrelated dimensions of ethical irony that collectively offer a means to consider the ethical challenges of a hierarchically embedded relational leadership. First ethical irony involves the thoughtful adoption of an ironic perspective such that the leader accepts his or her own fallibility and ineptitude in the face of the ethical demands to which she or he is called to respond. This sees the leader accepting responsibility for the ethical demands that arrive from others, while simultaneously recognising that she or he is incapable of meeting those demands and that any ethical response she or he makes is restricted by the discursive and structural hierarchies within which one is embedded. Second, ethical irony involves the rhetorical delivery of an ironic performance: an irony of manners through which a leader is able to espouse and pursue ethical concerns while also communicating the inevitable personal and structural limitations of that enterprise. Third, ethical irony involves the embedded attitudes, temper, stances, habitus, or style of a person in possession of an ironic predilection: a more or less enduring subjectively experienced, physically embodied, culturally conditioned, and interactively fashioned and refashioned disposition toward irony. Through this predilection the leader can cope with the contradictions, strains, and challenges of an ethical engagement informed by such a reflective ironic perspective and requiring such an ironic performance.

The article begins by reviewing the literature on relational leadership with a special focus on its ethical dimensions. Second, we explore recent research that positions the ethics of relational leadership as being characterised by a fundamental dilemma

arising from the leader not being able to adequately respond to the ethical demands of those to whom he or she is rendered responsible. Third, we theorise this dilemma as an irreconcilable tension between an infinite ethics and a finite practice, and propose "ethical irony" as a means through which leaders' work can be adopt a serious, sincere, and self-aware ethically engaged stance in the context of this tension. Fourth, we elaborate on three dimensions of ethical irony, as a leader's ironic perspective, ironic performance, and ironic predilection. The article concludes by assessing the value of ethical irony as a practical leadership ethic.

RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND ITS ETHICS

Relational leadership has been described as one of the "non-traditional" (Reitz, 2015) or "post-industrial" (Komives, Longerbeam, Owen, Mainella, & Osteen, 2006) approaches at the forefront of new leadership theory in the twenty-first century. Whereas earlier theories, be they trait, style, contingency, or transformation based (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009; Reitz, 2015), attend to leadership in terms of different attributes of leaders themselves, relational leadership exists primarily *between* the leader and those led in the context of social interaction and dialogue (Uhl-Bien, 2006). A relational approach is contrasted with an "entitative" approach. The latter imagines a person as a unique being who exists independently of both other people and the contexts in which they are located. Mired in western individualism, entitative approaches view leaders as stable, instrumental, and independent.

   The relational approach conceives of people in social and grounded rather than individual terms. This is said to invoke

> new leadership ideals where heroic masculinities can be replaced by less individualistic and more humane constructs, where the potential of leadership in every social situation is emphasized. Thereby it may serve to challenge the dominating leadership discourses and redirect focus onto the mundane and relational aspects of leadership work (Crevani et al., 2010: 84).

From a relational perspective to be a person means to exist in relation to others such that the self is an ongoing accomplishment that emerges through interaction and mutual consideration (Hosking, 2011). Relationally, leadership is understood as a process of social influence though which organizing and coordination emerge, and through which practical, behavioural, ideological, and cultural changes can be enacted and produced in organizations (Uhl-Bien, 2006: 655). In some cases this process of influence is, perhaps idealistically, regarded as non-hierarchical and distributed (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Maak & Pless, 2006) even though the assumption is that relational leaders are those who occupy formal positions within an organizational hierarchy.

   When contextualised power relationships are considered, leaders and followers are not thought to be already fully formed subjects whose existence precedes their relationship. Rather, it is the relationships themselves through which these subjects are forged, such that power is "a quality of all relational processes and realities" (Hosking, 2011: 54). This social constructivist standpoint also holds that

it is the context of the relationship as well as the actual relationship that is subject to construction, and that this context is political (Grint, 2005). At the same time, the relational situations that people find themselves in at work are not pre-given, but rather emerge from the cognitive, affective, political, and social dimensions of the interactions between those people (Fulop & Mark, 2013). This is to say that while particular meanings of leadership can become institutionalized so as to appear fixed in their meaning, this process of institutionalization is an ongoing accomplishment recreated through practical relationships. As such, each leadership relation is seen to have its own character as it differs historically, spatially, and culturally (Raelin, 2016).

Understanding leadership as a processual practice conducted relationally has led to an appreciation of the ethical, affective, and interpersonal dimensions of leadership, over and above its rational, impartial, and procedural elements (Hosking, 2011; Raelin, 2011), even though the ethical dimensions of relational leadership are largely implicit or theoretically underdeveloped. At a general level it has been argued that the relational perspective "should be viewed less in terms of knowledge and truth […] and more in terms of *ethics*" (Hosking, 2011: 460, emphasis in original). Relational leadership, as the name portends, is concerned with ethics as it is located in, and emerges from, the everyday relationships, interactions, and conversations in which leaders are engaged (Maak & Pless, 2006). It is within these relationships that moral accountability is said to be located (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Komives et al., 2006). Central considerations to date have included the degree to which those relationships are characterised by trust, reciprocity, benevolence, integrity, and assessments of ability (Brower, Shoorman, & Tan, 2000).

It has been suggested that an ethics based on a sensitivity to such considerations contrasts with "egocentric and heroic approaches to leadership" by focussing on relations between people and pointing to an ethical practice undertaken through open dialogue, accepting interpersonal difference, being accountable to others, public accounting for one's actions, and being reliable (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011: 1427). Such conclusions point to some limitations of existing approaches to relational leadership ethics. When relational leadership theory turns to a discussion of ethics, this is most commonly limited to identifying a range of virtues that might characterise what are considered "good" relationships, rather than considering the relationality of the ethics itself or the complex and hierarchical conditions within which, organizationally, any such ethics would be both constructed and practiced. In this way, relational leadership ethics has not developed far beyond being considered in terms of well meaning "relational dialogue" and empathic understanding. By its own admission, this does not address "questions of power, identity, nor the relationship between leaders and organizational circumstances" (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011: 1445) even though such matters have been shown to be central to relational leadership more generally (Hosking, 2011).

Ethics cannot simply be reduced to an enumeration of presumed "qualities" that can be attached to relationships (e.g. Ferch & Mitchell, 2001) and communities (e.g. Edwards, 2014) that it sustains and from which it emerges. It may be the case that leaders and followers are interdependent, both in the practical terms of having to rely on one another, and in the ontological terms of leadership identity being generated out of relationship with others rather than preceding them (Komives et al., 2006),

but to fail to account for the organizationally embedded and asymmetrical power relationship that exists between leaders and followers risks an ethics informed by naïve idealism and bourgeois niceties.

The value of relational leadership is that it highlights "a view of leadership and organization as human social constructions that emanate from the rich connections and interdependencies of organizations and their members" (Uhl-Bien, 2006: 655). But, it is this relational richness, in all of its complexity, that cannot and should not reduce ethics to the scene of the interpersonal interaction amongst those assumed to be equal in power. This challenges any conception of relational leadership ethics to go beyond just identifying putatively "positive" characteristics of relationships per se, and bear the burden of developing an ethics that accounts for how knowledge and existence are ongoing processes of socially embedded relating (Dachler & Hosking, 1995). Relational leadership and its ethics are not, therefore, things possessed by persons, either individually or in interaction, but need to be located in the ongoing process of making and re-making as people come together in situ and, in doing so, (re)construct their realities as well as their relational positions (e.g. as leader and follower) (Hosking, 2011). Such would be an appreciation of ethics that gives full recognition not just to relationships, but to the "the social construction processes by which certain understandings of leadership come about and are given privileged ontology" (Uhl-Bien, 2006: 655).

In sum, existing research in relational leadership has located ethics in relations between people so as to attend to the responsibilities and commitments that individuals bring to relationships. This ethics is posited very much as a matter of interaction, communication, and reciprocity whereby leadership ethics is borne out of trust, emotional openness, sincerity, and a willingness to be vulnerable (Carmeli, Tishler, & Edmondson, 2012). Less accounted for are the full possibilities of what relationality means, most especially in terms of how the social construction of leader-follower relations cannot be reduced to the agential practice of those involved. The leadership relation is not one that is entirely malleable at the hands of those who participate in it, most especially when it is located within existing hierarchical structures.

It has been noted that the long association of leadership with masculine power and authority cannot simply be wished away by a new relational theory, given that this culturally embedded association exerts "pressure to reconstruct the story to maintain the status quo association of leadership with individual action, masculinity, and static, hierarchical notions of power and control" (Fletcher, 2004: 653). Relational leadership might be regarded as an ideal which, in practice, must be enacted, as a striving "towards non-competitive and non-hierarchical relations with others" (Liu, 2015: 12), but such enacting cannot escape institutionalized contexts characterised by persistent tensions between relational aspirations and the strong cultural traditions and embedded organizational practices of asymmetrical hierarchical relations.

THE IRRESOLVABLE DILEMMA OF ETHICAL LEADERSHIP

Ethical relational leadership has largely been considered in terms of how leaders engage in honest, open (Carmeli, Tishler, & Edmondson, 2012), trusting (Brower, Shoorman, & Tan, 2000), and "positive" (Pless & Maak, 2011) relationships with those

they lead. This reflects an underlying "ethics of reciprocity" rooted in the idea that ethics is about "living well with others" and fostering "relational integrity" (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011: 1439). As already inferred, notable about these approaches is that the ethical status of relations between people is assumed rather than argued or theorised. Moreover, the embedded power asymmetries within which relational leadership is located are rarely highlighted. Even in the few cases where the relational leadership literature acknowledges ethical theory and philosophy explicitly (e.g. Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011), this is done in a general manner and without detailed consideration of the meaning and practice of ethics. As such, the meaning of ethics and its practical exigencies (Clegg, Kornberger, & Rhodes, 2007) are largely taken for granted—rendered unproblematic and simply a matter of being able to distinguish "right" from "wrong" (e.g. Maak & Pless, 2006) or being able to identify that which is ethically questionable (e.g. Cardona, 2000).

The assumptions of ethical certainty and ethical reciprocity that are deployed or presupposed in existing relational leadership research are highly questionable especially when considered in terms of the philosophical tradition of relational ethics—a tradition, remarkably, that has attracted little attention from researchers on relational leadership (for an exception see Liu, 2015). Philosophically, relational ethics, most commonly traced back through the work of Emmanuel Levinas, is focused on recognition and respect for others as the condition of ethics rather than a reciprocal exchange between those assumed to be equals (Frosh, 2011). Relational ethics, within this tradition, stands in stark contrast to reciprocal ethics in that the latter is understood as, at best, a form of socio-economic exchange which serves to benefit the self. Relational ethics, in contrast, is understood to be founded on mercy, generosity, and hospitality towards the other without such expectation of return (Rhodes & Westwood, 2016). With relational ethics the social constructivism that centrally informs relational leadership is pushed to the limits such that one's own self is recognised as not only being constructed through social relations, but also (as a social construction) being responsible for, indebted to, and unsettled by the other (Popke, 2003).

The relations that characterise such a relational ethics are inherently non-reciprocal. Levinas (1969: 68) takes relations between people as "irreducible to objective knowledge" and extends this further to the idea that the I and the other, rather than being two varieties of the same thing, are radically different. The other is not another me, but is someone to be revered and respected through the enactment of a responsibility that expects nothing in return. The other with whom one has an ethical relationship is referred to by Levinas as "the face," such that the ethical relation is always one that is "face-to-face." This is a relation with an-other who transcends one's own knowledge and its totalizing systems. To relate to the other ethically is thus to attest to his or her infinite difference to oneself, and hence to resist any impulse to reduce them to an object of one's own knowledge. It is in this sense that ethical relations are non-objective and essentially infinite. The relation of ethics is, then, not based on mutuality, self-advantage, or exploitation, but on generosity, deference, and humility. Relational ethics, extending from Levinas' philosophy, establishes that relations between people are ethical precisely because they are non-reciprocal: they are unequal in that they are

based primordially on one's responsibility to the other without prior consideration or anticipation of reciprocation. One's experience of others thus provides an assignation of ethics which precedes the self and which is present despite one's self.

Levinas' ideas have been brought to bear on many dimensions of organizational practice including corporate social responsibility (Roberts, 2003), business ethics (Jones, 2003), diversity (Muhr, 2008), organizational justice (Byers & Rhodes, 2007), and human resource management (de Gama, McKenna, & Peticca-Harris, 2012). One of the most promising, albeit nascent, extensions of this has concerned leadership ethics. A Levinas inspired approach stands in contrast to those where "both ethics and leadership are thought to be the properties of a rational autonomous individual" (Liu, 2015: 5). Further, it extends the social constructivist foundations of relational leadership by embracing the idea that "responsibility to the other is born out of our vulnerable exposures to one another, stirring a primordial obligation that is infinite and irrevocable" (Liu, 2015: 5). This obligation, which Levinas explicitly theorises in relation to infinitude, speaks directly to the meaning of leadership such that ethics and leadership are inseparable and leadership itself can be regarded as responsibility to others (Rhodes, 2012). The conclusion this abets is that "it is up to responsible leaders to turn outwardly to the face and respond with an unconditional 'yes, here I am'" (Jones, 2014: 60).

From a Levinasian perspective it is in responding to the other that a leader can appreciate his or her moral obligations as they arrive in the context of their relationships and the social structures in which those relationships exist. Attending to this obligation in a reflexive, engaged, contextualised, and embodied way is said to provide a means through which ethical leadership can be contemplated and practised (Grandy & Sliwa, 2017). Leaders are thus invoked to open themselves up to others in concrete encounters, place the others ahead of themselves, respect others' differences, and recognize "the importance of being present to the face in each unique encounter and respond appropriately to needs as they emerge" (Jones, 2014: 56). As this description suggests, a Levinasian ethics is "infinitely demanding," in that it calls one to respond with unending devotion and responsibility to the other ahead of one's own needs or desires (Critchley, 2007).

When it comes to leader-follower relationships in hierarchical organizations, there is a clear pre-existing tension between an ethical relation, defined by Levinas as one where the other "approaches me from a dimension of height and dominates me" (1969: 214), and the culturally sedimented conception of leaders as operating from a position of relative hierarchical height as compared to those they lead (Parker, 2009). The weight of the ethical demand grows even heavier when one considers the multitude of others to whom a leader might be responsible, be they employees, bosses, family, friends, formal organizational stakeholders, and even strangers. While it is indeed the case that "ethical leadership is located in one's accountability and responsibility to others as they are dynamically co-constructed in context" (Liu, 2015: 12), it is also true that the individual leader will encounter many people in many different contexts, each calling for a response that addresses a very particular potential for accountability

to that person. The implications of this tension are profound in that the questions that this poses for leadership are:

> How is the unbounded and infinite obligation that I have to the (one) Other to be rendered compatible with the equally incalculable being and claim of the other Other, the third person? How are the rights of all the others to be respected within the infinite relation of the face to- face? The implication for organizations is that even if we accept that an ethics of organized work can only be rendered from a consideration of the absolute particularity of face-to-face relation with the Other, this does not account for the presence of the other Others, and therefore is not sufficient by itself for an ethics of organization (Byers & Rhodes, 2007: 245).

In light of this seemingly insurmountable challenge, researchers working with Levinas' philosophy to understand leadership ethics have turned to his account of justice (Levinas, 1974) as a means of rendering relational ethics relevant in organizational settings (e.g. Aasland, 2009; Bevan & Corvellec, 2007; Knights & O'Leary, 2006; Rhodes, 2012). For Levinas (1974) justice is called forth by the appearance of what he calls "the third." While Levinasian ethics arises in the face-to-face encounter with the other to whom one is subservient, it also raises questions about what happens when a third party demands responsibility. How then is one's responsibility to be divided? Levinas (1985: 89) responds: "it is consequently necessary to weigh, to think, to judge, in comparing the incomparable" and it is through this that justice is ethically "inevitable." Concomitantly, the infinite, non-objective and incessant responsibility to the other that forms the basis of relational ethics becomes subject to a finite rationality that must make decisions about relative responsibilities to many others located in a complex and inegalitarian set of social relations. Practically, relational ethics imposes a "requirement to compare all of the demands, and decide which ones to try to serve, which to neglect or how to compromise between them" (Rhodes, 2012: 1324). In addressing such issues, a relational ethics informs ethical leadership practice by reconceiving justice as "ethics is put into practice" (Aasland, 2007: 224).

IRONY AS ETHICAL ENGAGEMENT

The turn to ethically informed justice as the means through which relational ethics can be brought to bear on the demands of the lived experience of leadership is a significant conclusion that has been drawn from Levinasian studies of leadership. Such a conclusion accepts that ethics is "experienced in the face-to-face interaction and driven by an inexhaustive care" that must be moderated by justice in the "realm of the Social Order" (Knights & O'Leary, 2006: 134). The experience of ethics is one that is mired in the existential dilemma of being caught between the infinity of ethics (as Levinas theorises it), and the finitude of any possible practical responses to it. A leader encountering such an ethics engages in "grappling with his/ her conflicting relationships and responsibilities" such that this "grappling" is what constitutes ethical leadership (Rhodes, 2012: 1327).

Such conclusions are in keeping with a relational ethics inspired by Levinas, but they fall short of attending with any specificity to how this grappling might be approached in practice. While leaders might be hypothetically counselled to "practically conciliate concerns of care for the proximate other with concerns of justice for all" (Bevan & Corvellec, 2007: 216), this serves as an injunction while offering only limited practical consideration of how the issues and tensions involved might be addressed. In other words, after accepting that ethics must "transition" to fair practice (Aasland, 2007), the way that such a transition can be enacted hinges on the open question of how the irresolvable differences between the finite and the infinite are to be dealt with in the context of lived experience and in a manner that does not create a false resolution.

Any attempt to answer this question must address the essential conundrum in the ethics of relational leadership. First, relational ethics is the assignation of an infinite demand for responsibility to the other. Second, relational ethics insists that this infinite responsibility is one demanded individually by many different others. Third, and as a result, if relational ethics is to have bearing on practice it requires that the response to these multiple infinite ethical demands be somehow divided between the many. In rational-practical terms this is an impossible position in that it necessitates the incomparable to be compared and the infinite rendered finite, such that decisions can be made and action be taken about to whom one's attention will be directed, and to whom one's resources will be distributed. Theorised this way relational leadership ethics is caught in an irreconcilable bind between the infinity of the ethical assignation and the finitude of practice, yet one where to sacrifice either would neuter the ethics that informed them. To forgo practice would result in an ethereal ethics that bore no relation to the action of the leader or the lives of those he or she led. Conversely, to forgo the infinity of ethics would result in a vulgar form of pragmatism where calculating costs and benefits would be an impoverished substitute for the necessary burden of ethics.

This is further complicated when we acknowledge an ethics that originates in a demand for infinite responsibility will be, in the practice of leadership, necessarily intertwined with hierarchy and power. As Derrida (2000) intimates in his reading of Levinas, power and ethics cannot in practice be separated in that to be hospitable to the other requires the possession and distribution of resources. It is further the case that the power that a leader has to address the ethical demands of the other cannot simply be assumed (or assumed away), and in practice that power is bestowed, at least in part, through bureaucratic authority. Any assumption that relational leadership is reducible to a form of collaboration between equals is defied in that in order to give to the other one must have something to give, and in organizational terms that "something" relies on relations of authority. Moreover, in that giving there is always a practical choice to be made in that the individual who responds to the other through the generosity of ethics does so from a position of power as it relates to the control or possession of that which is given. A relational ethics that involves a subservience to the other and other's demands is in the paradoxical situation of enacting this through a possession of authority that determines what is given to whom.

Relational ethical leadership is caught in a double-bind between the excessive demands assigned to the leader on the one hand, and the complexities of authority and distribution that arise in socio-organizational practice. We are unable, and do not wish, to posit a totalizing and singular "solution" to such inevitable, necessary, and endemic problems. We do, however, wish to explore possibilities for how leaders can effectively approach them in a way that captures, communicates, and lives with the burden of such irreconcilability without being debilitated by it. In wrestling with this task we turn our attention to irony as an approach to leadership that can capture, communicate, and survive the burden of this irreconcilability while still having to take action and make decisions in the here and now. As we will seek to show, irony as a perspective, a performance, and a predilection, has a long and reputable history as a means for addressing such "contradictions of human life and the complications of thought" (Fernandez & Huber, 2001: 6). The potential value of this to the practice of ethical leadership, we seek to demonstrate, is considerable.

It is important to note in embarking on an argument for ethical irony that this is done in full awareness of irony's complex, controversial, and chequered history. While capturing irony's essence has been equated with trying to grasp mist (Muecke, 1976), this has been accompanied, somewhat ironically, by ongoing controversy around its value. "Boosters and knockers" (Guhin, 2013: 24) have condemned or celebrated irony as "the devil's mark or snorkel of sanity" (Barnes, 1990: 155). Irony's enthusiastic supporters praise its appreciation of paradox and the limited ability of human beings to realise any "Godlike" desires. Irony, in this view, is a "disciplinarian feared only by those who do not know it, but cherished by those who do" (Kierkegaard, 1989: 326). Critics, however, equally fervently condemn its distance and detachment from simple aspirations and motivating goals as "decaffeinated belief" (Zizek cited in Pound, 2008) and "infinite absolute negativity" (Kierkegaard, 1989).

In making the case for the relevance and value of irony for leadership ethics, we acknowledge the existence of such tensions and debates. The ethical irony that we seek to elaborate here is a form of "humble irony" (Burke, 1962: 512), a "perspective on perspectives" that is aware of the existence and limitations of its own "final vocabulary" (Rorty, 1989: 73), the dilemmas this creates for engaged action, and the critical, and potentially cruel, "edge" that it possesses (Hutcheon, 1994). Ethical irony, as we present it, is a form of engaged irony that draws on Rorty's commitment to "liberal irony," Kierkegaard's support for "mastered irony" (Frazier, 2006), and Burke's celebration of irony's "comic frame" (Carlson, 1986). This is a form of irony exemplified in recent overviews of the relevance of irony in organizations (Hoyle & Wallace, 2008; Johansson & Woodilla, 2005) and its usefulness in addressing the tensions, paradoxes, and contradictions of organisational life (Barker & Sewell, 2006). This view is advanced while acknowledging the importance of being sensitive to the dangers of ironic over-detachment (Kunda, 2006) and its restriction to a counterproductive and illusory weapon of the weak (Badham & McLoughlin, 2005; Cohen & Taylor, 1992; Pound, 2008)

While we acknowledge the multiple directions that an ironic perspective might take, the form of irony identified and advocated here is one that, in response to existential

uncertainties, is associated with a wry smile rather than a self-satisfied smirk or a sardonic grin. In its general orientation, we take irony to denote a form of thought, word, and deed that recognizes incongruity and contradiction in human affairs, without allowing that incongruity to paralyse action. It enables incompatible ideas to be held simultaneously without demanding that one be sacrificed in the name of the others. Irony encompasses forms of thought and action that find meaning in recognizing yet questioning the vocabularies that frame our world, the conventional stories that we live by, the established meanings and coherence we impose upon the world, and the confident ambitions that we possess and strive for. In this sense, irony not only acknowledges fallibility, it also identifies folly, questions arrogance, and delights in reflection. As acknowledged by classical introductions and overviews of irony, this form of irony variously incorporates a perspective that acknowledges incongruities (Burke, 1984), a performance that communicates such incongruities (De Man, 1996), and a predilection that recognises and deploys such perspectives and performances (cf. Gouldner, 1967; Kierkegaard, 1989).

In terms of our current concern with ethical irony and relational leadership, our approach involves recognising, communicating, and living with the excess of the ethical assignation of responsibility for the other, and the limits of how flesh-and-blood leaders can respond to that assignation. Part and parcel of this perspective is an awareness of the limitations and fallibility of all subsequent choices in the face of such circumstances, an appreciation of the denial of limitations in our self-understanding and communications with others, and the search for "better" options while recognising the contested and constrained nature of all such "solutions." Such a perspective acknowledges, even celebrates, that while we might act enthusiastically in the realization of our intentions and pursuit of our ideals, we live in a world of accident, unintended consequences, and thwarted ambitions. The difference between such an ironic stance and that of either the committed zealot or the distanced cynic is an engaged yet reflective "doubleness": a perspective, performance and predilection based on a mindful ability to both *look through* our perspective and *look at* it (Kegan & Lahey, 2009: 51; Lanham, 1995; McLoskey, 1994). It is this doubleness that is central to the relationship between irony and leadership ethics.

The connection of irony with a practical ethics of relational leadership comes directly from the consideration of the infinite demands that ethics assigns, and the finite possibilities that can be enacted by an individual leader. This is a connection that echoes Kierkegaard's (1938: 159) definition of irony:

> Irony is the fusion of a passionately ethical view, which inwardly lays infinite stress upon the self – and of education which outwardly (among others) abstracts infinitely from the personal I. The result of the latter is that no one notices the former; therein lies the whole art of irony, and that is what conditions the infinite stress of the first.

Ethical irony, then, is a matter of accepting an ethics that is called for by an infinite other, while being able to do so from within the bounds of an ego that can allude to but not really comprehend infinity. Ethical irony, in the terms we have been introducing it, can be described as "a form of spirit which views the finite against the backdrop of the infinite" such that "the finite can be seen anew in light of the

infinite" (Søltoft, 2001: 267). The point here is that ethical irony can enable the acceptance of the ethics as being both necessary and impossible, without resulting in either giving up on ethics or reducing it to a formulaic or rule-based exercise in rational judgement. Irony proffers a means of acting in the context of the irreconcilability of relational ethics.

In expounding the possibilities of ethical irony, we have already articulated how relational leadership takes place within a set of hierarchical discourses, practices, and relations. As such, a key aspect of ethical irony is a reflective appreciation of the challenge of developing ethically informed practice when this is taken into account. In one sense this involves a recognition of existing inequalities of power and authority, as well as the role that any romance of leadership may have in misrepresenting, or at least distracting attention from, such hierarchies. At another level, however, an ethical irony grounded in a "strong defence" of rhetoric (Lanham, 1995), points to the inevitability and desirability of surfacing all "acts of hierarchization" (Wess, 1996: 21) built into the social categories we live by. Following Burke, the "terministic screens" through which we interpret the world have inbuilt attitudes that presume hierarchical arrangements, allocate praise and blame, and posit end points. Moreover, these are drawn upon and reinforced by the rhetorics we deploy to foster selective identifications (Bisecker, 1997). Even attesting to ethical "hospitality" (Derrida, 2000) has its own conception of the hierarchical, inhospitable, or non-cosmopolitan "other," and carries with it its own tragic notions of guilt, blame, victimization, and purification (e.g. Dikec, 2002). For ethical irony, a "comic" acceptance of our ethical fallibility and human folly in applying such acts of hierarchization is part of a reflexive and pragmatic moral stance.

THREE DIMENSIONS OF ETHICAL/IRONIC LEADERSHIP

So far we have considered ethical irony as a means through which the rational irreconcilability, yet ethically necessary incompatibility, between an infinitely demanding ethics and a finite and hierarchically embedded practice might be conceived for a relational leadership ethics. What remains is to examine how such a conception relates specifically to the demands upon leadership in enacted practice. In so doing we put forward three dimensions of ethical irony for the relational leader: ethical irony as a particular "gaze" or perspective on the world, ethical irony as a performance that assists in dealing with ethical contradiction in practice, and ethical irony as a predilection that serves as an approach through which leadership can take on the challenges of accepting responsibility for communicating and living with an ethical demand that it can never fully meet.

The Ironic Perspective

Within organizations and outside, an ironic perspective of life involves, in its simplest sense, the observation of situational irony (a notion that first emerged in the Middle Ages). This entails noting the gap that exists in any situation between what people think they know and what they actually know, what they believe themselves to be doing and what they are actually doing, what they intend to bring about and what

they actually bring about, or what they aspire to and what they achieve. With ethical irony this gap is not simply a matter of observing life's many contradictions, but rather of acknowledging the inexhaustible break between the ethical demands of the other and what can be practically achieved. This is a gap, as we have been exploring, between the need to act in the world in the name of ethics, and the inability of such acts to ever fulfil the demands that arise in that name.

This irony is a commentary on the human folly of presuming to have (or even being able to realise) "superior" high-flown cognitive and ethical ideals. As Frazier (2006) notes, while Rortian (1989) irony focuses on the phenomenon of contingency, presuming the inability of many to recognise the partiality of their "final vocabularies," Kierkegaardian (1989) irony strongly emphasises the significance of embedded *incongruity*, and the gap between what is presumed, expected, and hoped for, and what is actually the case. An essential element is a recognition of not only the partiality and limitations of one's own perspective, but also its associated prejudices and attitudes, and the inevitability of our entrapment within such prejudices. A simple and unqualified claim to be ethical, within this view, is an act of unreflective hubris—a narcissistic homage to the self that regales in its own presumed moral superiority. Within such a view, while ethics might inform leadership practice, that does not mean the leader can be pronounced as being "ethical" lest she or he retreat into self-righteous and self-aggrandizing moralism.

Ironically, a claim to being ethical defies ethics in that it grants assurances to an ego that should always be put in radical question by the alterity that gave rise to ethical relations. The practice of leadership ethics, should it claim to have achieved ethicality, is thus revealed as an inflated arrogance on the part of those involved. This is so whether it is leaders who proclaim their own ethics, or commentators whose sense of moral certitude gives them the brazen courage to pronounce judgment on the ethicality of others. Leadership ethics always risks the hubris that comes before (or is in some sense part of) the "fall" as leaders find themselves to be blind to features of the situation that they are in and to their sense of who they are ethically. This takes the form of dramatic irony when others understand the characters' ethical hubris, but the actors themselves do not share this knowledge. For leadership, ironic ethics evinces a reflexivity that enables the leader to see this hubris in themselves.

Significantly, the irony captured by such an ironic perspective can be contextual, sociological, or existential (Booth, 1974; Brown, 1977). It can range from local and context specific observations of what Thomas Hardy called "life's little ironies" (in Hoyle & Wallace, 2008: 1429), to more general sociological observations of the unintended consequences brought about by the blinkered perspectives and unwitting actions of communities or groups, and to more existential considerations of the absurdity of arbitrary commitments and inflated pretensions. In relation to organizations, such an ironic perspective has been identified and advocated as an acknowledgement of endemic irony (Hoyle & Wallace, 2008) within a contradiction-centred view of organizations (Hatch, 1997). Promoted here is a pragmatism in the face of contradiction that, in contrast to resonant tropes such as metaphor, accepts, captures, and responds to the dissonance that such contradictions involve and create (cf. Alvesson & Spicer, 2010; Oswick, Keenoy, & Grant, 2002).

The ironic perspective extends to an appeal for a power-sensitive approach to the limitations of dominant hegemonic views of organizational reality, the paradoxes they perpetuate, and the marginalisation of alternative voices (Trethewey, 1999); including the witting or unwitting role that one's own perspective might play in such processes. Drawing on the arguments of Ferguson (1993) and Trethewey (1999) for an ironic approach to the contradictory and paradoxical nature of feminist approaches to gender ethics, relational ethics can be viewed through either "interpretive" or "genealogical" perspectives. The interpretive perspective is concerned with shifting the balance between an economy of reciprocity and an ethics of generosity, identifying their social and political biases, and rhetorically and politically advocating a shift in perspective and action. The genealogical perspective, in contrast, focuses on the power-discursive nature of all rhetoric and rituals, language games and regimes of practice, and is more sensitive to the ways in which a generous relational ethics can itself become a partial discursive regime of truth.

As Turner (2002) infers in his exploration of cosmopolitan virtue, his genealogical position involves an engaged detachment towards all "final vocabularies" (Rorty, 1989), including our own and especially ethical vocabularies that seek final judgement over who and what is ethical. Following Trethewey (1999), an ironic perspective on the ambiguities and contradictions of ethical positions would be reflective of the fallibility and temptations towards hubris embedded in our ethical engagements and judgements, without requiring a final (and "false") reconciliation. What would remain unreconciled is the tension between the infinity of the ethical demand and the finitude of human action. That ethical irony permits a perspective that allows for this irreconcilability, it is a means to eschew the temptation to resolve the tension between the infinite demands of ethics either with failed resignation or with ethical hubris. The irreconcilable can thus remain, out of ethical necessity, unreconciled.

A contradiction-centred view of organizations is sensitive to the ethical ironies embedded in a late modern culture that possesses competing social imaginaries (Taylor, 2004), orders of worth, and regimes of justification (Boltanski, Thevenot, & Porter, 2006). While the economic realm is dominated by instrumental rationality, hierarchical relationality, and an economic self-interest, commitments to egalitarian political principles and romantic/individualistic cultural ideals are also part of modernity, embedded in civil society, the public sphere, and the cultural-aesthetic industries (Alexander, 2013). It is to be expected that such ideals will play a role in any consideration of what it is for a leader to be "ethical," and moreover, they are a radical impetus to the practice of relational ethics. These cultural contradictions will be reflected not only, for example, in the clash between an ethos of reciprocity and an ethics of generosity, but also in regard to the question of "generous to whom?" and "ethical to which others?" Ongoing tensions between different embedded moralities are an inevitable feature of modern consciousness with its "pluralisation of life worlds" (Berger & Luckmann, 1995). As Bauman (1991: 251) put it:

> Under these circumstances, the foremost paradox of the frantic search for communal grounds of consensus is that it results in more dissipation and fragmentation, more heterogeneity . . . . What purported to be the formula for agreement to end all disagreement

proves to be, the moment it has been formulated, an occasion for new disagreement and new pressures for negotiation. All effort to solidify loose life-world structures prompt more fragility and fissiparousness . . . . The only consensus likely to stand a chance of success is the acceptance of the heterogeneity of dissensions.

The value of irony, as this implies, is its ability to accept the plurality and contradictions that mark an engagement with ethics, and to accept too the inevitability and value of living with the dissonance that this creates. For leadership it is being able to work with this dissonance, never forgetting one's commitments to others, that marks an ironic stance for relational ethics.

The Ironic Performance

The ironic perspective, as just discussed, offers a stance through which the challenges and demands of hierarchically embedded relational leadership ethics can be appreciated, and their irreconcilability can be approached. At the level of the ironic perspective, however, ethical irony is still just a way of seeing things differently, but not of doing anything differently. The question remains as to what this means for the actual performance of leadership as it is enacted in relations of authority? As a form of communication, the ironic performance extends the ironic perspective into forms of influence and action. It shows up the fallibility of one-dimensional interpretations of events, revealing the existence of multiple meanings, and working with the tensions between them. In so doing, an ironic performance has an "edge" (Hutcheon, 1994) in that it not only invites a questioning of the authority of dominant or surface meanings, but also disrupts the pride and arrogance of those purveying or identifying with them; it upsets easy moral positions that fail to account for the existential tensions that arrive when ethics is considered fully. As an ironic performance, or irony of manners, irony extends into the area of communicating such multiple meanings, acknowledging the limitations of authority, and revealing an "edge" in controversial and contested situational contexts.

The ironic performance has traditionally been identified with the use of verbal or rhetorical irony, sometimes seen as saying one thing and meaning another. Due to its origins in Socratic dissembling techniques, it also carries the connotations of subterfuge and pretension: an indirect, manipulative and deceitful questioning of established authority by someone "in the know." Such interpretations only capture the surface dimensions of irony as well as avoiding its ethical capabilities. The kind of ironic performance we are addressing as being related to ethics is what has been referred to as a more "complex" (Vlastos, 1991) or "third way" (Hutcheon, 1994) irony. On the one hand this encompasses a broad "irony of manners" (e.g. involving winks, shrugs, costumes, adornments, etc.), as well as including various degrees of acceptance and sympathy towards "what is said." Such an ironic performance involves questioning taken-for-granted inequities and easy ethical positions (including the speaker's own). In regard to ethical irony, as we have described it here, an ironic performance entails a mode of communicating with and relating to others that speaks to the necessity and infinite demand of ethics, while also, in both rhetoric and ritual, communicating its contested nature and finite limitations.

The performance of ethical irony should be distinguished from engaging in sarcasm or ridicule from a stable position of presumed superiority; including any use made of "irony" that derives from such a position. Irony is not a singular phenomenon, and can be deployed in multiple ways. It can be superior or humble, divisive or unifying. It can be a weapon for distancing people or for creating common bonds. It can also provide relief by eliciting recognition of shared delusions and surfacing dilemmas and tensions experienced in common. What we are calling ethical irony is not, therefore, to be equated with irony in all its forms. Ethical irony involves a leader not only recognising the multiple and unresolvable ethical demands that are placed both on her and on others, but also initiating forms of rhetoric and "anti-rites" (Douglas, 1968) that enable these to be openly acknowledged and discussed, even though the tensions and ambiguities that they contain ultimately remain unresolved. While some perceive irony as essentially conservative, accepting and reinforcing the dominance of the surface ethos and acting as a "safety valve," ethical irony as we employ the term here is subversive and transformative in its questioning of presumed final vocabularies (Rorty, 1989) and associated moral hierarchies. This is so because it enables repressed and dissenting views to be aired, provides an effective means of "speaking truth to power" and above all allows ethical tensions to be voiced without being neutered through artificial reconciliation.

As a dramatic phenomenon, an ironic performance involves revealing how the performer is both "in" and "out," "actor" and "spectator," of whatever perspective, role, or action they are employing or undertaking. Ethically this means being both located in the infinite demands of ethics, as well as being limited by the possibilities of practice and justice. While an ironic performance may involve using this "doubleness" as *protection*, as a cover for the resistance or challenge it embodies, it can also be a source of *identification* between the speaker and audience, a source of *relief* from the strains of total commitment to impossible dilemmas, a basis for collaborating in *creative* responses to contradictory views or demands, or some combination of the above. It is on these grounds that the ironic performance can serve as a means of practically negotiating what we described earlier as the irreconcilability of ethics.

In work contexts, reflections on the use of irony as a performance have tended to focus on the nature and role of humour. In accordance with simpler and limited views of irony, a tradition of functionalist thought has addressed the role of humour as essentially a form of coping with conflict, stress, and dissonance, and a means for facilitating cooperation between diverse views and interests (Westwood & Rhodes, 2007). Equally one-dimensional interpretations are provided by more critical writers who either praise irony as an effective means of "undercover" resistance or condemn it as an essentially conservative safety valve or illusory and debilitating jouissance (Badham & McLoughlin, 2005). A more complex understanding is provided by those who recognize each of these elements or potentials, but integrate them within a broader understanding of the "comic" and the ironic as a multifaceted anti-rite or symbolic inversion that surfaces multiplicity, contradiction, and tension albeit with complex, situational, and often unpredictable effects (Linstead, 1985; Westwood, 2004).

An ironic performance of an ethics of relational leadership goes beyond the use of humour, however. It includes a broad ranging "irony of manners" in communicating

the fallibility and folly of those adhering to official or unreflexively one-dimensional views of ethics, especially those views that see ethics as something that can be unproblematically achieved by individual leaders in a heroic fashion. The performance of ethical irony is one that would never lay claim to being "ethical" in the sense of having achieved moralistic righteousness. This is an irony that adamantly pursues that which it knows it can never achieve. In accordance with complex views of irony, this includes facilitating communication and dialogue around the ambiguities, tensions, and contradictions within the ethics of relational leadership itself. At a general level, this involves acknowledging the uncertainties surrounding the jokes in the structure (Douglas, 1968) or organizational puns (Weick, 1979) within any ethical practice.

In regard to relational leadership ethics, this means recognizing the tensions within and between the infinite demands and limited response that ethics gives rise to, and guiding the means through which generosity, hospitality, welcome, and compassion can be directed. In so doing an ironic performance entails an awareness and handling of "doubleness." As symbolic beings, our ability (and fate) to enact a "double part," to both act and reflect upon action, to be ourselves and to look at ourselves, to be both the "laughing" and the "laughable" animal, both a "self who laughs" and a "self who is laughed at," is recognised, communicated, and celebrated. What this entails is giving performances that both espouse and promote an ethics of relational leadership, while also acknowledging the partiality, ambiguity, tensions, and unintended consequences of such an ethic. As Burke puts it in a self-reflective observation, "Even humility can go to one's head!" (cited in Rueckart, 1993: 299).

In a pluralistic world characterized by a "heterogeneity of dissensions" (Bauman, 1991: 251) the effectiveness of an ironic performance depends on capturing what could be called a *resonance of dissonance*: an appeal to a common understanding of the complexity and diversity inherent in ethical life. As social beings it involves us in an understanding and recognition of the double plot within social life, the existence of a serious "paramount reality," and contrasting "provinces of meaning" (Berger, 1997: 8), dominant symbolic rituals, as well as symbolic reversals through more or less institutionalized anti-rites (Douglas, 1968). However, rather than representing a retreat from social reality, the handling of such a double plot, as far as ethics is concerned, requires a recognition of the limits of finite reality in relation to the infinite demands of ethics.

The Ironic Predilection

In ancient Greece, the comedic character of the *eiron* was mainly depicted in negative terms, as a foil to the arrogant *alazon*, yet still primarily an unprincipled and distanced dissembler. A more productive image of the Socratic ironist was primarily a later development, but the tensions between the negative and positive features of the ironist remain an enduring feature of the figure's characterisation. In common parlance, the disagreements over the character of the ironist are usually simplistically and crudely presented, with the purveyor of irony regarded as either a "snorkel of sanity" or a "smirk and a sneer" (Barnes, 1990: 155). Taken negatively, the ironist is a cynical, distanced, arrogant, and manipulative human being, espousing

a creed, as Hegel (1886/1993: 72) described it, of "absolute infinite negativity." This ironist is close to the Greek *eiron*, a schemer devoid of any worthwhile sense of morality. For his or her supporters, however, the ironist is a tolerant, humble, liberal, and reflective human being, sensitive to one's own limitations, aware of and tolerant of the limitations of others, charitable but not gullible, and with a wry scepticism and sense of the comic in observing and participating in the carnival of human life. The ironist, in these terms, is the deployer of an irony that is characterised, as Anatole France put it, by the "gaiety of reflection and the joy of wisdom" (in Johanssen & Woodilla, 2005: 15). Variously described as a "personality," "disposition," "temper," or "habitus," this is the kind of ironic positional stance that we are advocating here. This predilection is a more or less enduring orientation, fashioned and refashioned through an interaction between subjective inclination and structural conditioning. It should be viewed less as a fixed individual trait and more as a habituated stance. Such is the predilection of the person who takes this kind of ironic stance towards leadership ethics as we have described it.

   In studies of organizations, empirical research has been dominated by stereotypical images of the managerialist "zealot," the estranged "cynic," and the dramaturgical "ironist" (Badham, Calydon, & Down, 2012). In such studies the "ironist" is portrayed in terms similar to that of the negative *eiron,* although with a greater emphasis on superficiality, inner emptiness, and confusion than extreme distance or sardonic cruelty (Kunda, 2006). In contrast, and aligned with our conception of ethical irony, others have praised the mature abilities of ironists able to cope with ambivalence and live with paradox, as "tempered radicals" (Meyerson, 2003), "principled infidels" (Hoyle & Wallace, 2008), "creative resistors" (Clegg, Kornberger, Carter, & Rhodes, 2006), "insider-outsiders" (Klein, 2007), "engaged ironists" (Badham & McLoughlin, 2005), or even the "good soldier Svejk" (Fleming & Sewell, 2002). In relation to leadership in particular, the importance of an "ironic understanding" amongst leaders has been acknowledged (Alvesson and Spicer, 2010: 39), with the focus on an ironic awareness of complexity, lack of control, and the value of perspectives others bring a characteristic of constructive-developmental leadership theory (Rooke & Torbert, 1998).

   The ability of a relational leader to adopt an ethical predilection incorporating an ironic perspective and delivering an ironic performance requires cognitive, emotional, and behavioural complexity and resilience in coping with and creatively responding to the dissonance and ambivalence they confront in themselves and others. Ethics, as we have conceived it, is complex, ambiguous, and above all, anxiety producing. It can be a paralysing force as one realises that its demands exceed human possibility, and that no matter what one does, ethically, it can never be enough to live up to those demands. The predilection of ethical irony is that which enables a leader to accept and enact the unbearable burden of ethical responsibility. Meyerson and Scully (1995: 593) offer a telling example in their identification of "the heat, passion, torment" of tempered radicals. They point to the challenges that a tempered radical stance faces, grappling with isolation, the stigma of hypocrisy, and pressures for co-option. They emphasise, however, not detachment, but enhancing their ability

to speak multiple languages, enriching affiliations with those committed to different ethical standpoints, and focusing on local actions and small wins while appreciating their contribution to vitality, learning, and transformation in diverse organizational environments. Such is the predilection, or habituated stance, of the ethical ironist.

For ethical relational leaders, an ironic predilection involves a reflective appreciation of both the rationality of justice and the ethics of generosity, as well as divisions within and incompatibilities between them, advocates for each, and preparedness to be outsiders-within. By extension, and in practice, it involves a recognition of the contradictory nature of our moral and public spheres, the limits of our capacity to act on behalf of others, coupled with an enduring commitment to the aspirational hopes. It also involves being able to adopt a "layered" approach to ethics moving from enduring commitment to a "thin" layer of ethical generalities while being involved in "thick" activities of local ethical action and prescription, and a general serious playfulness towards the stance they adopt (March & Weil, 2005; Turner, 2002). The temperament that enables ethical irony is one that regards the self not as a source of moral certitude, self-assured in its own righteousness. Instead it is one that acknowledges the impossible burden of ethics without giving way to a cynical resignation that nothing can be done. Ethical irony is served by a certain type of "action orientation" through which action is to be taken in the face of infinite ethical demands, and where the ethics of those actions can never be justified with the good conscience of moral certainty.

CONCLUSION

As we commented at the opening of this article, relational leadership has emerged in recent years as an approach that has sought to move beyond heroic and individualistic approaches to theory and practice, embracing instead a more reciprocal, engaged and dialogic appreciation of what leaders do (Uhl-Bien, 2006). From this position, relational leadership has also been promoted as a means to engage leadership ethics at the level of social and interpersonal practice (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). Both implicitly and explicitly relational leadership has been understood in ethical terms. Located in the relationships and interdependencies between people, this leadership values respect, collaboration, communication, compassion, and the empowerment of others. Highlighted is an ethics that involves leaders' affective engagement with those they lead, and a genuine concern with and response to their needs (Pless & Maak, 2011).

Relational leadership clearly offers a valuable opportunity to reconsider leadership ethics from a perspective grounded in the people's affiliations and relations as they are practiced in the embedded day-to-day activities of work. As we have argued, however, to date an explicit theorization of a relational ethics for leadership has only begun to be considered. It is on these grounds that with this article we have endeavoured to develop a philosophically informed approach to relational leadership ethics that both does justice to the depth of the ethical thought that informs it, as well as relates practically to the real life issues of ethics that arise through workplace relations. In pursuing this endeavour, the labour of our article has

been to bring a philosophical approach to relational ethics, especially following Levinas (1969; 1974), to bear on advancing theories of relational leadership. Levinas has been crucial here in that his work offers us a sophisticated ethical philosophy that locates ethics precisely in one's relationship with others. Moreover, from Levinas we appreciate the inherent dilemmas, double-binds, and contradictions that characterise what happens when practice is inspired by ethics (Knights & O'Leary, 2006; Rhodes, 2012).

In developing and applying Levinasian relational ethics to leadership practice, our article has endeavoured to contribute to the development of relational leadership in three ways. First it has theorised leadership existentially as being caught in an irreconcilable bind between an infinitely demanding ethics and the finite possibilities of a response to those demands. As we have argued it is the challenge posed by this necessary yet impossible relationship that characterises the ethical predicament of the relational leader. Second, we have questioned relational leadership theory's focus on socially constructed interpersonal relations and how it has elided the fact that leadership relations are most commonly enacted and contextualised within hierarchical organizational structures characterised by asymmetries in power and authority. This has led to our third, and major, contribution of having proposed what we refer to as "ethical irony" as a way of approaching the practical demands placed upon leaders in responding to ethical imperatives in a way that does not result in either an escape from ethics, or being crushed by its burden.

Considered in relation to Levinas' philosophy, relational leadership fosters a recognition of the contextual, relational, and processual nature of ethics as practical wisdom. However, unless the dilemma of a commitment to the infinite weight of the ethics and a recognition of finitude of hierarchically embedded practices is addressed, there can be no "practical" appreciation of such a relational ethics. An implicit, and sometimes explicit, reliance upon a "superior" ethic of reciprocity, and implications of ethical certainty in its pursuit, betrays the spirit of a non-heroic and relational approach to leadership. It consequently holds back discussion of and experimentation with a practical ethics. In contrast, ethical irony, as we have conceived it here, is intended to contribute to the realisation of a more consistent and practical means of understanding and theorizing the ethics of relational leadership.

It is important to be clear, however, what we mean by a "practical" contribution in this context, as it differs from simple pragmatic realism. We attest that morality is *made* practical through a recognition that there can be no intellectual resolution of the dilemma we have outlined, just as liberals such as Berlin (1969: 149) emphasize the absence of any monistic resolution in a "world in which ends collide" and Rorty (1989) notes the irreducible tension between self-creation and solidarity. The result is an emphasis on what Mills, Berlin, and Rorty describe as "experiments for living," involving the "practical wisdom" of "bending" and adapting multiple, conflicting, and ambiguous moral rules in context (Schwartz & Sharpe, 2010). It also involves subtle and local combinations of rhetorics in awareness of the role of paradox, power, and serendipity in human affairs (Sewell & Barker, 2006). From this standpoint rationales for and forms of "practical wisdom" are explicitly considered as components of a situated relational ethics. Such rationales include: a creative

view of praxis as the invention (rather than discovery) of morality; a selective combination, adaptation, and testing of partial views; and a reflective understanding of the partial yet considered public process of justifying and explaining actions in terms of motives and reasons of motives. Also included is the intertwining and blending of passionate commitments to "thin" moral generalities accompanied by the qualification, compromise, recognition of complexity, and disagreement that accompanies the "thick moralities" resulting from their application in context.

Ethical irony breaks down the process of addressing these issues into the three distinctive, albeit interrelated, areas of practical activity we have identified. These dimensions of ethical irony serve to outline considerations of not only cognition, but also performative action and means for living with absurdity and incongruity. The ironic perspective raises the issue of recognising and living with such incongruities in moral deliberations and human existence. The ironic performance involves the legitimation and pragmatics of surfacing and communicating such dilemmas in dialogue and in relationship with others. The ironic predilection concerns the challenges of creatively coping with and elegantly responding to the tensions and disturbances created by such an ironic perspective and performance as practiced within the asymmetrical structures of organizational hierarchies.

We note here that in developing their different views of liberal irony, mastered irony, and the comic, ironists such as Rorty, Kierkegaard, and Burke all grapple in different ways with the issue of moral engagement. This is an engagement that surrounds a required combination of the critical, reflective, and distanced component of irony *with* a degree of acceptance of and commitment to the embedded institutions, practices, and perspectives that frame our social existence (Burke, 1984; Frazier, 2006). Ethical irony is, in this sense, essentially practical as it encompasses a recognition of, and grappling with, a reflective use of social moralities in context. For those seeking a certain grounding for ethics, and one based on universalistic rules or prescriptions, a recommendation for such an ethical community may appear lacking. However, as McLoskey (1994: 295) put it, such a perspective provides "procedural rather than end state justice … the ability to toggle between looking at and looking through a text … is the best defence we have yet devised for what we value."

"Ethical irony," as we have positioned it in terms of ironic perspective, ironic performance and ironic predilection, presents a new way to consider leaders' ethical practice. The implication of this is that the relational leader can never *be* ethical in any ontological sense, but can only ever engage in the ongoing and ultimately demanding challenge that ethics places on leaders in the context of the relationships that define them. The quality of ethical leadership, then, arises not from having achieved ethical status, but rather from an unending realisation that ethics can never be fully achieved yet must always be pursued.

This begs the question of whether pursuing and achieving such a quality is practically feasible, given the instrumental, complex, contested, and hierarchical nature of life in organisations. We might also ask, in the context of corporations operating in a neoliberal order that privileges profits over people (Chomsky, 1999), whether it is naïve to expect ethics to emerge from organizational leadership itself

(Rhodes, 2016). Our response to such questions is threefold. Firstly, we are acting initially as interpreters rather than legislators of ethical aspirations in late modern organisations (Bauman, 1987)? Our position is developed in the face of identifiable and widespread awareness of the ethical limitations and even hypocrisy of claims to be ethical in the modern context, as well as an acknowledged presence of dissonance in the face of multiple competing demands and restrictive conditions. The argument for ethical irony is made on the basis that, to an often unacknowledged degree, we are already ironic in our perspective, performance, and predilection. Secondly, those struggling to be ethical in such conditions, like Meyerson's (2003) "tempered radicals" or Ferguson's (1993) and Tretheway's (1999) "ironic" feminists, are also often aware of the dilemmas and associated stresses that they face. What the ethical irony approach does is explore and elaborate a basis upon which to further reflect on the meaning of the struggle for ethics that real people are involved in, and, hopefully, to do so with a greater "lightness of being" (Kundera, 1984). Thirdly, to be practical is not simply to conform to what is taken to be a pre-existing reality, but to be aware of the manner in which that reality is constructed, and address how it might be changed and how one's response to it may change. In the face of currently dominant rhetorics and rituals of rationality, it may be that the often misinterpreted and disputed term "irony" itself is not the one best able to provide a convincing "perspective by incongruity" capable of prising open and changing current realities (Burke, 1984). However, we would argue, and hope, that the approach to ethics that an ironic stance provides helps contribute to an ethical discourse that takes us somewhat closer to creating the kind of cosmopolitan public culture to which so many aspire.

REFERENCES

Aasland, D. G. 2007. The exteriority of ethics in management and its transition into justice: A Levinasian approach to ethics in business. *Business Ethics: A European Review*, 16: 220–226.

———. 2009. *Ethics and economy: After Levinas*. London: MayFlyBooks.

Alexander, J. 2013. *The dark side of modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Alvesson, M., & Spicer, A. 2010. *Metaphors we lead by*. London: Routledge.

Avolio, B. J., Walumbwa, F. O., & Weber, T. J. 2009. Leadership: Current theories, research, and future directions. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 60: 421–449.

Badham, R., & McLoughlin, I. 2005. Ambivalence and engagement: Irony and cultural change in late modern organizations. *International Journal of Knowledge, Culture and Change Management*, 5(4): 132–143.

Badham, R., Claydon, R., & Down, S. 2012. The ambivalence paradox in cultural change. In J. Hassard, B. Burnes, & D. Boje (Eds.), *Routledge Companion on Organizational Change*: 407–424. Routledge: London.

Barnes, J. 1990. *Flaubert's parrot*. New York: Vintage.

Bauman, Z. 1987. *Interpreters and legislators*. Cambridge: Polity.

———. 1991. *Modernity and ambivalence*. Cambridge: Polity.

Berger, P. 1997. *Redeeming laughter: The comic dimension of human experience*. Berlin: De Gruyter.

Berger, P., & Luckmann, T. 1995. *Pluralism and the crisis of meaning: The orientation of modern man*. Gutersloh: Bertelsmann.

Berlin, I. 1969. *Liberty*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bevan, D., & Corvellec, H. 2007. The impossibility of corporate ethics: For a Levinasian approach to managerial ethics. *Business Ethics: A European Review*, 16: 208–219.

Bisecker, B. 1997. *Addressing postmodernity: Kenneth Burke, rhetoric and a theory of social change*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press.

Boltanski, L., Thevenot, L., & Porter, C. 2006. *On justification: Economies of worth*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Booth, W. 1974. *A rhetoric of irony*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Brower, H. H., Schoorman, F. D., & Tan, H. H. 2000. A model of relational leadership: The integration of trust and leader–member exchange. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 11: 227–250.

Brown, R. H. 1977. *A poetic for sociology: Toward a logic of discovery for the human sciences*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Burke, K. 1962. *A grammar of motives, and a rhetoric of motives*. Cleveland: World Pub. Co.

———. 1984. *Attitudes toward history*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Byers, D., & Rhodes, C. 2007. Ethics, alterity, and organizational justice. *Business Ethics: A European Review*, 16(3): 239–250.

Cardona, P. 2000. Transcendental leadership. *Leadership and Organization Development Journal*, 21(4): 201–207.

Carifio, J. 2010. Development and validation of a measure of relational leadership: Implications for leadership theory and policies. *Current Research in Psychology*, 1(1): 16–28.

Carlson, A. C. 1986. Gandhi and the comic frame: "Ad bellum purificandum." *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 72(4): 446–455.

Carmeli, A., Tishler, A., & Edmondson, A. C. 2012. CEO relational leadership and strategic decision quality in top management teams: The role of team trust and learning from failure. *Strategic Organization*, 10(1): 31–54.

Chomsky, N. 1999. *Profit over people: Neoliberalism and global order*. London: Seven Stories.

Clegg, S., Kornberger, M., & Rhodes, C. 2007. Business ethics as practice. *British Journal of Management*, 18(2): 107–122.

Clegg, S. R., Kornberger, M., Carter, C., & Rhodes, C. 2006. For management? *Management Learning*, 37(7): 7–27.

Cohen, S., & Taylor, L. 1992. *Escape attempts: The theory and practice of resistance to everyday life*. London: Routledge.

Crevani, L., Lindgren, M., & Packendorff, J. 2010. Leadership, not leaders: On the study of leadership as practices and interactions. *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 26(1): 77–86.

Critchley, S. 2007. *Infinitely demanding: Ethics of commitment, politics of resistance*. London: Verso.

Cunliffe, A. L. 2009. The philosopher leader: On relationalism, ethics and reflexivity—A critical perspective to teaching leadership. *Management Learning*, 40(1): 87–101.

Cunliffe, A. L., & Eriksen, M. 2011. Relational leadership. *Human Relations*, 64(11): 1425–1449.

Dachler, H. P., & Hosking, D. M. 1995. The primacy of relations in socially constructing organizational realities. In D. M. Hosking, H. P. Dachler, & K. J. Gergen (Eds.), *Management and organisation: Relational perspectives*: 1–28. Aldershot: Avebury.

de Gama, N., McKenna, S., & Peticca-Harris, A. 2012. Ethics and HRM: Theoretical and conceptual analysis. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 111(1): 97–108.

De Man, P. 1996. *Aesthetic ideology*. Minneapolis: University of Minesota Press.

Derrida, J. 2000. *Of hospitality*. Redwood City: Stanford University Press.

Dikec, M. 2002. Pera peras poros: Longings for spaces of hospitality. *Theory, Culture and Society*, 19(1-2): 227–247.

Douglas, M. 1968. The social control of cognition: Some factors in joke perception. *Man*, 3(3): 361–376.

Drath, W. H., McCauley, C. D., Palus, C. J., Van Velsor, E., O'Connor, P. M., & McGuire, J. B. 2008. Direction, alignment, commitment: Toward a more integrative ontology of leadership. *Leadership Quarterly*, 19(6): 635–653.

Edwards, G. 2014. *Community as leadership*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

Fairhurst, G. T., & Uhl-Bien, M. 2012. Organizational discourse analysis (ODA): Examining leadership as a relational process. *Leadership Quarterly*, 23(6): 1043–1062.

Ferch, S. R., & Mitchell, M. M. 2001. Intentional forgiveness in relational leadership: A technique for enhancing effective leadership. *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies*, 7(4): 70–83.

Ferguson, K. 1993. *The man question: Visions of subjectivity in feminist theory*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Fernandez, J., & Huber, M. (Eds.). 2001. *Irony in action*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Fleming, P., & Sewell, G. 2002. Looking for the good soldier, Svejk: Alternative modalities of resistance in the contemporary workplace. *Sociology*, 36(4): 857–873.

Fletcher, J. K. 2004. The paradox of postheroic leadership: An essay on gender, power, and transformational change. *Leadership Quarterly*, 15(5): 647–661.

Frazier, B. 2006. *Rorty and Kierkegaard on irony and moral commitment: Philosophical and theological connections*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Frosh, S. 2011. The relational ethics of conflict and identity. *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society*, 16: 225–243.

Fulop, L., & Mark, A. 2013. Relational leadership, decision-making and the messiness of context in healthcare. *Leadership*, 9: 254–277.

Gouldner, A. W. 1967. *Enter Plato: Classical Greece and the origins of social theory*. London: Routledge.

Grandy, G., & Sliwa, M. 2017. Contemplative leadership: The possibilities for the ethics of leadership theory and practice. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 143: 423–440.

Grint, K. 2005. Problems, problems, problems: The social construction of 'leadership'. *Human Relations*, 58: 1467–1494.

———. 2010. The sacred in leadership: Separation, sacrifice and silence. *Organization Studies*, 31: 89–107.

Guhin, J. 2013. Is irony good for America: The threat of nihilism, the importance of romance and the power of cultural forms. *Cultural Sociology*, 7: 1–16

Hatch, M. J. 1997. Irony and the social construction of contradiction in the humor of a management team. *Organization Science*, 8: 275–288.

Hegel, F. 1886/1993. *Introductory lectures on aesthetics*. London: Penguin.

Höpfl, H. M. 2006. Post-bureaucracy and Weber's 'modern' bureaucrat. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 19: 8–21.

Hosking, D. M. 2011. Telling tales of relations: Appreciating relational constructionism. *Organization Studies*, 32: 47–65.

Hoyle, E., & Wallace, M. 2008. Two faces of organizational irony: Endemic and pragmatic, *Organization Studies*, 29: 1427–1447.

Hutcheon, L. 1994. *Irony's edge: The theory and politics of irony*. London: Routledge.

Johansson, U., & Woodilla, J. 2005. *Irony and organizations: Epistemological claims and supporting field stories*. Copenhagen: Copenhagen Business School Press.

Jones, C. 2003. As if business ethics were possible, 'within such limits'... *Organization*, 10: 223–248.

Jones, J. 2014. Leadership lessons from Levinas: Revisiting responsible leadership. *Leadership and the Humanities*, 1: 44–63.

Kegan, R., & Lahey, L. 2009. *Immunity to change*. Boston: Harvard Business Review Press.

Kierkegaard, S. 1938. *Journals of Soren Kierkegaard*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

———. 1989. *The concept of irony/Schelling lecture notes : Kierkegaard's writings*, *Vol. 2.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Kish-Gephart, J. J., Harrison, D. A., & Treviño, L. K. 2010. Bad apples, bad cases, and bad barrels: Meta-analytic evidence about sources of unethical decisions at work. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 95: 1–31.

Klein, J. 2007. *True change*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Knights, D., & O'Leary, M. 2005. Reflecting on corporate scandals: The failure of ethical leadership. *Business Ethics: A European Review*, 14: 359–366.

———. 2006. Leadership, ethics and responsibility to the other. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 67(2): 125–137.

Komives, S. R., Longerbeam, S. D., Owen, J. E., Mainella, F. C., & Osteen, L. 2006. A leadership identity development model: Applications from a grounded theory. *Journal of College Student Development*, 47: 401–418.

Kunda, G. 2006. *Engineering culture: Control and commitment in a high-tech corporation*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Kundera, M. 1984. *The unbearable lightness of being*. New York: Harper & Row.

Lanham, R. 1995. *The electronic word*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Levinas, E. 1969. *Totality and infinity: An essay on exteriority*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.

———. 1974. *Otherwise than being: Or beyond essence*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.

———. 1985. *Ethics and infinity*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.

Linstead, S. 1985. Jokers wild: The importance of humour in the maintenance of organizational culture. *The Sociological Review*, 33: 741–67.

Liu, H. 2015. Reimagining ethical leadership as a relational, contextual and political practice. *Leadership*. doi: 10.1177/1742715015593414.

Maak, T., & Pless, N. M. 2006. Responsible leadership in a stakeholder society: A relational perspective. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 66: 99–115.

March, J., & Weil, T. 2005. *On leadership*. New York: Wiley-Blackwell.

McLoskey, D., 1994. *Knowledge and persuasion in economics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Meyerson, D. J. 2003. *Tempered radicals: How everyday leaders inspire change at work*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Meyerson. D., & Scully, M. 1995. Tempered radicalism and the politics of ambivalence and change. *Organization Science*, 6: 585–600.

Muecke, D. C. 1976. *Irony*. London: Methuen.

Muhr, S. L. 2008. Othering diversity, A Levinasian analysis of diversity management. *International Journal of Management Concepts and Philosophy*, 3: 176–189.

Nagel, T. 2012. *Mortal questions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Oswick, C., Keenoy, T., & Grant, D. 2002. Metaphor and analogical reasoning in organization theory: Beyond orthodoxy. *Academy of Management Review*, 27(2): 294–303.

Painter-Morland, M. 2008. Systemic leadership and the emergence of ethical responsiveness. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 82(2): 509–524.

Parker, M. 2009. Angelic organization: Hierarchy and the tyranny of heaven. *Organization Studies*, 30(11): 1281–1299.

Pless, N. M., & Maak, T. 2011. Responsible leadership: Pathways to the Future. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 98: 3–13.

Pound, M. 2008. *Zizek: A (very) critical introduction*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerrdmans.

Popke, E. J. 2003. Poststructuralist ethics: subjectivity, responsibility and the space of community. *Progress in Human Geography*, 27(3): 298–316.

Raelin, J. 2011. From leadership-as-practice to leaderful practice. *Leadership*, 7: 195–211.

Raelin, J. A. 2016. Imagine there are no leaders: Reframing leadership as collaborative agency. *Leadership*, 12: 131–158.

Reitz, M. 2015. *Dialogue in organizations: Developing relational leadership*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.

Rhodes, C. 2012. Ethics, alterity and the rationality of leadership justice. *Human Relations*, 65(10): 1311–1331.

———. 2016. Democratic business ethics: Volkswagen's emissions scandal and the disruption of corporate sovereignty. *Organization Studies*, 37(10): 1501–1518.

Rhodes, C., & Westwood, R. I. 2016. The limits of generosity: Lessons on ethics, economy, and reciprocity in Kafka's The Metamorphosis. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 133(2): 235–248.

Roberts, J. 2003. The manufacture of corporate social responsibility: Constructing corporate sensibility. *Organization*, 10(2): 249–265.

Rooke, D., & Torbert, W. 1998. Organizational transformation as a function of CEOs' developmental stage. *Organization Development Journal*, 16(1): 11–28.

Rorty, R. 1989. *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rueckart, W. H. 1993. *Kenneth Burke and the drama of human relations*. San Francisco: University of California Press.

Schwartz, B., & Sharpe, K. 2010. *Practical wisdom*. New York: Riverhead Books.

Sewell, G., & Barker, J. 2006. Coercion versus care: Using irony to make sense of organizational surveillance. *Academy of Management Review*, 31(4): 934–961.

Søltoft, P. 2001. Ethics and irony. In L. P. Perkins (Ed.), *The concept of irony*: 265–287. Macon: Mercer University Press.

Taylor, C. 2004. *Modern social imaginaries*. New York: Duke University Press.

Trethewey, A. 1999. Isn't it ironic: Using irony to explore the contradictions of organizational life. *Western Journal of Communication*, 63(2): 140–167.

Turner, B. 2002. Cosmopolitan virtue: On religion in a global age. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 4(2): 131–152.

Uhl-Bien, M. 2006. Relational leadership theory: Exploring the social processes of leadership and organizing. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 17(6): 654–676.

Vlastos, G. 1991. *Socrates: Ironist and moral philosopher*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Weick, K. 1979. *The social psychology of organizing*. McGraw Hill: New York.

Wess, R. 1996. *Kenneth Burke: Rhetoric, subjectivity, postmodernism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Westwood, R. I. 2004. Comic relief: Subversion and catharsis in organizational comedic theatre. *Organization Studies*, 25(5): 775–95.

Westwood, R. I., & Rhodes, C. (Eds.). 2007. *Humour, work and organization*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Yukl, G. 1999. An evaluative essay on current conceptions of effective leadership. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 8(1): 33–48.