# Self Constitution as The Foundation for Leading Ethically: A Foucauldian Possibility

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ABSTRACT: This article challenges the assumption that the source of ethical leadership is the well-intentioned leader of good character. Drawing from Michel Foucault's critical philosophy, it argues that those aspiring to lead ethically must actively constitute themselves in order to become subjects who are free to exercise ethical agency. The practices of self-care (*epimeileisthai sautou*) and courageous speech (*parrhesia*) are introduced as means by which such self-constitution can be approached. The case of US President Barack Obama's inability to close the detention centre at Guantanamo Bay serves as an illustrative device to ground Foucault's ideas. The argument enriches a philosophically informed rendering of ethical leadership in three ways: by highlighting the role resistance plays in any leader's attempts to achieve ethical ends, by demonstrating the importance of an orientation of critique on the part of those aspiring to lead ethically, and by revealing the importance of followers in realizing ethical outcomes.

KEY WORDS: critical ethics, Foucault, self-care, *epimeileisthai sautou,* courageous speech, *parrhesia*

Two days after being sworn into office as the president of the United States on January 22, 2009, Barack Obama signed an executive order for the "prompt closing of the detention facilities at Guantanamo Bay." The order dictated that the facility would cease operations in "no less than a year." At the end of Obama's eight years in office, 41 of the 779 people originally detained in the prison were still held in Guantanamo Bay with 196 of those released during his presidency (Scheinkman, McLean, Ashkennas, Tse, & Harris, 2017).

The detention of prisoners without recourse to legal process has been seen by many throughout the world as unethical and an embarrassing legacy of the previous presidency. Indicating his commitment to righting this moral wrong, Obama was quoted as saying "I am issuing the order to close the facility in order to restore the standards of due process and the core constitutional values that have made this country great, even in the midst of war, even in dealing with terrorism" (Henry, Starr, & Walsh, 2009).

How is it that such an aspiration, supported by millions of people throughout the world as well as many in the US, and endorsed by 'the most powerful man on the planet,' has remained unrealised? Certainly, legal and bureaucratic factors play their part (a major difficulty, for instance, has been identifying a place where detainees might be tried). Even beyond such issues, the case points to the power of historic and institutional dynamics and their role in limiting leader agency aimed at realising ethical ends.

Contemporary leadership ethics literature is largely mute concerning such limitations. At the centre of the ethical leader is thought to be the ethical person, who freely chooses the extent to which they infuse their way of being a leader with an ethical stance (Brown & Mitchell, 2010; Ciulla, 2005; Treviño, Pincus Hartman, & Brown, 2000). The inability to act ethically is largely conceptualised as a consequence of individual moral failure, and 'bad apples' such as Jeffrey Skilling, Ken Lay, or Bernard Madoff are duly punished. Although there is a body of literature which considers the role of climate and culture in moulding ethical behaviour, much of it assumes that leaders rise above such climates, and indeed are responsible for creating them (Aronson, 2001; Lawton & Páez, 2015; Mendonca, 2001; Shin, 2012). Few studies attend to the way in which that climate, or even followers and their expectations, shape leaders' ability to respond ethically to situations they encounter. This lack of attention echoes broader suppositions within the leadership literature about the unquestioned power organizational leaders wield (Chullen, Rowe, & Zemanek, 2015).

The French philosopher Michel Foucault disrupts many traditional views about power and how it operates. This article draws from his thinking in order to problematize assumptions apparent in the literature concerning the ease with which leaders can exercise ethical agency. According to Foucault's late works, freedom is critical to such agency and is hard won through a process of self-constitution. Self-constitution involves recognizing the limits to one's agency arising from two features of power: the way in which resistance acts as a counterpoint to its exertion, and the way it is embedded not just in individual human consciousness, but in social mores, historical precedents, and institutional constraints. This article argues that awareness of these dynamics, as well as an attitude of self-critique in relation to them, are vital (and largely overlooked) aspects of leaders' ability to achieve ethical outcomes.

Foucault's thinking enriches the ethical leadership literature from a philosophical standpoint in at least three ways. Firstly, it highlights how resistance and disciplinary power impact any leader's attempts to achieve ethical ends (rather than overlooking them). Secondly, it demonstrates the importance of an orientation of critique (rather than self-awareness or the development of good character) as essential to those aspiring to lead ethically. Finally, it exposes the way in which followers are also implicated in the realisation of ethical outcomes (rather than understanding leaders to be the primary provenance of such outcomes). These insights are important because they challenge the commonly held view that ethical leadership arises from the intentions of virtuous individuals. Without this understanding, good intent can remain an aspiration rather than a realisation, as in the case of Barack Obama and Guantanamo Bay.

The article is structured as follows. It begins by critiquing key assumptions underpinning current ethical leadership literature. Foucault's intellectual project is introduced, focusing particularly on his writings concerning power and his late work on ethics. In relation to the latter, self-constitution is described and the practices of self-care and courageous speech are brought to bear on the possibility of leading ethically. The discussion highlights the difficulties a Foucauldian rendering poses for the possibility of leading ethically itself, suggesting that the requirements of

remaining the leader can themselves work against the accomplishment of ethical outcomes. Foucault's ideas are grounded by applying them to the case of Barack Obama's inability to close the detention centre at Guantanamo Bay.

## ASSUMPTIONS UNDERPINNING CURRENT ETHICAL LEADERSHIP LITERATURE

Three assumptions which underpin much of the ethical leadership literature are briefly introduced here: firstly, that character is the bedrock of ethical leadership; secondly, that leaders enjoy freedom in exercising ethical agency; and finally, that leaders are responsible for the ethics of their organizations.

### *Character is the Bedrock Upon Which Ethical Leadership is Built*

The importance of being an individual of high character in order to lead ethically is an unquestioned theme running through much of the literature. At the centre of the ethical leader is seen to be the ethical person, and leading ethically is often conceived as merely how that ethical person carries their values into the way they lead. For instance, Bass and Steidlmeier assert that the first pillar upon which the ethics of leadership rest is "the moral character of the leader" (1999: 182) a sentiment echoed in the work of Brown and Mitchell (2010), Trevino, Pincus Hartman, and Brown (2000), and Ciulla (2005). Hartman (2006) poses the further question about the extent to which a virtuous character can be developed.

The difficulty with this assumption is that it equates being an individual of high character with achieving ethical outcomes. Perhaps this is a consequence of the view that the ends of leading (or managing) are given and it is only their means which might be debated (MacIntyre, 1985). The business ethics scholar Dennis Gioia (1992) strikingly shows how this is not the case in his retelling of how Ford Motor Company executives decided not to refit their Pinto cars with a lifesaving part once they discovered its engine would explode during rear-end collisions. The executives were not evil, and indeed thought of themselves as virtuous people (Gioia, himself was one of them). However, their individual characters did not prevent them from framing the issue at hand as an economic, rather than an ethical one. Whereas the broader business ethics literature identifies the importance of frames and organizational norms in ethical decision making (Moberg & Seabright 2000; Werhane 2007), their impact is neglected by much of the ethical leadership literature. This may be because leaders are seen to create the frames used for decision making in most organizations as implied by the next assumption.

### *Leaders Have Freedom in Exercising Ethical Agency*

The ability of the leader to choose to act ethically remains unquestioned by most of the ethical leadership literature. This is in line with the broader leadership literature which undertheorizes the way in which leaders' power works and how resistance accompanies any exertion of will on the leader's part. Instead, the hierarchically superior position leaders often hold is assumed to grant them the ability to achieve desired ends (Chullen et al., 2015). Such a view also fails to take account of the way

in which leaders themselves are embedded within systems of social relations and are subject to the weight of history (Gordon, 2002; Hunt & Dodge, 2001).

Furthermore, this assumption does not recognize that being a leader involves taking up a social role which can require behaviours different to those outside of the role. In their empirically based research concerning the social psychology of leadership, Reicher, Haslam, and Hopkins (2005) demonstrate that in order to be accepted as the leader, individuals cannot veer too far from what their followers accept in terms of leadership behaviours. Because of this, being accepted as the leader can sometimes require acting in ways that do not necessarily align with personal standards or values. By acting virtuously among those who do not aspire to the same values, a leader may alienate followers and no longer be accepted as their leader. Although Reicher, Haslam, and Hopkins do not explicitly consider the ethical implications of followers' expectations on how leaders take up their positions, their thinking has important implications for understanding the limits individuals face when attempting to lead ethically.

From the organizational studies perspective, Crane, Knights, and Starkey (2008) offer a Foucauldian analysis to show how organizational members are not completely free in exercising their moral judgements. In particular, they highlight Foucault's concern with the way in which the power of institutional structures can "deny the possibility of acting ethically" (2008: 302). Their article also indicates the importance Foucault placed on constituting oneself as an ethical agent in order to win the freedom to act ethically. Although intended to frame the limitations to acting ethically for organizational members generally, their work is a helpful leaping-off point for considering the ways in which leaders are also constrained in their ability to exercise ethical agency.

### Ethical Leadership is Individually, Rather than Collectively Determined

The ethical leadership literature focuses almost entirely on individual leaders as the source of ethical leadership, without considering the collective input of followers and the context within which they operate. Indeed, the call for this special issue aligns with this assumption by asserting, "the heart of many ethical problems in business is not corporations per se but the men and women who run them" (Ciulla, Knights, Mabey & Tomkins, 2015). This focus on the individual is also apparent within five recent reviews of the ethical leadership literature (Brown & Mitchell, 2010; Brown & Treviño, 2006; Ciulla, 1995, 2005; Lawton & Páez, 2015). As suggested by Knights and O'Leary (2005: 363), "given the psychological approach to leadership taken since the 1980s, it is not surprising that the literature on ethical leadership is similarly individualistic."

In Ciulla's most recent review she moves momentarily beyond the individual leader to note the part followers play in creating ethical leadership. She writes, "if you accept the proposition that leadership is a relationship, you cannot study the ethics of leadership without including the ethics of followers. . . . followers have power and hence responsibility" (Ciulla, 2005: 329). This idea is developed further in Price's (2006) account which suggests how broader, relationally based dynamics

play an important role in ethically questionable activity on the part of leaders. He cautions that the privileging of leaders can result in cognitive failures in which leaders come to believe "that they are beyond the scope of morality by which the rest of society lives" (Price, 2006: 60). However, these dynamics remain unexplored in most of the ethical leadership literature.

The power that leaders are assumed to have in influencing their followers' ethical behaviour (rather than the other way round) is encapsulated in the idea of a 'trickle-down effect' (Mayer, Kuenzi, Greenbaum, Bardes, & Salvador, 2009). A number of empirical studies have ostensibly found a positive relationship between leaders of high moral development (based on Kohlberg's [1984] work) and the ethical climates of their organizations (Mayer et al., 2009; Neubert, Carlson, Kacmar, Roberts, & Chonki, 2009; Schminke, Ambrose & Neubaum, 2005; Shin, 2012). However, it is important to note that in each of these cases the relationship identified is correlative, rather than causal. In other words, the identified relationship between leaders of high moral development and high ethical climate does not mean that the leader is causing the climate. In correlative relationships of this nature, interpreting the causality in the inverse direction would also be valid. Indeed there could be no causal relationship at all.

These three assumptions have brought the ethical leadership literature to a place where its primary unit of analysis is the individual leader and the main questions it asks concern his or her characteristics, how they do what they do, and why they do it (Lawton & Páez, 2015). Obama's failure to achieve the ethical end of closing Guantanamo Bay suggests that factors other than the character of leaders, their motivations, or even the assumed amount of power they wield, play a role in achieving ethical outcomes. Michel Foucault's thinking provides a radical understanding of how power operates, and it is to his work that the article now turns.

## FOUCAULT'S PROJECT AND ORGANIZATIONAL STUDIES

The French intellectual Michel Foucault is known for his critical analyses concerning social institutions such as prisons and mental hospitals as well as inquiries into how institutional forces shape understandings of sexuality and deviance. Foucault's thinking has provided a rich resource to queer theory (Huffer, 2009) and feminism (McNay, 1992)[1] as well as a radical lens through which social practices such as education (Marshall, 1989), nursing (Henderson, 1994), and social work (Chambon, 1999) might be viewed. Within the field of management, Foucault's work underpinned a radical rethinking of accountancy practices in the late 1980s spearheaded by the founder and editor of *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, Anthony Hopwood. Hopwood set out an 'archaeology of accounting,' revealing its socially constructed and political nature (Hopwood, 1987). Scholars such as Miller and O'Leary (1987) and Hoskin and Macve (1986) also drew from Foucault to problematize assumptions about the neutrality of financial practices, and Knights and Collinson (1987) demonstrated their power as disciplinary structures in their study of shop-floor workers in a motor vehicle manufactuer in the UK.

Organizational studies scholars also began to apply Foucault's work to organizational settings in the late 1980s (Burrell, 1988; Cooper & Burrell, 1988; Knights & Willmott, 1989). In particular, Stewart Clegg used Foucault's thinking to introduce a circular model of power which stressed its relational nature, an idea which is critical to the argument being formed here (Clegg, 1989,1994). Since then Foucault's ideas have been a key underpinning for the critical analysis of organizations (Chan, 2000; Chan & Garrick, 2002; Clegg, 1994; Knights, 2002; McKinlay & Starkey, 1998; Rowlinson & Carter, 2002; Wray-Bliss, 2002). Indeed, Carter (2008) suggests that Foucault has had a profound, if unexpected, impact on a range of topics addressed by organization theorists ranging from the understanding of organizations as systems of surveillance (Sewell & Wilkinson, 1992) to human resource practices such as recruitment and selection (Townley, 1993) to informing the notion of worker subjectivity as part of the labour-process debate (Knights & Willmott, 1989).

In comparison to the organization studies field, fewer leadership studies scholars incorporate Foucault's work into their theorizing. Recently, Harter's book (2016) draws from Foucault's last three lecture series to set out a Foucauldian approach to leader development. Although Harter's interpretation provides an accessible rendering of Foucault's work to a novitiate readership, it avoids grappling with the complex dance of power and resistance and how this can limit a leader's agency, a critical consideration in the realisation of ethical ends. Such tensions are explicitly identified in Knights and Willmott's article (1992) which highlights the relational nature of leader-follower relationships and encourages leadership scholars to go beyond orthodox tendencies to focus on traits or even behaviours to take into account the phenomenological and structural aspects through which leadership is achieved in practice. Critiquing traditional accounts of corporate strategic leadership and its failure to adequately theorize power, Knights and Morgan (1992) draw from Foucault's ideas to highlight the role of discourse itself in achieving leadership.

Accounts such those offered by Knights and Morgan and Knights and Willmott which question the assumption that leaders wield power unproblematically are relatively rare within the leadership canon. It is my conjecture that it is the unproblematized approach to power apparent in much leadership theorizing (see Clegg & Hardy [1996] and Gordon [2002] for further discussion of the under-theorisation of power within leadership scholarship) which is at the heart of the schism between organizational studies' embrace of Foucault's work and leadership studies' (relative) neglect of it. For organization studies theorists, Foucault has provided a helpful language to deconstruct and problematize organizations in the wake of the significant critical turn in management theorizing. Critical approaches to leadership occupy a relatively marginalised position within the leadership canon. With the exception of Knights, Willmott, and Morgan mentioned previously, its most prolific proponents (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003; Gemmill & Oakley, 1992) have not drawn from Foucault to further their theorizing.

Vitally, the two disciplines approach the issue of power in very different ways: critical organization studies does not accept assumptions that power is unidirectional and located within individual agency, whereas leadership theorizing rarely questions this view. Foucault's work challenges this assumption and indicates that leaders

themselves are not as free as they might think in exercising their agency because of both the resistance that accompanies their exertion of will, as well as the disciplinary forces to which they themselves are subjected. The example of Obama's inability to close down Guantanamo Bay, despite being the US's leader, is a case in point. Bringing a Foucauldian reading to bear on this case provides a heretofore neglected avenue for analysis which indicates the limits to leaders' power, but also new means by which those limits might be approached. However, Foucault's work itself goes through permutations before arriving at the conclusion that winning such freedom is possible.

## TURNING TO FOUCAULT

Foucault's output has regularly been categorized into three phases (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983; Lynch, 2016; O'Farrell, 2005). The first is his archaeological phase, in which the means by which knowledge comes to be accepted as such and the role discourse plays in that validation process is examined. Attending particularly to how the new science of psychiatry developed discourse around classifications of sanity and health in texts such as *Madness and Civilisation* (Foucault, 1977c) and *The Birth of the Clinic* (Foucault, 1975), he argued that these classifications were largely established by "a self-constituted class of experts who, through their talk established truth or falsehood" (Burrell, 1988: 222). This period culminates with his text *An Archaeology of Knowledge* which purports that truth is "the production of statements and their regulation within discrete systems of discourse independent of consciousness" (Foucault, 1977a: 28).

The so-called second phase of Foucault's work is labelled genealogical. In it, he explores the ways in which power, knowledge, and the body are interrelated. Central to this phase is the notion of disciplinary powers which he develops in the text *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault, 1977b) and which will be elaborated in more detail in the following section of the article. A related concept developed in his *History of Sexuality Volume 1* is that of biopower, which describes the way in which populations themselves can be disciplined through surveillance and normalising assessment processes (Foucault, 1976).

The third phase seems to take a radical departure from these earlier works. In it, Foucault looks back almost two thousand years to examine practices offered by the philosophies of antiquity aimed at achieving self-constitution. Beginning with his text *The History of Sexuality Volume 2* (Foucault, 1985) and developed more fully in the last three lecture series he gave at the College de France in Paris between 1981 and 1984 (Foucault, 2001, 2008a, 2008b), Foucault explores how the institutional and culturally informed norms within which one lives can be identified and called into question. According to Foucault, it is only through the attainment of freedom realised by such reflexivity and critique that ethics can be enacted. In order to appreciate this argument more fully it is important to understand his views on power.

### Foucault and Power

Power and how it works was a central preoccupation during Foucault's genealogical phase. Fundamental to Foucault's understanding of power is that it is *exercised*

rather than *possessed*. In this way, it is always "strictly relational … power relations' existence depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance" (Foucault, 1976: 95). From such a perspective, those leading others will always encounter resistance when attempting to exert influence because "freedom's refusal to submit cannot be separated (from it)" (Foucault, 1994b: 342). Critically, this will also be the case when leaders attempt to exercise ethical agency. From this perspective leaders do not achieve their ends merely by asserting that something should be a certain way. Instead, the agents upon whom leaders seek to exercise power must *be able* to be affected. Furthermore, Foucault stresses that relations of power "are not univocal" and can be reversed (Foucault, 1976: 27).

In this way Foucault's work problematizes one of the fundamental assumptions which underpins much leadership theorizing: that leaders operate outside of systems of power (or indeed are the source of power in any system), and by virtue of their hierarchical position automatically exercise their will over others. Resistance is conceptualised as "integral to power/knowledge relations" (Knights, 2016: 105), rather than as something that can be avoided if change is handled in a so-called 'correct' manner. Following from this, it cannot be assumed that one person can consciously force his or her ethical will on others without encountering resistance.

From this perspective, fostering change requires influencing networks of relationships in which the power to change is embedded. Individuals who might not be recognized as holding power can be crucial to the achievement of change, especially if they influence more explicitly dominant agents (Rouse, 2003). The connections between those one wants to affect are therefore vital, as is their collective willingness to be affected (Wartenberg, 1990). A leader's capacity to realise outcomes is therefore determined by his or her ability to affect networks of relationships in particular, coordinated ways. It is important to recognize that all of those within those networks exercise power and they can use that power to align with or resist a leader's desired outcomes.

These understandings of the way power and resistance coexist and the ensuing need for social alignments in order to affect change bring insight into why leaders with clear, ethically driven aims may not be able to achieve them. As noted earlier, this more complex appreciation of power and how it works is absent from much ethical leadership literature, resulting in the problematic presumption that achieving ethical outcomes is dependent on a leader asserting his or her virtuous character. A Foucauldian rendering indicates that followers must be able to be affected by a leader's intent in order for that intent to realised, and that the larger social system (in which the leader is also enmeshed) must also align accordingly.

Recognising the dynamics of the larger social system brings us to a second concept developed by Foucault which points to the limits of a leader's ethical agency, that of disciplinary power. Elaborated in *Discipline and Punish* (1977b) he distinguishes between sovereign power based in the ability to cause physical harm, and disciplinary power which seeks to control behaviour at the micro level through practices of surveillance and normalisation. Although considered to be a more humane form of discipline, such practices "penetrate people's souls by way of their bodies" (Burrell, 1988: 288) and "transform a relationship of power that was

one of violence into a relationship of subjection that is a relationship of discipline" (Foucault, 1994b: 340). In this way, Foucault asserted the power of anonymous structures and networks of knowledge in maintaining control, rather than it only emanating from human consciousness (O'Farrell 2005).

Crucial to the argument being developed here is the recognition that everyone, even those acting as leaders, are embedded within disciplinary regimes which limit their capacity to act freely. The article returns to the case of Barack Obama attempting to close Guantanamo Bay in order to consider the role that resistance and disciplinary powers may have played in the president's inability to close the detention facility.

*Early Attempts to Close Guantanamo Bay*

Guantanamo Bay's history and the unique jurisdiction under which it operates are important factors in any consideration of how the detention facility might be closed down. Although Cuba enjoys ultimate sovereignty over its forty-five square miles of land and water, it has been leased as a US naval base since the end of the Spanish-American War in 1898. As such, Guantanamo operates in a legal limbo, and was deliberately chosen as a site to hold those arrested in the course of President George W. Bush's war on terror. According to then Assistant Attorney General Patrick Philbim, "its ambiguous nature" meant that anyone detained there would be "beyond the juridical reach of any federal court" (Reid-Henry, 2007: 629). As such it was deliberately established as a prison beyond sight of the US justice system. The history and status of the facility can be interpreted as aspects of the disciplinary powers which would resist any change initiated by the new president. Its very design as a geographic anomaly and juridical lacunae meant that normal ways of operating were suspended; old rules could not apply in such a space.

The extent to which Obama was mindful of the ambiguities and tensions he would need to engage with in order to close the detention facility is not clear. As reported in *The New York Times* in 2012, General James Jones, national security advisor at the start of Obama's presidency, said that the president and his aides thought closing the prison was "a no brainer—the US would look good around the world" (for doing so) (Becker & Shane, 2012). It is interesting to conjecture the degree to which assuming this action to be a "no brainer" resulted in the President not interrogating the dynamics in play as carefully as he might have had he considered it to be a more contested issue.

Four months after signing the executive order Obama emphasized his continued intention to close the facility, mentioning the topic twenty-eight times in a speech lasting under an hour. However, the *New York Times* reported:

> Walking out of the Archives, the president turned to his national security advisor at the time, General James L. Jones, and admitted that he had never devised a plan to persuade Congress to shut down the prison. [According to an aide] the president seemed to have "a sense that if he sketches a vision, it will happen, without his really having thought through the mechanism by which it will happen" (Becker & Shane, 2012).

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At this point then, Obama seems to have recognised that in assuming the correctness of his aspiration, he had failed to implement a process to enable its achievement. In the terms articulated in the previous section, he had not achieved the necessary social alignments to realise this aim. Rather than engaging in this work, the self-evident nature of the decision apparent in the account above may have resulted in Obama not questioning his expectation that others would willingly follow his lead.

Interestingly, Pfiffner (2011) reports that during the first months of his presidency Obama enjoyed the support of his Republican rival, John McCain, as well as the previous president, George W. Bush, to close the facility. However, his then chief of staff Rahm Emanuel, deemed that the time and energy required to win the backing of other members of the legislature for this initiative would detract from Obama's ability to pass the health care bill (which Emanuel envisioned as the defining feature of the Obama presidency). The initial energy generated to forge a bipartisan agreement to close Guantanamo quickly dissipated, especially in light of an aborted terrorist attempt to blow up a plane in flight on 25 December 2009 (O'Connor & Schmitt, 2009).

Obama's aspiration for achieving this ethical outcome became enmeshed in a miasma of resistance and disciplinary forces: heightened fear in the electorate, a legislature held by the opposing party looking to score points, as well as the entrenched and questionable history of the detention centre itself. Does Foucault offer any ideas about how Obama, or others wishing to achieve ethical outcomes when leading, might have a better chance of doing so?

## FOUCAULT'S CRITICAL ETHICS

Foucault's *The History of Sexuality Volume Two: The Use of Pleasure* (1985) marks a shift in his work away from his exploration of the discourses of sexuality and how they proliferated in the Victorian era to pursue the question of how one might develop the kind of subjectivity capable of ethical action. Turning to ancient Greek, Roman, and early Christian thought, he drew from their notions of practices of self to explore how the ethical life might be achieved. In a seminar given at the University of Vermont in 1982 he explained this shift by suggesting that "perhaps I have insisted too much on the technology of domination and power. I am more and more interested in the interaction between one's self and others, and in the technologies of individual domination, in the mode of action that an individual exercises upon himself by means of the technologies of the self." (Foucault, 1994a: 225)

Technologies of the self are the means by which one "performs the act of being oneself" and relate to three other technologies Foucault describes: "technologies of production, technologies of the sign and technologies of power" (Foucault, 1994a: 225). Becoming a subject, that is, an individual who has won freedom, is critical to the ability to act ethically. Freedom is achieved through recognizing the institutional dynamics, normalizing forces, historical trajectories, and fields of power which limit one's choices in subtle and often unrecognised ways. He mines the work of the ancients to discover the modes of subjectivation and practices of the self which are the means by which such freedom can be expressed.

It may be helpful at this point to elaborate Foucault's understanding of ethics. Primarily, Foucault saw ethics as a practice, one which involves a critical approach to oneself as well as to the context in which one is embedded (Foucault, 1984b). In this way, it is not about following moral codes, but instead requires the subject to form his or her own responses in relation to those codes. Describing the distinction Foucault draws between morality and ethics clarifies this point. By morality, Foucault is referring to "a set of values and rules of action that are recommended to individuals through the intermediary of various prescriptive agencies such as the family (in one of its roles), educational institutions, churches and so forth" (Foucault, 1985: 25).

Two elements comprise morality: codes of behaviour (the rules) and forms of subjectivation (the ways in which those rules are enforced from a social perspective). Acting ethically differs from acting morally in that doing so demands one aligning one's actions with one's beliefs about what is right beyond the social mores of the group (Foucault, 1984a). It is thus transforming in that it is a way of recreating one's responses consciously in relation to normalizing influences. In this way, rather than being unconsciously compliant, acting ethically calls for critical examination of those mores and sometimes for their disruption.

This is especially pertinent within bureaucratic contexts in which compliance with prevailing organizational norms can result in ethically questionable behaviours; see for instance Robert Jackall's seminal study of the moral mazes endemic to bureaucratic structures (Jackall, 2010). Although the argument suggesting the importance of moving beyond morality in order to achieve an ethical standard is problematic in that it begs the question of the ultimate arbiter of what is ethical, what is critical to note in relation to the distinction Foucault draws is the importance of identifying and critiquing prevailing moralities and the institutional dynamics which normalise behaviours and judgements. The ability to reflect in this way in order to identify hidden yet powerful dynamics working to keep the detention centre open might have aided Obama in his bid to close it down. Being able to operate with such a degree of reflexivity is a critical aspect of constituting the self, as elaborated below.

### Constituting the Self

Foucault devoted his late work to the question of how one might foster the kind of subjectivity capable of achieving the freedom necessary to act ethically (Foucault, 2001, 2008a, 2008b). The writers from antiquity who Foucault studied offered practices in order to constitute the self. These were "operations on [one's] own body and soul, thoughts, conduct, and ways of being so as to transform [oneself] in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality" (Foucault, 1994a: 225).

Foucault expands on the meaning of self-constitution through reference to Plato's dialogue *Alcibiades 1* (Foucault, 1994a). Of pertinence to this article is that Alcibiades was in training to govern others, that is, through this dialogue Plato was setting out to educate a future leader. Alcibiades wants to learn what it takes to govern others well, and Plato suggests first and foremost he must commit to practices of self-care, a critical component of self-constitution.

*Care of the Self*

For the classical Greeks, the principle of care of the self was "one of the main rules for social and personal conduct and for the art of life" (Foucault, 1994a: 226). In elaborating the notion of care of the self it is important to note the differences between its classical Greek meaning and its twenty-first century interpretation. As Foucault was quick to point out, such care was not synonymous with the "Californian cult of the self" (Foucault, 1994a: 271) which he saw as dedicated to navel-gazing and often resulted in an unhelpful form of narcissism. Rather than permission to coddle the self, the Greek version of self-care involved continual and deep critical scrutiny of one's motives and actions.

There are two aspects of the Greek notion of care of the self which are important to explicate. Foucault explains firstly that the self in question is the ground of one's identity. "It is not based in the physical or material things which one possesses, including one's body.…The self is not clothing, tools, or possessions; it is to be found in the principle that uses these tools.…You have to worry about your soul – that is the principal activity of caring for yourself" (Foucault, 1994a: 230). In making sense of this idea, Davidson suggests Foucault and the Greeks before him are referring to a transcendent aspect of the self which creates the experience of belonging to a whole similar to a mode of "cosmic consciousness" (Davidson, 2003: 129). It is the deepest, most enduring aspect of the self which is important to attend to rather than the self which is experienced as a bundle of ephemeral desires connected to the pursuit of status or material wealth.

Although the soul is not a concept which finds its way into much of the current ethical leadership literature, Knights & O'Leary (2006) allude to such a notion in their article highlighting the preoccupation with wealth and acquisitions common to many contemporary leaders. Without using the term 'the soul,' their argument aligns with the Greek view that those aspiring to lead ethically must firstly attend to more enduring aspects of the self rather than to material gain or social status.

The second aspect of the Greek notion of self-care which is important to clarify is that of care. Here the term *epimeileisthai sautou* comes into play. As Foucault explains,

> *Epimeileisthai* expresses something much more serious than the simple fact of paying attention.…It is always a real activity and not just an attitude. It is used in reference to the activity of a farmer tending his fields, his cattle, and his house or to the job of the kind in taking care of his city and citizens, or to the worship of ancestors or gods, or as a medical term to signify the fact of caring (1994a: 230).

Crucially, this kind of care is not solely directed to the well-being of the self, but serves others' well-being also. Indeed the purpose of caring for the self is in order that the interests of the larger community might be well served (Davidson, 2003).

Fundamental to *epimeileisthai sautou* is an attitude of self-critique. The Foucauldian scholar Richard Lynch identifies three levels of such critique essential to fostering the freedom at the heart of Foucault's ethics. Firstly, one must recognise and challenge the codes and norms which are unreflectively adopted. These are the invisible cages

which hold expectations in place and which can limit manoeuvrability. Secondly, one must challenge one's own motivations, the ends and positions one seeks, and how one behaves towards others. Finally, one must challenge the networks of power relations which exist between vying interested agents (Lynch, 2016: 181). In deliberately unearthing these assumptions, "things begin to lose their self-evidence" (Foucault, 2000: 447). Losing a sense of self-evidence is vital, as doing so "opens up spaces of freedom on the frontier, when gestalt shifts become possible" (Lynch, 2016: 184). This is the space where the freedom necessary for ethics can arise.

## Obama and Caring for the Self

How might the notion of care of the self have assisted Obama in realising his aspiration of closing Guantanamo Bay? Staying with the notion of self-care as critique of the system in which one is enmeshed; his public utterances indicate Obama was not including numerous contextual dynamics in his deliberations. As previously suggested, given his assumption that closing the detention centre was self-evidently correct (a "no brainer"), it seems that he did not attend to building the social alliances necessary to do so. In this way he may not have adequately analyzed and engaged with the power dynamics in play.

In applying an orientation of self-critique to Obama's handling of the situation, his own motivations to close the facility appear to be straightforwardly 'ethical.' On the surface, signing the order seemed to represent the new president's commitment to re-establishing the US as a country which adhered to ethical principles within the global community. However, it may be instructive to speculate about other motives which may have coloured Obama's action.

For instance, in his analysis of the president's mode of dealing with the terrorist agenda which was such a predominant feature of his early months in office, Yin (2011) suggests that signing the executive order so soon after his inauguration could be interpreted foremost as symbolic of his desire to sever his administration and its policies from those of George W. Bush. In that way the act could be interpreted as a theatrical salvo, a flourish which had not been carefully thought through.[2] The need to be seen to be acting decisively and with determination within the first days of holding office may have led Obama to recklessly make a promise which he did not subsequently follow up with the necessary tactical commitment. His ethical failure, as Bernauer and Mahon might argue in their paraphrasing of Foucault, was in beginning with "liberty, rather than with the limit" (Bernauer & Mahon, 2003: 151).

A further area for self-critique on Obama's part might be in relation to his mode of decision making and personal style. As observed by a number of commentators remarking on Obama's approach, he is above all a rational man, who believes decisions should be made on rational grounds; i.e. on their self-evidence (Milbank, 2011). Harter suggests that a key aspect of self-care is its enabling "the subject (to) win this victory in the interior of his psyche. He must overcome himself" (2016: 28). Perhaps recognising the limitations of his tendency to rely on rationality and the self-evidence of the ethics of his decisions (in this instance, think of his

approach to health care as well as closing Guantanamo Bay) may have provided new openings from which alternative, more successful, ways forward might have been crafted.

Engaging in such deliberate self-critique is not easy, especially when acting as a leader. Being seen to be sure of oneself, confident and decisive are qualities that followers often value, especially in times of crisis or transition. This is where the difficulties of being an ethical leader begin to reveal themselves. Far from being dependent on good character or intent, winning the freedom which makes one capable of acting ethically from a Foucauldian perspective can seem to oppose the very nature of leading itself. This tension will be elaborated further in the Discussion section.

There is a second aspect of constituting the self which also may have helped Obama close Guantanamo Bay: that of courageous speech, or *parrhesia*.

### Courageous Speech: Parrhesia

A second notion from early Greek philosophy which Foucault explores in relation to the fostering of freedom is courageous speech; *parrhesia*. Foucault explains that etymologically, *parrhesiazesthai* means to "say everything … the *parrhesiastes* … does not hide anything, but opens his heart and mind completely to other people through his discourse" (2001: 12). Importantly, through *parrhesia* the speaker emphasises freedom in the act of speaking because in speaking the truth, individuals puts themselves at risk (Foucault, 2008a: 65). It is this element of riskiness which emphasises the freedom of the speaker.

The tensions arising from those engaged in politics (such as leaders) attempting to engage in *parrhesia* are noted by Foucault and others (Luxon, 2008; Weiskopf & Willmott, 2013). Given that for the Greeks, *parrhesia* was undertaken by a lower-status individual in relation to a higher-status individual, or one who could damage him or her, how could it be applied to leadership? There are two possibilities offered here. Firstly, as a way of taking care of the self, individuals aspiring to act ethically are encouraged to recognise where they stand in relation to the larger system dynamics acting on them. In other words, the aspiring ethical leader must speak courageously at least to him or herself. Luxon suggests that doing so results in a "disposition to steadiness," in which individuals are able to "forestall immediate reactions and instead maintain a steady attitude towards themselves, to attend to changes and reactions, and to sift through a raft of information … before drawing a conclusion" (2008: 387).

*Parrhesia* therefore encourages leaders to speak the truth to themselves, even when, or perhaps especially when, that truth contradicts the political exigencies they face. Speaking such truth potentially fosters moments in which self-evidence is loosened, and new possibilities can emerge. Barratt (2008) emphasizes the active nature of *parrhesia*, suggesting that in order to go beyond abstract questioning of the self, *parrhesia* requires consciously seeking truthful encounters with others, in order to test one's assumptions.

This observation leads to a second vital way in which parrhesia can become part of a leader's practice: through ensuring that *parrhesiastes* are present within their

inner circle of advisors, as well as within their group of followers more generally. The fool within monarchs' courts as depicted in the works of Shakespeare represents this voice which often finds a way of telling hard truths to the monarch through the use of humour. Being open to *parrhesia* and indeed welcoming it is a means by which self-critique is widened to include disparate and perhaps more critical perspectives. This requires courage on the part of both the *parrhesiastes* and the leader him or herself.

## Obama and *Parrhesia*

Writing about how decisions were made in the early years of the Obama presidency, Pfiffner (2011) notes that rather than enacting the more inclusive debate and discussion which Obama seemed to be offering in his run-up to the election, the president increasingly centralized decision making processes, and was highly influenced in his decisions by a few trusted advisors (most markedly by his chief of staff, Rahm Emanuel).

Pfiffner observes that unlike previous presidents, there appeared to be no one taking the part of the honest broker within Obama's circle of advisors. This had historically been an informal position, taken by a trusted member of staff who was responsible for ensuring a fair representation of diverse views available for discussion before taking important decisions. Such groups could be seen as *parrahistic*, in that they provided a mechanism whereby realities not in keeping with the leaders' views might be expressed. According to Pfiffner (2011), Obama did not elicit the perspectives of such a gathering in his deliberations about Guantanamo Bay and how to handle it.[3]

It is of course impossible to know whether or not Obama engaged in *parrhesia*, or in the level of critique (both of himself and of the context) which self-constitution requires. He may have engaged with both the context and his own proclivities critically, and he may have taken counsel from others willing to speak truthfully to him, and all of these actions may still have resulted in forty-one detainees occupying Guantanamo Bay at the end of his presidency. As Bernauer and Mahon explain, for Foucault ethics is always an indeterminate arena, and is "irreducible to the question of political success" (2003: 151). Nevertheless these ideas point to a radical rethinking of how leaders aspiring to realise ethical outcomes might do so, as elaborated in the final section of the article.

## DISCUSSION

This special issue incorporates articles which broaden understanding of the philosophical foundations for leadership ethics. Foucault's critical ethics offers a robust challenge to significant assumptions informing current ethical leadership literature. Perhaps most importantly, Foucault's analysis challenges a hallmark of current theorizing: that being a person of good character provides the primary foundation for ethical leadership.

Certainly, being a person of virtuous character with aspirations to lead ethically may be an important starting point, but as the case of Obama's intention to close Guantanamo Bay shows, good intent is not sufficient. Foucault's later work

introduces the practices of self-constitution as the basis for moving beyond good intent. In particular, he indicates that individuals must anticipate resistance to their efforts to influence others to act ethically, even when to do so is a 'no brainer.' Additionally, leaders must foster an attitude of self critique in order to work themselves free of prevailing orthodoxies and their own proclivities in order to become a subject capable of ethical action.

Three further implications of this analysis for those aspiring to lead ethically are offered here. Firstly, the idea of loosening what is self-evident challenges assumptions concerning the importance of a leader being certain and strong in his or her views. A theme running throughout Foucault's canon is that of the need to notice the way in which taken-for-granted truths limit human agency and possibilities. Only through becoming alert to the pervasive nature of power and how it operates through historic and social structures, as well as within all relational encounters, can the freedom to exercise ethical agency be realised. The continual practice of critique, both of the self and of the contexts in which one is enmeshed, can reveal the cracks amidst seemingly intractable forces through which new realities can be generated.

Of particular relevance to leaders acting in the contemporary context is to notice the way in which prevailing neo-liberal, market, and financially oriented assumptions constrain choices and preclude ways of operating which might result in different ethical relations between organizations and their customers and communities (Casey, 2002). Decisions to outsource, for instance, which are so easily made on the basis of financial merit alone, would be problematized were the inevitable correctness of such a move questioned. By proactively working to identify the prevailing orthodoxies which silently inform decisions, the leader expands the range of possible ways forward and potentially broadens his or her range of moral consideration.

This suggestion points to a second implication of Foucault's work: the ongoing and continual nature of critical engagement aimed at achieving ethical agency. Foucault asserts that the power which limits ethical agency, "is everywhere," thus everything "is dangerous" (Foucault, 1983: 232). The word 'dangerous' points to Foucault's view that ethics are always indeterminate. For him knowing with absolute certainty that an action is good or bad is impossible; indeed, from his perspective this dichotomy itself is unhelpful. Every act results in consequences which will favour some parties and their interests over those of others. By framing Guantanamo as an unquestioned bad, Obama narrowed his perspective on the situation in ways that may inadvertently have been unhelpful.

This realisation highlights the importance of continually critiquing not only the context within which one is located, but also one's response to that context. Lynch elaborates on this point, suggesting that what is vital is an "attitude of critique which recognises its convictions are always preliminary but that also recognizes that it is free, and empowered, to alter reality, to realise new possibilities, and to resist the norms and power relations within which it is given" (Lynch, 2016: 203). Following from this, those aspiring to lead ethically must constantly interrogate how contexts are held in place, by questioning the language used to obscure damage done (speaking of collateral damage rather than civilians killed), the interests served by decisions

(multi-national agricultural conglomerates vs domestic farmers), as well as the voices included in decision making forums (and how much they are able to say truthfully).

Thirdly, one of the problems with current conceptualizing of ethical leadership (and leadership more generally) is that its focus on individuals absolves the collective from its responsibility in creating ethically dubious outcomes. Foucault's understanding of power as relational implicates all of us in creating the contexts in which individuals might more easily lead in ethically adventurous ways rather than being constrained by organizational moralities. Followers, too, have responsibility to actively constitute themselves through practices of self-care and courageous speech in order to exercise ethical agency. Sometimes that agency might express itself in the form of resistance rather than compliance. Giving voice to alternative viewpoints and realities is a key way in which followers can help leaders identify the fissures and cracks out of which ethical agency might emerge.

*Implications for Leadership Theorizing*

These three implications raise further issues for leadership theorizing more generally. As previously mentioned, there are aspects about how leadership is conceptualised, both among scholars and practitioners which make self-constitution problematic for leaders. The myth of the omniscient and decisive leader runs deep. The prevailing discourse concerning leadership itself acts as a disciplinary power which holds unhelpful expectations of leaders who are able to act with unilateral, unquestioned decisiveness in place. As a panacea for all ills, the leaders of collective longing are idealised as strong, stable, and omniscient in their ability to predict and fix the future. It must also be pointed out that the fantasy leader of popular mythology is further supported by the plethora of leadership theories which distil this complex phenomenon to lists of traits or competencies which can be measured through diagnostic questionnaires. The idealised leader of both theory and practice is not anxious or unassuming. He or she operates in a way that is almost in direct opposition to the self-inquiring, indeterminate posture encouraged by a Foucauldian notion of self-constitution.

Interestingly, just as the fantasy of the all-powerful, individually agentic leader seems most pervasive, the impossibility of its realisation is also becoming more apparent. Even Obama's successor in the White House is discovering the limits to his ability to exercise unilateral power. Perhaps this leads to a new understanding of how acting ethically as a leader might operate; rather than aiming to achieve certain ethical goals, leading ethically might be conceptualised primarily as opening spaces to explore uncertainties, and to straightforwardly challenge the dream of finding easy answers to the complex conundrums of our times. Searching for ways to position oneself in more realistic, open, and even humble ways is perhaps a form of resistance which would help to unravel the monolith of collective fantasy concerning leaders and leadership so apparent in our times.

Identifying how leadership discourse acts as a disciplinary power raises the question of other dynamics which hold current possibilities for leader action in place. To what extent do leaders often have to serve the status quo, even while proclaiming

to act as the great transformational mechanism of our times? The political power of a leader is often invested in the interests of those who keep him or her in power; which often results in leaders tied to maintaining, rather than disrupting, current realities. Acting ethically, however, often involves agitating for outcomes which are beyond the current status quo. Vitally, it can require extending moral consideration to those outside the ring of powerful stakeholders (on whom one's leadership position depends) and acting on their behalf.

Being an ethical leader in these terms is disruptive, and as such risks the loss of one's position as a leader. Navigating such territory is tricky and requires much more than reference to one's values; it demands skilful alliance building, sensitivity to shifting power dynamics, and a commitment to constant critique of oneself as well as the situation. Furthermore, a Foucauldian rendering requires the willingness to accept the impossibility of knowing without question whether a decision or action is ethical or not. Rather than committing to what one views as right, Foucault urges an experimental attitude which accepts that knowledge is always incomplete. Once again, such positioning is not easy for leaders who often expect themselves, and are expected by others, to have the answer, and to be clear about the way forward.

### Further Research

The ideas offered here point to rich territory for future research and theorizing into the possibility of leading ethically. Most importantly would be the need for investigating how power works in achieving ethical outcomes. To what extent are leaders able to alter institutional dynamics which themselves militate against ethical behaviour? Investigating instances such as the case of Anthony Jenkins, former CEO of Barclays Bank in the UK who was appointed to clean up banking practices after his predecessor Bob Diamond was convicted of rate fixing, would be vital in this regard. Jenkins was fired after three years as CEO, with a range of reasons offered for this decision, but it is interesting to wonder about the extent to which Jenkins' ethical stance was not acceptable to his followers (or indeed to the Barclays hierarchy which had first appointed him).

A second area for further work concerns the kinds of developmental processes which foster the self-critique essential to a Foucauldian view of ethical agency. How can leaders learn to work constructively with dissent, and in fact to seek it out? How can leaders balance the needs of followers to have answers, while also actively seeking ambiguity and loosening of knowledge structures? How can followers be encouraged to speak courageously to those who (ostensibly) hold power over them? Such studies would disrupt many of the self-evident assumptions apparent not only in the ethical leadership literature, but in the leadership literature more broadly. The notion that leading ethically can challenge the very legitimacy of a leader's position itself has not been adequately investigated to date, but provides a further avenue for future scholarly work.

### TO CONCLUDE

It is helpful to notice that in his account of Foucault's critical ethics, Richard Lynch asserts that rather than offering a philosophy of despair, ultimately, Foucault's thinking

carries within it the "seeds for hope" (Lynch, 2016: 203). Through the process of self-constitution and the type of alertness it fosters, the fissures, the cracks, the loosening of what is self-evident can be grasped and grappled with. And it is this grappling, this unwillingness to accept 'what is' without interrogating its claims, which fosters the freedom essential to ethical agency on the part of not just leaders, but of us all.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

## NOTES

1. Although it must be noted that feminist scholarship has also critiqued his work; see Diamond, Quinby, Benhabib, and Cornell (1990).

2. Indeed, President Trump performed similar decisive flourishes in the early days of taking office, for instance by signing an executive order prohibiting individuals from certain countries entering the US, an action that was quickly suspended by the judiciary.

3. Interestingly Pfiffner notes that Eisenhower's use of such a forum seems to have prevented him from committing troops to the Vietnam war (whereas in contrast, Lyndon Johnson, who tended to make decisions centrally and incrementally, did involve the US in this highly contested and detrimental conflict).

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