Author details

Mr Stephen Gibbs

Senior Lecturer

Department of Leadership and Management

The Business School

University of Huddersfield

Queensgate

Huddersfield

West Yorkshire

HD1 3DH

UK

Tel + 44 (0) 1484 473891

Fax + 44 (0) 1484 473174

E-Mail: s.p.gibbs@hud.ac.uk

Biography

Stephen Gibbs is a Senior Lecturer in The Business School at The
University of Huddersfield, West Yorkshire, United Kingdom. He
is part of the academic team delivering the School's MBA
programme. His Phd research is in modern strategic leadership and
self, considering the nature of existence and the continuing
influence of modernity on leadership enquiry. Prior to academia his
career background includes senior leadership roles in publishing
and logistics industries. His final post was as Managing Director of
a global distribution organisation. His MBA is from Lancaster
University Management School.

Leadership and Existentialism: Building a Groundwork

Stephen Gibbs

University of Huddersfield

Abstract *Existentialist thought is an emerging area of significance to leadership learning. This in part appears due to leadership discourse being captured by the modern rationalist tradition; this tends to encourage leadership research to seek at times to present a coherent and unified understanding which some regard as unsatisfying or reductive. This dissatisfaction adds to the idea that leadership is a contested topic as well as open to new paths of enquiry. Existentialist thought offers a thematic that straddles rationalist and non-rationalist discourse as it gives privilege to the totality of existence. Such broad notions leave its links to leadership as tenuous. However, recent leadership research considers key existentialist notions as of renewed interest: such as, freedom, edification and authenticity. Leaders at least appear referent in their practice to these as well as other areas that existentialists find crucial to their 'basket of thought'. Further groundwork in linking these two areas appears a new opportunity for leadership enquiry.*

Key words *Existentialism, leadership, self, authenticity, rationalism, post-rationalism, freedom*

Introduction

Existentialist thought is re-emerging as of growing significance to leadership learning. This is in part due to the presentation of leadership in unified and objective forms that appear to limit its possibility (Lawler, 2005). There are diverse reasons for this but dominant is the concern that leadership thinking and research has been captured by the modern rationalist tradition (Lawler, 2005; 2007; Ashman & Lawler, 2008). And this is concurrent with the Western view that the human being is in themselves unitary and coherent (Collinson, 2003). Also, unlike management constructs, leadership research has failed to present consistent notions that satisfy (Grint, 2005). This leaves leadership as a contested and controversial topic, at odds with analytical philosophy and thereby is open to research methodologies from new areas, including themes present in existentialist thought. It is in this area that recent research has sought to build a groundwork of connections (Lawler, 2005; 2007; Ashman & Lawler, 2008). This short paper covers just some of the basic foundational elements of this new endeavour. However, the author doesn't view existentialism as a new discovery for leadership, but rather sees its themes as having the ability to shed new insights and offer a useful critique of rationalist perspectives. There is value in its language and meaning for the leadership debate.

Existential thought as a challenge to rationalist views of leadership

Existentialism isn't a coherent philosophical position (Flynn, 2006; Barrett, 1958; Kaufmann, 1975). It is a contested area by its very nature, and in more recent incarnations has been accused of being a passing post-war fad that only captured a darkened European mood (Barrett, 1958). It has also been considered

as a new beginning for the rediscovery of self, and that its themes of freedom and authenticity in leadership are a productive field for leadership learning (Lawler, 2005). Despite these contested views of the value of existentialist thought there have been a number of relatively consistent themes running through discourse (Flynn, 2006). These have been put forward as largely in the area of *humanism* (pursuit of meaningful existence in the face of external pressures); *existence* (becoming authentically human by your own choices); *time* (concerned with the quality of lived time; that is the value of here and now and the what is to come); *freedom* (the reflective self standing outside of our lives); *ethical* (concerns with authentic existence and being true to self); *truth as subjective* (truth, from whatever source, ultimately received inwardly) and *totality of existence* (the understanding of internal self and the world around us apprehended as a whole, including ununified discourses in both literature and art) (Sartre, 1943, 1965, 1985, 1988; Barrett, 1958; Flynn, 2006; Heidegger, 1962, 1966; Kierkegaard, 1941, 1962). There are many other themes and sub-themes but there isn't scope to represent them all in this short paper. However, a key notion that rises from amongst these for organisational studies is the leader as an authentic person who is very much at the centre of decision making and influencing an organisation's economics in late or liquid-modernity (Agarwal & Malloy, 2000; May & Cooper, 1995).

Barrett, writing at the height of post-war existentialist writing, offered that:

> "The very themes of existentialism were something of a
> scandal to the detached sobriety of Anglo-American
> Philosophy. Such matters as anxiety, death, the conflict
> between the bogus and the genuine self, the faceless man of
> the masses, the experience of the death of God are scarcely
> the themes of analytic philosophy" (1958: 8)

This unease remains as uncomfortable today as such enquiry finds few solid frameworks that satisfy the pragmatist views of leadership development. This is partly due to the modern rationalist tradition's view of self (Taylor, 1989). That the individual shares a human nature, whose attributes can be discovered objectively through scientific and sociological research (Northouse, 2001). Under these modes, the modern suggestion is, that these leadership characteristics can be mapped and shared for future application.

It is this latter view, that leadership enquiry can identify leadership characteristics present within human nature, which has struggled to be sustainable within the field of management and organisational studies (Grint, 2005; Lawler, 2005). The *typing* of the individual within rationalist leadership enquiry appears at odds with the transcendent and authentic individual described within existential themes; the individual who *becomes* free to choose his/her direction rather than be bound by their predetermined essences. Existentialism therefore suggests to leadership that all is possible, as human essence is determined after existence (Kierkegaard, 1941; Sartre, 1965; Lawler, 2005).

More recent leadership research shows leadership less as fixed typologies but as a process of experiences that forms the basis of knowledge that is itself shaped through social interaction (Kempster, 2009). This alludes to the suggestion of transcendent possibilities, a theme strongly linked to existentialist notions of becoming (Kierkegaard, 1941).

Tension between rationalist and metaphysical leadership enquiry

This liquid-modern challenge to the notion of a human nature appears critical to existential perspectives on leadership. Kierkegaard sees this presumption of a human nature as a critical flaw. That man/woman is not a system to be

diagnosed (1941). To attempt such is to miss the point of Being. Sartre offers

the notion of man as being able to free himself of all limitations, and being able

to only put onto herself those elements that she chooses. Such thinking appears

to attack reductionist perspectives of human existence and leans the debate

towards an ontology, and asking questions of epistemology. It also challenges

the Spirit of Enlightenment thinking and notions of mechanistic enquiry

(Taylor, 1980). Polanyi captures this tension:

> "Postivism had set out to eliminate all metaphysical claims
>
> of knowledge. Behaviourism had started on the course that
>
> was to lead on to cybernetics, which claims to represent all
>
> human thought as the working of a machine. Sigmund
>
> Freud's revolution had started too, reducing man's moral
>
> principles to mere explaining human affairs without making
>
> distinctions between good and evil. Our true convictions
>
> were being left without theoretical foundation" (1975: 22).

Therefore, leadership remains poised between movements in human enquiry.

Kempster (2009) refers to the challenge for leadership learning of combing

existing sets of thought that *"are not natural bedfellows, as they draw from*

different research traditions…" (p. 54). The same problem exists here of

considering knowledge based enquires with notions of metaphysical claims on

humanity. They don't sit together easily. Although, it should be said,

existentialism draws strongly on phenomenological notions.

Sartre's (1965) assertion that knowledge is an abstract of existence, and

Kierkegaard's (1941) position as a non-systemiser leads us to the critique of

knowledge based leadership. Lyotard asserts that scientific knowledge has been

given a privileged position but is a changing discourse and other forms of

knowledge require their consideration (1979). It suggests that analytical philosophy from the rationalist tradition has generally sought to encourage coherency in its enquiries (Murdoch, 1992). From an existentialist perspective this coherency is then a reduction of meaning, a loss of the 'whole' as a result of focusing our attention on the 'fragments'. For existentialism is an appeal to raising human existence to new heights and considering knowledge as an abstract of existence (Sartre, 1943). We may say at this stage, 'so what?' In response we might assert the existentialist view that rationalist conceptions of self lead human beings to inauthentic living, or borrowing their expressions from others; and thus being 'less than they could be' (Sartre, 1943; 1948). That is, the individual leader has borrowed their meaning from others, presenting the notion of being *inauthentic* and not true to one's own meaning. This suggests a turning of the individual leader towards inwardness for understanding, subjectively, rather for external objective truths (Taylor, 1989; Heath, 2000).

Both leadership and existentialist notions appear to defy attempts to diagnose or codify. It would appear then that on this basis the two areas of enquiry have some connection. Both leadership and existential thought have concerns with the paths of human existence and their movement through life.

Existential enquiry is not new: *"Existentialism [as] a manner of doing philosophy and a way of addressing issues that matter in people's lives is at least as old as philosophy itself"* (Flynn, 2006: ii). Many of its significant writers find some agreement with this broad statement. Why then is this focus important? There is a strong suggestion that as the modern era rose and developed from the Enlightenment vision that the existence of the individual in society changed significantly. This appears to be accepted across sociological, anthropological and existential fields (Taylor, 2007; 1989; Barrett, 1958;

Burnes, 1992; Malpas, 2005; Bauman, 2004; Giddens, 1991; Polanyi & Prosch, 1975; Polanyi, 1958).

Since leadership is concerned with the human being's influence of other human beings the connection between human existence and leadership appear strong (Lawler, 2005; 2007; Ashman & Lawler, 2008).

Rational modern society as a limit to leadership development in the current season – a place for existentialist leadership

Modern society struggles with questions of existence for it can be viewed as an empty concept (Heidegger, 1927). This struggle is in part because philosophy has moved from being regarded as a 'way of life' to being a profession with its proponents largely grouped within University faculties. This restriction of philosophical discourse from among the free flow of the citizenry makes its value easier to dismiss. The marginalisation of the philosopher, poet and seers from the social landscape leave scope for other more politically and economically legitimised roles (Barratt, 1958; Ladkin, 2010). Is it possible we accept writers, scientists and professionals as legitimate social roles, whose meaning and contribution can be articulated in measurable forms? Many of these contributions to society create economic value that can be more easily traced on the balance sheet. But philosophy's purpose is to appeal for human beings to 'know themselves'. This persistent question is of dubious currency for it leads rarely to certain outcomes, only to other boundaryless questions which are at odds with modern notions of value. In capitalist societies value is attributed to wealth creation. If the line from the social role runs unbroken to the bottom line or equates to shareholder value then it is celebrated as, in a very modern sense, wealth brings freedom.

John Garnett, Director of the Industrial Society, wrote in 1981, in the still very uncertain early days of the reformist Thatcher government:

> "I believe, therefore, that the common purpose towards
> which we must all work is firstly, the creation of wealth. In
> creating wealth we create the goods and services, the
> material things which are crucial." (Garnett, 1981: 27)

By means of illustrating public discourse, British Observer newspaper columnist Katherine Whitehorn writes in her autobiography of her readers' letters in the 1980s challenging the idea of wealth creation as unquestioned means. This at a time when British society was re-asserting 'market forces' as its arbiter of fostering 'good society':

> "Teachers complained that all meetings of governors and
> staff centred on cash and balancing the books; education was
> hardly mentioned. One nurse sighed that 'some nurses
> believe the bean-counting nonsense and question whether
> particular patients are worth their bed space'. A publisher
> wrote: 'It is horrifying to think what accountants have done
> to that once noble profession'" (Whitehorn, 2007: 232).

With the social backdrop of a struggling economy and high unemployment it would be difficult to destroy Garnett's aspiration. It is in this late-modern context that we see leadership discourse as rooted within its era of objectified characteristics, and presented as types (Grint, 1997; Lawler, 2005; Northouse, 2001).

> "The message then is to bring home to everybody who
> manages and supervises throughout the nation that this is
> their moment of destiny. Nelson had his day and Drake had

his day, but if the greatness which is there in the British people is to be brought back, called forth, that is not going to be done by the politicians. Nor by making laws. Nor by teachers, because the people we are trying to reach are past teaching age. It is not going to be done by trade union leaders because people don't go to the meetings. It is not going to be done by priests because people don't go to church. I suspect that the people who are going to bring back the greatness to this nation are those of us who employ people, who manage people. The section leaders, as foremen, as middle managers, as senior managers" (Garnett, 1981: 27).

Much of Garnett's text displays the nervousness of British management avoiding the complexity of their predicament; resting responsibility for change on the shoulders of heroic traits or 'leadership types'. It isn't depressing alone that Garnett views the protagonists as beyond being teachable, if we interpret him correctly, but that the trade union leaders, politicians, priests and teachers are marginalised in creating renewal for an ailing economy; as philosophers were marginalised before them. And we might ask how free was Garnett from 'borrowing' his meaning from the powerful leadership figures around, not least Margaret Thatcher herself; noted for her *"brutal style in negotiations"* (Rickards & Clark, 2006: 182).

This discourse implies that leaders need to find acceptance within modern society; she or he has to adopt many of these objectified identities in order to be accepted by 'the group' or by society as a whole (Northouse, 2001). Leaders who ask wider questions may find themselves ejected along with the philosophers if they deviate far from their prescribed roles. One aspect of late-

modern leadership's way of securing such acceptance is to demonstrate the objectified notion of leaders as wealth creators. For leaders to express themselves outside this remit risks their marginalisation.

> "Do we make it clear what the leadership responsibilities are? Has the leader had some instruction? Leadership instruction in what leaders need to do – not in what leaders need to be." (Garnett, 1981: 26)

Objectifying leadership within frames of heroic leadership has been a dominant thread through rationalist discourse in the 20th C. Garnett's possible desperate pleas to the employer to rescue Britain from its malaise by returning to a wealth creation ethos pays little attention to the long-term effects of a society giving itself over to free-market-ideology with such intent.

These objectified notions of leadership stem from celebration of ideas around human existence, in particular the idea that certain individuals possess special innate qualities (Northouse, 2001). This trait based theory of leadership draws heavily from a materialist's perspective that emerges through The Enlightenment period. Humanity, the materialist explains, has a rational scientific reason that reveals the causes of his/her capriciousness.

This suggests that seasons in society are prone to construct the characteristics that it finds most appealing. Garnett's leader, we might suggest, is the employer whose focus is wealth creation; and we can't help but notice that neo-liberal laissez-faire economics sought to replace the unique hybrid of British-Socialism that emerged from the social context of post-war Britain, with its members demanding social reforms commensurate with the contribution of its citizens during its Industrial Era (Bernstein, 2004). At these turning points in the social milieu society often seeks the New Man (Barrett, 1958).

Considering how eras, such as modernity, shape rationalist notions of leadership we consider Ivan Turgenev's character Evgeny Bazarov in *Fathers and Sons;* he is represented as a figure of the new liberal age emerging after the thirty year oppressive reign of Nicholas I in the first half of the 19th C.

> Richard Freeborn, Turgenev's translator, writes: "What Turgenev sensed about this 'living person' [Bazarov] was, above all, his 'nihilism', his commitment to science and materialism, his negative cast of mind, his self-assurance, cynicism, energy, repudiation of aesthetic feeling and everything 'romantic'". (Freeborn cited in Turgenev, 1991: xii).

Both the aesthetic and rationalist figures of leadership tend to emerge as a reaction to their social backdrop and celebrated as of value; as embodiments in human form of the unarticulated gut feelings of the people. At last a figure captures our senses, we might say. The leader is then both constructed from the social milieu and celebrated by it. Garnett's New Man is a focused employer free from the Trade Unions, teachers, politicians for whom the general populous see as militant, lazy and upon whom disaffection is poured.

Future questions for a groundwork:

The ability therefore for any leader to come to terms with themselves and describe themselves to themselves free from social context becomes problematic; especially when moving away from rationalist descriptions and modes of enquiry which benefit from their structures and models (Rose, 1989) . But this existential stream of thought reminds the organisational leader that they remain a person first (Werhane, 1999). This then is the appeal of existentialist themes for the leader seeking to come to terms with the weak application of

prescriptive forms of leadership. Existentialist leadership offers the possibility, in a Sartrean sense, to shed any social construction, to only place on the human canvas that which the individual conceives is of value (Sartre, 1943; 1948; Kierkegaard, 1941; Lawler, 2005). This appeals to the intrinsic notion of adaptation and change within the sphere of leadership learning; that all is possible, including defying rationalist notions of structured knowledge (Heidegger, 1927). This is the critical tension for leadership enquiry; that leadership is doing and being, learning and existing on a higher plane.

This remains though a difficult complex and paradoxical quiz. As if we're mixing oil and water between domains (Kempster, 2009). We see in sociological leadership studies (and these that populate significant proportions of organisational enquiry) the need for leaders to manage meaning, as if meaning is a commodity that is put on like work clothes (Rickards & Clark, 2006; Smircich & Morgan, 1982). Almost as if leaders can acquire 'authenticity' if they can practice sincerity. This is the critical difference for the moral themes within existential discourse; that it appeals to authenticity in its *authentic* incarnation (Lumby & English, 2009). That positions held are not borrowed but are felt and held by the leader, potentially, at any cost, as their moral worth is greater than the wealth gained or lost. The tension between these teleological and deontological approaches are key to existential perspectives on leadership (Racheals, 1986; Beauchamp & Bowie, 1997; Raphael, 1989; Weiss, 1998; Kant, 1977). This position isn't without irony, as disillusionment with failed ideals features within existential discourse (Stack, 1977; Kierkegaard, 1949).

References

Agarwal, J. & Malloy, D. C. (2000) The Role of Existentialism in Ethical Business Decision-Making, 9(3), pp143-54

Ashman, I. & Lawler, J. (2008) Existential Communication and Leadership, Leadership, 4(3), pp253-69

Bauman, Z. (2004) Identity, Cambridge: Polity Press

Barrett, W. (1958) Irrational Man, A Study in Existential Philosophy, London: Mercury Books

Beauchamp, T. L. & Bowie, N. E. (1997) Ethical Theory and Business, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall

Bernstein, G. L. (2004) The Myth of Decline, London: Pimlico

Burnes, B. (1992) Managing Change, a Strategic Approach to Organisational Dynamics, Harlow: Pearson Education Limited

Collinson, D. L. (2003) Identities and Insecurities: Selves at Work, Organisation, 10(3), pp527-47

Flynn, T. R. (2006) Existentialism, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Garnett, J. (1981) Managing without a Stick or Carrot, Industrial Management and Data Systems, 81(7/8), pp26-7

Grint, K. (2005) Leadership: Limits and Possibilities, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan

Heath, G. (2000) The Self and Communicative Theory, Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited

Heidegger, M. (1927) Basic Writings, New York: HarperCollins

Heidegger, M. (1962) Being and Time, Blackwell Publishing: Oxford

Heidegger, M. (1966) Discourse on Thinking, New York, NY: Harper Torchbooks

Kauffman, W. (1975) Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre, New York, NY: Times Mirror

Kant, I. (1788) Critic of Practical Reason, Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill

Kempster, S. (2009) How Managers Have Learnt to Lead, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan

Kierkegaard, S. (1941) Concluding Unscientific Postscript, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press

Kierkegaard, S. (1949) Either/Or: A Fragment of Life – Volumes 1 and 2, trans W. Lowrie, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press

Kierkegaard, S. (1962) The Present Age, trans A. Dru, New York, NY: Harper & Row

Ladkin, D. (2010) Rethinking Leadership, A New Look at Old Leadership Questions, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing

Lawler, J. (2005) The Essence of Leadership? Existentialism and Leadership, Leadership, 1(2), pp215-31

Lawler, J. (2007) Reply to Ian Ashman, Leadership, 3(1), pp107-113

Lumby, J. & English, F. (2009) From Simplicism to Complexity in Leadership Identity and Preparation: Exploring the Lineage and Dark Secrets, Leadership in Education, 12(2), pp95-114

Lyotard, J. (1979) The Postmodern Condition, A Report on Knowledge, trans G. Bennington & B. Massumi, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press

Malpas, S. (2005) The Postmodern, London: Routledge

May, C. & Cooper, A. (1995) Personal Identity and Social Change: Some Theoretical Consideration, Acta Sociologica, 38, pp75-85

Northouse, K. (2001) Leadership Theory and Practice. London: Sage

Polanyi, M. (1958) Personal Knowledge, Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy: Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press

Polanyi, M. & Prosch, H. (1975) Meaning, London: The University of Chicago Press

Racheals, J. (1986) The Elements of Moral Philosophy, New York, NY: Random House

Raphael, D. D. (1989) Moral Philosophy, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Rickards, T. & Clark, M. (2006) Dilemmas of Leadership, Abingdon: Routledge

Rose, N. (1989) Governing the Soul, London: Free Association Books

Sartre, J. (1943) Being and Nothingness, London: Methuen

Sartre, J. (1965) Essays in Existentialism, New York, NY: Citadel Press

Sartre, J. (1973) Existentialism and Humanism, London: Methuen

Sartre, J. (1985) Existentialism and Human Emotions, New York, NY: Citadel Press

Sartre, J. (1965) Nausea, London: Penguin

Sartre, J. (1948) What is Literature?, London: Methuen

Smircich, L. & Morgan, G. (1982) Leadership: the management of meaning, Journal of Applied Behavioural Science, 18(3), pp257-73

Stack, G. J. (1977) Kierkegaard's Existential Ethics, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press

Taylor, C. (2007) A Secular Age, London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press

Taylor, C. (1989) Sources of The Self, The Making of the Modern Identity, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Turgenev, I. (1899) Diary of a Superfluous Man, Holicong, PA: Wildside Press

Weiss, J. W. (1998) Business Ethics, Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace & Company

Werhane, P. L. (1999) Moral Imagination and Management Decision-Making, New York, NY: Oxford University Press

Whitehorn, K. (2007) Selective Memory, London: Virago Press