

Wisdom in leadership from a philosophical point of view

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1. Wisdom from a philosophical point of view

1.1. The love of wisdom and the wisdom of love

Exploring wisdom as the basis of effective and trustful leadership, invites to rediscover the essence of philosophical streams that don't leave the central topic of wisdom or meaningfulness to religion. The need of wisdom (1)inventing both (2)effective and (3)trustful leadership is completely in line with the three central questions western philosophy since Socrates was dealing with. From the beginning philosophy was concerned with questions respectively on (1)insight (theory), (2)acting in a right way (ethics) and (3) meaningfulness¹. Trustfulness gives sense or meaning to your leadership. If leadership has to be effective you need guiding rules about how acting in a correct way. To prevent to become too idealistic in working out leadership with wisdom, philosophy invites you not to forget the important role of rationality inventing the right insight.

It is remarkable how, in an era when more and more the concept of wisdom is articulated, an ancient source of wisdom, namely philosophy, risks to be overlooked. This is rather strange, first because philosophy literally means the love of wisdom. Secondly because philosophy traditionally paid attention to meaningfulness interpreted as love or compassion. From the perspective of the need for wisdom and meaningfulness we can resume that *philosophy* stands for the *love of wisdom* and the *wisdom of love*.

An interesting guide to this approach of philosophy as a source of wisdom or meaningfulness is the French philosopher Luc Ferry in his book *Apprendre à vivre* (Paris, 2006). Following Ferry's starting point of philosophy, we can say that man (and a fortiori, a company a leader want to manage with wisdom) is mortally bounded just like a company that can crash. As a finite being, man and what he undertakes is limited in space and time. Unlike the animals he knows he will die like the people whom he loves. This situation a priori is alarming and often unbearable by the fear it creates. Think of the first sentence in Hobbes' *Leviathan*: "Fear and I were twins"(Th. Hobbes, *Leviathan*). Full of fear, man becomes unhappy and questions rise concerning the meaning of life or meaningfulness. In religious systems the answer to the fear for death (or in a wider sense, for a

leader, the fear for bankruptcy of his company) mainly refers to the importance of confidence or trust. It is remarkable to know that the Latin word for trust is *fides*, the same word that also means the religious term "faith". If you trust in God, you're saved beyond death. It goes without saying that this attitude of trust, by definition means an attitude of humility in front of the saving God.

Philosophy however soon got rid of this humility in respect of a supreme being you trust. Philosophy trusts on human reason to overcome the fear for death or bankruptcy. Epicurus for example defines philosophy as a medicine to counter fear. The Stoic Epictetus even reduces all philosophical questions to this fear for death. Montaigne described philosophy as "learning to die" while Spinoza said that "the wise man is less mortal than the fool". Also behind Kant's question "what may we hope" one discovers the same concern about our limited life.

Fear not only prevents us to be happy, but also to think or act in a free way. Philosophy therefore puts forward that man is free to save himself. Philosophy thus prefers freedom over trust to search for happiness, right thinking (theory) and acting in a proper way (ethics). Indeed, even if the search for happiness of the free man without faith in God has to get a significant place in philosophy in search of wisdom, this cannot be achieved without a profound reflection on reality (theory) and on how to act properly (ethics). However as philosophy literally means "love of wisdom", finally philosophy tends to eliminate herself to make room for wisdom itself. The reason for this is that to *be* wise by definition is not the same as to desire or to seek wisdom. To *be* wise as far as possible effectively means thinking and living happy and free, when finally we have overcome the fears that raised up by our finiteness.

When in this first part of this paper we try to articulate this particular view on philosophy and wisdom, in the second part we deal with the question how leading with wisdom can be shaped in more concrete leadership.

1.2. The antique, the modern and the post-modern philosophical view on wisdomⁱⁱ

1.2.1 The antique stoic wisdom of love

One of the first philosophical schools that systematically connected this rational demand for wisdom with the question of knowledge or theory and the question of ethics is the antique greek philosophical school of stoicism. Theory for stoics or *to theion / ta theia orao* means observing

(*oia*) the divine (*theion*). The-*oia*, according to the stoics, is an attempt to contemplate the divine in our surrounding reality. They called the cosmos, the ordered structure of the universe, the divine (*theion*). It is not like for the Jews and the Christians, a Being outside the universe. In order to understand reality the point is to adore the divine or the cosmos (*theoin*).

Because the cosmos or nature functions in a quite harmonious way, this cosmos also can be used as a just and good model for human behaviour. A theory of justice was established like in Roman Law, to give each person what him or her belongs. This means to assign everybody his or her place within the harmonious and "just" cosmos. Ethics in line with this stoic vision on understanding or theory thus means that man is invited to connect or to adapt his behaviour to the cosmos. Much like Hans Jonas today means when he says that the purpose of man lays in nature.

The wisdom we then discover is that as members of the well-ordered universe, we can participate in the stability of this fair cosmos. Our agony then is unjustified, not only in a subjective way but also in objective pantheistic terms. As the universe is eternal and we are intended to participate forever, we will always remain. But at this stage philosophy is not yet wisdom, but only an articulation of love (*philo*) of wisdom (*sophia*). However according to the stoics, through practical exercises we are able to move from the mere desire for wisdom to wisdom itself. These exercises are fully focused on the suppression of anxiety and come back in later stages of philosophy like for instance with Spinoza and Nietzsche and also in eastern philosophy (Buddhism for instance). Remarkable for most of these exercises is the fact they are linked with time. In our relation with time we indeed experience fear which feeds remorse and nostalgia concerning the past and expectations concerning the future. As a consequence the starting point of the exercises of the stoics was to train in not cultivating hope. Good life is a life without hope or fear, what only can be realised from the belief that the world is harmonious and good. Because the present is the only dimension of real life and this present by definition is unstable, it is wise not to attach to what is perishing or to detach us from earthly goods. Also in Eastern philosophy (Buddhism), this is a central topic. Instead of hope as an eternal spring, hope is the greatest calamity for both the Stoic and the Buddhist. Because of hope we risk to forget that there is no other reality than the here and now. What's more and what's essential for our search for wisdom, we then miss the chance to practice wisdom as loving people.

1.2.2. The modern humanistic wisdom of not preventing the freedom of the other

In summary for a stoic (or Buddhist) if you want to get rid of your fear for death, in the first place you should try to understand the cosmic order, secondly, in your behaviour you should try to imitate this order and finally it's the question to find your place in this cosmic order and to unify with her to obtain some form of eternity beyond death. The emergence of the modern world is accompanied by the collapse of this classical cosmology by a technical-scientific revolution never seen in human history. Modern science discovered that world is not round, closed and hierarchical but rather an infinite meaningless chaos, in which objects without harmony collide. Humanism arises as an era in which man appears to be alone, without help of the cosmos or God. On the theoretical level man must wonder how the world is intelligible, if she is no longer infinite, ordered and harmonious. In ethics, it is now impossible to interpret the cosmos as an example. The classic quest for wisdom that led to the wisdom of love at first sight comes to an end. With the Declaration of Human Rights of 1789, as a climax of humanism, man once and for all came in the center of the world. Rousseau made a clear distinction between animals and humans. The latter is intelligent and is susceptible to forms of sociability. Why man is so different from all other living beings is the fact that he is free. Man can depart from natural rules but creates its own culture. The big difference with animals, says Rousseau, is that man consciously can choose evil (animals kill other animals, but rather from an instinct, people do it "intentionally"). In contrast, man has the possibility to act selflessly and altruistically. However, for this choice between good or evil, one thing is necessary: the freedom of choice of man. Thus, our desires can only be constrained if we really want it.

So we come to the Kantian idea that people are treated not as means but as ends. Our nature spontaneously tend towards egoism. If I want to make place for others and to limit my freedom so that I don't prevent the freedom of the other, then I have an effort to provide. This is the precondition for a peaceful coexistence of people. In fact it is only from the autonomy of man that true solidarity is possible. In this way we don't have to condemn individualism, like Christians sometimes risk to do. On the contrary, we rediscover a personalistic characteristic, Christian philosophers like Mounier and Maritain further worked out. The term individualism refers to the creation of a moral world in which individuals as persons are given values according to their ability to move from the logic of the natural selfishness to construct a responsible ethical universe. Secular

ethics thus can be summarized as a set of values that can be expressed by means of obligations or rules and that invites us to articulate (a minimal) respect for the other.

However the question now is how with the rise of humanism in addition to a new theoretical and ethical philosophical answer, this wisdom is supplemented with the answer how we can be happy and how we can overcome our initial fear for death without claiming God or a relationship with the cosmos. From this perspective civil liberties made room for all sorts of "worldly salvation religions" such as scientism, revolution and patriotism, with the expectation that man lifted himself for the benefit of a higher cause. But all this resulted in the greatest tragedies in world history, with millions of deaths like during the Great War, the Shoah and Hiroshima.

The result of this evolution was the fact that man was no longer regarded as the real center of the world and reason no longer as the exclusive means of emancipation. This was already articulated during the nineteenth century, particularly by the controversial philosopher Nietzsche. According to Nietzsche humanism of the Enlightenment still remains the prisoner of the basic structures of religion. Hence for Nietzsche even democracy is considered as a new religious fantasy. Nietzsche rejects the free will and proclaims his doctrine of the *amor fati*, the acceptance of 'fate' and the 'eternal return'. The *amor fati* commands us to embrace reality, but what should we do with dramas such as Auschwitz and Hiroshima? In fact, from the beginning the philosophy of Nietzsche risked to be a model of anti-humanism, a doctrine against democracy, human rights and even progress itself.

1.2.3. The post-modern wisdom of compassion

Philosophy as a source of wisdom therefore needs to articulate further a postnietzschean humanism. For Ferry this means a rehabilitation of the notion of transcendence he discovered in the philosophy of Heidegger. However this is not a transcendence and immanence of a God concept. There is no omniscient or general known and therefore this transcendence can not be metaphysical. Ferry rather thought at a cube to express this transcendence. When you look, you only see three sides instead of six. In other words, any presence implies an absence, any hidden immanent transcendence. It is true that elements of wisdom like truth, beauty, justice and love remain transcendent to any particular individual. We must recognize that human knowledge never can be omniscient. Science no longer is self-assured and domineering but slowly learns to question itself. Ferry refers to Henri Dunant,

founder of the Red Cross calling for a health institute without bounds. He got this insight after an appearance on the battlefield of Solfereno where he saw the countless victims without any help or assistance. Soldiers who are defenseless or injured no longer belong to a particular nation, but must be helped because of their humanity. Helping those people is a humanitarian act. This is only possible if man is able projecting oneself in another. This is what Ferry calls an "enlarged thinking" that already began with Kant. As source of wisdom we can only rely on the reason of man (theory) and like Levinas, on the understanding of and compassion for others (ethics) leading to meaningfulness. Finally only love guarantees that this process of enlarged thinking makes sense. For someone like the atheist philosopher Ferry wisdom of love is the only credible answer to the question of the meaning of life: "Let us learn to live and to love and if necessary to learn to think at death daily. Not because in an unhealthy manner we are attracted by death, on the contrary. Because we look how, here and now, what is to be done with those we love and with whom we will lose unless they lose us before. And I'm sure this kind of wisdom exists." (Ferry, 2006)

1.3. Conclusion

What do we learn now from this search for possible sources of philosophical wisdom. The interesting thing with the philosophical perspective of Luc Ferry is the fact that he starts with the problem of finitude. By the wisdom of religious systems (Christianity for instance) this fear for death is countered in a particular way. For instance by the Christian faith in the physical resurrection after death when man again encounters whom he loved. Remarkably, however, is that the search for wisdom to get rid of our fear for death from the beginning also was prominently present in both Western and Eastern philosophy. Both in stoicism, with the remarkable parallels with Buddhism, as in modernity with, for example, Kant and in post-modernity after Nietzsche with a philosopher like Levinas, ultimately a trans-cultural response of wisdom as love for the other or as compassion, is articulated. The fear for death confronts man with his question concerning the meaning of life or the demand for meaningfulness in general. However this fear for death does not prevent man to look for a rational interpretation of wisdom to get an answer for the existential fear for death. Compassion for the other as the articulation of the meaning of life, whether you are reflecting from an eastern

philosophical point of view or from a stoic, Kantian or Levinasian one, therefore can be seen as a cross-cultural interpretation of what wisdom really means.

It's interesting to see how this wisdom of compassion not only is applicable in response to man's existential fear for death but also as a guide for the question how today one can manage a company in a wise way. The background of the risk of bankruptcy of a company in a era of global financial and economic crisis, creates a similar fear for finitude as the fear for death for a human being. It is remarkable therefore that in management literature nowadays more and more the concept of compassionate leadership is put forward. This means that more and more compassion is also expressed as a trans cultural source of wisdom in management.

2. The trans-cultural paradigm of compassionate leadershipⁱⁱⁱ

2.1. Compassionate leadership in Western management literature

What seems to be essential in compassionate leadership in western management literature is that a leader with compassion takes the other and his suffering or failing seriously without losing his own interest. In a globalized society with problems like child labour, climate change, financial uncertainty and multiculturalism, compassionate leadership might become an alternative leadership style.

In *Creating Leaderful Organizations*, Joseph Raelin (2006) argues for a new style of leadership. In this new paradigm^{iv}, compassion is a core value which transforms leadership from one individual's responsibility into a new way of working for everyone. Raelin's *Leaderful Organisation* is built on creating a trust-oriented environment in which he develops a vision that reinvents leadership for today's organisations citing new leadership models in some of the world's most progressive companies. He cites the leadership style of Jim Kelly, former CEO of UPS, who rejects the notion of the CEO superstar in favour of "people working together to get things accomplished".^v Harley-Davidson is cited for their "circle structure" in which each "circle" selects a coach who has "acute communication, listening and influencing skills."^{vi} Raelin quotes Robert Kelley's observation that leadership should have the moral and psychological balance to pursue personal and corporate goals at no cost to either and, above all, pursues the desire to participate in a team effort for the

accomplishment of some greater purpose.^{vii} These examples illustrate the possibility of leadership being transformed from an individual property to a collective responsibility.

Already in his 1977 *Harvard Business Review* article Abraham Zaleznik depicted the manager as a rational, bureaucratic, dutiful, practical, and unimaginative dullard. However he saw the leader rather as a visionary, restless and experimental dynamo. Raelin explains how through work-based learning and its dialogic approaches, participants over time appear to surface a different form of leadership that is less characterised by the manager model and more by a collective form that he refers to as “leaderful”: “This term is new but is required because the idea of involving everyone in leadership and seeing leadership as a collective property is quite distinctive from the archetype of leadership based on its root definition as the ‘person out in front’.... In compassionate leadership, members commit to preserving the dignity of every single member of the team, meaning that they consider each individual whenever any decision is made or action taken. The net effect of leaderful development has enormous bottom-line implications, not to mention its endorsement of the steadfast values of authenticity, trust, humility, and compassion.”^{viii} Raelin juxtaposes the traditional leadership paradigm as dispassionate against the new paradigm as being compassionate. His use of compassion is connected with values that maybe regarded as values that are primary to the creation of wisdom in management. Pruzan and Pruzan Mikkelsen (2006) give one section of their book, *Leading with Wisdom* to compassion which is based on interviews with five business leaders who believe that a leader must have a concern for others and even move “from fear to love”.^{ix}

In an article in the *Harvard Business Review*, Jane Dutton *et al* wanted to explore why organisational compassion is significant beyond the obvious and compelling reasons of humanity.^x They found that a leader’s ability to enable a compassionate response throughout a company directly affected the organisation’s ability to maintain high performance in difficult times. Compassion fosters a company’s capacity to heal, to learn, to adapt, and to excel.^{xi} In creating a context for action, leaders can truly unleash an organisation’s power to heal: ”As a leader you can set the right example to awaken the potential for compassion, and you can prompt the organizational infrastructure to reinforce and institutionalize compassionate acts. Perhaps the most important step you can take is to model the behaviours you would like to see others demonstrate. Frequently, people aren’t sure if it’s appropriate to bring personal matters into the workplace, or they may

simply not know how. You can show them, using your status and visibility as a leader” (Dutton *et alii*, 2002). Essential for Dutton *et al* is that organisational response doesn’t have to start at the top. Leaders need to recognise and support instances in which spontaneous organisational and compassionate actions occur at the lower levels of a company: “As these stories show, organisational compassion can be contagious. Indeed, what we call ‘positive spirals of compassion’, where one act of compassion inspires another, are common.”^{xii}

It may be concluded that the positive effect that individual and organisational compassion have is not always evident, but it seems that employees and citizens will reward companies and government that treat them humanely. The costs of not providing leadership and the organisational infrastructure to support people are considerable. For instance, people tend to be distracted at work, and if they don’t have appropriate outlets, they may become unresponsive and even uncooperative. In fact, just as compassion can be contagious, so can the detachment that accompanies a non-compassionate response.^{xiii}

2.2. Compassionate leadership from a Buddhist perspective

Dot ZEN^{xiv}, written by Seamus Phan and Ter Hui Peng, is inspired by the Buddhist Diamond Sutra where cooperation is the key to survival and success, and non-aggressive philosophy and wisdom is advocated for running business ventures and organisations. This is a fundamental thread to business leadership defined by compassion. For the authors of *Dot ZEN* the question is if there is a way for executives to nurture ethical leadership in themselves and peers, whilst enabling the organisation to grow.^{xv} As a lifelong student of Buddhist philosophy since the age of six, Phan learned compassion as an exceptionally powerful value in building ethical or sustainable businesses. He quotes The Dalai Lama who in the *Art of Happiness* says, “Be compassionate. Not just to your friends, but with everyone. Be compassionate”.^{xvi} Compassion is the sympathy for the suffering of others, with a desire to help. So why would compassion and leadership be distant to each other, Phen asks. The problem for many corporate or non-corporate entities today lies in the fact that by only adhering to the letter of the law, they believe they are ethical to the spirit or core of their business or organisation: “But ethics is more than compliance to the law. It is similar to what HH Dalai Lama mentioned as psyche or spirit. And that has to do with compassion for everyone, every stakeholder,

every customer, and every employee. (...) As the Chinese says, ‘make big problems small, and small problems nothing at all’. If you can reduce our problem from big to small to nothing, you may end up not with new enemies every time, but new allies and friends.”^{xvii} Phan explains that compassion is not just for enlightened leaders like HH The Dalai Lama and Gandhi: it can be nurtured and tightly integrated into the fabric of any corporation, including highly competitive and volatile technology businesses. To enact compassionate leadership in a corporation, compassionate leadership must be grounded in ethics, not just in compliance. It is crucial, according to Phan, to educate everyone in the culture of compassion before any short-term perceived gain: “In almost any leadership failure, most are attributed to the lack of proper and timely communication with employees. If the leader is to create an environment for compassionate results, he or she must lead in the education, and must be the role model for others to follow....Reward not just those who deliver results, but especially those who create meaningful partnerships (even with the competition).”^{xviii} The Buddhist way of compassion is not one of cowardice, but one of mindful courage. For Phan the sustainable way forward is for managers and employees to be happy at their workplace and content with the same mindful courage of a Buddhist warrior (a kind of a corrected echo of Hobbes’ “*fear and I were twins*”): “Compassion and leadership are twins at birth, separated perhaps by the environment, but must ultimately be joined together for true wisdom and strength to emerge. Even as we debate the issue of ethics and of ethical dilemmas, we can learn to appreciate that if we intrinsically understand and apply principles of compassion and contentment, ethics and leadership would simply fall into place.”^{xix}

Whilst Buddhist compassionate leadership emerges from a belief in minimising self-interest and maximising mutually beneficial transactions, the Confucian perspective on compassion comes from the disposition of “the man of benevolence” who understands his responsibility for promoting public morality and behaviour and in putting people first. The current reconstruction of Confucian thought in contemporary China is already creating a fresh interest in the application of Confucian thinking in Chinese business education which was recently illustrated by the creation of the Confucius Business School in Hong Kong and Shandong.

In *The Analects*, the compilation of Confucius’s teachings, compassion is expressed in his call to leaders to exemplify a moral nobility and to act with kindness, loyalty and faithfulness.^{xx}

Compassion is central to Confucius's notion of the "man of humanity", who is called to "really love humanity" and to "hate inhumanity".^{xxi} The responsibility of the *chün-tzu*, literally meaning "son of the ruler" but also referring to the morally superior person, is to practice *shu* (altruism). The distinction is made with the "inferior person" whose life is based on the standard of profit and self-interest.

Ren Jianxin, president of ChemChina, a state-owned enterprise, was recently asked why his company owned the restaurant chain, *Malan Noodle*. He answered as a *chün-tzu* but in the contemporary guise as a *responsible entrepreneur*: "...[A]s a responsible entrepreneur I have to try as hard as I can to create jobs for the unfortunate. Creating a service business like *Malan Noodle* was one of the solutions I came up with."^{xxii}

The common thread in Buddhist and Confucian thought lies in respect, even love, for the other. It is fundamentally a sympathy for the other, especially those who are more unfortunate than oneself.

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Notes

- ⁱ See L.Abicht, H.Opdebeeck, *Zin en inzicht.Een filosofisch uitzicht voor iedereen*, Acco, Leuven, 2009
- ⁱⁱ For this chapter we found a lot of inspiration in L.Ferry, *Apprendre à vivre*, Plon, 2006.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Compare with our publication on “Compassionate Leadership as an expression of the Common Good” in H.-C.de Bettignies&M.J.Thompson (Eds.), *Leadership and the Common Good*, Garant, Antwerp/Appeldoorn, 2010, p. 115-128.
- ^{iv} The School of Management of Walden University (Phoenix, AZ, USA) has, in recent years, organised seminars under the title: “A New Paradigm: Compassionate Leadership”.
- ^v Jim Kelly quoted in J. Raelin, *ibid*, p. 116.
- ^{vi} *Ibid.*, p.33
- ^{vii} J.Raelin, “Don’t bother putting leadership into people” in *Academy of Management Executive*, 2004, vol. 18, no. 3, p.132
- ^{viii} *Ibidem*, p. 134-135
- ^{ix} P. Pruzan and K. Pruzan Mikkelsen, 2006, *Leading With Wisdom: Spiritual-based Leadership in Business*, Sheffield: Greenleaf, pp. 140-179.
- ^x J.Dutton, P.Frost, M.Worline, J.Lilius and J. Kanov, “Leading in Times of Trauma” in *Harvard Business Review*, January 2002, p.55-56
- ^{xi} This study was based on three years of research conducted at the CompassionLab, a joint project of the University of Michigan Business School and the University of British Columbia. They begun their work in 1998, based on a common interest in the way that stories of compassionate acts could inspire further acts of compassion. Recently, they have been looking at how the degree of organisational compassion in a company affects employee retention: *Ibidem*, p.57.
- ^{xii} *Ibidem*, p.60-61.
- ^{xiii} *Ibidem*, p.61
- ^{xiv} S.Phan and T.Peng, *Dot ZEN: Practical tips and thoughts on business, Marketing, PR and Internet from the Diamond Sutra*, Singapore, McGallen & Bolden Associates, 2003
- ^{xv} S.Phan, Dot ZEN, Ethical and Compassionate Leadership, *International Journal of Knowledge, Culture and Change Management*, Vol. 4, 2004, p.1359-1360
- ^{xvi} HH Dalai Lama mentioned in the book “Art of Happiness” that “mind” actually means a more holistic concept, known as “Sem” in the Tibetan language, which is a combination of intellect, feeling, heart and mind, or loosely described as “spirit” or “psyche”. Why is happiness, and the training of the psyche, important in business? The spate of colossal corporate scandals, collapses and fraud may have something to do with myopia, that of being shortsighted to the long term. The most successful and sustainable business have always built their businesses painstakingly through the decades: *Ibidem*, p. 1362
- ^{xvii} *Ibidem*, p.1360-1361
- ^{xviii} *Ibidem*, p.1361-1362
- ^{xix} *Ibidem*, p.1363
- ^{xx} See further Joanne B. Ciulla, 2003, *The Ethics of Leadership*, Wadsworth / Thomson.
- ^{xxi} Confucius, *The Analects*, 4:6 in Wing-Tsit Chan, 1969, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, Princeton University Press.
- ^{xxii} Ren Jianxin, President of ChemChina interviewed by the McKinsey Quarterly, 2008:3, p.56.