

# Leader Authenticity and Ethics

## A Heideggerian Perspective

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# Leader Authenticity and Ethics: A Heideggerian Perspective

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In the shadow of various business scandals and societal crises, scholars and practitioners have developed a growing interest in authentic leadership. This approach to leadership assumes that leaders may access and leverage their “true selves” and “core values” and that the combination of these two elements forms the basis from which they act resolutely, lead ethically, and benefit others. Drawing on Heidegger’s work, we argue that a concern for authenticity can indeed instigate a leadership ethic, albeit one that acknowledges the unfounded openness of existence and its inherent relationality. On this basis, we propose an ethics-as-practice approach in which leaders respond to the situation at hand by being “attuned to attunement,” which cultivates an openness to otherness and a responsibility to others.

**Key Words:** leadership ethics, authenticity, Heidegger, philosophy, nonfoundational ethics, resoluteness

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*If you yearn for authentic, moral, and character-based leaders, read on (George, 2003: 5).*

Leadership ethics—the ethical formulations and foundations of how leaders should act in organizations—attracts both scholarly and practitioner interest. Moreover, “in many ways, leadership ethics is an umbrella for all areas of professional ethics” (Ciulla, 2020: xi), and leadership ethics is thus central to business ethics in a way that cannot be represented by ethics statements or codes for business conduct alone (Flynn & Werhane, 2022: 1). Regardless of whether they have formal roles, leaders are expected to be effective, to be morally exemplary, and to help their organizations and others to thrive (Ciulla, Knights, Mabey, & Tomkins, 2018). Although leadership may be defined in a more processual or distributed manner, attributions of leadership tend to be made toward persons rather than relations (Ciulla et al., 2018). In addition, “followers” tend to question a leader’s competence and morality when crises arise (Ciulla, 1995), including team-level conflicts, project failure, and corporate bankruptcy. Leaders are cognizant of such expectations and may become deeply concerned, or even experience anxiety, at the prospect of failing their followers and their organizations and ceasing to be seen as leaders (Segal, 2010).

In response to such concerns, a substantial body of work is engaging with normative leadership theories in which ethics takes center stage, such as transformational leadership, servant leadership, aesthetic leadership, and authentic leadership (Ciulla & Forsyth, 2011; Johnson, 2019; Lemoine, Hartnell, & Leroy, 2019). In this article, we focus on authentic leadership (AL), which is growing in popularity among current and aspiring leaders in the business world. AL is concerned with the salience of self over role (Lemoine et al., 2019) and with how self-knowledge grounds leaders’ morality and is conducive to effective and ethical action in business (Ciulla, 2020: 154). The concern for authenticity in leadership has been popularized through best-selling business books by George (George, 2003; George & Clayton,

2022; George & Sims, 2007), Brown (2012, 2018), and Cashman (2017), among others. This approach to leadership assumes that leaders may access and leverage their “true selves” and “core values” and that the combination of these two elements forms the basis from which they act resolutely, lead ethically, and benefit others. AL has also become the subject of a stream of scholarly literature that echoes and thus legitimizes the rationale presented in the aforementioned bestsellers. It for example appears in studies defining traits of authentic leaders and measuring how they are perceived and how they perform (Iszatt-White, Carroll, Gardiner, & Kempster, 2021). The topic of AL furthermore features in various higher education courses and programs, including those at top-ranking institutions like Harvard.

However, in their recent work, Fischer and Sitkin (2023) dispute that so-called positive styles of leadership inevitably lead to desirable outcomes. Moreover, the foundational theories and implications of AL have been challenged in recent research. Arguments have been put forward concerning the supposed existence of a “true” and “stable” self, the idea that we can and should align or even merge our personal and professional selves, and how to distinguish authentic from inauthentic leaders (Alvesson & Einola, 2019; Johnsen, 2018; Kempster, Iszatt-White, & Brown, 2019; Ladkin & Taylor, 2010). Regarding efforts to practice AL, the literature shows how difficult it is for women and persons from other (organizational) minority groups to come across as authentic leaders (Ladkin, 2021; Monzani, Hernandez Bark, Van Dick, & Peiró, 2015) or to perceive themselves as such (Lee, 2020).

Iszatt-White and Kempster (2019) suggest that we need to go beyond the positive psychology aspect of AL and approach authenticity from other angles, such as psychoanalytic or existentialist perspectives, to interrogate the practice of (authentic) leadership. Their proposal echoes calls over the years, including in this journal, for a more rigorous, philosophical

discussion, in business ethics, of leadership ethics and leadership styles that focus on the moral dimension (Ciulla, 1995; Ciulla et al., 2018). Responding to these calls, we draw on discussions of authenticity in Heidegger's work. Our interest in authenticity as a relevant concern for business ethics and leadership resonates with philosophical arguments positing authenticity as an unavoidable ethos in contemporary times, notably the work of Taylor (1991). Our aim here is thus not to "correct" practitioners in their aspirations and desires for what they refer to as authenticity but to contemplate what it means to invoke authenticity in relation to leadership and the implications for the ethics of leadership practice in the AL versus Heideggerian perspective. Other work related to leadership and authenticity has employed Heideggerian concepts (see, e.g., Cunliffe & Hibbert, 2016; Segal, 2010; Zundel, 2012); however, in these studies, the ethics discussion remains rather implicit (Ciulla, 2020) or concerns a group of philosophers connected to existentialism in business ethics more broadly (Agarwal & Cruise Malloy, 2000; Ashman & Winstanley, 2006).

In this article, we argue for leadership ethics derived from Heidegger's understanding of authenticity and advocate a resolute practice of being "attuned to attunement," which cultivates an openness to otherness and a responsibility to others in day-to-day leadership performance. Moreover, we discuss how leadership ethics derived from AL raises ethical concerns, particularly related to a circular logic in judging what constitutes authenticity and, by extension, ethical leadership (Ciulla, 2020). In developing these arguments, we contribute to the integration of insights from Continental philosophy into business ethics (see, e.g., Ciulla et al., 2018; Painter-Morland, 2017). Our work adds an existential-ontological ethics dimension to the discussion of authenticity in relation to leadership and the consequences for business ethics. We provide an alternative to the dominant conceptualization of authenticity in leadership and

contribute to the scholarship on nonfoundational approaches to ethical questions in business, which is notably found in the stream of research on ethics-as-practice (Clegg, Kornberger, & Rhodes, 2007; Painter-Morland, 2008). Here it should be noted that nonfoundational ethics does not indicate indifferent, neutral, or merely descriptive ethics. We define nonfoundational ethics as an approach to ethical concerns in which there is no principal or ultimate basis of ethics and which therefore demands us to respond to ethical questions that have no final or universal answers. Thus nonfoundational ethics is not concerned with defining or formulating universal, general, or transcendental principles and standards of what is right or good but instead focuses on the practice of responding to singular ethical concerns and situations.

Moreover, this article holds significance for leaders eager to lead ethically and who have an interest in AL. Indeed, it takes their wish for “authenticity” seriously and acknowledges the deep, potentially existential consequences of their experiences of disruption to, or dealignment with, their professional surroundings. Our reconceptualization of authenticity in leadership may particularly resonate with leaders who do not correspond to stereotypes of how a leader looks and acts and who may therefore struggle with how to come to terms with the calls for authenticity in leadership. Thus our work also opens avenues in relation to recent discussions connecting the concern for diversity in ethics and AL (Gardiner, 2017; Iszatt-White, Stead, & Elliott, 2021; Ladkin, 2021; Ngunjiri & Hernandez, 2017).

## UNDERSTANDING AUTHENTICITY

To discuss authenticity in relation to leadership ethics, we first need to understand the possible meanings of authenticity and how leaders can relate to it. In both the AL literature and Heidegger’s work, we find common ground in viewing authenticity as being worthy of

consideration and in the claim that we are inauthentic when we are unreflectively absorbed in the world around us, in culturally prescribed ways of being and acting. However, there are notable differences between the AL and Heideggerian perspectives on authenticity, not least regarding the possibility to “look inside” and derive leadership ethics from one’s values. To understand the possible meanings of authenticity, we examine the perspectives on authenticity that appear in popular AL books and related scholarly work before contrasting them to the Heideggerian perspective and discussing its connection to our focus on leader authenticity.

### *Authentic Leadership*

George’s best-selling business book begins with this striking statement:

Thank you Enron and Arthur Andersen. The depth of your misconduct shocked the world and awakened us to the reality that the business world was on the wrong track, worshiping wrong idols and headed for self-destruction. . . . We needed this kind of shock therapy to realize that something is sorely missing in many of our corporations. What’s missing? In a word, leadership. *Authentic leadership* (George, 2003: 1).

George and Clayton (2022) subsequently add systemic shocks, such as the financial crisis of 2008, the COVID-19 pandemic, George Floyd’s murder, the war in Ukraine, and climate change, to the shocks in the business world. Overall, in popular AL books, authenticity is interpreted as a necessary “moral turn” for leadership to address the moral breakdown that supposedly threatens the liberal, capitalist model of (Western) society. This echoes broader business ethics discussions that argue that without any concern for ethics in leadership, “even the most meticulously prepared ethics statements are destined to founder, as evidenced at Enron and elsewhere” (Flynn & Werhane, 2022: 1).

This view of authenticity is also echoed in executive education programs:

Companies need to be developing leaders who exhibit high standards of integrity, take responsibility for their actions, and make decisions based on enduring principles rather than short-term expedience. The best

leaders are authentic leaders—people whose inner compass guides their daily actions and enables them to earn the trust of subordinates, peers, and shareholders.<sup>1</sup>

We see here that, beyond responding to large-scale crises, AL is seen as a positive approach to leadership that can help leaders address and possibly avoid day-to-day crises. This is important not only for the organization and its members but also for the leaders themselves. Once leaders have realized that they need somehow to respond to the crises—small and large—that may occur around them, but may find it difficult to decide how, they can find themselves in a personal and professional crisis. Confronted by possible shortcomings in how they view themselves and their failure to meet expectations others have set for them, leaders need to find a way “to be” and to act in accordance with expectations once again.

Indeed, not acting, or being immobilized by crises, may be interpreted as a breach of authenticity (Iszatt-White, Stead et al., 2021). Doing nothing or simply expressing and experiencing confusion signifies deficiencies in organizational responsibility and confidence, and “executives who cope with the conflicts of responsibility with anxiety are likely *not* to exhibit authenticity in their behaviour” (Novicevic, Harvey, Buckley, & Brown, 2006: 70). The aim for proponents of AL is thus to propose a way for leaders to escape anxiety or any other affective state that clouds their judgment, prevents authenticity, or stops them from meeting the expectations and needs of others. Thus deploying AL arguably provides leaders with a way out of crises.

From the AL perspective, becoming an authentic leader means identifying our core values. These values cannot be learned from a book but are the result of life’s experiences and challenges:

Many people do not know who they are. They are so focused on trying to impress others that they let the world shape them rather than shaping themselves into the kind of leaders they want to be. . . . Your True North is the moral compass that guides your actions, derived from your most deeply held beliefs, your

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.exed.hbs.edu/authentic-leader-development/>.



values, and the principles you lead by. It is your internal compass, unique to you, that represents who you are at your deepest level (George & Clayton, 2022: 2).

If leaders are serious about change, they need to commit to identifying these building blocks of authenticity and developing their own moral compass; it is thus not about simply following steps in a superficial, run-of-the-mill way (George, 2003). Nevertheless, some general guidance may be found in the related executive education course at Harvard University: “Develop greater confidence in your own capabilities; Recognize and address your blind spots as a leader; Learn from feedback and the challenges you encounter daily; Lead an integrated life that enables you to balance work, home, and other pursuits.”<sup>2</sup> Aligned with this perspective, scholarly work on AL posits that authenticity can be viewed as a range of mental and behavioral processes through which one can discover and maintain the core self (Kernis & Goldman, 2006).

In summary, the AL perspective advises that, rather than remaining focused on the desire to fulfill shareholder and stakeholder expectations (which may be immoral or harmful to the business and society), individuals must actively look inward to find a path to authenticity and become ethical and effective leaders.

### *Heidegger on Authenticity*

By way of contrast, we now turn to the Heideggerian perspective on the meaning of authenticity. Gardner, Coglisier, Davis, and Dickens (2011) relate the modern concern for authenticity in leadership to its philosophical roots in the Greek aphorism “know thyself,” in Socrates’s call to not live an unexamined life, and in Aristotle’s virtue ethics. They argue, however, that AL research has been more strongly influenced by social psychology, yet they acknowledge that

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.exed.hbs.edu/authentic-leader-development/>.

current work on authenticity also “owes a great deal” to that of more contemporary philosophers, such as Heidegger and Sartre (Gardner et al., 2011: 1121).

Although AL-related work and leadership ethics more broadly do not feature detailed discussions of Heidegger’s work (Ciulla, 2020), the German philosopher is indeed one of the key thinkers on what it is “to be” and on the meaning of authenticity. For Heidegger, each of us is (a) “being there” (*Dasein*), thrown into the world and, as such, already intimately related to other people (Heidegger, 2010: 116). However, “initially, and for the most part, the self is lost in the They [*das Man*]. It understands itself in terms of the possibilities of existence that ‘circulate’ in the present day ‘average’ public interpretations of *Dasein*” (Heidegger, 2010: 365). This means that we are absorbed in the world around us (the They) in an unreflected<sup>3</sup> and unquestioned manner, whereby “one simply does what one does.” This unquestioned absorption in the surrounding sociality gives us a sense of “being at home” in the world, a sense we strive to maintain and do not question.

However, for Heidegger, this apparent sense of being at home and the continual drive toward a familiar, comforting experience of the world constitute “a *flight of Dasein* from itself as an authentic potentiality for being itself” (Heidegger, 2010: 178). In other words, Heidegger emphasizes that when we feel most at home, we may be the furthest from engaging with our own existence. We are constantly drawn toward acting uncritically according to the They and thus to repeatedly “choose inauthenticity” (Dreyfus, 1991: 315). For Heidegger, the concern here is not

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<sup>3</sup> An issue in Heidegger’s work is the distinction between reflection and reflexivity. We note that he does not use the German for either concept but instead uses the term *Verstehen* (understanding), a discussion of which is beyond the scope of this article. However, in line with definitions and usage in academic literature, we consider that reflection and reflexivity may be distinguished as follows: “Reflection involves reliving and rerendering: who said and did what, how, when, where, and why. Reflection might lead to insight about something not noticed in time, pinpointing perhaps when the detail was missed.” Contrastingly, “to be reflexive involves thinking from within experiences, or as the Oxford English Dictionary puts it ‘turned or reflected back upon the mind itself’” (Bolton, 2010: 13–14). Depending on the meaning intended, we thus use *reflected/reflection* or *reflexive/reflexivity*.

to discuss authenticity as a willful reaction (e.g., to shocks and crises as presented in the AL literature) but to make the more general point that we live mostly inauthentic lives in the comfort of sharing a homely feeling with those around us.

Importantly, inauthenticity is not judged as morally bad or wrong; it is merely the customary way of living in the world—a way that may, however, obscure other ways and possibilities for living our lives. Authentic being, or its potentiality, can be glimpsed only when we are somehow interrupted, distanced, or alienated from this customary being at home in the world, when there is discord, dissonance, or disruption in the previously unquestioned norms of the social They. For Heidegger, in such moments of disruption, we may face a sense of “unhomeliness” (*Unheimlichkeit*), unfamiliarity, or uncanniness and no longer feel at home in our common world (Heidegger 2010, 182–83). In his view, this sense of not being at home constitutes an experience of our authentic existence—of our being thrown into the world without absolute bearings, solid foundations, or universal meaning.

Furthermore, Heidegger argues that anxiety is a prominent “mood” or “attunement” through which this “uncanny” condition of our existence may be disclosed to us (Withy, 2015). With the notion of mood or attunement, Heidegger means that we never experience the world in a way that is neutral or objective but always in a way that is affective, entangled, and situated.<sup>4</sup> More specifically, anxiety is a “fundamental attunement” (*Grundbefindlichkeit*) (Heidegger,

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<sup>4</sup> Heidegger (2010: 133) writes, “Mood assails. It comes neither from ‘without’ nor from ‘within,’ but rises from being-in-the-world itself as a mode of that being.” A mood is thus not a psychological “inner condition” (Heidegger, 2010: 133) that would concern only a single individual; rather, attunements are always somehow reflections or resonances of a collective and historical situatedness. As such, Heidegger argues that one of the fundamental attunements of ancient Greece was astounded wonder (*thaumazein*), whereas two of the most prominent attunements of modernity are profound boredom and anxiety, which are also the attunements most elaborated on in Heidegger’s work—even if love also gets a brief mention (Heidegger, 1994: 133ff.; 1995: 160ff.; 1998: 87). Finally, we note that Heidegger is not consistent in distinguishing between the terms *mood* (*Stimmung*) and *attunement* (*Befindlichkeit*), and neither are the various English translations of his work. In the remainder of the article, we mainly use the term *attunement*, even though we are aware of its possible distinction.

2010: 178) of our “being-in-the-world.” Fundamental attunements are ways in which we experience the world that provide us with an “opening” to (re)think some of the most prevalent issues of our existence: “being,” time, and finitude (Heidegger, 1995). Fundamental attunements shake our foundations and displace our presupposed understandings of ourselves. Through fundamental attunements like anxiety, in which “everyday familiarity collapses” (Heidegger, 2010: 182), we can be brought face-to-face with our potential for *authentic* being (in the original German text, *eigentlich*, meaning “proper” or “actual” being).

Going beyond the AL approach to anxiety as an individual psychological state, Segal (2010: 386), for example, invokes Heidegger’s work to argue that anxiety in a leadership context arises when a leader finds their “identity as a leader–person to be at stake.” Segal argues that the CEO experiences anxiety when the company’s future, and thus the leader’s standing in the company, is at stake. Experiencing anxiety at such times means that leaders can no longer live undisturbed in their practice and surroundings (Chia & Holt, 2006). At stake here is seeing oneself and being seen as a worthy person and leader, as someone who not only executes (as managers do) but also acts on a vision to make a positive difference in the world (Spoelstra, 2018).

For Heidegger, such a confrontation with our (potential for) authentic being is thus not the consequence of an act of will or a rational decision. Furthermore, the consequence of this confrontation is not an opening toward one’s core values, firm beliefs, or other supposedly stable elements of being. Rather, “in the clear night of the nothing of anxiety, the original openness of beings as such arises” (Heidegger, 1998: 90). Anxiety is thus an attunement through which we can be exposed to unhomeliness as the ontological condition of *Dasein*, to the lack of stable and

solid ground, to the unfounded openness of being. Hence uncanniness, rather than being at home in the world, (un)grounds the meaning of “being” (Withy, 2015).

It follows that, from a Heideggerian perspective, encouraging leaders to “resolve” anxiety, as AL suggests, is neither desirable nor possible. Neither is there an “unsullied inner self” (Lawler & Ashman, 2012: 333) that leaders can use as a foundation, providing them with certain, solid ground for action. Noting such differences, however, does not immediately enable us to deduce how a Heideggerian view of authenticity might lead to a different and potentially better course of action in the conduct of business, that is, a renewed leadership ethics. We now turn to engaging in such discussions to further the argument that we may find grounds to retain authenticity as a concept relevant to leadership ethics while remaining critical of AL.

## THE ETHICS OF AUTHENTICITY

In this section, we move on to discussing the ethical implications of AL versus Heideggerian views on authenticity. We first examine the ethics of authenticity prescribed by AL, arguing that such ethics cannot constitute a reasonable course of action. Then, we examine how ethics can be derived from a Heideggerian understanding of authenticity to provide a more persuasive alternative while sustaining the validity of striving for authenticity in leadership.

### *The Ethics of Authentic Leadership*

According to popular AL books, once a leader has identified their true, authentic values, they must “dare to lead” from this place of vulnerability (Brown, 2018). Deploying AL involves being “self-aware and acting in accord with one’s true self” and thus being ethically responsible toward others (Gardner et al., 2011: 1121). There is also an assumption that authenticity can somehow

be projected onto followers, who will then emulate this way of being (Lemoine et al., 2019). Practicing AL thus creates an alignment between the ethical actions of the leader, the business ethics enacted throughout the company, and even the organization's mission (see, e.g., George & Clayton, 2022: Figure 9.2). Such harmonious outcomes of AL have been linked to the Aristotelian concept of *eudaimonia* (Lemoine et al., 2019), a form of happiness or human flourishing resulting from rational action grounded in intellectual and moral virtues and that is argued to be "the ultimate test of ethical and effective leadership" (Ciulla, 1995: 238). Furthermore, Gardner et al. (2011) interpret *eudaimonia* as an alignment between who we truly are and how we act as leaders.

This view of leadership ethics suggests that leaders who are leading from their core values are inherently morally responsible; therefore accusing them of acting immorally becomes impossible (Johnsen, 2018). Conversely, if leaders are found to act immorally, this must be because they were not authentic enough in the first place and need to try harder, or because a given company or organization is not the right setting in which to deploy their authentic leadership, as George (2003) concluded from his own experience. Yet, if we adopt this logic, would not a Mafia godfather also feel that his values of loyalty and strength align with those of his organization and therefore that both he and the organization he is leading are authentic and thus ethically responsible? Johnsen (2018) argues that Skilling, as CEO of Enron, was seduced by his own moral values. Leaders who believe they are being true to themselves, leading authentically for the good of others, and experiencing the promised alignment and comfort of homeliness, may thus, from a different perspective or at a later date, be judged to have been acting unethically.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Best-selling AL books present many examples of successful businesspeople who are also authentic leaders, and the authors are themselves successful and wealthy business leaders. However, as Spoelstra (2018) notes, the earlier

Following AL reasoning, authentic leaders hence cannot be challenged morally, as “morality seems to be both the result of being authentic and a quality of authenticity” (Ciulla, 2020: 154). The successful deployment of AL appears to be a “happy coincidence” (Spoelstra, 2018) between ontology and ethics, or between the “being” of a leader and the morality of their organization, or an instance of “moral luck” whereby business success makes leaders appear moral (Ciulla et al., 2018). Moreover, striving to deploy AL demands intense emotional work, especially in the case of leaders from organizational minority groups who struggle to live up to what they believe will make them good leaders (Iszatt-White, Stead et al., 2021). The prescribed AL approach and ethics are thus setting up many “real-life” leaders for failure in the short or longer term and suggest that only near-“saintly” leaders may succeed in practicing AL (Ford & Harding, 2011).

In summary, deploying a leadership ethics grounded in personal values may lead to several troublesome outcomes. AL ideals can result in leaders who are seduced by their own personal belief systems and deploy a hegemonic leadership style, which is not inherently ethical. They can also make many leaders feel ongoingly inauthentic and inadequate and lead to them blaming themselves for failing their own ideals, their colleagues, and their organizations—professionally and personally. Overall, leaders have no way of establishing whether their failure to act as effective and ethical leaders (and emulating this throughout the organization) is due to their own misidentified values, others’ misperceptions that they are not authentic, or AL itself not being able to deliver on its promises.

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books by George include examples of now-discredited authentic leaders like Lance Armstrong (former professional road-racing champion and team leader whose titles were stripped for doping) and Mike Baker (former CEO of the US-based ArthroCare Corporation who was sentenced to 240 months in prison for fraud), which defeats the proof-by-example logic.

### *Heidegger and Ethics*

Earlier, we explained how Heidegger (2010: 184) asserts the potential, via anxiety, to reveal both “authenticity and inauthenticity as possibilities of [one’s] being.” Not fleeing from anxiety may enable us to reconsider who we are and who we want to be; in other words, it can help us *ethically* contemplate possible relations to the openness of being. When we use *ethically* here, we are informed by Heidegger’s interpretation of ethics as a manner of being or existing in the world that is neither stable nor fixed (Heidegger, 1998: 253), where ethics concerns a contemplation of the “open region in which the human being dwells” (Heidegger, 1998: 269, 271). For Heidegger, ethics is thus an existential or ontological concern: “In its principle, the ethics that thus announces itself refers to nothing other than existence. No ‘value,’ no ‘ideal’ floating above anyone’s concrete, everyday existence provides it in advance with a norm and a signification” (Nancy, 2002: 71). Anxiety thus reveals existence without a preexistent meaning or significance, which also means that “*Dasein* cannot have a meaningful life simply by taking over and acting on the concerns provided by society” (Dreyfus, 1991: 304). Instead, one must explore the uniqueness and specificity of a given situation and its context to perceive the openness of possible significations, responses, and actions within this context. However, for Heidegger, such possibilities are not found deep within ourselves. The proposed ethics is, instead, one grounded in ontology and understood as a “responsibility to otherness” (White, 1991).

If we apply this to our interest in leadership, this means there is no transcendental position outside leadership practice from which we can derive definitive principles of action, as we are always situated in a changing world (Zundel, 2012). The significance and meaning of a situation and the response that it demands must be reconsidered each and every time. Thus, given that the relationship between leaders and their surroundings is such that they cannot, in practice,



be separated, a space *within practice* needs to exist where the leader can “become philosophical in an existential sense” (Segal, 2010: 385). A leader is just one individual among others in the world. Leaders do not have a superior, extraordinary capacity to be unaffected by their surroundings and perform their actions based on unwavering personal moral grounds.

Importantly, from this perspective, there is also no guaranteed or safeguarded way in which the leader can judge if the newly chosen course of action is better than the previous one—or if it is a good one in general.

### *On Resoluteness*

Heidegger (2010: 365) suggests that to endure the vertiginous opening of existence in anxiety, we must respond with “authentic resoluteness” (*eigentliche Entschlossenheit*). In its general meaning, resoluteness is the “quality of being strong and determined”<sup>6</sup> or a “firm or unwavering adherence to one’s purpose.”<sup>7</sup> This meaning is also echoed in the AL literature, where we can, for example, read that companies are looking for “confident executives, [whose] secure self-esteem is the foundation of authenticity exhibited in their individual behaviour as leaders” (Novicevic et al., 2006: 70), or who, “when their principles are tested, . . . refuse to compromise” (George, 2003: 12).

In contrast to the steadfastness of acting from determinate principles (one’s core values) toward fixed goals, Heidegger’s conception of resoluteness—as signaled by the *Ent-* in *Entschlossenheit*—denotes a “removal of closure” (*ent + schliessen*). For Heidegger, resoluteness concerns an attitude of unclosing, refraining from definitive conclusions, or a dis-enclosing of closure. Resoluteness is thus the authentic responsiveness to the openness of being.

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<sup>6</sup> *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, s.v. “resoluteness.”

<sup>7</sup> *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. “resoluteness.”

We further note that this, for Heidegger, ontological meaning of *Entschlossenheit* resonates with the etymology of the term *resoluteness*, which stems from the Latin *resolvere*—a process of breaking up, loosening, untying, or even dissolving.

Practicing resoluteness thus means enduring and being concerned about this “openness of being” without immediately trying to close it down. Leaders who are inclined to act in a generalized or standardized manner across various situations by delving into an already developed toolbox of principles, goals, or values are closing themselves off from the openness and uniqueness of each situation and are thus acting inauthentically. Instead, Heideggerian resoluteness describes a letting go or suspension of any preconceptions of the reactions required in different situations. Thus leaders can become open to the specific demands and unique needs of each situation, which may call for very different responses and require leaders to alter their “belief systems” (Dreyfus, 1991).

This, however, does not suggest that we cannot, or should not, make any decisions at all, nor that we cannot “cut through” the open space of interminable interpretations of who we can be and how we can act. Indeed, Heidegger emphasizes an intimate connection between authentic resoluteness, as an attitude of dis-enclosure, and the necessity of decision-making: “Resolutely taking over one’s own factual ‘there’ implies at the same time resolve [*Entschluss*] in the situation” (Heidegger, 2010: 364). The difference between Heidegger’s view and the conception of resolute decision-making in the AL literature, however, is in the former’s acute awareness that our actions and decisions could always have been “otherwise” and that this “otherwise” could have been better. In other words, there is an acknowledgment of the necessity and obligation to make decisions, alongside a strong realization that we can never do this from a transcendental position of absolute certainty but always only in situ.

Heideggerian resoluteness thus acknowledges the uncertain and fragile boundedness of our decisions, no matter how informed by principles or values they may be. The unending ethical task, then, is one of “becoming homely in being unhomely” (*Heimischwerden im Unheimischsein*) (Heidegger, 1984: 143), in other words, of becoming attuned to the primordial “not being at home” of human existence and responding to it. However, this primordial “not being at home” is not a curse that dooms us to eternal nonbelonging; rather, we belong to the disclosure of being, to the fundamental openness of existence—our own and that of others—that never stops questioning us.

#### ACTING RESOLUTELY: TOWARD AN ETHICS-AS-PRACTICE FOR LEADERSHIP

If we can turn our gaze neither outward toward transcendental principles nor inward toward a set of core values to reveal how to be an authentic leader, what does this mean for leaders who strive for authenticity and seek to change their leadership ethics? On the basis of Heidegger’s understanding of authenticity and resoluteness, we suggest that leaders move toward a practice of being attuned to attunement and developing an awareness of one’s own and others’ attunements (that always already influence one’s being-in-the-world) and the possible differences, or dissonances, among them.

##### *Being Attuned to Attunement*

Heidegger was concerned with what it is to “be” rather than with theorizing and prescribing particular ways of being and acting. We here argue that we need to devise ways in which we can learn from his philosophy to develop leadership practices, not least ones that would not presume a prevailing or permanent attunement of anxiety. Indeed, even though “anxiety can arise in the

most harmless of situations” (Heidegger, 2010: 183), we cannot predict, provoke, or control our experience of it nor ascertain that we are actually experiencing anxiety. We can, however, try to develop practices that can be more generally meaningful and deployable in business.

Specifically, we contend that leaders should demonstrate sensitivity toward idiomatic *differences* in practice so they can guide their responses toward exploring how the uniqueness and dissimilarities of each situation inform the various calls for action that resist generalization. This entails, instead of holding an uncompromising attitude toward their own values, that leaders practice preparedness to continually reconsider their decisions should the situation so demand, whatever their reasons for the original decision at the time. Thus leaders would demonstrate responsiveness to the openness of situations, an openness to otherness, and enact a responsibility for their decisions before, during, and after they are made. This would demand that leaders try to distance themselves from an unquestioned “being at home” or from “thinking as a reflex” (Alvesson, Blom, & Sveningsson, 2017: 14).

We propose this to be a practice of being “attuned to attunement,” in other words, a practice of awareness—cognitive, perceptual, emotional, and physical—of attunements and the possible dissonances among them. As discussed earlier, attunements cannot be chosen or controlled, and the world is experienced through them. Yet, leaders can practice becoming attuned to these attunements—both their own and those of others. This is not a purely speculative, intellectual exercise nor a way of trying to detach from the world; rather, it is a way of actually staying close to what is “going on.” Notably, though leaders, like everyone else, are always traversed by attunement, by mood, they could practice noticing when they or others around them are “not in the mood” (Ahmed, 2014) as a basis for reopening their way of acting as leaders. Attunements are thus affective states for practice while simultaneously providing a

backdrop for actions directed at phenomena (Elpidorou & Freeman, 2015: 668). We therefore argue that being attuned to attunement—being attentive to and reflexive about the attunements that one and others experience—can be a practical, ethical direction for leaders. In such a practice, the leader can become “attuned to the wonder of the usual” (Zundel, 2012: 121), which here includes the ordinariness of difference.

### *An Existentially Informed Ethics-as-Practice*

Practicing being attuned to attunement resonates not only with Heidegger’s notion of ethics but also with an ethics-as-practice perspective. In ethics-as-practice, “ethical choices can be understood as defying predetermination by ethical models, rules, or norms; ethics are both unpredictable and future oriented, situated, and contextual” (Clegg et al., 2007: 108–9), and thus ethical decisions can be made only with regard to a particular situation. Moreover, the ethics-as-practice perspective does not make personal values irrelevant to decision-making but rather implies that predefined moral frameworks cannot simply be applied to address the messiness of the real world and of day-to-day business (Painter-Morland, 2008). Furthermore, ethics-as-practice does not mean that “anything goes” or that we should be “crudely pragmatic, but instead is one that emphasizes the context and interpretation of ethics” (Clegg et al., 2007: 117). In a similar vein, Painter-Morland (2008) argues that, even if we adopt an ethics-as-practice approach, we should not abandon other forms of ethical training, as this training provides an opportunity for repetition, discussion, and an extension of the repertoire of ways to be and to act ethically in organizations. In turn, this idea of training and repetition harks back to the meaning of the Greek term *ethos*.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> In the second book of the *Eudemian Ethics*, Aristotle explains that the term ἦθος (*ethos*) has a close relationship to the term ἔθος, meaning “habit” or “custom,” and that *ethos* therefore denotes the “moral character” or “disposition”

As we are thrown into and immersed in the social world, becoming attuned to attunement and eventually changing leadership practices is no small feat, and there is no guarantee that doing so will lead to better leadership. However, we contend that taking an existentially informed ethics-as-practice perspective can put leaders on a different path—one that offers the potential for them to see and sense their own leadership (in) practice and how it affects the relationships in that practice. Thus leaders can reflexively distance themselves not only from single acts or tools of leadership but also from the way in which they understand their ethics of leadership while being immersed in practice (Chia & Holt, 2006). This also aligns with Cunliffe and Hibbert's (2016: 55) view that leadership learning in practice “requires reflexive attunement within an unfolding world [and] may only occur with disruption to unnoticed practices.”

Finally, although anxiety is a central notion in this article, notably echoing its discussion in Heidegger's work, it is important to underline again that the practice we propose is not tied to experiences of anxiety or to particular types of events or shocks. We wish to emphasize, however, that taking our condition of uncanniness, of unhomeliness, seriously *in fine* means that striving for authenticity is less about trying to feel good and comfortable and more about the Heideggerian notions of attunement and resoluteness as constitutive, existential elements of our being-in-the-world. This being-in-the-world is abyssal in that it can never be grounded, and this abyssal nonfundamentality is at the same time the (un)ground that commits us to doing something in the world. As previously offered, resoluteness is an opening of closure, a dis-enclosure (Nancy, 2008), and a way of enduring this opening rather than trying to reenclose it by retreating or fleeing to familiar ways of being—and leading. The Heideggerian approach thus

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that a person, virtuous or not, acquired by way of “repetition” and “habituation” (Aristotle, 2014: 2.1220a–b [50]). On the notion of *ethos* in Aristotle and Heidegger, see also Bjørnholt Michaelsen (2021).

also contrasts with approaches in which leaders resort to moral disengagement to avoid discomfort (Bonner, Greenbaum, & Mayer, 2016).

## CONTRIBUTIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND RESEARCH AVENUES

In this article, we have engaged with the AL literature and Heidegger's work to understand what it might mean to pursue authenticity in leadership and how these different conceptualizations lead to distinct paths in terms of ethics. We contribute to leadership ethics by building on previous work that considers the link between Continental philosophy and business ethics (Agarwal & Cruise Malloy, 2000; Ashman & Winstanley, 2006) and answering the call for a more rigorous philosophical discussion, in business ethics, of leadership ethics and leadership styles centering on the moral dimension (Ciulla, 1995; Ciulla et al., 2018). We argue how, for Heidegger, there is neither a transcendental or general principle nor an inner core of authenticity to be revealed by turning inward that would guarantee an ethical foundation for leaders' actions and decisions. Instead, striving for authenticity in leadership demands that the leader acknowledge the unfounded openness of being and resolutely take this into account when acting and making decisions. In other words, the leader must take responsibility for others by making decisions that acknowledge the entanglement with the surrounding world and the specificity of each situation that may arise. This also involves a continued preparedness to reverse or alter decisions should the situation require it. The focus is thus more on the situation, event, or "other" that calls for a response and a decision to be made than on the leader who makes the decisions.

Moreover, we contribute to existing discussions of leadership, authenticity, and ethics by proposing a practical suggestion for deploying leadership ethics that builds on a Heideggerian perspective on authenticity. Given the socially embedded ontology inherent in a Heideggerian

approach to leadership (Cunliffe & Hibbert, 2016), our proposed practice of being attuned to attunement must therefore be approached as a relational practice that requires purposeful engagement with those around us. However, we acknowledge that adopting such an existential-ontological approach may not be self-evident to practitioners and may require some more bridging work. Also, we need to study and develop organizational cultures with space for leaders to both retain their authority claims and relationally redefine their day-to-day leadership practices to be ethical and effective leaders (Bolle, 2006).

To deal with each situation in a way that may need to differ from the expectations and norms prescribed by the *They*, Heidegger suggests that we look to practices from the past—those that were once constitutive of the *They* and have been marginalized or even forgotten (Dreyfus, 1991). For Heidegger, history is about forgetting particular understandings of being and the practices linked to such understandings (Hopkins, 2011). Yet, practices are handed down through culture and can thus be recalled, enabling the contemporary “us” to view the situation at hand differently (Dreyfus, 1991). Whereas Heidegger was concerned with marginalized practices in a particular (Western) culture, that is, he adopted a rather cultural-conservative standpoint, we suggest that contemporary leaders be open to new practices that somehow break with normative, scripted behavior beyond their own cultural heritages and comfort zones. Some of these variations may be forgotten—we cannot recall them—or not yet known to us, but all are part of the shared world we inhabit (see, e.g., an inspirational example about Māori leadership by Spiller, Maunganui Wolfgramm, Henry, and Pouwhare [2019] or Warner and Grint’s [2006] discussion of “American Indian ways of leading”). As Ciulla (2020: 157) suggested, “since Heidegger believes life projects are done in history they are also done as part of various groups . . . hence the primary question in the context of history is not about ‘Who shall I become?’ but



‘Who shall we become?’” Still, we should not romanticize particular “alternative” leadership approaches, as there may be a trap in searching for a morally and socially superior way of leading, as well as issues of cultural appropriation.

Thus what is needed here is a combination of contextual sensitivity to difference with a readiness to explore the social-relational consequences of leadership action. In this way, the opening toward otherness can reveal other possibilities of being that are closed to us when we are absorbed in the They. Striving for authenticity in leadership thus becomes a quest that is inherently relational, contextual, and potentially available to *all* leaders. As remarked earlier, AL studies point to the difficulties encountered by members of minority groups in organizations to come across or see themselves as authentic leaders (Iszatt-White, Stead et al., 2021). It would thus be relevant to explore whether minoritized leaders who are more likely to be “not in the mood” and feel estranged from their surroundings (Ahmed, 2014), or leaders who have worked in a varied range of settings in their careers and who may be more habituated to reframing their actions accordingly, have already devised ways of practicing being attuned to attunement. Moreover, in this article, we are concerned mainly with people in a formal leadership role, who are the main focus of AL and large parts of leadership ethics discussions. Future work should expand on this viewpoint and consider how the practice we propose is relevant to a broader range of leaders, including those in nonformalized leadership positions.

Also, besides anxiety, researchers may also wish to consider how other fundamental attunements of our being-in-the-world that Heidegger discusses in his oeuvre, such as astounded wondering, profound boredom, and love (Heidegger, 1994: 133ff.; 1995: 160ff.; 1998: 87), might fuel discussions of leadership ethics. For example, Carroll, Parker, and Inkson (2010: 1046) find that leaders are “too ready to dismiss boredom as an enemy, and too uninterested in

facing up to boredom, tolerating it, and using it reflectively as a tool of diagnosis for both their own and their organizations' states." In addition, the practice of being attuned to attunement that we are proposing here would cohere with a more detailed discussion of the Heideggerian notion of care (*Sorge*), which is understood as primordial caregiving and concern for "being," including our own being, other beings around us, and the world. We are not talking here about an altruistic morality, but instead, we follow Nancy (2002: 72): "what is established is rather that, whatever the moral choice, the other is essential to opening." This unlocks many avenues for future research, as Heidegger's notion of care has only rarely been considered from angles relevant to business ethics, whether in relation to caring leadership (Ciulla, 2009; Tomkins & Simpson, 2015) or to caring organizations more broadly (Elley-Brown & Pringle, 2021).

Finally, to build on our Heideggerian perspective on authenticity, more work is needed to delineate concrete practices besides the one of being attuned to attunement that we propose. Although Agarwal and Cruise Malloy (2000) attempt to build a decision-making model for business ethics related to authenticity, Ashman and Winstanley (2006) point to issues in their definition of authenticity and to broader criticisms of the possibility of developing ethics from existentialism. We suggest that future research considers philosophers who have engaged with Heidegger's ideas on authenticity in relation to ethics with a stronger focus on action. These include De Beauvoir's (1947/2013) discussion of the ethics of ambiguity, connecting the existentialist concern for authenticity to ambiguity and freedom; Taylor's (1991) work on the ethics of authenticity beyond the risk of self-centered relativism; and Fanon's (1952/2015) discussion of identity, authenticity, and the experience of otherness. Other philosophers' work in this wake, emphasizing the relational dimensions in ethics, includes Arendt's (1958/2013) view on the moral obligation to act for the world (see also, in this journal, Gardiner, 2018) and

Levinas's (1961/1979) view of ethics as preontological and relational. Here we return to Ashman and Winstanley's (2006) prompt that both theoretical and empirical work developing existentialist (or existentialist-inspired) perspectives is warranted and would contribute greatly to business ethics.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, we have proposed a Heideggerian pathway to thinking about authenticity in leadership and its ethical implications, as an alternative to the AL perspective. The AL literature suggests that, when faced with shocks and crises putting their leadership at stake, leaders should connect to and leverage their "true selves" as a steady foundation for leadership ethics. Instead, following Heidegger, striving for authenticity means not to flee from the attunement of anxiety that opens us up to our uncanny condition of existence. Faced with this lack of firm ground, we need to act resolutely and repeatedly be open to deciding on alternative (and, it is hoped, better) courses of action, instead of falling back on the familiar. Connecting these Heideggerian insights to leadership ethics, we have argued that this demands an ethics-as-practice stance—a situated, reflexive, and relational view of who to be, how to act, and how to lead in the particular situation at hand. On this basis, we propose that leaders can cultivate being "attuned to attunement," that is, being reflexive about how they and others are experiencing the world around them. Leaders can thus practice being open to difference and to other ways of dwelling in the world of business and beyond.

This constant reopening and contemplation does not, however, make ethical questions and decisions "simply relative" in the pejorative sense; it makes them matters of interminable negotiation without determinable conclusions, whereby leaders may need to reopen each

decision on how to act while maintaining their responsibility to otherness. The challenge therefore becomes how to develop additional, practical ways for leaders to navigate business ethically without transcendental, fixed points of orientation. In Nietzsche's (2001: 119) words, this leaves us with the horizon of the infinite: "we have forsaken the land and gone to sea!"

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