

# Philosophy, Leadership, and Scholarship: Confucian Contributions to a Leadership Debate

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## Abstract

Almost every leadership study conducted falls into one of these two perspectives: essentialism (one best way) and non-essentialism (context and interpretation focused). This article traces how essentialism and anti-essentialism became so prevalent within Western philosophy/science and later became embedded in studies of leadership. Reconciliation of these two opposing perspectives has been difficult because they make vastly different claims about the nature of reality and knowledge development. The article makes visible the assumptions, limitations, and contradictions within the essentialist and anti-essentialist perspectives. I propose the use of Confucian philosophy as a way to move forward, beyond "apparently" dichotomized views of leadership, introducing a new avenue for future studies.

Recently several leadership scholars have commented on a problematic tension within the literature – there is a dichotomy between researchers that tend to see leadership as an essentialistic or universal concept versus those that tend to see it as a non-universalistic or non-essentialist concept (Barker, 2001; Grint, 1997).<sup>i</sup> This tension is also often described as between the "one best way" and "subjective interpretation." Practitioners are often left wondering whether they should be developing core traits and behaviors that will transcend circumstances or whether they should be focused on situation or contextual cues to guide their leadership. Essentialist scholars (Burns, 1978; Greenleaf, 1977) suggest that non-essentialists are wasting people's time by having them focus on details of subjectivity, context, and culture whereas non-essentialist scholars (Astin & Leland, 1991; Ensari & Murphy, 2003; Offerman & Phan, 2002) worry about the reductionist and simplistic notions developed by essentialist scholars that do not acknowledge the role of interpretation and local conditions. Both lines of argument worry about a deep and pervasive issue in the scholarship of leadership – what ontological stance makes most sense? As Grint (1997) notes, "we tend to perceive leadership in such oppositional terms and this may not be the most appropriate way to analyze, develop and enact leadership" (p. 3).<sup>ii</sup>

Underlying these two perspectives are fundamentally different epistemological (theory of knowledge) and ontological (views of reality and phenomena) assumptions. Grint (1997), Hunt (1991), and Barker (2002) are among the few scholars to conduct an examination of the fundamental assumptions of leadership. They all note that during this historical time period, as great shifts in scientific thinking are occurring, an examination of changing assumptions is needed.<sup>iii</sup> Most research has centered on defending the appropriateness of either the essentialist or non-essentialist positions. Few scholars have tried to explore how we might understand leadership differently by bringing these two perspectives together or moving beyond them.

Almost every leadership study conducted or philosophy offered falls into one of these two perspectives, essentialism and non-essentialism.<sup>iv</sup> Why is essentialism so prevalent and why is reconciliation so elusive? Essentialism is so prevalent because it undergirds Western philosophy and research. Reconciliation has been difficult because the two “pure” perspectives are dichotomized and make vastly different claims about the nature of reality and knowledge development; as currently conceptualized they are logically inconsistent. Yet, this tension does not exist in some non-western writings on leadership.

This article has two main goals: first, to develop an awareness of the essentialist assumptions responsible for the problematic dichotomized leadership literature (through a review of the literature); and second, to propose the use of Confucian philosophy as a way to move forward, beyond “apparently” dichotomized views of leadership, introducing a new avenue for future studies.<sup>v</sup> This perspective is helpful because it demonstrates that the two views are not logically contradictory or mutually exclusive. Why focus on underlying assumptions about the nature of reality in order to advance our thinking on leadership? This paper will demonstrate that different assumptions about ontology (represented in the debate of essentialism) greatly affect the study of leadership and ultimately our understanding of the phenomenon. Practitioners might be better served by research and an understanding of leadership that demonstrates that these two views each have legitimate assumptions and that it is problematic to maintain a pure essentialist or non-essentialist view.

The article will proceed as follows: First, I review the contested nature or definition of leadership, and define essentialism and non-or anti-essentialism. Second, I review the leadership literature from the essentialist and non-essentialist perspectives. There is an extensive collection of essentialist texts. In order to make this comprehensive task manageable, I have chosen certain texts to epitomize the essentialist position such as Burns (1978), Greenleaf (1977), Fiedler (1964/76), and Heifetz (1994). All are classic and/or famous texts on leadership. I will then review the non-essentialist positions, which can be divided into several related schools of thought: cognitive, social/cultural, processual, and contextual approaches. There are comparatively fewer non or anti-essentialist researchers that have written on leadership. The leadership field is dominated by essentialist scholars, but there is a growing interest in exploring non-essentialist perspectives. The review of essentialist and anti-essentialist positions in the leadership literature provides evidence of the dichotomized views and ways essentialism pervades

our conceptualizations (even within the anti-essentialist perspective which emerged in opposition). The article ends by describing some assumptions of Confucian philosophy and how it might be applied to the study and practice of leadership.

### **Philosophical Stances: Essentialism and Anti or Non-Essentialism**

Before describing essentialism and non-essentialism and how they affect the study of and understanding of leadership, it is important to briefly note that the definition and conceptualization of leadership is highly contested. Almost every text written on leadership notes that definitions vary by the primary assumptions brought to examine the phenomena.<sup>vi</sup> For example, trait theorists define leadership as a set of traits while behavioral theorists identify it as a set of skills. Researchers from a social constructivist perspective tend to define leadership as a process and relationship. There are seven main approaches that have been brought to bear to study leadership and constitute main schools of thought: trait, behavioral, power and influence (the more recent power/influence theories are sometimes referred to as reciprocal leadership theories), contingency, cultural, cognitive/processual/social constructivist, and critical/postmodern approaches (Bensimon, Neumann, and Birnbaum, 1989; Grint, 1997). One of the key underlying assumptions of these varying definitions regards views of ontology, which will be described next. Thus, this paper argues for another way to define or conceptualize leadership, adding to this on-going debate and examination.

#### *Understanding Essentialism and its Legacy*

Views on essentialism affect the way leadership has been defined as either a universal phenomenon (essentialist) or as a cultural, context-based phenomenon (anti-essentialist). For example, trait, behavior, power and influence, and contingency theories are most often aligned with researchers holding essentialist assumptions while cognitive, cultural and critical theorists tend to be aligned with anti-essentialist assumptions. This distinction will be described in greater detail in a later section. Next I begin to define essentialism.

One of the most basic definitions of essentialism is: members of a category have a property or attribute (*essence*) that determines their identity.<sup>vii</sup> Essentialist philosophy has changed slightly over time, but began with Plato and Aristotle, who believed that the universe was made up of two different realities: the essential universe and the perceived universe (Takala, 1998). The essential universe was that ideal or perfect universe while the perceived universe was a façade or perception. The perceived universe is continuously changing and dying. All observed imperfections would be a part of that perceived reality and they would not affect the perfect essential reality beneath. The goal of wisdom and later scientific research is to identify the essences or “real knowledge” and to get beyond the perceived, which is merely opinion and belief. The essential forms are more “real.” How does this essentialist view affect the study of leadership? Although this will be described in detail in the section on essentialist views of leadership, in brief, Plato attempted to identify the ideal mindset and skills (such as prudence, wisdom,

justice, courage) for the philosopher king (leader) that could be used within any situation in order to move societies toward the ideal state.

Plato and Aristotle's views of the nature of reality were also infused into modern notions of science. This century, Popper supported in general "methodological essentialism" (based on Aristotle) which directs research of invisible essences through examination of their phenomenal changes (Ellis, 2001). Scientific essentialism, which gained credibility in the first half of the last century, defends the view that the fundamental laws of nature depend on the essential properties of the things on which they are said to operate. These laws are not imposed upon the world by God, the forces of nature, or anything else, but rather are immanent in the world (Ellis, 2001). Natural objects must behave as they do, because to do otherwise would be contrary to their natures. The laws of nature are, therefore, metaphysically necessary, and consequently, there are necessary connections between events. Essentialist ontology was used to explain the physical world and it was also applied to social phenomena over the last hundred years and used in virtually every discipline and field. Within leadership, the goal was to identify the universal laws (represented through traits, behaviors, power/influence strategies) that govern the phenomena.<sup>viii</sup>

#### *Toward an understanding of anti-essentialism*

Because essentialism is understood as a belief in the real, true essence of things, the invariable and fixed properties, which define the "whatness" of a given entity, it is typically defined in opposition to difference (Fuchs, 2001). Anti-essentialists or non-essentialists hold that a complex system of cultural, social, psychological, and historical differences, not a set of pre-existent human essences, position/constitute the subject or human phenomenon (Fuchs, 2001). Anti-essentialists come from many different disciplinary traditions. Some are anthropologists that find the search for universal human characteristics problematic in the face of deeply embedded cultural differences. Others come from psychology and worry about the ability of labels to properly identify complex phenomena. Yet, non-essentialists are not abandoning the idea that phenomena exist, such as leadership, but that they are more complex, multi-faceted, and varying than previously envisioned.

In addition to the critique that essentialism is not an accurate portrayal of reality, another concern has been lodged by postmodern, poststructural, and post-colonial scholars. Post colonialists argue that essentialism was used to reduce indigenous people to an "essential" idea of what it means to be African/Indian/Arabic, thus simplifying the task of colonization (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1995). Essentialism is seen as an act to control and oppress nature and people. Instead, nationalist and liberationist movements define themselves as comprised of complex multi-faceted individuals without an essentialist nature to be colonized. In a postcolonial interpretation, essentialism is more than an inaccurate reflection of the state of the world (although this is argued as well), it is an act by those in power to marginalize and oppress others. Over the years, has an essentialist view of leadership been used to protect a class of people to maintain their hierarchical status within leadership positions by defining the quality and characteristics of a particular group as leadership? These critiques also lead to the significance of examining

essentialist assumptions that continue to undergird much of the leadership research. It is these kind of questions that have made more and more scholars adopt anti-essentialist approaches in recent years.

Yet, the long-standing tradition of essentialism also makes one wonder if something more than maintaining power has made this position convincing. Are there any compelling aspects to the essentialist position that might be lost in the move toward anti or non-essentialism? How can we advance leadership research in a context in which the essentialist position has been shown to be so problematic across almost every academic field and discipline (although this is not to say that some scholars do not find essentialism compelling)? To better answer these questions, I review essentialist and anti-essentialist views within leadership.

### **Essentialist views of leadership**

Within essentialism, leadership was understood as a set of ideal or essential characteristics and traits. The search continues for a pure form of leadership – the traits, behaviors, or processes that can be identified which reflect leadership in its basic form. As noted earlier, almost all trait, behavioral, power/influence, and contingency/situational theories of leadership (which makes up the vast majority of all research), emerge from an essentialist perspective.<sup>ix</sup> I will provide four exemplars across this host of theories to demonstrate the way essentialism is pervasive in the leadership literature and how it is enacted.

#### *Essentialism in Power and Influence Theories*

Perhaps one of the most influential works on leadership in the past century was written by James MacGregor Burns (1978). Burns puts forth the quintessential essentialist perspective within the power and influence tradition, reviewing hundreds of years of conceptualizations of leadership in order to ascertain key aspects. His goal is to develop a “general” theory of leadership that transcends time, context, and culture, which is itself the task of an essentialist. Burns puts forth the proposition that leadership is an ideal relationship that is characterized by two basic types: transactional and transforming. The transactional leader is much more common and is involved with exchanging one thing for another. Bureaucrats, political parties, and legislators tend to operate within the transactional form of leadership. The transformational leader seeks to cultivate followers’ higher needs and engages the full person of the follower (p. 4). The transformational leadership process is more mutual and elevates the follower and leader. Burns also examines moral leadership that is related to the fundamental needs, aspirations, and values of the followers and also an inherent part of transformational leadership. The aim of leadership is social change measured by intent and by the satisfaction of human needs and expectations. Burns refers to this aim as the “essence” of leadership (p. 15). Transformational and transactional leadership are idealized types that are characterized by essential, timeless, unchanging features that can be identified across culture, situation, and context. Also, Burns believes it is possible for the leader to

identify the “true” and essential needs of followers – certain universal psychological, economic, spiritual, aesthetic, and safety needs.

#### *Essentialism in Trait and Behavioral Theories*

Greenleaf’s concept of the servant leader also reflects essentialist assumptions and falls within the trait/behavioral approach to studying leadership (some refer to it as a reciprocal approach). Greenleaf (1977) identifies the essential features of the servant leader, providing a guide for behavior. He describes exemplary individuals he has observed who exhibit the behaviors of servant leaders noting that the qualities transcend context, organization, or historical time period. The two essential behaviors are integrity and a profound sense of the mystical, both guided by the heart (p. 249). The leader is a servant, a person who first wants to serve others and puts their needs and desires before his or her own. A set of traits and behaviors mark the servant leader: goal oriented, listens and understands others, pays attention to language and meaning, imagination, reflection, acceptance and empathy, focusing on the unknowable, prophetic or practicing foresight, awareness and perception, persuasion, and conceptualizing. Greenleaf reviews the actions and traits of leaders throughout history to identify this group of essential traits and behaviors.

#### *Essentialism in Contingency Theories*

For the most part, situational or contingency scholars are also essentialist; they document idealized and universal personality traits and situations and match the leader’s orientation with certain organizational contexts or situations. Fiedler is one of the early writers on contingency theory, examining how a leader’s personality or behavior affects leadership performance (1964) and situational theory, focusing on aspects of the organization or environment (1976). The “essential” leader’s personality traits are task-oriented versus relationship-oriented. The “essential” leadership environment feature is situational control marked by: 1) the leader being or feeling accepted and supported by group members; 2) the task is clear cut and structured; and 3) the leader has the ability to reward and punish, and thus obtain compliance. The task-motivated leader performs best in both high and low situational control. Relationship motivated leaders perform best in situations in which control is moderate. Fiedler’s conclusion is that leaders perform best in situations that match their leadership style. People can be reduced to an enduring preference style that can be matched to a stagnant environment that can be identified at some point in time. Experience, training, and organizational turbulence are also conditions that can be “fixed” and examined in relation to leader effectiveness.

#### *Essentialism in Situational Theories*

A more recent version of situational theory is Heifetz’s adaptive leadership (1994). Similar to Fiedler’s work, Heifetz attempts to identify idealized situational types that can be examined and planned for by change agents. There are three leadership situation types: 1) Type I- clear problem definition, clear solution and implementation, primary locus of responsibility for the work is with the leader and the work is technical; 2) Type II – problem definition is clear, solution and implementation requires learning, the primary locus of responsibility for work is shared between leaders and followers and the work is both technical and adaptive; 3) Type III – the problem definition requires

learning, the solution and implementation requires learning, the primary locus of responsibility for work is with the follower and secondarily the leader and the work is adaptive. Technical kinds of work are routine and mechanical and the follower can depend on the leader to develop a solution. Heifetz uses a medical analogy of a patient to describe how certain medical situations require little troubleshooting, the diagnosis and solution are clear. However, in Type II and III situations, the work is adaptive and requires involvement of the patient.

The task of leadership is to be able to accurately identify the situation and match leadership activities. Type I responses are the most typical, because they entail a more authoritative approach, which is prevalent in society. However, Heifetz points out that many of the situations we encounter are actually type II or III and that a type I response is not effective. He reviews various leaders' decisions examining when they effectively identified the situation type and matched their response and showed that they encountered successes when this occurred. What makes Heifetz or Fiedler essentialist is that the situations they identify are not believed to differ based on cultural, social, psychological, and historical differences.

#### *Strengths and limitations of essentialism*

The attraction of essentialist theories is that they provide specific advice to change agents by identifying essential characteristics of leadership that can be used regardless of the context or that identify enduring context issues or situational types to match leader personality and preferences. The idealized types (like servant leadership) or models developed such as adaptive leadership provide ready tools and approaches for leaders. The results are tangible and usable. At some level, they also provide hope. Beyond the problematic world of appearances lie enduring truths about leadership that if we try hard enough, we can understand and implement. The problem with these approaches is that they tend not to hold up to empirical analysis, although the evidence has been mixed. Vision is the only characteristic of effective leadership that appears to be repeatedly found across studies (Bolman and Deal, 1991). Some are more commonly identified such as commitment or passion, the ability to inspire trust and develop relationships. Reviews of the leadership literature find hundreds of attributes, traits, behaviors, and situational variables, but none appear essential or universal although researchers argue for their legitimacy, even with data or evidence lacking (Bolman and Deal, 1991). Perhaps it is the way that essential or universal qualities are defined or conceptualized (separate from context) that makes it difficult to document. Other limitations of essentialism have already been noted such as the way it can be used to oppress individuals and groups by portraying reality as a single perspective that represented the interests of elites.

### **Non-essentialist views of leadership**

Leadership remained a relatively essentialistic phenomenon until the 1980s when researchers began to challenge assumptions of universality through the lens of cultural, cognitive, contextual/ processual theories of leadership (Bensimon, Neumann, and Birnbaum, 1989). Many different aspects were examined including cultural differences

in leadership (for example that different countries value different traits or power and influence strategies), social differences (for example, race and gender), different psychological orientations (for example, different types of intelligences or cognitive orientations among leaders), organizational differences (that different organizational contexts require different leadership – including processual change which examines distinctive organizational histories and cultures), and historical differences (for example, that different approaches to leadership were required in the 1960s than are required now) (Antonakis, Avolio, & Sivasubramaniam, 2003; Astin & Leland, 1991; Ayman, 1993; Bensimon, 1989; Bolman & Deal, 1991; Dawson, 1994; Gordon, 2002; Kezar, 2001; Osborn, Hunt, and Jauch, 2002; Tierney, 1993).

Underlying many of these new approaches to examining leadership, particularly cognitive and cultural theories, is the notion of social constructivism and/or constructivism. Social constructivism is the belief that reality is developed through people's interpretation of the world and a denial of essences. Reality is a social and cultural construction, not an idealized form beyond our immediate perception. By examining multiple interpretations, a shared sense of reality can be detected, yet, our understanding of reality is always partial and imperfect. Constructivism is a philosophy founded on the premise that, by reflecting on our experiences, we construct our own understanding of the world we live in. Each of us generates our own "rules" and "mental models," which we use to make sense of our experiences. The cognitive perspective is more aligned with the constructivism perspective, while the cultural perspective is closer to the social constructivist perspective (Bensimon, Neumann, and Birnbaum, 1989; Kezar, 2001). More recently, postmodern theorizing of leadership has also been conducted. Postmodern scholars challenge universal truths and essences because there is no objective vantage point (or reality) and our perceptions are the only thing we can come to know (Grint, 1997). They also question whether universal essences or truths even exist beyond our perceptions. Instead, knowledge is seen as contingent to local conditions and contexts.

How do these perspectives relate to the notion of creating non-essentialistic views of leadership? Social constructivists, constructivists, and post-modernists take a non-essentialist view that leadership is shaped by local conditions, individual backgrounds/experience, and circumstances. Local conditions and circumstances vary and "essential" situation types are not possible to identify. There are no essential traits or behaviors that can or should be identified; the process is contingent upon many factors and conditions. Yet, as noted earlier, anti-essentialists, for the most part, are not abandoning the idea that leadership exists, but that it is more complex, multi-faceted and varying than previously envisioned. Social constructivists and postmodernists suggest that past essentialist studies of leadership identified traits and behaviors or influence strategies that reflected the perspectives of those in power; generally wealthy, white men (Astin & Leland, 1991). Next, I review the major strands of non-essentialist leadership research: cognitive, cultural, and contextual/processual theories.

### *Anti-essentialism in Cognitive Theories*

Cognitive theories of leadership identify how leaders have different perspectives or lenses (Bensimon, Neumann, and Birnbaum, 1989). For example, Bolman's and Deal's research, *Reframing Organization*, 1991, demonstrated that leaders tend to examine situations through one or more lens or cognitive orientations (e.g., political, symbolic, structural, or human resource). Building on contingency theory, they also demonstrated that different situations might require different cognitive approaches to leadership; a political orientation might serve a leader in one situation while a bureaucratic orientation is important within another. They break from contingency theorists' essentialist efforts of matching situation and leader type. Instead, they describe how leaders often try to lead organizations by finding the one right answer and the one best way and they are stunned by the turmoil and resistance that they thereby generate (1991, p. 18). Bolman and Deal argue that leaders must be passionately committed to their principles, but flexible in understanding and responding to the events, situation, and contexts around them that are constantly shifting and changing. This view is anti-essentialist in claiming that there are no enduring qualities of leadership that change agents can cling to. In addition, we can not come to an understanding of some essential traits, behaviors, power and influence strategies, or even cognitive orientations that are the essence of leadership. Instead, leaders must constantly relearn and leadership is more artistry, not exact or precise. Research demonstrating that leaders have vastly different cognitive orientations resulted in social/cultural research about other types of differences among leaders' approaches and beliefs.

### *Anti-essentialism in social and cultural theories*

The social/cultural leadership literature examines gender and race (e.g., Astin & Leland, 1991; Cantor & Bernay, 1993; Ferguson, 1984; Helegesen, 1990; Kezar, 2001; Rosener, 1990; Statham, 1987) as well as cross-cultural issues (e.g., Ayman, 1993; Morrison, 1991; Tierney, 1993). Studies of women leaders have demonstrated that they tend to understand, define and enact leadership in unique ways from men (Astin & Leland, 1991; Bensimon & Neumann, 1993). The leadership of women emphasizes reciprocity, mutuality, and responsibility toward others; is collective and participatory; focuses on relationships and empowerment; and highlights outcomes as a central goal of leadership (Astin & Leland, 1991; Cantor & Bernay, 1993; Ferguson, 1984; Helegesen, 1990; Rosener, 1990; Statham, 1987). In contrast to men's style, they de-emphasize hierarchical relationships, individualism, and one-way power relationships (Astin & Leland, 1991; Cantor & Bernay, 1993; Helegesen, 1990). Although fewer studies exist, research on racial or ethnic differences in the U.S. have found that their leadership also differs from the earlier research conducted on all white, male samples. Native Americans emphasize community, wisdom, and spirituality as important for leadership and African Americans describe a non-hierarchical, community based definition of leadership (Ayman, 1993; Morrison, 1991; Tierney, 1993).

Cross-cultural studies have exploded in the literature in the last decade and provide some of most powerful examples of the non-essentialist position (Dickson, Den Hartog, & Mitchelson, 2003; Dorfman, 1996; House, Wright, & Aditya, 1997). Dickson, Hartog

and Mitchelson (2003) describe how since 1996 there has been a decline in the quest for universal leadership principles and a rise in awareness of differences, generally applying Hofstede's dimension of culture. The research examines a host of issues from differences related to individual countries -- to an examination of clusterings of countries based on like contexts or histories. The studies reveal unique ways that leadership is defined among eastern (collective, wholistic, spirituality based) and western cultures (hierarchical, authority based, and individualistic) (Ayman, 1993; Cox, 1993; Enarsi & Murphy, 2003). Other studies have examined cross cultural difference based on more general societal/cultural differences such as individualistic (focus on individual achievement and rights) versus collective societies (focus on collective achievement and rights) and found dramatic differences (Chong & Thomas, 1997; Enarsi & Murphy, 2003; Hofstede, 1991; Offerman & Hellman, 1997; Offermann & Phan, 2001).<sup>x</sup>

#### *Anti-essentialism in processual and contextual theories*

In addition to different mental models, cross-cultural, racial and gender differences, studies have also examined how the context affects leadership (Parry, 1998; Pettigrew, 1997; Pettigrew, Woodman, & Cameron, 2001). Osborn, Hunt, and Jausch (2002) argue that the leadership literature has long emphasized micro perspectives. Macro perspectives that take context and complexity into account have received limited attention. Many contextual and processual theories of leadership emerge from anthropological approaches applied to the study of organizational phenomena (Chaffee & Tierney, 1988; Dawson, 1994; Pettigrew, 1997; Tierney, 1988) The focus is on how organizations and societies have particular histories and cultures that affect organizational phenomena, including leadership. Contexts are usually so distinctive that comparison across them is often not meaningful. For example, Tierney's (1988) analysis of higher education leadership demonstrates how leadership is like a spider's web—each one is unique to the spot in which it is created. Similarly, leadership is unique within each context. Also, leadership is dynamic and unfolds over time – an underlying assumption of processual theories. Because it is a process, it is volatile, sensitive to changes, and universal essences make little sense in this emergent understanding and context of leadership (Dawson, 1994).

#### *Strengths and limitations of anti-essentialist theories*

The anti-essentialist leadership approaches have been heralded for addressing the missing elements of context, culture, and social dynamics to the study of leadership. There is growing evidence that the various aspects of context make a difference for leadership processes and effectiveness. Because they are newer in application, there has been less empirical data as well as less criticism developed. In the introduction I noted that there is some concern that anti-essentialist views send leaders off on “a wild goose chase” to understand cultural and social differences, psychological orientations, and situational and historical elements which can become an all consuming process. The level of cognitive complexity required to attend to all the elements of context may not be realistic for most people. The significance of attention to these contextual and social elements compared to the importance of enduring qualities is largely unknown.

## Confucius and Leadership

What can a philosopher who wrote over two thousand years ago, in another culture, possibly add to our current understanding of leadership in the United States? First, he provides an alternative language and system for thinking about leadership that moves beyond the essentialist/non-essentialist dichotomized view of leadership. Confucian philosophy demonstrates how these perspectives can be complimentary and enrich each other rather than be mutually exclusive.<sup>xi</sup> Second, Confucius wrote specifically on the concept of leadership providing examples for how to envision this modified approach to leadership. Confucian philosophy is based on a different set of assumptions about the nature of reality (metaphysics). Eastern thought did not develop along the lines of Platonic/Aristotelean, Western thought. Objects were not considered essences and appearances were considered real, not illusory. As a result, the concepts from the essentialist and anti-essentialist positions can be made compatible and not at odds, but in harmony.

In the translation of the *Analects* of Confucius by Roger Ames and Henry Rosemont, they describe some of the characteristics of Chinese metaphysics and language that result in a very different view of leadership. They claim the English language is substantive and essentialistic and Chinese is an eventful language that focuses on expressing a world of events seen as persistently episodic. They use the metaphor of a tree to describe this difference:

To take an example, the tree seen in one's front yard is clearly the same tree all year long; its substance—underlying reality—remains the same, despite differing appearances throughout the year. In the world of lived experience, it is not forced on us to focus on the tree's sameness, substance, or essence. Rather we can experience a tree with flowers and buds, a tree with green leaves, then with brown leaves and finally a tree with no leaves at all. The tree appears differently and why can't the appearance be "real"? The tree can be perceived eventfully, relationally, with respect to all the seasons, other natural phenomena, and with respect to ourselves as well." (p 21)

The language and system of the English language is focused around essences. "Tree," for example refers to the essence of the tree, not these various changes and relationships. The definitive article "the" means the one and only. The language and metaphysical system of the Chinese focuses on both subject and object simultaneously and reflects felt experience. In the words of Ames and Rosemont: "the Chinese were not concerned with seeking the essence of things – that which remained constant throughout the changes manifest to our senses. On the contrary, they seem to have presupposed that the only constant is change itself. There is no discussion of underlying reality versus changing appearance in early Chinese texts: reality and appearance are one and the same. (p. 23)."

Confucius was not concerned with describing how things are in themselves, but how they stand in relation to something else and within a particular time period. Contingencies,

context, particulars, and change are the focus of both language and in the understanding of various phenomena. Ames and Rosemont provide another helpful example. Children must be filial to their parents throughout life, but the relation between them changes over time. When young, children stand in the relation of beneficiary to their parents, but change to benefactor when they mature. Relatedness in the Confucian philosophy is intrinsic and constitutive. In Western terms, nothing and nobody has an essence, but can only be defined in relation at any given time. Within this worldview, process, relationships, cyclical changes are the focus for understanding. Another aspect of western essences is that attributes adhere. A leader is kind, courageous, or cunning. Because Chinese always saw things relationally, courageous will mean something different from one situation to the next. Over time, leaders, and/or the process of leadership, evolves as do the qualities related to it.

The last important aspect of the Confucian world is that regularities underlie change. Giving up essentialism does not necessarily mean adopting a non-essentialist view as described by some social constructivists and postmodernists. Life is not arbitrary or subject to chance. As noted in the Analects foreword: “there are as many different ways to be a filial son or daughter as there are sons and daughters, but certain attitudes and conduct fall beyond the pale. (p. 27).” Although the provisional and processional emphasis in Confucian philosophy is similar to social constructivist and postmodernist theories that see contingent truths as the goal for understanding and science, the absence of essentialism or absolutism is not relativism.<sup>xiii</sup> Confucian philosophy seeks out a third position, unknown and unarticulated within western philosophy. Things can only be understood within context, but there can be regularities within this contextualized understanding of relationships and events. Social constructivism and postmodernism philosophies, which emerged as a rejection of positivism and essentialism, might benefit from seeking assumptions outside Western philosophy.

How does the Confucian worldview and philosophy affect conceptualizations of leadership and future research on the topic, especially in relation to the controversy over essentialism and non-essentialism? First, the Confucian worldview provides a way to bring together and make commensurate the research traditions and assumptions of essentialists/positivism and anti-essentialists/social constructivism. *Social constructivist researchers may be wary of essences and hence feel reluctant to emphasize regularities within studies of leadership. Positivists and universalists have been limited in advancing new ways to conceptualize enduring aspects of leadership, because of traditional Western language and philosophy.* Essentialists and non-essentialists do not have a language or worldview to articulate how leadership might be seen as having regularities yet also be transformative and in constant flux. Both avenues of research can offer insights and may be more powerful when combined and reconceptualized.

*What this means is that it is not possible to speak of leadership outside a context and it is not possible to speak of leadership events and relationships without reference to enduring notions or characteristics.* The organization, the cultural setting, the people involved, the nature of the work are constantly in flux and all have a significant effect on the process of leadership. Yet, there must be attention to underlying concepts. In the Analects,

Confucius proclaims: “to rule a country of a thousand chariots, there must be reverent attention to business, sincerity in expenditure, and love for men; and the employment of people in the proper seasons.” (Book one, chapter five). Attention to business, sincerity, and love for all are some enduring qualities that are affected by and related to the context and local conditions. Love for all or sincerity might mean different things to different groups of people within a diverse and plural country of a thousand chariots. The leadership process entails an understanding of the local relationships and events in which sincerity is enacted. Sincerity might have varying qualities based on the unique elements of the context.

Let’s take the example of building community. Within a predominantly African American context this might mean storytelling, communal dialogue, and making spiritual connections. Yet African American communities are unique; thus, the leader needs to be attentive to the pluralness of African American community. In a more heterogenous environment with multiple ethnic or racial groups, building community might mean understanding differences, developing ground rules, and developing respect for cultural heritage. Leaders and leadership become focused more on the way that any action can only be understood in relation to the context and events. This is a different approach or mindset from the tradition of identifying and transmitting universal ideas about how to be a successful leader. It is also not situational leadership where you are matching idealized situation types with leader traits/preferences. The leader is seen as more adaptable to varying contexts and contexts are more local and varied than in situational or contingency models. Immediately, our Western minds will try to conceptualize the issue as situational leadership as our view of reality constrains our thinking.

It must be remembered though that enduring qualities do make up a substantial part of Confucian philosophy. Confucianism is an inherently practical philosophy, and leadership needs to have some understandable guides for action. Personal virtue and right ordering of personal relationships were central to leadership. Confucius designated proper conduct in family, kinship, and friendship as well as among social equals and between superiors and subordinates in organizations and institutions. Bass and Steidlmeier (1998) describe some of the core characteristics of Confucian leaders: “The virtue of *ren* (human-heartedness, benevolence, love) and the virtue of *yi* (righteousness) are the grounding virtues of the moral life. They express the way (*dao*) that one existentially embraces. *Ren* is the lodestar that permeates every action of the superior person.” How might we use these ideas in today’s context? Integrity, trustworthiness, and respect might be core leadership values found in diverse cultures throughout the world (Hofstede, 1997). However, the social customs and practices through which they are realized may vary considerably. Even when a core set of values, such as integrity or respect, is found in all cultures, their ordering and relative importance may vary by culture.

Future leadership research might examine what some of these core characteristics might be as well as examine their unique meaning, ordering and importance, holding in tension what Western philosophy considered the universal and the particular. This line of research might identify more enduring principles, approaches, or qualities of leadership

than have been found in previous empirical studies. As noted earlier, there are few universalistic qualities that have been identified as important to leadership. Some recent studies have focused on examining both what is unique to particular cultures, but what might be universal leadership traits. For example, Hartog, et. al. (1999), posited that recent research emphasizes differences among cultural groups (cross-cultural research), yet they argue there are universal attributes associated within charismatic and transformational leadership. Their research identified a set of leader attributes that appear to be universally endorsed, as well as differences by culture. More studies in this vein will likely yield important findings that help us rethink leadership as an essentialist concept and to sort out the nature of leadership as a phenomenon. Also, Shamir and Howell (1999) examined how contextual variables related to the emergence and effectiveness within charismatic leadership.

Confucian philosophy complements and enriches the cognitive (anti-essentialist) perspective where the leader “reframes” situations. In a cognitive reframing approach, if situations require a political approach, leaders are supposed to adapt their approach. Preferred cognitive styles are often hindrances to a leader’s success. The successful leader is able to interpret situations and/or other people’s actions from various cognitive orientations (political, relational, and structural) and take actions based on this complex reading of the situation. These various lenses or frames are similar to the attention to context noted in Confucian philosophy. However, there are times that leader adaptation may not be in the best interests of an organization or issue. For example, an administrative leader on a college campus in a budget meeting with Trustees might be successful using a political approach (protecting faculty members’ tenure status but giving up the right of workers to unionize), but that approach may conflict with an important enduring value that is important to integrity -- equity in the work environment for all employees.

Although the leader can read the information about budget cuts and examine the structural implications (cut employees), relational implications (lower morale), and political implications (who has the most power to fight back against cuts), etc., they also need to keep attuned to important enduring values or qualities. Also, having a leader work within their area of strength, might be preferable to adapting to the desired cognitive orientation to match the problem. The over-riding emphasis on adaptation to context and situation might prove a stumbling block to leadership in the future if it is not paired with attention to enduring qualities and characteristics. Confucian philosophy is helpful in emphasizing both.

The emphasis on process, relationships, and cyclical changes could redirect the attention of leadership practitioners and researchers. Barker (2002) notes the importance of relationships within the newest approaches to leadership, that Rost has labeled post-industrial. Post-industrial approaches to leadership were advanced in the late 1980s and early 1990s based on studies of Japanese companies and their success and ability to develop a competitive advantage over U.S industry. Relationships and process were a core element of Japanese leadership practices, which they inherited partly from China. The investigation in this article into ontology provides more evidence for the significance

of exploring relationships and process as key components for understanding leadership. The notion of cyclical changes might be another interesting avenue for research. For example, does society/organizations go through cycles where different orientations or qualities of leadership are needed? This is an important line of future research. Recent lines of research on processual and dynamic leadership or complexity/chaos theory applied to leadership also focuses on relationships, process, and different notions of time, all challenging traditional ontological notions about leadership (examples include Parry, 1998; Pettigrew, 1997; Hunt and Ropo, 1998).

Let us consider another way Confucian philosophy might be used is to rethink and advance essentialist and non-essentialist leadership approaches. Earlier, I described how transformational leadership was based on a set of universal principles. Using Confucian thought one might ask a different set of questions about transformational leadership in order to move it beyond its essentialist position. Are certain enduring characteristics relative to the culture or expressed uniquely in different cultures? Authentic transformational leadership might depend on the culture of the followers. Is the servant leader a western notion of leadership or are there elements that transcend various cultures? Another line of research is how can we document, understand, and evaluate leaders who focus on context and enduring qualities simultaneously.

In closing, Confucian philosophy appears a helpful contribution for reframing the way we study and practice leadership in the United States as well as for rethinking the essentialist and anti-essentialist perspectives that have evolved in Western communities. A new ontological stance that blends and reconciles these perspectives will enrich leadership research. The purpose of this article is to make visible the essentialist and anti-essentialist perspectives and to understand the assumptions, limitations, and contradictions within these two perspectives. Second, it offers an alternative way to conceptualize leadership to advance the study of this phenomenon. The Confucian ontological stance can be adopted by researchers, helping them to evolve the important work that is beginning to break down the dichotomous language/assumptions. In a short paper, I can only offer a few suggestions for how the study and practice of leadership might be transformed, but I hope this helps the reader to rethink his or her approach to the study of leadership in ways that address a fundamental concern within the scholarship.

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<sup>i</sup> Essentialism and anti-essentialism will be described in more detail in the first section of the article.

<sup>ii</sup> Grint notes that one way to break down the “bi-polar” approach is to conceptualize leadership studies as a continuum examining the importance of the universal traits or behaviors versus the nuances of context and local conditions cross cut with objective (positivist) and subjective (constructivist or interpretivist) assumptions about knowledge. A chart where different approaches can be charted, compared, and examined serves as a heuristic device to begin breaking down the dichotomous thinking that has prevailed for years. However, this approach does not address or reconceptualize the dichotomous research approaches. It is a helpful first step in examining these two lines of research together, more holistically, as they are typically discussed separately.

<sup>iii</sup> Grint’s compilation of leadership research notes, but does not examine, epistemological and ontological assumptions of research in classical (2000BC to 1800AD), modern (1900-1980), and alternative (1980-present) time periods. The alternative approaches include critical, postmodern, and social constructivist approaches to leadership. In Hunt’s synthesis of leadership research he devotes a chapter to “leadership knowledge orientations” and compares basic assumptions such as ontology, epistemology and views of human nature across a continuum from highly objective to highly subjective to demonstrate that leadership knowledge looks very different based on the knowledge orientation brought to the study. He argues for a critical pluralism, rather than for any one leadership knowledge orientation. Barker provides the first thorough examination of assumptions of leadership research beginning with Plato, focusing mostly on what he terms the industrial period corresponding to Grint’s modern period. Barker compares the assumptions of the industrial to the post-industrial (1980 to present) period, focusing mostly on the application of a reciprocal model of leadership that conceptualizes leadership as a process and relationships.

<sup>iv</sup> Grint (1997) does note that even though most studies fall into the essentialist or anti-essentialist position, there is a spectrum of perspectives within these positions.

<sup>v</sup> There are other perspectives that might be taken to reconceptualize leadership. For example, symbolic interactionists examine the locus of the particular and universal as well. I will discuss chaos theory briefly in this paper. But Western theories often have difficulty completely shedding the essentialist assumptions. But, Confucian philosophy seemed stronger because non-western philosophies are not characterized by the essentialist assumptions.

<sup>vi</sup> Rost (1991) completed a thorough analysis of the theories, origins, and uses of the word leadership and found that the term has been defined in multiple and conflicting ways, models are contradictory and the conceptualizations vary tremendously. Over 221 different definitions were identified in his review (Rost, 1991).

<sup>vii</sup> Essentialism is often discussed interchangeably with universalism (essentialism) and relativism (anti-essentialism) to the chagrin of some researchers. Both universalism and relativism have been critiqued as weak stances and some essentialism and anti-essentialist do not take extreme objectivist or subjectivist stance. Yet, most essentialist researchers strive for universal principles and much of the anti-essentialist research is calling for approaches to leadership that are relative to the cultural, situational, and time contexts.

<sup>ix</sup> A brief definition of these various theories of leadership might be helpful to those not familiar. Trait theories identify specific personal characteristics that contribute to a person’s ability to assume and successfully function in positions of leadership (Bensimon, Neumann, and Birnbaum, 1989). Behavioral theories study leadership by examining roles, and categories of behavior, examining leader’s task (Bensimon, Neumann, and Birnbaum, 1989). Power and influence theories focus of the source and amount of power available to leaders and the manner in which leaders exercise power. Reciprocal approaches to studying leadership focus on leaders as a relational process and emphasize followership (Komives, Lucas, and Mahon, 1998). Contingency theories emphasize the way situational factors such as the groups involved or external environment affect leadership (Bensimon, Neumann, and Birnbaum, 1989).

<sup>xi</sup> The author does not intend to suggest that the essentialist and anti-essentialist perspectives do not have value. Instead, the introduction of Confucian philosophy is a way to enhance the value of these perspectives by demonstrating how they can be complimentary, more so than they are now presented in the

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literature and to present avenues for research that examine the complimentary qualities of these perspectives.

<sup>xii</sup> Some social constructivists and postmodernists do not define themselves as relativist and instead try to describe a middle ground. For example, they might adopt some universal ethical stance such as rape is immoral, but see most other ethical choices as relative to the culture.