TAKING STOCK OF MORAL APPROACHES TO LEADERSHIP:
AN INTEGRATIVE REVIEW OF ETHICAL, AUTHENTIC,
AND SERVANT LEADERSHIP

G. JAMES LEMOINE
University at Buffalo—The State University of New York

CHAD A. HARTNELL
Georgia State University

HANNES LEROY
Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam

Moral forms of leadership such as ethical, authentic, and servant leadership have seen a surge of interest in the 21st century. The proliferation of morally based leadership approaches has resulted in theoretical confusion and empirical overlap that mirror substantive concerns within the larger leadership domain. Our integrative review of this literature reveals connections with moral philosophy that provide a useful framework to better differentiate the specific moral content (i.e., deontology, virtue ethics, and consequentialism) that undergirds ethical, authentic, and servant leadership, respectively. Taken together, this integrative review clarifies points of integration and differentiation among moral approaches to leadership and delineates avenues for future research that promise to build complementary rather than redundant knowledge regarding how moral approaches to leadership inform the broader leadership domain.

INTRODUCTION

A vast focal shift has swept the field of leadership research in the 21st century. Whereas scholars had previously argued that leadership could not or should not be concerned with issues of ethics and morality (e.g., England & Lee, 1974; Rost, 1991; Thompson, 1956), the moral nature of leaders is now seen by many as not only necessary for the good of society but also essential for sustainable organizational success (Freeman, Wicks, & Parmar, 2004; Gulati, Nohria, & Wohlgemotten, 2010; Padilla, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2007). As a result, many new morally focused approaches and theories of leadership have emerged in the literature, with nearly 300 articles in peer-reviewed journals that pertain to just three of these: ethical leadership (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005), authentic leadership (Gardner, Cogliser, Davis, & Dickens, 2011; Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2008), and servant leadership (Liden, Wayne, Liao, & Meuser, 2014b; van Dierendonck, 2011).

The emergence of these new models raises old questions that have persisted in the larger leadership domain regarding the degree to which proliferating leadership constructs are distinct (Lord, 2011). Our review focuses on ethical, authentic, and servant leadership because they each explicitly reference moral content in their definitions, are conceptually well developed, and offer a substantial body of empirical research to draw on. Other constructs such as spiritual (Fry, Vitucci, & Cedillo, 2005), humble (Owens & Hekman, 2012), and responsible (Maak & Pless, 2006) leadership might reference alternate or complementary forms of moral leadership. We do not review these constructs here because of their relative lack of scholarly attention compared with ethical, authentic, and servant leadership; however, their examination through the moral framework revealed in our review would constitute a promising future research direction.

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1 Corresponding author.
Day, Zaccaro, Avolio, & Eagly, 2017; Meuser, Gardner, Dinh, Hu, Liden, & Lord, 2016). Criticisms of the leadership literature have been abundant throughout much of its scholarly life, among which are a perceived lack of theoretical development, overlapping constructs, questionable measurement, and redundant outcomes (Lombardo & McCall, 1978; Rost, 1991; van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013; Yukl, 1999).

Are moral leadership studies accumulating redundant or unique knowledge? Is the literature repeating the mistakes of the past or is it breaking new ground?

A comprehensive literature review can address questions about constructs’ novelty or redundancy by clarifying their conceptual and theoretical boundaries, and then documenting evidence from the empirical literature to discern whether their theoretical commonalities and differences are supported (Clark & Watson, 1995). Following this model, the first part of our review takes stock of more than a decade of rapidly accumulating empirical research to ascertain what we have learned about moral approaches to leadership. Our review of the empirical literature reveals a plethora of commonalities. Although some distinctions among ethical, authentic, and servant leadership are clearly drawn by their respective foundational literatures (a point we subsequently explore in our theoretical review), most of the empirical work treats them much more generally and homogeneously in terms of their moral content, obscuring important theoretical distinctions. This generic approach creates three problems. First, to a large degree, scholars link ethical, authentic, and servant leadership to common outcomes with few tests to delineate the degree to which they generate construct-specific effects. Second, researchers typically use common theory to justify the inclusion of common mechanisms without regard to each leadership approach’s theoretical distinctions. Finally, empirical measures feature a degree of common composition, or significant points of overlap. These challenges are not uncommon for constructs in early stages of validation, but they paint a pessimistic picture of the field’s future prospects. Rather than accumulating unique knowledge, our findings raise uncertainty about the extent to which moral forms of leadership are breaking new ground.

On its own, the lack of differentiation highlighted in our review of the empirical literature would seem to suggest that ethical, authentic, and servant leadership should be consolidated into a single “moral leadership” construct. Such a conclusion, however, dismisses the meaningful distinctions in each construct’s conceptual foundations. We explore these points of divergence in the second part of our review as we consider the theoretical origins and moral foundations of each construct, illuminating a much more promising path forward for the study of moral leadership. This review reveals each leadership approach’s unique and even contrasting answer to the question: “What is moral?” (Blasi, 1984; Eisenbeiss, 2012). We found that ethical, authentic, and servant leadership are distinct in their emphases on compliance with normative standards, self-awareness and self-concordance, and stakeholders, respectively. These “moral contents” reflect the three major approaches to normative morality proposed by the moral philosophy literature (e.g., Baron, Pettit, & Slote, 1997; Shafer-Landau, 2015): servant leadership’s emphasis on stakeholder outcomes is congruent with moral consequentialist theory, ethical leadership’s focus on norms and standards aligns with deontology’s core precepts, and authentic leadership’s foundation in the leader’s self-awareness and moral courage is consonant with the most critical elements of the virtue ethics approach. We highlight exemplars from a growing minority of empirical work that feature these moral foundations and provide initial evidence for differences in nomological networks. More precise linkages to each leadership approach’s moral foundations highlight the tensions that may exist between various approaches to moral leadership. Indeed, consequentialists, deontologists, and virtue ethicists may end up with completely different responses when faced with the same moral dilemma (Shafer-Landau, 2015). These distinctions and even potential tensions between the three approaches stand in sharp contrast to the empirical overlap we identified in the first part of our review.

Our integrative review, thus, raises critical issues concerning points of convergence among the three moral leadership approaches that threaten to undermine the extent to which extant scholarship can inform how leaders’ moral behaviors uniquely contribute to our understanding of leadership and its effectiveness. We leverage the theoretical foundations to identify underemphasized connections between moral forms of leadership and their respective moral underpinnings. In the final section of this review, we describe how attention to these moral bases can both attenuate the challenges of common outcomes, theory, and composition identified in the empirical review and also inform new research directions which promise to meaningfully expand our understanding of how morality and leadership
intersect. We discuss how these opportunities have important implications for theory and measurement within the broader leadership literature.

In summary, our review reveals substantial promise in the study of moral leadership, albeit promise largely untapped in much (but not all) of the extant research. A surface-level examination of the broad body of empirical literature might indicate that authentic, ethical, and servant leadership lack distinction and could be consolidated into a single moral leadership construct without meaningful loss, but a deeper investigation of their conceptualizations and emerging substreams of research suggests that this would be an atheoretical mistake. Considering any of the three approaches to moral leadership as “generically moral” obscures potentially important variance in both the constructs themselves and their correlates and oversimplifies much more complex phenomena. Their conceptual distinctions highlight the need for more thoughtful consideration of the forms of normative morality in moral leadership research, and a small body of exemplary research showcases the promise of such an approach. The moral foundations have significant import for improving each construct’s validity by refining their conceptual boundaries, further differentiating their nomological networks, and disentangling commonalities among their empirical measures. Resolving these issues illuminates an array of meaningful research questions with potential to generate more robust theory on how morality and leadership intersect and interact in practice.

A CONSTRUCT VALIDATION APPROACH

We adopt a construct validation approach to structure our review. Contrary to popular practice, construct validation is not a stamp of approval that exists in perpetuity once certain initial empirical thresholds have been met. Rather, construct validation is an iterative process of theoretical development and refinement via empirical evaluation (Cronbach, 1971). The theory is developed by specifying a nomological network, or a pattern of relationships based on theory and observation that “make clear what something is” (Cronbach & Meehl, 1955: p. 290). Aspects of this nomological network are tested empirically, the findings of which form the basis of evidence for refined theory. Accordingly, construct validation is a continual learning process in which nomological networks expand and contract based on new insights derived from theoretical development and empirical investigation. This dynamic interplay between theory and measurement underscores the importance of periodically assessing the degree to which a construct’s accumulation of empirical evidence supports their theoretical bases and identifying opportunities for scientific advancement via “ever more precise specification” (van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013: 45).

Our review follows the theoretical development, empirical assessment, and theoretical refinement steps of the construct validation process. We first review ethical, authentic, and servant leadership’s conceptual foundations. Next, we review the empirical literature to assess whether it corresponds with theoretical distinctions. We then identify theoretical refinements through reviewing the moral moorings that underpin each form of moral leadership. Drawing on these three components of our review, we discuss the implications of theoretical refinement for the future of ethical, authentic, and servant leadership research as well as offer insight into how all three moral forms of leadership can contribute uniquely to our understanding of moral leadership in the workplace.

REVIEW OF CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

We begin our examination of the three forms of moral leadership by reviewing their definitions and dimensional structure (Table 1) as a prelude to our review of the empirical literature. Our purpose in this portion of the review is not to critique or add to extant theory. Rather, we summarize seminal conceptualizations as a foundation upon which to examine whether extant empirical work has accentuated points of theoretical commonality or distinctiveness.

Ethical Leadership—A Focus on Compliance with Normative Standards

Ethical leadership is defined as “the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making” (Brown et al., 2005: p. 120). An ethical leader acts both as a “moral person,” maintaining fairness and honesty in relationships with subordinates, and as a “moral manager,” demonstrating and reinforcing desired and normatively appropriate behaviors (Table 1) (Brown et al., 2005; Treviño, Hartman, & Brown, 2000). Predicated on these conceptual foundations, the framers of ethical leadership posited that ethical leaders are credible role models who emulate desired ethical attitudes and behaviors for subordinates and provide rewards
for ethical conduct and consequences for “those who don’t follow the standards” (Brown et al., 2005: p. 120). They combine a general, consistent moral character with a focus on organizational or cultural norms, standards, and rule compliance. These conceptual emphases appear in the unidimensional measure of ethical leadership, representing both the moral person and manager (Brown et al., 2005).

### Authentic Leadership—A Focus on Self-Awareness and Moral Self-Concordance

In contrast to ethical leadership’s focus on compliance with external expectations, authentic leadership is primarily concerned with a leader’s self-awareness, self-regulation, and self-concordance, and modeling these characteristics to subordinates (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). Authentic leadership uniquely and consistently focuses on leaders’ self-concept and concordant self-expression (Shamir & Eilam, 2005). Authentic leaders are described as individuals who value a salience of self over role (Henderson & Hoy, 1983), “persons who have achieved high levels of authenticity in that they know who they are, what they believe and value, and they act on those values and beliefs while transparently interacting with others” (Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans, & May, 2004: p. 802). Authentic leaders, thus, make moral judgments freely and independently, without concern for potentially opposing normative or external social pressures (Guignon, 2004; Taylor, 1991).

As shown in Table 1, authentic leadership is composed of four dimensions: self-awareness (i.e., knowing oneself), balanced processing (i.e., objectively thinking through both sides of issues), relational transparency (i.e., acting in accordance with one’s true nature rather than contrived or fake manners), and an internalized moral perspective (i.e., moral self-regulation and behaving in accordance with these moral values) (Walumbwa et al., 2008). Although this operationalization has been dominant in research and its dimensional structure has been validated (Neider & Schriesheim, 2011), a variety of definitions and understandings of the construct have emerged (Gardner et al., 2011, for a review). The common element among them is a focus on the leader’s self-confidence, self-concept, self-awareness, authenticity, and general character.

### Servant Leadership—A Focus on Multiple Stakeholders

Robert Greenleaf defined servant leadership as: “The servant-leader is servant first. . . the difference manifests itself in the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conceptual Definition</th>
<th>Dimensional Structure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethical leadership</td>
<td>• Moral person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Moral manager (reinforcement and modeling)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authentic leadership</td>
<td>• Self-awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Balanced processing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Relational transparency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Internalized moral perspective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Servant leadership</td>
<td>• Behaving ethically</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Creating value for the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Putting others first</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Helping others grow and succeed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Emotional healing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Empowering others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Conceptual skills</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1: Conceptual Definitions and Dimensional Structure**

- "The demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making." (Brown et al., 2005: 120)
- "The servant-leader is servant first... the difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant - first to make sure that other people's highest-priority needs are being served... do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit or, at least, not be further deprived?" (Greenleaf, 1977: 13–14)
- "(a) The role of the leader is a central component of their self-concept, (b) they have achieved a high level of self-resolution or self-concept clarity, (c) their goals are self-concordant, and (d) their behavior is self-expressive." (Shamir and Eilam, 2005: 398–399)
- "The servant-leader is servant first... the difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant - first to make sure that other people’s highest-priority needs are being served... do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit or, at least, not be further deprived?" (Greenleaf, 1977: 13–14)
that servant leadership and subsequent definitions align in their suggestion (Lemoine, 2015: p. 45). In sum, Greenleaf meaningful improvement for all stakeholders development, empowerment, and continuous and culturally within relationships, oriented towards follower influence behaviors, manifested humbly and ethically within relationships, oriented towards follower development, and de-emphasizing glorification of the leader” (Hale & Fields, 2007: p. 397); “a model that identifies serving others – including employees, customers, and community – as the number-one priority” (Spears, 2002: p. 4); “a group-oriented approach to leadership that emphasizes serving others” (Schaubroeck, Lam, & Peng, 2011: p. 865); and “influence behaviors, manifested humbly and ethically within relationships, oriented towards follower development, empowerment, and continuous and meaningful improvement for all stakeholders” (Lemoine, 2015: p. 45). In sum, Greenleaf’s conception and subsequent definitions align in their suggestion that servant leadership’s distinctive focus is on serving multiple stakeholders. The most prominent operationalizations of servant leadership (Ehrhart, 2004; Liden, Wayne, Zhao, & Henderson, 2008) comprise similar dimensions and include behaving ethically, creating value for the community, putting others first, helping others grow and succeed, emotional healing, empowering others, and conceptual skills (Table 1).

Comparing Ethical, Authentic, and Servant Leadership

Although ethical, authentic, and servant leadership are commonly grouped together as somewhat homogeneous moral approaches to leadership (Dinh, Lord, Gardner, Meuser, Liden, & Hu, 2014), their definitions reveal potentially meaningful distinctions in their conceptual emphases. Ethical leadership focuses on compliance with normative standards, authentic leadership focuses on self-awareness and self-concordance, and servant leadership focuses on benefiting multiple stakeholders. It was with this framing in mind that we commenced our full review.

In the ensuing empirical literature review, we document the outcomes and mediators examined in nearly 300 articles focusing on ethical, authentic, and servant leadership. The study-specific results of this review are reported in Appendices 1–3, which are available as online supplements to this article. Appendix 1 reports the direct effects between ethical, authentic, or servant leadership and a study’s outcome(s). Appendix 2 documents the mediating mechanisms through which ethical, authentic, and servant leadership indirectly affect a study’s outcome. These tables collectively attest to the voluminous and diverse empirical support for the criterion-related validity of the three approaches to moral leadership. Appendix 3 illustrates the more limited body of literature documenting antecedents to ethical, authentic, and servant leadership. Rather than focusing on the granular detail of each individual study, we report conclusions derived from broad patterns that emerged within our review.

EMPIRICAL LITERATURE REVIEW

Our review of the empirical body of literature reveals that similarities among ethical, authentic, and servant leadership’s effects are far more prevalent than their differences. Our review identified three problems that require attention to increase the usefulness of research into moral forms of leadership: common outcomes (i.e., emphasis on criterion-related validity), common theory, and common composition (i.e., construct measurement overlap).

Common Outcomes—Emphasis on Criterion-Related Validity

A substantial volume of scholarship has focused on connecting ethical, authentic, and servant leadership to common organizational outcomes such as positive employee attitudes and behaviors to establish criterion-related validity in each respective stream of research. Table 2 illustrates the extent of this issue, listing the most frequent outcomes and
select citations for the multitude of articles studying the relationship (either direct or indirect) between one of the three forms of moral leadership and each outcome (the full version of this table with a complete citation listing can be accessed in online Appendix 4). Research on common covariates is necessary to establish each leadership style’s importance in organizations (particularly for relatively new approaches to leadership), but the sheer volume of work relating moral forms of leadership to variables common to any form of effective leadership adds little to our understanding of the most distinctive elements of each construct. Although replication studies are helpful in any scientific
field, there comes a point at which effects are clearly established and research becomes redundant. No fewer than 50 articles, for example, have revealed links between moral leadership and organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB) (an unsurprising finding, given the link between other leadership styles and OCB). Continuing to investigate common outcomes may be justified if studies examine unique mechanisms through which moral forms of leadership influence important outcomes such as leader effectiveness and follower attitudes and behaviors. However, the vast majority of empirical work that we reviewed examined a common set of mediating mechanisms as well, as shown in Figure 1, and the arguments for their inclusion are generally similar. Many of these mediating mechanisms are “the usual (empirical) suspects” that are also frequently hypothesized across general (and non-morally focused) leadership behaviors. Such similarity among the three constructs raises questions about their distinctiveness: if all three predict similar outcomes via similar mediators, to what degree are three separate constructs necessary? Furthermore, if these outcomes and mediators are similar to those found in research on more goal-focused and less ethics-centric forms of leadership, what makes moral leadership uniquely important?

The abundance of common criteria documented in the extant literature disregard novel outcomes that reflect the theoretical distinctions among the three moral forms of leadership. Furthermore, with a preponderance of evidence supporting ethical, authentic, and servant leadership’s criterion validity, we must conclude that continued research repeatedly examining well-established links between moral forms of leadership and common outcomes is redundant. Sustained efforts in this respect threaten to blur important distinctions among the moral forms of leadership established in original theory and stall the progression of knowledge. This conclusion does

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**FIGURE 1**

The Usual (Empirical) Suspects—Mediators and Outcomes Common to Ethical, Authentic, and Servant Leadership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Moral forms of leadership</th>
<th>Mediators</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethical leadership</td>
<td><strong>Context</strong></td>
<td><em>Leader effectiveness</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authentic leadership</td>
<td>Justice climate</td>
<td>Perceived leader effectiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Servant leadership</td>
<td>Trust climate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive climate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Affect/well-being</strong></td>
<td>Positive affect</td>
<td><strong>Burnout</strong> (-)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Emotional exhaustion (-)</td>
<td><strong>Stress</strong> (-)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cognition</strong></td>
<td>Efficacy</td>
<td><strong>Well-being</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Promotion focus</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Team process</strong></td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td><strong>Job attitudes</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Motivation</strong></td>
<td>Job satisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Intrinsic motivation</td>
<td>Supervisor satisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Need satisfaction</td>
<td>Organizational commitment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perceived org./supervisor support</td>
<td>Affective commitment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Psychological capital</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Psychological empowerment</td>
<td><strong>Turnover intention</strong> (-)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Psychological ownership</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Psychological safety</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Work engagement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Org./group/personal identication</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Overall justice</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Distributive/procedural/interactional justice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Trust in leader</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Behaviors</strong></td>
<td>Knowledge-sharing</td>
<td><strong>Behaviors</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lower-level leadership (behavioral contagion)</td>
<td>OCB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LMX</td>
<td>Voice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Extra effort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Org./group/individual performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Creativity/innovation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Proactivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Customer service behaviors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Deviance (-)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
not suggest discontinuing empirical research on moral leadership; rather, it calls attention to the need for investigating moral leadership’s effects on more theoretically specific outcomes.

Common Theory—Shared Mechanisms and Logic

In addition to the focus on common outcomes, another factor that drives empirical similarities among authentic, ethical, and servant leadership is the use of common theories to explain how and why each moral form of leadership is related with particular outcomes. The “usual (theoretical) suspects” among ethical, authentic, and servant leadership are identified in Table 3. Not surprisingly, our review reveals that social exchange theory and social learning theory were used most ubiquitously to explain the effects of moral forms of leadership, collectively accounting for more than half of the research in which a guiding theoretical perspective was listed (Table 3). An inspection of authentic, ethical, and servant leadership research using these two theories reveals a common underlying logic. Social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) has been applied within moral forms of leadership to suggest that moral leaders engender positive relationships with followers who reciprocate by engaging in positive behaviors (that may be directed toward the leader, colleagues, the work unit, or customers) that their leader values. Similarly, social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) suggests that followers observe their moral leaders’ behaviors because leaders are attractive and credible role models. Followers emulate these positive behaviors because they are expected to be valued, rewarded, and supported in the workplace. Taken together, these two theories within the moral forms of leadership literature draw similar conclusions about leaders’ effects on followers as the leadership and affect literature (van Knippenberg & van Kleef, 2016). That is, moral forms of leadership engender positive relationships that develop followers’ positive affect and cognitions, resulting in followers engaging in positive behaviors that generate positive outcomes. The body of evidence establishing this phenomenon indicates that continuing to retread this ground would do little to enhance our understanding of how moral leadership works.

Table 3 shows that social identity theory, self-determination theory, and social cognitive theory are also points of theoretical commonality among moral approaches to leadership. Using these theories broadly has led researchers to generate a body of research with more empirical similarities than differences because they consider similar sets of mediating mechanisms. For instance, social identity theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) is invoked to consider the extent to which moral forms of leadership compel followers to identify with the supervisor, workgroup, or the organization. When applied loosely, these theories generate the conclusion that positive forms of leadership are similarly motivational (i.e., meet followers’ needs, influence followers to identify with the collective, and build followers’ confidence in their competence). Empirical similarities driven by common theoretical applications have, thus, led scholars to become increasingly wary of generic research models in which multiple forms of leadership are seemingly substitutable. Our point is not that these theories are irrelevant (in fact, they seem relevant for any positive leadership approach). Rather, it is to underscore the importance of applying general theories in more specific ways to better elucidate the theoretical differences among forms of leadership (moral or otherwise).

### Table 3

The Usual (Theoretical) Suspects—Theoretical Perspectives Common to Ethical, Authentic, and Servant Leadership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical Perspectives</th>
<th>Ethical Leadership</th>
<th>Authentic Leadership</th>
<th>Servant Leadership</th>
<th>Total Across Three Moral Forms of Leadership</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social exchange theory</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social learning theory</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-determination theory</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social identity theory</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social cognitive theory</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Common Composition—Construct Measurement Overlap

A detailed comparison of the items underlying the most frequently used validated measurement scales indicates that commonalities in their item composition may contribute to the substantive empirical overlap identified earlier. The operationalization of each moral approach to leadership should be derived from its theoretical underpinnings (Clark & Watson, 1995; Cronbach & Meehl, 1955). Consistent with the theoretical differences that underlie ethical, authentic, and servant leadership, our review of each construct’s operationalization revealed some distinctive emphases. Despite these important differences, we also uncovered several points of commonality. Figure 2 illustrates the conceptual overlap among ethical, authentic, and servant leadership, as well as the dimensions unique to each approach to moral leadership. Table 4 identifies specific sample items from the measurement scales that illustrate commonalities and differences among ethical, authentic, and servant leadership. We first discuss ethical, authentic, and servant leadership’s distinctive dimensions and then elaborate on their shared aspects.

Distinctive dimensions. Consistent with their respective conceptual definitions, the core operational distinctions among ethical, authentic, and servant leadership are compliance with normative standards, self-concordance and self-awareness, and stakeholders, respectively. Among the moral approaches to leadership, ethical leadership is unique in its use of rewards and punishments to hold followers accountable for organizational standards and values. Ethical leadership’s novel focus on compliance with normative standards is exemplified by the item “[my manager] disciplines employees who violate ethical standards.” Authentic leaders uniquely demonstrate self-awareness and actively seek feedback for personal growth. These behaviors are consistent with the theoretical importance of self-awareness and self-regulation to authentic leadership and are evidenced by items such as “[my manager] solicits views that challenge his or her deeply held positions.” A novel aspect of servant

FIGURE 2
Empirical Commonalities and Distinctions among Ethical, Authentic, and Servant Leadership

- **Ethical leadership**
  - Uses rewards and punishments to hold followers accountable for organizational standards and values

- **Authentic leadership**
  - Demonstrates self-awareness and actively seeks feedback for personal growth

- **Servant leadership**
  - Creates valued outcome for multiple stakeholders

- **Moral consistency**
  - Moral/ethical behavior
  - Enhances followers’ personal growth
# TABLE 4
Comparison of Ethical, Authentic, and Servant Construct Operationalizations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Most frequently used measurement scales</th>
<th>Ethical Leadership Example Items</th>
<th>Authentic Leadership Example Items</th>
<th>Servant Leadership Example Items</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theoretical dimensions</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Exhibits moral/ethical behavior</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Holds high ethical standards</strong></td>
<td>Role modeling normatively</td>
<td>Internalized moral perspective</td>
<td>Behaving ethically</td>
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<td>appropriate (i.e., ethical)</td>
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<td>Behaving ethically</td>
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<td>behavior</td>
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<td>“Holds high ethical standards”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>interacts openly, fairly,</td>
<td>relational transparency</td>
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<td>and honestly</td>
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<td>treating employees fairly;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>communicating with openness and</td>
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<td></td>
<td>honesty</td>
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<td><strong>Moral consistency</strong></td>
<td>Moral Person</td>
<td>Internalized moral perspective</td>
<td>Emotional healing</td>
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<td>“Conducts his/her personal life</td>
<td>“Makes decisions based on his or</td>
<td>Helping subordinates grow and</td>
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<td></td>
<td>in an ethical manner”</td>
<td>her or her core values”</td>
<td>succeed</td>
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<td><strong>Concern for followers</strong></td>
<td>Caring</td>
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<td>Helping subordinates grow and</td>
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<td>“Has the best interests of</td>
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<td>succeed</td>
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<td></td>
<td>employees in mind”</td>
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<td><strong>Enhances followers’ personal growth</strong></td>
<td>Using rewards and</td>
<td>Relational transparency</td>
<td>Empowering</td>
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<td>punishments to hold followers</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Holds followers accountable</strong></td>
<td>Using rewards and</td>
<td>“Disciplines employees who violate</td>
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<td></td>
<td>punishments to hold followers</td>
<td>ethical standards”</td>
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<td><strong>Demonstrates self-awareness</strong></td>
<td>Self-awareness; Balanced</td>
<td>“Shows he or she understands how</td>
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<td></td>
<td>processing</td>
<td>specific actions impact others”</td>
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<td><strong>Creates valued outcomes for multiple</strong></td>
<td>Conceptual skills</td>
<td>Having conceptual skills</td>
<td>“My manager has a thorough</td>
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<td>stakeholders**</td>
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<td>understanding of our organization and its goals”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Putting subordinates first</td>
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<td>“My manager seems to care more about my success than his/her own”</td>
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<td>Creating value for the community</td>
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<td>“My manager is always interested in helping people in our community”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Creating value for those outside of the organization</td>
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leadership is that it is attentive to and creates valued outcomes for multiple stakeholders internal and external to the organization. This focus is operationally exemplified by dimensions that reference creating value for others, and items such as “My manager is always interested in helping people in our community.” As shown in Table 4, all three of these unique foci are prominently featured in the constructs’ measurement, providing the most useful basis for establishing their distinctions. These points of differentiation are critical to establishing discriminant validity.

Common dimensions. As would be expected of all moral approaches to leadership, ethical, authentic, and servant leadership model moral/ethical behavior. However, the measurement items used to assess their approaches to moral/ethical behavior are undifferentiated. All three constructs ask respondents to assess the degree to which their manager holds or makes decisions based on high ethical standards. Ethical leadership assesses ethical behavior by the item: “[my manager] sets an example of how to do thing the right way in terms of ethics.” Authentic leadership includes the item “[my manager] makes difficult decisions based on high standards of ethical conduct.” Servant leadership similarly measures the item: “[my manager] holds high ethical standards.” These items appear to measure the same thing. Although generic morality is a theoretical component of each approach to moral leadership, these items may nonetheless obscure empirical distinctions among the scales. Similarly, other common behaviors include being open, fair, honest, and respectful.

Whereas this moral/ethical behavior is common to all three moral forms of leadership, other commonalities exist between two of the three leadership approaches. Ethical leadership and authentic leadership, for instance, share a focus on moral consistency, although the nature of this consistency varies in a way that mirrors each concept’s conceptual emphases. Authentic leadership scales assess a self-concordant approach to moral consistency by measuring the degree to which behaviors are consistent with core values and beliefs. For ethical leadership, this dimension refers to the congruence between the leader’s actions and the norms they enforce to their followers. That is, ethical leaders hold themselves to the same high ethical standards that they expect of others, showing consistency and modeling appropriate behaviors. This common focus on moral consistency suggests that behavioral integrity (Simons, 2002), or the alignment between words and actions, is important for both ethical and authentic leaders.

Ethical leadership also shares a point of commonality with servant leadership: concern for followers. Concern for followers pertains to leaders’ focus on advocating for and protecting their followers’ best interests, not using their followers as a resource to promote self-interested, personal gain. Ethical leadership scales assess the degree to which a manager “has the best interests of employees in mind.” Servant leadership similarly asks followers to evaluate the extent to which a manager “puts my best interests ahead of his/her own.” These commonalities indicate that prosocial motives and behaviors (Bolino & Grant, 2016, for a review) are shared across ethical and servant leadership.

Servant leadership and authentic leadership are both attuned to followers’ development and personal growth. They develop followers through empowering them and encouraging them to be highly involved and participate in making important work decisions. These behaviors foster followers’ personal growth by building autonomy and self-efficacy which, consequently, enhance their pride in and personal responsibility taken for work outcomes. These commonalities between authentic and servant leadership indicate that coaching (Hackman & Wageman, 2005) is an essential behavior for both, helping followers acquire skills essential to their personal growth and development.

Our review of construct operationalizations reveals that measures address their respective moral form of leadership’s unique theoretical emphases, but they also incorporate other, more generic moral content that obfuscates their distinctiveness. Points of commonality among ethical, authentic, and servant leadership—including general positive leader behaviors such as generic morality, behavioral integrity, prosocial behaviors, and coaching behaviors—can be problematic for discriminant validity because they can create confounds among the three constructs. When facets of authentic, ethical, and servant leadership are measured with similar items, a risk emerges that research may be accumulating redundant information, or worse yet, generating spurious conclusions.

Altogether, common outcomes, common theory, and common composition raise serious doubts about the usefulness of multiple approaches to moral leadership. The following section more closely inspects each leadership approach’s theoretical foundations and empirical exemplars in an effort to more clearly differentiate among moral forms of leadership.
CHALLENGE TO THE STATE OF THE SCIENCE

The Promise of Authentic, Ethical, and Servant Leadership

The meaningful theoretical and empirical issues identified in the previous section may spark doubt as to the usefulness of studying multiple moral approaches to leadership. After all, if they all have similar structures, are measured in overlapping ways, and work through similar mechanisms to reach similar outcomes, can we truly assume they are distinct? Does research on authentic, ethical, and servant leadership add new knowledge to our understanding of how morality affects leadership, or are they merely symptoms of our field’s construct proliferation? The body of research described thus far suggests that ethical, authentic, and servant leadership’s effects are overly similar to the point of redundancy. In addition, significant overlaps in measurement lead to highly correlated constructs, building the case that the three might, indeed, be redundant.\(^3\)

Despite these troubling commonalities, there is also evidence of promise. Although a great deal of the literature around moral forms of leadership seems overlapping and limited in contribution, the original theory developing authentic, ethical, and servant leadership clearly builds constructs which are meaningfully distinct from one another as well as other leadership constructs and theories. Furthermore, there is a small but substantial body of empirical work examining and highlighting each leadership approach’s unique elements. In this section, we investigate these promising areas of distinction and illuminate connections among them with seminal theories of moral philosophy.

Authentic, ethical, and servant leadership are all, in general terms, moral. Each, however, uses a markedly distinct theoretical approach to normative morality (or the question of what is good and right, and what is not: Shafer-Landau, 2015). These normative moral foci are referred to in multiple literatures as the content of morality or the criteria an individual uses to determine what is fundamentally right or wrong (Eisenbeiss, 2012). Put another way, multiple individuals with equally strong moral identities, sensitivities, and maturation (Hannah, Avolio, & May, 2011a) might agree that it is important to take the action judged to be most morally correct, but those individuals could disagree on what, exactly, constitutes the morally correct answer. As Blasi (1984; p. 132) noted, “where one person sees compassion as being essential to his or her identity, another emphasizes instead fairness and justice; where one considers obedience as a central ideal, another stresses moral freedom.”

Put another way, it is clear that authentic, ethical, and servant leadership have all been positioned as “moral” forms of leadership. But much more rarely addressed is the question of what, specifically, that morality entails. Both political conservatives and liberals view their opinions as moral, but if those opinions contradict (as they often do), how can both be right? Different people view morality from different perspectives, answering fundamental questions of what is right and what is wrong very differently (Haidt, 2012): those on the political left and right, for example, often view the other’s approach as amoral or even immoral. This is not just a theoretical argument about ideology. The moral forms of leadership indicate that the question “What is moral?” can be addressed in meaningfully distinct ways. These distinctions—rooted in consequentialism, deontology, and virtue ethics—are alluded to in theory but have only rarely been addressed in the extant empirical literature, representing both omission and opportunity.

Servant Leadership: A Consequentialist Focus on Multiple Stakeholders

Rather than being constructed through a review of the literature and extant theory, the ideas for servant leadership were generated during the decades in which Robert Greenleaf observed managers and employees working together, noting the most effective approaches and competencies (Frick, 2004). As noted previously, Greenleaf’s impetus for developing the servant leadership concept was grounded in the belief that a more caring and other-focused leadership approach is essential to the good of businesses, communities, and broader society (Greenleaf, 1977, 1996a, 1996b, 1998). This motivational thrust is similar to writings on stakeholder...
theory (Freeman, 1984; Freeman & Gilbert, 1988) that prioritize external stakeholders in equality with, not inferior to, financial stakeholders. Servant leadership’s multiple stakeholder emphasis, thus, extends a leader’s concern beyond the traditional focus on employees or the organization to include the well-being of external stakeholders such as customers and communities.

A small but growing subset of the servant leadership literature examines effects directly connected to servant leadership’s stakeholder focus. Illustrative exemplars showcasing models specific to servant leadership theory and documenting relationships with stakeholder-focused criteria are noted in Table 5. Several articles, for instance, connect servant leadership with contextual cues, such as serving culture and service climate, focused on broadly helping others (Hunter, Neubert, Perry, Witt, Penney, & Weinberger, 2013; Liden et al., 2014b; Ling, Lin, & Wu, 2016; Neubert, Hunter, & Tolentino, 2016). Servant leadership predicts a variety of service-related outcomes, including customer-first orientation, customer-focused citizenship, and customer value cocreation, which involve organization members transcending simple “customer service” to go above and beyond in their efforts to help customers (Chen, Zhu, & Zhou, 2015; Hsiao, Lee, & Chen, 2015; Jaramillo, Grisaffe, Chonko, & Roberts, 2009). As such, customer service behaviors and quality are unique outcomes to servant leadership (Liden et al., 2014b, 2016).

In addition to customers, followers are important stakeholders for servant leaders. Servant leadership is related with follower outcomes not directly related to performance such as work–family positive spillover, work–family balance (Wang, Kwan, & Zhou, 2017), and workplace spirituality, a concept that concerns an employee’s community, meaningful work, and inner life (Williams, Randolph-Seng, Hayek, Haden, & Atinc, 2017). Stakeholders also extend beyond the organization’s followers and customers to the broader community. For example, Liden et al. (2008) found that servant leadership predicted subordinate community citizenship, defined as attitudes and behaviors beneficial to the broader society outside of typical organizational boundaries. One unique and key individual characteristic that facilitates servant leaders’ concern for a broad set of stakeholders is empathy (Washington, Sutton, & Feild, 2006). Empathy’s effects are demonstrated by findings relating servant leadership to high degrees of care for others, such as research indicating that the followers of servant leaders in health-care contexts most effectively help patients manage their pain (Neubert et al., 2016). Altogether, this more communal focus may explain why, unlike other more charismatic or leader-centric forms of leadership (Judge, Bono, Ilies, & Gerhardt, 2002), servant leadership is negatively predicted by extraversion (Washington et al., 2006). Research indicating that women are more likely than men to act as servant leaders (Fridell, Belcher, & Messner, 2009) provides additional evidence of an enhanced communality. Servant leadership is also uniquely predicted by community building (Parris & Peachey, 2013), demonstrating further alignment with a stakeholder focus.

Servant leadership’s novel focus on serving the needs of multiple stakeholders—benefitting followers, organizations, customers, communities, and societies (Chen et al., 2015; Ehrhart, 2004; Liden et al., 2008) while avoiding causing harm (Greenleaf, 1977, 1996a, 1996b)—is concordant with the normative moral theory of consequentialism (Mill, 1863; Ryan, 1987). Consequentialism, one of the three major theories of normative philosophy (or perspectives on how individuals choose what is right and what is wrong; Baron et al., 1997), argues that what makes an attitude or behavior moral is how it impacts the good of the world (Moore, 1903). As the name suggests, consequentialism mandates examining the consequences of actions, and from there determining whether actions are morally appropriate. It is these consequences, rather than expectations, norms, standards, or personal benefit that determines morality. The fundamental value of the moral consequentialist is the overall state of affairs, or the way the world is (Scheffler, 1988; Sinnott-Armstrong, 2015). Utilitarianism, the most prominent form of consequentialism, defines the “valued ends” of morality as well-being for all. Stated differently, it maximizes happiness and creates “the greatest good for the greatest number” (Shafer-Landau, 2015). In the utilitarian’s mind, service to all people is important, regardless of whether or not those people happen to be part of an organization or whether they purchase from an organization.4

Consequentialism’s unique approach to morality can be demonstrated by the classic “trolley car dilemma” (Foot, 1967), a popular thought experiment in philosophy theory. In this dilemma, a runaway

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4 Although we acknowledge utilitarianism as just one form of consequentialism, we use the terms “consequentialist” and “utilitarian” interchangeably from here forward, consistent with the philosophy literature.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>Theory</th>
<th>Content Relevant to Consequentialism</th>
<th>Antecedents</th>
<th>Mediators</th>
<th>Moderators</th>
<th>Dependent Variable</th>
<th>Core Findings</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Graham (1991)</td>
<td>Servant leadership “requires that organizational actions benefit, or at least not harm, all stakeholder groups...” &lt;Servant leadership&gt; will include sensitivity to the needs and interests of all organizational stakeholders.” (p. 112)</td>
<td>Servant leadership focuses on social responsibilities and the good of all organizational stakeholders</td>
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<td>Ehrhart (2004)</td>
<td>The servant leader acknowledges “his or her moral responsibility not only to the success of the organization, but also to his or her subordinates, the organization’s customers, and other organizational stakeholders.” (p. 68)</td>
<td>Servant leadership has a moral responsibility to benefit stakeholders internal and external to the organization</td>
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<td>Washington, Sutton, and Field (2006)</td>
<td>Empathy and integrity</td>
<td>Followers’ perceptions of leader empathy values and leader integrity are positively related with follower perceptions of supervisors’ servant leadership</td>
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<td>Hsiao, Lee, and Chen (2015)</td>
<td>Employee service-oriented citizenship behaviors</td>
<td>Supervisor servant leadership influences employee customer value co-creation through service-oriented citizenship behaviors</td>
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<td>Hunter, Neubert, Perry, Witt, Penney, and Weinberger (2013)</td>
<td>Service climate</td>
<td>Store manager servant leadership influences followers’ aggregated sales behavior, coworker citizenship behavior, and individual turnover intentions through store-level service climate</td>
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<td>Jaramillo, Grisaffe, Chonko, and Roberts (2009)</td>
<td>Customer orientation</td>
<td>Manager servant leadership influences salesperson customer-directed extra-role performance through salesperson customer orientation</td>
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<td>Liden, Wayne, Liao, and Meuser (2016)</td>
<td>Serving culture</td>
<td>Store manager servant leadership influences employee customer service behaviors through store-level serving culture</td>
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<td>Ling, Lin, and Wu (2016)</td>
<td>Employee service-oriented behaviors</td>
<td>Supervisor servant leadership influences employee service quality through employee service-oriented behaviors. The relationship between servant leadership and service-oriented behaviors is stronger when service climate is high</td>
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<td>Wang, Kwan, and Zhou (2017)</td>
<td>Work-to-family positive spillover</td>
<td>Supervisor servant leadership influences salesperson work-family balance through salesperson work-to-family positive spillover</td>
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<td>Williams, Randolph-Seng, Hayek, Haden, and Atinc (2017)</td>
<td>Workplace spirituality (i.e., inner life, meaningful work, and community)</td>
<td>Supervisor servant leadership increases employee creativity through workplace spirituality. The relationship between servant leadership and workplace spirituality is stronger when leader political skill is high</td>
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<td>Chen, Zhu, and Zhou (2015)</td>
<td>Service quality, customer-focused citizenship behavior, and customer-oriented prosocial behavior</td>
<td>Store manager servant leadership is positively associated with employees’ service quality, customer-focused citizenship behavior, and customer-oriented prosocial behavior</td>
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<td>Liden, Wayne, Zhao, and Henderson (2008)</td>
<td>Community citizenship behavior</td>
<td>Supervisor servant leadership dimensions (i.e., helping subordinates grow, behaving ethically, and creating value for the community) are related with individual-level employee community citizenship behaviors</td>
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trolley car is out of control and headed straight for a section of track to which five people have been tied. If you (as the observer) do nothing, those five people will die. However, you happen to be standing next to a switch which will divert the trolley car onto a different set of tracks to which only one person is tied. Therefore, you can do nothing and allow the trolley car to kill the five people on the current track or pull the switch, sacrificing one person to save those five. The consequentialist approach to this problem is simple: saving five lives creates more well-being than saving only one. For this reason, the consequentialist argues, it is morally right to pull the lever and save five at the expense of one. Similarly, consequentialists judge any moral decision by how it will improve the lives of the many, with the greatest ratio of benefits to drawbacks. Consequentialist approaches are often used to promote initially unpopular views, such as the abolishment of slavery (Bentham, 1996), on the grounds that some discomfort to a powerful few is outweighed by the greater needs of the many. On the other hand, arguably immoral acts, such as lying, stealing, or even murder, are justifiable by consequentialists if they result in the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Punishment for a crime is only moral if it will improve lives by facilitating repentance or preventing further crime. Punishment for the sake of punishment is not moral in this view.

The similarities between consequentialism and Greenleaf’s (1977) conceptualization of servant leadership (“make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served”) are striking. Rather than prioritizing reciprocation and exchange, norms and rules, or even the emergence of a shared vision, theory indicates that servant leaders’ actions prioritize serving the good of multiple stakeholders. Furthermore, Greenleaf’s (1977: p. 14) original servant leadership definition (Table 1) transparently indicates the importance of consequences (e.g., “what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or, at least, not be further deprived?”) to servant leadership. Servant leadership further aligns with consequentialism via its acknowledgement that the organization itself is a valued stakeholder. Prominent servant leadership scholars have long argued that the organization’s success is one of many valued ends for servant leaders (Liden, Panaccio, Meuser, Hu, & Wayne, 2014a). Similar to stakeholder theory (de Luque, Washburn, Waldman, & House, 2008; Freeman, 1984), servant leaders believe that serving other stakeholders benefits the organization because it leads to long-term organizational success (van Dierendonck, 2011). Reciprocally, organizational success is beneficial to other stakeholders (e.g., employees) and affords the organization an opportunity to continue to serve its community and society (Greenleaf, 1977). This reasoning is consistent with the consequentialist view that individual success allows individuals and organizations to better position themselves for future aid to others (Sidgwick, 1907; Singer, 1979). After all, if an organization closed its doors, it would be incapable of helping others and may endanger the well-being of several other stakeholders dependent on the organization’s existence (e.g., employees). Therefore, servant leadership’s explicit focus on performance (distinct among the forms of moral leadership) is not only compatible with its moral nature but also concordant with its broad stakeholder allegiances (Brink, 1986; Freeman, 1984; Greenleaf, 1977).

**Ethical Leadership: A Deontological Focus on Compliance with Normative Standards**

Rather than prioritizing stakeholders as a moral emphasis, the ethical leadership construct instead focuses on compliance and alignment with standards and normative expectations. This focal motivation is best illustrated by the development of what would become the ethical leadership construct in qualitative data collected by Treviño, Brown, and Hartman (2003) and Treviño et al., (2000) involving structured interviews with chief executives and ethics officers. These executives noted that one of their primary motives for acting ethically was to prevent scandals, lawsuits, and negative publicity within their organizations. For example, Treviño et al. (2000) noted executives’ response to the question: “What does ethical leadership accomplish?”

“There the executives we talked with said that ethical leadership was good for business, particularly in the long term, and avoids legal problems. ‘It probably determines the amount of money you’re spending in lawsuits and with corporate attorneys. . . you save a lot of money in regulatory fees and lawyer fees and settlement fees.’” (p. 136)

Ethical leadership theory maintains that alongside basic moral elements such as fairness and honesty, the construct’s view of morality is guided chiefly by the importance of compliance with norms and standards (e.g., Brown et al., 2005; Brown & Mitchell, 2010; Brown & Treviño, 2006; Treviño et al., 2003). Ethical leadership is, therefore, evaluated relative to the context within which leaders are embedded and...
is bound by subjective interpretations (Brown et al., 2005; Eisenbeiss, 2012). Brown and Mitchell (2010) noted that the phrase “normatively appropriate conduct” in ethical leadership’s definition is intentionally ambiguous because it reflects the belief that ethical behavior is determined by compliance with norms and rules relative to the organization, industry, and national culture. Treviño et al. (2003) argued that the general right or wrong of an ethical leader’s actions might be idiosyncratic as “the ethical dimension of executive leadership is likely to be a highly subjective phenomenon open to multiple interpretations. Ethical issues are often ambiguously defined and observers’ evaluations of ethical leadership are likely to depend on subjective perceptions of the leader’s character and motives” (p. 8). Some executives in Treviño et al.’s (2000) qualitative development of ethical leadership did mention concern for stakeholders (critical to servant leadership theory), and the authors themselves propose that ethical leaders should be interested in the greater good (Treviño et al., 2003), but these emphases were not included in the formal ethical leadership construct (Brown et al., 2005).

In our review of the extant literature on ethical leadership, we only discovered a relatively small body of research that specifically exploits the opportunities in ethical leadership’s unique focus on standards and compliance; a sample of these ethical leadership exemplars are listed in Table 6. Alone among moral leadership constructs, ethical leadership predicts an individual’s duty orientation to respect and honor organizational rules and principles, which mediates an indirect negative effect of ethical leadership’s impact on rule compliance and within-organization whistleblowing (Mayer, Nurmohamed, Treviño, Shapiro, & Schminke, 2013; Schaubroeck et al., 2012). Unlike the other approaches to moral leadership, ethical leaders use transactional discipline to reinforce norm-based expectations (Brown et al., 2005; Treviño et al., 2000). These actions, in turn, predict outcomes such as impressions that subordinates are being judged by their managers (Stouten, van Dijke, Mayer, De Cremer, & Eeuwema, 2013).

Table 6 indicates that moderators also accentuate ethical leadership’s compliance focus. Ethical leadership most powerfully impacts outcomes such as whistleblowing when followers are focused more on rules than on the consequences of their actions (Bhal & Dadhich, 2011), and ethical teammates may be a necessary precondition for ethical leadership to affect whistleblowing (Mayer et al., 2013). Ethical leadership suppresses corrupt acts such as accepting bribes and selling confidential information in cultures less concerned for helping others and acting independently (Kolthoff, Erakovich, & Lasthuizen, 2010). Of the moral approaches, only ethical leadership is associated with political skill (Harvey, Harris, Kacmar, Buckless, & Pescosolido, 2014), but individuals with low political skill may benefit the most from the ethical compliance environment generated by ethical leaders (Kacmar, Andrews, Harris, & Tepper, 2013). Furthermore, research suggests that ethical leaders may even exploit policies and rules to enhance their own ends (Den Hartog & Belschak, 2012). These findings suggest that ethical leaders might act in ways that other approaches to morality might judge immoral. Supporting this perspective, ethical leadership may suppress citizenship in the presence of strong rules and HR policies (Kalshoven & Boon, 2012) and is unrelated to a leader’s own workplace deviance behaviors (Harvey et al., 2014).

Notably, many of these relationships are unique to ethical leadership, relative to other moral leadership approaches. We found only one article relating ethical leadership to stakeholder service-related constructs that are more prevalent in the servant leadership literature. The study in question (Schaubroeck, Lam, & Peng, 2016) had two outcomes: service performance, which was operationalized as employee evaluation ratings, and service adherence, or compliance to company guidelines and rules around customer service. For both outcomes, there was no direct relationship with ethical leadership; rather, the effects flowed through the mediating variable of normative belief, or the perception of salient and important norms in the workplace. Put another way, this mediating mechanism indicates that ethical leadership only increased service behaviors through making clear to employees that such behaviors were required by company norms and standards. Ethical leadership’s distinctions from servant leadership’s more consequentialist emphasis are also empirically supported by studies finding that subordinates of ethical leaders develop skills at identifying legal, but not more generally moral, ramifications of scenarios (Kuntz, Kuntz, Elenkov, & Nabirukhina, 2013); that the effect of ethical leadership on whistleblowing is suppressed when there is a stronger focus on negative societal consequences of decisions (Bhal & Dadhich, 2011); and that ethical leadership is not predicted by consequentialist ideology, but it develops
## TABLE 6
Selected Research Demonstrating Ethical Leadership’s Deontological Moral Content

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>Theory</th>
<th>Antecedents</th>
<th>Mediators</th>
<th>Moderators</th>
<th>Dependent Variable</th>
<th>Core Findings</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brown, Trevino, and Harrison (2005)</td>
<td>Ethical leadership represents “the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct... The term “normatively appropriate” is deliberately vague because... what is deemed appropriate behavior is somewhat context dependent.” (p. 120)</td>
<td>Ethical leadership focuses on modeling and enforcing behavior consistent with norms, which may vary by organizational and cultural context</td>
<td>Ethical leadership leverages a more “relativistic” approach to morals based on organizational and cultural norms. It is plausible that these norms could conflict with moral judgments made by more individually based frameworks</td>
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<td>Eisenbeiss (2012)</td>
<td>Ethical leadership “...[leaves] open what norms ethical leaders may refer to when promoting them to followers... does ethical leadership behavior always mean compliance with the prevalent organizational norms? What if these norms demanded behavior that is not in accordance with general moral values and standards?” (p. 793)</td>
<td>Ethical leadership predicts ethical leadership, whereas consequentialist ideology does not</td>
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<tr>
<td>Harvey, Harris, Kacmar, Buckless, and Pascosoldo (2014)</td>
<td>Deontological ideology</td>
<td>Duty orientation, Fear of retaliation for breaking rules, Moral reproach, Consequences of ethical actions, Formal and informal ethical culture</td>
<td>Ethical leadership suppresses instances of employee deviance (breaking laws and organizational policies) through enhancing employee inclination to “honor the organization’s codes and principles” Across multiple studies, the combination of ethical leadership and coworkers who act ethically and follow rules lead to the lowest fear of retaliation for whistle-blowing, which in turn predicts whistle-blowing Across multiple studies, ethical leadership curvilinearly relates with OCB (inverse U-shaped) through moral reproach, or a feeling of being judged by the leader</td>
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<td>Hannah, Jennings, Bluhm, Peng, and Schaubroeck (2014)</td>
<td>Ethical leadership</td>
<td>Duty orientation, Fear of retaliation for breaking rules, Moral reproach, Consequences of ethical actions, Formal and informal ethical culture</td>
<td>Ethical leadership’s impact on whistle-blowing is most powerful when followers focus on rule-following, but least powerful when followers focus on the consequences of their actions Some ethical leaders may use rules and compliance enforcement to further their own ends, limiting ethical leadership’s positive impact on followers The effect of ethical leadership on illegal behaviors such as bribery and conflicts of interest (ECOs) is strongest in countries with cultures highest in moral concern for laws and rules, but weakest in countries with stronger cultures of independence and benevolence Ethical leadership helps individuals identify potential legal issues, but does not predict their ability to recognize nonlegal but ethical dilemmas and their ramifications</td>
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<td>Mayer, Nurmohamed, Trevijo, Shapiro, and Schminke (2014)</td>
<td>Ethical leadership</td>
<td>Duty orientation, Fear of retaliation for breaking rules, Moral reproach, Consequences of ethical actions, Formal and informal ethical culture</td>
<td>Ethical leadership helps individuals identify potential legal issues, but does not predict their ability to recognize nonlegal but ethical dilemmas and their ramifications</td>
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<td>Stouten, van Dijke, Mayer, De Cremer, and Euwema (2013)</td>
<td>Ethical leadership</td>
<td>Duty orientation, Fear of retaliation for breaking rules, Moral reproach, Consequences of ethical actions, Formal and informal ethical culture</td>
<td>Ethical leadership helps individuals identify potential legal issues, but does not predict their ability to recognize nonlegal but ethical dilemmas and their ramifications</td>
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<td>Bhal and Dadhich (2011)</td>
<td>Ethical leadership</td>
<td>Duty orientation, Fear of retaliation for breaking rules, Moral reproach, Consequences of ethical actions, Formal and informal ethical culture</td>
<td>Ethical leadership helps individuals identify potential legal issues, but does not predict their ability to recognize nonlegal but ethical dilemmas and their ramifications</td>
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<td>Den Hartog and Belschak (2012)</td>
<td>Ethical leadership</td>
<td>Duty orientation, Fear of retaliation for breaking rules, Moral reproach, Consequences of ethical actions, Formal and informal ethical culture</td>
<td>Ethical leadership helps individuals identify potential legal issues, but does not predict their ability to recognize nonlegal but ethical dilemmas and their ramifications</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kohoff, Etskovich, and Laesruinen (2010)</td>
<td>Ethical leadership</td>
<td>Duty orientation, Fear of retaliation for breaking rules, Moral reproach, Consequences of ethical actions, Formal and informal ethical culture</td>
<td>Ethical leadership helps individuals identify potential legal issues, but does not predict their ability to recognize nonlegal but ethical dilemmas and their ramifications</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kuntz, Kuntz, Elenkov, and Nahirrunkhina (2013)</td>
<td>Ethical leadership</td>
<td>Duty orientation, Fear of retaliation for breaking rules, Moral reproach, Consequences of ethical actions, Formal and informal ethical culture</td>
<td>Ethical leadership helps individuals identify potential legal issues, but does not predict their ability to recognize nonlegal but ethical dilemmas and their ramifications</td>
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<td>Schaubroeck, Hannah, Avodio, Kozlowski, Lord, Trevino, Dimotakis, and Peng (2012)</td>
<td>Ethical leadership</td>
<td>Duty orientation, Fear of retaliation for breaking rules, Moral reproach, Consequences of ethical actions, Formal and informal ethical culture</td>
<td>Ethical leadership helps individuals identify potential legal issues, but does not predict their ability to recognize nonlegal but ethical dilemmas and their ramifications</td>
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more frequently in those with deontological moral mindsets (Letwin et al., 2016).

Overall, our review suggests a striking alignment between ethical leadership and the broad normative moral approach of deontology. Like consequentialism, deontology is one of the three major approaches to normative ethics, but it differs from consequentialism in that it is wholly unconcerned with the outcomes of actions (Anscombe, 1958; MacDonald & Beck-Dudley, 1994). Instead, the deontological approach to what is right and what is wrong depends on the structure of an act, and how the act itself aligns with established rules, norms, and ideas of justice. Where a consequentialist would judge the morality of an act by its outcomes and how well they improve broad well-being, the deontologist instead examines the act itself and whether it is judged as correct according to set standards of behavior. In the trolley car example presented earlier, the consequentialist would pull the switch, sacrificing one person to save five, prioritizing the well-being of the many. The deontologist would struggle with this act because, regardless of the outcome, taking an active action that would kill an innocent human being does not align with moral codes. It does not matter that it is only one person, or that more lives could be saved by sacrificing that one person; the act of killing an innocent person is wrong according to moral standards of behavior, regardless of the outcome. The deontologist argues that even if an act that breaks our moral rules and maxims has positive outcomes for well-being, it is still immoral (Shafer-Landau, 2015). Consider the case of a man who cheats on his taxes to support his family or steals from the state to give to the poor, but the amount is so little that the government’s operations are not affected. The consequentialist might argue that this act is moral because well-being is enhanced without causing harm to anyone, whereas the deontologist would argue that stealing or cheating on taxes is fundamentally wrong according to standards and law.

The most popular form of deontology is Kantianism, which postulates that immoral acts are those which are fundamentally contradictory to their context (Baron et al., 1997). This position is established in the principle of universalizability (Pettit, 2000); if everyone in the world acted a certain way, would the action be plausible and its goal achieved? For instance, if everyone stole others’ property, then the concept of property would be meaningless, so stealing would have no purpose, and hence the action is immoral. Considering ethical leadership, if employees did not follow organizational standards, the organization’s structure and framework would fall apart and the organization could not exist; therefore, standards and rules are moral. A related form of deontology, the philosophy of law (Coleman, 1989), argues that laws, rules, and standards themselves create moral obligations: they coordinate social activities (such as everyone driving in the correct lane or forming orderly queues for service), and individuals who act against these conventions may needlessly endanger or frustrate others, causing moral harm.

Regardless of the specific form, the uniqueness of the deontological approach to morality is the focus on morality as adherence to a system of rules. Kant wrote that it is irrelevant whether an act creates an outcome that we or others care about; the act is moral because the actor obeyed their moral duties, and nothing more (Paton, 1971). The ethical leader seeks to make these duties and norms a salient part of the day-to-day mindset of followers (Treviño et al., 2000) through active attempts to institutionalize those norms as part of team cultures (Treviño et al., 2003). Although the ethical leader encourages voice, as an extension of the fairness exhibited by the moral manager (Brown et al., 2005; Lam, Loi, Chan, & Liu, 2016; Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009), the ethical leader is less open to criticism of company standards and policies, and certainly intolerant of non-compliance (Hannah et al., 2014; Mayer et al., 2013). Questioning of organizational norms may, therefore, be frowned upon by ethical leaders. In support, Brown and Mitchell (2010: p. 596) observed, “Heterogeneity in ethical values within an organization could work against attempts to foster an effective ethics and compliance program. . . .” Exactly what ethical leaders consider to be right and wrong, beyond basic values such as honesty and compliance to norms and standards, is vague (Eisenbeiss, 2012). This ambiguity is deliberate such that behaviors or mindsets considered unethical in one industry or country might be quite acceptable in another (Brown & Mitchell, 2010). In sum, this evidence points to the paramount nature of norms, standards, rules, and laws as the focal normative context of ethical leadership.

Another unique aspect of ethical leadership relative to the other moral approaches to leadership is its reliance on transactional influence as a method to compel followers to conform to normative standards (Brown et al., 2005; Brown & Mitchell, 2010). This focus is clear in ethical leadership’s seminal theoretical development and operationalization, and
congruent with deontology. Whereas a consequentialist might ask whether society would benefit from punishing a rule breaker, the deontologist argues that on principle, wrongdoers deserve punishment (Kant, 1887; Shafer-Landau, 2015). This is a notable distinction from servant leadership. Greenleaf specifically argued against coercion in favor of persuasion, even for the most heinous of acts such as slavery (Greenleaf, 1970). Altogether, a deontological focus on compliance to and enforcement of norms, rules, and laws emerges as the most differentiating aspects of ethical leadership relative to servant and authentic leadership.

**Authentic Leadership: A Virtue Focus on Self-Awareness and Moral Self-Concordance**

The hallmark of authentic leaders is their authentic and transparent expression, and action in concordance with their beliefs (Avolio et al., 2004). Authentic leaders’ morality is proposed to be independent of external expectations, such that the authentic leader would make decisions based on their own moral compass, rather than on other people’s opinions of ethics (Guignon, 2004). Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, and Walumbwa (2005) suggested that self-awareness and self-regulation are core competencies of authentic leadership that provide positive modeling whereby followers learn and develop authenticity. The most dominant theoretical perspectives used in developing the concept of authentic leadership were authentic functioning and self-determination. Kernis’ (2003) theory of authenticity was not specific to leadership but was meant to differentiate an optimal or stable self-esteem from a fragile or defensive self-esteem. Authentic functioning would result from and help build optimal or stable forms of self-esteem. Kernis’ work identified four components of authenticity: self-awareness, unbiased processing of self-relevant information, behavior in accordance with one’s true self, and openness and honesty in relationships. Authentic leadership’s dimensional structure (Walumbwa et al., 2008) bears a close resemblance to these dimensions. Whereas scholars on servant and ethical leadership have written extensively regarding the use of persuasion (Greenleaf, 1977) and positive and negative incentives (Brown et al., 2005) to guide followers to moral paths, authentic leadership relies less on these methods. As Luthans and Avolio (2003) wrote, “The authentic leader does not try to coerce or even rationally persuade associates, but rather the leader’s authentic values, beliefs, and behaviors serve to model the development of associates” (p. 243). Authentic leaders model authenticity to develop trust and serve as role models (Gardner et al., 2005), passively “projecting” their authentic self to followers (Walumbwa et al., 2008).

Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) was foundational to authentic leadership’s conceptual development (Gardner et al., 2005; Gardner et al., 2011; Ilies, Morgeson, & Nahrgang, 2005). Inherently autonomous motivation occurs when individuals’ goals are concordant with their personal values and beliefs, and they experience high levels of interest and enjoyment pursuing goals because the effort is self-expressive (Gagné & Deci, 2005). This intrinsic, or autonomous, motivation is a central element of authentic leadership, alongside autonomy and self-concordance. Indeed, Gardner et al. (2005: p. 345) argued that a leader’s own authenticity and moral freedom, as described earlier, are the “first and foremost” elements of authentic leadership. As such, authentic leaders’ moral behaviors and their honest and fair treatment of subordinates emerge specifically through their own regard for autonomy, transparency, and moral freedom. In sum, authentic leaders maintain self-concordant moral freedom, thereby developing the authenticity and autonomy of followers (Gardner et al., 2005; Leroy, Anseel, Gardner, & Sels, 2015).

Attention to these unique aspects of authentic leadership in the empirical literature are somewhat seldom seen, but some scholars have begun to focus on these distinctions (illustrative exemplars are shown in Table 7). For instance, research indicates that authentic leadership is uniquely predicted by a leader’s strong physical enactment of their true emotions and values and their tendency to tell stories about their past, particularly stories of the more sensitive, negative, and potentially embarrassing aspects of their past (Weischer, Weibler, & Petersen, 2013). Authentic leadership is also the only approach to moral leadership predicted by self-consistency, self-knowledge (Peus, Wesche, Streicher, Braun, & Frey, 2012), and cultures oriented on flexibility (Azanza, Moriano, & Molero, 2013)—all constructs connected to self-awareness and the display of the leader’s authentic self. Because of these self-concordant behaviors, authentic leaders are viewed as possessing high levels of behavioral integrity (Leroy, Palanski, & Simons, 2012) and are, therefore, judged by followers as predictably consistent in their values and beliefs (Peus et al., 2012). Research also indicates that men are more likely than women to emerge as authentic leaders (Monzani, Bark, van Dick, & Peiro,
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>Content Relevant to Virtue Ethics</th>
<th>Core Findings</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Luthans and Avolio (2003)</td>
<td>Authentic leadership is “a process... which results in both greater self-awareness and self-regulated positive behaviors on the part of leaders and associates, fostering positive self-development... the authentic leader is true to him/herself...” (p. 243)</td>
<td>Authentic leaders prioritize understanding themselves and acting in accordance with their true natures</td>
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<td>Shamir and Eilam (2005)</td>
<td>For the authentic leader, “(1) The role of the leader is a central component of their self-concept, (2) they have achieved a high level of self-resolution or self-concept clarity, (3) their goals are self-concordant, and (4) their behavior is self-expressive.” (p. 306–309)</td>
<td>Authentic leaders are highly self-aware, and use that self-awareness to achieve and maintain both internal consistency and authentic honesty in their relationships with others</td>
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<td>Weiser, Weihler, and Petersen (2013)</td>
<td>Leader value enactment and story-telling</td>
<td>Perceived supervisor self-knowledge and self-consistency are positively related to supervisor authentic leadership; supervisor authentic leadership influences followers’ supervisor satisfaction, affective commitment, extra-effort, team supervisor satisfaction, and team effectiveness through perceived leader predictability</td>
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<td>Puus, Wesche, Streicher, Braun, and Frey (2012)</td>
<td>Self-knowledge and self-consistency</td>
<td>Manager authentic leadership influences employees’ organizational job embeddedness through employee psychological ownership and self-concordance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Erkutlu and Chafa (2017)</td>
<td>Employee self-concordance</td>
<td>Supervisor authentic leadership influences followers’ ethical and prosocial behaviors through followers’ display of moral courage</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hannah, Avolio, and Walumbwa (2011)</td>
<td>Moral courage</td>
<td>Supervisor authentic leadership (i.e., authenticity) influences teamwork behavior and team productivity through team authentic leadership (i.e., authenticity)</td>
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<td>Hannah, Walumbwa, and Fry (2011)</td>
<td>Team authenticity</td>
<td>Department leader’s authentic leadership influences team leader’s individual-level LMX through team leader’s authentic leadership; team leader’s authentic leadership and individual-level LMX influence followers’ citizenship behavior through followers’ self-concordance</td>
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<td>Hirst, Walumbwa, Arceo, Buturbutar, and Chen (2016)</td>
<td>Self-concordance and trickle-down authentic leadership</td>
<td>Team leader’s authentic leadership influences followers’ affective organizational commitment through followers’ perceptions of leader behavioral integrity; leader behavioral integrity influences followers’ work-role performance through followers’ affective organizational commitment</td>
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<td>Leroy, Palinski, and Simons (2012)</td>
<td>Perceptions of leader behavioral integrity</td>
<td>Follower authenticity (i.e., authentic followership) and team leader authentic leadership influence follower work-role performance through follower need satisfaction; follower need satisfaction mediates the interaction of follower authenticity and team leader authentic leadership on follower work-role performance</td>
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<td>Mehmood, Hamstua, Nawab, and Vriend (2016)</td>
<td>Follower learning goal orientation</td>
<td>Supervisor authentic leadership influences follower intrapreneurial behavior through organizational empowerment and organizational identification</td>
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<td>Valansia, Moriano, and Molero (2016)</td>
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2015), whereas women were more often seen as servant leaders (Fridell et al., 2009). This finding might be explained by gender roles which position women as more caring and careful not to upset others, whereas men are more independent and blunt.

Followers of authentic leaders grow in their own self-concordance (Erkutlu & Chafra, 2017; Hirst, Walumbwa, Aryee, Butarbutar, & Chen, 2016) and moral courage to stay true to their convictions (Hannah, Avolio, & Walumbwa, 2011b). This self-concordance motivates followers to learn and engage in creative processes, as evidenced by authentic leadership’s unique effects on followers’ learning goal orientation (Mehmood, Hamstra, Nawab, & Vriend, 2016) and intrapreneurial behavior (Valsania, Moriano, & Molero, 2016). Authentic leadership may be strongest when it is combined with authentic followership, such that leaders and followers share their core values in a psychologically safe environment, assess their situations honestly and frankly, and work together to ensure fulfilling and productive experiences (Leroy et al., 2015). Indeed, theory suggests that a core motivation of authentic leaders is to have authentic followers who similarly feel free to express themselves transparently and make their own moral judgments. Several studies have examined the unique impact of the authentic leader on this process (e.g., Hannah, Walumbwa, & Fry, 2011c; Özkan & Ceylan, 2012). Outcomes involving moral courage and freedom are unique to authentic leadership.

Authentic leadership theory, conceptualization, and measurement all place strong emphasis on the authentic characteristics of the leader and behaviors that build these qualities in followers. Authentic leadership definitions focus on self-awareness and self-concordance, and operationalizations emphasize the leader’s own self-views and self-consistency. It is clear that authentic awareness, expression, and moral freedom are unique points of differentiation for authentic leadership. Self-awareness and self-concordance compel authentic leaders to approach questions of morality by valuing their own judgments over the rules or preferences of others (Guignon, 2004; Taylor, 1991). They trust that ethicality emerges from most closely following their own moral compass (May, Chan, Hodges, & Avolio, 2003). This approach is markedly dissimilar from the moral views espoused by consequentialism and deontology, but is consonant with the final of the three major approaches to normative morality: virtue ethics.

Drawing from Aristotle, virtue ethicists argue that the core of morality exists not in attention to norms and rules (deontology) or outcomes (consequentialism) but within the virtues of the moral decision-maker (e.g., Foot, 1978; Hursthouse, 1999). To understand morality, Aristotle argued that one must first understand the nature of a moral person, including their own moral courage, consistency, generosity, and wisdom, because these are the characteristics (or virtues) from which good deeds spring (Annas, 1993). In the strict Aristotelian form, virtue ethics theory focuses on character traits that contribute to individuals fulfilling their own unique function and purpose such as confidence and practical wisdom. These virtues focus on self-awareness and understanding. They are, by definition, self-concordant—they do not conflict, but rather combine to produce an overall virtuous or moral individual. Without self-awareness, Aristotle wrote, one could find neither happiness nor morality.

Deontological and consequentialist approaches offer a specific set of decision-making tools that theoretically provide a morally correct response to any situation, regardless of moral complexity. Virtue ethicists instead argue that such predetermined decision rules are invalid because true morality arises from the reflection and consideration of the wise and the self-aware (Anscombe, 1958). In such individuals, potential courses of action provoke emotions that not only indicate areas of moral relevance (not dissimilar to the situational activation of moral traits: see Tett & Burnett, 2003) but also motivate and guide moral behaviors (Shafer-Landau, 2015). These moral sensitivities and characteristics, or virtues, precipitate both moral motivation and the moral awareness to take morally correct actions (Hannah et al., 2011a). Whereas deontologists and consequentialists argue that individuals are moral because they use moral decision rules to make moral choices, virtue ethicists instead theorize the opposite: individuals make moral choices because those individuals are fundamentally moral and self-aware. The virtue ethicist’s reliance on their own moral judgment raises the possibility that they may change their mind as to what is moral, as is argued for authentic leaders: “They have the credibility to... seek alternative ways of approaching them without being perceived as disingenuous or shifting with popular opinion. They can change their mind and be seen to be acting consistent with their end-values and therefore authentic” (Luthans & Avolio, 2003: p. 249).

It is clear from our review that the founders of authentic leadership theory explicitly envisioned it with the virtue ethics approach to morality in mind. Several initial theoretical articles on authentic
leadership begin with the root concept of authenticity, tracing it back to Greek philosophy and positioning it as the core of the positive leader. Shamir and Eilam (2005) characterize authentic leadership as an “eudaimonic activity,” drawing from Aristotle’s conception of flourishing in concordance with one’s true self (Kernis & Goldman, 2006). Concurrently, Ilies et al. (2005) wrote that authentic leadership manifests in the authentic leader’s eudaimonia, such that they realize who they truly are by expressing who they truly are. This honest self-expression would, in turn, cause followers to consider their own self-concordance and start down the path to their own authentic eudaimonia. Authentic leadership draws heavily on theories of self-determination and authenticity; virtue ethics and the concept of eudaimonia are prominent within both theories (e.g., Beadle & Knight, 2015; Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Ryan, Huta, & Deci, 2013).

Authentic leadership highlights the philosophy of virtue ethics, but not necessarily the study or inclusion of specific virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Rather, authentic leadership aligns with the existential philosophy of moral freedom and responsibility that gave rise to the importance of virtues. This philosophy supports authentic leadership’s unique approach to what is moral: rather than focusing on standards or stakeholders, authentic leaders view morality as that which aids individuals in understanding themselves, acting in self-concordant manners, and following their own moral compass regardless of the expectations of society or others (May et al., 2003; Taylor, 1991). Conceptualizations of primary virtues, such as optimal self-esteem and authenticity (Kernis, 2003; Kernis & Goldman, 2006), and a more personal and flexible system of moral judgments (Kasser, Vansteenkiste, & Deckop, 2006; Luthans & Avolio, 2003) form the basis of authentic leadership theory and provide a salient basis to distinguish authentic leadership from other approaches to leadership.

**AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

The specific theoretical frameworks proposed by the founders of ethical, authentic, and servant leadership theory and illustrative empirical exemplars illuminate rich distinctions that coalesce with the three approaches to normative ethics. These connections pose important implications, highlighting interesting new research questions for moral leadership and providing opportunities to overcome challenges which have emerged in the literature thus far. Specifying the relationships between ethical, authentic, and servant leadership with deontology, virtue ethics, and consequentialism, respectively, reveal opportunities to reengage in the iterative process of theoretical development and refinement (Cronbach & Meehl, 1955) to strengthen each construct’s validity. Differentiating moral forms of leadership according to their normative moral content provides opportunities not only to address the three limitations unveiled in our review of the empirical literature but also to explore meaningful new research directions that draw on a deeper perspective on how specific forms of morality manifest in leadership. We discuss each of these opportunities in turn.

**Attenuating Commonalities in Moral Leadership Research**

Anchoring ethical, authentic, and servant leadership to their respective moral foundations affords opportunities to increase each construct’s content validity and illuminate differentiated nomological networks (i.e., attenuating common content). Differentiating moral forms of leadership with deontology, virtue ethics, and consequentialism, respectively, integrate theoretical perspectives unique to each specific moral framework (i.e., attenuating common theory), and ameliorate deficiencies in prevailing empirical measures (i.e., attenuating common composition).

**Attenuating common outcomes.** “A good theory articulates not only what a construct is, but also what it is not” (Clark & Watson, 1995: p. 311). Although ethical, authentic, and servant leadership theory has done a respectable job defining what each leadership approach is, their conceptual boundaries (i.e., what they are not) are much more amorphous. Ambiguous conceptual boundaries pose problems for differentiating among moral forms of leadership (as well as other forms of leadership). It also exacerbates the proclivity for researchers to examine the effect of moral forms of leadership on common outcomes, leading to the tenuous conclusion that positive forms of leadership all lead to (the same) positive outcomes. Moral foundations diminish the tendency to examine moral forms of leadership with generic outcomes by tightening each construct’s theoretical boundaries and specifying antecedents, mediators, and outcomes that are theoretically pertinent to each moral form of leadership’s moral emphasis.

Moral foundations clarify inclusion and exclusion criteria for ethical, authentic, and servant leadership’s constituent content. For instance, ethical leaders’ normative ethics in character and action
(Brown et al., 2005; Treviño & Brown, 2004) help us understand why they conform to organizational norms and enforcement of those norms. Consequently, ethical leadership’s components focus on maintaining order through modeling and enforcing compliance to standards, norms, and laws. A deontological focus on compliance, however, is agnostic about a leader’s moral freedom or concern for all stakeholders. Authentic leaders’ virtue ethics form the foundation of why they value self-awareness, relational transparency, and balanced processing (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Walumbwa et al., 2008). Consistent with virtue ethics, authentic leadership’s internally focused behaviors emphasize leaders’ behavioral conformance to their personal convictions regardless of social norms, social pressure, and external expectations. This moral focus is potentially antithetical to the other two moral approaches’ foci on conformance to norms and concern for stakeholders. Finally, servant leaders’ other-oriented consequentialism (Greenleaf, 1977; Liden et al., 2014a) compels them to express concern for the community, invest their efforts in emotional healing, and help others to grow and succeed. The dimensions of servant leadership, thus, reflect a consequentist focus on the enhancement and benefit of a wide variety of organizational stakeholders. Although servant leadership behaviors are theoretically expected to be congruent with the leader’s core values, self-concordance is much less important to servant leadership than a concern for stakeholders. Furthermore, servant leadership is equivocal about conformance to standards, norms, and laws. Taken together, moral foundations provide clarity regarding the theoretical boundaries (i.e., the inclusion/exclusion criteria) for ethical, authentic, and servant leadership.

In addition to tying each moral form of leadership’s internal dimensions together into a congruous whole, the three moral foundations provide guidance for identifying differentiated and theoretically specific antecedents, processes, and outcomes. As shown by the illustrative exemplars in Tables 5–7, testing the theory specific to each leadership approach illuminates the effects unique to ethical leadership (e.g., followers’ compliance and strong ethical cultures), authentic leadership (e.g., followers’ learning orientations and mutual respect), and servant leadership (e.g., followers’ volunteerism and stakeholder focus). There is little reason to expect servant or authentic leadership to relate to compliance with potentially arbitrary rules and standards, or for ethical or authentic leaders to prioritize corporate social responsibility beyond any immediate benefits perceived for the organization. Similarly, authentic leaders are expected to allow their subordinates a degree of moral autonomy that might be inappropriate for ethical or servant leaders. This autonomy would further apply to authentic leaders themselves, who would chafe at the moral restrictions inherent in the more explicit decision criteria used by ethical or servant leaders. In this manner, these moral foundations highlight theoretically relevant constructs within each leadership approach’s nomological network that collectively contribute a more integrated view of how ethical, authentic, and servant leadership uniquely inform our understanding of moral leadership and its effects in organizations. Differences in moral content foreshadow differences in nomological nets, and it is those differences that both establish construct distinction and uniquely add to our insight on moral leadership.

**Attenuating common theory.** A general approach to the moral content of leadership suggests a general approach to theorizing its effects, limiting our understanding of the underlying processes of these phenomena. Leadership can be defined as the process of motivating or influencing others toward the achievement of collective goals (e.g., Rost, 1991; Yukl, 2010). Morality in general and moral philosophies specifically clearly are relevant to the study of leadership because morality highlights the shared social norms that leaders could use to motivate others toward collective goals. By espousing and enacting any of these three moral philosophies, the leader paints a picture for followers of a well-functioning collective where everyone adheres to the same principles. Two basic principles underlie this approach to leadership (regardless of moral content) and are well represented in our review: social exchange and social learning. By espousing the value of morality through their leadership, leaders are asking (or sometimes requiring) followers to buy into a social exchange system: if you do this for the collective, the collective will serve you in the following way. Furthermore, conveying this moral philosophy is often done through espousal of the underlying philosophy, a vision for the future that followers can imagine, as well as enacting it such that the underlying philosophy becomes more tangible in the minds of followers. This attempted transmission of morality is perhaps what most clearly distinguishes the moral approaches to leadership from other amoral (goal-focused) or immoral approaches. And because of this common moral nature, some
overlap among ethical, authentic, and servant leadership’s nomological networks is inevitable. For instance, given that all three approaches feature generally moral behaviors such as honest and fair subordinate relations, it is not surprising that all three are related to outcomes such as trust, justice perceptions, and relational quality.

Therefore, social exchange and social learning paradigms are certainly logical processes by which moral leadership phenomena can emerge, but perspectives such as these are not comprehensively explanatory. Furthermore, because similar social exchange and learning processes operate for amoral forms of leadership, exclusive attention to these general theories risks creating redundant knowledge. Instead, we propose that differences in moral content point to distinct theories, which, in turn, may best explain exactly how authentic, ethical, and servant leadership uniquely predict outcomes of interest. For instance, servant leadership’s consequentialist focus naturally aligns with stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) and its predictions that stakeholder good generates desirable business outcomes. One might argue that the stakeholder reciprocation implied by stakeholder theory falls under the umbrella of the aforementioned social exchange paradigm, but stakeholder theory nonetheless represents a more precise perspective on the phenomena expected from a consequentialist approach to morality. As such, it promises to better explain servant leadership processes than a more general approach might. Similarly, although self-determination theory has been invoked to explain multiple leadership approaches, it is most relevant for authentic leadership, given that authentic leaders’ focus on autonomy. Ethical leadership’s more transactional approach to morality, meanwhile, suggests a link with a normative approach to reinforcement theory (e.g., Treviño, 1986; Weiner, 1972).

These examples are representative, but certainly not all-inclusive. The “usual theoretical suspects” such as social learning and social exchange are also relevant theoretical lenses that explain moral forms of leadership’s influence, but these perspectives apply broadly to influence behaviors in general. If a theory can explain many leadership behaviors and styles, as well as dyadic influence processes unrelated to leadership, a question arises as to whether it helps us understand what makes any of those forms of influence unique. Sharper theoretical specification offers the promise of more precisely explaining leadership phenomena and helping us identify distinct mediators, moderators, and outcomes of both practical and theoretical importance. Theories more specifically attuned to each form of moral leadership provide complementary perspectives that help provide the robust theoretical frameworks from which meaningful research can emerge.

**Attenuating common composition.** Anchoring the three approaches to moral leadership in their respective moral foundations offers opportunities to better differentiate current points of compositional overlap (as shown in Table 4 and Figure 2) and more precisely define how ethical, authentic, and servant leaders uniquely approach a similar set of behaviors. Although the moral leadership scales were originally constructed based on the primary theoretical elements underlying each construct, theoretical refinements reveal opportunities to similarly refine measurement to maintain construct validity (Clark & Watson, 1995; Cronbach & Meehl, 1955). The issues discussed in the following paragraphs focus on a fundamental question that is a pressing concern for this research as well as the larger leadership literature—What are respondents really reporting when they assess scales associated with moral forms of leadership: general perceptions of leader liking (Mumford & Fried, 2014) and leader effectiveness (van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013) or specific evaluations of leader behaviors?

**Aligning measurement and theory.** The commonalities in item content across moral forms of leadership raise questions about whether common or distinctive dimensions drive the variance in outcomes. As illustrated in Table 2, the dominant measures of authentic, ethical, and servant leadership are mixed in their distinctiveness; whereas each scale has items that reflect unique elements such as accountability for ethical standards (ethical leadership), balanced processing (authentic leadership), and a multi-stakeholder focus (servant leadership), some other aspects of the scales are quite similar. Broad, multidimensional operationalizations are conducive to linking moral leadership approaches to general organizational outcomes but may introduce questions about whether, for instance, it is truly servant leadership that drives OCB or whether it is general morality such as leader fairness or truthfulness that explains the variance. Put another way, is it important for OCB that moral leaders emphasize a stakeholder perspective, or is a stakeholder focus irrelevant for OCB when considering the impact of general honesty and impartiality? The similar results among the three moral forms of leadership across criteria suggest the latter may be true. Attention to the moral forms of leadership’s dimensions has been rare since their introduction, and the nature of how these
dimensions interrelate and predict outcomes remains poorly understood. The assumption that all dimensions have an equal contribution to the leader's moral emphasis, for instance, remains doubtful. A dimension-specific approach to moral forms of leadership may help move the field forward by illuminating more specific sets of leadership behaviors that account for leadership's effectiveness (van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013; Yukl, 2012).

Answering questions related to whether ethical, authentic, and servant leadership's distinctive moral foundations drive their relative predictive validity is challenging with current scales because varying levels of item specificity may produce responses that are disconnected from what measurement scales intend to measure. As measurement items become more abstract (as is often the case for broad approaches to morality) and, thus, less behaviorally focused, scales risk measuring generic follower attributions and attitudes rather than followers' evaluations of discrete leader behaviors. Bagozzi and Edwards (1998) suggest that variability in item depth may distort what we are intending to measure by eliciting general affective and cognitive attributions.

**Item depth.** Item depth refers to items in a measurement scale that are written at different levels of abstraction. Three types of construct depth—component level, facet level, and global level—represent the lowest level of abstraction, intermediate level of abstraction, and the highest level of abstraction, respectively (Bagozzi & Edwards, 1998). Component-level items are the most concrete and objective in terms of observations and experiences. They often describe observable behaviors. Facet-level items require subjective interpretations of words like “fair,” “honest,” and “trust.” Global-level items assess overall attitudes or require general responses to abstract concepts (e.g., “holds high ethical standards”).

Example items from the measurement scales in Table 2 show that all three moral forms of leadership mix levels of abstraction from concrete, observable behaviors to higher level factors (fairness, honesty, and trustworthiness) to more abstract, global assessments (high ethical standards). The heterogeneity in item depth is particularly problematic for moral forms of leadership because abstract questions trigger broad cognitive and affective (e.g., leader liking and leader effectiveness) responses that convolute theoretical distinctions among leadership types. This issue is especially salient for items tapping a general moral leadership factor (such as honesty and fairness), which are often framed more globally and abstractly than other items, increasing this attribution risk. Consequently, moral leadership measures are vulnerable to “halo effects” (Meindl & Ehrlich, 1987). That is, generic items may lead respondents to view all three approaches to leadership as generally positive and, therefore, extrapolate or assume high ratings for other seemingly positive characteristics and behaviors based on their general appreciation and admiration of the leader. It is, thus, not surprising that meta-analytic effects between the three moral forms of leadership and relational perceptions such as trust in the manager and leader–member exchange (LMX) range from 0.65 to 0.71 (Hoch, Bommer, Dulebohn, & Wu, 2018). The magnitude of these correlations raises legitimate questions about the discriminant validity between moral leadership scales and employees’ relational perceptions. Although our comparative review provides an opportune example to raise the potentially pernicious effects of variance in item depth within the moral leadership literature, most other leadership measures similarly include at least some attributional or global-level questions. They also exhibit similarly high correlations among leadership constructs and relational perceptions. This problem raises the question: “What are employees really assessing when measuring ‘leadership’?”

Efforts are needed to ascertain the degree to which items in a leadership scale assess general attributions as opposed to the specific phenomenon the item is intended to measure. This effort may seem daunting for areas as subjective as moral leadership behaviors, but it is necessary to gain confidence in the validity of our measures and distinguish them empirically from other leadership constructs. Toward this end, a question to consider is whether respondents are being asked to judge the degree to which they perceive a leader as moral, versus the degree to which observable behaviors are enacted in a moral way. For instance, “makes fair and balanced decisions” (from the ethical leadership scale) may tap general justice perceptions; “my manager is always honest” (from the servant leadership scale) could measure a trustworthiness attribution; and “makes difficult decisions based on high standards of ethical content” (from the authentic leadership scale) involves an attribution of ethics rather than an evaluation of specific behaviors. This issue could be resolved by editing items to the less abstract component level or by further revising them to reflect the unique moral content of each leadership approach. It is also plausible that the scales’ discriminant validity could be enhanced by reducing more generally moral items
and increasing items specific to each approach’s moral content.

To be clear, many items in the three scales do not exhibit these potential issues. Exemplar items within each scale are written at the component level and include behavioral descriptions, such as “discusses business ethics or values with employees” (ethical), “tells the hard truth” (authentic), and “I am encouraged by my manager to volunteer in the community” (servant). These items incorporate distinct elements of each leadership approach’s moral frameworks, and they reference specific and observable behaviors. These items may be chiefly responsible for the promising results shown in our exemplar tables, indicating that the measurement scales meaningfully tap distinctive components of their respective leadership frameworks.

In summary, items within ethical, authentic, and servant leadership scales should be carefully examined to assess a consistent level of depth (i.e., observable behaviors) in an effort to gain confidence about what is being measured. Given the potential threats to validity, items should be written at the component level so that respondents are able to report specific and unambiguous observations of leader behaviors. Although somewhat restrictive, this approach may be the most effective at mitigating respondents’ propensity to rate global assessments of leader liking or leader effectiveness. Otherwise, measurement scales within the moral leadership domain may be “hoping for A, while measuring B” (Kerr, 1975).

**Item breadth.** An additional advantage to focusing on component-level items is that narrower item breadth further increases construct validity because it reduces the risk of measuring a phenomenon by its antecedents or outcomes, a practice that creates an additional threat to validity that is germane to the moral leadership and the broader leadership literature alike (van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). Leadership constructs are notorious for including items that confound its content with antecedents and outcomes. This problem stems from ambiguous definitions of leadership itself as well as broad theoretical expositions of leadership’s omnius influence process (often incorporating traits, behaviors, processes, relational elements, and/or outcomes) that relegate “leadership” to a catchall term with imprecise meaning. Attempts to capture a commensurately broad variety of elements in a single scale creates significant methodological challenges for leadership constructs, including confounds among causally related components of the influence process such as leader characteristics (i.e., who a leader is), leader behaviors (i.e., what a leader does), and leader effects (i.e., what a leader produces).

As an example of the confound between a construct and its effects within the moral leadership domain, ethical leadership is often related to employee trust in a leader (e.g., Chughtai et al., 2015; Newman et al., 2014; Xu et al., 2016), but the ethical leadership scale includes as one of its items, “can be trusted.” There are excellent theoretical reasons to believe that ethical leadership and trust should correlate, but the inclusion of this item within the ethical leadership scale renders any empirical conclusions regarding this outcome suspect. Behaviorally focused items that focus on the distinctive elements of ethical, authentic, and servant leadership (i.e., compliance, self-concordance, and concern for multiple stakeholders, respectively) will minimize confounds, clarify causal relationships within each construct’s nomological network, and increase empirical differentiation among the three approaches to moral leadership.

Attention to the distinction of leader characteristics from leader behaviors may be especially important for servant leadership theory, which has consistently been conceptualized as a blend of leader characteristics (i.e., a servant leader is “servant first”) and behaviors (i.e., a servant who aspires to lead) (Greenleaf, 1977; Liden et al., 2008; van Dierendonck, 2011). In this respect, servant leadership items measuring both behaviors and characteristics are in conceptual alignment, but this broader theoretical categorization may create problems disentangling who a leader is and what a leader does. Hence, it may be useful to construct separate scales to assess servant leader characteristics and servant leader behaviors, which would enable empirical tests of whether the relationship between them is consistent with theory.

In sum, given the diversity of the elements with leadership’s broader influence process and the causal implications associated with leader characteristics, leader behavior, and leader effects, it is imperative to adopt more refined nomenclature and measure each definitional feature under leadership’s theoretical umbrella separately to increase the “definiteness of the components” (Cronbach & Meehl, 1955) within ethical, authentic, and servant leadership as well as their respective nomological networks. Sustained efforts to the contrary confound characteristics with behaviors and behaviors with their effects, creating dangerous threats to validity that undermine the utility of leadership research (van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013).
Capitalizing on Moral Foundations in Future Research

Beyond addressing and resolving issues in the empirical literature, the moral foundations underlying ethical, authentic, and servant leadership provide a foundation to examine many promising new research questions. The theoretical differences among deontology, virtue ethics, and consequentialism introduce opportunities to examine the fit among moral approaches to leadership, develop a more refined understanding of their joint impact on organizational and follower effectiveness, and advance philosophical theory through observing leader behaviors in organizations.

**Fit among moral forms of leadership.** Refining distinctions among ethical, authentic, and servant leadership based on their respective moral philosophies open theoretical avenues to debate whether leaders can hold multiple moral philosophies simultaneously and develop propositions about the potential effects of interactions between moral forms of leadership. The essence of these research questions is defining the nature of the relationships, in practice, among deontology, virtue ethics, and consequentialism. Are moral philosophies underlying the three moral approaches to leadership congruent such that they complement one another in building a grander, more holistic morality, or are they fundamentally opposed? Perhaps, the answer is not dichotomous and, instead, requires more nuanced questions such as the following: Where are the points of moral consonance (i.e., complementarity and consistency) among moral philosophies? Where are the points of moral dissonance (i.e., contradictions resulting in moral dilemmas)? Such questions are central to understanding three relational contexts associated with moral congruence: within-leader (with connections to leaders’ moral identity), leader–environment, and leader–follower moral congruence.

**Within-leader moral congruence.** Moral philosophies are not just abstract ethical theories because similar to how religions or political parties are ideals about how societies could and should function, leaders can attach significant emotional value onto moral philosophies, integrating them into their core identities. Existing leadership research contributes to research on moral philosophy by highlighting the identity work that occurs when people internalize these philosophies into who they are and the emotional valence that is attached to it as a result. Leaders’ emotional attachments to specific moral identities highlight why there might be tension between moral philosophies. Buying into one perspective often means not choosing, or even explicitly rejecting, other perspectives. Within the moral philosophy literature, these situations have been termed “moral dilemmas,” where individuals are forced to choose between two sets of actions derived from different moral philosophies (e.g., the trolley car dilemma). For anyone who has wrestled through or worked with these dilemmas, this is not just a cognitive or intellectual exercise. These questions reach the core of one’s moral identity and can lead to strongly emotional debates with others (or even within oneself). If, as proponents of ambidextrous leadership (Rosing, Frese, & Bausch, 2011), paradoxical leadership (Zhang, Waldman, Han, & Li, 2015), and enabling leadership (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018) suggest, leaders juxtapose paradoxical perspectives, to what degree are multiple moral philosophies tightly coupled or loosely coupled? The leadership domain is fertile ground to investigate and theoretically refine why there might be tensions between alternative moral approaches and the identity processes that hinder constructive debate around the value of each moral philosophy. Despite the theoretical richness in examining the interplay of and inherent tensions among multiple moral philosophies, our review of the ethical, authentic, and servant leadership literatures indicate that this opportunity has been squandered in favor of the tenuous assumption that moral forms of leadership are mostly interchangeable.

Moral dilemmas raise a question that is rarely examined throughout the leadership literature: “Can leaders employ more than one moral philosophy simultaneously?” It is logical to assume that a highly moral individual might prioritize compliance with standards, self-awareness and self-concordance, and stakeholders, but adhering to all three moral moorings is not necessarily assured. Some leaders might believe in following rules even if they do not believe in them; others might advocate for bending or breaking organizational norms in the service of stakeholder good; still others could lack strong feelings for compliance or compassion for stakeholders and, instead, be guided solely by their own instincts or deeply held philosophies or religious convictions. It is not difficult to imagine scenarios in which the three moral interests would align. For instance, individuals follow norms and standards in part because they honestly believe that they positively impact the people affected by them (Coleman, 1989). Other cases may be less straightforward, and might
involve conflicts among the leadership styles. Consider a case where an organization had an opportunity to move into the highly lucrative business of selling tobacco products in developing countries. The company and countries would likely have no norms or laws prohibiting this business venture, but the health outcomes for customers would be clear. The organization’s decisions might rely on which type of moral leadership is dominant. On a more microscale, imagine an employee who needed time off for a family emergency but lacked vacation or leave days. What that employee’s manager might believe is the right thing to do might differ with what would have the most positive impact on the employee, which in turn may not match the organization’s norms and policies. What does a moral leader do if telling the truth and representing him- or herself authentically would have negative implications for stakeholders, or result in his or her speaking against company norms and culture? In all of these cases, the type of morality evidenced by the moral leader becomes essential.

Although it may be possible for leaders to switch between moral philosophies over time and situations (e.g., using deontology in one situation and consequentialism in another), moral dilemmas may impede on their overall sense of moral coherence, consistency, and integrity (Simons, 2002). Leaders who use different moral principles in different situations—ethical in one situation and servant or authentic in the next—may adversely affect followers who seek behavioral consistency and predictability from their leaders. Moral dilemmas may create weak situations in which followers become confused by attempting to interpret the leader’s inconsistent ethical principles. Exploring interactions among different moral philosophies introduces interesting questions about followers’ interpretation and response to ethical behavior.

It has been assumed that moral leadership styles identify leaders who make moral decisions, but exactly what is moral is often subjective. For instance, in a case of declining profits, are layoffs more moral when they affect the smallest number of employees, or is an organization-wide pay decline more moral because no one is laid off? If the three approaches to morality are not orthogonal, then such situations raise questions as to moral trade-offs. If leaders are equally high in compliance-focused ethical leadership and community-focused stakeholder leadership, but they are forced to make a choice against one approach and in favor of the other, what ramifications would their choice have for their well-being and future behavior? Would followers perceive leaders as inconsistent and weak who are sometimes self-concordant but, in other cases, comply with company policies without personally believing in them? Would leaders be more likely to find compromises that retain elements of both moral perspectives? Beyond mere philosophical musings, such questions are of paramount importance in contexts such as organizational change, workforce reductions and layoffs, or corporate social responsibility (CSR) allocations, among others. A more nuanced investigation of how these three leadership approaches work together, or against each other, is needed to truly understand how moral leadership might affect such essential organizational outcomes.

Leader–environment moral congruence. Distinguishing moral leadership approaches by the content of their morality also introduces the importance of investigating fit, or contingency perspectives, to morality. Existing approaches to moral leadership are quite normative and morally absolutist in that they suggest one optimal moral behavioral pattern. However, a degree of relativity may exist such that certain approaches fit better within certain contexts. Different contexts differ in their emphasis on different moral content, including national cultures, political or religious climate, and industry or corporate cultures—all of which suggest a contingency perspective to moral leadership that is not as predominant in current research. Ethical leaders would be most sensitive to these contextual issues because of their awareness and prioritization of cultural and organizational norms (Brown et al., 2005; Brown & Mitchell, 2010). Authentic and servant leaders, though, would be expected to be far less concerned with such norms. Servant leaders would focus on stakeholder good regardless of expectations. This perspective is congruent with stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) in which organizational goals transcend mere profitability, a viewpoint that may or may not align with a company’s internal norms. Authentic leaders might be most strongly opposed to prevailing norms, given their high moral courage and belief in moral freedom; indeed, to more deontological cultures and environments, the authentic leader may well be viewed as an unpredictable “loose cannon.” Could ethical leaders, then, be the most effective at navigating differences among national and organizational cultures, whereas authentic leaders would struggle the most? If ethical leaders are open to different contextual demands and willing to switch to the current moral standards, then the answer is yes. It is plausible, however, that an ethical leader might be more absolutist
and even rigid in his or her adherence to one system of norms and expectations over another. The factors that make ethical leaders more or less likely to adapt their adopted norms, rules, and standards are worthy of study, especially in a cross-cultural context.

**Leader–follower moral congruence.** Followers themselves may form a similar contingency for the individual effects of each moral leadership approach. Although explicated at one or more points in time by great thinkers, the three moral philosophies have existed in various forms across different societies throughout history. Their prevalence, explicitly in culture and both consciously and subconsciously in cognition (Shafer-Landau, 2015), suggests that beyond their explicit formulation, these philosophies have and will continue to exist also on a more implicit level: fundamental assumptions about how societies should function that are not always questioned or well-thought out. Recognizing both the implicit and explicit nature of moral philosophies is important to understand their impact on leadership effectiveness. For instance, a leader may explicitly buy into a philosophy in thought or theory only to find him- or herself challenged in those beliefs by followers because they contradict more implicit assumptions (e.g., religious or political beliefs). Furthermore, a certain moral leadership approach may have little to no effect because specific followers (or larger groups) have implicit beliefs or schemas around what is right and wrong that are not easily challenged or changed. Opposing moral philosophies may even lead to counterproductive effects (e.g., conflicts, views that the other party is unethical), which might suggest that a moral leadership approach is undesirable.

In sum, depending on the belief system and moral philosophy of individual followers, the leader’s attempt to use one leadership style over another may fail. Our understanding of the role of followers in cocreating leadership is underdeveloped in general (Shamir, 2007; Uhl-Bien, Riggio, Lowe, & Carsten, 2014), but should be especially important in the area of moral leadership. Opposing moral views might diminish the effects of certain forms of leadership influence. Although more homogenous approaches to moral leadership research might suggest that a compliance-focused leader and a community-focused follower would find alignment in their equally strong moral identities, inconsistent moral content may instead precipitate conflict. Research from social psychology suggests that when individuals encounter others who use fundamentally different moral philosophies to guide behavior, we tend to judge those others as immoral, rather than simply using a different moral perspective (Haidt, 2001, 2012). Consider, for instance, an individual listening to a speech given by a member of an opposing political party. Such an individual is unlikely to consider the differing moral natures of individuals and give the speaker the benefit of the doubt in a moral assessment; instead, they are most likely to react intuitively to conclude that the speaker is immoral. In this manner, how would an authentic, virtue ethics-oriented follower react to an ethical or servant leader? Questions such as these demonstrate that moral leadership may serve as a double-edged sword.

**Trade-offs and negative effects associated with each moral approach to leadership.** New directions for research are also suggested by scholarship on the three approaches to normative morality. Consequentialism theorists, for example, ask what exactly is the most optimistic path to well-being—that is, whose outcomes should be prioritized, and by how much (Scheffler, 1988; Shafer-Landau, 2015)? Similarly, studies of servant leadership should examine how and whether it is possible for servant leaders to effectively balance organizational concerns with the goods of stakeholders such as customers, employees, and communities. Is such a balance among multiple stakeholders’ concerns plausible? If so, is there an optimal stakeholder balance that can be achieved for the overall good, such as the controversial concept “effective altruism” which has been proposed (but not empirically verified) as the most impactful form of utilitarian consequentialism (Gabriel, 2017; Singer, 2015)? Proponents of consequentialism and deontology are sometimes faced with the criticisms that their forms of morality suggest unjust actions and unintended outcomes, respectively (Baron et al., 1997; Shafer-Landau, 2015). Do these criticisms apply to servant and ethical leadership? Does the relative unpredictability of the virtue ethics approach, in that moral decision-makers are guided by self-concordance and authentic reflection rather than by consistent and predictable decision rules, have implications for the authentic leader? Might authentic leaders be viewed by followers or management as inconsistent, unpredictable, or unreliable? Virtue ethics scholars currently debate between Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian approaches, with the former advocating a single concordant and fulfilling set of virtues without conflict, and the latter arguing that there is no one best virtuous set of characteristics (Oakley, 1996). Are authentic
leaders, then, aligned in their virtues, or is there variation? If there is, what are the ramifications of these differences?

Leaders as a context to descriptively evaluate normative philosophical concepts. New directions for research within the moral leadership literature are plentiful, but additional opportunities arise in consideration of a cross-disciplinary approach. Whereas the leadership literature is often criticized for its overreliance on empiricism and absence of strong theory (e.g., van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013), the philosophy and ethics literatures are conversely in need of rigorous empiricism to test their many theories (Widdershoven & van der Scheer, 2008). In this manner, each of the two disciplines is well positioned to capitalize on the strengths of the other. A comprehensive listing of these opportunities is beyond the scope of this article, but we provide some examples to foreshadow the potential. For instance, many experts in the study of ethical philosophy feel that there is one objectively correct normative moral approach. In other words, they maintain that one theory best explains how individuals consider moral behavior (e.g., Baron et al., 1997). The organizational context provides an applied ethical environment from which to descriptively examine such normative questions. Do most managers make decisions based on norms and standards, based on outcomes and stakeholders, or based on their own self-concordant judgments? Of these three approaches, which is the most effective in terms of organizational success, team development, or more morally oriented outcomes? Our review suggests that the organizational context is an environment where different moral approaches can be present, even simultaneously, with distinct outcomes for each approach to moral leadership.

CONCLUSION

Although morality’s usefulness in the leadership domain has often been questioned (e.g., Mumford & Fried, 2014), our comparative review of the three dominant moral approaches (i.e., ethical, authentic, and servant leadership) clearly indicates that moral leadership behaviors positively impact a host of desirable organizationally relevant outcomes. This conclusion counters old critiques that issues of morality in leadership are unimportant (e.g., England & Lee, 1974; Rost, 1991; Thompson, 1956). To the contrary, moral forms of leadership have much potential to explain leadership’s influence in a manner substantially distinct from classical forms of leadership such as task-oriented, relationship-oriented, and change-oriented leadership (DeRue, Nahrgang, Wellman, & Humphrey, 2011; Yukl, Gordon, & Taber, 2002).

At the same time, our review indicates a need to further develop and refine our understanding of how morality influences leadership. In an attempt to establish criterion validity, the study of similar effects among different moral approaches has led to conceptual vagueness regarding their unique content. Most of the articles reviewed here exhibited high degrees of redundancy, adding little to our overall understanding of how and why the alignment of morality with leadership might be important. The continued study of similar outcomes and generic mechanisms, combined with inattention to core theory, suggests that moral leadership is falling prey to the same issues that have historically plagued leadership research (Nohria & Khurana, 2010; Rost, 1991; van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). However, our review of the theoretical foundations underlying different approaches to moral leadership, and a supporting body of empirical research aligned with distinct moral philosophies, offers signs of promise.

A leader’s morality can influence their leadership effectiveness in distinct ways. If leadership represents a relational process of influencing followers toward achieving collective goals, then moral forms of leadership suggest what those collective goals are and how they might best be reached. Followers can be inspired by a leader who advocates the highest common good for all and is motivated to contribute to that common good from an expectation of reciprocity (servant leadership; consequentialism). Followers can also be inspired by a leader who advocates the adherence to a set of standards or rules and is motivated to contribute to the clarity and safety this structure imposes for an orderly society (ethical leadership; deontology). Followers can also be inspired by a leader who advocates for moral freedom and corresponding responsibility and is motivated to contribute to this system in the knowledge that others will afford them their own moral autonomy (authentic leadership; virtue ethics).

These distinct leadership approaches to morality are all bounded by followers’ perceptions of, and implicit agreement with, what values and standards constitute moral behavior. Followers’ internal moral standards and implicit comparisons with those of their leaders introduce a significant challenge for moral approaches to leadership. What is seen as moral to one set of followers may be seen as immoral by another set of followers. This conflict suggests
that leaders who invoke morality to influence their followers should take care in doing so—specifically with awareness of alternative approaches to morality. The tensions between the multiple approaches to morality may mean that some benefits are reaped but others are lost, and that some followers are convinced (those adhering to the same moral philosophy) but others distance themselves. Do these moral leadership tensions suggest leaders should avoid the conflict altogether and be agnostic concerning issues of morality? Decidedly not! Morality in organizations matters for leaders and those being led, and many important and practically useful research questions remain to be addressed. But based on our review, a more nuanced and more careful approach to moral leadership is warranted.

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G. James Lemoine (jlemoine@buffalo.edu) is an Assistant Professor at the School of Management at the University at Buffalo (State University of New York), and a researcher with the UB Center for Leadership and Organizational Effectiveness. He primarily studies issues related to leadership, ethics, creativity, research methods, and how they do and don’t play nicely together.

Chad Hartnell (chartnell@gsu.edu) is an Assistant Professor at the J. Mack Robinson College of Business at Georgia State University. He is interested in leadership and the organization’s social context. His research examines how leadership and organizational culture interrelate and the intervening mechanisms through which they influence organization, group, and individual effectiveness.

Hannes Leroy (leroy@rsm.nl) is an Associate Professor at the Rotterdam School of Management and Academic Director of the Erasmus Center for Leadership. He is interested in authenticity – the extent to which one remains true to oneself – at work: whether individuals feel authentic, are perceived as authentic, and encouraged to be authentic, particularly in a role of leadership.