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# John R. Wooden, Stephen R. Covey and Servant Leadership

A Response to Commentaries

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## INTRODUCTION

I would like to thank the following colleagues who provided insightful and provocative commentaries on the target article: Mark Hamilton and William Vaughan, Barry Posner, Dave Ulrich, Danny Mielke, Simon Robinson, Rick Hackett and Gordon Wang, Andrew Mullins, Douglas Hochstetler, Heather Reid, Jim McKenna, Chad Carlson, Sharon Stoll, Jon Hammermeister, and Tim Elcombe.

Hamilton and Vaughan argue that it is likely that elements of servant leadership and paternalism emerged at different stages of Wooden's career (p. 26). This is reflected in his "wide curiosity about life and his willingness to learn from the past" (p. 26). In his latter years, Wooden lived out his principles more fully and was open to the process of sanctification; i.e., he was "working out his salvation with fear and trembling" (p. 26).

Like Hamilton, Posner emphasizes that all human lives involve a complex journey; "life is not a journey along either a single or very straightforward pathway" (p. 29). In terms of Wooden being considered one of the greatest coaches (leaders) of all time, Posner points to the finding in his workplace research that shows the importance of "how clear [direct reports] feel their leaders are about their leadership philosophy" (p. 30).

While Posner articulates "the enduring legacy of leadership" in terms of how leaders "transform their followers into leaders themselves" (p. 30) - and it can be seen how many of Wooden's former players became successful leaders - Ulrich argues that "real leadership is what happens when the leader is not around" and "Wooden and Covey's ideas have far outlived each individual because their ideas enable others to find their success" (p. 32).

For Ulrich the "holy grail of leadership" may be found by a person looking in to find oneself, looking outside to influence others, and looking up to find one's *purpose* (p. 32; emphasis added). Mielke argues to become "a servant leader/coach with guiding principles that are spiritually connected and morally driven requires one to *purposefully* make choices to develop the traits necessary to serve others" (p. 35; emphasis added), and these are choices that both Wooden and Covey made early in their lives. On the matter of spirituality, Robinson notes that the "acceptance of an implied religious spirituality" is "something not totally resolved in Wooden or Covey" (p. 37).

Hackett and Wang argue that "[cardinal] virtues [such as courage, justice, humanity, temperance, wisdom and transcendence] may be especially important to the effectiveness of leaders since they are expected to be *role models* who motivate and direct others toward achieving common goals" (p. 39; emphasis added). Mullins examines what Aristotle meant

by describing someone as virtuous, and with regard to character formation he notes that both Wooden and Covey understood that “there is a back door that we all need to use to catch up on qualities that we did not learn when we were young” (p. 42):

Wooden in particular knew intuitively that his level of demand on himself set the limits on the development of his “boys”. John Paul II wrote “My father never had to be tough on me because he was so tough on himself.” Wooden shared the wisdom of John Paul’s father. Few effective *role models* set themselves up to be so, but they do accept the responsibility when it presents itself. (p. 42; emphasis added)

In noting the influence on Wooden of his wife, parents, teachers and coaches, Hochstetler draws attention to the challenge that coaches face in “drawing from the beliefs, strategies, and mindset of others without becoming a complete copy” and cites the example of football coach John Gagliardi who “took the philosophy demonstrated by his coach and decided to do the complete opposite!” (p. 46).

Given that virtue is learned mostly through example, Reid wonders “why Wooden seems to have put more effort into listing the virtues in a Pyramid rather than displaying them himself – at least in the early part of his career”:

But it would be just as wrong to expect a coach to be a perfect example of virtue as it would be to expect athletes to learn virtue through a single example. In practice, virtues are learned in communities. So rather than thinking of coaches as teachers of virtue – through example, or theory, or pyramids, or successful habits – we might think of them as leaders who set up communities within which virtue may be cultivated. (p. 50)

Like Reid, McKenna is also sceptical about the value of Wooden’s Pyramid – “even allowing for their heuristic value” (p. 54) – in terms of leadership development

McKenna makes a link between role models and research in cognitive psychology on how leaders and followers understand the world and process information (see [1, p. 426-428]). Carlson indicates that in Aristotle’s time, “one’s *role models* would be elder statesmen – those individuals who had served their city-state with dignity”, and that today successful coaches “become the models of virtue we idolize” (p. 58; emphasis added).

Although Wooden lived his life virtuously, Carlson argues that this does not mean he was a servant leader. Stoll argues that Wooden was a servant leader, even “though obviously at times [he was] a paternalistic figure” (p. 63). Hammermeister argues that “Wooden’s genius was more paternalistic in nature and not a pure servant leader approach” (p. 67). Elcombe agrees with the conclusion of the target article that Wooden is best classified as a paternalistic leader rather than a servant leader (p. 69). However, Elcombe challenges the “pragmatic value” of “the leadership ideologies crafted and advanced by Wooden and Covey – particularly the principled, virtue theory account which underlies both approaches” (p. 69). While Reid points out that “[a] good leader needs to find the right balance between authority and permissiveness to create an environment where virtue may grow” (p. 51), Elcombe contends that Wooden “exhibited pragmatic tendencies himself when confronted by hard cases [such as Bill Walton]” (p. 69), and that Wooden engaged in “a process of self-discovery and contextual awareness” (p. 72) The remainder of this response-to-commentaries will discuss pragmatism.

## PRAGMATISM

Elcombe argues that another legendary basketball coach, Phil Jackson, was “pragmatic in his orientation when confronted with complex, challenging situations” (p. 71). In arguing that Wooden was similarly pragmatic, Elcombe notes that Wooden “relented to players such as Bill Walton when issues were contemplated in a wider context” and that he “continuously reaffirmed his preference over time to reduce the number of rules imposed upon his players” (p. 72).

Using situational leadership theory, Palestini [2] argued that “there were times when [Wooden] compromised some of his minor principles in order to maintain harmony”:

[Wooden] readily acknowledged that Bill Walton required special care because he seemed to live two lives – the All-American, coachable player and the anti-establishment protester. Suffice to say that John Wooden most likely employed political leadership behaviour when it was appropriate to do so. [2, p. 199]

Palestini also makes reference to an instance when Phil Jackson “compromised his principles” in a political context [2, p. 63]. Palestini uses Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal’s situational leadership theory which analyses leadership behaviour through four frames of reference: structural, human resource, political, and symbolic [2, p. 13]. In this theory, “appropriate [leadership] behaviour depends on the circumstances at a given time”; “no single way of leading works in all situations” [2, p. 50]. Making reference to Hersey et al’s [3] situational leadership theory, Gardiner [4] states that “Hersey, Blanchard, and Johnson’s emphasis on task and relationship – and the leader’s use of each determined by situation – appealed to American pragmatists” [4].

## PRAGMATISM IN AMERICAN POLITICS

In everyday life, the term ‘pragmatist’ may be used in a complimentary manner to describe a person who ‘gets results’ [5, p. 1]. It may also be used in a pejorative manner to describe a person (particularly a politician) who will do whatever it takes to success regardless of principle [5, p. 1]: “Politicians and pundits see pragmatism as the essence of American politics – the art of the possible, rooted in our aversion to ideology and our genius for compromise” [5, p. 2].

Kloppenberg [6] distinguishes between “vulgar pragmatism” – which is “merely an instinctive hankering for what is possible in the short term” and “philosophical pragmatism”, which “challenges the claims of absolutists – whether their dogmas are rooted in science or religion – and instead embraces uncertainty, provisionality, and the continuous testing of hypotheses through experimentation” [6, xxxiv]; “a method for testing beliefs in experience<sup>1</sup> rather than measuring them against a yardstick of unchanging absolutes” [6, p. xxxv]. Kloppenberg examines how the philosophical pragmatism of William James and John Dewey informs the political views of Barack Obama<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Kloppenberg [7] notes that for James and Dewey experience involved not only language but also “interpersonal, aesthetic, spiritual, religious, and other prelinguistic or non-linguistic forms of experience” [7, p. 104] and that experience was conceived not as introspection but rather as “the intersection of the conscious self with the world” [7, p. 102]: “They conceived of experience as intrinsically and irreducibly meaningful, and they insisted that its meanings were not predetermined or deducible from any all-encompassing pattern. They argued that meanings emerge as cultures test their values in practice that we encounter expressions of those meanings in the historical record” [7, p. 104].

## ABRAHAM LINCOLN

Siemers [11] described Abraham Lincoln's political analysis as "principled pragmatism" in that "he continually assessed political context to appropriately prioritize among his political principles to best realize them in the long run" [11, p. 807]. In a similar vein, Pritchard [12] states:

[Lincoln] *compromised on approach, not principle*, regarding slavery. He dealt with his society where it was at the time and worked from there. Initially he sought to prevent slavery's spread to the territories. Then as circumstances changed – secession by the southern states – his goal became preservation of the Union. And then as the Civil War progressed, circumstances changed again and he issued the Emancipation Proclamation. So he was pragmatic yet principled in his approach. [12, p. 30; emphasis added]

What Pritchard [12] states above regarding 'approach' draws attention to the distinction between 'means' and 'ends' in debates about pragmatism along with the related concept of 'expediency' (used in a pejorative sense; i.e., "what is done out of self-interest or because it is most convenient rather than the best solution" [13]). Silver's [14] view resonates with that of Pritchard [12]:

Lincoln's prudence, like that of all great statesmen, was not ideological in character. It operated with a certain latitude or flexibility of means, yet always within a fixed moral horizon, in the absence of which it would have been unintelligible. The problem with pragmatism is that it wrongly extends the latitude and flexibility that the prudent statesman exercises in the realm of *means* to the realm of *ends*. In doing so, it reduces all human ends to mere preferences or subjective values and thus renders unintelligible democracy itself. [14; emphases added]

And here is what Barack Obama states about Lincoln:

We remember [Lincoln] for the firmness and depth of his convictions – his unyielding opposition to slavery and his determination that a house divided could not stand. But his presidency was guided by a practicality that would distress us today, a practicality that led him to test various bargains with the South in order to maintain the Union without war; to appoint and discard general after general, strategy after strategy once war broke out; to stretch the Constitution to the breaking point in order to see the war through to a successful conclusion. I like to believe that for Lincoln, *it was never a matter of abandoning conviction for the sake of expediency*. Rather it was a matter of maintaining within himself the balance between two contradictory ideas – that we must talk and reach for common understandings, precisely because all of us are imperfect and can never act with the certainty that God is on our side, and yet at times we must act nonetheless, as if we are certain, protected from error only by providence. [9, 97-98; emphasis added]<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Kitson [8] notes that Obama mentions neither pragmatism nor pragmatist philosophers in *The Audacity of Hope* [9], and that "by his own account in *Dreams from My Father* [10], Obama's worldview, however much it accords with "philosophical pragmatism," evolved in the distinct circumstances of his personal struggle to find where he belonged in America" [8].

On the matter of expediency, Dickstein [17] notes how Randolph Bourne in his 1917 article, “Twilight of the Idols” [18] criticized John Dewey’s pragmatic justification of America joining World War I as showing Dewey’s “concern with technique and efficiency at the expense of consistent values” [17, p. 8]:

To those of us who have taken Dewey’s philosophy almost as our American religion, it never occurred that values could be subordinated to technique. We were instrumentalists, but we had our private utopias so clearly before our minds that the means fell always into its place as contributory. And Dewey, of course, always meant his philosophy, when taken as a philosophy of life, to start with values. But there was always that unhappy ambiguity in his doctrine as to just how values were created, and it became easier and easier to assume that just any growth was justified and almost any activity valuable so long as it achieved ends. The American, in living out his philosophy, has habitually confused results with product, and been content with getting somewhere without asking too closely whether it was the desirable place to get. [18, p. 343]

Diggins [19] regards Lincoln as a “philosopher president” [19, p. 34; cited in 11, p. 806]: “the texture of [Lincoln’s] thought was ultimately universalist and essentialist; he believed that humanity had certain qualities and endowments that applied to all people everywhere” [19, p. 36; cited in 11, p. 806]:

As a *politician*, Lincoln was a pragmatist willing to adjust to events and to adapt different policies to different circumstances, ever ready to revise positions based on new developments, and determined not to see America bound by the dead hand of history. As a *philosopher*, however, Lincoln was a moralist and even an absolutist, unswerving in his belief that natural rights are inalienable and hence inviolable, that the Republic’s founding principles have the capacity, if properly understood, to remain immune to change, and the meaning of right and wrong is not relative and dependent upon time and place. [19, p. 37; emphases added]

Diggins [19] argues that Lincoln’s philosophy would not have concorded with the American Pragmatism that arose in the late nineteenth century:

Pragmatism insisted then, and persists in claiming now, that there is no knowledge outside of experience. But to Lincoln values are born of remembrance, not forthcoming experience. The pragmatists minimized the importance of the historical past because only the present and future – the true “experience” in their view – could be acted upon and changed. ... Lincoln, in contrast, sought to have Americans re-enact the past in imagination so that the Spirit of ’76 would not fade from memory. [19, p. 37]

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<sup>3</sup> These words of Obama were quoted by Schulten [15] who argued that “Obama’s approach to politics draws on Lincoln’s sense of Constitution and Dewey’s concept of value” [15, p. 808]. However, Brinkley [16], who also draws on this passage from Obama, believes that “Obama is perhaps only a halfway pragmatist – he still has at least one foot in the soil of moral conviction” [16].

### CHARLES PEIRCE

According to Putnam [20], “That one can be both fallibilistic and antisceptical is perhaps *the* basic insight of American Pragmatism” [20, p. 21; emphasis original]. This can be understood through Charles S. Peirce’s objections to Descartes’ philosophy, in particular his cable metaphor:

[In response to Descartes’ claim that reasoning should be thought of as a single chain of inference leading back to epistemically basic intuitions (cognitions not inferred from other cognitions) Peirce argues that knowledge should be thought of rather as a collection of mutually supporting beliefs. Inquiry is not built up step by step from a single premise but is the result of many different findings: philosophy’s ‘reasoning should not form a chain which is no stronger than its weakest link, but a cable whose fibres may be ever so slender, provided they are sufficiently numerous and intimately connected’ [21, p. 29]. The cable metaphor captures the combination of *fallibilism* and *anti-scepticism* that he thinks so important, for although any particular finding might be erroneous, this does not invalidate the entire structure of knowledge. [5, p. 20-21; emphases added]

For Peirce, pragmatism was a method for attaining clarity of ideas within the norms of a community of continuing, self-correcting inquiry directed toward truth, which is “that opinion the community would reach, given sufficient inquiry, and which is known fallibly by individuals” [22]. Peirce’s pragmatic maxim has been described as “a rule designed to clarify our conceptions by directly relating them to experience” with these conceptions being anchored within *conceivable* practical action [23]<sup>4</sup>.

### JOHN DEWEY

Unlike Peirce, pragmatists from James and Dewey onwards have tended to see a relationship between pragmatism and everyday practical concerns:

Peirce trained as a laboratory scientist, is primarily interested in the implications the experimental methods of inquiry might have for philosophy, distinguishing sharply between the interests which motivate scientific inquiry and the concerns of everyday life. He holds that the method of science has no relevance to political questions, and insists on the importance of distinguishing the pursuit of truth from the pursuit of good for society. Dewey, in contrast, commends the application of the method of science to all areas of human life. [5, p. 6-7]

Bernstein [24] uses a metaphor of the craftsman to describe the process of experimental inquiry in which “there is a reconstruction involving a continuous interaction between the craftsman and the subject matter that he is transforming”: “The craftsman perfects his art, not by comparing his product to some “ideal” model, but by the cumulative results of experience – experience which benefits from tried and tested procedures, but always involves risk and

<sup>4</sup> “The term “conceivable” marks the difference between Peirce’s and James’s pragmatic maxims. In reducing Peirce’s “conceivable consequences” to consequences, James seemed not to understand why conceivable consequences are not exhausted by actual instance, and why “pragmatic,” in the philosophical sense, is very different from “practical,” in the everyday sense. ...The pragmatic meaning of a stop sign is that it will determine the consequences in general, and not simply the individual autos which stop. It is also the autos which would stop, that is, the conceivable consequences.” [22]



novelty” [24, p. 219].

Rodgers [25] states that for Dewey “the purpose of education was the intellectual, moral, and emotional growth of the individual and, consequently the evolution of a democracy” [25, p. 845]. For Dewey, democracy is not only a form of government, but a way of life and a moral ideal [25, p. 223]. From an examination of Dewey’s *How We Think* [26] and *Democracy and Education* [27], Rodgers [25] concludes that the following six phases of reflection consistently appear in what is a process of experimentation involving “interactions between the self, others, and one’s environment” and “in turn serves as the next experience from which learning can continue” [25, p. 863]:

1. An experience;
2. Spontaneous interpretation of the experience;
3. Naming the problem(s) or the question(s) that arises out of the experience;
4. Generating possible explanations for the problem(s) or question(s) posed;
5. Ramifying the explanations into full-blown hypotheses;
6. Experimenting or testing the selected hypothesis. [25, p. 851]

Making reference to Dewey [26], Ermeling [28] argues that the process that John Wooden used “to systematically improve his teaching of basketball over a period of three decades” provides “a unifying and compelling illustration of the potential of the inquiry-based approach for any pedagogical context” [28, p. 197]. From a review of the classroom education literature, Ermeling [28] used four key features that were shared by three “thoroughly documented models of professional inquiry focused on improving classroom instruction – Japanese lesson study, action research, and the Getting Results model”:

- #1 Identifying and defining important instructional problems specific to the local context
- #2 Preparing and implementing detailed instructional plans
- #3 Utilizing evidence to drive reflection, analysis, next steps
- #4 Persistently working toward detectable improvements, specific cause-effect findings about teaching and learning [28]

Drawing from Nater and Gallimore [29], Ermeling [28] showed how Wooden demonstrated each of these features; for example #3:

[Wooden] kept a record of every practice in a loose-leaf notebook for future reference and prior to practice he had each plan typed on a 3 x 5 index card which he distributed to all the coaches and managers. Once the practice or lesson started he followed the plan as faithfully as possible and then used the back of these 3 x 5 cards to note observations, ideas, and improvements. After practice, he and his coaching staff would meet to review notes and observations and to make decisions regarding future planning and implementation efforts. [28, p. 201]

## PEIRCE’S COSMOLOGY

Bernstein [24] notes that few philosophers have developed the categorical scheme from Peirce’s 1893 essay “Evolutionary Love” [30] [24, p. 198] in which he regards Christianity as diametrically opposed to economics and Darwinian social principles [31] and which also had for Peirce “a cosmic significance, which Peirce associated with the doctrine of the



Gospel of John and with the mystical ideas of Swedenborg and Henry James [32]:

Two gospels are current in our day. One is the gospel of Christ. It proclaims that God is Love; that Love it is that is the creative, the vivifying, the evolutionary principles of the universe; and that if we can only enter into the spirit of Love, so as to see how it acts and to put our trust in it, then we shall be able to bring about a new stage of man's development. The other gospel is the gospel of political economy and of natural selection. It teaches that the great engine of all advances, the redeemer of the world, is the combination of bestial passion, ruthless selfishness, and famine to exterminate the weak. Now there are plenty of people in this world silly enough to try to accept both gospels together. [33, p. 35, cited in 31]

The Love that Peirce refers to is Christian agape and his conception of evolutionary processes – chance, mechanism, and higher purpose – he names, respectively, tychasm, anacasm, and agapasm [31].

Elcombe [34] brings together Peirce's concepts of evolutionary processes and fallibilism to distinguish *tychastic* coaches (no teleology; pure spontaneity is unbounded by any constraints) [34, p. 93], *anancastic* coaches (fixed teleologies; mechanical style determined by necessity) [34, p. 94] and *agapastic* coaches (dialectic of spontaneity and constraint; teams/athletes have histories that create order and regular habits but do not negate the possibility of the need for spontaneity) [34, p. 98]. Elcombe's starting point is that it is "shallow and narrow" to regard 'coaching philosophies' in the "ever-changing sport world" as "fixed and unwavering ideological commitments" [34, p. 90] and that the philosophy of Peirce, James and Dewey can be used as a method "to critically examine and subsequently reconstruct the beliefs, values and ideas that fund our lives" [34, p. 91]. Elcombe argues for "the advantages of an agapastic approach to coaching based on Peirce's conception of evolution through creative love" [34, p. 90] with particular emphasis on "a fixed telos" being replaced by "the certainty of love, no matter the outcome" [34, p. 100]:

Peirce pointed to St. John's Golden Rule. Peirce believed this adage captured the true evolutionary philosophy: "growth comes only from love, from – I will not say self-sacrifice, but from the ardent impulse to fulfil another's highest impulse" [30]. Only love could stimulate and account for the evolution of the universe: "Love, recognizing germs of loveliness in the hateful, gradually warms it into life, and makes it lovely" [30] ... Through the transaction between spontaneity and constraint, agapastic evolution incorporates relationality, growth, and a developmental teleology. Functions and purposes, transitions and boundaries, sequence and hierarchies always at once play a role in Peirces' conception of agapasm. ... Only through risk can athletes grow. Limits must be probed and redefined; habits must be transformed and reconstructed; objectives must be sought and refined – all without guarantees. Consequently coaches must be 'prepared', must be knowledgeable, and must be willing to risk as well while providing unconditional love: agapasm. [34, p. 96; 97; 100]

Wooden's concept of "love" (see p. 16 in the target article), which is based on that of Amos Alonzo Stagg, aligns well with the "unconditional love" that Elcombe refers to above, which is based on Peirce's agapasm.

As indicated in the target article (p. 2) Abraham Lincoln was Wooden's favourite

American. Inspired by “Lincoln’s insistence on living simply and honestly” [35], Wooden regarded Lincoln as “strong and caring” [36] and (like Mother Teresa, who is the person in his lifetime Wooden has most admiration and respect for) “interested in mankind as a whole and not themselves” [36]:

I’ve been called a common man. He had love for everybody. He had as much sympathy for the Southerners who had lost their lives as for the Northerners who had lost their lives [in the Civil War]. And his Gettysburg address is one of the greatest things ever written. And I think his second inaugural address – “With malice toward no one, with charity for all” – was really something. At the end of the terrible war, when they were discussing reparations to the South, the Secretary of State, who was critical of Mr. Lincoln, said, “Your supposed to destroy your enemies, not make friends of them.” And his answer was, “Am I not destroying the enemy when I make a friend of him?” That’s a statement. [36]

## CONCLUSION

Carlson argues that Wooden’s main leadership style was that of a teacher and his leadership was based on “a relatively rigid structure of moral pedagogy that inculcated the type of hard work and self-discipline...that would breed success in his players and others around him” (p. 58). Elcombe challenges the pragmatic value of “principled accounts of moral leadership” (p. 69) (including those based on virtue ethics) and concluded that Wooden “exhibited pragmatic tendencies” when confronted with “hard cases” (p. 69) such as Bill Walton “when issues were contemplated in a wider context” (p. 72). Consider the following passage from a *Sports Illustrated* article [37] which highlights the “wider context” during Walton’s era of playing for UCLA and seems to say something not only about Wooden’s “relatively rigid structure of moral pedagogy”, but also perhaps his “pragmatic tendencies”:

Wooden’s greatest achievement isn’t the 10 in 12, or seven in a row, although such a feat will surely never be accomplished again. It is rather that he did all this during the roily years from 1964 to ’75 – an era in which 18-to-22 year-old males were at their most contrary – at UCLA, a big-city campus awash in the prevailing freedoms. Your star player lies down in rush-hour traffic to protest the Vietnam War. (Stand up for what you believe, Bill Walton’s coach always said, but be willing to accept the consequences.) ..... Former UCLA center Steve Patterson remembers the day, in the fall of 1970, that he and forward Sidney Wicks asked to be excused from practice to show solidarity with a nationwide rally protesting the Vietnam War. “He asked us if this reflected our convictions, and we told him it did,” says Patterson. “He told us he had his convictions, too, and if we missed practice it would be the end of our careers at UCLA. ...

[In Walton’s final year Wooden] relaxed some of the inviolable principles on which he had always insisted. He excused Walton from practice on Mondays and Tuesdays because of the center’s aching knees. Detecting inconsistency, the team took advantage. That March...UCLA squandered a seven-point led in the second overtime of the NCAA semifinals and lost to North Carolina State. “Bill was such a megastar he probably didn’t need to practice,” says Lee. “But maybe the team needed him to practice.” ...The next season, with the Bruins again playing on his exacting terms, they became champions once more. [37]

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