

**KETS DE VRIES LIBRARY**

# **THE PATH TO AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP**

**DANCING WITH THE OUROBOROS**



**MANFRED F. R. KETS DE VRIES**

# The Palgrave Kets de Vries Library

Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries, Distinguished Professor of Leadership and Development and Organizational Change at INSEAD, is one of the world's leading thinkers on leadership, coaching, and the application of clinical psychology to individual and organizational change.

Palgrave's professional business list operates at the interface between academic rigor and real-world implementation. Professor Kets de Vries's work exemplifies that perfect combination of intellectual depth and practical application and Palgrave is proud to bring almost a decade's worth of work together in the Palgrave Kets de Vries Library.

Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries

# The Path to Authentic Leadership

Dancing with the Ouroboros

palgrave  
macmillan

Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries  
Kets De Vries Et Associees  
Paris, France

ISSN 2730-7581

ISSN 2730-759X (electronic)

The Palgrave Kets de Vries Library

ISBN 978-3-031-04698-8

ISBN 978-3-031-04699-5 (eBook)

<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-04699-5>

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2023

This work is subject to copyright. All rights are solely and exclusively licensed by the Publisher, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed.

The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use.

The publisher, the authors and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made. The publisher remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG. The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

# Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction: Dancing with the Ouroboros</b>	<b>1</b>
	Time, Rebirth, and the Ouroboros	1
	Being Twice Born	3
	Our Character Armor	5
	The Red Thread	6
	Spinning Our Fate	11
<b>2</b>	<b>Covid and the Seven Deadly Sins</b>	<b>13</b>
	Leadership Virtues Post Pandemic	19
<b>3</b>	<b>Evil: Reality and Imagination</b>	<b>21</b>
	The Ambiguity of Evil	23
	Obedience to Authority	24
	Group Dynamics	26
	The Dark Psyche	28
	Nurture and Nature	28
	Preventing Evil	29
	Mental Acrobatics	30
	What Is Moral?	30
	Creating a Secure Base	32

Don't Be a Bystander	36
Societal Considerations	36
Avoiding the Darkness	38
<b>4    The Psychology of White-Collar Criminals</b>	<b>41</b>
Introduction	41
The Fraud Triangle	44
The People Equation	46
The Greed Factor	46
Low Behavioral Self-Control	47
Narcissistic Disposition	47
Corporate Psychopathy	48
Neuro-criminology	49
Ways of Prevention	49
Corporate Culture	51
Leadership Development	51
Entry and Exit	52
<i>Control Systems</i>	52
The Perfect Crime	52
<b>5    The Dance Macabre of Shame</b>	<b>55</b>
Shame and the Human Condition	56
Shame vs. Guilt	58
An Evolutionary Perspective	58
The Psychological Perspective	59
Overcoming Shame	60
A Master Emotion	66
<b>6    Catching the Thief of Time: The Perils of Procrastination</b>	<b>67</b>
Introduction	67
The Procrastinator Test	68
Contributing Variables to Procrastination	69
Character Types	71
Behavioral Recommendations	72
Too Big a Task	73
Lack of Self-Control	73

	Time Management	74
	Recognize Busyness	74
	Have Some Fun	75
	What's Happening Under the Surface?	75
	Perfectionism	75
	A Highly Critical Superego	77
<b>7</b>	<b>The Inner Theater of the Super-Rich</b>	<b>81</b>
	Introduction	81
	Becoming a Billionaire	83
	The Inner Theater	84
	The Dark Dyad Revisited	89
	Managing Wealth	91
<b>8</b>	<b>To Hell with Charisma</b>	<b>93</b>
	Introduction	93
	The Darker Side of Charisma	95
	Charisma and Transference	98
	A Lack of Philosopher-Kings	99
	The Importance of Civil Education	101
<b>9</b>	<b>Transformation Challenges</b>	<b>105</b>
<b>10</b>	<b>Creating Emotionally Intelligent Organizations</b>	<b>115</b>
<b>11</b>	<b>Magic and Management</b>	<b>123</b>
	Historical Musings	124
	The Allure of Pseudoscience	125
	The Need to Manage Uncertainty	126
	Singularity and Lack of Specificity	127
	Human Gullibility	127
	Astrology's Darker Side	129
	A More Empowered Way to Go Through Life	129



<b>12</b>	<b>Kōans as Agents of Change</b>	133
	Negative Capability	133
	Ambiguity in Action	134
	What Had Happened?	135
	Opening the Mind Through Not-Knowing	136
	Preventing Early Closure and Allowing for Ambiguity	138
	Wrestling with Kōans	139
	Learning, Unlearning, and Relearning	143
	Getting You, the Reader, More Stuck	146
	Ending the Circle	149
<b>13</b>	<b>Concluding Remarks</b>	151
	The Transformative Self	151
	Creative Destruction	155
	<b>Index</b>	159

## About the Author

**Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries** brings a different view to the much-studied subjects of leadership and the psychological dimensions of individual and organizational change. Bringing to bear his knowledge and experience of economics (Econ. Drs., University of Amsterdam), management (ITP, MBA, and DBA, Harvard Business School), and psychoanalysis (Membership Canadian Psychoanalytic Society, Paris Psychoanalytic Society, and the International Psychoanalytic Association), he explores the interface between management science, psychoanalysis, developmental psychology, evolutionary psychology, neuroscience, psychotherapy, executive coaching, and management consulting. His specific areas of interest are leadership (the “bright” and “dark” sides), entrepreneurship, career dynamics, talent management, family business, cross-cultural management, succession planning, organizational and individual stress, C-suite team building, executive coaching, organizational development, transformation management, and management consulting.

As the Distinguished Clinical Professor of Leadership Development and Organizational Change at INSEAD, he is Program Director of INSEAD’s top management program, “The Challenge of Leadership: Creating Reflective Leaders,” and the Founder of INSEAD’s Executive Master Program in Change Management. He has also been the founder of INSEAD’s Global Leadership Center. Furthermore, he has been a world-renowned pioneer in team coaching. As an educator, he has

received INSEAD's distinguished MBA teacher award six times. He has held professorships at McGill University, the École des Hautes Études Commerciales, the European School for Management and Technology (ESMT), and the Harvard Business School. He has lectured at management institutions around the world. The *Financial Times*, *Le Capital*, *Wirtschaftswoche*, and *The Economist* have rated Manfred Kets de Vries among the world's leading management thinkers and among the most influential contributors to human resource management.

Kets de Vries is the author, co-author, or editor of more than 50 books, including *The Neurotic Organization*; *Organizational Paradoxes*; *Struggling with the Demon: Perspectives on Individual and Organizational Irrationality*; *Leaders, Fools and Impostors*; *Life and Death in the Executive Fast Lane*; *Prisoners of Leadership*; *The Leadership Mystique*; *The Happiness Equation*; *Are Leaders Made or Are They Born?: The Case of Alexander the Great*; *The New Russian Business Elite*; *Leadership by Terror: Finding Shaka Zulu in the Attic*; *The Leader on the Couch*; *The Family Business on the Couch*; *Sex, Money, Happiness, and Death: The Quest for Authenticity*, *Reflections on Leadership and Character*; *Reflections on Leadership and Career*; *Reflections on Organizations*; *The Coaching Kaleidoscope*; *The Hedgehog Effect: The Secrets of High Performance Teams*; *Mindful Leadership Coaching: Journeys into the Interior*; *You Will Meet a Tall Dark Stranger: Executive Coaching Challenges*; *Telling Fairy Tales in the Boardroom: How to Make Sure Your Organization Lives Happily Ever After*; *Riding the Leadership Roller Coaster: A Psychological Observer's Guide*; *Down the Rabbit Hole of Leadership: Leadership Pathology of Everyday Life*; *The CEO Whisperer: Meditations on Leaders, Life and Change*; *Quo Vadis: The Existential Challenges of Leaders*; *Leadership Unhinged: Essays on the Ugly, the Bad, and the Weird*; *Leading Wisely: Becoming a Reflective Leader in Turbulent Times*; and *The Daily Perils of Executive Life: How to Survive When Dancing on Quicksand*. Furthermore, he has designed various 360-degree feedback instruments, including the widely used *Global Executive Leadership Mirror* and the *Organizational Culture Audit*.

In addition, Kets de Vries has published more than 400 academic papers as chapters in books and as articles. He has also written approximately 100 case studies, including seven that received the Best Case of

the Year award. Furthermore, he has written hundreds of mini articles (blogs) for the Harvard Business Review, INSEAD Knowledge, and other digital outlets. He is also a regular writer for various magazines. His work has been featured in such publications as *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Fortune*, *Business Week*, *The Economist*, the *Financial Times*, and the *Harvard Business Review*. His books and articles have been translated into more than thirty languages.

Furthermore, Kets de Vries is a member of seventeen editorial boards and is a Fellow of the Academy of Management. In addition, he is on the board of a number of charitable organizations. He is also a founding member of the International Society for the Psychoanalytic Study of Organizations (ISPSO), which has honored him as a lifetime member. In addition, Kets de Vries is the first non-US recipient of the International Leadership Association Lifetime Achievement Award for his contributions to leadership research and development (being considered one of the world's founding professionals in the development of leadership as a field and discipline). He received a Lifetime Achievement Award from Germany for his advancement of executive education. The American Psychological Association has honored him with the "Harry and Miriam Levinson Award" for his contributions to Organizational Consultation. Furthermore, he is the recipient of the "Freud Memorial Award" for his work to further the interface between management and psychoanalysis. In addition, he has also received the "Vision of Excellence Award" from the Harvard Institute of Coaching. Kets de Vries is the first beneficiary of INSEAD's Dominique Héau Award for "Inspiring Educational Excellence." He is also the recipient of three honorary doctorates. The Dutch government has made him an Officer in the Order of Oranje Nassau.

Kets de Vries works as a consultant on organizational design/transformation and strategic human resource management for companies worldwide. As an educator and consultant, he has worked in more than forty countries. In his role as a consultant, he is also the founder-chairman of the Kets de Vries Institute (KDVI), a boutique global strategic leadership development consulting firm with associates worldwide ([www.kdvi.com](http://www.kdvi.com)).

Kets de Vries was the first fly fisherman in Outer Mongolia (at the time, becoming the world record holder of the Siberian hucho taimen). He is a member of New York's Explorers Club. In his spare time, he can be found in the rainforests or savannas of Central and Southern Africa, the Siberian taiga, the Ussuri Krai, Kamchatka, the Pamir, and Altai Mountains, Arnhemland, or within the Arctic Circle.



# 1

## Introduction: Dancing with the Ouroboros

*It is not more surprising to be born twice than once; everything in nature is resurrection.*  
—Voltaire

*It is said of the ouroboros that he slays himself and brings himself to life, fertilizes himself and gives birth to himself.*  
—Carl Jung

### Time, Rebirth, and the Ouroboros

What's the ouroboros? And why should we be interested in this strange image of a serpent eating its own tail in this collection of essays on authentic leadership?

In answering these questions, let's begin by adopting an etymological perspective. The term "ouroboros" originates from the Greek *oura* meaning "tail" and *boros* signifying "eating," thus referring to "he who eats his tail." Its imagery has a very long history. In fact, the earliest record of this image appeared in the thirteenth century BC on a golden shrine in the tomb of the Egyptian king Tutankhamen. It was used to depict the way the ancient

Egyptians understood time. To them, time wasn't seen as a linear process. On the contrary, it was portrayed as a series of repetitive cycles, very much based on the imagery of the flooding of the Nile or the journey of the sun. Thus, the ouroboros became symbolic of the cycle of life, death, and rebirth. To be more specific, the ancient Egyptians already recognized how nature created life out of destruction. And as the ouroboros was a symbol without a beginning or end, it also signified a break with the linear, and instead focused on the cyclical. No wonder that the loop represented by the ouroboros was bound to the concept of time, the circle being symbolic of the finite and infinite. In fact, the current mathematical symbol for infinity may have been derived from a variant of the classic representation of the ouroboros.

The ouroboros imagery helps us to reconsider how to look at our lives. It presents us with an eternal cycle of destruction and re-creation. Or as the well-known mythologist Joseph Campbell would say, "Life lives on life. This is the sense of the symbol of the ouroboros, the serpent biting its tail. Everything that lives, lives on the death of something else. Your own body will be food for something else. Anyone who denies this, anyone who holds back, is out of order. Death is an act of giving."

At this stage of my life, the symbolic nature of the ouroboros has increased in significance. Drawing on the life cycle theory as developed by one of my former teachers, the psychoanalyst Erik Erikson, I have now reached that later stage in life he painted by using the polarity of integrity versus despair. To Erikson, integrity refers to our ability to look back at our life with a sense of accomplishment and fulfillment—to be satisfied with what we have achieved. It alludes to a sense of feeling whole, of being at peace with ourselves. Alternatively, on the other side of the coin, we find despair, conveyed by a sense of bitterness and regret—the feeling of having led a wasted life. This sense of despair also refers to a need to ruminate over mistakes made, not to mention falling into the abyss of depression. Thus, at this integrity-versus-despair stage of life, we might be asking ourselves whether we have led a meaningful, satisfying life. We may have doubts about the choices we've made. Given the way we have lived our lives, we could well question whether we let go of other opportunities. In short, could we have made better choices?

In light of the human condition, having such feelings is inevitable. Doubts about the choices we have made is all too human. And transcending these doubts will be quite a challenge. However, instead of torturing ourselves about the choices we've made, wouldn't it be much wiser to ask ourselves whether our choices have been "good enough"? Have our choices been satisfactory? After all, searching for perfection is an invitation to misery. Isn't it true that the wise strive to do their best, while the foolish strive for perfection? We can only hope that at the end of our days, we have come to accept that we did the best we could; that whatever we did, made for a well-lived life. Only by feeling good enough—not in a search for perfection—can we set ourselves free.

## Being Twice Born

But if feeling "good enough" isn't an option, the imagery of the ouroboros can be helpful. If we don't feel good in our skin, taking its symbolism as a guideline, we can always try to reinvent ourselves. We can strive for a "rebirth," if only symbolically. In fact, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Harvard psychologist and philosopher William James already made a distinction between people who were "once-born" and "twice-born." According to James, "once-borns" are individuals who do not stray from the straight and narrow. They are tied to familiar territory where they have always felt comfortable. Some of them, however, during their life's journey, may have become spiritually and intellectually challenged. When faced with unexpected adversity, such as dramatic life crises, they could become "reborn." These "twice-borns"—people who have undergone an experience of fundamental, moral, and spiritual upheaval (a near-death experience would be the most dramatic example)—may have the courage to transcend their self-limitations. Given what they have experienced, they may see it as necessary to make dramatic changes to their lives.

But that's not to say that gradual or incremental change cannot have its advantages. Transition does not always require great drama. We do not necessarily have to look death in the face. Sometimes, changing our orientation to the world may come about when small frustrations gradually



build up, eventually becoming unbearable. And that might be the moment that prepares some people for a major change. Even though in these situations it may take much more time for meaningful change to occur, it provides the comfort of getting where we want to go in a more expectable and safe manner. And even though the process may only be an incremental one, by taking small steps we may also be able to break our dysfunctional habits, to build new ones that will help us to better deal with future challenges. Unfortunately, if we choose to take this route, there will always be the chance that we may get stuck in purgatory. It could very well be that each small step forward will be quickly nullified by everything else that is wrong with our lives. If that's the case, then incrementalism isn't going to be the answer.

In contrast, affected by a dramatic life experience, twice-borns have come to realize that their perspective on life is no longer good enough. Whatever happened, it has created a feeling of imbalance. It makes them prepared to sacrifice their present dissatisfied self for a future, more hopeful self. And even though they may resist making the necessary changes, at the same time, they may also be looking forward to entering a new version of life. It is all part of this "twice-born" process.

By undertaking such a journey, these twice-borns may be able to attain a greater sense of authenticity, integrating the conscious and the unconscious parts of their psyche. Subjecting themselves to this kind of psychological labor will contribute to a greater awareness of who they truly are. And by acknowledging the different aspects of themselves—including their flaws and imperfections—they may be able to reach a level of self-actualization that otherwise they would never have reached. This is the kind of integration that contributes to greater inner peace. In other words, what we can observe is how twice-born people actively use difficult changes in their external life to come to peace with their inner demons. They not only recognize their flaws but also try to use this knowledge to build a more integrated self. It is this transformation of the self that leads to a reaffirmation of life.

Often, twice-born people have made heroic efforts to reinvent themselves because they have realized that if they don't embark on change, they might descend into a state of living death. It is what made them decide to escape their self-imposed mental prisons. They want to free