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Studying Political Leadership

Foundations and Contending Accounts

Robert Elgie



Studying Political Leadership

Palgrave Studies in Political Leadership

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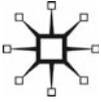
Studying Political Leadership

Foundations and Contending Accounts

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To my family

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Preface and Acknowledgements

This book took life a long time ago. After finishing my PhD in 1992, I was looking for a new project. I was interested in presidents and prime ministers and I was teaching a module on Political Leadership in my first lecturing job at Loughborough University. So, I decided to write up my thoughts as a book. I was extremely lucky to be supported in that project by both the late Vincent Wright at Nuffield College, Oxford, and Stephen Kennedy at Macmillan. Eventually, the project saw the light of day as my *Political Leadership in Liberal Democracies* book in 1995.

I continued to teach Political Leadership as I moved first to the University of Limerick, then briefly to the University of Nottingham, and finally in 2001 to Dublin City University. Over the years, the module has changed a lot. Not only has it been updated each year, there have been at least five very different versions of the syllabus.

I had always had the idea of updating my 1995 book. However, with the syllabus changing and with wider developments in the study of political science, I realized that I did not simply want to write a second edition. I needed a whole new approach. This led me to thinking about how people studied political leadership. This was no small exercise. In the end, this book took a full two years to write. Yet, it is the fruit of research that I have undertaken over many more years than that. At times it was a frustrating and even demoralizing exercise, so difficult was it to try to identify the foundations of different arguments. Given the nature of the study of political leadership, I should have realized that this was always going to be the case.

I would like to thank the people who helped me with this book, though the usual caveat applies that it is all my responsibility. Specifically, I would like to thank Alex Baturo, Karen Devine, John Gaffney, Ken McDonagh, and Shane Martin for their comments on particular aspects of the proposal and manuscript. I would also like to thank Amber Stone-Galilee, Andrew Baird, and Jemima Warren at Palgrave Macmillan.

1

Leadership – The Interactionist Paradigm

When we think of leaders, we tend to think of people who head groups of individuals. When we think of leadership, we tend to think of both the actions of those people and the outcomes of their actions. When we think in this way, it is difficult to imagine any group of humans, however ancient and however small, existing or at least prospering without leaders and leadership (Blondel 1987a: 1). For Bass (1990a: 20), leadership is a ‘universal phenomenon’. From this perspective, we can safely assume that leadership has existed since the earliest times.

Understood this way, stories of leaders and leadership have almost certainly been present in the oral tradition for millennia. Tales of bravery and derring-do would have been passed down from one generation to the next, inspiring new stories in their turn. In this sense, Bass (*ibid.*) is also almost certainly correct when he states that the ‘study of leaders and leadership is coterminous with the rise of civilization.’ Even if the very earliest stories are now lost, the first surviving accounts of leaders and leadership are still remarkably ancient. Bass (*ibid.*: 4) presents the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs for the words ‘leadership’ (*seshemet*), ‘leader’ (*seshemu*), and ‘follower’ (*shemsu*). These pictorial representations date back more than 5,000 years. For his part, Hunt (1999: 132) states that there are descriptions of leadership from ancient China, in Greek mythology, such as Homer’s *Odysseus*, and in the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament. Rustow (1968: 684) takes the story forward: ‘[l]eadership (by whatever name) was a familiar theme to the distant forerunners of social science in classical antiquity and in the Middle Ages.’ In other words, people such as Plato and Plutarch in ancient times as well as medieval writers, most notably Machiavelli, were all writing about what we might call ‘leadership.’

2 *Studying Political Leadership*

While people have been writing about leadership in some sense or another for millennia, in English the term 'leadership' was first used only as late as 1821. From around this point on, we start to see the beginnings of what we now call 'leadership studies,' meaning a body of academic work with its own intellectual reference points. By the late 19th century, the central research question in this area was clearly articulated. Do leaders shape events, or do events shape the actions of leaders? By the mid-20th century, the basic answer to this question was understood. Leaders' actions both shape events and are shaped by them. While this fundamental proposition is now generally accepted, an enormous body of work spread across many different academic disciplines has tried to tease out the specific relationship between leaders and the environment in which they operate. This work has generated a number of 'modern classics', but there are no agreed foundational texts upon which all other work must be built. In short, despite millennia of study and a vast amount of more focused academic work over the last two centuries, over and above a very simple and rather banal proposition that both leaders and context matter the study of leadership remains an essentially contested subject.

This book tries to make sense of the study of leadership in general and the study of political leadership in particular. The central argument is that what we understand as leadership and how we choose to study it is conditioned explicitly or implicitly by much more fundamental ontological and epistemological choices that we make and the extent to which they privilege personality and/or context-based explanations. These choices relate to what we think about the world and what we think we can know about the world. They shape what we consider as leadership. They shape what we look for when we are considering leadership. They shape how we talk about leadership. They shape what we include in the canon of leadership studies. They shape what we judge to be good and bad leadership. So, even if Bass is correct that leadership is indeed a universal phenomenon, the study of leadership, like the study of social and political life generally, is ontologically and epistemologically diverse. There is no grand unifying theory of leadership. We can certainly identify trends in the study of leadership over time, but any attempt to synthesize the contemporary study of leadership into a single narrative would either be incoherent or would necessarily privilege wittingly or unwittingly one set of ontological and epistemological assumptions over another. In this context, this book aims to identify the diversity of ways in which political leadership is currently studied rather than trying either to impose an impossible

unity on such diversity or to present a new narrative from a particular perspective.

In the chapters that follow, we identify four approaches to the contemporary study of political leadership. Each approach makes certain ontological and epistemological assumptions. These assumptions vary from one approach to another, generating distinctive ways of talking about political leadership and prioritizing personality and/or context-based factors. In this chapter, we place the contemporary study of political leadership in its broader intellectual context. We begin by identifying the concept of ‘interactionism’, which captures the basic idea that both leaders and context matter. We show that this is a very old idea, which began to be articulated more systematically in the period from the late-19th to the mid-20th century. We then show that even though this concept is now common to almost all studies of leadership, it is an insufficient basis on which to generate a satisfactory theory of leadership.

Leaders, the context of leadership, and the interaction between them

In March 2003, a US-led force invaded Iraq in an effort to bring down the regime of Saddam Hussein. British military personnel were part of the invasion force. The decision to commit British forces was approved by the Cabinet and supported by the House of Commons. However, the policy was personally associated with the prime minister of the day, Tony Blair, who actively promoted British participation. So, why did PM Blair agree to Britain’s involvement in the invasion? In part, it was a function of Blair himself. For example, Blair developed a personal friendship with US President George Bush, whose administration was pressing for international support for the policy. More generally, it has been argued that Blair’s personality was central to the outcome. Specifically, he is said to have had ‘a high belief in his ability to control events, a low conceptual complexity, and a high need for power’ (Dyson 2006: 290). These traits ‘played a substantial role in shaping the process and outcome of British decision making in the Iraq case’ (*ibid.*: 302). At the same time, though, the context was clearly shaping PM Blair’s thinking. In particular, the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on New York changed what Blair called ‘the calculus of risk’ (The Iraq Inquiry, p. 7, line 10). Prior to this time, Blair felt that Saddam Hussein was a ‘problem’ (*ibid.*: 6, line 16), but after this time he came to the conclusion that ‘we couldn’t run the risk of such a regime being allowed to develop [weapons of mass destruction]’ (*ibid.*: 35, lines 11–12). Along

with President Bush, PM Blair felt that Saddam Hussein could not be trusted to refrain from developing such weapons and they both felt that the United Nations inspectors were not being allowed to conduct their work within Iraq freely. In this context, whereas previously Blair supported the policy of sanctions against Saddam Hussein's regime, after 9/11 the situation had changed and he was willing to commit British forces to the US-led invasion.

This vignette neatly illustrates the idea that political leadership is the result of the interaction between leaders and the context within which leaders operate. We can expand upon this point by thinking counterfactually. With a different leader and the same context, or with the same leader and a different context, would the same outcome have happened? If someone other than Tony Blair had been prime minister in 2003, would Britain have committed ground forces to Iraq? We have no way of knowing, but there is no guarantee that the prime minister's relationship with President Bush would have been so close. Without the resulting sense of trust between the leaders of the two countries, the British prime minister may have been less willing to lend support to the US-led operation. What is more, a different prime minister may simply have had a different attitude towards the situation. After all, others within the Cabinet system, such as the Foreign Minister from 1997–2001, Robin Cook, did not share Blair's interpretation of the problem. Had Cook been PM, then we can reasonably assume that British forces would not have been committed in the same way. By the same token, even with Blair as prime minister, would he have taken the same decision without the events of September 11, 2001? Again, we cannot know, but it is reasonable to think that he might never have even had to think about what he should do. The situation might simply not have arisen. What is more, if there had been no attacks but if President Bush had still decided that Saddam Hussein's regime was a threat and that invasion was necessary, then Blair's interpretation of the 'calculus of risk' would almost certainly have been different. As a result, it is much less likely that he would have supported an invasion of Iraq.

The idea that political leadership is the result of the interaction between the personal characteristics of leaders and the political environment with which they are faced is the foundation for the study of both leadership generally and political leadership in particular. For instance, in his overview of decades of leadership studies, Bass (1990b: 55) concludes that we have reached a synthesis around 'theories of interacting persons and situations.' Paul 't Hart (2014a: 10) asserts that '[t]here is now a firm body of thought and research that chooses to understand public leadership

as an interactive process between those we call leaders, the people that choose (or feel forced) to be led by them, and the environment in which their interaction takes place.’ In a recent high-profile Handbook, Shamir (2012: 353) concludes that ‘[m]ost leadership scholars believe and state that leadership is constituted in the interaction between the leader, the followers, and the situation.’ Greenstein (2006: 373) goes one further, stating that ‘It is a near axiom of the behavioral sciences that the actions people take are a function of two broad sets of influences – their personal characteristics and the environment in which they are situated.’ In relation to political leadership specifically, Sheffer (1993: viii) identifies very fully the state of the art in this area:

Most people believe that leadership qualities are connected to personal attributes, and hence that leadership is a very individualistic phenomenon. But most scholars in this area agree that in addition to personal attributes, leadership is intimately related to the fabric of the leaders’ relevant societies, to social and political organizations, to established institutions, and to leaders’ relations with smaller and larger groups of followers and supporters.

Blondel (1987b: 321) states more succinctly that ‘leadership cannot be divorced from the environment within which it occurs.’

In sum, we can safely say that the idea that leadership results from the interaction between leaders and the context in which they operate is now foundational. However, this was not always the case. In the 19th and early 20th centuries there was a prolonged debate between those who prioritized the importance of the individual in society and those who placed the emphasis on the importance of impersonal social forces. This debate was conducted across what we would now understand as different academic disciplinary boundaries and for the most part was often only indirectly related to the concept of leadership. All the same, the contemporary study of leadership, indeed the notion of leadership studies as an academic discipline or sub-discipline, is founded on the concept of interactionism that emerged from this debate.

The origins of interactionism

There are two elements to the concept of interactionism – the individual and the context in which the individual operates. The importance of the individual in shaping events has been stressed for centuries. If we think of history as the stories of kings and queens, emperors and rulers, then

the idea that the individual, or leader, is the prime mover behind social and political change is present in Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans*, Suetonius' *The Twelve Caesars*, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, *Holinshed's Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, and so on. Indeed, we have a seemingly natural tendency to divide up political history into personalized chunks – the Tudors, the Borgias, the Stalinist era, the Thatcher period, the Clinton presidency, the Merkel Chancellorship, and so on. In so doing, we focus attention on the supposed importance of the individual leader or leaders more generally.

The historian, Thomas Carlyle, writing in 1840, provided a very clear statement of the importance of individuals in his essay *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*. Here, he states:

Universal History, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here. They were the leaders of men, these great ones; the modellers, patterns, and in a wide sense creators, of whatsoever the general mass of men contrived to do or to attain; all things that we see standing accomplished in the world are properly the outer material result, the practical realization and embodiment, of Thoughts that dwelt in the Great Men sent into the world: the soul of the whole world's history, it may justly be considered, were the history of these.

For Carlyle, history was biography and biography was history (Frye: 2010). He is willing to concede that whether the 'Great Man' manifests himself (and we should also add herself) as a poet, a prophet, or a politician 'will depend on the time and environment he finds oneself in' (*ibid.*, 99). However, Carlyle believed that such people 'are intrinsically of the same material' (*ibid.*). They are 'the same kind of thing' (*ibid.*, 39). In other words, 'Great Men' have a quality, or set of qualities, which places them apart from other people and which is the source of their greatness.

In his essay, Carlyle provided many manifestations of what he considered to be greatness, but he did not provide any detailed discussion of what common qualities were required for those manifestations to occur. For Carlyle, they were simply God-given and self-evident in the actions of the individuals. However, later in the 19th century and particularly in the early 20th century the search for such qualities became more systematic. For example, in 1869 Francis Galton published *Hereditary Genius*. A cousin of Charles Darwin, Galton was interested in identifying whether genius, or ability, was passed down from one generation to another. He

concluded that it was. This generated what today we would call a ‘policy recommendation.’ He stated:

... as it is easy ... to obtain by careful selection a permanent breed of dogs or horses gifted with peculiar powers of running, or of doing anything else, so it would be quite practicable to produce a highly-gifted race of men by judicious marriages during several consecutive generations (p. 1).

In a post-Holocaust world, these words have a somewhat chilling ring to them. However, we need to place his ideas in their contemporary context. Above all, Galton was a Darwinian who was convinced by the power of natural selection. He argued that people born with a hereditary genius would go on to succeed almost whatever the circumstances. He states:

I believe ... that, if the “eminent” men of any period, had been changelings when babies, a very fair proportion of those who survived and retained their health up to fifty years of age, would, notwithstanding their altered circumstances, have equally risen to eminence (p. 38).

Thus, like Carlyle, Galton claimed that individual qualities would trump circumstances. The two writers differed, though, both in that Galton believed he had identified the qualities that were necessary to succeed – ‘innate ability combined with zeal and with capacity for hard labour’ (*ibid.*) – and in that he argued that such qualities could be imparted to the next generation through the careful selection of marriage partners.

The idea that people were born with innate qualities, or traits, and that certain traits were associated with success was actively pursued in the first decades of the 20th century. This work spawned the eugenics movements of the 1920s and, fatally, the policies of the Nazis towards Jews, Roma and homosexuals in Germany. However, it also led to a very active and for the most part much more benign research tradition that flourished in the early part of the last century. This work was conducted mainly in the discipline of psychology, or social psychology, and generated the first body of work that can be considered under the heading of leadership studies. The so-called trait approach to leadership aimed to identify whether particular leaders exhibited specific personality traits that were different from non-leaders and, if so, what were they? Bingham and Davis (1924) conducted one such study. They administered an intelligence test to 122 business people attending a conference.

The group included people at various levels of seniority, ranging from sales people to executives. They found that everyone had a higher level of intelligence than the average person in society, but within the group the more successful people were more likely to be associated with 'non-intellectual traits of personality' than intelligence (*ibid.*: 22). In other words, executives were no more intelligent than sales people, but they did have an extra quality. In many regards, this study is typical. It was just one of many academic studies that were searching for the traits that distinguished one set of people from another; its conclusions were qualified – the authors were very keen to stress that these statistical associations they had identified were relatively weak and that further research was needed; and its focus was on business leadership, which is where the study of leadership has flourished ever since.

The trait approach was dominant for nearly 50 years. Indeed, in his mid-century review of the literature, Ralph Stogdill (1948) identified more than a hundred studies published since the turn of the 20th century that had this focus. In his review, Stogdill concluded that there was indeed some evidence that the average leader was different from the average person in a number of regards, including sociability, initiative, and persistence, though he too was quick to note that the strength of the findings was not very strong (*ibid.*: 63). In retrospect, though, Stogdill's review became well known for presenting a systematic statement of what subsequently came to be called 'interactionism.' He argued that 'leadership must be conceived in terms of the interaction of variables which are in constant flux and change' (*ibid.*: 64) and concluded that 'an adequate analysis of leadership involves not only a study of leaders, but also of situations' (*ibid.*: 65). 'The evidence,' he said, 'suggests that leadership is a relation that exists between persons in a social situation, and that persons who are leaders in one situation may not necessarily be leaders in other situations' (*ibid.*). With these words, Stogdill's article marked the beginning of a new academic era of leadership studies.

In one sense, the understanding that situational factors are related to outcomes is as old as the study of leaders. After all, even the most leader-centric studies have to place their subjects in a particular time and place. It would be nice to know whether Alexander the Great would have been such a renowned leader had he lived during the Roman Empire, but we can only discuss his achievements in relation to the times in which he actually lived. In the late 18th and 19th centuries, though, there was a profoundly important intellectual shift that affected the way in which the importance of context was understood (Rustow 1968: 684). Around this time, influential works were published that discussed economic and

social change without any reference to leaders. More than that, there was little or no theoretical place for leaders in these works. For example, Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* written in 1776 introduced the concept of the 'invisible hand of the market.' This is the idea that the economy is self-regulating. If consumers are free to choose what they want and producers are free to supply what they wish, then a market equilibrium will be reached. In his work, there is plenty of talk of individuals in the form of buyers and sellers, but there is no talk of leaders. Instead, there are simply impersonal law-like patterns of social exchange that determine the relationship between individuals in society. A similar point applies to the work of Karl Marx writing in the mid-19th century. For Marx, the units of analysis were not individuals, but social classes. 'Society,' he stated (Marx 1973 [1857–1861]: 265), 'does not consist of individuals, but expresses the sum of interrelations, the relations within which these individuals stand.' For Marx, history was the product of the struggle between opposing social classes. The course of history was ineluctable. There was an inevitable transition from one stage of human development to another, culminating in communism. In this highly deterministic view of history, there may be a place for leaders to 'enlighten and guide the masses' (Cawthon 2002: 96), but for the most part they were irrelevant to the larger course of events.

Throughout the 19th century with the rise of the industrial revolution and sweeping social change generally, writers were increasingly concerned with issues of urbanization, poverty, inequality, public health, population, and other issues that affected society as a whole. There was also a growing political concern with the effects of these changes on the established social order. For some, like Thomas Carlyle, uncontrolled social forces were inherently dangerous, threatening to reverse the natural social order. The French Revolution was the best example in this regard. For others, social change provided the opportunity for more equality and greater liberty across societies as a whole. Thus, whereas some people reacted to these social changes by wishing to preserve the existing order and emphasizing the need for 'Great Men' who would lead society to a better and more enlightened place, others wanted to understand how society worked so as to improve its condition and harness its potential, relegating leaders to mere figureheads who were effectively controlled by social forces and who wielded little independent influence.

In this context, Herbert Spencer's *The Study of Sociology* published in 1873 was particularly influential. Spencer provided a direct critique of Carlyle's 'Great Man' theory of history. For Spencer, individuals are

shaped by the societies in which they live. On the basis of this logic, he argues that the 'Great Man' is 'a resultant of an enormous aggregate of forces that have been co-operating for ages' (p. 24). He states:

If it be a fact that the great man may modify his nation in its structure and actions, it is also a fact that there must have been those antecedent modifications constituting national progress before he could be evolved. Before he can re-make his society, his society must make him. So that all those changes of which he is the proximate initiator have their chief causes in the generations he descended from. If there is to be anything like a real explanation of these changes, it must be sought in that aggregate of conditions out of which both he and they have arisen. (p. 25)

In this way, Spencer provided a direct critique of the idea that 'Great Men' shared a particular set of innate qualities that both set them apart from ordinary people and ensured they were able to exercise good leadership over society as a whole. More than that, Spencer argued that even if leaders did share a particular set of qualities the individual was powerless against the combined weight of forces in society. Caesar, he says, 'would never have made his conquests without disciplined troops, inheriting their prestige and tactics and organization from the Romans who lived before them' (*ibid.*). In other words, even if 'Great Men' appear to be the forces for change, they are merely puppets. Change can only come about if society as a whole is willing to support it.

Thus, by the late 19th and early 20th centuries we can identify two very different paradigms. On the one hand, there were historians who supported the traditional view that individual leaders were the agents of change. In addition, there were those working within the nascent discipline of psychology who were very much concerned with the systematic study of personal qualities and their relationship to leadership. On the other hand, the new disciplines of economics and sociology were invariably either hostile to the study of individuals and leaders or simply did not require any significant reference to them in order to account for the outcomes which they wished to explain.

The concept of interactionism provides a synthesis of these two competing views. In his 1880 essay *Great Men, Great Thoughts, and the Environment*, William James provided the first coherent statement of this sort. He addresses very directly the debate between Carlyle's 'Great Man' theory of history and Spencer's notion of social determinism. Talking about why 'Great Men' appear, he states:

How does the environment affect them, and how do they affect the environment? Now, I affirm that the relation of the visible environment to the great man is in the main exactly what it is to the “variation” in the Darwinian philosophy. It chiefly adopts or rejects, preserves or destroys, in short selects him. And whenever it adopts and preserves the great man, it becomes modified by his influence in an entirely original and peculiar way.

In this way, James rejects Carlyle’s idea that ‘Great Men’ will triumph in any situation. They will only emerge if they are in tune with their times. ‘Cromwell and Napoleon need their revolutions,’ he states, ‘Grant his civil war.’ However, James also rejects Spencer’s notion that leaders cannot have any individual impact on history. Arguing counterfactually, he states: ‘Would England have today the “imperial” ideal which she now has, if a certain boy named Bob Clive had shot himself, as he tried to do, at Madras?’ On the basis of this logic, he then makes the following argument:

...social evolution is a resultant of the interaction of two wholly distinct factors, – the individual, deriving his peculiar gifts from the play of physiological and infra-social forces, but bearing all the power of initiative and origination in his hands; and, second, the social environment, with its power of adopting or rejecting both him and his gifts. Both factors are essential to change.

Thus, James provided an explicit statement of what later came to be called ‘interactionism’, as he attempted to reconcile the two opposing perspectives that were dominant at the time.

There were nearly 70 years between the publication of William James’ essay and the appearance of Ralph Stogdill’s article. In the meantime, the idea that leadership was a function of the relationship between the leader and the leadership environment was not forgotten. For example, in his 1888 book *The American Commonwealth*, Viscount James Bryce echoed the idea that great leaders only emerge when the context is right. Asking why in the US great men have not been chosen as president, one of the reasons he identifies is ‘because they are not, in quiet times, absolutely needed.’ In 1926, William Fielding Ogburn came to a very similar conclusion as William James previously. He writes: ‘...the extent of the influence of great men depends not only on their talent but also on the favourableness of the social conditions’ (Ogburn 1926: 229). Indeed, only a year prior to Stogdill’s review of leadership

studies, William Jenkins (1947) had provided a similar review. There, he concluded (*ibid.*: 75):

Leadership is specific to the particular situation under investigation. Who becomes the leader of a given group engaging in a particular activity and what the leadership characteristics are in the given case are a function of the specific situation including the measuring instruments employed. Related to this conclusion is the general finding of wide variations in the characteristics of individuals who become leaders in similar situations, and even greater divergence in leadership behavior in different situations.

Therefore, while Stogdill receives the lion's share of the credit for identifying the concept of interactionism, he was merely building on older insights as well as more contemporary findings.

Overall, we can say that by the late 1940s there was an academic discipline, or sub-discipline, that can be called leadership studies and that within this domain the idea that leadership is the result of the interaction between the leader and the situation with which the leader is faced had become the standard academic wisdom. To this day, interactionism remains foundational for those studying leadership in whatever academic discipline. If so, then, why is there still so much controversy about the nature of leadership and why is it studied in so many different ways? In short, what are the limits of interactionism and the study of leadership?

The limits of interactionism

The debate about personality vs. context in leadership studies has a counterpart in the debate about nature vs. nurture in psychology. This latter debate raises some very profound and controversial questions. Why are some people more intelligent than others? Why do some people become drug addicts when others do not? Why do some people behave in particular ways and others differently? Is our behavior shaped solely by our life experiences and sensations, or are we born a certain way? Is our behavior, our lifestyle, our physical and mental health the product of the genes that we are born with or the environment in which we live? Are we the product of nature or nurture?

In 1874, Francis Galton coined the term 'nature and nurture.' 'Nature,' he said, 'is all that a man brings with himself into the world; nurture is every influence from without that affects him after his birth' (Galton 1874: 12). As we have seen already, Galton believed that personality