Article

The Anointed Steward: A Critical Review of Western Christian and Secular Steward Leadership Literature

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Abstract: This paper critically examines the literature associated with steward leadership from the Western Christian and secular perspectives. The motivation is to offer a better understanding for individuals endeavoring to apply the emerging steward leadership paradigm to organizations. The critical review process was determined as the best method to cultivate direct and indirect literature across multiple diverse domains. Over 1000 sources were examined, resulting in over 400 coded themes creating the foundation of the critical review. During the critical coding appraisal of the literature, four concentrated themes were identified: "steward" and "servant" as leadership modalities, and "mission" and "stakeholder" from a stewardship governance perspective. The identified themes led to the natural creation of a conceptual filter tool, allowing the literature to be more easily identified and sorted based on organizational utility. The literature's narrative reflection and the normative filtering of the themes identified two key summary details. The first detail was the notion of steward and servant leadership being inescapably connected and inseparable. The second detail was that stewardship governance is a plausible remedy for agency, but agency controls are still needed based on contingency.

Keywords: leadership; steward; stewardship; servant; agency; governance; critical review

1. The Role of the Steward

"Anointing" has several overt meanings akin to being chosen, divine influence, such as a priest, knight, or king claiming the divine right to authority (Fleming 1998). Sadly, the act of anointing can also be a means to heal the sick, often in conjunction with the thoughtful prayer of a church community or an offering as a closure to a life with respectful care (Fleming 1998). Luke 4:18 states the following: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed" (ESV). This verse from Luke about God's anointment in a way parallels the most common definition of being a steward as a caretaker, chosen and trusted to act on the wishes of the owner (Rodin 2010). In the context of this paper, anointing is the selection, often self-referentially, to be a leader and to assume the role of stewardship.

The role of the steward can be considered as old as the Code of Hammurabi, in which stewardship was part of the rules regarding wages, property rights, land rights, or anything financial within societal law wherein a surrogate to the owner controlled the owned (Nagarajan 2011). The high steward of Egypt was revered and depicted in statues from the 13 dynasties (circa 1640 BCE) as the royal household's critical overseer (Shupak 1992; Metropolitan Museum of Art 2023). Wilson (2016) crafted a detailed history from throughout antiquity, depicting stewardship from the Greek perspective, with an emphasis on the Christian Gospels' perspective, describing stewards as "caretakers" even when they were enslaved. In the Mormon tradition, Brigham Young, John Smith, and John Pierce Hawley instituted the rites of consecration and stewardship for Mormon lands for Latter-day Saints, where a protectionary perspective of the environment was crafted to create Zion on Earth (Johnson 2019). For the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), the

act of stewardship is critical to offering charity and faithfulness (Crippen 2010). Likewise, the concept of stewardship can be found in Islam, in which leadership is considered a triangulation among God, the leader, and the followers, based on the teachings of the Qur'an (Astuti et al. 2020; Rizaldy and Hidayatullah 2021). Nevertheless, the literature is incomplete and offers contradictory findings regarding the origin of the concept, despite having a similar meaning to the word "stewardship" from the Greek words *epitropos* ("trustee" or "guardian") and *oikonomos* ("overseer", Watts 2008).

2. Research Statement and Motivation

With the growing popularity of stewardship attributed to Western Christian leadership modalities and governance, it remains unknown whether and to what extent potential applicationists can access utility from sporadic, sometimes contradictory, perspectives in the current literature. This paper aims to critically review the existing literature concerning steward leadership from several direct and indirect sources. To that end, the desire to optimize and understand the conceptual differences between sources required creating a filtering tool that allowed perspectives to be sorted into four generalized research quadrants to foster broad access and a functionalist order. This conceptual outcome of the critical review is by no means a terminal grading system or a provider of binary labels to works that prohibit academic reach, as the current sources of peer-reviewed academic journals and others contain variations with minimal homogeneity. The point is that any steward-based research claim will always be subject to a Bayesian response to expand or contract the domain knowledge across any time horizon.

In addition, this paper applies research from both the Western Christian and secular domains to further the understanding of the fragility of steward leadership as a new modality in some aspects while retaining significant robustness from more venerable servant leadership research. In particular, the latter is often regarded as parent aggregation in which being a steward has been a substantial aspect of the overarching theory over the last 50 years. This entanglement of theories reveals that, despite the distinctions in style, the message remains highly imitative, thus highlighting the overall duality of modality and governance.

2.1. Critical Literature Review Process

Grant and Booth (2009) created the search, appraisal, synthesis, and analysis (SALSA) approach to literature reviews to analyze 14 types of literature reviews used in academic research. A critical review process was determined to be the most appropriate approach to reviewing the literature associated with steward leadership based on several factors. Starting with the search and appraisal process, the literature for Western Christian-based stewardship is mainly in non-peer-reviewed book form and, as noted later, is a meager, yet burgeoning, offering. As Grant et al. indicated, the critical literature review must create a presentation where the analyzed and synthesized essential research and theories drive the need for indirect works to complement a conceptual understanding. In this case, the voluminous amount of indirect work had to be thoroughly vetted regarding servant-based and stewardship theory codings, which were appraised and chosen for their impact on steward leadership and the overall needs of a critical review.

The initial search process followed a hermeneutic approach consisting of three rounds of search and subsequent coding (Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic 2014). The fundamental attribute of the hermeneutic approach is the circular repetition of building on new information and the freedom to move across domains in search of relevant research as a Bayesian process (Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic 2014). The leading search keywords were "steward", "stewardship", "steward leadership", and "stewardship theory". The primary databases searched included Google Scholar, EBSCO, SCOPUS, JSTOR, and ProQuest, and, lastly, general Google searches as a secondary process check to the academic databases. The coding review used MAXQDA (VERBI Software 2022) qualitative analysis software, whereby the initial search started on 1 June 2022, compiling more than 1013 documents

reviewed and generating 433 coded segments from 136 final sources finalized on 1 August 2023. Table 1 presents the complete set of codes. The process spanned several diverse domains and resulted in over 100 coded memos assisting with the analysis (Kuckartz and Rädiker 2019).

Table 1. Final codes generated by the appraisal process.

Code	#Codes	#Sources
Agency	10	17
Fad/Meme	31	7
Servant Leadership (stewardship as part of)	29	15
Distinctions	10	4
Secular Governance Stewardship	52	14
Religious Governance Stewardship	25	8
Secular Steward Leadership	30	7
Religious Steward Leadership	44	14
What Is Stewardship?	25	13
Sensemaking	79	22
Conflict	98	15
	433	136

Jesson and Lacey (2006) noted that the best critical literature review tells a compelling story of something potentially new within known understanding and research. Grant and Booth (2009) agreed that storytelling is the key attribute of a critical review that requires a narrative approach to synthesizing the selected works to review. The noted advantage of narratives pertaining to synthesis is the ability to portray context and an advanced understanding, from delicate nuances to novel connections between diverse voices and research (Willis 2019). Equally crucial to conveying the knowledge provided by the narrative is the final analysis, constructed not as an answer or even a hypothesis of the critical review but as a conceptual apperception of how the literature interacts across different domains (Grant and Booth 2009).

To complete the introduction of the critical review process and the SALSA approach, two other relevant subtopics will be reviewed, in turn, below. The first is the relevance of steward leadership being reborn as a leadership modality. Is it simply a fad that may or may not be worthy of completing this critical analysis? This examination of relevance can be compared to any substantiation or proofing where a pilot inquiry is required, as the findings of the initial search are part of the first round of critical review coding. The second relevant subtopic is the introduction to a novel sorting tool or filter, as noted in the introduction, which allows the literature to be coded and better understood based on the synthesis and analysis of the literature reviewed and included in this paper.

2.2. Examination of Steward Leadership as a Passing Fad

Stewardship schemes offer three substrates in the literature: (1) steward leadership, (2) being a steward as a general label based on one's actions, and (3) stewardship theory as governance. All three make different references to an origin deriving from both Western Christian and secular perspectives and are often used interchangeably (e.g., Block 1996; Rodin 2010; Wilson 2016). This interchangeability creates tensions originating from the camps of applicationists premised on varying versions of steward-based research models, regardless of whether steward leadership is a subset of servant leadership or if the construction exists outside Western Christian interweaving (Block 1996; Donaldson and Davis 1991; Rodin 2010). Stewardship theory has secular origins because this kind of governance is conceptualized as a replacement for agency theory; however, it is considered neutral and is highly cited in Western Christian steward leadership research (Donaldson and Davis 1991; Wilson 2016). The point is that more questions than answers exist concerning why some researchers gravitate toward one perspective over others (Creswell and Creswell 2018).

This philosophical variation should not surprise applicationists, as this is a normal situation for theory diaspora and the tension created by opposing research and interpretation (Miron-Spektor and Erez 2017).

Often, the trends of management and leadership methods occur in waves and maintain a 4- to 10-year cadence, though this is debatable depending on the source of the information (Gibson 2001; Gibson et al. 2003; Huczynski 2012). Arguably, the complete extinction of a leadership model is highly unlikely and somewhat irrelevant to a greater context; however, there are ancillary methods to seek nuances that may affect the robustness of steward-based constructs (Schmidt-Jessa and Gajtkowski 2021; Sparavigna and Marazzato 2015). The first test to inquire about the periodicity of use in book publications was the Google Ngram viewer in Figure 1.
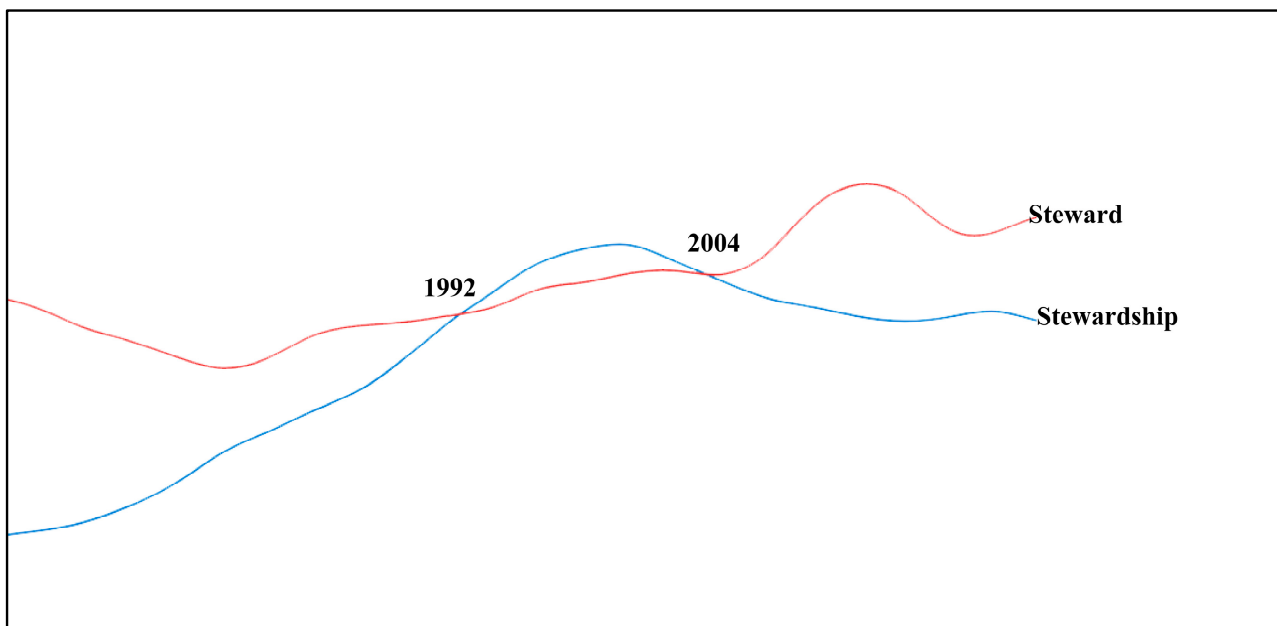
Figure 1. Google Ngram plot of "steward" and "stewardship" from 1985 to 2019. Note that the graph was generated automatically from the given keywords and edited for size and clarity.

As Figure 1 demonstrates, convergences in the years 1992 and 2004 can be found in the plot of the terms "steward" and "stewardship"; however, no apparent popular rise can be clearly observed in either mention. The word "leadership" in the combination drives the lines toward zero, meaning that the keyword is significantly more popular than the "leadership" adder in the plotted literature titles. A catalyst could have been Block's bestselling *Stewardship* (Block 1993), as the peak coincides with the highest plot of the "stewardship" line. The acceleration of the "steward" trend line could be attributed to books published by Rodin and Wilson in 2010 and 2016, respectively. Although the Google Ngram viewer helps to identify peculiarities that require additional attention for initial investigations, it does not indicate anything remarkable. As a secondary means of investigating the robustness of "steward" and "stewardship", Google Trends (2023) depicted average search indexes of 17 and 12, respectively. However, such results do not indicate detailed population information or geographies of index spikes over the last 5 years. Alternatively, Exploding Topics (2023) showed a 15% growth in popularity for "steward" and a 13% growth for "stewardship" over the same 5-year period, indicating the rising popularity of these search terms.

The measurements in Figure 1 and the data associated with Google Trends (2023) and Exploding Topics (2023) indicate neutral to positive growth for "steward" and "stewardship" in the popularity of publications and searches by general use. Nonetheless, this is hardly conclusive. This difficulty in reaching a conclusion validates what Gibson (2001)

expressed as massive frustration regarding organizations' need to replace failed (faddish) leadership models. The integration and time invested in adoption, as noted for culture change (i.e., a vital leadership topic), have a known period of adoption (Hughes 2016). Many researchers (e.g., Block 1996; Donaldson and Davis 1991; Rodin 2010; Wilson 2016) have stated directly or alluded to the idea that, from a heuristic perspective, the ability to be a steward in the context of leadership or governance already blends well with an organization, as it is less foreign than the significant mindshare shift of other paradigms. For Gibson (2001), all trends lose their identities as interventions and eventually become norms. Familiarity with being a steward makes the construct significantly less fragile than alternatives (Gibson et al. 2003). Nonetheless, only consistency and time permit a better understanding of theoretical independence or assimilation by another leadership paradigm.

2.3. Introducing a Conceptual Filtering Tool

During the initial coding process in the second round, patterns of concentration formed through the consolidation of the coded segments. This concentration is a natural progression outlined by the hermeneutic circle (Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic 2014). Divisions across themes, such as "steward" or "servant", became apparent as a primary element of the reviewed work. It is a revelation that most works listed both, and one theme had a defined advantage over the other. Additionally, specific to governance, the dividing themes were "mission" or "stakeholder" in the same, almost equal, distribution. These four themes stand as the defining attributes of the critical literature.

With these themes defined, research confusion can be greatly reduced by sorting steward-based research components into a more convenient and well-known four-quadrant Cartesian plane. The impetus for this sorting and deconstruction format is the perspective associated with research design, which is familiar to most researchers as worldviews (Creswell and Creswell 2018; Lincoln and Guba 1986). Applying the four-quadrant filtering method, steward-based themes act as the researcher's worldview, facilitating an organizing approach similar to that of a postpositivist versus a social constructionist for example (Creswell and Creswell 2018).

To illustrate steward-based relationships in the literature, Figure 2 presents a Cartesian plane wherein the quadrants represent the following worldviews, where the focus stands for an emphasis with intensity and the driver is the strong force behind the resolution of leadership: (1) steward-focused and servant-driven, (2) servant-focused and steward-driven, (3) stakeholder-focused and mission-driven, and (4) mission-focused and stakeholder-driven. To depict this process, Figure 2 can be imagined as a grading tool, in which a paper from Davis et al. (1997b) focuses on the stewardship theory that replaces agency for corporate governance. The Davis et al. work would be more concentrated in the lower-left quadrant, wherein stakeholders have a greater focus driven by the strength of the mission. In contrast, Rodin's (2010) views of steward leadership featuring the Western Christian leadership modality can be observed in quadrant 1, representing steward intensity complemented by the strength of being a servant. Similar to worldviews in research, the deconstruction of steward-based research does not offer homogeneity, which means that steward research contains elements of the other quadrants applied as needed by the original scholar.
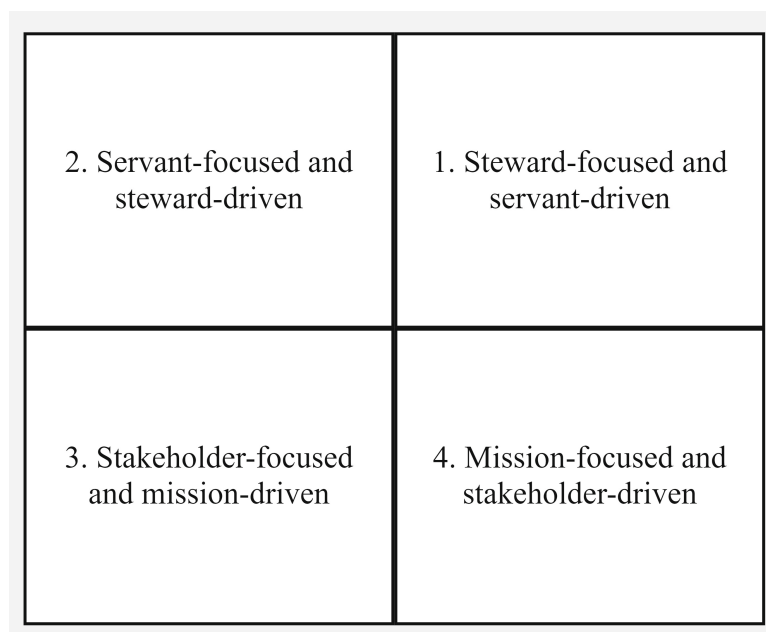
Figure 2. The depicted four quadrants of steward leadership.

3. Being Focused and Driven as a Steward Leadership Modality

The origin of Western Christian steward leadership, mostly manifesting in the first research quadrant, is often associated with Clinton's (1989) leadership emergence model. In fact, the first mention of steward leadership as a construct appeared as an umbrella theory that influenced the needs and desires of leaders and followers. In contrast, servant leadership is depicted as a subset of steward leadership (Clinton 1989). In Clinton's work, stewardship success was based on a timeline of work through a leader in a way that matures over time (Rodin 2010; Wilson 2016). In particular, Clinton (1988) established this timeline based on reviews of over 400 biblical and historical accounts of leadership. Clinton (1989) expressed the underlying condition of stewardship when he stated the following: "A Christian leader is a person with God-given capacity and God-given responsibility which is influencing a specific group of God's people toward God's purposes" (p. 141). Notably, Clinton (1988, 1989) acknowledged the need to be a steward-focused leader using a servant-participatory style, indirectly illustrating a typical entanglement between servant and steward leadership. Thus, these concepts motivate the quadrant design in terms of the intensity of focus based on the authors' intent, followed by the necessity of the secondary attribute of strength, the vehicle for application, as noted.

Wilson (2016) considered Clinton (1989) an essential fixture in the emanation of stewardship and further investigated biblical accounts to expand on their roots. This fixture has led to an even broader history culminating in two relevant scriptures: "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein" (Ps. 24:1 ESV) and "Behold, to the Lord your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it" (Dt. 10:14 ESV). Wilson (2016) further argued that the primary definition of "stewardship" based on scripture is "to achieve the objectives of the owner and stakeholders by managing people and resources" (p. 124). Notably, the term "stakeholders", which was adopted from "stockholders", refers to individuals or groups with concerns about an organization or business, typically in discussions with non-profit organizations (NPOs) and social responsibility measures (Freeman 2001).

Wilson (2016) conducted this research to introduce steward leadership as both a modality complementing Rodin (2010) and a model of governance complementary to the secular world of Donaldson and Davis (1991) and the Western Christian work of Brinckerhoff (2004). The governance connections will be reviewed in quadrants 3 and 4. For now, the attention to the leadership modality centers on Rodin's account of what defines a

steward leader. Rodin includes three foundational elements in his views of stewardship construction: (1) being a leader in the image of God, (2) the freedom that stewardship provides, and (3) the distinctiveness of steward leadership vis-à-vis alternative modalities. The first two foundational elements pertain to what God represents regarding stewardship as the ultimate owner: who the steward serves, on the one hand, and the relationship between God and the leader on the other (Rodin 2010).

The last foundational element is the distinction between stewardship and other leadership models. Rodin (2010) used the fundamental truth of the Christian faith (i.e., that people are all created in God's image) as the critical basis of these foundations in the process of becoming a steward leader at four levels of relationships (i.e., pathways with God, self, neighbor, and creation). Wilson (2016) called Rodin's relationship process "journeys", arguing that they "impact the people the steward serves and the organization the steward leads" (p. 93). Ultimately, Rodin embodied the process of becoming a faithful and godly steward as an inner transformation of the heart, thereby differentiating stewardship from other theories based on directional attribution, as will be reviewed later in greater detail.

Wilson (2016) built on Rodin (2010) with the three foundational lenses of stewardship: ownership, motivation, and accountability. Wilson described these lenses in distinct ways that continue to differentiate steward leadership from other theories, as expressed by Rodin. Regarding ownership, the former, similar to the latter, summarized the premise that begins with identifying the leader with the heart of both a steward and a servant. Acting as a responsible caretaker, the steward understands two things: a leader does not own the resources that God has gifted them, and the gift of responsibility is a true blessing (Wilson 2016). Wilson further explained that ownership also refers to one's relationship with the ultimate owner, God, and that such a relationship makes stewardship unique because the other leadership styles express only owner–leader attributes.

Stewardship embraces a leader's sense of accountability for effectively caring for the resources with which they are entrusted, as well as for ensuring openness, fostering communication, and growing relationships with stakeholders (Clinton 1988, 1989). Within this accountability, Wilson (2016) addressed Rodin's (2010) view of the freedom of the steward: "But through a close relationship with God and the encouragement of stakeholders, steward leaders can experience freedom" (p. 106). Wilson further described one distinction between secular versions of leadership similar to risk aversion and the steward's risk management through a relationship with God and stakeholders in which the freedom stewards enjoy results from God's entrusting responsibility to them. Correspondingly, the parable in Luke regards an allegorical reference to the cultivation of fig trees and the decision on whether to cut them down or let them grow (Lk. 13:6–9 ESV). The former entails the repurposing of usable land, while the latter involves taking the risk of the trees remaining barren, indirectly moving stewards to consider risks through God's promise (Lk. 13:6–9 ESV).

3.1. Data-Driven Research Specific to Steward Leadership

Avolio et al. (2009) noted a weakness of the values-based participatory style modalities of servant and, indirectly, steward leadership: "As with LMX [leader–member exchange theory], the measurement of servant leadership is problematic. Many different measures of servant leadership have already been proposed with scales and items" (p. 436). Being objective, Avolio et al. alluded to a much-needed consensus. However, van Dierendonck (2011) compared 14 validated studies regarding servant leadership and offered a different view: the non-consensus of the scale and the continual efforts of diverse researchers made servant leadership a popular and novel field of leadership study requiring further investigation.

Not discounting the work of stewardship theory as secular governance (e.g., Donaldson and Davis 1991), steward leadership has rarely been explored in the research outside that of servant leadership, with only a few noteworthy examples. Wilson (2010) conducted the first studies outside Clinton's (1988) initial work as part of a dissertation focusing on NPOs. Wilson started with 235 Western Christian leaders as the initial candidates, with the aim of seeking demographic and attitudinal orientation to serve as the primary measure of a

qualitative study. A total of 10 interview subjects were chosen from the 77 original surveys. Apart from investigating the lived experiences of Christian leaders, Wilson intended to present a novel understanding of motivations by engaging in a dialectic exchange with the subjects to determine the leadership modalities employed by current leaders. The results of Wilson's 2010 work produced the latter in 2016, which influenced much Western Christian steward leadership research.

April et al. (2010) also conducted a study from a secular perspective that involved examining the factors regarding steward leadership implementation. They asked the following: "Why has stewardship, in all its acknowledged superiority over traditional forms of leadership, not taken a more appreciable role in our lives?" (p. 60). The demographic features were nationality, industry, and employed position, followed by age and gender. The instrumental finding was that applicationists over the age of 35 were more apt to use steward leadership in susceptible, fragile areas of the organization, confirming Clinton's (1989) claims about stewardship and the need for maturity. Interestingly, all the other factors had little influence on the use or intended application. Their research aimed to guide stakeholders in providing more effective training targeting the fragility and maturity of organizational leadership. In a follow-up publication, April et al. (2013) noted an ancillary report as an essential study for steward leadership, despite never mentioning steward or servant leadership. Wilson et al. (2006) explored the leadership qualities affecting social responsibility by surveying over 100 leaders with two thematic outcomes (i.e., acting with integrity and caring for others) as the most important attributes of a leader. Their findings complement those of Clinton (1989), Wilson (2016), and April et al. (2013).

Katsande et al. (2022) crafted a validated questionnaire measuring a spliced transforming steward leadership construct, remarking that the variation in steward leadership combines steward (April et al. 2013; Block 1996) and transformational (Burns 1978) leadership. Katsande (2021) surveyed 341 participants to study the relationship between the character and competencies of the leader in relation to steward attributes. The study revealed that the benevolent nature of organizations was substantiated by leaders' attitude of servanthood and their consent not to defect for personal utility as an equilibrium (Katsande 2021).

3.2. The Entanglement of Steward and Servant Leadership

The entanglement between steward and servant leadership is well established; it is positioned on the lack of consensus, uneven popularity, and projected purity of one concept being more specific to Western Christian needs than potential rivals (Niewold 2007; Wilson 2016). Wilson (2016) stated that servant leadership is naturally inspired to serve in the same way that it establishes stewardship as its critical component (van Dierendonck 2011). Such service inspires a servant to lead, highlighting the weightiness of servant-based leadership as a contribution to stewardship (Wilson 2016). Greenleaf (2007), who is credited with the origin of the concept of servant leadership, stated the servant leader's credo as an introduction:

> Caring for persons, the more able and less able serving each other, is the rock upon which a good society is built. If a better society is to be built, one that is more just and more loving, and provides greater creative opportunity for its people, then the most open course is to raise both the capacity to serve and the very performance, as servant, of existing institutions by new regenerative forces operating within them. (p. 9)

Greenleaf established servant leadership in the original essay inspired by Hesse's (2003) famous mystical novel *The Journey to the East*, in which the servant Leo leaves an expedition in a hostile jungle, resulting in extreme chaos and an experience that provides lessons in humility and transcendence (Spears 2005).

Understanding a few granularities about Greenleaf (2007) and Hesse (2003) can create a helpful preamble to compare steward and servant leadership. Greenleaf was a Quaker from Indiana who used the stories of the abolitionist John Woolman, who persuaded fellow

Quaker slaveholders to abandon the slavery practice through "gentle, clear, and consistent persuasion" (Spears 1991, p. 21). There is a possible incongruity between John Woolman and Hesse, the peacemaking Quaker and the counter-culture icon of the Vietnam era, whom Ziolkowski (2003) noted a common nickname of saint Hesse among the hippies. The plurality of servant leadership referred to by Greenleaf (2007)—which transcends religious containers—plays a vital role because plurality is perceived as a secular stance for Western Christian applicationists seeking more purity, possibly motivating the movement away from servant leadership and its secular ties (Niewold 2007; Rodin 2010; Wilson 2016).

One of the most significant challenges in deciphering Greenleaf (2007) was that his writings never concretely defined servant leadership, leading to the creation of several path-dependent tributaries (van Dierendonck 2011). However, Greenleaf offered the fundamental aspect of a servant leader that always transcends one's self-interest as the impetus for all future definitions.

Compared with other leadership assemblies, servant leadership predominantly targets followers' satisfaction, including their safety, work–life balance, and organizational commitment (Avolio et al. 2009). The participative style and focus on serving the needs of others also permit a shift from a traditional system wherein power is concentrated at the top to one where it is broadly shared at all levels (Blanchard 2003). In summarizing the work of several servant leadership researchers and pundits following Avolio et al.'s (2009) exploration of servant leadership, van Dierendonck (2011) established a rigorous set of servant–leader characteristics: (1) humility, (2) authenticity, (3) interpersonal acceptance, (4) stewardship, and (5) providing direction. On the surface, van Dierendonck's inventory complements Wilson's (2016) concentration on the importance of steward leadership's ownership, motivation, and accountability.

Wilson (2016) and Rodin (2010) recognized the heightened confusion concerning the relationship between servant and steward leadership. Writers such as Blanchard (2003) and Spears (2005) built on Greenleaf's (2007) original premise that stewardship is part of servant leadership and the greater exposure of servant theory over 50 years. As Wilson stated, "We have established that stewards are servants, but not all servants are stewards" (p. 124). Wilson further emphasized the fundamental strategic disparity between the two theories: servant leadership focuses on serving individual needs, while stewardship focuses on the mission and the management of resources. In scripture, 1 Corinthians 4:15 confirms Wilson's view of the dichotomy demonstrated by the Apostle Paul, wherein stewardship is described as an entrustment, with the mysteries of God being more specific than being a servant (ESV). The verse expresses that it is not Paul but God working through Paul as the gospel that leads to the road to salvation. Thus, in this interpretation, Paul can be considered an anointed steward of the gospel. However, the apparent paradox of Wilson (2016) and his unidirectional memetic message can be observed in Mark 9:35: "And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, 'If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all'" (ESV). Mark 9:35 is one of the many scriptures that Western Christian servant leader applicationists can use to justify the need to serve, complementary to the same verses used by Wilson (2010) and Rodin (2010) to target stewardship justification in isolation.

3.3. The Focus and Drive of a Secular Steward Leader

Wilson (2016) identified several secular stewardship authors contributing to the body of knowledge. Although offering a construct of ownership, unlike Wilson (2010) and Rodin (2010), Covey (1997)—one of Wilson's secular sources—described the unique idea of delegation, wherein the steward delegates power but retains full accountability. This delegation process corresponds with Wilson's and Rodin's views of trust and mission and has five core components: (1) the parameters and guidelines, (2) the supplemental resources to accomplish the task, (3) an understanding of the standards and reporting, (4) a thorough knowledge of the expectations and goals, and (5) an acknowledgment of the positive or negative consequences (Covey 1997). Interestingly, the empowerment and

sharing of power is a crucial formulation of stewardship within the servant leadership construct and is echoed by secular steward leadership authors such as Block (1996), April et al. (2013), and Sergiovanni (1996).

Block (1996) explained that stewards must choose service over personal utility (defection) with practices that eliminate the patriarchy from empowerment, including the equalization of rewards, collective meaning and purpose, and community commitment. Block's central theme is the elevation of stewards to lead organizations with long-term goals and joint utility over short-term goals and personal utility, creating a balance. Interestingly, all the secular sources of steward leadership take the position of servant leadership regarding how the servant is intensified and that the notion of being the steward is the strength of the process based on accountability, as demonstrated in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2. Selected steward-focused and servant-driven literature (quadrant 1).

Year	Author (s)	Title
2016	Wilson	Steward leadership in the non-profit organization
2010	Rodin	The steward leader: Transforming people, organizations, and communities
2010	Wilson	Steward leadership: Characteristics of the steward leader in Christian non-profit organizations
2004	Brinckerhoff	Non-profit stewardship: A better way to lead your mission-based organization
2004	Brinckerhoff	Non-profit stewardship: A better way to lead your mission-based organization
1989	Clinton	Leadership emergence theory: A self-study manual for analyzing the development of a Christian leader
1988	Clinton	Leadership development theory: Comparative studies among high level Christian leaders

Table 3. Selected servant-focused and steward-driven literature (quadrant 2).

Year	Author (s)	Title
2022	Katsande et al.	Developing the transforming steward leadership questionnaire scientifically validated measurement instrument
2021	Katsande	Developing transforming steward leadership scientifically validated measurement instrument
2013	April et al.	Steward leadership: A maturational perspective
2011	van Dierendonck	Servant leadership: A review and synthesis
2010	April et al.	Stewardship as leadership: An empirical investigation
2007	Niewold	Beyond servant leadership
2005	Spears	The understanding and practice of servant-leadership
2003	Blanchard	Servant leader
1997	Covey	The seven habits of highly effective people: Restoring the character
1996	Sergiovanni	Moral leadership: Getting to the heart of school improvement
1991	Spears	Robert K. Greenleaf: Servant-leader
1970	Greenleaf	The servant as leader in corporate ethics and corporate governance

4. Governance Being Focused and Driven as Stewardship Theory

The first task in identifying quadrants 3 and 4 requires basic definitions of NPOs, for-profit organizations (FPOs), and agency theory. An NPO is often synonymous with Western Christian and secular charities (Omura and Forster 2014). NPOs do not offer products or make profits in the conventional business sense (Brinckerhoff 2004). The apparent difference is that an FPO seeks profits and is under a distinct governance that aims to manage a business and focus on shareholders (Brinckerhoff 2004; Omura and Forster 2014), compared to an NPO, in which the stakeholder is the community served according to the NPO's mission (Cosenza 2007), which is described as covenantal by researchers such as Sergiovanni (1996) and April et al. (2013). Despite the significant role that NPOs play in society, they are plagued with challenges—from a scandalous culture to poor governance—that lead to failures (Afifuddin and Siti-Nabiha 2010). Furthermore, constant media attention has created many watchdog and supervisory groups scrutinizing and scouring NPOs to root out bad players (Choo 2005; Kulik 2004).

Ariza-Montes et al. (2020) noted limited research and information regarding NPOs' management practices. They stated that the available information analyzes NPO employees'

bleak existences, characterized by low pay, low morale, instability, and turnover, all leading to negative emotional states. Despite the detrimental publicity and poor NPO employee satisfaction, NPO leaders demonstrate an aversion to change when presented with the leadership options devised by FPOs (Afifuddin and Siti-Nabiha 2010; Ariza-Montes et al. 2020). Conceivably, the reluctance to change and the focus on empowerment and power shifting create fear in the NPO leaders that their employees will question their motivations and beliefs regarding their mission (Avolio et al. 2009). The ability to reduce such anxiety is among the appeals of steward leadership for NPO governance; the steward remains in charge and empowers through service as the mission dictates, alleviating the leader's fear and enhancing employees' lives (Wilson 2016).

Similar to quadrants 1 and 2, quadrants 3 and 4 echo the same intensities and strengths based on the researcher's positionality. From a secular perspective, Donaldson (2005) proposed stewardship theory to foster alignment, trust, and optimization with stakeholders based on a joint leadership-derived mission. Wilson (2016) identified the fourth quadrant as novel governance wherein the alignment and intensity of the mission are replete with the purpose of the stewards serving the mission, with the ultimate master being God.

Stewardship Theory as the Solution to Defection

According to Donaldson and Davis (1991), stewardship theory can be conceptualized as a novel antithesis of agency. Means and Berle (2017) noted the ongoing tension between ownership and the leadership hired to control an organization. In 2023, controversies still surround this tension, and best practices of reduction or prevention are often associated with ongoing organizational failures and scandals (Rondi et al. 2023). Agency theory covers tension and mitigation efforts through governance processes popularized by Jensen and Meckling (2019), Eisenhardt (1989), and Fama and Jensen (2019), with over 50,000 collective citations. Eisenhardt (1989) began by addressing the underlying assumptions of human behavior as being rational, critical with later debate, and having a drive for personal utility. This idea adds to Donaldson and Davis's (1991) notion of the desire to seek opportunities and minimize risks related to pain and punishment.

According to Caldwell et al. (2008), agency theory advocates hiring a professional leader based on optimized performance according to shareholders' plans for their utility. Eisenhardt (1989) added two agency problems to the uncertainty and incompleteness of information and intention: (1) the principal cannot assess the agents' actions to ensure the exact process as desired, including morality, and (2) the exertion of maximum effort. Cosenza (2007) agreed and commented that agency loss, referring to the perceived or measured detriment of agency problems, originates from the process of monitoring and preventing loss through control. Nonetheless, the methods of application and measurement in conceptual or tangible formats vary widely across publications. Grundei (2008) and Donaldson and Davis (1991) stated that, on the one hand, the literature describes agency as ineffective based on minimal controls. On the other hand, it is destructive, especially in terms of oppressive controls that reduce overall organizational fitness.

Donaldson (2005) defined the origin of stewardship by saying the following: "While argument and evidence is supporting the manager as the agent of agency theory, there are other arguments and evidence—overlooked by agency theory—of the manager as being responsible and pro-organizational, which I term stewardship theory" (p. 13). Grundei (2008) emphasized one comparison between agency and stewardship concerning the general approach to uncertainty with managerial behavior. In particular, Grundei emphasized agency distrust and avoidance versus stewardship trust and acceptance as a binary divide. This emphasis concerns the visceral challenge of agency problems, prescribed enforcement mechanisms, and the nature of human behavior seeking personal utility (Fama and Jensen 2019; Wilson 2016). "The key issue is thus not to heighten control and monitoring of management, or to make them ersatz owners, but rather to empower executives" (Donaldson and Davis 1991, p. 60).

In the original work of Donaldson and Davis (1991), followed by Davis et al. (1997b), Albanese et al. (1997) provided a rebuttal, saying that "today's 'agent' may be tomorrow's 'steward,' or vice versa", implying that within the framework of agency theory, problems, loss, and the novelty of stewardship are contingent, not binary (p. 611). Davis et al. (1997a) replied to Albanese et al. (1997) by stating that the intention of the original stewardship and agency comparison was based on Jensen and Meckling's (2019) casting of rationality and the pursuit of self-interests while recognizing the apparent contingency. The point is that agency is often viewed as the dark and sinister function of immense corporate evil. This view should not be so, as Donaldson (2005) noted later. Often, managers are overtrodden with preconceived maladaptive behavior based on an unconnected scandal. Donaldson (2005) offered a compromise by maintaining that "stewardship theory is clearly an extremely positive and, in that sense, one-sided view of managers, and its utility is as a corrective against agency theory. The truth is undoubtedly some synthesis" (p. 1083).

The mechanism offered by stewardship about why someone would not seek the personal utility to defect remains elusive in the literature. Grundei (2008) echoed Wilson (2016) and Rodin (2010), assuming that the notions of trust and mission focus are the keys to the power of stewardship theory. To discern this more clearly, a summary of game theoretical processes can help as a normative backdrop to agency and stewardship theories (Von Neumann 2020). Game theory specific to an iterated prisoner's dilemma binds agency to stewardship. Starting with an idealized situational game, players follow a set of rules and competitively receive some payoff in the most classical sense (Martin 1978). To restate the optimization, the dominant strategy for each detainee is to confess with the utility maximization of going free, that is, as in the Nash equilibrium (Axelrod and Hamilton 1981). The natural state of agency is the defection to personal utility (Jensen and Meckling 2019). Stewardship theory offers anti-defection, in which something else prevents defection and then requests a denial of personal utility, the governance intensity toward the mission, as per Wilson (2016), or the intensity toward stakeholders, as per Donaldson and Davis (1991).

The interpretation of the literature used to create Tables 4 and 5 is akin to Tables 2 and 3, representing some repetition, as steward leadership-focused modalities also delve into mission intensity and stakeholder strength. The NPO and the stronger anti-defection focus were also distributed similarly. The more FPOs and a secular focus on governance specific to Donaldson and Davis (1991) are distributed to quadrant 3, where the stakeholder function is more intensive the more the mission has a role in supporting stakeholders.

Table 4. Selected stakeholder-focused and mission-driven literature (quadrant 3).

Year	Author (s)	Title
2019	Schillemans et al.	Trust and verification: balancing agency and stewardship theory in the governance of agencies
2017	Keay	Stewardship theory: Is board accountability necessary?
2012	Hernandez	Toward an understanding of the psychology of stewardship
2008	Caldwell et al.	Ethical stewardship—Implications for leadership and trust
2008	Grundei	Are managers agents or stewards of their principals? Logic, critique, and reconciliation of two conflicting theories of corporate governance
2006	Caers et al.	Principal-agent relationships on the stewardship-agency axis
2005	Donaldson	Following the scientific method: How I became a committed functionalist and positivist
2004	Kulik	Agency theory, reasoning and culture at Enron: In search of a solution
1991	Donaldson and Davis	Stewardship theory or agency theory: CEO governance and shareholder returns

Table 5. Selected mission-focused and stakeholder-driven literature (quadrant 4).

Year	Author (s)	Title
2016	Wilson	Steward leadership in the non-profit organization
2010	Wilson	Steward leadership: Characteristics of the steward leader in Christian non-profit organizations
2004	Brinckerhoff	Non-profit stewardship: A better way to lead your mission-based organization
1989	Clinton	Leadership emergence theory: A self-study manual for analyzing the development of a Christian leader
1988	Clinton	Leadership development theory: Comparative studies among high level Christian leaders

5. Conclusions and Call for Future Research

In the introduction, the "anointed steward" was defined as the leader chosen to assume the role of a steward as being the caretaker, trusted to act on the wishes of the owner (Rodin 2010). The critical review reaffirmed this position. Moreover, the critical review introduced a filtering tool that allowed the literature to be sorted into quadrants where the focus of being a steward or servant manifested as a connected rivalry. The de-emphasized rival was not discarded but redirected as a vital source of drive akin to fire, needing fuel. With governance, the manifestation was on mission or stakeholders in the same type of rivalry. Despite attempts to fortify binary labels, the heterogeneity of steward leadership and stewardship theory fosters unilateral thematic use in multiple works that are inescapably connected.

An argument can be made whether the conceptual tool improved the isolation process, as two crucial ideas emerged from the coding and analysis. The first is that steward leadership is closer to servant leadership than it is independent of it. This connection means that entanglement often consists of perception-based technicalities, and the application of either theory is porous, requiring sensemaking, especially when facing conflict. Second, stewardship theory offers mitigation to agency loss based only on application. Regarding being a functionalist, Donaldson (2005) conceded that no homogeneity was in stewardship based on the circumstances and the necessity for contingency. This lack of uniformity exists because agency controls are sometimes needed, despite trust and alignment. Regardless of either idea, the point is that leaders move from one quadrant/construct to another based on the same notions, irrespective of the intensity and selection of an overarching modality or governance.

Call for Future Research

One of the most important outcomes of a critical review is the generation of many questions from the review process, from both the synthesis of the existing literature and the negative aspects of missing elements often present in a parallel domain. The list of inspired questions follows:

- How does steward leadership grow in both Western Christian and secular domains?
- Can there be a greater adoption of secular stewardship data and theories that can positively influence and yet allow the maintenance of Western Christian traditions?
- Can academic reciprocity of steward leadership research exist?
- How does steward leadership make organizations more anti-fragile to catastrophic forces like 9/11 or COVID-19?
- How does steward leadership reconcile with progressive subjects, such as gender and intersectionality?
- How does steward leadership reconcile with stewardship from other religious traditions?

These inspired questions mainly focus on the future of steward leadership from an integration perspective that has many challenges, as both Western Christian and secular academic groups are stoic in the substrate of how steward leadership is apparent to them. The notions of pluralism, inclusivism, exclusivism, and the like have perplexed Western Christians, as they signify the encampments of worldviews and how other religions interact with local variations of Christianity, be they fundamental or moderate. This perplexity

is complemented by the notions of academic rigor and objectivism in the ever-growing egalitarian nature of Western societies, in which tolerance is considered not only good form but also an expectation.

McDermott (2009) discussed Martyr Justin's stance on other philosophers as religions alongside their ways of understanding and articulating God. McDermott opined that Justin often used oppositional perspectives, making him one of the more original Christian thinkers in antiquity. This originality meant that Justin, who did not fear failure, asked all the difficult questions and was not afraid to seek alternative sources of truth to fortify his positions on faith (McDermott 2009).

Finally, Gadamer (2018) referred to *wissenschaft*, a German term encompassing the search for scholarship that includes science, theology, and the humanities. The notion of wissenschaft merges relativistic and positivistic truths, whereas Gadamer expressed a liminal space between the two truths in which truth and knowledge are contingent on capture, expression, and timing. From the critical review, it seems that steward leadership thrives in the liminal space, providing both a stable definition of an anointed purpose and the possibility of something greater, aspired to by authors and researchers across the reviewed literature.

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