A review of "The Third Lens: Multi-Ontology Sense-Making and Strategic Decision-Making" edited by Mika Aaltonen, published by Ashgate ISBN 9780754647980 (2007)

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Abstract

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Introduction

This book offered a series of stand-alone yet ostensibly inter-connected essays designed to present complex human systems viewed through a metaphorical 'third lens'. Third lens, according to Mika Aaltonen, was multi-ontology (multiple conceptions of reality), which influences and is influenced by epistemological and methodological 'lenses' to generate contextualized understanding. Aaltonen employed this third lens as a device to enhance strategic and future-oriented sense-making. Such sense-making was argued to be further enhanced through recognition of the importance of time to the contextualization of any understanding that might be achieved. The book was written as a type of 'sandwich': three beginning chapters (all by Aaltonen) to set the stage and develop what he termed a 'chronotope space' for displaying strategic landscapes and three concluding chapters by various authors, which challenged conventional notions of causality implicit in sense-making activities, surrounding the three middle chapters by various authors, which developed specific perspectives for modeling sense-making. A final but extremely brief concluding chapter by the editor attempted to bring the collection to a meaningful conclusion.

Aaltonen developed the concept of chronotope space through chapters 1 to 3. He provided a contextual foregrounding discussion of strategic decision making in Chapter 1 which set the stage for developing his 'third lens' perspective as a way of linking time and strategic landscape in the context of an organization's past, present and future. The chronotope space provided a conceptual way of tying together diverse modes of thinking about the future. Using a spherical coordinates metaphor, visionary (future-oriented), linear and disruptive (nonlinear, discontinuous, perhaps chaotic) thinking defined the poles of a 3-dimension axis system, along which an organization's strategic context could be located at any point in time. Different positions along the three axes called for different ontological, epistemological and methodological emphases in sense-making—thus creating a link to the 'third lens' metaphor. Aaltonen also argued that organizational positioning within a chronotope space implied particular 'takes' on what constituted causality and how it might be observed/understood. As a trio of chapters, Aaltonen did a reasonably convincing job of selling the value and potential utility of the chronotope space framework. However, after chapter 3, chronotope space was not referred to again until the final concluding chapter in the book.

Aaltonen intended the middle three chapters to illustrate how his framework could work for particular types of strategic problems. Chapter 4 (by Stefan Bergheim) displayed an exercise in large-scale systems modeling from an economic perspective. This perspective invoked a number of largely undefended assumptions (e.g., quantifiable system variables; achievable long-term equilibrium within the socioeconomic system, absence of feedback linkages) resulting in what was essentially a conceptually linear market segmentation model. The concluding section of the chapter was almost apologetic in focusing on what the model excluded or could not cope with, which largely negated its potential as a contextually sensitive forecasting tool. Furthermore, the chapter never clearly connected with the concept of the third lens nor with the chronotope space perspective that had been developed in the first three chapters. The chapter was therefore almost completely independent of the overarching theme of the book itself.

Chapter 5 (by Tapio Kanninen) displayed a useful dynamic political perspective designed to assist future-thinkers in identifying and assessing global and regional threats (what Kanninen called an 'early warning-response system'). The framework explicitly captured the notion of change over time as well as trying to identify some of the more complex feedback loops. Important

interconnected components in the framework were: international system change, economic change, changes in values and changes in physical environment, technology and know-how. Every proposed linkage between components was explained in some detail. I found the framework to be well-argued and illustrated. However, aside from the explicit recognition of the importance of the time dimension in sense-making activities, the ultimate connection between Kanninen's framework and Aaltonen's primary arguments remained tenuous at best. Thus, as a stand-alone piece, this chapter had value; as part of the larger book, it was difficult to see where it fit in.

Chapter 6 (by Aaltonen) presented a '3P-model' for understanding "macro-transformation of societies". The model owes a great deal to the well-known futurist, John Naisbitt. The model integrated platforms (supported by a scaffold of major drivers of development and change to a particular point in time), pieces (interconnected components within a specific platform; e.g., environment, technology, values, politics) and probabilities (associated with rates of change in various components and platforms). How this model furthered Aaltonen's 'third lens'/chronotope space agenda was completely unexplored. It is almost as if Aaltonen had developed two independent frameworks and wanted to ascribe value to each, without exploring their relationships to each other.

Chapter 7 (by Aaltonen & T. Irene Sanders) signaled a shift in focus in the book and provided a discussion of the concept of sensitivity to initial conditions as a way of rethinking the meaning of causality. The discussion reviewed fairly stock standard complexity/chaos theory material. There was nothing really new added here and how this discussion connected with the thirds lens/chronotope space framework was left largely unexplored.

Chapter 8 (by Paul Cilliers) presented a very through and readable discussion of complexity and sense-making. Cilliers reinforced both the necessities for and the constraints imposed by creating models of a complex world. He also explored the implications of causality within the context of a complex system. He closed with a short gem of an argument that understanding complex systems was not only a descriptive activity but also an ethical one, involving choices anchored in a normative dimension. This argument could have used much greater development, in the context of Aaltonen's proposed third lens conceptualization, but, alas, no such connections were made. Once again, we have a very good stand-alone chapter, but one whose relationship to the larger thesis of the book remained obscured.

Chapter 9 (by Eve Mitleton-Kelly) provided a basic reworking of the concept of final cause, from Aristotelian first principles. She drew some important conclusions about the problems with single cause thinking for events. She also showed that causal connections could coevolve in the context of a complex system. As a stand-alone chapter, Mitleton-Kelly's contribution was worth some attention. However, as part of Aaltonen's larger conceptual agenda, its role remained unclear.

Chapter 10 (by Aaltonen) was the concluding chapter in the book occupying just three pages. It was meant to tie the different chapters in the book to the third lens/chronotope space perspective. Furthermore, it tried to show how the chapters on causality could be related to the middle three perspective chapters. However, it failed quite badly, on both counts, at building the necessary linkages and integration. There was no depth of exploration here; discussion was terse and cursory. Aaltonen leaves the reader to decipher out how each of the chapter 'stories' was to be connected to the third lens perspective and to the chronotope space framework. All this left me thinking "why bother with the conceptualization at all?"

In general, for me the book did not really work in the way that Aaltonen appeared to intend. The three parts of the 'sandwich' never got satisfactorily melded together in a way that made the whole meal palatable. In fact, the three broad sections could be seen as parts from three different types of books, each with a different purpose. Several chapters would have worked just as well as stand-alone contributions. Aaltonen needed to do much more integrative work across the chapters to sell his message and achieve the potential that was there at the beginning. In this case, the whole was in fact much less than the sum of its parts, which for a book purporting to address a complexity agenda was problematic indeed.