Donna Ladkin, *Rethinking leadership: A new look at old leadership questions*, Cheltenham: Elgar, 2010. 202 pp. £68.00 (hbk). ISBN 978 1 84720 935 1 2011. £25.00 (pbk). ISBN 978 0 85793 131 3

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This latest publication by the leadership scholar Donna Ladkin is very timely and highly thought-provoking. Facing non-integral processes and realities in contemporary society and business in general, as well as in organization and leadership research in particular, the book provides a compelling argument for a more holistic conceptualization of leadership. Sensitive, it offers perspectives on transforming conventional interpretations and practices of leadership. In this way, Ladkin’s book manifests a welcome analysis for dealing with the increasingly complex challenges leaders and leadership are exposed to in our contemporary world. At the same time as the instrumental logic and modalities of liberal globalized capitalism encroach all spheres of ecological life and human endeavours, leadership requires new forms of leading, wise governance and practical realizations towards a more responsible practice.

The shortcomings of traditional leadership studies explain Ladkin’s emphasis on questioning, unsettling and re-opening, rather than on categorization, complacency and closure. Philosophically, questioning is a way of thinking, which is a quest that, instead of not seeing the wood for the trees, helps to understand the surrounding wooded area. This quest(ioning) allows walking a path through the thick ambiguous forest of what is called leadership (Harter, 2006) and opens up some ‘clearings’. In this spirit, Ladkin invites the reader to enter and interrogate the territory and landscapes of leadership. Aiming at destabilizing and repositioning, she tries pushing to the limits and re-interpreting conventional questions and conceptualizations. Thus, she is truly re-searching as a form of looking anew to the old, supposedly known and somehow over-used or over-interpreted phenomenon of leadership.

The first three chapters discuss philosophical reflections on studying leadership. Based on well-known limitations of conventional studies of leadership, the author joins post-positivistic conversations about exploring the leadership terrain by using insights from Continental philosophy. As a response to the question of why there are so many theories of leadership, Ladkin introduces in chapter 2 basic ideas of phenomenology and their relevance for leadership research. Describing a phenomenological approach as one which allows understanding various sides and perspectives, her discussion of phenomenology itself appears as ‘sided’, focusing on selective aspects and lines of thought. The liberties of simplification offer impressive illustrations and applications of some phenomenological ideas, but, as a somewhat inadequate representation, that may be distorting. The supposed sub-jectivist stance needs to be qualified, specifically discussed and contextualized as part of a transcendental sphere, which is more than and different from private or personal.
Polarizing phenomenology as ‘subjectivist’ in opposition to ‘objectivist’ approaches is in danger of glossing over nuances and divergent interpretations of the complex relationship between ‘subjectivist’ and ‘objectivist’ orientations and attempts for overcoming them. A curious reader could have been informed more about further developments and diverse methodologies of phenomenology in relation to leadership research.

Another problematic issue concerns the uncritical linkage between phenomenology and social constructionism. Although constructionism is helpful to understand how historically and culturally contingent phenomena arise from physical and social worlds, the status and claims of (social) constructivist thinking is in conflict with Merleau-Pontyian phenomenology and ontology (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, 1995). While sharing an anti-naturalist and anti-essentialist approach and having similar methodological orientations, phenomenological ontology does not follow the constructionists’ tendency towards an anti-realistic stance, but emphasizes the constitutive dimension. For Merleau-Ponty the task is not to construe the world; but rather to interrogate it to reveal the Beingness of the world and its self-other systems. The interest is in how phenomena are constituted in the field of Being understood as embodied topography as well as historically and culturally mediated, expressed and transformed space.

Recognizing leadership as a dynamically poly-perspectival process, in which interacting elements come together, Ladkin tries to contextualize it comprehensively. Strangely then, the figure representing this moment (pp.28, 178) takes the embedding context – which is a situated being-in-the-world – as one of the ‘factors’, with person-oriented leaders and followers and purposes as others. Furthermore, the interested reader would like to learn more about how the facets or elements of the moment are inter-related. Explaining the elusive disappearance and invisible dimensions of leadership, Ladkin refers to distributed and critical approaches, before returning again to a phenomenological interpretation of identity. What could have been more present here is the influential debate about the body as absent (e.g. Leder, 1990) and Merleau-Pontyian ontological reasoning about the invisible.

We learn with Ladkin about failed leadership in Heideggerian terms of present-at-hand and ready-to-hand and break-downs, exemplified with the case of Hurricane Katrina and its absence or lack of leadership moments. Recent links to other Heideggerian perspectives on a practice-based reflexivity in leadership (e.g. Segal, 2010) especially on organizational phenomena like strategy-as-practice (e.g. Chia and Holt, 2009) would have been enlightening. Philosophically, problems with Heideggerian interpretation (e.g. neglect of the body, lack of communicative existentials) and further ontological implications (e.g. ‘Gestell’ or ‘Gelassenheit’) could have been explained more critically.

Venturing into the relationship between leaders and followers, chapter 4 shows the significance of Merleau-Pontyian philosophy for understanding embodied and relational leadership dynamics. Using key notions from Merleau-Ponty’s late ontology, especially flesh and reversibility, Ladkin shows the essential intertwining of immanence and transcendence. Importantly, for Merleau-Ponty both do not only inform (p.58), but also constitute each other ontologically through a blurring, transgression, encroachment of all the opposites within an ambiguous in-between space. Moreover, the status of the body in Ladkin’s discussion (p.60) appears problematic, particularly with regard to the influential differentiation between the physical body (Körper) and the living body (Leib). According to Merleau-Ponty, the body itself is already lived, meaningful, intentional and responsively relational. Rejecting the modernist version of referentialist-representalism and refuting the reductionist strands of empiricist-objectivistic and the rationalistic-subjective paradigms, Merleau-Ponty
revealed the role of the phenomenal field and a situated bodily perspective. Not being merely sensory nor intellectual, the living body has both ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ dimensions. Existentially, it is constituted in the interchange between self and world, mind and matter, culture and nature. Ladkin highlights this reversibility thesis, and concurs with Merleau-Ponty’s attempt to recast the traditional disjunction between perceiver and perceived as well as other dualistic categories. Self-reflectively, she illustrates the idea of reversibility by giving an example of being observed in her office while observing herself (p.63).

But it seems important to understand reversibility as part of the post-Cartesian ontology of In-Between and elemental Flesh. However, this flesh as ‘unity of contraction’ (p.64) is not a harmonizing fusion, but mediates through differentiation and differences. Using Merleau-Ponty’s ontology, the author reflects on what a ‘Flesh of Leadership’ (p.71) could mean and what this implies for leader and follower roles as well as feelings involved (pp.182–3). The subsequent description of an exercise used in leadership development training (‘leading hands’) illustrates convincingly some of the ideas. One possible radicalization, which could have been discussed more, is that the reversible post-dualistic ‘inter-being’ (Merleau-Ponty, 2003: 208) and intercorporeal flesh opens up reciprocal ethics, transformative politics and justice (Johnson, 2008: 169). This then helps to consider ethical bodies and a new ethos in leadership as well as ecological and sustainable responsibilities.

Chapter 5 explores the potential and actuality of aesthetics for leadership practice and research. Based on a reconstruction of Weber’s notion of charisma and selective contemporary renderings, and referring to US President Obama as an example, Ladkin then introduces aesthetics as a mode of sensed apprehension and judgment. Unusually, she links Kant’s aesthetic experience of the sublime to the context of Weber’s charismatic authority. The analysis of charisma in action as a sublime aesthetic encounter and the interaction between the two are exemplified by a case analysis investigating the political leaders Clinton and Obama during the US election process in 2008 and JF Kennedy as charismatic leader. Mentioning the need for impressing followers as a quality of charisma (p.99), it would have been informative to learn more about the link to research on impression management.

Based on the ideal of an autonomous self-mastering individual of reason, Kantian epistemology can be interpreted as one of an alienated knowledge, which subordinates the ‘Other of Reason’ like body, feelings, desire and imagination. The aesthetically interested reader misses the use of some more aesthetic categories related to leadership phenomena. One question which arose for me was: How does the supposed non-person-bound charisma in the leadership moment work in terms of the feelings and aesthetic experiences of individuals? It would have been interesting to learn even more about how aesthetic competencies, transmitted by artistic and design exercises and experiments, do work (or not), facilitated by different artistic materials and media, for example drawing, painting, print-graphics, photography, video, sculpture and theatre.

In chapter 6 the meaning of meanings is investigated to understand what is so important about the ‘vision-thing’. By using selective sources, the supposed meaning-making as leadership practice is discussed. Furthermore, the Heideggerian ‘existential’ throwness and attunements are chosen and linked to leadership as are basic ideas of Gadamerian hermeneutics. However, a more critical hermeneutics could also problematize the aspired ‘fusions of horizons’ consider the crucial dimensions of power, and the specifically ideological deformation of language uses and potential dark sides and possible misuses of meaning-making.
In an impressive case study about a project on ecologically sustainable ways of operating, Ladkin illustrates processes of aligning meaning and practice in relation to stake-holders’ engagement and decision-making as part of ‘applied’ hermeneutics. Readers versed in organization theory will miss a critical discussion of the influential, but in itself problematic discourse on sense-making as initiated by Weick and others. Integrating embodied perspectives on the role of imagination and the sense-making of bodily senses would have been revealing.

Co-authored chapter 7 tries to make use of the highly sophisticated process philosophy to complement phenomenology. The critical reader misses a reflection of tensions and their limitations and a critique of a conservative use of change to keep business-as-usual.

Overall, Ladkin’s book might be seen as an example of a kind of positive leadership (e.g. Cameron, 2008) in the tradition of positive psychology, appreciative inquiry, prosocial behaviour and positive organizational scholarship. Many of her ideas seem to resonate and contribute to ‘spirals of flourishing’ (Cameron et al., 2003: 3), reflecting life-giving, generative and ennobling human conditions. However, a critical reflection of this orientation would not only see the strengths, like well-being, thriving, resilience or virtuousness, but would also consider the weaknesses and dangers, like new forms of more subtle exploitations and co-option of the positive. This is especially apparent in practices of change and HRM, like self-limiting empowerment, questionable emotional intelligence or prescribing fun at work, and the need for further refinement (e.g. Fineman, 2006).

This book is brilliantly written and provides a valuable and innovative contribution both in form of content and style. Even if there is a remaining, perhaps insolvable tension between the claims of being both philosophically stretching and practically relevant (p.13), Ladkin does an admirable job of connecting philosophical reflection and leadership action and passion. Though ambitious and radical, it is not at all priggish compared to many other books that aim at rethinking basic concepts. While written with a sense of modesty, the book expresses highly significant messages and brings them alive in an entertaining and compelling way. The reader is taken on an exciting journey towards a different kind of leadership. Weaving, albeit selectively, important conceptual and empirical threads together, this body of text offers a richly patterned and even poetic tapestry.

However, further and more critical implications for theory, methodology and research on leadership practices in organization would have been helpful. In particular, (inter-)disciplinary bridge-building moves could have been made to the fields of organization studies, like organizational learning, emotion in organization or the emerging stream of strategy as practice. Nevertheless, this book provides timely possibilities to reassess and further investigate the deeper relevance of leadership and a more comprehensive and creative understanding of its tasks, processes and enactments. It provides integral perspectives on leadership as part of an embodied organizational life-world, opening options for more genuine, relational ways of leading forward to what could be interpreted as ‘inter-leadership’ (Küpers and Weibler, 2008). All those interested in a truly ‘alter-native’ understanding of leadership theory and practice will find this book not only informative, but also deeply rewarding. With its philosophical base and concrete fleshying-out of abstract ideas, it will appeal to those readers who are looking for a broader understanding and bolder vision of leadership.

Rethinking Leadership not only provokes critical questions, but also provides leading answers and perspectives for more ingenious ways of understanding what it means and implies to lead and to follow as an embodied, ongoing journeying.
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Richard Bolden, Beverley Hawkins, Jonathan Gosling and Scott Taylor (eds), Exploring leadership: Individual, organizational and societal perspectives, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. 214pp. £50.00. ISBN 978 0 19 954765 4 (hbk)

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In seven detailed chapters, Exploring Leadership reviews a great number of themes relating to leadership, at – as the title promises – a number of different levels of analysis: individual, organizational and societal. In doing so it also offers a clear and definite sense of a particular school’s perspective on leadership (the Centre for Leadership Studies (CLS) at the University of Exeter). The CLS perspective is one that emphasizes the following values: relevance, curiosity, inconvenience, creativity, closeness and influence. The book stands, or should stand (in the case of influence) as a fine example of each of these values, which is deservedly high praise.

The heart of the book comes in three dedicated chapters (Chapters 3,4,5). These respectively discuss leadership in relation to the individual (e.g. trait accounts, leadership styles), the organizational (e.g. power, culture) and the societal (e.g. globalization, sustainability). These are prefaced by two chapters: (Chapter 1) a brief introduction – framing the text and contribution (this satisfactorily answers the authors’ question, ‘not “another” book on leadership?’); and (Chapter 2) an overview of ‘theoretical considerations’ – which includes discussion of the origins of leadership theory, the nature of leadership in relation to management and the contested nature of the term. The book closes with two chapters dealing with emerging perspectives and dilemmas, such as gender, toxicity and spirituality.