

Genevieve Lloyd
Reclaiming Wonder: After the Sublime
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Reviewed by Amarantha Groen, 2018

Amarantha Groen is currently teaching in the Humanities Department at Erasmus University College in Rotterdam. She teaches various courses in philosophy, and recently developed her own course in feminist philosophy, introducing a new area of study to the university's curriculum. She obtained her bachelor's degree in philosophy with a focus on feminist phenomenology and completed her research master's degree in gender and ethnicity studies at Utrecht University. She wrote her thesis on the feminist potential of wonder, and her research interests include feminist theories of the body, queer theory, critical theory, and new materialisms.

Quote: "At its peak, wonder can foster the renewal of 'active, imaginative, emotionally engaged thinking,' which not only depends but thrives on the absence of certainty, on not-knowing."

Genevieve Lloyd's latest work, *Reclaiming Wonder: After the Sublime*, which traces the philosophical history of wonder and its potential within contemporary contexts, may not come as a surprise to those familiar with her work. Throughout her oeuvre, Lloyd has demonstrated a profound, sustained, and meticulous passion for creative and political readings of the history of philosophy. Ever since her, by now, feminist classic, *The Man of Reason*--in which she carefully and provocatively traces the association of maleness with (shifting conceptions of) reason and rationality throughout the canon of Western philosophy and opens the rethinking of central concepts in philosophy and scientific discourse--she has engaged intensely with the history of philosophy. *Reclaiming Wonder* continues the affirmative reading that is typical of her approach, marked by a readiness to critically and creatively engage with thought, producing new debates and insights that can be put to work. Another defining characteristic of Lloyd's oeuvre, which returns in this new work, is her particular attention to, and expertise on, the work of Spinoza. The philosopher, who was until recently a largely overshadowed "undercurrent" figure (Lloyd has been among those who have actively brought him out of the historical shadows and into the present), helps her think through issues such as responsibility, freedom, difference, and diversity. Thus, *Reclaiming Wonder* can be read in line with the project of reading the history of philosophy critically yet affirmatively, and with Lloyd's longtime engagement with Spinoza's thought. Both threads return anew and are connected by way of an inquiry into the philosophical history of wonder.

Reclaiming Wonder begins from the observation that philosophy, although having once regarded wonder as a state of the mind defining the distinctive intellectual activity of philosophy, gives hardly any serious thought to the concept in contemporary discourse. Lloyd observes that wonder is at present largely relegated to the realm of the escapist fantastic, rather than to the realm of "serious intellectual engagement with reality" (2) as was the case for the ancient philosopher. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, its ancient connections with knowledge were

overshadowed by two forces: the increased preoccupation with the rigorous methods of scientific inquiry and rationalization of Descartes, and the idea of the sublime grounded in post-Kantian ideas of the absolute. These forces together eclipsed all of what wonder was, and what it could still become (213).

Intervening in the philosophical and, by extension, political neglect of wonder, *Reclaiming Wonder* traces these and other trajectories of wonder's (dis)continuities and (dis)appearances in philosophical and literary texts and, consequently, defends wonder's "continuing importance in the life of the mind" (3). It is not her intention to find a definitive theory of its nature or role for the present, but that "in better understanding the old wanderers, we might find some insights which we can put to work" (208). To "reclaim" wonder, then, is both to reconnect with the insights about wonder from the history of philosophy and to restate them in a new context, while also reclaiming a territory that has been ceded in the "colonisation of wonder by the fascination of the sublime" (13). Reclaiming wonder, moreover, is directly political and pivotal in strategizing against false certainties. It is this latter dimension--having a role to play in contemporary social critique--that makes this work especially relevant to our current political climate.

The book itself arguably takes after its subject, as it is written from a mode of wandering wonder: tracing a concept that, as Lloyd asserts, itself lacks a clear location and "sometimes seems to be grasped only in a sense of something that has gone missing" (207). Accordingly, in tracing the meandering and (dis)appearing lines and intersections of wonder through the history of philosophy, the experience of reading *Reclaiming Wonder* has a searching, wandering quality with no simple trajectory or a single concept.

As Lloyd fleshes out "Socratic Wonder" in the first chapter, "Pause for Thought: Plato and Aristotle on Wonder," the topic up for debate is the very nature of knowledge. Wondering for Plato's Socrates not only indicates a philosophical mind, but constitutes a necessary mental condition for pursuing philosophical knowledge. The resulting wisdom is accompanied by a kind of not-knowing that is to be celebrated instead of extinguished. Moreover, the connection among philosophy, wonder, and social critique finds its beginnings in this period. In the subsequent reading of Aristotelian wonder in the *Metaphysics*, two things happen to wonder's journey: on the one hand, the element of desiring to understand is brought to the fore as its affective dimension. On the other, the thinking that begins in wonder has as its purpose the alleviation of wonder itself, creating an emphasis on the superior end state of thought--increased knowledge--instead of the process, as seen in Plato. As Lloyd explains, although the two strands of wonder go their separate ways, they have an original shared concern with the place of wonder in living well. That is, both Aristotle and Plato welcomed wonder as a positive feature of mental activity, which is crucial to living well.

This all changes in the seventeenth century with Descartes and Spinoza. In chapter 2, "Passion or Distraction? Descartes and Spinoza on Wonder," philosophical antagonisms are set up between the two in which wonder is the implied subject of concern. Descartes takes Aristotle's view of wonder as being "less noble" than the end state in which it finds its completion: wonder now potentially constitutes a serious threat to knowledge (34) and loses its associations with more practical concerns with

living well. Immobilizing the mind like a statue, Descartes warns that it can turn into "blind curiosity" (35) that seeks out rarities for the sake of wondering at them rather than knowing them (36). Whereas Descartes gave wonder the status of a primary passion, Spinoza does not even count wonder among what he calls the "affects," as it does not meet the condition of involving mental movement; the mind comes to a standstill by the singularity of the object of its attention (40). Stressing the connections between wonder and imagination, Spinoza regards wonder as a fixation of the imagination that brings to a stop the flow of the imagination's movement between similar things (42). However, this pause is integral to intellectual activity, and it strengthens our efforts to know as it enhances "the mind's struggle to understand the natural world and its own place in it" (45). For both Descartes and Spinoza, the object of wonder was seen as something out of the ordinary; something momentous and potentially overwhelming. This association returns with the eighteenth-century fascination with the sublime.

In the third chapter, "Burke and Kant on the Sublime," Lloyd investigates a crucial conceptual shift toward the sublime and shows that the "astonishment" that is produced by Burke's sublime can be seen as a version of wonder, but one that has lost its old relations with reason and intellectual inquiry (63). As such, the sublime connects to the idea of a power far beyond the limits of clear thought (61) and acts on us in ways that overshoot reason. Lloyd then takes her reader to Kant's development of the sublime (and Deleuze's reading of it), which differs greatly from Burke's version, and in the *Critique of Judgment*, is most closely associated with the mind's capacity to reason. For Kant, in the experience of the sublime the imagination finds itself struggling in a fruitless effort to exceed its own limits, forced to recoil and succumb to an "emotional delight" (66). And as Deleuze interprets it, the sublime is generated through the tensions among the faculties of the imagination, understanding, and reason, which seek their own limit. That is, the sublime resides not in objects, but in thought. As Lloyd argues: "Human reason itself here becomes something wondrous" (67).

Chapter 4, "Romanticism and the Allure of the Sublime," traces the influences of Kant's sublime and Spinoza's striving or *conatus* on the post-Kantian understanding of wonder. As Lloyd argues, the repercussions of the sublime in Romanticism evoked a condition no longer closely connected with the celebration of the intellect or reason. The Romantics did, however, appropriate Spinoza's *conatus* and Kant's notion of the struggles of the faculties of the mind, and subjected them, as Lloyd claims, to "vagaries of later interpretation and appropriation" (75). Had they followed a "firmer trajectory from Spinoza into post-Kantian thought" (76), the path of wonder may have been different. Through a careful reading of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Lloyd illustrates the allure of the sublime and its hazards. Her reading of the Gothic novel as capturing the desire to control and understand the forces governing human life (80) instigates a literary exploration of the notion of the sublime and "its intensifying effects on the interactions of imagination and emotion" (87). The big takeaway here is that the Romantic sublime had its roots in wonder and eclipsed wonder's old connections with knowledge (87).

Chapter 5, "Wonder and Stupidity: Flaubert on Romanticism," brings us to the anti-Romanticism of Flaubert's literary classics, and opens a new trajectory of wonder that surprisingly connects it to *bêtise*, stupidity, which, as Lloyd admits, "may seem to be

among the more outlandish moments in its variegated history" (218). For Flaubert, stupidity is wanting to reach conclusions. Lloyd reads his literary works as rich in enactments of the relation between wonder and stupidity. Moreover, his more theoretical correspondence offers a glimpse of a post-Romantic vision of a kind of wonder. This wonder does not have the "heady aspirations of the sublime" that appeals to some sort of unreachable or transcendent beyond, but rather evokes an artistic vision of a world as free from conclusion; a contemplation of what is "just there" (99). Although Flaubert never wrote a systematic account of stupidity, Lloyd reads dimensions of the collective stupidity of received opinion through his multiple texts, in which he addresses the conditions under which stupidity, as an antidote to wonder, may flourish (101).

Chapter 6, "Reconnecting with Socratic Wonder: Heidegger and Arendt," shifts to yet another trajectory of wonder and catapults the reader into the twentieth century and its philosophical takes on the concept. Through his analysis of boredom and the sense of indetermination of unfamiliarity that characterizes it, Heidegger brings about many connections with the ancient interpretation of wonder. The kind of thinking associated with wonder becomes a sort of "thoughtful questioning" (130). As a kind of intellectual mood directed at the usual, wonder here cannot be reduced to something that is alleviated by an explanation. However, as Lloyd mentions, the intricate qualifications Heidegger ties to wonder does make it seem like a "potentially exasperating project," and the path he tracks back may seem "unduly tortuous" (131). Arendt takes further the trajectory opened up by Heidegger. Agreeing with Heidegger that the thinking that begins in wonder is not related to the unusual, but to the everyday, and to the fact that wonder is a *pathos* to be endured and sustained, she is, however, skeptical about his ideal of detached wonder. This entailed, for Heidegger, a retreat from engagement with exceptional human affairs. Arendt herself witnessed Heidegger's apparent lack of judgment of Nazism (134), and it is quite enlightening to see this historical parting of ways played out from the vantage point of wonder. Lloyd then turns to Arendt's "admiring wonder": a wonder closely connected with the capacity for responsible and engaged thinking. Drawing on Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, Arendt argues that the strand of engaged thinking associated with Socratic wonder "draws us into the collective, sociable aspects of imagining" (139). At this point in the book, through a reconnection with Socratic wonder, we have firmly arrived at the explicitly political and productive dimensions of wonder.

In chapter 7, "Derrida on Aporia, Time and Mortality," we encounter another twentieth-century trajectory that tries to reconnect with Socratic wonder. Lloyd here argues that Derrida's treatment is similar to Spinoza's, but that whereas for Spinoza "singularity was a feature of an unfamiliar object confronting the mind intent on knowledge" (142), for Derrida singularity applies not only to the object, but also to the mind's experience in apprehending it--and to the mind itself (143). That is, what is before us ceases to be assimilated, either to other things or by the knowing subject. *Aporia*, Lloyd concludes, can thus be seen "as a state of incipient alienation" (143). Following Derrida's journey "down that track of Flaubert," Lloyd asserts that for Derrida, stupidity lurks around the corner for the philosopher who tries to reach conclusions through the stubborn persistence of asking questions. That is, the philosopher's effort to understand can be complicit in a form of stupidity (152). With this warning in mind, the next chapter sets out to investigate some political implications that wonder may have in the face of collective stupidity.

It is in chapter 8, "Political Wonder and Social Critique," where Lloyd finally brings to life the material discussed so far, combining insights from the previously discussed thinkers to inform social critique. With the help of Flaubert, Lloyd observes the present prevalence of social clichés and how, in "contemporary conditions of global communication, the political effects of such constantly repeated slogans, mantras and sense-bestowing narratives are more apparent" (155). She then links Spinoza's criticism of religious misuse of social narratives with more recent critiques of social imaginaries. Taking up the idea of a form of collective imagining, which is at the same time formative of individual thought processes, Lloyd explores what our contemporary versions of "received ideas" are and, in line with Flaubert's observations, how such ideas come to act as an oppressive and debilitating force hindering active thinking (161). Building upon Chiari Bottici's idea of political myths, the chapter addresses strategies of demystification as related to such constructs as the "clash of civilizations," the "war on terror," or the defense of "the West."

Lloyd then takes yet another route to wonder that starts from Arendt's work on refugees. In pulling this thematic toward the present in which the mass movements of people create a situation "in which the operation of political myths is rife" (174), Lloyd convincingly demonstrates the conceptual issues and competing certainties at stake in current debates about asylum seekers. Building upon Arendt's rough sketch of a cast of mind belonging to Socratic wonder--grounded in passionate or engaged thinking that requires a synthesis of intellect, emotion, and imagination--the chapter concludes with the assertion that our current "impoverished political thinking" (181) would be well served by reconnecting to those old roots of wonder.

Chapter 9, "Wonder and Transcendence," takes a step back to explore the connection between awe and religion, a connection thus far not thoroughly investigated. Through a discussion of Charles Taylor's distinction between the religiously neutral "secular" and the antireligious idea of secularism, Lloyd examines the claim that wonder depends on a belief in transcendence, and traces wonder's changing relations with religion. The sublime, she argues, acted in some ways as an emblem of access to a transcendent realm, and as a site of romantic yearning for the "Absolute." The chapter also discusses this yearning within the modern context of the rhetoric of "religious fundamentalism" and makes the daring suggestion that a lack of "viable and sustained forms of wonder" might be at the root of the vulnerability, and hankering for the sublime, of the young who are susceptible to "radicalization" (201). Perhaps, Lloyd asserts, wonder could come to represent the acceptance of a world without the Absolute--a world in which the recognition of difference is both challenging and delightful (203).

The book's conclusion embeds Lloyd's work into recent projects of bringing the philosophical history of wonder into contemporary contexts. Here, she discusses Mary-Jane Rubenstein's revitalized Heideggerian approach in *Strange Wonder*, Philip Fisher's reconnection of modern science with ancient ideas of wonder in *Wonder, the Rainbow, and the Aesthetics of Rare Experiences*, and a recent feminist philosophical reclaiming of wonder by Marguerite La Caze in *Wonder and Generosity*. Through La Caze's reading, Lloyd touches upon Luce Irigaray's pivotal reading of Cartesian wonder in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. Irigaray reads wonder as a state that resists any effort to assimilate or reduce its object to sameness. This classic feminist

reconceptualization of wonder as *the* designated passion for recognizing difference enters the stage rather late in a book that seems to have as its aim to think exactly of ways in which wonder can aid in the recognition of differences against the backdrop of our shared humanity. The relative lack of scholarship of feminist theorists and philosophers included in this work is a bit puzzling, as the engagement with and recognition of difference could be argued as belonging explicitly to the feminist realm. That is, failing to ground the concept in a feminist genealogy or include some of the other feminist thinkers who have tried to reclaim wonder--Iris Marion Young, Sara Ahmed, and Bracha Ettinger, to name a few--is perhaps a missed opportunity to reclaim wonder more decidedly for feminist thought and scholarship.

That said, the book closes with a strong plea for embracing uncertainty instead of demanding explanations, and for the way in which wonder challenges the ideals that base themselves on certainty. At its peak, wonder can foster the renewal of "active, imaginative, emotionally engaged thinking" (215), which not only depends but thrives on the absence of certainty, on not-knowing (215). As mentioned at the beginning, the book itself takes after its subject, and so too is reading *Reclaiming Wonder* an exercise in uncertainty, leaving plenty of space (arguably sometimes too much) open for new connections and relations to arise. Lloyd forges many links, but this can sometimes be confusing to the reader.

Finally, when it comes to the defining issue of our age, climate change, Lloyd shows that it is indeed time for wonder to come out of the shadows of the sublime. Whereas the sublime was often characterized by an exultant celebration of human reason, fitting within the understanding of humans as the highest form of the development of the species, it falls short in confronting our modern context in which human reason has become utterly suspect. Returning once more to Spinoza, who realized the vulnerability of human reason in the face of the universe, she ends with the thought-provoking observation that "wonder at the immensity of the universe can bring a sharper sense of the fragility of what is near" (218).

All in all, this timely and rigorous tracing of wonder will be of great interest to anyone interested in the history of philosophy, effective strategies of social critique, and the way in which wonder can inform politics today. Telling not one story, but many complex and interwoven stories, the work itself confronts the tension between doing justice to an immense conceptual complexity, and presenting a comprehensive story. *Reclaiming Wonder* sometimes straddles the line, but in the end manages to successfully do both.