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JEREMY DAVID BENDIK-KEYMER

ORCID: 0000-0002-3224-1090

Case Western Reserve University

Wonder & Sense: A Commentary

Words and Things (*Phenomena*)

1. One of the basic distinctions of philosophy is between words and things. By “things” is meant *phenomena*—that which appears and which, as such, is something. Moreover, what makes something a phenomenon involves attention. Paradoxically, at first, “nothing” can be something, because we focus on it in order to discuss it.¹ When it comes to thought, only being is; that is, thought and being are one, and not being cannot be thought.² When we think, we deal with being.

2. Words, however, are slippery. They are like the clothes-pressing sign for sale in an antique shop that Author A of Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or* compared to Hegelian “actuality.” You enter the shop mistaking that your clothes can there be pressed only to find that the sign, not the thing, is obtainable.³

3. When we speak carefully, we have to make sure that we mean the same things by our words. This is especially the case when disagreeing. For if we mean different things by our words, we will not actually disagree about anything.

4. The three articles in this seminar issue of *Studia Philosophica Wratislaviensia* do not mean the same thing by “wonder.” As a result they are hardly disagreeing. Dr. Lisowska’s and my articles are almost about the same thing, while Dr. Małecki’s article is about many different things.

5. It is therefore important to refocus our attention on the things we’re talking about and not get caught up in words.

¹ J.-L. Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, transl. J.L. Kosky, Palo Alto 2002.

² I. Kimi, *Thinking and Being*, Cambridge 2018.

³ S. Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, vol. 1, transl. H.V. Hong, E.H. Hong, Princeton 1987, “Diapsalmata”.

What Is Orientation in Wonder?

6. Moreover, the thing I'm exploring is different than the thing Martha Nussbaum is.⁴ Except for one rare moment in her early work, *Love's Knowledge*, Nussbaum never, to my knowledge, cleaves to the notion of sense as philosophically important.⁵ She speaks of the "sense of life", but never of the sense that is found in life.⁶ But it is the sense that is found in life—and the sense that we make—that interest me and that I link with the thing called "wonder."

7. Let it be clear about the tradition. As Lisowska has perceptively researched, the tradition in question is Kantian, not Humean.⁷ Understanding the sense of the world and demanding that the world make sense are the marks of this Kantian tradition.⁸

8. In this Kantian tradition, sense is objective and public. It can be criticized. Those who claim it are accountable for their claims. In other words, sense is open. Sense involves the very best thing against fetishization, bias, reductiveness, misrecognition, moral blindness:⁹ critical, interpersonal, isonomic reasoning.¹⁰

9. The relation between wonder and sense is the thing to which we should give our attention in this seminar. Wonder is a *subject-relative* condition on sense, just as sense is an *object-relative* condition on wonder.¹¹

10. Sense is an object-relative condition on wonder, because what we wonder about is the sense of things or about how to make sense of things.

11. Wonder is a subject-relative condition on sense, because to find the sense of things or to make sense of them, we must consider other possibilities of sense.

⁴ Malecki conflates my views with Martha C. Nussbaum's. The article he cites is my reading of Nussbaum's views. Lisowska indicates the difference, but does not always mark it clearly. To avoid misattribution, let me be clear: Of the things cited, only my unpublished conference paper on capability determination employs my own views. The only way my views show up in the other cited articles is indirectly when offering charitable and probing questions of Nussbaum's positions.

⁵ M.C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, New York 1990.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 4 ff.

⁷ Malecki lumps work by Jesse Prinz together with work by or on Irigaray and work on or by Nussbaum (or Nussbaum and Wichert). This allows his article to advance a neo-Humean understanding of wonder and to go off on its own direction.

⁸ S. Neiman, *The Unity of Reason: Rereading Kant*, New York 1994; also *Moral Clarity: A Guide for Grown-Up Idealists*, Princeton 2009.

⁹ I have changed Malecki's "objectification" to "fetishization" (a) to avoid confusion with neo-Kantian objectivity, and (b) following Axel Honneth, *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea*, with J. Butler, R. Guess, J. Lear (M. Jay [ed.], New York 2008), where in this case another living being is—in Nussbaum's and Wichert's understanding—a persona and a subject of recognition.

¹⁰ Cf. K. Karatani, *Isonomia and the Origins of Philosophy*, transl. J.A. Murphy, Durham 2017.

¹¹ I have used "subject-relative" to avoid the confusing and equivocal connotations of something being "subjective."

Sense & Wonder

12. Sense is intrinsically comparative, just as signs are.¹² If it makes sense that Governor DeWine of the State of Ohio, U.S.A. shuttered polling stations due to COVID-19,¹³ if only because it does not make sense to open them.

13. The comparative nature of sense goes into the reasons why something makes sense as well. The main reason for shuttering polling stations was to protect the senior citizens who commonly work during elections. They, while being the most vulnerable to COVID-19, would also be exposed to the general populace for an entire day at close quarters with multiple common surfaces touched. This reason makes sense only because it does not make sense to leave polling stations open and thereby increase the risk of exposing senior citizens to COVID-19. In fact, doing that would be senseless.¹⁴

14. In each thing that makes sense, there's a world that can be explored for its sense and its senselessness. And to make sense of anything, we must draw on that world, comparatively—or, you might say, considerably.¹⁵

15. How do we consider the sense of things comparatively? Through or by this thing I call “wonder”.

16. Wonder is one thing through and by which sense is possible. Without wonder, there would be no sense to anything, for we could not consider the alternatives to the sense of any given thing and so would not grasp the sense of any given thing.

17. Wonder is the thing that, more than anything else subject-centered, is oriented by the possibilities of things, namely, how they can make sense and how they cannot make sense. Wonder and possibility have a tight connection.

18. If sense-finding and sense-making are basic to the drive of reason, and wonder is basic to grasping the possibilities of sense, then wonder is basic to the drive to reason. Not only is it reasonable,¹⁶ it is necessary for reasoning.

19. Several things follow: (1) As wonder is a part of reasoning, wonder is not explainable as an emotion devoid of reason. Humean accounts do not understand the relationship between wonder and sense.

20. (2) Nor is wonder “passive”. Someone wondering is receptive to the appearance of sense, but their receptivity is active as they consider the possibilities of sense.¹⁷

¹² F. de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, transl. W. Baskin, New York 2011.

¹³ D. Merica, “Ohio governor announces polls will be closed Tuesday over coronavirus”, *CNN* 17.03.2020.

¹⁴ See the relationship between senselessness and evil in S. Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy*, Princeton 2015.

¹⁵ A reason is a consideration in favor of X.

¹⁶ Cf. my “The Reasonableness of Wonder”, *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 18 [3] (2017), pp. 337–355, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19452829.2017.1342385>.

¹⁷ The relationship between wonder and sense dispels Lisowska's worry about wonder being passive and articulates its place in judgment without reducing it to an act of judgment. In other words, the relationship bypasses the dichotomy Arendt articulated and which, in my opinion, somewhat misunderstands wonder.

21. (3) Wonder is ordinary and worldly among people—found in everyday thoughtfulness from the child on up to the person doing chores around the house.¹⁸ “Look: I wonder if I should use this cleaner on this toilet bowl?”

22. (4) Wonder is an operation that can be set into practices and even institutionalized, just as forms of reasoning can be. “Let us play a learning game: Tell us how you think the water flows from the showerhead. Let’s examine the different children’s theories and their possibilities, why they do or do not make sense”.¹⁹

23. (5) Wonder is, far from being the servant of bias or of reductiveness, the very thing that would allow us to consider other possibilities than our bias, reductiveness, etc.²⁰ I point out that you are paying seemingly exclusive attention to thin, blond, caucasian bodies and thereby challenge you to wonder about what is going on with that: “Why white people? Why people as thin bodies? Why seemingly exclusively?”

24. (6) Wonder is intrinsically interpersonal. It is constitutively open to second-personal accountability.²¹ That I consider the sense of something implies that I consider how it fits or changes the world. Everyone else is there in that world, also able to challenge me to say why the world I think makes sense does make sense!

25. (7) Wonder is necessary for politics. In so far as the political is focused on how we should live together in this world, we must wonder to be political. Figuring out how we should live together demands considering what makes sense.²²

Wonder & Life

26. My speculation on what the politics of wonder could be began by seeing that it was implied by Martha C. Nussbaum’s work. In Nussbaum’s philosophy, the origin of this politics was her expansion of the frontiers of justice to include other species in justice and in moral consideration more widely.²³ Nussbaum’s realization about the role of wonder in her philosophy came from a form of biocentrism.²⁴

¹⁸ Malecki’s characterizations of wonder as exceptional flights of attention and esteem come from a neo-Humean understanding of wonder as an emotion motivating action in specific ways he calls “pleasurable.” But pleasure is contingent in relationship to wonder.

¹⁹ See, for instance, D.R. Scheinfeld, K.M. Haigh, S.J.P. Scheinfeld, *We Are All Explorers: Learning and Teaching with Reggio Principles in Urban Settings*, New York 2008, chapter 1.

²⁰ This dialectical inversion applies to all of Malecki’s main criticisms.

²¹ S. Darwall, *The Second Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability*, Cambridge 2006.

²² The more interesting question is not whether wonder is needed for politics, but what developing our capacity for wonder might do for protest and for politics as an iterative unsettling of common sense. See my *After Martha C. Nussbaum’s Politics of Wonder: Four Unconventional Essays around the Notion of Positive Anxiety*, London, forthcoming.

²³ See my “From Humans to All of Life: Nussbaum’s Transformation of Dignity”, [in:] *Capabilities, Gender, Equality: Towards Fundamental Entitlements*, F. Comim, M.C. Nussbaum (eds.), Cambridge 2014, pp. 175–191; M.C. Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership*, Cambridge 2006.

²⁴ M.C. Nussbaum, “Human Capabilities and Animal Lives: Conflict, Wonder, Law: A Symposium”, *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 18 [3] (2017), pp. 317–321, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19452829.2017.1342382>; Lisowska is right on her own terms to expand beyond biocentrism.

27. The focus was on life, not sense. Given, though, that the partner of wonder is sense, is there a good reason to ally wonder with life?²⁵

28. Yes. Living beings are *loci* of sense-seeking, even if they seek their own kind of sense. It therefore makes perfect sense to wonder over living beings and the sense that they seek, that is, the way that they live.

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However, Nussbaum's position, being a form of moral individualism, would seem unable to accept the vitalism of Lisowska's account as a guide to moral reasoning. That's too bad, but Nussbaum might one day change her mind.

²⁵ Lisowska links wonder to the excess of life, understood as a mutually reinforcing, dynamic tension between lives and the holistic process of life, thereby bringing Aristotelianism in conversation with Romantic vitalism and creating a logical category similar to the ontological difference in Heidegger's thought.

Nussbaum M.C., *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, New York 1990.

Saussure F. de, *Course in General Linguistics*, transl. W. Baskin, New York 2011.

Scheinfeld D.R., Haigh K.M., Scheinfeld S.J.P., *We Are All Explorers: Learning and Teaching with Reggio Principles in Urban Settings*, New York 2008.