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## Stirred by Your Presence

**Abstract:** Traces of you reach me through my senses. But without wondering in your presence, I cannot see you. For beings of sense and meaning such as ourselves, being stirred by another's presence opens wondering. The implications of such claims are striking for what perception involves, for being in touch with another, and for good relationships. The paper proceeds as a series of "strokes," from an ancient Greek word for whirling. Turning quickly about, words enact being stirred into wondering, interspersed with visual glimpses, a photographic series. Building on recent work by the author, the paper draws on Jean-Luc Marion's phenomenology; Daniel R. Scheinfeld, Karen M. Haigh, and Sandra J.P. Scheinfeld's early childhood educational theory, and a phrase by Martha C. Nussbaum describing the intentionality of wondering. This is deepened by attention to what the phenomenological tradition calls "passive synthesis," and what the author, following F.W.J. Schelling, has called "positive anxiety," the soul's excitement around the possibility of sense and meaning.

**Keywords:** Wonder, phenomenology of the other, passive synthesis, touch, perception, interpersonal relationships

*Without wondering in your presence, I can't see you.*

### Whirling/Strobe 1

I do not see you, but you are standing there. I will not walk into you. I register the physical presence of a human being, possibly even of someone with a name that is yours. But I do not see you. Seeing you is not a matter of physical perception, even if one of my five senses might be necessary to take you in at this moment.

The sense perception of you is not sufficient to see you. But to see you is also not to imagine some inner life of yours. To see you is not to apprehend an object of perception or of thought. Well, but then what is it to see you?<sup>1</sup>

The strange reality is that I see you only as you show yourself, and this is not reducible to the senses, my imagination, or my thought.<sup>2</sup> For you to show yourself is for you to make an appearance in my world. How am I to make sense of that? What meaning am I to find in it? As you show up, and if I am to process your entrance, I can only make some sense of you, take you to be meaningful in some way. You are not nothing. Yet to process how things make sense and what meaning to find in things (let alone people!) demands wondering around them.<sup>3</sup> Without the possibilities of sense and meaning around any possible sense or meaning, we cannot grasp the sense or the meaning.<sup>4</sup> These possibilities open up only in some degree of wondering, the meaningful, interesting “space” around the sense and meaning of things.<sup>5</sup> The wondering stays with the presence of what or who interests it. I wonder “in the presence of,” in your presence.<sup>6</sup>

## Whirling/Strobe 2

That *I* come to wonder is you reaching me, for you are always more than a given sense and meaning. You show yourself in the stirring. The stirring leads to you, but not as an object, rather as a provocation. This word “provocative” has taken on an aggressive meaning in my culture whether the provocation be insult or sex. But we know the root meaning of the word is to call forth, to draw out voice from someone.<sup>7</sup> It is for this reason that the presence that makes us wonder is provocative. Wondering involves the pregnancy of “purposiveness” in apparent “purposelessness” that Kant identified with the experience of the beautiful in the free play of the imagination, that is, the experience of having a fecundity of meaning and

<sup>1</sup> This paper could be located in a critical tradition of thought about the interpersonal politics of wonder. It sits within the tradition of what de Beauvoir thinks of, in the words of Bonnie Mann, as “reciprocal recognition between two freedoms.” See B. Mann, “Feminist Phenomenology and the Politics of Wonder,” *Avant* IX [2] (2018), p. 57, doi: 10.26913/avant.2018.02.03). I depart from—in the sense of trying to deepen—this project of anti-domination through a tacit critique of *recognition* in this paper, drawing on the influence of Jacques Rancière’s anti-identitarian impulse. See K. Genel and J.-P. Deranty, *Disagreement or Recognition: A Critical Encounter on the Politics of Freedom, Equality, and Identity*, New York 2017. In feminist terms, my approach makes *disorientation* central to the tradition of interpersonal encounter. See S. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Durham, NC 2006.

<sup>2</sup> J.-L. Marion, *The Erotic Phenomenon*, transl. S.E. Lewis, Chicago 2010, section 20, “Signification as Face.”

<sup>3</sup> J. Bendik-Keymer, *Nussbaum’s Politics of Wonder: How the Mind’s Original Joy Is Revolutionary*, images by M. Morrison, London 2023, motet 2.

<sup>4</sup> By “sense,” I mean what makes sense, and by “meaning,” I mean what something means.

<sup>5</sup> 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, pp. 36–37: “Creating a space in her own mind that allows for the child’s idea to grow.”

<sup>6</sup> M.C. Nussbaum, *Justice for Animals: Our Collective Responsibility*, New York 2023, p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> Dictionary, “provoke,” version 2.3.0 (284), Apple Inc. 2005–2021.



Figure 1. *Untitled, 2023, photo courtesy of Jeremy Bendik-Keymer.*

sense when one does not know yet how to make complete sense or appreciate the full meaning of something or someone.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> I. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, transl. W.S. Pluhar, Indianapolis 1987, section 11ff. See also J. Bendik-Keymer, *Nussbaum's Politics of Wonder*, motet 2.

This stirring is isomorphic with the operation of the self, that is, with someone's capacity to enact "I" as a form of acknowledgment, belief, commitment, or intention. To be oneself is to enact a process, not to be an object. It is essentially a form of responsibility.<sup>9</sup> When you appear, you have a life of your own, an inner life, "something that is going on inside."<sup>10</sup> This life is also in process and is not an object but is enacted responsibility on your part flowing out of your striving. To respond to you is then to respond to that striving, not some objectification to which I reduce you. In speaking first of other than human animals and then of humans, Nussbaum comments:

[W]e imagine that something is going on inside; it's not sheer random motion, but directed somehow by an inner awareness, by a someone. Wonder is connected to our perception of striving; we see that creatures have a purpose, that the world is meaningful to them in some ways we don't fully understand, and we are curious about that: What is the world for them? Why do they move? What are they trying to get? We interpret the movement as meaningful, and that leads us to imagine a sentient life within. Really that is what happens when we meet other human beings.<sup>11</sup>

Wondering by me follows the purposiveness of you in the world, including raising questions of what and how the world is to you. And then what is that to me? The motion of you calls on me to make sense of things, to respond. That is the stirring.

### Whirling/Strobe 3

Imagine, then, that I do not—or cannot reasonably—choose to wonder. Perhaps I do not reasonably have the room to wonder. Or perhaps I have made a life of deciding against wondering much at all. For our purposes here, let us just assume that I do not happen to wonder in your presence.<sup>12</sup> What follows then?

The simple answer is that I cannot let myself be stirred by searching for the sense and meaning of you. Let us imagine someone sending up flares in the night, dark signals. One's mind might go this way and that trying to interpret them: What could they mean? What makes sense in explaining why they are occurring

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<sup>9</sup> Ch. Larmore, *The Practices of the Self*, transl. S. Bowman, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 2010.

<sup>10</sup> M.C. Nussbaum, *Justice for Animals*, p. 11.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*. We might ask questions here about wondering in the presence of any living being, not just of you. And we might ask about wondering in the presence of so-called "objects," such as artifacts, abstractions, or inanimate things. There are many subtleties to field here, but I am going to assume in this work that the interpersonal relationship between "you" and "I" is basic to the life of wonder, with analogies developing from it based on the form of how "I" relates to sense-making and meaning-making at all. This is not an argument to consider for this essay, although others have suggested it: notably Cora Diamond and Martin Buber in very different ways; the first through Wittgensteinian attention to our form of life and "grammar" of making sense of things as broadly anthropomorphic, the latter through the notion of "primary words," i.e., relations, with the "I-Thou" relationship being basic to our possibility for interacting with anything should we stand toward anything accordingly.

<sup>12</sup> It may be that I have a generalizable excuse for not wondering much in the presence of others due to some oppressive or morally unlucky condition in which I find myself. It may also be that it is smart not to wonder too much about another in some circumstances.

or what they want to say and for what point? This would be wondering, of course. But we could also slot the flares into categories—fireworks, patriotism, bored fun, a celebration—and not think of them again. When we take them to be settled in our understanding and not worth turning over in our minds, they no longer stir us to figure them out, what they mean, or how they make sense in the world. We are stirred by no settled thing. Being stirred amounts to being open to and about the sense and meaning of something, looking for more or other there. Then too with you: if I have got you and do not consider you as calling for interpretation or understanding, your presence will not stir me.

Wondering sets “I” (not “me,” unless you are observing what I am doing) in motion in the presence of that one about whom or which one wonders. Without being set in motion as a “self” (an operation of responsibility to the sense and meaning in my life),<sup>13</sup> I have no room to grow in relation to that one about whom or which I wonder. But this adjustment, even this growing, is needed to make space for *you* as you appear in subtle or major ways apart or different from my preconceptions. Without making such room, without then getting to some degree lost with or in your presence, I cannot truly meet you. Without getting—at least momentarily—lost with you by wondering in your presence, I cannot find you anew where you appear unexpectedly. This is to fail to see you, the one who emerges with a life of your own despite my preconceptions.

### Whirling/Strobe 4

It is not clear that we ever see another if by “seeing” we mean a stable object. This is why an image of another so easily comes apart from them and becomes a fantasy or a lifeless arrangement of visuals: if the image is of an object, it is not them. But for them to show up in the image exceeds the image as image. Only if we remember the relationship they have formed with us, even if momentarily, can the image become a sign of the even momentary relating. Now we hold the relating and see through it. But this is not to see in any obvious, physical sense, even if we come to the relationship inside ourselves through sight initially. In seeing you through the relating, though, I must remain open to being moved by the relationship. Here comes wonder again.

Relationships have a life of their own between the relata.<sup>14</sup> If I am to be in a relationship, I must be continually responsive to it, even if in small adjustments, or I will gradually or severely lose touch with it, lose it. In order to be responsive to a living relationship, I must be mindful of it and continue to consider it, making sense of how it is faring and growing, or fading, finding the meaning in it whether it is dormant or flares dark in the night. This open consideration involves searching for the emerging sense and meaning of it, and this takes wondering. Wondering, whose life is in being lost searching for sense and meaning, is an antidote to losing relating. Being lost in wondering about a relationship is vital for finding it again.

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<sup>13</sup> Ch. Larmore, *Practices of the Self*.

<sup>14</sup> S. Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, transl. H.V. Hong, E.H. Hong, Princeton 1995.





Figure 2. *Untitled (dog hair)*, 2023, photo courtesy of Jeremy Bendik-Keymer.

Let us suppose, though, that I do wonder in relating to you. Then, I wonder in your presence again, this time, through the relationship that ebbs and flows between us even if momentarily like a pulse of dim light. Then I find you only in your

appearing to me with my mind let in motion. I find you in the sense that is stirring and the meaning that is emerging, a unique trace of this time between us, this feeling of how it goes, this presence. I do not catch you, but you change me slightly in opening a relationship in me that is discrete and unique to us. Is this perhaps what it is to see you, to see where things go with you stirring the sense and meaning of things here and there in these and those ways?

### Whirling/Strobe 5

If I do end up seeing you in the stirring of my mind's excitement, it is only because you reach me, that is, reach out and touch me. But this touch just as with that sight need not be physical, and here sight and touch are confounded, seeing being touching, touching being seeing, a hot and holy mess of relating. It is time then to talk about touch, which as Marion reminds us in his reading of Husserl is both touching and being touched.<sup>15</sup>

The phenomenological tradition's discussion of "passive synthesis" is a way to discuss activity *in* receptivity, or receptivity *as* activity. Instead of the active, intellectual constitution of the object of intentional thought, passive synthesis marks a way in which conscious beings find the world being constituted before they even mentally grasp it, not just constituting what is meaningful and makes sense to them but finding sense and meaning showing up as a presupposition of deliberate reflection.<sup>16</sup> In short, passive synthesis makes the space of being affected, often in excess of what one immediately can process, in such a way that the work of making sense and meaning of things is already inside one's life as a challenge, a pregnancy even. In my terms, this is to be stirred into a latent form of wonder prior to deliberate acts of wondering.<sup>17</sup>

The mind rests in positive anxiety, an excitement (a humming of potential meaningfulness), the excess of possibilities of sense and meaning in the world without which there could be no sense and meaning, no free play around conceptualization as such.<sup>18</sup> I call this the mind's original joy, following on Nussbaum's reading of Lucretius, or plainly, the mind's excitement.<sup>19</sup> This excitement is wonder as a background condition of the mind.<sup>20</sup> When we wonder, we draw on this condition and focus our minds in varying degrees even unto sustained acts of wondering (and we can of course make this focus a habit through practices of wondering).<sup>21</sup>

<sup>15</sup> J.-L. Marion, *The Erotic Phenomenon*, section 23, "My Flesh, and the Other's."

<sup>16</sup> E. Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, transl. D. Cairns, Dordrecht 1988. See also J.-L. Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, transl. J.L. Kosky, Palo Alto 2002.

<sup>17</sup> J. Bendik-Keymer, *Nussbaum's Politics of Wonder*, motet 2, drawing on Schelling's *System of Transcendental Idealism* in part and more generally on the theme of receptivity in Schelling's work.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 12–15.

<sup>19</sup> M.C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of the Emotions*, New York 2001, pp. 189–191.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. V. P. Glaveanu, *Wonder: The Extraordinary Power of an Ordinary Experience*, London 2020.

<sup>21</sup> On practices of wondering, see S. Vasalou, *Wonder: A Grammar*, Albany 2016.

Unless our souls are crushed and our minds are dead, we walk in the world with some degree of wonder. Our ongoing receptivity to the world and this life is one of some degree of wonder, the open ferment of the mind, or we could not even be able to come to interpret the world at all, would not be able to grow into it and learn. A wonderless mind is a dead one, possibly crushed or dominated, deprived, or starved to inaction. But even in negative anxiety—commonly called dread—there is some degree of positive anxiety in the background. For how else could we dread anything if things were not in the first instance meaningful, if the demand for the world and this life to make sense were not prior? But the possibility of these depends on some degree of wonder. The mind's excitement underlies even dread. Would that we could recognize that.

To accept touch is one way to do so, to become stirred back into positive anxiety out of torpor, frozenness, or dread. Touch is the restorer of the mind. But we must understand what touch is, and this is why passive synthesis is so important. Just as I cannot see you without wondering in your presence, no one can touch another without finding where the other is open to touch. Touch must be wanted to some degree. Unwanted attempts at touch are mere contact, the making of a being into an object for manipulation. Only wanted touch connects. To be touched means that another has found where your mind is moving, even if in a barely moving trickle locked under layers of rock. To touch means to seek where another's consciousness is in motion, to meet there.

In other words, touch seeks out the passive synthesis of another, the activity in receptivity that opens up the world of sense and meaning in excess of our deliberate conceptualizations. Touch seeks out the presence of wonder in another, their soul's excitement.<sup>22</sup> But this depends on being stirred by another enough to have seen them lest we miss them entirely, do not meet them as they appear to us in our own stirred mind. My wondering in the presence of you is a condition on finding you such that I could ever be in touch with you if that were something we wanted.

And let us be clear. Touch, here, need not be physical. It can be seeing, call, communication. This is why letters can touch us from across the ocean, a meaningful glance in a crowded room, or the tones inside an address, a "hello." The mystery of touch is that it can be so many things except our bodies connected. The corporeal falls away from touch which is, if anything, spiritual.

## Whirling/Strobe 6

The stakes here are obviously true relating as such. For readers of popular relationship self-help columns in newspapers, there is a banal version of what this essay argues and then a more unconventional one. Given the argument here thus far, the banal moral is that to truly see another depends on letting them reach you. As a result, true relating depends on there being enough room in

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<sup>22</sup> Here, I use mind and soul interchangeably in the Aristotelian tradition, where this work's tradition is located. In other words, I am not speaking of soul as an immortal, detachable dualism with the body but as animation in the body.





Figure 3. *Untitled (left hand)*, 2023, photo courtesy of Jeremy Bendik-Keymer.

a relationship for another to reach you and for you to be reached. Even more than “give,” there has got to be room in a relationship for people to truly make sense to each other and be meaningful in their own ways. Otherwise? Otherwise, little

to no relationship. This moral is deep, but it is also common to advice columns in some such form.

The more complex version of these popular psychological platitudes is that what keeps a relationship true is its life of wonder. This is not currently common in the advice columns I have read. Here, “true” does not mean accurate or even truthful, i.e., sincere.<sup>23</sup> “True” in this context means authentic. But an authentic relationship has an internal connection to accuracy and sincerity as well. For a relationship to be authentic, it must continue to relate in both directions. That is, each person must find themselves in the relationship and find that the relationship has a life of its own that they accept and cultivate. What this takes, quite simply (but often difficultly), is some degree of each committing themselves in the relating. This finding is what Larmore calls a “practice,” i.e., an operation, a dynamic process that is intentionally undertaken.<sup>24</sup> As an operation of the “I,” this process is one of responsibility in which one acknowledges how and what one feels, determines and commits to what one believes or does not, sets and sticks to one’s intentions for the reasons one has for them, and comes to terms with one’s desires, among other things. In Larmore’s words, the process “consists not in having discovered what [one] thinks, but rather in having decided what [one] is going to think.”<sup>25</sup> The practice of the self is a practice of self-relating to others and the world through emotion, belief, intention, desire, and so on, showing up committed to what makes sense to one based on how one has interpreted what is meaningful.

Here, we can see where wondering is important. To figure out what is truly meaningful and what actually makes sense to oneself takes some degree of wondering, that is, of engaging with the possibilities of sense and meaning around any given thing to determine what does and does not make sense about it and what is and is not a precise meaning of the thing in question. Without finding the room to wonder, the process of being oneself and relating to oneself, others, and the world deteriorates if not breaks down entirely. But if one can no longer be oneself in a relationship, tantamount to relating oneself to oneself and in the relationship to the other and to the relationship with its life of its own, then the relationship deteriorates if not breaks down entirely. A lack of wondering by way of the self undercuts relating as such and with it every relationship that would otherwise be meaningful and come to make sense in terms to which those involved decide they can commit.

Accuracy and sincerity enter in with wonder, too, for to wonder about what makes sense requires figuring out what to believe, and to acknowledge one’s confusion and one’s beliefs takes sincerity with oneself. If further, the relationship with another is to be authentic, then each one involved must relate to themselves, each other, and the relationship itself on the basis of some degree of wonder, that is, by having become responsible as themselves in the relationship. The relationship will

<sup>23</sup> B. Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy*, Princeton 2004.

<sup>24</sup> Ch. Larmore, *The Practices of the Self*, p. 65: “[T]he self relates to itself by committing itself and not by way of any kind of self-knowledge. The relation to oneself that is constitutive of the self is thus an essentially practical relation.”

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 63. See pp. 66–67, too: Larmore’s *locus classicus* for the practice of the self appears to be Fichte’s *Tathandlung*, albeit with differences.

be false if in it each cannot make sense by and of themselves and of each other, at least in the process of trying to do so, which is what wondering attempts. But this too demands some degree of communication—whether it be verbal or non-verbal—to figure out what the relationship means to both involved and how to relate on the basis of each having related to themselves. And so sincerity between selves in the relationship also becomes key. Finally, without accuracy between those who are in a relationship, how to find each other and relate to each other breaks down. There comes to be little structure of dependable belief—or at least the attempt to have dependable, committed beliefs—from which one can build a relationship that one can depend on in being oneself with the other. Authentic relationships thus involve accuracy and sincerity indirectly by way of the need for wondering being a part of the relationship that grows from being ourselves, together.

To say that true relating needs room for one another to reach one another—and for the relationship to take on a life of its own—signals the space in the mind that is opened in and by wondering.<sup>26</sup> This is what it means to say that a relationship depends on space to have it, that is, on giving space to each other. The space need not be physical. Two people can relate with much capaciousness up close for days on end. What matters is whether the relating is in motion throughout as the people make sense to each other and remain meaningful together with what is between them likewise doing so and making sense. That takes the room in each person to wonder in the presence of the other. This room is mental and psychological—or as I prefer to say, soulful. It is found in a way that each person and the relationship between them is held by the other with room around what that holding means and how it makes sense. And if either person loses that room, for whatever reason, then strain to the relationship can set in. But if each person maintains that room and continues to relate, the relationship will grow as it makes sense for it to do as each person works out its meaning with the other and finds that they can accept and commit to it in such and such a form in such and such a way. Wonder is thus vital for good relationships. This means that it is essential to them in whatever form they take as true relationships.

## Whirling/Strobe 7

The picture we have then of wondering is not one of some momentary epiphany caused by the presence of another. It is not the revelation of the other as a fullness of time. Rather, it is of wondering as part of the ongoing life of being oneself and of relating, beginning with being able to perceive the other as they come to show themselves and move through this world and one's life. Work on one's character can make the focused use of wonder a habit that is virtuous in relationships, but even when one has not made wondering into a disposition, the truth of the relationship still depends on wonder in the background carrying on to some degree in small acts of wondering from day to day.

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<sup>26</sup> D.R. Scheinfeld et al., *We Are All Explorers*, pp. 36–37.

What this essay has done is to characterize that ongoing life through the mind's excitement, bringing out how relating depends on an undertow of excitable ferment to make meaning and sense out of one another and the relationship itself. This has been understood along the lines of being in touch with one another always as something dynamic and to be worked out when things that matter emerge between you, including in one's own or the other's life. Touch then depends on wondering just as relating does and just as perceiving does too.

The positive anxiety in how we consider each other and this world and life comes to condition every bit of the relating, to be the dynamic dimension of touch. Our spiritual relationships, if they are to be authentic, depend on positive anxiety suffusing them in opening out to make sense and find meaning in this life and the room beyond it held by our soulful minds. From seeing to touching to relating, nothing of each other comes forward if we are not stirred by the excitement of meeting someone beyond our preconceptions.

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