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Introduction: Giving Room to Embodied Relationships

The special issue *Z(a)dziwienie ciałem—to Wonder (to Wander) in Corporeal Relationships* aims to contribute modestly and imaginatively to the recent wave of work around wonder. In some respects, too, it continues the short seminar “Discussing Wonder” published in *Studia Philosophica Wratislaviensia* vol. XV, no. 2 (2020). In the ancient Greek philosophical tradition, wonder helped philosophers make sense of the nature of their own inquiries and their striving for knowledge. This is the context in which Plato and Aristotle first discussed wonder (*thaumadzein*). The concept was reprised in a similar framework when Descartes and Spinoza laid foundations for modern philosophy, and Martin Heidegger and Hannah Arendt looked back to wonder when they tried to rethink the role of philosophy in the 20th century. These are only some significant points along the way of a concept with a varied and complex history.

In the current century, some publications offer historical overviews of wonder.¹ Others closely analyze the term itself,² while still others engage with existing accounts to develop novel approaches. The “Discussing Wonder” seminar gave an initial impression of the span of the contemporary debates about and around wonder. Contributors to that seminar included the co-editors of the current issue, Jeremy Bendik-Keymer and Urszula Lisowska, as well as Wojciech P. Małecki. Bendik-Keymer

¹ G. Lloyd, *Reclaiming Wonder: After the Sublime*, Edinburgh 2018.

² S. Vasalou, *Wonder: A Grammar*, Albany, NY 2015.

presented wonder as a mode of autonomous and accountable disagreement. Lisowska focused on wonder as a response to diverse forms of life, whereas Małecki adopted a critical approach to wonder informed by empirical research. Each of these interpretations moved far beyond the original focus on wonder as a tool for philosophy's self-understanding.

The focus of the current issue—wonder in corporeal relationships—has emerged at the intersection of the topics addressed by Bendik-Keymer and Lisowska in their respective papers in the “Discussing Wonder” seminar. Two points of reference stand out as particularly important for the general idea of the collection. One of them is Luce Irigaray's essay on wonder from her book *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*.³ There, Irigaray rereads Descartes to present wonder as the openness to the irreducible difference of another person, including their sexual, that is—bodily, difference. Thus, for Irigaray wonder contributes to corporeal relationships such that bodies relate to each other as different rather than despite their differences.⁴ The other coordinate is provided by Martha C. Nussbaum's discussion of wonder. For Nussbaum, wonder is an emotion that responds to the inherent, non-instrumental value of what—or whom—evokes it.⁵ Like Irigaray, Nussbaum thus links wonder to the radical openness to difference. But she goes on to add that what causes wonder is the perception of inner activity, the recognition that the wonder-inspiring being has a life of their own.⁶ In this way, Nussbaum moves beyond Irigaray's approach to emphasize that wonder answers to the diversity of all kinds of bodies, both human and other-than-human.

In the spirit of these two contemporary approaches, the articles in this issue ask if and how wonder can help us relate to otherness and are particularly (though not exclusively) interested in its bodily manifestations, taking into account both human and other-than-human beings. Moreover, relating to otherness also involves self-reflection, something that can be seen in the papers in this issue taking up the role of wonder in embracing one's own uncanniness.⁷

Some of the contributors to the issue have already published on wonder. Anders Schinkel is the author of the monograph on the educational importance of wonder.⁸ Jeremy Bendik-Keymer has extensively engaged with Nussbaum's approach en route to developing his own idea of wonder as the mind's positive anxiety (or excitement

³ L. Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, transl. C. Burke & G. C. Gill, Ithaca 1993 (1984).

⁴ Cf. also M. La Caze, *Wonder & Generosity: Their Role in Ethics and Politics*, New York 2013 for the discussion of Irigaray's concept of wonder.

⁵ M.C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, Cambridge 2001.

⁶ M.C. Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice Disability, Nationality, Species Membership*, Cambridge–London 2007 (2006); M.C. Nussbaum, *Justice for Animals: Our Collective Responsibility*, New York–London–Toronto–Sydney–New Delhi 2023.

⁷ This should be remembered when considering Bonnie Mann's worry, in her criticism of Luce Irigaray's writing on wonder, about the potentially self-undermining effect of wonder on the wondering person (B. Mann, “Feminist Phenomenology and the Politics of Wonder,” *Avant* IX [2] (2018), pp. 43–61, doi: 10.26913/avant.2018.02).

⁸ A. Schinkel, *Wonder and Education: On the Educational Importance of Contemplative Wonder*, London–New York 2021. Cf. also K. Egan, A. Cant, G. Judson (eds.), *Wonder-Full Education: The Centrality of Wonder in Teaching and Learning Across the Curriculum*, New York–London 2014.

over sense and meaning).⁹ His account has further argued for wonder's political¹⁰ and environmental relevance.¹¹ Urszula Lisowska has also approached wonder as an environmental category, linking it to Hannah Arendt's concept of reflective judgment.¹² Other authors have not explicitly written about wonder before but have been working for some time in its vicinity. Brian Hisao Onishi, too, is in the process of writing a book about New Materialist wonder in dialogue with phenomenology.

There are a number of things that are stylistically distinctive about the issue. It is interdisciplinary, philosophical in a broad sense, not owned by the professional discipline of philosophy. While five of the authors—Jeremy Bendik-Keymer, Magdalena Hoły-Łuczaj, Urszula Lisowska, Brian Hisao Onishi, and Anders Schinkel—are trained in professional philosophy and teach as philosophy professors, Anders Schinkel is also on the faculty of education of his institution, Jeremy Bendik-Keymer has worked in a department of international studies, and Brian Hisao Onishi is part of an interdisciplinary humanities faculty. The remaining three authors of the issue include the anthropologists, Shannon Lee Dawdy and Zak Arrington, and the sociologist, Danielle Celermajer. Moreover, Shannon Lee Dawdy is a serious filmmaker, and Danielle Celermajer heads the Sydney Environment Institute, which is constituted in an interdisciplinary manner and has published a notable work of memoir and public reflection on the extinction crisis happening along with global warming. Among those trained in philosophy, Magdalena Hoły-Łuczaj and Urszula Lisowska were trained in Poland, Ander Schinkel in the Netherlands, and Brian Hisao Onishi and Jeremy Bendik-Keymer in the United States of America—the former from a strongly phenomenological program and the latter from a program known for its form of analytic moral philosophy and the depth of its history of philosophy. The wide range of backgrounds and approaches behind the work in this issue can be felt.

At the same time, the issue is strongly phenomenological or working with thinkers who have moved in and out of the phenomenological tradition. This raises a number of questions about the meaning and status of phenomenology that are not directly engaged in the issue but that should be noted here. The main matter concerns the critical limitations of phenomenology. These depend on everything from

⁹ Cf. Kierkegaard: "anxiety is freedom's actuality as the possibility of possibility" (S. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*, transl. R. Thomte, Princeton 1980 (1844), p. 42). Cf. also V. Glaveanu, *Wonder. The Extraordinary Power of an Ordinary Experience*, London–New York 2020 on wonder and the exploration of possibilities.

¹⁰ J. Bendik-Keymer (with images by M. Morrison), *Nussbaum's Politics of Wonder: How the Mind's Original Joy is Revolutionary*, London–New York–Dublin 2023.

¹¹ J. Bendik-Keymer, "Beneficial Relations Between Species & The Moral Responsibility of Wondering," *Environmental Politics* (2021), pp. 1–18 [online], doi: 10.1080/09644016.2020.1868818; "The Other Species Capability & The Power of Wonder," *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 22 [3] (2021), p. 161, doi: 10.1080/19452829.2020.1869191, pp. 154–179; "The Reasonableness of Wonder," *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 18 [3] (2017), pp. 337–355, doi: 10.1080/19452829.2017.1342385. Cf. also R. Carson, *The Sense of Wonder*, New York 1998 (1965) for a classic discussion of wonder in the environmental context.

¹² U. Lisowska, "Wonder and Politics in the Anthropocene: Beyond Curiosity and Reverence," *Environmental Philosophy* 19 [2] (2022), pp. 269–287, doi: 10.5840/envirophil2022915120.

its particular forms of subjectivity to its transcendental aspirations, notwithstanding its complex fantasy of presenting as a rigorous methodology rather than a mere descriptive exercise. Phenomenology is also historically situated, as Sarah Ahmed so well explored,¹³ and its historical situation involves complicated questions of positionality in what might now be understood as the epistemology of coloniality. In other words, if this issue were an edited volume of book length, a section on the historicity of its aspirations and assumptions would be in order.

What is perhaps worth noting is that all of the pieces are rooted in broad struggles against domination, oppression, or the narrow normalization of important modes of being like being-toward-death, aging, or the experience of being in the world. In this regard, they provide one rooting for a larger and broader critique of normalization as a feature of historical assumptions and predispose readers to look for how the world could be otherwise. Thus, they might be said to contribute to the critical attitude that Foucauldians have long espoused, provided that we do not think of them as excluding a further historical genealogy of their positions and assumptions.

This critical attitude—a making of space around ideas and norms so that we can wander enough in them to become playful with them and possibly oppositional—is reinforced by the stylistic innovations of several of the pieces, which tacitly or explicitly challenge conventional academic norms. Of the clearly innovative formats, one paper is a piece of creative writing that mixes first-person prose poetry with aphorism involving theory. Written by Danielle Celermajer, whose book *Summertime: Reflections on a Vanishing Future*¹⁴ was nominated for one of Australia's highest literary awards, this piece, *Wondering Through Our Outlines*, takes up her work from her memoir and essay on omnicide and develops it in a manner that could sit alongside the late work of Roland Barthes. The result is artful to read, philosophy in a sense to which Nietzsche accustomed us through his literary styles. Or while *Stirred by Your Presence* by Jeremy Bendik-Keymer may present at times like condensed phenomenology, it nonetheless develops the rhetorical notion of a “strobe” drawing on that word's root, “to whirl.” The paper proceeds through strobe pulses of reflection combined with three absurd and eerie photographs that enact, somewhat ironically, the point of the piece. Readers may recall Jean-Luc Nancy's writing from *Birth to Presence*, but the reflection is as much grounded in Martha C. Nussbaum, Bernard Williams, and Charles Larmore's capacious analytic moral philosophy as it is in the phenomenology of Jean-Luc Marion and the spirit of Sarah Ahmed's enlivening of disorientation. Finally, Shannon Lee Dawdy and Zak Arrington carry on a dialogue together rather than writing a paper and explicitly describe their work as counter-normative in academic circles. The open-ended and almost tattered form of the discussion itself raises a formal point about what it takes to bring wondering into academic research. The authors discuss the ethnographic method and discoveries, a way of doing philosophy that is resolutely engaged with non-academics and their views. What does that method teach us about philosophizing with wonder?

¹³ S. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Objects, Orientations, Others*, Durham 2006.

¹⁴ Penguin Random House 2021.

Even in the more traditional academic papers, the authors reported stretching themselves and trying out something a bit different for each of them. *Others in My Aging (Confronting de Beauvoir, Malabou, and Heidegger to Make Sense of Aging)* by Magdalena Hoły-Łuczaj involves autobiographical reflection to center its core intuition around which it builds its argument drawing on Heidegger, Malabou, and de Beauvoir. “*You Shouldn’t Try to Be What You Can’t Be*”: *How Wonder Freed Embodied Agency* by Urszula Lisowska likewise reveals itself to be a discussion of the author’s own bodily condition. Brian Hisao Onishi’s paper, *The Wonder and the Terror of Getting Lost in “The Room,”* is part journaling combined with philosophical reflection on virtual reality and gaming. Finally, *Wondering Animals: Reflections on Human Exceptionality* by Anders Schinkel is the author’s first major paper on wonder and the biological broadly construed.

So, this special issue is deliberately a bit weird and at times painfully soulful. There is a larger point behind its conception that often makes it into the content of the studies themselves. We live in an age with a great deal of social alienation. The polycrisis of the past half-decade is with us: climate crisis, resurgent authoritarianism, xenophobia and racism, queerphobia around relationships, child-raising and gender, the pandemic, the invasion of Ukraine, and economic recession. But these crises overlay the still deep social alienation of the long unwinding of European imperialism and its entanglement with capitalism, neo-liberalism, extractivism, and ongoing settler colonialism (including coloniality). Good relationships need to be restored and, in many ways, created. Subject to the broader historical critique to which we have gestured in this introduction,¹⁵ we think wonder has a role to play in this larger social project. Wonder in the post-Kantian—not neo-Humean—tradition can be a settled cast of mind, not some flighty epiphany of emotion. Wonder can be steadied into the virtuous appreciation of the differences and singularities of others as autonomous people or even beings with forms of life of their own. Throughout the issue, wonder is considered as an active power, capable of breaking the entrenched patterns of domination, rather than itself being held captive by them. So, the essays in this issue work in their own weird ways to win back forms of soulfulness within our relationships with each other, other forms of life, our environments, and our materiality, beginning with our bodies and the metaphysical conditioning of our time as it passes through political economy. Soulfulness can only be authentic. In a world that is socially alienated, it takes strangeness to get there.

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¹⁵ With thanks to one of our reviewers for pressing us on this lacuna.

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Others in My Aging (Confronting de Beauvoir, Malabou, and Heidegger to Make Sense of Aging)

Abstract: After a critical analysis of Simone de Beauvoir’s and Catherine Malabou’s accounts of aging, the paper offers an alternative to them. In contrast to de Beauvoir and Malabou, it explores the actual share of other beings, both human and non-human, in one’s aging. The paper employs the Heideggerian ontological framework and his concepts of “bodying” and gesture to argue that changes induced by others do not damage or contaminate one’s being but allow the disclosure of someone’s particularity in its undefinable character.

Keywords: aging, body, other, Heidegger, de Beauvoir, Malabou

Introduction

As Chris Gilleard aptly observes, while academic philosophers have talked much about death, they have had much less to say about aging.¹ Aging has attracted less philosophical attention despite our dealing with it at least as much as we deal with death. As a matter of fact, in our direct everyday experience, we seem occupied with aging—both of ourselves and others—even more often than with death (again, both of ourselves and others). By bringing attention to this fact, I do not mean to challenge the significance of our mortality but merely to point to the negligence of aging by philosophy.

¹ See C. Gilleard, “Aging as Otherness: Revisiting Simone de Beauvoir’s Old Age,” *Gerontologist* 62 [2] (2022), doi: 10.1093/geront/gnab034, p. 286; M. Bavidge, “Feeling One’s Age: A Phenomenology of Aging,” [in:] *The Palgrave Handbook of the Philosophy of Aging*, G. Scarre (ed.), London 2016, p. 207.

Even more neglected is the role of other beings (both human and non-human) in someone's aging. This neglect can be seen in two rare cases of philosophical engagements with aging, that is in Simone de Beauvoir's and Catherine Malabou's investigations. They both offer insightful and valid, to some extent provocative, observations regarding aging, which, interestingly, tilt in two different directions. De Beauvoir focuses on the semblance of the significance of changes classified as aging, while Malabou points to the radicality of transformation they bring to the given being. Juxtaposing their position, however, will reveal that they both diminish, quite unexpectedly and similarly, the importance of participation of other beings in changes, including those of physical nature that we refer to as "aging."

My paper aims not only to indicate this lacuna concerning the role of others in our aging but also to explore it and shed new light on the role of others in this process. To properly approach this omission, it would be advisable to address four inextricably linked questions: What is aging? What is the source of it? Can someone be ever known? Can someone's being be defined?

To answer them, I will use phenomenology, drawing on the work of Martin Heidegger. I will do so, although Heidegger does not have much to say about aging or, more broadly, about any changes in the individual human being. On the contrary, he remains strikingly silent about the transformation of *Dasein* (being there) as a particular human being. Yet, his remarks on the phenomenon of "bodying" and how the meaning of bodily gestures emerges to us when combined with the complex structure of disclosing our being (being ourselves) open a way to explore the share which others have in our aging as an alternative to those of both de Beauvoir and Malabou, who differently use phenomenology in their investigations.

My main argument will be then that, first, in considering aging, we need to consider that at least some of the observable changes we identify with this phenomenon result from the impact of other beings (e.g., stress caused by them, pregnancy, environmental factors), and, second, that through these changes the ownmost, the being of the given person, can be disclosed. The paradoxical nature of this disclosure, rooted in the tension between otherness and mineness, reveals the uncanny, to speak in Heideggerian terms, character of the being.

I will develop this argument in the following order. In the first and second parts of the paper, I reconstruct de Beauvoir's and Malabou's views on aging. In the third part, I critically review their positions. In the last part, I offer an alternative account of aging with a focus on the participation of other beings in the (sense of) changes that we identify with aging, taking advantage of the categories laid out by Heidegger's ontology.

De Beauvoir and the Other's Gaze

Simone de Beauvoir's work on aging, *La vieillesse* (1970; transl. to English as *Old Age* in the UK and as *The Coming of Age* in the US, 1972), suffered scholarly

neglect, especially when compared to *The Second Sex*.² This rather lengthy book (585 pages in the English version) is divided into two parts. The first reviews the biological, anthropological, historical, and sociological factors that decide whether someone appears old. The philosophical core of the book is then presented at the beginning of its second half, which explores the “subjective” or (“interior”) point of view on aging and contrasts it with the “objective” (or “exterior”) perspective discussed in part one. That is to say, the critical thing is the tension between these two. Martha C. Nussbaum summarizes this clash: “At one level one may feel young within, but seeing the sudden scorn of society, one experiences a dramatic subjective shift, since that being-seen is also a part of who one subjectively is.”³

A good illustration of this tension is the situation described by de Beauvoir. She was in the company of Sartre when one of his friends came into the hotel dining room and said he had just met another of their friends sitting with an old lady. That “old lady” appeared to be a friend of de Beauvoir and Sartre. However, they had never considered her an “old lady.” De Beauvoir and Sartre “were utterly taken aback” by such a comment. On the one hand, they had to accept it, but on the other, as de Beauvoir claims, “an alien eye had transformed [de Beauvoir’s friend] into another being.”⁴

It is worth highlighting this comment because it aptly catches de Beauvoir’s views on aging and can be directly juxtaposed with Malabou’s ideas on this subject. The latter will literally think of an old person as becoming another being, while in de Beauvoir’s account, this another being is a kind of shadow that starts to accompany us, concealing our authentic being.

Hence, de Beauvoir offers two accounts of aging and its source. On the one hand, old age is identified as a disadvantageous and sudden change related to biological mechanisms. It is negative because it refers to the deterioration or decrease of capacities. For instance, while getting older, athletes cannot perform as they used to when they were younger. Similarly, women at a certain age are not as fertile as they were in their twenties.⁵ This unfavorable alteration, de Beauvoir suggests, appears always suddenly—it comes out of the blue to us. Although it does not happen momentarily in our body-in-itself, it is abrupt and rapid for our being-for-itself.

De Beauvoir observes that it is common to scarcely recognize the people you have known for years but have not seen in a long while. You are puzzled about how they have changed, and you become momentarily aware that they are probably equally

² With certain notable exceptions: C. Gilleard, “Aging as Otherness”; M. McLennan, “Beauvoir’s Concept of ‘Decline,’” *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* 6 [3] (2020), pp. 1–17, doi: 10.5206/fpq/2020.3.7929; or texts gathered in the volume edited by Silvia Stoller: *Simone de Beauvoir’s Philosophy of Age Gender, Ethics, and Time*, S. Stoller (ed.), Berlin 2014.

³ M. Nussbaum, S. Levmore, *Aging Thoughtfully: Conversations about Retirement, Romance, Wrinkles, and Regret*, New York 2017, p. 27.

⁴ S. de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, transl. P. O’Brain, New York 1972, p. 289 (emphasis mine—M.H.-L.).

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 17–18; M. McLennan, “Beauvoir’s Concept of ‘Decline,’” pp. 5–6.

surprised to see how you have changed too.⁶ De Beauvoir claims that this astonishment is the very matter of the famous passage from Marcel's Proust *Time Regained* when the main protagonist becomes aware, on the one hand, of how much time has changed all the people he used to know, but on the other hand, he can hardly overcome the impression that all of these changes constitute merely costumes the people are wearing for a fancy dress party. Or, maybe, he finds it extremely hard to accept that those people did have change—they have aged.⁷

This dissent lies at the heart of the second account of aging proposed by de Beauvoir. In accordance with it, our old age is revealed to us when we become aware that others perceive us as old even though we can still feel young or ageless.⁸ This second perspective on aging could be actually labeled “internalized” instead of “interior.”⁹ It is so because it results from the reluctant acceptance that we got old because other people perceive us this way. In other words, other people see me as old; consequently, I start to see and understand myself as old.

This two-stage nature of becoming self-aware of our old age is rooted in de Beauvoir's reading of “being-in-the-world” (which is the title of the second part of her book) as inspired by Sartre (and not Heidegger). According to it, being-in-the-world consists in that we are always related, or exposed, to other people or to how they look at us. The way other people see me co-constitutes my being-for-itself.¹⁰ In this sense, the Sartrean concept of the “look” (or gaze) (*le regard*) underlies de Beauvoir's account of aging—it is reflective self-consciousness of entering a particular stage as mediated by the assessment made by others, which is hard for us to accept.

The above thesis is the single thought (in the Heideggerian sense) that reverberates throughout the second half of *The Coming of Age*, which is saturated with a great number of examples, social anecdotes, passages from literary works, or statements from well-known figures that are supposed to illustrate it. They all indicate that, at some point, we start to be seen by others as old due to the “objective” factors—e.g., gray hair, wrinkles, our age and as a result, we start to see ourselves in this way, which, however, arouses strong opposition from us.

The crux of de Beauvoir's ontological perspective on aging is the intrinsic “otherness and unrealizability of age” in our self-understanding.¹¹ De Beauvoir repeatedly claims that, first, if others had not drawn my atten-

⁶ Ibidem.

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ S. de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, pp. 293–294.

⁹ The complex nature of it is revealed already in the fact that de Beauvoir did not name the second part of her book simply “Old Age Seen from Within,” as one might expect on the basis of the title of the first half (“Old Age Seen from Without”) but “Being-in-the-World.”

¹⁰ C. Gilleard, “Aging as Otherness,” p. 287; L. Dolezal, “Reconsidering the Look in Sartre's, ‘Being and Nothingness,’” *Sartre Studies International* 18 [1] (2012), pp. 10–11.

¹¹ C. Gilleard, “Aging as Otherness,” p. 287.

tion to the fact that I aged, I would (probably) not have noticed it, and second, that even when others are convinced that I am old, I usually do not feel this way.

Such a view may be alien to many people who often feel old because their body can no longer do what it used to do, for instance, as in the case of athletes mentioned by de Beauvoir. The philosopher, however, does not seem to challenge the significance of such a feeling. Instead, she focuses on the alternative experience when one can still feel young (probably when changes in their body do not impact their everyday living) or even ageless as long as other people do not challenge such a view. Moreover, even when they reluctantly acknowledge that they have “objectively” aged (as persuaded by other people), they do not believe this is not the actual them, but some others within them.

De Beauvoir unpacks this experience, saying: “Within me it is the Other—that is to say the person I am for the outsider who is old: and that Other is myself.”¹² This other appears then to be a kind of *doppelgänger* (born out of the look of other people) that coexists with me, from whom I still can discern the real me. It may also be claimed that the first is a kind of “mask,” which, on the one hand, hides our flesh and, on the other hand, can never be thrown off (like a shadow).¹³ Such a fundamental rupture (or doubling) is unavoidable on the ground of Sartrean-de Beauvoiran existential ontology since “being-for-others” is a necessary condition for our “being-for ourselves.” Being seen is not optional or secondary to consciousness but is an inherent part of the structure of reflective awareness.¹⁴

A good way to capture de Beauvoir’s view is that with aging, we deal with what we might call double otherness. On the one hand, other people (may try to) make me realize that I have (objectively) aged, while on the other hand, my aging as such (subjectively) is unrealizable for me; it is only my strange twin—that is the other (originating from these others)—that starts (unawares and unwantedly) to inhabit (with) me, which can be found to be old.

It seems that de Beauvoir’s account of aging is full of otherness. And yet, I shall argue, there is another kind of others’ share in my aging that she undermines—a different one from the primarily epistemic. Before I elaborate on what type of otherness appears to be missing in de Beauvoir, I would like to outline Malabou’s concept of aging to indicate similarities between these two French philosophers. This should facilitate capturing the backdrop against which I shall present an alternative way of thinking about otherness in my aging.

Malabou and Becoming the Real Other

While Simone de Beauvoir belongs to the existentialist tradition, Catherine Malabou’s works are rooted in deconstruction, neuroscience, and psychoanalysis.

¹² S. de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, p. 284.

¹³ S. Heinämaa, “Transformations of Old Age Selfhood, Normativity, and Time,” [in:] *Simone de Beauvoir’s Philosophy of Age Gender, Ethics, and Time*, p. 173.

¹⁴ C. Gilleard, “Aging as Otherness,” p. 288; L. Dolezal, “Reconsidering the Look in Sartre’s, ‘Being and Nothingness,’” p. 10.

Yet Malabou, like de Beauvoir, claims to adopt a phenomenological orientation in her exploration of aging as an instance of what she calls “destructive plasticity” and develops it in her book *Ontology of Accident*.¹⁵

The opposition between changes following “the usual order of things” and “accidents” such as traumas, catastrophes, and injuries is at the heart of her theory. According to Malabou, these changes fall under two contradictory schemas: the continuity schema and the event schema.¹⁶ In the first, “lives run their course like rivers,” and all changes that appear belong to the “almost logical process of fulfillment.” Malabou does not explain the fulfillment of what exactly this would be. We may assume that, somewhat against her emphasis on the need to revisit beings as absolutely dynamic structures, she implies here that there is some essence that each being is implementing in the span of its existence, but we will return to this inconsistency later in the paper.

So, while Malabou acknowledges that a “regular” course of life also includes “vagaries and difficulties,” she claims that they are absolutely different from detrimental accidents. The latter are entirely unexpected, and their negative magnitude is incomparable to the typical troubles that human beings face. Consequently, transformations understood according to the two schemes are entirely unlike: the first are mild and gradual, and the second are rapid and abrupt.

Malabou claims that it is plausible to distinguish between “usual” changes which reinforce one’s identity and severe “accidental” changes which “swipe away” the previous identity in lieu of a completely new identity appearing in its place. However, she does not unpack the sense in which “regular” changes “reinforce” one’s identity, except for saying that they can “caricature” or “fix it.”¹⁷ She is interested in “the ruptures of existence” or “deep cuts to biographies.” These breaks are so radical that there are no links to the rest of the preceding identity, and thus it can be claimed that some new being occurs.¹⁸

The possibility of undergoing such changes is the ground of destructive plasticity. That latter consists in that annihilation, loss, and disintegration may be recognized as the beginning of the formation of the new being within the boundaries of the antecedent one. In this sense, destruction can be formative, but this sculpting is not necessarily positive.¹⁹

According to Malabou, old age can be understood as a kind of destructive plasticity. Malabou argues that “even in the most peaceful aging, there will always be an accidental, catastrophic dimension.”²⁰ She argues that we usually do not really notice those around us becoming old—“we notice a few wrinkles, a few sags, a few lapses. But even so, there’s always one fine day when we no longer say ‘he or she

¹⁵ C. Malabou, *Ontology of Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity*, transl. C. Shread, Malden 2013, p. 6.

¹⁶ J. Palmer, “Catherine Malabou, ‘The Ontology of the Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity’ [review],” *Oxford Literary Review* 36 [1] (2014), doi: 10.3366/olr.2014.0092, p. 142.

¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁸ C. Malabou, *Ontology of Accident*, p. 2.

¹⁹ Ibidem, pp. 3–4.

²⁰ Ibidem.

is aging' but rather 'he's old, she's old,' he or she has metamorphosized into an old person like in some tragic version of a childhood fairy tale."²¹

To confirm the validity of her insight that all of us, sooner or later, will be turned into old people, and that this transformation will turn out to be quite unexpected and puzzling—Malabou, just like de Beauvoir, refers to the already mentioned famous scene of the ball from the Proust's novel. However, she reads it differently than de Beauvoir, shifting the burden from becoming aware of being old to just becoming old. More precisely, Malabou finds in Proust reaffirmation that we may experience older people being transformed into entirely different people from the ones we used to know.²² In this sense aging (or becoming an older person) is the most common event of destructive plasticity that happens to everyone.

Summing up, Malabou points out changes (among which she locates aging) pertaining so deeply that due to them, some person is not only "modified" but "becomes someone else."²³ It is then not the eye of the viewer that is the source of otherness in aging, nor is it limited to the strange twin that starts to coexist with the original subject (as it was in de Beauvoir), but this otherness finds its embodiment in the utterly new being that eliminates the former one and takes its place.

In holding so, Malabou encourages us to recognize changes that beings undergo in the course of our life to be real (not only apparent as de Beauvoir holds) and serious, or literally substantial—that is pertaining to the changes in our substance. According to Malabou, there is no substance prone to far-reaching mutation.²⁴ This claim starkly contrasts with the traditional account in which the substance warrants the identity of the given being. Malabou, in turn, points to the capacity to be completely transformed as to the primordial feature of the substance. By this token, the source of aging is definitely inherent to the given being, even though the mechanism underlying it is not clearly identified by science (medicine, neuropsychology, etc.).

From a philosophical point of view, however, what seems to be the most ambiguous and vague in Malabou's stance is the lack of clarity in explaining what allows us to connect the "previous" and the "transformed" being. Is it their physical continuity? Malabou does not offer an answer to that.

She neither explains how we can tell nor know what qualifies as a mild change and what constitutes a cut in someone's being. The very possibility to assess these changes assumes that we know entirely, to the core, someone, and we are able to define their essence—somewhat against Malabou's call to cease recognizing the substance as the ground for identity.

²¹ Ibidem, p. 42.

²² Ibidem, pp. 52–53.

²³ See C. Malabou, *The New Wounded: From Neurosis to Brain Damage*, transl. S. Miller, New York 2012, p. xi; 15; M. McLennan, "Beauvoir's Concept of 'Decline'," pp. 11–12.

²⁴ Malabou also underscores her departure from the traditional metaphysical stance by referring to her views as to the "ontology of accident." In so doing, she plays with the ambiguity of the word "accident," which, on the one hand, is a synonym for the unexpected event, on the other, names the features of the substance that are the subject of change. Malabou merges these two meanings to revisit the notion of the substance.

This claim probably will become better justified when juxtaposed with de Beauvoir's views, which will not be that different from Malabou's. Bringing them together will also facilitate sketching an alternative way of thinking about aging: the one which will both embrace the sense of still being oneself and the significance of changes that one may undergo and, moreover, will be less hermetic in conceptualizing these changes by acknowledging the share that other beings have in them.

Otherness and Mineness in Aging

Although de Beauvoir's and Malabou's concepts of aging might appear to be quite opposite at first glance—one is focused on the other's look, making us aware that we got old, the second on turning into the other being when one arrives at old age—they are both concerned with being old rather than getting older or coming of age. De Beauvoir's and Malabou's attention is focused on the point when someone is (already) old (even if this assessment is as arbitrary as de Beauvoir's) and not on the process which leads to such a moment. For both philosophers, the occurrence of old age is found to be sudden. It is not gradual but precipitous.²⁵

Yet de Beauvoir holds that modifications observable for others in me need not have anything to do with me being still me. They are only important because they interfere with others making sense of me. We need not genuinely embrace them. "Can I have become a different being while still remain myself?"²⁶ No, she claims.²⁷

In doing so, however, she seems to conflate the transcendental (ontological) sense of being yourself with the empirical (ontic) bundle of psychological structures or properties that form personality.²⁸ Moreover, de Beauvoir appears to identify the younger (personality) with the "default myself"; that is when we have grown up but are still young.²⁹

Malabou, quite surprisingly, adopts a similar line of reasoning. She also believes that there is a kind of "default myself" when all our capacities gain their most complete degree.³⁰ Malabou builds on the metaphor of flight³¹ to talk about people reaching "cruising altitude" in their lives. This is the peak point of ourselves—our fullness. Its loss results in our no longer being who we used to be. As a result of changes, she argues, a new being occurs.

²⁵ C. Malabou, *Ontology of Accident*, p. 42 on the finality of the stage of old age regardless of how long one has yet to live.

²⁶ S. de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, p. 283.

²⁷ See S. Heinämaa, "Transformations of Old Age: Selfhood, Normativity, and Time," p. 174.

²⁸ M. McLennan, "Beauvoir's Concept of 'Decline'," p. 8.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 8, 10–11; see L. Fisher, "The Other Without and the Other Within: The Alterity of Aging and the Aged in Beauvoir's 'The Coming of Age,'" [in:] *Simone de Beauvoir's Philosophy of Age Gender, Ethics, and Time*, pp. 111, 118.

³⁰ A relatively uncritical idealization of this period is probably why Nussbaum is so critical of de Beauvoir's *La Vieillesse*. She writes that the book is "among the most preposterous famous works of philosophy" that Nussbaum has ever encountered. It is even "worse than preposterous." M. Nussbaum, S. Levmore, *Aging Thoughtfully*, pp. 27–28; see M. McLennan, "Beauvoir's Concept of 'Decline,'" p. 1.

³¹ C. Malabou, *Ontology of Accident*, p. 41.

Malabou also denies that a being can become different yet still be itself. This, however, calls for identical criticism as in the case of de Beauvoir, namely to point out that she, in an unjustified and misleading way, identifies the sense of being ourselves with the certain stage or configuration of our psychological and physical properties.³²

I find such a way of discussing aging unhelpful as an aging person. Here I am, a healthy woman in her mid-thirties, mother of two. I feel different compared to how I felt ten years ago. I am not as engaged and passionate as I used to be. Instead, I have become more and more aloof. But I am not sure if this is necessarily a negative change. If I were to choose, I am not entirely convinced that I would like to regain the former capacity to be excited at the expense of being distant. But maybe I would? Either way, this change is significant to me, like the fact that I get tired more easily.

And yet, I feel that I am myself to the same extent as I have always felt. I would not say that I used to be more myself. Because when would it be? When I was a child, a teenager, or in my twenties? No, the sense of mineness of my being comprises all this time and all these far-reaching changes. The latter also includes those physical—my skin, my posture, my organs, my physical fitness. I know that I look different, and those changes cannot be seen as growth. But are they necessarily a decline or loss of mineness—the sense of being me, no one else? No.

Importantly, I can see that my friends have changed too; they are different now, and these are not mere appearances. At the same time, I have a strong sense that they are still themselves, these particular people, and no one else. This ambiguity is unsettling. I have to navigate, or switch, between these two equally important sides of my experience—acknowledging the changes my friends underwent and recognizing their undeniable particularity.

But what is even more wonderous is that I have an unyielding impression that all these changes, which catch my attention, run to other beings that changed, or affected, the people I know, or at least I think I know. It is an unshakable feeling that behind all those changes there are some other beings that impacted my friends.

To illustrate it, I can contrast the already recalled scene of the party from Proust's *Time Regained* with my own experience of my high school reunion. Over a dozen years after graduation, we can meet all together. With some of the people I see each other quite frequently as they are my close friends; with some, it is the first time in years that I have had a chance to talk to. Despite this difference, I can see that they (or actually we) all have aged. No, it is not that we have turned gray and become elderly people. The changes are mild, as Malabou would probably assess it. If I were staring at all the faces, I could spot small wrinkles on the foreheads and around the lips, maybe dark circles under the eyes, and later, I would notice slightly drooping shoulders. But this is not what I see. What I see are

³² This becomes especially visible when she omits the fact that despite Marguerite Duras describes herself in *The Lover* precisely as an “aged girl,” a woman aged by accident, too soon, between 18 and 25, she still finds her to be herself, somewhat against all the visible changes (see C. Malabou, *Ontology of Accident*, p. 56).

their life struggles. I cannot resist the impression that all their personal and professional failures and successes are embodied in how they have changed—and the latter are not less weighty than the first. Those changes, more importantly, did not happen in a vacuum. They are effects of dealings with other beings.

In Proust, the narrator could not fight the feeling that he came to the dress, not a regular party. I, in turn, cannot help but see in my high school friends and colleagues their difficult divorces, relatively early death of their parents, breakdowns in the course of their professional or romantic relationships, as well as raising children and holding prestigious positions, which while giving incredible satisfaction, also leave traces due to involvement, stress, anxiety, excitement, and effort related to them.

Of some people, I know what (both negative and positive) they went through; of some, I do not, and I start to wonder—what happened to them? Who or what affected them that they were changed this way? But maybe I am wrong. Perhaps this is simply the natural order of things that certain qualities of our bodies and faces change. But, downplaying the factors that could affect the process of aging seems to oversimplify this phenomenon. For instance, one of my colleagues became a professional sailor, traveling around the globe. What is so conspicuous about his look is that sun and wind exposure changed (or aged) his face in a different way than in the case of the rest of us, staying inside buildings daily. This example, I believe, proves illustrative of how posthuman factors impacted his aging.

My point is that other beings contribute to our aging, *not* only epistemologically, making us aware that we aged as de Beauvoir claimed, but they actually contribute to our aging. It is not just anonymous and undefined “life that has happened” to us that we aged, as she cites Louis Aragon.³³ This life consisted of interactions with other beings that affected us. These are our husbands, wives, bosses, siblings, children, parents, customers, friends, students, and many others who were a source of my stress, disappointments, sorrows, happiness, anxiety, comfort, and pride that “sedimented” in me.³⁴

It is not then just the gaze of other people (the way they see me) that makes us old. They actually make us old by changing us. In particular, the participation of other beings in our traumas, which impact us so heavily and contribute to our aging, should be underlined. Except for autoimmune illnesses, the etiology of which

³³ S. de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, p. 283.

³⁴ This phrase clearly alludes to Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s theory of sedimentation, but the actual resemblance between it and my proposal is rather low. Merleau-Ponty places great emphasis on the past, claiming that everything we have ever perceived, thought or done remains an implicit dimension in our present life. Even if we cannot remember our past perceptions, our previous thoughts, or actions we once undertook at some point in time, there is no doubt about the fact that these perceptions, thoughts and actions belonged individually to us and still influence our present life (S. Stoller, *We in the Other, and the Child in Us: The Intersection of Time in Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty*, p. 200).

My account, in turn, points shifts the burden on the chiasm of the otherness and mineness, indicating that these are *others* that affected *us*, and that spotting the changes inflicted by them is the moment of (someone’s) being’s disclosure. Furthermore, “me” is not identified here as the set of features, but understood as mineness in accordance with the Heideggerian framework.

is still largely unknown, all tragedies in our lives are somehow related to or caused by other beings, intentionally or not. Malabou highlights that they may occur without reason, even if that would be a small number of cases. But maybe even in the latter, we are just incapable of identifying the cause of the transformation. Still, most traumas are induced by significant villains in our lives: abusive spouses, toxic supervisors, hit-and-run drivers, and illnesses attacking our dearest and nearest.

The critical difference between Malabou's stance and mine, however, lies not in that she distinguishes between changes resulting from the "vagaries of life" and traumas, undermining the others' share in both kinds of changes. Most of all, unlike Malabou, I argue that changes do not transform a being into another being but can reveal its uncanny particularity (which cannot be, however, conflated with any kind of "personality"). That is to say, changes (even those radical) induced by other beings can disclose the "proximally and for the most part" withdrawn being of a given being because they draw attention to them as those who underwent changes (or simply aged).

To elaborate on the paradoxical nature of this disclosure—revealing ownness through modifications caused by others—I shall turn to Heidegger. Quite unexpectedly, his ontology might help make sense of such changes. His account of the phenomenon of gesture will be of great importance.

Making Sense of Others' Impact With Heidegger

Before I look at Heidegger's remarks on gestures, it is worth mentioning that his ontology played some role for both de Beauvoir and Malabou. In the case of the first, Heidegger's philosophy sets the very framework for exploring the being of human beings. While mediated by Sartre's rereading of it, such categories as "being-in-the-world" evidently point to being inspired by Heidegger.

In Malabou, the situation is slightly more complicated. In *Ontology of Accident*, we find no references to the author of *Being and Time* despite her being a Heidegger scholar. Malabou has written a book on thinking change by Heidegger (*The Heidegger Change: On the Fantastic in Philosophy*). The explanation why Heidegger is absent in her book on destructive plasticity lies probably in the fact that he was focused on the shifts in the understanding of the metaphysical status of human beings throughout the various epochs of history, in the sense of being a historical construct (as a rational animal, subject, etc.) and not as individual beings (persons). As a matter of fact, as I tried to clarify elsewhere,³⁵ he was surprisingly silent about changes in individual human beings.

Yet, as I shall argue, Heidegger's account of gestures might be stretched to reexamine the sense of changes we refer to as aging, acknowledging their bodily

³⁵ M. Hoły-Luczaj, "Shapeability—Aristotle on Poiein-Paschein and the Other Dimension of Being in Heidegger," *South African Journal of Philosophy* 41 [1] (2022), pp. 37–48, doi: 10.1080/02580136.2021.2025326.

nature.³⁶ Importantly, Heidegger's understanding of gestures is grounded in the core of his philosophy, namely the "ontological difference" between being and beings. For Heidegger, being, when emerging from behind a being (as different in kind from it), discloses what belongs uniquely to a given being. Heidegger's conceptualization of being is inherently linked with the semantics of the adjective *eigen*, which refers to "own," "proper," and "particular." From *eigen* derives also *eigenste* ("own-most") and *Eigentlichkeit* ("authenticity" or "ownness"), as well *er-eignen* ("to appropriate," "to make one's own") and *Er-eignis* ("the event," or "the event of appropriation"). Seeing how these words interrelate allows us to say that being in Heidegger involves disclosing the own-most of beings. Such an account of being is also confirmed by his claim that being consists in disclosing "mineness" (*Jemeinigkeit*) of me as an individuum,³⁷ or, as he holds later, in revealing particularity (being-this-one) (*Jediesheit*), which is characteristic of a "thing as a thing."³⁸

Significantly, the being thought of in terms of ownness is marked by the fundamental paradox: what is the most *own* turns out to be the most uncanny (*unheimlich*).³⁹ The very meaning of *eigen* conveys such ambiguity as it can be translated not only as "own" or "particular," but also "peculiar" and "strange." Heidegger takes advantage of this variety to stress that being is unexplorable, groundless, and never fully to be scrutinized. Being, unlike beings, is beyond control and definition.

The distinction between beings and their being is followed by the opposition of the ontic and ontological aspects of beings. We cannot, however, think of them as two separate domains but rather as intertwined. For instance, we can specify such features of a pencil as being wooden, measuring four inches, or having graphite. This is an ontic description focusing on the substance of the thing. We arrive at the ontological level when we point out how the aforementioned features are related to the way the pencil reveals its being as something assigned or involved in writing and, as such, connected to other things indispensable for this activity (paper, desk, human hand). That is not to say that writing is the only way the pencil can disclose its peculiarity. It can happen in many other kinds of involvements (serving as pot flower support or a tool for creating a puppet).

Moreover, Heidegger's concept of the referential context ("world") should not be read merely as the claim that things need some background to be understood. The idea of world-hood, also expressed by the notion of the "equipmental whole" or network of significations, emphasizes that beings only jointly can unfold their being:

³⁶ Kevin Aho also makes use of Heidegger to ponder the question of aging. He refers to the Heideggerian account of temporality to explain how midlife crisis closes the horizon of future, making us believe that there is nothing that is still (good) awaiting us over there (K. Aho, "The Contraction of Time and Existential Awakening: A Phenomenology of Authentic Aging," [in:] *The Evening of Life: The Challenges of Aging and Dying Well*, P. Scherz, J.E. Davis (eds.), Notre Dame, pp. 83–84).

³⁷ See M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, transl. J. Macquarrie, E. Robinson, New York 1962, p. 68.

³⁸ M. Heidegger, *What is a Thing?*, transl. W.B. Barton, V. Deutsch, South Bend 1967, p. 14–16.

³⁹ M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 233; see K. Witty, "Uncanniness," [in:] *The Cambridge Heidegger Lexicon*, M. Wrathall (ed.), Cambridge 2021, pp. 789–791.

they are incomprehensible as separate items.⁴⁰ Their relationality—“hanging together”—is a crucial moment of the disclosure of being.⁴¹

Heidegger’s account of the body, let alone of gestures, also falls under the scheme of ontological difference. While it may appear that he neglected the problem of the body,⁴² he consequently stressed that he does not want to make it a starting point in (re)thinking the fundamental status of human beings as it gravitates towards understanding them as consisting of different parts (i.e. body and soul) or of different kinds of matter (i.e. physical and spiritual).⁴³

Only later, foremost in *Nietzsche*, did Heidegger start to outline some positive ways of approaching the problem of a body ontologically. He suggested that we focus on the phenomenon of bodying or bodyingforth (*leiben*) being the essence of, or revealing the sense of the body. It was grounded in the difference between the body, understood as a “corporeal thing,” and “the lived body,” expressed in German by the words *Körper* and *Leib*. Heidegger coined the neologism *leiben* to name the event of disclosure of the meaning of the body as lived by me or some other concrete person.⁴⁴

One of the clearest examples of employing this perspective can be found in Zollikon Seminars, which Heidegger (invited by Medard Boss) offered to psychiatrists and medical students between 1959 and 1971. Heidegger refers here again to the difference between the boundaries of the corporeal thing and the body, which consists in the fact that the bodily limit is extended beyond the corporeal limit.⁴⁵ He explains that arguing that bodyingforth of the body is determined by the way of someone’s being.⁴⁶ According to Heidegger, the bodyingforth has a peculiar relationship to the self.⁴⁷ He refines this by saying:

I just saw how Dr. K. was “passing” his hand over his forehead. And yet, I did not observe a change of location and position of one of his hands, but I immediately noticed that he was thinking of something difficult. How should we characterize this movement of the hand? As a movement of expression?⁴⁸

In this passage, Heidegger tells us that in dealings with others, trying to make sense of them, we are not usually focused on strictly anatomic or physiological descriptions (unless we are doctors or scientists interested in these particular domains).

⁴⁰ See S. Clark, “Strange Strangers and Uncanny Hammers: Morton’s ‘The Ecological Thought’ and the Phenomenological Tradition,” *Green Letters* 17 [2] (2013), doi: 10.1080/14688417.2013.800339, p. 105.

⁴¹ M. Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, transl. A. Hofstadter, Bloomington 1988, p. 163; see V. Blok, “Heidegger’s Ontology of Work,” *Heidegger Studies* 31 (2015), pp. 109–128; M. Holy-Łuczaj, “Shapeability—Aristotle on Poiein-Paschein and the Other Dimension of Being in Heidegger,” *South African Journal of Philosophy* 41 [1] (2022), pp. 37–48, doi: 10.1080/02580136.2021.2025326.

⁴² See K. Aho, *Heidegger’s Neglect of the Body*, New York 2009; D.F. Krell, *Daimon Life. Heidegger and Life Philosophy*, Bloomington 1992.

⁴³ M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp. 73–74; K. Aho, *Heidegger’s Neglect of the Body*, p. 30.

⁴⁴ M. Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. I, transl. D.F. Krell, San Francisco, pp. 565–566; K. Aho, *Heidegger’s Neglect of the Body*, p. 37.

⁴⁵ M. Heidegger, *Zollikon Seminars*, transl. F. Mayr, R. Askay, Evanston, IL 2001, p. 86; K. Aho, *Heidegger’s Neglect of the Body*, pp. 36–37; D.F. Krell, *Daimon Life*, p. 343.

⁴⁶ M. Heidegger, *Zollikon Seminars*, p. 86.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 87.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 88.

When approaching other beings, we are rather occupied with what they express and how they do it.⁴⁹ Yet, as Heidegger underlines, we must remember that what is expressed is the particularity of the given being, its being. It is not that some issue is generally difficult, but it is difficult for a particular person. And this person reveals that through this precise movement observed by us.

This movement, which, on the one hand, expresses someone's particularity and, on the other, catches other people's attention, is specified by Heidegger as a "gesture" (*Gebärde*). This notion plays quite a significant role in Heidegger's philosophy. He usually links it with the human ability to think and speak and, in doing so, to open (the sense) of being.⁵⁰ In *Zollikon Seminars*, he, quite uniquely, points to the bodily dimension of the gesture, exposing at the same time its inherent relationship with the mineness (oneness).

I move within a gesture. And the hand? How does it belong to me? The hand belongs to my arm. It is not only a movement of the hand, but also of the arm, the shoulder. It is my movement. I moved myself.⁵¹

The above passage also specifies that gestures have worldly character. That is to say, they can never be isolated from the network of beings. They always occur and can be understood as located within a specific arrangement of beings (placing a watch on a table is another example of gesture in *Zollikon Seminars*).⁵² However, this is not at odds with the fact that gestures reveal the mineness of the being we are focused on.

Summing up, a gesture seems to be the form of the clearing of being. I believe that this Heideggerian concept and the idea of bodying can be stretched or reread in the context of aging. Such a reinterpretation would embrace the following points.

First, we need to distinguish between the ontic and the ontological sides of the changes which we classify as signs of getting older. The first refers to objective and measurable issues such as the appearance of wrinkles, a different condition of the skin, a reshaped contour of the face, and a slight back hunch. Investigation of the ontological aspect of those changes would go beyond the binarism of physical and mental facets and start with naming what I actually can observe or what kind of irresistible impression I get by looking at them. So, in the modifications in the faces, hands, and the way my friends and colleagues speak, I readily observe growing reflectiveness, fatigue, confidence, bitterness, easing, disillusionment, aloofness... They replaced the former spontaneity, enthusiasm, imprudence, bashfulness, shyness... The list could go on as I would look at each person I encountered at the reunion.

But as I mentioned earlier, in understanding these transformations, I do not stop at recognizing the new condition of each of these people, but I wonder why the above changes occurred. Probably, these two steps cannot be separated.

⁴⁹ See K. Aho, *Heidegger's Neglect of the Body*, p. 41.

⁵⁰ D. Kleinberg-Levin, *Gestures of Ethical Life: Reading Hölderlin's Question of Measure after Heidegger*, Stanford 2005, p. 220–221; D.F. Krell, *Daimon Life*, p. 282.

⁵¹ M. Heidegger, *Zollikon Seminars*, p. 89.

⁵² *Ibidem*.

Noticing that someone's cheerfulness gave way to being toned down, I immediately start thinking about what could bring that. Sometimes, I know, more or less, the likely cause, and sometimes, I may only assume the possible ground for such a change, depending on how well I know the person. But in both cases, as described earlier, I orient my understanding toward their personal and professional failures and successes embodied in the considered changes.

All these events—job search, hard work, promotions, pregnancies, parenthood, betrayals, divorces, or having too much fun lifestyle—and following from that stress, anxiety, excitement, fatigue, and disappointment, etc. altered the people I (used) to know in a way we usually label as aging. Significantly, in all those events, other people and non-human beings participated (environmental factors, sometimes various substances, such as alcohol or drugs). Or, more precisely, other human and non-human beings affected my friends and colleagues, causing or contributing to a variety of situations that emotionally and physically reshaped them.

However, the key thing within the reread Heideggerian framework is that those affections cannot be identified as any kind of “contamination.” It is not that these other entities interfered with the being of my friends and colleagues. On the contrary, the changes caused by those other beings reveal the being of my friends and colleagues—in its ambiguous character, as at once pointing to the ownmost and uncanniness of each of my friends and colleagues.

These changes draw my attention to the given person, to their being—being this one and no one else. Importantly, I try to resist the belief that “They” (*Das Mann*) aged or that it is a normal thing that, with a flow of time, “Everyone” comes of age. On the contrary, I focus individually on each person I encounter—thanks to the spotted changes.

Simultaneously, observing these changes makes me realize that individuality or being-this-one is not restricted to the set of features but is essentially never to be fully known and explored. I cannot say that someone (me included) was more themselves years ago. This ontological particularity, being-this-one, takes many shades throughout life. And the fact that others play such a vital role in it makes it even stranger.

Conclusions

Unlike death, aging is not among the most popular themes in philosophy. Thus, works by Simone de Beauvoir and Catherine Malabou on that subject deserve much appreciation. Their investigations complicate and enrich our understanding of the phenomenon in question. De Beauvoir points out that our (old) age is never fully realizable for us, as we always tend to feel ourselves. Yet, other people may succeed in making us aware that we become old because they see us this way. This phenomenon results in the occurrence of my strange twin, “the other” in me, about whom I know that others see him or her as old, but I cannot identify myself with him or her. Malabou, in turn, focuses on the fact that, with coming of age, people (sometimes) transform into other beings wholly different and separate from the ones they used to be.

Instead, my proposal wishes to shed more light on how others (both human and non-human) actually contribute to us becoming different in the process we refer to as aging, which, however, paradoxically reveals our being. In other words, I argued that in making sense of the symptoms of someone's aging, including ourselves, we should acknowledge the participation of other beings which affected (causing stress, excitement, fatigue, etc.) this particular person. Detecting this influence, however, does not mean that someone's being has been damaged or contaminated by others. On the contrary, such changes induced by others allow the disclosure of someone's particularity in its undefinable character, having no "peak point" or optimal stage.

To elaborate on that claim, I reexamined Martin Heidegger's idea of bodying, let alone his account of gestures. Rereading them, I argued that we have to switch between its ontic and ontological aspects in understanding aging. We need to go beyond the objective and observable (ontic) indicators of aging and make (ontological) sense of them. To that end, it is worth taking into account that beings are always individual (their "own") but never isolated (they are always in-the-world). This means that, on the one hand, it is the particularity (ownness) of some being that is revealed in the attempts to understand changes that someone has undergone; on the other hand, they are always related to some other beings that induced those changes. In doing so, investing the aging discloses what is our own, which at the same time is never to be fully known—our being in its uncanny character.

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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?¹

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.² 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.³ Without the possibilities of sense and meaning around any possible sense or meaning, we cannot grasp the sense or the meaning.⁴ These possibilities open up only in some degree of wondering, the meaningful, interesting “space” around the sense and meaning of things.⁵ The wondering stays with the presence of what or who interests it. I wonder “in the presence of,” in your presence.⁶

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.⁷ 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

¹ 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.

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

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

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

⁵ 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.”

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

⁷ 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.⁸

⁸ 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.⁹ When you appear, you have a life of your own, an inner life, "something that is going on inside."¹⁰ 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.¹¹

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.¹² 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

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

¹⁰ M.C. Nussbaum, *Justice for Animals*, p. 11.

¹¹ *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.

¹² 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),¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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.

¹³ Ch. Larmore, *Practices of the Self*.

¹⁴ 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.¹⁵

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.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷

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.¹⁸ I call this the mind's original joy, following on Nussbaum's reading of Lucretius, or plainly, the mind's excitement.¹⁹ This excitement is wonder as a background condition of the mind.²⁰ 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).²¹

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

¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ 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.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 12–15.

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

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

²¹ 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.²² 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

²² 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.²³ “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.²⁴ 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.”²⁵ 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

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

²⁴ 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.”

²⁵ *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.²⁶ 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.

²⁶ 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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The Wonder and the Terror of Getting Lost in *The Room*

Abstract: This paper deals explicitly with two competing definitions of wonder. On the one hand, we have something like Mary-Jane Rubenstein's strange wonder where the very ground on which we stand is shaken and aporias determine our interaction with the world via wonder. We lose the very foundation on which we understand reality and thereby call into question our epistemological grasp of the world. On the other hand, we have Jan B.W. Pedersen's epistemological wonder where wonder is a kind of surprise or presentation of reality where we are struck by an epistemological lack. Wonder urges us forward in hopes of strengthening and broadening our understanding of the world. Both definitions seem to coalesce in the project of unveiling the reality of the world. Pedersen's project is explicitly epistemological in that wonder, be it an emotion or some kind of noetic faculty, reveals the world to us in a way that we didn't know before. Rubenstein, on the other hand, moves beyond epistemology by attempting a kind of strange ontology that opens new possibilities that were not previously accessible. In both versions, we end up peeling away a filmy layer of the world to find some other reality. In this paper, I will argue that there is a tension between wonder and terror that shows up in between Rubenstein's and Pedersen's definitions; a kind of wonder that attends to, at least partially, the filmy veil of reality. To do this, I will appeal to Weird fictions, including the virtual reality (VR) game, *The Room*, to pull at this tension and demonstrate its generativity for thinking through experiences of wonder and terror, including how they frame the meaning of our world(s).

Keywords: wonder, virtual reality games, terror, phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty, embodiment

You open your eyes. You are standing on a moon drenched balcony over what appears to be a London alleyway. You are prompted inside by the oncoming dark and the compulsion to keep working on a case involving multiple missing persons. Realizing that you are at an end to the evidence, you read a report left by your sergeant that guides you to the wall safe. Inside, you find a glowing obelisk curtained in growing tentacle-like vines. You hear a creak behind you, and before you reach for the obelisk, you quickly scan your surroundings to verify that you are alone. You are unsure if the noise came from your office (reality) or from beyond. Regardless, you are the only one there. You turn back to the safe and retrieve the obelisk. Immediately, everything changes. The lights flicker a red camera filter color and the projector that holds your evidence is rolling on an endless loop of static. You return to where you started only to find a newly placed note next to the projector. Either you missed a veiled companion, or things have changed more drastically than you thought. The note gives you new information about the case you are working on, but more than information, the note generates a sense of terror and wonder. Where did the note come from and who placed it there? How much has changed in the short time that you have possessed the obelisk? Is anything safe?

This is the opening scene of the virtual reality version of a game called *The Room*. Like many virtual reality (VR) games, it combines textual cues with a virtual landscape to generate a meaningful world. In a good VR game, the virtual world can temporarily replace the material world as the primary carrier of meaning. This is in part due to the way that VR maintains the body as an anchor in the world and as the principal mechanism through which meaning emerges. Cognitive research has shown that some VR experiences induce bodily engagement that mirrors real life orientations. According to Hava Aldouby, “We orientate toward visual stimuli (art objects included) as if preparing to physically interact or make contact, whether this is actually possible or not.”¹ What I find most interesting about *The Room* is the balance between a sense of atmospheric dread and a wonder that compels both a continual investigation of the world and a continual revealing of the world. Despite the lack of monstrous figures or nonplayer characters (NPC), I often find myself looking over my shoulder for some lurking menace, which prompts me to remove the VR headset to scan my material surroundings. *The Room* does a good job of playing on the tension between revelation and concealment so often discussed in phenomenological discourse. Every clue both reveals and conceals, and the world develops as an ongoing dialogue between the virtual body, the material body, and the virtual environment. The very access to the game via the VR headset also both reveals the VR world and conceals my material world. The game itself is mostly puzzle based, leading you through the story via clues, environments, and occasional hints. But it is the atmospheric element that makes the game particularly interesting because it is emotionally generative. As I will argue, along with the tension between revelation and concealment, the game produces a tension between terror and

¹ H. Aldouby, “Art and Presence: Investigating Embodiment in a Virtual Art Gallery,” [in:] *Shifting Interfaces: An Anthology of Presence, Empathy, and Agency in 21st-Century Media Arts*, H. Aldouby (ed.), Leuven 2020, p. 61, emphasis in the original.

wonder, motivating the exploration of the two ideas as both separate and simultaneous. I will use the game's atmospheric environment as a clue toward understanding the relation between terror and wonder and ultimately argue that some versions of wonder entail an experience of terror and vice versa.

We can begin with two competing definitions of wonder. On the one hand, we have something like Mary-Jane Rubenstein's strange wonder, where the very ground on which we stand is shaken and aporias determine our interaction with the world via wonder. According to Rubenstein, wonder "arises when the understanding cannot master that which lies closest to it—when, surrounded by utterly ordinary concepts and things, the philosopher suddenly finds himself surrounded on all sides by aporia."² We lose the very foundation on which we understand reality and thereby call into question our epistemological grasp of the world. We can begin to see the tension between wonder and terror in this definition because if we get lost in VR environments, the ground on which we know things begins to shift. This generates wonder but also a feeling of unsettled terror when we are suddenly caught between two worlds. Further, Rubenstein's version of wonder very quickly challenges the trend to limit wonder to an epistemological concept because knowledge ends up being a fundamental aporia that generates a kind of dizzying sense of wonder. That is, every time that we attempt to define what knowledge is we do so in terms of knowledge. It is like trying to cut a pair scissors with itself. Thus, the very thing on which we stand begins to slip away when we grasp that we are unable to attend to knowledge via the faculties of knowledge. We can, in this sense, never know what knowledge is, which leads to the opening of holes in our understanding of reality. Ultimately, we are left to wonder at the (sometimes dangerous) gap.

On the other hand, we have Pedersen's epistemological wonder where wonder is a kind of surprise or presentation of reality where we are struck by an epistemological lack. For Pedersen, "Wonder is a sudden experience that intensifies the cognitive focus and awareness of ignorance about a given object. It is typically an unsettling yet delightful experience that makes one aware that there might be more to the perceived object than meets the eye."³ Here, wonder urges us forward in hopes of strengthening and broadening our understanding of the world. Both definitions seem to coalesce in the project of unveiling the reality of the world. Pedersen's project is explicitly epistemological in that wonder, be it an emotion or some kind of noetic faculty, reveals the world to us in a way that we didn't know before. Rubenstein, on the other hand, moves beyond epistemology by attempting a kind of strange ontology that opens new possibilities that were not previously accessible. In both versions, we end up peeling away a filmy layer of the world to find some other reality. In this paper, I will argue that there is a tension between wonder and terror that shows up in between Rubenstein's and Pedersen's definitions; a kind of wonder that attends to, at least partially, the filmy veil of reality.

² M.-J. Rubenstein, *Strange Wonder: The Closure of Metaphysics and the Opening of Awe*, New York, NY 2008, p. 3.

³ J.B. Pedersen, "Weird Fiction: A Catalyst for Wonder," [in:] *Wonder, Education, and Human Flourishing: Theoretical, Empirical, and Practical Perspectives*, A. Schinkel (ed.), Amsterdam 2020, p. 1.

Much of Rubenstein's analysis of wonder focuses on the relation to the familiar. She attempts to move away from the epistemological framing of wonder because wonder ends up a mere step toward the goal of knowledge. Rather than fizzle in the face of knowledge, she contends that wonder has a kind of staying power, a power that is located in wonder's ability to wonder "at the strangeness of the most familiar: at that which, within the possibilities of determinate thinking, still remains indeterminate, unthinkable, and impossible."⁴ Pedersen spends less time explicitly locating wonder within the familiar but is not very far from Rubenstein's concern. Pedersen sees wonder as both something to be sustained and as something related to horror. But rather than a dizzying ungrounding of the foundations of knowledge or existence, the sustainability of wonder is found in a kind of cultivation. Pedersen's main goal is to generate a "balanced wonder" that is "free from negative constraints" and "may prompt the discovery of new sources of flourishing and in effect prove the antidote to complacency."⁵ So, while wonder is epistemologically oriented it must be sustained beyond the accrual of knowledge.

The relation between wonder and horror highlights the implicit relation between wonder and familiarity. According to Pedersen, because "horror encompasses the assumption that the person experiencing it is comfortably situated within a universe of meaning ... horror comes as a direct result of losing the center around which a given life revolves and which makes it a coherent whole."⁶ For Pedersen, this sense of horror is like wonder because both account for threats to that which is familiar. This is not to say that they, or the threats they respond to, are the same. In fact, Pedersen makes a critical distinction between the two such that wonder is a confrontation "with the limitation of our knowledge but at the same time we are filled with the urge to further our knowledge."⁷ Horror, on the other hand, "is a representation of the structure of our individual universe of meaning under threat ... We know what it looks like and so what horrifies us cannot be truly unknown."⁸ While I disagree with the claim that what horrifies us cannot be unknown, both horror and wonder are motivated by their relation to the familiar. That is, what is familiar is under threat in some way.

Both Rubenstein and Pedersen extend the relationship between wonder and horror through the connection between wonder and wound. According to Rubenstein, "Insofar as wonder can function as a kind of wound in the everyday, it must again be emphasized: just as a wound ceases to be itself when it heals, wonder is only wonder when it remains open."⁹ For Pedersen, "Wonder can be seen as a wound but also something that produces smiles, joy, and delight. It may be that it is synonymous with marvel and admiration and that it is a sensation connected to the senses."¹⁰ Even through the claim that wonder "produces smiles, joy, and delight," the idea

⁴ M.-J. Rubenstein, *Strange Wonder*, p. 8. Emphasis in the original.

⁵ J.B. Pedersen, *Weird Fiction*, p. 4.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 41.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 42.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ M.-J. Rubenstein, *Strange Wonder*, p. 10.

¹⁰ J.B. Pedersen, *Weird Fiction*, p. 22.

that a wonder is also a wound lines up with the relation to familiarity. Wonder acts as a kind of trauma to what was understood or to the reality that was accepted. Even if it leads to delight, wonder-as-wound-as-trauma leaves open the connection between what produces wonder and what produces terror.

The identification of wonder as wound also highlights the bodily component of wonder. That is, the tension between wonder and terror is experienced via the body and thus allows for a phenomenological analysis of each term. Both wonder and terror stun us in our activity, and through this experience we become paralyzed and sometimes immobile. Here we can briefly think of objects of wonder. What are objects of wonder but those things that call to us to experience this kind of immobilization. Standing in front of the Grand Canyon, exploring the Taj Mahal, or being confronted by the scale of the Colosseum are experiences of objects of wonder. These objects, however, are not somehow filled with magical powers but work to organize wonder around them. They enact a kind of wondrous gravity that calls for those inclined to experience wonder. But the relation between the object and the experience of wonder is never a necessary relation. That is, not everybody who encounters these objects are immediately full of wonder. There must be something else besides the object of wonder itself, and maybe even beyond the wonderer themselves. There is no doubt that objects of wonder have some great capacity to call on people to experience wonder, otherwise their reputation would disappear very quickly. These objects have a kind of gravitational pull that bends their observers toward a greater likelihood for wonder. Or, they are like portals to other dimensions that call to those so inclined to travel, but they do not necessarily show up for everyone. In these experiences of wonder generated by specifically sought after objects, then, there has to be something wonderful about the object and the one experiencing wonder. It is not that the object forces us to wonder by meeting necessary and sufficient conditions. Rather, there is something in between the two poles of wonder that acts as a kind of gravitational force.

Beyond the smiles of joy and delight, Pedersen acknowledges that there is another side to wonder, which he calls “dark wonder.” In “dark wonder” horror and wonder comprise two poles of a single circle. In Pedersen’s words: “At one end is horror, you go around the circle to wonder and on the other end of the circle, close to horror yet not horror, is dark wonder.”¹¹ Following Pedersen’s definition, it is possible to conceive of climate change as an object of dark wonder. It poses an existential threat to humanity, which should advance feelings of fear and terror. Yet anxiety seems to be a more appropriate description of our emotional and cognitive response to climate change because there is no clear and impending doom. Even Cthulhu, rising from the depths of the ocean, is a discrete object with definable boundaries and a bodily anchor. Climate change has none of those qualities. Regardless, terror and horror seem to arise, for Pedersen, in the face of an explicit threat to our life or our world.

In the tension between wonder and terror, I argue that moments of terror can also be moments of wonder, and moments of wonder can be moments of terror. This is the initial tension seen in Rubenstein’s definition and is contrary to some

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 328.

scholars of wonder who have argued that wonder is specifically associated with delight. Even in “Dark Wonder” Pedersen claims that “wonder is typically an unsettling yet delightful experience—and something perhaps we ought to seek out.”¹² In *Wonder, The Rainbow, and the Aesthetics of Rare Experiences*, Philip Fisher calls wonder a kind of “aestheticization of delight.”¹³ Rubenstein’s definition of wonder, however, makes very little of wonder as delight. Instead, she focuses on wonder as an “unsettling pathos.”¹⁴ The idea that in wonder we can encounter the reality that we thought we knew in a new and uneasy manner, that we can experience the most familiar setting as unfamiliar entails some sense of terror at a basic level. If wonder is about the opening of reality to new possibilities and new organizations, what Jeremy Bendik-Keymer calls a kind of “positive anxiety,”¹⁵ then wonder entails some overlap with terror.

The Room and the Limits of Games

You read the note left by the invisible intruder. It is signed by someone calling themselves “The Craftsman.” The note indicates that your missing persons investigation is stranger than originally conceived and that they have information that could help you solve the case. Whoever wrote the note also left you a box with a pair of eyeglasses locked inside. You spin a compass-like dial until you find the right combination. Inside the box are what look like steampunk goggles. When wearing the goggles, the room turns to an ominous shade of green. You turn again to check behind you. Was that the knocking again? No, this time it sounds like creaking footsteps. You verify that no one else is in the room (which room?), but footprints have appeared that lead you to another locked box and another puzzle. Once solved, a platform emerges that seems just the right size for the obelisk you retrieved from the safe. Placing the obelisk on the platform reveals a hidden reality beneath the everyday material existence of your office called the “Null.” You find yourself in an empty room with no distinction but a table in front of you and another letter from “The Craftsman.” Yet, you still hear that creak. Which veil is being lifted? Which veil needs to be lifted to obtain the source? It isn’t clear what the Null is, but the note indicates that it is both invisible and powerful. You follow the instructions and reality shifts once more.

What is interesting about this scene from *The Room* is the revelation of a new version of reality and the mechanism by which access is given. Not only are we granted entry to something called “the Null,” we are also shown that reality in the game is much deeper and much stranger than initially assumed. It may be the case that the reality in which we began was a kind of veil that hid something truer or

¹² Ibidem, p. 322.

¹³ P. Fisher, *Wonder, the Rainbow, and the Aesthetics of Rare Experiences*, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1998, p. 2.

¹⁴ M.-J. Rubenstein, *Strange Wonder*, p. 4.

¹⁵ See J. Bendik-Keymer, “Beneficial Relations Between Species & The Moral Responsibility of Wonder,” *Environmental Politics* (2021), p. 1–18.

more real. Access to the Null is initiated by a pair of goggles, a tool that deliberately enhances vision. It is likely no mistake that vision is used as the primary means to navigate dimensions of reality given that the tool used to access the game itself is also a kind of eyewear. When I put on the VR headset, a new reality is presented to me. But unlike the Null, I do not question which reality is more real. I can always remove the goggles to firmly ground myself back in my bodily subjectivity (find that knock...), back in my projects and tasks (or was it footsteps?), and back in my habitual space (safety). The question presented is not whether the virtual game is more real than my material existence, but whether my material existence contains any mechanisms that mask access to reality.

The scene also reveals a fundamentally limiting condition of games and virtual worlds: the rules. While the rules of physics may not necessarily act the same as the material world, the virtual world is necessarily structured. I can only move certain objects, which in turn provide clues for how to proceed. Unlike the material world, the infinite reserve of revelation and concealment is limited. Not only does this help to move the game along, but it may also be what Nicholas J. Mizer has called “rationalized constraints.”¹⁶ According to Mizer, rationalization of gameplay typically happens throughout the history of the game. Speaking specifically of *Dungeons and Dragons (D&D)*, Mizer tracks how role-playing games navigate the tension between the expansive imagination of the players and the limiting structures of the game. Because games become “increasingly rationalized over time” they also often become “dull and unbearable to the players.”¹⁷ Finding a tension between wonder and terror in *The Room* must necessarily consider the impact such rationalization has on the emotional, cognitive, and even ontological aspect of the game.

Veils of Reality

Part of my argument is just that there are moments in which we claim to have a veil removed from our eyes, some new vision given to us, some quality of the visual world offered in relief of the dampened sensual experience that categorizes our everyday experience. We can see these kinds of things when we talk about momentary breaks in depression or anxiety. In many instances, people dealing with depression describe relief from their depression as if some kind of light is turned on and some new access to the world is granted. On an episode of the podcast *Radiolab*, for instance, the use of transcranial direct current stimulation (tDCS) is discussed in terms of its possible use to increase the speed of learning and rate of calculation. At one point the host, Jad Abumrad, tries tDCS and is shown various three dimensional (3D) images. Under normal circumstances, Abumrad claims that he is unable to see these images clearly. However, while under tDCS, the images are easily identifiable and seen clearly. This leads him to say that he feels “very very

¹⁶ N.J. Mizer, *Tabletop Role-Playing Games and the Experience of Imagined Worlds*, Cham 2019, p. 29.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

awake.”¹⁸ Another producer of the show, Sally Adee, also experienced tDCS but did so while playing a video game. Not only was Adee able to perform better and make strategic calculations more quickly, she discussed how the process seemed to put her anxiety in relief. According to Adee, “It was like somebody had wiped a really steamy window, and I was just able to look at the world for what it was.”¹⁹ In both instances, there is a sense in which tDCS reveals reality and lifts an opaque obstacle from those who undergo the procedure,²⁰ as if our standard experience of sensation hides some aspect of reality from us. This is especially interesting in discussions concerning anxiety and depression, complex veils that seem to negatively filter reality for those afflicted.

Louise Danielsson and Susanne Rosberg describe the process of battling depression as an “ambiguous striving against fading.”²¹ Collecting phenomenological data through interviews with clinically depressed patients, Danielsson and Rosberg demonstrate the embodied nature of depression. In an interview, one of the patients describes depression as “an artificial world” that left them with a strange feeling of rejecting reality.²² The authors describe this strangeness in terms of Freudian uncanniness and argue that depression “can be understood as an unhomelike being-in-the-world, where the body, and life itself, turns alien.”²³ If depression leads to an uncanny alienation of the body, then the desire to overcome depression is a kind of “homecoming.”²⁴

The homecoming that occurs when one lifts the veil of depression can be taken as a highly qualified experience of delight. One of the interviewees from the Danielsson and Rosberg article describes the momentary relief of depression as their body “singing out.” Another describes the “pleasure” of walking that confirms that their body “really works.”²⁵ I do not deny that Fisher and Pedersen seem to be onto something important by calling attention to the relation between wonder and delight. However, there are times when peeling back the film of reality to see things in a new way, to see things strangely, or as they “really are,” are moments of terror, moments of abject weirdness. What happens, for instance, when we start from a perspective of the naïve complacency depicted in the 1988 John Carpenter film

¹⁸ J. Abumrad, R. Krulwich, *Radiolab*, June 26, 2014, retrieved July 4, 2023, from <https://radiolab.org/podcast/9-volt-nirvana/transcript>.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ While this is clearly anecdotal, there is growing research on the use of tDCS for depression. For more information about tDCS and its effect on depression, see: A.K. Kurzeck, B. Kirsch, E. Weidinger, F. Padberg, U. Palm, “Transcranial Direct Current Stimulation (tDCS) for Depression During Pregnancy: Scientific Evidence and What Is Being Said in the Media—A Systematic Review,” *Brain Sciences* 8 (2018), doi: 10.3390/brainsci8080155.

²¹ L. Danielsson, S. Rosberg, “Depression Embodied: An Ambiguous Striving Against Fading,” *Scandinavian Journal of Caring Sciences* 29 (2015), p. 503, doi-org.ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/10.1111/scs.12182.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 504.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 507.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 506.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 504.

They Live. Pederson's "dark wonder" works when we wonder at things that do not delight but cause us to be afraid or call to us in a sense of terror. I claim that we can map this sense in which the world becomes newly available as partly generative of wonder and partly generative of terror. In this sense, wonder is not just a light, not just terror, but something in between the two.

Embodied Games/Embodied Reality

Given the necessary structure and rationalization of games, there is something strange about the claim that games, especially virtual reality games, can contribute to an experience of wonder. In many ways the virtual gaming experience requires that I take up the world through my own body. More than handling controllers, when I move my body in the primary world, I also move in the virtual world. I reach for objects with my material/virtual body and swivel my head to look at 360 degrees of playing field. Yet, in another sense, I make my body invisible in the game so that I can take up the virtual world as meaningful. Virtual reality, especially in successful games, does the work of both putting a veil between myself and reality and revealing a world that is saturated with reality. I separate myself, deliberately from reality, but I also remove the limitations of reality. While I do not want to claim that VR gaming is like depression, the ability of the body to recede or emerge sets up a strange tension between the fading from reality described by Danielsson and Rosberg and the revelation of reality in VR gaming.

In *The Possible Phenomenal Autonomy of Virtual Realities*, Matthias Kofoed-Ottesen attends to some of the concern about whether games can generate a sense of wonder by arguing that virtual reality worlds are autonomous from non-virtual worlds. He does this by appealing to the discussion of place articulated by Martin Heidegger in his article *Building, Dwelling, Thinking*. His claim is that despite the reliance upon the non-virtual world to provide a sense of meaning, virtual worlds meet the conditions that establish *place* as set out by Heidegger. But more important to my argument is the way that Kofoed-Ottesen uses Merleau-Ponty's view of the phenomenal body schema as a frame for thinking about virtual worlds as autonomous places. Specifically, through the habituation of our bodies to the virtual worlds we inhabit, the worlds take on a depth that renders them distinct from the non-virtual world. Both time and space become newly meaningful through a habituation of practice and as acted out via the phenomenal body, which here is rooted in the virtual body.

One of the most compelling parts of Kofoed-Ottesen's argument is the claim that virtual realities are autonomous from non-virtual worlds. A significant component of this claim is that virtual realities immerse us into a new world and make present a set of rules and practices that are distinct from the material world. Kofoed-Ottesen goes on to claim that this is often disturbed by what he calls "immersion breaks," where immersion breaks "are defined as the moment when the individual experiencing the virtual reality environment is made aware of the non-virtual environment

in a way that disturbs the consistent totality of the virtuality.”²⁶ What I find compelling in Kofoed-Ottesen’s argument is that in *The Room*, there are times when immersion breaks add to the atmosphere of the game. That is, in attempting to peer beyond the scope of the playing field, a ghostly sheen of the material (non-virtual) world emerges. This is often shocking like being struck by an “outer” world beyond the veil of appearance and introduces a feeling of terror that is motivated by the sudden and unexpected appearance of the material world. Further, if we accept Kofoed-Ottesen’s conclusion that virtual places are autonomous, then the experience of an immersion break is an experience of an outside world interrupting the habituated world. This enacts a “Weird” intrusion of some outside force and aligns with Mark Fisher’s version of the Weird, which is characterized by “irruption into this world of something from outside.”²⁷ Given the autonomy of the two worlds, immersion breaks position the material world as an outside intruder, thus making the material world Weird.

Ethics and VR Worlds

The level of immersion in VR creates philosophical and ethical questions for players, programmers, and even researchers. In *Real Moral Problems in the Use of Virtual Reality*, Ramirez and LaBarge identify the danger of using VR as a mechanism for psychological research. Ultimately, they argue that “if it would be wrong to subject a person to an experience then it would be wrong to subject a person to a virtually real analogue of that experience.”²⁸ More important for my purposes here, they argue that VR experiences have a higher “perspectival fidelity,” which makes it more likely to generate experiences that can be taken as real and thus carry ethical weight.²⁹ Coupled with Kofoed-Ottesen’s claim that virtual realities are phenomenologically autonomous worlds, we can begin to connect the impacts of virtual reality experiences on the material world. That is, following Ramirez and LaBarge, who claim that “we need to consider possible indirect impacts the simulation might have on other agents whom the subjects of the simulation might interact with later, outside of the simulation itself,”³⁰ it may be possible to ask how the “immersive fidelity” and autonomous reality generated by VR impacts the world outside of gameplay. Explicitly relating this back to the tension between wonder and terror, we can analyze the way that immersion in VR worlds manipulate the emotions of the player, which in turn manipulates the affective response to material conditions.

The “immersive fidelity” of VR experiences translates into a kind of emotional immersion so that the boundary between the character and the player becomes

²⁶ M. Kofoed-Ottesen, “On the Possible Phenomenological Autonomy of Virtual Realities,” *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology* 20 (2020), p. 5, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/20797222.2020.1857945>.

²⁷ M. Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, London 2016, p. 20, emphasis in the original.

²⁸ E.J. Ramirez, S. LaBarge, “Real Moral Problems in the Use of Virtual Reality,” *Ethics and Information Technology* 20 (2018), p. 260, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10676-018-9473-5>.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 249.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 251. Emphasis in the original.

blurred and even dispersed. We can be given background information about the character (e.g. they are a police detective) but because the player performs the character's actions via their virtual/phenomenal body, the player takes on the character in a radically immersive way. In VR experiences, we move *as* the body of the character rather than moving an on-screen avatar as in non-VR games. When placed in atmospherically intense contexts, such as in *The Room*, the emotions felt by the character are identical to the emotions felt by the player. This raises the level of something like horror, which, as Noël Carroll has remarked, already institutes the audience into the emotional experiences of the characters.³¹ But this is a feeling that also draws one in and invites further exploration.

For Andrea Pinotti, the avatar experience acts as a “powerful identity operator which allows for a virtually infinite number of negotiations of selfhood.”³² The avatar puts the player at a distance from themselves in the same way that a mirror might, changing the body from a lived body to a body object. But the body under scrutiny is largely missing. More than a compelling and generative relation to the body, Pinotti claims that the self is revealed in a two-way mediation “which permit interventions from the virtual onto the real world as well.”³³ Here she appeals to neurocognitive research and argues that “avatars seem to be able to impact actual reality, modifying for instance gender and racial biases via the elicitation of a full-body ownership illusion.”³⁴ Along with a kind of empathy and an experience of the self from a distance, there is also a sense of a kind of possession. I possess the other as myself and control the other from my own perspective. I possess the body as a self, but the self is revealed through the body, including the height and perspective of the avatar. If, as Pinotti shows, the possession of an avatar can have an impact on my self as manifest in the material world and via my material body, the next question to be asked is how far does this go? Do I now have a heightened sense of induction because I have possessed a detective? Why does it seem as though I can feel the Null even when I am not playing? Unlike some of the experiments discussed by Pinotti and Aldouby, the stakes involved in gameplay are only related to my own concern, safety, and enjoyment, which may lead to a shorter temporal impact. The effects of possessing the character of *The Room* fade quickly as I return to my (safe) material world. A lingering concern with Pinotti's argument is her description of self-revelation in VR as “auto-empathy.” This seems to indicate that I empathize with myself as seen from a distance, through the act of embodying another. Does this reveal me, in “auto-empathy” as a possessor?

While I cannot expand on the role as possessor here, there is something uncanny about the experience. And as I return to my material environment, I am left with a persistent feeling of disease. In the twin activities of playing the game and possessing another, we have a mixing of the terror and fear of horrific experiences that repel (I flee the implicit danger of the atmosphere and the haunting moon)

³¹ N. Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart*, New York 1990, p. 17.

³² A. Pinotti, “Avatars: Shifting Identities in a Genealogical Perspective,” [in:] *Shifting Interfaces*, p. 33.

³³ *Ibidem*.

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

and the allure of the context and environment. This allure that drives me to investigate seems very much like the wonder described by Pedersen. Further, sitting in between terror that repels and wonder that compels, is the Weird, which Fisher articulates as “a fascination usually mixed with a certain trepidation” that “cannot only repel” but “must also compel our attention.”³⁵ We, as the player, are immersed into a character that is both repelled and compelled at the same time. The atmospheric tension of *The Room* drives me to solve the puzzles while it also forces me to constantly look over my (virtual/phenomenal) shoulder.

Rabbits and Alternate Reality Games

Revisiting the question of whether games can reveal reality to us, I turn to the novel *Rabbits* by Terry Miles. In the novel, “Rabbits” is a game played by people who are obsessed with games, and it is rumored that people lose their lives while playing. But the risk of death is equally buoyed by the promise of rewards, including a cash prize or an invitation to work in the CIA. Knowledge about the game is incredibly decentralized with no clear source of information or direction to the degree that it isn’t even clear what kind of game is being played. Described as an “Alternate Reality Game” or ARG, the contestants interact with real entities and real histories to decode the game’s puzzles and unlock new futures (via prizes, losses, or changes to the material world). “Rabbits” is especially tuned to a weird reality that is available only to those who investigate with a specific set of skills and are attuned to a specific kind of interaction with the world. Because the game evolves in the material world and is not limited to any specific playing field, it unfolds in the background of everyday activity and is largely unnoticed by most people. Two questions arise from the novel’s main premise that a game like this can be run on a global scale with little centralized information. First, thinking about how rules define games, how is it that a game can reveal reality through a deliberate set of restrictions? Second, what does it mean to play a game that one can “play” without knowing that they are playing? Again, *The Room* may offer insight for the seeming contradiction between rules, limitations, and revelations.

While *Rabbits* seems to be another iteration of the VR fantasy novel like Ernest Cline’s 2011 novel *Ready Player One* or a myriad of LitRPG³⁶ entries, the relation to reality and treatment of time is what sets it apart. *Ready Player One* is powered by nostalgia and a longing for past experiences. This is the case even for those in the story who have not experienced that past. Parzival, for instance, grew up loving pop-culture artifacts that are relevant to the maker of OASIS, the massive virtual world in which much of the novel takes place, and thus spends most of his time

³⁵ M. Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, p. 17.

³⁶ LitRPGs are typically novels where characters take on characteristics similar to RPG characters. This often includes a complex games or other realities. Characters often gain new attributes through experience or interactions and “level up” as the narrative progresses. There narrative is set and no dynamic interaction occurs between the reader and the text.

playing games and watching movies made in the 1980s.³⁷ The past is brought forth and made relevant through a meta-game played in the OASIS. Instead of bringing forth the pop-culture past for its players, LitRPGs establish another kind of reality, often rooted in fantasy. That is, they work on the basis of bringing forth a world that could have been but is not, and has not, ever been.³⁸

Rabbits is not about the future that could have been nor is it about the world as it could have been otherwise. Instead, it is about the world we currently have, though modified and made strange by parallel tracks. K, the novel's main character, has memories of events and movies that no one else seems to remember. But more than a possible hallucination about possible events that never occurred, K is also missing information that everyone else seems to have. The world of *Rabbits* is our own world. If Carrol is right that horror, as opposed to fantasy and science fiction, is about strange entities inhabiting the world we know, then we have to put *Rabbits* closer to the horror genre than either of the other two because it is about our world. But *Rabbits* doesn't read like a horror novel. There are no monsters or evils lurking in the dark, no looming unknown things hiding in the clouds, no shadows threatening the safety of our most familiar spaces. But there are times when *Rabbits* is horrifying. More than broadly speculative, *Rabbits* is weird. It offers a break in reality, and the treatment of the world whose claim to reality is weak at best. K is forced to wonder about whether she is in the reality she always knew, or if something has dramatically changed. Put the other way around, the weird world of *Rabbits* wonders K by reorganizing time, the meaning of her activities, and the horizon of possibilities.

Putting on a headset to start the game requires a kind of submersion into a new reality. If I don't sink into the story, then the experience highlights the limitation of reality rather than the expansion of reality. Instead of revealing the world to me, it prohibits my engagement with the world, obstructing my vision, and obfuscating the real. If we take up a phenomenological perspective, Merleau-Ponty's *The Phenomenology of Perception* demonstrates how the world is available to us in a kind of infinite ongoing process. The very act of a phenomenological bracketing means that I put out of play the assumption that the world exists in any other way than through my experience of it. That is, phenomena are what show reality to be reality. When I engage in the virtual reality world, I take up the space that's available to me. It expands beyond the limits of my material surroundings. This is the basis of Kofoed-Ottesen's argument about phenomenologically autonomous virtual realities. The virtual world is limited to a defined playing field, which prohibits the expression that comes via Merleau-Ponty's description of the body subject as "freedom."³⁹ But the body is also limited in the material world and in that material expression,

³⁷ In *Ready Player One*, the recently deceased creator of the OASIS leaves clues and puzzles based on his favorite movies, games, television shows in the virtual world. Whoever solves the puzzles first is granted ownership of the company that runs the OASIS.

³⁸ M. Cisco, *Weird Fiction: A Genre Study*, Cham 2021, p. 27.

³⁹ M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, transl. C. Smith, New York, NY 1962, p. 231.

which leads Merleau-Ponty to admit that the body is never an “unconditioned freedom.”⁴⁰ In the material world and through my material body, I can stand up, take a walk around the room, pick up a book. When I pick up the book, I initially see the front of the book. But I can explore the book by turning it over. As phenomena are presented to me, I attend to a horizon of experience so that the back of the book is first presented as a potentiality not as an assumed reality. *The Room* seems to limit my ability to do this because there are only a few defined objects that I can interact with. I can pick up a book, but not every book. I can turn this piece of paper around or look through this letter that was left on a table to reveal a similar horizon of meaning. But at other times, I try to pick up a pen or turn a chest around and I’m unable to interact with the objects I am exploring. My hands seem to go through the objects, demonstrating their flimsy sense of reality. In fact, the reality of this virtual world generally seems flimsy. This sense of flimsiness can work to take me out of the world by revealing its limitations. It shows me that virtual reality is not a revealing, but a concealing.

Getting Lost

But as I move along, knowing that this world is not a world filled with infinite possibilities, I am also struck by the atmosphere of the world. Narratively, *The Room* participates in the tradition and genre of cosmic horror. It is a game where I explore a world that is revealed to me through puzzles and enchanted objects. The world of meaning in *The Room* is built upon the idea of revealing that which is hidden beneath the mundane. Ultimately, the game pulls at the tension, often found at the heart of phenomenology, between revealing and concealing.⁴¹ Through this revelatory sense, I encounter the world of *The Room* differently as it opens and reveals something strange and distinct from what I expected or anticipated. The very ground of my understanding, going back to Rubenstein’s definition of wonder, is uncovered as false, which thereby leaves me without a firm footing on which to establish a clear relationship with the rest of the world. The world of *The Room*, like the objects of wonder, organizes experiences of wonder around it. The world of *The Room* wonders me. It investigates me and reveals me as a phenomenal object within a broad phenomenal schema.

As I progress through the game, I confront various levels that are deliberately full of surprise. I knowingly enter the world in a modified state of naivete. I don’t know what this world is like. It doesn’t act like the world I know and the surprise that I feel compels me to discover other parts of the world and to know how it works and how I habituate my body with the world in a more intimate way. This again seems to match up with Pedersen’s definition of wonder, where wonder is “a state of mind, which potentially can give rise to a desire for inquiry.”⁴² The world of *The Room* is full of wonder in that it pushes me forward to investigate. But it is also

⁴⁰ Ibidem, p. 198.

⁴¹ See ibidem, pp. xxiv and 7.

⁴² J.B. Pedersen, *Weird Fiction*, p. 6.

more than that. The objects themselves are limited by the rules. The objects themselves are limited by the creators of the game. But the atmosphere seems to exceed the rules of the game. That is to say, in the rules of the game I do not encounter any other person or mechanism of attack. There is no monster waiting behind the door or around the corner. There is nobody sneaking behind my back. I know this, and yet there are moments when I must look around to confirm that this is true. I turn around in circles just to make sure that nobody is there. The knowledge of the game's dynamic is itself a surprise because of the atmosphere it generates. My expectations and my experience continually clash, leaving me unsettled.

But this too is part of the wonder of the world. I am both always safe and never safe. I do not know what the world offers. I do not know what the puzzles will reveal. I do not know what the game will ultimately lead to. But I am spurred on by the generativity of the world. There are times when the atmosphere becomes so real and so present that I have to lift off the VR set to see if there is something in the room with me. In one sense, this breaks the experience of the game. I can always take off the VR set and return back to the world. This is a true immersion break, but it is not always clear which reality is being broken. If we accept the "two-way" directionality of Pinotti's avatars, then something slips in between the two worlds. If I carry the atmosphere with me in my bodily habits, then I release the atmospheric dread of the room into my material environment. More than an immersion break, the intrusion completes the circuit of the game and extends its reach. There is a kind of veil or thin membrane that I cross, back and forth. And the distinction is not between reality and not reality, but a kind of portal through reality in which I engage a new and expansive world. The world of *The Room* bleeds into the world of my material body. I take up the room that's around me through both my material body and my virtual body. My virtual body, therefore, extends into, and in some way drives my understanding of the world itself.

We can situate this tension between solving puzzles as acquisition of knowledge and the excessive nature of the atmosphere in *The Room* in the distinction between wonder and curiosity. For Rubenstein,

curiosity at its most irresponsible skips from one marvelous phenomenon to the next, "resolving" each puzzle as quickly as possible in order to possess it—materially or epistemologically—and move on to something newer and more bizarre. Accelerating toward a state of perpetual distraction and departure, curiosity eventually becomes "the inability to stay at all."⁴³

Following the rules of *The Room*, I am perpetually pushed forward to the next puzzle and to the next level. But the question at the heart of Rubenstein's distinction is about how the difference between curiosity and wonder applies to our ability to stay. It is here that *The Room* provides insight regarding how to map the tension between Rubenstein's and Pederson's versions of wonder. That is, for Rubenstein the goal is to figure out how to stay in wonder. Or, at the very least, to find a wonder that does not dissolve in the solution of knowledge. But "staying" in *The Room* is less about remaining open to the answers of the puzzles and more about staying in the open mystery of the atmosphere. The wonder of *The Room* is less

⁴³ M.-J. Rubenstein, *Strange Wonder*, p. 27. Emphasis in the original.

about curiosity generated by the puzzles, and more about the atmosphere and openness of the world. But following Ramirez, LaBarge, and Pinotti if VR experiences have real impacts on psychology of the player and the kinds of experiments that are ethically allowable, is it possible that the staying power of the atmosphere bleeds into the experience of the material world? Is there a sense in which the atmosphere transfers from the phenomenal body to the material body, generating a sense in which the way *The Room* wonders me ultimately leads to an intrusion of wonder into the material world? This leads to a kind of phenomenology of the body that we can do in *The Room*, where *The Room's* atmosphere envelopes my body schema, fusing the virtual body with the material body. What happens if, like in *Rabbits*, the game cannot be distinguished from the material conditions of everyday living?

VR Experiences as/and Hallucinations

After exploring a museum full of Egyptian relics and an old church suffused with mythology and cosmic energy, you find yourself following a winding staircase and through a cloud of spiderwebs. Reaching the bottom, you are again transported, but this time to a house of an ancient witch, who like you, is trying to solve the mystery left by The Craftsman. The witch's house is full of standard witchy things like a boiling cauldron, vials of liquid and a chandelier that is made of what looks like the carcass of a deer. More than the standard witch accoutrement, it is the way the moon shines through the window and the floorboards creek that generate the sense of atmosphere and dread. You continuously feel someone near, but do not see them. Your body tenses to meet a stranger, but you never do. At one point you unlock a passageway through a large tree trunk that occupies the central room. There you find a table with three outlined spaces that call for some as of yet unknown set of objects. Through a series of puzzles, you find small relics that fit into each one of the spaces. Unsettling and disembodied voices guide you to more tasks, providing tarot cards as entry to pockets of reality through an alcove door. As was the case in previous settings, the walls are covered with ancient runes and symbols that guide you on to the next clue and the next puzzle. It isn't always clear who left the runes. Was it The Craftsman? The Witch? Does it matter? You walk outside your glass slider to the back patio and find runes similar in shape and pattern to the ones from the witch's house. Your children are gone for the weekend, so no one has played with chalk since it last rained. You flicker back and forth, the "immersion break" breaking the divide. The moonlight floods the witch's hovel, as you stand waiting for the key to materialize so that you can move on to the next puzzle. The light is a kind of diffraction pattern that bends reality and blends your material and virtual bodies in a continuous phenomenal body. You can hear the rain and smell the must of your basement at the same time that you see the full moon clearly through the open window. No clouds in sight.

Two things are incredibly disturbing. First is that every time you turn your back on the door you hear it slam loudly. Second are the voices. It is unclear who is calling to you, but it acts like the dialogic world that calls for and motivates

investigation. It demands something of you even if the language/signs are unclear without unlocking them first. Going against Koffoed-Ottesen's claim that virtual worlds are autonomous, it may be helpful to think about the world of VR as a kind of hallucination. Merleau-Ponty draws some conclusions about hallucinations in *The Phenomenology of Perception*. There he claims:

What protects the sane man against delirium or hallucination, is not his critical powers, but the structure of his space: objects remain before him, keeping their distance and... touching him only with respect. What brings about both hallucinations and myths is a shrinkage in the space directly experienced, a rooting of things in our body, the overwhelming proximity of the object, the oneness of man and the world, which is, not indeed abolished, but repressed by everyday perception or by objective thought, and which philosophical consciousness rediscovers.⁴⁴

Sanity and hallucination, it seems, are a product of a spatial relationship. Truth is important, but it is more about the bodily comportment toward objects in a given schematic context. Instability is a central part of the generation of hallucinatory experiences because the spaces in which we navigate meaning are constituted and verified by others. That is, it is the "stable and intersubjective world" that offers a mark of veracity. Thus, what hallucinations lack is the "the fullness, the inner articulation which makes the real thing reside 'in itself,' and act and exist by itself."⁴⁵ As such, "the hallucinatory thing is not, as is the real thing, packed with small perceptions which sustain it in existence."⁴⁶ This claim has consequences for individual objects, like objects that are in VR worlds but are not manipulable in the game by the player. But it also has implications for the entire space generated by the VR environment, especially in relation to the experience of immersion.

Immersed into a VR world like *The Room*, the singularity of perspective (there is no option to play with others or in a multiplayer mode) and lack of intersubjectivity means that all meaning within the game is on shaky footing. There are clearly differences between hallucinations as we typically understand them and VR experiences. I choose when and where to enter into the VR world. I can leave it at any time and return to the material environment and ground myself in the safety of the intersubjective world. There are also rules and repeatable opportunities (I can replay a level or repeat a puzzle). But the shaky ground of knowledge in a world without intersubjectivity lines up with the challenged ground of knowledge articulated in Rubenstein's version of wonder. The distinction between hallucination and VR experiences allows me to accept the claims made by Koffoed-Ottesen and Merleau-Ponty at the same time. The unreality of the objects in *The Room* has to do with their inability to be continually investigated. And yet, if I spend enough time in *The Room*, the objects and the environment offer a "concrete hold on time in a living present" that "glides over time as it does over the surface of the world."⁴⁷ I habituate to the world so that the "two-way" mediation starts to impact the material world.

⁴⁴ M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 339.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 395.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 395–396.

You begin to see that the world is full of puzzles. The challenge on the back of the cereal box will reveal a new step in the day. Your daughter walks into the room and asks if you are ok. She tells you that you have been staring at the box for 10 minutes. You calmly let her know that you are almost done with the puzzle and will move on to the next step. The runes on the back are almost aligned.

The temporality of *The Room* is oddly different from the temporality of the material world. Things seem to move a little slower. The movement of the sun and the phases of the moon are not markers of the passing of time. Taking off the visor requires a kind of adjustment back to the material world. How much time has passed here? There is even a sense in which the two temporalities can begin to jumble. The adjustment of the body schema is a kind of flickering back and forth. Which body am I possessing? If the immersion is realistic enough, which forms the background of the ethical problems of research identified by Ramirez and LaBarge, it becomes possible to question which world is more “real.” But if we return to Merleau-Ponty, we may be able to put this kind of question out of bounds. In *The Phenomenology of Perception*, he claims that “to ask oneself whether the world is real is to fail to understand what one is asking, since the world is not a sum of things which might always be called into question, but the inexhaustible reservoir from which things are drawn.”⁴⁸ The tension between wonder and terror has come full circle. The ground on which to know the world as real is shaken by the pull to continue to investigate. Seized by the world in the dizzying possibilities of flickering realities, the firm grasp of the real begins to fade and we are left with the question: What happens if we cannot return from our wonder?

You open your eyes, stretch your back, and return to the keyboard. You are a philosopher attempting to spell the meaning of the world with twenty-six letters. There are voices beyond your range of vision. It isn't clear if they are trying to tell you something, to help you out, or if they are content with their own puzzles. Time seems to flow uniformly here, but the rules seem somewhat flimsy, which means that there is some threat, and thereby some danger, of unpredictability. The sunlight pushes through the semi-closed curtains, dust floating in the stranded rays. There is great wonder here, and terror. But you are comforted by the fact that you can return to the safety of The Room whenever you want.

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⁴⁸ Ibidem, p. 401.

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Wondering Through Our Outlines

Abstract: Moving through a series of encounters, some with animals other than humans, some with other philosophers, this paper explores how Earth others can and do call humans to transformative and ethical attention. By creating a flow between creative non-fiction, and more discursive explorations of the process of encounter, it both considers and seeks to evoke the ways in which wonder transforms the outlines between humans and other animals. Whereas the ways of knowing that Val Plumwood called “master rationality” reduce the otherness of other animals to the negative outside of the moral human, they are always there to be apprehended as their own, positive presence. When one attends with what Simone Weil calls “passive activity,” the truth of others as themselves or in their world can appear, and a type of ethical responsibility follows.

Keywords: Wonder, attention, animal ethics, Simone Weil, responsibility

1. Outlines

In her novel *Outline*, Rachel Cusk narrates ten conversations that her protagonist, an unnamed writer, has during a trip from her home in the UK to Greece, where she has travelled to teach writing workshops.¹ At no point does the narrative gaze fall directly on the writing teacher herself except insofar as she is affected by or affects those with whom she is interacting. These others are, however, portrayed in the closest of detail. To the extent that she emerges as a character with substance at all, it is as the silhouette brought into relief by the contours of those who move into and out of her life.

¹ R. Cusk, *Outline*, London 2014.

This absence is not made explicit, but Cusk does articulate the conceit through the words of another character, a woman whose life had been derailed by what she refers to as “an incident” that occurred some time before the two met, when this (second) woman was mugged and assaulted. During a conversation with the narrator, whom she meets immediately upon her arrival in Greece, also to teach into the writing workshops, the woman is reflecting on an encounter she had shortly before with the man who had been sitting beside her on the plane.

[T]he longer she listened to his answers, the more she felt that something fundamental was being delineated, something not about him but about her. He was describing, she realized, a distinction that seemed to grow clearer and clearer the more he talked, a distinction he stood on one side of while she, it became increasingly apparent, stood on the other. He was describing, in other words, what she herself was not: in everything he said about himself she found in her own nature a corresponding negative. This anti-description, for want of a better way of putting it, had made something clear to her by a reverse kind of exposition: while he talked, she began to see herself as a shape, an outline, with all the detail filled in around it while the shape itself remained blank. Yet this shape, even while its content remained unknown, gave her for the first time since the incident a sense of who she now was.²

The metaphor of the outline as it is fleshed out here is essentially ambiguous. An outline, it seems, comprises a continuous line with no breaks, containing what is inside and excluding what is outside. It would seem to be both hard and impermeable. Yet when beings converse with each other in words, through movements, or by touch, what seemed static and impermeable turns out to be otherwise. Outline becomes interface, even flow of becoming. Deborah Bird Rose captures the permeable outline at its apotheosis in the form of the kiss between the tongue of the flying fox and the nectar. Just there, she writes, “life happens ... the entanglement of response and reaction without dissolving those who kiss into a pool of sameness: kissing is of the edges, of contiguity, not continuity ... The kiss ... finds it difficult to specify who is the giver and who is the receiver.”³

2. Yes!

Sitting on the deck, the wind touches my cheek to beckon the slight turn of my head, and now I am caught by countless orange leaves quavering diagonal; from the forest above, towards the pond below. And towards us. The effect is arresting, I’d even say transcendent, but lest I fall for the temptation of locating it in that there-less there, a leaf lands on Simon’s golden coat (as he lies near my feet), and instead, a smile takes me.

Being caught in the flight of orange against blue and green opens me up to the impossible intensity of the Ginkgo tree’s yellow against the red of the maple that grows beside it. Now the swoosh of air that the wild ducks make as they land on the pond. Now the undulation of the chestnut trees, huge, fully possessed as the wind transforms them.

² Ibidem, pp. 239–240.

³ D.B. Rose, *Shimmer; Flying Fox Exuberance in Worlds of Peril*, Edinburgh 2021, p. 223.

E.E. Cummings⁴ commiserated with the trials of “sweet spontaneous earth,”
“pinched

and
poked” by the
“fingers of
prurient philosophers.”

His words perhaps sought to console earth’s beauty “prodded” by the

“naughty thumb
of science.”

I am guessing that his heart had already been beckoned by what (who?) those fingers and thumbs could never reach, and so, he was (still and again) able to hear earth

answerest
them only with
spring).

Having spent the last years of her life thinking, writing about and mourning the extinction of many of the Earth others with whom humans have shared the planet,⁵ in her final months, Deborah Bird Rose was working on a book that would be both lamentation and celebration. Certainly, it was from the time she had spent with Aboriginal people, and on the basis of what she had learned from them as they brought her into their worlds that Bird Rose assumed her kinship relationship with Earth others, and in particular with flying foxes. Yet in *Shimmer*, she documents her encounters with the many non-Indigenous people who had come to live and dedicate their lives to flying foxes, and for whom these creatures were also kin. I too have met some of these people, who recounted to me what it was like to try to save these creatures during days upon days of soaring temperatures they cannot survive, and then to collect thousands upon thousands of their small dead bodies as they lay on the ground where they had fallen.

At their best, Rose wrote, our (human) lives are “embedded in generosity, responsibility, beauty and goodness that we ourselves did not make.”⁶ As with Simone Weil, for Bird Rose this engagement with “the ongoing-ness of life” is an ethical matter and carries responsibilities. It is hard to read her words about the moral responsibilities that accompany “becoming ancestral”⁷ without acknowledging that

⁴ E.E. Cummings, “La Guerre (part V),” [in:] *Cummings Complete Poems 1904–1962*, G. F. Firmage (ed.), New York–London 2015, p. 63.

⁵ D.B. Rose, T. Van Dooren, M. Chrulaw, *Extinction Studies: Stories of Time, Death and Generations*, New York 2017.

⁶ D.B. Rose, *Shimmer: Flying Fox Exuberance in Worlds of Peril*, Edinburgh 2021, p. 16.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 134.

she was writing a text that she knew would be her last. From her hospital bed, she tells us she can see “the busyness of city life,” but as she experiences herself in dying’s transition zone, it is her responsibility as one who has borne and still bears witness to write: “We don’t know what may yet happen, we still must act.” Onerous words, as she herself acknowledges, followed immediately by the exclamation, “*Yes!* Here is the great powerhouse of life on Earth.”⁸

3. Sky Calls

The carpet of birdsong has a tendency to recede into the background—at least into my background when I am preoccupied. But when the black cockatoos are shouting at each other as they enter the valley, there is no ignoring them. No mistaking their insistence that they have something to say about what is happening, although probably not to me. Even when the cockatoos are way beyond my sight, their conversation (which so often sounds to me like a robust argument), their pronouncements or their announcements demand attention. When they do come into my field of vision, they are as impressive as you’d expect them to be from what you have been hearing. More like fighter pilots than gliders, they head for some trees. When I look up, I can barely discern them, huge and incontestable in the upper branches, bird and branch dark in relief against the searing light of the Australian sun. Just as I have managed to make out their shape and the yellow on their tail feathers and to feel that extraordinary satisfaction in catching them in my sight, they are off again. And I after them, only earthbound!

I walk down here following their path north because now they have me intrigued and seduced. Three and then another four and then six or seven, ten, fourteen, more—a big mob. Perhaps there are grubs in the trunks or fruit on the branches they’ve decided will make a tasty meal. Perhaps they are just out for the lark of it. They certainly look like they’re having a blast.

Now I need to crane my neck to see them because they have landed on the very upper branches of the two she-oaks standing beside the house where the chickens sleep overnight. I look up, and they definitely seem to be looking down at me, although, unlike me who has to squint intently and still can’t see much, they have no trouble making me out. And it’s surely not the impressiveness of my cries or the brilliance of my movement across the ground that has brought them here. They know that this is where I throw seeds every morning and every evening for the wild ducks, and they have come to check out if there is anything in it for them. And although they likely don’t give a toss about me, that doesn’t stop them offering me the most extraordinary gift of gaining a perspective on myself as nothing more (and nothing less) than a seed tosser.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 16.

4. Un-Mastering Identity

In theorizing the production of identity, and of experience, ecofeminists (amongst others) identified what Val Plumwood called “master rationality,” whereby the world and the beings who occupy it are constituted according to a series of binaries that function through a dynamic of negation and domination.⁹ Plumwood sets out some of the effects this schema has on those that (for this rationality precludes their being who’s) fall on the inverse side of the (ontologically and morally) positive beings. Specifically, they are backgrounded, radically excluded, defined entirely through their relationship with the positive term, reduced to their instrumental value (to the positive term), and homogenized.¹⁰

By exposing the hierarchical nature of the binary logic at work in master rationality, critical theories of justice have, for the most part, focused their effort on shedding light on the damage the application of “master rationality” causes for those on what we might call “the inverse side.” Take, for example, the vast chasm that lies between the ideal of the human individual as the bearer of rights in contemporary liberal democracies, and farmed animals. “Livestock,” as we call the billions of pigs, cows, chickens, sheep and goats who today constitute 60% of the total mammalian biomass on the planet,¹¹ are positioned in contemporary societies as a massive resource for human consumption and capital and are subjected, in every aspect of their lives, to the impacts of human decisions, laws and policies, but remain completely excluded as subjects of justice, or rights holders from all legal and political institutions.¹² That farmed animals are so positioned is thus not merely a matter of avowed injustice for the sake of convenience or profit, but an effect of the master rationality. Insofar as humans are held as being uniquely endowed with a moral status defined in terms of its transcendence of animal status, and hence the moral right to both certain protections and to a guaranteed right to demand a say over their collective lives, other animals are condemned to show up as, and occupy the negative space left by, the outline of this human figure.

⁹ See V. Plumwood, “Nature, Self, and Gender: Feminism, Environmental Philosophy, and the Critique of Rationalism,” *Hypatia* 6 [1] (1991), pp. 3–27.

¹⁰ V. Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*, London 2002, pp. 106–109. One sees the operation of this master rationality and its impacts with particular poignancy in the continuity between the dichotomisation of the “animal” and the “moral” in Immanuel Kant’s articulation of the emergence of the life of the “moral human” “independent of animality and even of the whole sensible world” (I. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, ed. and transl. L. White Beck, 3rd ed., New York 1993, pp. 169–170). For a further discussion see D. Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*, Chicago 2021 and D. Celermajer, C.J. Winter, “Fables for the Anthropocene: Illuminating Other Stories for Being Human in an Age of Planetary Turmoil,” *Environmental Philosophy* 19 [2] (2022), pp. 163–190.

¹¹ Y.N. Bar-On, R. Phillips, R. Milo, “The Biomass Distribution on Earth,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115 [25] (2018), pp. 6506–6511.

¹² A range of projects seeking to challenge this systematic exclusion are being mounted, including the Non-Human Rights Project, which has mounted a series of cases seeking recognition of the personhood of individual animals before US courts, and more recently, and in line with the shift in nomenclature, the More-than-human Rights Project, see <https://mothrights.org/>.

The fact that it is other animals and not humans who spend their entire lives in legalized confinement, have their offspring forcibly removed, and are killed at the point where maximum profit can be reaped makes clear who is on the downside. So long as the conditions distributed on either side are thus defined, no one would want to fall on the animal side. Nevertheless, insofar as the system of classification produces all and any identity through this dichotomous dynamic, the ideal characteristics of humans (or those humans who are permitted to count as fully human) are also constrained. True, the possibility of assuming the characteristics of the dominant side is logically foreclosed for those on the inverse; but also for those on the “best side,” straying onto the “wrong side” counts as transgression. As David Gilmour and Roger Waters (of Pink Floyd) wrote and (even better) sang, a lead part in a cage.¹³

What particularly intrigues me is the phenomenology of this split identity. Is there longing for what lies on the other side, coded both as another type of being, and as “cannot be me”? Do some humans sense their own connection to what is defined as their lack, and hence their own alienation? And if they do, how do differently located and constituted people respond to this sense? Some double down to thicken the (out)line, heighten the wall, fortify the distinctions, and even kill the reminder. Others, it seems, find ways of straying. These impulses and differences seem particularly acute in this age of many names, including E.O. Wilson’s term, Eremocene, the Age of Loneliness, derived from the Greek *eremo*, meaning not only lonely, but *bereft*.¹⁴

5. Attention

Iris Murdoch famously described a moment when gazing out the window “in an anxious and resentful frame of mind, oblivious of my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige” she observed a kestrel hovering. She describes the shift thus: “In a moment everything is altered ... There is nothing now but kestrel.”¹⁵ The attention she described has a distinctive character involving not merely a shift to another as the object of perception, but a type of revelation. Where-

¹³ The reference is to the Pink Floyd song, “Wish You Were Here.”

¹⁴ I’m reminded of a poem by R.K. Fauth, “Playing with Bees,” which includes the lines,

So the world turned
its one good eye
to watch the bees
take most of metaphor
with them.
Swarms—
in all their airborne
pointillism—
shifted on the breeze
for the last time.

R.K. Fauth, “Playing with Bees,” [in:] *A Dream in Which I Am Playing with Bees*, Texas 2024.

¹⁵ I. Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, London 1970, p. 82.

as before, one perceives the world around one through lenses of sense-making that reduce the otherness of another to what is available within the lexicon of rehearsed knowledge, when one attends in a way Murdoch is evoking, the truth of another as themselves or in their world can appear.

The remarkable way in which the sight of the kestrel captured her attention is not for Murdoch merely an aesthetic phenomenon. It is also an ethical one. The displacement of the inward gaze—which she called “unselfing”—coincides with the world as it is coming into view. For a moral realist like Murdoch, this appearance, this lifting of the mystifications cast by the self’s preconceptions, occasions an understanding of the right way to be and to act. The possibility of goodness is not, as in utilitarian and deontological ethics, achieved through the abstract discernment of the correct rule and its subsequent application to the matter at hand. Rather apprehending what is morally right and then acting on it requires a radical outward turning, a suspension of the conceptual apparatus that egotism has produced through a process of acquiring knowledge of laws or norms that it can reproduce or adapt. Morality requires attention. It requires presence.

Murdoch’s assertion that attention can give rise to an appreciation of the right response rests on her view that what impedes one accurately apprehending another in the first place is the shadow of ourselves, with all of our categories and preconceived expectations, as well as our ultimate concern for ourselves. The reason the kestrel can break through what would otherwise seem impermeable is that in its sheer magnificence, it displaces the machinations of the ego, even the ego’s manoeuvres to displace itself. This does not mean there is no activity on the part of the self, for the very possibility of apprehending “nothing but kestrel” requires an open-minded attention. The revelation occurs at a meeting place, where otherness touches upon openness, drawing the human who is attending beyond the boundaries of knowing and being it had been occupying.

For Murdoch’s contemporary, Simone Weil, attention was also an explicitly ethical practice. Weil, like Murdoch, recognized the role attention played in overcoming the difficulties posed by the task of “unselfing,” given the impossibility of deploying will to lift our own shadow. As she puts it,

In such a work all that I call “I” has to be passive. Attention alone—that attention which is so full that the “I” disappears—is required of me. I have to deprive all that I call “I” of the light of my attention and turn it to that which cannot be conceived.¹⁶

Weil contrasts the practice of “waiting, attention, silence, immobility,” a type of “passive activity,”¹⁷ a “negative effort,”¹⁸ with striving “after goodness of our will”—the latter being “one of the lies invented by the mediocre part of ourselves in its fear of being destroyed.”¹⁹ Attention “consists of suspending our thought.” The thought

¹⁶ S. Weil, “Attention and Will,” [in:] S. Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, transl. E. Crawford, M. van der Ruhr, London 2002, p. 118.

¹⁷ S. Weil, “Forms of the Implicit Love of God,” [in:] S. Weil, *Waiting for God*, London–New York 2021, p. 137.

¹⁸ S. Weil, “Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies,” [in:] S. Weil, *Waiting for God*, p. 66.

¹⁹ S. Weil, “Forms of the Implicit Love,” p. 137.

involved in attention should above all “be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive the naked truth of the object which is to penetrate it.”²⁰ So potent is this type of attention that in the rare instances when it can be brought (for it is a “rare and difficult thing”), “those who are unhappy in this world” have “no need for anything else.”²¹

Though Freud might seem an odd addition to this exploration of the practice and significance of this quality of attention, in his little-known text, “Recommendations to Physicians Practicing Psycho-Analysis,” the depiction and explanation of the importance of “evenly-suspended attention” provides a useful compliment to Weil’s injunction against thought that has “seized upon some idea too hastily” and is thereby “not open to the truth.”²² Evenly-suspended attention might be best approached via its better-known counterpart, free association; though in this case, the attention is a practice of the listener (the analyst) and not of the speaker (the analysand).

The logic motivating Freud’s advice that analysts should free associate was that by giving over their desire to narrate their lives or to describe their troubles, the selectivity and correlative exclusions that would follow from such deliberate or directed forms of speech would be bypassed; here would be space for the unconscious to speak. Correlatively, through the practice of evenly-suspended attention, the listener might avoid the corresponding dangers. As Freud put it, “as soon as anyone deliberately concentrates his attention to a certain degree, he begins to select from the material before him; one point will be fixed in his mind with particular clearness and some other will be correspondingly disregarded, and in making this selection he will be following his expectations or inclinations.”²³

When it comes to other animals, and the more-than-human world more generally, I have been struck by the possibilities that this type of softened, disarmed attention affords in smoothing a passage between selection and categorization, and the experience of wonder. Upon meeting the pigs with whom I live, visitors frequently comment on their dirtiness, and when we stroll to the donkeys, conversation turns to their stubbornness. I see the filters of expectation in the inclination of visitors’ bodies; their approach to these animal others mediated through what they already seem to know. Were the encounters to end there, I would be left lamenting the extent to which their engrained orientations to the world and to Earth others deprive them of who is there. But quite often, after some time wandering the land, after we have sat and watched the light move across donkeys playing as evening falls, after their hands or perhaps the side of their faces have been touched by the grass-scented muzzle of a horse, my visitors’ words, their bodies, their curiosity tell me that the lines have started to dissolve.

²⁰ S. Weil, “Reflections on the Rights Use,” p. 67.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 68.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 67.

²³ S. Freud, “Recommendations to Physicians Practicing Psycho-Analysis,” [in:] *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, J. Strachey (transl. and ed.), Volume 12, 1912, pp. 111–120.

6. Their Gazes

It is evening, and he and I have been giving everyone their dinner, cleaning the pastures, filling large chaff bags with straw for tomorrow. Wookie, who is old and blind but still so fierce that he remains the alpha horse, has his warm rug on for the night, and the chickens are nodding off behind the door that I have just closed and locked. The light is fading.

Because it is winter and she is bored, Penny has sauntered over to find a little entertainment before she goes to bed. First, she goes into Wookie's stable because she knows there will be food she can vacuum from the floor where it has fallen through his old teeth. Then she tosses over the buckets of water and digs the field just around it. I walk up to her huge low bronze-coloured body, she snorts *hello*, and I say, *let's go home*. Slightly disgruntled, she nevertheless walks with me, pausing at the chicken house to see if she might snack on any remnants of grain the chickens have left on the ground outside, over to the barn to check if the garage door is open, and then stops on the grass that slopes down towards where she lives. She drops onto her side and tells me she'd like a belly rub. She closes her eyes and seems to enter some type of blissful state interrupted only when I declare that I have had enough, lift myself off the ground and ask her if we can please go home now. When we get to her run, I open the gate, say *goodnight*, and watch as she wanders over to the house where Badger, the old pig who spends most of his time resting, is already fast asleep.

When I wander back, he is standing looking north across the pasture where the horses and the donkeys are grazing. He is completely still. There is a planet in the sky above them. I come to stand by his side. Just over the four-rope gate, three donkeys are facing and watching us. I have so many stories about them, a compendium of nicknames that reveal their quirks and distinctive personalities, and at first, when one of them makes a low bray, all I can see is their not-so-subtle request for us to open the gate so they can play havoc in the garden, eat the new trees and cavort up and down the driveway. But the evening is gentle, and they are arresting. I say aloud, *What if we put aside everything we think we already know about them?*

And who shows up are three beings whose breath is soft and whose time is long and who are here with us under the planet. I am drawn into their gazes out onto worlds through which they move day and night, feet on the soft earth, muzzle into the grass, sounds now of each other, now unfamiliar caught in those large antennae ears, catching the scent of me as I come in and out of their worlds. Only now she is as unrecognizable as they are.

Now it is now.²⁴

²⁴ This allusion to the temporality of the encounter should not be confused with claims that other animals live in the eternal present, claims that have been deployed to deny them moral personhood on the basis that they do not have a conception of the past or future and hence of their own lives. My point is rather about the capacity of other animals to bring humans into the absolute present. On the erroneous nature of temporal claims about other animals, see F. De Waal, *Mama's Last Hug: Animal Emotions and What They Tell Us about Ourselves*, 2019 and C. Kabadayi, M. Osvath, "Ravens Par-

7. Lonely, Not Lonely

Amongst the many names that humans have given to these times, struggling as we are to gain some nominative hold to still the terror of disorientation²⁵ is the Eremocene, the age of loneliness. The kicker is that in its haunting quality and its affective pitch, the name undoes whatever stabilization the act of naming might have sought to achieve. When I sit with the reality of loneliness, the spectres of the banished others (the longed-for others) are more, not less, present. Reading a word can also be an encounter.

Loneliness isn't an accidental feature of contemporary life on Earth in accelerating ecological collapse. Although the manifestations of an increasingly desiccated world are likely to provoke the experience of loneliness, the existential loneliness of the Eremocene is neither a by-product of extinction or deforestation nor an effect of no longer hearing the birds of our childhoods or being cooled by the shade of trees on hot summer days. It is a way of being concomitant with the disenchantment that Weber claimed was the character of modernity. In his exploration of the possibility of wonder in the context of a disenchanted world, Jeffrey Kosky describes what he understands as the reconstitution of what counts as a legitimate way of being a human that produces disenchantment and, by extension, loneliness. As he puts it,

A good modern... does not come under the spell of mysteries, nor is he held in thrall by the charm of unspeakable wonders. He lets his actions and decisions be organized as methodic and systematic means in pursuit of known ends, and he can, precisely because he calculates means to pursue ends "controlled by the intellect," offer a reasonable account of all he does.²⁶

Let us pause for a moment and reflect on what is being claimed here. This modality of knowledge, as Weber described it, comprises "rationalization and intellectualization," employs "technical means and calculations," and hence expels "mysterious incalculable forces" from its ambit.²⁷ Such processes of calculability and reasoning logically entail certain restrictions on what can show up as knowable. The known can only be that which can also be clearly and unambiguously counted. It must have a beginning and an end. It must have clear outlines: lines that make clear what is inside and outside and that provide unambiguous demarcations. Further, the ends that "he" pursues, and which then prescribe the means "he" adopts are those that are also "controlled by the intellect" (understood in the restrictive terms just set out). Accordingly, those ends cannot be ones that take into account the good or the flourishing of beings who—by definition—cannot enter into his knowledge. Here are conjoined a truncated epistemology, a rigid ethical hierarchy, and a disenchanted lonely world. To return to my initial pause then, the claim here would seem to

allel Great Apes in Flexible Planning for Tool-use and Bartering," *Science* 357 [6347] (2017), pp. 202–204, doi: 10.1126/science.aam8138.

²⁵ See Brian Onishi's paper *The Wonder and the Terror of Getting Lost in "The Room"* in this volume.

²⁶ J.L. Kosky, *Arts of Wonder: Enchanting Secularity—Walter De Maria, Diller+ Scofidio, James Turrell, Andy Goldsworthy*, Chicago 2019, p. xii.

²⁷ The text of Weber's is *Science as Vocation*, quoted in J. Kosky, *ibidem*.

be that the modern subject of the west assumes their contours within these quite disciplined and bounded epistemic, ethical and ontological fields.

It is important to read Weber's description of this form of knowledge within the broader context of his attempt to trace certain historical trends and shifts in the accepted forms of legitimation that were generally accepted in a given social and political context. In articulating this form of knowledge, he was making a distinction so as to illuminate the emergence of ways of knowing that he saw as novel, and that, given their implications, he thought merited distinguishing. Of late though, the claim that this form of knowing is coincident with the knowledge available to "moderns" in "the west" seems to have taken hold with particular vehemence.

As I read through the writings of many of my contemporary scholars, I increasingly notice the figure of the "modern west," or even the (eternal) west, depicted as a monolith in which the form of knowledge and experience Weber here depicts reigns unchallenged. Given the vigorous critiques of essentialism that dominated scholarly debates in the latter decades of the twentieth century, and the many movements, perspectives, peoples, as well as on the philosophical, political and cultural cleavages within "the west," one would think that such monolithic caricatures would be easily and readily rebutted, both analytically and empirically. That they so frequently pass unchallenged ought to make us curious about what is going on.

Perhaps what motivates such glossing of the many forms of knowledge, philosophies and ways of being that might otherwise be said to belong to "the west" is the range of affects circulating as we confront intensifying crises of injustice and ecological collapse. I well understand the anger, or the guilt, or both, at the impacts of forms of life that emanated from the empires of Europe and their colonial outposts, that reaped and continue to reap such havoc on the peoples and ecologies they dominated, and that now wrack all planetary life. But comprehending the affective terrain undergirding the conflation of the particular form of knowledge and associated ways of being Weber distinguished and Kosky pinpointed with either "the west" or "the modern" is not the same as accepting the veracity of this conflation. And this is not simply a matter of truth; it also concerns the effect this conflation has on the objects of analysis themselves: ways of knowing and "the west." Because the effect is to constitute the very monolith it claims to observe.

What presents itself as righteous criticism serves, albeit ironically, to fortify the very hegemony it seeks to disable. Rather than illuminating the counter-hegemonic tendencies attention might light upon, it forecloses and renders imperceptible a great deal of what many humans in the midst of modernity, in the midst of the west, in the midst of philosophy, have long affirmed as dimensions of knowing that lie at the heart of what makes their lives worth living. Where are poetry and artistic practice, Romanticism, birdwatching and stargazing?

When our arguments occlude these forms of knowing, forms that have lived and continue to live amongst those who constitute "the modern" and "the west," do we not ourselves assent to the omnipotence of a constrained way of knowing? Do we not affirm its capacity to murder all other modalities of knowing, and the impotence of these other modalities, their incapacity to survive, even to flourish and resist? Do we note bow to the sovereignty of master rationality?

Even more deleteriously, to assent to the idea that all “modern (western) subjects” have been fully interpolated into this way of knowing the world is to affirm the feebleness of Earth others, and their incapacity to appear in any way other than as the reduced means-to ends, bits of resource to which this schema would relegate them. It is to deny, no—more than that—to refuse—to us (the humans of “the west”) the capacity to be permeable to the authentic heterogeneity of others, and to Earth others the potency to break through in their heterogeneity. It is to add a seal to the outline, to arm the border guards with ever more deadly weapons. Such analytic certainty is not innocent. Perhaps a more fertile path would be one that hesitates, allowing that for all that has been truncated, and the violence that has been wrought, “we” moderns, we of the (heterogenous) west, are also and already available to the appearance of the wonderful.

8. Side by Side with Katy

To be ever ready to admit that another person is something quite different from what we read when he is there (or when we think about him). Or rather, to read in him that he is certainly something different, perhaps something completely different, from what we read in him. Every being cries out silently to be read differently.²⁸

Two memories of Katy, who was a pig, and me, a human, pulse through my arms, hands, and fingers as I write. They have been resting heavy in my gut, and now they are moving onto the page. In one, my back rests on her belly, her belly touches my back; my head on her shoulder, her shoulder beneath my head. The afternoon light is intensely bright, and her eyes are closed, but mine are trained on the book I hold up against the sun. She is still, but the passage of her breath, deep and even, moves through my body and soon we are breathing together. Her underside is against the earth, which also presses up beneath my butt and legs stretched out beside her.

I’m doing something so ostensibly cognitive and uniquely human: reading. But the papers and books I bring with me when I read with *her* are always about other animals, and almost always, given how things are these days, about the violence, suffering, and injustice that these human forms of life are raining down upon them. Industrial factory farming. Habitat destruction. Extinction. When I read the words describing the fast and slow deaths and reflect on the worlds they are seeking to convey, our bodies touching like this, the words start to have the palpable and affective quality they merit. I’ve come to sense that there is something terribly wrong with reading these texts in an office with barely a window constructing a carefully outlined view onto the world. The text and me on one side, the “in” side; the animals on the other. If that is reading about animals, kick me outside.

Here with her, the papers almost always end up grimy and often slightly rumpled. They are usually out of order when I get back home because I removed the paper clips when I took them out of my bag. And because she scoots around quite a bit, I sometimes drop them, and the wind might even blow them a little way down the

²⁸ S. Weil, “Readings,” [in:] S. Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, pp. 134–135.

run or into a bush nearby where I will pick them out and try to reassemble them. Their disorder and muckiness seem completely apt though, and I really don't mind because it is such a damned privilege that she will lie with me like this, allowing me to read with her and to wonder about the meaning of what I am reading in this unmediated presence of her life.

The other memory has moved up as a bitter taste in my mouth as it starts to crystalize into something like a narrative, and my teeth are on edge, like chalk on a board.²⁹ This time there is no breath and there is no warmth from or in her body, because she is dead, and I am gazing at the curve of her blackened back. All of those pages and pages about violence against other animals and ecological devastation and the climate catastrophe are her charred body. The heat of the fireground is palpable through my shoes, and the air buzzes almost unbearably loud with flies.

The intimacy of the afternoons of the first memory has been jettisoned into: finality that will never be again. And yet, as I gaze at her, I am down there inescapably contemplating how it was for her to be killed like this. What happened to her world in those minutes before she was burned to death? And because of those many days, and all of the others where we walked together, or when I smelled her vanilla scent, or when I fed her watermelon and listened to her munch her way through the huge dripping pieces, I tarry between life and death. It's a strange gift she keeps on giving me, or perhaps it's more accurate to say it's a gift we created together. I'm still held there with her, never fully able to get away to the fantasy place where, because I am a privileged human being, I'm safe from things like fires.

Only that's not true because she is dead and I am here writing about her.

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²⁹ I elaborate on Katy's life and her death in D. Celermajer, *Summertime: Reflections on a Vanishing Future*, 2021.

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“You Shouldn’t Try to Be What You Can’t Be”*: How Wonder Frees Embodied Agency

Abstract: The paper presents the agency of human beings as embodied, i.e. it shows what it means to think about agency as founded on being a body (rather than merely exercised through a body). It is also argued that the free—i.e. reflective and spontaneous—exercise of agency should likewise be understood as embodied. The paper argues that both the appreciation and experience of the free exercise of embodied agency require wonder. The latter is defined as the attitude that facilitates the relationship of familiarization without appropriation. The paper shows how wonder contributes to the experience of freedom related to expressing one’s own unchosen (bodily) difference while relating to the differences of others.

Keywords: wonder, reflective judgment, embodiment, agency, freedom, transcendence, immanence

Setting the Argument

In her daring book, *Pleasure Erased. The Clitoris Unthought*, Catherine Malabou tells the story of the systematic neglect of the one organ of the female body whose sole purpose is to produce pleasure.¹ In convincingly calling for more attention to the body in feminist reflection, Malabou’s focus on the “a-functional” clitoris ensures a non-reductive approach to the body. Is pleasure for pleasure’s sake not gratuitous? Malabou’s argument opens up the possibility of celebrating the

* S. Barrett, *Waving My Arms in the Air*, Parlophone Records Ltd. 1993.

¹ C. Malabou, *Pleasure Erased: The Clitoris Unthought*, transl. C. Shread, Cambridge 2022.

female body in and for itself without contextualizing it in the potentially oppressive account of what the body can and should be able to do.

The question is, however, whether we can avoid the latter point—i.e. the question of what a particular body can and should be able to do—once we have accepted the conclusion that effectively follows from Malabou's argument. By celebrating the clitoris, Malabou challenges the domination of one model of the human body and emphasizes the diverse forms of human embodiment.² Yet, if we appreciate the plurality of human bodies, it seems necessary to ask: what does it mean to be a particular human some-body? What does it take to thrive as this some-body? Here, the question of what a body can and should be able to do—the question of the body's agency—inevitably suggests itself. Yet, it does so against the backdrop of some skepticism. The very focus on the plurality of bodies implicit in Malabou's study warns against potentially homogenizing and functionalist accounts of any body.

In this paper, I intend to meet these two seemingly conflicting objectives, i.e. to offer a way to talk about the agency of human bodies without reducing their plurality. I propose to do so by considering the agency of human beings—including the experience of freedom in the exercise of agency—as embodied. I want to question the gap between facticity (the way we are) and freedom (our ability to go beyond what and who we are). I will treat the body as fundamental to the way that each person is: when I want to consider the given of my condition, I have to start from my body. But I assume that embodiment does not necessarily exhaust all the factors that pertain to the way that I am and that, in this respect, function like my body. While in this paper I focus on the body, my account of agency, if successful, should also cover this second sense of facticity.³ At the same time, I will use the latter to illuminate the former in the part of the paper in which I move from judgment to the judgment of taste.

Questioning the gap between facticity and freedom is an outcome with potentially important political implications. My main objective is thus to show what it would mean to think about the agency of human beings and the related experience of freedom as embodied and to suggest the political implications of this understanding of agency. My main hypothesis is, in turn, that freely experiencing the embodied agency of human beings, as well as creating politics compatible with it, requires wonder, preliminarily defined as the attitude that facilitates (the relationship of) familiarization without appropriation. I understand familiarization without appropriation as the relationship in which the parties connect across, rather than despite, their differences. They reach out to and attempt to learn about (familiarize themselves with) each other but without trying to reduce (appropriate) each other's differences to the "comfort zone" of what is already known and fully transparent to them. For example, to approach my parents with wonder would mean for me, first,

² Cf. Emily Ann Parker's complex study of Western philosophy's hostility towards what she calls "the elemental difference" of bodies (E.A. Parker, *Elemental Difference and the Climate of the Body*, New York 2021).

³ In this broader sense, facticity could be linked to Heidegger's use of the word *eigen* (one's own) and related terms, as discussed in Magdalena Holy-Luczaj's contribution to this issue (see "Others in My Aging. [Confronting de Beauvoir, Malabou and Heidegger to Make Sense of Aging]").

to acknowledge that they represent a different generation than mine and also that, despite my inevitably getting older, they will never stop seeing me as their child, and, second, to try to understand what they do (in general and in our relations) by allowing for the specificity of their position.⁴

In other words, wonder engenders a relationship *par excellence* in which the parties relate to each other as different. Accordingly, the initial connection I am making between wonder and the intention to acknowledge the pluralism of human embodied agency is the former's sensitivity to diversity. The idea here is that wonder helps us relate to our bodily diversity in such a way that it frees up our agency in ways that I hope to specify.

The Thyroid—Rethinking Human Agency

Malabou's book is important to me for two more reasons. Like Malabou, I want to give a special place to the female embodiment; however, rather than concentrating on the female experience alone, I treat the case as exemplary for thinking about the broader question of human embodied agency. My argument will thus move in a spiral way: zooming in on female embodiment and zooming out on human agency in general. Moreover, I follow the author of *Pleasure Erased* in suggesting a focus on a bodily organ. But, in contrast to Malabou's choice of the a-functional clitoris typically linked to female bodies, I propose to introduce as a point of departure and arrival a highly functional, sex/gender⁵-neutral organ—the thyroid. Shortly, I will explain why this neutral organ arises in questions of feminine embodiment especially.

The thyroid is an endocrine gland which plays a crucial role in the overall metabolism of an organism. A properly functioning thyroid—or, more generally, the successful performance of thyroid functions⁶—ensures the efficient transformation of consumed substances, including oxygen and the proper development of the organism. It could be said that the thyroid keeps things together for a body and gets it going. In this sense, the thyroid is crucial to the body's agency if agency is understood very generally as its ability to achieve and maintain its proper development. I will treat this bodily dimension of agency as essential to what human agency is in general. We are agents as bodies, meaning that we perform agency due to how we are organized as bodies, which crucially involves the proper performance of thyroid functions. On the whole, I want to treat the thyroid as a figure representing the embodied character of agency. While the paper is not, strictly speaking, about the thyroid, it uses it as a guiding image.

⁴ Cf. Iris Marion Young's discussion of a mother-daughter relationship in her paper "Asymmetrical Reciprocity: On Moral Respect, Wonder, and Enlarged Thought," [in:] *Judgment, Imagination and Politics: Themes from Kant and Arendt*, R. Beiner, J. Nedelsky (eds.), Lanham–Oxford 2001, pp. 213–214.

⁵ Rather than settling for either "sex" or "gender," I use the expression "sex/gender" to emphasise that femininity, masculinity and other sex/genders are the entanglements of political/cultural and biological factors.

⁶ Patients with thyroid tumours often have the organ fully or partially removed. As a result, they need to substitute the actual functioning of the thyroid with proper medications.

Despite the sex/gender-neutrality of the thyroid, thinking about this organ justifies treating female embodiment as exemplary for thinking about human agency as embodied. This is for two reasons. First, there is a well-documented discrepancy in the incidence of thyroid diseases and dysfunctions to the disadvantage of female bodies.⁷ While the reasons for this imbalance are still being researched, the estrogen and progesterone levels in female bodies have been cited among probable factors.⁸ Possibly, the way in which female bodies are organized can interfere with the functioning of the thyroid and therefore with the agency of female bodies. A more general relevance of this point is that when we think about human agency as embodied, we need to acknowledge that it is (partly, though crucially) based on the factors over which we do not have agency. Human agency critically depends on the network of elements which interact, but also potentially conflict, with each other.

Second, some research suggests that there may be an association between certain forms of contraceptive pills for female-bodied persons and specific thyroid dysfunctions.⁹ If this is so, then some causes of thyroid dysfunction are what we could call biopolitical ones—factors related to the political administration of female bodies. When thinking about human agency as embodied, we need to allow for the disruptive—but also potentially constructive—impact of the bio- and necropolitical regulations of human agency.¹⁰ At the same time, since female-bodied persons who use contraception decide to intervene in the existing forms of the functioning of their bodies, they exercise their embodied agency freely. By the free exercise of embodied agency I mean the ability to reflect on and possibly change the existing patterns in which reality is organized, including both the materiality of one's bodies and the structure of our world. While I understand unqualified embodied agency as the body's general ability to strive for their development, the free exercise of embodied agency includes moments of decision and potential novelty. My point is that the free exercise of embodied agency should itself be conceptualized as embodied. It is not something that we merely do to our bodies but also something that we do as bodies and due to the ways in which we are structured as bodies.¹¹

⁷ Cf. R. Castello, M. Caputo, "Thyroid Diseases and Gender," *Ital J Gender-Specific Med* 5 [3] (2019), pp. 136–141, doi: 10.1723/3245.32148.

⁸ Ibidem; J.E. Mulder, "Thyroid Disease in Women," *Women's Health Issues* 82 [1] (1998), pp. 103–125.

⁹ F. Torre et al., "Effects of Oral Contraceptives on Thyroid Function and Vice Versa," *Journal of Endocrinological Investigation* 43 (2020), pp. 1181–1188, doi: 10.1007/s40618-020-01230-8; Y. Qiu et al., "Birth Control Pills and Risk of Hypothyroidism: A Cross-Sectional Study of the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, 2007–2012," *BMJ Open* 11 [6] (2021), doi: 10.1136/bmjopen-2020-046607.

¹⁰ Cf. N. Lykke, "Making Live and Letting Die: Cancerous Bodies Between Anthropocene Necropolitics and Chtulucene Kinship," *Environmental Humanities* 11 [1] (2019), pp. 108–135, doi: 10.1215/22011919-7349444.

¹¹ The general outline of my approach corresponds to the philosophy of elemental difference recently offered by Emily Ann Parker. In her complex project, Parker proposes to go beyond the performative accounts of the differences between human beings. She argues that, while (as the philosophers of performativity emphasize) socio-political conventions, imaginaries, prejudices and institutions do crucially impact how human differences, including bodily differences, are figured, "no human invented the fact that human bodies are not all alike" (an insight which she attributes to Luce Irigaray; E.A. Parker, *Elemental Difference and the Climate of the Body*, p. 26). What she calls "non-universal

Between Immanence and Transcendence

To begin to explain what is at stake in thinking about the free exercise of embodied agency, I want to take a clue from Iris Marion Young's classic paper "Throwing Like a Girl." Writing from the perspective of Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist phenomenology, read along with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's body-centered phenomenology, Young argued that a female-bodied person experiences a characteristic tension. On the one hand, the female experiences herself as a transcendence—an agent capable of using her body for the purpose of going beyond the existing circumstances and initiating new projects. On the other hand, and at the same time, she perceives herself as an immanence—a being trapped in a body and reduced to the status of an object.¹² I will argue that the conflict described by Young is characteristic of the embodied agency of human beings in general, although different groups of human agents experience it differently and some more intensively than others. The tension between immanence and transcendence can be construed as fundamental to the experience and exercise of freedom for embodied human agents.¹³

The figure of the thyroid shows how. While the thyroid is itself a bodily organ, it ensures that the body can act rather than merely being acted on. But to better explain the connection between immanence and transcendence, we might link the conflict to an ambivalence that occurs in the work of Hannah Arendt, in her philosophically rich expression, "that which is as it is." The expression appears in two apparently unrelated contexts. First, Arendt used it when she talked about wonder as *thaumadzein*—the *pathos* reportedly experienced by Socrates and elevated by Plato to the status of "a feeling of a philosopher" and the beginning of philosophy.¹⁴ "*Thaumadzein*," Arendt says:

bodily events" (ibidem, p. 9) exists because bodies are elementally—and fundamentally—different and as such can receive differential treatment. Although quite common, the experience of having a female body is not universal (not all human beings have female bodies). Being a female-bodied person with a malfunctioning thyroid is a still less common experience. Even if some thyroid disfunctions can be caused by human interventions (such as contraception) which in turn are based on human evaluative judgments, it is a certain kind of bodies—e.g. female ones—that are being made vulnerable to harm: and "no human invented the fact" that female bodies differ from non-female bodies. Like Parker, I want to acknowledge this irreducible diversity of bodies that is acted upon but cannot be fully explained by socio-political factors.

¹² I.M. Young, "Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility and Spatiality," *Human Studies* 3 (1980), pp. 137–156. Young's use of the terms "immanence" and "transcendence" draws on the existentialist tradition. Cf. S. de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, transl. C. Borde, S. Malovany-Chevallier, New York 2010; J.-P. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, transl. H.E. Barnes, New York 1956.

¹³ Young acknowledges that, once we locate agency in the body, we must accept that agency is always marked by the tension between transcendence and immanence, inasmuch as bodies are always passive as well as active. But what distinguishes female embodied agency is, according to her, the simultaneity of immanence and transcendence. Women are inhibited even when they engage in activity (I.M. Young, "Throwing Like a Girl," p. 145). It is a version of this stronger claim that I want to universalize and develop here, showing how it can actually generate the sense of freedom.

¹⁴ Plato, *Theaetetus*, transl. B. Jowett, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1726/1726-h/1726-h.htm> (accessed: 4.06.2023).

the wonder at that which is as it is, is according to Plato a *pathos*, something which is endured and as such quite distinct from *doxadzein*, from forming an opinion about something. The wonder that man endures or which befalls him cannot be related in words because it is too general for words [emphasis mine—UL].¹⁵

"That which is as it is" stands for something that cannot be assimilated into and expressed through words, proving that there is and always will be something beyond that which we are able to articulate. As such, the experience of *thaumadzein* could be linked to what Young calls transcendence. *Thaumadzein* has a liberating effect to the extent that it makes a person realize that they do not have to stay locked up in any specific mode of thinking and that there is always something more than what is accessible—what appears (*doke*)—to them at the moment. But this discovery is also upsetting in that it unsettles the apparent certitudes, making the wondering person speechless and, as a result, leaving them helpless.

Second, the expression "that which is as it is" appears when Arendt talks about the features of her identity that she believed were "given, not made." Responding to Gershom Scholem's criticism of her treatment of Adolf Eichmann's trial, she says:

I found it puzzling that you should write "I regard you wholly as a daughter of our people, and in no other way." The truth is I have never pretended to be anything else or to be in any way other than I am, and I have never even felt tempted in that direction. It would have been like saying that I was a man and not a woman—that is to say, kind of insane. [...] I have always regarded my Jewishness as one of the indisputable factual data of my life, and I have never had the wish to change or disclaim facts of this kind. There is such a thing as a basic gratitude for everything that is as it is [emphasis mine—UL]; for what has been given and what was not, could not, be made [emphasis in the original]; for things that are *physei*, not *nomoi*.¹⁶

While the passage was inspired by the discussion about Arendt's Jewish identity, which remains its central focus, the comparison to sex/gender that Arendt makes is remarkable and suggests that she considered both the examples of what has been "given, not made." In this context, the expression "that which is as it is" refers to the factors that Arendt perceived as defining her as an immanence. *Physei* (as Arendt calls them) constitute specific background conditions, unchosen factors that set the general coordinates for who we are. And yet Arendt speaks of "gratitude for"—reconciliation with—these "given, not made" circumstances. As a result, that which is the most immediate and non-negotiable and that which stretches beyond the directly accessible come together *via* one peculiar phrase, "that which is as it is."

This is a very interesting consequence, suggesting the coincidence of the most familiar and the most distant. I want to argue that this synthesis happens through wonder. What Arendt calls *thaumadzein* involves experiencing the impossibility of appropriating that which (or who) evokes it. This is key to my own conception of wonder. Yet, I would add that the work of wonder does not end at that point. Wonder continues and helps the wondering person reach out to (familiarize themselves with) the "object" of their wonder without attempting to assimilate it fully. This broader concept of wonder captures the ambivalence of "that which is as it is"

¹⁵ H. Arendt, "Philosophy and Politics," *Social Research* 57 [1] (1990), p. 97.

¹⁶ H. Arendt, "Letter to Gershom Scholem," [in:] H. Arendt, *The Jew as Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age*, New York 1978, p. 246.

signaled by Arendt. Wonder facilitates familiarization without appropriation, the dual movement to that which cannot be assimilated (transcendence) and back to the most immediate, to oneself (immanence).

Yet, if the concept of wonder, which Arendt seemed to reserve for the experience of transcendence, could be extended to cover both extremes of the “that which is as it is,” it is worth testing if the same transformation would work for embodiment as one of Arendt’s examples of immanence.¹⁷ Indeed, I want to argue that it is because we are bodies that we experience the coincidence of immanence and transcendence (represented by the thyroid as a body organ that enables the body to act rather than just being acted upon) and that wonder plays a crucial role in transforming this coincidence into the sense of freedom.

Judging Differences

A good starting point for thinking about the connection between wonder and the freedom experienced in being a body can be found in Luce Irigaray’s work. Irigaray dedicated one of the chapters of her influential study, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, to wonder. Engaging with Descartes’ classic presentation of wonder as “the first passion,” she argues that wonder is evoked by that which is new, surprising and “not yet assimilated or dissimilated as known.”¹⁸ Because it is not limited by prior knowledge, wonder constitutes “the space of freedom between the subject and the world”¹⁹—it allows its “objects” to freely appear without being constrained by the subject. Irigaray’s approach supports my working definition of wonder. She presents wonder as the attitude of openness (familiarization), which creates a genuine relationship, i.e. it does not lead to the appropriation of the other person but, instead, respects their transcendence (“The other never suits us simply”).²⁰ In Irigaray’s arguments, wonder provides the context for the appreciation of sexual difference,²¹ which should be neither assimilated as fully known nor rejected as object but embraced in its specificity.

Irigaray’s reading of wonder in connection with the sexual difference focuses on the moment of transcendence, e.g., of opening up to the bodily difference of the other, such as the sexual difference. What interests me, however, is also how this effort of reaching out reflects back on the wondering person. Here, a story may help.

¹⁷ It is true that Arendt gave two different examples of what she described as *physei*—not only an aspect of her embodiment (her femininity) but also her Jewishness. Thus, she offers a broad understanding of immanence (or what I have earlier called facticity), without implying that either of them is more basic than the other. In what follows, I use some additional themes from Arendt’s philosophy to develop and justify my own account of the fundamental role of embodiment. However, I do not claim that this is the view that Arendt herself would fully accept. Neither do I comment on Arendt’s other example of *physis*—i.e. her Jewishness—as I am in no position to address this topic.

¹⁸ L. Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, transl. C. Burke, G.C. Gill, Ithaca 1993 (1984), p. 75 (emphasis in the original). Cf. R. Descartes, “The Passions of the Soul,” *Early Modern Texts*, <https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/descartes1649part2.pdf> (accessed: 4.06.2023).

¹⁹ L. Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, p. 76.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 74.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 79.

For a moment, let us turn to the theory and practice of The Milan Women's Bookstore Collective [MWBC], a group of Italian feminists active in the late 1970s and 1980s. Like Irigaray, the MWBC were interested in sexual difference, as evidenced by their major publication, *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice*. There, the Milanese start from the experience of being a specific body—a female one—and want to develop this very fact “into the principle of our [women's] freedom.”²² Their research thus complies with my argument to the extent that they were concerned with what it means to be free for a specific body. They emphasized not only the differences between women and non-women but also among women themselves.²³ Most interestingly, they discovered that it was through addressing their mutual differences that they began to experience freedom. And they came to this conclusion when they engaged in making judgments about literature (as befitted a group centered around a bookstore), which quickly revealed a great diversity of opinions among them.²⁴

The experience of the Milanese received an interesting development from Linda M.G. Zerilli in her book *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*.²⁵ Zerilli turns to the Milanese as part of her search for an account of freedom that could help overcome what she sees as the crisis of feminist theory and practice. She argues that the understanding of freedom emerging from the practice of making aesthetic judgments discovered by the Milanese provides a good template for thinking about freedom both in feminist theory and political philosophy in general.²⁶ What the author finds particularly interesting is, first, that the judgment-making of the Milanese was a relational practice. She suggests that the MWBC members had been aware of the differences between them all along; what changed when they engaged in judging was that they began to express these heterogeneities to each other, formulating judgments about each other and making themselves vulnerable to each other's assessment. In the process, they began to actively negotiate the meanings of their differences rather than ignoring them or treating their senses as settled.²⁷ Second, Zerilli argues that the heterogeneities expressed by the Milanese through aesthetic judgements were irreducible to the general characteristics of their social positions, such as class, education, sexuality etc.²⁸ While it is evident that the social milieu can significantly impact one's aesthetic preferences (e.g. determining the type of music, literature, films etc. that the person likes), it also appears that, to the extent that the term “aesthetic preference” is to have any sense, it cannot lose its individual, even idiosyncratic, character (manifested, for example, in the choice of preferred composers and authors, as well as their works) altogether.

²² The Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice*, transl. P. Cicogna, T. De Lauretis, Bloomington–Indianapolis 1990 (1987), p. 122.

²³ “We must not enclose it [sexual difference] in this or that meaning, but must accept it along with our being-body and render it significant: an inexhaustible source of ever-new meanings” (ibidem, p. 125).

²⁴ Ibidem, pp. 109–111.

²⁵ L.M.G. Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*, Chicago–London 2005.

²⁶ Cf. Zerilli's later publication, *A Democratic Theory of Judgment*, Chicago–London 2016.

²⁷ L.M.G. Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*, pp. 106–107.

²⁸ Ibidem, p. 109.

The idiosyncrasy of aesthetic judgments points to their additional feature that Zerilli does not address. While the preferences determine how we choose, they—in their idiosyncrasy—are not up for us to choose. Arguably, there is even something compelling about them: one would say that they cannot help but like this particular song, book or film. This peculiarity of aesthetic judgments was recognized in the approach that inspired Zerilli's own account, namely Hannah Arendt's interpretation of judgment. On her part, Arendt drew on Immanuel Kant's theory of the reflective judgment of taste to argue that it offers a good blueprint for theorizing political judgment. As she did so, she revised Kant's principle of "enlarged mentality" (or "broadened thinking"), on the basis of which reflective judgments were supposed to operate, and re-read it as a matter of "being and thinking in my own identity where actually I am not."²⁹ In this way, Arendt emphasized the impossibility of leaving one's own idiosyncratic point of view behind³⁰ while also calling for the effort of reaching out to others.

Zerilli's observations on the MWBC's practice of judgment, supplemented with their Arendtian background, shed light on an important matter. If, as Zerilli argues—and so does Arendt in her way³¹—the practice of making judgments based on enlarged mentality is the practice of freedom, then freedom is what the person experiences when they express their own unchosen difference ("my own identity") in the process of relating to others ("where actually I am not"). This expression of difference is, in turn, provoked by an object—say, an artwork (to stick to the original context)—which elicits the person's response. The sense of freedom derived from judgment-making is thus paradoxically based on the simultaneous realization that things can be otherwise (that others can perceive the object in question differently) and that there is a specific way in which I am who I am (that manifests itself in how I perceive the object). The paradox is strictly connected to Arendt's definition of enlarged mentality, which, in turn, effectively replicates the ambivalence of the "that which is as it is." When I engage in an enlarged mentality, I both embrace that which is the most intimate and unquestionable for me (i.e. the immanence that I am) and go beyond it and towards the transcendence of the irreducible strangeness

²⁹ H. Arendt, "Truth and Politics," [in:] H. Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, London 2006, p. 237. Cf. H. Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, Chicago 1992; I. Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, transl. W.S. Pluhar, Indianapolis–Cambridge 1987.

³⁰ Cf. also Arendt's remark in the essay "The Crisis of Culture": "By his [sic!] manner of judging, the person discloses to an extent also himself, what kind of person he is" ("The Crisis of Culture: Its Social and Its Political Significance," [in:] H. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, p. 220).

³¹ Death prevented Arendt from completing her studies of judgment. But, based on her existing work, it could be argued that judgment was supposed to link the *vita contemplativa* part of the human condition, to which it technically belongs, with its active aspect (*vita activa*). While Arendt consistently argued that freedom can be genuinely experienced only through action, i.e. through initiating new events while relating to others, she also seemed to link the principle of novelty to the internal ("contemplative") faculty of the will (H. Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 2: *Willing*, San Diego–New York–London 1971 [1977, 1978]), p. 109). Judgment, as the faculty through which we decide how things appear to us (how we want them, so to speak) and thereby show who we are to others, offers a way to externalise (and therefore: materialise) the ability to choose (H. Arendt, *Willing*, p. 217; H. Arendt, *The Crisis in Culture*, pp. 196–222).

and plurality of others. In the practice of judgment, the two dimensions of the "that which is as it is" meet to generate the sense of freedom. That which transcends me brings me back to myself: I realize that there are other ways of being than my own and, simultaneously, I embrace (and articulate) the right to be the way I am.³²

The point here is that wonder, understood as the attitude that facilitates familiarization without appropriation, now appears to be an important part of the experience of freedom based on the practice of judging.³³ When interpreted in connection with judgment, familiarization without appropriation emerges as a reflective process through which I not only embrace the other person's freedom but also reconcile myself with who I am. The experience of freedom thus becomes related to owning up to being oneself without claiming to own oneself.³⁴

Remember the thyroid. In my argument, the thyroid represents the ability to transform the given circumstances into the source of activity without escaping the very fact of being conditioned. After all, the thyroid is itself a body organ. Let me, then, go back to the body to show how wonder and judgment specifically address and express bodily differences.

Wondering (at) Bodies

It is worth emphasizing that in Kant's original formulation from *The Critique of Judgment*, which Arendt embraced, reflective judgment was described as the judgment of "taste." While this use of the term was conventional, Arendt commented on the specificity of the sense of taste, emphasizing its private character.³⁵ This

³² Cf. also Magdalena Holy-Luczaj's paper in this issue on the worldly (relational) character of self-disclosure in Heidegger.

³³ To better integrate wonder into the account of reflective judgment, it could be added that enlarged mentality structurally requires wonder. The openness to differences as differences is what motivates the effort of going beyond one's own pre-reflective attitude and what drives the process of listening to others without trying to appropriate their points of view to one's own. Iris Marion Young argued that wonder constitutes an integral part of Arendt's model of judgment (I.M. Young, "Asymmetrical Reciprocity: On Moral Respect, Wonder, and Enlarged Thought," pp. 220–225). Working with his own Kierkegaard-inspired concept of wonder as the positive anxiety of considering things, Jeremy Bendik-Keymer has shown, in turn, that wonder "works in a similar way to the aesthetic judgment of the beautiful in Kant's *Critique of Judgment*" (J. Bendik-Keymer, "The Other Species Capability & The Power of Wonder," *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 22 [3] (2021), p. 161, doi: 10.1080/19452829.2020.1869191).

³⁴ Cf. Arendt's concept of freedom as non-sovereignty (H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, second edition, Chicago–London 1998 [1958], pp. 234–235). In other words, seen in connection to reflective judgment, wonder is neither objectifying (I.M. Young, "Asymmetrical Reciprocity: On Moral Respect, Wonder, and Enlarged Thought," p. 222) nor self-effacing (Bonnie Mann expressed such worry in her paper, "Feminist Phenomenology and the Politics of Wonder," *Avant* IX [2] (2018), pp. 43–61, doi: 10.26913/avant.2018.02.03). Through wonder, we refer to differences actively. On the one hand, we treat the differences of others seriously, as points of view to be taken into account rather merely being celebrated for their otherness. On the other hand, we do not renounce our own difference but rather come to embrace it. Wonder allows me to appreciate the diversity of others without disclaiming myself.

³⁵ H. Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, pp. 64–66. Cf. also H. Arendt, *Denktagebuch, 1950–1970*, U. Ludz, I. Nordmann (eds.), München–Berlin 2020, p. 636.

comment is perceptive. As a sensual faculty, taste involves the literal incorporation of something external to us while also being inherently discriminating about it. We taste the food and decide whether we find it good good-tasting. These features of the sense of taste have inspired Arendt's recent commentators to interpret the judgment of taste as the activity through which individual bodies position themselves vis-à-vis other bodies and assess their relationships with them. For them, the judgment of taste emerges as "a constitutive moment of corporeal subjectivity" that "helps create the borders of an embodied self."³⁶

In this reading, the judgment of taste is construed as an embodied faculty. Whatever judgments are specifically about, they are also, fundamentally, the modes of experiencing and expressing one's embodied agency. Here, the connection between preferences and agency begins to emerge, and considering the thyroid can be helpful again. The thyroid displays the body's ability to be an active agent as the body that they are, that is the capacity to use that which is given to go beyond these very immediate circumstances. Just as my preferences are unchosen and at the same time allow me to choose, so is my body given for me and enables me to change that which is given.³⁷

Merging these two aspects via the concept of the judgment of taste, we can begin to think about the free exercise of embodied agency as crucially involving the act of choosing against the background of that which is unchosen. Recognizing the conditions of the free exercise of my embodied agency starts from acknowledging the specificity of my position. Suppose that I am a female-bodied person of reproductive age, suffering from a thyroid condition. Through the judgment of taste, I decide how I want to locate myself in the network of bodies, given the body that I am and whatever I need to function as this specific body. I start from the factuality ("that which is as it is") of my own body and make a claim addressed to ("that which is as it is" of) other bodies. In a very general sense, all such claims are made on behalf of my thyroid, i.e. for the sake of my ability to exercise agency as the particular body that I am. I can demand what I need to function as this body (e.g. access to thyroid medications), decide how I want to be or change it (e.g. by using contraception), call out existing injustices in the treatment that my body receives (e.g. the gender inequalities in the vulnerability to harm related to contraception), make alliances with other bodies (e.g. with bodies with thyroid dysfunctions), etc. All of these judgments represent my ability to draw on my body as the source of agency manifest in relating to other bodies—and to do so freely, by choosing how I want to be the body that I am.

At the same time, the relational character of the judgment of taste means that those to which I open myself up to are not just objects to which I respond but also other agents. While my judgment expresses my attitude to, say, the healthcare

³⁶ C. Sjöholm, *Doing Aesthetics With Arendt: How to See Things*, New York 2015, pp. 79–80. Cf. also K. Curtis, *Our Sense of the Real: Aesthetic Experience and Arendtian Politics*, Ithaca–London 1999.

³⁷ These interventions can be far-reaching, including e.g. the change of one's sex/gender. Still, while it is many things, sex/gender transition is also a bodily experience—and a non-universal one, to use Emily Ann Parker's expression (cf. footnote 12).

system (e.g. making a claim to safe medications), it is also a way of relating to others as thyroid-endowed beings, i.e. agents with their own claims (e.g. to their share in healthcare). But how does this relation become a relation, rather than a confrontation?³⁸ Here, it is worth supplementing the account of wonder presented so far with what is known as the biocentric reading of wonder. This approach has been inspired by Martha Nussbaum's observations on wonder and developed by Jeremy Bendik-Keymer. Thinking within the framework of her capabilities approach, Nussbaum follows "the biologist Aristotle" in arguing "that there is something wonderful and wonder-inspiring in all the complex forms of life in nature."³⁹ What elicits wonder at both human and non-human beings is, in turn, the realization that all "complex forms of life" strive for their own good, i.e. that they display agency in the general sense of the term.⁴⁰ By showing that the wonder-inspiring agency cuts across the human and non-human divide, Nussbaum emphasizes that she understands agency as embodied. Bendik-Keymer develops these intuitions in the context of his own conception of wonder as "the manifestation of positive anxiety in the realm of thinking where we consider sense and meaning amid the free play of possibilities around any given thing."⁴¹ This understanding of wonder allows him to describe it as biocentric, meaning not so much that wonder responds only to living beings as that they are its "special focus."⁴² If wonder opens up inquiries about what makes sense to us, it cannot but be moved specifically by how different beings strive for their flourishing.⁴³ Wonder is inherently sensitive to the new possibilities of sense, including the overall frameworks in which diverse life forms can be said to have a meaningful existence.

Moreover, Bendik-Keymer has argued that wondering at different forms of life helps us appreciate the diversity of human lives.⁴⁴ Wonder tends to unsettle apparent certitudes: once we realize that there is nothing obvious about being human (because other forms of life are also worthy of consideration), we begin to appreciate that there is nothing obvious in being human either. Biocentric wonder is thus reflexive in the sense that I have offered in the paper, arguing that, as an attitude complementary to judgment, wonder reflects on the wondering person and results

³⁸ In her creative involvement with Arendt's philosophy in the series of lectures *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of an Assembly*, Judith Butler goes so far as to suggest that other bodies "dispossess" my own perspective. My very own body takes my body beyond myself to the extent that it is sensually perceived—and in this sense: displaced—by other bodies. For Butler, then, the very fact of being a body results in the simultaneous experience of immanence and transcendence (J. Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Cambridge–London 2015, pp. 76–77. Cf. also *ibidem*, p. 97).

³⁹ M.C. Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice Disability, Nationality, Species Membership*, Cambridge–London 2007 (2006), p. 347.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 93–94; M.C. Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*, New York 2000, pp. 72–73; M.C. Nussbaum, *Justice for Animals: Our Collective Responsibility*, New York–London–Toronto–Sydney–New Delhi, pp. 28–30.

⁴¹ J. Bendik-Keymer (with images by M. Morrison), *Nussbaum's Politics of Wonder: How the Mind's Original Joy is Revolutionary*, London–New York–Dublin 2023, p. 15. Cf. footnote 34.

⁴² J. Bendik-Keymer, "Beneficial Relations Between Species & The Moral Responsibility of Wondering," *Environmental Politics* 31 [2] (2022) [online], doi: 10.1080/09644016.2020.1868818.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, pp. 5–6.

⁴⁴ J. Bendik-Keymer, "The Reasonableness of Wonder," *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 18 [3] (2017), pp. 337–355, doi: 10.1080/19452829.2017.1342385.

in their sense of being free. If the judgment is interpreted as an embodied faculty, then it begins by determining one's own position as the particular body that one is (e.g. a female-bodied, thyroid-dysfunctional person in reproductive age). But this cannot be done without considering the diversity of other bodies. Read along the biocentric lines, wonder as the attitude which facilitates familiarization without appropriation helps transform the experience of the transcendence of other bodies into the sense of being free as a body relating to other bodies. It thus performs the task symbolically represented by the thyroid as the body organ that develops the given circumstances into the source of agency.

Conclusion: Exercising Embodied Agency Freely

Throughout the paper, I have attempted to combine two sets of what could be described as the “unchosen conditions of freedom”⁴⁵: my own body and the materiality of other bodies (including human bodies) with whom I share the world. The free exercise of my embodied agency consists in my making decisions about how I want to be the specific body that I am while relating to other bodies. Knowing that there are other, non-female (and differently female) and non-thyroid-dysfunctional bodies enables me to appreciate better what it means for me to strive as a female, thyroid-dysfunctional body. But at the same time, as I realize that there are many ways of being a human body, I discover many ways of addressing these bodily differences as well. Freely exercising embodied agency consists in making decisions about how I want to live my own unchosen bodily difference. These decisions pertain to my own body (and can concern, e.g., the medications that I use) and to the world that I share and create with others (and can concern, e.g., the organization of the public healthcare system).

I have treated the thyroid as the bodily organ that represents the transformation of the given, the fact of being conditioned (by one's own body and the factors that affect it), into the ability to act (including acting freely). I have developed this idea by offering an account of wonder, interpreted in connection with reflective judgment. As the attitude that generates familiarization without appropriation, wonder moves between the transcendence of others—appreciating the irreducible diversity of their embodied striving—and the immanence of one's body. The oscillation between these two vectors generates the sense of freedom linked to recognizing the right to act as the one specific body, among many others, that one is. This experience of freedom is thus not only reconciled with but also follows from the sense of non-sovereignty. The realization that I cannot appropriate—i.e. fully control others—helps me appreciate my own body, which I do not control entirely either, as not just a source of vulnerability but also the foundation of my freedom. As Judith Butler writes in her interpretation of Arendt's political philosophy, “in being free, we affirm something about what is unchosen for us.”⁴⁶

⁴⁵ J. Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, p. 112.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*.

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Co-wondering Death

Abstract: In this paper, two anthropologists explore what it means to “co-wonder” as an ethnographic and philosophical method, exemplifying what this might mean through an open-ended dialogue about a subject they hold in common—the study of death. As the “last wonder,” death brings home how the puzzle of our embodiment is both the source and the means for human speculation at its farthest limits.

Shannon: Thinking about death may be the one activity that makes everyone a philosopher. In order to introduce our method of “co-wondering,” it seems appropriate to start with the death *of* a philosopher, Socrates. I also have in mind the recent death of a close friend of mine, a philosopher named Rob, whose disposition towards the ultimate question has been troubling me. I’ll turn to his story later on. In that way, our own dialogue can be framed by the deaths of two philosophers who can help us think about both method and substance.

To begin, Zak, do you think what we are doing here is Socratic? I also find myself wondering whether Socrates feared his own death.

Zak: For Hannah Arendt, the event of Socrates’ death in the history of philosophy introduced a gap between the domains of politics and philosophy.¹ Between the forms of speech of persuasion, directed at the masses and hence conventional for

¹ H. Arendt, “Philosophy and Politics,” *Social Research* 57 [1] (1990) [1954], pp. 73–103.

political practice, and of the dialogic, directed at “the two,” in the sense that one can work something out with another as a traditionally philosophical mode. It was Socrates’ commitment to the dialogic form as a mode of speech in his own trial, rather than resort to the tools of political persuasion, that was ultimately what led him to his public, political death. So, from the vantage of the state, philosophical dialogue seems first to appear in opposition to the functioning and life of the polis, while the death of the philosopher seems both to confirm and secure politics to the domain of opinion. Yet, for Socrates, both the dialogue form and the form of his own death are bound to philosophy’s “ultimate questions”: those questions stretching beyond the limits of empirical science and from which the empirical sciences emerge, that rise from the feeling of wonder to which the philosopher is thrown—in body and in mind. That feeling, as has been said, that is both the beginning and end of the philosopher’s life. As a condition of possibility for philosophy’s beginning, wonder’s affect rests in the philosopher’s ability to endure this state in body and in thought. As an end(ing), wonder’s thrust in the philosopher’s life suggests both a realization, an aim, or a goal as well as a terminus—as in a disappearance or a death. Perhaps this is where our own dialogue stays with a practice that might be called Socratic: in enduring wonder as both beginning and end. What would it mean to dialogue-death in a state of wonder? To engage wonder as an end in itself and to confront the possibility of wonder’s end?

Being receptive to the world, its possibilities, as the text *Stirred by Your Presence* (Bendik-Keymer, this volume) suggests, allowing for a space of lostness to open in the presence of another is what makes the work of wonder flicker in and between us. It means that an activity that can be called wonder might emerge between beings as a kind of intimacy that is both about knowledge and about that which is just beyond what comes to be knowable. A remainder that might be seen as the gap in my knowledge of anyone whose presence I share, but a gap in-presence that always allows for the possibility of there being more.² It is from this sense of shared presence that I wanted to ask about this practice of co-wondering. Wondering together. What we’re engaged in right now. How did it come up in your work? Do you think of it as an embodied practice?

² Some strands of psychoanalysis connect with this idea of the aporia or the irreducible gap between oneself and others that is propulsive of one’s desire (to know more about the other). Yet, in Phillips and Bersani’s own dialogue concerning intimacy, the desire to know, to gather knowledge of self and other, is something that might work better when suspended. They suggest that the distance between oneself and another, this space of unknowing that opens up the very capacity for wonder, might be the better site for a kind of intimacy that rests in acknowledging and honoring the unreachable parts of ourselves, rather than one of aiming to bridge this gap between selves through an unending attempt to unearth knowledge of others. Though their dialogue doesn’t deploy the concept of wonder, perhaps this could be thought of as an ethics for a non-paranoid relating of bodies in speech that might be said to allow for a co-created space of wonder (L. Bersani, A. Phillips, *Intimacies*, Chicago 2008; see also E. Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid You Probably Think This Essay Is About You,” [in:] E. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, Durham 2002, Ch. 4, on paranoid positions of reading and relating).

Shannon: Actually, your question makes me realize that while I was working on our film (*I Like Dirt*),³ about changing death practices in California, there were a lot more presences in the co-wondering than just me and the person I was interviewing, although we might have thought of ourselves as the main actors. In addition to interviewing professionals and innovators in death care, we (note the “we”—the wonder team is rapidly expanding) did some person-on-the-street interviews at county fairs, at surf spots, after a marathon—in other words, interrupting people doing very life-affirming things. The two questions I always asked were: “What do you want done with your body after you die?” and “What do you think happens to us after we die?” I didn’t plan it out this way, but you could say that the entire ethnographic project became a form of co-wondering. Sometimes people had ready answers to both of these questions, but more often it was the first time anyone had asked them that, and they had to pause. But this co-wondering was never just a dyad – there were others in this pop-up lab of the ethnographic space. Our future selves, our body (both the living one and the anticipated corpse), and our dead selves. And ghosts often entered the conversation—loved ones whose deaths may have made us wonder in an earlier moment about the death-process of becoming. It was more plurilogue than dialogue. Thinking about death and what happens to humanness afterwards is the ultimate stimulus to wonder. It defines the limits of knowledge at the broadest frontier of metaphysics.

To be honest, one of the things I did not expect to happen through the project was my own philosophical development. I didn’t have answers myself to these questions when we started and I didn’t think I needed them. I was the observer and the questioner. I thought I could get away with a safe and passive role in the co-wondering. But my interlocutors, and especially my ever-curious friend and collaborator Daniel Zox, didn’t let me off the hook. They kept asking how I myself would answer. Eventually, I felt an ethical responsibility to participate in the vulnerability of theorizing something that no one can claim expertise about, at least no one we can talk to outside of a seance or a dream. I needed to reciprocate in the wondering, to not hold myself back in the position of the supposedly more-knowledgeable researcher. Death makes innocent fools of us all. But I did resist the embodiment of wonder in the filmed dialogue. I refused to enter the visual frame and later I edited out my voice—the questions I had asked in the co-wondering process. I told myself that I wanted people to speak for themselves. I wanted my own point of view to recede into the background—to let them have the floor. But in doing so I now realize that I was falsifying the truth about co-wondering. At the same time, I know that all film manipulates in this way, hides the methods of its making. That’s just what films of even the most honest kind have to do to distill some clarity in narration—to get across a question or a point that will then generate another, larger round of wondering in and among the viewers. Circles of co-wondering expand. Wonder is social, the anthropologist in me is delighted to realize!

³ *I Like Dirt* (dir. Daniel Zox and Shannon Lee Dawdy), Zox Films 2021, <https://vimeo.com/414171087>. See also S. Lee Dawdy, *American Afterlives: Reinventing Death in the Twenty-First Century*, Princeton 2021.

That said, in another way I did engage in a very embodied form of wonder in the filmmaking process when I volunteered to be wrapped in a shroud and placed at the bottom of a grave for several hours in a green cemetery. I was intensely curious about how it would feel to imitate the dead, to play-act my ending. Would I be overcome with fear and anxiety? Would I feel suffocated? Bored? Cold? Lonely? Uncomfortable? I learned from the experience that at least in that version of death, my body enjoyed a sense of deep relaxation and calm, and a kind of timelessness. It was soothing, in fact. I did not anticipate that. The experiment was reassuring and I often think back to it when anticipating my death or those of others. There was a feeling of “everything’s going to be OK.” Different but OK.

After finishing the film and the larger book project, I realized that my answer to the first question about the destiny of the body is that I want to be made into an archaeological site for fun discovery by someone in the future—no need to make it a sacred site though. And my answer to the second question about the afterlife went from drawing-a-blank to a kind of faith that death is a form of radical transformation, though not from being to nothingness, which is a cocky error that hard atheists make (perhaps Sartre did too, but I read his “nothingness” as more about the indeterminateness of human life). I learned through the co-wondering that whatever else one can say in speculation, our personhood (a catch-all for soul/spirit/personality) transforms into memories and traces among the living. And that the body transforms into matter that disperses, either rapidly or gradually, back into the earth system. Undeniably, your part within Gaia transforms upon your death, but it is not annihilated. Death is just one revolution in a wheel of transformation. It is not a finality. I no longer believe in final “ends.” Death is so much richer than an ending.

I am fairly certain that not all modes of ethnography involve co-wondering. You, though, are about to embark on an ethnographic journey—a wonder/wander as you have put it. How would you go about bringing co-wonder into your methods?

Zak: Co-wondering-as-method. Thank you for this. It strikes me that part of anthropology’s project works through modes of familiarization and estrangement to approach the epistemological gap the discipline takes as fundamental to its project: difference, cultural difference. It is curious to me that the historical position of anthropology’s project is one that rests upon a kind of wonder about difference opened up from the affordances of colonial contact, violent forms of imperial extension and extraction that also generated globalizing discourses on figures of racialized otherness. Wonder towards the gap of cultural difference as a disciplinary aim, and terror (of difference) to be overcome, as a project of knowledge production that also rests on histories of colonial terror. I think it is an ethical question regarding the stakes of making something that seems strange familiar (ostensibly through knowledge) and to make the familiar strange by approximating cultural difference. From this, might anthropology be a discipline that speaks to the apparent tensions between wonder and horror more than others? In any case, it seems important to consider the historical position of anthropology when crafting a method of ethnographic practice that grounds itself in wonder and co-presence, because this history

is in part what allows me to speak, act, and ask from the position that I have and take in the world.

In addition to this, I feel compelled to think about what it means for me to do the kind of work and practice we call ethnography. In my own sense of this, ethnography grounds itself as a practice in a kind of co-presence motivated by questions in one's encounter with a world. A kind of practice grounded in the ways in which we ourselves are constituted as question-asking beings. Perhaps in this way it can be thought of as an engagement with the world pulled along by the propulsive wonder of the questions we are asking of it, of our interlocutors. Within this, though, there is the requirement that we open ourselves to surprise—surprise in the way we come to feel or think in brushing up against a world; surprise in the ways our interlocutors—those we speak with and learn from—respond to our questions; surprise in the way those responses pull out of us yet more questions—unexpected questions we didn't know or couldn't have known to ask before. We move along this unfolding path “in the field,” a kind of wandering movement spurred by this feeling of wonder. It is an inherently collaborative process.

I was struck by your take on co-wondering as a more-than-dyadic practice in your work; that there is not simply a one-to-one encounter between the dialogic two in this death wondering. Future selves, the body and its potentialities (the living and the corpse-to-be), the dead self, ghosts. There is this sense of a manifold set of relations and entities between what seems to be two bodies interacting. There is perhaps always a more, a horizon, something contained or lived (even as potential) beyond what can be seen or made visible in the moment that is both what we are, and how we relate, in wonder together. This sense of the manifold, that we hold in our bodies more than we seem to be in a single moment but also what we might become I suppose is in part what makes the body irreducible to itself as a thing, even as corpse, or corpse-to-be. It also opens up the question of who, and perhaps what, participates in co-wondering? Who and what gets to have a voice in this practice?

In my own work, I look at practices concerned with dying and death. People who are using psychotropics such as psychedelics to transform their, and others', relationship to dying and death, who can also be said to be working on death/dying by shaping it, using the intimacies between themselves, medicines, and other people to develop sensibilities concerning death and dying that seem also to point to possible conceptions of an afterlife. One of the things that grounds wonder as a concept, and that propels wondering as a verb or practice, is this feeling that inspires those kinds of questions that cannot be answered, whose answers the truth of which cannot be verified.

Shannon: Have you yourself spent much time wondering about your own end?

Zak: I'm reminded of a series of episodes in my life beginning when I was quite young, about the age of eleven. I began having seizures that, symptomatically, ended up pointing to the existence of a brain tumor growing in the right hemisphere of my brain. A scan of my head revealed a mass that shouldn't have been there pressing itself against my skull, displacing the matter inside my head. A kind of life-within

whose cells' division and persistence, their inability to die the death necessary for the organism's continuity (the ability of the cell to die for the sake of the organism's continuity of life, what the biologists have come to call "apoptosis"), came to threaten the life of the remainder of my organism. It was presented to me as part of me, my body, but also as distinct; an invading bundle of living cells, a threat cultivated by and emerging from the life that I am and that I take myself to be, yet a threat whose composition seemed to be altogether foreign, somehow of me but outside of me. Something, ultimately, to be extracted, removed, separated from me, then annihilated. It was made of the stuff that I am, but contradictory to what I believe I hold within me, what I possess as me: my own life and living. The presentation of tumoral existence as well as the prospect and process of the tumor's removal certainly thrust me into a wondering. Not arising from the abstract position that I know I will die, eventually, but that there, then, emerged a relation that offered up to my own thinking a sense of the shape of my own ending as a possibility—from this specific set of emergences; from the particular genre of crisis prompting medical scrutiny; from the risk involved in separating the tumor from my body. Symptom. Scan. Surgery. Secure survival... perhaps a kind of wonder initiated from this specific set of encounters, a kind of wonder turned towards worry, this anxious mode of moving through what one wonders about.

From this episode in my own life I want to return to the event of a seizure (in this case connected to the emergence of something threatening the life of the organism, as symptomatic) as a kind of end that suggests something about wondering about death itself as perhaps the "last wonder," as D.H. Lawrence put it.⁴

In a sense, a seizure might be thought of as a little end in the life of a body, an end that both points to, and encapsulates, an end to the "me" that lives in or identifies with the body I take to be mine. As an event, the seizure is that which seems to sever me from my body, replacing my presence and bodily agency with movements and modes of attention (as negation of conscious attention) that I do not call my own. That which I take to be most familiar to me, my body, becomes strange. My body moves but I am not there to move it, to bear witness to the movements it makes. It is from this severing, being seized, held in separation from awareness of body and my being in and with this body, that I begin to wonder about this bodily relation (a relation of my body to myself, to my body in its environment, and my body's relation with itself) as a kind of end that contains within it intimations of other ends, one that realizes a halting of a body's own lively processes. The end that is seen so clearly as the cessation of its movements, toward a terminus, a resting place, one that conjoins notions of the soul's flight from the body, rather than, as in perhaps the seizure, the body's flight from the soul (it is from this distinction that a seizure's resonance with possession rings most clearly). This kind of possession highlights how relationality and embodiment situate wonder as a capacity. But it also underscores how terror and horror might be experienced when a body becomes strange to itself and to others. A kind of "dark wonder" (Onishi, this volume) emerges when "my" body loses its sense of "mineness," that which allows me

⁴ D.H. Lawrence, *The Ship of Death and Other Poems*, London 1947.

to sense myself as an agentive author of its gestures and movements (See also Holy-Luczaj, this volume).

Yet, it is the body's receptivity, its ability to be taken hold of, suspended, thrown, again and again—into this capacity for wonder—that delivers the philosopher to a recognition: that of knowing that one does not know. For the philosopher, this recognition is a state of return, a repetition, and one that is potentially unmooring, disturbing, that takes hold of one's faculties. It is through such an experience that Arendt references the philosophical shock of wonder, "those frequently reported traumatic states in which Socrates would suddenly, as though seized by a rapture, fall into complete motionlessness, just staring without seeing or hearing anything."⁵ Wonder seems to hold this capacity to shock in the ways in which it, too, possesses the wonderer; where our figure of the philosopher "is for one fleeting moment confronted with the whole of the universe, as he will be confronted again only in the moment of his death."⁶ Hence, Socrates' own seizures, those moments he was gripped in speechless motionlessness also explicates the irreducibility of the body's sensibilities in bearing-bodily what was considered for the philosopher a *pathos*, the pathos of wonder: to leave that which is suffered through one's being-possessed by the unknown open, unreconciled.

This openness can be uncomfortable, even devastating, as in some confrontations with certain conceptions of death (read: so-called "secular" death). That is, some form of separation from awareness is also something that some (notably the anthropologist Ernest Becker) have suggested is a result, or effect, of an intellectual understanding that humans are mortal beings—that we know of this coming end to a life, every human life. That is, the awareness of mortality, an awareness one comes to hold for oneself, while living, effects a kind of terror so profound that one seeks to displace awareness of this fact by innumerable means, through modes of distraction that aim to push confrontation with this awareness away from conscious, contemplative presence. This is at least the thesis known as the "death denial hypothesis."⁷ Rather than critique this position, however, I am interested in the concepts of experience and consciousness (attention, nonattention; awareness, unawareness; presence, absence) that rest upon what it means to possess the capacity to wonder about one's own end in addition to dispositions that seek to cut off wondering precisely at life's end. Beyond this form of self-wondering, might we also think about a circuit of sense experience set up between bodies in dialogue that explains something about what it means to relate, to come to know, and to connect the ways we come to think and feel the world as a space of wondering together, even if what we ultimately come to know is our unknowing?

In your own work, you have spent time being and thinking-with bodies—bodies that are said to be living, bodies that are taken to be dead or in a process of

⁵ H. Arendt, "Philosophy and Politics," p. 98.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 100.

⁷ Becker develops this thesis by asserting that death, and fear about death itself, is a primary, universal fear constituting the human psyche, one that is responded to both individually and collectively through modes of denial that attempt to displace confrontations with human mortality (E. Becker, *The Denial of Death*, New York 1973).

becoming dead. How have these encounters affected your own body—your corporeal body, but also the body of your work? In other words, how has this ethnographic mode of embodied being-with compelled you to consider, for instance, the role the dead play in pulling the living into ways of wondering?

Shannon: I had no idea how much I would open up by asking that very personal, impertinent question! I wish I could reciprocate with my own vulnerability in confronting a self-ending, but my experience has been more about the death of others. Still, those can affect one as a seizure, so maybe there is some common ground there, particularly in the sense of “to convulse involuntarily,” or to be “taken over.” When I experienced the sudden death of a beloved, my body felt suckerpunched and my psyche collapsed to the floor. I had no control over the movement of my chaotic emotions. We call these kinds of deaths “untimely” ones, meaning that they happen before the time of what we think of as a natural life course. But they are also untimely in that the shock and otherworldliness they incite stops normal time. Like a seizure, they are a violent pause to our everyday flow of routine and feeling.

When the body fails unexpectedly, it is a dramatic case of Heidegger’s hammer breaking—the fragility and temporality of life itself becomes “present-at-hand.” He is usually understood to mean that this type of shock to attention leads to analytical thinking, but there is an element of surprise and “whyness” that suggests to me that wonder is the more basic, underlying mode of perception.

The other thought I had is in reaction to your reflections on the out-of-control lifeforce of tumor cells which can, paradoxically, cause the death of their host body. So often when we think of wonder, we think of an experience of the sublime of nature (Kant’s starry sky), or about consciousness beholding itself (Hegel’s spirit) or, as I have learned from the contributors to this special issue, two human consciousnesses authentically experiencing the gap between their bodies and selves (and perhaps it is authenticity and vulnerability in this encounter that distinguishes it from Hegel’s Lord and Bondsman—that’s what *Stirred by Your Presence* had me thinking, among other things). Martha Nussbaum and Donna Haraway might include the encounter between a human and a dog as a possible relation of wonder, when the gap between radically different forms of sentience is felt.⁸ And now I am thinking that if most wonder is, in fact, co-wonder—about a relationality between beings—then perhaps it is possible to say that wonder is the essence of the relationship between the living and the dead.

It also strikes me that a sense of wonder induced by something outside of human control—an earthquake, a sunset, a sudden death—happens in quite a different time zone than when an ethnographer (or other questioner) attempts to initiate a relation of wonder with another person or persons. Are certain forms of dialogue a means to artificially induce wonder? Perhaps that’s too vulgar a way to think about it, but the use of psychedelics seems to point to another way in which we humans attempt

⁸ D. Haraway, *When Species Meet*, Minneapolis, MN 2007; M. Nussbaum, *Justice for Animals: Our Collective Responsibility*, New York 2023.

to engineer a relation of wonder to the world. Wonder doesn't just happen to us. We seek it out, we make it happen.

Zak: The questions I am asking in ethnographic practice are altogether tethered to this peculiar and supposedly “primary feeling” of wonder. In some ways, the work I'm currently involved with can be thought of as emerging from wonder (perhaps my own) and as attending to the ways wonder can be a capacity to cultivate. In my study, the focus is on people whose relationships to their own deaths have been inflected through that prophetic mode of anticipation that the medical field denotes as prognosis. It is a mode of ushering bodies into a calculated estimation of their individual life chances. In the United States at least, such a space of living amidst anticipated death seems oftentimes to induce a state of profound worry (perhaps one side of wonder, wonder about the future negatively inflected, its cognate being anxiety).

Indeed, these therapies, known as psychedelic-assisted therapies for those facing end-of-life, are aimed at addressing this worry about death, often called “existential anxiety” in diagnostic terms. These therapies, curiously enough, aim to alleviate this particularly modern form of suffering by initiating the individual into a relation with psychedelics to induce, among other things, a state of what might be called spiritualized wonder. Practitioners recruit these substances to essentially instrumentalize their capacities to generate states of deep wonder—to wonder about one's own being, one's sense of what's real and possible, and sensory-aesthetic experiences that seem to allow those undergoing the drugs' effects to feel out what it might be like to die and be dead. It is precisely this transformation, this initiation into deep wonder one might say, that is thought to bring about relief from the shallower form of wonder that is existential worry/anxiety.

When I think about wondering or co-wondering as method, my intuition is to stay with this horizon that stretches just beyond the knowable, to try and pull at the threads of these dimensions as people encounter them. One set of concepts that you have elaborated in your work, I think, speaks to some of these concerns. That is, the concepts of decomposition and decay. Both are processes that occur, say, to a dead body or a corpse. But you have also enacted a method of writing, engaging your own ethnographic findings, as a form of “decomposition,” or decompositional thought. In other dimensions of your work on the dead you have articulated “decay” as something you see happening to dimensions of American ontologies. Both decay and decomposition suggest processes of coming apart, perhaps a horizon of dissolution, disincorporation, maybe also an incorporation into something else (the body becoming worm food, becoming tree, becoming mushroom, etc.). Do you see these concepts as diagnostic of a present moment? Might these concepts also be useful for thinking about a way of wondering about lively processes that we are all presumably caught up in that could offer a possible alternative to ways we might live, and be, in the world?

Shannon: There isn't much that is starry sky about tumor cells, at least as a form of beauty, which was Kant's bias. And I presume not much sentient about

them. But in the moment that the body confronts the body as something less than united and whole—in fact, that it is composed of competing parts—another kind of wonder opens up. It is not about beauty, but about strangeness. Or rather, about realizing that our ideas of whole-bodies/self/identity are precious fictions. Fictions that crumble if we allow ourselves to see the parts rather than the whole—the cells rather than the body, the microbial colony and its host rather than the corpse. So, I am approaching your question about decomposition and decay as one that makes a circle with the cells that took over your young body for a while (I am so happy they didn't win against the other, calmer cells!). When I interviewed experts in at-home funerals and green burials, I learned that, in their view (with some biological justification), death is not an event, it is a process. The cells and the microorganisms that compose the temporary boundedness of our bodies die at different rates over about a three-day period. And the microorganisms that the living body supported (yeasts, gut bacteria, viruses, and the occasional complex parasite) are gradually replaced with a different constellation of small beings that prefer a colder, less active, less bounded organic host.

Ethnographically, yes, I feel that in the U.S. today, and perhaps elsewhere, there is a new kind of consciousness of our bodies as flowing assemblages of cells and other beings, and less of an attachment to a physical “wholeness” that fixes our sense of self. I was struck by the fact that my interlocutors who had visible and multiple body modifications such as piercings and tattoos were among those who seemed the least bothered by the idea of their bodies being eaten by worms after their heart stops beating. I have wondered whether the current fad for fermented foods (homebrews, kombucha, kimchi, yogurts, sourdoughs) isn't part of a new zeitgeist in which we recognize the seething unboundedness of life—and thus the partiality of any one “death.”

A return to psychedelics also seems to be very much part of the new zeitgeist in the West. Perhaps the boundary between chemical and biological life/agents is also dissolving? In some indigenous practices, I know that entheogens are thought to have a kind of life force, or be the vehicle for the life force of supernatural beings. I am very curious whether the clinical settings of your study preclude wondering about how the drugs work. There almost seems to be a pragmatism about the practice—that the mechanics of psychedelics do not need to be understood, so long as their effects are therapeutic. But how would we ever know whether in the final moments the fear of death is overcome? Further—is this necessarily a good thing? Isn't the fear of death the ultimate “positive anxiety” that keeps us caring for one another? So are these drug therapies enhancing wonder or deadening it? Perhaps we are moving from a “denial of death” to a “denial of fear.” I have an impulse to mistrust efforts to pathologize an emotion. Isn't fear itself a natural and inevitable experience in confronting death? Fear is on some level quite biological and embodied. It's an instinct that gets expressed through a flow of hormones (chemicals) of most complex animals. Perhaps we are just finding new ways to struggle towards a quixotic transcendence of biology...

Zak: Interestingly, boundaryless and boundlessness are core principles that seem to emerge from these psychedelic domains as well. For the ways these substances are being drawn into medical domains for “therapeutic” purposes, the capacity to dissolve boundaries, and to dissolve one’s sense of self, seems to merge psychedelic phenomenology with an ideal of almost romantic unitariness. For those facing a hastened death, who feel alienated in living out their illnesses, a sense of dissolving into union with all things can be reassuring, perhaps especially to those lonely individuals of modernity. You mentioned all the non-human actors that participate in the death of a single human body, the “partiality of any one ‘death.’” The philosopher Eugene Thacker suggests that human thought may largely emerge from the non-human.⁹ He draws an analogy from all the non-human forms of life that make up what we call a single human body, arguing that essentially we are majority non-human entities from the perspective of the life of/on our “bodies”—we are only partially what we take ourselves to be. What about all that which is non-human that might participate in “one’s own” dying? In what ways might we come to think of one’s material and psychic undoing as a process such as this? Psychedelics seem to offer up relations that speak to ways of being-in-the-world that rest on transformative bodily processes such as these.

I agree that there seems to be a kind of pragmatism to the ways psychedelics are being taken up in medical contexts. What is emphasized is that these substances seem to be effective for various applications in the domain of mental healthcare, yet the potency of the phenomenologies described (i.e., mystical experiences, spiritual dissolution) seem to become mainly criteria for efficacy. They essentially become black-boxed with no emphasis on wondering how and why such experiences emerge from these relations. But the assertion that “fear” as well as a whole set of emotional concerns in human dying can be directly addressed through chemical intervention, the experiences these chemicals can engender, is a powerful one, one that seems to draw a line toward the limits of human agency up to the point of death.

I must say, though, I am somewhat suspicious of how this “fear of death” is naturalized as a universal fact (as in Becker’s work and the way his theories are used in the context of medicalized psychedelic therapies for end-of-life). What if this fear is perhaps partly a product of a particularly modern constellation of affective and emotional horizons? Or perhaps the texture of the fear, the way fearfulness becomes a particular fear, is also embedded in history as much as it can be pointed to chemically, hormonally. For instance, could it be that this fear of death emerges in its most forceful articulation from the introduction of increasingly technical interventions into the human organism, interventions that aim at intervening into the finite life of the individual body, the person, to enable it to keep on living (that is, in other words, practices that constitute forms of life extension)? Perhaps this characteristically modern development, this making of human life, its maintenance, into a technical operation results in something quite similar to Weber’s articulation

⁹ E. Thacker, *In the Dust of This Planet: Horrors of Philosophy (Volume 1.)*, Winchester 2011.

of modern disenchantment.¹⁰ For him, it was because people in the age of science know, or believe that they could know if they wanted to, how something like a piece of machinery works, or how a tree grows. That the world is disenchanting due to the replacement of mystery by possible knowability—technical know-how. There may indeed be some resonances between this Weberian assessment of modernity and the question of this “fear of death” as an orientation to failing, dying, modern bodies. That is, because life itself is seemingly open to being intervened upon through technical means,¹¹ what results is a sense that human life ought to be something that can be “fixed,” in a sense (and this recapitulates the association with “brokenness” from Heidegger’s example, a striking way in which a human body becomes likened to a broken piece of technology). Perhaps these spiritualized exercises¹² with psychedelics in the clinic are about a process of transcending limitations, climbing beyond ourselves through operations on and through bodies.¹³ In this way, these practices concerning dying with psychedelics represent a limit horizon to human agency: an act of preparing oneself for the unpreparable, to use the body to cultivate a capacity to let go of it, to leave it behind.

Yet, if fear of death as medicalized pathology is a historical phenomenon, might the attending use of psychedelics to cultivate wonder in the face of death suggest that wonder, too, may very well be of, and in, history? It seems that if wonder is a capacity to be cultivated (the philosopher must choose to endure wonder to practice philosophy, one who is confronting death might take psychedelics to engender a sense of wonder in the face of death) it is not necessarily the case that this primary philosophical feeling is a given. Arendt suggested that wonder itself came under threat in her assessment of mid-century totalitarian political movements. In the overwhelming capture of opinion in the figure of the “masses,” one is unable to find the solitude necessary for self-dialogue, to find a moment within one’s interiority to endure the feeling of wonder, to allow wonder to work on and through one’s notions. More recently, Catherine Malabou has argued that the contemporary moment is characterized by one where the ability to experience wonder may be under threat.¹⁴ For her, disaffection as a state of feeling, or non-feeling, forecloses the primary philosophical affect of wonder. Forms of globalized power in the contemporary “neurobiological age” directly threaten subjects’ capacity for feeling, affectivity,

¹⁰ M. Weber, *Science as a Vocation*, transl. R. Livingstone, 1917, on modernity, disenchantment, and instrumental reason.

¹¹ Extending an analysis of biopolitics from Michel Foucault, Rose argues that the range of political forms that seek to govern the biological life of humans has now become a form of governance over the sphere of biological life itself. Biotechnology, cell cultures, and a range of medical applications that make use of various forms of life that have come to render biological life as radically open to technical intervention represent this expanded sphere of contemporary biopolitics (N. Rose, *The Politics of Life Itself*, Princeton 2007).

¹² P. Hadot, *The Selected Writings of Pierre Hadot: Philosophy as Practice*, transl. M. Sharpe, F. Testa, London 2020, on spiritual exercises.

¹³ P. Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life: On Anthropotechnics*, transl. W. Hoban, Malden, MA 2013, on practices of self/human transcendence, spiritual practices.

¹⁴ C. Malabou, “Emotional Life in a Neurobiological Age: On Wonder,” Talk Given at Cornell University 2013.

to experience wonder at all. She suggests that, “the neural subject is a potentially disaffected individual, a non-effected subject precisely deprived of all capacity to wonder.”¹⁵ Thus, on one hand, a threat to wonder is a question of spatial relations to relations of speech and thought: one possibly loses the space to find one’s interiority, to make space for wonder as a component feeling of solitary contemplation. On the other, the neural correlates of affectivity are potentially attenuated when shocked by the traumatic force of contemporary forms of power. That wonder itself could be somehow under threat as conceived of through distinct historical, political contexts suggests that wonder itself may be a thoroughly historical affect. Wonder is indeed social. And its capacity seems bound to rather transient forms of sociality and power that condition a body’s malleable sensibilities, its receptivity and response to its relations and situatedness in place and time.

Shannon: I love this idea that death can enchant us. I wish that my friend Rob had been open to that enchantment earlier in his struggle with cancer. But I also know that such wishes are just a projection of my own fears and desires. Rob was braver than I. He sat with the horror side of death for most of his too-short life (he died at the age of 57 in October 2023). Rob had a PhD in philosophy and was also a skilled mathematician. He tended towards analytical philosophy. He was an avowed atheist with a love of neuroscience and a trust in technology. But still, he read voraciously (and repetitively) in continental and existential philosophy (his copies of Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, and Nietzsche were well-worn). He was a complex guy. In our own dialogues, it became clear that he had a deep-seated fear of death and a persistent anxiety about his biological health that had long pre-dated his cancer diagnosis during the Covid-19 pandemic. I suspect that he read deeply into metaphysics because in part he hoped there to find a cure for his fears. As far as I can tell, it never really worked. Rob was terrified of death, but remarkably courageous and optimistic about the most harrowing medical interventions.

When medical life extension started to fail, Rob started looking very seriously into going the cryogenics route—he wanted his brain to be frozen, for his consciousness to have a fighting chance in the future. He believed in a technological fix for death. Everything I knew about cryogenics suggested that it was a scam.¹⁶ Early in his treatment, we had a huge argument about it. Later on, his suffering—and especially his fear—was difficult to witness, but I also came to admire his remarkable will to live. In cryogenics, the embodied nature of our human-being is both embraced and denied. For some people, this ultimate intervention amounts to a Frankensteinian horror. But for Rob, it offered hope and possible salvation. I have been meditating a lot on Rob’s approach to death in the month that has transpired

¹⁵ In reference to such forms of power, Malabou figures both physical brain trauma, forms of political violence and environmental catastrophes that may result in forms of PTSD as consonant with this condition.

¹⁶ Cryogenics presupposes a biologically reductive theory of consciousness, firmly on the physicalist side of the zombie debate in philosophy set off by David Chalmers in *The Conscious Mind* (New York 1996); see also S. Dawdy, “Zombies and a Decaying American Ontology,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 32 (2019), pp. 17–25.

between his last breath and the due date for our edits on this article. I like to think that he wouldn't mind me sharing these thoughts with you and with the readers of this journal. Under "employment" on his death certificate, it proudly reads "philosopher"—nothing more, nothing less. Rob has helped me realize that there are two general types of attempted cures for mortal fear: to open up the question with wonder, or to close it off with surety. That surety could come from religious literalism or from analytical thinking (both kinds of faith). But paradoxically, wonder—the opposite of surety—may be the best cure for the analytical atheist's fear: "I neither know nor think I know" (Plato, *Apology* 21d).

A few weeks before Rob passed what Socrates called the Styx, I wrote a letter to him that shared the recent death experience of another friend of mine (also an intensely intellectual guy) whose heart had stopped three times in one day. This friend told me that he had been transported to such an indescribably peaceful place—which was not a nothingness—that it has been difficult for him to return to embodied life. After his partner finished reading my letter aloud, Rob seemed to relax a little. She remembers him saying something like: "well, maybe I shouldn't miss out on whatever that is."

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Wondering Animals: Reflections on Human Exceptionality

Abstract: Both historically and in common human practices, attitudes, and beliefs, a sense of human exceptionality in comparison with other animals undergirds normative anthropocentrism, i.e. prioritization of human interests. The question I wish to address in this article is whether we can use a particular element of the cognitive apparatus or toolkit that supposedly makes us special, namely our sense of wonder, to decenter us. Several authors have argued that when we view other beings or the natural world with wonder, we are inclined to care for and wish to protect them. But here I am interested in what happens when we turn our sense of wonder onto ourselves as the peculiar animal, the strange evolutionary experiment that we are. Not, as has historically been done, in an admiring way, but in an evaluatively more neutral way, characterized by puzzlement, an attunement to mystery, and a sense of unlikeliness and contingency. In particular, how might our thinking about ourselves change when we think from a wonder that revolves around our embodiment, around that which roots us most firmly in the world, in “nature,” and reminds us most clearly of our membership of a community of earthly life? Wondering at and about ourselves as an animal species may remind us of our material embeddedness in the world, but what could its ethical import be? More specifically, the paper explores whether there is an escape from the ethical quandaries of human exceptionality, which relate to the impossibility of doing with or without that exceptionality. I argue that there is not, but that in wonder we can hold together incompatible possibilities.

Keywords: Wonder, human exceptionality, anthropocentrism, anthropology, ecology, evolution

“Who does not wonder at this chameleon which we are? [...] Who is there that does not wonder at man? [...] [M]an fashions, fabricates, transforms himself into the shape of all flesh, into the character of every creature.”

Pico della Mirandola¹

1. Introduction: Human Exceptionality and Its Consequences

In their history of the philosophy of biology, Marjorie Grene and David Depew observe that “much of the interest that human beings have in other living beings reflects our unquenchable interest in ourselves.”² The claim surely overgeneralizes, because it does not seem plausible that *all* human populations, everywhere and at all times, have had an “unquenchable interest” in themselves. Such an interest, and perhaps “unquenchability” in general, seems to describe the “Western” cultural tradition—say, from Aristotle via Aquinas to current (palaeo-)anthropology—best, and particularly the period from the Middle Ages to the present, in which “science” came into its own and diversified into countless realms of curiosity. That said, as far as we can tell, no other animal species is or can be so preoccupied with its own exceptionality as these (in evolutionary or geological terms) recent exponents of *Homo sapiens* are; in that sense, the preoccupation with exceptionality is self-confirming.³

In a speech composed in 1486 that he never delivered because Pope Innocentius VIII prevented it, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola claimed to have discovered “why man is the animal that is most happy, and is therefore worthy of all wonder,” and he thought the answer “wonderful and beyond belief.”⁴ The source of “man’s” dignity, according to Pico, lay in the fact that God gave us “no fixed seat, no form of thy very own, no gift peculiarly thine.” Unlike other creatures with their limited nature, human beings “are confined by no bounds,” and God told “man”:

thou wilt fix limits of nature for thyself. I have placed thee at the center of the world, that from there thou mayest more conveniently look around and see whatsoever is in the world. Neither heavenly nor earthly, neither mortal nor immortal have We made thee. Thou, like a judge appointed for being

¹ G. Pico della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of Man*, transl. C. Glenn Wallis, [in:] G. Pico della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of Man*, Indianapolis–Cambridge 1998, pp. 5–6.

² M. Grene, D. Depew, *The Philosophy of Biology: An Episodic History*, Cambridge 2004, p. 322.

³ Viewing human beings as exceptional (as different from other beings in a different way than those other beings differ among each other) is, of course, not unique to the “Western” philosophical tradition. To offer just one example, Richard K. Nelson wrote of the Koyukon of central Alaska: “For the Koyukon, humans and animals are clearly and qualitatively separated. Only the human possesses a soul (*nukk’ubidza*, ‘eye flutterer’), which people say is different from animals’ spirits.” Yet, with the Koyukon, “[t]he distinction between animals and people is less sharply drawn than in Western thought—the human organism, after all, was created by an animal’s power”; cited in R.M. Torrance, *Encompassing Nature: A Sourcebook. Nature and Culture From Ancient Times to the Modern World*, Washington, D.C. 1999, p. 42.

⁴ G. Pico della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of Man*, p. 3.

honorable, art the molder and maker of thyself; thou mayest sculpt thyself into whatever shape thou dost prefer. Thou canst grow downward into the lower natures which are brutish. Thou canst grow upward from thy soul's reason into the higher natures which are divine.⁵

“Man’s” greatness, therefore, lay in the fact that “he makes himself what he chooses”—that is, it is up to him whether he becomes a more or less virtuous creature, closer to the beasts or to the angels.⁶ And this was closely tied to the fact that “man” includes the whole of nature in himself in two senses: in uniting the heavenly and earthly, the immaterial and the material in himself, and in knowing the world in its entirety.⁷

Though set in an entirely different metaphysical and theological framework, Pico’s work anticipated later anthropological thought by highlighting two interrelated aspects of human nature: our biological openness or indeterminateness and our special relationship to the world. Arnold Gehlen poignantly expressed the former, with a term borrowed from Herder, by saying that human beings are biologically *Mängelwesen*, deficient creatures, entirely dependent on creating a second nature, an *Ersatzwelt* (replacement world), in order to survive.⁸ And he articulated the second borrowing Scheler’s notion of *Weltoffenheit*, world-openness: human beings, because they are not bound by instincts, are not immersed in their world but can distance themselves from the world so that it becomes an object for them. As Gehlen writes, an entire suite of human traits, which at first sight appear merely physical—the duration of human pregnancies, the helplessness of babies, our (relative) hairlessness, our skull shape—can only be understood in connection with our “world-open” mode of being in the world.⁹ At the same time, as Helmuth Plessner observed, the human mode of being, which he characterized as “eccentric,” has to do with the fact that we are closed from the world in a way that other animals are not. We are not just bodies immersed in the world, but we are aware of being delimited by our skins. We do not fully coincide with our bodies but are in a (to some extent) conflictual relationship with the physical existence to which we are bound. As an interpreter writes, “[s]truggling with this conflict is something that makes man [*sic*] completely different from other animals, as they cannot experience their interiority, and are not aware of their closure from the world” [...] It is not possible for [animals] to perform something for which the instincts are not equipped and that could place them in a difficult situation.”¹⁰

While knowledge of and thinking about (other) animal capacities has since become much more refined, it has not really shaken the idea of human exceptionality—that we are fundamentally different from other animals, i.e. different from

⁵ Ibidem, p. 5.

⁶ P.W.J. Miller, *Introduction*, [in:] G. Pico della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of Man*, pp. xiv–xv.

⁷ Ibidem, p. xv.

⁸ A. Gehlen, *Anthropologische Forschung: Zur Selbstbegegnung und Selbstentdeckung des Menschen*, Reinbek 1961, p. 48.

⁹ Ibidem, p. 57.

¹⁰ O. Tolone, “Plessner’s Theory of Eccentricity: A Contribution to the Philosophy of Medicine,” [in:] *Helmuth Plessner’s Philosophical Anthropology: Perspectives and Prospects*, J. de Mul (ed.), Amsterdam 2014, pp. 163–175, i.c. p. 164.

them in an importantly different way than they differ among each other.¹¹ It is now common to see this as an evolved uniqueness,¹² and it tends to be expressed by anthropologists—largely mirroring “common sense”—in terms of a combination of abilities for complex language, abstract thought, empathy, theory of mind, social cooperation, and so on, leading to unique human features and achievements like art, religion, symbolic representation, and control over the natural world.¹³

It is increasingly clear that our uniqueness is not necessarily a good thing. The exceptionality resulting from (some) humans’ use of their exceptional suite of capacities is eloquently expressed in the term “Anthropocene,” a proposed name for the (arguably) new geological epoch we have entered, in which *Homo sapiens* exerts an undeniable and undeniably destructive influence on planetary ecosystems, with long-lasting effects. “For the first time in Earth’s 4.5 billion year history, a single species is increasingly dictating its future.”¹⁴

In the genesis of this situation, the interplay between (arguable) actual human exceptionality and a certain human self-perception, involving, so many have argued, an exaggerated sense of exceptionality seems to have played an important role. Hence, among the responses to the ecological crises of the Anthropocene—anthropogenic climate change, species extinction, biodiversity loss, among others¹⁵—are calls for a rethinking of “our place in nature,” as it is traditionally called, of how we view our relation to other animal species and our role in planetary ecosystems.¹⁶ The key problem identified by many is that of anthropocentrism, a worldview as well as a political and ethical orientation, in a nutshell, that affords a central place to—i.e. prioritizes—human interests over those of other beings or ecosystems.¹⁷

¹¹ J. Gregg, *If Nietzsche Were a Narwhal: What Animal Intelligence Reveals about Human Stupidity*, London 2022.

¹² K. Laland, “What Made Us Unique: How We Became a Different Kind of Animal,” *Scientific American* (September 2018), <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/what-made-us-unique/>.

¹³ See, for instance, C. Stringer, *The Origin of Our Species*, London 2012, and P. Pettitt, “*Homo Sapiens*” *Rediscovered: The Scientific Revolution Rewriting Our Origins*, London 2022.

¹⁴ S.L. Lewis, M.A. Maslin, *The Human Planet: How We Created the Anthropocene*, n.p. 2018, p. 3.

¹⁵ See IPCC, “Summary for Policymakers,” [in:] *Climate Change 2023: Synthesis Report. A Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* [Core Writing Team, H. Lee and J. Romero (eds.)], Geneva 2023 (in press); IPBES, *Summary for Policymakers of the Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services*, S. Díaz, J. Settele, E.S. Brondizio, H.T. Ngo, M. Guèze, J. Agard, A. Arneeth, P. Balvanera, K.A. Brauman, S.H.M. Butchart, K.M. A. Chan, L.A. Garibaldi, K. Ichii, J. Liu, S.M. Subramanian, G.F. Midgley, P. Miloslavich, Z. Molnár, D. Obura, A. Pfaff, S. Polasky, A. Purvis, J. Razzaque, B. Reyers, R. Roy Chowdhury, Y.J. Shin, I.J. Visseren-Hamakers, K.J. Willis, and C.N. Zayas (eds.), Bonn, 2019; also, for instance, E. Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*, London 2014; D. Wallace-Wells, *The Uninhabitable Earth: A Story of the Future*, n.p. 2019.

¹⁶ Individual references make little sense here. Work in environmental ethics and animal ethics as well as in environmental education and human-animal studies abounds with such proposals.

¹⁷ I use the term “anthropocentrism” here in the sense described by Ben Mylius as “actively normative anthropocentrism” (as distinct from perceptual, descriptive, and passively normative anthropocentrism). As Mylius writes, actively normative anthropocentrism “manifests in paradigms that either a. contain

Now, the question I wish to address in this article is whether we can use a particular element of the cognitive apparatus or toolkit that supposedly makes us special, namely our sense of wonder (which may be seen as a particular form of our “world-openness”), to decenter us. Several authors have argued that when we view other beings or the natural world with wonder, we are inclined to care for them and wish to protect them.¹⁸ But here I am interested in what happens when we turn our sense of wonder onto *ourselves* as the peculiar animal, the strange evolutionary experiment, that we are. Not, though, in Pico’s admiring way, but in an evaluatively more neutral way, characterized by puzzlement, an attunement to mystery, and a sense of unlikeliness and contingency. In particular, how might our thinking about ourselves change when we think from a wonder that revolves around our embodiment, around that which roots us most firmly in the world, in “nature,” and reminds us most clearly of our membership of a community of earthly life? Wondering at and about ourselves as an animal species may remind us of our material embeddedness in the world, but what could its *ethical import* be? This is the central question of this paper, to be addressed in section 4. To set the stage for it, I will, in section 3, explain what I see as two ethical quandaries of human exceptionality: it seems to be something we can neither live with nor without, something that is both good and evil. But before we go there, we have to ask: what does “wondering at ourselves as an animal species” *mean*, and what could it look like? This question is addressed in the following section.

Answering the above questions requires engaging in a special kind of empirically informed philosophy, traversing the fields of anthropology, evolutionary biology, paleontology, and ecology not just to gather “facts” to inform philosophical and ethical reasoning but also to provoke different ways of seeing—just as happens in wonder.¹⁹

assertions or assumptions about the superiority of *Homo sapiens*, its capacities, the primacy of its values, its position in the universe, etc.; and/or b. attempt to make ethical or legal prescriptions (shoulds/oughts) based on these assertions or assumptions”; B. Mylius, “Three Types of Anthropocentrism,” *Environmental Philosophy* 15 [2] (2018), pp. 159–194, doi: 10.5840/envirophil20184564, i.c. p. 184.

¹⁸ For instance, R. Carson, *The Sense of Wonder*, New York 1998; R.W. Hepburn, “The Inaugural Address: Wonder,” *The Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume LIV* (1980), p. 1–23; K.D. Moore, “The Truth of the Barnacles: Rachel Carson and the Moral Significance of Wonder,” *Environmental Ethics* 27 [3] (2007), pp. 265–277, doi: 10.5840/enviroethics200527316; M. Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership*, Cambridge 2006; M. Nussbaum, *Justice for Animals: Our Collective Responsibility*, New York 2022; J. Bendik-Keymer, “The Reasonableness of Wonder,” *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 18 [3] (2017), pp. 337–355, doi: 10.1080/19452829.2017.1342385; J. Bendik-Keymer, “The Other Species Capability & The Power of Wonder,” *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 22 [1] (2021), pp. 154–179, doi: 10.1080/19452829.2020.1869191; H. Washington, *A Sense of Wonder Towards Nature: Healing the World Through Belonging*, London 2018.

¹⁹ T. Wayward, “Ecological Space: The Concept and Its Ethical Significance,” [in:] S.M. Gardiner, A. Thompson (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental Ethics*, Oxford 2017, p. 311.

2. Ways of Wondering at Ourselves as an Animal Species

“We are not separate from the rest of the living world; we are part of it down to our bones [...].”

Neil Shubin²⁰

“We are metabolic prisoners of our large and expensive brains.”

Paul Pettit²¹

2.1. What Does It Mean to Wonder at Ourselves as an Animal Species?

Wondering—to attend to something in wonder—at its core involves perceiving it as remarkable in being both puzzling, strange, counter to expectations, or mysterious, and at the same time worthy of remark, worth attending to for its own sake. As often as not, we wonder at or about something that was already (in some sense) familiar to us and not particularly noticeable but which suddenly—though sometimes also through our own effort—appears to us as strange and remarkable. It is stripped of its previously obvious meaning and can no longer be taken for granted.²² As Jeremy Bendik-Keymer notes, wonder “throws a margin of doubt around the normal.”²³ So related to the other two is a third key element to wonder, namely that we perceive things under the sign of the possible; that is, as contingent possibilities and realities that could have been and could be otherwise.²⁴

So, wondering at ourselves (at human beings) involves seeing ourselves as remarkable in the sense of puzzling and worth attending to and as contingent possibilities—we might not have been (this way). To wonder at ourselves as an animal species, however, involves something more and more specific. Here, the starting point for our wonder and the context in which we choose to dwell is our knowledge that we, *Homo sapiens*, are a species of animal, an “outcome” (though without any sense of finality) of evolution, and more specifically one of around 6400 extant mammal species. It means that we emphasize something that many social orders, practices and languages seem designed to make us “forget,” namely our commonality with all those other species we habitually lump together in the category of “animals” as distinct from (not to say opposed to) humans. A primary aspect of this commonality is our embodiedness with all that this implies about our entanglement with “the

²⁰ N. Shubin, *Our Inner Fish: The Amazing Discovery of Our 375-million-year-old Ancestor*, London 2009, p. 43.

²¹ P. Pettit, “*Homo Sapiens*” *Rediscovered*, p. 21.

²² For the relation between wonder and meaning see A. Schinkel, “Wonder, Mystery, and Meaning,” *Philosophical Papers* 48 [2] (2019), pp. 293–319, doi: 10.1080/05568641.2018.1462667.

²³ J. Bendik-Keymer, *The Reasonableness of Wonder*, p. 344.

²⁴ See A. Schinkel, *Wonder and Education: On the Educational Importance of Contemplative Wonder*, London 2021, ch. 1 (and the many sources listed there) for a fuller description and analysis of the experience and concept of wonder.

world,” how it impacts us, informs us, how we respond to it physically, emotionally, and so forth. Animals and plants embody the rhythm of day and night that stems from the earth’s rotation around its axis: when it grows dark, most birds fall silent and find a protected place to sleep; many flowers close for the night, and so we close our eyes and sleep. Being earth-bound, we are heavy, subject to gravity; therefore, as a horse’s spine sags with age, so ours does, and we shrink. Our bodies tell us when we need food, and when we go hungry for a long time, we (like other animals) become stressed and depressed. Our “animal nature” is undeniable.

Moreover, instead of observing ourselves from a standpoint within the human world (the “introspective” self-reflection which makes up the bulk of research in the humanities and social and behavioral sciences), we observe ourselves from a standpoint “outside” the human world, a biological, ecological, paleontological or geological perspective, which always takes in more than “us,” because we appear in a context of “other” life—or rather, a living context in which we are no less and no more “other” than other manifestations of life. We observe ourselves, also, not from *within* a particular standpoint in time and space, but as appearances in time and space, or, as Wittgenstein put it, “together with space and time” (emphasis in original).²⁵

Wondering at ourselves in this way serves to defamiliarize what it means to be human—it brackets taken-for-granted understandings of this that remain immersed in “the normal”—but may *also* serve to highlight what a *peculiar* species of animal we are, quite possibly an exceptional animal, for better or worse.

2.2. *Ways of Wondering at the Animals We Are*

There are many avenues of entry into wonder(ing) at and about ourselves as an animal species. Evolutionary biology offers a number of them. One is by making us aware of the origins of our bodies. Though no one may have planned them, human bodies have a plan, and this body plan is not fundamentally different from that of other animals. We have a front and a back, a top and a bottom, a mouth and an anus, and we have limbs sticking out. All this is true of flies as well. What is more, the genes that determine the structure of the body in flies (or mice, or fish, or any other bilaterally symmetrical animal) are essentially the same—and, wonderfully, the order of these *Hox* genes corresponds to the order of the body regions in which they are active: they are ordered from head to toe.²⁶ In the ways we fall ill, too, are clues to our embeddedness in the evolution of life; for instance, some metabolic diseases are caused by malfunctioning mitochondria, and mitochondria, scientists believe, were originally free-living microbes that became incorporated more than a billion years ago in the bodies of our very distant ancestors. Or, to give a perhaps more vivid example, “[m]en’s tendency to develop hernias is a trade-off between our

²⁵ L. Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914–1916*, New York 1961, 83e. Wittgenstein writes: “[T]he good life is the world seen *sub specie aeternitatis*. [...] The usual way of looking at things sees objects as it were from the midst of them, the view *sub specie aeternitatis* from outside. In such a way that they have the whole world as background. Is this it perhaps—in this view the object is seen together with space and time instead of in space and time?” (emphasis in original).

²⁶ N. Shubin, *Our Inner Fish*, pp. 89–110 and 182.

fish ancestry and our mammal present.” In this case, the full story is one about g-nads in male *Homo sapiens* (and many other mammals) descending, during embryonal development, from the liver to their free-dangling position.²⁷

Our senses provide a related avenue toward wonder. In her book, *A Natural History of the Senses*, Diane Ackerman writes:

We like to think that we are finely evolved creatures, in suit-and-tie or pantyhose-and-chemise, who live many millennia and mental detours away from the cave, but that’s not something our bodies are convinced of. [...] To begin to understand the gorgeous fever that is consciousness, we must try to understand the senses [...].²⁸

She points out that “[s]mell was the first of our senses, and it was so successful that in time the small lump of olfactory tissue atop the nerve cord grew into a brain. Our cerebral hemispheres were originally buds from the olfactory stalks. We think because we smelled.”²⁹ (Emphasis in original.) And she observes:

Our sense of smell, like so many of our other body functions, is a throwback to that time, early in evolution, when we thrived in the oceans. [...] [W]e carry the ocean within us [...]. [...] Our blood is mainly salt water, we still require a saline solution (salt water) to wash our eyes or put in contact lenses, and through the ages women’s vaginas have been described as smelling “fishy.” [...] Not only do we owe our sense of smell and taste to the ocean, but we smell and taste of the ocean.³⁰ (Emphasis in original.)

Yet another way to secure us firmly in the tangled bush of the evolution of earthly life—a way that at the same time highlights the fragility of the human experiment—is to show the dependence of our origins on pure chance. As Stephen Jay Gould writes in his marvelous book *Wonderful Life*, “if you wish to ask the question of the ages—why do humans exist?—a major part of the answer must be [...] because *Pikaia* survived the Burgess decimation” about half a billion years ago.³¹ In Gould’s view, there is no necessity whatsoever to our existence; evolution did not work toward us, nor does it end with us. “*Homo sapiens*, I fear, is [...] a wildly improbable evolutionary event well within the realm of contingency.”³²

At this point, it is worth pausing to ask why accounts of the origins of (aspects of) our bodies would evoke wonder—especially since they are not guaranteed to do so in everyone at all times. To my mind, they do have a strong wonder-evoking power, though always provided that the “listener” lets them sink in, and this power may be explained in terms of a number of factors that come together in these examples.³³ One is that they highlight the virtually infinite complexity of (the evolution of) life, a complexity that—amazingly—we can intellectually probe to some extent, but that also comes with a sense of extreme serendipity and contingency. Another is that these accounts “force” us to keep together in our minds extreme contrasts—between “simple” life forms and our own, between the physical and the

²⁷ Ibidem, pp. 193–197.

²⁸ D. Ackerman, *A Natural History of the Senses*, New York 1991, p. xviii–xix.

²⁹ Ibidem, p. 20.

³⁰ Ibidem, p. 20–21.

³¹ S.J. Gould, *Wonderful Life: The Burgess Shale and the Nature of History*, London 2000, p. 323.

³² Ibidem, p. 291.

³³ For this, I draw on R.W. Hepburn, *The Inaugural Address: Wonder*, pp. 7–12.

mental—while spanning vast distances in time. That we can philosophize now because eons ago some small creature’s olfactory sense served that creature well is an appropriate object of wonder, regardless of our ability to prove that link through scientific research; in part this is because the emergence of consciousness from organic matter remains mysterious, in part because, as Hepburn notes, “explanation runs *towards* the totality [of laws and entities], but there absolutely ends.”³⁴ Finally, there is an aesthetic element to the above examples, too, that is also likely to evoke wonder: there is a kind of beauty in the way the present remains linked to an unimaginably distant past; and beyond that, they direct our attention to the “miracle,” as Wittgenstein put it, “that the world exists. That what exists does exist.”³⁵

2.3. Ecology: Having a Niche and Being at Home in the World

In ecology, the concept of a “niche” is that of “a place in an ecosystem which a species has adapted to occupy.”³⁶ Or, in a more elaborate definition: “A summary of the conditions and resources that must be available in order for a species to maintain a population in the long term. A niche therefore is not a place but a conceptual volume with numerous dimensions (an n -dimensional hypervolume), such as temperature, humidity, and food supply, each defined by the tolerable range for that particular species.”³⁷ While these two definitions emphasize the conditions required for the survival and flourishing of species, other definitions stress the ecological role played by species: “The functional position of an organism in its environment, comprising the habitat in which the organism lives, the periods of time during which it occurs and is active there, and the resources it obtains there. In other words, its niche is the role that a species plays in a community.”³⁸ These are two sides of the same coin, of course, because a species cannot be part of an ecosystem without playing some role in it. It is impossible only to be acted upon; a species or rather individuals and populations belonging to a species always also act upon their “environment.” Within the concept of an ecological niche, it is important to distinguish the fundamental niche, “an abstraction of the conditions of survival for the organism when it is not competing with others,” from the *realized* niche, “the conditions of survival for the organism competing with others in the real world.”³⁹

The concept of a niche provides a fruitful avenue toward wondering at and about ourselves as an animal species because it throws a spotlight on the exceptionality of *Homo sapiens*—or at least of many historical and contemporary populations of our species. Whereas (populations of) other species tend to occupy clearly defined and relatively stable—though always dynamic—niches, the same cannot be said for *Homo sapiens* since the Late Pleistocene. Our species is certainly not the only

³⁴ Ibidem, p. 9.

³⁵ L. Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914–1916*, p. 86, cited in R.W. Hepburn, *The Inaugural Address: Wonder*, p. 10.

³⁶ P.H. Collin, *Dictionary of Environment & Ecology* (5th ed.), London 2004, lemma “niche.”

³⁷ R. Hine (ed.), *A Dictionary of Biology* (8th ed.), Oxford 2019, lemma “ecological niche.”

³⁸ M. Allaby, *A Dictionary of Ecology* (5th ed.), Oxford 2015, lemma “niche (ecological niche).”

³⁹ D.L. Hardesty, “The Human Ecological Niche,” *American Anthropologist* 74 (1972), p. 460.

species that has “culture,” but it is the only one with cumulative culture, allowing us (or perhaps in a way forcing us) to develop increasingly complex technologies and social arrangements.⁴⁰ This is also known as the “ratchet(ing) effect.”⁴¹ As a result, human niches (and the plural is absolutely necessary here) have been extraordinarily dynamic,⁴² and in the course of the Holocene, we see an enormous expansion of our realized niche, which, compared to other animal species, is much closer to our fundamental niche.⁴³ Moreover, in the case of much of contemporary humanity, the notion of an ecological function that is part of the concept of an ecological niche seems to have become divorced from any sense of playing a part in maintaining the ecosystem in which a niche is occupied. In fact, the role that humanity plays in the wider ecological community is now largely a destructive one, undermining the conditions for the survival and flourishing of countless animals, plants, and other species, including our own—though, of course, this also opens up niches for other species, such as extremophilic bacteria adapting so as to be able to break down plastics.⁴⁴

This unusual development in the human species is linked to a suite of capacities that set human beings at a distance from the world that allowed us an unprecedented measure of control over our environment, but at the same time, arguably produced an enduring sense of “homesickness” or alienation from the world. As I have argued elsewhere, “the metaphor of ‘homesickness’ does not diagnose a pathology but expresses an inescapable aspect of the human condition, namely that as human beings we are not ‘naturally’ at home in the world, but need to make sense of the world and our place in it.”⁴⁵ But when we wonder at ourselves as an animal species, we cannot stop at this peculiar feature of our species and can hardly fail to observe another way in which we are exceptional, namely the incredible diversity of ways of life exhibited by human populations (and even individuals). Moreover, we must acknowledge that “our” state of homelessness can become and, in the case of modern industrial societies, has become a pathology. While for a long time human populations have been able to find a home for themselves within the natural world, current industrialized societies offer a “home” that is entirely at odds with our and others’ ecological needs.

In sum, when we wonder at ourselves from an ecological perspective, we appear as liminal creatures, both animal and in some ways “beyond” animal, part of the natural world and outside of it. Wonder stems from that liminal position, but it also reveals how problematic that “we” is: part of human exceptionality is that

⁴⁰ G.L. Vale, L.G. Dean, A. Whiten, “Culture, Nonhuman,” [in:] *The International Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, H. Callan, S. Coleman (eds.), Hoboken 2018, doi: 10.1002/9781118924396.wbiea1662.

⁴¹ M. Tomasello, A.C. Kruger, H. Ratner, “Cultural Learning,” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 16 [3] (1993), pp. 459–511, doi: 10.1017/S0140525X0003123X.

⁴² A. Fuentes, “Human Niche, Human Behaviour, Human Nature,” *Interface Focus* 7 (2017): 20160136, doi: 10.1098/rsfs.2016.0136.

⁴³ T. Wayward, “Ecological Space,” p. 312.

⁴⁴ N. Atanasova, S. Stoitsova, T. Paunova-Krasteva, M. Kambourova, “Plastic Degradation by Extremophilic Bacteria,” *International Journal of Molecular Sciences* 22 [11] (2021), p. 5610, doi: 10.3390/ijms22115610.

⁴⁵ A. Schinkel, “Wonder, Mystery, and Meaning,” p. 303.

species-level generalizations are rarely possible, meaning that the term “human exceptionality,” when used descriptively rather than merely to refer to a conceptual construct, is one to be handled with protective gloves.

3. Ethical Quandaries of Human Exceptionality

Historically, if we survey the history of “Western” philosophy, we can see that two different functions or reasons for stressing human exceptionality dominate: a self-serving one, justifying (ab)use of animals, and one that is at first sight much nobler: reminding us of our ethical potential (see Pico della Mirandola above, for instance). The latter may be self-serving, too, however, if it stems from an exclusive concern with interhuman moral obligations. Quite often, we find the two functions combined; Aristotle and Kant (to offer just two examples) are cases in point.

In his *Politics* and *Ethics*, Aristotle argued that “men”—and by this, he did mean men in particular, though only free men, not slaves—are fundamentally different from brute animals.⁴⁶ “[T]he real difference between man and other animals is that humans alone have perception of good and evil, right and wrong, just and unjust.”⁴⁷ In other words, only human beings are (potentially, if they do not happen to be slaves, women, or children) moral and political beings. Only they (or “we”) are capable of virtue and thus of *eudaimonia*, the good life, the life of happiness or human flourishing. The reason why only human beings are capable of a virtuous life is that they are endowed with reason and speech (for which, in Greek, one and the same word can be used: *logos*). “Nature, as we say, does nothing without some purpose; and for the purpose of making man a political animal she has endowed him alone among the animals with the power of reasoned speech.”⁴⁸ This is not something we are born with, of course; at first, we are like the other animals: “for both children and animals have a share in voluntary action, but not in choice,” which requires deliberation.⁴⁹ Importantly, this fundamental difference Aristotle perceived between “men” and other animals had practical, moral and political implications: just as the soul should rule the body, man should rule woman, and rational masters should rule irrational slaves, so human beings should rule other animals—this is better for them. Tame animals, Aristotle argues, are better (off) than wild because they are kept safe.⁵⁰ But clearly, it is also better for us: “[W]e must believe, first, that plants exist for the sake of animals [a category which presumably includes human beings], second, that all other animals exist for the sake of man. [...] If [...] we are right in believing that nature makes nothing without some end in view, nothing to no purpose, it must be that nature has made all things specifically for the sake

⁴⁶ See the references below or excerpts in A. Linzey, P.B. Clarke (eds.), *Animal Rights: A Historical Anthology*, New York 2004.

⁴⁷ Aristotle, *The Politics*, Middlesex 1977, Book 1, ch. 2, p. 29.

⁴⁸ Aristotle, *Politics*, Book 1, ch. 2, p. 28.

⁴⁹ Aristotle, *The Ethics of Aristotle: The Nicomachean Ethics*, Harmondsworth 1985, Book 3, ch. ii, p. 116.

⁵⁰ Aristotle, *Politics*, Book 1, ch. 5, p. 33.

of man.”⁵¹ And this, for Aristotle, justified both the use of domesticated animals and hunting wild animals for food, clothing, or whatever other use.⁵²

Whereas Aristotle placed human beings and other animals—and he did say “other animals,” after all⁵³—on a continuum, though with a crucial qualitative difference between them, Kant chose to picture human beings as inhabitants, simultaneously, of two worlds, the natural world that is subject to laws of causality and the rational world of freedom, of rational beings that act according to reasons. Rational beings act according to self-imposed laws that all rational beings (as such) must accept, and acting in accordance with laws that all rational beings cannot but accept is the way to respect them as ends in themselves.⁵⁴ As (potentially) rational beings—and the only ones we know of—Kant held human beings to have a special dignity and to be worthy of a corresponding respect. Human beings have an intrinsic worth, whereas all other creatures only have a derivative value, depending on their value or use to us. In an essay on “duties towards animals and spirits,” or (with reference to Baumgarten) duties toward “beings which are beneath us and beings which are above us,” Kant asserts:

[S]o far as animals are concerned, we have no direct duties. Animals are not self-conscious and are there merely as a means to an end. That end is man. We can ask, “Why do animals exist?” But to ask, “Why does man exist?” is a meaningless question. Our duties towards animals are merely indirect duties towards humanity.⁵⁵

Kant is, of course, completely aware that human beings often do not act in accordance with their rational nature, i.e. with the moral law, and thus his emphasis on human exceptionality also serves the dual function of reminding us of what we can be and how we ought to be on the one hand and justifying a special moral treatment of human beings and the exploitation of animals on the other.

⁵¹ Ibidem, Book 1, ch. 8, p. 40. Jean Kazez rightly notes the self-serving inconsistency in Aristotle’s argumentation: “[t]he two grounds [Aristotle offers] for placing humans atop the double pedestal [i.e. on top of other animals, on top of plants] don’t sit very well with each other. You can think we’re above animals because they exist for our sake, to meet our needs *or* that we’re above animals in the sense that living under our rational command is good for them.” (J. Kazez, *Animalkind: What We Owe to Animals*, Chichester 2010, p. 20).

⁵² In fact, Aristotle wrote that it justified the use of war not only against wild animals, but also against “such men as are by nature intended to be ruled over but refuse”; see the reference in footnote 9. Thus, though Aristotle himself chose not to see it, his work also contains elements of a view that stresses the continuity and commonalities between humans and other animals. Moreover, his *wonder* at the natural world in all its forms can be and has been taken as inspiration for an ethics of human-animal relations that significantly reduces the emphasis on human exceptionality. See (among others) M. Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice*; M. Nussbaum, *Justice for Animals*; J. Bendik-Keymer, “The Other Species Capability & The Power of Wonder.” Still, these interpretations and elaborations of his work take us far beyond Aristotle’s own explicit views on human-animal relations.

⁵³ Given his biological interests it is not entirely surprising that Aristotle included us in the category “animals”; he wrote works on (other) animals as well: see D. Balme, *Aristotle’s ‘De Partibus Animalium I’ and ‘De Generatione Animalium I’* (with passages from II.1–3), Oxford 1972.

⁵⁴ See, for instance, J. Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* (4th ed.), New York 2003, ch. 10; A. MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics*, London–New York 2002, ch. 14; I. Kant, *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, Stuttgart 2002, part 3.

⁵⁵ I. Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, transl. L. Infield, New York 1963, p. 239.

Apart from these two functions we can distinguish a third, related to the function of bolstering interhuman morality but informed by a broader view of the category of moral patients. The utilitarian philosopher Peter Singer, for instance, recognized that the categories of moral agents and patients should not be conflated and that there are good reasons to consider the latter as considerably broader than the former. Famously, Singer argued against speciesism and, more concretely, against the use of animals for food, clothes, and animal experimentation. In countering the common objection to vegetarianism that other animals kill for food, and therefore so may we, Singer argues:

The point, of course, is that nonhuman animals are not capable of considering the alternatives, or of reflecting morally on the rights and wrongs of killing for food; they just do it. [...] Every reader of this book, on the other hand, is capable of making a moral choice on the matter. We cannot evade our responsibility for our choice by imitating the actions of beings who are incapable of making this kind of choice.⁵⁶

In Singer's work then—as in most other work in animal ethics—a crucial difference between human beings and other animals is recognized and emphasized in order to remind us of our moral obligations toward other animals, obligations that are uniquely ours.

Now, the first ethical quandary of human exceptionality may be described as follows: we have good reasons to want to be rid of human exceptionality as a justification for exploitative relations with other animals, but can we get rid of that without undermining the basis for caring and respectful moral relations with other species? Can we deny or downplay human exceptionality without undermining all the roles played by emphasizing our exceptionality?

This ethical quandary of human exceptionality is perhaps the central theoretical problem in animal ethics and certainly one of its core problems. Many arguments by animal advocates rely strongly on the premise of sameness or commonality between human beings and other animals, either because this commonality means that other animals share features with us that constitute grounds for moral considerability and/or for moral-motivational reasons. But those same arguments also rely on the premise of human exceptionality: unlike all other animals, we are moral beings and can choose not to eat meat, etc. If our commonality with other animals is stressed too much, it becomes hard to defend stringent moral duties toward other animals because our morality (our moral capability) is relativized or downplayed. (Equally, though less relevant to the argument of this paper, if our exceptionality is stressed too much, it may become difficult to deny humans a special moral status. But further exploration of this issue would require attention to underlying value theories.)

It is important to note that the quandary described here is real, not the result of an error in reasoning. Following the quote presented above, Singer anticipates the objection that by admitting that there is a significant difference between humans and other animals, he has revealed the flaw in his case for the equality of all animals. He replies by invoking the difference between moral patients and moral agents. One does not have to be a moral agent, i.e. be capable of making moral choices, to

⁵⁶ P. Singer, *Animal Liberation*, New York 2002, pp. 224–225.

be a member of the class of moral patients; the latter only requires having interests that can be frustrated or harmed, being capable of experiencing forms of pleasure and pain, and the like. Now, Singer is obviously right that one should not conflate the categories of moral patients and moral agents. But that does not mean it is perfectly easy to uphold both human exceptionality and strong moral obligations toward other animals. The problem has both a psychological and a philosophical dimension. Psychologically, for many people, a sense of human exceptionality will be accompanied by a sense of superiority or moral priority. And philosophically, if we engage deeply in wondering about human beings *as animals*, it becomes difficult to resist, from a supposedly universal standpoint, the implications of recognizing the crucial role played in morality by contingent moral sentiments. Moreover, such wondering is likely to give rise to the need for an empirical correction to the anthropology implied in much ethical theory: human beings appear, in actual fact, to be far less capable of what they are supposed to be capable of, if we accept that “ought implies can”—we are far more like other animals than we like to think, far less “rational,” far less capable of considering long-term consequences, and so on.

But in fact, in a final twist, we must recognize that we are also far less like other animals than would be good for this world because we are uniquely capable of influencing the world in ways that have destructive consequences that we seem to be unable or unwilling (which may stem from another kind of inability) to consider. This is the point made by philosopher John Gray when he speaks of *Homo sapiens*, by paleontologists Jordi Agustí and Mauricio Antón when they say that “*Homo sapiens* appears unique because of its ability to exterminate other species,” and by anthropologist Pat Shipman when she writes: “I maintain that humans are the most invasive species that has ever lived.”⁵⁷

Acknowledging this forces us to recognize a second ethical quandary related to human exceptionality, namely that from an ethical point of view our exceptionality is, as Justin Gregg points out, a double-edged sword.⁵⁸ Our much-lauded exceptional capacities and qualities, which have allowed us to create art, cumulative culture, civilizations, science, and so on, are equally responsible for the (mass) extinctions we have caused and are causing, and for the perverse ideologies, extreme violence and extraordinary cruelty by which we make each other suffer.⁵⁹ If we wonder honestly about ourselves as the animal species we are, we cannot skip over the fact

⁵⁷ J. Gray, *Heresies: Against Progress and Other Illusions*, London 2004, ch. 3; J. Agustí, M. Antón, *Mammoths, Sabertooths, and Hominids: 65 Million Years of Mammalian Evolution in Europe*, New York 2002, p. 280; P. Shipman, *The Invaders: How Humans and Their Dogs Drove Neanderthals to Extinction*, Cambridge–London 2015, p. 2.

⁵⁸ J. Gregg, *If Nietzsche Were a Narwhal: What Animal Intelligence Reveals about Human Stupidity*, London 2022, p. 255: “Because we are indeed exceptional if not necessarily ‘good,’ we have generated more death and destruction for life on this planet than any other animal, past and present.”

⁵⁹ In light of this it is striking how many anthropological statements about the exceptionality of *Homo sapiens* are overall positive in tone, highlighting the appearance of more complex tools, art, and symbolism. But for a view that highlights the unique evolutionary path of human beings also in terms of our problematic traits, such as our distinctive capacity for warfare, see A. Fuentes, “*Human Niche, Human Behaviour, Human Nature.*”

that the exceptional qualities that make us—in a sense—moral beings also make us a deeply troubled and troubling species.

4. Can Wonder at Ourselves as an Animal Species Decenter Us?

Facing this question, we are once more confronted with a paradox. On the one hand, wonder at ourselves as an animal species decenters us by definition because it requires us to take up a standpoint outside the human world. This means, first-ly, that we do not look outwards from ourselves as the center of our circle of vision and, secondly, that the view we get instead is not one in which we can assign centrality to any species but one of evolutionary and ecological interconnectedness. In Mylius' terms, to wonder at ourselves as a species of animal implies that we overcome descriptive anthropocentrism, which at least paves the way for normative decentering.⁶⁰ On the other hand, the question itself foregrounds an aspect of human exceptionality: the capacity for wonder. Although affirming human exceptionality is by no means synonymous with affirming normative anthropocentrism, it does—as argued in the previous section—create difficulties for non-anthropocentric ethics that rely on a strong downplaying of human exceptionality. So we need to take a closer look at the potential ethical import of what happens when we wonder at ourselves as an animal species. I will do so under three headings, following the key themes identified in section 2: commonality, contingency, and exceptionality.

4.1. Commonality

Wondering at ourselves as a species of animal is clearly not the same as biocentric wonder.⁶¹ It does not necessarily involve admiration for the intricate complexity or elegance of other kinds of animals or for the “solutions” evolution has found for the problems species encountered, and it does not place nature or other animals at the center of wondering attention. Still, there are affinities between these ways of wondering and the moral tendencies they are likely to inspire. As said, one “effect” of wondering at ourselves as a species of animal (or rather one thing implied by it) is that instead of our differences, our commonalities with other species are foregrounded. This involves both shared ancestry and common traits. Raimond Gaita argued that perceiving, in a way that includes feeling, our common humanity with other people is crucial to being susceptible to our moral obligations toward them and much more powerful than merely observing that they have all the traits that we generally consider necessary for moral considerability and being bearers of human rights.⁶² Similarly, perceiving and feeling our commonality with other animal species is morally powerful; it can displace a sense of moral priority and sensitize us to our moral obligations toward (individuals of) other species.

⁶⁰ B. Mylius, “Three Types of Anthropocentrism,” p. 186.

⁶¹ See references in footnote 18 for advocates of biocentric wonder.

⁶² R. Gaita, *A Common Humanity: Thinking about Love and Truth and Justice*, Abingdon 2008.

Secondly, foregrounding commonality is likely to come with a nuancing and critical questioning of beliefs regarding human exceptionality. We are rational animals, but are we really that rational? We are capable of complex feelings, but is the same not true for many other species? We have language, but is that actually as unique as we thought? And should it necessarily be seen as a sign of superiority, or is it just a result of different ecological needs, an adaptation we happen to have evolved because it benefited us?

Furthermore, as wonder heightens our awareness of our “animality,” it shakes our moral confidence—not because animality implies “brutishness,” but because it foregrounds the overwhelming extent to which human behavior is not the result of the exercise of an extraordinary autonomy, but determined by the (social) environment. Equally, it shows our sympathies to be limited in much the same way that those of other social animals are.⁶³ Gazing upon ourselves in wonder, we may well appear as a flawed, hopeless species suffering from an exceptional distance between potential and actuality. As a result, while it may sensitize us toward our moral responsibility towards other species, wondering at ourselves as an animal species may equally undermine our moral resolve.

4.2. Contingency

Wondering at ourselves as an animal species comes with a strong sense of contingency. As Stephen Jay Gould powerfully argued, we are not the crown of creation, nor the culmination of evolution, and if in the distant past things had been only a tiny bit different, we would not have been here to ponder our exceptionality—we are in that sense lucky to be here. This realization works powerfully against a sense of superiority or priority—the sense present, for example, in both Aristotelian philosophy and traditional Christian doctrine that other species were created for us.

There is a future-oriented side to this, too: just like other species, *Homo sapiens* will not be around forever. It is hard to predict what the lifespan of our species will be, whether it will be a couple of million years as is average for mammals, or much more or much less; our unusually strong influence on the conditions of our own evolution makes both possibilities equally likely.⁶⁴ At any rate, the realization that we will at some point be gone, and most likely before the death of our star, is likely to have a humbling effect and to relativize the importance of human projects such as the building of empires or the striving for technological progress. Even at a smaller scale, I find it diminishes the urgency of our day-to-day business and deadlines—a psychological effect that is not logically necessitated by wonder at ourselves as an animal species but that harmonizes well with it. However, the urgency

⁶³ G.J. Warnock’s description of the human predicament in terms of limited resources, limited information, limited intelligence, limited rationality, and limited sympathies still seems quite apt; he considered limited sympathies to be the most important one “in the inherent liability to badness of the human predicament”; G.J. Warnock, *The Object of Morality*, London 1973, p. 26.

⁶⁴ As Pettitt notes, “[i]n evolutionary terms we are a crazy experiment” (P. Pettitt, “*Homo sapiens*” *Rediscovered*, p. 10). And if we are honest, the jury is still out—see J. Gregg, *If Nietzsche Were a Narwhal*.

of moral projects may also be diminished by the view *sub specie aeternitatis*—how important are our moral efforts, in the grand scheme of things?

4.3. *Exceptionality*

Even in the act of wondering itself, wondering at ourselves as a species of animal also foregrounds “our” exceptionality (but remember my cautionary remark on “human exceptionality”). Not only in this act, however, but also in realizing how far “we” have run away from the meaning of an ecological niche or home that applies to other species. We are an unusually unusual animal, exceptional for better and worse—and from an ecological perspective perhaps mostly for worse, since the “better” (under which heading may come our abilities to create art and poetry, exhibit altruism, fight for justice, and so on) does not really benefit any species except our own. Human moral efforts in the field of nature conservation and animal advocacy merely counteract human-inflicted damage, after all. As Beth Shapiro writes, “[w]e are [...] unlike other species. [...] We outcompete all other species by killing them or taming them. We adapt to changing climates by engineering solutions outside of biology and, now, by engineering biology.”⁶⁵ As noted in section 2, human exceptionality is a double-edged sword. That means that becoming more aware, through wonder, of that exceptionality may at the same time reinforce our sense of moral responsibility (resulting from our extraordinary mental and emotional capacities) and a sense of despair about our moral capabilities (not to say moral incapability).

5. Conclusion

At this point, it may feel odd to arrive at a conclusion. In fact, I believe that wondering about ourselves as an animal species inevitably comes with a certain inconclusiveness because our wondering starts from and highlights our liminal position in the world. That liminality was expressed by Pico della Mirandola half a millennium ago as that we are “neither heavenly nor earthly, neither mortal nor immortal.” But in Pico’s work this was immediately preceded by God’s declaration to “man” that “I have placed thee at the center of the world”—something that a contemporary wonderer, informed by biology, ecology, and related disciplines, could hardly maintain. Still, wonder at ourselves as an animal species does not impose one particular narrative: it may completely (descriptively) decenter us in stories about life on earth, but equally the narrative may come to center upon us as objects and subjects (and therefore special objects) of wonder—the latter does not presuppose a flawed conception of evolution as culminating in us. Even a narrative that highlights human

⁶⁵ B. Shapiro, *Life as We Made It: How 50,000 Years of Human Innovation Refined—and Redefined—Nature*, London 2022, p. 260. Curiously, while admitting that bison almost went extinct twice because of “us” (i.e. *Homo sapiens*), she still manages to say that “[t]hanks to us, more than 500,000 bison live today in herds across North America,” completely ignoring the fact that this conservation success merely compensates somewhat for our earlier destructive influence.

exceptionality does not justify normative anthropocentrism, however; as noted in section 3, it underlines our moral responsibility as much as our special status.

Is there an escape from the ethical quandaries of human exceptionality? I do not think there is. I believe we cannot avoid holding within our minds at the same time our commonality with other animals and our exceptionality, and within the latter, both our potential for moral responsiveness and sensitivity and our extraordinary capacity for cruelty and destruction. If this seems impossible, I would argue that wonder is like a quantum state, capable of holding mutually exclusive possibilities within itself. At the very least, then, to act from a state of wonder at ourselves as a species of animal implies an openness to the possibilities we exclude when we act.

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