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**From the Selected Works of Mary-Jane Rubenstein**

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Jonathan Malesic, Review of *Strange Wonder*  
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Mary-Jane V Rubenstein, *Wesleyan University*



Available at: [https://works.bepress.com/mary\\_jane\\_rubenstein/28/](https://works.bepress.com/mary_jane_rubenstein/28/)

Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Avicenna. With the exception of a brief discussion of the hierarchy of man and angel among the three religions, here Brague does not attempt to elucidate any differences among Jews, Muslims, and Christians on the topic—nor is the point of his discussion their similarity. This is simply taken *a priori*. In contrast, his delightful chapter “Geocentrism as the Humiliation of Man” broadly examines Christian, Jewish, and Muslim cosmological views, but with careful attention to context that shows convincingly that the classical and medieval notion of the earth at the center of the cosmos did not elevate the place of humanity, but instead was a sign of its insignificance.

This focus on Latin Christianity points to a teleological and contemporary orientation. The Arabic philosopher who receives the most attention by far in the collection is Averroes; he is the subject of the only chapter devoted to a single medieval figure (Chapter 16, “Was Averroes a “Good Guy”?). Yet Averroes, as Brague himself proclaims, “was translated and commented upon, and quite quickly, by both Christians and Jews of the northern Mediterranean.” In contrast, the Arab world “almost totally forgot him” (221). Averroes now figures in the law curriculum in Paris, and it is with this background that Brague considers his legacy. Brague’s focus on Europe is not uniformly positive; he sarcastically wonders about the cultural vitality of Europe: “But are Europeans really living? . . . Or are they zombies frantically agitating their limbs so as to pass for being truly alive?” (19). Brague gives his readers a welcome series of dynamic and intriguing views of the philosophical landscape of the Middle Ages, with an eye to unpacking contemporary European dilemmas.

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*Strange Wonder: The Closure of Metaphysics and the Opening of Awe.*  
By Mary-Jane Rubenstein. Columbia University Press, 2009. 272 pages.  
\$50.00.

Philosophy begins with *thaumazein*—wonder, amazement, awe—as Socrates says in Plato’s *Theaetetus*. The problem, according to Mary-Jane Rubenstein, is that Western philosophers since then have preferred the security of calculation to that head-spinning wonder. Philosophy has found it easier to “internalize [wonder], presenting itself as the agent, rather than the patient, of wonder” (16). The result has been disastrous, as the calculative mindset reinforces the morally dangerous binaries and categories that threaten to see people and things as less than they are and as less than oneself.

Rubenstein aims in *Strange Wonder* to rehabilitate *thaumazein*, hoping that it can shatter the rigid, closed-ended thinking that underwrites the West’s worst political endeavors. To do this, she examines the thought of four

twentieth-century philosophers: Martin Heidegger and three heirs to his contentious legacy, Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Jacques Derrida. It is in this tradition, Rubenstein maintains, that we can see most clearly the possibility and challenge of renewing philosophical wonder.

The introductory chapter briefly situates the question of wonder in the history of philosophy, starting with Thales, who marveled at the heavens so intently that he fell into a well (20). Philosophers early on recognized that wonder can inhibit rational investigation, and vice versa, and in subsequent centuries, they began to favor investigation, allying themselves with early modern science. From that point, the great wonderers were outsiders to mainstream philosophy. Heidegger's significance is that he "finally got Western thought to listen to and for the ghost of *thaumazein*" (17). Heidegger is a difficult philosophical hero, as Rubenstein acknowledges. Indeed, in criticizing Heidegger's Nazism, Hannah Arendt argued that excessive wonder would lead one to ignore mundane moral and political realities, including others' suffering. For Rubenstein, Arendt's evaluation is completely backward: "any unquestioning capitulation to ideology, Heidegger's included, is a matter not of too much wonder, but rather of too little" (23). We must therefore admit that even philosophy's prophet of wonder found it hard to sustain wonder's open-ended indeterminacy.

Following the introduction, four chapters take the figures in turn. Rubenstein considers the authors in great depth and with good humor, examining works from all stages of their careers, showing them to be imperfect and ambivalent wonderers. Heidegger recognizes the dangers of mere curiosity about the world and ignorance of everyday concerns that attend the loss of philosophical wonder. To him, wonder includes two components: *Erschrecken*, shock at the existence of beings, and *Scheu*, awe at being itself (34). These are held together in the basic philosophical attitude of "*Verhaltenheit*, a mood whose steady liminality is maintained through the equiprimordial countermovements of *Erschrecken* and *Scheu*" (39). Oscillating between complementary experiences of wonder, someone exhibiting *Verhaltenheit* never rests easily in predetermined categories. The world is instead always surprising. In emphasizing *Verhaltenheit*, Rubenstein indicates that the way to maintain openness to wonder will involve not self-identity, but relation.

Interpersonal relations are focuses for each of the three post-Heideggerians considered. For Levinas, indeterminacy suffuses meeting the other, who invites both violence and moral responsibility and who always points toward an infinite Other. Because Levinas's account acknowledges a destabilizing terror and awe in every interaction, it seems initially to offer what Rubenstein is seeking: an attitude open to indeterminacy and "the extraordinary in and through the ordinary, the awe-full truth in the midst of the [Platonic] cave" (24). But as Rubenstein then shows, Levinas's ethic does not finally have room for indeterminacy itself. In positing two different senses of awe-inspiring infinity, the *Ille* and the *il y a*, Levinas maps them onto the good/bad binary and then further maps the "bad" *il y a* onto chaos, materiality, and the feminine. There is thus

no real indeterminacy here; Levinas places the infinite under a conceptual binary, in which it is already determined that a form of infinitude should be shunned.

Nancy gets less attention than the other three; much of his chapter reconsiders Heidegger. From Nancy, we learn that self-identity breaks down in the “exposure” characteristic of a community stripped of any “myth” of its secure foundation (118). On Nancy’s account, the Levinasian *il y a* is “all there is” (121), a contingent, pluralized field of interaction. In such a situation, “the work of thinking is . . . unworking,” breaking down the structures of thought that inhibit acknowledging groundlessness and plurality (115).

The chapter on Derrida aims to show how genuine decisions occur when the wonderer is confronted with indeterminacy’s paradox: “for a decision to be itself, it must be undecidable, otherwise it is mere calculation” (145) and therefore, in a sense, decided *a priori*. A major concern here is subjectivity, working out *who* decides the undecidable. Rubenstein’s best exemplars of genuine *thau-mazein* and of decisive subjectivity are found in Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*, in which the pseudonymous author is amazed, for better and for worse, by Abraham’s movement of faith in the face of undecidability. She gets to this point by way of Derrida’s *Gift of Death*, in which Derrida fails to maintain undecidability precisely because he overlooks Abraham’s faith in the absurd. Kierkegaard’s Abraham believes that he will sacrifice Isaac and then get Isaac back in this life; resolving the wondrous absurdity is not postponed to an indefinite future, but is a wonder within the mundane. Derrida’s Abraham, by contrast, is a figure of resignation in the face of the impossibility of giving up Isaac and keeping him, too.

*Strange Wonder* can read like an account of Derrida and the others’ failures to remain true to their own standards for philosophical wonder. It may make the reader wonder, if these figures cannot remain open to wonder’s indeterminacy, then how essential to the philosophical enterprise can wonder really be? Even Heidegger, seeking to return philosophy to the insecure path of wonder, cannot sustain it: “the closer Heidegger comes to *thau-mazein*, the farther he runs from it” (47). In his lectures on Plato, Heidegger seems to claim that truth lies in clear and distinct discoveries, forgetting his own doctrine that it is found only “in the unrelenting difference of the between” (56).

Rubenstein hints toward wonder’s wider significance in an epilogue, remarking on the early modern obsession with collecting and classifying “wonders” from far-away lands and tying the two components of *Verhaltenheit* to their absurd misappropriation in the American “shock and awe” military campaign against Iraq in 2003. The modern nation, like the modern individual, in awe only of itself, aims “to *inflict* shock and awe, . . . ultimately *imposing* wonder, in the most terrifying ways, upon the world it masters” (188). Ethically speaking, then, wonder’s merit is in “keeping things difficult” (125), avoiding the easy, once-and-for-all closures offered by arrogant self-identity, autonomy, and ideology.

While few would dispute either the unwisdom of reducing the truly wondrous to the merely curious or the unethicity of idolizing oneself, radical

indeterminacy seems an excessive remedy for the sickness Rubenstein diagnoses. Rubenstein may underestimate just how difficult it already is to find just and livable, yet fleeting and revisable, closures in ethics and politics. The architects of the shock and awe offensive could have seen the error of their ways had they only listened to post-Heideggerians like Arendt and Richard Rorty, for whom morality involves self-critique and politics concerns achieving the best situations here and now with the materials at hand. To Rubenstein's credit, she articulates perhaps the best case against her argument in quoting Rorty's objection to Derridean indeterminacy in a long footnote (227–228). As Rorty suggests, advocates of indeterminacy have provided many fruitful new ways of thinking, but indeterminacy is not good at outlining ways of living, and therefore it alone cannot be the philosophical norm.

In all, the book offers a new understanding of an influential sector of twentieth-century philosophy. Seen through the lens of the attempt to remain open to wonder, these thinkers aim to remain true to philosophy's oldest, and perhaps contrary, impulses: to marvel at the world and to determine how to live. This perspective will surely be valuable to scholars of modern Continental philosophy of religion.

As a study of wonder itself, however, *Strange Wonder* may have limited appeal. A study with such a sweeping aim (reversing a trend that began virtually when "Western philosophy" itself began [12]) can only succeed with very wide historical scope, but it cannot convince experts without careful, sustained attention to major thinkers in the tradition the author is trying to overturn. Rubenstein opted for sustained attention over scope, and as a result she will likely convince experts in the Continental tradition that openness to wonder can cure the ills Heidegger and his heirs saw in philosophy. Many such readers may not need convincing, however, precisely because those already committed to post-Heideggerian thought are probably already inclined to remain open to indeterminacy. Those not already committed to this tradition may find the book's long chapters, filled with terms of art, rather daunting.

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*Buddhism and Science: A Guide for the Perplexed.* By Donald S. Lopez Jr. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008. 264 pages. \$25.00.

A quick electronic search of "Buddhism and science" will yield hundreds of enthusiastic articles, books, and web pages claiming the compatibility or complementarity of these two seemingly disparate ways of thought and practice. Many claim that science studies the material world, while Buddhism studies the mind with similar empirical precision, or that Buddhism is a kind of science itself rather than a religion. What is often lost in these claims is that