
Review

Reclaiming wonder: After the sublime

Genevieve Lloyd

Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2018, viii + 231pp.,

ISBN: 978-1474433112

Contemporary Political Theory (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-018-00297-6>

The story of wonder spans millennia and occupied the thoughts and efforts of a dizzying array of thinkers pursuing a plethora of intellectual ends. With a multiplicity of definitions and uses, wonder served as a marker for wisdom and inquiry, states of mind, and as a precondition for the related term ‘sublime.’ All of which leads one to puzzle over the banality of the uses that people make of wonder today. As Genevieve Lloyd argues in *Reclaiming Wonder: After the Sublime*, wonder in the twenty-first century often seems limited to minor curiosity, typically of a childlike nature, or is relegated to the fantasy genres of films and books. Such a characterization misses out on the significance of a term that has great potential political use. Thus, Lloyd seeks to rescue the idea of wonder and reassert its importance through an analysis of its use from Plato to the present.

Lloyd starts with a discussion of the meanings of wonder, and by noting the lack of any contemporary or sustained overview of the topics from a philosophical point of view. The main part of the introduction offers a brief overview of the chapters to come and something of a justification for the choice of authors. Some seem obvious including Plato, Aristotle, Burke and Kant. Others provide an alternative entry point into the topic through, for example, the novels of Flaubert and Shelley. The volume is relatively slim and it is not surprising that some authors are absent. As Lloyd shifts from ancient to early modern philosophy, she leaves some Roman and early medieval purveyors of wonders, such as Pliny the Elder or Isidore of Seville, unmentioned. While absent authors might provide interesting historical context for the idea of wonder, they do not meet Lloyd’s overarching goal of examining the philosophical, and ultimately political potential of the topic.

The narrative is largely chronological and begins, in chapter one, with an examination of wonder in antiquity. Plato and Aristotle, of course, each had something to say about this topic. Plato discussed it as the source of philosophy due to its ability to perplex and bewilder people trying to exercise their intellect. Aristotle also links it to the origins of knowledge. Wonder leads us to seek answers to the questions that confront us in our daily lives.



Lloyd skips over a millennium or two in order to cover Descartes and Spinoza in the second chapter. Descartes, Lloyd believes, viewed wonder as a state of the soul, one that immobilized people but helped them focus attention on the unexpected. Spinoza, however, repudiated this view of wonder. Instead, he believed wonder caused action on the part of people and led them to use their imagination to grapple with the unfamiliar. Lloyd turns in the next chapter to the classic accounts of the sublime penned by Burke and Kant. Wonder was associated with the momentous and the overwhelming and, in this way, had connections with religious feelings. Lloyd suggests that wonder thus provided a basis for ideas about the sublime that emerged in the age of Enlightenment. Burke's version of the sublime was not subsumed entirely by aesthetics but evoked a terror and astonishment. Kant lodges the sublime within human reason. Lloyd, drawing on Deleuze, seeks to situate Kant's idea of the sublime, and wonder, within the overarching arguments found in his *Critiques*.

Having so far focused largely on standard philosophical works, Lloyd turns, in chapter four, to an analysis of the Romantic period. After a brief look at Hegel, Schelling, and Schopenhauer, she undertakes an extended discussion of Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* (1818). The story of the scientist Frankenstein, and of his nameless creature, combines the terror and excitement of a variety of debates on the nature of life, the power of natural philosophy (and especially the new science of electricity), and the nature of the soul. The setting of the story's finale, at the Arctic Circle, drives home the terrifying wonder and sublime beauty of the bleak, seemingly lifeless terrain.

In the fifth chapter, Lloyd analyzes the connections between wonder and the notion of stupidity. In this case, stupidity is not a deficiency in thought processes or ignorance, but a universal condition described as a mental stillness caused by encounters with the wondrous. The French author Flaubert associates this type of stupidity with a denial of thinking found when someone falls into a stupor. Lloyd provides another extended literary discussion exploring pertinent themes found in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and especially his unfinished novel, *Bouvard and Pecuchet* along with the related *Dictionary of Accepted Ideas*. In *Bouvard and Pecuchet*, the eponymous heroes start out as clerks but, thanks to an inheritance, begin to do some of the things they could not do before, such as spend time acquiring knowledge for the general betterment of humanity. Unfortunately, they transform their wonder into stupidity when, after suffering accusations of subversive behavior, they turn to recording knowledge rather than using it to solve problems. As part of this analysis, Lloyd examines writings by Foucault and Sartre, both of whom engaged with the life and works of Flaubert.

The last four chapters propel Lloyd's argument through the philosophical ideas of the twentieth century and provide the most direct and extended discussion of the impact of wonder and the sublime on the political realm. Chapter six examines Heidegger and Arendt (who appears again later). Through a discussion of the former's ideas about boredom, Lloyd emphasizes how considering strangeness and indeterminacy led him to wonder as a form of not-knowing. Arendt agrees with Heidegger that wonder was more than just an emotion driving people to be astonished and ask



questions when confronted with something strange. She also suggests that wonder is really an ‘admiring wonder’ (p. 135) because it forced a pause in thinking.

The seventh chapter tackles Derrida and his analysis of the ancient idea of *aporia*, when the mind becomes perplexed and stops. Drawing on a variety of literary and philosophical sources (including Flaubert), Derrida connects wonder again with stupidity and the French idea of *bêtise*, here defined more broadly than mere stupidity and as a peculiarly human condition rather than simply animal bestiality.

Lloyd turns in chapter eight to a discussion of political wonder and social change in the twentieth century with a particular focus on Arendt. The chapter begins with a discussion of political language, drawing on writers like George Orwell and Derrida, as well as the concept of social imaginaries. Wonder, Lloyd suggests, can serve as a powerful tool of social and political critique by applying it to received wisdom and other forces that could limit active thinking. To grapple directly with this possibility, Lloyd takes Arendt’s writings on refugees and the current political debate over “asylum seekers” as an extended example. She notes that wonder in this case manifests as shock and dismay when people realize their expectations might not fit the political realities. The debate over strong borders and protection, Lloyd argues, stems from a political delusion that limits options and prevents political leaders from reimagining their range of possible solutions.

The last substantive chapter examines the relationship between wonder and religion in modern secular societies. Lloyd discusses, among others, Lyotard’s views on the sublime in Kant, and how they relate to ideas about religious awe. She ends with a short conclusion pondering the place of wonder going forward. The author hopes that this future includes a reassertion on the part of people to connect modern ideas of wonder with those in the past, while simultaneously ensuring the multiplicity of views regarding wonder. Wonder, Lloyd believes, can challenge ideas of certainty and perhaps help motivate deeper understandings that could lead to fresh insights and help solve current political and social problems.

Lloyd’s overall argument is wide-ranging and thoughtful. She draws on an impressive array of sources and authors from the Greeks to the present. This is a lot to tackle in a short space but Lloyd largely stays focused on her task. Her attempt to apply wonder to the current political problems facing asylum seekers provides a coherent demonstration of how a more nuanced understanding of wonder could help people engage with issues in a concerted fashion. A few minor typographical errors in the text do not detract from the grand sweep of Lloyd’s survey of wonder and the sublime.

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