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Mary-Jane Rubenstein, *Strange Wonder: The Closure of Metaphysics and the Opening of Awe* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), pp. 272. $45.00; £26.50.

Philosophy not only begins in wonder, argues Mary-Jane Rubenstein, but also should remain there, because it is wonder which keeps us properly attuned to the 'strangeness' and 'shock of the every day', and directs us to look ongoingly for 'the extraordinary in and through the ordinary' (pp. 23–4). Thus, fighting against what she perceives is the common philosophical tendency in the West to foreclose prematurely on wonder, Rubenstein urges us instead to '*stay with* the perilous wonder that resists final resolution, simple identity, and sure teleology' (p. 24). Here, Plato's Socrates offers some initial inspiration: in his dialogue with Theaetetus, Socrates engages in the sort of wondering (*thaumazein*) which both initiates philosophical inquiry and sustains it, keeping it open, awash in uncertainty and indeterminacy. In further developing and defending this concept of wonder, Rubenstein relies heavily (though not uncritically) on four twentieth-century continental philosophers: Martin Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-Luc Nancy and Jacques Derrida. Heidegger in particular looms larger here, since he isolates what Rubenstein calls wonder's 'double movement': *Erschrecken*, or the initial 'shock . . . that, strictly speaking, beings cannot be' (p. 36), and *Scheu*, the subsequent 'awe' that beings nevertheless are – or, that 'being *happens*. Where being cannot possibly happen' (p. 37).

A central concern of the book, which Rubenstein voices and to which she remains clearly (and rightly) attuned, is whether wonder has deleterious social and political effects. Hannah Arendt originally voiced this criticism against Heidegger, attributing Heidegger's own terrible political decision to join National Socialism in Germany to excessive wonder – the sort of wonder that frees the wonderer from any particular social and political attachments and obligations, and therefore also 'allegedly renders the philosopher incapable of forming opinions or making decisions' (p. 21). In response, Rubenstein argues that wonder has an intrinsic this-worldliness that attunes the wonderer to the ethical needs of the other. Through her analyses of Heidegger, Levinas and Nancy (in each of the first three chapters), she claims to show that 'far from disabling ethical being-in-the-world, a truly sustained *thaumazein* would expose existents neither as escapist nor as egocentric, but rather as always and only (in)essentially bound up with one another' (p. 133). In order fully to counter Arendt's objection, Rubenstein turns in the final chapter to analyse and defend Derrida's claim that 'undecidability' conditions every instance of concrete decision-making and remains essential

for responsibility. Perhaps most interesting here is Rubenstein's analysis of Derrida's reading (and as it turns out, misreading) of Kierkegaard on the story of the binding of Isaac in Genesis 22. For Rubenstein, it is because Abraham remains caught in the anxiety of undecidability, and maintains wondrous 'faith in the impossible *in this* life' or the 'absurd' (p. 172) – that is, faith in the return of the son that he agrees to sacrifice – that he is free to act, not stymied by self-reliance, self-certainty or ethical calculation, even though in the end 'it is impossible to say "who" made the decision, for the decision was made, if it was made, not by a self or an Other, but through their infinitely complicated, mutually interrupted *relation* at the terrifying height of absolute undecidability' (p. 175).

Strange Wonder is passionately argued and engagingly written. Moreover, it is impressively ambitious: in a real sense, Rubenstein aims to rehabilitate, by way of genuine philosophical retrieval, the Western philosophical tradition itself, reinscribing within it with the very attitude of wonder from which it was born. Wonder, she powerfully concludes, is both fundamental and irrepressible: 'it will not "just go away," and much like the phenomenon of religion itself, the harder the West tries to expunge wonder, the more disastrously it asserts itself' (p. 189). Claims like this are clearly fraught with social, political and religious implications, some of which Rubenstein only begins to explore. More tantalisingly and frustratingly left unexplored in the book are the specifically theological dimensions of wonder, and the theological questions that Rubenstein's rich philosophical analysis of wonder raises. For example, Rubenstein clearly appreciates and defends wonder's apophatic character – its own groundless, 'awful uncertainty' (p. 188) and indeterminacy – but she only gestures at what a wonder-infused apophatic or negative theology might look like.

More problematic, from an alternative philosophical and theological perspective, is the opposition Rubenstein sets up between wonder and knowledge. Rubenstein argues that closing off wonder's indeterminacy through knowledge leads to internalising wonder within the subjective, 'securing' self. But a comparable, mirroring worry also remains: without knowledge, we cease to be anchored to a reality outside of ourselves about which we ongoingly can wonder. Arendt's fundamental concern also remains: devoid of any grounded convictions or beliefs, the persistent wonderer remains vulnerable to external manipulation, socially, politically and intellectually. From this perspective, a wonder replete with indeterminacy and divested of any knowledge turns out to be not very wondrous at all.

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