Those who have become perplexed by contemporary continental philosophy — those left wondering how such dizzying thought applies to reality at all — will discover in the important book, *Strange Wonder*, a way for thinking through (with) this uncertainty.

The *end* pursued in Mary-Jane Rubenstein’s first monograph is an exposition of the very *beginning* of philosophy according to Socrates: wonder. Yet while Western philosophy acknowledges that wonder is its origin or catalyst, it almost ineluctably attempts to tame or eliminate that same wonder in which it was conceived. Rubenstein locates a resistance to the inhospitable welcome philosophy has traditionally extended to its progenitor in the work of Martin Heidegger. Through Heidegger and three philosophers who inherit Heidegger’s work — Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Jacques Derrida — Rubenstein explores “what it might mean to stay with the perilous wonder that resists final resolution, simple identity, and sure teleology” (23).

In witty and inviting prose, Rubenstein introduces wonder through the Platonic dialogue *Theaetetus* (1). Socratic wonder [*thaumazein*] “arises when the understanding cannot master that which lies closest — when surrounded by utterly ordinary concepts and things, the philosopher suddenly finds himself surrounded on all sides by aporia” (3). For Socrates, this wonder is where philosophy begins (3). Socratic wonder, however, ought not be confused with the serene contemplation from an arm-chair that the word *wonder* might connote for the contemporary reader; rather, Rubenstein wants to sustain the “frightening indeterminacy” of wonder which is “inherently ambivalent,” and in which both “amazement and terror” coincide (7; 9). Welcoming such wonder pits

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Rubenstein against the common trajectory of philosophy wherein attempts are made to “delimit” wonder by “comprehending the source of the wondrous” (14; 16).\(^2\)

Also contrary to the claims of some philosophers, Rubenstein emphasizes that the wonder that gives birth to philosophy is not opposed to the mood that determines certain Western religions.\(^3\) The Hebrew *Yir’ah*, suggested in this text as the “theological mood *par excellence,*” and the New Testament invocation of *Fear and Trembling* as described by Soren Kierkegaard, exhibit a strange symmetry to Socratic *thaumazein* for Rubenstein (10; 178).

The bulk of the text provides lucid evaluations of the “aweful retrieval[s]” of Socratic *thaumazein* made by Heidegger and his beneficiaries (23). Although an accessible book by the standards of continental philosophy, it is nevertheless suited for those who have spent some time in the Black Forest with Heidegger. Each chapter roughly responds to a criticism of the “excess of wonder” Hannah Arendt implicates as the cause of Heidegger’s commitment to National Socialism (20).\(^4\) Rubenstein argues against Arendt’s first charge that wonder cuts one off from “‘the real word,’” by showing the object of Heideggerian wonder, properly realized, is the “everyday” — the most “usual” (30). Moreover, the late Heidegger’s mood of *Verhaltenheit* contains everything Rubenstein is seeking in Socratic *thaumazein*, precisely insofar as it moves “between the transcendent and the everyday” (39). Next, the wondrous Levinasian infinity can only become itself through the face of an other that demands responsibility, thereby preventing escapism or capitulation to dictatorship (63-65). In the work of Jean-Luc Nancy, Rubenstein locates a wonder that inheres necessarily in a relational ontology in which the “inessential” “is essence ‘itself’” and “the one and the many are equiprimordial” (128;

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\(^3\) Leo Strauss, for example, contrasts the fundamental moods of Athens and Jerusalem. *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism; An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss*, ed. Thomas Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989) p. 251.

\(^4\) Rubenstein confronts the issue of Heidegger’s deplorable Nazism and wonder multiple times in ways not replicable here. Too briefly stated: Rubenstein avers that Heidegger had “too little” wonder when he capitulated to Nazi ideology (23).
Finally in a rigorous and provocative chapter on Derrida, a case is proffered that a “decision is made...only in and through the very undecidability that divests me of all self-certainty” [emphasis added] (183). The alternative is merely abiding by a “formula” (145).

Despite finding wonder in each philosopher, Rubenstein also discovers that each figure falls short of maintaining hospitality to wonder in ways emblematic of the trend in Western philosophy writ large. In a cogent critique of Levinas, for example, Rubenstein exposes a “resurrected...cogito” that Levinas installs to protect against the bad indeterminacy of wonder (73; 96). Throughout the book, this transcendental subject is a mole-like indicator of a suppression of wonder. The philosophical subject internalizes wonder in a kind of apotheosis, and therefore we find the subject popping up where wonder is delimited (187).

Rubenstein eschews positing any subject and instead reveals a “mutually interrupted relation” between self and other, and infinite responsibility amidst “terrifying...undecidability” (175). This idea is deftly unfurled in the fourth chapter and warrants attention — partly because it is so unnerving (175).

In a book full of acute analysis and self-effacing humor, a strain of Heideggerian philosophy is gathered and related in an original fashion to ethics and politics. Rubenstein makes a compelling case that only hospitality to wonder can open “philosophy or politics or religion to the possibility of the transformative” (189). This beckons to another contribution borne by the book. Through a treatment of wonder, Rubenstein traverses not only philosophy but also religion, politics and ethics. Literature can also be added to this litany: Hamlet’s injunction to hospitality permeates Rubenstein’s thought and buttresses the text as it is the first line quoted and returns to close the last chapter. Given wonder’s entanglement with diverse genres for thinking, Rubenstein’s text may also induce us to question these scenes so dividable — poems so limited.

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5 Philosophers have been reticent to do so for obvious reasons. See footnote four.
Tom Crosby
Boston College
crosbyt@bc.edu