

Michael Funk Deckard and Peter Losonczi, eds.
*Philosophy Begins in Wonder: An Introduction to Early
Modern Philosophy, Theology, and Science.*
Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications 2010.
390 pages
US\$43.00 (paper ISBN 978-1-55635-782-4)

Given that many people first get attracted to philosophy by wonder it may seem surprising that we do not have volumes of philosophical writings on the subject. It almost appears we are afraid that a complete explanation of wonder would dissolve the phenomenon. Besides, a society dominated by a desire for unambiguous scientific explanation of the natural phenomena that once induced surprise and awe may not be in need of a philosophical account of wonder. Not intimidated by the *status quo*, Michael Funk Deckard and Peter Losonczi present a collection of fifteen essays in an attempt to fill the void. Fortunately the result is not merely a *Lückenbüßer* but, thanks to the quality of the individual chapters and the collection as a whole, has the potential to become a classic.

The papers have been grouped into three thematic sections: ‘Historical, Scientific, and Religious Context’ (3 chapters), ‘Wonder in Seventeenth-Century Europe’ (6 chapters), and ‘Wonder in Eighteenth-Century Europe’ (6 chapters). The main focus is on a historic exploration of the complex role wonder has played in science, philosophy, and theology during the renaissance and enlightenment period. Beginning with an examination of writings from the early 15th century, the reader is introduced to a wide range of emotions attached to wonder. Over the centuries wonder has been linked to the secrecy of the divine, the admiration for the miracles of creation and enchantment with the starry heavens above, to the fear of the demonic and the horrors of the unknown, and from an ascetic spirituality aimed at a mystical union with god to a driving force of the scientific revolution. Considerations of brevity do not allow me to pay detailed attention to the intricacies of each individual paper in this collection. Instead of superficially covering everything, I will deal in some detail with two chapters, selection of which is motivated by my own personal interests, and in no way reflects any judgment about the quality of the chapters I overlook.

‘Admiration, Fear, and Infinity in Pascal’s Thinking’, by Tamas Pavloitis, deals with the perplexed admiration we face when dealing with infinitude, an admiration that is inseparable from incomprehension. For Pascal ‘philosophy does not start out from or aim at canceling admiration. On the contrary, philosophy arrives at admiration’ (120). The Copernican revolution had moved the earth from the center of the universe and removed the cosmic enclosure imposed by the Aristotelean/Ptolemean worldview. The universe had suddenly become infinite, yet removing all boundaries prove to be not only a tremendous opportunity but also the ultimate challenge for the human intellect.

Infinite expansion of the universe is of course only one dimension that defies human reason and thus evokes—even demands—our admiration. On the opposite end of

the scale infinite divisibility creates the infinitesimal small challenging atomism: 'there are no atomistic segments in geometry. The points making up a straight line AB are infinitely small ...[and the line] needs to be interpreted as made up of an infinite number of points' (122). Again the challenge is not the mathematical formulation but the utter incomprehensibility of the idea—the impossibility of a visual imagine of an extensionless point and 'admiration is created in one as result of experiencing an unusual, not natural phenomenon, something reason cannot explain' (123). As the phenomenon of infinity has always fascinated human imagination and continues to challenge our intellect, we come to realize that our knowledge is limited by its nature. Even the foundation of modern rational science (mathematics) cannot offer an explanation of the inexplicable: 'the infinite rejects all attempts at rationalizing it' (123). We can only contemplate and admire the infinite, and thus wonder has to supplement reason in philosophy and science.

'Of Curiosity, or the Love of Truth', by Michael Funk Deckard, is an interesting, albeit not uncontroversial, attempt to show that an underlying strand of wonder in Hume's epistemology and ethics links the three books of his *Treatise of Human Nature* into a coherent whole. It is suggested that for Hume ideas, feelings and actions cannot be completely separated from each other, and that their unity and close interconnectedness form the foundation of a coherent theory of human nature. Curiosity plays a key role by driving the passions that underwrite our sense of morality and our rational faculties alike. Hume's empiricism compels him to assume that all ideas are based on impressions made upon the senses and our ability to perceive connections or associations between ideas and combine simple ideas into complex ones. However, the empiricist cannot rely on her understanding alone. Especially causation provides a genuine puzzle for her view: all she ever can observe is one event following another, the inference to causes is not supported by what she perceives, yet she is convinced causes are real. This creates a genuine puzzle, and not rational reasoning but passionate curiosity can push her beyond philosophical skepticism. '(T)he most wonder-inspiring part of the understanding is the desire to understand causation itself...Moral philosophy is needed to comprehend causation' (220). Curiosity, wonder, surprise, admiration of the beautiful are all inherently linked together, yet they need to be directed toward the right goals. For Hume we are inherently social creatures, and our passions can (or should) direct us through the social world as the understanding directs our scientific endeavors. Curiosity in and about others can help us to see ourselves through their eyes and in turn take pride in our actions. Of course, as with every good thing, there is a danger of excess: when the fascination with one's own accomplishments takes over, pride turns into vanity; and when the curiosity about the affairs of others becomes excessive, compassion turns into a desire for mere gossip. Hence, on a cognitive reading of Hume, curiosity and the passionate love of truth 'underlies the origin of all philosophical, scientific and religious pursuits' (233).

The remaining chapters span a wide variety of topics and give us more than a glimpse into the history of the influence that wonder had on western culture, philosophy, and science. Many of the historic details will be new to the majority of the intended audience and the authors covered include familiar names as Descartes, Hobbes, Milton, Spinoza, Berkeley, and Kant but also names only known to a smaller group of scholars as

Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, Pomponazzi, Campanella, Kircher, Patrizi or Vico. The coverage includes both an explication of historic texts and an interpretation based on a more or less particular angle taken by the author of the chapter. This brings me to a point of minor criticism. One stated aim of the editors is to provide a textbook for undergraduate students. The editors are careful to stress ‘that some chapters are more accessible than others for this audience’ (xiii). I agree with this evaluation and hope that for future editions the material presented here can be divided into more than one volume, in order to cater more directly to different audiences. This does not only concern the accessibility of the chapters mentioned by the editors but also the at times very interesting but uncommon interpretation of texts, e.g., Losonczi’s suggestion that the *Alchipron* plays a central role in Berkeley’s philosophy, or Saint Giron’s Freudian interpretation of Shaftsbury and Vico. For a future textbook it would be desirable to provide introductory sections outlining the historic context and the philosophical importance of the material discussed. For an edition aimed at a more advanced audience the addition of chapters with alternative interpretations of the material might be desirable. Still, the overall quality of the chapters presented here already makes this volume an excellent addition to the currently available choices for instructors and researchers alike. My hope is that it will be widely used.

Christina Behme
Dalhousie University