

BOOK REVIEW

**JEREMY DAVID BENDIK-KEYMER. NUSSBAUM'S POLITICS OF WONDER.
HOW THE MIND'S ORIGINAL JOY IS REVOLUTIONARY. BLOOMSBURY
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Jeremy David Bendik-Keymer's insightful book *Nussbaum's Politics of Wonder. How the Mind's Original Joy Is Revolutionary* (2023), with illustrations by Misty Morrison, provides a remarkable phenomenology of the polyphonic gist of wondering, consisting of four mutually related motets (essays) on different aspects of wondering's genealogy. Keymer describes the first motet as circling around (not prescriptively defining) the topic of "what wonder is and how it works" (p. 7), while the second one is characterized as revealing the roots of the human intrinsic capability to wonder. Consequently, the third and the fourth motets are focused on some practical implications of the polyphony of wondering in the field of politics. Specifically, Keymer explores the role of anger as triggering positive anxiety, whose performative power culminates into a "protest for others to wonder about how to make sense of the world together" (p. 7). Drawing a parallel with Nussbaum's vision of the gist of political judgment, as displayed in her reading of Henry James's character Hyacinth Robinson from *The Princess Casamassima*, Keymer picks up four "little words" (p. 7) that reveal the gist of the polyphonic wondering in his four motets, viz., these of "lostness", "devotion", "honesty" and "vulnerability".

Keymer's own approach to Nussbaum's works can be read as an example of a hermeneutical wondering in disagreement, considering that disagreement "rests on the prior actuality of positive vulnerability, whereby we can disagree only because we are in relationship first" (p. 193). In turn, such a hermeneutical wondering is irreducible to a form of basic criticism. The reason is that if we, as humans try to become thoughtful people in Keymer's sense, we can "add" "humanity to rationality", developing moral consideration of others (p. 23) due to our initial existential mutuality.

In this context, the space of politics of wonder is opened by Keymer through the interpretation of Nussbaum's interest in the so-called imaginative people as an interest encouraging the recognition and the participation of thoughtful people in the field of politics. Thoughtful people themselves can turn positive anxiety into a virtuous disposition through the process of wondering when realizing that sharing our world (Cf. p. 24) is the only morally accountable *modus vivendi*. That is why Keymer's objective is to "clarify the wondering in thoughtfulness, relocating politics in a form of thoughtful relationship to each other, even in a society struggling with reproduced, historically deep domination and resultant insecurity" (p. 25).

On a micro-methodological level, the question "What is political thoughtfulness?" (p. 25) finds its well-grounded answer in tackling "Nussbaum's politics of wonder" not as a source of a systematic critical examination, but as a topic in the sense of *topos* (Cf. p. 4) locating some insightful intuitions of wondering. These intuitions encourage one to conduct a genealogical dissection of the search for commonly shared meaning of being together, with a special focus on learning how anger and disagreement can be wonderful (Cf. p. 31), when co-discovering sense-making.

In the first motet, Keymer builds his vision of wonder on the state of mind's excitement. That is why enriching the constructive polyphony of wondering is considered by Keymer as a phenomenological process of opening up to the possibility of an intersectional reading of Aristotle's *De Motu Animalium* and Nussbaum's *Frontiers of Justice*. The objective of the reading in question is to reveal Nussbaum's intuitions behind the concept of wonder in Aristotle's sense, as well as finding some reasons for expanding its performative potential as wondering; as a process of getting lost in the world "because the world is the kind of thing that can be articulated ad infinitum" (p. 75). The difference between getting lost and being lost is that wondering makes room for "being deep in thought", viz., having "a disorientation pregnant with reorientation" (p. 75) that is underlain by the "ongoing awareness of the free play of possibilities" (Cf. p. 76) as a matter of positive rather than negative anxiety.

Consequently, the constructive process of getting lost is what builds a bridge between the first and the third motets. Specifically, the process of getting honestly lost together in the endeavor of wondering makes explicit the contrast with the states of "being lost and being dishonest with oneself about that" (p. 164). This difference in the internalization of honesty

necessitates the recognition of the difference between positive anxiety and negative one, when people are “distrustful, and *alone*, even next to others” (p. 164). In turn, adopting the approach of getting lost in wondering displays a modified version of the ancient skeptical *epoche* (suspension of judgment) (Cf. p. 164, Note 176) that prevents us from fixating “on our own identities” (p. 164).

One of the most important practical outcomes of avoiding such fixations is that one can have good reasons to give preference to plural worlds that encourage people to become lost together (p. 157) over being simply pluralistic (being simply aware of the differences over how one can live a good life). Furthermore, extrapolating the performative potential of plural instead of that of pluralism necessitates the introduction of the distinction between humankind and humanity, as is made by Keymer in the fourth motet. The reason is the demand to question “the *phenomenological environment of being wronged and of wrongdoing*” (p. 172) by restoring the moral accountability of what he calls relational reason through wondering (Cf. p. 173). As Keymer cogently points out, humanity signifies our potential as human beings to connect with each other considering that this capacity depends on our moral accountability. In turn, the methodological contribution of reevaluating the normative validity of the latter is that humans can become “*more relational and less egotistical*” having “*Less me. More us and the world*” (p. 165).

While in the first motet, Keymer explores “how we come to ourselves through wondering”, in the second one, he investigates the reasons for “wonder *before* we come to ourselves” (p. 86). The investigation is focused on Nussbaum's ideas, as displayed mainly in her works *Upheavals of Thought* and *Fragility of Goodness*. In this context, Keymer raises the question of what wonder means for a child and how it shapes (rather than determines) “their possibilities of becoming within being human” (p. 91). Specifically, Keymer expands his ‘topological’ reading of Nussbaum's works, while enriching her theory of child development by introducing the idea of personal relation, viz., the relation that opens up the possibility of accepting “another as entering into interpersonal space” (p. 87). The latter becomes recognizable as “a locus of sense-making and meaning-finding” (p. 87) that can play the role of a source of imagination, and joy in agency in Nussbaum's terms.

Keymer cogently outlines the topological climax of “our wonder in practices of wondering” (p. 86) by saying that one should argue for wondering over the child in a personal

relationship *with* [the emphasis is mine-S.S.] the child. Thus, one can appreciate not only the locality of wonder but also reveal the process ontology behind localizing wondering when this wonder “becomes the conceptual space for creating a “facilitating environment”” in Nussbaum’s sense (p. 87). In turn, such an environment is anticipated as creative since it supports children’s exercising of their “own mind’s excitement” (p. 87). The origin of creativity itself can be traced back to Keymer’s clarification of the distinction between functioning and flourishing that goes beyond Aristotle’s and Nussbaum’s ideas of *eudaimonia*. Keymer rereads Nussbaum’s vision of the world of the child as wonderful against the background of the assumption that “wonder is a basic human need that is central to our striving” (p. 95). Consequently, the world above can be interpreted as creating what she calls a facilitating environment only if one accepts that “We can strive without yet flourishing, but not strive without seeking to flourish” (pp. 92-93).

Keymer reconsiders Nussbaum’s point that wonder is non-egotistical and non-eudaimonistic by profoundly pointing out that saying so means to reduce what is eudaimonistic as such (Cf. p. 97). That is why one can argue that wonder “opens up *eudaimonia* beyond the narrowly self-interested realm of egotistical concern” (p. 97). This clarification is of crucial importance because recognizing wonder “at the heart of our “original joy”” (p. 104) makes room for a better understanding of Nussbaum’s interpretation of a child’s original joy as basic to our being (Cf. p. 104). Furthermore, revealing the genealogy of a child’s wondering as related to that of joy points towards the role of love in showing us another intrinsically axiological ‘originality’—that of how one relates to others seeing them just as they are (Cf. p. 101).

The triplet of originality of wonder, joy and love is explicitly embedded into the way one wonders over because when one wonders “over” someone (in this case, over the child) rather than wondering “about” and/or wondering “at” them, the process of wondering becomes “reflective, personal, and vulnerable” (p. 106). Specifically, wondering over a child assumes identifying them with. Such an identification, however, does not impose our understanding of wonder upon the child but lets them be (in the sense of giving them the freedom to become) what they are through the process of wondering. Thus, the mode of wondering over a child reveals what is “to relate to this child with care” and wonder, when anxiety is a positive anxiety mirroring a child’s original joy (Cf. p. 112). In this context, Misty Morrison’s remarkable images throughout the book display in practice what it means for wonder to be like a child’s

hand (Cf. p. 95), viz., “what the child can do or be with this hand” (p. 96), as is with wonder, while welcoming the possibilities of living by opening themselves to the world.

In the third motet, Keymeyer argues for the possibility of politics emerging out of wonder. Such politics is not a metaphorical project, but based upon the performative capacity of wonder to share powers with others, when looking for relational freedom between people (Cf. p. 126); when human beings realize that they can coexist autonomously only when they make sense together, viz., by co-discovering their mutual autonomy as an obligation of moral accountability (Cf. pp. 121-122).

Interpreting Nussbaum's insights, as displayed in her works *Love's Knowledge* and *Political Emotions*, Keymer argues that wondering is incorporated into a politics of wonder assuming the cultivation of honesty in our relations. Thus, the politics in question encourages a particular type of relational autonomy that can ground the establishment of an associated particular form of governance called isonomy (Cf. p. 122). According to Keymer, isonomy requires the justification of “relationally autonomous “power-with”” rather than “power over” people, viz., it assumes our capacity to develop freedom with each other as a precondition for group solidarity whose objective is to confront all the possible attempts at domination (Cf. 122, Note 21). Regarding wonder, isonomy is profoundly interpreted by Keymer as encouraging the learning to get lost together and making the effort to co-discover meaning, while disagreeing. In other words, wonder is considered as being “at the heart of conflict among moral equals” (p. 122), while protecting them from becoming enemies who look for exerting narcissist domination at the expense of governing the world together.

In this context, Keymer suggests recognizing Nussbaum “as a philosopher of political imagination with wonder” (p. 127). The reason is that in her book *Political Emotions*, she argues for partnership based on responsiveness that can ground the shaping of “freely imaginative” politics in our relations with each other (p. 127). The freedom of imagination is not a fruit of ungrounded phantasy but concerns relationships of equal respect built through the power of relational reason that bears the spirit of wonder. Specifically, Keymer explores the origin of the moral and phenomenological tension brought about by “Nussbaum's location of wonder” (p. 132), viz., the tension of localizing wonder as giving it not only passive importance but also a place of a center of free relationships. Regardless of his disagreement with Nussbaum's general negligence of the role of wonder, Keymer believes that the spirit of her writings on wonder

makes room for contrasting two types of politics: politics as subjugation and convention and politics as relational autonomy and subjectivation that motivates humans to get lost together in the process of wondering.

As Keymer cogently points out, the ontological and moral double-bind potential of localizing this new politics is triggered by our potential political involvement in sharing the world that necessitates some basic space of wonder. This space makes it possible to constructively situate the disagreement through honesty in wondering so that one moves politics from the domain of narcissism and negative anxiety to that of morality and positive anxiety in disagreeing. Specifically, honest disagreement becomes *topos* of isonomic politics by necessitating the localization of our commonly shared moral accountability, while “disagreeing over it” (Cf. p. 136). Thus, wondering together in honest disagreement makes the space between us a commonly shared space identifiable as a space of protest. However, we do not have to recognize the latter as a strive to annihilate the other by imposing a certain type of narcissism. The protest in the politics of wonder is rather a guarantee that people will remain in a relationship “precisely through the honesty” of disagreeing (p. 159).

Consequently, recognizing anger as having the potential to be embedded into an honest protest for wondering brings the issue of moral accountability to light. That is why in the last, fourth, motet, Keymer analyzes the genealogy of anger as wonderful, when questioning the origin of moral wrongs by discussing Nussbaum’s works *Anger and Forgiveness* and *Therapy of Desire*. Regardless of the fact that Nussbaum considers anger and anxiety as “mostly bad emotions” (p. 170), Keymer explores some of her intuitions as pointing towards questioning both the idea and the exertion of narcissist politics of domination and control. The contribution of anger is that its moral accountability encourages not some destructive relationships of looking for a payback, but what Keymer coins a communicative relationship. The latter calls for wonder understood as a protest against wrongdoing that displays the strive for “relational repair” (Cf. p. 170) as a matter of isonomic engagement.

An important contribution to the debates above is Keymer’s view of anger understood as entirely involved in the complexity of rationality when protesting moral wrongs (p. 179). His view is critically set against the background of A. Callard’s theory that contextualizes anger within the regulation of norms setting criteria for perfectionism. Furthermore, by contrast to Nussbaum’s vision of anger as purely emotional, Keymer demonstrates why anger as a form of

protest can be interpreted as a call for moral community, viz., as calling for a moral relation that is not necessarily emotional. Specifically, Keymer traces the origin of Nussbaum's theory of anger as a "childish and weak" emotion that provokes "narcissistic vulnerability" (pp. 179-180), with its immature drive for payback, to what he coins her "hybrid Aristotelian and Stoic account of anger"—anger lacking the logic of communicative relationships (p. 185). By missing what anger is about, viz., by denying its potential to address the wrong in a way that is morally consistent with relating (Cf. p. 187), Nussbaum underrates the role of non-narcissist vulnerability. Similar to positive anxiety, non-narcissist vulnerability makes us wonder, when "being vulnerable with another in relating openly and letting down one's guard" (p. 191). In the language of politics of wonder, such "positive" vulnerability resulting from grown-up anger makes room for the possibility of protest as a matter of reviving our mutual moral accountability; specifically, by opening up not only to what does but also to what does not make sense between us (Cf. p. 181).

Keymer's inspiring and thought-provoking book *Nussbaum's Politics of Wonder. How the Mind's Original Joy Is Revolutionary* (2023) shows us that engagement in doing is inseparable from that of undoing when wondering, viz., when we want to respond to the world as thoughtful people being guided by our relational reason. Only in this dialectical play of both doing and undoing, understood as constantly co-discovering the process of sense-making, people's response to the commonly shared plural worlds gives preference to humanity's responsibility over the narcissist resonance of humankind's struggle for power and domination.

That is why Keymer's book on the politics of wonder makes the reader think about the positive anxiety of being with others by respecting our mutually determined social flourishing. Furthermore, this book brings us back to some fundamental insights behind Plato's and Aristotle's visions of what is to wonder (θαυμάζω), viz., that wondering, as a beginning of philosophy is a constant process of loving wisdom (a compound of the Ancient Greek words φιλέω and σοφία). In this sense, such a politics of wonder is impossible, unless one not only recognizes but also experiences wonder as a matter of learning how to love the Other as morally equal in a constantly challenging interpersonal environment.