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# ***Schinkel, Anders. Wonder and Education: On the Educational Importance of Contemplative Wonder. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021.***

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In 2011, the British philosopher and Professor of Higher Education Research, Ronald Barnett wrote: “Universities are no longer permitted to be places of mystery, of uncertainty, of the unknown. The mystery of universities has ended.”<sup>1</sup> This was said in times where the neoliberal agenda was at its zenith and marketisation and consumerization, performativity and commodification had great impact on universities. What Barnett called for was a recovery of the sense of wonder in the encounter and presence of mystery. What indeed *is* language? What on earth *is* a human being? What *is* fundamentally love? Friendship? Human consciousness? Human reality? Truth? etc., etc.

These metaphysical questions cannot be answered sufficiently by pure facts or empirical studies and not even by clear-headed analytical philosophers. And maybe by no one at all. At least not if we are trying to answer these questions only through scientific (rationalistic epistemology, methodology-led and evidence-based) approaches or rigorous philosophical methods and systems. Something seems to slip away, something of deep ineffable importance and value, when human beings approach phenomena and lived experiences like love, playfulness, spirituality, contemplative thinking, artistic creation,

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald Barnett, *Being a University* (London: Routledge, 2011), 15.

overwhelming beauty in nature, etc. as *objects* to be scientifically examined and philosophically conceptualized. As the Austrian philosopher of language, Ludwig Wittgenstein claims: “Man has to awaken to wonder—and so perhaps do people. Science is a way of sending him to sleep again.”<sup>2</sup> And when scientism and neoliberalism enter into an alliance, it becomes very hard to wake up.

Although the neoliberal and neo-positivistic agendas on universities and educational systems are still strongly alive, nowadays we also see a growing critique and awareness of the limitations and defaults of these approaches to education and research. The new book *Wonder and Education: On the Educational Importance of Contemplative Wonder* (2021) by the Dutch philosopher of education, Anders Schinkel, is an important and foundational counterattack or antidote to this kind of intellectual and spiritual sleepiness.

The book is an impressive scholarly work, which shows a great overview of the theories and ideas already developed on both what it means to wonder *about* something as well as to wonder *at* something. The differences between to wonder *about* and to wonder *at* are carefully elaborated with references to the philosophy and phenomenology of wonder and to the history of ideas of wonder. These different aspects of the phenomenology of wonder are then carefully sewn into the discourse on the aim and practices of education and teaching today, especially in relation to moral and political (and environmental) education. When turning the last page, I am as a reader convinced of the educational importance of contemplative wonder, and I have also learned why wonder, *being in* wonder, also has an ethical impact on me and my ethical engagements with the world and other human beings.

However, I also wonder whether Schinkel has said the last word about what contemplative wonder is. His view and reflections on the many different approaches and theories on wonder are primarily guided by a pragmatic and analytical philosophical approach (his thinking is especially influenced by Alfred North Whitehead and Richard Peters). Although he refers a lot to phenomenology, I do not see him *doing* phenomenology, as for example the Canadian-Dutch phenomenologist Max Van Manen (2014) practices it. On the other hand, having left me as a reader in wonder may also illustrate that the mission of the book has been successfully completed. I enjoyed the journey.

### ***Some Reflections on the Concept of Wonder***

On the historical note, Schinkel makes us aware of the different meanings that have been connected to the concept of wonder across time. The Greek

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<sup>2</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 7.

word for philosophical wonder is *thaumazein* (to think with wonder), and the Latin word for the religious or spiritual wonder is *admiratio* (to regard with wonder). Both concepts consist of an ambiguity or two-sidedness. On the one hand, to wonder is the experience of standing face-to-face with something mysterious or sacred, something unspeakable and overwhelming, like a surplus of meaningfulness overflowing “the teacup of our concepts and language” (to associate again to Wittgenstein and his famous teacup example in *Lecture on Ethics*).

On the other hand, wonder is also to react to this encounter by trying to understand what is in front of us or what we are captured by. In this situation we are encouraged to give a kind of personal response to the call of this wonder. Like: Something in this moment is silently calling me to think or to act responsibly or with care, something of great value, one sense. There seems to be a passive and an active part of being in wonder. A receptive part and a responding part.

The Greek kind of wonder is fueled by a tension between Mythos and Logos. Socrates, Plato and Aristotle in different degrees and ways—Socrates and Plato in a more ontological way, Aristotle in a more epistemological way<sup>3</sup>—found wonder to be the beginning and passionate drive of philosophy (*philo-sophia*), that is, the love for wisdom, which somehow tries to bridge the knowledge of the divine with the human knowledge. The Greek goddess Iris—visualized in the rainbow and seen as the messenger from above—is in Greek mythology said to be the daughter of *Thaumas*, the god of Wanderer.<sup>4</sup>

The Christian kind of wonder from Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius to Aquinas and Cusanus is of another kind.<sup>5</sup> Here wonder becomes a praise of not-knowing, as a gateway of silence that emerges when experiencing God or admiring the creation of God incarnated in the life just in front of us. To wonder then becomes a form of praiseful singing, an expression of deep ineffable joy, thankfulness and reverent humbleness.

In modern times from Francis Bacon and René Descartes to the positivism of natural and later social science in the beginning of the 20th century, wonder is experienced as “broken knowledge.” Something has to be repaired,

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<sup>3</sup> Jan Patočka, “Negative Platonism: Reflections Concerning the Rise, the Scope, and the Demise of Metaphysics—and Whether Philosophy Can Survive It,” in Jan Patočka, *Philosophy and Selected Writings*, edited by Erazim Kohák (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989).

<sup>4</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: A Harvest Book, Harcourt, 1978).

<sup>5</sup> William Franke, *A Philosophy of the Unsayable* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014).

we sense, when we no longer can conceptualize and explain what we have experienced or seen in the world. Wonder is more to be understood—as, for example, John Dewey did—as “*scientific curiosity*.” Scientific wonder becomes a knowledge- and explanation-seeking wonder in contrast to the wisdom-seeking and admiring wonder of the philosophers and theologians. For Dewey wonder meant to fashion ideas, hypotheses, and their alternatives, and to do thought and concrete practical experiments in order to find new explanations or concepts to conceptualize and determine what before was unclear and indetermined to solve puzzlements and cope with concrete practical problems.

But this kind of wonder is what Anders Schinkel in *Wonder and Education* (2021) would call “*inquisitive wonder*” as opposed to “*contemplative wonder*.” He thinks that what is needed today, in an educational world still dominated by neoliberal and neo-positivistic thinking, is a re-vitalization of the understanding of contemplative wonder and its importance for not only higher education but for human education as such. To show this, is the main goal of his book.

### ***The Broad Landscape of Research on Wonder Today***

The unique quality or originality of this book must be seen against the background of the broader landscape of current research done in the philosophy and phenomenology of wonder. In fact, and this might come as a surprise to some, it is a huge research discipline today. I think it is appropriate to say that there exist four strands of research on wonder today. The first is connected to the history of philosophy and to the studies of singular philosophers who have specifically reflected upon the concept and phenomenon of wonder (e.g., Heidegger, 1984).

The second strand is a systematic strand that attempts to establish theoretical positions. From the second half of the 20th century, we find scholars who try to identify the essence of the phenomenology of wonder (e.g., Verhoeven, 1972). Parallel to this, one can also notice how wonder becomes involved in a kind of ongoing battle of worldviews. From natural science, we see attempts to understand the phenomenon of wonder purely on a secular and naturalistic ground (e.g., Dawkins, 1998). In contrast, new attempts to understand wonder from a postmodern, post-metaphysical and even post-secular worldview emerged at the turn of the century (e.g., Rubenstein, 2008). One can also talk today about a “post-postmodern” and “apophatic” (e.g., Franke, 2014) approach to wonder as an ineffable and metaphysical experience, which is

made possible exactly by the erosion of the Great Metaphysical Systems and Narratives.<sup>6</sup>

The third strand is the multi- or cross-disciplinary research, which moves outside the circle of theoretical philosophy and theology and explores wonder as a dialogical, therapeutic, innovative, artistic, educational, health-promoting and environmental factor. Some research is done by individual researchers connecting the multidimensional aspects of wonder learned from theoretical studies in theology, art, philosophy and phenomenology to a specific branch like qualitative, art-based and phenomenological research (e.g., van Manen, 2014), psychotherapy, health care, ecology (e.g., Washington, 2019) or education (e.g., Schinkel, 2021). Other kinds of research in this strand are undertaken in close cooperation with practitioners from different branches (e.g., Vasalou, 2012; Egan et al., 2014).

A fourth strand would be concrete empirical studies of wonder. There has not been a lot of these empirical studies yet. One example is Gallagher et al. (2015), who conducted a neurophenomenological investigation of awe and wonder with people who have been in space or in simulation of being in space. Another example is Hansen (2016) and Hansen and Jørgensen (2021) who conducted a phenomenological-oriented action research project at a Danish Hospital and Hospice. Here so-called Wonder Labs were used to charge the health practitioners with a growing sense for “wonders-in-action” as well as a reflective ability to wonder at the wondrous phenomena of care, which they encountered in their daily lives as care professionals.

### ***Location and Contribution of Wonder and Education***

The book *Wonder and Education* by Anders Schinkel is localized in the third strand. As a philosopher of education his focus and unique contribution to the research on wonder is on the question how the relationship between wonder and education can be theoretically described. And more precisely, why contemplative wonder is of educational importance today. I think he has done a remarkable scholarly job, helping us to see in depth the many aspects and dimensions of contemplative wonder and connecting these insights to education.

Two examples of books which have already tried to show and explain the importance of wonder in education are *Organizing Wonder: Making Inquiry Science Work in Elementary School* (Hall et al., 2010) and *Wonder-full Education: The Centrality of Wonder in Teaching and Learning Across the Curriculum*

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<sup>6</sup> Jan Patočka, “Negative Platonism.”

(Egan et al., 2014). What is obvious in the first book is its single-minded focus on scientific wonder, that is, the naturalistic knowledge- and explanation-seeking wonder, what Schinkel names inquisitive wonder. The second book is more complex and blurred. It contains short and very different chapters with authors (teachers) from many different areas and scientific disciplines and interests, which overall gives me as a reader a diffuse impression of what wonder, and the educational importance of this wonder, really might be. Some describe wonder in poetic terms and yet connect it to deep psychology and quantum physics in a “holistic” and spiritual way. Others are very “hands-on” and show in practice how they create learning spaces for wonder. But in describing these practices it is very difficult to distinguish teaching, which creates curiosity, surprise, pondering, awe or astonishment from teaching that cultivates authentic wonder. And yet others<sup>7</sup> want to give depth to science education by reclaiming the value of wonder. However, this kind of wonder is the naturalistic and inquisitive wonder, which the natural scientist Richard Dawkins praises in his book, *Unweaving the Rainbow: Science, Delusion, and the Appetite for Wonder* (1998).

What distinguishes Schinkel’s book *Wonder and Education* from these two books is firstly the quality of the monography, which can give the reader the necessary immersion, time and depth on the subject matter. And secondly, his systematic, ongoing and coherent reflections and argumentations that brings us—like in the process of the hermeneutic circle—slowly but steadily closer to a deeper understanding of the nature of the contemplative wonder and its relevance for educational work.

Shortly said, the book consists of six chapters. In the first chapter, “What Is (It Like to Experience) Wonder?,” he strikes the tone of why wonder is in itself wondrous to think about and wonder at. He presents distinctions between phenomenology of curiosity and wonder, and between inquisitive and contemplative wonder, ending by pointing to eleven characteristic elements of contemplative wonder.

In the second chapter, “Wonder and the World,” he wants, as he writes, “...to go beyond phenomenology and conceptualization to ask how wonder relates to the world...” (p. 55). He adopts firstly an evolutionary and naturalistic perspective on wonder, but then returns to a phenomenological perspective. However, it is not easy to quite figure out what Schinkel’s own ontological and philosophical position is on the relation between wonder and world,

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<sup>7</sup> cf. Yannis Hadzigeorgiou, “Reclaiming the Value of Wonder in Science Education,” in *Wonder-Full Education: The Centrality of Wonder in Teaching and Learning Across the Curriculum*, edited by Kieran Egan, Annabella Cant, and Gillian Judson (London: Routledge, 2014).

because he makes use of such different approaches: a non-existential interpretation of Wittgenstein, the analytical philosopher of education Richard Peters, pragmatic philosophers like John Dewey and Alfred Whitehead as well as existential philosophers and phenomenologists like Martin Buber, Martin Heidegger and Hannah Arendt.

It is in the next three chapters (“Wonder and the Aim of Education,” “Wonder and Moral Education,” “Wonder and Political Education”) that Anders Schinkel shows his strength and uniqueness as a philosopher of education. These chapters are recommendable readings. They put the phenomenology of wonder in context within current discourses on theory and philosophy of education. The sense of wonder, and the educational effects and practices or virtues that being in wonder can cultivate, are compared, for example, to writings of Richard Peters<sup>8</sup> and his, in my view, still important emphasis on the value of liberal art education. It is also reflected in connections with the writings of contemporary educational researchers on human flourishing<sup>9</sup> and why the sense of wonder may nourish human flourishing as well. And the critical voice of the Dutch educational philosopher, Gerd Biesta and his “World-oriented View” of education<sup>10</sup> is also compared with the experience of a “World-behind-our-Worldviews,” which according to Schinkel can be found when being in wonder.

It is inspiring to read the two chapters on wonder and moral and political education, and how and why the sense of wonder can foster empathy, imagination (the awareness of alternative possibilities), love and compassion not just for other human beings but for the world and nature as such and its wonderful creatures. The experience of deep contemplative wonder is, as Schinkel emphasizes, essentially “other-acknowledging.” This sense of wonder can therefore also nurture morally transformative experiences and reassessments of the importance of things and phenomena (the mysterious experience of the surplus of meaningfulness emanating from the world as such) and why such a world- or meaning-encounter can stimulate the transcendence of ego- as well as anthropo-centrism. Whether the sense of wonder is a source of virtue ethics or an ethics in itself, is not a question that Schinkel dwells upon, but he makes me, as a reader, wonder about and at it.

The book ends with the following conclusion: “...we need to be attentive to the creation and maintenance of wonder-supporting conditions in

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<sup>8</sup> Richard Peters, *Ethics & Education* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1970).

<sup>9</sup> Kristjan, Kristjánsson, *Flourishing as the Aim of Education: A Neo-Aristotelian View* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

<sup>10</sup> Gert Biesta, *The Beautiful Risk of Education* (London: Routledge, 2016).



education, transform the curriculum to make it truly world-oriented, and replace educational policy based on an instrumentalist, economic ideology with world-oriented educational policy. ‘Cursed be the dullard who destroys wonder’, said Whitehead. Cursed indeed” (p. 198). And I agree. Let these words be my final recommendation for this book.

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