

Kevin M. Cahill, *The Fate of Wonder: Wittgenstein's Critique of Metaphysics and Modernity*, Columbia University Press, 2011, 253 pp.

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Kevin M. Cahill's *The Fate of Wonder* is a well written and well researched book that explores a number of topics that, while touched on in the secondary literature, benefit from further discussion. The book has a few flaws—some of the chapters read more like articles than chapters, and I did not find all of its claims persuasive—but overall it is a valuable contribution to Wittgenstein scholarship.

At the outset of the book, Cahill clearly states the three ideas that structure his interpretation: according to Wittgenstein, according to Cahill, 1) the goal of philosophy is to reawaken wonder, 2) features specific to modernity impede wonder which makes his work a form of cultural criticism, and 3) one of the fundamental obstacles to wonder is philosophy's traditional reliance on theory (2, 81).<sup>1</sup> Others have made Claim 1 before (Bearn, Edwards, and Cooper, among others), although I have always found Wittgenstein's later discussions of wonder to be predominantly, albeit not exclusively, negative. Wonder is, as Plato and Aristotle tell us, the origin of philosophy, but this comes as a warning, not a promise or instruction for Wittgenstein's later attempts to bring philosophical questioning to a close. This feeling is a symptom of the temporary disorientation we fall into when our usual grasp of ordinary grammar is stripped away by the bizarre conditions and situations philosophy places us in, and it is of no more significance than the fact that we associate certain colors with days of the week. There simply is nothing to wonder at about these topics, despite the fact that they can induce a deep puzzlement. An attitude of reverence towards this puzzlement cultivates just the kinds of confusions I think he is trying to root out.<sup>2</sup>

Claim 2 is perhaps Cahill's most interesting and original idea. He points to a gap in the literature between those interested in Wittgenstein's thoughts on topics such as language or math and those who focus on the spiritual aspects of his thought and life (4-5). Cahill wants to close this gap by reading the philosophy as an expression of a spiritual concern, specifically, a recoil from certain features of modernity. These features are to be found in Western metaphysics as a whole as well as in the contemporary view that science can provide ultimate explanations of everything. Since this inhibits the attitude of wonder, or seeing things as miracles as he puts it in the "Lecture on Ethics" (53-5, 68), and since this view has become especially prominent in our time, Cahill argues that Wittgenstein's work functions as a critique of contemporary culture (50-1, 58, 114, 127, 140-1).

Claim 3 is also interesting, and I believe important and true, although the way it relates to the other topics is not always clear. If I understand it correctly, Cahill is contrasting our unreflective, active

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1 Unless otherwise noted, all references are to *The Fate of Wonder*.

2 Here's just one example, not nearly enough to substantiate my interpretation: "what is typical of the phenomenon I am talking about is that a *mysteriousness* about some mathematical concept is not *straight away* interpreted as an erroneous conception, as a mistake of ideas; but rather as something that is at any rate not to be despised, is perhaps even rather to be respected. All I can do, is to shew an easy escape from this obscurity and this glitter of the concepts" (*Remarks on the Foundation of Mathematics* p. 274).

following of rules (and performance of other actions) with the disengaged, rational reconstruction of how this occurred, where the reconstruction gives a distorted account of how the action occurred (114, 119). He connects the disengaged model of intelligence of Claim 3 with the modern scientific attitude of Claim 2, both of which block the wonder of Claim 1. He also throws in a (sub?) claim about metaphysical views of necessity creating further problems (2, 115), with Wittgenstein trying to get us to accept deep contingency. I think this is an extremely important theme in Wittgenstein, but it felt underdeveloped here.

With this perspicuous overview of the basic ideas completed, I will briefly summarize the book and then come back with some concluding comments. It is divided into two parts which deal with early and later Wittgenstein separately, although Cahill sees the periods as largely continuous (112, 122). Putting his hermeneutic cards on the table, Cahill lets the reader know that he subscribes to the resolute reading of Wittgenstein as championed by Cora Diamond and James Conant, albeit with a few reservations and modifications. Also, he gives a therapeutic reading of the later work, aligning the two periods on the eschewing of theories (6, 112, 182).

The first chapter lays out three ways of reading the *Tractatus*: the “standard” reading which sees its sentences as nonsense because they try to say logical facts that can only be shown (23), the “ineffabilist” reading which combines Schopenhauer’s ethics and ontology with Russell and Peano’s logic (29-30), and the resolute reading according to which the book as a whole amounts to an extended *reductio* of attempts to grasp language and reality from the outside (29-30, 37). Cahill lands solidly, but not slavishly, on the resolute reading. He argues that this reading allows for one kind of permissible nonsense, namely, ethical claims that emerge from a good intention where the speaker is aware of the fact that they are nonsense (36).

Chapter Two is the longest section of the book, and it would have benefitted from being divided into two shorter chapters, I think. Its goal is to explain how the *Tractatus* can have an ethical point given its own views. Although 6.53 seems to limit us to only neutral, scientific descriptions of facts, Cahill argues that the “Lecture on Ethics” and Wittgenstein’s comments on Heidegger and Kierkegaard encourage us to use ethical sentences as well, as long as we are aware that they are nonsense (58, 67). We can tell whether someone is using such propositions properly (i.e., self-consciously) or illegitimately (i.e., believing them to have literal sense) by looking at the context and the speaker’s intention (59). I find this a rather surprising reading of the early work, which contains little discussion of context (beyond fixing what symbol particular signs stand for) and virtually none of speakers’ intention. Indeed, Wittgenstein remains suspicious of this latter idea throughout his career, albeit for changing reasons.

Cahill brings in Heidegger’s early work to help illuminate matters, a move many might find, shall we say, counter-productive, but which I applaud. His move is original in connecting Heidegger’s early work to Wittgenstein’s early work, whereas most of those who bring the two into dialogue link Heidegger to Wittgenstein’s later writings (9, 88). Cahill compares the *Tractatus*’ scientific assertions about matters of fact to *Being and Time*’s “*das Man*,” the anonymous practices and phrases that make up public intelligibility (58, 60). These sentences are incapable of expressing wonder (71), so these experiences—read anxiety for Heidegger—break the hold this way of talking has on us, opening us up to

other ways of speaking that individualize us (60-2). Cahill also makes an odd claim about Heidegger appealing to something beyond oneself, invoking Dreyfus' reading concerning marginal practices, to contrast him with Wittgenstein who does not bring in anything external (84-5, 147). But Heidegger insists that authenticity introduces no new content, merely altering the way we relate to the same world, rather the way the happy person and the unhappy person take up different relationships to the same set of facts. Furthermore, I found it unfortunate that Heidegger was not used in connection with the contrast between engaged action and disengaged reflection, since this topic dominates Division I of *Being and Time*. Presumably, Cahill found this comparison to lie outside the purview of his discussion, an understandable way to keep the book focused and relatively short.

Chapter Three briefly explains how the *Tractatus* fails, thus motivating Wittgenstein's later method. Although the book tries to change our self-understanding by changing our attitude towards language, this is brought about in an intellectualist manner: we must grasp the nature of language in order to become a different person (91). Besides being overly intellectualist, this also implies that there is a single essential nature to language for us to grasp, an idea he came to reject (93, 95).

Moving on to Part II, Chapter Four concentrates on the idea of progress. Cahill goes into great detail about the motto of the *Philosophical Investigations*, a topic he rightly points out is usually ignored. The motto fits nicely into his view of Wittgenstein as offering a cultural critique since our culture prides itself on science as establishing an enormous advance over previous ages, which accentuates the disengaged view of rationality that he opposes (122). Cahill presents an alternative view of thinking as embedded and finite, a topic I whole-heartedly agree is in Wittgenstein's later work (and Heidegger's work throughout—another possible point of contact), but this idea strikes me as a positive claim, an act forbidden by his interpretation of Wittgenstein as offering no claims of his own (Cahill addresses this worry at p. 121).

Chapter Five connects the conception of rules as following an infinite set of rails to contemporary cultural notions of science and progress, making Wittgenstein's criticisms of the former amount to a critique of the latter. There is some discussion of things showing up as mattering (141) and shared commitments (143), though these topics could have used more discussion. They also strike me as further examples of positive claims. Cahill addresses Wittgenstein's interest in religion as offering a "grammar of wonder" (147), a very nice phrase. Here too interesting connections could be made with Heidegger's later focus on the holy and the gods, especially as objections to our modern science-dominated society which cannot accommodate such topics, though I mean this as a suggestion, not a criticism. Finally, Chapter Six briefly explains one of Wittgenstein's central aims as undermining a picture of rationality that is corrosive to society (151), with brief contrasts with McDowell (152-5) and Cavell's (155-62) versions of this idea.

Overall, *The Fate of Wonder* is very readable and helpful in exploring Wittgenstein's thoughts about culture as a philosophical analysis rather than merely the preferences of an eccentric mind. The objections I have raised concern particularly difficult issues that anyone analyzing Wittgenstein must face and on which knowledgeable scholars can and do disagree. This book is easy to recommend.