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## Plato and Wonder

David Bollert

*SOCRATES: Surely you're following, Theaetetus; it's my impression at any rate that you're not inexperienced in things of this sort.*

*THEAETETUS: Yes indeed, by the gods, Socrates, I wonder exceedingly as to why (what) in the world these things are, and sometimes in looking at them I truly get dizzy.*

*SOCRATES: The reason is, my dear, that, apparently, Theodorus' guess about your nature is not a bad one, for this experience is very much a philosopher's, that of wondering. For nothing else is the beginning (principle) of philosophy than this, and, seemingly, whoever's genealogy it was, that Iris was the offspring of Thaumás (wonder), it's not a bad one.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Plato, *Theaetetus*, trans. Seth Bernardette (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 155c-d. Burnyeat's rendering of Theaetetus' response is also worth noting: "Oh yes, indeed, Socrates, I often wonder like mad what these things can mean; sometimes when I'm looking at them I begin to feel quite giddy." See Plato, *The Theaetetus of Plato*, trans. Myles Burnyeat (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1990), 155c-d. Burnyeat translates the Greek word *hyperphuês* (an adverbial form which stems from *hyperphuês*, which means, amongst other things, 'overgrown' or 'enormous') as "like mad," and thus his translation emphasizes the strange and extraordinary throes in which the philosopher is often trapped; such a disposition, though it gives birth to the rational exercise *par excellence*, i.e., philosophy, borders on madness. On the connection between philosophy, wonder, and madness, see John Sallis' essay "A wonder that one could never aspire to surpass," as found in *The Path of Archaic Think-*

The observation that philosophy is grounded in wonder, *thaumazein*, is part of the Platonic legacy which has been adopted and appropriated by thinkers as diverse as Aristotle, Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger.<sup>2</sup> More contemporary thinkers, such as John Llewelyn and R.W. Hepburn, have also sought to come to a deeper understanding of Plato's declaration, as found in the *Theaetetus*, that wonder is the *arche* or beginning of philosophy.<sup>3</sup> Most thinkers who come to grips with Platonic wonder focus on one dialogue alone, namely the *Theaetetus*, and such a focus is understandable inasmuch as this dialogue contains Plato's explicit linking of philosophy and *thaumazein*. In this paper, however, I would like to raise a question which does not receive a great deal of attention in the secondary literature: is there room for an astonishment which has as its focus that which is uniquely human?

### *Socrates, Sophocles, and 'The Ode to Man'*

What types of considerations or 'things' do we find enveloped in a sense of wonder in Plato's dialogues? The source of astonishment for the young Theaetetus in the aforementioned passage is a numerical puzzle forwarded by Socrates: is it not the case that six dice are 'more' than four dice but fewer or 'less' than twelve dice?<sup>4</sup> A second example occurs during Socrates' speech in the *Symposium*, wherein he recounts the instruction that he received from Diotima concerning the true nature of love. At the height of the famous 'ascent passage', after the true lover has "learned to see the beautiful in due order and succession," starting from the love of a beautiful body and ascending through the beauty of souls, institutions and laws, the sciences, and ending with the "single science, which is the science of beauty everywhere," he will be rewarded with a wonderful vision: "when he comes toward the end [he] will suddenly perceive a nature of wondrous [*thaumaston*] beauty (and this,

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*ing*, ed. Kenneth Maly (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 253. I am deeply indebted to, and influenced by, Sallis' wonderful insights in this essay.

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 982b; G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover, 1956), 234 [Here Hegel speaks of "Aristotle's dictum that philosophy proceeds from wonder," which, of course, Aristotle inherited from Plato]; S. Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way*, eds. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 347-48; Martin Heidegger, *Basic Questions of Philosophy*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and Andre Schuwer (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press), 135.

<sup>3</sup> John Llewelyn, "On the saying that philosophy begins in *thaumazein*," in *Post-Structuralist Classics*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (London: Routledge, 1988); R.W. Hepburn, "Wonder," in *Wonder and Other Essays* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1984).

<sup>4</sup> Plato, *Theaetetus*, 154b-155c.

Socrates, is the final cause of all our former toils)—a nature which in the first place is everlasting, not growing and decaying, or waxing and waning. ...”<sup>5</sup> Or, as a final example of that which evokes astonishment in the dialogues, let us recall the ‘Ring of Gyges’ myth as presented by Glaucon in the second book of the *Republic*. Here Glaucon weaves a tale wherein a certain Lydian shepherd, who was purported to be an ancestor of Gyges, was tending his flock when a tremendous thunderstorm and earthquake erupted simultaneously; afterwards, the shepherd noticed that the ground had split and a chasm had formed at the very spot where his sheep normally grazed. We are told that the shepherd “saw it, wondered [*thaumasanta*] at it, and went down. He saw, along with other quite wonderful [*thaumasta*] things about which they tell tales, a hollow bronze horse. It had windows; peeping in, he saw there was a corpse inside that looked larger than human size.”<sup>6</sup> The wonder of Theaetetus is sparked via a mathematical puzzle; Diotima speaks of a wonder in the presence of a beauty which is eternal and never-changing, i.e., the beautiful itself; and the ancestor of Gyges is wonder-struck by a super-human corpse. All of these are proper and understandable objects of wonder, yet, one asks, what of the astonishment which attends and surrounds the human person? Is there a place in the Platonic dialogues for a wonder which has humanity itself as its object?

At the beginning of the *Phaedrus*, Socrates meets the dialogue’s namesake as the latter is about to go beyond the city walls for a stroll in the country. It seems that Phaedrus has spent the morning listening to a speech on love that his good friend Lysias has recently composed; Socrates surmises that Lysias regaled Phaedrus with several readings of the speech, and now Phaedrus wishes to commit the piece to memory by speaking it out loud beyond earshot of his fellow Athenians. Socrates confesses to his friend that he is a “man whose passion for such speeches amounts to a disease,”<sup>7</sup> and thus he eagerly accompanies Phaedrus in walking outside the city walls into the surrounding countryside, hoping thereby to hear a discourse on love. As they walk alongside the stream Ilissus, Lysias points out to Socrates the place where Boreas, the north wind, reportedly kidnapped young princess Oreithyia, and asks Socrates if he believes that the legend is true. Socrates responds by telling

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<sup>5</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, in *The Dialogues of Plato* (New York: Charles Scriber’s Sons, 1911), 210a-211a.

<sup>6</sup> Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Allan Bloom, 2d ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 359d. The entire myth can be found at 359c-360b.

<sup>7</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus and Letters VII and VIII*, trans. Walter Hamilton (London: Penguin Books, 1973), 228b.

Lysias that he, Socrates, must first inquire into his own nature before he investigates other matters:

*Now I have no time for such work, and the reason is, my friend, that I've not yet succeeded in obeying the Delphic injunction to 'know myself',\* and it seems to me absurd to consider problems about other beings while I am still in ignorance about my own nature. So I let these things alone and acquiesce in the popular attitude towards them; as I've already said I make myself rather than them the object of my investigations, and I try to discover whether I am a more complicated and puffed-up sort of animal than Typho\*\* or whether I am a gentler and simpler creature, endowed by heaven with a nature altogether less typhonic.* <sup>8</sup>

In short, Socrates finds that there is more than enough wonder which enshrouds the human person to occupy his time; as Benjamin Jowett puts it: “ ‘the proper study of mankind is man’, who is a far more complex and wonderful being than the serpent Typhon.”<sup>9</sup> One is reminded here of the first lines of the famous ‘Ode to Man’ as found in Sophocles’ *Antigone*:

*Many are the wonders, none  
Is more wonderful than man.  
This it is that crosses the sea  
with the south winds storming and the waves swelling,  
breaking around him in roaring surf.*<sup>10</sup>

‘Wonders’ and ‘wonderful’ stem from the Greek word *deinon*, which can mean, amongst other things, that which brings about a sense of wonder, but it also can connote that which is strange or uncanny, terrible, fearful, or dreadful; it can per-

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\* Hamilton notes the following with respect to the Oracle at Delphi: “The inscription ‘Know thyself’ upon the temple of Apollo at Delphi expresses the essence of the philosophy of Socrates, who turned philosophy away from the study of external nature to that of man as a moral being.” See Plato, *Phaedrus*, p. 25, n. 1.

\*\* Hamilton notes the following with respect to Typho: “Typho is the father of the winds, a monster with a hundred heads. By a play on words, Plato connects the name with the noun *tuphos*, vanity or arrogance, and its negative adjective, *atuphos*, here translated ‘less typhonic’.” See Plato, *Phaedrus*, p. 25, n. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 229e-230a.

<sup>9</sup> Benjamin Jowett, “Introduction to the *Phaedrus*,” in *The Dialogues of Plato, vol. 1* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1911).

<sup>10</sup> Sophocles, *Antigone*, trans. David Grene, in *Greek Tragedies*, eds. David Grene and Richard Lattimore, 2d ed., vol. 1 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), p.194, lines 368-372.

tain at once to that which evokes an affirming wonder with respect to a human being and to that which is monstrous in humanity.<sup>11</sup> The Chorus notes that human beings are capable of traversing the sea, yet, tellingly, they refer to humankind by using the neuter pronoun: “This it is that crosses the sea...”. What, then, is a man? A monster, perhaps? A rational being? Both? Socrates too is perplexed about his nature: is he monstrous like Typho, the monster with a hundred heads, or is he a “gentler and more simple creature,” blessed by heaven with reason, speech, and civility? Socrates, like the Chorus in *Antigone*, finds that there is more than enough astonishment surrounding human nature to last a lifetime; we need not fall back to the strange beings and monsters of lore to discover the wondrous, for we ourselves are an inexhaustible source of *thaumazein*.

### *The Wonder of Humanity*

Of course, Plato does not restrict the scope of humanity’s wondrous nature to hints and intimations of the strange or uncanny elements which dwell within us; he is not a circus barker with a philosophical bent who offers up the more freakish aspects of the human person in order that we may gawk, stare, and sate our lust for mere novelty. Deeper issues are at hand for Platonic wonder and its relation to that which is uniquely human. For example, let us turn to the *Phaedo*, a dialogue which provides an account of Socrates’ last day of philosophical conversation with his friends before drinking the hemlock. At 88c of the dialogue, we find the following exchange between Echebrates and Phaedo:

*ECHECRATES: By the gods, Phaedo, I have real sympathy for all of you! For as I myself now listen to you, it occurs to me to say something like this to myself: “What argument will we trust from now on? The one that was so powerfully trustworthy—the argument that Socrates gave—has now fallen into discredit.” For this argument, that our soul is a sort of tuning has now, as ever, a wonderful hold on me, and your speaking of it reminded me, as it were, that up till now all this seemed to be the case to me too. And now what I really need is some other argument which will, from a new beginning as it were, persuade me that when somebody dies, the soul won’t die along with him. So tell me, by Zeus, in what direction did Soc-*

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<sup>11</sup> I am indebted to the thought of Martha Nussbaum for this interpretation of the Greek word *deinon*. See, for example, Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and ethics in Greek tragedy and philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986; 2d. reprint, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 52-53.

*rates pursue the argument? And which was it: Did he too, as you say the rest of you did, reveal in any way that he was distressed; or did he instead come serenely to the aid of the argument? And was his aid sufficient, or did it fall short? Go through everything for us as precisely as you can.*

*PHAEDO: Although, Echebrates, I'd often wondered at Socrates, I never admired him more than when I was present with him then. That he should have something to say was perhaps not out of the ordinary. No, what I really wondered at him for was this: first, how pleasantly and kindly and admiringly he received the young men's argument, then how keenly he perceived how we'd suffered under their arguments, then how well he healed us and, as if we were men who'd fled and been laid low, rallied us and turned us about to follow him and consider the argument.<sup>12</sup>*

As it is not out of the ordinary, as Phaedo reminds us, that Socrates is seldom at a loss for words, so too is it not out of the ordinary that Phaedo often finds himself, to use Jerome Miller's exquisite phrase, "in the throes of wonder."<sup>13</sup> Indeed, in the beginning of the dialogue, Phaedo reveals to Echebrates that on the day of Socrates' death "wondrous were the things that I experienced when I was present."<sup>14</sup> *What*, then, provokes Phaedo's wonder? It is *not* the fact that Socrates has a response to the seemingly devastating counter-arguments forwarded by Simmias and Cebes which is the primary cause of Phaedo's wonder; what fuels his astonishment is Socrates' *disposition* in the face of said counter-arguments. Unlike the others present, Socrates is not daunted nor depressed by the challenge of these counter-arguments. Phaedo stands in awe of Socrates' kindness toward his challengers (compare this to Thrasymachus' or Callicles' behavior when challenged) *and* the empathy that Socrates reveals in recognizing the despair that grips those present whose hopes for a convincing *logos* for the immortality of the soul have been dashed upon the rocks. It is Socrates' *healing* of the men present, which occurs *before* his actual response to the counter-arguments, that Phaedo holds to be wondrous; it is not the virtuosity of Socrates' response, but the care that grounds the response itself, which calls for Phaedo's greatest admiration and astonishment.

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<sup>12</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*, trans. Eva Brann, Peter Kalkavage, and Eric Salem (Newburyport: Focus Publishing, 1998), 88c-89a.

<sup>13</sup> See Jerome Miller, *In the Throes of Wonder* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).

<sup>14</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*, 58e.

Finally, the *moment* in the dialogue when Phaedo expresses his wonder for Socrates' character is quite suggestive. As Brann, Kalkavage, and Salem put it, "At this moment we approach the very center of the dialogue, the heart of Plato's labyrinth."<sup>15</sup> Immediately *prior* to Phaedo's description of his astonishment at Socrates' response, Echecrates expresses a sense of hopelessness inasmuch as the argument which holds that the soul is a kind of tuning, an argument which had a "wonderful hold" on him, has been defeated. Indeed, Echecrates, as he listens to Phaedo's recollected account, finds that he himself is staring down into the abyss of misology, the hatred of reasonable discourse, in the same manner as those who were actually present that fateful day in Socrates' jail cell. Immediately *following* his stated admiration for Socrates' encouraging disposition, Phaedo once again begins to recount for Echecrates the conversation that took place on the day of Socrates' death, and in doing so he immediately recalls Socrates' warning against the very misological stance that Echecrates is now, in the 'present moment', on the verge of adopting. Phaedo's declaration of wonder is a 'hinge'<sup>16</sup> which connects the misology that Echecrates is 'currently' threatened by to the threat of misology which plagued those present during the actual conversation. In the "very heart" of the dialogue, both in terms of its length (Phaedo's declaration of wonder occurs almost exactly in the middle of the dialogue) and its dramatic core, stands a heartfelt account of Socrates' wondrous nature.

Upon close reading of the dialogues, one finds that there are many different manifestations of wonder which pertain to human conduct and disposition. The opening scene of the *Crito* reveals the wonder of the dialogue's namesake at the calm and dignified repose of Socrates in the face of his impending execution. Socrates awakes in his cell to find Crito, one of his oldest friends, sitting patiently and quietly in the corner, reluctant to disturb his friend's slumber. Socrates is somewhat baffled by this: 'why', he asks, 'did you not wake me immediately upon entering the cell'? Crito answers his old friend in the following way:

*No, no, by Zeus, Socrates, I only wish I myself were not so sleepless and sorrowful. But I have been wondering [thaumazô] at you for some time, seeing how sweetly you sleep; and I purposely refrained from waking you, that you might pass the time as pleasantly as possible. I have often thought throughout your life hitherto that you were of a happy disposition, and I*

<sup>15</sup> Eva Brann, Peter Kalkavage, and Eric Salem, introduction to *Phaedo*, p. 11.

<sup>16</sup> I am borrowing the metaphor of wonder as hinge from Jerome Miller; Miller borrows said image from Derrida. See *In the Throe of Wonder*, chapter two.

*think so more than ever in this recent misfortune, since you bear it so easily and calmly.*<sup>17</sup>

Let us recall as well the admiring wonder that Socrates holds for the brothers Glaucon and Adeimantus in book two of the *Republic*; not willing to accept the relatively easy defeat of the arguments of the sophist Thrasymachus that ‘might makes right’ and the unjust life is the most profitable one, the brothers forward their most persuasive arguments *against* the desirable nature of justice so that Socrates can, hopefully, defeat their arguments and thus prove, to their satisfaction, that the pursuit of justice is intrinsically worthy and hence provides its own reward. In light of this challenge, Socrates offers us the following observation: “I listened, and although I had always been full of wonder [*êgamên*] at the nature of Glaucon and Adeimantus, at this time I was particularly delighted [with their conduct]...”.<sup>18</sup> So too does Theodorus, in the dialogue *Theaetetus*, find himself in a state of astonishment at the intellectual gifts of the dialogue’s young namesake; at the beginning of the dialogue, Theodorus describes Theaetetus’ remarkable gifts to Socrates:

*Know well, of all whom I’ve ever met—and I’ve consorted with very many—I’m aware of no one yet whose nature is as wonderfully [thau-mastôs] good. For to be as good a learner as he is, in a way that’s hard for anyone to match, and yet to be exceptionally gentle, and on top of this to be manly beyond anyone whatsoever, I would have expected that it doesn’t occur....But he goes so smoothly, so unfalteringly, and so effectively to his lessons and investigations, and all with so much gentleness, just as a stream of olive-oil flows without a sound, as for it to be a cause of wonder [thau-masai] that someone his age behaves in this way.*<sup>19</sup>

Finally, it would be remiss not to speak of the wonder which the beloved feels in the presence of a true lover; Socrates speaks to this very *pathos* in the *Phaedrus*:

*And when the lover is thus admitted, and the privilege of conversation and intimacy has been granted him, his good will, as it shows itself in close intimacy, astonishes [ekplêttei] the beloved, who discovers that the friend-*

<sup>17</sup> Plato, *Crito*, in *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, trans. Harold North Fowler (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1966), 43b.

<sup>18</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 367d-368a.

<sup>19</sup> Plato, *Theaetetus*, 144a-b. See also Sallis’ essay cited in n. 2.

*ship of all his other friends and relatives is as nothing when compared with that of his inspired lover.*<sup>20</sup>

Thus we find that the Platonic dialogues reveal that the human person is not only the *type* of being who is astonished by mathematical puzzles, transcendent Forms, and preternatural creatures, but that we ourselves are worthy *objects* of wonder as well. The dignified calm that Socrates exhibits in the face of death; the noble enthusiasm of Glaucon and Adeimantus to set the conditions for a convincing account of justice; the remarkable intellectual gifts of the young Theaetetus; and the resplendent nature of true love; all of these, to borrow an expression from Socrates, are “worthy of our wonder.”<sup>21</sup> This is not to say that Plato privileges the realm of humanity, with all of its uncertainties, *doxa*, and general ‘messiness’ over and above the realm of that which is universal, unchanging, and eternal; to claim this would be to ignore the general sway of such dialogues as the *Republic*, *Meno*, and *Phaedo*, amongst others. Perhaps Plato is simply reminding us that the eternal does not *exhaust* what legitimately calls for our astonishment. Perhaps he wishes to add to the Delphic injunction “Know thyself” an exhortative corollary: “Wonder at thyself.”

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<sup>20</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, in *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, trans. Harold North Fowler (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1966), 255b.

<sup>21</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 376a.