

Weber, "The Biology of Wonder: Aliveness, Feeling, and the Metamorphosis of Science"

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Book Review

Weber, Andreas. *The Biology of Wonder: Aliveness, Feeling, and the Metamorphosis of Science*. New Society Publishers, 2016.

Translated and updated from an earlier German-language version, *The Biology of Wonder: Aliveness, Feeling, and the Metamorphosis of Science* takes on the task of finding ethical lessons for humanity from outside of the modern mainstream of biological science. Largely appealing to empirical evidence, but also to love, the author taking on this task is Andreas Weber, who has training in biology, philosophical ethics, and cultural studies. He is fully aware of how his work challenges normative understandings in the world of the life sciences. He also offers an alternative, positive framing of the “naturalistic fallacy”, the supposed error of deriving an “ought” from an “is”, that is prominent in the academic study of philosophy. In effect, he turns to what he labels as the latest advances in biological science (these take on the role of the “is”) in order to provide a basis for his conclusion that all beings should be loved (the “ought”) by people because humans are part of a diverse biological world and the more-than-human members of that Earth community are part of us. Weber also peppers this work with personal stories—the type of anecdotes that I was taught to avoid, along with the aforementioned naturalistic fallacy, in my undergraduate philosophy courses.

While challenging philosophical convention, these stories principally serve to effectively break up the more analytical portion of the book. Each narrative is also presented in segments, with the effect that *The Biology of Wonder* has a certain pleasing rhythm. They also are generally presented with the point illustrated in what is deliberately a more emotionally appealing way. This feature echoes a constitutive part of Weber’s argument, which amongst its other elements posits that mainstream biological science has committed an error in excluding emotions, to the detriment of its ability to craft a full picture of the reality it purports to study. It should be added that the majority of Weber’s stories are highly memorable and serve to ground the constitutive elements of his articulation of the wondrous qualities of living beings. These narratives include one recalling from his youth a small pond that provided habitat for newts, which, in a magical way, inspired his interest in the functioning of life. Weber holds that, again to its peril, modern biology has largely failed to invoke such an imagination-enriching element of wonder.

At least in translation, a few elements of these narratives seem juxtaposed to Weber’s overall ethical arc in *The Biology of Wonder*. For instance, he recalls his post-adolescent sexual exploits with women as “conquests” when reflecting on the importance of the aforementioned pond for his later life. Moreover, in a move that reads as Eurocentric, he describes a local guide and his daughter as speaking “their strange musical language” (Weber 2016, 147) during his narrative

about a journey to view one of the rarest carnivores in the world, the Ethiopian wolf. Yet it must be conceded that even such problematic descriptions add to the memorability of these narrative interludes, which further include everything from Weber's rendering of a tumultuous quest to encounter a blue whale in a small vessel off the Canary Islands to a tale of distress and post-surgery death he helped inflict upon a rabbit in the name of scientific research during his formative scientific education.

In employing this approach, Weber, despite identifying at points as a theoretical biologist, in a cogent sense crashes the normative disciplinary boundaries of both philosophy and the biological sciences. As a result, I suspect that he is even less likely to get a fair hearing in both disciplines. Nonetheless, Weber is arguing in a way that certainly holds appeal for some prominent thinkers in associated sub-fields, including the ecological ethicist David Abram, who pens the foreword, although given a couple of the comments therein I am left wondering if Abram was able to engage in a close reading of the final version of *The Biology of Wonder*. More substantively, as the majority of the biological and philosophical insights in the book have largely already been rendered by other academics, it is fair to conclude that Weber's contribution is best located in the synthesis between the empirical and philosophical, which are bridged by love for other beings that he names "poetic ecology". This term helps capture the emotive value within an ecological ethics of entanglement that simultaneously recognizes the Earth community and the autonomy of each individual living being, in a way that Weber frames as non-deterministic contributions to the poetics of life on our planet. A key to understanding just what he is getting at here is found in the formula that Weber returns to on several occasions, namely, that each autonomous subject requires the larger ecological community context in order to function. However, concomitantly the larger life community requires individual members, most of whom are striving for fullness and vitality in line within the current limits and future possibilities correlated with their natures. Here, ontology and ethics are avowedly united without recourse to theological premises. According to Weber's analysis, there is no longer any room for an individualistic ethic in this world. An onto-ethical, subject-communal nexus is simply descriptive of the way things actually are. Recognizing this reality and integrating its consequences, an incarnated ethics of poetic ecology supportive of creative life thus becomes the human task made more urgent at this moment in history marked as it is by an anthropogenic biodiversity crisis that is erasing animal and plant agents who have made us who we are.

As implied above, for Weber, this is not a unidirectional connection. To cite a cogent example, humans do not simply give voice to animals' concerns. Rather, language is merely a way that our natures allow us to express ourselves and more-than-human plants and animals also bear witness to both their and our essential location as part of an ecological community. It should be emphasized that for Weber, this does not imply a completeness of natural world. In that

regard, he cites and modifies late poetic songwriter Leonard Cohen's insight that there is a crack in everything, which allows the light to get in. Here, it is helpful to note the explicit contrast Weber frequently invokes between poetic ecology and varieties of Darwinism that see all beings as engaged in a mechanistic struggle to be the fittest. Weber is emphatic that this is not what Darwin himself would have wished for by the end of his life. Weber thus condemns neo-Darwinism for what he characterizes as its shallow mechanistic focus. More simply put, *The Biology of Wonder* can be taken as arguing that neo-Darwinism and other mechanistic worldviews about nature narrow down the complexity of the poetry in play in any evolutionary moment. Moreover, Weber continues, such creative moments are rarely characterized by merely deterministic factors. Enlivened subjects interacting in complex and interconnected systems ensure the nearly ever-present possibility of multiple outcomes. In summary, for Weber, the world of living beings, flowing from their almost invariably unique subjectivity interacting with others, is poetry, not fixed equation. It follows that we need to understand biological reality as enlivenment, which, in turn, is the key to healthy relationships.

As someone trained in religious ecological ethics who is inclined to support his morality of enlivenment, I was left wondering if Weber was too quick to dismiss the potential of faith-inspired concepts and actors as contributing to his project. For example, he rather summarily decries the notion of respecting more-than-human members of the Earth community because they are God's creation. However, there are strong parallels between his argument and certain strains of natural law active in many religious traditions, including Christianity, which similarly to Cohen's insight tend to understand members of the created world as incomplete works in progress. Thinkers holding such views on natural law undoubtedly influenced some of the precursors that Weber cites when mustering support for his ethics of poetic ecology. In so much as those strands of natural law themselves allow for alternative paths upon which to discern moral guidance through observing the natural world, there is at the very least a parallel active here on a philosophical level that may have been acknowledged in this book and differentiated in order to strengthen Weber's arguments. That tension and the others mentioned above duly noted, *The Biology of Wonder* remains a stimulating and well-crafted read that fosters reflective thinking concerning the subjectivity of all living beings on this planet as they relate to the context of a vibrant Earth community. This alone makes the time invested in reading Weber's monograph well worth it for any reader interested in where we have come from and where we are going as subjects struggling for wholeness, healing, and life within a community of beings undertaking a comparable struggle in ways that accord with their present natures. Further, according to Weber, in this effort, enlivened beings contribute to a future of change and innovation in a fashion that could never be predetermined in a mechanistic manner because of their status as living agents. As Weber presents this framing in an innovative manner, the present book will be of interest to both ecological ethicists struggling to discern a

role for subjective autonomy within the Earth community and open-minded readers with neo-Darwinian tendencies. Few contemporary books can claim such dual-track potential, thus making *The Biology of Wonder* a welcome addition to both academic and public libraries.

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