

Two Understandings of Wonder and Their Heideggerian Roots: Alexandru Dragomir and Anton Dumitriu

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Abstract

The question concerning the meaning of philosophical wonder has generated a lesser known but nonetheless significant debate during the last century, especially since Martin Heidegger addressed it and maintained that *thaumazein* is the fundamental disposition (*Grundstimmung*) of the Greek inception of thinking. This article brings forth a draft of two accounts on *thaumazein*, given independently by two Romanian philosophers, each of them is rooted in their own sense in Martin Heidegger's thematizations. For this purpose, the first part of the article consists of a genealogical outline of Heidegger's take on the problem which aims at indicating its essential developments. The later part is based on an analysis of the two interpretations which in turn seeks to uncover both the Heideggerian legacy and their original contributions.

Keywords: *thaumazein*, *philosophia mirabilis*, philosophy of wonder, Alexandru Dragomir, Anton Dumitriu, Heidegger's Romanian reception

The meaning of *θαυμάζειν* puzzled Martin Heidegger during all the periods of his thinking, even though this matter did not reach a proper development until his later texts. In the overall picture of Heidegger's thinking, the *wonder*-theme was neither a core question, nor a peripheral line of inquiry. Nonetheless, it played a significant supporting role in the development of fundamental topics such as the origin of

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philosophy, questioning or thinking itself. The first brief mention is to be found as early as 1919, as he indicates in *KNS*. There, he ponders on the fact that the commonplace understanding of the essence of *the interrogative comportment* was usually put in terms of a volitive *drive* or *desire for knowledge* (“*Trieb nach Erkenntnis*” und “*Wissen-Wollen*”) that itself originates in *θαυμάζειν* – *astonishment and wonder* (“*Staunen und Sichverwundern*”) (Heidegger 1999, 67; 2008, 53-54). Dissatisfied with the traditional assessment, Heidegger furthers in the following courses up to *Being and Time* two intertwined lines of questioning the grounding experience of wonder and its counterparts by submitting them to a twofold critical destruction of the connotations acquired in the Aristotelian posterity and in the Pauline-Augustinian tradition.

In brief, Heidegger’s original exegesis of Aristotle’s texts disregards both the psychological-volitive model of depicting *θαυμάζειν* as the origin of philosophy, as well as the model according to which wonder names a mere causal impetus that brings forth our lack of knowledge, thus opening the act of questioning and dissipating in this process. Heidegger portrays Aristotle as a *proto-phenomenological thinker* that has the merit of grounding the beginning of his ontology in *the primordial experience and meaningfulness of producing* (*ποιήσις*)¹. On the other hand, Aristotle’s ontology mimics the hierarchy instilled by his conception of the divine, according to which the supreme type of activity consists in a pure contemplation of itself. Thus, for Aristotle the fundamental dynamic of human life and implicitly the highest form of human understanding is *Σοφία* realized as *θεωρεῖν* – a pure, objective, abstract, unaffected – way of seizing and articulating the world. The impact of this paradigmatic shift of meaningfulness from an involved dealing with the world in productive concern to a detached theoretical attitude has been a recurring point of interest for Heidegger throughout his work. The shift itself is the core element – the first “misguided” phenomenological reduction – that predetermined the entire metaphysical tradition of the Western philosophy.

What role does wonder play in this whole narrative? First of all, for Heidegger this shift of focus that occurred during the time of Plato and Aristotle represents the genesis of the tradition of understanding *θαυμάζειν* as a transitory disposition that simply “kick-starts” the search for knowledge and needs to be abandoned when the end is met. If originally *θαυμάζειν* named the experience of encountering the strangeness of immediate and familiar beings, Aristotle directs it to the furthest *causes and principles* “τῶν πρώτων ἀρχῶν καὶ αἰτιῶν” (Aristotle 1975, 172 [Met. 1.982b9]) – *the ultimate viewpoints (Hinsichten)* “in which beings can in themselves be defined” (Heidegger 2002, 138). Thus, for Aristotle *θαυμάζειν* refers to a psychological precipitant to the cognitive drive for knowledge that in the best scenario opens the theoretical pursuit of the grounding principles. Heidegger goes beyond this epistemic framework and argues at an ontological level that due to this disengagement that occurs in *αχολή* (*leisure* or *sojourning*) the “free” *wonder* falls prey to “the fallen care”, loses its original disclosive power and disintegrates into autonomous ordinary tendencies that aim at accessing the aspects of things.

The topic of *the fallen care* – understood as the fundamental tendency of life to dissipate into impersonal modes of being – belongs to Heidegger’s early confrontation with the implicit ontology of the Judeo-Christian tradition. In this sense, Heidegger distinguishes between the dimensions of *fallen wonder* expressed by its latinized formulae: *curiositas* – curiosity and the original Greek *θαυμάζειν*. During his phenomenological decade, the destruction of the Augustinian moral-epistemic interpretations of curiosity as a vice, as well as *the destruction* of Aristotle’s theoretical wonder, became the premises for the development of Heidegger’s own take on the problem. In *SuZ* 1927, Heidegger thoroughly develops the existential of curiosity in the 36th paragraph, but when it comes to *θαυμάζειν* he merely indicates that it refers to a sort of “*contemplation that wonders at being... to the point of not understanding*” (Heidegger 1977a, 229; 1996, 161), a type of contemplation that has nothing in common with the fallen curiosity. It is plausible that he projected an unravelling of the

authentic *θαυμάζειν* for the second part of his *magnum opus*, the part which has remained unwritten.

Ten years later, in a lecture course from the winter semester 1937-1938 (Heidegger 1992, 151-197), Heidegger returns to the question concerning the meaning of *θαυμάζειν* that he left for the most part unanswered. This text finally provides the much-anticipated end of his destruction of the phenomenon. This is achieved by a clear delimitation of wonder (*Erstaunen*) from curiosity (*Neugier*), amazement (*Sichwundern*), marvelling (*Verwundern*), admiration (*Bewundern*), astonishment (*Staunen*), and awe (*Bestaunen*). Here, Heidegger gives an extended thematization of *θαυμάζειν* in thirteen features that effectively reverses “the reduction” of wonder that occurred with Plato and Aristotle. Therefore, *θαυμάζειν* names *the basic disposition (Grundstimmung)* that determined *the first beginning of thinking* in the Western tradition, an attunement that overturns the relation of familiarity with the immediate beings which become most unusual. “What alone is wondrous: beings as beings.” (Heidegger 1994,145). *Θαυμάζειν* dis-poses the Dasein into a space without entrance or exit, in which the only option becomes *the essential thinking*, the genuine questioning of being in *unconcealedness (ἀλήθεια)*. Heidegger reckons that this grounding experience was limited only to the first thinkers, our historical epoch could not retrieve their harmonic attunement with the being. His later mentions of wonder in the 1955 conference: *What is Philosophy?* (Heidegger 2006, 22-23; 2003, 79-81]), or in the 1969 *Le Thor Seminare* (Heidegger 1977b, 331; 2012, 38]) stem from this text and reach the same conclusions.

To sum up, through the destruction of the Greek and Judeo-Christian traditions Heidegger aims in the early writings at the ontological core of wonder, as an *existential*, but succeeds into unfolding only its fallen counterpart, namely curiosity. In his later thought he brings some light on the problem but settles on indicating the ontological determinations of *θαυμάζειν* belonging exclusively to the inception of Greek thinking.

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Apart from the fact that Alexandru Dragomir² (1916-2002) and Anton Dumitriu³ (1905-1992) were both highly trained professional thinkers that were forced to spent most of their lives in a totalitarian society, they have little in common. Dragomir's thinking stems from the metaphysical-phenomenological traditions of philosophy while Dumitriu was committed to the history of logic and epistemology. The only legitimate perspective that can bring together the two thinkers is that their writing bears proof of some of the earliest reception of Heidegger in the Romanian philosophy. Although their texts are worthy of an extended analysis, we will focus exclusively on the topic of *θαυμάζειν*.

1. Alexandru Dragomir's wonder at *the world we live in*

In a series of private conferences held in 1988, intitled *About the world we live in*, Dragomir briefly addresses the problem regarding the origins of the theoretical thinking and the appearance of the intellectual way of life in the Greek world. In the central focus of his analysis stands the A29 Diels-Kranz fragment, attributed to Anaxagoras, according to which "...the aim of life is *θεωρία*, and that from it [is born] freedom" (Dragomir 2016, 134). Dragomir reads *θεωρία* in the sense of "understanding the world" and *ἐλευθερία* as *the inner freedom* derived from autonomous thinking. The establishment of this radical kind of relation with the world signifies the birth of a new human type: the intellectual – "someone who values the intellect more than anything and who considers knowledge to be the sole purpose of human life" (Dragomir 2016, 136). This inception that on a large scale predetermined the course of our entire history and preconfigured the *world we live in*, had two immediate consequences. Firstly, the intellectual – in the name of his freedom – tends to oppose the previous social, political, and religious order. Secondly, due to *a latent possibility*, the intellect is inclined "to proclaim its own absolute supremacy" (Dragomir 2016, 137), thus instilling a deviation of the human

being. At this point, Dragomir is indebted to the Nietzschean reading of the beginning of rationality and goes further in arguing that through this *coup* the intellect becomes *the tyrant* of human being. As a result, the intellect fails its purpose as *guide* in order to become the mere *producer* of science and technology. Moreover, following Heidegger, Dragomir traces this shift in Aristotle's articulations of the emergence of science where the latter argues that the purpose of the highest form of knowledge is knowledge itself. In order to prove that the ultimate knowledge has no practical outcome Aristotle advances two genealogical explanations regarding its conditions of possibility: the autonomous *Σοφία* starts from *οχολή* (leisure) and *θαυμάζειν* (wonder). Same as Heidegger, Dragomir comprehends *οχολή* as *an inner disposition* that induces a halting in *the flow of life*, a transgression of the immediate concern. In the same way, *Θαυμάζειν* indicates a complementary disposition that *inter-rupts* the flow of life and instates the object of wonder in the central focus of our attention. Here, Dragomir seems to be on the same page as Heidegger, wonder and leisure are no mere emotional or mental states but *existentials*, fundamental structures of our Dasein. Although Dragomir lacks Heidegger's dual representation of wonder (fallen-authentic) and his *destructive* method, he has the merit of confronting a question his mentor left unanswered.

If wonder begins with the realization of the *strangeness of world* and the more we go back in time, the more intense this disposition is, than what counts as its origin and why were the first Greek thinkers better equipped to be attuned to it than us?

“For me, this sensation of strangeness is based on three things: (1) the belief that the world is made; (2) the belief that, given that it is made, it is not made by us; (3) and the belief that, since we did not make it, we cannot understand it either. On the other hand, the world of technology does not inspire fear in me, and does not cause me truly to wonder, precisely because this world is made up of technological products that we ourselves made; and since we have made them, we understand them; and since we understand them, they no longer seem as strange to us as the plants, the animals, and the mountains, which we did not make. Thus, my wonder before them is no longer so intense” (Dragomir 2016, 140).

In other words, the assumption that *the world of nature* is made by something other than us grounds *the wonder-worthy* fundamental strangeness. As far as our understanding is shaped by the things we made and the *non-made* reality is incomprehensible, the only way to approach *the world of nature* remains to consider it similarly made. In a note explaining this thought, Dragomir points out that the assumption that “*reality is something made*” (Dragomir 2016, 140) is central to the Greek understanding of the world, to the Christian worldview, but also to the modern scientific worldview (the hidden belief behind the idea of law of nature is that someone made them). Moreover, Dragomir adds that even the correspondence theory of truth silently assumes this belief.

In Heidegger’s meta-narrative of the history of being, *Θαυμάζειν* refers in a strict sense only to the *first beginning of philosophy*, when it played the role of the unifying fundamental disposition that *in-formed the essential thinking* of the Greeks. But Heidegger never justifies in a direct way why *Θαυμάζειν* belonged exclusively to the relation of the first Greek thinkers with the world and why this type of basic disposition is forever lost? Dragomir gives this question a powerful answer by bounding the decline of wonder to the progressive abandonment of the world of nature and also to the loss in our time of the belief that reality is made.

2. Anton Dumitriu’s *philosophia mirabilis*

In 1974 Anton Dumitriu publishes in spite of harsh censorship a peculiar book even by today’s standards: *Philosophia mirabilis. An attempt into an unknown dimension of the Greek philosophy* (Dumitriu 1974). In this text, Dumitriu gives course to an ambitious project to unify and systematise Aristotle’s metaphysics and to an honourable extent he succeeds in depicting a complete picture. Dumitriu wrote with a didactic intent thus his exegesis is worthwhile but unfortunately this text was never translated into English. The surprising fact is that the logician Dumitriu assumes here a critical dialogue with Heidegger (one of the forbidden philosophers for the most part of the Romanian totalitarian

communist regime) on the matter of understanding Greek thinking. The extent of his critique of Heidegger need to be deciphered within a hermeneutical attitude of generosity, especially since Dumitriu had access only to the 1954 edition of “*Vorträge und Aufsätze*” (Heidegger 2000) and to the 1956 Neske edition of the “*Was ist das – die Philosophie?*” (Heidegger 2006). Nonetheless, this limited reception created the conditions for an original project.

Being unaware of Heidegger’s early readings of Aristotle and having at disposal only a few of his renderings of the presocratic thinkers, Dumitriu adopts Heidegger’s ontological framework of understanding the fundamental disposition of wonder. The problem he encounters is that in the traditional interpretation of Aristotle, *Θαυμάζειν* is nothing more than a passing pathos that brings into attention our ignorance on a matter and thus activates our drive to become knowledgeable. In contrast, for Heidegger this *pathos* names the ἀρχή of thinking in its *fullest sense*, as a *governing principle*. “The pathos of wonder thus does not simply stand at the beginning of philosophy, as, for example, the washing of his hands precedes the surgeon’s operation. Wonder (*Erstaunen*) carries and pervades philosophy” (Heidegger 2003, 81). Additionally, in one of the central lines of *What is Philosophy?* conference, Heidegger argues that the archetypal “object” of wonder could not be the everyday paradoxes or difficulties but “the fact that being is *gathered together* in Being” (Heidegger 2003, 49). If Dumitriu in his attempt *to recover the original and authentic meaning of philosophy* is to keep the Heideggerian view of wonder, how could it be reconciled with the traditional perspective he previously endorsed?

Firstly, Dumitriu argues that Heidegger’s reading of Aristotle is ground-breaking but missed the deeper sense of the Greek wonder. According to Dumitriu, Heidegger only accurately described the passive aspect of wonder in the sense of the disposition throughout which the beings are attuned and opened to their being. Instead, Dumitriu believes that *Θαυμάζειν* also contains an active meaning, on the grounds of its archaic descendance from *θαῦμα* – miracle. Accordingly,

philosophy starts from the shock or trauma (*θαῦμα*) of actively realizing *the miracle of being*, and only when it comes to articulating this grounding experience the permanent tension of wonder (as Heidegger described it) is necessary.

Consequently, Dumitriu claims that Greek theoretical philosophy is essentially two sided. On the one hand, the first philosophers understood thinking as a “*thaumasia philosophia* (θαυμάσια φιλοσοφία)” – *a philosophy of miracle* – i.e., the active experience of the miracle of being that determines and changes the ontological status of *Sophos*; on the other hand, thinking necessary becomes knowledge about being, thus a “*philosophia mirabilis*” – *a philosophy of wonder* (Dumitriu 1974, 155). Ultimately, in a dark irony of the history of reception, Dumitriu arrives at the conclusion that Heidegger did not think through the event of being. Still, Dumitriu’s intuition that *Θαυμάζειν* conserves a glimpse of the Homeric *θαῦμα* is reasonable and the attempt to make sense of Aristotle noetic philosophy by organizing it around this idea is also worth considering. Unfortunately, the contingencies of history restricted their development and impact.

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In conclusion, although the two understandings outlined here have a limited scope of applicability in Heideggerian studies, these early interpretations are meaningful because they advance the question regarding the connotations of *Θαυμάζειν*. The fact that both of them independently assumed Heidegger’s ontological framework and pursued paths of developing it, despite their limited access to his writings, bears testimony of the potential impact of Heidegger’s thinking on the way to a philosophy of wonder.

NOTES

¹ “For the primordial sense of being is *being-produced* (Hergestelltsein)” (Heidegger 2002, 144).

² The main biography of Alexandru Dragomir was written by Gabriel Liiceanu (2004, 17-65). We assume that Dragomir had access to most of Heidegger’s published writings prior to 1943, at least during his two years of doctoral studies in Freiburg (1941-1943).

³ For an introductory biography of Anton Dumitriu see Stanciu (2013, 407-425). The *History of Logic* (Dumitriu 1977) is the only translated writing of Anton Dumitriu.

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