



## Review of Loriliai Biernacki, *The Matter of Wonder: Abhinavagupta's Panentheism and New Materialism*

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*The Matter of Wonder* by Loriliai Biernacki is a monograph in five chapters, drafted with extensive references to cognitive scientists, philosophers of religion, and Sanskrit commentaries. The introduction aptly frames the project within the context of religious studies where the core questions about the “Self” according to key theists are answered through an intersection of non-skeptical epistemologies and realist conceptions of subjectivity. The First Chapter embraces panentheistic implications, which are reencountered alongside the potential for panpsychism in the Fourth Chapter. The Second Chapter unfolds with a phenomenology, aesthetics, and ontology of “wonder” that make way for a sense of agency composed of the same; while the Third Chapter relates levels of interiority with complex embodiment, and agentic modes we have with our bodies, as individuals. The Fifth Chapter is a practical application of philosophy to contemporary issues.

As we have now seen, contemporary inquiries about consciousness need not have questions or answers based in science and innovations in material culture. Though even in western theories, the same tired dualisms continue to arise irrespective of ancient Greek forerunners of monism, and Spinoza. If we are missing something in a theory of mind that is needed to for the problematic of mind in material culture, then it is time to look towards non-dualist philosophies, rather than historicized monism that does not come to life in thinking about what consciousness is or why it matters. In *The Matter of Wonder*, Biernacki does a substantial job of applying a transcendental argument of the classical Indian philosophy, well rooted in eleventh century Kashmir, to a comprehensive ontology where the distinction between materialism and metaphysical idealism is the first of several dualities to be laid to rest. Yet, in their place a solution comes in the form of a more controversial position, i.e., a panentheism that allows realism and idealism to follow from materiality. In all, it

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is a convincing presentation in terms of avoiding any quick leaps to religious commitments, or aims of reaching enlightenment. It also systematically includes clear glosses on the technical concepts of personhood, soul, cognitive experiences and the idea of God. The result is that one need not be a theist at all to follow the thread of reasoning from body, which is not nested outside mind in any way on this theory, to the further and an all-encompassing condition of sentience that makes information and meaning possible.

Answers to the questions of what is meaningful and who can have knowledge are one side of the practical application of Abhinavagupta's cosmology from the Sanskrit text *Īśvara Pratyabhijñā Vivṛti Vimarśinī*. It is not difficult to imagine that this renowned eleventh century tantric philosopher, as the central synthesizer of theory of consciousness in his time, could anticipate skepticism about AI. The shift from thinking about the subject to the object felt through the subject is a central paradigm shift that also does away with another ingrained distinction between feeling and knowing. Hence, the 'matter of wonder' turns on the primacy of the affective subject of experience that we all participate in as conscious beings. Once again, instead of merely historicizing a philosophical view, Biernacki puts into application an affective basis for science and technological change, ultimately hinting at redemption in the current ecological crisis by way of a complicated affective power play. A key point underlying the moral-psychological discussions of issues here is the ontology of the self in a world of seeming multiplicity. Biernacki is quite clear that the central problem is that of multiplicity within the unity of consciousness. On the level of introspection a "self-wonderment" stands in deference to the agent as a limiter and a unifying subject. The view is a subtle blow to the distinction between self as a knower, self as a doer, and the self as an enjoyer. It seems certain here that the affective state of wonder is primarily an ontological state, played out in the question-and-answer act of knowing, determinative act of desiring, and agentive act of doing, in unison. This final stage of theorizing takes into account quantum physicist, John Wheeler's immaterial sourcing of reality in *yes-no* questions that rupture our normal way of thinking about "matter." We need only to pay attention to the dimension of desire, a ground for emotion, in all such questioning. Thus, we have reason to regard this presentation of Kashmir Shaiva philosophy as worthy of consideration even on secular readings. Indeed, Biernacki confirms that Abhinavagupta incorporated materialist and secular views into his deduction of sentient origination.

The charting of an individual's relation to the world through the grounds of subjectivity, and within a framework of ontological wonder, is not done without reference to Thomas Nagel's critique of objectivity, and of marvel! It turns out he is right that just because the world strikes us as wonderful does not imply a goal of 'producing wonder' in a conscious nature. No such stretches of reason are implied, and instead we meet with neuroscientists such as Anil Seth who claims that we construct reality through consciousness. It is here that Biernacki gets at the heart of the matter by considering the phenomenology of inner speech that is a cornerstone for Abhinavagupta. A special form of wonder that is the basis of all "aesthetic taste" in the classical Indian arts tradition, is posited as a form of aesthetic savoring where we hit rock bottom in subjectivity. In other words, there is a "wonder" to be considered in the fabric of the cosmos, without any experience of separation from what

is wondered about. And this gives us a great deal to think about as a start to understanding reality and changing conscious focus. *The Matter of Wonder* touches on many comparative ideas, including those of George Berkeley, John Donne, Charles Darwin and the Buddha. It does not touch on the theories of philosophical wondering in Aristotle and Plato, nor wonder as the foundational emotion in Descartes' *Passions of the Soul*—and this may be for the best. We can conclude, pace Abhinavagupta, this wonderment is of the ever-new variety about any old thing we find a way to make new again. This is how the affective ontology could sustain a new discourse in our philosophy of action.

## Declarations

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