Lisa Sideris's Consecrating Science

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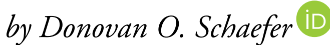
MERE SCIENCE: MAPPING THE LAND BRIDGE BETWEEN EMOTION, POLITICS, AND ETHICS

by Donovan O. Schaefer



Abstract. Lisa Sideris's *Consecrating Science: Wonder, Knowledge, and the Natural World* (2017) proposes that the call by some science advocates for a new moral framework based on scientific wonder is flawed. Sideris develops a typology of "wonder" with two separate affective axes: "true wonder" that is the prerogative of a sort of dwelling with the overwhelming mystery of life, and "curiosity" that presses to resolve puzzles and break through into a space of total clarity. The former, Sideris writes, is an ethical resource that, by placing the human self against the backdrop of the unknowable cosmic expanse, prompts humility and genuine admiration for nature. The latter is the theater of "mere science." This essay follows suit with Sideris's line of questioning, but also pushes back on the correlation of wonder with ethical attentiveness and proposes ways that science in its puzzle-solving mode can be brought back into the ethical conversation.

Keywords: affect; climate change; ethics; Bruno Latour; Lisa Sideris; wonder

Lisa Sideris's *Consecrating Science: Wonder, Knowledge, and the Natural World* (2017) proposes that the call by some science advocates for a new moral framework based on scientific passion is flawed. This flaw lies in the advocates' misunderstanding of the nexus linking wonder to ethical actions. Sideris develops a typology of "wonder" with two separate affective axes: "true wonder" that is the prerogative of a sort of dwelling with

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the overwhelming mystery of life, and "curiosity" that presses to resolve puzzles and break through into a space of total clarity. The former, Sideris writes, is an ethical resource that, by placing the human self against the backdrop of the unknowable cosmic expanse, prompts humility and genuine admiration for nature. The latter is the theater of "mere science." It is a sort of intellectual chain-smoking, the endless, restless, sniffing-around to iron out confusion and manufacture certainty. It extinguishes mystery and dissolves ethical relating.

My sense is that Sideris's critiques are almost entirely on target. At the heart of her project is a fascinating, deeply insightful set of proposals about the way that emotions translate into ethical, political, and scientific action. This sort of conversation is, in my view, on the cutting edge of humanistic inquiry, and it is here that I want to meet Sideris and probe the perspective she offers. My question is whether the typology of wonder Sideris offers can be seen as intersecting straightforwardly with the ethical and political consequences she warns us about. I want to try to rescue science from "mereness" by proposing that both wonder and puzzle-solving are affective and that we need to be careful about mapping any one affect onto ethics. I want to push back on the correlation of wonder with ethical attentiveness and propose ways that science in its puzzle-solving mode can be brought back into the ethical conversation.

One of Sideris's axioms in this book is that wonder at nature and the scientific fixing of nature have different emotional ontologies. She suggests that the consecration of science risks producing an arrogant, emotionally detached relationship with nature that ultimately leads to moral indifference. But wonder—real wonder—is an avenue for overwhelming the self and opening a path for moral transformation. Sideris writes that wonder at nature "is emphatically not a pursuit of certainty and security, not a celebration of all that we know." She continues: "Released from the quest for security, we begin to appreciate wonder's family resemblance to other (praiseworthy) dispositions: humility, caution, empathy, as well as what we might provocatively call 'virtuous ignorance'" (Sideris 2017, 176). By contrast, "[t]he radical privileging of scientific reality puts environmental values on shaky ground," she writes. "It estranges us from what we experience as real, meaningful, and beautiful" (Sideris 2017, 48).

My concern is this: the relationship between emotion and politics is complicated and must be studied carefully (Schaefer 2015). To swing hard in the direction of "true wonder," it seems to me, brings its own political risks. This comes across, for instance, in Sideris's emphasis on wonder as an enduring, inherently unstable and uncontainable principle. There's a Heideggerian tone humming in the background here—Heidegger as the consummate thinker of wonder, the limitless questing after the ground of Being, and the skepticism that science can ever deliver any kind of meaningful claim. But as Emmanuel Levinas wrote in *Totality and Infinity*,

"In subordinating every relation with existents to the relation with Being, the Heideggerian ontology affirms the primacy of freedom over ethics" (Levinas 1969, 45). Is it possible that the Heideggerian emphasis on wondering at the expansive mystery of things is a liability for ethics, rather than an asset? This would certainly be the conclusion of religious studies scholar Steven Wasserstrom, who tracks the way that scholars drifting in the wake of Heidegger, such as Mircea Eliade and Anton Corbin, "[e]ach resolutely opposed [to] technology and sociology, reductionism and nihilism, orthodoxy and positivism," produced an ethically deracinated version of religion that was in ongoing flirtation with various forms of fascism (Wasserstrom 1999, 6). The focus on individuated mystical wonder was a highway to "a sheer *Tremendum*, a hierophany beyond ethics or reason" (Wasserstrom 1999, 234).

Put another way, it is not obvious to me that wonder yields a moral relationship. Or rather, it may well yield a moral relationship with what is in front of you, but making that into a big moral relationship—a relationship with the global ecosystem of oceans, atmospheres, forests, and riverways, and relationships with earthworms and honeybees as much as with redwoods and bald eagles—that relationship does not seem to have any relationship with wonder. Admirers of private nature reserves have no significant moral investment in eliminating greenhouse gas emissions. There is a grim inside joke among advocates for farm animals—that most self-described animal lovers are deeply attached to snuggly creatures in front of them but are perfectly happy to whisk the mass-produced atrocities of factory farms under the rug.

Relatedly, Sideris suggests that some sort of embodied immediacy is necessary for an empathetic relationship. "Apprehension of life's mysterious essence," she writes, "is imperiled by a lack of sensory engagement, for only through such direct and affective connection to nature do we form an attachment that is—potentially—both ethical and enduring" (Sideris 2017, 176). She champions a democratization of science, a taking science out of the hands of scientific technocrats surrounded by labyrinths of expensive equipment funded by macroscale grants, and returning it to the level of individuals. To this end, she sides with David Abram in arguing that "relegating ordinary experience of the world to a secondary, derivative realm increases reliance on experts to inform us of what is real and true about the world, what is worthy of our wondering response" (Sideris 2017, 194). This goes along with her full-throated endorsement of Arundhati Roy's moral recentering on "small heroes" and the "dismantling of the big" (Sideris 2017, 199). This is where I want to raise a note of real dissent.

Sideris is correct that science risks creating an elite class of wonder-priests who work at the edge of existing knowledge and mediate access to that knowledge for laypeople. However, I want to reframe this problem as a byproduct of the changing conditions of production of science rather than

a carefully executed ideological agenda. What we are seeing is a condition in which the material conditions of knowledge production have changed, with the horizon of discovery of knowledge landing further and further from everyday experience. "Science does not *directly* grasp anything accurately," Bruno Latour writes, "but slowly gains its accuracy, its validity, its conditions of truth by the long, risky, and painful detour through mediations: of experiments, not experience; laboratories, not common sense; theories, not visibility" (Latour 2010, 111f). Whereas earlier generations of scientists tended to be amateurs and polymaths, contemporary scientists must be trained in specialized environments and benefit from an extraordinary investment of resources in order to take a seat at the scientific table. This expansion of scale produces, of necessity, a class of technicians who can barely talk to one another, never mind laypeople. But it is also totally necessary to preserve the expansive horizon of science—its ability to *see things at a distance* from the human scale and, hopefully, devise solutions.

The challenges that face us now are not human-scale challenges. It is exactly this sort of individualized horizon that makes it impossible to see things like macro-level climate disruption and ecosystem warning signals. At the very least, it is the only mechanism for collating local-level change into a picture of macro-level catastrophe. To that end, it is incumbent on us to listen to scientists who are drawing on deep, highly technical data sets. It seems to me that this democratizing imperative, while resonating tunefully with a certain liberal sensibility, is actually exactly what we *do not* want right now. The Donald Trumps, the Scott Pruitts, and the Ted Cruzes of the world traffic in exactly this smug insistence that their "feeling for science" can go toe-to-toe with consensus-driven science. We need to be listening to planet-scale science that is highly abstract, highly detached from our day-to-day sensory experiences, and highly technical. There is an argument to be made that climate change has emerged as the crisis that it is precisely because it is tailor-made to slip through the net of liberal common sense, which emphasizes individual judgment and personal experience.

And this brings us to one final point, about modesty. Sideris writes that she is fully on board with a version of science that tells the story of science in a nonpositivist, nonabsolutizing fashion. On some level, I understand the value of calling that modesty. But I want to take another cue from Latour here, and suggest that when we pay closer attention to the modes of creation of scientific facts, they should *increase*, rather than decrease our confidence in them. As Latour writes in his "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?" the landscape has shifted, and formerly progressive tools for critiquing science have now been repurposed by antienvironmentalists who seek to muddy the waters around climate science. Such being the case, the danger, he writes, "would no longer be coming from an excessive confidence in ideological arguments posturing as matters of fact—as we have learned to combat so efficiently in the past—but from an excessive *distrust* of good

matters of fact disguised as bad ideological biases!" (Latour 2004, 227). In Rachel Carson's moment, scientific modesty may have been a necessary watchword. But in the current moment, rather than highlighting the modesty of science, it may be eminently necessary to rejuvenate confidence in science in order to protect the climate consensus and devise meaningful responses.

For all these reasons, I think there needs to be partnership with puzzle-solving. It is not obvious to me that puzzle-solving—which I would argue is an affective mode in itself—is radically exterior to moral frameworks, nor that wonder has some sort of special prerogative for evoking moral response. But even if that were not true, science—including big science—is an indispensable tool for framing response to climate catastrophe. None of this is to contradict Sideris's central insight, to highlight the laziness of the assumption, championed by some scientists and religious naturalists, that scientific cosmology can knock out religious cosmology in a one-to-one substitution. Sideris has set the table beautifully, advancing a much more sophisticated exploration of the relationship between science, emotion, and morality. In particular, it opens conversation about what emotions do, where they lead, and how they convey us to particular ethical postures.

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