

**Maria Balaska, *Anxiety and Wonder: On Being Human* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2024).**

**Reviewed by Peter Joseph Fritz, College of the Holy Cross**

Contemporary culture seems convinced that anxiety debilitates and impedes, nothing more. We must rid ourselves of it, at great cost. We must fear it, lest it tighten its grip. We must treat it psychologically, attack it with apps, meditate our way out of it. For some people, who suffer acutely from anxiety, this is necessary. Others, faced with ordinary forms of anxiety, ought to reassess it and their relation to it.

Balaska contests common-sense pathologization of anxiety, examining it instead, inspired by Kierkegaard, in terms of possibility (14). She joins anxiety to wonder, since both are experiences that throw us into the question of existence (2). Both face us with vertigo: “The experience of dizziness serves as a bridge that connects wonder to anxiety” (74). With anxiety and wonder alike, we can learn from our moods (5). What do we learn? That we are in a world, and that we are sense-makers (9). These may not seem like earth-shattering revelations, but Balaska makes a persuasive case that anxiety and wonder’s capability for making them explicit can effect a powerful shift in how people live.

The core aim of the book is to advocate for a “more complex view of the affective life” based on “the complex status of the presence of meaningfulness” (76). Pursuit of this aim leads Balaska back to the origin of philosophy, whose prime task is to deal with the givenness of the world’s intelligibility (78). I find Balaska’s aim laudable. We all could reckon more carefully with our emotional and sensed lives, the uncanny human ability to apprehend reality, to arrange it, to be moved by it, to mold it—but also reality’s equally uncanny resistance to such efforts. Recollection of philosophy’s primal gesture, such as Balaska urges, bears perennial importance.

Balaska conjugates this primal gesture by presenting anxiety and wonder as dynamic experiences of objectlessness, the nothing or no-thing that exceeds (while never severing ties from) our everyday rapport with objects and things. Dread and awe interrupt these surface relationships. She chooses as chief interlocutors Freud and Lacan (chapter 2), Heidegger (chapters 3 and 4), Plato (chapter 4), Arendt (chapter 4), Wittgenstein (chapter 5), and, above all, Kierkegaard (throughout). This last author exerts influence on all the others. Balaska treats each adroitly, with remarkable focus and concision, drawing from each a little more insight into the open-endedness of human life, which we would

do well to enact with greater creativity, rather than avoiding by squelching our anxiety and deadening our wonder.

For scholars (and enthusiasts) of Kierkegaard, Balaska's extended exegesis of key moments (pun intended) in *The Concept of Anxiety* will delight (49–61). Balaska crisply renders Kierkegaard's masterful account of the ambivalence of spirit that shines through anxiety. Her work on this shows its importance in chapter 5, where, in a successful attempt to bring the best out of Wittgenstein, Balaska deftly directs his skepticism toward "wonder at the world's existence" in the direction of Kierkegaardian-Heideggerian appreciation for paradox as a viable "form of understanding rather than its breakdown" (94, emphasis original). Competency in paradoxical understanding leads Kierkegaard, after all, to write so compellingly about anxiety as possibility.

*Anxiety and Wonder* is not a practical guide to living anxiety-free or seeking after wonder, nor does it pretend to be. Its task is more modest, yet, as I see it, monumental for that (even in a slim volume). Balaska offers this book as an opening, a statement of possibility, a call to creativity. I often worry, as did Kierkegaard, and so it seems does Balaska, that people ignore the openness that ought to define them. I say this not as a criticism, but a little as a lament. In our day of constant bombardment with information (including information about how to prevent or assuage anxiety, though not so much—how telling!—about how to enjoy wonder), it is not overblown to state that we are actively prevented from recurring to the personal depths on which Balaska fixes her and her readers' attention. Balaska's excellent book exhorts listening to a call that issues from these depths, which manifests itself in anxiety and wonder. Should readers heed her word, possibilities will open. Quite possibly, the change will be invisible, but for those who listen, "the orientation of their lives is shifted, and the overall tone is different" (103). *What* to do (specifics) will now have a different why and how. The closure that seems to define us will be breached. This is why we read philosophy in the first place: to awaken to our dizziness and, insofar as we are able, to embrace its implications, namely, that we are free, and should live that way.