



Philosophy and the Human Situation

Wonder

Ronald Hepburn

Why should the topic of wonder have haunted me over decades of my life? Part of the answer is because wonder is a many-sided, complex concept to explore – with connections to scientific, philosophical, religious, aesthetic and moral domains. But also because wonder, when it is an open, appreciative celebration of its objects, simply ranks among memorable experiences.

Scientific enquiry is triggered and kept alive by wonder, by the attitude of attentiveness it fosters. The same is true of philosophical explorations. 'A philosopher remains a philosopher', wrote Gabriel Marcel, 'only so long as he retains the capacity for wonderment... despite everything... that tends to dispel it'. Over the history of religions, and in particular the development of the holy within theism, the shudder at the uncanny and weird is transmuted to adoration and wonder. Yet wonder does not require belief in God. If problems should arise over the philosophical basis of belief, and worship becomes impossible for a person, wonder is probably the nearest intense appreciative attitude and emotion that is free of problematic metaphysics and so remains available. Wonder can be evoked by the pure thought of the world's existence – contingent and inexplicable – in the absence of any surmise about the existence of God. And, if the world and its contents were not sources of wonder in themselves, we would not have been tempted to see them as filtering the perfections of deity. In the field of aesthetics, poets and other artists have often seen their task as a wondering celebration of the world of their experience. But the relevance of wonder spans both art and nature. Environmental philosophers cannot fail to see nature's power to evoke wonder as among the main motivations of their interest and concern. The links between wonder and the ethical are as clear and strong as any: a temperament attuned to wonder does not leap towards dominance and manipulation, but dwells appreciatively on otherness – whether of things or persons; wonder goes naturally with respect and often with love.

What then are the sort of items that have tended to arouse wonder? They could hardly be more diversified: the vast and the minute, the long-lasting and the ephemeral, the baffling and the rationally understandable in nature, the beautiful in nature: also of course, human effort and achievement.

It's already clear that there are varieties of wonder. Some are questioning, probing, restless: others more calmly contemplative, nudging close to aesthetic experience. Let's sample the first of these. 'No man', wrote Francis Bacon in *The Advancement of Learning*, 'No man can marvel at the play of puppets, that goeth behind the curtain and adviseth well of the motion'. It's often thought that the more we can causally explain, the less we can wonder: that it's only the gaps in explanation that can (temporarily) sustain our wonderment and that reminds us of a 'God of the gaps' theology, and it would have the same sort of instability. Hardly a high human value, if it must leave the scene as soon as truth arrives. But is that so?

Wonder can be taken as a symptom of a limit, or a failure, in our understanding of the world ('anxious curiosity', Adam Smith called it), an irritant that we seek to 'get rid of' by enhancing our understanding. It's liable, however, to come back. Even if at each stage – as our science advances – wonder is 'got rid of' – in favour of new knowledge, there always lie ahead further problems, and therefore further occasions for wonder – restless, probing wonder.

Sometimes, of course, we discover that we have responded with wonder inappropriately, marvelling at some superficial trick or illusion or ill-founded claim which titillates, but won't sustain, our wondering attitude. In fact, we give ourselves to wonder somewhat as we give ourselves in a friendship, entrusting ourselves to the other person in an open and therefore vulnerable way. So the question is always a serious one: have I been excessively trusting or credulous? Will the object of my wonder let me down? Or, have I been excessively cautious, sceptical, and so missed something of value?

Obviously, you cannot tell – simply from the nature of a person's wonder itself – whether or not it has an appropriate object. Two people might well experience equally intense wonder, although we know that one or the other must be misdirecting it. Let us say – the mind-body

dualism of the one presents him with a wonder-evoking interaction between totally distinct kinds of entity, and the materialism of the other lets her direct her wonder at the extraordinary capability of material bodies alone to have the power of feeling and thought. But there is no case for perpetually withholding our wonderment, just because it's possible that we have got it wrong! Fallibility reigns here as everywhere else. We do our best – and respond appropriately, legitimately, to the beliefs we reach.

What displaces wonder may not be simply discovery of a causal mechanism – or not that by itself. One thing causal explanation often does is to reduce the isolation of an object or event, embedding it in a system of laws; whereas, what tends to enhance wonder is often the isolating of its object – letting it stand out in its individuality. Here we are beginning to edge away from restless, questioning wonder towards contemplative wonder. Let's go further in that direction.

A phenomenon of nature which is the undisputed work of impersonal causation can arouse and sustain wonder, if it results in an effect that sharply contrasts with our perceptual expectations: where, for instance, dramatic upthrusts of dark volcanic rock disrupt an otherwise flat, green pastoral landscape, or where the caverns and underground rivers of limestone country contrast strikingly with the green fields above.

Often singled out for special wonderment is the existence on the earth's surface of living beings – in cosmic terms minute and highly vulnerable – with vast uninhabitable regions on every side. It's true that causal (evolutionary) explanation could reduce the element of surprise in such wonder. 'Can we expect anything else – if the conditions for life are in fact realized here?' we might say. None of this, however, alters the perceived contrast between living and lifeless, between sentient beings and the vast impersonal theatre in which they live out their lives. This contrast may be quite enough for sustained wonder.

Perceptual contrasts are central to another sort of case, where wonder rejoices in unpredictably diversified emergent qualities: for instance, the varied forms of water – from liquid... to ice... to vapour... cloud... hail and snow: or the variety and the constant changing of colours in sunsets and sunrises.

Again, wonder is aroused by the display of unlikely potentialities: in the arts – that a few strokes with a brush can evoke a startlingly vivid landscape; or that the sound of bow on gut or steel strings can carry powerful and subtle expressive power. Here we wonder at qualitative leaps (from the instrument as physical object to its individual emotional impact; from sparse brush-strokes to emergent landscape). Wonderment here – whether of art or nature – is emphatically an aesthetic-appreciative response to phenomenal contrast and perceptual transformation.

More simply still, wonder can be aroused by certain irreducible, striking sensory impressions, wonderful in themselves, not on account of any emergence: a vivid blue sky, a mountain-top panorama, a snow-field. That sort of wonder cannot be sabotaged by going 'behind the curtain', in Bacon's image. For we are directly aware of the source of our wonder, the colours or sounds themselves.

If you are still worried that the possibility of universal causal explanation (with the threat of 'What else would you expect?') seems to undermine at least some occasions of wonder, there is a further suggestion to be made. May we not reach a final really secure object of wonder in the world as a whole? Explanation runs towards the totality, and there it ends. 'Aesthetically', Wittgenstein wrote, 'the miracle (das Wunder) is that 'the world exists. That what exists does exist'. Wonder, that is, readily arises from a sense of utter contingency; that there should be a world rather than nothing. We can call this 'existential wonder'. The cosmos is beyond explanations: necessarily unique. No comparisons can dilute our response: wonder persists.

Suppose I accept all that. It may strike me now that the world-as-a-whole need not have to remain the sole appropriate object of wonder. The world is not a separate entity, distinct from its various constituent parts. It must be towards those parts – within our experience, that we direct our wonder. So the fact that these are connected in a causal network does not sabotage existential wonderment.

Moreover, since the mysterious totality cannot itself be grasped in our experience, we often use some striking limited object as a symbol of the whole (whether in religion or art or aesthetic appreciation of nature) – and the quality of existential wonder, cosmic wonder, rubs off, as it were, on the symbol – be it forest, mountain, sea or sun.

Despite all that I have been saying, it is nevertheless easier to wonder appreciatively at the grand, bare thought of the world's existence than at a great many particular goings-on within

the world, that are painful, sad or tragic. For there is not only the benignly purposive-looking (the fulfilment of conditions for the appearing of a Shakespeare or a Mozart); but there are also cancer cells and destructive viruses, and in the animal world the constant grim roles of predator and prey). Are we forgetting all that in speaking of wonder as universally appropriate? Ought I not to be checked by a secular equivalent of the theologian's Problem of Evil?

Certainly, an unqualifiedly pessimistic view of the world would not sustain wonder, but only perhaps dread, or nausea. But wonder at the emergence of living and sentient beings is not, I think, undermined by the constraints of their finitude. Admittedly, it is hard not to shrink before what looks like callousness and unconcern in nature over the existence of individual living beings, and that connects, no doubt, with the fear of our own death. But we see these as inadequate responses, as we come to grasp the processes by which we have emerged. The quality of our wonderment may well be chill and troubled as we contemplate the mixture of creative and destructive in nature. Yet it can survive recognisably as wonder. Perhaps it can survive better than some other would-be comprehensive attitudes to nature, such as respect or love.

In noting that wonder can constitute an appreciative experience, valued in itself, we have been already explicitly thinking of it in aesthetic terms. Although not all wonder belongs to aesthetic experience, and not all aesthetic experience is 'wondering' in tone and attitude, nevertheless, they do certainly seriously overlap. There are aesthetic theories whose key concepts are 'heightened' or 'expanded' consciousness, and so stress aspects of aesthetic experience that come closest to wonderment, which is equally concerned with unusually concentrated, attentive experience. Relevant also are theories which, in a wide sense, are platonic – for which experience of aesthetic excellence is part-fulfilment and part-frustration. Beyond the excellence actually displayed in some object – whether in art or in nature – is always (for the Platonist) the hint of a yet more intense, unalloyed, elusive and wonder-evoking vision – Call it beauty itself, or the essence or form of the beautiful.

On a less rarefied plane, John Stuart Mill wrote: 'It is not understanding that destroys wonder, it is familiarity'. A succession of poets, artists of various kinds with a very explicit concern with wonder have sought to show us the familiar as once more unfamiliar: to see it as if for the first time: 'awakened... from the lethargy of custom'. Their methods for restoring wonder have been highly varied. Wordsworth, for one, could single out perceptually ambiguous, sense-disturbing objects and experiences – the rainbow, say, or the elusive sound of the cuckoo. Responding to these, a reader could then become attuned to endless objects of wonder in nature-at-large.

In some cases, a remote background – perhaps again surrogate for the cosmic context itself – is felt to be momentarily and movingly present in determining our response to the limited object which we are focally contemplating: hence a sense of wonderment. For instance (to repeat an example and a few words of comment from my original essay), in the beautifully-worked ending to Coleridge's poem, *Frost at Midnight*, the final image is of the 'silent icicles/quietly shining to the quiet Moon'. The moon plays this role, itself source of the icicles' shining – remote but impinging on and determining the perceived quality of the small near-at-hand objects that mirror it, and carrying the mystery of that remote background to the human scene, the cottage, the infant, Coleridge's memories.

I would like to mention one further area of aesthetic experience in which wonder plays a specially important part, and that is the history of the concept of the sublime. It's a concept that many today ignore as unfashionable; and others subject to extravagant re-working. Many eighteenth century accounts of the sublime had a markedly awesome and wondering quality. Sublimity, to them, involved a blending, or balancing, of dread and exhilaration at nature's vast spatial and temporal extent and its huge energies; yet to hold these components in equilibrium was strenuous and precarious. The balance could be lost by proudly exaggerating the mind's capacities in apprehending nature: lost equally if the fearful side of the experience degenerated into mere demoralized horror. If wonder and awe, however, remain dominant, the seriousness and the complexity of the experience are less likely to be surrendered. Conceived in that way, sublimity is concerned to transform the threatening and overwhelming in nature into what can be grasped in a momentous aesthetic (or aesthetic-religious) experience, even contemplated with a solemn joy, brought about in important part through the agency of wonder.

If I have said little here explicitly on the ethical affinities of wonder, it's not because I have changed my mind on the importance of that topic, but partly because Professor Benson has

quoted me extensively on it. Even so, we have never really been very far from the ethical. The ethical life is not only a matter of rules and principles: it is as much, perhaps even more, a matter of the attitudes, emotions, images, vision that inspire and integrate our life's aims, our projects, our style, and so guide our approach to ourselves, to others and to the non-human world. So at one extreme, we can be over-credulous, given to fatuous marvelling, in love with the frisson of the strange: at the other extreme, we can be sardonic, superciliously shut-off from any wonderment at anything, any acknowledgement of mystery. It is obvious how both of these do damage to a person's character and, therefore, ethical life. To find our path between these is an exercise in practical, ethical wisdom.