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The Inaugural Address: Wonder

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Source: *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes*, Vol. 54 (1980), pp. 1-23

Published by: [Wiley](#) on behalf of [The Aristotelian Society](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4106778>

Accessed: 19/09/2014 09:56

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The Inaugural Address

WONDER

R. W. Hepburn

The importance of wonder among human experiences has been acknowledged often enough in philosophical literature: but discussions of wonder, and particularly of its problematic aspects, are less common. Its importance is easily made out. Scientific enquiry has been stimulated and sustained by wonder, by the attentive, questioning, baffled but appreciative stance of the person who wonders. For philosophers, wonder has been taken as the starting-point (Plato, Aristotle). St Thomas saw wonder as a 'kind of desire for knowledge'.¹ For many, it is more than starting-point. 'A philosopher remains a philosopher', wrote Gabriel Marcel, 'only so long as he retains [the] capacity for wonderment (*étonnement*) . . . despite everything . . . that tends to dispel it'.² In both the religious and the aesthetic fields, wonder has played climactic roles. In the development of theistic experience, for instance, the elements of the terrifying and weird give way to a response of wonder and exaltation. If there are problems over the availability of mystical and of numinous experience to a person who rejects their traditional background of metaphysical beliefs (monistic or theistic), the same is not obviously true of a religiously toned wonder, whether directed at particular, arresting objects or events in nature, or at the sheer existence of a world at all. In the aesthetic field, wonder has been a central concern to poets and other artists in a variety of traditions, among them Christian, Platonist and Romantic; and it plays a dominant role, notably, in theories of the sublime—in those that have a claim to more than historical interest.

The chronicled objects of wonder display a prodigious diversity. They have included the products of freedom and high intelligence and the products of chance: the inexplicable and mysterious as well as the intelligible structures discovered in nature: not only the remote but the familiar too: the enduring and the eternal, but also the changing and ephemeral.

But what, here, is problematical? For a start, by no means

all writings on wonder see it as a highly prized mode of experience, to be fostered and stabilized. It has been seen variously (a) as signalling a check in our understanding of the world ('anxious curiosity'—Adam Smith), which we seek to 'get rid of' by extending our grasp.³ Again, (b) allowing that some people come to love wonder for its own sake, such people have been seen as hostile to the pursuit of naturalistic explanation, preferring to marvel rather than to understand. The pursuit of scientific knowledge—it is argued—would in fact provide them with objects enough for wonder. Although in each case eventually wonder is ousted by knowledge, the procession of problems is, for us, endless. More pessimistically, (c) some other writers have seen the growth of naturalistic explanation as necessarily and generally displacing wonder, whether we like it or not: and these writers do not like it at all. (Among the poets, Leopardi.) None of these views is my own; but they indicate attitudes that I try to take account of in what follows.

Undeniably wonder can stimulate a person to enquiry: it may be intensified when the enquiry succeeds and the enigmatic in nature becomes intelligible. But it may thereafter dwindle, as its object becomes assimilated and commonplace knowledge. The question, then, arises: Must it always be so? Often the displacement of wonder is of no great moment to us. Yet, equally undeniably, wonder can also be highly valued as a form of human experience, overlapping with both the aesthetic and the religious; and we may wish it did possess stability and were invulnerable to undermining. Can it be so stabilized; or is there a perspective from which any object or event can be shown not to be wonderful at all? Is wonder, in principle, always expendable, consumable, displaceable through the very attaining of some superior cognitive viewpoint? We do not wish to be found in the posture of foolish wonder—wonder that is purely a function of our ignorance. Yet many of us are no more happy with the thought of the universal displaceability (even if only in principle) of wonder: 'the odds is gone, And there is nothing left remarkable Beneath the visiting moon'.⁴

Though serious discussions of wonder are not numerous, some do exist; and I have indicated a sample of these in my Notes at the end of this paper.

Consider, then, the question of what I have called the dis-

placing and stabilizing of wonder. Some philosophers have indicated, in different idioms, a distinction between an ephemeral emotional response to some baffling phenomenon or disturbing discontinuity in experience, and a steadier, perhaps permanently available response to what is apprehended as worthy of wonder.

Kant's usage is striking and suggestive. He certainly distinguishes between astonishment (*Verwunderung*) which fades as a sense of novelty diminishes, and wonderment that is steady and unthreatened (*Bewunderung*). We apply the expressions 'sublime' and 'noble' to certain objects, 'provided they do not so much excite astonishment (*Verwunderung*)' which is directed at 'novelty exceeding expectation', as admiration (or wonder, *Bewunderung*)—'an astonishment which does not cease when the novelty wears off'.⁵ And there is no reason to omit the best-known of all Kantian remarks on *Bewunderung*:

Zwei Dinge erfüllen das Gemüt mit immer neuer und zunehmender Bewunderung und Ehrfurcht, je öfter und anhaltender sich das Nachdenken damit beschäftigt. Der bestirnte Himmel über mir und das moralische Gesetz in mir.⁶

The oftener and more steadily . . . Kant, that is, is untroubled by worries about instability in this occasion of wonder. Its objects are 'connected directly with the consciousness of my existence', i.e. they reveal to me how things stand. In the transient shock of astonishment one may suspect illusion—'doubt one's own eyesight': but wonder endures, where no doubt about eyesight remains. We read rather of an 'expansion of the mind'.⁷

We could then, tentatively, bring wonder in some of its manifestations into close relation with the concept of *truth* and concern to attain the truth. It would be unsurprising if a person attached more importance to experience of wonder at an object which he sees himself as having truly apprehended, than to wonder or 'astonishment' that may well have a misperceived object. Foolish or stupid wonder would be wonder arising from failure to grasp or realize what is before one: and there are reasons enough for not wishing to be held captive by such. I give myself to wonder in ways not too fancifully analogous

to how I give myself in a friendship, entrusting myself to another in an open and therefore vulnerable way. So the question is always a serious one: will the object of my wonder let me down?

Obviously, there is no way of reading off from the quality, intensity or duration of a person's wonder itself, whether or not it is directed at an appropriate object. Two people might well experience wonder in equal degree and in like quality, although one or other must be misdirecting his wonder. One of them, say, is a mind-body dualist, wondering at the marvel of interaction between utterly different kinds of entity, and the other a materialist who directs his wonder at the capacity of matter (as he sees it) to give rise to the full range of sentient and conscious experience.

I want, however, to revert to the contrast, picked out in Kant, between the proper objects of wonder and astonishment at 'mere' novelty. Although wonder itself has a questioning and questing aspect, it rests in its objects, once they are judged in some way *worthy* of wonder. This is an attitude quite different from the thrust of curiosity or the itch after the novel. Heidegger touches on such contrasts in *Being and Time*. Mere curiosity is given an inferior place in Heidegger's scheme. He speaks of curiosity as 'leaping from novelty to novelty . . . not tarrying'. 'Curiosity has nothing to do with observing entities and marvelling at them (*thaumazein*). To be amazed to the point of not understanding is something in which it has no interest. Rather, it concerns itself with a kind of knowing, but just in order to have known'. When curiosity 'obtains sight of anything, it already looks away to what is coming next': it never 'dwells anywhere'.⁸

This rings true: curiosity-knowledge is seen as a kind of possession, a tick on the tourist's place-list. Wonder does not see its objects possessively: they remain 'other' and un-mastered. Wonder does dwell in its objects with rapt attentiveness. There seems, too, a variable relation between the element of curiosity or interrogation in wonder and a contemplative-appreciative aspect ('dwelling'), in which it is furthest from mere curiosity. I think, however, that even where enquiry has reached some terminus—perhaps the mystery of the sheer existence of the world—that interrogative element, no longer expecting any

further answers, may still persist in a muted and generalized form within wonderment. With it may persist also an odd sense of the *gratuitousness* of the object and its qualities. Its existence strikes us as a gift, undeserved. A sense of *unlikelihood* pervades the experience. But these aspects are highly elusive, and their description can hardly avoid metaphor.

Some occasions of wonder could not be described at all convincingly in terms of response to the surprising and novel, of curiosity at the puzzling or as signalling an advance in our systematic understanding of nature. I am thinking, for instance, of a broad range of cases that can plausibly be held to rise from the linking of present experience with memory-traces of very early experience: where adult objects of experience or 'reverie' (thinking of Bachelard, *The Poetics of Reverie*) resonate with obscure but psychologically vital patterns or impressions from the individual's remote past, and are thus given the qualities of wonder and mystery. The objects may be elemental features such as the sea or sky, a mountain or a human face, suddenly seen with a visionary intensity. To Bachelard, when the archetypal qualities of childhood are communicated, it is 'under the sign of wonder'.⁹

It would be a mistake to see in this sort of account of wonder any ground for a down-grading or reductionist dismissal of it. Ground is given, rather, for gratification that vivid sensory and emotional impressions from early life can continue to vivify much later and often less keen experiences: or, more accurately, that the earlier and later together can fuse to produce a new experience, in which the faint awareness of a wide temporal gap between the components is essential to the wonder-arousing synthesis. Undermining or down-grading would be threats only where speculative, cognitive claims were made on the basis of such experiences: for instance, religious claims about a transcendent being or state. But, quite crucially, they do not have to be taken as cognitive—or illusory-cognitive. They are a reminder that there are kinds of contemplative wonder which contain no implicit claim to an extension of grasp of how things ultimately are.

These and other cases of meditative wonderment may strike one as having a somewhat paradoxical quality: often their objects do not impinge upon us as 'alien determinations' of

consciousness. We actively celebrate their qualities, rather than receive them purely passively, and our sense of mental freedom is not jeopardized. Nevertheless, the sense of the objects' otherness is not lost. The total experience remains object-directed and object-absorbed; and forms of value we acknowledge in and through the experience do not have the quality of a wilful projection: quite the contrary. Even so, there remain many other instances of wonder in which serious perplexity can arise about the appropriateness or inappropriateness of their objects, the stability or instability of our response, the possibility of its being undermined by new information or by reflection. I turn to some of these now.

The Conditions of Wonder: What confirms and what undermines it. Do mathematical or logical truths offer any scope for wonder? Does not logical necessity rule out wonder? A paradigm of foolish wonder would be someone's marvelling at the thought that *not one bachelor is married*. So far as any valid piece of logic, including any apparent *consequentia mirabilis*, is reducible to a series of perspicuous and patently necessary inferences, wonder must mark only our failure of grasp. And yet there does seem room for a wonder that is compatible with understanding. Perhaps it is best taken as directed at the ingenuity and resourcefulness of logicians and mathematicians—in extending the concept of number, exploiting the notion of infinitesimals, and so on. Given a lucidly set up calculus, wonder at a particular result can indeed be challenged and deflated by the question, 'What else would you expect?'; but the same retort is hardly in place *vis-à-vis* the exercise of freedom and imagination that produced the calculus initially.

No man, wrote Francis Bacon, can 'marvel at the play of puppets, that goeth behind the curtain and adviseth well of the motion'.¹⁰ Wonder, to Bacon, is 'broken knowledge', and knowledge proper displaces it. So the question again arises: Is it true that as the range of *causal* explanation increases, so the scope for wonder necessarily decreases? If so, any hoped-for stability or permanent availability of wonder is illusory: the situation is like a 'God-of-the-gaps' theology, increasingly threatened as the gaps in knowledge are filled.

Certainly it would be odd, watching a see-saw, if I were to

be filled with wonder that when the left hand seat is depressed, the right hand seat rises. Our disposition to wonder is at its lowest when a causal mechanism is as perspicuous or simple as that, and where we see why thinkable alternatives are not actualized. Much wonder has arisen from perplexity ('baffling' of understanding) over causal connections: concern over truth and understanding is indeed opposed to a self-indulgent or apathetic wonder that prefers delightful bafflement to causal investigation.

What displaces wonder is not simply discovery of the causal mechanism. Causal explanation reduces the isolation of an object or event, embeds it in an intelligible system of laws; whereas wonder is often enhanced (though I do not claim always) by the *isolation* of its object: it is often excited by suppressing the background that confers intelligibility or causal continuity (as again with the illusions of the puppet-theatre).

Does it follow, then, that the more phenomena can be causally explained, the less scope remains for wonder? Or, in the vocabulary of the freewill debate, must we opt for an 'incompatibilist' account of wonder in relation to causal explanation? I want to argue for a 'compatibilist' alternative.

(a) *The perceptually wonder-evoking as compatible with causal explanation.* Wonder at a causally explicable phenomenon can be defended as non-illusory, if the phenomenon goes markedly against normal *perceptual expectations*, given its context. Geologists, for instance, may explain the appearance of an abrupt mass of rock, among the gentler contours of the country around it, as the core or plug of a former volcano. The perceptual contrasts of contour and textures in the landscape remain, and may elicit a wonder that the causal story does not dissipate, though it may reduce initial surprise or bafflement. Perceptual strangeness, and therefore wonder, are sustained when the paths of causal explanation are complex enough not to habituate or condition perception.

Some writers single out as an object of special wonderment the persistence of the 'fragile', living beings notably, on the thin habitable zone of the earth's surface, surrounded by enormous airless spaces. Some aspects of this wonder may be accountable on similar lines. The causal story does tend to

undermine the surprise-element of wonder once again. 'What else would you expect?'—if the conditions for life are in fact satisfied on the earth's surface, and if we can explain causally why potentially destructive forces do not at present overthrow these conditions. There remains however, the contrast for perception and imagination between living beings and their cosmic environment, between their sensitivity, sentience, internal complexity, vulnerability and the indifferent and mindless regions around them. This contrast, and the wonder it can evoke, survive the acceptance of a causal account. The wonder fades to the extent that the details of the causal story become vivid, and it certainly feeds upon an anthropocentrically selective view; but that is not to say it involves illusion. We are not so far from Kant in the Third Critique, where he considers an aesthetically arresting phenomenon, like 'mineral crystallization' which displays an apparently teleological ordering in nature. Kant rejects a 'realism' attributing actual ends to nature. 'The halo in the grotto of Antiparos is merely the work of water percolating through strata of gypsum'⁶ but our aesthetic pleasure is not threatened by denying such 'objective finality'; for we can autonomously exercise our aesthetic judgment on the perceived forms of nature nevertheless.

(b) *Wonder at emergent qualities.* In a closely related range of cases, wonder is directed at emergent qualities of a counter-intuitive kind: causality again being acknowledged. (The transformations of a familiar substance like water; the variety and constant changes of colours arising in the refracting of sunlight in the atmosphere.) In other cases, wonder is aroused by *prima facie* unlikely potentialities: that ink blobs on paper can be made to vividly evoke a landscape; that bowed strings and blown pipes have their powerful and subtle expressive powers. 'Unlikelihood' here signals simply the succession or co-presence of highly contrasted qualities, qualitative leaps (the instrument and its emotional impact, the two-dimensional blobs and the impression of a complex three-dimensional landscape).

Essentially the same story can cover much more complex emergent qualities. The most dramatic example is wonder at the evolutionary emergence of living structures from the less ordered and less differentiated. Or, is wonder again coming

out of ignorance? In calling the potentialities 'unlikely', am I just underestimating them—even while (inconsistently) acknowledging them and marvelling at them? Not necessarily. This wonder also may be not a wondering *how* (how A's emerge from B's), but closer to a quasi-aesthetic appreciative response to the phenomenal contrast between A and B.

(c) Wonder can be aroused by certain sensory impressions, quite out of relation to any background of emergence: a vivid blue ocean, a dazzling sheet of mountain-ice . . . They are phenomenally irreducible, even though causally explicable. The wonder is not vulnerable to the Baconian going 'behind the curtain'. For it is not the genesis of the phenomenon that elicits the wonder, but the phenomenon itself, colour, sound, or combinations of impressions. There is no 'going behind' it.

In *Conversations with Goethe*, Eckermann wrote: 'We talked of the Theory of Colours, and . . . about drinking glasses, the dull figures on which appear yellow against the light, and blue against the dark, and therefore allow the observation of a primitive phenomenon (*Urphänomen*). "The highest which man can attain in these matters," said Goethe . . . , "is astonishment (*das Erstaunen*—'wonder'); if the primary phenomenon causes this, let him be satisfied; more it cannot bring; . . . here is the limit. [But this] is generally not enough for people; they think they must go still further; and are thus like children who, after peeping into a mirror, turn it round directly to see what is on the other side'.¹¹

We do not need to enter into discussion of Goethe's science in order to see the pertinent analogy. Also, Goethe's image of the mirror contrasts strikingly with Bacon's puppet-image. In the latter, the spectator's experience is clearly not 'ur-phenomenal'.

(d) If the general possibility of causal explanation—with the threat of 'What else would you expect?' still seems to undermine some occasions of wonder, there is a further and obvious suggestion to be made. The finally secure object of wonder is the *totality* of laws and entities, the world as a whole. Explanation runs *towards* the totality, but there absolutely ends. (I am thinking within a non-theistic context: something on theism

B

and wonder will come shortly.) 'Aesthetically', Wittgenstein wrote, 'the miracle (*das Wunder*) is that the world exists. That what exists does exist.'¹² We can give no reason for the world's being rather than not being. We can meaningfully ask why it exists, but we have no resources for answering it.¹³

Wonder is generated from this sense of absolute contingency; its object the sheer existence of a world. I shall call it 'existential wonder'. All reasons fall away: wondering is not a prelude to fuller knowledge, though the generalized interrogative attitude may persist.

Adam Smith claimed that wonder arises where some object of attention 'refuses to be grouped . . . with any set of objects'. If we can match the object with resembling cases, 'our Wonder is entirely at an end': but 'if we can recollect none', our wonder is 'the greatest possible'.³ We may extend this to the whole universe. It necessarily is unique: so wonder towards it is invulnerable to destruction by comparison. (The fact that universes are not 'plentiful' troubles some versions of the theistic proofs; but the same fact is a support to the non-theist's attempt to ground his attitude of wonder.)

Suppose I accept that the world as a whole is the 'finally secure' object of wonder. I may reflect that it need not be judged the *sole* appropriate object. For what is that totality but the constituents that compose it? To direct wonder at the universe must be in practice to direct it at the parts—any or all of them. If the world's existence is the basic wonder-generating fact, there is no good reason after all why that existential wonder should seem threatened by the network of causal relationships among the world's constituents. Moreover, the totality is itself ungraspable in experience, and this prompts us to take (as happens in various aesthetic and religious contexts) some particular finite objects as symbolic substitutes or surrogates for the universe—receiving as it were the charge of wonder appropriate to the whole. Causal explanations, then, may dampen 'surprise-wonder' at the generation of particular events, but existential wonder is secure, whether directed at the thought of the whole or at the particular seen as representing the whole.

(e) Not only are there varieties of wonder which are not undetermined by causal explicability, there are also other varieties for

which explicability is an altogether necessary condition. First: the wider the scope of explanation in terms of basic laws of nature, the greater our sense of the intelligibility of the world (granting that its intelligibility never becomes total). This sense has been a recurrent source of wonder. (Hence my qualified claim above about wonder as evoked by the isolated object.) The wonder aroused by the discerning of intelligible patterns in nature has, in turn, been one main motivation in scientific enquiry. In *The Act of Creation* Arthur Koestler discusses the role played by the sense of wonder in the work of some notable scientists (Appendix II and elsewhere).

(f) Wonder may be elicited not only by the bare notion of intelligible structure. For the particular set of laws progressively uncovered are laws which have produced life, consciousness, freedom, moral and aesthetic awareness. Certainly, had they not done so ('had it in them' to do so), we could not make this observation or do any wondering. Yet that does not rule out the appropriateness of wonder at the fulfilment of enormous numbers of conditions, successive and simultaneous, for the emergence of sentient and rational beings.

(g) Wonder can be a response to the scope the world offers for the exercise of rational and aesthetic capabilities, its power to *sustain* their exercise. Reflecting from a non-theistic viewpoint, I am unconvinced that the beauty and rational interest of the world are sufficient grounds for postulating God; but this puts no embargo upon responding to these features with wonder—or indeed to any other features of the world which theism has taken to be the signatures of God, taken as features lent only to nature, rather than nature's by right.

It is nevertheless easier to wonder at the grand, bare thought of the world's existence than at a great many particular objects and goings-on within the world, rather as it is easier to love 'humanity' than some instances of humanity. If we carry back to the thought of the totality-and-its-potentialities the *dysteleological* as well as the teleologically benign (cancer cells proliferating in a child's brain, as well as the realizing of conditions for creativity in the brain of Mozart), is wonder still uniquely appropriate? Is it in fact any easier to justify the response of wonder

to the actual world, within a non-theistic view, than to construct a theodicy?

To judge wonder appropriate does seem to presuppose value in its object, whether in the object itself intrinsically or as a condition for something else having value. An unqualifiedly pessimistic view of the world would not sustain wonder, but only perhaps dread, or nausea or a sense of the absurd.

The Christian theodicy-writer has to cope with belief in the omnipotence and omniscience of God, and with the fact that *not* to create is an option for God. He cannot appeal to recalcitrance in the medium of creation. And even the thought of a life hereafter very dubiously compensates for the drastic marring of lives here and now by such evils as mental deficiency from birth: nor can these be readily accommodated in a 'vale of soul-making' theodicy.

But reflections that tend to defeat theodicies do not necessarily defeat non-theistic outlooks that foster an attitude of wonder. Wonder at the appearance in the world of living and sentient beings is not nullified by their finitude and vulnerability. The unlikely or amazing thing is not the *breakdown* of function in complex living structures, but their having come to function at all. Resentment and rebellion are easy attitudes to adopt in face of the fragility of living individuals and the brevity of their lives, the apparent callousness of nature to its most extraordinary products. But these are increasingly seen to be inappropriate responses, half-personifying nature's energies, as one grasps the processes by which we have emerged.

To turn, very briefly, to the place of wonder in theism. Theism sees God as the maximally wonder-evoking being, since perfections converge in him, though in a radically mysterious manner. Objects in the created world intimate, reveal-conceal the creator—his wisdom, beauty, goodness; and they are objects of wonder on that account. To the theist, the nearer one penetrates to ultimate reality, the nearer one approaches the supreme object of wonder.

High though the claims of theism can legitimately be pitched in relation to wonder, they can be pitched excessively high. Josef Pieper wrote: 'To Aquinas [the capacity to wonder] even appeared to offer proof that man could only find peace

and rest in the contemplation of God . . . The truth that human nature is intended for no less an end [than the beatific vision] is revealed in the fact that we are capable of experiencing the wonder of the creation, or quite simply, that we are capable of wonder'.¹⁴

I doubt whether there is a route of argument from wonder to God. We cannot assume that desires for a complete fulfilment of human nature, and for 'peace and rest' have an object adequate to satisfy them—unless something like theism is already presupposed. And, as I have been arguing, existential wonder can be evoked by the pure thought of the world's existence as contingent and inexplicable: hence in the absence of any theistic surmise.

A very different use might be made of the wonder-evoking power of Christian discourse and the view of the world it mediates. That evocative power could be taken as its *fundamental* role, instead of taking it as descriptive of the ultimate nature of the world and the Being who transcends it. Its aim would be to display the world with the freshness and radiance of Bellini's *St Francis*. The difficulties with such an account are analogous to those of other non-cognitive revisions of theism. If the account were accepted, Christian discourse would fail to perform that very (evocative) role. It would perform it reliably only so long as it accepted *also* the cosmos-descriptive role, and referred all that evokes wonder to its divine source. Wonder, as theistic discourse interprets it, responds to objects as they reflect or intimate the splendours of deity: it hangs upon the derivative, creaturely status of finite objects. Undermining the metaphysical-religious belief in an actual transcendent deity would undermine also this interpretation of wonder. A person would be much less open to disillusionment, if the objects of his wonder were taken to be, directly, the objects and events in the natural world itself, or the sum of these. To be evocative of wonder, an object need not be seen as filtering the perfections of deity.

The Ethical Affinities of Wonder. No transcendental argument seems feasible to show that wonder is rationally demanded towards the world; and on the other hand not even the dysteleological elements seem to rule it out as inept. But I see no way

of decisively excluding a wide range of alternative responses to the basic cosmic situation in relation to man: sardonic or ironical or depressive (at the disproportion between our capacities and aspirations and the limitations and 'chanciness' of human life and fulfilment). 'Nausea' and dread are others. Yet this is not to say that there is nothing for reason to do in discriminating between the alternatives. Temperamentally, individuals find certain of the options specially compelling: but the responses are also modifiable by reflection. For instance, it can be argued that ironical and sardonic attitudes, when they predominate, tend regrettably to shield or mask a person from experiences of certain types of value, including high values which (once acknowledged) would evoke awe or humility. Again, a response of dread at the human predicament keeps the prospect of our individual death before us, anticipates it, as it were, and so gives the 'dreadful' a gratuitously debilitating hold over life as a whole.

Considerations of the same order can be brought in favour of fostering the attitude and experience of wonder. They arise from the *life-enhancing* character of wonder, appreciative and open, opposed to the self-protective and consolatory. Particularly relevant is a set of liaisons or affinities that connect wonder with moral attitudes. They concern dispositions which, if they are given place in an integrated human life, form a consistent, harmonious set.

The attitude of wonder is notably and essentially *other-acknowledging*. It is not shut up in self-concern or quasi-solipsistic withdrawal. Some philosophers have thought that moral solidarity with others was best promoted by a metaphysic which denied the ultimate separation of individual selves (Schopenhauer was one). I should want to argue on the contrary that the task and distinctive point of view of morality are obscure until the *otherness* of one's neighbour is realized, and realized with it is the possibility of action purely and simply on another's behalf.

Admittedly, it is easy to exaggerate the reliability of carrying over attitudes and emotional responses from one domain to another, from the non-moral to the moral. Few people can have taken more seriously than Wordsworth both the fostering of wonder and exploring of affinities between attitudes to non-

human nature and to persons in moral relationship. Yet 'even in his own case,' John Beer has recently written, Wordsworth 'could not be sure that the experiences of wonder had always led to the love of humanity: there was some evidence that, in his youth, cultivation of the wonderful in nature had led to an isolating aestheticism'.¹⁵

There is, even so, a close affinity between the attitude of wonder itself—non-exploitative, non-utilitarian—and attitudes that seek to affirm and to respect other-being. Unlike some religio-ethical attitudes, for instance the Puritanical, wonder does not deflect attention and concern away from the phenomenal world, but on the contrary values and enjoys its diversity.¹⁶ Respect for nature as such, and in particular for living beings, is not Kant's *Achtung*, though it does rule out attitudes of vandalism and thoughtless manipulation. The nearer the object of wonder comes to having the life, sentience, and rational powers proper to moral person-hood, the more the element of respect in wonder takes on the Kantian quality. The more intense a person's wonder at the human brain, so inadequately modelled by any of our favoured mechanical analogies, the less bearable becomes the thought, for instance, of wantonly putting a bullet through it or crushing it with a rifle-butt.

A close affinity between wonder and *compassion* has been acknowledged by various writers. Where a human life is the object of wonder, there can be a poignant realization of both potentiality and fragility. From that point of view of humanity compassion can readily flow.

To respect and compassion as moral correlates to wonder, we could add *gentleness*—concern not to blunder into a damaging manipulation of another. The agent realizes the blinding effects of self-absorption: the mis-perception of others and others' needs that can stem from it.

From a wondering recognition of forms of value proper to other beings, and a refusal to see them simply in terms of one's own utility-purposes, there is only a short step to *humility*. Humility, like wonder, involves openness to new forms of value: both are opposed to the attitude of 'We've seen it all!'

The latter attitude is even more hostile to wonder than the attitude of 'taking for granted', for behind it stands an implicit false picture of the world. It sees us as standing *vis-à-vis* nature

as a spoiled child stands to his home—arranged for his sole convenience and support, and when it fails so to function, the proper object of his rage, resentment or sullen boredom.

‘Respect for one’s fellow men’, wrote Lévi-Strauss recently, ‘cannot be based on certain special dignities that humanity claims for itself as such, because then one fraction of humanity will . . . decide that it embodies those dignities in some pre-eminent manner. We should rather assert at the outset a sort of *a priori* humility . . . Humility in the face of life, because life represents the rarest and most astonishing creations observable in the universe’.¹⁷

Moral attitudes include attitudes to oneself. Self-evaluation need not be selfish solicitude or narcissism but can involve wonder at one’s own existence and individual nature. Indeed, the more the latter predominates, the less crudely acquisitive self-love is likely to be.

There can enter also an element of ‘meta-wonder’, wonder at my own nature as a wondering being. I am part of nature, yet I have a measure of contemplative detachment from my world, bound up with my freedom, without which the world about me could please, surprise and terrify me, but not prompt me to wonder.

Aesthetic Aspects. In acknowledging its appreciative and contemplative aspects, we have already identified an aesthetic aspect of wonder. Something more explicit needs to be said about that.

The boldest suggestion would be that the fields of aesthetic experience and of wonder are co-extensive. (Coming close to that, in “Structures of Wonder in Aesthetic Experience” (*Dialogue XI*, 1972) H. Hagen argued that wonder is ‘the exercise of intentionality for its own sake’, intensified awareness. Likewise, in aesthetic activity the main aim is ‘expansion of cognition’ and intensity of perception.) The fields of aesthetic experience and wonder do indeed overlap; but I would resist any stronger claim.

Not all wonder belongs to aesthetic experience; some arises in religious or metaphysical reflection, where that acquires a sense of mystery. Again, a muted interrogative attitude remains important in wonder, even when its questions are known

to be without answer. Wonder is not always self-sustaining: some moves towards resolution and its own supersession.

Not all aesthetic experience is 'wondering' in tone and attitude. If it were, we could not speak of a 'renaissance of wonder' within art. And even within a class of wonder-centred Romantic poems, to achieve an adequate response the reader has a great deal more to do besides experiencing wonder. Although a representational art is concerned to *exhibit* or *celebrate* its subject-matter, it need not do so always in a wondering way.

Where wonder is not itself the central aesthetic effect, it may be an element in the total experience of a work of art, a higher-order element. It is wonder at the achievement of what (*independently* of wonder) is of high aesthetic value, perhaps at the complex formal integration of a symphonic movement, or at its vivifying initially unpromising materials. Thus wonder cannot be identified with aesthetic experience as such.

To consider now the overlap: both are concerned with unusually concentrated, rapt experience: there are aesthetic theories whose key concepts are 'heightened' or 'expanded' consciousness, or the 'privileged moment'. These all stress aspects of aesthetic experience that come closest to wonderment. Other aesthetic theories even have an important place for the interrogative and restless element in wonder. I am thinking of theories that, in a very wide sense, could be called platonic or neoplatonic, for which experience of aesthetic excellence is characteristically part-fulfilment and part-frustration. Beyond the excellence actually displayed in some object, is always the hint of a yet more complete, unalloyed, elusive ideal: The *thaumaston . . . kalon . . .* of the Symposium.¹⁸ Platonic in a wide sense, for this characteristic mode of experiencing beauty does not stand or fall with a platonic ontology. The ideal or Form can be given, not a constitutive metaphysical interpretation but a regulative one instead.

A succession of poets, artists and theorists with a very explicit concern with wonder can be readily traced from the first Romantics down to Surrealists and beyond. Though many of them sought to reveal the familiar as if for the first time, their methods for eliciting wonder were notably diversified—from the gentle representing of the everyday in a new light, to the

violent disorientating of the senses. Various questions of philosophical interest arise in this connection, including the relation between wonder in the context of art, and illusion. There have been writers who readily sought to excite wonder towards objects of experience by setting them in a context of the marvellous—indifferent whether illusion was involved or not, so long as we would be ‘awakened . . . from the lethargy of custom’, and the familiar given ‘a sense of novelty and freshness’. Wordsworth gave special prominence to perceptually ambiguous, sense-disturbing objects and experiences—e.g. the rainbow, the elusive cuckoo’s song.

. . . the earth we pace
 Again appears to be
 An unsubstantial, faery place;
 That is fit home for Thee!¹⁹

That is to say, the sense of wonder is to be extended from some particular remarkable being to the whole world of experience. Clearly, such devices could involve illusion, the suppressing of causal connections and explanations.

The devices could, however, play more than one role.

(i) The ‘marvellous’ objects may be taken as representative of nature, and only if they are in fact explanation-defying, anomalous, will they serve as catalysts for a wondering vision of nature. This interpretation makes the whole venture highly vulnerable to the scientist’s explanations of the rainbow, the acoustic properties of cuckoo’s song . . . And to ignore naturalistic explanation is to court self-deception and superficiality in the level of experience.

(ii) The devices by which wonder is first elicited or revived may be seen as the ladder we throw down once climbed: merely instrumental, and disposable once they have done their work. Without being taken as literal anomalies or miracles, they may yet sufficiently startle lethargic perception and allow a skilful poet to ‘spread the tone’ (Coleridge), generalizing the wonderment over nature.²⁰ Here there is no self-deception, or risk of disillusionment.

Among poets of highest quality to whom wonder and the question of its conditions was crucial is Leopardi. ‘Wonder

(*la maraviglia*) is the principal source of pleasure in the fine arts'. But Leopardi also feared that the conditions for wonder depended upon beliefs about the world and ways of apprehending it that had become increasingly hard to sustain, with the growth of scientific understanding. Leopardi believed that the sublimity once evoked by experiences of indeterminably vast distances was progressively ousted as we come to measure them, replacing the mysterious by the determinate and quantified. ('Science destroys the principal pleasures of our spirit because it determines the things and shows us their limits'.²¹) And yet Leopardi shows in *L'Infinito* how his view of nature did not in fact deprive him of the possibility of evoking wonder, through presenting finite objects against a cosmic background, spatial and temporal: the endless imagined spaces beyond the visible scene from the hillside; the wind rustling the plants in contrast with the infinite silence, the sounds of the present 'living' season set against the thought of 'l'eterno, e le morte stagioni'. From these come the overwhelming or 'drowning' of the poet's thoughts and their 'sweet shipwreck'.

Recall again Wittgenstein's remarks in the *Note Books* (1914–1916). 'The work of art is the object seen *sub specie aeternitatis*'. To see objects in this way is to see them 'from outside'; so 'that they have the whole world as background'; it is to see 'the object *together with* space and time instead of *in* space and time'. Wittgenstein's reflections carry him to the thought of the completed object as a world. 'As a thing among things, each thing is equally insignificant; as a world, each one equally significant.' In contemplating an object, 'it was my world, and everything else colourless by contrast with it'. In the rather different cases I am thinking of (from Leopardi, and in a moment from Coleridge again), the background—as the encompassing totality or its representative—is felt to be momentarily present in determining our response to the limited object which we are focally contemplating: hence the wonderment. The background need not be explicitly the cosmos, but a cosmos-surrogate. For instance, in the perfectly-wrought ending to Coleridge's *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 introduced this part of the paper by way of Wordsworth's brooding upon ambiguous and disturbing objects, hard to integrate with the solid world of determinate things in their proper spatial and temporal places. Returning to that theme, I want to make one related remark, only, about music among the arts. Very generally, any hint of being at ontological odds with that spatio-temporal object-world, of being incommensurable with it, may prompt us towards interpreting a field of experience as a 'world in itself'. Accepting such promptings, taking this subject-matter as a world, we are taking it as a proper object of existential wonder. Cosmos-wonder is transferred with ease to any strangely unassimilable micro-cosmos.

In aesthetic experience, it is perhaps with music that this happens most readily. First because in our attempts to describe that quality of experience of serious music we most often confess that language cannot (in Kant's phrase) 'get on level terms with' the musical experience itself. Despite the power of the music to express human life-emotions, we are often aware of a closer relation between one musical expression and another than between musical and non-musical experience.. Secondly: the medium itself has precisely an odd, questionable relationship with the world of spatio-temporal objects. This can be articulated in various ways—perhaps always rather stammeringly. 'Music', wrote Heine, 'is a strange thing. I would almost say it is a miracle. For it stands halfway between thought and phenomenon, between spirit and matter, a . . . mediator, like and unlike each of the things it mediates . . .'²² Not surprisingly, more philosophers than one have acknowledged music is a world in itself; they include Schopenhauer and Wittgenstein.²³

In at least two further areas of aesthetic experience wonder plays a specially important part, in the history of the unfashionable, but revivable, concept of the sublime, and in theory of tragedy.

Though early accounts of the 'great' or sublime had a markedly wondering quality, arising from the fusion of dread and exhilaration at displays of nature's energies or immensities, the maintaining of that fusion or tense equilibrium was diffi-

cult and fitfully managed. It could be lost both by overstressing the mind's capacities in apprehending nature, and lost equally by allowing the dreadful side of the experience to degenerate into mere Gothic horror, shock, violent excitation. If anything is left there of wonder, it is of a crude quality going with passive reception of intense stimuli. A recent writer on sublimity seemed to find no incongruity in speaking of 'rock' music as attempting to 'induce the sublime reaction by an insistent repetition of beat' and exceptional degree of loudness. Clearly, what I want to say here (without room to develop it in this paper) is that the presence of wonder marks a distinctive and high-ranking mode of aesthetic, or aesthetic-religious, experience characterizable by that duality of dread and delight. So conceived, sublimity is essentially concerned with transformation of the merely threatening and daunting into what is aesthetically manageable, even contemplated with joy: and this achieved through the agency of wonder.

Secondly: the domains of sublimity and of tragedy are close neighbours; and a role can be traced for wonder, in relation to tragedy quite closely parallel to the role we have just claimed for it *vis-à-vis* the sublime. It is true of many highly valued tragic dramas that we are prevented from seeing the tragic events as no more than grim, desolate and crushing. Some positive value is affirmed, even in a rare and intensified form, precisely in and through the human response to the revelation of the dysteleological side of the world. That value should be thus realized in the very shadow of its imminent annihilation—there, of course, lies the ground of the wonder.

Conclusion. What do I hope to have shown, in this Inaugural Address? Chiefly and simply that there is ample work for reason to do in respect of wonder as a philosophical topic. I have raised and very sketchily considered various perplexities over the conditions under which wonder can be judged appropriate or inappropriate, as a response to certain views of the world. At best, that may open a discussion.

A fuller discussion needs to be linked to two further and not primarily philosophical studies. One is the psychology of the origins of wonder, in early experience, and its later transformations. Another is the educator's task—the pedagogics of wonder. How, if one does wish to commend the possible roles

of wonder outlined above, can they be furthered and fostered in place of attitudes of cynicism, indifferentism and other rivals?

NOTES

The following may be noted among philosophical discussions on wonder. (Limitation of space precludes summary.) Adam Smith, *Essay on the History of Astronomy* Section II; A. F. Shand, *The Foundations of Character* (MacMillan, 1914); J. Pieper, *Leisure, the Basis of Culture* (Faber, 1952); Howard L. Parsons, "A Philosophy of Wonder", *Philosophical and Phenomenological Research*, XXX, 1969-70.

¹ St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, IaIIae Q.32 a.8

² G. Marcel, *The Existential Background of Human Dignity* (O.U.P., 1963), 12.

³ Adam Smith, *op. cit.*

⁴ Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra* IV.xv.

⁵ I. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, Critique of Aesthetic Judgment §58.

⁶ I. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, *ad fin.*

⁷ I. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, Critique of Teleological Judgment §1.

⁸ M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, I.5, II.4.

⁹ G. Bachelard, *The Poetics of Reverie*, Ch.3 §9.

¹⁰ Francis Bacon, *Of the Advancement of Learning* in *The Philosophical Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. J. M. Robertson, 71. Compare Adam Smith: "Who wonders at the machinery of the opera-house who has once been admitted behind the scenes?" (*op. cit.*)

¹¹ J. P. Eckermann, *Conversations with Goethe*, 18 February 1829 (tr. Oxenford).

¹² L. Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914-1916*, 86. See to E. Zemel: 'Wittgenstein's Philosophy of the Mystical', *Review of Metaphysics*, September, 1964.

¹³ M. K. Munitz, *The Mystery of Existence* (1965). See also R. S. Peters, *Reason and Compassion* (Routledge, 1973). Peters develops a view similar to my own.

¹⁴ J. Pieper, *op. cit.*

¹⁵ J. Beer, *Wordsworth and the Human Heart* (MacMillan, 1978), 188.

¹⁶ J. Passmore, *Man's Responsibility for Nature* (Duckworth, 1974).

¹⁷ C. Lévi-Strauss, *Encounter*, LIII, July 1979, 24.

¹⁸ Plato, *Symposium* 210E.

¹⁹ J. Beer, *op. cit.* 185ff. Wordsworth, *Poetical Works* (Oxford), Vol II, 277-8. My own comments do not attempt to interpret how any actual writer saw the matter.

²⁰ S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, Vol I, 59.

²¹ G. Leopardi, *Zibaldoni*, (Mondadori) Vol I, 1209; 971. Cf. G. Singh, *Leopardi and the Theory of Poetry* (University of Kentucky Press, 1964).

²² H. Heine, *Letters on the French Stage*, in J. Barzun, ed., *Pleasures of Music* (Michael Joseph, 1952).

²³ M. D. C. Drury, 'A Symposium . . .' in K. T. Fann, ed., *Ludwig Wittgenstein, The Man and his Philosophy* (1967). Music, to Wittgenstein, was "something very central and deep in his life. He told me that this he could not express in his writings . . ." (68). Drury adds at the

end of his remarks, this time not on music but philosophy: "No one had such power to awaken again that primitive wonder from which all great philosophy begins" (71). See also P. B. Lewis, 'Wittgenstein on Words and Music' *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 17, 1977, 111ff.

ERRATA

- Page 3 1.9 For *Berwunderung* read *Bewunderung*
Page 17 1.5 For the class read a class
Page 22 Note 1 For *Philosophical* read *Philosophy*
Note 12 For See to read See too
Note 21 For *Zibaldoni* read *Zibaldone*

Typographical errors in the Inaugural Address occur through no fault of Professor Hepburn's.