

Beginning in Wonder

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“And the end of all our exploring/Will be to arrive where we started/And know the place for the first time.” – T. S. Eliot, Four Quartets (‘Little Gidding’)

I. The Origin of Philosophy

“It is through wonder [thaumazein],” says Aristotle, “that men now begin and originally began to philosophize;”¹ and as Plato tells us, through the mouth of Socrates, “wonder is the feeling of a philosopher, and philosophy begins in wonder.”² These sayings are well-known, and they are also representative of an important thread that runs through much of the western philosophical tradition,³ and yet, in contemporary philosophy at least, they are not much reflected upon.

For the most part, it seems, such sayings are taken to indicate that philosophy has its starting point, understood in terms of its motivational or psychological impetus, in puzzlement or curiosity at some feature or features of the world. Yet while puzzlement and curiosity are undoubtedly an important part of philosophical experience, to say that it is wonder in the sense of puzzlement and curiosity alone that stand as the origin of philosophy seems inadequate both to the character of philosophy itself and to the character of wonder. If philosophy is to be more than a mere game, but an activity into which one is drawn because of the demanding nature of the issues it addresses – because of the way one is inevitably given over to caring about those issues – then mere puzzlement seems not to be a good description of that out of which philosophy first arises. If wonder is itself something that can capture us, that can enthrall and enrapture, as it surely can, then wonder must be more than puzzlement, more than curiosity.

The way that Plato and Aristotle themselves talk of the phenomenon of wonder seems to confirm that it is, indeed, not just puzzlement or curiosity that is at issue here. “He was not a bad genealogist who said that Iris [the rainbow/messenger of heaven] is the child of Thaumias [wonder]” says Plato’s Socrates,⁴ while Aristotle goes on, in the Metaphysics, to say that “even the lover of myth [philomythos] is in a sense a lover of Wisdom [philosophos], for the myth is composed of wonders.”⁵ It is surely not wonder in the sense of puzzlement alone that the myth evokes; nor does curiosity seem a likely relative of the rainbow. Moreover, talk of wonder as that in which philosophy has its beginning is unlikely to mean, in the Platonic and Aristotelian context, merely that which serves as the psychological impetus towards the activity of philosophizing. For the Greeks especially, the idea of

beginning or origin is not just the idea of a temporal starting-point, but also of that which determines the very nature of the thing whose origin or beginning it is and Aristotle explicitly connects these ideas when he tells us that “the nature of a thing is a beginning”.⁶ The Greek word ‘arche’ (αρχη) captures just this idea of beginning or origin as also determining ‘cause’ or first principle.

Talk of wonder as the beginning or origin of philosophy does not imply that philosophy is primarily about wonder or that there is a need for a ‘philosophy of wonder’ as somehow the true and proper basis of philosophy, nor does it mean that philosophy can only ever be properly carried on while in a state of wonderment or that puzzlement and curiosity have no role to play in philosophical activity. Talk of wonder as the beginning of philosophy should rather be taken to indicate something about the character of philosophy as such, and so about its nature and limit, about that to which it is a response and so that to which it must be adequate. Inasmuch as wonder is taken to be “the feeling of the philosopher”, so wonder must be that which is determinative of philosophy and philosophical activity, that which is its proper ‘measure’, and to which it must, in some sense, always return. But what then is wonder, such that it may be the origin of philosophy? And what is philosophy, if wonder is its origin?

II. Appearance and Encounter

Wonder can take a number of forms. We may wonder at things, but we can also wonder about them. In this latter sense our wondering takes the form of a questioning that may itself be a response to an initial astonishment, puzzlement or curiosity – to wonder about things may thus mean no more than to puzzle over them, to think about them or to seek some explanation for them. The sense of wonder at issue in Plato and Aristotle, however, is no mere wondering about, but rather the wonder that is indeed a response to things and to the world – the sort of wonder that is experienced, for instance, in the sight of the rainbow as it shines through a wet, cloudy, but suddenly sunlit sky.

Although they may well be associated with it, and so should not be viewed as irrelevant here, mere puzzlement and curiosity are indeed quite distinct from this sort of wonder. A clear demonstration of this distinction is given by the fact that we may be struck by wonder at some phenomenon in spite of being satisfied with our understanding and explanation of it. A rainbow, for instance, can inspire wonder in a way that is quite unaffected by the knowledge that it is produced by the refraction of sunlight through droplets of water in the atmosphere. This is important to note, since Aristotle, for one, clearly does not ignore the role wonder may play in giving rise to a search for explanations of just this sort, and yet wonder also seems to involve more than just this. The point is not that wonder has no connection with this sort of “desire to know” (or with the puzzlement that

may be associated with it), but rather that the satisfaction of such a desire does not exhaust the original wonder from which it may have arisen. Wonder proper should perhaps be viewed, then, as standing apart, not only from mere puzzlement or curiosity, but also from certain forms of astonishment or amazement, since the latter, while they can be used in ways that make them near synonyms with wonder, often carry a stronger suggestion of a temporary baulking of the ability to explain, understand or predict. Wonder is, in fact, consistent with both ignorance and understanding (this is something, as we shall see below, crucial to the character of wonder as such); it involves a way of seeing the world, and the things in it, that is independent of what one may know or what one can explain, even though, it may also have an important role in making knowledge or explanation possible.

Plato, as we have seen, associates wonder with the rainbow (Iris, 'the messenger of heaven')⁷. And the association seems particularly apt, since the experience of wonder goes hand-in-hand with the experience of things as suddenly illuminated or lit up – with the experience of things as shining forth into the world around them. Emmanuel Levinas comments on this by connecting the experience of wonder directly with the experience of light:

The contact with light, the act of opening one's eyes, the lighting up of bare sensation, are apparently outside any relationship, and do not take form like answers to questions. Light illuminates and is naturally understood; it is comprehension itself. But within this natural correlation between us and the world, in a sort of doubling back, a question arises, a being surprised by this illumination. The wonder which Plato put at the origin of philosophy is an astonishment before the natural and the intelligible. It is the very intelligibility of light that is astonishing; light is doubled up with a sight. The astonishment does not arise out of comparison with some order more natural than nature, but simply before intelligibility itself. Its strangeness is, we might say, due to its very reality, to the very fact there is existence.⁸

There is a long philosophical tradition – one as old as philosophy itself – that associates light with intelligibility, and there is certainly something powerful, at least to those of us who are sighted, about the use of visual metaphors and images in this context.⁹ But Levinas' point here would probably be almost as well served by reference to any other medium or mode of experience – think of the sudden presencing of things in a particular taste, a touch, a sound, a movement. What is at issue here is not only wonder at light and sight, but wonder as a response to the often sudden and striking encounter with things – whether it be light refracted through droplets of water in the sky, the explosion of taste in a mouthful of wine, the heady scent of blossoms on the still night, the experience of the open-ness of space and the capacities of the body in the exhilaration of a dance, or the complex interplay of elements in a piece of music. In each case, it is the encounter – and the character of that encounter as a

revealing, an opening up, of things and of the world – that seems to lie at the heart of the experience of wonder.

Wonder is thus not so much a response to any particular appearance or set of appearances, although it always requires some such appearance as its focus and its immediate cause, as it is the response that is evoked in us by the very recognition of appearance as such (although that recognition may not always be well-articulated). And if that recognition, and the wonder that accompanies it, is most often evoked by the beautiful, the tremendous, the elegant or the sublime, then this is perhaps because of the way in which these forms of appearance call attention, most immediately and directly, to their own appearing, to the fact of their being encountered. One is brought to a halt by the appearance, and forced to attend to it, not because it shows something else (as it may indicate some use, purpose or cause), nor because of anything that explains how it is (the processes or conditions that give rise to it), but merely by the fact that it is. The wondrousness of the rainbow thus resides in the very fact of its being; the wonder we experience in the face of someone we loves lies in the simple fact of their existence and our encounter with them.

The encounter with the extraordinary that often gives rise to wonder – the encounter with the wondrous in its most strikingly immediate forms such as the sublime or the beautiful – brings suddenly to our attention the very fact of encounter. Yet in bringing such encounter to the fore, what is brought forward is not itself something that is extraordinary or unusual, but rather something that is itself ‘ordinary’ and everyday. All of our activity, all of our existence, is constituted in terms of such encounter, although for the most part it is given little notice, and such encounter makes up the very fabric of our lives. In every act we touch something, respond to it, move in relation to it, and our lives are constituted by such encounter and response as if those lives were made up of the reciprocating movements between interconnected threads in a dense and intricate web. Inasmuch as the wonder that arises in the experience of the extraordinary brings such encounter into view, and so brings into view something that may be viewed as the most ordinary and ubiquitous of phenomena – such that it may seem trivial and unilluminating to draw attention to it – so it also shows such encounter to be itself extraordinary and even strange.

One might say that while wonder is often immediately evoked by that which is self-evidently remarkable or extraordinary, that which is most remarkable, and which is present in every experience of wonder as remarkable, is nothing other than the simple fact of encounter, of intelligibility, of being. But in that case, wonder needs nothing ‘special’ to bring it about. Thus Heidegger says of the ‘thinking of being’ which he takes to be fundamental to philosophy that it “does not require a solemn approach and the pretension of arcane erudition., nor the display of rare and exceptional states as in mystical raptures , reveries and swoonings. All that is needed is simple wakefulness in the presence of any random

unobtrusive being, an awakening that all of a sudden sees that the being 'is'".¹⁰ Thus, while wonder may often be evoked by the self-evidently extraordinary, it may also arise out of the simple, sudden, immediate awareness of the existence of some thing; out of the recognition of the questionability, the strangeness, the wondrousness of things, and of our encounter with them, as it occurs in the most common and ordinary of ways. Indeed, this is surely wonder at its most basic; the wonder of which Blake seems implicitly to speak in Auguries of Innocence: "To see a World in a grain of sand,/ And a Heaven in a wild flower,/ Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,/ And Eternity in an hour."¹¹ The experience of wonder might thus be understood as encompassing all those modes of encounter in which the ordinary is made remarkable, in which the extraordinary spills over into the mundane, in which the familiar becomes strange.

Often, of course, it is precisely the transformation in experience that comes with wonder (and to which Blake's lines give voice) – whether through the ordinary or the extraordinary – that has been the aim of poetry and art. "In the poetry of the poet," says Heidegger, "and in the thinking of the thinker, there is always so much world-space to spare that each and every thing – a tree, a mountain, a house, the call of a bird – completely loses its indifference and familiarity."¹² Yet if philosophy has its origins in the wonder that art and poetry may be seen as aiming to evoke, it surely does not aim at bringing such a state about. Philosophy may have its origins in the experience of the transformation of the world – its lighting up – that comes with wonder, but it is a response to that transformation, not its cause. Of course, poetry and art can also be seen as responsive, but they nevertheless have a mimetic quality that philosophy lacks – a mimetic quality that means that while poetry and art are responsive, they are also themselves 'affective'. Thus the artistic or poetic moment can be seen as 're-presenting' the moment of encounter or appearance in a way that makes it available to us in a renewed (or sometimes 'new') form and thereby providing us with something that is itself the occasion for wonder.¹³ Philosophy, for the most part, lacks any such 'mimetic' character, but instead responds to that which appears, and to the moment of appearance, by way of exploration and articulation of that appearance and the moment, the region, the world, within which it occurs.¹⁴ It is easy, nevertheless, to mistake philosophy for poetry, or vice versa, just because of the way in which each stands in an essential relation to the event of appearance and encounter, and so to wonder and the wondrous. It is also easy to reject or trivialize the origin of philosophy in wonder precisely out of a desire to prevent just such a confusion – although to do so is to commit no less an error.

Inasmuch as wonder arises out of the event of encounter as that event is brought strikingly to awareness – thereby showing the ordinary as extraordinary, the familiar as strange – so wonder also constitutes a sudden awareness of our own existence, not as something separate or apart from the encounter nor from that which is encountered, but as

already given over to it. The experience of the wondrous is an experience in which we find ourselves already moved, already affected, already opened up to what is before us. It requires no effort on our part, no decision or act. The experience of wonder is an experience of our being already given over to the world and the things in it. In this sense the experience of wonder is indeed, as Levinas says of the experience of light, “apparently outside of any relationship”. Just as the experience of opening one’s eyes is an experience of the immediate coming to visual presence of things – not the experience of the establishing of some relation, but of things being, simply, ‘there’ – so the experience of wonder is the experience of ourselves as already in the sway of wonder, of ourselves as already ‘there’ along with the wondrous.

In wonder, we encounter things in a way that is prior to encounter as any sort of relating to things; the encounter that wonder brings into view is just our being already with things, already given over to them and them to us. Thus Levinas talks of the “natural correlation between us and the world” – although such talk of correlation, no matter how ‘natural’, undoubtedly suggests a sense of ‘co-relation’ that must fail to capture what is really at issue. If there is a “natural correlation” between us and the world, it is a correlation that consists in nothing more than the fact of our already being ‘in’ the world. In the experience of wonder it is thus our being already ‘in’ that comes to the fore – our being already ‘there’ in the very same place as the things themselves. In our wonder at the rainbow, we find ourselves already in the world and in no need of finding some way to relate to it, to come into coordination with it, to make contact with it. The world is there, and us with it and a part of it, just as we are there with the rainbow, and so with sky and cloud, wind and rain, earth and rock, animal and plant, friend and stranger. In wonder, even in the wondrousness of some single thing, the world is itself brought to appearance and with it our own prior belonging to that world. In this respect, while in wonder things are indeed ‘made strange’, we do not thereby find ourselves ‘out of place’. The ‘making strange’ that occurs in wonder is a making strange of our very belonging inasmuch as that belonging is itself brought to light.

The experience of wonder that I have so far been describing is closely akin to the experience that Hans-Georg Gadamer describes as present in the experience of art¹⁵ – and that he also finds elaborated in Heidegger’s famous essay on ‘The ‘Origin of the Work of Art’.¹⁶ Wonder is something that overtakes us, in which we are caught up, and in which we are given over to the wondrous; similarly, the artwork is not some ‘thing’ that stands over against us, but rather something that ‘happens’ to us and into which we are drawn. In the artwork, moreover, we find a form of self-revealing on the part of the work itself that opens up a space in which we encounter something that goes beyond the work – a self-revealing that illuminates the world in which the work stands, as well as our own standing before that work and in that world. The artwork thus always exceeds anything that either the artist or the

audience might intend in the work and so always bring with it a certain startlement or surprise:

The work of art that says something confronts us itself. That is, it expresses something in such a way that what is said is like a discovery, a disclosure of something previously concealed. The element of surprise is based on this. "So true, so filled with being" [So wahr, so seiend] is not something one knows in any other way. Everything familiar is eclipsed.¹⁷

Gadamer takes the working of art, in this respect, to be exemplary of the experience of understanding and so of the very experience of encounter or appearance. Indeed, at the end of Truth and Method, Gadamer uses the concept of the beautiful – understood as 'radiance', as that which self-evidently 'shines forth'¹⁸ – to explore the character of self-evidence that belongs to that which is intelligible or encounterable. Like beauty, understanding or encounter is an event in which something appears in and of itself, an event in which one finds oneself already caught up, an event that can surprise and surpass.

Gadamer says of beauty that it has the mode of being of light, but just as Levinas' use of light in illustrating the character of wonder need not be taken to indicate something that is exclusive to the visual alone, neither should Gadamer's comments be taken to indicate that the beautiful is only to be found within the domain of sight. In both cases, the image or metaphor of light is itself used to reveal something about the wondrous and the beautiful, which we can now see to be themselves closely related, namely, the way in which both are tied to the 'self-presencing' of things in appearance or in encounter. The beautiful, then, in the sense Gadamer employs it, is that which is self-evidently apparent; wonder is that in which we find ourselves caught up in our response to such self-evident appearance.

Inasmuch as we find ourselves, in the experience of wonder, already caught up in response, and so, indeed, as already belonging to the world, so we find ourselves already caught up in care for and concern about that world. Wonder is thus a symptom of our prior commitment and involvement, since, although wonder may be possible only when we have the freedom of a certain degree of contemplation (Aristotle emphasizes the way in which philosophy arises only when we have some release from the constant demands of simple survival), it is out of our commitment and involvement that the 'desire to know' itself arises. Moreover, as the desire to know drives philosophical activity, so philosophy is itself driven by our being already given over to the world in this way – it is, as I noted in the introduction, because we are already taken up by the issues with which philosophy deals that philosophy is more than a mere game, more than a simple 'distraction'. Yet inasmuch as the 'desire to know', along with philosophy itself, arises out of our prior commitment and involvement in the world, then so we may say that this desire, and philosophical activity as such, only has

content and significance insofar as that content and significance is supplied by the concrete circumstances of our involvement, of our being there, of our prior belonging to the world.

Recognition of this point can help to clarify the way in which wonder can be a response to the very fact of encounter or appearance, and so to our prior belonging, and yet it is nevertheless always directed towards some particular appearance, some particular feature or aspect of the world. It is not the world in general that preoccupies us, but the world in its specificity; and, similarly, it is not the world in general that immediately evokes wonder, but some part or aspect of the world. It is, however, through the part – through the particular thing or event – that the whole is brought to light; it is through the particular encounter or appearance that the fact of encounter or appearance as such is brought into view. In wonder, then there is not merely the doubling up of light with sight, as Levinas puts it, but also the doubling up which is analogous to this, namely, the doubling up of the thing that appears with the appearing itself – what Heidegger refers to as “the twofoldness of what is present and of presence”.¹⁹ Properly then, it is this double ‘appearance’ – of that which appears along with the appearing – that is the stimulus to wonder as well as its focus.

III. Strangeness and Questionability

In the terms Levinas uses in the passage quoted above, and that are also echoed in Gadamer’s discussion of the beautiful, wonder arises out of a response to the event of ‘intelligibility’ – the event of our encounter with things, the event of experience – in which that event is itself brought to the centre of attention. Wonder is a response to existence, to being, that is brought about by the recognition of existence in the sheer fact of something’s existing. Yet if the experience of wonder is a response to intelligibility, existence, encounter, and an experience of the very fact of encounter, then it also involves, as Levinas points out, and as Gadamer may also be taken to confirm, a certain surprise, a questioning, in the face of such encounter. Thus wonder halts us, and, like the stars Hamlet describes as brought to a standstill by the grief of Laertes at the death of Ophelia, we are “wonder-wounded.”²⁰ In this respect, the experience of wonder, and the encounter with the wondrous, represents a sudden disabling, an intrusion into our normal activities and a disruption of those activities. The experience of wonder thus takes us out of our ordinary involvement with things and makes what is ordinarily unquestioned, questionable, makes what ordinarily seems familiar, strange.

It is precisely this aspect of wonder, this ‘making strange,’ that makes it natural to connect wonder, even if the connection is also misleading, with the experience of puzzlement. But the questionability and strangeness at issue here cannot be dispelled by any solution, since what is at issue – what is rendered strange – is the very fact of appearance and of encounter. Of course, this experience of things ‘made strange’ may also give rise to philosophical (and even scientific) activity: in the face of our prior involvement, and so our

prior care and concern, the strangeness and questionability of things constitutes a source of discomfort that we ordinarily seek to resolve or dispel through the search for answers and explanations. Yet while such activity may result in an explanation of that which is the immediate cause and focus for wonder (the rainbow, for instance), and so for the strangeness and questionability that accompanies it, such explanation does not touch that which is the underlying source of wonder, namely, appearance or encounter as such. Indeed, the fact that the surprise and questionability that seem so closely associated with wonder may be present, even though the phenomenon at issue is apparently well-understood, can itself be most readily explained by pointing to the distinction between a particular phenomenon (say, the rainbow) and its phenomenal character as such (its appearing or being encountered). To elucidate the former is not to elucidate the latter.

Here, once more, we find the 'doubling up' that we saw above, but now the doubling of that which appears with the appearing is matched by a doubling of two modes of strangeness that correspond to these. The strangeness of that which appears leads on to explanation, or may already be satisfied by an existing explanation, but the strangeness of the appearing is amenable to no such resolution. In this respect, wonder may give rise to puzzlement, and puzzlement to explanation, and yet the wonder, and the underlying strangeness, may nevertheless remain. Of course, for just this reason, the strangeness that is present in wonder need not always be doubled: when we encounter what is ordinary and familiar – what is understood and already explicable – as remarkable, strange and wondrous, then the 'doubling' of that which appears with the appearing, of that which is encountered with the encounter, is matched, not by two modes of strangeness, but rather by the coupling of the remarkable and the ordinary, of the strange and the familiar, of that which is outside of any explanation and that which is explicable.

There is no way in which one can get behind the simple fact of appearance or encounter, the simple 'given-ness' of things,²¹ in order to find something more basic from the standpoint of which such encounter, such given-ness, might itself be investigated. That is not to say that we do not often try to do just this (indeed, a large part of philosophy is made up of just such attempts), but rather that to try to do so is already to have misunderstood the basic situation in which we find ourselves. In the experience of wonder what is brought strikingly to awareness is the event of appearing and encounter through a particular instance of such appearing or encounter. As such, what is also made evident is our own prior belonging to the world, our being 'always already' there, and yet, in being made evident in this way, our 'being-there' is also rendered strange. We may well be able to describe and explain aspects of our concrete situation, both in general and in particular, and yet neither can we describe or explain that situation in its entirety (since there is always more that could be said and more that could be asked) and nor can we even begin to explain the fact of our situatedness as such

(since we can never stand outside or apart from such situatedness²²). Our 'being there', the very fact of our situatedness, cannot properly be made the object of any explanation, and yet it is just such situatedness or belonging – our already 'being-there' alongside things, in the encounter with things – that lies at the heart of the experience of wonder and that provides the impetus to explanation with which wonder is also associated.

Plato's association of wonder with the rainbow, and Levinas's treatment of wonder as like the experience of light, both suggest a conception of wonder as associated with visibility and transparency. Yet inasmuch as wonder is also associated with the inexplicable fact of our situatedness, so it is bound up, not merely with transparency, but also with a certain failure of transparency, with a certain opacity. In wonder, our 'being there' is suddenly 'lit up,' and yet in being illuminated, it is also shown as essentially dark – while we can 'see into' the intricacies of the world and our situation in it, that there is a world, and that we are already given over to it, is absolutely impenetrable. Our 'being there', our situatedness, on the basis of which the transparency of encounter and of appearance is possible, cannot itself be made transparent, and thus, inasmuch as light is 'doubled up' with sight, as that which appears is 'doubled up' with the appearing, so also is transparency 'doubled up' with opacity.

That there is such opacity here does not indicate, however, some 'blindness' on our part, some defect in our intellectual 'vision', for there simply is nothing here that can be an object of such vision. The opacity at issue thus represents the proper bound that limits the capacity for explanation and for questioning; inasmuch as it is tied to the situatedness on the basis of which any encounter or appearance, and so any explanation or question, is possible, so it can also be said to limit and to make possible transparency itself. In Gadamer and Heidegger, of course, the interplay between transparency and opacity that here appears as a fundamental element in wonder also appears, as a fundamental ontological structure (albeit in somewhat different form), in terms of the interplay of concealing and unconcealing that is the event of truth.²³ For Gadamer and Heidegger, this 'event' is constitutive of the open-ness of the world on the basis of which any particular statement can be true or false or any particular thing can be present or absent. Thus, just as opacity can be said to underlie transparency, so, in the terms Gadamer and Heidegger employ, concealment can be said to underlie open-ness or unconcealment.

The impossibility of arriving at any complete 'transparency' in respect of our situatedness, our 'being-there', may be seen as identical with the difficulty that accompanies the attempt to make sense of subjectivity within a pure objective or 'naturalistic' framework – a difficulty (though it is not always seen as such) that is associated with various forms of reductionism, materialism and perhaps also with the so-called 'problem of consciousness'. It

would be presumptuous, however, to suppose that this means that it is subjectivity that is the problem here – at least so long as one thinks of subjectivity in terms of some inner ‘mental’ realm of ‘thought,’ idea or consciousness. It is not that subjectivity brings a lack of transparency with it, but rather that such subjectivity is itself always situated, already given over to the world, and it is just this situatedness that gives rise to a lack of transparency. To be situated is always to stand in such a way that one is oriented towards some things and not others, it is to find some aspects of the world salient and others not, it is to find oneself literally ‘there’. It is ‘being there’, in this sense, that is the central element in subjectivity, and subjectivity does not underlie or explain such ‘being there’.

Just as light illuminates, and yet, in illuminating, is not itself illuminated, so our situatedness, our ‘being-there,’ opens up the world, and us to it, and yet is itself hidden and closed off. In this respect, we may say that it is our situatedness that enables and yet also restricts our capacity for explanation; and similarly it is wonder, as a response to the sudden and striking awareness of our situatedness, that stimulates the desire for explanation, and yet also brings explanation to a halt. In wonder, then, explanation finds its origin and its absolute limit, and, consequently, part of the experience of wonder is finding oneself in the somewhat paradoxical situation of being confronted by that which seems both to demand explanation and yet also resists, and indeed stands prior to, such explanation – we are thus led to question while having no capacity to answer. As Levinas says of the question of being (which is one way in which the questionability at issue in the experience of wonder may be expressed) : “The questioning of Being is an experience of Being in its strangeness. It is then a way of taking up Being. That is why the question about Being – What is Being? – has never been answered. There is no answer to Being.”²⁴ If there is no answer here, perhaps it is mistaken to suppose that there is really a question. Perhaps what Levinas should be taken to be pointing towards is just the way in which what is at issue is an experience of strangeness – the strangeness of our prior belonging. The strangeness at issue is rather like the strangeness that arises when, as a child, one asks oneself how it is that one is oneself, that one belongs just here? Such questions are only questions in a somewhat peculiar and perhaps attenuated sense, since not only do they have no possible answers, but it is not clear what form answers could take nor is it obvious that answers (at least not to those questions) are actually what is required.

Focusing, not on being, but on the world and reason, Merleau-Ponty writes: “The world and reason are not problematical. We may say, if we wish, that they are mysterious, but their mystery defines them: there can be no question of dispelling it by some ‘solution’, it is on the hither side of all solutions.”²⁵ The distinction Merleau-Ponty makes here between the ‘problematical’ and what we may choose to call the ‘mysterious’ (a distinction that echoes Gabriel Marcel’s famous contrast between the ‘problematic’ and the ‘mysterious’²⁶) has a

particular relevance to the discussion of wonder and the nature of the questioning that may arise in the face of wonder. For what wonder reveals, namely, our prior belonging to the world, is something that we may choose to call mysterious and marvelous, and yet, although it may give rise to questioning and surprise, is not itself something that can ever properly be put into question. The encounter with things and with the world is thus not rendered 'uncertain' by the experience of wonder. On the contrary, wonder is the response to the immediacy and reality of encounter, of intelligibility, of existence. It returns us to the world (a world that we never properly leave), rather than taking us away from the world or the world from us. Consequently, although wonder involves a certain experience of strangeness, it does not involve estrangement from the world, but rather constitutes a recognition of our prior belonging to the world – what appears as strange is just that prior belonging. It is just such belonging that leads us on to question and to explain, that makes such questioning and explanation significant, that makes it matter.

IV. The Return of Philosophy

If the origin of a thing is what determines it, then the beginning of a thing is both its limit and also its end. The beginning of philosophy in wonder is thus significant, not because it tells us how it is that philosophy happens to come about, but rather because it tells us something about what philosophy is, about what it is not, about that at which it is directed, about that which constitutes its proper concern. Of course, in talking about 'philosophy' here, we are not talking about everything that may possibly fall under this label. 'Philosophy' names an institutional entity that is, in part, defined simply by a certain set of socio-cultural circumstances, and that may also change with those circumstances; 'philosophy' also names a range of problems, activities, and concerns that may vary from one thinker, one time, one place to another. The word 'philosophy' is thus employed here with all of this in mind, and yet in a way that nevertheless holds to the idea that 'philosophy' does name something distinctive that is roughly continuous from the Greeks through to the present and that, whatever the various expressions and incarnations it may go through, remains centrally bound up with the experience of wonder found in Plato and Aristotle. But what more, then, can be said about philosophy, if it does indeed have its origin, and so also its end and limit, in the kind of wonder that has been explored and elaborated upon above?

Inasmuch as it begins in wonder, then philosophy has its origin in a response to the original event of encounter in which we find ourselves already given over to the world and to the things in it. In the experience of the wondrous we are brought face to face with that event in a particularly striking way. The experience of wonder, while it is on the one hand an experience of the accessibility and transparency of the world – in wonder we are brought to awareness of the self-evident appearing of things through some particular instance of such

self-evident appearance – is also an experience of the strangeness of that accessibility and transparency. The experience of transparency always remains opaque and the more striking is our awareness of it, the more opaque does it seem. The experience of wonder is thus an experience of the way in which, to revert to Levinas' metaphor, the lighting up of things, their intelligibility, brings with it an essential and impenetrable darkness. It is not the darkness that arises through lack of light, but the darkness that arises as a consequence of light – like the darkness that stands behind the lit object itself, the darkness that stands behind the source of light.

Yet although philosophy arises out of the experience of this transparency and opacity as they occur together, it seems as if it has often tended to lose sight of this interplay and so of the real nature of the experience of wonder in which it begins. Thus contemporary philosophy, insofar as it reflects on the matter at all, does indeed tend to interpret its wondrous origin as indicating an origin in puzzlement, questioning and curiosity, rather than in the wonder that has been at issue in the discussion above. Yet such puzzlement, questioning and curiosity is not characterized by an experience of transparency as it is also bound to opacity, but rather of an opacity that increasingly gives way to transparency – puzzlement thus gives way to solution, questioning gives rise to answers, curiosity leads on to knowledge. Even if complete transparency is never actually achieved, still it is such complete transparency that is the paradigm. Moreover, when opacity does come to the fore in much contemporary philosophical discussion, it typically does so in a way that rules out the possibility of transparency – in a way that is, indeed, often intended to cast doubt on such transparency. Thus contemporary skepticism and relativism, which might be taken to arise out of a recognition of the inevitability of opacity and the impossibility of complete transparency, do not give recognition to the interplay and reciprocity between opacity and transparency, but instead remain fixated on a contrast between opacity and transparency understood as mutually exclusive alternatives – a contrast that seems only to be resolved on the side of opacity.

To construe matters in this way, however, is not merely to find oneself already cut off from the experience of wonder, but also as alienated from the world – indeed, in this respect, the very desire for transparency seems to lead to a loss in the capacity to see how transparency can ever be possible. Philosophy may thus begin in wonder, but inasmuch as the demand for explanation constitutes a demand for illumination and transparency, so it can also come to constitute a blindness to the interdependence between transparency and opacity, and so also a blindness to the prior belonging to the world that first drives the demand for explanation as such. In this respect, philosophy begins in wonder, but it often ends in alienation – alienation from self, from others, and from ordinary things, as well as the extraordinary. Such alienation is not just a matter of the experience of philosophical difficulty

in understanding or explaining how there can be knowledge of the external world or of other minds or of one's own 'mental states', but also of how philosophical activity can connect up with the fundamental and everyday experiences of human life, with the things that drive us, that affect us, that matter to us.

Historically, it was a desire to return philosophical thinking to the problems of 'life' – understood not in terms of some category of 'Lebensphilosophie', but of life as that which takes us up, that makes demands on us, in which we already find ourselves immersed – that drove the work of the young Heidegger and that also led to Gadamer's own engagement with him in the 1920s.²⁷ It was in this light that Heidegger appropriated the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, using it, not as a means to develop philosophy as a more rigorous 'science', but instead as providing a path back to our original, 'hermeneutic' situatedness, to our original encounter with things, to our original being 'there'. Heidegger's thought was always directed towards such a 'turning back' to that situatedness, a turning back to the original happening of being and of truth. In this respect, Heidegger can be viewed as attempting to return to that which is also evident to us in the experience of wonder. Indeed, Heidegger himself says of wonder that it:

... displaces man into and before beings as such...Wonder is the basic disposition that primordially disposes man into the beginning of thinking, because, before all else, it displaces man into that essence whereby he then finds himself caught up in the midst of beings as such and as a whole and finds himself caught up in them.²⁸

In returning to recognize the origin of philosophy in wonder, we can see the significance of and motivation behind the sort of philosophical 'revolution' that Heidegger attempted. Moreover, in returning to recognize the origin of philosophy in wonder, it also becomes possible to see how the philosophical preoccupation with transparency, and so with opacity as its alternative, first arises, as well as to recognise its deeply problematic character. Transparency is a misguided ideal, and opacity is not so much a barrier to understanding as it is, in part, its enabling condition.

Wonder is not the primary focus of philosophical inquiry or reflection, and yet there can be nothing more fundamental to philosophy than event of encounter and appearance, and, with it, the interplay of opacity and transparency, that comes to the fore in the experience of wonder. It is this that is properly the end of philosophy in the sense of being that to which philosophy must finally address itself. Inasmuch as this event is not something that can itself be rendered transparent – inasmuch as it remains irreducibly opaque – then here philosophy comes up against its own proper bound and limit. Moreover, while the experience of wonder may be unusual, and the event of encounter or appearance may itself be experienced, in the throes of wonder, as itself extraordinary and remarkable, still in being

brought to awareness of such encounter or experience, we are brought to awareness of something that is indeed the most mundane, the most ordinary, the most ubiquitous of 'happenings'. In this respect, philosophy does not begin in something out of the ordinary, but in the bringing to awareness of the most ordinary; it does not find its limit in something that transcends our everyday experience, but in the very 'being there' of that experience; it does not find its 'end' in a space or time beyond, but only in this place – the place in which it already finds itself, which it never properly leaves, and in which there is always something further to explore. Wonder is thus a returning, sometimes with the abruptness of a sudden shock, to the world to which we always, already belong – it is in that return that philosophy begins and to which it must always itself go back.

¹ Aristotle, Metaphysics A, 982b11-12.

² Plato, Theatatus, 155d.

³ R. W. Hepburn provides some indication of the extent to which the importance of wonder has been acknowledged throughout the western philosophical tradition in his 'Wonder', in 'Wonder' and Other Essays (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1984), pp.131-154.

⁴ Plato, Theatatus, 155d.

⁵ Aristotle, Metaphysics A, 982b19-20.

⁶ Metaphysics, 1013a20

⁷ Iris can refer to the goddess or to the rainbow or to both. Whereas the other messenger of the gods, Hermes, had his winged helmet and sandals to enable him to move between heaven and earth, Iris used the rainbow as her bridge between the two realms. Iris had the dubious distinction of being the messenger who brought discord, whereas Hermes brought peace.

⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, Existence and Existents, trans A. Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhof, 1978, p.22.

⁹ See Gadamer's discussion of light and radiance in connection with beauty and intelligibility in Truth and Method, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, (New York: Crossroad, 1989, 2nd rev. edn.), pp.480-487. Gadamer's treatment of this issue will be mentioned briefly below.

¹⁰ Heidegger, Parmenides, trans. André Scuwer and Richard Rojcewicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), p.149.

¹¹ 'Poems from the Pickering MS', in Blake: Complete Writings, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p.431. The ideas of eternity and infinity invoked by Blake may be taken to suggest a notion of transcendence that is sometimes taken to be an element of the experience of wonder, as well as of other phenomena, and that is itself worthy of investigation in its own right. See especially R. W. Hepburn, 'Time Transcendence and Some related Phenomena in the Arts', in Hepburn, 'Wonder' and Other Essays, pp.108-130. Gadamer takes a certain 'time-transcendence' or, or better, the transcendence of 'ordinary' time and the emergence of, as he puts it, 'fulfilled' or 'autonomous' time, particularly as it associated with the festival, as an important element in the experience of art, see 'The relevance of the beautiful', in The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays, trans. Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp.41-5.

¹² Martin Heidegger, An Introduction to Metaphysics, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), p.28.

¹³ Notice that this form of 'mimesis' is not mere 'imitation', but realisation. See Gadamer's discussion of mimesis in Truth and Method, pp.110-121.

¹⁴ David Rothenberg writes of the difference between philosophy and poetry that: "It is not that one seeks to explain, while the other evokes. It is that the former must ask and ask, and keep on asking, until our very sense of perplexity becomes exact, complete, not solvable, but a place to contemplate and inhabit through wonder, a positive word, a state of grace, an excited way of loving the world" – David Rothenberg, 'Melt the Snowflake at Once! Toward a History of Wonder', in Edward F. Mooney (ed.), Wilderness and the Heart (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1999), p.20.

¹⁵ Gadamer, Truth and Method, pp.101-69.

¹⁶ See Gadamer, 'The Truth of the Work of Art', in Philosophical Hermeneutics, trans. and ed. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), pp.213-28, and Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art', in Off the Beaten Track, trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Baynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp.00-00..

¹⁷ Gadamer, 'Aesthetics and Hermeneutics', in Philosophical Hermeneutics, p.101.

¹⁸ In German, the word scheinen, meaning to shine as well as to appear, is itself related to the word schön, meaning beautiful.

¹⁹ Martin Heidegger, 'Cézanne' in Denkerfahrten 1910-1976 (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1983), p.163.

²⁰ See Hamlet, Act V, Scene 1:

What is he, whose grief
Bears such an emphasis, whose phrase of sorrow
Conjures the wand'ring stars, and makes them stand

Like wonder-wounded hearers?

Shakespeare's conjoining of 'wonder' and 'wound' may be taken to reflect a deeper etymological connection. As Howard Parsons speculates: "Wonder, from the old English wundor, might be cognate with the German Wunde or wound. It would thus suggest a breach in the membrane of awareness, a sudden opening in a man's system of established and expected meanings, a blow as if one were struck or stunned. To be wonderstruck is to be wounded by the sword of the strange event, to be stabbed awake by the striking", in Howard L. Parsons, 'A Philosophy of Wonder', Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 30 (1969-70), p.85.

²¹ Note that the 'given-ness' at issue here, namely, our prior belonging to the world, is not the same 'given-ness' as is at issue in Sellars' famous 'myth of the given' – see Sellars, Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997. The latter consists in the idea that there must be some level of immediacy (sense-data, 'experiences', facts, etc.) that provides the non-inferential basis for knowledge, and as such the 'myth of the given' remains a response within an essentially epistemological framework according to which our prior belonging is already, in some sense or other, in question.

²² It is important to note that our inability to escape from our situatedness does not mean an inability to escape from the particular details of our situation, but only an inability to escape from, and so to make an object of explanation, the fact of situatedness as such. A failure to appreciate this point often leads to the acceptance of relativist or historicist positions. Similarly, the fact that our being in the world always takes on a particular character and orientation does not make it any less a mode of being in the world or any less a mode of involvement in the world. To be in the world is to be involved with things in certain determinate ways.

²³ See, for instance, Gadamer, 'The Truth of the Work of Art', especially pp.225-8. It is important to note that neither Gadamer nor Heidegger need be seen to be rejecting the mundane sense of truth according to which truth is a matter of the correctness of statements. Instead, they point towards a more basic sense of 'truth' (assuming that we wish to use the term in this way) as the original event of concealing/revealing.

²⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, Existence and Existents, trans. A. Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhof, 1978), p.22.

²⁵ Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, translated by Colin Smith, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962, p.xx

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- ²⁶ See Gabriel Marcel, Being and Having, trans. Katherine Farrer (Boston: Beacon Press, 1951), p.100: "A problem is something met with which bars my passage. It is before me in its entirety. A mystery, on the other hand, is something in which I find myself caught up, and whose essence is therefore not to be met before me in its entirety".
- ²⁷ See, for instance, Gadamer, 'Reflections on My Philosophical Journey', in Lewis Edwin Hahn (ed.), The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer, Library of Living Philosophers XXIV (Chicago: Open Court, 1997), pp.8-9.
- ²⁸ Martin Heidegger, Basic Questions of Philosophy. Selected Problems of 'Logic', trans. Richard Rojcewicz and André Schwer (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1994), p.147.