



Wonder

A GRAMMAR

SOPHIA VASALOU

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Acknowledgments

It is one of the quieter themes of this book that we owe our emotional lives—including our arrival at emotional experiences important enough to compel us to make them the subject of thought—to complex journeys of formation whose roots and foundations are not always open to view. Yet if, scratching the topsoil of my own history, I were to search for my debts, I would find the first one in my encounter with the early Arabic philosophers as a postgraduate student in London many years ago, and especially with al-Kindi, whose reformulation of philosophical arguments against the eternity of the world opened doors in my mind to possibilities of wonder that turned my own world on its head. The vein of experience has followed its usual vicissitudes since then, sometimes thinning, other times thickening, and all the while increasing the debts I owe not only for experiences of wonder, but also for the possibility of making these experiences the subject of more reflective thought.

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These debts are just a handful of many others, lying deeper in the ground and scattered more diffusely. With such a history of debts, this book would be content if it could one day figure in the history of someone else's debts for experiences or thoughts that made a difference.

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Introduction

Wonder: known and unknown, familiar and strange; arched with rainbows, tensed with shadows; source of pleasure and cause of suffering; pointing beyond itself, pointing to nothing but itself. The work that follows—pitching itself on the side of the question rather than the side of the answer, on the side of the long essay (with its heuristic undertones of experiment and overture) rather than the complete treatise (with its overtones of mastery and closure)—took shape because of a hunch that a closer reflection on wonder was long overdue. Yet why even talk of “hunches” or of dues, as if one’s thinking was always concerned to be on the pulse or in tune, scenting out intellectual mood or cultural tempo and making sure it is in time or ahead of it? The simple truth is that it belongs to wonder’s physiognomy that it commands to be thought out when it has once struck; and this is because thinking it is one of the few means by which one might hope to retain it, and if nourishing were possible, even conceivably to feed it.

The thinking that follows passes through several pathways, some of which cross and cross again, and almost all of its pathways can be counted as ways of asking a single question in different inflections: “What is wonder?” and again: “Why does wonder matter?” In following these pathways, this meditation will have speed enough to make for breathlessness. So it is worth pausing at its beginning to briefly place in view what lies ahead; and this means saying something more about how this meditation took its own beginnings and its present shape.

For every reflection needs a foothold—even reflection demanded by experience—and every quest needs a beginning—even a quest for the

wonder that supplies beginnings to reflective quests—which opens up the space for pursuing it in structured ways. Like all other trains of reflection, this one owes many debts to those who have already opened up its specific space in both the recent and more distant past, foregrounding the salient themes and orienting questions through which wonder may be thought. But one of the most important debts it owes, both for its initial foothold and the structure of its reflective space, is to a recent articulation of wonder whose appeal is matched by its ability to galvanize thought; and whose galvanizing power is that of all aphoristic assertions, which offer crisp claims about what “is” in ways that invite one to plough up the earth around them.

It is a spirit of aphorism to which our mode of questioning would often seem to commit us from the very first breath. “What *is* wonder?” we ask; and we expect to be answered with unified claims about what wonder *is* or *isn't*. Rising to meet this question in a work that addresses the complex status of wonder as both stimulus of reflection and aesthetic reaction, Philip Fisher recently offered us a crisp formulation by way of response. Wonder: “a sudden experience of an extraordinary object that produces delight.”¹ It is a view—Fisher calls it an “essential definition”—whose appeal is linked to the way it speaks to many of our strongest intuitions, to those immediate intuitions that first assemble themselves when we reach for the physiognomy of wonder. “What is wonder?” we ask, and we reach for images of the face that children present to the world when confronting something seen for the first time, for the wide-eyed looks of pleasure and gasps that are suddenly torn from their lips. Reaching for images closer to our own present, we may recognize this wonder in the sudden exclamation of pleasure that escapes us before an *aurora borealis* or our excitement as we turn the shining fossil of a marine animal in our hands, thousands of years streaming through our fingers; in the wide-eyed look of the scientist as she watches the courtship dance of birds of paradise from her makeshift hideout or the dance of celestial bodies behind the telescope’s lens.

Suddenness, novelty, pleasure: terms that put together a “grammar” of wonder and, having opened the experience of wonder to thought, hold it to a structure that would normatively answer for all of its instances. And yet—leaning now closer to the flowing surface of this statement to look—is this the only way in which we know wonder to be parsed? For peering closer, we may allow the joints of this statement to stand out one by one to interrogate them in ways that begin to break up the fluency of its aphoristic “is” and brake its speed.

For with SUDDEN we might ask: And does wonder always *strike* or might not wonder also need to be *hunted* or *stoked*? With EXTRAORDINARY we might ask: And is the extraordinary something that reveals itself or something that may also need to be discovered? And if we twice converge on the notion of a hunt, or a quest, aren't we also querying whether wonder PRODUCES or whether it may not also itself demand to be produced? That, in the same breath, is to consider: What would be the OBJECT—not only in the sense of *content* but the more valorized notion of *objective* or *intent*—of such wonder? And is DELIGHT the self-sufficient answer? And what, finally, probing deeper into the unobtrusiveness of grammar, is the meaning of that present tense which relates delight to wonder as its cause (producES) with all the stability of the eternal that grammar places at its disposal?

And having carved these joints open, we may begin to reach beyond our immediate intuitions and the physiognomy of wonder they assemble to attune ourselves to a broader range of intuitions, which offer the material for a rather different grammatical portrayal. For if wonder is the gasp torn from us as children when we are confronted with something hitherto unseen, there is also another kind of gasp that is torn from us as adults when we study more closely—as scientists, as philosophers, as students of spiritual techniques—what has already been a thousand times seen and see it again. If wonder sends us looking, there is also a kind of wonder for which we may later seek—seeking out starlit skies and mountain tops, bending closer to lines of poetry, leaning closer to drops of water or snowflakes or the wings of flies to look. If wonder is the exclamation of delight faced with the *aurora borealis* or the wide-eyed look of the scientist as she watches the dance of fabulous animals or the dance of objects in the sky, this pleased response often shades dangerously into others—to a look of pained confusion, or frozen anxiety, or awed terror, before a spectacle that disturbs our expectations or overwhelms our ordinary frames of thought, pulling us too far away from the zone in which the extraordinary can be contemplated without disturbance; to something darker, bearing the texture of fear, as we confront the grandeur and enormity of the world that surrounds us.

These interpenetrating borders of feeling, of course, raise a question about how the linguistic boundaries may be drawn around “wonder” as against its conceptual siblings within the larger emotional field it inhabits. In doing so, they call attention to the fact that the question “What is wonder?” must be anchored in a consideration of our linguistic practices in the first instance, and may need to be heard as a question linguistic in

kind. To attend to wonder's status as a phenomenon of language, however, is simultaneously to attend to its exposure to historical change. And it is thus to confront the fact that questions about what wonder *is* cannot be answered judiciously without considering what wonder *has been*, and without opening ourselves to the thought that wonder has sometimes been another kind of thing, in which its borders and the feeling tones that track them have been differently configured. At the same time, to the extent that these different feeling tones—darkness and delight, fear and joy—form part of wonder's larger emotive field, sometimes even entering its linguistic identity, this also suggests that not only our "What (is wonder)?" but our "Why (wonder)?" may likewise take a more complex response, one in which we should be prepared to listen for the reasons that may make us, not only desire wonder, but strive to escape it. And attuned to these reasons, we may be also prepared for the entailment that wonder will sometimes appear within our lives, not as a natural event, but as the object of a quest with the higher pitch of a conquest—one that, in pitting us against our own will, will provoke finer-grained questions about the nature of our will to wonder, or about its unnaturalness.

Studied more closely, and unsettled from their fixity, the joints of this definition of wonder thus swing open to angles of questioning that hold the key to a deeper understanding of how wonder should be parsed, and to a more inclusive view of its grammar—of its characteristic objects, feeling tones, means of provocation, and reasons for being desired. And this will be a view that, in holding wonder to the light against the broken glass of history, and against the broken glass of our language with the jagged divisions it marks between concepts, may ultimately discourage us from asking the question we are drawn to—"What is wonder?"—with expectations of a unified answer, and may make it easier for us to acknowledge that wonder is and has been many things. In doing so, it will share in the type of insight we have inherited from Wittgenstein, whose philosophical perspective provides this meditation on wonder with its scaffolding at several junctures, and who taught us to look for the answers to large essentializing questions—"What is knowledge?" "What is time?" and so to "What is love?" or "What is wonder?"—by attending to the life such words lead in our language.

Focused by the loosened elements of this initial definition and the angles of questioning they open out to, the book that took shape can be read as an exercise at map reading: as a venture to map some of the core aspects of wonder's grammar, or in the more living metaphor with which we began, to plot some of the highlights of its character, sketching the

passion of wonder from different angles—linguistic, historical, evaluative—in ways that bring into view the rich tracks it has carved in our intellectual history and continues to drive through our present. Not a comprehensive documentation but a heuristic starting point, not a reflection that exhausts its object but a reflection that opens it up more fully, the aim of this book is to bring wonder nearer to us as a reflective object and to provide new frameworks through which to approach it, in the hope that by thinking about wonder we may also discover why we might wish to dwell in it, and may find new ways of doing so.

The grammatical statement that provided this meditation with its initial foothold—wonder: “a sudden experience of an extraordinary object that produces delight”—has been retained as an influence on its structure throughout, as reflected most visibly in its chapter divisions, which take up the joints of this statement to interpret them in particular terms and develop them in more specific directions.

The discussion opens (Chapter 1: “WONDER”) with a question about the reasons for the singular neglect of wonder among contemporary philosophers and researchers of the emotions, surveying a number of factors that appear to position wonder as an anomaly within taxonomies of the emotions and make it recalcitrant to the analytical frameworks through which the emotions are often approached. Wonder’s adaptive significance seems harder to parse than that of many of the other emotions; its physical expression seems harder to read than the physical expression of fear or anger or grief; its invitation to action, and its constitutive judgments, seem similarly elusive compared with the other emotions we study. It is an outlook that brings an emphasis on what wonder is *not*—on what makes wonder an object of ignorance or doubt. Yet in the next moment, this outlook demands to be recalibrated by an emphasis on what we *do* know about wonder, and the access we in fact have to its identity as an emotion. It is an access that stands to be grounded in the simplest facts about our mastery of language, which enables us to speak the words of wonder and ascribe wonder to others when we see it expressed. As for all other concepts, the conceptual boundaries of wonder may be fluid and it may resist rigid definitions; yet there are still elements that can be identified as its special (if singularly thin) logic, and above all, the judgment of positive value it pronounces on its object.

A first grasp on “what wonder is”—yet this is a grasp that the next tract of the discussion (Chapter 2: “DELIGHT”) takes upon itself to interrogate and extend, refining this present-tense *is* with a more strongly

historical sensitisation to what wonder *has been*. Focusing the discussion is a question about what wonder “feels like” which looks past the contemporary association between wonder and pleasure, seemingly constitutive of its identity, to track the experiential tone of wonder across a longer historical past. The first stage of the discussion engages the sweeping history of wonder as a passion of inquiry offered by Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park in their *Wonders and the Order of Nature* (1998), which makes a claim about the changing tone of wonder from pleasure to discomfort that is central to their broader view of wonder’s historicity and the openness of its identity to change. The pleasurable wonder marking the “Age of the Marvelous” in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (so Daston and Park) is succeeded by a wonder that carries more negative affective valence, exemplified in the writings of the eighteenth-century philosopher Adam Smith, and heralding the historical displacement of wonder from elite culture. Having placed a broad-brushstroke sketch of wonder’s larger history in view, this particular claim is interrogated through a closer examination of the notion of wonder expressed by Adam Smith and an alternative reading of its significance.

Yet pleasure and pain, in fact, have been locked in complex patterns of interdigitation throughout wonder’s history; wonder has often been linked, not to delight, but to the darker elements of terror or fear. And while there are certainly important *historical* ways in which these patterns could be narrated, this is a story that can also be told in different terms—as a story of competing possibilities or conflicting approaches to wonder that cut across historical divides. The next part of the discussion follows this different mode of storytelling by drawing on another key study of wonder, Mary-Jane Rubenstein’s *Strange Wonder* (2008), and on the typology of Platonic and Aristotelian wonder it articulates. Aristotle’s wonder delights; Plato’s bears a darker tincture—a phenomenological distinction in turn linked to the governing aspirations of each: to swiftly dissipate wonder through explanation, thereby reestablishing the mastery of reason (Aristotle); to maintain the openness of wonder in the face of fearful uncertainty and vulnerability (Plato). Approached critically, this typology suggests a way of telling the story that may be parsed as, not historical, but ethical in kind, demanding a better navigation of temptations to which intellectual activity is inherently exposed. Wonder’s darkness must often be endured; just as wonder’s pleasure may often require conquest. In this light, Daston and Park’s view of wonder’s demise can also be read again; and so can the question—Is wonder still open to us?—that underpins it.

Turning away from wonder's feeling tone, the next chapter ("SUD-DEN") turns to wonder's objects and its mode of striking or descent, using Philip Fisher's account in *Wonder, the Rainbow, and the Aesthetics of Rare Experiences* (1998) to first delineate the understanding of wonder's objects and mode of striking that comes most naturally to us, so as to then begin to question it. Wonder suddenly strikes, wonder breaks upon us unwilling when we are confronted with what is unfamiliar or unexpected, to then fade as novelty fades and the extraordinary is assimilated into the ordinary background of our lives. It is an account of wonder that brings its own sense of tragedy; and more importantly, one that overlooks the different senses in which the notion of the "extraordinary" may be understood, and in doing so overlooks the character of wonder as a judgment, and the ways this character lays it open to willful cultivation.

Wonder's vision can constitute, not merely an involuntary event, but a voluntary act and practised achievement; and not an unwilling beginning, but a cultivated end. It is a cultivated achievement, in fact, that has been central to the discipline of many of our highest intellectual, aesthetic, and spiritual practices—among scientists and artists, philosophers and religious thinkers. In such practices, it has often been precisely what is most ordinary (in the sense of what is regular or familiar) to which the attention has been deliberately reoriented, inviting us to see it as worthy of wondering remark.

Wonder as an act—as an act to be willed and produced; as an experience to be quested and hunted. The next move (Chapter 4: "PRODUCE") is to take this notion of activity forward by first articulating or rearticulating it in its most rudimentary sense, that which is constituted by the practice of language. For with a richer notion of wonder's grammar now partly in view, the linguistic anchoring of wonder already articulated demands to be revisited and reinforced through a finer-grained attention to our application of the language of wonder and to the conditions that support it. And this means attending more closely to the connection between our linguistic practices and the thicker cultural practices identified as habitats for a different kind of wonder, and to the role of the latter in conditioning the intelligibility of wonder's linguistic expression.

With this linguistic anchor more firmly in place, wonder's relationship to the notion of practice or activity can then be elicited more sharply by focusing on a strain of wonder with special significance for the history of the concept. For an aspect of wonder's physiognomy that has often been picked out as one of its most distinctive features is its opposition

to self-interest and utility. This opposition has figured especially prominently where wonder has been articulated in its status, not as a passion of inquiry, but an aesthetic response. And it has been elicited nowhere more brilliantly than in the particular strain of wonder—that potent mixture of terror and joy, of darkness and delight—represented by the aesthetic experience of the sublime. For the sublime, as Kant and Schopenhauer notably recount it, involves a transformation of vision that demands a conquest—a conquest of interest that is also an overcoming of the lower aspect of one’s being and that places one in contact with one’s higher and truer identity. In doing so, it displaces the direction of wonder and reverses our judgments about what is extraordinary or great, turning the wondering gaze away from the world in all its grandeur and inward to the subject in its higher capacity; and this is a capacity in which it is no longer mastered by, but rather masters, the world.

A moment of aesthetic vision that involves a conquest; yet we can locate this wonder against an even thicker notion of activity—one that indeed also brings out the ethical character this conquest may carry—by turning to another philosophical episode that lies embedded in the lineage of the Romantic sublime and its characteristic wonder. For shadowing the later sublime is a notion of human sublimity or greatness that achieved its highest ethical expression among ancient philosophers in the ideal of “greatness of soul,” where it was linked to a similar capacity for reversing our judgments of value and transcending the lower for the higher, and a similar displacement of wonder to the human subject in its higher capacities. This sense of wonder was in turn enshrined in a series of philosophical practices that included the imaginary of “cosmic flight” or “cosmic consciousness,” which manifested but also nurtured the human capacity for moral and intellectual transcendence through an imaginative cultivation of vision that we may call more thickly (following Pierre Hadot) a spiritual exercise and a disciplined *askesis*.

Having brought this richer grammar of wonder more fully into view, the discussion finally turns to address one of its remaining critical joints, parsing this as a broader question (Chapter 5: “OBJECT”) about the reasons why wonder might itself form an object of will and aspiration. It is a question we may seek to answer by appropriating a framework of interrogation often applied to the emotions, considering (or reconsidering more attentively) what wonder feels like; what wonder leads us to do; what wonder tells us, or how it makes us judge. Addressing wonder’s forward-looking value as a stimulus for inquiry, however, now demands a more sensitive effort to locate this value in the larger

ethical space in which it may be judged. And this means attending more openly to the connection in which wonder may stand to our modes of self-evaluation, and finally foregrounding a notion of mastery—linked with a more problematized notion of pride—that recurred in our foregoing discussion, to reflect on its status and proper role within intellectual quests.

Yet if wonder can find clear justification in the service it offers to such quests—in its ability to lead us toward the goods that structure them—wonder’s ability to “tell” yields a more complex understanding of its value. For it returns us to the basic “logic” of wonder as a judgment of positive value to make us question whether wonder could ever be demanded by its objects—a demand with the force of entitlement, a response we *owe*—and if not, whether there is a different way of articulating the demand at stake. From one perspective, our spades would seem to hit against bedrock, and an argument for the value of wonder would seem to demand an argument for something as basic as the value of a consciously lived life.

Yet there is, for all the brittleness of the ground we tread here, something more to be said about the value of wonder that stands to be grounded on what wonder “tells.” This can be brought out by finally returning to the wonder of the sublime—in both its Romantic embodiment and ancient antecedents—for a finer, and this time more critical, consideration of its significance and enduring relevance. For even those who do not share the substantive philosophical commitments of the sublime’s later articulators, and who may frown on the ethical spirit that breathes through their encounter with the world’s grandeur, may be able to recognize that basic encounter and its characteristic wonder, and see in it the kernel of a kind of truth-telling sufficient to make us treasure this wonder and seek it out, will it and aspire to it. This is a wonder that—sometimes; maybe on extraordinary occasions; occasions that represent the climactic product of individual journeys of formation and histories of passionate education in which the disciplining of our attention will play a crucial role—can tell us who we are.

Questioning wonder’s pleasure, questioning wonder’s suddenness, looking beyond the extraordinary that strikes us to the extraordinary that our judgment must seek out, holding up our habit of asking “what is?” to fracture it with the pluralism of “what has been?” and the contingency of “what we say,” and even so fractured, to look for answers to “why wonder?” that remain sensitive to the many “why not?”s—already this betokens enough of the ground to be covered, offering a dense map

of the map reading ahead, and sweeping over the joints of wonder's grammar with leaps steep enough to call for bridges.

So let us peer closer to these joints to consider, beginning by putting our ear to the sources from which the EXPERIENCE of wonder first promises to be known—or to elude our knowing.

WONDER: An Emotion Unlike Others?

Doubting Wonder

It has been hailed as the beginning of philosophy and as the thrill that makes it chase after the stars; as the end philosophy tends to, and as a state philosophy aims to expunge by explanation; as the essence of art, as the aim of art, and as the means that art uses to accomplish its aims; as the origin of scientific quests; as the result of scientific quests; as the religious experience par excellence, the only proper response to a created world, and the only possible response of those whose eyes have been opened to see the glory of God in a blade of grass and every created being. It has been acclaimed as a form of redemption, and identified with consciousness itself. Inflected as awe; cadenced as bewitchment; transfigured as the sublime—a sense of wonder has claimed a key presence in a variety of practices of knowledge, activities, and pursuits.

Yet for an emotion fêted so widely across a broad range of human practices, wonder appears to register as a rather elusive presence to those who would seek to understand it. This elusiveness, Mary-Jane Rubenstein suggests to us, may possess a special kind of inevitability—the elusiveness of an investigation whose subject is the very ground that sets it into motion, or, otherwise put, the special difficulty attaching to the self-defeating project of “thinking the condition of thinking’s own possibility.” For to ask, “What is wonder?” is only possible once wonder has already set up the question as an object of (wondering) reflection. So how, she asks, “is philosophy to go about seeking the very wonder that sets it into motion?”¹ *Mutatis mutandis*, we might say the same about any inquiry that claims wonder as the origin of its motion.

This deeper difficulty may lie in the shadows; but in the daylight lies something simpler to remark, yet no less surprising for that, and that is the widespread neglect of wonder in contemporary research on the emotions. It is a neglect that appears to unite psychologists and philosophers of the emotions otherwise divided by important methodological and philosophical differences on questions such as what the emotions are, how the respective roles of cognition and physiology should be understood, what the respective roles of culture and biology consist in, or what to name as the basic or primary emotions (and on what grounds). And it is one that extends, not only to wonder, but also to related members of the emotion family to which it belongs, such as awe.²

Why might that be? The answer to this question can be put briefly before expanding: in taxonomies of the emotions, wonder often presents itself as an exception or anomalous instance—as an emotion unlike others.

Remarking the neglect of wonder in his pioneering book-length account, Robert Fuller named one reason for it by pointing to an important feature of contemporary theories of emotion: their preoccupation with an evolutionary paradigm for the study of emotion and with the adaptive significance of emotions considered as biological phenomena. Evolutionary psychologists, it is true, have warned that this preoccupation should not be understood too narrowly—in terms, for example, of a concern with immediate physical survival.³ Yet it is clear that some emotions lend themselves to rewarding analysis more readily within this frame than others, and it is not surprising that, within the terms of this paradigm, biologists and psychologists have tended “to emphasize those emotions that lead to the performance of adaptive behaviors such as withdrawal, avoidance, mating, or aggression.”⁴ More generally, Fuller argues, the focus cultivated by this framework has fallen on emotions that are short-lived; that orient people to concrete aspects of the immediate physical environment; and that are associated with specific facial expressions or gestures. Emotions such as fear and anger—which can easily be tied to behaviors with strategic adaptive importance—are perhaps the strongest exemplars of the analytical promise of such a scheme. By contrast, wonder presents itself as a more awkward fit.

The problem of fit, as one of the elements of Fuller’s argument intimates, begins from the moment wonder is sought in the body. It is significant, in this connection, that those working from within an evolutionary or biological paradigm who have joined in the neglect of wonder

have included the heirs of the particular evolutionary perspective on emotions developed in Darwin's *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872). This work, which proposed to study the regularities of human expressive behavior and their biological roots, has become the starting point in recent decades for an investigation of the universality of facial expressions corresponding to basic emotions. Notwithstanding the promise held out by Darwin's remarks on the related notion of admiration in his work, wonder has failed to figure among the emotions which this tradition has concerned itself with. It is excluded, for example, from the list of basic emotions produced by Paul Ekman—one of the best-known exponents of this view—which includes sadness, happiness, fear, anger, disgust, and surprise.⁵ This exclusion must be taken in part as an avowal of the difficulty of pinning an unambiguous expressive profile to wonder, which might help restate the difficulty with wonder as one that concerns the elusiveness of its embodiment—a suggestion made explicitly in recent work with regard to one of wonder's conceptual siblings, awe, putting down its scientific neglect to its lack of a distinctive facial expression.⁶ Among emotion researchers, in fact, those who have included wonder among primary or basic emotions have represented a quaint minority. And even those that have accorded it a place in their taxonomies, such as the Dutch psychologist Nico Frijda (whose work was clearly located in the Darwinian tradition) and the early British psychologist William McDougall, have not always done so in a way that seems sufficiently respectful of the differences—subtle yet not to be dismissed in advance—between related emotional concepts (such as surprise and wonder, or wonder and curiosity) in ordinary language.⁷ (A point, of course, that already suggests that the question raised here could not be tackled without addressing the fractious topic of our ability to identify and individuate emotions.)

These two aspects—the relative obscurity of the adaptive value of wonder and the relative indeterminacy of its expression—are not unconnected, and together they point on to a further reason—linked with other methodological tendencies of current emotion research—for this programmatic neglect of wonder. For both difficulties in turn reveal an underlying embarrassment in producing distinct statements about what, falling in line with recent terminology, we would call the action tendencies of wonder, the inbuilt motion of this emotion—or, put more simply still, what wonder makes us *do*. For if fear makes us freeze or fight or flee, if anger makes us rear for confrontation, if envy prepares us for a

bitter revenge, if love makes us seek out, and contempt eschew—action tendencies that can be used to build theories about their adaptive value in human history, and that are directly related to the repertory of expressive behavior associated with them—what might one say of wonder that would hold with equal force?⁸

For wonder, it seems, can make us do everything or nothing. Even our doing, as this has often been understood (in the history of philosophy, certainly, but not only) has been a species of non-doing, or whatever else we might understand by contemplation. It is striking, for example, and of direct relevance to this point, that some of the emotion researchers who have given their attention to wonder and committed themselves to incorporating it within their taxonomies have presented a picture of wonder whose most remarkable feature is its passivity. In Frijda's account, this passivity is manifested both on the level of physiology—marked by suspension of breathing and general loss of muscle tone, which “causes the mouth to fall open, and may make the subject stagger or force him to sit down”—and of expressive behavior more narrowly defined—open eyes, raised eyebrows, open mouth, a forgetful relaxation of the body. This passivity, to which Frijda relates the functional significance or meaning of the family of emotions comprising amazement, surprise, and wonder—a significance that would appear to consist in the enhancement of contact—is reflected in “the arrest of locomotion and instrumental action.”⁹

And it is precisely this accent on instrumentality, or its lack—one that will reverberate more than once through our discussion—that we need in order to give an even deeper account of the occlusion of wonder we have been trying to track, and perhaps the most accurate diagnosis yet of the difficulty that has made of wonder such a conspicuous absentee from contemporary taxonomies of the emotions. For not evolutionary rationale; not universality of distinct facial expression; nor yet only action-tendencies—it has rather been judgment or cognition that has come to figure most prominently in recent views of emotion in both psychology (most markedly since its methodological comeback from behaviorism) and in philosophy.

An account of emotion whose natural adversaries have ranged broadly from behaviorists, proponents of a physiological James-Lange theory of emotion, to empiricists of Hume's ilk, this is a view that comes in different forms and with different construals of its constituent elements. (What is cognition? Is cognition or judgment identical with the emotion, its cause, or a constituent part? Is it necessary or sufficient for

emotion?). But whether in psychology or philosophy, such theories share a stress on the role of what, varying with the idiom, we may call the person's (organism's) goals or values, interests or projects, or more broadly, the elements entering a person's well-being. My fear as I walk down a dark road registers my safety and integrity as an object of value presupposed by anything else I might desire; my grief traces out a halo of value around the person I have lost; my joy at news of an unlooked-for success registers my attachment to a certain kind of achievement; my guilt registers a breach between an ideal I had treasured and now feel I have let down. In its philosophical guise, in which it has emerged out of a combat with dismissive views of emotions as dangerous or irrational or physiologically brute, the cognitive view of emotions has sometimes been parsed as a claim that emotions tell us something about the world; they tell us "how things are" or let us "see things as they really are"—a knowledge of the world that is fundamentally evaluative, and so a knowledge of *our* world.¹⁰

One of the most suggestive views of this kind is the one recently articulated by Martha Nussbaum in her *Upheavals of Thought*, where she presents a "neo-Stoic" account that stresses four aspects of emotions: their aboutness (emotions have objects); their intentionality (emotions have intentional objects that embody ways of seeing); their basis in beliefs (emotions embody sets of beliefs about objects); and most crucially for the "eudaimonistic" view Nussbaum wants to defend, their connection with value (emotions see objects as invested with an importance that makes reference to an agent's own flourishing). Emotions, on this view, are judgments about external things to which we attach value and which we see as intimately involved in our flourishing; which are vulnerable and beyond our control; and which thus involve an acknowledgment of passivity before the world.¹¹ Nussbaum is at pains to stress that to describe emotions as eudaimonistic is not to describe them as egoistic, and that we may value things intrinsically and for their own sake (if not impersonally) even though we will always value them as part of *our* life and projects, and thus from an inalienably self-referential perspective. Yet even this broader understanding of value seems to encounter difficulty in accommodating wonder, which Nussbaum herself describes as the emotion most strikingly subversive to this scheme. "[A]s non-eudaimonistic as an emotion can be," wonder is an emotion, according to Nussbaum, which "responds to the pull of the object, and one might say that in it the subject is maximally aware of the value of the object, and only minimally aware, if at all, of its relationship to her own plans. That is why it is likely

to issue in contemplation rather than in any other sort of action toward the object.”¹²

Weakly connected to action; unconnected to self-referential goals and plans; thus breaching every category that emotion theorists bring to bear when approaching individual emotions. And it is Nussbaum once more who affords us the leverage for yet another addition to this enumeration of wonder’s unlikenesses, and for making contact with one of our starting points or rallying points (the SUDDEN-ness of emotions, which we may here parse as their ability to strike). For a feature of emotions that has often recurred in theoretical analyses—and that cognitive theories such as Nussbaum’s have been thought challenged to accommodate—is the sense of passivity that shapes the way we typically experience them. Speaking with her own experience of grief as exemplar, she writes of the “feeling of terrible tumultuousness, of being at the mercy of currents that swept over me without my consent or complete understanding . . . the feeling that very powerful forces were pulling the self apart, or tearing it limb from limb,” which is an instance of “the terrible power or urgency of the emotions . . . the sense one has that one is passive or powerless before them.”¹³

This fact—that we experience emotions as uncontrollable, and ourselves as passive with regard to them; the fact that emotions *strike*—lies at the root of much traditional hostility toward the emotions, and it is one that, it has recently been suggested, we can read off the very grammatical evidence of our language. That emotions are “passions”—in the literal sense of “states produced by one’s being *acted on* in certain ways”—is suggested, Robert Gordon writes, “by the fact that the great majority of adjectives designating emotions are derived from [passive] participles: for example, ‘amused’, ‘annoyed’, ‘astonished’, ‘delighted’, ‘depressed’, ‘embarrassed’, ‘frightened’ . . . ‘overjoyed’, ‘pleased.’”¹⁴ It may seem remarkable, then, that in this respect wonder once again presents itself as an anomaly, and only conveys passivity when encountered in compound (“wonderstruck”). It is an anomaly that our own experience of frequent struggles with paroxysms of anger, fear, and grief, and rare encounters with a wonder that overpowers and we seek to repulse, may appear to confirm, and that once again bespeaks a weaker anchor in the body and a more ambiguous (thus less overpowering) kind of embodiment.¹⁵ And this, in the light of Nussbaum’s analysis, should not surprise us, if the intensity of emotion is commensurate to the degree of importance with which its object is invested among our goals or projects,¹⁶ so that an emotion weakly connected to one’s interests would be one that strikes

weakly—and one too weakly connected to patterns of vital human interests to have been written into the body by the evolutionary process as a *striking* one cannot repulse.

With our attention to the linguistic idiosyncrasies of wonder sharpened, we are now well prepared to remark another, which unseats wonder from among the passions in a different though closely related way. For with many of the emotions, the emotion terms are often employed in the expression of the emotion itself as first-person attributions (“I’m angry with you,” “I’m feeling sad” or “I’m so scared”). With wonder, by contrast, that seems to be the exception rather than the rule. “How remarkable,” “How extraordinary,” or just “*Wow*”—the expression of wonder often appears as an attribution to the object rather than an emotional state ascribed in the first person to oneself (“I wonder” and “it fills me with wonder” are relative rarities in our speech). Writers on the emotions have pointed out that in responding emotionally to an object, we typically find ourselves ascribing a quality to the object or perceiving it “as having the emotion-proper property.”¹⁷ To be disgusted at something is to perceive it as disgusting, to hate a person is to see him as hateful or despicable—a fact that Peter Goldie suggests is closely bound up with our experience of emotions as being justified or reasonable. Yet what seems remarkable about wonder is that, in the language games we play with it, such an explicitly attributive mode constitutes the dominant form of our expression.

What this shares with the grammatical point marked just before (concerning the element of passivity ordinarily enshrined in our language) is a tendency to draw emphasis away from the emotion as an experience, and to channel it toward the object that excites it. Yet even to those convinced of the depth of grammar, this peculiarity may not seem sufficiently significant or striking until it is joined to another observation, which develops Goldie’s emphasis on rationality and justification—and with which we can finally bring to a close the long list of credentials establishing wonder’s uneasy membership in traditional taxonomies. For in focusing on judgment or cognition, cognitivist theories of emotions have taken themselves to be concerned with an element that plays a cardinal role on two different levels of our thinking about emotions: in our ability to identify and distinguish emotions, and in our ability to justify and explain them. The judgment, implicit in my fit of anger, that someone has inflicted undue injury on something I care about, or the judgment, implicit in my access of grief, that something or someone I loved is now lost to me, are central to what identifies these emotions as anger or

as grief. And it is again these kinds of judgments—judgments in which factual beliefs and evaluative assumptions stand closely partnered—that would figure prominently in any effort to justify our emotional reactions and defend them as rational or fitting.

With wonder, however, we may find ourselves stumped for words when we reach out to identify the tissue of judgments and beliefs that form its rational core. “How remarkable!” What more can we immediately say of wonder’s judgments and wonder’s justice than that it responds to a perception of an object as remarkable, extraordinary, beyond expectation? And this observation may well leave us feeling that, while emotions may be judgments of value, this “judgment” is too naked a postulation of value to merit the name—more an exclamation than a judgment, and too much *feeling* to be even dignified with words.¹⁸ It is, perhaps, this sense of wonder’s nudity—its deficient or fluid rational core—that is expressed in the well-known psychologist Richard Lazarus’s reluctant retreat before “states like awe, wonder, and faith-trust,” which “can be used in more than one sense,” rendering their meaning one about which it is “difficult to know what to say.”¹⁹

This point—like several others in our list—is one we are scheduled to revisit in later stages of our thinking. But for now, we can draw this list of wonder’s eccentricities to a close and merely turn the page over to remark that this singular position of wonder among the emotions, far from being the preserve of contemporary theories, has been mirrored in the position wonder has occupied in other phases of its history, particularly in its philosophical trajectory. In his landmark work on the emotions, *The Passions of the Soul* (1649), Descartes would give a prominent place to the passion of wonder, yet in doing so he would make its exceptional status clear in ways that loudly echo the reasons for wonder’s occlusion in modern taxonomies. For Descartes, the passions “dispose our soul to want the things which nature deems useful for us”—useful, that is, qua embodied beings. Yet wonder is a passion we experience “before we know whether or not the object is beneficial to us,” which is the ground for Descartes’s naming it as the first of the passions.²⁰ This disconnection from interest is in turn related to a diminished mode of embodiment; for given that the sole object of wonder is knowledge, wonder is “not accompanied by any change in the heart or the blood, such as occurs in the case of the other passions,” but is only related to the brain.²¹

And while, notwithstanding these two forms of elevation, Descartes himself would still treat wonder as a passion requiring criticism and correction,²² it is in fact wonder’s exceptional position in a philosophical

history that since its earliest days has treated the passions as objects of suspicion—to be critiqued, disciplined, and corrected—that provides the most illuminating insight into its unusual credentials. Emotion, as Robert Solomon notes, “has almost always played an inferior role in philosophy, often as antagonist to logic and reason.”²³ Yet wonder has repeatedly emerged among philosophers as a codicil to this blanket distrust. This is certainly the case with the Stoics, well known for their jaundiced view of the passions as false judgments of value, and for whom (as for many of the ancient schools) philosophy served as a therapy for the passions. The negative view of wonder often associated with the Stoics and encapsulated in the familiar maxim *nil admirari*—which links wonder to the problematic emotional attachments subjected by the Stoics to scathing ethical critique—should not here mislead us. For it takes its place next to a positive appreciation of wonder as a response to the natural world in the context of theoretical inquiry which reveals that the spirit that had made wonder the philosophical passion par excellence for both Aristotle and Plato, a passion to be prized and not repulsed, continues to breathe through Stoic writings.²⁴

Leaping ahead to a more recent philosophical episode—in what is meant to be an indicative and not an exhaustive enumeration—we may say the same of Kant, who shares many affinities with the ancient philosophers and many of their sources of distrust, and whose ethical viewpoint has often been construed (though not always justly, it has been argued) in terms of a sharp rejection of the role of emotion in morality and a strident emphasis on reason. Yet it is Kant who, closing the *Critique of Practical Reason*, left us with one of the most eloquent expressions of wonder when he wrote: “Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration (*Bewunderung*) and awe (*Ehrfurcht*), the more often and more steadily one reflects on them: *the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me*”—thus tying wonder to the heartland of his ethical theory.²⁵ And it is Kant likewise who, as we will see more fully later, makes of that species of wonder that forms the flagship of Romantic sensibility, the sublime, one of the most telling moments of his aesthetics, a moment that is notable for its separation from selfish interest, and that drives deep nerves into Kant’s ethical outlook as a whole.

Knowing Wonder

Wonder, then, emerges as an emotion unlike others in every way, and one calculated to fall through the cracks in taxonomies of emotion—hence,

we may conclude, its programmatic neglect in contemporary theories, which have shrugged it off as too slippery to be responsibly handled.

An apophatic view of wonder if there ever was one—and not a view with which we could allow ourselves to rest. For on the one hand, if wonder falls through the cracks of our taxonomies, this could also be read as a token of the limitations of such taxonomies or indeed of rigid taxonomies in general, which may demand of phenomena a greater unity than they inherently possess. An insistence on analyzing emotions too narrowly in terms of their characteristic action-tendencies, for example, would be resisted by several central emotions, such as hope or regret. Our habitual inclination to seek the emotions in the face, it has been similarly suggested, betrays a limiting focus on emotions as paroxysms or “episodic perturbations” that is liable to obscure the importance of longer-standing emotions such as love or anger or jealousy on our lives. Such emotions express themselves over time in complex ways, registering—as Peter Hacker observes—“in the reasons that weigh with one in one’s deliberations,” in “the desires one harbours” and “the thoughts that cross one’s mind in connection with the objects of one’s feelings,” as much as in a disposition to episodes of occurrent passion that imprint themselves visibly on our physical frame.²⁶

Loosening the tenacity of these taxonomic grids, mollifying the steely unity they try to impose on phenomena, we may find ourselves less at a loss faced with the psychological phenomena we attempt to chart. And in this case, such mollification may leave us more open to acknowledging that, if we even consider positioning wonder within taxonomies of the emotions despite the challenges it poses to them, this is not merely a contingent residue of our intellectual history and of the decisions of earlier inquirers to classify wonder as a maverick yet central member of their psychological schemes, but also a reflection of a basic recognition of what wonder has in common with those other experiences we class as “emotions” within our passionate life—and as such, already a pointer to the positive hold we have on wonder rather than the hold we lack.

For wonder may not tear the soul limb from limb like anger or like love; wonder may not often leave us passive or helpless in the power of its grip. Yet if we think of reaching for the language of “passion” to talk of wonder despite our limited experience of wonder’s passivity, like Plato before us who spoke of wonder as a *pathos* in introducing philosophy to its origin (*Theaetetus* 155d), it is to the extent that we can after all recognize that, on those rare occasions on which it strikes, wonder can momentarily make our chest expand and our breath deepen, can leave

us uplifted and moved, as the passions often move, changing the way we see the world and impelling us to act in response to our changed vision, as the passions often impel us. It is an impulse whose bidding may often appear to take the thinnest of forms, as its characterization by observers such as Frijda suggests, at its thinnest simply bidding us to stand before objects with still attention or to lean closer to dwell on them more intently. Yet this already constitutes a pattern of acting or characteristic motion sufficiently distinct to enter our account of wonder's status as an emotion, and one that writes itself in our opening face and widening eyes in ways that anchor wonder visibly in the body's script.²⁷ These multiple recognitions of wonder's status as an emotion, in turn, are ones that are embedded in the most basic forms of our language, as when we speak of wonder as something we "experience" and "feel."²⁸

While wonder thus challenges the analytical categories habitually applied to the emotions, it is only a steely reading of these categories that would leave wonder entirely defeated by them, in ways that would exclude it from the framework of the passions altogether and expel it beyond our epistemic reach. And how, after all, could such an expulsion be even envisaged? For bracketing the analytical frameworks of those claiming a more-than-ordinary expertise on familiar phenomena, what—it might be asked—could be closer to us than wonder? What—to grasp at one of the joints of the Ur-text imparting structure to our present thought—could be closer to us than that emotional experience that, it has been suggestively claimed, is identical to nothing less than EXPERIENCE itself?

For if the ordinary, as Wittgenstein suggested, is not experienced as such, and we only notice something insofar as it is unexpected or unfamiliar, then surprise, and *mutatis mutandis* wonder, would seem (Philip Fisher glosses) to "become the very heart of what it means to 'have an experience' at all."²⁹ And if wonder forms the heart of experience in the present, this point could also be transposed to the past as an insight about the historical progression through which our very world has been formed. The texture of ice cream, the look of snow, the sound of a waterfall, the pleasure of holding a book in one's hand, of standing up unsteadily on one's skates and gliding, of the first look of love one sees returned—everything that was once unfamiliar would have been filtered through wonder into one's world. This is also the implication one could draw out of Descartes's view as we have outlined it and which Deborah Brown does us the service of bringing out more distinctly when she remarks that, for Descartes, to the extent that all "other passions

presuppose some knowledge of the object,” all “presuppose the prior effects of wonder.”³⁰ To take that reflection seriously would be to be surprised into the view that wonder must lie at the historical root of every object that has entered our experience. Seen in this light, wonder would constitute not only the heart of experience but its gatekeeper. And don’t we imply as much when we keep coming back to children as the paradigm in which wonder must be thought?

That might be going too fast, forming certainties about the proper objects of wonder that are too quick to be trusted, and that it will be the task of another chapter (“SUDDEN”) to more attentively explore. More to the point, it may be questioned, if wonder is identical to experience, how often we really experience the world in the way Wittgenstein can be heard as pointing to. The wonder we experience as children, after all, is one to which we would seem developmentally fated to forfeit our access.

Any attempt to place wonder in sharper view, in fact, must take its starting point from the acknowledgment that wonder is an experience that does not often strike or often take us in the power of its grip, and that typically enters our passionate lives as an isolated incursion, for reasons that the connection between wonder and the unfamiliar forged above, joined to Nussbaum’s earlier statement of wonder’s “non-eudaimonistic” character, already illuminate from different directions. For if wonder emerges in the first instance as a response to that which stands out from what is ordinary and familiar, and if everyday life presupposes multiple unnoticed backgrounds of this kind for its very constitution, wonder is an experience to which we have every reason to think we would not be routinely exposed. And given the push and pull of practical concerns that govern our lives and the self-referential passionate responses they set in motion, we may also see why a passionate response ungrounded in such concerns is one to which we would rarely stand open, and when we do, one which might lack a more enduring anchor in our lives that would make it readily accessible for reflective examination.³¹ In light of wonder’s unsteady relation to our ordinary lives, wonder’s elusiveness when we seek to place it within our epistemic reach should not surprise us.

Wonder’s nearness, yet wonder’s remoteness—a pair of conflicting characterizations of wonder’s relation to our lives that we do not encounter for the last time, and that would here offer opposing estimations of the epistemic grip we might hope for: wonder eludes us—yet wonder is something we know inside out and as intimately as anything we experience before we can scarcely walk or talk. Yet to bring these competing

claims into balance and place a sharper story about our knowledge of wonder into view that calibrates more judiciously what we know with confidence and what we hold in doubt, we now need to lean more deeply inward toward the roots of a confidence which will seem rudimentary, yet which forms the foundation of anything we can know or doubt.

To turn inward for discoveries such as these is a move that philosophers have learned to distrust in many of its philosophical forms, and here we must side with Wittgenstein and his interpreters in appropriating the insight that one of the few yet also most illuminating inward turns that is open to us is linguistic in kind. For however much psychological phenomena may reflectively puzzle us, and however we might distinguish between their different degrees of experiential nearness or remoteness, our first temptation, when approaching them philosophically, has often been to picture them as lying as close to us as anything that takes place within our own breast or inside our own minds. Yet the grasp we seek over such phenomena, on the view articulated by Wittgenstein, stands to be achieved not by turning inward to observe what takes place within us, but by a different kind of inward turn, to our ordinary linguistic usage. To know what an emotion such as anger or joy or wonder “is,” put tersely, is simply to know how to engage in the language games we play with those words, using them to express our own anger or our wonder, or to describe the reactions of others.

And that is a turn inward to the resources of our own language that is simultaneously a turn outward in at least two separate ways. First, because it is a turn to an “I” that participates in the “we” of the linguistic community one belongs to as a competent speaker of one’s language with authority to judge what can and cannot be said. Second, because the first person plural is additionally a turn outward to the body, through which language must ordinarily pass in order to reach us. For without the expression of the body, the competent speakers of language who formed my authority as a child could never have taught me to speak, even as it is bodily expression that later on, as an accomplished master of language, continues to provide me with criteria for ascribing psychological concepts to others. This was the viewpoint expressed pithily in Wittgenstein’s rich if not immediately penetrable aphorism that “the human body is the best picture of the human soul” (*PPF*, 25), which encapsulated a more wide-ranging venture to call attention to the natural expressions and reactions that language builds upon, grafts itself upon, and replaces. Aphoristically again and *in medias res*, yet suggestively enough: “The verbal expression of pain replaces crying, it does not describe it” (*PI*, 244).³²

And so, *mutatis mutandis*, with the verbal expression of anger, or fear, or surprise.

Our ability to use expressions such as “I am in pain” or “I am angry” or “It fills me with wonder” and “How wonderful!” will be then be genealogically connected to the fact that we had once been offered the words of pain or anger or wonder to replace our wince or our flushed face, our exclamation or dropped jaw, by those with a mastered relationship to language. Our mastery of this language will be a mastery that has first passed through the body. In this narrative, the child will figure as hero twice over, not only in constituting the archetype or paradigm in which wonder must be thought, but in forming the historical root of anything we can say about wonder—or about any other psychological concepts—as speakers of our language.

To remark this is to return to one of the points mentioned above in our enumeration of wonder’s (“apophatic”) unlikenesses—its enigmatic relationship to the body, and the ambiguous expression in which it finds embodiment, which seemed to shut it out of the universalizing perspective of modern-day Darwinians—to directly qualify its force. For if we have ever learned to (speak of) wonder, it would seem that wonder—like pain, or like anger—is something we must be able to see (recognize) expressed. Yet this qualification will have limited relevance unless nuanced further. Because even on Wittgenstein’s terms, the relationship between language and our natural reactions is not a simple one, and the form of “seeing” just invoked not one in which the biological provides the only system of signs. To the bodily or biological, Wittgenstein’s interpreters have added two other contexts that must be taken into account in tracing the course of our linguistic learning, as also the operation of our linguistic practices once mastered. One of these is the cultural context that conditions our expressive possibilities—for it is social conventions, as Peter Hacker notes, “that partly determine within a social group what may *count* as an expression of love or hatred, gratitude or resentment, affection or contempt”—while the other is the narrative context that conditions our interpretation of behavior.³³

The latter context is what is cryptically alluded to in Wittgenstein’s question: “Why does it sound odd to say: ‘For a second he felt deep grief?’” (*PPF*, 3), to which Stanley Cavell’s words come as interpretation: “What I call something, what I *count* as something, is a function of how I *recount* it, tell it.” How I tell it: how I connect it to what came before and what came after; how I trace its pathway across time—a pathway that counts grief by its causes and counts its depth by its

more-than-momentary effects. Elsewhere, Cavell uses the term “logical history” to refer to these kinds of recounting (“a passion, one might say, has a history, as an action has; a logical history”).³⁴ And “logic,” here, refers us to the notions of intelligibility that are deeply enmeshed in the ways we apply psychological concepts to ourselves and others. For to identify a given bodily manifestation as a particular emotion, as Stephen Mulhall points out, directly depends on our ability to regard it as an “intelligible human response to the circumstances embodied in the relevant background.”³⁵ It is to such background that you would need to refer in order to understand my outburst of weeping as one of rage, or grief, or pain, or relief, and the words you teach me would be the words in terms of which you can understand and make sense of my natural expression.

And it is likewise in this context—where another’s capacity to make sense of my reactions comes up as a stage and condition for my capacity to be taught—that notions of normality and abnormality enter our view, as an indispensable adjunct of intelligibility. It is Cavell, again, who spells out the hold of such notions most compellingly, illuminating the extent to which our ability to (learn to) communicate with each other in language depends on the sheer contingent fact that as human beings we tend to react to certain things in certain ways we take to be normal. To imagine a person who reacts differently—who, for example, expresses suffering by laughing, who could be comforted by whipping, who “laughs at rejection or physical pain the way we laugh at a joke,” who screams in pain when touched with affection, who is “bored by an earthquake or by the death of his child or the declaration of martial law” or who gets “angry at a pin or a cloud or a fish”—is to imagine a kind of person of which we may have to say: “Such people do not live in our world,” and to whom whether we can still respond as persons comes into question.³⁶ If one experiences the force of these counterfactual imaginings, one may see in them the seed of an insight that attaches itself to our own case with similar force. For is the language of wonder one that could be taught to a child that reacted to rainbows or kites or its first vision of the world under snow or the modern-day Disneyland designed for enchantment (or any of the other everyday sources of wonder to which children are exposed) with tears of rage or boredom or distress, or of any other emotion under which we might dare to interpret his tears? Such a child, we might say, does not form part of our shared world.

If we began by talk of a look inward, however, the line we have just drawn out exposes us to the strongest outward-moving thrust. Because to speak of intelligibility and its constraints (including constraints

of normality) is to begin to trace a ring around wonder that would set boundaries around what “can” or “cannot” be (called) wonder and what we can and cannot wonder at, finally bringing us up sharply against our starting question to demand a firmer response. For the question, “What is wonder?” could be parsed again by asking: Just how tightly can this ring be drawn? To restate it in terms we have only freshly employed: If passions have a logical history, what logic belongs to wonder?

To know what wonder “is” will be a knowledge of how to use its characteristic language and engage in its language games, we tersely said moments ago. It is a knowledge of what to call wonder and when to speak of it which means that we know wonder as intimately as any other emotion we have learnt to recognize in others and been taught to express, and as intimately and as confidently as any word we have mastered the ability to use, a mastery we exhibit when we spot looks of wonder on another’s face (“there was such wonder in her eyes as she suddenly walked in and saw—”) or when we describe ourselves as having being filled with wonder at a sight or a thought (“it fills one with such wonder to think—”). This mastery of the phenomena would seem robust enough to allow us to respond to the intellectual defeat expressed by some theoretical inquirers—wonder is a state about which it is “difficult to know what to say” (Lazarus)—with the simple counterclaim that in a real sense, in ordinary circumstances, and as ordinary speakers of our language if not as theoretical investigators claiming a more-than-ordinary expertise, we do know what to say and when to say it.

Yet the story of this mastery, it must now be observed, cannot be entirely told in such simple terms. For that, on the one hand, would be to overlook the variety of factors that influence our use of psychological language, and that may indeed differentiate between the linguistic habits of individuals nominally belonging to a unified linguistic community. The ways we employ such language, after all—the emotions we experience and express and reflectively ascribe to ourselves, as much as the emotions we succeed in recognizing in others—reflect capacities of feeling and sensitivities of judgment that vary across individuals and depend on the particular journeys of personal formation and types of passionate education to which they have been exposed.

And to the extent that this education places us in relations of dependency to the linguistic communities we inhabit and to the attitudes to the emotions that shape their outlook, the ease with which we reach for a particular emotive vocabulary to speak of ourselves and speak for others will also reflect the broader attitudes and evaluative stances of our

community to the emotion in question. If wonder thus presents itself to its students as an elusive phenomenon—to resume our running theme yet again—the reasons for this may go beyond the “constitutive” disposition to rarity that was pinned above to its paradigmatic connection to the unfamiliar and paradigmatic disconnection from self-concern. For it may signal a linguistic distance from the vocabulary of wonder that reveals something important about its uncertain status within our cultural life, and is already a testament to what Mary Baine Campbell describes as our deeply ambivalent stance on its value.³⁷

But putting this more complex point aside, to tell this story so simply would also be to overlook, and more basically, the multiple moments of uncertainty or doubt that typically shadow our ordinary linguistic transactions. For: I see a child wake up on a winter morning to a world glittering under snow for the first time and run up to the window to stare out with shining eyes, and (encouraging, recognizing) I say: “Isn’t it wonderful?” I see a child watching fish turn and shimmer in the aquarium, a child looking at iridescent seashells or shiny stones in the natural history museum—eyes wide, hands stretching out to touch the glass—and I later say: “You should have seen the look of wonder on her face.” The expression is there; and so is the narrative context—a context even more perspicuous to me for my having constructed it myself (leading her to the window, taking her for a weekend visit to the museum) with the very intention to provoke a wondering response.

Yet: I see a member of my walking group stop in his tracks as we make our way through the darkened landscape of a remote island and raise his eyes to the densely starred sky, and I hear him say, “Wow.” Later recounting this scene, do I speak of “wonder” or “awe,” of “amazement” or simply “surprise” in describing his response? With nothing but his exclamation and wide-eyed look to guide me, any of these words would find a foothold in this scene, though some of them will seem thicker and some thinner than others. “Surprise” may seem too thin for the grandeur I see (and could I imagine him seeing it differently?), too quickly jolting and as quickly passing (it is my sense of what the scene “demands” that again speaks), too suggestive of a rudimentary ignorance (as if he had not expected to find the very sky there; as if nothing whatsoever, in this era of mass information, had prepared him for the possibility that the stars could appear in such density in the absence of artificial light). “Awe” may seem too thick in the depth of feeling it attributes, suggestive of a grandeur that touches deeply enough to humble; though if my fellow-walker remains rooted to the spot while everyone walks on and I