

DID YOU EVER WONDER?

Reginald M. Durbin, O.P.

I RECALL once watching a small boy at his first circus. He had curly red hair, and was, I would judge, about four or five years old. From the opening parade of elephants to the last spine-tingling lion taming act, he would be first bewildered or frightened, hiding his head in his mother's lap, then amusingly entranced by it all, not wanting to miss a single thing. The bigger the animal or more unusual the feat of daring, the more he would be startled; the more too would he be wide-eyed with curiosity when he overcame his bewildered amazement.

In seeking to discover where philosophy begins I have chosen this homely incident because of a conviction that philosophy is the high point of a personal development which has its beginning in just such a childlike wonder. Four progressive stages in this development are discernible: first, there is the bewildered amazement of the child; then there is an imitative, a reverential wonder that we find in the craftsman and artist; there is, thirdly, a kind of fear-filled wonder at the marvelous and mysterious; and lastly there is that special, detached yet impelling wonder which gives rise to philosophy.

As an example of the imitative or reverential wonder of the craftsman, I should like to recall a striking sequence in a movie of a few years back. The scene is set near the end of a furniture company's production line; there we see a foreman of some years' experience in earnest conversation with the new, and quite young, director of the company. The old man takes a fragile looking table from the conveyor belt, grasps it with one hand, lifts it by a single flimsy leg, and crashes it against the floor in disgust. He is ashamed, ashamed as a person, to have had a part in making such cheap products. The picture that shows through in this scene is that of an old fashioned craftsman who

takes great pride in his work and who holds the objects of his craft in a sort of reverence.

We may ask how such an attitude of reverence comes about. It seems to me that it must begin with a lad of eight or ten, first becoming interested in his dad's work and workshop. It must begin when such a boy is at the stage of hero-worship, when he thinks no one can do anything quite as well as dad. His own first efforts are crude; he needs the constant corrections he receives. In the two or three years it will take to make an artist of him, he will often wonder at the way wood and tools seem to obey, even to anticipate, the wishes of his father. He will be taught to respect the wood and not cut it or split it against the grain; his father will very likely handle the wood with a sort of tenderness as he tries to teach his son this lesson.

I have chosen this example from an older generation because it is hard to imagine the same tenderness with wrenches and huge machines and welder's torches. But it remains true even today that the genuinely good laborer will handle the tools of his trade with care and that he will have learned such carefulness from watching an older man with respect and wonder.

Fear-filled wonder at the mysterious, unlike the child's and the craftsman's wonder, can be better exemplified from history than from personal experience. This is so both because grown-ups of today seldom feel this wonder as sharply as did men of the past, and because this stage of wonder was the historical prelude to the stage we are most interested in, that of philosophical wonder. The setting for the transition from myth and mystery to philosophy and science was the ancient Near East, specifically Egypt and Greece. Egypt has nearly always been pictured as a land of mystery, a land of a priestly class with immense political power; similarly, Greece is everywhere recognized as the birth-place of philosophy as we know it today.

It is to the priests of ancient Egypt that mankind owes its first written language and its first acquaintances with what would become astronomy and geometry. These beginnings in pre-scientific knowledge constitute one half of a forked tree with roots sunk deep in fear-filled wonder. Naturally the other fork of this "tree of knowledge" leaned toward magic and superstition. But wonder is clearly at the root of both the knowledge and the superstition; for what first set these men apart as a priestly class was their higher knowledge, the fruit of asking questions left unasked by men of lesser curiosity.

And if we are indebted to the Egyptian priests for these pre-scientific insights, we are likewise indebted to them by reason of the attractive force their accomplishments exercised upon the great minds of early Greece. Thales and Anaximander, imitating Egyptian interest in the stars and the origins of the world, brought about a stupendous change whereby myths were turned into philosophy. A hundred years later Pythagoras executed an even more ingenious transformation of Egyptian line drawings and practical measurings into mathematical speculations of a high order.

That each of these "wonders" was aroused by something striking seems to be the first generalization we can draw from the examples. The circus with its brilliant panorama of sights and sounds; the picture of a true craftsman whose work is a thing of joy rather than a tedious job—these immediately strike the imagination. The same would certainly be found true of the wonder of the Egyptian priests and ancient philosophers if we were to consider them in sufficient detail. Concluding then with some assurance that what we wonder at is something striking, the question remains: What makes it striking, thus exciting wonder? The answer is simple because the object of one of the examples, the circus, is so universally the object of wonder. This would naturally lead us to believe that there is at the root of all wonderment something sensible, yet not merely sensible, but sensible in a spectacular and extraordinary way.

Next we might profitably note the emotional reactions that go to make up wonder. We noticed that the child in our example was at first bewildered and startled at the strange sights of the circus; this displays one emotion, fear, since bewilderment is one of the forms that fear takes. We saw also how the child became all-seeing in his curiosity, and we can provisionally put curiosity down as an emotional reaction. And finally we watched how enthusiastically this child enjoyed his visit to the circus; here again we find an emotion at work, that of joy. These three emotional reactions—fear, curiosity, and joy—are more or less clearly observable in our other three examples. However, in the case of the craftsman and, to a far greater extent, in the case of the philosopher, the fear assumes a peculiar form. In the philosopher it will be the fear of ignorance as we will see further on.

Finally, these four examples, as we hinted already, represent an upward progression or development of wonder. The child's wonder ends in a pure sense delight. The craftsman, although his

skill is properly intellectual, is nevertheless more often thought of as a man of instinct, as a man with a certain "feel" for his work. Fear-filled wonder at the mysterious, the third type that we saw, might seem a small advance over the wonder of the craftsman were it not for the historical fact that this wonder served as a prelude to philosophy: And at the peak of the process we find philosophical wonder, to which we can now turn our attention in order to find its exact definition.

We are in a position now to clarify our notion of wonder by examining its philosophical definition according to St. Thomas. For him wonder is a kind of fear; it is one of a group of three special emotions contained under the general emotion of fear. These three "fears" are wonder, bewilderment, and anxiety (*admiration, stupor, and agony*). Bewilderment is the emotional reaction to some unaccustomed great danger; the very unaccustomedness is what causes the bewilderment. Anxiety, the plague of our busy twentieth century, is caused by a danger against which we have no defense because of the vagueness and indefiniteness of its object. Such an emotion, in a common example, would be that experienced by a hostess who "just had a premonition that something was going to go wrong" at a party she was giving. The third kind of fear is what we commonly speak of as wonder.

An understanding of bewilderment can be of considerable help in clarifying the nature of wonder, because of the close affinity wonder has with bewilderment. What we are bewildered at is always something so big and forbidding that, we think, it could cause us nothing but harm. Often enough upon sober consideration we find that the danger was all in our imagination, and our bewilderment disappears as suddenly as it had appeared. With wonder this is not the case: the reason for wonder is not the unaccustomedness of the danger but its overwhelming magnitude. We wonder at the colossal. As a result wonder has a more lasting and beneficial effect on us—we not only fear the colossal, we also seek to know it, and our wonder lasts until we get to know as completely as possible the extraordinary fact that set us wondering.

These two emotions, fear and bewilderment, flow from a consciousness of the difficulties involved in intellectual activities, just as laziness is a consequence of our recognizing the difficulties involved in manual labor. But bewilderment is more like laziness than is wonder because it comes to a complete stop; it

will go no further; it is, as it were, stunned to muteness and immobility. While wonder conceals beneath the fear an irresistible attraction. We are drawn to magnificent things even though we fear the dangers they might entail. This difference between wonder and bewilderment enables St. Thomas to say that wonder is the beginning of philosophy, bewilderment its end.

Another point that St. Thomas notices is that wonder is an ambiguous term—not every wonder is a type of fear, and on the other hand, not every kind of wonder is the beginning of philosophy. What the philosopher fears is making a mistake: he recognizes some fact as a fact, but simply cannot fit it into the pattern of what he already knows. He is afraid to deny the fact, entranced by the possibility of explaining it, yet at the same time afraid to pass judgment on it until he has found the real explanation. So he begins to seek and his seeking is what we call philosophy. The first man to search thus for the explanation of an extraordinary fact was the first philosopher, whether history has recorded his name or not.

How can we sum up our analysis of wonder? First of all, it is a kind of fear. The dangers involved are ignorance (making hasty judgments) and the burdensomeness of intellectual activity. The object of wonder is not just any matter but some phenomenal, some magnificent fact. Finally, the result of wonder is a deep, penetrating, intellectual (and therefore also, volitional) search for explanations. Wonder is, therefore, a kind of fear, aroused by some extraordinary fact the cause of which we do not know; as philosophical wonder it attracts us irresistibly to search for explanations of the original fact.

Even if everything said in our analysis of wonder were perfectly clear, an example or two would help. In pointing out the characteristics found to be true of wonder, Pythagoras seems the best choice among the ancient philosophers. First, he embodies all the stages of wonder, from child to philosopher, something that can be said of none of the other ancient philosophers except possibly Socrates and Plato. Then too, innumerable legends have, over the centuries, come to surround the name of Pythagoras, legends which bear unconscious witness to the part that wonder plays in philosophy. It is as though the fashioners of these legends had an intuitive grasp of the ideal philosopher, which ideal they then, only half purposely, embodied in their Pythagoras myths. Finally, Pythagoras is a good example because of the core of truth beneath the legends; this core high-

lights the part wonder played in Pythagoras' own philosophizing.

The feeling one gets on reading the stories about Pythagoras is one of being in the obvious presence of wonder. The stories relate how Pythagoras crossed the sea to Egypt in his ardent search for true wisdom, which he expected to find among the Egyptian priests. And that part of the story which connects his wisdom with the wisdom of the priests seems unquestionably true; at some time in his life he was literally overwhelmed by the discovery of Egyptian geometry and knowledge of the occult. Pythagoras also deserves credit as the first to apply geometry to the study of the stars, and, in general, mathematics to the study of all phenomena. In this he was a distant forerunner of the modern scientist.

Again Pythagoras is witness to the part played in wonder by fear of ignorance and a habit of cautious judgments. At least this is one more probable conclusion we can draw from the myths, which tell how, recognizing the poverty of true wisdom in his native Greece, Pythagoras was led to search for it in Egypt. We are told that he thus spent twenty or more years of his life, patiently travelling to Egypt and the other countries of the ancient Near East. In this search he was constantly goaded on by a sense of guilt over his own and his countrymen's ignorance of the "mysteries" known by the Egyptians.

One further point of interest with Pythagoras is his group of followers, the Pythagoreans. They add the final touch to our picture of wonder in the philosophy of Pythagoras. For in this first dawning of philosophy much of the earlier spirit of mystery learning remained; the "wisdom" of Pythagoras and his travels, his unlimited spirit of wonder, gave him an irresistible charm and an unquestioned ascendancy over the minds of these disciples. This is a key point in our exposition: because such an attraction should not be restricted to the primitive stages of philosophy. Granted a spirit of wonder in himself, a good professor should be able, even in our "scientific" twentieth century, to instill the same spirit in his pupils.

St. Thomas, in his commentary on Aristotle's *De Anima*, outlines three things a professor should do in beginning any science: he should show his pupils the utility, the order, and the difficulty of his science. By showing the utility he will make the students willing to work. By showing them the order of the science he will make them docile. And by showing his students the difficulties involved, the professor will make them want to pay close

attention. The application of this teaching technique to the notion of wonder seems ready-made. Wonder, as we said, is the fear aroused by an extraordinary fact the cause of which is unknown; as philosophical wonder it attracts the wonderer irresistibly to search for explanations. The three factors St. Thomas sets out for the professor are: 1) utility, which, when applied to wonder, would serve as a substrate or reason for fearing ignorance—unless the science promised something useful for the student's life he would never be willing to take upon himself the intellectual labor demanded; 2) order, which would fit into our scheme as a hint or clue in the search for causes—if the student has been impressed by the usefulness of the science, he will now be docile, following the professor along a well marked path toward the true explanations; 3) difficulty, which is at the heart of wonder—it is this difficulty that both repels and attracts the student; both the fear and the attraction will make him alert and attentive. Utility, order, difficulty; willingness, docility, and wonder (attention)—is there a professor anywhere unwilling to aim at these?

But what sort of utility should the professor present to a class in order to arouse willingness in them? Obviously he could appeal to fads, such as the current craze over Existentialism. "When you get out, you will meet hundreds of people who are talking Jean Paul Sartre. Why, you will be absolutely intellectually stunted if you know nothing about him!" Or, he could make his appeal along religious lines: "Look how many thousands of people philosophical Materialism is winning away from Christ. You must know what it is all about if you are to win them back." Such appeals might arouse enthusiasm in some students, but not a truly *philosophical* enthusiasm.

The proper approach is through the specifically philosophical yearning in man. The professor must offer his pupils some speculative fact that is of sufficient moment to arouse an honest philosophical interest. To exemplify this it would undoubtedly be easiest to turn to some one of the special sciences, sociology or politics, chemistry or physics. Instead of that, however, it may prove helpful to outline a practical, and I hope interesting, approach to Natural Philosophy, a science which many find extremely uninteresting.

The fact to begin with in this case happens to be the very subject-genus—change and the thing undergoing the change (*ens mobile*). Most students are at a loss when it comes to describing change very precisely, even though they are certainly conscious

of the concrete reality. (This much is to be expected, but it might prove interesting to the professor to ask his students to define change; the answers they would come up with might be strange indeed!) But the specific problem here is not to get across the scientific definition of change as formulated by Aristotle; it is to show the students the importance of finding some definition, whatever it might turn out to be. The scientifically Aristotelian and correct way would be to show the orderly progress of the science toward the first demonstration in Natural Philosophy, namely that change is the act of the thing changing, not of the agent responsible for the change. "How dull can you get!" the student might be thinking to himself up to this point; but it is a matter of actual fact that Descartes, and all modern science after him, suffered from ignorance of this very point. Any student in the class with a smattering of modern science will recognize it as a fact that science treats change as though it were a separate commodity passed from one body to another (so many calories of heat, such and such a quantity of kinetic energy), rather than an actualization of something within the changing body itself. If the professor knows enough about Descartes and modern science to digress for a few minutes on this apparent side issue, to show something of the truth and falsity of this basically imaginative and mathematical conception, he will have gone a long way toward putting at least some *initial* life into his subject.

In concluding we should not be going too far in hoping that at least some will see the advantages of finding such an interest-arousing speculative fact for a philosophy course. This attempt, in fact, to arouse interest should find obvious application in any other field of education; every teacher needs to arouse interest and should be able to do so in a way adapted to his subject matter. But certainly, for the philosophy professor, there is no substitute for a sense of wonder in himself and the ability to excite a similar wonder in his students.



The teacher must make his teaching live, make his students think, and uncover for each of his students the talents he has at his disposal. The teacher will put the student into more intimate contact with himself, nature, the family, his fellow-citizens, the Church, which is the city of the children of God, with God, Who is the origin and goal of all life (Pius XII).