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**Thaumazein in Ancient Greek
Philosophy and Wonder in the
Writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein**

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Thaumazein in Ancient Greek Philosophy and Wonder in the Writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein

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Abstract

In this paper I will discuss the role and meaning of wonder as decisive force in philosophising as obvious in ancient Greek philosophy and in the writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Even though I do not dare to contend that Wittgenstein was directly influenced by ancient thinkers, I suggest that there are parallels in their philosophical attitudes toward both the phenomenal world and the world beyond.

I will first discuss the metaphorical approach toward the world in Homer and Hesiod and then the shift from myth to logos as discernible in the Pre-Socratic philosophers, Plato and Aristotle. Finally I intend to convey the dimension of wonder in Wittgenstein's philosophising – in the way of his regarding both the phenomenal world and the world 'outside the world of facts', and in particular in his attitude towards ethics and the limits of language. In his *Lecture on Ethics*, Wittgenstein mentions the experience of 'wonder at the existence of the world' as his first and foremost example – his 'experience par excellence' – for his understanding of ethics.

In the following, I will distinguish between wonder as aesthetic contemplation and wonder as puzzlement and questioning, thus between wonder as silent admiration of the world on the one hand and a dynamic preoccupation with the manifold and ever-changing aspects of every object of philosophising on the other. Besides, I will show in how far the dimension of wonder in Wittgenstein's works can be compared to the ancient Greeks' *thaumazein* and to Plato's and Aristotle's remarks about wonder as the beginnings of philosophy.

Key words:

Corresponding Author:

στον Α.

‘For men were first led to study philosophy,
as indeed they are today, by wonder. [...]’
(Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 982b)

Wonder as a decisive force in philosophising – in fact, as its beginning, as Plato and Aristotle put it¹ – has not lost its relevance since. It is indispensable for any serious preoccupation with the complexity of the world and its resulting philosophical problems as it was back then.

Frequently, as Aristotle said, ignorance and the search for knowledge play a part, however, rational explanation all too often can destroy the experience of wonder, as Wittgenstein remarked. (CV, p. 5e) In his case, wonder, on the one hand can be observed as an ethical attitude of silent admiration of the world, on the other it leads to questioning again and again philosophical problems as obvious in the *Philosophical Investigations*.

It is impossible to consider the whole history of the concept of wonder with its changing forms and interpretations in the context of this paper; thus I will restrict myself to discuss the role and meaning of wonder in ancient Greek philosophy and in Wittgenstein’s philosophising. Even though I do not dare to contend that Wittgenstein was directly influenced by ancient thinkers, I suggest that there are parallels in their philosophical attitudes toward both the phenomenal world and the world beyond – the world outside the world of facts, to put it in Wittgensteinian terms.

Wonder in Ancient Greece

In order to consider the dimension of wonder in ancient thought, it is necessary to begin with men of thought and poetry like Homer and Hesiod. Between them and the following philosophers both parallels and decisive differences can be observed, one of them in their attitudes toward religion. Whereas in Homer man had an anthropomorphic idea of gods while searching to explain the world by metaphors and myths, the first philosophers – the so-called Pre-Socratic thinkers – were striving for rational and scientific explanation. Still, mythological elements continued to pursue – as can partly be seen in Plato.

The aspect of wonder in Homer, Solon, Hesiod – and in part in the Ionian Natural philosophers – can above all be defined as an act of admiration, also ‘astonishment’ in the sense of puzzlement, a curiosity of the cosmos. (Martens 2003, 20) The wish to explain the mysterious is satisfied by mythologizing the world of the gods. The typical idiom for looking in wonder – the *thaumazein* [θαυμάζειν] – occurs in Homer as *thauma idesthai* [θαύμα ιδέσθαι] meaning

¹Cf. Plato, *Theaetetus*, 155c-d and Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, A 2, b 982 12.

something like ‘to look at a miracle’. Everything transcending the phenomenal world was identified with the gods, therefore wonder originated in the relation of man to the gods which was carried by a feeling of admiration and safety. It was above all beauty and greatness which evoked wonder in man – Richard Kroner sees beauty as the key of understanding the spirit of ancient Greek thought and refers to Hegel, who described the religion of the Greeks as ‘religion of beauty’. Even though the Greeks officially admired the gods, secretly and implicitly they admired the cosmos as the most divine. (Kroner 1957, 46). This unconscious and unspoken pantheism hidden in polytheism was a presupposition for religion and art in ancient Greece. (Cf. *ibid.*)

The Greeks’ admiration of the cosmos with its mysterious phenomena in nature thus expressed itself in stories, even though rational thinking gradually developed side by side with a mythical apprehension of the world. Hesiod for the first time poses the question for the creation of the world, his cosmology is a synthesis of cosmogony and theology (Kroner 1957, 72). However, he remains captured in epics, thus creating his *Theogony* from earlier myths.

In ascribing to the muses the ability to apprehend the unhidden truth (*aletheia* [ἀλήθεια]) – and not only the illusory half truths as in Homer’s works – Hesiod took a first step beyond myth toward philosophising. According to Schadewaldt, this was one of the beginnings of philosophy. (Schadewaldt 1978, 85) Similarly, Snell sees in Hesiod’s *Theogony* a ‘remarkable step on the way from epics to philosophy’ and thus calls Hesiod due to his questions after the origin and nature of the world the “predecessor of philosophy.” (Snell 1993, 20)

In his genealogy of the gods, Hesiod describes *Thaumas* [θαύμας, root: θαύμαντος: wonder] as the child of *Pontos* (God of the sea) and of *Gaia* (Goddess of the earth). The fact that *Thaumas* viz. ‘to wonder’ is described as a child of the sea, can be understood by the close relationship of the Greeks to the sea which appeared to them as a sphere of miracles, constantly changing in light and colour. *Iris*, the rainbow, stands for *Thaumas*’ daughter, the messenger between earth and heaven, the world of men and the world of gods.

Even though in Hesiod’s works wonder at the beauty of the cosmos is central, there is a difference to Homer’s man-god-relationship in so far as Hesiod equates natural phenomena with gods.

Thales of Miletus and the subsequent Pre-Socratic Philosophers, who endeavoured to explain the world by scientific methods instead of myths went one step further. In reinterpreting the God *Okeanos* as the general principle of water, Thales, according to Aristotle, took the step from myth to logos. The succeeding philosophers such as Anaximandros, Anaximenes were still striving at explaining the principle of the world – either by air, fire or *apeiron* (the infinite, indefinite). Heraclitus and Parmenides rejected a merely sensory perception of the world and emphasized rational thinking as path to knowledge and thus truth. The silent unquestioned admiration of the cosmos gradually moved toward a sense of puzzlement which later in Plato and Aristotle became a source of tension. In their philosophies the former reflections about the cosmos turn to reflections about man and his existence in the world.

In this sense, Socrates was concerned about man and his search for truth. In his method of elenchus he tried to lead his pupils to philosophical arguments in order to sharpen their sense for truth. While questioning everything, he leads them to ever new perplexity and astonishment – not unlike Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations* as we shall see later on. Socrates' method of dialectics of specific questioning and answering finally returning to its start – the non-knowledge – can to some extent be compared to Wittgenstein's attitude of wonder at essential matters that cannot be explained.

In his well-known remark about wonder to Theaetetus, Plato alludes to Hesiod's picture of Iris, the daughter of *Thaumas*:

For nothing else is the beginning (principle) of philosophy than this, and, seemingly, whoever's genealogy it was, that Iris was the offspring of Thaumas (wonder) it's not a bad one. (*Theaetetus* 155c-d)

The picture of the rainbow which stimulates to wonder at the colours emerging from sun and rain and which is regarded as the daughter of *Thaumas* – the personified wonder – is characteristic of Greek mythology with its colourful metaphors. The unexplainable is depicted in myths in order to render what cannot be grasped by ratio, but only *shown*, as Wittgenstein would say.

The metaphorical presentation of the miraculous, though, can above all be said about the beginnings of philosophy – i.e. the Ionian Natural philosophers and their preceding thinkers and poets – less about Plato, even though he quite often uses metaphors and similes, drawing back to myths. In the dialogue *Phaedrus*, e.g., dealing with Eros, the theory of Ideas and rhetoric, myth – apart from dialectic speech – serves as means of education, and the myth of cicadas is a wonderful example of oblivious dedication to the beauties of the cosmos leading to creativity as illustrated in the cicadas which in their devotion to endless singing forget about any physical needs and therefore stand for the 'prophetesses of the muses'.

For Plato, wonder is a necessary step for philosophising, a pre-requisite for the man who would love wisdom – the *philosophos* – and thus starting point for knowledge. Wonder as both admiration and puzzlement is particularly obvious in the *Symposion* where in the discussion between Socrates and Diotima on the nature of Eros the word *thaumazein* occurs several times – both as admiring wonder and puzzlement about what Diotima tells Socrates about love and the beautiful – i.e. the act of philosophising proceeding from love of sensory beauty to the beauty of souls and ultimately epistemological truth (210e) – 'the good and the beautiful', the 'idea of ideas', the divine good itself. Plato's high valuation of the beautiful is reminiscent of Homer's admiration of the cosmos and the divine, but in a new, reflected and abstract way. In Plato the sensory is transformed into the sublime so to speak. Besides, the ethical component expressed by *kalokagathia* [καλοκαγαθία] is of central relevance.

In Aristotle we find the relationship between silent wonder and the emergence of scientific questions arising from astonishment.

For men were first led to study philosophy, as indeed they are today, by wonder. At first they felt wonder about the more superficial problems; afterward they advanced gradually by perplexing themselves over greater difficulties; e.g. the behaviour of the moon, the phenomena of the sun, and the origination of the universe. Now, he who is perplexed and wonders believes himself to be ignorant. (Hence, even the lover of the myths is, in a sense, a philosopher, for a myth is a tissue of wonders.) Thus if they took to philosophy to escape ignorance, it is patent that they were pursuing science for the sake of knowledge itself, and not for any utilitarian applications. (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 982b. Transl. by A.E. Taylor)

Thus Aristotle, in his remarks about wonder, too, refers to the first men of thought in ancient Greece and emphasizes the significance of both myths and the search for knowledge, while refusing any practical purpose. Yet, despite his appreciation of myths, Aristotle's words reveal a preference for a rational view of the world. Hundreds of years later, Wittgenstein, tired of scientific progress, takes the other way round – the way from rational explanation back to pictures, metaphors, similes, gestures and the like – similar to myths.

In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle writes about the different ways of life by which men strive after happiness – distinguishing between the slavish life of pleasure, the refined and active life of politics and the theoretical life personified by the philosopher in his oblivious contemplation for exploring the eternal, unchangeable principles. At that time, *theoria* as originating in such an attitude of wonder was seen as characteristic of the philosopher in order to perceive the truth. As Aristotle emphasized, philosophy is 'the only *liberal* science; it alone of the sciences exists for its own sake.' (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 982b)

Whereas wonder as a contemplative attitude of admiration lacks rational considerations, these are necessary for wonder as puzzlement in order to deal with epistemological questions. In the following I will discuss in which sense and in which situations wonder in Wittgenstein can be seen as an attitude of contemplation or as a state of puzzlement, i.e. which elements of intellectual perception – *intellect/intuition* or *ratio* – prevail.

Wittgenstein and wonder

In his manuscripts, occasionally Wittgenstein speaks of 'wonder' – in connection with his understanding of ethics, his criticism of science and his preoccupation with aspects, aspect-seeing and change of aspects in the *Philosophical Investigations*. However, the term wonder does not occur often and it is never the object of conceptual analysis. This fact is quite telling: for the person who wonders – as Ernst Bloch notes – is so sensitive that 'he rather

suffers of any language, one could say: he ought to be mute if language had not been invented by others.’ (Bloch 1996, 16)

Apart from a few explicit remarks about wonder, Wittgenstein’s way of philosophising, his very approach toward philosophy and the objects of his philosophising – be they phenomena of the visible world, fictitious examples he simply imagined, or questions concerning the realm of the invisible – can be said to be characterized by an attitude of wonder, this in both an ethical and aesthetic sense. Even though I am going to discuss the aesthetic and the ethical aspects separately, I want to emphasize that both aspects cannot really be separated from one another but must be seen as complementary, thus consistent with Wittgenstein's remark ‘Ethics and Aesthetics are One’. (TLP, 6.421)

In the following, I distinguish between wonder as silent admiration of the world on the one hand and a dynamic preoccupation with the manifold and ever-changing aspects of every object of philosophising on the other.

Notebooks 1914-1916 and Tractatus

Wonder as aesthetic contemplation

As regards the aesthetic significance of wonder, we are reminded of the aesthetic contemplation described by Schopenhauer – a contemplation in which the ‘pure subject of knowledge’ is absorbed by looking at an object, by being lost in it so that subject and object become one. The subject is elevated beyond the world of suffering with its pain, and – on finding himself on a higher level – intuits the ‘Platonic idea’ in the object of his contemplation.¹ In these ‘rare happy moments’ any analysing form of questioning and search for attempts at explanations would be out of place. In his apprehension of the eternal and universal idea inherent in the transitory, concrete and present object of contemplation (be it a tree or other beautiful and admirable object in the world or be it an object of art) the aesthetic observer viz. the ‘pure subject of knowledge’ consists merely of intellect, deprived of all forms of the principle of sufficient reason, i.e. of space and time. There is a strong ethical component in Schopenhauer's description of the aesthetic contemplation – namely in so far as the observer's intellect rises beyond the sensory and thus beyond the burden of the body to an extent that he is spiritual being.

As to Wittgenstein, there are parallels to Schopenhauer as early as in the *Notebooks 1914- 1916* and in the *Tractatus*. This applies above all to the passages where we can speak of mystic-pantheistic tendencies in Wittgenstein’s philosophy and of his ethical and aesthetic considerations. On October 7th in 1916 Wittgenstein emphasizes the connection between ethics and art – as an expression of the view *sub specie aeternitatis*.

¹Whereas Plato differentiates between phenomenon and idea, Schopenhauer distinguishes between the will as thing in itself (in a metaphysical sense) and the will as adequate and inadequate manifestations in the world. Schopenhauer’s idea thus is merely the adequate manifestation of the will in contrast to the inadequate manifestations of the will represented by the individual, transitory phenomena.

The work of art is the object seen *sub specie aeternitatis*; and the good life is the world seen *sub specie aeternitatis*. This is the connexion between art and ethics.

The usual way of looking at things sees objects as it were from the midst of them, the view *sub specie aeternitatis* from outside.

In such a way that they have the whole world as background.

Is this it perhaps – in this view the object is seen *together with* space and time instead of *in* space and time?

Each thing modifies the whole logical world, the whole of logical space, so to speak.

(The thought forces itself upon one): The thing seen *sub specie aeternitatis* is the thing seen together with the whole logical space.

The view sub specie aeternitatis

According to Spinoza's *Ethics*, it is in the nature of reason to regard things as necessary, not as contingent.¹ As this necessity is the very necessity of God's eternal nature, it is in the nature of reason to regard things in the light of eternity – i.e. under the view *sub specie aeternitatis*. This view is the highest form of perceiving things and differs from the inadequate perception of opinion and imagination.

As quoted above, Wittgenstein makes use of the concept in his treatment of the connection between ethics and aesthetics in his earlier writings, however, the term occurs in later years, as well, and denotes a view of the world which transcends the world of facts, a view quite different from a scientific one. Whereas the so-called ordinary and scientific view of things follows the principle of sufficient reason and is thus restricted by the forms of time and space, the *view sub specie aeternitatis* transcends time and space. In the *Tractatus*, 5.61 Wittgenstein writes that logic pervades the world and this does not only mean that the limits of the world are the limits of logic, but it also suggests that in the world nothing happens which would contradict the laws of logic viz. the laws of God's eternal nature in a Spinoza's sense. In a view *sub specie aeternitatis*, things are perceived in their necessary and logical connection. At the same time one recognizes that the facts of the world are not the end of the matter, but that what is essential – the meaning of the world – lies outside the world, outside space and time.

“To view the world *sub specie aeterni* is to view it as a whole – a limited whole. Feeling the world as a limited whole – it is this that is mystical.” (TLP, 6.45)

To be happy means to devote one's life to the spirit, freed from the desires of the will, and in Schopenhauer's terms to merely contemplate, as a 'clear eye of the world'. (WWR I, § 36, 186). This is achieved by aesthetic contemplation. 'Is this the sense of the artistic way of looking at things that it looks at the world with a happy eye?' Wittgenstein asks on 20th of October 1916. What in the *Tractatus* he defines as the mystical, in the *Lecture on Ethics*

¹Spinoza 1992, p. 93.

as wonder at the existence of the world, is here described as aesthetic miracle: ‘Aesthetically, the miracle is that the world exists. That there is what there is.’ (ibid.)

In addition to art, Wittgenstein, in later years, also considers philosophy to view the world from the right perspective: Similarly to the artist who is gifted to render something ordinary in a way that it appears as a work of art, and thus enables us – in Wittgenstein’s terms ‘compels’ us – to view the things in the right perspective, philosophy is capable of doing this, as well:

But now it seems to me too that besides the work of the artist there is another through which the world may be captured *sub specie aeterni*. It is – as I believe – the way of thought which as it were flies above the world and leaves it the way it is, contemplating it from above in its flight. (C&V, 7)

Whereas the view from above and its goal to leave everything as it is reminds us of the mystical and somewhat stoic attitude toward the world as discernible in the *Tractatus* and the wartime notebooks, the reference to ‘thought in flight’, though, suggests the dynamic process of movement characterizing Wittgenstein’s philosophising in later years. The demand to leave everything as it is further suggests a distancing oneself from any intrusion akin to scientific explanation. In contrast to an intuitive, aesthetic way of contemplation a scientific or philosophical in the sense of an analytical one would dim and finally distort the view of what is essential. As I will discuss later, over the course of years, Wittgenstein gradually became increasingly critical toward science and analytically orientated philosophy.

While for Spinoza the view *sub specie aeternitatis* is to be understood as the contingent perception of reason that leads to a life of virtue, Wittgenstein claims that the view *sub specie aeternitatis* is directed toward any sphere of the human mind and culture, especially the fields of language, philosophy and art:

‘Style is the expression of a general necessity. This holds for a writing style or a building style (and any other). Style is general necessity viewed *sub specie aeterni*.’ (DB, 28)’

In moments of viewing the world *sub specie aeternitatis*, in aesthetic contemplation, or – in other words – in an attitude of oblivious wonder, Wittgenstein seems to have been liberated from what is transitory and profane, being totally absorbed in the object of philosophising. Thus the characteristic of a happy and harmonious life ‘cannot be a physical one but only a metaphysical one, a transcendental one’. (NB, 30.7.16)

The Lecture on Ethics

When Wittgenstein was asked to give a lecture to the Heretics in 1929, he decided to speak about something he considered of utmost importance, but did not want to treat it as a topic of philosophical discussion: ethics. Wittgenstein

thus addressed a philosophical topic, but not in a scientific way; instead, he presented the topic by means of referring to his personal experience. In this lecture the ethical meaning of wonder in its deep and universal sense especially comes to light. Among the three examples given for his personal understanding of what ethics might be, Wittgenstein explicitly mentions ‘wonder at the existence of the world’ as his ‘experience par excellence’. It is exactly this wonder at the world as something miraculous and not self-evident that reveals its ethical dimension – in contrast to the kind of wonder at something sensational that strikes us. Here the difference between relative and absolute value is obvious, as is also the case with the other examples provided: the feeling of absolute safety and the feeling of guilt. Whereas the sentence ‘I feel safe in the house when it is raining outside’ is understandable in everyday language and thus to be considered a meaningful sentence, the sentence ‘I feel safe whatever happens around me’ would strike us as nonsense; however, it is an example of absolute value. Every attempt at expressing in words something about ethical values only reveals the limits of language and would thus be a ‘running up against the walls of our cage’.

In none of Wittgenstein’s other written works is the connection between wonder, ethics and language in the sense of being reduced to silence as obvious as in the *Lecture on Ethics*.

Philosophical Investigations: Aspect and change of aspect: Wonder as puzzlement and questioning

Wittgenstein's attitude of wonder cannot only be observed under ethical and aesthetic aspects viz. in aesthetic contemplation, but also in his philosophical method, i.e. in his philosophical dialogues which aim at regarding and investigating any object from various perspectives. Insofar Wittgenstein did not maintain a silent and stoic attitude toward the ‘existence of the world’, but his philosophising leads to movement, to creativity, to a ‘change of aspects’. Yet, the perception of a change of aspects is not possible without an attitude of wonder. His incessant way of writing several variants of formulations of a sentence hints at how he tried to present his philosophical concern – i.e. his awareness of subtle nuances in the meaning of our thoughts, our different views at things and thus manifold ways of interpreting the phenomenal world finding expression in our language, even if often in an imperfect, or even deformed way. Thus, the dimension of wonder in Wittgenstein is closely connected with the way we see and interpret things. Just as the meaning of words changes according to their occurrence in different contexts, objects, pictures and illustrations etc. can be seen and interpreted from various perspectives. Since the world in itself is continually flowing – as Heraclitus emphasized –, it is important to recognize as many perspectives as possible in order to take them into consideration when we want to describe the objects of our philosophising. In his philosophical reflections, Wittgenstein gives numerous examples in which he investigates the various aspects of things

and how we grasp them. The perception of different aspects is facilitated by the ability to wonder, but it is accompanied by ratio: 'I think it could also be put this way: Astonishment is essential to a change of aspect. And astonishment is thinking.' (LWPP I, § 565)

'What is strange is really the surprise; the question: "How is it possible!" It might be expressed by: "*the same* – and *yet* not the same."' (LWPP I, § 174)

The decisive point is the change of aspects, i.e. the moment when we perceive the change. This moment evokes wonder: 'But the change evokes the surprise not produced by the recognition.' (LWPP I, § 517)

It is only in the change of aspect that we realize the aspect. This is but a short moment in which we see how the new aspect 'dawns' – a moment which is accompanied by a state of wonder within us: 'The aspect only dawns, it does not remain fixed. But that has to be a conceptual, not a psychological, remark. The expression of seeing an aspect is the expression of a *new* perception.' (LWPP I, § 518) One gets the impression that the picture or object changes, yet it is only the impression that changes, the view of the observer – his way of perception.

As people differ in seeing and perceiving things, and as their way of discovering different aspects also differs from person to person, there are a great number of aspects; to name them is a question of conceptual definition. Wittgenstein speaks about different 'kinds of aspects', of 'hugely many interrelated phenomena and possible concepts'. (LWPP I, § 581).

Wittgenstein's critical attitude toward science

'Man has to awaken to wonder – and so perhaps do peoples. Science is a way to sending him to sleep again.' (C&V, p. 5e)

Wittgenstein's sceptical attitude toward progress, technology and science can be observed in many passages throughout his writings, just as his ambivalent attitude toward analytical methods in philosophy:

The mathematician too can of course marvel at the miracles (the crystal) of nature; but can he do it, once a problem has arisen about *what* he sees? Is it really possible as long as the object he finds awe-inspiring or gazes at with awe is shrouded in a philosophical fog? I could image someone admiring trees, & also the shadows, or reflections of trees, which he mistakes for trees. But if he should once tell himself that these are not after all trees & if it becomes a problem for him what they are, or what relation they have to trees, then his admiration will have suffered a rapture, that will now need healing. (C&V, 65)

The crucial point here is to free oneself of a scientific as well as philosophical attitude in the sense of striving for explanation, in order to

restore a natural view of the phenomenal world. In an attitude directed toward analysing, the ability to wonder is ‘put to sleep’, or destroyed.

However, it would be misleading to conclude that scientific explanation destroys the miraculous in every case. In his critical remarks on Frazer’s *Golden Bough*, Wittgenstein maintains that every phenomenon can appear mysterious and meaningful to us, not only to the so-called primitive man who has no scientific explanation for, say, phenomena in nature like fire, thunderstorm and the like.¹ Within an attitude of wonder in its actual and deeper sense any phenomenon can strike us as something wonderful and mysterious. In fact, the awakening of the human intellect ought to sharpen our sensibility for what is miraculous and therefore worth being met in an attitude of wonder. It is in this respect that one could refer to ancient Greek philosophers who wondered at the world and its phenomena like fire, water and the like, and who gradually moved from a silent admiration of the cosmos to a striving after explaining in a scientific way. Still, they did not lose their respect and attention toward the miraculous of the world. *Thaumazein* is a means to reveal the mysterious in order to achieve *aletheia* and thus philosophical truth.

The ethical aspect of wonder

Apart from the *Lecture on Ethics*, the ethical aspect of wonder is particularly discernible towards the end of the *Tractatus*, where Wittgenstein holds what one could describe as a mystical attitude toward the world: ‘It is not *how* things are in the world that is mystical, but *that* it exists.’ (TLP, 6.44)

Wonder at the ‘existence of the world’ viz. the world ‘*that* it exists’ incorporates an ethical dimension arising from an attitude of awe: Awe in the sense of being conscious of a sphere that is mysterious and ineffable and which eludes rational and verbal explanation. This attitude of awe is carried by distance and awareness of one’s own limits. As Pascal writes about the position of man in nature, man would “shudder” at the sight of the wonders surrounding him, and he would rather be prepared to contemplate in silence but striving to explore them. (Pascal 1956, 31)

Wittgenstein’s wonder at the existence of the world lies on the same level as his attitude of silence toward the sphere of the ineffable: in other words, the ethically grounded wonder leads to an ethically grounded silence. As he remarked to members of the *Vienna Circle*: ‘Astonishment at the fact of the world. Any attempt to express it leads to nonsense.’ (WVC, p. 93) Wonder, therefore, is closely connected with ‘nonsense’ which he saw in every attempt at verbalizing ethical and religious questions, for this would go beyond the limits of meaningful language and, at the same time, beyond the limits of the world.

Not only in his early writings, but also later, in fact, throughout his life, Wittgenstein’s philosophising has a strong ethical component or flavour that

¹Cf. MS 110, 197f.

can be perceived in his very language, his style of writing. There is a kind of subtlety, an attitude of silent wonder that finds expression in an extraordinary sensibility for the language he uses. His reflections result in an extremely deliberate choice of words and structuring of sentences in terms of which he tries to grasp the object of his philosophising: ‘O, why do I feel as if I wrote a poem when writing philosophy? It is as if there was something small that has a wonderful meaning. Like a leaf, or a flower.’ (MS 133, 13r)

The more precious and higher the object of philosophising appears to Wittgenstein, the more modest he becomes – being conscious of the limits of language and of science. This is the origin of his distinction between what can be said clearly and between what can only be *shown* – a distinction he drew in the *Tractatus*, yet which he basically kept throughout his writings. What can be *shown* – in ethical and aesthetic matters – can be experienced by the ability to wonder. The state of wonder or contemplation transcends the level of linguistic or scientific analysis and can at best be expressed aesthetically, e.g. in poetry, painting or music. Wittgenstein's frequent use of metaphors, similes and fictitious examples is a means to at least hint at what cannot be expressed by ordinary language. His respect for both the visible world and the world beyond is connected with his awareness and acknowledgement of the limits of scientific-rational explanations. In his foreword to the *Philosophical Remarks* he expresses his feeling of resentment about the idea of progress and belief in science of his time, acknowledging his isolated position within the ‘vast stream of European and American civilization’, whose spirit is different from his’. He is ‘striving after clarity and perspicuity in no matter what structure’ and grasp the world ‘at its center – in its essence’.

Conclusion

In his approach toward the objects of his philosophising, an approach marked by respect and admiration, Wittgenstein stands in the tradition of ancient men of thought, revealing parallels both to Homer and Hesiod in their mythological apprehension of the world – their silent contemplation of the cosmos – and to later Greek philosophers like Thales of Miletus and others, above all to Socrates, Plato and Aristotle in their way of curious questioning and analyzing.

Even though wonder represents the starting point and pre-condition for any kind of philosophising, the experience of speechlessness involved causes a paradoxical state for the person who philosophises, for wonder on the one hand leads to a deeper understanding of the mysterious and ineffable, on the other hand, though, it eludes conceptual determination and thus the possibility for positive philosophical results. As such, wonder, despite or perhaps precisely because of philosophical insight, leads to a state of failure.

There is no escape but to accept this fact and resign in silence. Wittgenstein must have considered Socrates’ claim ‘I know that I don’t know’ (the knowledge of ultimate non- knowledge) to be a painful paradox – a

problem he was unable to solve and toward which he held a controversial position: as heir to the philosophical tradition reaching from Plato to Kant, Hamann and Schopenhauer – to mention only a few –, Wittgenstein's attitude toward philosophy and the sciences was ambivalent: On the one hand, his analytical investigations into philosophy were of a scientific nature, on the other, he held a distanced and even critical attitude toward rational explanation – an approach in part similar to that of an artist or mystic. Wittgenstein's two differing positions correspond to his distinction between the world of facts and the sphere outside the world of facts: whereas he considers the former to be grasped in terms of language and of science, the sphere beyond the world of facts – in traditional philosophy usually treated as metaphysics –, to his mind eludes language and cannot be explained satisfactorily by science. Wittgenstein's attitude of wonder (and his apparently controversial utterances about the phenomenon) correspond to this dualistic view of the world:

- a) Wonder, on the one hand means an ethical-aesthetic contemplation directed toward wholeness and against any form of analysis. This attitude is akin to the ancient Greeks' silent admiration of the beauties of the cosmos as well as to their ethical approach toward the unexplored, also to the form of *theoria* still described by Plato and Aristotle.
- b) On the other hand, wonder means an active questioning, and involves thought, reasoning, and investigation (in order to restore puzzlement and irritation about the objects which appear strange). It originates in reason, *ratio*, and corresponds to the philosophical urge viz. to the philosophical wonder observable not only in ancient, especially attic philosophy, but later in traditional philosophy, as well.

While a) can be seen as a kind of global, universal awe, b) shows itself in a specific kind of wondering and a discursive approach toward the manifold objects of the world.

Whereas the experience of the mystical attitude of wonder cannot be shared via words viz. language, the attitude of dynamic wondering at and questioning about the individual phenomena of the visible world prepares the ground for a dialogic interaction with a 'you' – real or fictitious – as can be observed in Wittgenstein's mature philosophy. But even here there is a danger of *aporia* as Wittgenstein implicitly hints at in the example of the fly-bottle (PI, § 309), where he alludes to the painful, endless progression of philosophical arguments from question to answer and then to next question: the never-ending astonishment at ever new aspects of perception in dealing with philosophical problems. The 'vanishing' of the problems Wittgenstein did not expect by arriving at solutions, but by achieving 'dissolution', not by theory but by activity. In other words, by a radical change in philosophy – enabled by a philosophical method not unlike to a Socratic therapy which, so it seems to me, took its starting point in an attitude of wonder, while at the same time directing

individuals to an attentive view of and care for both what is in the immediate surroundings and to an attitude of respect and awe for what escapes philosophical explanation.

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