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WONDER: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION

By

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Wonder: A Phenomenological Exploration

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Abstract:

This paper presents a phenomenology of wonder through careful description of the internal state of wonder, defined here as “full engagement with something that bewilders you.” This phenomenology explores what is at stake in regards to our inhibitions toward wonder, how we can overcome those inhibitions, what the experience of wonder is like, and what effects wonder can have on our lives and ethical activity. This includes an investigation of the relationships between wonder and topics such as judgment, attention, engagement, imagination, play, and our ethical treatment of the more-than-human world. This paper demonstrates that by cultivating wonder we are both more fully ourselves and more capable of care towards what we might otherwise take for granted. Regardless of the origins or deeper benefits to wonder, a more careful and wondrous attention to the things around us invites us into relationship with them. This sense of relationship is itself a positive influence in motivating ethical treatment of our often ignored more-than-human surroundings.

Introduction

Why wonder?

This project is an attempt to understand what makes wonder *wonder*. In other words, what is it *like* to have wonder towards something? What goes on, not in the brain, but in the mind, in our lived experience, that constitutes wonder?

I have been asked many times why I think this is an important topic. It is at least interesting; for the most part, eyes don't glaze over when I mention that my academic focus lies in wonder and imagination. Yet interesting is not the same as important. I am currently working within the discipline of environmental philosophy, and environmental philosophers are even more aware than most of the difficult and urgent problems plaguing our planet. As I write these words, Australia is on fire, America has pulled out of the Paris Accord, and more than 60% of the wildlife population of the world since 1970 has died off. My heart is above all else with the natural world at this time, and I investigate the topic of wonder almost solely for what I see as its potential to address this crisis.

I study wonder, imagination, and enchantment because I believe these are vital human capacities that have been given the short shrift by our culture. I also believe that if we want to properly diagnose the global ecological crisis of our time, one aspect of that diagnosis must involve an examination of what, in *us*, is so broken that it has led us on a path of domination and destruction. A lack of wonder may seem, at first glance, to be an unlikely culprit, but I believe this lack pervades much of our ability to dismiss and disregard the natural world, and much of our yearning to fill some void of meaning that causes us to plow over our (now mostly invisible)

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surroundings. I hope to flesh out these arguments throughout this thesis, but first I believe it is important to make a few qualifications.

Scholarship without murder

My project will be to construct a phenomenology of wonder. I say *a* phenomenology because I want to reinforce that this will not be an attempt to be universal, complete, or final. My vocabulary surrounding wonder (including the way I will use words like judgment, attention, engagement, and metaphor) should only be considered useful where they are relatable. Usefulness is, after all, my ultimate end; if my descriptions shed some light on common experiences, then those descriptions might have utility in our understanding of aspects of human experience that our culture may be sidelining or missing.

Constructing a phenomenology means looking at what an experience is *like*, in part so that we can come to a greater understanding of what we mean when we speak of it with each other. For instance, we may agree that a simple definition of happiness is “feeling good,” yet we appear to have to take on faith that this definition reflects a similar internal state for us both. More subtle articulations can deepen our mutual understanding. Consider how we tend to describe things that make us happy as “uplifting.” Indeed, there seems to be an “upward lifting” movement to the internal experience of happiness, in contrast to the “downward sinking” movement of sorrow or melancholy. This is a simple example of an exercise in phenomenology, and illustrates an important clarificatory point: a phenomenology does not attempt to make statements about how things *literally* are, but restrains itself as much as possible to the way we *experience* them. Keep this in mind moving forward: for instance, when I claim that things

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appear agential when we attend to them, this is entirely separate from claiming that things have consciousness or agency in and of themselves.

I also hope to avoid the trap of jargon; my goal with developing a vocabulary, or with reinterpreting certain common words for my own purposes, is to tread a fine line between readability and specificity. It would be tempting to create an entirely new vocabulary, as some impenetrable phenomenologists have done in the past, to escape the conventional associations of certain words. Yet to do so, I think, is to get away from the point. Without something relatable, like the notion of “attention,” to ground us, what resonant things about human experience could we really be saying? After all, it is these common aspects of our engagement with our world – how we pay attention, what it means to judge something, what it means to feel enchanted – that we are trying to more deeply understand. Still, the way I will be using these familiar words is particular, and so in addition to taking care with how I explain them in-text, I’ve included a glossary at the end of this thesis (p. 56) with my definitions. Words or phrases that appear in bold can be found in the glossary.

How can I speak about wonder without killing it? Some of the most important aspects of wonder include spontaneity, inexplicability, and speechlessness. Giving speech to something that takes speech from us seems to carry serious risk of an erasure, a literal talking-over. My solution, which is perhaps more of a compromise, will be to try to be playful, to not take my own work or my own descriptions too seriously. To be sure, there is a certain kind of playfulness that can be used to justify terrible writing, and this I want to avoid. Poorly done literary criticism is sometimes dense with impenetrable allusions, language games, and invented jargon, then is defended as “playful.” Perhaps this is play to the person writing it, and I do not want to diminish the joy in creating a wild, interrelated puzzle out of an essay or book. However, this more often

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strikes me as a lack of compassion for the reader, or a lack of concern that the reader has anything concrete to take away from a piece, and thus as irresponsible.

I know that some readers, particularly those more poetically or artistically inclined, may disagree with my project on the basis that a philosophical investigation of wonder, no matter how careful, runs too much of a risk of doing harm to the experience. Perhaps, some might suggest, I should tell stories that evoke wonder, or create artworks that convey wonder, that these projects are more worth my time and energy and are more capable of authentically transmitting such a nebulous and special experience.

To these readers I can only say that we are all strange beings, and that one of my strangenesses happens to be that I enjoy this kind of analysis – both the writing of it and the reading of it. I am enriched by it, and have found that, in my own life, philosophical analyses have given me some of the greatest tools for understanding and, yes, enlivening my own wonder. I am aware that not all of us benefit from this mode of engaging with things, especially those things we hold most dear. I empathize with this sentiment, and I fully acknowledge that my project may not benefit everyone interested in fostering a more wondrous orientation. I hope, however, that those who are strange in some of the ways that I am strange can find something of value here.

I will attempt to understand wonder without explaining it (and especially without explaining it away). Nothing in my descriptions should be read as complete or as reductive. I will try to avoid inserting “just” or “only” before a description. Whether I have succeeded or failed in this is a matter of its effect, and that is something for which I must ask my reader’s help. If you notice you are beginning to think too schematically or analytically about wonder, if recollections of my descriptions have begun to replace your felt experience, I encourage you to dismiss my

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descriptions entirely and trust yourself. This work is meant to be wholly supplemental to the lived world; I have no desire to create a separate world of concepts for us to masturbatorially inhabit. If at any point you feel too high off the ground, try to get back on the ground.

A word on sources and acknowledgments

I've taken a risk with this thesis; I've decided not to use any quotes or direct citations throughout the body of this work besides a few epigraphs at the start of each chapter. My decision to do this in no way reflects a belief that I am working in a vacuum, or that I do not owe many incredible people and thinkers for their contributions and for the ground on which I am building. Instead, I choose this route because I want to reinforce the accessibility of my descriptions. In other words, these arguments, though my development of them depends on many people, *should* stand alone. They should be arguments that my reader can, at each step, look inward at themselves or outward at the world to validate. If the reader is asked to look sideward at the accounts of other thinkers for support, I worry that this would distract from the immediacy of this validation process. It may become either 1) easy to accept the words of someone else as true, without testing for yourself, or 2) possible to argue in the abstract with another thinker, without testing for yourself. By omitting the words of others from my descriptions, I am not trying to be the only word on the subject; rather, I am trying to be one among many in collaboration with each of my readers.

Another factor in making this decision is that, when gradually developing a specific phenomenology, each aspect of my description builds carefully on the last. If I introduce another's vocabulary – such as Martin Buber's notion of primary words in *I and Thou*, which

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argues as I do for the felt agency and subjectivity of things we are engaged with – then I need to spend space and time connecting his vocabulary to my own. This might get confusing, and I am not sure including and incorporating others’ vocabularies would aid in creating a fuller picture of wonder. As I have stated, though, I do not want to paint a picture of my work as an island. For this reason, I have included footnotes wherever the ideas of another need signposting. Many of these are not so much citations as general references so that, if my reader wishes to explore a specific concept further, they have an idea of where to look.

These footnotes, combined with a bibliography, will serve as a reference guide for the academic influences that undergird this project. These do not include the personal acknowledgements of people who have greatly aided me at each step of the way, whether as mirrors to reflect and encourage my own thinking, as emotional supports, as mentors, or as friends. To this end, I want to first thank my committee: Christopher Preston, David Gilcrest, and especially Deborah Slicer and David Abram; the former for being a rigorous and compassionate committee chair, the latter for not only being an ally but also one of my chief influences. In the back of my mind, too, I keep the words of my wonderful undergraduate advisor and professor Barbara Sproul, whose “high mind, low talk” admonition is something I strive for. I am grateful to more friends and peers than I have space to name, but I want to be sure to acknowledge Hila Tzipora Chase for years of engaging conversation and inspiration and Morgan Beavers for writing a thesis on wonder and encouraging me to write one, too. I also want to thank Kirstin Waldkönig, Marisa Diaz-Waian, David Nowakowski, and Mason Voehl, and of course my family, both human and nonhuman: my parents Judy and Jim, my siblings Rio, Rinny, and Zeus, the chickens, the songbirds at our feeders, the trees in the woods I was raised in, and, perhaps

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most especially, the centuries-old sugar maple with a human face in our front yard, which fell seven years ago but which I can still feel acting within me.

What is wonder?

Wonder has many associations: some equate it with grand experiences of awe, others with simple curiosity (“I wonder if...”). I don’t think it is necessary to limit or narrow our definition to a particular kind of wonder. Rather, I believe there is a way to include all forms of wonder in a single definition. In addition, I would hope that all my explorations into wonder can reflect whatever my reader’s intuitive definition is, even as I put forth my own.

I consider the experience of **wonder** to be “full engagement with something that bewilders you.” Each word here deserves exploration: in particular, the meanings of “full engagement,” “bewilders,” and even “something” will need clarification. Chapter 1 will dive deeper into what, precisely, keeps us from bewilderment, Chapter 2 will investigate the meaning of full engagement, and Chapter 3 will explore the role of metaphor in experiences of wonder. All three chapters will integrate these investigations into notions of thingness, of what things we can experience wonder towards, and of how these things transform as a result of our wonder. Finally, the conclusion of this thesis will step back from phenomenological description to address the effects of wonder: what does it do for us, and what does it do for the world? Though all these topics will be explored in more detail later, I still think that some amount of explanation for my definition would be good to include upfront.

First, what does it mean to be **bewildered**? I consider bewilderment to be similar to confusion, but with an important difference: confusion anticipates a comprehensible solution to a

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problem, while bewilderment is solution-less. It stands in itself. Confusion seeks an end to confusion, to wrap itself up, while bewilderment seeks nothing. Confusion often results in frustration or consternation when a solution evades it, while bewilderment is – all else being equal – a kind of disorientation that commands our attention. Confusion looks to a finished future, bewilderment sees an incredible present.

Imagine your lunch always disappears from the communal fridge at your office. This might produce frustration and confusion, but is not likely to result in bewilderment. You can assume that someone is taking your lunch, and even though you don't know who is doing it or why, none of the potential explanations for your disappearing lunch feel out of your reach. You can easily imagine the whole affair concluded once this explanation is revealed. This is because, even though you don't know the solution, you know it is a solution you would be able to comprehend. It fits a pattern or model of how things work that you have come to accept. On the other hand, imagine you open the fridge and see your lunch in front of you, but as you reach for it, it vanishes into thin air. Confusion would probably seem an insubstantial way to describe your initial reaction to this. It's likely that, in the moments before your mind starts to come up with potential explanations (am I hallucinating? is there a hole in this shelf? am I dreaming?) you would find yourself bewildered in raw response to what has occurred. The vanished lunch, in this way, would command your attention and engagement. It may feel there is no way to respond except in incredulous wonder.

Bewilderment and explanation are not mutually exclusive. You might experience bewilderment at an Olympic athlete's incredible prowess, and even when the biological explanations for her feats are presented to you, your wonder could remain. You might be inclined to say something like, "But I just can't *wrap my mind* around how she can do that!" Or,

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consider the wonder you might experience in seeing the first snow of winter. Your bewilderment at the beauty of this scene is unlikely to diminish simply through a knowledge of what snow is; there remains the unanswered, unanswerable question of its strange, striking beauty. Chapter 1 will explore further the relationship between knowledge, familiarity, and wonder in an attempt to discern what it is – if not these things – that inhibits our bewilderment (and thus our wonder).

What does it mean to be fully engaged with something? One aspect of **engagement** is certainly **attention**; to be engaged, we need to be attending to the thing we are engaged with in some form. I would hardly have a right to say I am fully engaging with my dog if I halfheartedly throw sticks for him while texting my friend, or that I am fully engaging with the car I am kicking down the road while my mind is elsewhere. Certainly I am engaging at least somewhat with both, but there is a difference between some engagement and full engagement.

To be engaged with something is, by definition, to be interacting or participating with it in some way. When you are fully engaged, you are participating with as much of *you* as possible. This goes beyond what we generally conceive as mere attention (Ch. 2 will nuance our notion of attention, however). If I am fully engaged in playing fetch with my dog, this does not only mean that I am looking at and listening to my dog. It also means that a part of me is feeling his spike of joy as he leaps up to catch the stick before it lands, another part of me is overtaken by the smell of grass and the way it brings to mind childhood summer memories, while yet another part of me is already reaching for the stick again without my conscious intention. When we speak not just of what I notice through attention but also of my feelings and responses to what I notice, we are speaking of engagement. Engagement is thus a reciprocal kind of conversation, and so full engagement implies an intensity and variety of this conversation. Chapter 2 will dive in-depth

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into attention and engagement, with the hope of discovering how these processes work in the dynamic field of experience.

Finally, when we are bewildered and fully engaged, and thus in a state of wonder, miraculous things can seem to occur – or at least things can seem miraculous to us. Chapter 3 will center around these strange effects of wonder and the way we speak of them with others; in particular, the ways that **metaphor**, imagery, and language are bound up in experiences both of bewilderment and full engagement, and thus are inherently bound up in wonder.

Chapter 1: Judgment

What inhibits wonder?

The universe, Haldane said, is queer. It is queerer, he said, than we can imagine. But isn't it we who are queer? Queer above all in that, after a few years in it, we begin to take the world for granted?

– John Moriarty, *Dreamtime*, 61

To understand a thing is a bridge and possibility of returning to the path. To explain a thing is murder. Have you counted the murderers among scholars?

– C. G. Jung, *The Red Book*, 4

Speaking broadly, wonder is considered an unusual state of mind in adults. We generally associate it with rare and significant moments, like viewing the Mona Lisa, summiting Everest,

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or giving birth. If wonder is unusual, there must be a reason why this is so. A tempting response might be that wondrous things simply do not happen often. This places the “burden of wonder” on the world outside of us; wonder is a quality that is either lacking or present, and we ourselves are consistent, unchanging receivers of whatever is out there. We know, however, that this is not the whole picture; certainly there are moods where we are more or less likely to be struck by something wondrous. We ourselves are a large part of what makes an experience of wonder possible. It may be the case that certain things in the world are more likely to elicit wonder in us than other things, yet there is clearly something within us, a varying capacity for wonder, that is an additional factor. Even if it were the case that wonder existed in some static quantity in external things, that would still not address the question of what this unusual experience *feels* like, and feelings (if we buy the model of wonder being “true” or “deserved” only when directed at certain things) can still be fooled. There must be a reason why we are not always “fooled,” why wonder is not more commonplace.

This leads us to our first major phenomenological question: What is it about our everyday mode of experience that makes wonder so rare? What functions as a block to a constant state of wonder or, phrased differently, what does wonder require that is in such short supply? Wonder is bewildering; it is something that sweeps us up, that engages us unexpectedly. Therefore, whatever inhibits wonder must be something that limits our capacity to be surprised or to encounter the unexpected. It must involve a presumption of control, of total comprehension, or at the very least an apathy towards new stimuli.

Do knowledge or familiarity inhibit wonder?

One contender for a cause to the loss of wonder might be the increasing knowledge of the world around us that we acquire as we get older. We learn facts about things, and as we acquire these facts, what was once mysterious to us appears comprehensible. Therefore, fewer things disorient us in a way that places us in a state of wonder. Knowledge as the end of wonder also bonds the two colloquial uses of wonder; I might wonder why the sky is blue, and this mystery might fill me with wonder. When I learn it is blue because of the sun's rays deflecting through the atmosphere, both my wondering and the wonder it produces cease. I encounter the sky, now, as something I know, and so its mysterious strangeness vanishes. The world grows smaller, less interesting, and less wondrous.

While there does seem to be a connection here, there are also some problems with the notion of knowledge as the end of wonder. Perhaps the most glaring is that, in many cases, learning about something can *produce* wonder. For instance, it is equally likely that discovering the cause of the sky's blueness might inspire a child to think more on the sun, on cosmic relationships, or on the mysteries of physics. Learning that a boulder with beautiful waves on its face is composed of the sediment of thousands of years of geologic history might open an entire world of wonder as you run your fingers along its smooth surface, imagining what forms of life may have existed at each phase of the time physicalized before your eyes. It is clear that learning things does not in itself block wonder, but rather that a certain kind of *response* to knowledge can.

Consider the difference in these two responses to learning why the sky is blue:

- 1) A child learns the sky is blue because of diffracted light in the atmosphere. The child is overtaken by the strangeness of a world where light plays with matter and spreads itself

over her entire planet so casually. She closes her eyes and feels the heat of the sun, the vastness of space. She imagines photons as tiny buzzing bees, frantically arriving and not arriving. She opens her eyes and looks up, feeling the sky reflecting in the water of her own eyes, wondering if the sun has invented the color blue.

- 2) A child learns the sky is blue because of diffracted light in the atmosphere. He accepts this as a total explanation, files it away, and does not wonder about the sky anymore, because it is *just* some light. He feels disappointed. He wishes that a wizard did it.

For the first child, the fact of light diffraction becomes a gateway to entire worlds that produce further wonder, enhancing her initial wonder at the sky. Importantly, the sky itself does not disappear for the first child; she does not become preoccupied with additional mysteries to the point of forgetting the initial object of her wonder; the blue sky is still wondrous. For the second child, however, the fact becomes a container to lock the blue sky within. He sees his knowledge as complete, and the sky as finished. Perhaps he might reflect on this fact, and feel some wonder when considering, for instance, photons, or space, until these too are completed through explanation – yet even in this case, the box in which the blue sky has been put has no need to be opened. That he wishes a wizard did it is common among children who experience facts as disenchanting; when taken, as this child takes it, as a whole explanation, it is natural to wish the explanation were instead something that produces even more obvious mystery than the question.

If a fact is a door, then the first child's response is to open it, while the second child's response is to lock it. The fact is not at fault here. After all, a door is both for opening and for locking. Yet it is precisely this difference in response that determines whether wonder will grow or conclude. If you move about the world believing facts are for explaining and concluding

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mysteries, you will lock every door you encounter, without even a peek beyond the threshold. Your world will, as a result, grow smaller and smaller – a long hallway of locked doors. If, however, you view facts and knowledge as entryways to further mystery, as strings that bind mystery to mystery, then your world will be ever-expanding.

At this point, it looks like we have a more complete picture of how wonder can be blocked, which might aid us in understanding why it is uncommon: whenever we respond to knowledge as if it has *finished* the thing we are learning about, we end our wonder. There appears to be something at least a little broader than this, however, that can kill wonder. It doesn't seem that facts – and especially not only *true* facts – are the only boxes we can put things in, or the only doors we can lock. There appears to be an analogous process that occurs whenever we put things into categories – boxes – of any kind. If I encounter a fact explaining the biology of a tree, and proceed to reduce the tree to biological interactions and kill my wonder at it, then I am also likely to do the same with any plants, or with an entire forest, even if I do not know the facts about each species. Somehow, knowing that a certain kind of finalizing explanation *exists* can be enough to inhibit wonder from being experienced, even if I have no knowledge of the explanation itself.

Or we could get away from hard facts entirely. Let's say I have a negative interaction with a certain type of person; a lumberjack, for example. There is a way I could respond to that negative interaction in the same way the second child responded to the fact of why the sky is blue. In this case, that would mean taking my experience with this person as a total explanation of them; I could reduce them entirely, for instance, to the one time they were rude to me. I could lock that door, consider them as “that rude person,” and not think of them again. I could also go

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even further, and use this interaction as a reason to judge an entire class of people (lumberjacks) as rude.

There also appears to be a way in which we dismiss things as objects of wonder without knowledge ever entering the picture. When we are familiar enough with something, when we encounter the same sorts of things repeatedly, we may sometimes cease to see them. If I take a run down the same suburban street every morning, the trees that line the sidewalk could all start to blur together. I may begin to think of them as “*just* those trees along the sidewalk,” if I think of them at all. After this occurs, even if I travel somewhere new, I may barely see the trees on this new sidewalk either; they could be consumed by the already-established background category of “sidewalk trees,” and thus I may not ever give them a second glance. I do not think explanation is absent here, however: it is present in the same way it is present when a child asks, “what is up there?” and an adult answers, “the sky.” It is not impossible to think that our second child (the one who wished a wizard had made the sky blue) could take even this answer as a disenchantment, and that the sky itself might dull before the “sky.” A label for something can be responded to as a kind of explanation and so it, too, carries the potential to be a closed box or a locked door.¹

Here, as in the case of the two children learning facts about the sky, it is not familiarity or labeling that is resulting in my lack of wonder at these sidewalk trees; it is my particular *response* to my familiarity. It may feel that familiarity dissuades me from a kind of deep attention that might lead into wonder, yet this may only be because I am taking what is familiar for granted. A different sort of response, one that sees familiarity as a door to open rather than lock, might lead me to deepen my wonder at the things most immediately around me.

¹ Perhaps when a label acts as an open door, rather than a closed one, it becomes a *name* instead. A name can grow and expand, acquire stories and mystery... a label seems instead to constrain or constrict what a thing can be.

Although our relationship with and responses to knowledge, facts, and familiarity may seem complex, the particular form of response that works to kill wonder appears the same in every case. In all three of our examples – the forest of “just biological machines,” the caricature of “just rude lumberjacks,” or the label of “just sidewalk trees” – the most important word is “just.” Learning about how trees work, or being offended by someone else’s impoliteness, don’t seem to be at issue here. Even the extrapolation to categories (sensible in the case of trees, absurd in the case of lumberjacks) would not in itself limit one’s capacity to be surprised, to be engaged, or to feel wonder. What does appear to inhibit that capacity is the finality, the conclusiveness, and the reduction inherent in deciding that something (or an entire group of things) is *nothing other* than what you have decided it to be. It is when this occurs that wonder at a thing becomes impossible. It is not knowledge or familiarity that results in a lack of wonder, but rather *this* specific kind of response to knowledge or familiarity. I think **judgment**² is an appropriate word to describe this particular response.

What is judgment?

To judge something is to decide it is *nothing other* than whatever you have judged it to be. The word’s legalistic and somber connotations lend themselves to this meaning; it is a final ruling. Judgment appears to be one kind of response to knowledge; it is to take knowledge as ended, and to determine that there is nothing more worth saying or knowing (you may be aware there are more things to know, but you have determined those things to be pointless). Equally, judgment can be a response to familiarity: something is “*only* that thing that has always been

² I owe Marisa Diaz-Waian for suggesting this term during the early phases of my project, when I was still entertaining the idea that knowledge and wonder were incompatible.

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there,” and the possibility that it could be (or could express) anything else is safely dismissed.

Judgments therefore rest on the assumption that it is possible to effectively contain and comprehend all that matters about a thing within your idea of it.

This doesn't mean the person judging something needs to know every fact about it; I could be aware that I do not know the first thing about human biology, and still judge my body to be “just a complicated sack of meat.” Even if I am aware that there is a lot of information I don't know, I am still capable of judging something as *merely* that complex of information. Once I have decided that something is *merely* something, even if what I have decided it to be is hopelessly complex, then I have judged it, and it appears that it can no longer be the subject of my wonder. In this way, judgment and possession of knowledge are independent from one another. The closed room of a judgment may have a lot of empty space in it to be filled with knowledge, but what is most important about it is that it is *closed*. New facts or information might fill that space without challenging my judgment, and without appearing to open any of the locked doors.³

Judgment also appears to be independent from actual familiarity. If I see one small mountain on a road trip, and am the sort of person who makes and keeps firm judgments, I may judge – consciously or unconsciously – that I am entirely familiar with mountains. This is equivalent to claiming that mountains have nothing more for me; mountains have exhausted themselves within me. This is, of course, absurd; there are many kinds of mountains, and each one is unique. Yet if I keep my judgment firm, it is possible that all various future mountains, even if I see them, would bore me. To me, they would be *merely* mountains, the thing I became

³ Seeking out information at all – curiosity – does seem to be a small form of wonder. In other words, to be curious is to open up one's judgment a little. To “wonder,” to let in things. Even though it may not feel like the radical kind of wonder, and may not be recognized as wonder at all, you can't really learn anything without suspending your judgment at least a little.

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entirely familiar with on that first road trip. How is it that a judgment can be so powerful that it takes away the power of mountains to elicit wonder? Surely there must be peaks that would break through even the most firm judgment and evoke an unconscious “wow”? Yes, it is possible for the world to crack our judgments and draw forth reactions of wonder. Yet judgment *is* quite good at deflecting these moments. This is because of the symptom of judgment that, more than any other, makes it an enemy of wonder: judgment has the capacity to make invisible the world around us by causing us to be *inattentive* to things we have judged.

Consider what precisely is happening when I judge that a rock is *merely* a “rock.” I have projected a finite, bounded, and static label onto the thing in front of me, and determined that there is nothing more to this thing besides my label, or at least nothing I should be concerned with. Essentially, I have ceased to see the rock at all; I have identified it with my judgment of it. I contain it completely and I expect it to be nothing other than what I contain. There is no reason for me, in my state of judgment, to attend to it. If the rock insists something about itself strongly enough to crack through my judgment – perhaps a striking vein of quartz catches my eye, or the rock’s surface feels uncannily smooth in my palm – it is likely this will only result in a momentary adjustment of my judgment from “rock” to “smooth rock with quartz.” It is unlikely, if my judgment is firm, that this adjustment will leave enough space for wonder, and the rock itself will quickly retreat back to invisibility behind my projection. In this way, judgment has a negative relationship with both attention and surprise. The more we judge, the less we notice. The less we notice, the less there is that could surprise us. The less that could surprise us, the less

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likely we are to experience wonder. In this way, judgment dulls the world and saps it of possibility⁴.

Before moving further into the relationship between judgment and wonder, there are a couple more points about judgment alone that will become significant later. First, there is a strong connection between judgment and objectification. Essentially, to judge something *is* to objectify it; it is to turn a thing into an object with fixed boundaries and measurable qualities. It is to claim, “this can be entirely known.” Something that is entirely known does not need and cannot benefit from attention, respect, freedom, and so on. When people objectify other people – for instance, in the case of the sexist objectification of women as *merely* bodies, or the racist objectification of a racial Other as *merely* brutes – this is the same process we employ when we judge anything to be *merely* something.

Additionally, all judgments claim possession of an Other. When a judgment claims “I can contain all of this thing in my idea about it,” this is a claim of ownership. Consider how a judgment plays out: first, the thing you are judging disappears. The actual strange, weighty clump of stuff that you have judged as “rock” vanishes. Then your idea of what a “rock” is takes the actual rock’s place. Since what was once the rock is now merely your idea, and since you have declared the rock *finished* through judging it as such, you have effectively claimed total possession of the rock. Scale is irrelevant to this claim of possession; if I judge the universe to be “nothing other than colliding atoms” or “nothing other than stuff made by God for our benefit,” in both cases I have claimed absolute ownership of the universe. This is because, in the dynamic field of direct experience, there *is no more universe*; there is only my judgment of it, which I feel

⁴ John Moriarty frequently uses the term “Medusa mindset” (extensively in the “Ulropeans” chapter of *Dreamtime*) to describe a way of seeing which turns everything we look at to stone, freezing it into whatever dead contained thing we presume it to be. I like how active and brutal this metaphor is for judgment-as-projection.

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to be within me, contained, and closed. Perhaps it is no coincidence that such broad judgments tend to result in feelings of isolation or emptiness.

Finally, judgment prohibits relationship. This falls naturally from objectification and possession, but is worth highlighting. I can *use* something I have judged, but I cannot *relate* to it. Objectified people are used, but are never related to. A judged thing can be used for whatever purpose I judge it to have; picking up and throwing a rock does nothing to challenge my judgment of it. Relating to the rock – allowing it to have equal participation in my engagement with it, to express itself as a full being with which I am in relationship – will in all cases threaten the solidity of my judgment.

To summarize: it appears that the faculty which most inhibits our wonder is judgment. Judgment is a particular kind of response to knowledge or to familiarity, where a thing is wholly contained within our conception of it. We are less attentive to it, and therefore have less of a capacity to be surprised by it. A judgment reduces and objectifies a thing, and in so doing, implicitly claims ownership over that thing. Judgments also make real relationship impossible; judged things can only be used or ignored.

At this point, judgment seems like a terrible thing. And, in the context of our investigation into wonder, judgment *does* appear to be wonder's chief enemy. On the other hand, there is a clear utility and necessity to judgment, and I think it would be disingenuous to not give some space to its importance. It seems like judgment's primary and most necessary role is to reduce our cognitive load. We *need* to be able to take things for granted in order to function. If everything bewildered us, and if we could never be 100% certain exactly what something is or how to appropriately respond to it, we would not have made it far in our evolution as a species. Putting things in closed boxes and not attending to them further helps us attend to the things that

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matter more to us; it is a way for us to prioritize our attention. Judgment also helps us understand the practical usages of things without needing reflection or engagement with that thing. I know a hammer is for hitting nails; I can take this for granted and not need to attend to my hammer as I build my shed. This does not mean that judgment equates to practicality in all cases – we often need to dispense with judgments in order to think more laterally and flexibly, in order to shake how we might be looking at a problem. But judgment does serve an absolutely central function in successfully being human, and so when I frame judgment antagonistically in this thesis, it is only an antagonist insofar as cultivating wonder is concerned.

Now, if judgment is the capacity within us that most inhibits wonder, perhaps we can look to these aspects of judgment for further clues as to what wonder itself is. A place to start might be to investigate the ways in which judgments can give way to wonder.

Disruption and suspension of judgment

While judgments can be strong, they are never impenetrable. They are final, but only in the sense that when we make a judgment, we *consider* it final. Our consideration may change, and it seems to me that the causes for this change can fit into two broad categories. First, our judgment may be disrupted when something surprises us enough to bewilder us. Second, we seem to have the freedom to suspend our judgment through an act of will. The main difference between these two processes is that disruption is experienced as originating in the judged thing, while suspension seems to come from oneself. In both cases, where before we were inattentive and judgmental, we instead become attentive and engaged. It is through this attention and engagement, it seems, that experiences of wonder first become possible.

Let's look more closely at what happens in each of these responses to judgment. In the case of disruption, a judgment moves from firm to porous (or disappears completely) as a result of that judged thing surprising us. Since judging something inherently limits our capacity to be surprised, this often requires a significantly unexpected event. For example, if the rock that I had judged to be *merely* a rock sprouted legs and began crawling towards the riverbank, it might be such a surprise to me that I briefly experience wonder before my judgment snaps back and applies "hermit crab" in place of "rock." In other cases, we may believe we have judged a thing before experiencing it, yet something in the experience will shake that judgment. It is fully possible that no matter how many pictures of the Taj Mahal you see, or how much you have read about its size or its history, something in the experience of witnessing the actual Taj Mahal itself might still elicit unexpected wonder.

Perhaps the cause for this could best be explained through the notion of attention. Something in the thing itself *commands* or *grabs* our attention because it is so unexpected. The rock sprouting legs is surprising, so we are forced to attend to it, to notice it, and to take stock of it. In the case of the Taj Mahal, the surprising element is slightly less obvious. We might say that there is something inherent to the quality of experience itself – *actually* seeing it, feeling small in the presence of it – that one cannot prepare for before it occurs. This is, of course, not always the case; it is as possible to be bored by the Taj Mahal as it is to be bored by any mountain when you have judged them firmly finished. Yet the direct experience of something striking does appear to have the ability to break through many judgments by commanding our attention to it despite ourselves. It may seem to be the case that you knew what the Taj Mahal was before you saw it, yet your wonder at it can only occur when it surprises you – with how immense, iridescent, or ancient it feels – thus disrupting your previous judgment.

While disruption is significant and powerful, treating it as the only antidote to judgment is equivalent to treating wonder as if it exists only externally and in special things or special moments. Disruption puts the onus of wonder on the world; wonder can only be experienced when, cyclically, something wondrous suddenly occurs. I think this notion of wonder is familiar to our colloquial understanding. We might hear talk of how all creation is wondrous, or how it is a miracle to be alive, yet in our everyday experience we know that most things we encounter do not feel miraculous. Many people read statements about the wonder in all things as inherently mystical, and respond with either halfhearted agreement or an eye-roll. In any case, we know that true wonder is rare. However, there might be a specific process or mode of engagement, one we have control over, that has the potential to suspend our judgment and allow more things to elicit experiences of wonder. This mode of engagement has fallen out of fashion in modern cultures, but is straightforward enough to be recovered: we might call it *paying attention*.

A suspension of judgment occurs whenever we decide to pay attention to something. Judgment presumes complete containment and complete control; therefore, there is no way to intentionally notice anything without a conscious or unconscious suspension. Since judgment and attention are incompatible, paying attention inherently leads to a judgment becoming at least slightly more porous than it was before. Perhaps I attend to the stone I have just picked up. In doing so, I might notice tiny flecks of mica that reflect light differently depending on how I turn my hand. It's possible that I will be struck by these flecks and find them beautiful or engaging, and could even feel some wonder at how they glisten in the light. In this mode of attention, it is significant that I don't have an agenda; in other words, it matters that I don't know what I expect to see. If I already have a judgment for mica and know I am just picking up a rock to find mica, then noticing mica in a rock does not suspend any of my judgments. This is akin to the

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distinction between seeing and looking; if I am *looking* for something, then there is a good chance I am not *seeing* much. At the very least, if my only outcomes are that I find what I am looking for or that I do not, then surprise is unlikely to enter into the picture. Meanwhile, if my intention is instead to see what is there, I might notice any number of things that could shake up my judgment and provoke feelings of bewilderment, fascination, curiosity, or wonder.

Chapter 2: Attention

What is the route to wonder?

After a lot of practice at *attending* to the images I conjured up, I belatedly thought of *attending* to the reality around me. Then the deadness and greyness immediately sloughed off – yet I’d thought I’d never move through a visionary world again, that I’d lost it. In my case it was largely my interest in art that had destroyed any life in the world around me. I’d learned perspective, and about balance, and composition. It was as if I’d learned to redesign everything, to reshape it so that I saw what *ought* to be there, which of course is much inferior to what *is* there. The dullness was not an inevitable consequence of age, but of education.

– Keith Johnstone, *Impro*, 14

I must walk more with free senses. It is bad to *study* stars and clouds as flowers and stones. I must let my senses wander as my thoughts, my eyes see without looking. Carlyle said that how to observe was to look, but I say that it is rather to see, and the more you

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look the less you will observe. I have the habit of attention to such excess that my senses get no rest, but suffer from a constant strain. Be not preoccupied with looking. Go not to the object; let it come to you... What I need is not to look at all, but a true sauntering of the eye.

– Henry David Thoreau, *J, IV, o. 351*

The experiencing body... is not a self-enclosed object, but an open, incomplete entity... We may think of the sensing body as a kind of open circuit that completes itself only in things, and in the world.

– David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, 123

In judgment we find a response to experience that inhibits wonder from becoming possible. Here, I want to explore judgment's remedy – to discover what allows wonder to occur. I think this remedy is attention, but in claiming this, I ought to first more clearly distinguish between two different forms of paying attention: “looking” and “seeing.”⁵

I think of looking as attention with a goal; it is always “looking for.” For this reason, looking does not challenge a judgment. To look is still to slightly suspend a judgment, but barely; it is to suspend it in as limited a way as possible, and then snap it back into place once what you are looking for has been found. I might look for the signs that a tree I am examining at is a maple. I suspend my judgment *just* enough to glance at the leaves and allow them to be

⁵ I recognize that using the terms “looking” and “seeing” while speaking of attention prioritizes visual perception. This prioritization will continue in many other metaphors I use going forward, but I do not mean to imply a sensory hierarchy, nor that attention is primarily a visual phenomena. I use visual language for two reasons: first, I happen to be a visual thinker, so the language is comfortable for me. Second, the English language prioritizes visual metaphors, so it would be more difficult for me to find familiar vocabulary in English for other senses. If the cultural bias of this prioritization distracts you, perhaps consider – as Hila Tzipora Chase reminds me – that birds prioritize the visual as well, and imagine that this thesis is written by a bird.

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whatever shape they are, rather than what I had judged them to be. When I find that they are shaped like maple leaves, my judgment of “maple tree” snaps onto the tree as firmly as “possible maple tree” did moments earlier. Looking is a highly managed, highly future-focused form of attention that is not very likely to elicit wonder.

Seeing, on the other hand, is the opposite. To see is to more radically suspend judgment and allow whatever is present to you to express itself spontaneously. When we see, we become receptive to these expressions, particularly to what *in the thing itself* draws us in the most. We have not decided before attending what it is we are attending to, and therefore we are much more likely to be surprised, bewildered, and engaged. When I see the tree in front of me, I might notice how the unusual shape of its leaves feel like a candelabra, how the deep brown of the bark contrasts with the snow covering the roots, or (and we will get to what this might mean later) how the tree strikes me as lonely, or authoritative.

Looking can either lead to or be a response to confusion. Being future-focused, looking seeks an answer to a finite question, and so seeks to end itself. Seeing, by contrast, can either lead to or be a response to bewilderment. Seeing, like bewilderment, stands in itself, and the more it stands, the more it grows. When I speak of *attention* from this point forward, I am speaking of seeing, not looking.⁶

Attention and expressive agency⁷

⁶ If by attention I mean what I have referred to as “seeing,” then I think a good general term for “looking” might be examination. I’m putting this in a footnote because while I believe this is a helpful terminological distinction to make, I won’t be addressing examination any further in this project.

⁷ As I have alluded to, Martin Buber’s work in *I and Thou* is especially influential in my making these connections. Buber links encounter to the experience of subjectivity and totality in the Other.

Now that we have established a distinction between disruption (when a thing breaks through your judgment) and suspension (when you yourself do so), it might be time to delve a little deeper and see if this distinction is really necessary. As we look more closely at the two processes that bring us out of judgment, the lines between them start to blur. First, in both cases, the process centers on noticing something surprising. Second, this surprising thing, whether it's the immensity of the Taj Mahal or mica speckling a river stone, is something *out there* that draws a level of engagement and attention from us, and that thus has the potential to provoke wonder.

Initially, I had described attention as a capacity that can be drawn by something (as in the case of disruption) or paid to something (as in the case of suspension). Yet this distinction, when we attend to our own attention, is less than clear. Is it really the case that attention is something we give or that is taken, like a currency or a discrete object? Attending to a tree does not involve my glaring at the tree, trying to send my "attention" to it as if it is some stream that moves out of my eyes to the tree's trunk. Instead, attending to the trees feels more like an *openness in the direction of* the tree. Perhaps the felt experience of attention is not analogous to an exchangeable object at all, but is instead a sensuous porosity that moves between open and closed, that leans toward a thing but does not impose something upon it. In the end, it feels more like it is the tree that expresses itself and gives something to me.

Therefore, while suspension *is* an act of will, maybe it is simply a will to be open to more and more subtle disruptions, and thus to smaller and smaller surprises. The glistening of mica can be seen as drawing or commanding my attention in a way not meaningfully distinct from, for instance, a thunder clap; the only difference is that the thunder clap is louder. You don't need to be in a state of open or deep attention with the sky to hear the booming shout of thunder, but you might need to drop into such a state to pick up on the gentle whisper of a mica speckle. In both

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cases, however, something in the thing itself is expressing, and through attention you are noticing.

Just as judging something is to claim that it is finished and has nothing more of importance to say, attending to something is to claim that it may still reveal something important and unexpected; in other words, that it may surprise you. Inherent in this claim is that the object of your attention is unpredictable. It may do things, show things, or be things that you recognize you are not able to predict or anticipate (if you thought you could, you would have judged it). One definition of attention, then, might simply be the act of seeking out surprise. It is worth noting, though, that this anticipation of surprise is not the same as a knowledge of unpredictability in the case of, for example, probability. Understanding that something might do any number of things, and that you aren't sure which one it will do, does not necessarily qualify as an openness to surprise, because it does not necessarily challenge any judgment. For example, if you recognize that a given rock has a low probability of mica speckling its surface, you might consider yourself surprised by finding some, but as this still fits within the boundaries of your judgment and objectification of the rock (what it is, what it can do, what it can be), it's unlikely to bewilder you and elicit wonder.

For these reasons, I think the word "**agential**" is more applicable to how things feel in a state of attention than "unpredictable." An agent is something that, put most simply, does what it pleases unrelated to our expectations. What an agent decides to do does not imply any visible or invisible causal chain; agents are actants, so they act how they want. An agent might grab or command your attention (thus disrupting your judgment), or it may surprise you with an unusual quality the more attentive you are to it. In any case, it is something the thing itself is doing. Just

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as judgment objectifies something and therefore robs it of agency, attention grants a thing agency through allowing it to express itself.

Also contributing to this sense of agency in objects of our attention is the feeling that they have an inexhaustible depth.⁸ Noticing something will always give way to noticing more, so long as attention is maintained. When I attend to a fallen log in a meadow and notice the sponginess of its decaying trunk, this could give way to my noticing the small ridges my fingers find as I press down on this sponginess. Then I might attend visually to these ridges, which could cause me to notice the small discolorations made by fungus. These discolorations, in turn, might lead to my noticing the particular smell of the trunk, which then evokes a particular emotion in me... and so on. The notion that there is never an end to the gifts of attention implies, for our sensing bodies, that there is a generative spontaneity in the object of our attention. This spontaneity is something we associate, even if only unconsciously, with agency or – to go even further – subjectivity. Inexhaustible depth is felt, when we are receptive and attentive, to have some kind of intention at its source, even if we never make explicit this intuition.

To make this clearer, consider a comparison with an object we commonly experience as having subjectivity: another human being. We don't always encounter other humans with attention; often we judge and dismiss one another almost as easily as we do everything else. When we do this, we are considering one another to be unconscious objects (even if incidentally). But when we connect with one another to the point where we feel heard and seen (and also capable of hearing and seeing the other person), what precisely is it that makes us feel like we are interacting with a fellow *being*? It seems that the central quality we experience is that of spontaneous expression. In other words, when we are connected, I do not know or predict

⁸ I am borrowing the phrase "inexhaustible depth" from David Abram, who uses it in *The Spell of the Sensuous* to describe the intricate and never-repeating patterns with which organic things dialog with our senses.

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what you will say; I grant you the freedom and space to express yourself, and I am attentive to what you express. I recognize that what you express comes from *you*, can only come from *you*, and that there is an inexhaustible depth, an immeasurable wellspring, to what you could reveal. This is in stark contrast to how I might conceive of the vase on the table between us by way of judgment. The vase is *just* a vase, and thus I can contain it in myself; you, meanwhile, could be *anything*, and through my attention to you I am feeling out all the things you could be. Thus in deep human relationships there is often wonder (consider the wonder, not to mention the bewilderment, of falling in love). I see no reason why, through this same kind of attention, we could not experience a generative spontaneity and thus an agency within *all* things.

From attention to engagement

Attention is clearly important for breaking through judgments and opening up the possibility for wonder. However, my initial definition of wonder emphasizes engagement rather than attention. When does attention become engagement, and what is the difference between them? If attention is not something we “pay” but is rather a capacity that opens us up to receiving the spontaneous expressions of others, then it is essentially passive. Attention, framed in this way, does not include our response to the things we attend to. It does not include the feelings or emotions that might be brought to the surface by a certain smell or color, for instance, nor does it include the way my body might unconsciously move towards the glistening light peeking over the top of a hill. Attention describes my capacity to receive these expressions, to notice the many voices and forces of the things around me, but it does not describe the way these voices and forces affect me. When we include the sense-response dialog in our descriptions of an encounter,

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we are speaking of engagement rather than attention. Attention is necessary for engagement to occur, and on a basic level (as we will explore later) attention with no engagement is impossible, but this distinction is still important.

Engagement is always a kind of conversation; we receive an expression as a result of our attention, and this expression provokes within us a certain response. This response, in turn, often leads to closer attention, to the noticing of something further, which then coaxes out another response, and so on. Consider again the example of the log I find in a meadow. The rich, dark, wet texture of the decomposing trunk might lead me to want to press down on it with my finger. In this case, both the feeling of *wanting* to do so and the act of doing so are part of my response. When I do so, and my finger sinks into the spongy wood, the touch sensation of this becomes a new expression that my attention allows me to perceive, and that I then respond to, both internally and externally. If I grant the log agency here, then it, too, is responding to my own expressions; its willingness to sink under my finger could be seen as a response to my putting it there, and the way the dark color reaches out and draws me towards it may be felt as its response to my attention. When we are engaged with something there is a felt mutuality, a reciprocity, between ourselves and the object of our engagement. Wonder, then, both in its granting of agency and in its reliance on this mutual engagement, must be an experience of profound connection. Therefore, in order to more fully grasp what wonder is, it becomes necessary to explore exactly how this connection with an other draws into play deep parts of ourselves.

Channels of engagement and feeling-responses

If engagement is a kind of dialog, what is its language? It would be easy to say sense-experience, and this is partially correct. But I think when we look more closely at how engagement operates in the dynamic field of felt, direct encounter, there is a lot more going on than (how we would conventionally describe) straightforward sensing and responding. Every expression we receive through attention is inevitably bound-up in our associations, memories, particular experiences, tastes, and personal resonances. Your “spongy wood” might be a gross thing, evoking rot and decay and unsavory smells, while mine might be something I soak in, that causes me to feel at peace in the woods. This is not only a matter of our external responses, but of our internal responses; not only will you not go press down on its surface, you will also *see* the wood differently than I do. This is part of the reason, it seems, that attention must always involve engagement. Unless we judge our experience in order to report on it (thus replacing it with our idea of how it should be), *no one* simply perceives “spongy wood.” We will always perceive the spongy wood with a particular emotive affect. I will call this amalgamation of felt resonances that coalesce into this affective perception a **feeling-response**, in the same way the unconscious movement of my body towards the object of my attention might be a body-response. All expressions that we receive through our attention we experience as already bundled up within these feeling-responses.

The inability to ever separate sense-experience from the feeling-responses it provokes is, I think, embedded within the nature of what an experience is. If I rub the surface of a small rough rock, I will have an experience of this roughness, yet my experience and the rock’s actual roughness are two different things. To the rock, its roughness is a quality it expresses outward to all attentive things. To me, it is a sensation always already wrapped up in complex resonances and associations. My roughness is thus a kind of imperfect reflection of the rock’s expression.

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Encounter, in this case, would be the meeting of these two roughnesses; my own and the rock's. Through my touching of the rock and my attention to my touch, something from the rock touches something in me. Roughness itself, then, is not something I or the rock own independently of one another, but is what we might call a **channel of engagement**, a particular pathway that places the rock and I in relationship. The rock and I meet one another through roughness. Encountering the rock's roughness through my attention coaxes out my own roughness, feeling-responses included, as if it were something already asleep within me.

Through this channel of engagement, I encounter the rock in a particular way, one that is already saturated with my feeling-responses. As such, I might feel in this roughness a severity, a melancholia, a violence, or any number of other associations I may have with jagged edges and sharp points. It is tempting to categorize these feeling-responses entirely as projections of my own making, as independent of anything having to do with the rock itself. However, I think to do this is to lose sight of the crucial role attention plays in allowing for these experiences to occur. Expressions of the world that we receive through our attention provoke these feeling-responses, so already they are not solely ours. And as we have discussed, in our felt encounters with things there is no way we can distinctly separate these feeling-responses from the sensations that draw them out; in my experience, this rock's roughness simply *is* severe.

In addition, if we look more closely at what it is really *like* to experience feeling-responses such as severity or melancholia, we may start to see how they are tied in a more fundamental way to "mere" sensation. Consider, again, the phenomenology of "happiness" we began in the introduction to this thesis. There, we addressed how through looking at ways we talk about happiness – such as how we describe things that make us happy as "uplifting" – we can come to a more subtle and specific understanding of how happiness might feel. In addition to

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uplifted, when we are happy we may say that we are light, or bubbly, or full. These descriptors are all, at base, sensory. They are reports of internal felt sensations, in this case the feelings of being lifted up, of weightlessness, and of saturation. I think this holds true for all things we might call feelings or emotions; when it comes down to the direct experience of these phenomena, they are coalescences of particular sensory experiences. Later, we give names to these coalescences, such as happiness, or severity, or disgust, but before they were these names they were sensations.

Perhaps even more importantly, before they could ever be sensations, they must have been expressions from the world. Internal sensations, and their coalescent categorization as particular feelings, did not come from nowhere. At the most basic level, the dynamic of these particular sensations with our feeling-responses comes about as a result of material experience. Jagged things can hurt, can cause us pain, sometimes aggressively. Jagged voices do this, jagged gestures do this, jagged rocks do this. The world's disruptive expressiveness has taught us what sensations are severe. Just as we did not invent the fact that jagged rocks can puncture our skin, we also did not invent the fact that jagged words can puncture our self-esteem. The metaphors we use for this latter case *come from* the former; if we describe emotional pain as puncturing, it is only because rocks with sharp edges punctured us or our ancestors. With no sharp rocks, there can be no sharp words.

Understanding this, when I have a feeling-response of this rough rock as severe, in what way exactly am I projecting? If the definition of severity (in terms of my *experience* of severity) involves nothing other than particular sensations such as, in this case, roughness, then experiencing what I might call severity in response to this roughness is to do nothing but give a different name to it. The severity I experience is, like my experience of roughness, not something that I or the rock wholly own, but is born in the space between us through our relationship. The

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same could be said when, in a state of genuine attention and engagement, I experience a leaf uplifting in the wind as happy. Since we are already experiencing things as agential and expressive when we are engaged with them, feeling-responses in this way are perhaps best described as a kind of empathy. All empathy could be projection, yet by carefully relying on the expressions of others, we can have more confidence that our empathy is genuine.

At this point, we can begin to glimpse what a state of wonder might feel like. Since wonder itself involves *full* engagement, and since feeling-responses emerge as one aspect of engagement, it doesn't appear that wonder is a particular feeling-response. Rather, it seems that wonder can include *any* feeling-response. For example, while I think there is a conversation to be had about the differences between (positive) wonder and terror, for the purposes of our definition here, wonder *includes* terror. Wonder may also include an incredulity at how disgusting, or ecstatic, or sorrowful, or peaceful something feels, as well as aspects of encounter not part of the affective perception of feeling-responses, such as how enormous, or shiny, or stretchy it is. Often wonder involves a simultaneity of multiple intense feeling-responses, since we can have any number of channels of engagement open between ourselves and the world. Wonder appears to involve both a breadth and an intensity of engagement, but is not itself a *type* of engagement. Since feeling-responses are, at a basic level, sensations, then wonder as full engagement is what happens when we are attentive to the otherness of the sensuous world such that it coaxes out, both in depth and variety, all that we can feel.

The broad field of attention

Up to this point, we have limited our examples of attention and engagement to simple sensory experiences, discernible as belonging to one of the six conventional senses. This may limit us moving forward, in part because the feeling-responses we frame in emotional language are vastly complex, and involve not one or three particular sensations but an intricate synesthetic network of them. Happiness is clearly not just “being lifted up”; if it were, every elevator ride of your life would be the pinnacle of joy. In our thinking, we have a tendency to isolate and separate sensations along the lines of sight, hearing, touch, smell, taste, and motion. To attend only to kernels of experience that fit cleanly in one of these six categories, however, is to look for rather than to see; it is to judge our experience as *merely* visual or *merely* auditory, which never accurately reflects the experience first-hand. To be sure, we may direct our attention into a sensuous porosity that favors one or several senses, but our sensing bodies as entire bodies are never closed. Sensuous experience is a dynamic, inherently synesthetic, inherently ambiguous field.⁹ To attend to our encounters and engagements with things, and the way these encounters resonate within us as feeling-responses, we must be aware of this intractable synesthetic ambiguity. Wonder as full engagement cannot be discovered if we attempt to constrain our experiences in this way.

We have also been limited to examples of encounter with single objects, which functions in a similar way to a limitation to single sensations. By this I mean that, in a state of attention that is seeing and not looking, we are attentive to other things besides the primary object of our attention. Earlier I described attention as an *openness in a direction*. I think this is a good way to articulate the kind of fluid perception that defines attention. It is not openness merely to one specific, definable object, but is also a sudden awakensness to an already-entangled world. I am not

⁹ David Abram makes a compelling argument for the inherent synesthesia of experience towards the end of the second chapter of *The Spell of the Sensuous*.

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equally perceptive to all of my surroundings, as my attentiveness has a direction; but I am also not laser-focused on only one specific phenomenon. It is precisely this openness that allows me to notice one thing and then another. Judgment must enter into the picture for me to take something out of its context and consider it as an abstracted object. Until that happens, my attention is in a direction, and so I perceive expressions of varying vitality and volume from that direction, and these expressions all combine and coalesce within me as feeling-responses and potentially deep engagement. For example, the rock's roughness alone is probably not the only thing producing my feeling of severity. Contributing to this channel of engagement might be the cloud that passes above me, the dark color of the ground I unearth by lifting the rock, or the sudden chill wind that raises the hairs on my arm.

So overall: attention leads to engagement, which connects specific feelings within us to the world around us, beginning with an open sensuous receptivity. This receptivity draws us into relationship and dialog with things, and leads to a sense that things have a spontaneity and an expressive agency. The channels of engagement that open between us and expressive others have the potential to produce wonder, since they may draw out intense, complex sensations that bewilder us and our sense of the things around us.

Now that we have addressed the inhibitions to wonder and the process that overcomes these inhibitions, we can look more deeply at the experience itself: what other unexpected phenomena await us in the bewildering state of wonder?

Chapter 3: Metaphor

What is the state of wonder?

“The things of this world are vessels, entrances for stories; when we touch them or tumble into them, we fall into their labyrinthine resonances.”

– Lynda Sexson, *Ordinarily Sacred*, 1

“I was beginning to glimpse a complex array of images for mind itself, visible patterns of mental process far more fitting than the neurological categories and mechanical descriptions I’d been inundated by in my psychology classes. Here, all around me, was a field of patterned metaphors as precise as one could want for the dynamic life of the psyche.”

– David Abram, *Becoming Animal*, 112-113

“Those who think metaphorically are enabled to think truly because the shape of their thinking echoes the shape of the world.”

– Jan Zwicky, *Wisdom and Metaphor*, 11

Picture yourself in a world of constant wonder. What kind of place comes to mind? If you are like me, you might imagine a world of magic and mystery, a landscape rich with meaning. We would not be alone in these conceptions; tales of wonder from all around the world recount unusual beings, magical spells, and bewildering occurrences. Stories of otherworlds, spirit worlds, and mythological realms have pervaded human societies for as long as we have had language. What is it about these worlds that enchants us so deeply? Part of the explanation

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assuredly has to do with bewilderment; we have no way to explain these incredible things, and nothing to grasp at, which disorients us and perhaps encourages experiences of wonder.

Yet this is incomplete; these worlds are not only bewildering, they are also meaningful. They possess a kind of closeness and significance that resonates with us, and that opens strong channels of engagement. Consistent in all these imaginings is a feeling that the wondrous things we encounter would call us, grab us, or speak to us in a variety of shifting yet equally entrancing ways at every moment. Each meeting with a new thing could be an adventure, an unexpected journey into some new experience, some new feeling, and thus some new part of ourselves. Everything in this fantastical world is particular, vibrant, and expressive. A stick on the forest floor would not *merely* be one among many other sticks, but could be, for example, an ancient key, or a symbol of life against death, or a sword. Meaning and significance is felt to pervade such a world almost as a second substance.

In the way these stories of otherworlds and fantastical realms affect us and inspire us, I believe we can find clues to a full conception of wonder as an experience. After all, I don't think the otherworld and this world are ever separate places. The otherworld, it seems to me, is this world when seen with wonder.

Seeing in metaphor

We have spoken of attention as the opening of channels of engagement that bond an expression from the world with a sensuous feeling-response within oneself. A rough rock touches my parallel rough-rockness, unlocking that sense experience within me. We have also spoken of how it is never possible to isolate these feeling-responses to one sense or to one

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specific object. My sense of rough-rockness is deeply bound up in the resonances and associations I experience from this sensation, and many barely-perceptible phenomena besides just the rock's roughness could be contributing to my feeling-response. Finally, we have explored how these feeling-responses are always sensuous, even when we would articulate them – out of necessity due to their complexity – as feelings and emotions. Thus the affect of severity I perceive from the rock is not a projection of the human quality of severity, but is the perception of a confluence of sense experiences that were always the true definition of severity. All these building blocks are necessary for the next claim I want to make: to see metaphorically¹⁰ can be a deep form of sensuous engagement, and thus of genuine attention.

Imagine that you are walking through a forest in early summer. You are attending to the things around you; to the feel of the wind on your skin, the rustle of the leaves, the soft give of the ground underfoot as you step. The sensuous porosity that is allowing you to notice these things is also leading you to notice your spontaneous feeling-responses; the wind feels not only physically gentle, but compassionately gentle (since part of the confluence of sense-experience we call “compassion” might include exactly this kind of soft supportive weight). You continue along the path, and as your attention deepens and widens, you feel a quiet bewilderment towards all the manifold encounters that coax into expression hidden feelings within you. Being fully engaged with a forest that bewilders you, you are in a state of wonder.

Suddenly, you turn a corner to find a grove of dead trees that has been cursed by a magician. This is not an impression or a reflection; you feel it in your bones. This grove *is* cursed, and the magician is still here. The wind has picked up, raising the hairs on your arm. The gnarled branches of the largest tree curl bizarrely downward, as if in pain. One tree is half-

¹⁰ My thanks to Kirstin Waldkoenig for suggesting I go with the word metaphor (as opposed to some less familiar terms) for this section.

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decomposed, still standing up – you can taste the rot in the air. This tree is her, the magician! You can see her scraggly white hair, her gnarled oak staff. The moss on the ground is darker, here. The sun has just gone behind a cloud and you feel cold; the dread in the air is palpable. This place does not want you here – or perhaps it is in pain, and you could aid it. For now, you think it is best for you to leave.

What is happening now? Have you crossed over from a state of deep attention to inexplicable insanity? To answer these questions, we must address the one that undergirds them: What, exactly, does it mean to see metaphorically?

Put most simply, it means to perceive things as potentially many other things; to allow a thing to unfold into its own metaphors. The rock is not only “severe,” it is an ancient weapon used to kill a god, or a key to the heart of cruelty, or a grumpy turtle. This is the world children inhabit during games of imaginative play; it is also a world almost always saturated in wonder. We are used to considering this kind of encounter as pure imagination and projection, if we consider it at all. Yet to say these experiences come entirely from us, and that the expressive power of things has no sway, is to go against all we have come to understand about attention and engagement. There is a way we can build on what we have been working towards to come to a more subtle and revealing conception of metaphor, enchantment, and imagination.

To use the vocabulary we have already been developing, what is happening in metaphoric seeing is not too distinct from recognizing confluences of sense experience as coalescing into emotions or feeling-responses. Instead of encountering these confluences as feelings like “happy” or “severe,” however, we find them bound up in a secondary, metaphoric sense-experience. This can only happen when we are willing to suspend our judgment of something enough not just to notice its particular expressions, but to allow the object of our attention to

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fully shift into another thing, to express powers or qualities that reflect our engagement with it in a way that nothing else could. That last point is key: it seems that these moments occur because they are the most effective and direct way we can interpret the particular sense-experiences of a given encounter. They organically emerge as expressions of deep engagement. What these metaphors are metaphors *for* are the subtle and complex ways I engage with objects of my wonder. I am attracted to a red river stone that glints in the sunlight; it is insufficient to my wonder to still see this as a stone – it is a *ruby*.

Let's look more closely and try to understand each part of this encounter. When you come upon the grove of trees, you are already at or near a state of wonder. Your attention is open and receptive, and so you are feeling-responding to the sensuous expressions of the forest around you. Many things happen at once: the sun passes behind a cloud, the wind picks up, you see gnarled trees, you smell rot. This could have coalesced into a feeling-response of the grove as foreboding and ended there. The feeling of foreboding likely includes in its sensuous recipe some distasteful smells or a sudden shift from light to darkness. However, something in this combination gained specificity. You didn't just feel a sense of foreboding; you saw a witch with a gnarled oak staff and scraggly white hair cursing a grove of trees.

First, let's return to the common assumption that imagination is purely projection. Surely only we know what a magician or a curse is, not the trees, right? And surely media, literature, and stories would have conditioned and influenced the kinds of metaphors we might create? It seems absurd to suggest that seeing a grove of trees as cursed by some power is an expression of the trees themselves and not a projection I bring wholly to the encounter.

To be sure, a relationship of attention is necessary for any metaphor or feeling-response to not be an egotistical superimposition. We already have a name for when this kind of

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imposition occurs: judgment. I could very well impose a metaphor as a judgment, and thus fully believe the grove is cursed before encountering it, or pretend that it is cursed in ignorance of what it expresses to me, thus refusing attention and refusing engagement. In the example above, however – where, in a state of deep attention, the grove strikes you suddenly as cursed – both you *and* the grove participate in the formation of this image. The particular shape the metaphor takes will assuredly be guided by your past experiences and associations, but it will also be guided by the sensuous expressions of the grove itself. You and I coming upon the same grove in the same state might encounter different metaphors. At the same time, however, we would probably *not* encounter *entirely* different metaphors. Maybe where you see a magician, I see the Grim Reaper. Or even a magician, as well, except mine has raven-black hair and a straight steel rod. What I am unlikely to see in this grove of dead trees – if I am paying any attention at all – is, say, a grinning toddler with a beach ball.

As we have already established, when our attention is open enough we become entangled with things to such an extent that the channels of engagement we develop provoke feeling-responses. Perhaps what is happening here is the next step up, so to speak: we become entangled with a network of feeling-responses so complex that the only way they can seek expression is through metaphor. If sensory experiences are the ingredients that form feeling-responses, then feeling-responses might be the ingredients that form metaphors. A deep and close attention is thus required, and as such, so is the willingness to allow associations to freely present themselves. Perhaps such specific feeling-responses involve the taste of death and decay, the black downward-moving melancholy of crumbling, the small hope of restoration gleaned from a bright leaf peeking out under rotted bark, the old wisdom in death and stillness, and countless other webs of sensations that can only be articulated metaphorically and imagistically but which

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feel, in your meeting with the trees, immediate and unmediated. When you see in a grove of trees that a magician has cursed it, what you are really saying through your encounter, then, is this: “This grove of trees *feels the same way* as it would feel were it cursed by a magician.” The image becomes an articulation of a vast array of sense experiences and feeling-responses, a collective articulation by your attentive body and the grove itself of all your channels of engagement.¹¹

In speculating about how sensations become feeling-responses and feeling-responses become metaphors, I do not mean to imply whatsoever that metaphors are somehow distant from direct sensory experience. In every meaningful way, our metaphors in the dynamic field of imaginative engagement are shaped by the highly specific physicality of things. Perhaps the downward bend of the branches of the central tree in the grove, for instance, evokes an association of a hunched old woman, or the dark moss on the ground contributes to your seeing her in flowing black robes. It is your attention that allows you to pick up on these things (or rather to be receptive to their spontaneous expression), and it is your suspension of judgment that allows the grove to transform in conversation with you. As we discussed in the previous chapter, however, these sensations are never alone; they are always in dialog with our feeling-responses and associations to form the dynamic and ambiguous field of encounter. Like feeling-responses, it would be disingenuous to assume they belonged entirely to us; it is entirely possible that part of our images of a dark magician originated in encounters with groves such as this, in the highly specific shapes present here.

¹¹ In analyzing an encounter like this, I feel I should state explicitly that I am not trying to reduce metaphoric seeing – which includes mystical and spiritual experiences – in any way, shape or form. I am not claiming that these metaphors are “not real” any more than I am claiming that emotions are not real when I reframe them as feeling-responses that emerge in collaboration with the things around us. In fact, in some ways these moments of metaphoric seeing are *more* real (more attentive to the ways we encounter and interact with our world, more respectful of that world’s expressiveness) than any judgment could possibly be. It is judgments (“these are just trees”) that are by definition projections.

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The above examples might seem, at first glance, remarkable or at least out of the ordinary. How many of us take walks in the woods and find magicians? I think, however, that this metaphoric seeing makes perfect sense as an expression of wonder. If wonder involves a radical suspension or disruption of judgment, and if our judgments are what constrain us to see things in only a certain way, how could one result not be a greater allowance of things to be other things, if they so desire?

Talking in metaphor

I want to turn, now, to ways of speaking. We are social creatures who are influenced by one another, and so the ways we speak about things is highly influential on whether and how we judge or attend to them. It seems necessary here to explore how tales of wonder and **poetic language** work to enchant us and cultivate experiences of wonder, especially in how deeply they relate to metaphor. In order to do so, I want to address what appears to me to be the differences between poetic and non-poetic language¹², as well as the differences between **story** and explanation¹³. In both cases, the former seems to enhance attention and encounter, while the latter often inhibits attention and encourages judgment.

Non-poetic words are felt to mean one thing and one thing only; a word's entire meaning is contained within itself, and so (like any judged thing) it can only be used for its particular function or ignored; it does not need to be attended to. This thesis (with the exception, perhaps,

¹² I owe a lot of the thinking behind these different responses to language to Marvin Bram, an excellent philosopher who has also served as a mentor for me. Bram differentiates between univocal and polysemous language, which I have here simplified to non-poetic and poetic language. Robert Bringhurst, in *Everywhere Being is Dancing*, also articulates the role of polysemous, poetic language in a chapter on the polyphonous quality of the natural world.

¹³ My distinction is similar to that made by James P. Carse in the excellent book *Finite and Infinite Games*.

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of some examples) is written with non-poetic language, because while I hope to ultimately inspire wonder, I am not trying to do so through beautiful sentences. My words themselves are not things I want my reader to attend to and do not represent an easy route to wonder themselves; rather, they are signposts pointing towards that route. For this reason, I *want* the meanings and impressions my words convey to be taken for granted and to be easy to contain.

Poetic language, on the other hand, opens itself to many simultaneous meanings and to an inexhaustible depth of experiences. A striking description, like a surprising phenomenon, coaxes me to feel and deeply engage with it. Poetry is the language we resort to when we want to articulate subtlety and specificity of experience. When we speak poetically, we tend to convert experiences and feelings into metaphor. When poetry forms a complex, highly specific image, then, it seems to me that it is attempting to do the same thing as the spontaneous metaphors which occur in states of wonder. Through attention and engagement with the image a poem conjures up, I am likely to experience particular feeling-responses, and if both myself and the poet are successful, these feeling-responses reflect at least some part of the experience the poet is trying to convey.

Stories and explanations contrast in much the same way. In our initial conversation about judgment, we spoke a bit about explanations. We discussed how when we take facts or information about something as a total explanation for it, this results in judgment. A story, then, is a way of receiving information that opens the door to attention, engagement, and potential wonder. Explanations conclude relationships; stories draw you into them.

Consider two ways I might tell you about a significant experience I have gone through. I could explain to you what happened in a way that conveys the information, giving you the bare facts, or I could weave the memory into a story. If I explain, you might be inclined to file the

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information I recounted away; you received it, it has contributed to your picture of me, and now you are finished with it. If I tell a story, however, and tell it well, you are likely to be brought along with me. As my heart rate increases, so will yours; as I describe specifics of my memory, you will see them too. You are engaged, attentive; you are drawn into a relationship, not only with me but with all the images and metaphors I am conjuring up in my speech. Stories often use poetic language in just such a way, to draw out a certain porosity in the listener, to permit certain experiences and transformations, and to encourage a deep kind of attention and therefore engagement.

It is easy to speculate that the more stories we have – the more familiar with various subtle imagery, either through tales we have heard or sought, or saturation in poetry – the more resources we have to develop metaphors that might emerge spontaneously in experiences of wonder. If I were a part of a culture that told stories of many different kinds of magicians and many specific types of curses, my image in that grove, and especially the way I communicate it to others, would gain particularity. I also would likely be more receptive in my encounter to more subtle details that would reveal this particularity. This is analogous to someone who knows how to identify hundreds of species of songbirds. He and I, seeing the same birds, would have a different capacity to pay attention.

A story about something out in the world, then, a story that enchants it, a metaphor that captures some deep attention to the thing itself – this story would have power. The way we talk about things shapes the way we see them. If I tell you a story of a great beast who died on the side of a mountain, and can point to the scar it left, and if you engage with this story, you are also likely to engage more deeply with the mountain. The wonder in the story might bewilder you, disrupting your judgment of that mountain as just something in the background, causing you to

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pay closer attention and open more possibilities of expression. Contrast this with if I had told you the mountain is the fifth largest in its range and is just a bunch of dirt. If I position this to you as a total explanation of the mountain, and if you believe me, you are much less likely to engage with it or to experience wonder towards it. I can only explain something one way, even if my words change, because an explanation finishes a thing. On the other hand, I can tell infinite stories about the same thing, and each will reveal a particular doorway into relationship, a particular unfolding of a thing into its metaphors, a particular route to wonder and engagement. Each story, too, in using poetic language, has not one meaning or interpretation but unlimited meanings, unlimited entryways that may act within you.

Just like the conventional assumption that imaginative play is mere projection, there is an assumption that stories of wonder are mere superstition. Yet I think to make this claim is to overlook a profoundly necessary function these stories play, one that we have been severely missing in modern culture. These stories, these metaphors, put us into close relationship with the things around us – they encourage attention, care, engagement, and wonder. They are not substitutes for facts or information, because they are not operating in the same arena of truth; the truths they articulate are poetic truths, reflective of our intersubjective engagement with the various beings that surround us.

Metaphor and wonder

Metaphors encourage wonder and wonder encourages metaphor. When we speak in metaphors, we open up potential channels of engagements, certain parts of ourselves, in order to relate in new ways to the things around us. When we are deeply engaged and open to a state of

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wonder, one result may be that we see the things around us not only as themselves, but also as their metaphors. This dynamic follows from the definition of wonder as full engagement with something that bewilders you. Bewilderment is an open question, and could unfold into any number of simultaneous answers – just as a tree could be a wand, or the word “moon,” when used to describe an eye, could evoke a feeling of enrapturement. Metaphors are, in this sense, bewilderment’s equivalent to an answer, or at least they are as close to an answer as bewilderment can achieve. When we are bewildered, things begin to blur together. There is a paradox here; they blur, yes, but at the same time, we somehow see them more clearly than we ever had before.

Now, at last, we arrive at the final two questions of this thesis, and (I think) the most important: what does wonder do for us, and what does it do for the world?

Conclusion

What are the effects of wonder?

The wager is that, to some small but irreducible extent, one must be enamored with existence and occasionally even enchanted in the face of it in order to be capable of donating some of one’s scarce mortal resources to the service of others.

– Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, 4

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Faërie contains many things besides elves and fays, and besides dwarfs, witches, trolls, giants, or dragons; it holds the seas, the sun, the moon, the sky; and the earth, and all things that are in it: tree and bird, water and stone, wine and bread, and ourselves, mortal men, when we are enchanted.

– J.R.R. Tolkien, “On Faerie Stories,” 7

From a long way off I heard it. It was a birch. Invisible beings wielding invisible axes were felling it. It was frightful. Every axe blow to it was an axe blow to me.... I was a limbless trunk. Infinitely felled, infinitely hurt, I was a stump of me.

– John Moriarty, *Dreamtime*, 63

What does wonder do for us?

I think it is a safe assumption that most people are attracted to wonder. We like it, we like to feel it, we like to seek it. Whether this is through stories, or engaging with the world, or any number of other means, wonder is generally accepted as a positive and enriching experience. Why is this the case? Why do we think of wonder as a good thing? Why do we like it?

At this point, some of the answers to this question might already be surfacing. Wonder deeply engages us with the things we wonder at, and we like to be engaged. When we are in genuine relationship with things, we feel more ourselves. This makes sense when we consider what it means to engage. If relational engagement coaxes a rich and unexplored tapestry of our own feeling-responses into expression, then when we are in relationship we quite literally become more of what we are; we feel more deeply and variously. Wonder is the state we achieve

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when we are fully engaged and not seeking to end it; when we stand in bewilderment and not in confusion. As such, it is perhaps not so radical to say that we are most ourselves when we are feeling wonder. More of our feeling-responses, more of our deep resonances, more of our possible worlds and metaphors, are being drawn out of us and into expression in relationship.

At the same time as we become most fully ourselves, the world gains vibrancy, specificity, and power. Judgment dulls things because it dissuades us from attention; wonder commands our attention, and thus causes all the things we would previously not have noticed to burst with shape, color, emotion, metaphor, and meaning. This last word, meaning, is particularly significant: because feeling-responses are innately entangled with the shifting sensuous experience of engagement, these moments of engagement are *inherently meaningful*. In other words, they very often strike us as significant without requiring an explanatory justification for this significance. It is meaningful to me that the sunrise is beautiful because the sudden light, the encompassing scope, the warmth on my arm... these touch beauty within me; they *are and always were* beauty. In this same sense, collectively, could it be that the feeling-responses we express through our entangled engagement with the wondrous world that surrounds us *are and always were* meaning itself? Could the experience of meaning, of significance, of “ah, this feels real to me!” be, like wonder, a kind of feeling-response-of-feeling-responses; something that comes into being when we are engaged, and that never needed us to name it, to decide it, or to claim it, in order for us to feel it?

On a lighter but no less significant note, wonder also allows us to play, and play is joyful¹⁴. It is inherently playful to allow things to unfold into their possibilities. Judgment dulls the world because it limits things to only what we have judged them to be. It forces us to take

¹⁴ I wish I could spend more time with the idea of play and playfulness. James P. Carse in *Finite and Infinite Games* and Diane Ackerman in *Deep Play* paint profoundly subtle and evocative pictures of play.

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things seriously. Playfulness, on the other hand, is a particular kind of engagement with possibilities. This stick could be a wand, or a friend, or a sword; in each case, I can play with it as a way of engaging with it, and this is, I think, a rewarding and much-overlooked experience – especially in adults. Unlike judgment and explanation, story and metaphor allow us to engage playfully; if I tell you this stick is a wand, and if you do not dismiss this with your judgment (“no, it is *merely* a stick”), then you will pay a certain kind of attention to the stick and see what feeling-responses and surprises it can express through the metaphor of a wand. In this way, pretending and overt projection can actually encourage engagement with things, so long as they are playful and are not themselves judgments (“this stick *is* a wand, and can never be anything else”). Framing something through story or metaphor grants a particularly shaped entryway to attention and wonder, and this wonder can be expressed as genuine play.

To exist in a world filled with playful invitations to engage, where engagement coaxes into expression all parts of ourselves, and where all other things, too, are expressive in color, shape, variety, particularity, and meaning – this is to live in an enchanted world. By necessitating full engagement, wonder lets us into the broader ranges of what we are able to feel.

Bewilderment keeps the door open to this feeling. So it is precisely through wonder and its expressions in myth, metaphor, and poetry that we come to know how many ways there are to be deeply alive and entirely ourselves; wonder is not monolithic but is the definition of variety. To not have any judgments, to exist in this world permanently or to the exclusion of any other mode of experience, would be, of course, untenable and impractical. Yet I think it is not radical to say that, for our emotional and spiritual wellbeing, more of this playfulness, authenticity, and engagement than we currently experience would enrich our lives. Wonder, as we have explored it here, may be the antidote to alienation.

What does wonder do for the world?

I began this thesis by addressing the question of why I feel it is important to look deeply and carefully at the experience of wonder. I stated that my concern for this topic is intimately bound up in my concern for the world, in particular for the way we treat the more-than-human world. Now, I hope I can address why. It seems that the positive ethical fallout of cultivating wonder rests on a basic truth: we care more about things we have a relationship with than those we do not. Attention and engagement build relationships; judgment prohibits relationships. How can we expect ourselves to behave with compassion towards a world we have no relationship with, that we take for granted and hardly see at all? If I judge a forest to be *mere* trees, then each tree's unique expressiveness is erased in the container of my judgment. It then becomes much easier for me to dismiss trees altogether as unworthy of my attention and care.

Let's rely on one final example to make this concrete.¹⁵ Imagine that you and I are walking along a path, and we come to a clearing where there stands an enormous, ancient oak. You feel yourself beginning to be struck by this marvelous tree, but then I turn to you. "Wow," I say, "That must be 245 cubic feet of lumber." *Right, you think, it's just a tree, and just wood.* Later, encountering loggers who are planning to clear out some of the trees along this path, you tell them of the 245 cubic foot bounty awaiting them just a few hundred feet back.

Now let's back up. Instead of this comment about lumber, imagine we speak together of the tree in poetic terms. We exclaim at the color of the leaves, we talk about the shapes we see in

¹⁵ This example is (quite different, but) adapted from an anecdote told by John Moriarty in one of his lectures. Unfortunately, the video of this lecture is no longer available, and I haven't been able to find it anywhere else, so I cannot refer my reader to it. The title is "Seeking to Walk Beautifully upon the Earth."

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the bark, the power and presence we feel emanating from the trunk. Through our talk, we each deepen our relationship with the tree, beginning to see it wondrously. The more we attend to it, the more we engage with it, the less of a handle we feel like we have on it – in one sense, we are learning new things each time we notice some small detail, but on the other, each small detail expands the possibilities of the tree into so much more, bewildering any latent judgments we could still be holding. The tree begins to unfold into a tower, a pillar, a rooted web, a giant's tomb. Its solidity touches solidity within us, evoking our respect. In engaging in this way with the tree, it is much more likely that we would try to talk the loggers *out* of cutting it down.

Through judgment, we replace the world with our idea of it, blocking our eyes and ears to the spontaneous expressions that might draw us into relationship. Judgment allows us to use things with no further consideration, yet it seems ecologically that we are suffering from a dangerous amount of use. Systems that oppress others have always worked by silencing the other; by not hearing their voices, not attending to them, and instead judging them as a group or as mere numbers on a page. These systems transform the other into abstractions or ideas rather than people. This dehumanization is a form of judgment, and is one just as capable of justifying ecocide as it is of justifying genocide. It is exactly the kind of judgment we employ when we describe all the manifold forms of the natural world as “mere resources.” Attention and a cultivation of wonder works as a remedy to this tendency – is, in fact, the only remedy to mass objectification. Our capacity to be fully engaged and bewildered by the world around us allows for relationship, and as a result we are more likely to grant that world respect and care.

When we are in a state of wonder, we become porous and receptive to the manifold entanglements of things. The more we are entangled, the deeper our relationship, and the more we begin to extend our care beyond ourselves to these others. The feeling-responses and

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metaphors that attention and wonder produce do not belong to us, but belong instead to the invisible world of relationship we form in collaboration with the vibrancy around us. As a result, our sense of finite boundaries to the self begins to blur as well. Not only do we feel bewilderment towards the objects of our engagement, our selves literally be-wild: they spread outward, not in the form of projection or expansion, but in the form of entanglement and intimacy. The world, then, transforms from a backdrop in front of which human drama unfolds into a rich and dynamic field of emotions, beings, and sensations that draws the deepest parts of us into expression. In such a world, losing something that engages with us and produces wonder would amount to losing a part of ourselves. Losing more than something – losing a forest, an ecosystem, a river – would be nothing less than a final death of the rich ground of our metaphors, of our emotions, of our sensations.

It would be naïve to think that wonder alone could solve all our problems. Yet I find myself deeply skeptical of any political, technological, or social solution to ecological devastation that is not predicated on and buttressed by an encouragement of wonder. Wonder is intimacy, and intimacy is real seeing. If we lose sight of the centrality of wonder in our engagement with the world, then, I fear we lose sight of the world.

Glossary

Attention: Sensuous receptivity in a direction. Attention instantly suspends judgment, allowing one to receive spontaneous expressions from a thing. Attention always produces a response, and so always gives way to some form of engagement.

Bewilderment: When a judgment is suspended or disrupted and not looking to reassert itself. This is in contrast to confusion, where a judgment is disrupted and attempting to reassert itself.

Channel of engagement: The bond between an expression, noticed through attention, and the experience in us that expression calls forth. Roughness, light, the color green, the curve of a tree, etc are all expressions that can become channels of engagement.

Engagement: A dialog of attention and response. These responses may include feeling-responses and metaphoric seeing, among others.

Expressive agency: The felt experience that things, when attended to, spontaneously express themselves in a way we innately associate with intention and will.

Feeling-response: A kind of response within engagement wherein we perceive affectively some expression of the thing we are engaged with. That tree feels compassionate towards me; that river is angry.

Full engagement: When we are engaged with as much of ourselves as possible, whether through the depth of our engagement, the variety of ways we are simultaneously engaged, or both.

Judgment: A final ruling on what something is and possibly could be. Judgment is at play whenever we describe a thing as “just” something. Something can never be judged and attended to at the same time. Judgments rely on the belief that we can entirely contain all that matters about a thing.

Metaphor: A kind of response within engagement wherein a secondary thing emerges (either through spontaneous experience or through our communication) to capture the way a particular thing engages with us. “This feels *like* that.”

Poetic language: Language used metaphorically, where the intention is not to communicate a use or a function but is instead to communicate a particular experience of engagement.

Story: A way of speaking, often metaphorically and poetically, that is intended to place you in relationship with a thing. This is in contrast to an explanation, which is a way of speaking intended to conclude your relationship with a thing.

Wonder: Full engagement with something that bewilders you.

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