

3. WONDER

Among the many things that religious tradition holds in store for us is a *legacy of wonder*. The surest way to suppress our ability to understand the meaning of God and the importance of worship is to *take things for granted*. Indifference to the sublime wonder of living is the root of sin.

Modern man fell into the trap of believing that everything can be explained, that reality is a simple affair which has only to be organized in order to be mastered. All enigmas can be solved, and all wonder is nothing but "the effect of novelty upon ignorance." The world, he was convinced, is its own explanation, and there is no necessity to go beyond the world in order to account for the existence of the world. This lack of wonder, this exaggeration of the claim of scientific inquiry, is more characteristic of writers of popular science books and of interpreters of science to the laymen than of the creative scientists themselves. Spencer and others "seem to be possessed with the idea that science has got the universe pretty well ciphered down to a fine point; while the Faradays and Newtons seem to themselves like children who have picked up a few pretty pebbles upon the ocean beach. But most of us find it difficult to recognize the greatness and wonder of things familiar to us."¹ "The facts of the case, we venture to say, are so wonderful that from first to last no general impression of Nature reached along scientific or any other lines can be even in the direction of being true that does not sound the note of joyous appreciation and of reverent wonder."²

"The history of European thought, even to the present day, has been tainted by a fatal misunderstanding. It may be termed The Dogmatic Fallacy. The error consists in the persuasion that we are capable of producing notions which are adequately defined in respect to the complexity of relationship required for their illustration in the real world. Canst thou by searching describe the universe? Except perhaps for the simpler notions of arithmetic, even our most familiar ideas, seemingly obvious, are infected with this incurable vagueness. Our right understanding of the methods of intellectual progress depends on keeping in mind this characteristic of our thoughts. . . . During the medieval epoch in Europe, the theologians were the chief sinners in respect to dogmatic finality. During the last three centuries, their bad pre-eminence in this habit passed to the men of science."³

3. Wonder

Wonder or radical amazement is the chief characteristic of the religious man's attitude toward history and nature. One attitude is alien to his spirit: taking things for granted, regarding events as a natural course of things. To find an approximate cause of a phenomenon is no answer to his ultimate wonder. He knows that there are laws that regulate the course of natural processes; he is aware of the regularity and pattern of things. However, such knowledge fails to mitigate his sense of perpetual surprise at the fact that there are facts at all. Looking at the world he would say, "This is the Lord's doing, it is marvelous in our eyes" (Psalms 118:23).

That "wonder is the feeling of a philosopher, and philosophy begins in wonder" was stated by Plato⁴ and maintained by Aristotle: "For it is owing to their wonder that men both now begin and at first began to philosophize."⁵ To this day, rational wonder is appreciated as "*semen scientiae*," as the seed of knowledge, as something conducive, not indigenous to cognition.⁶ Wonder is the prelude to knowledge; it ceases, once the cause of a phenomenon is explained.⁷

But does the worth of wonder merely consist in its being a stimulant to the acquisition of knowledge? Is wonder the same as curiosity? To the prophets wonder is a *form of thinking*. It is not the beginning of knowledge but an act that goes beyond knowledge; it does not come to an end when knowledge is acquired; it is an attitude that never ceases. There is no answer in the world to man's radical amazement.

As civilization advances, the sense of wonder declines. Such decline is an alarming symptom of our state of mind. Mankind will not perish for want of information; but only for want of appreciation. The beginning of our happiness lies in the understanding that life without wonder is not worth living. What we lack is not a will to believe but a will to wonder.

Awareness of the divine begins with wonder. It is the result of what man does with his higher incomprehension. The greatest hindrance to such awareness is our adjustment to conventional notions, to mental clichés. Wonder or radical amazement, the state of maladjustment to words and notions, is therefore a prerequisite for an authentic awareness of that which is.

Radical amazement has a wider scope than any other act of man. While any act of perception or cognition has as its object a selected segment of reality, radical amazement refers to all of reality; not only to what we see, but also to the very act of seeing as well as to our own selves, to the selves that see and are amazed at their ability to see.

The grandeur or mystery of being is not a particular puzzle to the mind, as, for example, the cause of volcanic eruptions. We do not have to go to the end of reasoning to encounter it. Grandeur or mystery is something

with which we are confronted everywhere and at all times. Even the very act of thinking baffles our thinking, just as every intelligible fact is, by virtue of its being a fact, drunk with baffling aloofness. Does not mystery reign within reasoning, within perception, within explanation? What formula could explain and solve the enigma of the very fact of thinking?

What fills us with radical amazement is not the relations in which everything is embedded but the fact that even the minimum of perception is a maximum of enigma. The most incomprehensible fact is the fact that we comprehend at all.

The way to faith leads through acts of wonder and radical amazement. The words addressed to Job apply to every man:

Hearken unto this, O Job,
Stand still and consider the wondrous works of the Lord.
Do you know how God lays His command upon them,
And causes the lightning of His cloud to shine?
Do you know the balancings of the clouds,
The wondrous works of Him who is perfect in knowledge,
You whose garments are hot when the earth is still
because of the south wind?
Can you, like Him, spread out the skies,
Hard as a molten mirror?
Teach us what we shall say to Him;
We cannot draw up our case because of darkness.
Shall it be told Him that I would speak?
Did a man ever wish that he would be swallowed up?
And now men cannot look on the light
When it is bright in the skies
When the wind has passed and cleared them.
Out of the north comes golden splendor;
God is clothed with terrible majesty.

(Job 37:14-22)

In radical amazement, the Biblical man faces "the great things and unsearchable, the wondrous things without number" (Job 5:9). He encounters them in space and in time, in nature⁸ and in history;⁹ not only in the uncommon but also in the common occurrences of nature.¹⁰ Not only do the things outside of him evoke the amazement of the Biblical man; his own being fills him with awe.

I will give thanks unto Thee
For I am fearfully and marvelously made;
Wondrous are Thy works;
And that my soul knoweth exceedingly.

(Psalms 139:14)

The profound and perpetual awareness of the wonder of being has become a part of the religious consciousness of the Jew. Three times a day we pray:

We thank Thee . . .
For Thy miracles which are daily with us,
For Thy continual marvels . . .

In the evening liturgy we recite the words of Job (9:10):

Who does great things past finding out,
Marvelous things without number.

Every evening we recite: "He creates light and makes the dark." Twice a day we say: "He is One." What is the meaning of such repetition? A scientific theory, once it is announced and accepted, does not have to be repeated twice a day. The insights of wonder must be constantly kept alive. Since there is a need for daily wonder, there is a need for daily worship.

The sense for the "miracles which are daily with us," the sense for the "continual marvels," is the source of prayer. There is no worship, no music, no love, if we take for granted the blessings or defeats of living. No routine of the social, physical, or physiological order must dull our sense of surprise at the fact that there is a social, a physical, or a physiological order. We are trained in maintaining our sense of wonder by uttering a prayer before the enjoyment of food. Each time we are about to drink a glass of water, we remind ourselves of the eternal mystery of creation, "Blessed be Thou . . . by Whose word all things come into being." A trivial act and a reference to the supreme miracle. Wishing to eat bread or fruit, to enjoy a pleasant fragrance or a cup of wine; on tasting fruit in season for the first time; on seeing a rainbow, or the ocean; on noticing trees when they blossom; on meeting a sage in Torah or in secular learning; on hearing good or bad tidings—we are taught to invoke His great name and our awareness of Him. Even on performing a physiological function we say "Blessed be Thou . . . who healest all flesh and *doest wonders*."

This is one of the goals of the Jewish way of living: to experience commonplace deeds as spiritual adventures, to feel the hidden love and wisdom in all things.

Said David the king: "I shall testify to the love of the Holy One, blessed be He, and to the benefits He confers upon Israel, hour by hour, and day by day. Day by day man is sold [into slavery], and every day he is redeemed; every day the soul of man is taken from him, and delivered to the Keeper; on the morrow it is returned to him; as it is written: *Into Thy hand I commit my spirit: Thou hast redeemed me, O Lord, Thou God of truth* (Psalms 31:6). Every day miracles such as those that occurred at the

Exodus come upon man; every day he experiences redemption, like those who went forth from Egypt; every day he is fed at the breasts of his mother; every day he is punished for his deeds, like a child by his master."¹¹

The sense of wonder and transcendence must not become "a cushion for the lazy intellect." It must not be a substitute for analysis where analysis is possible; it must not stifle doubt where doubt is legitimate. It must, however, remain a constant awareness if man is to remain true to the dignity of God's creation, because such awareness is the spring of all creative thinking.

Such awareness was the wellspring of Kant's basic insight. "Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the more often and the more steadily we reflect on them: *the starry heavens above and the moral law within*. . . . The former view of a countless multitude of worlds annihilates, as it were, my importance as an *animal creature*, which after it has been for a short time provided with vital power, one knows not how, must again give back the matter of which it was formed to the planet it inhabits (a mere speck in the universe). The second, on the contrary, infinitely elevates my worth as an intelligence by my personality, in which the moral law reveals to me a life independent of animality and even of the whole sensible world—at least so far as may be inferred from the destination assigned to my existence by this law, a destination not restricted to conditions and limits of this life, but reaching into the infinite."¹²

4. THE MYSTERY

We live on the fringe of reality and hardly know how to reach the core. What is our wisdom? What we take account of cannot be accounted for. We explore the ways of being but do not know what, why or wherefore being is. Neither the world nor our thinking or anxiety about the world are accounted for. Sensations, ideas are forced upon us, coming we know not whence. Every sensation is anchored in mystery; every new thought is a signal we do not quite identify. We may succeed in solving many riddles; yet the mind itself remains a sphinx. The secret is at the core of the apparent; the known is but the obvious aspect of the unknown. No fact in

the world is detached from universal context. Nothing here is final. The mystery is not only beyond and away from us. We are involved in it. It is our destiny, and "the fate of the world depends upon the mystery."¹¹

There are two kinds of ignorance. The one is "dull, unfeeling, barren," the result of indolence; the other is keen, penetrating, resplendent; the one leads to conceit and complacency, the other leads to humility. From the one we seek to escape, in the other the mind finds repose.

The deeper we search the nearer we arrive at knowing that we do not know. What do we truly know about life and death, about the soul or society, about history or nature? "We have become increasingly and painfully aware of our abysmal ignorance. No scientist, fifty years ago, could have realized that he was as ignorant as all first-rate scientists now know themselves to be."¹² "Can we not see that exact laws, like all the other ultimates and absolutes, are as fabulous as the crock of gold at the rainbow's end?"¹³ "Beware lest we say, we have found wisdom" (Job 32:13).⁴ "They who travel in pursuit of wisdom, walk only in a circle; and after all their labor, at last return to their pristine ignorance."¹⁴ "No illumination," remarks Joseph Conrad in *The Arrow of Gold*, "can sweep all mystery out of the world. After the departed darkness the shadows remain."

The mystery is an ontological category. What it stands for is to most people most obviously given in the experience of exceptional events. However, it is a dimension of all existence and may be experienced everywhere and at all times. In using the term mystery we do not mean any particular esoteric quality that may be revealed to the initiated, but the essential mystery of being as being, the nature of being as God's creation out of nothing, and, therefore, something which stands beyond the scope of human comprehension. We do not come upon it only at the climax of thinking or in observing strange, extraordinary facts but in the startling fact that there are facts at all: being, the universe, the unfolding of time. We may face it at every turn, in a grain of sand, in an atom, as well as in the stellar space. Everything holds the great secret. For it is the inescapable situation of all being to be involved in the infinite mystery. We may continue to disregard the mystery, but we can neither deny nor escape it. The world is something *we apprehend but cannot comprehend*.

Science does not try to fathom the mystery. It merely describes and explains the way in which things behave in terms of causal necessity. It does not try to give us an explanation in terms of logical necessity—why things *must* be at all, and why the laws of nature *must* be the way they are. We do not know, for example, *why* certain combinations of a definite kind form a constellation which goes with the phenomena of electricity, while others with the phenomena of magnetism. The knowledge of how

the world functions gives us neither an acquaintance with its essence nor an insight into its meaning, just as the knowledge of general physiology and psychology does not give us an acquaintance with the Dalai Lama whom we have never met.

Science extends rather than limits the scope of the ineffable, and our radical amazement is enhanced rather than reduced by the advancement of knowledge. The theory of evolution and adaptation of the species does not disenchant the organism of its wonder. Men like Kepler and Newton who have stood face to face with the reality of the infinite would have been unable to coin a phrase about the heavens declaring the glory not of God, but of Kepler and Newton; or the verse: "Glory to man in the highest! for man is the master of things."

Scientific research is an entry into the endless, not a blind alley; solving one problem, a greater one enters our sight. One answers breeds a multitude of new questions; explanations are merely indications of greater puzzles. Everything hints at something that transcends it; the detail indicates the whole, the whole, its idea, the idea, its mysterious root. What appears to be a center is but a point on the periphery of another center. The totality of a thing is actual infinity.

There is no true thinker who does not possess an awareness that his thought is a part of an endless context, that his ideas are not taken from the air. All philosophy is but a word in a sentence, just as to a composer the most complete symphony is but a note in an inexhaustible melody.

Yet, how would we know of the mystery of being if not through our sense of the ineffable, and it is this sense that communicates to us the supremacy and grandeur of the ineffable together with the knowledge of its reality. Thus, we cannot deny the superiority of the ineffable to our minds, although, for the same reason, we cannot prove it.

On the other hand, the fact of our being able to sense it and to be aware of its existence at all is a sure indication that the ineffable stands in some relationship to the mind of man. We should, therefore, not label it as *irrational*, to be disregarded as the residue of knowledge, as dreary remains of speculation unworthy of our attention. The ineffable is conceivable in spite of its being unknowable.

The ineffable inhabits the magnificent and the common, the grandiose and the tiny facts of reality alike. Some people sense this quality at distant intervals in extraordinary events; others sense it in the ordinary events, in every fold, in every nook; day after day, hour after hour. The sense of the ineffable is not an esoteric faculty but an ability with which all men are endowed; it is potentially as common as sight or as the ability to form syllogisms. For just as man is endowed with the ability to know certain aspects of reality, he is endowed with the ability to know that there is

more than what he knows. His mind is concerned with the ineffable as well as with the expressible, and the awareness of his radical amazement is as universally valid as the principle of contradiction or the principle of sufficient reason.

Just as material things offer resistance to our spontaneous impulses, and it is that feeling of resistance that makes us believe that these things are real, not illusory, so does the ineffable offer resistance to our categories.

What the sense of the ineffable perceives is something *objective* which cannot be conceived by the mind nor captured by imagination or feeling, something real which, by its very essence, is beyond the reach of thought and feeling. What we are primarily aware of is not our self, our inner mood, but a transsubjective situation, in regard to which our ability fails. Subjective is the *manner*, not the *matter* of our perception. What we perceive is objective in the sense of being independent of and corresponding to our perception. Our radical amazement responds to the mystery, but does not produce it. You and I have not invented the grandeur of the sky nor endowed man with the mystery of birth and death. We do not create the ineffable, we encounter it.

Our awareness of it is potentially present in every perception, every act of thinking and every enjoyment or valuation of reality. Since it is an incontestable fact, no theory of man would be complete if it were left out. It is attested to by undaunted triumphant explorers who, when they have reached the peak, are more humble than ever before.

Subjective is the absence not the presence of radical amazement. Such lack or absence is a sign of a half-hearted, listless mind, of an undeveloped sense for the depth of things.

The ineffable, therefore, may be verified by every nonsophisticated man who must come upon it in his own unmitigated experience. This is why all words that hint at the ineffable are understandable to everybody.

Without the concept of the *ineffable* it would be impossible to account for the diversity of man's attempts to express or depict reality, for the diversity of philosophies, poetic visions or artistic representations, for the consciousness that we are still at the beginning of our effort to say what we see about us.

The awareness of the ineffable is that with which our search must begin. Philosophy, enticed by the promise of the known, has often surrendered the treasures of higher incomprehension to poets and mystics, although without the sense of the ineffable there are no metaphysical problems, no awareness of being as being, of value as value.

Just as the simple-minded equates appearance with reality, so does the overwise equate the expressible with the ineffable, the logical with the metalogical, concepts with things. And just as critical thought is conscious

of its not being identical with things, so does our self-reflecting soul bear in its heart an awareness of itself, distinct from the logical content of its thoughts.

We have characterized the perception of the ineffable as a universal perception. But if its content is not communicable, how do we know that it is the same in all men?

To this we may say that while we are unable either to define or to describe the ineffable, it is given to us to point to it. By means of *indicative* rather than descriptive terms, we are able to convey to others those features of our perception which are known to all men.

Perceptions of beauty are not expressed by definitions either, and because that which we sense is not identical in all regards, the descriptions offered are highly divergent. Yet we assume that they all mean essentially the same. This is because the reader recognizes in the descriptions the essence of a perception in which he shares, although the descriptions themselves differ widely.

The sense of the ineffable, the awareness of the grandeur and mystery of living, is shared by all men, and it is in the depth of such awareness that acts and thoughts of religion are full of meaning. The ideas of religion are *an answer*, when the mystery is *a problem*. When brought to the level of utilitarian thinking, when their meaning is taken literally as solutions to scientific problems, they are bound to be meaningless. Thus the basic *ideas* in Judaism have more than one dimension; what they refer to is a mystery, and they become distorted when taken as matter-of-fact descriptions. The idea of man as a being created in the likeness of God, the idea of creation, of divine knowledge, the election of Israel, the problem of evil, messianism, the belief in the resurrection or faith in revelation become caricatures when transposed into categories of pedestrian thinking.⁶

We have said that the root of worship lies in the sense of the "miracles that are daily with us." There is neither worship nor ritual without a sense of mystery. For worship and ritual imply the ability to address ourselves to God—an implication that cannot be integrated into any system of pure naturalism—and are only meaningful as a mystery we are convinced of, without being able to analyze it or to submit it to experiment. What is more, all worship and ritual are essentially attempts to remove our callousness to the mystery of our own existence and pursuits.

Let us take a loaf of bread. It is the product of climate, soil and the work of the farmer, merchant and baker. If it were our intention to extol the forces that concurred in producing a loaf of bread, we would have to give praise to the sun and the rain, to the soil and to the intelligence of man. However, it is not these we praise before breaking bread. We say,

"Blessed be Thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who brings forth bread from the earth." Empirically speaking, would it not be more correct to give credit to the farmer, the merchant and the baker? To our eyes, it is they who bring forth the bread.

Just as we pass over the mystery of vegetation, we go beyond the miracle of cultivation. We bless Him who makes possible both nature and civilization. It is not important to dwell each time on what bread is empirically, namely "an article of food made of the flour of grain, mixed with water, to which yeast is commonly added to produce fermentation, the mixture being kneaded and baked in loaves." It is important to dwell each time on what bread is ultimately.

Firm and abiding are the laws of nature. And yet, we are told that a farmer scattering the seeds in the earth for the purpose of growth must do so by faith in God, not by faith in nature. For this is the essence of faith: even what appears to us as a natural necessity is an act of God.⁷

The mystery of God remains for ever sealed to man. *Thou canst not see My face, for man shall not see Me and live*. Even the seraphim cover their faces with their wings in the presence of God (Isaiah 6:2). Solomon, who built the great Temple in Jerusalem, knew that the Lord who fixed the sun in the heavens decided "to dwell in deep darkness" ('arafel) (I Kings 8:12).⁸

All we have is an awareness of the presence of the mystery, but it is a presence that the mind can never penetrate. Such an attitude may be contrasted with Hegel's characterization of the transition of the Egyptian to the Greek religion. "The enigma is solved; the Egyptian sphinx, according to a deeply significant and admirable myth, was slain by a Greek, and thus the enigma has been solved."⁹ The extreme hiddenness of God is a fact of constant awareness. Yet His concern, His guidance, His will, His commandment, are revealed to man and capable of being experienced by him.

*God is a mystery, but the mystery is not God.*¹⁰ He is a *revealer of mysteries* (Daniel 2:47). "He reveals deep and mysterious things; He knows what is in the darkness and the light dwells with Him" (Daniel 2:22). In the words of the liturgy of the Days of Awe: "Thou knowest eternal mysteries and the ultimate secrets of all living." The certainty that there is meaning beyond the mystery is the reason for ultimate rejoicing.

The Lord reigns; let the earth rejoice;
Let the many coastlands be glad!
Clouds and thick darkness are round about him;
Righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne.
(Psalms 97:1-2)

We do not deify the mystery; we worship Him who in His wisdom surpasses all mysteries.

When the great moment arrived and the voice of God became audible at Sinai, what mysteries did it disclose? In apocalyptic visions one is shown "the treasures of the stars," mountains of gold, seas of glass, cities of jasper. Did Israel learn anything at Sinai about the enigmas of the universe? About the condition of the departed souls? About demons, angels, heaven? The voice they perceive said: Remember the seventh day to keep it holy. . . . Honor thy father and thy mother. . . .

When in response to Moses' request, the Lord appeared to tell him what He is, did He say: I am the all-wise, the perfect, and of infinite beauty? He did say: I am full of love and compassion. Where in the history of religion prior to the age of Moses, was the Supreme Being celebrated for His being sensitive to the suffering of men? Have not philosophers agreed, as Nietzsche remarked, in the deprecation of pity?

There are three attitudes toward the mystery: the fatalist, the positivist, and the Biblical.

To the fatalist, mystery is the supreme power controlling all reality. He believes that the world is controlled by an irrational, absolutely inscrutable and blind power that is devoid of either justice or purpose. The Maat of the Egyptian, Pta and Asha among the Indians and Persians, and the Moira among the Greeks signify a power set over the gods. The stern decrees of Moira are feared even by Zeus. To the notion of fate history is an impenetrable mystery, and man is in dark uncertainty with regard to the future. A tragic doom is hanging over the world, to which gods and men alike are subject, and the only attitude one may take is that of resignation. It is a view that is found in various forms and degrees in nearly all pagan religions, in many modern philosophies of history (history as a cycle of becoming and decay), as well as in popular thinking.

The positivist has a matter-of-fact orientation. To him the mystery does not exist; what is regarded as such is simply that which we do not know yet, but shall be able to explain some day. The logical positivist maintains that all assertions about the nature of reality or about a realm of values transcending the familiar world are meaningless and that, on the other hand, all meaningful questions are in principle answerable.

The awareness of mystery was common to all men of antiquity. It was the beginning of a new era when man was told that the mystery is *not* the ultimate; that not a demonic, blind force but a God of righteousness rules the world. In Greek tragedy man is invariably the victim of some unseen power which foredooms him to disaster. "Awful is the mysterious power of fate." "Pray not at all, since there is no release for mortals from

predestined calamity."¹¹ In contrast, Abraham stands before God, arguing for the salvation of Sodom: "Far be it from Thee to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be it from Thee! Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?"¹²

The theology of fate knows only a one-sided dependence upon the ultimate power. That power has neither concern for man nor need of him. History runs its course as a monologue. To Jewish religion, on the other hand, history is determined by the covenant: God is in need of man. The ultimate is not a law but a judge, not a power but a father.

The Jewish attitude toward the mystery may be compared with the following statement by Plotinus.

"If a man were to inquire of Nature, 'Wherefore dost thou bring forth creatures?' and she were willing to give ear and to answer, she would say, 'Ask me not, but understand in silence, even as I am silent.'"¹³

The Jew will not accept that answer. He will continue to pray, "O God, do not keep silence, do not hold Thy peace or be still, O God" (Psalms 83:2). "Why dost Thou hide Thy face? Why dost Thou forget our affliction and oppression?" (Psalms 44:25). God is not always silent, and Israel is waiting for the word. "He is our God; He is our Father; He is our King; He is our Deliverer. He will again in His mercy proclaim to us in the presence of all living . . . to be your God—I am the Lord your God."¹⁴

The most vexing issue in Jewish thinking, furthermore, is not, "wherefore dost Thou bring forth creatures?" but rather, "where is Thy mercy?" "Where is thy zeal and Thy might? The yearning of Thy heart and Thy compassion are withheld from me." "Look down from heaven and see, even from Thy holy and glorious habitation."¹⁵

5. AWE AND REVERENCE

The message that the Bible conveys is not that of despair or agnosticism. Job does not simply say, "We do not know," but rather that God knows, that "God understands the way to it," He knows where wisdom is. What is unknown and concealed from us is known and open to God. This, then, is the specific meaning of mystery in our sense. It is not a *synonym*