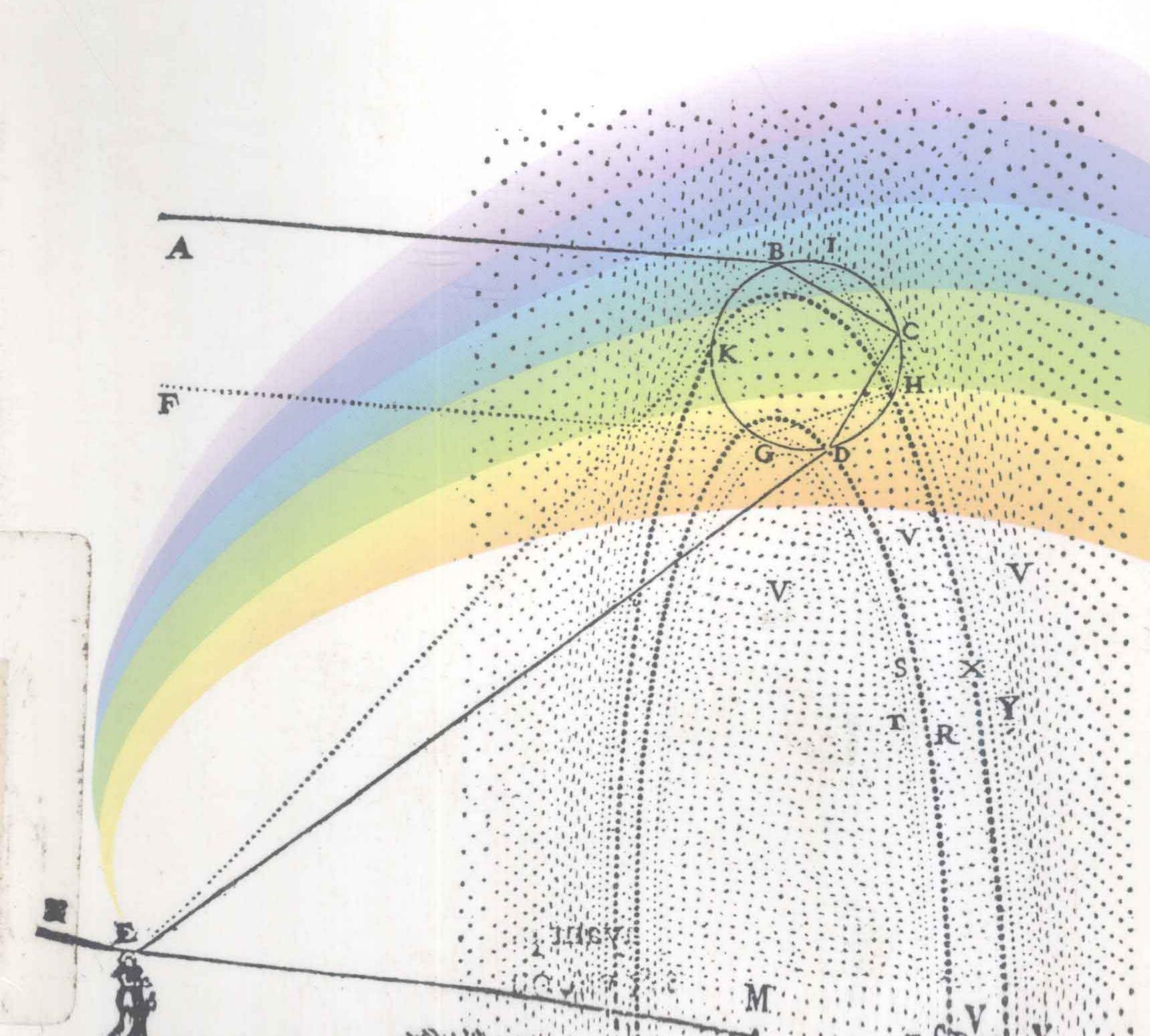


PHILIP FISHER



Wonder, the Rainbow, and the Aesthetics of Rare Experiences

PHILIP FISHER

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Fisher, Philip.

Wonder, the rainbow, and the aesthetics of rare experiences / Philip Fisher.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-674-95561-7 (cloth: alk. paper)

ISBN 0-674-95562-5 (pbk.: alk. paper)

1. Wonder (Philosophy) 2. Aesthetics. I. Title.

BH301.W65 1998

111'.85—dc21 98-22515

Designed by Gwen Nefsky Frankfeldt

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The Aesthetics of Rare Experiences

Wonder and the Sublime

The experience of wonder no less than that of the sublime makes up part of the aesthetics of rare experiences. Each depends on moments in which we find ourselves struck by effects within nature whose power over us depends on their not being common or everyday. Both wonder and the sublime are also categories within the aesthetics of surprise and the sudden, as is that favorite modern aesthetic category, shock. Finally, they are both experiences tied to the visual taken in a deeply intellectual way; they both lead us back to reflection on ourselves and on our human powers; and they both have deep connections to mathematics, as Kant showed in the case of what he called the mathematical sublime, and to whatever link there might be between mathematics and the most essential details of thinking itself. How we think and how we are drawn to think about just this, rather than just that, will be the subject of this book.

Modern thought since Romanticism and the philosophy of Kant and Burke has been more interested in the sublime than in wonder. In part this is because aesthetic experience has been exploited, in T. E. Hulme's phrase, as a form of spilt religion within romanticism.¹ In Hulme's metaphor, the emotions inspired in us by God, eternity, and

the universe as a whole and held within the jar of religion—feelings of the infinite, adoration, fear, the sublime—spill out in the process of secularization onto such parts of experience as our relation to landscape, the nearly religious importance of romantic love, and our worshipful interest in our own subjectivity.

The sublime secularized religious feelings of the infinite and of the relative insignificance of human powers in an attractive way, allowing the modern intellectual to hold onto covert religious feelings under an aesthetic disguise. Romanticism, along with the neo-Catholicism of decadence, the Wagnerian rebirth of myth, Symbolism, and even modernism itself had this component of carrying on, behind the back of the secular enlightenment, religious practices in the catacombs of the aesthetic, a technique pioneered within the aesthetics of the sublime. At the same time, in an industrial civilization more and more enchanted with the growth of human power over nature, the sublime was a covert antitechnological rebuke, an intellectual rearguard action against the steam engine of James Watt that would change the ratio of human power to natural forces forever.

In the sublime, fear and surprise, power and danger occur in a rich blend. The sublime could be called the aestheticization of fear. Wonder, the most neglected of primary aesthetic experiences within modernity, involves the aestheticization of delight, or of the pleasure principle rather than the death principle, whose agent within aesthetic experience is the sublime. The aesthetic sublime led so quickly to bombastic forms of music and, especially, painting that, with the exception of Wagner and Géricault, philosophical interest in the sublime has carried on happily a hundred years after the effect itself was aesthetically extinct and in a period where even the greatest landscape painting, that of Cézanne and Monet, has had little to do with this experience. With only a few exceptions, the sublime was an aesthetic category more important in the realm of kitsch than in high art. For that reason, as an aesthetic effect, the sublime should not be thought of as the alternative to the beautiful. It has more in common with such effects as the noble, the pious, or the grotesque, that area of aesthetics where we most often find second-rate artists compensating by invoking either strong effects or right thinking.

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With the sublime we have for two hundred years built up a more and more intricate theory for a type of art that we do not actually have and would not care for if we did have it. Once we look at the visual arts, especially architecture and painting since 1873, the founding moment of Impressionism, we have to be struck by the signs of a pervasive appeal to the experience of wonder. In architecture this is true in part because of the many new materials and building techniques that made possible, in combination, the construction of things never before seen on the earth. The most obvious example is the skyscraper, the first genuinely vertical building type in history, set in relation to the sky rather than the earth, surrendering at last the heavy mass, broadest in its base, that was the very essence of a building up to that moment. After the skyscraper it became possible to see just how much every previous building had been an exploration of the horizontal with only towers and lighthouses as exceptions. With skyscrapers we find ourselves in a new aesthetics of the city, forged out of the combination of electric lighting and the glass and metal of thin geometric forms rising straight up to heights previously of no use to humans. These new forms came clad in surfaces of glass, steel, or aluminum, the new materials of our century, arranged in sheets of repeating rectangles. Alongside the spatial thrill of these chaste forms, we also find in modern architecture and modern engineering striking cantilevered effects, in fact beams without posts, a second surprise equal to that earlier wonder, the arch.

Skyscrapers are our modern pyramids but without the look and heavy geometry of a cone of poured sand, bottom heavy, that pyramids have. The skyscraper has the apparent weightlessness of a single metal rod without a base, or with no visible base, since it has been driven with pile drivers into the bedrock below the ground and uses the inner earth itself as its concealed base. The modern skyscraper depends on the great steel mills of the late nineteenth century, most of which produced rails for the tens of thousands of miles of railroad track being laid across America and Europe. Once redundant lines crisscrossed the earth, the output of steel began to be shifted into the vertical dimension, and rails were laid up into the sky in a frame construction around which the skyscraper's outer shell could be wrapped.

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Architecture, in the years following modern steel and plate glass manufacturing, stands within an aesthetics of wonder because the long history of buildings made of wood, stone, grass, brick, bamboo, mud, and even marble provided no clues to what might work or take place next with the use of these new materials and within the new engineering of stresses and loads that was now possible. The architecture and the engineering of our time set us face to face with a radical newness within materials, within the organization of forces, and within spatial possibilities of a breath-taking kind, like that of working in an office on the fortieth floor or walking along a street lined with varied spikelike buildings more than a hundred times our own height. Architects in the last hundred years have addressed or solicited an aesthetic response of delight, a feeling of seeing the impossible happen, as we feel with the George Washington Bridge or the buildings of Chicago. Architecture set out to produce experiences of wonder.

On a smaller scale, the modern house from Frank Lloyd Wright or Le Corbusier to Richard Meier, Frank Gehry, or Peter Eisenman has orchestrated a similar pleasure of radical surprise, a novelty of material and effect that is the counterpart to the more obvious novelty of the business and urban architecture of our time. The materials as well as the size in which building was now possible with reinforced concrete, steel beam structure, and lightweight outer surfaces set up the physical premise for an aesthetics of wonder.

As we can see from certain architectural drawings of the early twentieth century, a number of Expressionist architects toyed with the idea of using the same materials and urban scale for a sinister, shadowy, intimidating architecture of fear. When we see these drawings it becomes clear that the modern architecture that was actually built was an architecture of light, of sun and blue skies, a radiant city as Le Corbusier liked to call it, a city built partly in response to the smokeblackened stone of the nineteenth-century city. Fortunately, it was the modern corporation with its optimism and confidence, its pleasure in power and in pleasure itself, that ordered and paid for these buildings, leaving unbuilt the brooding, shadow-crossed, sinister buildings of German Expressionist architecture, now visible only in the films of

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the 1920s, where their nightmarish shadows repeat the sinister Victorian city without regard for the entirely new urban world that had been created.

The material newness in architecture ran parallel to a century of painting in which, after Monet's first Impressionist work of 1873, a restless invention of new and unprecedented ways of painting indicated the search for a similar impact of complete technical freshness, as though some completely unprecedented thing were now going on at the spot where painting used to take place. The century that saw the choppy, bright strokes of Monet, the system of Cézanne, the flat bright colors of Matisse and Gauguin, the Cubist surface invented by Picasso and Braque, the dripped stringlike paintings of Pollock, the color field paintings of the American 1960s or the systematic work of Mondrian, has been defined by the technical search of many painters for an unprecedented look, a striking freshness, as though a whole new genre were in front of us and not simply more paintings of this or that kind—landscapes or portraits, allegorical history paintings or still-lifes.

The appeal of these works is not to an aesthetics of shock. Shock flourishes within the arts of time and particularly within such temporal problems as those of boredom and habit. Shock is a rejuvenation within fatigued systems of representation and thought. That is why the classical and religious mind of Baudelaire gave us our greatest poet of the aesthetics of shock. With shock we face the all or nothing, the Russian roulette of a mind or a system at the end of its rope. It is a last rather than a first move within experience. Surrealism, that most fatigued of modern art movements, is our own debilitated gambler with shock, squeezing some last life out of fatigued symbols by juxtaposing bizarre combinations among them—the melting watch, the banal combinations of Magritte, and those of the very appropriately named Max Ernst.

From Monet to Pollock, technical newness in painting has been tied to energy that could be demonstrated on the surface of the work, and to an excitement that is sometimes hectic and sometimes the sensual glow of ripe attention, as in the late paintings of Monet. The address to the viewer of these great and often oversized works of the last cen.

tury has been an address to the aesthetics of wonder; that is, to the feeling of radical singularity of means and purposes, to the idea of incomparable experiences, to the self-consciously fresh or first work in a technical direction where preparation for seeing it breaks down and gives few clues. But with wonder, above all else, there is the address to delight, to the bold youthful stroke, to pleasure in the unexpected and in the extension of means outside the limits where they might be thought to come to an end. The rapid wearing out of the new is also part of the aesthetics of wonder. The right timing of abandonment is as crucial as the moment of surprising entry. The very powerful, brooding, but very tired Cubist paintings that Braque carried on to the end of his life are part of the pathos of aging within an aesthetic of the quick and the fresh.

The narrative arts, for reasons that will be made clear later, have fewer chances within the aesthetics of wonder, although the nearly spatial poetry that follows Mallarmé and leads on to Rilke and Celan aims for the pleasures of a radical novelty and exoticism of sensation, and even of a rarity within combinations of words, that are signs of the appeal to wonder. Where painting and architecture find ever new continents of technique and materials to explore, language remains the only given material of poetry and narration. As a result the very basis for architectural wonder that rests on the effects of our first experiences of never before used materials is denied to writing.

An aesthetics of wonder is required by the art that we already find ourselves living within. That such an aesthetics has its alternative in the aesthetics of fear will be one of the claims of the pages that follow. That an aesthetics of wonder has to do with a border between sensation and thought, between aesthetics and science is another claim of my argument. That memory and narrative are antagonistic to an aesthetics of wonder will be one of the unexpected aesthetic discoveries of the pages that follow.

One core result of the argument that follows will be that there is a lively border between an aesthetics of wonder and what we might call a poetics of thought. How we think and what it is that leads us to think about this rather than that are topics within the aesthetics of wonder. The details of thought, of problem solving, of the analysis of works of art where a slow unfolding of attention and questioning

takes place in the presence of the work are all questions within the domain of wonder.

The argument that follows will work along the path that runs at the border between an aesthetics of wonder and a poetics of thought. It will be equally engaged with examples from philosophy, science, mathematics, and art. Each of my key illustrations, diverse as they may seem, will unfold the surprise of intelligibility, that moment when the puzzling snaps into sharp focus and is grasped with pleasure.

After a first characterization of the conditions of wonder, I will use three cases that might, at first, seem far afield from one another. These are:

First. The history of the curiosity about and the progressive explanation of the rainbow. How did the combination of pleasure and puzzlement in the face of rainbows lead to a scientific explanation? As a further question, did that explanation drain the aesthetic pleasure that had drawn us to think about rainbows in the first place? How did the rainbow become intelligible under the allure of wonder? Did it, once explained, force us to trade off knowledge for pleasure, intelligibility for wonder?

Second. A simple and very famous example from philosophy and mathematics, the challenge to double the area of a given square. How do the phases of bafflement, trial and error, and final surprise of what we call "getting it" display the experience of wonder in simple problem solving? How do the baffling details snap into place and yield the feeling of intelligibility?

Third. As we find ourselves drawn by the expectation of pleasure and the force of curiosity in front of a work of art, a contemporary painting of a kind that we have never seen before and whose details and content seem unintelligible to us, what path of thought leads us to the feeling of familiarity that is aligned to what we call "getting it" in the experience of solving problems?

My motive in using examples drawn from mathematics (the doubled square), from the science of everyday experiences (the rainbow), and from painting (a contemporary, abstract work of art) is to look

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behind or through the very distinct procedures within each of these domains to a common poetics of wonder, a map of the features of thinking that guide us to satisfaction and a feeling of intelligibility within experience. The local feeling of intelligibility is what we call, in simple cases like a joke or a reference, the feeling of "getting it." The state we linger in before this moment of "getting it" lasts sometimes for a few seconds and sometimes for months, and in this state we say "I just don't get it!" The path from the puzzling to the feeling of intelligibility raises, among other questions, the issue of just why certain things puzzle us. Not everything that we do not know or cannot ever know puzzles us and draws us into thinking about it in an attempt to explain it to our own satisfaction. At the other end of this path, the satisfaction of intelligibility, or what I call "local intelligibility," is different from what a philosopher would call knowing and it is even more remote from what Descartes called certain knowledge.

The feeling of intelligibility is like an ocean surrounding the small island of things that we truly know. Every century and every culture lives in a world that it finds intelligible even though other times and cultures believe that errors, false hypotheses, and a basic lack of the tools of later intelligibility left earlier and other cultures with a texture of intelligibility riddled with flaws. At the outer borders of what we think about and have some idea of, we go on thinking even though many of the tools we use are wrong or inadequate when viewed from later perspectives that will, in their turn, seem to be flawed and inadequate when viewed by still later perspectives. How do thinking and the satisfaction of local intelligibility go on while unsuspected deep flaws are carried forward within thinking? It is in this broad sea of intelligibility that so often turns out to need later and still later revision that the clear link between what we do in looking at a work of art and what we do in solving a problem or explaining an object of everyday experience like a rainbow can be found. In all three cases we are engaged in an ongoing fragile project of making sense, and it is the nature of making sense rather than the nature of knowing that is my concern.

Descartes wanted to wipe the slate clean so as to start from the few clear and distinct ideas that we might be certain that we know. New

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truths might be added only if they too were certain and clear. In everyday life we cannot think only by means of or about those things of which we are certain. Every culture must have a medical science no matter how thin or error-ridden its truths. Disease and death are made intelligible within every flawed and partial medical system because we confront illness not when we are ready and equipped with certain ideas but when it strikes. Under the rules of time, bad ideas are better than none at all because a dark requirement for any action at all is the background feeling of the world's intelligibility.

There is no more interesting question than how we carry out the antiphilosophical project of working with and improving the mixed web of error, uncertainty, the unknown and the unknowable while thinking and reaching results. Socrates insisted that to know what it is that we do not know is the humbling first step of true knowledge. We need to add that the impossibility of knowing any such thing is one of the things that strikes us when we look closely at the reasoning and science of the past, even in the moments of its greatest accomplishments, seventeenth-century physics or nineteenth- and twentieth-century medicine. When we look at the history of successful explanation and ask how it could be that it remained undamaged by the unreliable tools, unavailable technology, hidden errors carried on through the entire project of thought, inadequate basic terminology, sectors of ignorance built in like blank spots on a map and sometimes taking up 90 percent of the map itself, then we can see just how fruitful the idea of local intelligibility is as the necessary alternative to certain knowledge. Defective but still manageable rationality is what we actually have to use to make sense of the objects of our curiosity.

Wonder drives and sustains the defective rationality that gives us intelligibility under conditions where we will not even know that we have reached certain knowledge when and if we have.

Philosophy Begins in Wonder

Fear made the gods, but philosophy begins in wonder. By splicing these two sayings together we graft the contrast between religion and philosophy onto the history of the passions. Religion and mythology,

in the saying "Fear made the gods," depend on an explanation of the world in terms of an experience which begins in fear and then leads on to phases of propitiation and punishment until ending in sacrifice or atonement, those two profoundly religious forms of apology. The world of fear is one in which we are constantly in danger and constantly in the wrong. A world made reasonable by fear is inevitably a world of sin and punishment because part of the reasonableness of this world is the belief that we have deserved whatever it is that we now fear.

On the horizon of this world made intelligible by fear is the reminder of just how much more horrible the perceived alternative explanation must have been for this one to be so acceptable that it has been the most stable, rational account of nature and experience for most times and most people. The position of Adam and, one generation later, Cain, called by name after just having done wrong, and about to be punished with what we know to be everyday human existence itself, work and wandering, this position of the burden and threat of the ordinary and the everyday, a world in which Cain's fate of never being able to die is an even more horrible punishment than Adam's of being, now for the first time, condemned to die, this is the sketch of the starting point, the genealogy of human experience seen through one version of the aperture of the passion of fear. Fear and the gods yield an intelligible world.

An equally intelligible world unfolds from the claim that philosophy begins in wonder. It is in the Platonic dialogue *Theaetetus* that Socrates connected philosophy to wonder in the words that became the famous phrase. Socrates spoke in response to the words of Theaetetus, who had reached a point of total confusion and described himself as "lost in wonder when I think of all these things."²

Wonder is, in this case, the famous Socratic moment of knowing one's ignorance, knowing that one does not know. As Theaetetus said in expanding his words, "it really makes my head swim." Socrates passes over the word "lost" in Theaetetus' description to say that this "feeling of wonder shows that you are a philosopher, since wonder is the only beginning of philosophy, and he who said that Iris was the child of Thaumas made a good genealogy." The feeling (pathos) of

wonder (to thaumalein) is, in Plato's Greek, the only arche philosophias, with the word arche used as in our word Archeology, the study of the earliest state of things. Naturally the word arche leaves open the question whether wonder exists only before philosophy, defining prephilosophy, a source whose disappearance marks the beginning of real philosophy, or whether it continues to be the passionate moment that brings on thought in every occasion of philosophy. Philosophy itself here is understood in the widest sense of knowledge, science, wisdom. It would include geometry, astronomy, the study of ethics, aesthetics, politics, the law, and so on.

In English, the word "wonder" is used in two senses. The first is that of interrogation, where wonder is a verb ("I wonder why . . ."). The sum of the many questions, "I wonder why . . .?" makes up the activity of science, in so far as science is the power to notice and put in question, rather than the power to answer. The second use is in exclamation, where "wonder" is a noun ("What a wonder!"). English preserves the connection between intellectual curiosity ("I wonder if . . .) and the pleasure of amazement, that is, wonder taken in the aesthetic sense of admiration, delight in the qualities of a thing. Admiration in its root *mira* is, of course, the Latin word for wonder and also the root word for miracle.

After his remarkable compliment to philosophy in the first half of his sentence, why does Socrates then go on to speak of the goddess Iris and her father, Thaumas? Thaumatology will remain until the Renaissance in Europe the term for the science of wonders and for miracles, that theological form of wonder that must in the end be excluded from the meaning of wonder if a modern concept of science is to be set in place. Thaumas is the god identified here by Socrates as the etymology of the word *thaumalein* (wonders).

Iris, his daughter, is the rainbow. That the rainbow is the "daughter" of wonder makes it far more than one wonder among many. It is, we might say, the first and central instance, bound to wonder not just as one item in a list, but by ties of family, as the only known child. To understand philosophy we must go to its *arche* wonder, but to think out wonder we must descend genetically (father to daughter) to the rainbow. Philosophy and the rainbow appear across the fulcrum of

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wonder, by which they are both to be known, and are understood to be related in the most fundamental way: the way of *arche* and *genealogein*.

Iris is, in Hesiod's *Theogony*, the messenger of the gods, just as heaven is the face of the gods or just as Apollo is both the sun itself and the god of light. What we think of scientifically as the objects of nature (sun, thunder, light, rainbow) are not here separated from three things: first, from the form of existence that we call personality (each thing is given identity and personal history); second, from agency (no force is understood without an agent whose force it is and whose decision to use that force is understood); and, finally, from worship, fear, gratitude, and pleasure—no object of nature is cut off from our response to it, from our delight or fear in its presence.

The name Iris imposes all three of these conditions on the rainbow. The term Iris would continue to be used in all scientific works on the rainbow down to the time of Newton—so long as they were written in Latin or translated from the Greek or Arabic into Latin. The most common Latin title for a scientific work on the rainbow, De Iride, carries on the presence of this goddess within the most advanced scientific work on light, color, and the rainbow from Aristotle through Ptolemy, Grosseteste, Bacon, Theodoric of Freiberg, Descartes, and Newton. Only Descartes, publishing in French, deliberately avoided the mythological and poetic, but nonetheless everyday French word Iris. He wrote of *l'arc-en-ciel* so as to insist on the ordinary. Even the English word rainbow, or rain-bow, while seeming prosaic, uses the word "bow" to describe the semicircular form, and in doing this we repoeticize the term with an analogy to a bow and arrow even while insisting, with the word "rain," on one part of the causal explanation of the bow. This profound causal connection to the rain is missing from the mathematical French term, which names only the arc and points out that it is an arc in the sky, l'arc-en-ciel. The differences between "arc" and "bow," "sky" (ciel) and "rain," and between either of these French or English terms and the earlier word "Iris," make clear the fact that naming always remembers only certain details about an object, thrusting them to the front whenever we want to think about it at all, with certain lines of thought already favored, the