

The Diagonal and the Cross: Faith as a Source of Wonder[★]

STEPHEN L. BROCK
Pontifical University of the Holy Cross
Rome, Italy

THE IDEA for this essay owes its origin to a recent book by the Italian philosopher Enrico Berti. The volume, a fine introduction to ancient philosophy, is entitled *In principio era la meraviglia*—“In the Beginning was Wonder.”¹ As Berti explains in the prologue, he is deliberately echoing the first words of St. John’s Gospel, “In the beginning was the Logos.” Berti wants to contrast the starting-point of philosophy with that of the Christian religion.

Christianity starts from the absolute beginning, the first principle of reality—from God, whose Word created all things and became flesh in order to reveal His saving truth to men. This of course is not where philosophy starts. It starts from the things themselves, the familiar, visible ones; and more precisely, from the effect that these things have on the mind of one who beholds them in a certain way. This effect is wonder. In the *Theaetetus*, Plato has Socrates say that “it pertains to the philosopher . . . to be full of wonder, and there is no other beginning of philosophy than this.”² And Aristotle, in the *Metaphysics*, tells us that “it is owing to their wonder that men both now begin and at first began to philosophize.”³

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¹ Enrico Berti, *In principio era la meraviglia. Le grandi questioni della filosofia antica* (Rome: Laterza, 2007).

² Plato, *Theaetetus*, 155d.

³ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* I 2, 982b12–13.

Wonder is not the beginning of things. It only provokes the search for the beginnings of things, their principles or causes. Moreover, at least according to Aristotle, the first searches generated by wonder did not concern the most fundamental causes. They had a more restricted and particular scope. Later we shall see some examples. But only little by little did there emerge truly philosophical wonder, the wonder that motivates the search for wisdom. This concerns the very first causes, the principles of all things—of being in its entirety, as being. And only toward the end of the search does it become clear that the highest principle is something divine. Thus, in a way, philosophy ends just where faith begins.

Berti is not Heidegger. He is not saying that this difference between the origin of faith and the origin of philosophy makes them incompatible. A believer may very well philosophize.⁴ But the religious and the philosophical motivations remain distinct. Religion is born of the desire for salvation, especially salvation from death. Revelation shows the way toward it. The wonder that is at the origin of philosophy, on the other hand, is a pure desire to know. The philosopher, as such, finds the knowledge of the principles, especially the very first principles, to be desirable in itself, for its own sake, not merely as a guide to salvation.

Now I have no real quarrel with any of this. It seems right to say that the chief desire that religion aims to satisfy—both religion in general, and the Christian religion in particular—is not the wonder that Berti is talking about. It is the desire for salvation. But what I wish to suggest here, with the help of St. Thomas, is that nevertheless within religion—at least the Christian religion—there is still a role, and a significant one, for such wonder. In particular, I would like to propose that faith itself gives rise to a wonder of this sort; in other words, that there is a wonder that only the believer can experience. Even though it is based on faith, it is the same type of mental attitude as philosophical wonder. To explain this, I shall draw an analogy with an example of wonder furnished by Aristotle. As I see it, this analogy is a further aspect of the comparison between theological faith and human belief, as sources of the search for truth, that John Paul II explores in the encyclical *Fides et Ratio*.⁵

Wonder in General

First I need to identify the specific type of wonder that I am talking about. As Berti observes, wonder is really a rather broad notion.⁶ To *wonder* would be the translation of what Aristotle calls *thaumazein*. In

⁴ Berti, *In principio era la meraviglia*, vi.

⁵ See John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, especially nos. 32–33.

⁶ Berti, *In principio era la meraviglia*, viii.

Aquinas the word is *admirari*; the substantive, *admiratio*. Mostly following Aristotle, Thomas offers some fairly detailed accounts of the nature of wonder and of its various kinds.⁷ I shall sum up what I think are his most salient points.

Speaking generally, *admiratio* is a certain desire to know. Not everything that people want to know, however, is an object of *admiratio*. What *admiratio* bears upon is the *admirabile*, the wonderful. The wonderful, as such, is something that is desirable to know just for its own sake, not merely for some further utility. For this reason, it is also pleasant to know. And wonder itself, in all its forms, is also accompanied by a certain pleasure. Still, not even all the things that are pleasant to know are wonderful. Sometimes we enjoy seeing or hearing about the most obvious and familiar things, things that arouse no wonder at all.⁸ The wonderful is something that somehow exceeds or surpasses the knower, something that he does not entirely master, at least not without effort. For this reason, in addition to pleasure, *admiratio* often involves an element of fear, or at any rate some sort of insecurity, arising from one's being faced with something that is not obvious or banal or easily handled.⁹

The examples of wonder that Thomas offers cover a rather large variety of emotions.¹⁰ What prompts *admiratio* may simply be something great or high, something sublime, that we grasp only poorly or that far exceeds our capacity. This sort of thing fascinates us. Similar to this is the sort of *admiratio* that results from having been freed from a great danger. We enjoy recalling, reliving, and hearing about such events. Then there is the *admiratio* generated by what is new or unusual. Thomas observes that infants are full of this sort of *admiratio*, because for them *everything* is new and unusual.¹¹ Yet another sort of *admiratio* regards representations. Even the representations of things that in themselves are ugly or repugnant can attract our gaze, for the pleasure of grasping the relation between the representation and what it represents. Thomas explains that this is pleasant because the act of relating one thing to another is proper and connatural to the power of reason. Of

⁷ The chief texts that I shall draw upon are *Summa theologiae* (ST) I–II, q. 32, a. 8; ST I–II, q. 41, a. 4; S. Thomae Aquinatis, *In XII libros Metaphysicorum expositio* (= *In Meta.*), ed. M.-R. Cathala and R.-M. Spiazzi (Turin: Marietti, 1950), Lib. I, lect. 3, §§54–56, §§66–67. (Translations of Thomas in this essay are mine.) In Aristotle, in addition to the passages from the *Metaphysics* that I shall cite, see *Rhetoric* I 11, 1371a31–b11.

⁸ See ST I–II, q. 32, a. 8, ad 3.

⁹ See ST I, q. 41, a. 4; ST II–II, q. 180, a. 3, ad 3.

¹⁰ See ST I–II, q. 32, a. 8.

¹¹ See S. Thomae Aquinatis, *In Aristotelis librum De memoria et reminiscencia commentarium*, ed. R.-M. Spiazzi (Turin: Marietti, 1949), Lib. un., lect. 3, §332.

each of the types of *admiratio* mentioned so far, I think it would be easy to find examples in the Christian life. Certainly the faith leads us to consider and to admire highly sublime truths, divine truths, which immeasurably transcend our understanding and our capacity. The Scriptures also tell the story of our liberation from the greatest of dangers. The Gospel is certainly a novelty, unprecedented and unforeseen—the Good News of the Kingdom of God, which one must accept as a child. And the believer is pleased to discern the meaning of the many symbols and representations of the things of the faith, even those whose immediate objects have nothing attractive about them, such as the crucifix—though of course what it represents has a further significance of its own, a highly attractive one.

The Specificity of Philosophical Wonder

However, none of the aforementioned types of *admiratio* is the wonder that Berti is talking about. The difference is very simple. In each of the above cases, the object of *admiratio* is something already known. Its characteristics make it somehow fascinating. Knowing it makes one want to continue looking at it, so as to lose oneself in its grandeur, or to rest in the sense of security that it offers, or to be refreshed by its novel flavor, or to appreciate its meaningfulness, as the case may be.¹² But the object of the wonder that Berti is talking about is something not yet known. It is a matter for inquiry. The expression of this wonder is not an exclamation: *how lovely!* or *what luck!* or *how extraordinary!* It is rather a question: *how in the world . . . ?* or *why?* or simply *what is that?* Of course there is something known that gives rise to the question. But what one desires to know, what one wonders about, is the thing's cause, its explanation, which is hidden. The knowledge that chiefly stimulates this wonder is in fact the knowledge of one's own ignorance.¹³ A high-ranking government official once quipped that there are things we know, things we know that we do not know, and things we do not know that we do not know. Philosophical wonder falls in the second category. The wonderer desires to know something that he knows he does not know.

Thomas regards this sort of wonder as a very common feature of human life. It is perhaps the most typical expression of that natural desire

¹² On the sort of wonder that consists in a desire to continue looking, see *Summa contra Gentiles*, ed. P. Marc, C. Pera, P. Caramello (Turin: Marietti, 1961–67), III, c. 62, par. 9 (§2372).

¹³ According to Aristotle, the fact that what is desired is to overcome one's ignorance shows that the knowledge sought is desired for its own sake and not merely for some practical use: *Metaphysics* I 2, 982b19–22.

that Aristotle speaks of in the first lines of the *Metaphysics*, the desire to know. Of course not every desire to know is a desire for an explanation. It may be only curiosity about some new fact. But our mind really comes to rest only in the explanations of the facts, the knowledge of their causes. When faced with a fact that we cannot explain, we are thrown off balance. Our world is somehow destabilized.

We have all seen this sort of unrest—not very philosophical, perhaps, but altogether spontaneous, natural—in children. Not long ago I was in an airport lobby, seated near a lady and her young son. The boy was seven or eight years old. He was a gush of questions. “Mom, why do we have to wait so long? Mom, why is that man doing that? Mom, why is there so much noise?” Mom answered with wonderful patience. But finally there came a really impossible question (I forget what it was), and she replied, still very patiently, “You must understand, Johnny, I don’t know all the answers.” To which Johnny retorted, “Mom, why don’t you know all the answers?”

Here are some examples of wonder offered by Aristotle:

[A]ll begin, as we have said, by wondering that things should be as they are, e.g. with regard to marionettes, or the solstices, or the incommensurability of the diagonal of a square; because it seems wonderful, to everyone who has not yet perceived the cause, that a thing should not be measurable by the smallest unit.¹⁴

The range of the examples is noteworthy. Wonder can regard artifacts, such as marionettes; or natural phenomena, such as the solstices; or even mathematical functions, such as the relation between the diagonal and the side of a square. As we would say, this relation is an irrational number, the square root of 2. It cannot be formulated in terms of natural numbers. Thomas explains that this seems strange, because the two lines—the diagonal and the side—are continuous, and so infinitely divisible; how can it be that there is simply no length, not even an extremely small one, that can function as a unit to measure both of them exactly?¹⁵

Aristotle goes on to observe that when the knowledge that this sort of wonder seeks is reached, the wonder is quenched. Indeed such wonder seeks its own quenching. “But we must end in the contrary and . . . the better state, as men do even in these cases when they understand them; for a geometrician would wonder at nothing so much as if the diagonal were to become measurable.”¹⁶ Berti puts the point more strongly.

¹⁴ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* I 2, 983a14–18 (trans. Tredennick).

¹⁵ *In Meta.*, Lib. I, lect. 3, §§66–67.

¹⁶ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* I 2, 983a19–21.

The Greeks had no taste for inquiry for its own sake; they sought in order to find. Today people sometimes prefer to conceive of philosophy as a pure or endless search. To search seems to be a rather noble, critical, refined attitude, arousing esteem and respect, whereas to find seems banal, coarse and dogmatic. The truth is that a search is sincere, or authentic, only if one seeks in order to find. He who seeks only for the pleasure of seeking does not truly seek, but feigns seeking.¹⁷

This however does not mean that there is no such thing as the “pleasure of seeking.” That is, although this wonder cannot be solely for its own sake, it still does bring pleasure with it. Thomas assigns it a twofold pleasure.¹⁸ The first is in having apprehended the thing that arouses the wonder, such as the incommensurability of the diagonal. The second, which is the pleasure most proper to wonder, pertains to the *hope* of the discovery of the cause of the thing.¹⁹ This hope, he says, is what distinguishes wonder from mere *stupor*; that is, from feeling stupid, unable to know—which is hardly pleasant.²⁰ But of course, when the desired knowledge is reached, the hope of reaching it ceases. Hope regards what is not yet had.

If this wonder is quenched when the desired knowledge is reached, is the pleasure quenched too? The pleasure of the hope is quenched. But there remains, or rather begins, the pleasure of possessing the knowledge—the pleasure that is the contrary of the pain of knowing oneself to be ignorant. This however is no longer the pleasure of wonder, at least the sort of wonder that prompted the search. The object wondered about does not surpass the subject as it did previously. It is no longer hidden from him. Thus, when one discovers the conjuror’s ruse, the fascination ceases. At best there is the pleasure of being in on the secret.

If the object, once known, remains “wonderful,” it is with a different sort of wonder. Aristotle certainly holds that the objects of theoretical inquiry, such as those of mathematics or metaphysics, are wonderful, fascinating, for anyone who succeeds in knowing them. In mathematics, the wonder perhaps lies in the object’s definiteness and necessity. It is not subject to the instability and confusion that characterize the things that

¹⁷ Berti, *In principio era la meraviglia*, x (my translation).

¹⁸ *ST I-II*, q. 32, a. 8, ad 1. Here, instead of *talem esse quem non aestimabat*, I propose reading *talem esse qualem non aestimabat*.

¹⁹ Also interesting are *ST I-II*, q. 32, a. 8, ad 2 & ad 3: in some cases the search can even be more pleasant than the knowledge attained, because the perception of one’s ignorance stimulates a greater desire, and this renders the activity more intense and therefore more pleasant.

²⁰ See *ST I-II*, q. 41, a. 4.

usually occupy us. There is pleasure in seeing that even if the whole world should crumble, the diagonal will always remain incommensurable.

One other point in Aristotle's discussion of wonder deserves mention. He observes that those who first went beyond the common perceptions of men, for example in discovering some art, were considered wise and superior, and they too became objects of wonder to the others.²¹ What sort of wonder is this? Aristotle does not say, but I do not think it is merely the sort that provokes an exclamation. I would connect it with what he says a few lines previously: one of the features that distinguish the arts and sciences from mere sensation or experience is the fact that he who possesses an art or a science can also teach it, explain it to others.²² To say that the wise man is an object of wonder, then, may mean that, just like the objects of his knowledge, he himself—qua knowing them—is desirable to know. One wants to share in his wisdom, to learn from him. In other words, the professor, qua professor, is something wonderful (though perhaps only so long as he knows something that you do not).²³

Christianity and the Desire to Know

The mention of teaching serves as a bridge to the topic of faith. At least in Thomas's thought, the fact that faith or belief is something essential to the Christian religion is closely tied to the fact that, in Christianity, one relates to God as to a teacher. In revealing His Word, God is teaching us, instructing us in the way to salvation. As Thomas says in the *proemium* to the *Tertia pars* of the *Summa theologiae*, "our Savior the Lord Jesus Christ, in order to 'save His people from their sins,' as the angel announced, showed unto us in his own person the way of truth, whereby we may attain to the bliss of eternal life by rising again."

This bliss is of course something supernatural. There is no natural "method" for reaching it. Still, Thomas judges the way in which God has chosen to convey His teaching to be quite in keeping with our rational nature. It is a *discursive* way.²⁴ We do not learn the teaching all at once, but gradually, step by step. And it is right here, in the rational and human mode of this teaching, that Thomas locates the precise need for faith, for believing certain supernatural truths, in order to reach salvation. He cites

²¹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* I 1, 981b15.

²² Aristotle, *Metaphysics* I 1, 981b7–9.

²³ According to Thomas, part of the task of the teacher is to provoke wonder in the students. On this see the fine study by Marie I. George, "Mind Forming and *manuductio* in Aquinas," *The Thomist* 57 (1993): 201–13.

²⁴ *ST* II–II, q. 2, a. 3.

Aristotle: “he who is learning must believe.”²⁵ It often happens in teaching that the teacher must say certain things that the students are not at that moment capable of grasping fully. They will do so only later on, toward the end of the course. But if they do not believe these things, if they do not put faith in the teacher, they will not follow his teaching, and they will never succeed in grasping them fully.

What I wish to underscore is the fact that, although the truths revealed by God are supernatural, the need to believe them answers to a certain natural modality, in the sense of a rational one, pertaining to revelation. For Thomas revelation also possesses other “natural” dimensions. Some of them are quite pertinent to the theme of wonder—the same sort of wonder that philosophy involves, the wonder that consists in the desire to know.

First of all, we should remember that in Thomas’s view, the knowledge that God wants to teach us is not merely useful or practical knowledge. It does not regard only the movement *toward* salvation or toward the bliss of eternal life. Revelation also informs us that what beatitude *consists* in is a kind of knowledge. “This is eternal life, that they may know you, the one true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 17:3). This knowledge is not practical; it is theoretical, contemplative, for its own sake. It is maximally delightful. Moreover, as is well known, for Thomas not only happiness or bliss in general, but also that in which it most truly consists—the vision of the divine essence—is in some way the object of a natural desire of the mind (although it is attainable only with the help of supernatural grace).²⁶ The supernatural vision of God is the object of a natural wonder.

There has been a great deal of discussion of the natural desire for the vision of God and of its relation to grace in Thomas’s thought. Here I only wish to stress the fact that for him this desire has the character of wonder. There comes to mind what we are told of another boy, the young Thomas himself.²⁷ According to the account, he too was full of wonder. But there was just one question that he would incessantly put to his tutor: *quid est Deus*—what is God? Poor tutor. Later Thomas would realize that he had not been asking the right person. But he would also insist that the ques-

²⁵ *ST* II–II, q. 2, a. 3. The original runs: δεῖ γὰρ πιστεύειν τὸν μαθητὴν. Aristotle, *Sophistical Refutations*, ch. 2, 165b3.

²⁶ See, *inter alia*, *ST* I, q. 12, a. 1; *ST* I–II, q. 3, a. 8; S. Thomae Aquinatis, *Super evangelium S. Matthaei lectura*, ed. P. Raphaelis Cai, O.P. (Turin: Marietti, 1951), V.ii, §434.

²⁷ See Petrus Calo, *Vita S. Thomae Aquinatis*, §3, in *Fontes vitae S. Thomae Aquinatis notis historicis et criticis illustrati*, ed. D. M. Prümmer and M.-H. Laurent (Toulouse: Saint Maximin, 1911–37 [originally six issues of the *Revue Thomiste*]), vol. 1, 19.

tion is by no means out of bounds, a matter too high for such a poor creature as man. To say that the human mind is unable to know the divine essence, he maintains, is contrary not only to the faith but also to reason itself. This is because “in man there is a natural desire to know the cause, once the effect is grasped; from this arises wonder in men. So if the intellect of the rational creature cannot attain the first cause of things, the natural desire will turn out to be in vain.”²⁸ Human nature, a work of divine wisdom, would be badly made, incoherent with itself.

Still, one might wonder whether the question about the divine essence is really one that strictly natural reason is apt to pose. After all, the young Thomas had already received the grace of faith. However, it is important not to misunderstand the claim that the question is natural. This does not mean that all men will actually pose it. What Thomas says is that, once the effect is grasped, one naturally wants to know the cause. Once we understand that there are things that could not exist if there were no God—no supreme being, source of the rest and different from the rest—then there stirs the desire to know what this God is. But at the same time, this wonder will in a way be the most natural, because it concerns that which is most truly a cause, the very first cause, cause of all other causes. And I would suggest that we do find an example of this wonder in the writings of a mere pagan—in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*. It is not at the beginning, but toward the end, in the discussion of the first, unmoved mover (which Thomas, at least, identifies with the one true God).

Aristotle declares that the God upon whom heaven and earth depend is happy. He enjoys a supremely good life, that of the very best vital activity, the most pleasant one: the activity of the mind that contemplates what is most excellent. And then Aristotle says, “If the God is always in that good state in which we sometimes are, this compels our wonder; and if in a better, this compels it yet more. And the God is in a better state.”²⁹ Wonder. Is Aristotle simply uttering an exclamation? I think he means that the essence of God’s activity—which on his view is identical with the essence of God—surpasses us. He is always in a better state than we *ever* are, even when we philosophize about Him. We know that this essence exists, but not even at the end of our human search for wisdom do we grasp what it is.

We might say, then, that the question “what is God?” both is and is not a philosophical question. Philosophy succeeds in raising it, in showing that it is a genuine question, by showing that what it is about exists; but

²⁸ *ST* I, q. 12, a. 1; see *ST* I–II, q. 3, a. 8.

²⁹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* XII 7, 1072b24–27.

not in answering it.³⁰ However, if the question is truly an expression of wonder, then on Thomas's account, it must involve some hope of finding the answer. I suppose we can only guess what sort of hope Aristotle might have had. Perhaps only supernatural faith can ground an altogether *certain* hope of reaching this knowledge. At any rate, it seems clear that, even without faith, natural reason can appreciate this knowledge as surpassingly good and desirable, maximally beatifying.

What I shall propose in the last part of this essay is that the Christian faith "compels our wonder" about the divine nature—shows it to be something wonderful, desirable to know—even more than philosophy can. But first let me indicate one other sort of wonder that is connected with the doctrine of the Christian faith, and that will turn out to be pertinent to the later discussion. This too concerns a human, "natural" dimension of the doctrine; but this time, not on the side of the disciple, who insofar as he learns in a rational way must believe his teacher, but on the side of the teacher himself—the Incarnate Word.

The wonder that I am referring to is not that which Jesus provoked in others in order to incite their belief—that is, in order to obtain recognition as a teacher—by way of his miracles (his *wonderful* works) and his wisdom-filled utterances. It is the wonder that Jesus himself experienced. In the course of examining the characteristics that the Son of God assumed in the Incarnation, Thomas asks whether He has a human intellect. Of course his answer is affirmative, but what is interesting is the proof that he offers: the fact that Jesus wondered. The reference is to the episode of the Roman centurion, at whose faith, Matthew tells us, Jesus marveled (Matthew 8:10). Thomas explains: "Wonder cannot exist without reason"—that is, without a specifically human intellect—"because it implies an act of relating an effect to its cause; to wit, when someone sees an effect and is ignorant of its cause, he seeks to know it, as is said in the beginning of the *Metaphysics*."³¹

Further on, Thomas includes this wonder among the "defects" of human nature that Jesus assumed. As we saw, such wonder implies ignorance. Thomas does hold that Jesus' human intellect enjoyed the beatific vision from the very beginning of its existence. Nevertheless, he maintains, this did not exclude the capacity for acquiring knowledge in the normal human way, the way that starts from sense-experience. There were things about which Jesus did not always have "experiential knowledge" (*scientia experimentalis*), things that he discovered and learned.

³⁰ See *Fides et Ratio*, no. 33.

³¹ ST III, q. 5, a. 4. See also *Compendium theologiae* I, c. 205; *Summa contra Gentiles* IV, c. 33, par. 5 (§3691); *Super evangelium S. Matthaei lectura* VIII.ii, §702.

Thomas judges that Jesus assumed this wonder for our instruction, “so as to teach us to wonder at what He Himself wondered at.”³² In the case of the centurion, what we are taught to find wonderful is this gentile’s very faith in Him. This is rather striking. It means that, in a way, Jesus was wondering about *Himself*, as the object of this faith.

Mathematical Wonder Arising from Human Faith

Now I shall try to explain why I say that Christian faith, which is wonderful in itself, is also a source of wonder, the same general sort of wonder as that which prompts philosophical inquiry. In the text that I have in mind, Thomas compares the apprehension (cognitio) of God that is had through grace with that which can be had through natural reason. Grace, he holds, gives a higher apprehension. One of the objections that he takes into consideration is that in this life, no matter how perfectly one is united to God, He remains entirely unknown, and that even by natural reason one can be united to Him in this way; so grace does not seem to provide any higher apprehension. In the reply, Thomas grants that in this life, not even the revelation of grace gives an understanding of what God is, His essence, so that by it we are joined to Him as though to one unknown (quasi ignoto). Nevertheless the apprehension that it gives is higher than that of natural reason, in two ways. By grace, “we apprehend Him more fully, according as many and more excellent of His effects are shown to us, and according as by revelation we attribute to Him some things which natural reason cannot reach, as, for instance, that God is Three and One.”³³

It is the first of these ways that is especially of interest to us: “according as many and more excellent of His effects are shown to us.” Here we have the very structure of wonder. By grace, we grasp certain effects of God that natural reason does not grasp. These effects are still not adequate to show what the cause is—what God is—but they do make us grasp Him in a fuller way.³⁴ We grasp that He is even more transcendent, more unknown, than reason can say He is. The revealed effects render God even more wonderful.³⁵

At the same time, we should not forget that these effects are grasped by faith. This means that we do not see them. Faith bears on what is not seen. Only God and the blessed see these effects. It may therefore seem

³² *ST* III, q. 15, a. 8.

³³ *ST* I, q. 12, a. 13, ad 1.

³⁴ See *ST* II–II, q. 2, a. 3, ad 3.

³⁵ See *ST* II–II, q. 1, a. 1: by the effects of God that fall within the material object of faith, man is helped to tend toward the enjoyment of God.

odd to say that they can elicit our wonder, particularly if we have in mind the connection between wonder and philosophy. It is common, I think, to suppose that philosophical inquiry always starts from something seen and takes nothing on faith. Especially since Descartes, the philosopher is typically imagined to be one who doubts everything that he cannot see clearly for himself or cannot prove definitively from what he sees. He is not disposed to accept anything on the mere authority of another, even of a teacher—not disposed to go to school. Descartes' anti-scholastic project might almost be summed up as an effort to set aside Aristotle's maxim, "he who would learn must believe."³⁶

Can Aristotelian wonder be aroused by something not seen, something merely believed? I think it can. In fact I think an example of this has already been cited, that of the diagonal. This too is interesting in relation to Descartes, at least if it is true, as is often said, that he takes mathematics as the paradigm of knowledge. One might doubt whether his conception of mathematical method is the same as Aristotle's. But let us concentrate on the diagonal.

The diagonal of a square, they say, is incommensurable with the side. I imagine that most of us are ready to accept this. But do we really know it? Or do we only believe it? How many of us can actually prove it, that is, show why it is true? It is hardly something that one immediately sees. Of course we do see something. We can see the square and the diagonal traced inside it. There is no wonder here. But the incommensurability of the diagonal with the side can be seen, or grasped with intellectual "vision," *only by means of the proof*.³⁷ In other words, in this case one does not first see the fact, and then inquire into its cause or its explanation. If one does not see the explanation, neither does one see the fact. Without the explanation, the fact can only be believed.

This is not the place to go into the proof of the incommensurability of the diagonal. But in order to teach the proof, what would one need to

³⁶ Perhaps it is no accident that Cartesian philosophy does not begin from wonder at the things perceived by the senses. It does not begin as a search for the causes of such things; it begins by putting the things themselves in doubt. It does not accept the "authority" of the senses. According to Thomas, it is true that wonder contains an element of doubt. But the doubt is not about the fact that gives rise to the wonder. The fact is accepted as certain. What there is doubt or uncertainty about is one's own judgment of it (see *ST* I–II, q. 41, a. 4, ad 5). One doubts one's own capacity to explain and measure the fact, and one seeks the explanation. If there is a teacher who can help to guide the search, all the better. By contrast, if one doubts the fact itself, it makes no sense to seek its cause.

³⁷ When one has scientific proof of some truth, the truth is "seen," not immediately, but in light of the first premises. See *ST* I, q. 12, a. 13, ad 3; II–II, q. 1, a. 5.

do? Would it suffice to declare its fundamental premise? Its fundamental premise—I refer to the proof that Aristotle knew—is that the same number cannot be both even and odd.³⁸ In itself, this is a truth that we all understand. But if we only say that it is the fundamental premise of the proof, we have not yet explained anything. We have not yet shown that the diagonal's incommensurability follows from it. And so we have simply not yet shown the diagonal's incommensurability.

Elizabeth Anscombe, in a discussion of how one arrives at practical truth, says that she once saw as the motto of a chapter in a textbook of higher mathematics the line from St. James (1:22), "Be ye doers of the word and not hearers only." This was right, she says; "one does not learn mathematics by learning that mathematical propositions are truths, but by working out their proofs. . . . You have to do the mathematics; and the teacher can get you to do it: that is what teaching mathematics is."³⁹

The teacher can get you to do mathematics. He can guide you through the steps of the proof. But he can do so only if you are disposed to follow him. Suppose I tell a boy who has done a bit of geometry, but not much, "You know, there is no single unit, not even an extremely tiny one, with which to measure both of these lines exactly." It is rather likely that he will not believe me. For indeed, at first hearing, the proposition does not seem very credible. But if he does not believe me—or at least, if he does not to some extent "suspend disbelief"—then I *cannot* get him to see it. He will not listen to me or follow me through the proof. He will think I am only trying to trick him or to make him waste his time. Moreover, if he does not believe me, he will not experience any wonder at the incommensurability of the diagonal, because he will not consider it a fact. He will experience wonder only if he grants me at least some degree of mathematical authority, enough to give some degree of credit to my claim. Then perhaps he will say, "Really? Show me why!" This is why I say that even in mathematics, faith or belief can be a genuine source of wonder.

Christian Faith as a Source of Wonder

Is there anything analogous to this in the Christian faith? I imagine that there are many things, but for now I wish to suggest just one: the Crucifixion.

Here too, as with the square and the diagonal, there is something visible: a man hanging from a cross. But who is that man, and what is he

³⁸ See Aristotle, *Prior Analytics* I 23, 41a25–30; I 44, 50a37.

³⁹ G. E. M. Anscombe, "Authority in Morals," in *Faith in a Hard Ground: Essays on Religion, Philosophy and Ethics* by G. E. M. Anscombe, ed. Mary Geach and Luke Gormally, St. Andrews Studies in Philosophy and Public Affairs (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2008), 95, 97.

doing? According to his own account, he is the Son of God, and he is saving the world. Do we see this? Of course not. One who lacks faith does not accept it. This fact—the salvation of the world by the death of the Son of God on a cross—is one of those effects of God that natural reason cannot apprehend.

If an effect is not apprehended, one does not wonder at its cause—at least, not as cause of that effect. Philosophy can know the existence of God, as first cause of the world; and as we saw in Aristotle, it can wonder at Him. But Aristotle did not wonder at God as cause of this effect, the salvation of the world through Christ's passion and death.

Revelation does tell us what it is about God that led Him to cause this effect: His love, and more precisely, the *magnitude* of His love. At least in Thomas's view, the simple fact that God loves the world is something that natural reason can know. But it cannot know that He loves it so much. "God so loved the world that he gave His only-begotten Son, so that whoever believes in him should not die, but should have eternal life" (John 3:16). That Christ suffered and died for us is a sign of the magnitude of God's love for us, and Thomas judges that one of the reasons why it was especially fitting for Christ to suffer was precisely that man would thereby apprehend how much God loves him.⁴⁰ But all of this is a matter of faith. We cannot see, we can only believe, that God's love is what moved Jesus to suffer and die. Nor can we see this love as it is in itself, in its full magnitude. Rather, *if* we believe that Christ died for our salvation and that His doing so was moved by God's love for us, then we are led to believe that this love is very great, and we may wonder at its greatness. Only faith can give rise to this wonder.⁴¹

The wonder at God's love that I am talking about is not simply a feeling of awe or amazement. It is also the desire to understand it, to see it as it is in itself and not just to believe in it. God Himself wants us to believe in His Son in order that, by believing, we may enter into eternal

⁴⁰ *ST* III, q. 46, a. 3: through Christ's passion, "homo cognoscit quantum Deus hominem diligit, et per hoc provocatur ad eum diligendum, in quo perfectio humanae salutis consistit. Unde apostolus dicit, Rom.V, commendat suam caritatem Deus in nobis, quoniam, cum inimici essemus, Christus pro nobis mortuus est."

⁴¹ I do not mean to suggest that God revealed the magnitude of His love for us chiefly in order to elicit this wonder. As the quotations in the previous note indicate, the principal aim would be to provoke our own love for Him in return. However, one of the consequences of loving Him is surely the desire to behold Him and His love. (Thus *ST* I-II, q. 28, a. 2: "amans non est contentus superficiali apprehensione amati, sed nititur singula quae ad amatum pertinent intrinsecus disquirere, et sic ad interiora eius ingreditur.") Wonder is not always an "impersonal" attitude.

life—that is, into the full knowledge of the one true God and of Jesus Christ whom we believe He has sent on account of His great love for us. Only in heaven will God’s love for us be seen in all its grandeur; and only then will one see, rather than believe, the effect of this love, see that Jesus is the Son of God and that His death on the Cross has saved us. “And in that day you shall not ask me anything” (John 16:23).⁴²

The analogy with mathematics can be taken further. Reaching eternal life depends on believing, but this is only the beginning of the process. To believe means to accept Jesus as one’s teacher, to be his disciple (μαθητής). As a true teacher, however, Jesus not only tells us what we have to believe, in order to know the truth that He knows—that He *is*—but also presents us with a way to follow (μέθοδος). He is the way (ὁδός; John 14:6). And it is not enough to listen to him. There are assignments to be carried out. The word must be put into practice. One must take up one’s own cross and follow Him, step by step.

To say the least, the steps along this way are rather different from those of the proof of the diagonal’s incommensurability. Among other things, it is not a matter of simply drawing conclusions from already accepted premises. On the other hand, neither is it solely a matter of performing external deeds. The science of the Cross is first and foremost an interior purification. Those who will see God are the pure in heart. The heart has to become able to respond to His love and worthy to enter into the light and the joy of His truth.⁴³ The process inevitably involves effort and pain. But insofar as it is moved by hope of the goal, it also brings a certain foretaste of that joy. And an excellent way to cultivate the hope is to renew one’s wonder at the Master. In the words of a famous sixteenth-century Dominican:

[D]elight accompanies wonder, when he who wonders hopes to reach the knowledge of what he wonders at. Now, there is nothing more wonderful than a God made man and crucified for men. Hence, when the Christian contemplates this, with the firm hope of reaching the vision of such a great reality, he takes so much delight that nothing can be more delightful to him.⁴⁴

⁴² This is not to say that in heaven there will not be other kinds of wonder, such as the sheer awe at God’s grandeur and sublimity. This, Thomas judges, will be more intense than ever. See *ST* II–II, q. 19, a. 11.

⁴³ See *Super evangelium S. Matthaei lectura*, V.ii, §§434–35.

⁴⁴ “[A]dmirationem sequitur delectatio, quando qui admiratur sperat ad cognitionem eius de quo miratur pervenire. Nihil autem est mirabilius quam Deum factum hominem et pro hominibus crucifixum. Cum ergo Christianus hoc contemplatur, cum spe firma perveniendi ad visionem tantae rei, adeo delectatur

But Thomas does not merely recommend this wonder to us. In a remarkable passage in his commentary on the Gospel of St. Matthew, he suggests that the first to experience wonder at the Cross was none other than Jesus himself—during the very Crucifixion. Thomas is glossing the words of Matthew 27:46, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”—*Deus, Deus meus, ut quid dereliquisti me?* First he explains in what sense God “forsook” Jesus: not with respect to Jesus’ very union with God, nor with respect to His grace, but with respect to the human goods that he was deprived of in His passion—for we have these goods from God. Thomas then focuses on the words *ut quid*—“why?”

And he says “why?” not as though out of weariness, but perhaps as indicating compassion toward the Jews; thus he does not say it until after it grew dark, so that he would mean, “why have you willed that I be handed over to suffer, and that these be left in darkness?” And it also indicates wonder, for thus the charity of God is wonderful; as it says in Romans 5:8, “God commends His charity toward us, because when as yet we were sinners, according to the time, Christ died for us.”⁴⁵

Here Thomas is recognizing that although “why?” has the form of a question, it is sometimes uttered only as the expression of certain emotional states, not as a request for knowledge. Although Jesus would not be showing weariness, He may simply be showing compassion. But then Thomas suggests that He may also be asking a real question. He would be expressing the desire to know the magnitude of the love that has prompted the Father to give His only-begotten Son. Once again, in a way Jesus would be wondering about Himself, as to His suffering and dying on account of this love; and He would be doing so for our instruction, “so as to teach us to wonder at what He Himself wondered at.” I am in no position to judge how plausible this interpretation of Jesus’ utterance is. But it certainly does indicate that, for St. Thomas, the place of wonder in Christian life is anything but marginal. N V

ut nihil ei possit esse delectabilius.” Girolamo Savonarola, *De simplicitate christianae vitae*, ed. Pier Giorgio Ricci (Rome: Angelo Belardetti Editore, 1959), Liber V, Conclusio XV, 120 (my translation).

⁴⁵ “*Et dicit ut quid? Non quasi ex taedio, sed potest designare compassionem ad Iudaeos unde non dixit nisi postquam tenebrae essent; unde vult dicere: quare voluisti ut passioni traderer, et isti obtenebrarentur? Item signat admirationem, unde admirabilis est Dei caritas. Ad Rom. V, 8: commendat Deus caritatem suam in nobis, quoniam cum adhuc peccatores essemus, secundum tempus Christus pro nobis mortuus est*”: *Super evangelium S. Matthaei lectura*, XXVII.ii, §2383.