

The Dearth of Astonishment and Thinking as Negativity

Ontological Astonishment and Hegelian negativity

A widely present view throughout the philosophical tradition proposes that to be intelligible is to be determinate; indeed to be, properly speaking, is to be determinate. Needless to say, the status of determinacy and determination is at issue here. One might ask: How comes the determinate to be determinate? How does it come about that being as determinate is determinable by thought and hence rendered intelligible? The issue of a *becoming* determinate is at stake, not just some entirely static sense of being. One can see Hegel's connection of thinking with determinate negation, or more generally with subjectivity as self-relating negativity, as answering to such questions. What is simply given to be is not intelligible as such; it is a mere immediacy till rendered intelligible, either through its own becoming intelligible, or through being made intelligible by thinking. Thinking as negativity moves us from the simple givenness of the "to be" to the more determinately intelligible; but the former (the "to be") is no more than an indeterminacy, and hence deficient in true intelligibility, till this further development, determination has been made by thinking as negativity. A further complication in Hegel's view is that thinking as process of negation is not only a determining; it is in process towards knowing itself as a process of self-determining. Hence his more complex description: self-relating negativity. The operation of negation is not only a determination of what is other to the thinking, it is the coming to itself of the thinking process. In that sense, the return of thinking to itself, in the process of determining what is other, is not just making determinate, it is *self-determining*. The determining power of thinking in negativity is hence inseparable from Hegel's understanding of the meaning of

freedom. But there is a logic overall that governs the movement of thinking as negativity: thinking moves from indeterminacy to determination to self-determination.

I want to say that in all of this there is a dearth of ontological astonishment. I propose to explore some aspects of this dearth. For instance, given being as a mere indeterminate immediacy can barely be said to be, and even less said to be intelligible till rendered so by determining thinking which mediates by negativity. Hence being becomes the most indigent of the categories that is all but nothing, till thought understands that it has already passed over into becoming. I don't want to rehearse the famous opening of Hegel's *Logic*, but want to suggest, among other things, that Hegelian negativity, via a logic of self-determining thought, is born of and leads to a dearth of ontological astonishment. Instead of a sense of being as the marvel of the "too much," we find rather an indigence of "all but nothing." I think we need to distinguish between different modalities of wonder relevant to the issue: first a more primal ontological astonishment that seeds metaphysical mindfulness; second a restless perplexity in which thinking seeks to transcend initial indeterminacy towards more and more determinate outcomes; third, more determinate curiosity in which the initiating openness of wonder is dispelled in a determinate solution to a determinate problem.

Determining thought answers to a powerful curiosity that renders intelligible the given, rather than to a primal astonishment before the marvel of the "to be" as given – given with a fullness impossible to describe in the language of negativity, though indeed in a certain sense it is no thing. Heidegger, for instance, has a truer sense of this other nothing. My focus is less defending Heidegger as to suggest the need to grant something more than a logos of becoming and self-becoming – there is an event of "coming to be" that asks of us a different logos. It asks of us a different sense of being, a different sense of nothing – not the nothing defining a determinate process of becoming, or a

determining nothing defining a self-becoming: a nothing in relation to which a coming to be arises – a coming to be that is more primal than becoming. In a way, we can say nothing univocally direct about this nothing; rather we need to attend to how becoming and self-becoming presuppose this other sense of coming to be. A sense of this is communicated in the happening of a primal astonishment before the happening of the “to be.” I would call this “overdeterminate” rather than just an indigent indeterminacy. In light of it every process of determination and self-determination are secretly accompanied by what they cannot entirely accommodate on their own terms. This granting of the overdeterminacy of the “to be” has significance in relation to the dearth of ontological astonishment coming from understanding thinking as determinate negation, or self-relating negativity. It has very important implication for the practise(s) of metaphysical thinking, especially one that tries to stay true to metaphysical wonder in the mode of primal astonishment.

I will shortly say something about these three modalities of wonder, keeping in mind that wonder is not a univocal concept. It is not first a concept at all, but a happening, and as a happening it is plurivocal. The three modalities are internally related to each other, but they reveal a different stress in the unfolding of our porosity to being. If we do not properly attend to these different stresses, we can mistakenly think all wonder is subsumable into the curiosity that makes of all being an object of determinate cognition. This subsumption might consume curiosity, but it is the death of wonder. Wonder is not to be solely reconfigured as voracious curiosity that spends itself in ceaseless accumulation of determinate cognition. Equally, there is something other to thinking as self-relating negativity in wonder. In a way one might say that we do not have a capacity for wonder; rather we are capacitated by wonder. Since this capacitation is not determined through ourselves alone, *we alone* cannot bring it to life or revive it. Wondering is not a power over which we exercise self-determination;

it witnesses to a given porosity of being that endows us with the promise of mindfulness. If there is to be a vivification of the capacity, it is in coming home again to this porosity – and its capacitating of our powers. Ingredient in this homecoming is our capacity to know incapacitation.

Being Overdeterminate: Wonder as Astonishment

Turning to the first modality of wonder as astonishment, I find it impossible to describe this astonishment in the language of negativity. There is a wonder preceding determinate and self-determining cognition that takes the form of a certain ontological astonishment. Wonder before the being there of being and beings is precipitated in this astonishment. This has not to do with a process of becoming this or that but with porosity to the “that it is at all” of being. That being is, that beings have come to be at all, this is prior to their becoming this or that, prior to their self-becoming. In a certain sense, all human mindfulness is seeded in this astonishment.

A caution: the word “wonder” strikes one today as a bit too subjectivized – it is seen as the “gosh” feeling, the “wow” experience to which we give vent before the surprising and the strange. One need not deny this gosh and wow but there is an ontological bite to original wonder, perhaps captured better in English with the word “astonishment.” In astonishment there is *the stress of the emphatic*: the unexpected is not anticipated to happen and yet it happens. When we say “The wonder of it is...” and refer to a happening, we are suggesting something beyond expectation – the surprising has communicated the emphatic. Being struck by astonishment has something of the blow of unpremeditated otherness in it. Extreme astonishment can seem even to deprive one of sensation. The blow of otherness stuns us, seems to stupefy us, as if inducing a kind of black-out. Many of the

characteristics of astonishment – bewilderment, shock, consternation, deprivation of self-possession, benumbing, being “stricken” by amazement – astound one even unto a kind of ontological stupor.

All of this seems to be rife with a kind of negation – not our negation but our being negated. And yet it is more the affirmative “too-muchness” of the happening that is outlined in the event of astonishment. There is an intrusion of ontological frailty in the unpremeditated event of coming to be – it might not have come to be, it might not have been at all. And yet it is – surprising eventuation that hovers before us, floating above its own possible not being. It is hard for us to think on this boundary between being at all and possibly not being. Our porosity to the eventuation has the double character of itself happening as an opening, and being also a kind of “no-thing.” This is not thinking as negativity but rather enables its possibility. This is evident in the fact that, in the opening of porosity, the rupture of surprise, while striking into us, takes us beyond ourselves: the self-transcending of thinking is possibilized. Astonishment is not just a subjective feeling. It is more like the seeding and first fertilization of the promise of “subjectivity” by an enigmatic communication to sleeping mindfulness from out of the intimate strangeness of being. We are moved into a between space where, in a sense, we go from our minds to the things; and yet there is no fixation of the difference of minding and things; our mindfulness wakes to itself by being woken up by the communication of being in its emphatic otherness.

Instead of thinking as negativity, already even before we more reflectively come to ourselves, there is the more primal opening in astonishment – an opening of which I would speak in terms of a certain porosity of being. In this porosity there is no fixed boundary between there and here, between outside and inside, there is a passage from what is into the awakening of mindfulness as, before any effort of its own self-determination, opened to what communicates to it from beyond itself. We do not

open ourselves; being opened, we are as an opening. Astonishment awakens the porosity of mindfulness to being, in the communication of being to mindfulness, before mind comes to itself in more determinate form(s). In that respect also, it correlates with a more original “coming to be” prior to the formation of different processes of determinate becoming, and the more settled arrival of relatively determinate beings and processes. This is an important point in relation to the difference between wonder in the modalities of astonishment and curiosity.

It is hard to think this more original porosity of astonishment, for all thinking already presupposes it as having happened. All determinate knowing proceeds from it, but it is not yet determinate knowing; nevertheless some sense of it can be communicated. I behold the majestic tree and murmur: “This is astonishing!” I am not projecting my feeling; I am being awakened by the tree, and am awakening to myself, in a more primal porosity, where the striking otherness of this blossoming presence has found its way into the intimate recesses of my now roused and receiving attendance. This astonishment is not a vector of intentionality that goes from subject to object; it is a porosity prior to intentionality, and hence refers us back to a patience of being more primal than any cognitive endeavour to be. Porosity might seem like negativity in that it cannot be reduced to this or that determination, and allows dynamism and passage. It is not thinking as negation but rather a mindful *passio essendi* prior to and presupposed by every *conatus essendi* of the mind desiring to understand this or that. First we do not desire to understand. Rather we are awoken or become awake in a not yet determinate minding that is not full with itself but filled with an openness to what is beyond itself – filled with openness, if that is permissible to say, for such a porosity looks like nothing determinate and hence seems almost nothing, even entirely empty. Being filled with openness and yet being empty: yet this is what makes possible all our determinate relations to determinate beings and processes, whether

these relations be knowing ones or unknowing. Thinking understood primarily as negativity does not have enough of this porous patience, even though its endeavour to know ultimately derives from it.

One might object that the desire to know is a drive to determination, a drive that when it comes to know itself becomes also more self-determining. It is a well rehearsed theme that philosophy begins in wonder and Aristotle is often cited: “All men desire to know” (*Metaphysics*, 982b11ff.). Aristotle sees the connection of marveling and astonishment when he reminds us of the affiliation of myth and metaphysics, and also the delight in the senses. Nevertheless, the desire to know is understood essentially as a *drive to determinate intelligibility*, which on being attained dissolves the initial wonder launching the quest. The end of Aristotle’s wonder is a determinate *logos* of a determinate somewhat, a *tode ti*. This end is the dissolution of wonder, not its deepening or refreshing. Significantly, Aristotle invokes *geometry* to illustrate the teleological thrust of the desire to know (*Metaphysics*, 983a13ff.). I take geometry here as representative of determinate cognition whose *eureka* solves the problem but also surpasses the wonder.

I think the issue is better put in Plato’s *Theaetetus* (155d3-4) where *thaumazein* is named as the *pathos* of the philosopher. *Pathos*: there is a patience, a primal receptivity. This is not the self-activating knowing such as we have come to expect from Kant and his successors in German idealism, as well as in varieties of the constructivist epistemology we find in different contemporary inheritors of this Kantian stress. There is a pathos more primal than activity, a patience of the soul before any self-activity. One could say: there is no going beyond ourselves, no activation of our self-surpassing powers of transcending, without this more primal patience. I stress this since in modernity patience has often been relegated to a servile passivity supposedly beneath the high dignity of human power as self-activating, as self-determining. The truth is that no one can self-activate themselves into wonder. It comes or it does not come. We are *struck* into wonder. “Being struck” is beyond our self-

determination. We cannot “project” ourselves into “being struck.” It comes to us from beyond ourselves. It does not come in the spiky oppugnancy of a hostile estrangement, though the hateful can strike one. It comes in the communication of an intimate strangeness that makes us porous to what before us is enigmatic and mysterious.

Helpful here might be a brief comparison between first astonishment and curiosity (to which I return). Curiosity is more to be correlated with a determinate cognition of a determinate somewhat (*tode ti*) or “object.” By contrast, in astonishment it is not that an “object” as other simply seizes us, making us passive while it is actively dominating. What is received, as we undergo it in “beholding from,” cannot be thus objectified. What seizes us is the offer of being beyond all objectification, and the call of truthfulness to being. This is not first either subjective or objective, but transsubjective and transobjective. “*Trans*”: we witness a *crossing between* “subject” and “object” and an intermedium of their interplay which is more primordial than any determinable intermediation between the two. The happening of this “being-between,” in the occurrence of “beholding from,” reveals a porosity beyond subjectification and objectification and we are beholden to what eventuates in this between, making us answerable to its truth in our own being truthful. In the intimate strangeness of the porosity an excess of being flows, and overflows towards one. This is astonishing, not because initially we make no sense of it, but simply because the surprise of being’s being there at all is there at all.

If there is something *childlike* about such a beginning, this does not mean it is merely *childish*. The childlike opening is our finding ourselves astonished already in the porosity of being. We do not produce astonishment; astonishment *opens us* in the first instance, and there is joy in the light. The child *lives* this primal and elemental opening; hence wonder is often noted as more characteristic of earlier stages of life. Thus too, as has been also noted, children have a spontaneous tendency to ask the “big questions.” First

astonishment is more intimate with the primal porosity that constitutes the human being as metaphysically opened from the outset. The later developments of curiosity and sophisticated scientific knowing are seeded in the primal porosity but what its grant enables we too quickly take for granted. Then, alas, this maternal porosity can be long forgotten when the project of science comes more fully on the scene. When the child points to the night sky and murmurs – “Look, the moon!” – the astonishing has won its way into its heart. Later, the astonished child is recessed, even driven underground, in the curious project of (say) space exploration which lifts off the earth on the technical constructs of determinate cognition. The child is not only father to the man, but the man is the shield of time that shelters, or denies, the idiotic child it was originally born as. If the child dies, the shield shelters nothing, and the man dies too – a self-guarding hollowness, and not the elemental porosity. The callous of a self-circling *conatus essendi* covers over the idiotic pathos of the exposed child.

This more primal porosity of first given minding is at the origin of all modalities of mind, but as intimate with the giving of the first opening, it can be passed over, covered over. It enables the passage of mindfulness but the endowed passing can be passed over, since we come to ourselves in this passing. First a happening, it is only subsequently gathered to itself in an express self-relation. In this being gathered to itself, there is the risk of a contraction of what the first opening communicates. The gathering concretizes us as determinate, and as thus ontologically concentrated, we can contract the opening of the porosity to just what *we* will grant as given. I will come back to this when dealing with perplexity and curiosity, and with modes of minding that are determinate and self-determining. Nevertheless, as coming to mind in astonishment the porosity happens, we do not produce it, we do not determine it, it communicates from beyond our self-determination. Prior to the more determinate and determining selving of mindfulness the porosity that is neither of self or other happens as the between

space in which, and out of which, a variety of determinate and self-determining forms of minding come to be. These latter are derived, not original. What is more original is the between of porosity.

Being Indeterminate: Wonder as Perplexity

I now turn to perplexity as a second modality of wondering. We pass from original overdetermination to a mingling of indeterminacy and determination. In some ways perplexity shows more evidence of the work of negativity in it. We are apt to think of perplexity as signifying our being troubled with doubt or uncertainty, our being puzzled. The word “plexus” in perplexity suggests a plaiting, a twining, an entanglement. We find the sense of something involved, com-plex, interwoven, something intricate and difficult to unravel, perhaps so knotted we wonder where to start with trying to untangle it. Plagued by perplexity, as we sometimes put it, our thoughts seem to be tormented with some vexing matter we cannot comprehend. Not only is it difficult to understand, but we may find ourselves thinking: we do not know what to think. There is nothing of calm serenity in this modality of wonder – there is often anxiety, bewilderment, distress, trouble and perturbation.

Perplexity arises out of first astonishment. How so? An important element of first astonishment is the way original wonder does not so overtake us as to squash us as selving but comes to release us into our more evident being for ourselves, into mindful selving as promising of itself, and perhaps of more than itself. We are granted to come to be ourselves, freed also into our own self-becoming in the between. This is part of what I call the erotics of selving. The original “too-muchness” of being is not indeterminate, not determinate, but exceeds all determination. In the first instance it is overdeterminate, but as such endows the promise of self-determining. If astonishment holds the promise of the agapeic,

there is awakened in it the erotics of self-surpassing. In being thus awakened, we are as selving, and come to ourselves as enabled more fully to become ourselves.

Perhaps here some more express sense of thinking as negation can come into the open. Being awakened in the primal astonishment, the “too-muchness” of given being can seem to *oppress* us.¹ Given to be as ourselves, the intimation intrudes that we cannot be its full measure. Though we are not the measure of the “too-muchness,” we yet want to know it in full measure. In this disjunction troubled perplexity arises: we do not know, we would know, we know we do not know. We are stressed in the baffling difference between what we know is too much for us, and our intimately known desire to know just that “too-muchness.” Perplexity is born in the baffling difference wherein our mindfulness is torn between its desire to know and its intimate knowing that it does not know what is too much for it. To live with this baffling difference is not easy, and there is the inevitable urge to diminish its stress in seeking a knowing which reduces the “too-muchness” to proportions that allow us to appropriate its difference. We are then faced with the urge to develop the desire to know as our way of subjecting the given “too-muchness” to our measure, that is, to the proportionate measure of ourselves as knowers. Often perplexity takes off in this direction, but not always, and the entire situation is always more equivocal, since wonder as perplexity is recurrently haunted by faces of otherness that are just so as *disproportionate* to the determinate measure of our determinative cognition.

¹ Burke connects astonishment with horror: “...astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror” (*Enquiry*, Part II, section 1). He is not wrong but he is not entirely right either, since in terms of the analysis I offer here there is, in what he says of astonishment, a kind of mingling of wonder as agapeic astonishment and as erotic perplexity. The sense of horror becomes more overt. I think, *on the turn* of wonder from first astonishment to perplexity. Some of these nuances will be evident from my analysis, itself less psychological and more ontological-metaphysical than Burke’s.

Perplexity is a modality of wondering that brings us more into the *equivocity of being*: the play of light and darkness, the chiaroscuro of things and ourselves; the dark light of unformed things and things forming, of ourselves formless and seeking form and being returned to formlessness, of all things enigmatic and intimating, of ourselves the most baffling of beings, at once shouting absurdly and absurdly singing. Perplexity is not the reverse of astonishment but our waking to the troubling equivocity of the “too-muchness,” given in the astonishment. The equivocity is shown on both the sides of self-being and other-being. One might say the equivocity of the perplexing “too-muchness” is both transobjective and transsubjective. There is too much to the thereness of what is there; there is too much to the intimacy of being waking up to itself as our selving. Other-beings and selvings come from formlessness beyond form, are themselves as forming and coming to form, and finally point beyond themselves and all finite form. The troubling equivocity can fill us with great foreboding in face of the mystery of life, and every human being knows something of its disconcertment and dismay. It can drive us to distraction, it can drive us mad. It is never too much to say that it is always and ever too much for us to say.

Perplexity awakens a *seeking* for what is true in all significant art, in all intellectually honest philosophy, in all spiritually serious religion. Mostly, however, the seeking has no fancy names, as ordinary persons in accustomed community, mostly out of the limelight, seek to tread the way of truth (with a bow to Parmenides).

The equivocity of this perplexity is in the *doubleness* of being *both* the dismaying destitution of not-knowing *and* the ignorance of a voracious desire to know. Perplexity is second-born from original astonishment, but we wake up to ourselves even before and beyond the second-born desire to know. As a modality of wondering, something about perplexity is more primitive than what we normally call the

desire to know. For we have already passed through treasures and dispossessions to get to the quotidian awakening of what we more ordinarily call the desire to know. This more primitive perplexity takes shape in the archaeology of the selving that comes to be out of the original ontological porosity. Of course, as transobjective and transsubjective, this perplexity is not just a matter of selving alone with itself. As coming to awakening out of the porosity, it is already an equivocal way of “being with” what is other than selving – a “being with” that is ingredient in waking selving both to itself and what is other to itself. Perplexity as wondering, like the primal astonishment, is a way of being between the “too-muchness” of other-being and selving coming to wakefulness of both itself and what is other.

In wondering as perplexity, given the equivocal play of light and darkness, we are closer to something like Plato’s condition of the Cave. In perplexity, however, we are not in the Cave as prisoners who do not know they are prisoners. These latter do not know perplexity as an awakening. Perhaps these prisoners, that is, we ourselves in this condition, do have a dull presentiment that not all is as it seems. There is presentiment in perplexity but the dullness has already been tenderized into the pain of not being able to take for granted what now more and more enigmatically presents itself as being opened for questioning. To be perplexed is to realize that one is held in check by something too much for one’s own power. The chiaroscuro of being shows the troubling face of the equivocal “too-muchness” which holds us in a kind of thrall. To be enthralled is to be under a spell, but some thralls stop us, stupefy us. The “too-muchness” bewilders, befuddles, bemuses, bewitches us. Perplexity can be nonplussed by the equivocity. Nonplussed, we may appear to be stupid, but there is a salutary stupefaction in the wondering of perplexity. In moments of more ontological porous mindfulness that break into perplexity, we know that there is light, and that there is an access of light in perplexity truthfully undergone. That light might be the Siamese twin of the darkness, and yet the twinned

darkness does not make it any the less the light. It is *we ourselves* who are twinned: participants in the perplexity which both burdens and enlightens, double-headed between the burden of the mystery and the godsend of light that gives ontological uplift.

There is also the following deep equivocity. This we can see with an extremity of perplexity when it takes on the shape of *horror*: ontological horror before the being there of being in its excess to our rational measure. In the Cave we can turn *downwards* as well as upwards. Perplexity can come over us in the feeling of *being blocked from ascending into the light*. We would find light, but we find ourselves darkened – darkened in the very seeking for light itself. Not the measure of the light, we are also not the measure of this darkness. We cannot go up; perplexed we find ourselves falling. We may not want to fall, but we still find ourselves falling.²

Thinking as negativity may claim it can counteract the falling into equivocity by its progressive determination of intelligibility. The Hegelian way of doubt (*der Weg des Zweifels* – notice the reference to the double) will overcome radical equivocity through its own self-accomplishing skepticism.³ In accomplishing itself, skepticism overcomes skepticism, gives up its vagrancy (Kant

² Think of the *aporiai* of thought as showing a lack of *poros*: we are unable to find a way across, are at an impasse. In the *Theaetetus* Plato again and again stresses the philosopher's suffering of the aporetic. The question is related to perplexity. In the end perplexity is not dissolved but it can be the anticipation of a new occasion of trying to understand. It can also be addressed by myth or likely stories. Univocal theories are not enough. The way of philosophical perplexity is wayless. There is a noplacement that is the place of thought (Socrates is described as *atopos*, see *Symposium*, 215a2, 221c2-d6). This noplacement witnessed to the porosity of the soul. Concerning perplexity one also thinks of Kant and metaphysics: there are questions we cannot avoid raising but cannot also answer; we must raise them but we cannot put them to rest in a univocal science or theory. Perplexity here is not like pure reason. It reminds one of trying to rest but being unable to find a comfortable position; one keeps casting around for a better position but finally the perplexity does not get dispelled. With some thinkers, it can be the opposite: they try to get away from perplexity by a strategy: "on the one hand, this," "on the other hand, that." Indeed, is there not much of zigzag in Kant? Perplexity can remind one of a fever where we restlessly turns this way, that way. Of course, this can generate the idea that thinking is itself a kind of sickness, reflection a curse, as happens with the underground man of Dostoevsky, and here and there with Nietzsche. The barbarism of reflection (Vico) makes reflection itself the barbarism of the mind. This is perplexity sickened with itself, not the first astonishment, nor the posthumous wonder, I will discuss at the end.

³ *der Weg des Zweifels* – notice the reference to the double – is also described as a *Weg der Verzweiflung* – a pathway of despair §78; *Phenomenology of Spirit* as a "self-accomplishing skepticism (*sich vollbringende Skeptizismus*)."

described the skeptic as a nomad), and comes home to itself, in and as absolute knowing. Here knowing no longer feels the need to go beyond itself; it is finally at home with itself, having absolved itself from all alienating otherness, for all otherness proves finally to be its own otherness. It even surpasses the *desire* for wisdom, as in previous philosophy, and become possession of actual science, *Wissenschaft*. Previous philosophy was always *between* ignorance and wisdom; now there is no such between, since everything is between knowing and itself, in the circle of its own self-determination. In Hegel, after the old metaphysics, and the new critique, we are offered the new speculative philosophy which in post-transcendental form offers the totality of categories, each allegedly justified beyond critique, because having been radically critiqued by dialectic.

This dialectical way is carried on the labor of the negative to a mediation of the equivocity, through the many determinate intelligibilities, all the way to fully self-determining knowing. While this triadic movement from indeterminate, through determination, to self-determination has a certain qualified truth, it is not fully true to the dimensions of the perplexity suggested above. For here too there is something that exceeds determination, something also not to be described in the language of self-determining thought. If the latter take themselves to be the absolute measure of what is at issue, they suffer from the same bewitchment of the equivocity which they ostensibly claim to rationally mediate. They are within the Cave but have redefined its immanence as the whole, and hence are in an even worse position than those prisoners who know and grant with raw pain that they are still perplexed prisoners. The perplexity of the Cave has been dialectically domesticated: the Cave now is no Cave, since all there is (self-)determined as immanence at home with itself and beyond which there

Phänomenologie des Geistes (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1952), p. 67; *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 49.

is nothing greater to be thought. Without perplexity we settle into a false home at whose hearth flickers (self-determining immanence itself as) its own counterfeit god.

Being Determinate: Wonder as Curiosity

I will close with a few words about curiosity as a third modality of wondering, one in which the overdeterminacy of astonishment is too easily forgotten, one in which the perplexity that can live on in thinking as negation is further dulled, even unto the death of wonder. If to be is to be determinate, here to be is nothing if it is not determinate. Being is nothing but determinacy and to be exhausted in the totality of all determinations. The danger: hostility to ontological astonishment is twinned with the annihilation of the wonder of being itself.

Of course, we cannot but be curious, given our inextirpable desire to know the world around us and ourselves. The devil is in the details, or God is, we say; and often we think of the curious person, in his or her desire to know, as giving careful attention just to the details of things. Such attention, we think, can sometimes be carried to excess; it can be addressed to unworthy objects; we inquire into things, but too minutely. There is healthy curiosity; there seems also to be an undue or too intrusive inquisitiveness in which we are curious about what does not properly concern us. Curiosity, in a good sense, finds things interesting and surprising; its desire to know is open to the novel and strange; in turning to what is curious in things, inquiry fastens on their *interesting determinacy*, often with the twist of the odd. Novelty is important for the curious mind: the queer, the peculiar, whatever arouses closer attention. We also talk of a curious argument – one marked by ingeniousness or excessive nicety or subtlety. Those who are collectors of curiosities search in out of the way places for things or people out of the ordinary. Interestingly, inquisitiveness, whether in approved or unapproved senses, can lead to *inquisitions*, in which novelty itself is suspect. The inquisitor is particular about details because the

details revealed are unapproved. There is a desire to know what one has no right to know; *prying curiosity* intrudes on what properly does not concern it.

This double-edged character means that, qua wonder, curiosity is not a pure porosity to what is true. What we are in the idiotic recesses of our being infiltrates our manners of being curious. There can be something closer to the purer porosity, the reception of astonishment, the awakening of perplexity. There can also surge up a will to know marked by a *conatus essendi* that wills to overtake, subordinate, if not extirpate the porosity and patience that are more intimate to the idiotic, ontological heart of our being. I stress this doubleness again, since one might claim that in our time this second possibility has taken on such an all-pervasive life that it seems to have an irresistible power of its own, and not really to come to be out of the more original porosity at the origins of wonder as astonishment and perplexity.

If perplexity is a first-born child of primal astonishment, curiosity is a second-born. If astonishment is overdetermined, if perplexed mixes the overdeterminate and indeterminate, curiosity dominantly stresses the determinate. Often we think of wonder in this third modality as confronting problems. This is understandable – the “It is!” of first astonishment turns into the “What is?” (indeed “What the hell is it?”) of perplexity, turning now into the sober “What is it?” of curiosity. With this last form of the question, we ask about the determinate being there of beings, or the determinate forms or structures or processes. We move from ontological astonishment before being towards ontic regard concerning beings, their properties, patterns of developments, determinate formations, and so on. It is essential to the becoming of our mindfulness that we move into curiosity. The overdeterminate is saturated with determinations, not an indefiniteness empty of determinacy. The question “What is it?” turns towards the given intricacy of this, that and the other, and there can be something even reverent in

this turning, for it too shares in our porosity to the astonishing givenness. We can marvel at these given intricacies, coming to admire, and even be in awe of such immanent richness. Curiosity releases the self-surpassing energy of our questing to know in the mode of determinate questions bearing on this richness.

There is, however, a certain understanding of curiosity which turns the teleology of wonder into a movement from the indeterminate to the determinate, and thence from determination to determination, all the way to the totality of determinations which are held to exhaust the whole. If we connect Hegelian negativity with a teleological movement from indeterminacy, through determination to self-determining knowing, his understanding is not quite to be identified with the view that being is simply determinate. Nevertheless, he does share in a crucial aspect of this teleology: what seems mysterious in the initial indeterminacy is brought into the light of full intelligibility at the end of the unfolding, intelligibility determinable by knowing as self-determining. This is evident at the highest level of absolute spirit: art comes to an end when the enigma of the origin no longer retains anything secret; in the end religion safeguards no divine mystery that ultimately is too much for the power of philosophical knowing.⁴ Hegel's self-determination thus shares this crucial orientation with this understanding of the teleology of curiosity. This kind of curiosity negates the indeterminate, for this as such cannot be grasped, for only the determinate is thus graspable. Behind this grasping can operate a

⁴ On this in connection with art in relation to the teleological movement from symbolic, through classical, to romantic art, see my *Art, Origins, Otherness* (SUNY, 2003), chapter 3. In connection with religion, see *Hegel's God – A Counterfeit Double?* (Aldershot, 2003), and especially chapter 6 in relation to the idea of creation: creation is for him is a "representation" that does not get to the true understanding which is "creation" as God's own self-determination. Creation is not the hyperbole of radical origination (see *God and the Between*, chapter 12), nor is the world as created the eventuation of finite being as given to be as other to the divine. The stress is not on such radical "coming to be" but first on becoming, then on self-becoming, indeed the self-becoming of God, and this following the teleological movement from indeterminacy, determination to self-determination. Just as there is no sense of hyperbolic giving to be, there is no sense of the baffling nothing out of which finite being is said to be given to be; there is determination negation as the negativity immanent in the self-circling whole.

metaphysical *ressentiment* against anything in the ontological situation that exceeds its measure, a secret hatred of the overdeterminate. Equally all perplexity troubled by the “too-muchness” tends to be deemed an oppressive equivocity and as such no longer to be abided. There is no abiding with the mystery of given being. There is to be nothing abiding about the mystery of given being. If we conceive the teleology of knowing thus, and claim that this is the one and only path to the end of true knowing, the end result must be the evacuation of spiritual seriousness not only in art, and religion but also in philosophy. We then suffer not simply from a dearth but from the death of ontological astonishment. For there is no room now for *thaumazein* in the modality of agapeic astonishment or in the modality of erotic perplexity. Great art works, like religious reverence or awe, may offer us striking occasions of originating wonder – ontological admiration, appreciation of being. If such wonder is entirely impelled out of its initial hiddenness by determinative curiosity, the porosity is no longer kept open in philosophical mindfulness. Philosophy, lacking the initiative of originating wonder, must itself atrophy, its ontological astonishment or perplexity substituted for by the virtuosity of technical cleverness or the second-hand scholasticism of commentary on commentary. It becomes treasonous to the wiser patience of first astonishment.

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