

Kant and the End of Wonder

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IN THE CONCLUSION TO his *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), Kant famously writes: “Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing wonder [*Bewunderung*]¹ and reverence, the more often and more steadily one reflects on them: *the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me*. I do not need to search for them and merely conjecture them as though they were veiled in obscurity or in the transcendent region beyond my horizon; I see them before me and connect them immediately with the consciousness of my existence” (*Critique of Practical Reason*, 5: 161²).

In accordance with this revealing passage from the end of Kant’s *Critique of Practical Reason*, we can see virtually the whole of Kant’s philosophy as flowing from his wonder at either the starry heavens above or the moral law within. Not only does his philosophy *begin* in wonder, however, Kant also *ends* his discussions of the starry heavens and the moral law with a kind of wonder. Unlike philosophers who begin in

1. *Bewunderung*, which can be translated as “admiration” or “wonder,” is a type of *Verwunderung* (cf. 5:269, 365), which is the closest one comes to the Latin *admiratio* (cf. 7: 261; 15:51) or the English “wonder” in Kant’s writings. There is no strict German equivalent to the English term wonder. (Kant’s use of *Wunder* focuses on religious wonders, cf. e.g., 6:84–88.)

2. All references to Kant’s works are to the volume and page number in the German “Academy Edition,” xxx. Translations are taken from the Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant. Each volume in the Cambridge Edition includes Academy Edition pagination in the margins. The *Critique of Practical Reason* (along with the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*) is included in Cambridge’s volume titled *Practical Philosophy* (see next footnote). Both the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Critique of Judgment* are in Cambridge volumes with those titles.

wonder and end in complete understanding, Kant leaves his philosophy incomplete in such a way that wonder persists.

However, Kant still insists that wonder must lead to inquiry, and he seeks to focus this wonder-inspired inquiry properly. As he explains in a passage that occurs shortly after the one quoted above, Kant claims, “Though wonder . . . can indeed excite to inquiry, [it] does not supply the want of it” and asks “What, then, is to be done in order to enter upon inquiry in a way that is useful and befitting the sublimity of the object?” (5:162). This question is particularly urgent because it is so easy to enter into this inquiry in a *bad* way, in a way that leads to superstition or dogmatism or skepticism. As Kant puts it, “Consideration of the world began from the noblest spectacle . . . and it ended in astrology. Morals began with the noblest property of human nature . . . and it ended in . . . superstition” (5:162).

For Kant, wonder brings with it opportunities but also serious dangers. Thus Kant seeks to guide wonder-inspired inquiry and thereby bring wonder to its proper end in two key respects. First, Kant shows the ways in which wonder must be transformed and even replaced, by understanding in the case of the starry skies and by respect in the case of the moral law. Second and more importantly, however, Kant shows the “end” of wonder in the sense of its purpose or goal. Kant explains what role enduring wonder plays for understanding, acting within, and enjoying our world. Finally, however, Kant maintains an important place for an *unending* sort of wonder in the aesthetic appreciation of both nature (the starry skies) and one’s own transcendence (the moral law within).

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Kant’s philosophy can be divided into three main parts, each of which is tied to wonder. First, there is the metaphysics and epistemology that Kant lays out in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, the book for which he was most famous during his own day. This book focuses on offering a complete and systematic account of everything that can be known a priori about the world of experience, the world of the starry skies. However, the second half of the book deals with a “dialectic” between reason and the understanding, a dialectic that is a sort of rigorous unfolding of wonder at the ways in which the world outstrips our need to understand it. By making the structure of this dialectic rigorous and clear, Kant in a sense brings wonder to an “end,” but because the dialectic does not go away,

he really provides an “end” (in the sense of a goal) *for* a wonder that continues.

Second, there is Kant’s moral philosophy, laid out primarily in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, *Critique of Practical Reason*, and *Metaphysics of Morals*.³ Here, Kant turns to the moral law within. The *Groundwork* explains this moral law in terms of a “categorical imperative” that dictates whether an action⁴ is right or wrong, the *Critique* unpacks the metaphysical presuppositions and implications of the demands of morality on human beings, and the *Metaphysics of Morals* gives detailed accounts of various moral duties. All of this might seem, again, to bring wonder at the moral law to an end. But in fact, all of Kant’s attempts to make the moral law clear and rigorous are merely ways to *preserve* wonder at it, but a wonder that gets taken up into “respect” and it thereby effective in motivating action and bringing about virtue. In that way, wonder at the moral law is given an end (goal): the perfecting of the human will.

Third, there is Kant’s aesthetics, laid out primarily in the first part of his *Critique of Judgment*.⁵ Here Kant analyzes two distinct aesthetic feelings: a feeling for the beautiful and a feeling for the sublime. Both involve wonder. The former focuses wonder at beauty in nature, not primarily of the starry skies sort, but of those natural objects (bird’s songs, pretty flowers, etc.) that can provoke constant aesthetic contemplation. The latter, while often inspired by natural grandeur (probably including the starry skies), is fundamentally a sense of wonder at one’s own moral nature. In both cases, again, Kant gives detailed accounts of how such objects bring about wonder in human beings, and in that sense, he makes the experience of wonder less mysterious. But in both cases, he also shows how wonder is proper, how it can even be an end in itself.

3. All three of these works are included in the volume *Practical Philosophy (The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant)*, translated and edited by Mary J. Gregor, with a general introduction by Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

4. Strictly speaking, the categorical imperative applies to *maxims*, not actions. A maxim is a personal rule for action and generally has the structure, “In situations like S, I will perform actions like A in order to achieve goals like G.”

5. Wonder also plays an important role in the rest of the *Critique of Judgment*, which deals with Kant’s philosophy of biology and teleological account of nature, but the role of wonder in that account is beyond the scope of the present discussion.

WONDER AT THE STARRY SKIES:
THE *CRITIQUE OF PURE REASON*

Kant published the *Critique of Pure Reason* in 1781, after a “Silent Decade” during which he published virtually nothing. The work was and still is his magnum opus, the work that defined him as a philosopher. The specific focus of the book is to “explore the faculty which we entitle understanding, and determine the rules and limits of its employment” (NKS 11). Thereby, Kant’s “enquiry . . . is intended to expound and render intelligible the objective validity of [the understanding’s] *a priori* concepts,” that is, to answer the question “what and how much can the understanding and reason know apart from all experience” (NKS 11–12)? In other words, Kant aims to save but also limit metaphysics as an *a priori* science of the nature of reality.

Saving the possibility of a systematic and *a priori* metaphysics of the nature of reality might seem like neither a natural response to wonder nor a good way to show the ultimate value of wonder. For Kant, however, metaphysics is inextricably linked with wonder. Human beings make use of various principles for understanding our world, but “with these principles, [we] ris[e] . . . ever higher, to more remote conditions” (*Critique of Pure Reason*, A vii⁶). As we rise higher and higher and reach the heights of the starry skies above, human beings feel wonder at the majesty of these heavens, but we also invariably seek to understand them, and, in the end, human reason “sees itself necessitated to take refuge in principles that overstep all possible use in experience” (A viii). And thus metaphysics—the systematic study of these highest principles—is born. But for Kant, this sort of metaphysics is far from innocent. Out of an apparently reasoned response to wonder, reason “falls into obscurity and contradictions” (A viii). Thus is born a history of metaphysics within which philosophers seem to propose ever greater numbers of even more ridiculous and conflicting theories of the nature of reality.

For Kant, then, wonder must be brought to its proper end in a system that completely lays out all of the fundamental metaphysical principles that can be known *a priori*. More importantly, however, this “complete” metaphysics will, in the end, be fundamentally *incomplete*

6. Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* was published in two different editions. In referencing this work, I follow the customary practice of referring to page numbers in the first edition with the letter A and page numbers in the second edition with the letter B. This particular quotation is from the preface to the first edition, hence it has only an “A” page number.

in that rather than reducing wonder at the starry skies to lifeless and static knowledge, Kant will show that there is an *irreducible* wonder that is *active* and drives human beings on to a never-ceasing exploration of our world.

Kant's project, then, has two parts. First, he aims to lay out the basic principles of metaphysics that can be known *a priori*. Second, he shows the *limits* of these principles. The fundamental move that makes both parts of this project possible is a shift in perspective: "Up to now it has been assumed that all our cognition must conform to the objects; but all attempts to find out something about them *a priori* through concepts that would extend our cognition have, on this presupposition, come to nothing" (B xvi).

Kant's fundamental idea here is to shift our perspective about what we think "knowledge" involves. One "knows" something when one's justified beliefs about the world actually correspond to the way the world is. Typically, when one thinks of having accurate knowledge about the world, one assumes that this means that one's beliefs about the world have been *molded by* the world. But on this account of knowledge, Kant claims that one can never have *a priori* knowledge about the world, since such knowledge is—by definition—not based on experience of the world. Thus Kant proposes to think of knowledge differently. Knowledge still involves having a correspondence between one's beliefs and the world, but Kant considers the possibility that the world is molded by our beliefs, rather than vice versa. Of course, this sounds crazy, and Kant builds lots of caveats into this claim to make it less crazy. It's not that the *details*—what Kant calls the "matter"—of the world are determined by our specific beliefs. Rather, the *structure*—what Kant calls the "form"—of the world is determined by the structure of our cognition. Just as someone wearing rose-colored glasses could know *a priori* that whatever he sees will be rose colored because his glasses make his world rose-colored, our ways of perceiving and thinking about the world have a certain structure, and we can know that any world that we could possibly experience must conform to those structures.

Making this move has two effects. First, it becomes possible to have *a priori* knowledge of the world, as long as the "world" is defined as a world of *possible human experience*. On the basis of this fundamental move, Kant proceeds to analyze the structure of human's ability to sense objects and to think about them. The former capacity—which Kant

calls “sensibility” and which gives rise to what he calls “intuitions”—has a spatiotemporal structure. Every object of possible experience will be spatiotemporal, since it must be perceived through our sensibility, which makes its objects spatiotemporal. The latter capacity—which Kant calls the “understanding,” and which gives rise to concepts—has a structure that is captured in a set of twelve a priori concepts including such things as “substance” and “causality.” Every possible experience must fit into these a priori concepts. For example, every change in the world of possible experience must be a change *of a substance* and must *have a cause*. Putting together Kant’s a priori forms of intuition (space and time) and his a priori concepts, Kant gets a whole a priori metaphysics of the experienceable world.

However, the move that made this metaphysics possible has a second effect. As Kant explains,

From this deduction of the possibility of our faculty of cognizing *a priori* in the first part of metaphysics, there emerges a very strange result, and one that appears very disadvantageous to the whole purpose with which the second part of metaphysics concerns itself, namely that with this faculty we can never get beyond the boundaries of possible experience, which is nevertheless precisely the most essential occupation of this science. (Bxix)

If metaphysics is made possible by thinking of knowledge as being a matter of the world conforming the structures that make it possible for us to experience it, then we cannot make any claims about what the world might be like *independent* of those structures. That is, we can’t say anything about what a world that we could not experience would be like. Our a priori claims don’t extend that far. And that means that much of traditional metaphysics—which focused on claims about God, or the immortality of the soul, or freedom—is out of bounds. Kant’s complete metaphysics of possible experience also sets an absolute limit on metaphysics: we can’t go beyond possible experience.

But Kant does not think that the story simply ends there. The desire to ask questions that are out of bounds did not come from nowhere. Kant begins his *Critique of Pure Reason* with the following words “Human reason has the peculiar fate in one species of its cognition that it is burdened with questions which it cannot dismiss, since they are given to it as problems by the nature of reason itself, but which it also cannot answer, since they transcend every capacity of human reason” (A vii).

Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, it turns out, is a philosophical treatment of an aspect of the human intellect that is inextricably linked with wonder. While Kant sometimes uses the term "reason" in the way in which we are most familiar, as an all-purpose term for human thinking, Kant also often distinguishes between "reason" and "the understanding." The understanding, for Kant, is that form of human thinking that categorizes the world in accordance with concepts, making it understanding for us human beings. And much of the *Critique of Pure Reason* is an extended analysis of the *understanding*, showing how the *a priori* concepts of the understanding structure the world that we experience and thereby make metaphysical claims about that world possible. But in the second half of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant turns to a "dialectic" between this understanding and reason in a narrower sense. And in that dialectic, it becomes clear that reason is Kant's term for the intellectual work that wonder does in investigating the world.

The second half of the *Critique of Pure Reason* focuses on what Kant calls a "transcendental dialectic" (A293/B349) or a "transcendental illusion" (A295/B352). Kant spends this part of his *Critique* offering detailed analysis of various illusions that arise from conflicts between the understanding—which has *a priori* concepts that structure the world of possible experience—and reason. The "reason" on which Kant focuses here is an intellectual ability, like sensibility and the understanding, and it too has an *a priori* concept. But whereas sensibility is what makes it possible to perceive objects and the understanding is what makes it possible to think about these objects, reason is where "all our cognition . . . ends" (A298/B355); it is what one *ultimately* seeks in cognitions. Kant explains,

So the transcendental concept of reason is none other than that of the *totality of conditions* to a given conditioned thing. Now since the *unconditioned* alone makes possible the totality of conditions . . . , a pure concept of reason in general can be explained through the concept of an unconditioned. (A322/B379)

Put more simply, reason is the human's insatiable desire to know *why* something is the way that it is. But what reason wants is not simply *an* explanation, but the *ultimate* explanation. That is, reason seeks the kind of answer to the question, *why?* that doesn't require any follow-up. The "unconditioned" is just this sort of an answer, an answer that is not conditioned on any further answer.

In that sense, reason is the human intellect's nature response to wonder. Wonder is a sort of recognition of something beyond one's understanding, and reason is the desire to know that springs from this wonder. For Kant, all of this is natural and good. The problem, however, is that this desire to know the "unconditioned" runs up against the forms of sensibility and understanding that make it possible for us to experience. Kant gives many examples of this in his *Critique*, touching on all of the major debates in the history of metaphysics. For the purpose of this chapter, though, two examples will suffice.

Kant explains, for example, how metaphysicians get trapped by the question of whether or not the world is made up of atoms⁷ that cannot be subdivided into smaller parts (see A434–43/B463–71). On the one hand, reason seeks the "unconditioned," and that leads human beings to want to find a smallest possible atom, something that can bring our restless wonder to an end. On the other hand, the very structure of *space*—one of the forms of our sensibility that determines the structure of the world—is such that we can conceive of any particular space as being divided. No matter how small we think of an atom being, if we think of that atom as existing in the world of experience and thereby taking up space, we have to think of it as being—at least in principle—divisible. Reason's demand for an unconditioned smallest part runs up against the nature of that space which determines the structure of the world.

For another example, Kant discusses the possibility of freedom, both human freedom and the freedom of a "first mover" such as God (see A444–51/B472–79). On the one hand, reason requires an unconditioned, some cause that is not itself caused by anything else, since otherwise there can be no *ultimate* explanation of anything. And freedom is just this sort of uncaused cause. On the other hand, one of the concepts through which the world is structured is causality, and Kant's metaphysics shows that everything in the world of possible experience must have a cause. Thus there cannot be any freedom. Reason's demand for an unconditioned first cause runs up against the concept of causality that determines the structure of the world.

7. For Kant, as for most philosophers up until the twentieth century, the term *atom* just referred to the smallest constituent parts of the universe. Thus, what we might today call subatomic particles, would not really be subatomic in Kant's sense. Whatever we consider to be the *most basic* particles in the universe—quarks, leptons, superstrings—would be what Kant refers to by the term *atom*.

In both of these (and many other) cases, reason's efforts to deal with wonder at the magnificence of the world run into unavoidable and impassable barriers. The collision between reason's demands and the structures of experience causes a "transcendental dialectic," an illusory sense that one can get metaphysical insights into the world beyond the possibilities of experience. From this illusion springs an endless series of metaphysical debates in which each side argues for its view based on either the demands of reason or the requirements of the empirical world. Fortunately, Kant does not merely *diagnose* this transcendental illusion. He also provides a framework for understanding how illusion can be put in its place, and he shows the positive value in the impossibility of metaphysically satisfying reason's response to wonder.

Kant provides a framework for putting this illusion in its place by showing that the limitations imposed by spatiotemporality and a priori concepts are limitations on the world of *possible experience*. Such limitations tell us nothing about what Kant calls the "thing in itself." That is, these structures do not determine what a world would be like independent of the possibility of its being experienced. Kant calls this his "transcendental idealism," and its central claim is that while the formal structures of space and time and the a priori categories are completely real *in the world of experience*, they are "ideal"—that is, they don't necessarily apply—with respect to things in themselves. And that at least leaves open room for the unconditioned among things in themselves, even if there can never be an unconditioned among objects of possible experience. Kant is careful here not to claim that he has any *knowledge* of such things in themselves. As he puts it with respect to freedom, "I have not been trying to establish the *reality* of freedom . . . [and] have not even tried to prove the *possibility* of freedom . . . [but rather] that nature at least *does not conflict* with causality through freedom [at the level of things in themselves]—that was the one single thing we could accomplish" (A558/B586).

Transcendental idealism cannot itself establish that there *is* or even *could be* an unconditioned free cause, but it can show that Kant's metaphysical proofs of causality in "nature" (the world of experience) does not preclude the possibility of freedom for things in themselves.

This transcendental idealism sets up a structure for reconciling the demands of reason and the understanding, but in itself it does nothing to show what *legitimate* purpose reason could have in our experience of

the world. To do that, Kant develops the notion of “regulative” principles and ideals. As Kant explains,

The principle of pure reason we are thinking of retains its genuine validity only in a corrected significance: not indeed as an *axiom* for thinking the totality [or the unconditioned] in the object as real, but as a *problem* for the understanding, thus for the subject in initiating and continuing, in accordance with the completeness of the idea, the regress in the series of conditions for a given conditioned. (A508/B536)

The a priori forms of sensibility and the understanding function like axioms to define what is *real in objects*. Kant thus calls them “constitutive” principles because they help *constitute* what the objects actually can be. By contrast, the “regulative” principles of reason merely *regulate* a human being’s intellectual *activity*. They define what one is to *seek for* in objects, without promising that one can find it.

To go back to the example of freedom, we have seen that the search for the unconditioned in a series of causes gives rise to the transcendental illusion of freedom. If we were to take the unconditioned as a *constitutive* part of the real objective world, then we would have to believe that there is some cause that does not itself have a cause; that is, we would have to believe in freedom. As we saw previously, this belief gets us into trouble because we cannot think of any event (and hence not of any beginning to act of a cause) as being without a cause in turn. However, as a *regulative* principle, the idea of an unconditioned first cause is extremely valuable. If we seek merely for *a* cause of an effect, our understanding will not be extended very far. But if we seek for an *unconditioned* cause of a particular effect, then for each cause that we find, we will move back to a further underlying cause, and then to a yet further cause, and so on. We will never find an *actual* unconditioned cause in nature, but our understanding’s search, *regulated* by the *idea* of an unconditioned cause, will lead us to greater and greater knowledge of our world.

In the end, though, even this account of regulative principles is not the whole story for Kant. Kant constantly reiterates that reason’s response to wonder, while it provides an end (goal) for wonder, does not actually bring wonder to an end (completion). As we continue to search for the unconditioned, we learn more and more about the world in which we live. But unlike the kind of termination of wonder that might come with

actually *finding* the unconditioned, this discovery of more and more aspects of an always conditioned world only inspires even *more* wonder.

The present world discloses to us such an immeasurable show-place of manifoldness, order, purposiveness, and beauty, whether one pursues these in the infinity of space or in the unlimited division of it, that in accordance with even the knowledge about it that our weak understanding can acquire, all speech concerning so many and such unfathomable wonders must lose its power to express, all numbers their power to measure, and even our thoughts lack boundaries, so that our judgment upon the whole must resolve itself into a speechless, but nonetheless eloquent, astonishment. (A622/B650)

For Kant, metaphysics is born in wonder, facilitated in wonder, and completed—but never finished—by wonder.

WONDER AT THE MORAL LAW: KANT'S MORAL PHILOSOPHY

In the last section, we saw that Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* laid out the structures of sensibility and understanding that provide conditions of the possibility of experience. Kant thereby established both the legitimacy and the limits of metaphysics. And in setting limits to metaphysics, Kant emphasized the importance of wonder at the starry skies above. Reason responds to these starry skies with a search for the unconditioned, a search that has a valuable role to play in increasing knowledge of and thereby wonder at the natural world. But reason can never *find* the unconditioned in any possible experience, and thus one's wonder at the starry skies continues unabated. The last section also opened up another important way in which Kant deals with the unconditioned. Note only does the unconditioned play a regulative role in the search for knowledge, it is also a constant reminder that the world known through metaphysics is always only the world of possible experience. We have no theoretical knowledge of "things in themselves." And that means, for example, that while we can never know anything that is freedom, we also cannot rule out the possibility of free things in themselves. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant explains *this* important role of his transcendental idealism by claiming, "I had to deny *knowledge* in order to make room for *faith*" (B xxx). For Kant, however, this "faith" is not a religious leap of faith, nor an arbitrary choice to believe one thing rather

than another. Instead, Kantian “faith” is a reasonable response to another kind of wonder: wonder at the moral law within. So it is to that wonder that we now turn.

The key components of Kant’s moral philosophy are laid out in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. There Kant advances three key claims, all essential for understanding his conception of the moral law and how that moral law is connected with wonder. First, Kant begins the *Groundwork* with the famous claim that “It is impossible to think of anything at all in the world, or indeed even beyond it, that could be considered good without limitation except a *good will*” (4:393). Second, Kant claims that a good will is a will that acts in accordance with the moral law because it is the moral law and for no other reason. That is, a good will acts from duty. Famously, Kant considers someone who “without any other motive of vanity of self-interest . . . find[s] an inner satisfaction in spreading joy around them” and who therefore does good to other solely for the satisfaction he gets from seeing them happy. Kant argues that such actions, though “amiable,” have “no true moral worth” because they are not done for the sake of duty alone (4:398). Third, Kant argues that for human beings, this moral law takes the form of a “categorical imperative” that has a very specific form (or a set of specific forms). In particular, a good will is one that “acts only in accordance with that maxim through which [one] can at the same time will that it become a universal law” (4:421). All three of these claims are deeply connected to wonder, and all three end up being prominent parts of Kant’s eventual moral philosophy.

The first claim, that nothing can be considered good without limitation other than a good will, connects the *Groundwork* with Kant’s theoretical philosophy, in that the idea of being “good without limitation” evokes the standard of the unconditioned. To be good without qualification is to be *unconditionally* good. Morality, in the form of the good will, thus provides an end to the series of conditions that, in the empirical world, is endless. In the *Groundwork*,⁸ the good will is not “unconditioned” in quite the same way as the unconditioned of the first *Critique*. The good will is unconditionally *good*, not unconditioned as

8. In the third part of the *Groundwork*, and again in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant connects this unconditionally good will with an unconditioned free cause. At the end of this section, I discuss the way in which Kant does this in the *Critique of Practical Reason*.

such. Still, it provides a kind of stopping point, a place at which one no longer needs to ask the question “why?” And this stopping point, here as in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, is connected with wonder.

Kant’s second claim grows out of his first. The first section of the *Groundwork* focuses on articulating what sort of will could be a *good* will, if a good will is understood to be good without limitation. The first key move is to “explicate the concept of a will that is to be esteemed in itself and that is good apart from any further purpose” (3:397). Precisely because the will is good in itself, its goodness cannot depend upon anything external to it. Thus the *results* of the will cannot make it good. But then the goodness of such a will cannot be derived from any purposes that such a will accomplishes, since this would put the focus of the will outside of itself. Instead, the good will must be a will that acts solely *from duty*⁹ and not for any particular ends. And that means that a will the actions of which are ultimately justified by *any* ends cannot be an essentially good will. Kant gives several examples of this. A person who acts honestly, but for the sake of profit, does not have a good will. And someone who chooses not to commit suicide, but only because they want to continue living their generally happy life, does not have a good will. Only when one does what is right *because* it is right can one be said to have a good will.

But the implication of this abstraction from ends, for Kant, is that even one who helps others in order to see others experience joy does not exhibit a good will, since her will is directed not towards the goodness of the action but towards the effect it will bring about. Of course, Kant recognizes that human actions have purposes, and he recognizes that pursuing the joy of others is a purpose that a good will can have. His point is just that if the *ultimate* reason that one acts is to promote the particular end, then one is not acting out of duty, and hence one lacks a good will. To better understand Kant’s point here, it helps to distinguish between the *goal* at which one is directed when one acts and the *reason* that one acts for that goal.¹⁰ One can imagine two people who both pursue the joy of others, but for one, the ultimate reason for that pursuit is found in

9. Strictly speaking, Kant shifts from considering the good will to considering the concept of duty, which is that of a good will “under certain subjective limitations” (4:397). While important in many respects, this distinction is not important for the present purposes.

10. This distinction is taken from Christine Korsgaard’s discussion of the *Groundwork* in *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

the satisfaction that she takes in seeing others joyful, while for the other, the ultimate *reason* is found in the fact that making others joyful is one's duty. If we focus on the structures of will of the two people, the first has a will that aims for good goals when those goals are satisfying, while the second aims for good goals when the pursuit of those goals is morally good. In this context, it should be clear that the first will is not good *without limitation*. Rather, the first will is good only insofar as it happens to find satisfaction in good things. The second, by contrast, is a will that *always* pursues the good precisely because it pursues things *out of duty*.

Once Kant makes clear that the good will is a will that acts only out of duty, he is faced with a problem: How can a will be motivated to do something solely for the sake of duty? Kant's surprisingly simple answer to this question appeals, fundamentally, to *wonder*. In the *Critique of Practical Reason* (a sequel to the *Groundwork*), Kant explains how one can

show in an example the mark by which pure virtue is tested and, representing it as set before, say, a ten-year-old boy for his appraisal, see whether he must necessarily judge so of himself. . . . One tells him the story of an honest man whom someone wants to induce to join the calumniators of an innocent but otherwise powerless person . . . Then my young listener will be raised step by step from mere approval to *wonder* [*Bewunderung*], from that to amazement [*erstaunen*], and finally to the greatest veneration and a lively wish that he himself could be such a man (though certainly not in such circumstances) . . . All the *wonder* and even the endeavour to resemble this character, here rest wholly on the purity of the moral principle . . . Thus morality must have more power over the human heart the more purely it is represented. (5:155–57; emphasis added)

Kant's point here is that the moral law, when exhibited in all of its purity, is *immediately motivating through wonder*. Even a ten year old boy will experience wonder when he is led—in this case through a poignant example—to confront the moral law within. And this wonder will give rise to a “lively wish” and even an “endeavor” to be a person who always follows that moral law.

In the *Groundwork* and again in detail in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant connects this wonder at the moral law within with a practical attitude that he calls “respect.” As he explains in the *Groundwork*, “duty is the necessity of an action from respect for law . . . Only what

is connected with my will merely as ground and never as effect, what does not serve my inclination but outweighs it or at least excludes it altogether from calculations in making a choice . . . can be an object of respect" (4:400). Respect is the feeling that follows from wonder at the majesty of the moral law. It is the feeling of being motivated by that law to act in accordance with it. Respect is distinct from other forms of wonder or admiration, however, in that it is rooted in an unconditional wonder. Kant explains how one might admire or even be amazed by the "courage and strength" of another person without feeling true *respect* for that person. As he puts it (quoting Fontenelle), "I bow before an eminent man, but my spirit does not bow" (5:76). But the wonder that one feels at the moral law manifested in another person, even if that other person lacks any other excellences, is a wonder that gives rise to true veneration, a respect that motivates one to "endeavor to resemble this character" (5:156). It is a wonder that can be felt only at the unconditionally (and hence morally) good.

For Kant, then, morality in all of its purity inspires wonder. And that helps explain why it is so important for Kant to lay out a *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* that frees morality from the influence of anything empirical. In his moral philosophy famously insists that morality cannot be based on anything empirical. And in particular, he argues vociferously against what he calls "eudaimonism"¹¹ in morals, that is, any attempt to show that morality either springs from or ultimately serves our own self-interest. Many of the reasons for this insistence are purely philosophical. If morality is to be truly universal, for example, it cannot be based on any contingent empirical facts about human nature. But most fundamentally, Kant's concern with an empirical basis for morality is related to *wonder*. Whether one derives ethics from human nature or shows how what is ethical is ultimately what will make human beings happy or even ties ethics to divine rewards, in all of these cases, one tries to provide a reason for what is unconditionally good. And in the process, one makes morality more understandable, and more appealing to the senses but also less pure and ultimately *less wonderful*. Morality is all its purity is a source for wonder, and wonder at the moral law gives rise to a respect that is truly unconditional.

11. "Eudaimonism" comes from the Greek word *eudaimonia*, which is typically translated as "happiness." The point is that any attempt to reduce morals to happiness ends up degrading morals.

Having laid out the unconditional value of the good will and the importance of wonder at and respect for the moral law as the good will's sole motive for acting, Kant must turn to explain what sort of moral law could actually warrant this kind of respect. And just as Kant's second claim—that the good will must act out of respect for duty—followed from thinking about what would warrant calling the good will unconditional, so his third claim—his specific formulation(s) of the moral law—follows from thinking about what kind of moral law could be worthy of that kind of wonder that gives rise to respect. Kant asks, then, "What kind of law can that be, the representation of which must determine the will, even without regard for the effect expected from it, in order for the will to be called good absolutely and without limitation? Since I have deprived the will of every impulse that could arise for it from obeying some law, nothing is left but the conformity of actions as such with universal law, which alone is to serve the will as its principle, that is, *I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law*" (4:402).

The argument here is straightforward. In order to be a proper object of respect, the moral law, whatever it is, must appeal to nothing other than itself. Thus no particular goals or inclinations or characteristics of oneself or the world can be the reason that a particular action accords with the moral law. The moral law itself must be the only reason. But then the content of the moral law cannot include anything other than the fact that, whatever one does, one must do the sort of thing that could be a law. But if something is suitable for being a law for one person then it must be suitable for being a law for another, since every particular fact about oneself has been excluded from being relevant. Thus the moral law commands nothing other than that, whatever one does, one acts in such a way that one's actions can be made "universal law."

Though Kant distinguishes this moral law from the classic Golden Rule (4:429n), the basic idea is quite similar. One ought not make an exception of oneself. One ought not do the sorts of things that depend on other people *not* doing those same sorts of things. Kant discusses how to apply this law in several cases, the clearest of which is the case of false promising. If one considers making a false promise, it might be quite uncertain what the effects of that promise would be, but one can immediately know that a false promise cannot be done out of duty, since if the making of false promises because a "universal law," then there would not

even be such a thing as promises. When one thinks of false promising as a universal law, it contradicts itself and is therefore impermissible.

Kant goes on to articulate several different versions of this moral law. The most important (in addition to the “universal law” formulation in the quote above) is a version that focuses on the unconditional value of other people: “So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end, and never merely as a means” (4:429). The basic idea here is to always value people for their own sakes. Kant gets this version by thinking about what end one could have for one’s actions if they are truly to be unconditionally good. The only possible legitimate end would be an unconditionally good end. Following from the first version of the moral law, Kant then thinks about what ends one must always want to be universally considered to be worthy of respect. Since any choice of any ends depends upon one’s capacity to choose those ends, one can never coherently deny the value of one’s capacity to choose, and (by virtue of the universal law formulation) one must therefore respect *every* capacity for choice. Hence human beings, as free choosers, must always be respected.

Kant’s practical philosophy, then, moves from wonder at the moral law to the importance of *respect* as the proper motive for obeying that law, and from the unconditional value of morality implied in respect to several specific formulations of the nature of morality. Kant begins this articulation of the moral law with his fundamental principles in the *Groundwork*, and he goes much further in the actual *Metaphysics of Morals*, which details our duties in areas as diverse as property rights, sexual ethics, compassion for the poor, gossip, and taking care of one’s physical health. In a sense, the rigorous formulations of the moral law and its practical applications to all the details of life make it comprehensible, and they might seem to reduce the wonder that one feels at the moral law within. But for Kant, his account of the moral law (unlike accounts of eudaimonists) actually focuses attention on precisely those aspects of the moral law within that make it worthy of wonder. Moreover, by giving a clear and distinct formulation of that moral law, Kant facilitates the transformation of wonder into respect. The end (goal) of wonder at the moral law within is not a passive admiration, but a respect that brings the moral law into play in all of one’s actions.

Kant’s moral philosophy thus brings wonder to an end in two senses. On the one hand, “wonder” is transformed into respect, and thus one’s

wonder at the moral law is no longer the purely contemplative feeling that one might have towards the starry heavens. On the other hand, Kant shows the proper end-goal of wonder at the moral law. By fleshing out the moral law's specific demands, Kant shows that wonder at the moral law ought to direct us to specific practical activities and ultimately to that "good will" that is unconditionally good.

There is one final way in which Kant's moral philosophy intersects with his account of wonder. I started this section by pointing out that Kant saw his practical philosophy as completing his metaphysics and epistemology. While Kant's account of wonder at the starry skies ended up "denying knowledge" about the ultimate unconditioned grounds of the empirical world, his practical philosophy provides a basis for a "faith" that consists in making justified metaphysical claims about such unconditioned grounds. In particular, Kant's moral philosophy is based on the idea that we ought to act out of respect for a moral law that does not appeal to any empirically grounded desires. But if one is *obligated* to act in a way that is not determined by empirical grounds, then it must be *possible* to act in that way. And that implies that human beings are transcendently free since we can act in a way that undetermined by any empirical motives; we are uncaused causes of events in the world. As Kant puts it, one "judges, therefore, that he *can* do something because he is aware that he *ought* to do it and cognizes freedom within him, which, without the moral law, would have remained unknown to him" (5:30). The "faith" to which Kant alludes in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, a faith that the denial of metaphysical knowledge made possible, is filled in by the *Critique of Practical Reason*. The search for the unconditioned that had its beginning in wonder at the starry skies finds its end in the freedom that is a condition of the possibility of the moral law.

WONDER, BEAUTY, AND THE SUBLIME

In the previous two sections, we have seen how wonder at the starry skies and the moral law finds its "end" in Kant's philosophy. Wonder does not completely go away, but in both cases, Kant gives wonder a specification and a purpose. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, wonder at the starry skies is supplemented with a rigorous metaphysics of the conditions of possibility of experience and with a set of regulative ideals that drive human beings to deeper and deeper understandings of nature. But because our knowledge is always limited to the realm of experience, metaphysics

never gives access to the unconditioned, and so wonder at the starry skies persists. In Kant's moral philosophy as laid out in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, wonder at the moral law is transformed into a *respect* that motivates moral action purely for the sake of duty, and in the process one finds both an unconditioned *good* and the unconditioned freedom that one sought in metaphysics. In Kant's metaphysics and moral philosophy, wonder is transformed into something that motivates *activity*, whether as a regulative ideal of theoretical reason or as respect for moral law.

Kant's aesthetics turn again to wonder, but in the context of aesthetics, wonder is *not* taken up into any sort of practical activity. The work in which Kant offers his most developed aesthetic theory is called the *Critique of Judgment* because Kant sees aesthetics as linked with humans' ability to make judgments about particular things. In this work, Kant revisits both the regulative principles of the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the moral law of the *Groundwork*. The former ends up being closely linked with Kant's account of the beautiful, and the latter with the sublime. Correspondingly, the beautiful is based on a pleasurable wonder at nature that does *not* give rise to any deeper understanding. And the sublime is based on a wonder at one's own moral nature that does not (directly) give rise to any practical activity. Throughout the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant emphasizes that these kinds of wonder "continually recur."¹²



Starting with the beautiful, then, Kant raises a fundamental puzzle about judgments that a thing is beautiful. Kant points out that "the judgment of taste is aesthetic," by which he means, fundamentally, that we claim that something is beautiful just because it *seems* beautiful, because it gives us a distinctive sort of pleasure that we associate with beauty. For Kant, the beautiful cannot be explained by virtue of subsuming it under any concepts. (So, for example, the concept of the golden rectangle, or of exact resemblance to its object, do not define what beauty is.) Rather, something is beautiful when and only when it feels beautiful to someone of good taste. And there's the problem, because we also think that if

12. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, edited by Paul Guyer, translated by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 5:365, cf. 5:301, 5:245. All quotations in this section will be from this edition,

something is beautiful, then it really *is* beautiful, and anyone who does not think that it is beautiful has bad taste.¹³ What makes this even more complicated—but what also seems basically right—is that Kant is unwilling to use either epistemological categories or ethical ones to make sense of this bad taste. That is, someone who does not find a particularly beautiful sunset beautiful is not misapplying concepts; they might perfectly well understand that it is a sunset, that it has a particular hue of orange, and so on. And they are not *morally* wrong; there is nothing *evil* about not enjoying a beautiful sunset. But they are still missing something essential. They aren't *feeling* the right things. So Kant's puzzle is how to make sense of the fact that the beautiful is both *subjective*, in that it is based on my own personal feeling, and *universal*, in the sense that everyone *should* feel the same way.

One clue to answering this comes from a similarity between the wonder that gives rise to regulative principles in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the feeling of pleasure at a sunset. In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant reiterates that human beings seek a finality and completeness to our understanding of nature, one that is not constitutive for nature itself but that governs how we must think about it. But Kant adds that insofar as we successfully bring nature into accordance with increasingly general principles, we experience a *pleasure* in this increased understanding. As Kant explains,

[The] discovery [of the order of nature] is a task for the understanding, which is aimed at an end that is necessary for it, namely to introduce into it unity of principles . . . The attainment of every aim is combined with the feeling of pleasure; and, if the condition of the former is an *a priori* representation. . . then the feeling of pleasure is also determined by a ground that is *a priori* and valid for everyone. (5:187)

Kant's point here is that the search for the systematicity in nature brings with it periodic successes, such as when Newton discovered that

13. Admittedly, this universalism in aesthetics is not as common today as in Kant's day. We might be inclined to say that "beauty is in the eye of the beholder" and mean by this that there is no difference between good taste and bad or that no one can be *wrong* about whether something is beautiful. But I suspect that much of the reason that we hold this view is due to the fact that we can't see how a judgment that is based solely on a feeling can possibly be universal. If *that* is the reason that one is opposed to universalism in aesthetics, then Kant's argument is precisely what is necessary to vindicate a universalist aesthetics today.

the gravity that affected the planets and the gravity that caused apples to fall were two forms of the same force. Because this search for systematicity is something that is a natural response of a universal wonder at the world, the pleasure that we feel in these successes should be a similarly universal pleasure. Since everyone must seek to find systematicity in nature, everyone must be pleased by really understanding such systematicity.

These successes are *not* examples of *aesthetic* pleasure, however, since, for one thing, they bring wonder and its related pleasure to an end. One experiences pleasure at the process of gaining greater understanding of the unity of nature, but not in the understanding itself. *Discovering* gravity, or even learning about it for the first time (in the right frame of mind), is a pleasurable delight that flows from the satisfaction of an impulse to which wonder gives rise. But just knowing about gravity is not pleasurable. The pleasure is in the moment of coming to understanding, not in the understanding itself. For Kant, however, truly aesthetic pleasures are different in that they are *ongoing*. Some objects that we encounter in the world are such that “pleasure is connected with the mere apprehension of the form of an object” (5:189), but the pleasure here, like the pleasure of discovering new natural laws, is a pleasure rooted in the nature of our cognitive capacities. As Kant says, “the pleasure can express nothing but its suitability to the cognitive faculties that are in the reflecting power of judgment, insofar as they are in play, and thus merely a subjective formal purposiveness of the object.” (5:190) The idea here is that the same activity of cognition that takes place in bringing the apple and the planets under the general concept of gravity takes place in the contemplation of the sunset. But whereas the cognition of gravity ends up reaching an end, the cognition of the sunset does not. Now the cognition of gravity is nothing more than the outworking of wonder transformed into a regulative principle that seeks unity in nature. The cognition of the sunset involves that same wonder, working through the same cognitive capacities and with a similar directness, but now in what Kant calls a “free play.” The play is free because we can continue to think about the sunset from all sorts of different directions and never reach any “definite cognition” of the nature of the sunset. But unlike a merely confusing representation, where we just “don’t get it,” something that is beautiful is constantly *conducive to contemplation*, without ever being finally contemplated.

As Kant goes on to say, “That object the form of which . . . in mere reflection on it (without any intention of acquiring a concept from it) is judged as the ground of a pleasure in the representation of such an object—with its representation this pleasure is also judged to be necessarily combined, consequently not merely for the subject who apprehends this form but for everyone who judges at all. The object is then called beautiful; and the faculty for judging through such a pleasure (consequently also with universal validity) is called taste” (ibid.).

Since the cognitive capacities with which we think about the object are the general cognitive capacities of all human beings, anyone who spends the time and attention to properly contemplate something beautiful experiences the pleasure that comes from the free play of these cognitive capacities. The experience of the beautiful is a kind of enduring and contemplative wonder. Like the wonder that gives rise to regulative principles and an increasing understanding of nature, the wonder that underlies the beautiful is directed towards the world of nature—the starry skies, beautiful sunsets, and pretty flowers—and is rooted in humans’ capacities for understanding that world. But unlike the intellectual activity of those regulative principles, wonder in the beautiful does not seek anything beyond itself. It is not part of a quest for greater understanding but simply a pleasure in the contemplation of a beautiful form.

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Kant’s discussion of the sublime falls under his more general discussion of aesthetic judgment; so much of what Kant says about the beautiful also applies to the sublime. In particular, Kant emphasizes,

The beautiful coincides with the sublime in that both please for themselves. And further in that both presuppose neither a judgment of sense nor a logically determining judgment, but a judgment of reflection: consequently the satisfaction does not depend on a sensation, like that in the agreeable, nor on a determinate concept, like the satisfaction in the good . . . Hence both sorts of judgments are also *singular*, and yet judgments that profess to be universally valid in regard to every subject, although they lay claim merely to the feeling of pleasure and not to any cognition of the object. (5:244)

Like judgments about the beautiful, judgments about the sublime are at once subjective in that they are based on mere feeling and universal

because this feeling is the result of the interaction of universal human cognitive capacities.

In the case of the sublime, however, the feeling is not *wholly* pleasurable, and the cognitive faculties involved do not play together in the friendly manner in which they do in the case of the beautiful. Where the beautiful reflects the way in which humans' striving to understand the world conceptually is well suited to the presentation of particular objects, the sublime arises when one's relationship to the world is frustrated in one way or another.

Whereas "natural beauty (the self-sufficient kind) carries with it a purposiveness in its form, through which the object seems as it were to be predetermined for our power of judgment, and thus constitutes an object of satisfaction in itself, whereas that which . . . excites in us the feeling of the sublime, may to be sure appear . . . to be contrapurposive for our power of judgment, unsuitable for our faculty of presentation, and as it were doing violence to our imagination, but is nevertheless judged all the more sublime for that" (5:245).

Kant primarily describes two forms of this frustration. He starts with the case where one's attempt to understand the world in terms of a systematic whole can be frustrated by the sheer immensity or complexity of something. Kant describes, for example, the feeling of the sublime at the contemplation of St. Peter's in Rome: "The very same thing can also suffice to explain the bewilderment or sort of embarrassment that is said to seize the spectator on first entering St. Peter's in Rome. For here there is a feeling of the inadequacy of his imagination for presenting the ideas of a whole, in which the imagination reaches its maximum and, in the effort to extend it, sinks back into itself, but is thereby transported into an emotionally moving satisfaction" (5:252). Similarly, when contemplating the starry skies or grand mountains or the Grand Canyon, one can have an experience of not being able to "take it all in." And this inability to take it all in, while it involves a certain kind of displeasure, can also be strangely satisfying. In Kant's terms, it is sublime.

For Kant, the sublimity in contemplating the starry skies or the Grand Canyon or even St. Peter's is not something that is present *in* those starry skies. It is not *actually* the case that one literally cannot take it all in. Kant explains that we can come up with ways of measuring these things that *do* let us take it all in. By taking the distance between the self and the sun as a standard or by developing units like "light-years," we can

measure the distances between stars and come to a detailed understanding of them. Even with manmade wonders like St. Peter's, Kant points out that to experience the effect of being blown away, "we must avoid coming too near just as much as remaining too far away." We *can*, it turns out, "take it all in" in all of these particular cases. But what the experience of the sublime shows us is that we have a capacity to seek a complete knowledge of things that goes beyond what we actually experience of them. When we think about *what* precisely we aren't "taking in" in our contemplation of the Grand Canyon, we realize that it *cannot* be simply the sense data. We *are* always taking that in. But there is a demand for completeness, an ideal of reason, that is frustrated in moments of awe-struck wonder at these grand objects. And the recognition that there is in us a faculty of reason that outstrips all literal experience and takes us beyond the merely natural world. It provides an insight into a world beyond nature itself. And *that* insight strikes us with deep wonder. As Kant insists, "we express ourselves on the whole incorrectly if we call some *object of nature* sublime. . . . We can say no more than that the object serves for the presentation of a sublimity that can be found in the mind; for what is properly sublime cannot be contained in any sensible form, but concerns only ideas of reason" (5:245)

This first sort of sublimity thus comes when we find it impossible to fully take in the objects of our perception, but a second sort of sublimity is evident when we are confronted by "the irresistibility of [the] power [of nature] certainly makes us, considered as natural beings, recognize our physical powerlessness" (5:261):

Bold, overhanging, as it were threatening cliffs, thunder clouds towering up into the heavens, bringing with them flashes of lightning and crashes of thunder, volcanoes with their all-destroying violence, hurricanes with the devastation they leave behind, the boundless ocean set into a rage, a lofty waterfall on a mighty river, etc., make our capacity to resist into an insignificant trifle in comparison with their power. (ibid.)

Just as the previous case brought a kind of frustration of intellect but at the same time a deep sense of pleasure, so here one feels an intense fear at these sublime forces in nature, but at the same time a distinct sense of pleasure. And again, Kant explains this source of pleasure as a recognition of something about *oneself* that takes one beyond the realm of nature. In this case, however, what is revealed is "a capacity for judging

ourselves as independent of [nature] and a superiority over nature on which is grounded a self-preservation of quite another kind than that which can be threatened and endangered by nature outside us" (ibid.). In other words, the recognition of the fragility of one's life brings one face to face with one's nature *as a free being* who transcends nature and at the same time has a higher *moral* vocation that goes beyond one's mere mortal life.

In the beautiful and the sublime, Kant shows that the "end" of wonder orchestrated in his epistemology and ethics is compatible with an ongoing and pleasurable experience of wonder at the world in which we live. And especially in the feeling of the sublime, one returns precisely to the two sources of wonder with which Kant began. Despite all of the progress of the understanding in following through the regulative principles of reason to come to a greater understanding of the world, the contemplation of the starry skies still provokes a feeling of sublime majesty that proves that reason's wonder outstrips anything that the world can satisfy. And the contemplation of the awesome power of nature over one's mortal life brings attention back to the most important source of one's own worth and dignity, the wonderful moral law within, a moral law that places human beings in a realm of unconditional worth beyond any mortal danger.