

Fear and Wonder: Ultimate Questions

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

You're going to get your feet wet with questions that lead some toward existential, metaphysical, and religious contemplation through fear and wonder in this lesson.

You'll look at two examples, one from the third century BC with Aristotle, and then you'll explore Giambattista Vico in the 17th and 18th centuries. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Otherness

2. Fear and Trembling

1. Otherness

Most of us are familiar with the sound of thunder. We've heard it before. We know what it is. We are reassured by science. There's an explanation. What about a child who hears it for the first time? This deafening, thunderous, cacophony outside of oneself. It must be horrifying, or at the same time, it could fill a child with awe.

In any case, the child needs reassurance. What about early humans? How did they reassure their children when they themselves didn't know the source of this chaos in the sky?

Think about the time of Aristotle. He was a student of Plato, a third-century Macedonian Greek philosopher who said that the beginning of philosophy and philosophical investigation is wonder and awe. The experience of wonder and awe motivates and moves one toward the study of metaphysics, theology, and the intersection of the two. What's behind that is this experience of **otherness**, something completely different, separate, and overwhelmingly inaccessible.

In the example of the child hearing a thunderclap in the sky, a child needs something to reassure him or her, so the child clings to the parent for security and understanding. Similarly, primal humans began to seek understanding and explanation in the form of legends, myths, and gods or God. These are the seeds and the material of religion.

The word religion comes from two Latin words: a noun, "religio," that's taken from the verb "religare," meaning "to bind or connect." The meaning of this verb also carries with it a sense of obligation. The Romans paid

allegiance to this power—this mysterious power in the sky. This is a source of **piety**, a sense of reverence and even awe directed toward the divine. It became the Roman god Jupiter, also called Jove.



TERMS TO KNOW

Otherness

That which is not the self, including both other people and the material world.

Piety

A sense of reverence and even awe directed toward the divine.

2. Fear and Trembling

Giambattista Vico in the 17th and 18th centuries interpreted this experience of fear when confronted with otherness as a prompt or a motivation to do something or to create something with it. In his book *The New Science* he says, “Jove, as the fear felt by the first man, is imitated by them. They shake their bodies like the sky body of Jove himself. This primordial power of representation is slowly transformed into the world of human symbols, into the medium of language and cultural institutions in which all sensation is modified and given shape.”

Here it's human agency rather than supreme, supernatural agency. A bit of a paradox, in fact.

There's a quote in the Bible with respect to fear and trembling: “Wherefore, my beloved as he have always obeyed, not as in my presence only but now much more in my absence. Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.”



BIG IDEA

Regardless of who's behind the weather or who's reporting it, what it all points to is this human experience of a division, a separation from some vital non-material force that can't rationally be explained. One feels bound to this indefinable something, and what does one do with that?

Well, this might inspire a search for meaning and answers not only about God, nature, and divinity but also about the essence of spirit that might be experienced individually. Who's to say it's a spiritual essence when the spirit is still so clouded in mystery?



SUMMARY

One of the key ideas you've been looking at here is the notion of **otherness**: a sense of something completely separate and different and outside oneself. You looked at the example of thunder and a child's and a primal human's response to it, fear or wonder and awe. Aristotle's notion of wonder and awe was the ground for a philosophical, metaphysical, or theological exploration, investigation, and philosophical speculation. It opened up the possibility of a non-human agency. This was compared with Vico's understanding of this experience of **fear and trembling** as being a motivation to create human societies and structures that can mediate the tension of that experience of otherness. This fear can also

lead to piety as in the example of the Roman god Jupiter. You also looked at an example of piety from the Bible in terms of fear and trembling.

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