

First Contact

Provisional Reading List

1. Wonder, Admiration, and Surprise

As a start to the module, we consider some of the standard reactions to unusual, unfamiliar, and rare things: wonder, admiration, and surprise. We consider, in particular, the nature of emotions like wonder, and what importance they may have to science and, indeed, philosophy.

- (1) Adam Smith, “The History of Astronomy” [1795] in *Essays on Philosophical Subjects* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), eds. W.P.D. Wightman, J.C. Bryce, & I.S. Ross, Secs I-111, pp. 33-53.
- (2) Dacher Keltner & Jonathan Haidt, “Approaching Awe: A Moral, Spiritual, and Aesthetic Emotion” in *Cognition & Emotion* (2003), Vol. 17, No. 2, pp. 297-314.

Further Reading:

- (A) Rachel Carson, *The Sense of Wonder* [1956] (New York: Harper Collins, 1998).
- (B) Lorraine Daston & Katherine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature* (New York: Zone Books, 2001)
- (C) Philip Fisher, *Wonder, The Rainbow, and the Aesthetics of Rare Experiences* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).
- (D) Zeev Harvey, “Maimonides on Human Perfection, Awe, and Politics” in *The Thought of Maimonides: Philosophical and Legal Studies* (Lewiston: Edwin Meller Press), eds. Ira Robinson, Lawrence Kaplan, & Julien Bauer, pp. 1-15.

2. The Sublime

Wonder, surprise, and admiration are common reactions to things that are novel, unusual, and surprising. But they are also common reactions to the “sublime” – i.e., that which exceeds our understanding, imagination, or overwhelms our sense of beauty. Week 2 looks at some historical and contemporary literature that tries to delineate the category of the sublime.

- (1) Guo Xi, *The Interest of Lofty Forests and Springs* in *The Sublime Reader* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), ed. Robert Clewis, pp. 41-44.

- (2) Immanuel Kant, *Observations on The Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764), in *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), eds. Patrick Frierson and Paul Guyer, Secs. 1-2, pp. 13-35.
- (3) Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) [Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 2015], Part I(VII) & Part II, pp. 33-4, 47-73.

Further Reading:

- (A) Malcolm Budd, "Delight in the Natural World: Kant on the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature" in *British Journal of Aesthetics* (1988), Vol. 38, No. 1, pp. 1-18.
- (B) Emily Brady, *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

3. Epiphanies

Sometimes we come into contact with objects and experiences that have a special revelatory character. Suddenly, we see something anew, we acquire a new perspective on something old, or we acquire new understanding. These are what we normally call "epiphanies." But what is an epiphany, exactly, and how does it feature in the average human life?

- (1) Sophie-Grace Chappell, "Introducing Epiphanies" in *ZEMO* (2019), Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 95-121.
- (2) Marghanita Laski, "Criteria for Ecstasies" in *Ecstasy in Secular and Religious Experiences* (Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher, Inc., 1961), Ch. 3, pp. 37-47.

Further Reading:

- (A) William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* [1902] (New York: Penguin, 1982) [Selections].
- (B) R.R. Griffiths, W.A. Richards, U. McCann, R. Jesse, "Psilocybin can occasion mystical-type experiences having substantial and sustained personal meaning and spiritual significance" in *Psychopharmacology* (2006), Vol. 187, No. 3, pp. 268-83.

4. Conversion Experiences

Some experiences alter our fundamental beliefs and commitments. In so doing, they change our identity in a profound sense. We might call these "conversion experiences."

But are such experiences any different from a simple change of mind, or a change of belief, which happen all the time? And if so, how? How might others induce a genuine conversion in us?

- (1) William James, "Conversion" in *Varieties of Religious Experience* [1902] (New York: Penguin, 1982), Lectures IX-X, pp. 189-258.
- (2) Paul Faulkner, "The Nature and Rationality of Conversion" in *European Journal of Philosophy* (2019), Vol. 27, No. 4, pp. 821-836.

Further Reading

- (A) L.A. Paul, *Transformative Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
- (B) Helen de Cruz, "Religious Conversion, Transformative Experience, and Disagreement" in *Philosophia Christi* (2018), Vol. 20, No. 1, pp. 265-275.

5. The Ordinary is Strange

The ordinary is, well, ordinary. But, seen with a certain detachment, ordinary things (chairs, spoons, and ice cream) can suddenly appear alien and strange. We can begin to wonder at realities we normally take for granted. Sometimes comedy can accomplish this. Sometimes the consumption of substances. But what happens, really, when such new perspectives on the ordinary are taken, and what can they accomplish?

- (1) Jonathan Lear, *A Case for Irony* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), Part I, pp. 3-75.
- (2) Georges Perec, "The Apartment" [1974] in *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces* (New York: Penguin, 1997), pp. 26-39.
- (3) Soetsu Yanagi, "The Beauty of Miscellaneous Things" in *The Beauty of Everyday Things* (New York: Penguin, 2017), tr. Michael Brase, pp. 27-59.

Further Reading:

- (A) Carl Sagan, "Mr. X" in *Marihuana Reconsidered* (1971). Available online at <https://www.organism.earth/library/document/mr-x>
- (B) Michael Pollan, *The Botany of Desire: A Plant's Eye View of the World* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2002), pp. 171-193.
- (C) Chris Hadfield, *An Astronaut's Guide to Life on Earth* (New York: Little, Brown & Company, 2013), Part III, pp. 243-283.
- (D) John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* [1972] (New York: Penguin, 2008), Ch. 1, pp. 7-34.

- (E) Blaise Pascal, *Pensees* [16??] (New York: Penguin, 1966), Ch. XV, pp. 87-95.
- (F) Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009).
- (G) VIDEO: Emmanuel Vaughan-Lee, “Earthrise” (30mins – NYTimes, available online).

6. “Barbarians” & Cannibals

First encounters with foreign cultures are inherently fraught: epistemologically, morally, and politically. While such encounters are fascinating, they are also dangerous. The inability to understand and communicate with a group can lead to suspicion, projection, and unchecked bias. We may call deem practices we don't understand “barbaric,” and decide to suppress them as a result. This week looks at some historical arguments both for and against respecting the freedom of foreign cultures. It also examines some powerful firsthand accounts of first contact.

- (1) Juan Ginés de Sepulveda, *Democrates Alter* (~1552, excerpt), from *Introduction to Contemporary Civilization in the West* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961)
[<http://www.columbia.edu/acis/ets/CCREAD/sepulved.htm>]
- (2) Michel de Montaigne, “On the Cannibals” [1580] in *The Complete Essays* (New York: Penguin, 1993), Ch. 31, pp. 228-241.
- (3) Davi Kopenawa & Bruce Albert, *The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), translated by Nicholas Elliot and Alison Dundy. [Selections]

Further Reading:

- (A) Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvellous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).
- (B) Françoise de Graffigny, *Letters of a Peruvian Woman* [1747] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), tr. Jonathan Mallinson.
- (C) Bartolomé de Las Casas, *In Defense of the Indians* (~1552-3, Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1992), tr. S Poole, “Summary of Sepulveda’s Position” & Chs. 1-5, 28 (*bis*), 38, 42, 49-50, pp. 11-6, 25-54, 190-5, 243-9, 267-74, 304-13.
- (D) W.E.H. Stanner, “The Dreaming” (1953) in *The Dreaming & Other Essays* (Colingwood: Black Inc, 2009), pp. 57-73.
- (E) Gananath Obeyesekere, *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992)

- (F) Marshall Sahlins, *How “Natives” Think: about Captain Cook, For Example* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).
- (G) Adam Etinson, “Some Myths About Ethnocentrism” in *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* (2018), Vol. 96, No. 2, pp. 209-224.
- (H) Adam Etinson, “Conversation” in *New Literary History* (2018), Vol. 94, No. 2, pp. 267-73.
- (I) VIDEO: “Une Belle Leçon de Civilisation” (Available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FH1J14ojWfc>)

7. Talking to Aliens (Xenolinguistics)

It is a topic of longstanding fascination and intrigue: what would it be like to talk to an alien? How might communication with radically different lifeforms even work? This week’s readings combine some compelling fictional accounts of such encounters, with some recent work in linguistics (or “xenolinguistics”) that addresses this question. We connect these discussions to topics in the philosophy of language and interpretation as well.

- (1) Ted Chiang, “Story of Your Life” in *Stories of Your Life and Others* (London: Picador, 2014), pp. 109-72.
- (2) Catherine Hobaiter, Adriano Lameira, & Derek Ball, “Recognizing Intentional Signals and Their Meaning in Non-Human Communication” in *Xenolinguistics: Toward a Science of Extraterrestrial Linguistics* (Forthcoming), eds. Douglas Vakoch & Jeffrey Punske.

Further Reading:

- (A) Sue Burke, *Semiosis: A Novel of First Contact* (Croyden: Harper, 2018)
- (B) Carl Sagan, *Contact* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985)
- (C) Carl Sagan, Lida Salzman Sagan, & Frank Drake, “A Message from Earth” in *Science* (25 February 1972), Vol. 175, pp. 881-4.
- (D) Roger Williams, *A Key into the Language of America* [1643]
- (E) Willard Van Orman Quine, “Translation and Meaning” in *Word and Object* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960), Ch. 2, pp. 26-79.
- (F) Donald Davidson, “Radical Interpretation” in *Dialectica* (1972), Vol. 27, Np. 3/4, pp. 313-328.

8. On the Significance of Other Worlds

What would the discovery of life on other planets mean for our understanding of life on earth, and indeed, of the universe in general? What ethical implications might follow, for

example, from the discovery of alien life? What duties might we have to such agents? And how might such discoveries alter our concept of life itself?

- (1) Adam Frank, *Light of The Stars: Alien Worlds and the Fate of The Earth* (New York: Norton & Company, 2019) [Selections].
- (2) Bernard Le Bovier, *Conversations on the Plurality of Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), tr. H.A. Hargreaves [Selections].
- (3) Tim Mulgan, “The Ethics of ET” in *Aeon* (December 5th 2017) [Available online at: <https://aeon.co/essays/how-the-discovery-of-extraterrestrial-life-would-change-morality>]

Further Reading:

- (A) Alexander Wendt & Raymond Duvall, “Sovereignty and the UFO” in *Political Theory* (2008), Vol. 36, No. 4, pp. 607-633.
- (B) Carl Sagan, “Extraterrestrial Intelligence” & Extraterrestrial Folklore: Implications for the Evolution of Religion” in *The Varieties of Scientific Experience* (New York: Penguin, 2006), Chs. 4-5, pp. 103-147.
- (C) Michael Faber, *The Book of Strange New Things* (London: Canongate, 2015)

9. Animal Intelligence

What follows, both morally and conceptually, from the existence of animal intelligence? And how profound is animal intelligence likely to be, according to the latest science? How might we find new ways to communicate with such intelligence?

- (1) Peter Godfrey-Smith, *Other Minds: The Octopus and the Evolution of Intelligent Life* (London: William Collins, 2016). [Selections]
- (2) Alice Crary, *Inside Ethics: On the Demands of Moral Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016). [Selections]

Further Reading:

- (A) Amia Srinivasan, “The Sucker, The Sucker!” in *London Review of Books* (2017), Vol. 93, No. 17.
- (B) Adrienne Matei, “Bored? These Americans are Teaching Their Dogs to Talk” in *The Guardian* (December 8th, 2020).
- (C) Sy Montgomery, *The Soul of an Octopus* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015).
- (D) Jonathan Balcombe, *What a Fish Knows* (London: Overworld, 2016).
- (E) Thomas Nagel, “What is it Like to be a Bat?” in *Philosophical Review* (1974), Vol. 83, No. 4, pp. 435-450.

- (F) Frans de Waal, *Are We Smart Enough to Know How Smart Animals Are?* (London: Granta, 2016).
- (G) Peter Wohlleben, *The Inner Life of Animals: Suprising Observations of a Hidden World* (London: Vintage, 2016).
- (H) David Foster Wallace, "Consider the Lobster" in *Consider the Lobster And Other Essays* (London: Little, Brown, and Company, 2005), pp. 235-254.
- (I) VIDEO: "My Octopus Teacher" (Netflix)

10. Confronting Death

As mortal beings, we have no choice but to confront death – both our own and that of those we care about. Death is a part of life, as they say. But death is also the absolute negation of life. As living beings, it is utterly foreign and mysterious to us. How should we manage this mystery? And what, if anything, do we know about "life" beyond death?

- (1) Thomas Nagel, "Death" in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), Ch. 1, pp. 1-10.
- (2) Thomas W. Laqueur, *The Work of The Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), Part I, pp. 29-107.

Further Reading:

- (A) Immanuel Kant, "Thoughts on the Occasion of Mr. Johann Friedrich von Funk's Untimely Death" (1760) in *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), eds. Patrick Frierson and Paul Guyer, pp. 3-8.
- (B) Roland R Griffiths, Matthew W Johnson, Michael A Carducci, Annie Umbricht, William A Richards, Brian D Richards, Mary P Cosimano, and Margaret A Klinedinst, "Psilocybin produces substantial and sustained decreases in depression and anxiety in patients with life-threatening cancer: A randomized double-blind trial" in *Journal of Psychopharmacology* (2016), Vol. 30, No. 12, pp. 1181-1197.
- (C) *Japanese Death Poems: Written by Zen Monks and Haiku Poets on the Verge of Death* (Rutland: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1986), ed. Yoel Hoffman. [Excerpts].

11. Hope & Cultural Devastation

The world can sometimes change in drastic ways around us. The pandemic is one example of this. On such occasions, ordinary cultural practices, identities, and meaning-creating activities (such as going to work) can suddenly become obsolete. This can disrupt our sense of identity in profound ways. And navigating such change can require profound

imaginative and creative effort. Sometimes cultures must change drastically to survive. But how does this work, and how can we ensure continuity (and hope) amidst such change and reinvention?

- (1) Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006) [read the whole book] *

Further Reading:

- (A) Adrienne M. Martin, *How We Hope: A Moral Psychology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), Chs. 1 & 4, pp. 11-35, 98-118.
(B) Martha Nussbaum, "Hope, Love, Vision" in *The Monarchy of Fear: A Philosopher Looks at Our Political Crisis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), Ch. 7, pp. 197-247.
(C) VIDEO: Alan Saunders & Jonathan Lear, "The Dreams of Plenty Coups" (23 mins – on YouTube)