

Essay

Romanticism, Amazement, Imagination—*A trias religiosa*

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Abstract: To wonder is a gift of the romanticist in particular. Wonder seeks explanation. If reason doesn't provide that, imagination provides a way out. One imagines a transcendental world of which the God-idea may become the central point and the explanatory model of that that invoked wonder. The God-idea implies wonder, wonder that life exists, that things exist at all. Wonder promotes religiosity—i.e., the need to provide life with a vertical dimension—and religiosity facilitates, in its turn, wonder. Thus the circle is closed: romanticism, wonder, imagination, religiosity, wonder. A circle providing life with an important bonus, i.e., sense, meaning with a supernatural signature. This augments the chance that hope will be preserved, even as dark clouds begin to hover above one's life.

Keywords: wonder; imagination; romanticism; religiosity; God-idea; suicide

A trias religiosa: three intertwined intellectual faculties: amazement, imagination, romanticism. These are faculties that can move one, as [De Rijk \(2006\)](#) puts it, “to think higher,” a process that nurtures religiosity.

I begin by discussing the amazement component.

1. Amazement

I am an amazed person. And I have been for many years now. Thank God, I might add. The formulation illustrates the core of my argument: the view that amazement and religiosity are connected, albeit in a complex manner. I will attempt to unravel that complexity.

First of all, a definition. Then we know what we are talking about.

Amazement is a feeling that occurs when we experience or perceive something we are unable to place, unable to explain, that is literally beyond our comprehension.

Amazement can have a positive connotation. It then generates wonder.

Amazement can also have a negative connotation. It then causes aversion.

In this discussion, I speak solely of positive amazement: wonder, in other words.

But I am interrupting myself. I said amazement was a feeling. That is not actually the right word. It is more a state of mind. The concept of feeling is simple. It concerns something quite specific, a certain feeling such as grief, joy, or longing. State of mind better illustrates that amazement imbues one's entire mood, one's entire emotions, in a manner almost impossible to delimit.

I said that I have known amazement my entire life. But what is it that amazes me? I will give a few examples.

Amazement that being exists and not nothingness. What Heschl (1965) called “radical amazement . . . amazement not only at one facet of the world, but in the startling fact that there are facts at all”.

Amazement that life exists, life in its infinite variety. I speak of existential amazement. That might sound like a tired platitude, unworthy of an intellectual. Not so! There is nothing blunt about the statement. We inhabit what, as far as we are aware, is the only heavenly body where life occurs. The number of lifeforms in the animal and vegetable kingdoms, even within one species, is amazing. To what end, one might wonder. The sheer panoply engenders an overwhelming feeling of beauty. But that, surely, cannot be the reason for their existence. Its meaning escapes us.

Pregnancy is one such miracle. In a highly-specific time frame, according to a highly-specific design, by means of an extremely complex pattern of tissue development, two cells produce a viable individual. This process is evidently steered centrally and meticulously. The nature of that steering eludes us. In me, that evokes amazement.

Our brains are a miracle. They contain roughly 100 billion (10^{11}) nerve cells (neurons). Each neuron makes contact with other neurons at roughly 1000 points (synapses). That makes $10^{11} \times 10^3$ (one hundred trillion) synapses.

The number of neurotransmitters already known is more than 100 and most neurotransmitters are active on not one, but a number of receptors. This unimaginably complicated network is bunched together in a spongy organ of just less than 1500 mL.

All the elements for permanent chaos appear to be in place. But no: on the contrary, the brain actually makes it possible for us to lead a coordinated, productive existence. Order is the rule, chaos the exception. Evidently, the brain is powerfully, centrally steered. The nature of that steering eludes us. Amazing!

I, myself, decide how I organise my life; I decide what I do or do not do; I decide with whom I associate and with whom I do not. We possess free will; not a full 100%, but to a significant degree. How the ship is built may be globally defined, but I am the helmsman. I decide the ship's course.

Who or what is that “I”, that steering mechanism? We cannot find it in the brain. For more than half a century I have been engaged in brain and behaviour research. Nonetheless, I speak here of a miracle, a mystery, a reason for profound amazement.

I consider evolution—the development of lifeforms from highly primitive to highly complex—to be a (partial) miracle. Darwin's evolution theory states that this process is, essentially, a question of chance. Chance genetic mutations bring about phenotypic changes, making the organism in question better adapted to its living conditions and better equipped to survive.

It therefore has a greater chance of surviving than its conspecifics that are not thus equipped. The better-equipped and their progeny will dominate and the less well-endowed group will ultimately disappear.

There are strong arguments for the evolution theory and few sensible person will contest its validity. That is not where the problem lies. The question is whether the evolution theory offers a sufficient, full explanation for the origin of species. Is evolution really solely the result of pure chance?

There is reason for doubt. Single cell organisms ultimately developed into man. By trial and error, admittedly. But all the same! There appears to have been a steering, directing element at work in evolution.

Even for those who accept this premise/assumption, there is no question that this mechanism is, for now, a complete mystery. I speak unashamedly of a miracle.

The world is not, in my view, free of wonders. Our existence is littered with mysteries. Mysteries that will probably never be solved.

Many of my colleague natural scientists have a different opinion. They comfort themselves in the expectation that all the mysteries of human existence will be empirically deciphered. They believe that everything that is immaterial in our existence—amazement, hope, expectation,

sadness, happiness—in short, the mind, the soul, will prove reducible to matter and that the solving capacity of science (with a view to natural sciences, of course) is limitless.

That is what I call scientific messianism.

I do not share that expectation. The natural science end days, the time when there will be no more mysteries, is not yet in sight. In fact, in my view, it is an unappetising illusion. An unravelled existence is a disenchanting existence. For me, it would lose its colours and scents. Amazement is the spice of life; it colours the picture.

2. Imagination

So much for the first faculty: amazement. And now for the second: imagination.

There is reason for amazement. As I said, in this world there appear to be influences at work that escape our scientific analysis but can profoundly influence our existence—or, to put it slightly more succinctly, the existence of the existing.

There is a sense of there being more out there than meets the eye or ear. But, then, what? The human mind demands a rational exploration. There is none. Amazement then mingles with a feeling of unease. If reason provides no clarification, then the need arises to reach over the bounds of reason, to imagine a world beyond the horizon, an incomprehensible, unknowable, mysterious, supernatural, metaphysical world (Van Praag 2013, 2014). We then find ourselves in a void, which we simply fill. People are uncomfortable with voids; they arouse anxiety. Consequently, not even the assumed metaphysical remains empty. People perceive powers that influence earthly existence. Those powers can be perceived as unstructured—as the ‘Higher’, ‘The All’, ‘The Numinous’—or are rolled into one all-encompassing power, named God or the Everlasting. In the first instance, I am speaking of spirituality; in the second of religiosity.

Over the course of time, the need to provide life with a vertical dimension, which I therefore refer to as religiosity, became ‘clad’ in numerous stories, parables, moral-philosophical tracts, allegories and ideological treatises. From this, philosophies were distilled, systems that prescribe what to believe and how to live. Religious beliefs gained structure.

Moreover, a wealth of rituals was developed, intended to facilitate the way upward. Believers were given ‘tools’ to express their reverence for and trust in the Everlasting and demonstrate a devotion on the system.

And so a man-made philosophy founded on religiosity developed, equipped with an extensive protocol geared to facilitating acceptance of the doctrines. This, as a whole, I refer to as ‘religion’.

I therefore see religiosity as the substructure and religion as the superstructure. Religion is the formalised, structured form of religiosity (Van Praag 2008).

Religion provides an opportunity to place the amazement of which I spoke within a framework. Amazement at a world that appears to unfold according to a specific pattern; at life processes that seem not to run without direction, but in which a certain intentionality, a certain predictability can be detected; amazement at a world whose history does not appear to be a random process. One example that I hold dear. Evil is eternal, it seems ineradicable, but it never gains any definite victory. Thanks to mankind? I wonder. Despite mankind? From a rational point of view, highly unlikely. From the point of view of my imagination, I would like to keep that option open.

Religion introduces a hypothetical quantity—named God or the Everlasting—who is held responsible for that which generates amazement. An impressive postulate, in my view, neither verifiable nor falsifiable, just like the positivists’ messianic hope that our knowledge will prove unlimited and natural sciences will usher us into the end of time, an era that will know no more mysteries.

The metaphysical philosophy is, literally, a *deus ex machina*, but one that is dear to many.

Swaab (2003) condescendingly refers to the God idea as a stopgap to mask ignorance. A banal characterisation. I speak of a lofty assumption, one of the most impressive and influential ideas humanity has produced (Van Praag 2017).

I conclude that amazement—through our imagination—is a primary driver for religiosity. Amazement sets the imagination in motion, imagining nurtures religiosity.

3. Romanticism

And now the third component of what I call the *trias religiosa*, namely romanticism: the need for romance.

In addition to amazement, I see romanticism as the second driver for religiosity. The romantics are imaginers. Such individuals do not consider existence as it appears to them enough. They are unable or willing to live (solely) ‘functionally’; living according to principles of efficiency and productivity. They live ‘ornamentally’, embellishing life with elements that are not functional and are, in some sense, superfluous, but satisfy their sense of beauty and harmony.

They evoke those elements. They picture and depict them. They are prepared to give their imagination free reign. They decorate their life, making it more appealing than what they see as ‘bare’ life.

The romantics are, by definition, persons of feelings, who like to be moved, who are seeking emotional situations, such as those provided by love, art and nature. That emotional hunger also inspires their preference for the all-inspiring, the grandiose, the mysterious, the numinous. They seek situations with such qualities or they imagine them.

No wonder, therefore, that the romantic feels an affinity with the spiritual sides of existence. The world that begins where sensory perception ends. It is a world consisting of images generated by the individual himself. These are generally vertically ordered, in the sense that they reach towards what qualifies as the higher plane, the domain where the essence of existence should be sought.

One step further and the romantics are able to provide their spirituality with more structure, more handholds. They step into the world of religion and project their longing for the numinous onto a divine being, almighty, omniscient and omnipresent. They may join a religious group. They will primarily be fascinated by the rituals. They will have less affinity, however, with the doctrinal aspects.

This ‘conversion’ is not escapism; it is not a flight from what the rationalist calls reality. The religious component completes their existence.

I see romanticism as a nurturer of internally experienced, de-intellectualised religiosity.

I will summarise this part of my argument.

I talked about the person who allows himself to wonder. Reason has let him down and he seeks refuge in the realm of imagination. The romantic is ideally suited to quest for the amazing. He, too, therefore likes to venture into the realm of imagination. In this realm, just the other side of reason, there is the possibility to think upwards, to give life a vertical dimension, to imagine a transcendental world. In that world, an image of God develops. It becomes an explanation model for the amazing.

4. Utility

The second part of my argument is about utility.

Man exists in a sensorially perceivable, measurable and, in principal, knowable world and has the means to explore that world empirically. That has served him well.

In addition, man has the ability to reach beyond the rationally knowable world and imagine, to evoke, a supernatural world. In that world it is possible for him to “think upwards”, to give his life a vertical dimension, to create a virtual world in which a God image can develop.

The question arises of what you get out of this. What do those excursions beyond the horizon produce other than a series of pointless fantasies? Is there any sense to those escapades? My answer is: yes, there is. They provide something of inestimable value, namely sense, meaning.

I will clarify myself further.

In the existence of an animal, there are three major interests: self-protection, procreation and the satisfaction of material needs. Man, naturally, has those same needs. They represent what I refer to as the *profane* side of existence.

Profane life takes place on a flat plane, with no vertical dimension. It remains, literally, close to the ground. Existence is filled with the satisfaction of physical and material needs. Earning money, building a career, gaining success, prestige are the highest goals. Paradoxically, that way does not necessarily lead to satisfaction; it can even engender a profound feeling of dissatisfaction. The feeling that you are selling yourself short, leading a life that does not matter.

The expression, 'Money cannot buy happiness,' is generally seen as a prototypical platitude. There is more to it, though, than is generally assumed. A study of 800 students showed, for example, that those who considered career and money-making more important than a good marriage and having a good circle of friends described themselves as 'fairly' or 'very' unhappy twice as often as their less materially-minded peers (Perkins 1991).

Increased earnings in France, Japan and the United States over the past few decades have not been accompanied with any increase in the subjective feeling of well-being. The same proved true for nine European countries (Oswald 1997).

The average level of well-being may be higher in wealthy countries than in poor countries, but this could be the result of political factors and not so much the difference in affluence. Wealthy countries are, generally speaking, more democratic and egalitarian than poor countries (Diener et al. 1993). Globally, therefore, it seems that a fat bank balance is not automatically enough to justify an existence.

Spending just for spending's sake; consuming; surfing aimlessly on the Internet; zapping randomly through TV channels; being entertained at public events; promiscuous affairs; football fanaticism: it can easily get you through the day, or at least through your days off.

But it can get boring: 'What in God's name am I doing with my life,' you hear people say these days. They are filled with an intense feeling of lacking.

The French have the concise term 'ennui' for that state of mind. Someone starts feeling physically and emotionally exhausted, gloomy and emotionally flattened. Life no longer seems to have any point. To use a contemporary term: they become burned out (Freudenberger 1974; Iacovides et al. 2003). Such a state of mind can invoke suicidal tendencies. In other words, man has more interests than just the profane. Material things fill in existence, but they do not fulfil it.

For the thinking person, questions such as: 'What is man's place in the cosmos?' 'What am I doing here?' 'What am I living for?' 'What is the point of it all?' are not rhetorical, pseudo-questions, they are not expressions of 'a meaningful thinking,' as Koch (1981) claimed; they are cardinal.

A life in itself generally has no sense. A person gives (or does not give) sense to their own life. It only gains sense, meaning, once it is put to the service of ideas, ideals or values that are bigger and therefore more important than the individual themselves and their material interests. Purpose provides meaning with a predictable value. Those who have set themselves a goal in life have a greater life expectancy and fewer health problems and are more satisfied with their existence than those going through life without purpose as a map (McKnight and Kashdan 2009).

The gap between filling and fulfilling can be bridged with a wide range of immaterial values, such as care for your fellow man, social engagement and creative activities within the field of science or the arts. It can also be expressed—less exaltedly but no less nobly—in the need to make something of it: within the family, at work, in the voluntary sector; or in the need to develop oneself further: intellectually, culturally, emotionally.

This, I refer to as the *sacred* side of existence. I will strip this concept of its pathetic patina. I use it not in the sense of perfect or focused on God, but in reference to a way of life on the grounds of which, at the end of the day, one can say, 'I have not lived for nothing at all'.

A life with purpose has armed itself against suicidal tendencies (Van Praag 2010, 2011).

'Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy' (Lev. 19:2). In this message, the concept of holy is used in this sense. It does not call for sanctimoniousness or a serene existence withdrawn from the

world; it commands a 'worldly' way of life committed to the interests of society and one's fellow man. One in which one endeavours to contribute to the *tikkun olam* (Hebr.), the repairing of a violated world.

Focus on such values can be experienced as immanent, as ensuing from the individual himself, or as transcendental, as prompted, inspired or even as commanded by an Entity superior to the genus humanum, which ultimately decides the fortunes of the species. In the latter case, we arrive at religion. At a postulated, supernatural, mythical authority named God. That God has expectations and makes demands. For the believer, meeting these is both a duty and a source of satisfaction. For him, God is the ultimate, sublime giver of meaning. The metaphysical scope conceals powerful meaning givers.

Although the strength of the effect was not very pronounced, a positive correlation has, indeed, been established between, on one hand, the subjective feeling of well-being and, on the other, religious/spiritual factors, such as: 'religious certainty', 'strength of one's relationship with the divine', and 'devotional and participatory aspects of religiosity' (Diener et al. 1999; Diener 2000; Ellison 1991).

To avoid any misunderstanding: above, I did not use the term 'mythical' with regard to the God concept in a derogatory fashion. On the contrary, the myth is a superior means to express, in a narrative, symbolic form, experiences that are impossible to accurately express in words, impossible to concretise, but which are intensely perceived and have essential meaning for the individual. The God myth is such a myth. It has taken root in human society, affecting it profoundly and, I assume, permanently.

5. Conclusions

I spoke of a number of typical human attributes: romanticism, amazement, imagination, and how they relate to religiosity.

I drew the following connecting lines:

- Romanticism promotes amazement.
- Amazement opens up the world of imagination.
- With the aid of imagination, a metaphysical world is evoked, in which ideas emerge that can provide an explanation for that which amazement evokes. The God idea is the crux.
- Implicit to the God idea is existential amazement, amazement that life exists, that anything exists at all.
- come to the conclusion that amazement promotes religiosity and religiosity, in turn, facilitates amazement.

And so the circle closes: romanticism, amazement, imagination, religiosity, amazement.

A loop with an important bonus: purpose with a supernatural signature. That increases the chance of hope remaining intact, even when dark clouds gather above a life.

6. Summary

To wonder is a gift of the romanticist in particular. Wonder seeks explanation. If reason doesn't provide that, imagination provides a way out. One imagines a transcendental world of which the God-idea may become the central point and the explanatory model of that that invoked wonder. The God-idea implies wonder, wonder that life exists, that things exist at all.

Wonder promotes religiosity—i.e., the need to provide life with a vertical dimension—and religiosity facilitates, in its turn, wonder.

Thus the circle is closed: romanticism, wonder, imagination, religiosity, wonder. It is a circle providing life with an important bonus, i.e., sense, meaning with a supernatural signature. This augments the chance that hope will be preserved, even as dark clouds begin to hover above one's life.

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