

1. Introduction

What is enchantment? Its moments are short but deep: eyes meet, and everything has changed – sharing a perfect meal, both the food and the love

with which it was cooked, with a few close friends – walking through a landscape charged with mystery – being carried away by glorious music...

Most simply, enchantment is an experience of wonder. Variations include awe, amazement, astonishment. It can vary in intensity from charm, through

delight, to full-blown joy. Most of what I have to say concerns the last, or what we could call 'radical enchantment'

. As we shall see, such experiences are fundamental to being alive.

Any attempt to understand and appreciate enchantment requires respecting

its integrity. That includes resisting the urge to explain it away or reduce it to

something else, whether 'up' to God or 'down' to neurophysiology. It may be impossible to define precisely – indeed, being indefinable is essential to any

acceptable definition of it – but that doesn't mean it doesn't matter. Many important things are like that.

Almost anything can enchant, from orchids, fonts, motorcycles, incense and cheese to perfumes, comics and kites (both the kind that flies and the kind

you fly). Enchantment is nonetheless a particular phenomenon, because we

are a particular kind of being – the human kind. Despite our many differences,

we share some fundamental traits, needs and abilities. As a result, some contexts for enchantment are more common than others. After we explore its

principal dynamics, therefore, we shall turn to how they play out in love, in art, in religion, in food, in learning and in nature.

Enchantment also has certain recurring characteristics. They are not easy to

describe, because one of them is that it only happens in, and in response to,

precise actual circumstances. It cannot be separated, in practice, from its contexts. Here are a few first-hand reports in which some of those characteristics – notably a slightly weird combination of sensuality and spirituality – are already evident.

A textile maker and collector: 'I have spent countless hours collecting old Tsutsugaki, indigo blue cotton cloth with the patterns done with a tsutsubiki tube-drawn technique. I was captivated by their dynamic beauty and could not

resist their charm. Each one was new, different and irresistible'

. A perfumer

on Chanel No. 5 by Ernest Beaux (1921): it 'gives the irresistible impression

of a smooth, continuously curved, gold-coloured volume that stretches deliciously, like a sleepy panther, from top note to drydown.

'And a

motorcycle enthusiast on her 'bike of the mind' (which is very like her white Moto Guzzi Lario): 'I fear it; often I dream about it; sometimes I love it with longing as if it were already gone'

Why does enchantment matter? Its moments don't cancel out suffering. They can exist alongside it, however, and even provide solace. What the philosopher Max Weber summarised as 'undeserved suffering, unpunished injustice, and hopeless stupidity' remains as comprehensive a catalogue as ever, and we cannot blame anyone whose life has blotted out enchantment. But to deny it on principle would simply add to the misery. Why shouldn't anyone welcome it into their lives when they can? Sometimes enchantment makes life worth living. It can even be life-changing. Far from being a matter

of psychology, a purely subjective state of mind, enchantment can reveal profound truths, lead to deep values, and become central to a life well-lived. So, in closing, we shall turn to how to live in a way that is open to enchantment, and even works with it.

Before then, however, we shall consider the contraries of enchantment: not only its simple absence but disenchantment, and what I call 'glamour'

. That

brings us to Weber's famous prediction, almost a prophecy, uttered one hundred years ago, of 'the disenchantment of the world'

. Weber was at least

right about this: there are indeed powerful enemies of enchantment, with a programme to disenchant the world. That doesn't mean they have things all their own way, however. So we shall look at to what extent, and in what ways,

the world is now disenchanted.

It is important that we don't succumb to seeing enchantment everywhere and in everything, that it is as definite as may be for something that is essentially non-verbal (even when words spark it off). To that end, contrasting

enchantment with what it is not is instructive. Most obviously, when you are disenchanted – and, inseparably, when the world is disenchanted – it is an experience of abstract time and space. Both exist only as bits, one temporal

and the other spatial but all in identical units, so it can truly be said that when

you've seen one you've seen 'em all. Hence its boredom and ultimately

nihilism.

Enchantment couldn't be more different. It consists of a unique moment and a unique place, and it is saturated with meaning. From the

(disenchanted)

outside it appears tiny and limited, but it is actually bigger on the

(enchanted)

inside. In fact, as a character in John Crowley's novel *Little, Big* says,

'The

farther in you go, the bigger it gets,

' before adding,

'until, at the center point,

it is infinite. Or at least very, very large.

' By the same token, time stops. Or at least, goes very, very slowly. (I mean time as we live it, not as measured by a clock.)

However, the difference between infinite and very large, or stopping and slowing, is important, because an enchanted place is not quite infinite, and the moment, however endless while it's happening, will not last forever. Eventually the gently revolving eddy, temporarily sheltered by some fortuitous rocks near the bank, will find its way back into the rushing stream. As a consequence, the end of enchantment is already implicit in its occurrence. Every 'hello' of wonder is shadowed by a 'goodbye'; hence its poignancy.

Enchantment also differs from two other ways of being. To characterise these I have borrowed from classical Greek myth. One we can call Apollonian. This is the mode of coldly rational mastery, achieved through imposing order and system. Others are treated as objects to be dominated, manipulated or exploited, and the other's value is instrumental; it is valuable

only for how it may be used for some purpose or other. Enchantment, in contrast, is nothing if not a relationship between two subjects (the other subject can be almost anyone or anything) and for the enchanted person, the other's value is intrinsic. It needs, and can find, no further justification; we have reached bedrock.

The second mode is Dionysian: pleasure, rising to ecstasy and potentially culminating in union whereby the experiencing subject, being extinguished, vanishes. It is hot, emotional and overwhelming. Again, in contrast, even radical enchantment doesn't obliterate boundaries. It simply crosses them, rendering them permeable. In this process, as the psychologist Ethel Spector

Person says,

'paradoxically the self is neither lost nor diminished. Quite the contrary, the self is affirmed and enriched.

' Indeed, if there were no

boundaries at all enchantment would become impossible, because there would

be no subjects to meet and experience each other. One may experience enchantment as oneness, but as W.H. Auden says,

'for there to be one, first there must be two.

' And although light and delicate compared to Dionysian passion, enchantment can be piercing.

We shall be mainly concerned with enchantment in individual lives. There are collective enchantments, however. Examples include the spontaneous reactions to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the death of Princess Diana in

1997, and the Charlie Hebdo murders in Paris in 2015. In all three there was a

powerful emotional response, cutting across class, gender and race, which was

completely spontaneous. This was accompanied by a common perception of

what these events actually meant, their significance, that was equally uninfluenced by elite opinion. In fact, these responses left many in government, the media and the professional intelligentsia stranded between

scrambling to get on message, fearful of being left behind, and contemptuous

dismissal of the irrational masses. (Ironically, such hostility is itself often more visceral than reasoned.)

Thinking, which is as natural to humans as feeling or willing, is not a problem for enchantment. Rationalism, or any other 'ism' , for that matter, is.

An explanation for everything, even if only in principle, reduces everything to

some greater cause. That makes rationalism inherently disenchanting. We need not engage in it, however, and can choose otherwise. Theory, theōria in

Greek, originally referred to going elsewhere on a pilgrimage, participating in

their religious ritual, and reporting what happened upon returning home. To retrieve the wisdom long buried in modern meanings of the word 'philosophy'

, we must, as Wittgenstein says,

'do away with all explanation, and description alone must take its place'

.

The modern academy, unfortunately, loves explanation more than wisdom, and method much more than direct encounter. Its few studies of enchantment

therefore mostly reduce it sideways, so to speak, to something else: the sublime, the uncanny, the sacred and so on. But you won't find out much if your starting-point is that the phenomenon in question is really something else

we already understand (or think we do). What follows here, instead, is what I

have found out from not knowing, guided only by own experiences, thinking and knowledge garnered along the way. Sometimes I have been inspired and

guided by a few earlier explorers; but there too, I have had to trust my own instincts. What's the alternative?

A personal note seems appropriate, then, since I make no pretence of an impossibly 'objective' survey. My purpose in writing this book was to better understand and appreciate enchantment and perhaps, in sharing it, to help

others do so too. That desire grew out of an abiding love of wonder, sometimes sober, sometimes passionate, in ways that I am only noticing now.

But I have been equally shaped by a fear, sometimes bordering on terror, of its

lack – sheer meaninglessness – as well as a hatred of disenchantment, its opposite. (The lack and the opposite of enchantment, as we shall see, are not

the same thing.) Why? I don't know, and although it's fun to speculate I don't

think it's finally all that important. What matters is to work with what you're given, and give something back.

2. The Dynamics of Enchantment