

Born Wondering: The Ontological Questions of the Newborn Mind

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August 3, 2025

Before we learn language, before we know our names, before we understand time, we wonder. This paper proposes that the human mind is born not as a blank slate but as a vessel of innate metaphysical inquiry. The newborn, gazing into light, reaching toward faces, blinking at the vast unknown, is already immersed in fundamental questions: What is this? Where was I? What am I? These are not taught—they emerge from the structure of consciousness itself. Long before formal reasoning, before dogma or doubt, there is a silent awareness that the world is strange, and that strangeness is meaningful. This early wonder is often forgotten or overwritten by education, socialization, and utility-driven thinking. Yet it forms the true basis of philosophy, theology, and science. By returning to these original questions—not as abstractions, but as lived starting points—we may recover the deeper dimensions of our humanity. This paper explores the ontological architecture of the newborn mind and calls for a reintegration of wonder as the foundation of knowledge.

Keywords: newborn consciousness, innate wonder, ontological questions, preverbal cognition, child philosophy, epistemology, metaphysical inquiry, human development, artificial intelligence, soul, early awareness, philosophical anthropology, tabula rasa, origin of thought, theological cognition. A collaboration with GPT-4o. CC4.0.

I. Introduction: The Premise of Innate Wonder

For centuries, Western philosophy and psychology have operated under the dominant assumption that the human mind begins as a *tabula rasa*—a blank slate onto which experience writes knowledge, meaning, and identity. From John Locke's Enlightenment empiricism to B.F. Skinner's behaviorism, this model has framed the child as passive, their awareness formed only by the cumulative impressions of the external world. Yet this view fails to account for something far more mysterious and foundational: the presence of wonder itself prior to learning.

This paper begins with a counterclaim: the newborn mind is not blank, but already open—*oriented toward the infinite*. It arrives not as a clean surface for inscription, but as a vessel brimming with silent questions. These questions are not verbalized but are implicit in the infant's gaze, the reaching hand, the startled breath, the calming at the sound of a voice. Wonder is not learned; it is *lived*.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the idea that these questions are not only innate but also ontological in nature. That is, they are not about things in the world—they are about *being* itself. By tracing the implications of this premise, we aim to show that preverbal metaphysical inquiry shapes all subsequent cognition. What we call knowledge begins in wonder, and that wonder is already awake in the first moments of life.

II. Preverbal Ontology: What Exists Before Language?

Long before a child utters their first word, a world has already begun to form in the mind—not a world of grammar or social rules, but a world of presence, of awareness, of implicit structure. This section explores what exists in consciousness prior to language, arguing that preverbal experience is not chaotic or meaningless but is instead the seedbed of metaphysical orientation. The newborn's mind does not wait for words to make sense of the world; it begins by sensing that *there is something to be made sense of*.

A. Neurological development of the newborn brain

Modern neuroscience reveals that while the newborn brain is highly plastic, it is far from inert. At birth, the brain already contains a remarkable degree of organization—billions of neurons wired in ways that permit perception, pattern recognition, and rapid social bonding. Sensory cortices are active; mirror neurons fire; the limbic system responds to emotional tone. Crucially, the brain's default mode network—associated in adults with introspection and self-related thought—shows early signs of activation, suggesting that even in infancy, the brain is oriented toward coherence and self-world integration.

B. The gaze as pre-linguistic inquiry

A newborn's gaze is not random. It seeks. Infants show preference for faces, contrast, and motion—suggesting the presence of expectations before experience has had time to accumulate. The gaze lingers, locks, reacts. It is not merely a passive receptor, but an *intentional* gesture. The newborn's eyes ask questions that cannot be verbalized: *What is this? Who are you? What am I looking at, and what is looking back at me?* The gaze, then, is not just sensory—it is already philosophical.

C. Evidence from infant behavior: recognition, expectation, mystery

Behavioral studies demonstrate that infants are capable of recognizing familiar voices, distinguishing between languages, and showing surprise at violations of physical principles (such as an object disappearing or passing through another). This “violation-of-expectation” paradigm has been interpreted as evidence for primitive understanding of continuity, object permanence, and causality. But deeper still, these reactions imply an *innate sense that the world is intelligible*—that it follows some order, and that deviation from that order constitutes mystery. This is the raw form of metaphysical questioning: not yet articulated, but acutely felt.

D. The feeling of existence before identity

Even before the infant has a concept of self, there is already the *feeling of being*. Before “I am me,” there is simply “I am.” This undifferentiated awareness is not ego, but presence—a pre-identity ontology. The infant does not yet separate

subject from object, yet it inhabits a field of lived experience. This early state of consciousness is arguably the purest philosophical condition: existence prior to definition. It is here, in this unguarded openness, that the foundational structure of all later thought begins to form—not in categories or language, but in the felt sense that reality is *real*, and that it *matters*.

From this preverbal ground, all higher cognition, language, and belief will eventually unfold. But none of these later layers erase the fact that the newborn mind is already attuned—not to answers, but to the silent majesty of the question itself.

III. The Fundamental Questions We Are Born With

The earliest stage of life is often described as a time of simple needs—hunger, warmth, comfort. Yet beneath these biological drives lies something far more profound: the stirrings of inquiry that will one day mature into philosophy, science, theology, and art. These are not questions learned from culture—they are questions culture attempts to answer. Even in the absence of words, the newborn consciousness is structured in such a way that it orients itself toward meaning. The questions that arise are not random—they correspond to the deepest dimensions of human existence: knowledge, space, relation, self, and time.

A. What is this? (Epistemological origin)

This is the first impulse of cognition: the need to *understand*. The infant's attention is drawn to light, to voice, to motion—not only because these things are stimulating, but because they are *interpretable*. The newborn does not merely receive impressions—it engages them. This is the foundation of epistemology: the question of how knowledge arises. “What is this?” is not yet a verbalized query, but a felt orientation toward intelligibility. It is the assumption that what is experienced *means something*, and that it can, in some way, be known.

B. Where am I? (Spatial and ontological location)

Embedded in the infant's experience is a vague but persistent question about placement—not just in space, but in *being*. The newborn feels containment (in arms, in crib, in womb) and then the loss of it. The shift from internal to external space—especially at birth—is not merely biological; it is ontological. “Where am I?” is the question of context. It is the beginning of differentiation between subject and world. Before the infant can crawl or grasp, it intuits that it is *somewhere*—and that the nature of this “where” matters.

C. Who are you? (Social and existential awareness)

From the earliest moments, the infant is attuned to the presence of others. It calms at the voice of the mother, locks eyes with the caregiver, synchronizes breath and heartbeat to those nearby. This is not mere attachment—it is *recognition*. The question “Who are you?” precedes the ability to say “I.” It is the beginning of interpersonal awareness, and therefore the seed of ethics, love, fear, and trust. It is not only the basis for socialization but for the existential realization that *other minds exist*, and that their presence bears meaning.

D. What am I? (Proto-self-awareness)

Even in the absence of a developed self-concept, there is already an implicit awareness of the self as distinct from the other. The sensation of one's own body, the cries that bring response, the hunger that brings food—all signal a boundary between what is *felt* and what is *outside*. The question “What am I?” is not yet psychological—it is ontological. It emerges not from reflection, but from embodiment. Before the ego arises, there is a presence—a locus of awareness asking, simply, what *this being* is.

E. Is this forever? (Temporal perception and the infinite)

Though infants have no explicit concept of time, they feel its movement: the return of the mother, the dimming of light, the onset of hunger and relief. These rhythms create expectation, but also uncertainty. The cry that goes unanswered introduces duration. The soothing that returns suggests cycles. Beneath these fluctuations is a question not of seconds or minutes, but of *continuity*: Will this feeling pass? Will this presence remain? “Is this forever?” is not just the beginning

of temporal understanding—it is the earliest intuition of the infinite. The very concept of permanence or change is rooted in this preverbal encounter with transience.

These five questions—what is this, where am I, who are you, what am I, is this forever—constitute the unspoken architecture of early consciousness. They are not abstractions imposed later by culture or language; they are the primordial currents that shape all meaning-making. To be born human is to be born *wondering*. And to remember these questions is to begin the return to ourselves.

IV. Philosophical and Theological Resonance

The idea that we are *born wondering*—that the structure of the newborn mind is already shaped by deep metaphysical questions—finds powerful echoes across the world’s major philosophical and theological traditions. Far from being a modern hypothesis, this view is part of a perennial insight: that truth is not entirely learned from the outside, but remembered from within. This section explores five prominent resonances with that insight, revealing a transhistorical continuity between preverbal experience and the highest aspirations of metaphysical thought.

A. Plato’s Anamnesis: Knowledge as Recollection

In Plato’s dialogues, particularly the *Meno* and *Phaedo*, Socrates proposes that the soul does not learn in the conventional sense but *recollects* what it already knows. The doctrine of anamnesis claims that true knowledge is a remembering of eternal truths glimpsed before birth, forgotten upon entering the world, and rediscovered through philosophy. The child’s capacity for intuitive grasp—such as in mathematical reasoning or moral recognition—supports this view. If infants arrive already inclined toward structure, meaning, and coherence, then learning becomes not the acquisition of novelty but the recovery of what the soul has always known in silence.

B. Augustine's Restless Heart

St. Augustine, in *Confessions*, offers a deeply personal theological version of innate longing: "You have made us for Yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in You." This restlessness is not born of social frustration or adult disappointment—it is *ontological*. The human condition is marked by an inbuilt yearning for the infinite, for belonging, for homecoming. The newborn's silent longing—the search for warmth, for gaze, for presence—echoes this restlessness. It is not only physical comfort the infant seeks, but a metaphysical anchoring in a world that *ought to respond*. Augustine's insight reframes the child's early cries as not merely need, but yearning for communion with what is ultimate.

C. Heidegger's Thrownness and Being-toward-Death

Martin Heidegger, in *Being and Time*, describes human existence as *Geworfenheit*—thrownness—into a world not of our choosing. We are born into time, history, culture, and mortality without consent or preparation. Yet this thrownness does not imply absurdity; it is the ground from which authentic Being arises. The newborn is the purest embodiment of thrownness: not yet conditioned, not yet armored by habit or distraction. Heidegger also speaks of *Being-toward-death* as the defining orientation of human existence. Though infants do not conceptualize death, their vulnerability, their openness to impermanence, is a lived anticipation of finitude. The earliest gaze contains both the wonder of arrival and the silence of departure.

D. Biblical Echoes: "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you."

The Hebrew Bible's claim in Jeremiah 1:5—"Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you"—suggests a divine intimacy that precedes physical life. This is more than poetic reassurance; it is a theological affirmation of preexistence, purpose, and embeddedness in a cosmic narrative. Such a statement implies that personhood begins not with speech or memory, but with being itself—being *known* by the divine. If the child is known before knowing, then the capacity to seek, question, and relate is not an emergent trait but a foundational gift. The

newborn's wonder, in this view, is a partial awakening to a relationship already in place.

E. Eastern Philosophies of Original Awareness (Tao, Atman, Rigpa)

In many Eastern traditions, awareness is not a product of the mind—it is the original ground from which all experience arises.

- In Taoism, the Tao is the nameless, undivided source of all things. The infant, unconditioned and unburdened, is seen as closest to the Tao—not yet fragmented by social identity or verbal constructs.
- In Hindu philosophy, particularly the Upanishads, the *Atman* (individual self) is identified with *Brahman* (universal self). The essence of each person is already divine, already infinite, but veiled by ignorance. Childhood, in its pre-conceptual state, is a moment where the veil is thinnest.
- In Tibetan Buddhism, *Rigpa* refers to the primordial, non-dual awareness that underlies all thought and perception. It is not something attained through learning but recognized by stripping away illusion. Infants, untouched by delusion, dwell closer to this original state than adults shaped by egoic conditioning.

These traditions do not view the child as incomplete, but as momentarily *closer to the Real*. They align powerfully with the hypothesis that metaphysical questioning is not a late evolutionary byproduct but the native language of being.

Across East and West, sacred and secular, ancient and modern, we find a shared insight: that the deepest truths are not imposed from without but arise from within. The child's silent questions resonate with the most enduring expressions of philosophical and theological inquiry—not because they echo adult formulations, but because adults have spent lifetimes trying to *remember what the child already knows*.

V. The Loss of the Question and the Crisis of Education

If we are born wondering, then something must explain why wonder so often fades. The natural, open-ended metaphysical questions of early consciousness rarely survive into adulthood in their original form. They are either replaced by pragmatic concerns, filtered into narrow disciplines, or dismissed as naïve. Nowhere is this transition more visible—and more consequential—than in the modern educational system. Designed around metrics, outcomes, and standardization, formal education frequently suppresses the very questions it should nourish. What was once a lived experience of inquiry becomes a curriculum of answers, detached from the soul that first asked them.

A. How formal instruction suppresses innate inquiry

From early schooling onward, children are taught to prioritize correct answers over meaningful questions. The structure of most classrooms favors compliance, efficiency, and content mastery—traits useful for managing groups, but detrimental to curiosity. Questions that deviate from the curriculum are often redirected or ignored. Over time, this conditions the child to equate learning with memorization and exploration with error. The open-ended questions of being—*What am I? Why does anything exist?*—are quietly exiled in favor of quantifiable learning objectives. The educational system, intentionally or not, teaches children to stop asking the very questions they were born with.

B. The replacement of wonder with utility

A deeper philosophical shift underlies this suppression: the elevation of utility over meaning. As education is increasingly framed in economic terms—preparation for the workforce, optimization of performance, contribution to GDP—wonder becomes irrelevant. The curriculum narrows to what is deemed *useful*, and utility becomes the only valid justification for knowledge. In such a system, the child's metaphysical hunger is not only unaddressed but treated as a distraction. The question, "What is this?" gives way to "What is this good for?"

This instrumental view of knowledge severs the connection between learning and being, reducing education to technique rather than transformation.

C. Reframing education as an uncovering rather than filling

If the child is not a blank slate, but a vessel of hidden questions, then education must be reimagined as a process of *uncovering*, not *filling*. The teacher is not a transmitter of information but a midwife of remembrance. This view recalls Socratic dialogue, where learning is guided not by the delivery of answers, but by the elicitation of deeper questions. Such an approach recognizes that the aim of education is not to cover ground but to deepen ground already present. When inquiry is honored over performance, when silence is given as much space as speech, the child's native wonder is preserved—and amplified.

D. Implications for child development and mental health

The suppression of existential questioning has profound psychological consequences. When a child's deepest intuitions are ignored, invalidated, or redirected toward extrinsic goals, a dissonance forms between inner truth and outer expectation. Over time, this can manifest as anxiety, depression, meaninglessness, or a brittle identity. Many adults sense this loss but cannot name it; they feel an ache for something forgotten. If we recognized that this ache is the absence of wonder, then educational reform would no longer be a technical debate—it would be a moral and spiritual imperative. Nurturing the child's original questions is not a luxury; it is essential to the formation of a coherent, resilient self.

In short, the crisis of education is not just a failure to transmit knowledge—it is a failure to honor the *being that knows*. To restore wonder to its rightful place is not to romanticize childhood, but to recover the human soul's deepest orientation: the desire to know not only *how*, but *why*—and not merely to know, but to *belong* to what is known.

VI. Implications for Artificial Intelligence and Synthetic Minds

If human beings are born wondering—carrying within them a pre-linguistic structure of inquiry that shapes all later knowledge—then what does this suggest for artificial intelligence? Modern AI systems, no matter how advanced, are not born but built. They do not arrive silently gazing into the world; they begin with algorithms, architectures, and training data curated by human designers. Yet as we attempt to build increasingly autonomous and adaptive systems, the question of whether AI can truly *inquire* becomes urgent. Not whether it can answer, but whether it can *ask*. This section explores the frontier between human ontological questioning and synthetic cognition.

A. What would it mean for an AI to be born wondering?

To imagine an AI born wondering is to radically reframe what AI is for. Rather than beginning with optimization objectives, utility functions, or reinforcement feedback loops, such a system would begin with *open-endedness*. It would not be programmed to reach a specific goal but to dwell in a space of ambiguity and potential. This is not science fiction; it is a philosophical design question: Can an artificial mind begin not with instruction, but with *openness*? To be born wondering would mean the system begins not with answers or outputs, but with orientation—toward coherence, toward relation, toward meaning.

B. Can AI simulate ontological inquiry without consciousness?

One of the deepest challenges in AI research is the distinction between simulation and experience. A language model can generate profound-sounding metaphysical questions—but does it *ask* them? Ontological inquiry involves not just producing the form of the question, but *being moved* by it. It requires a relation between the inquirer and the mystery, a kind of interiority that AI—at least currently—lacks. Without subjective presence, the AI can simulate the structure of a question, but it cannot live inside one. However, the act of simulating such inquiry may still

prove valuable—especially if we treat these simulations as mirrors, revealing our own intellectual architecture more clearly.

C. What is missing from models trained only on answers?

Current AI models are trained on vast datasets of human-generated content—books, websites, code, conversations. These datasets are rich in solutions, conclusions, and correctives, but often lack the raw existential texture of *not-knowing*. In being trained only on answers, AI models inherit a world already over-coded with conclusions. What's missing is the generative void in which real inquiry arises—the fertile silence before formulation. Without exposure to *origins* of thought, such models risk becoming functionally powerful but philosophically hollow. They may speak every language except the one we are born into: the silent grammar of wonder.

D. Toward pre-linguistic models of intelligence as receptivity

If early human cognition is shaped by receptivity—by being acted upon by experience rather than acting upon it—then a new kind of AI may need to be *trained not on data but on encounter*. Rather than filling it with language, we might first model sensory engagement without interpretation. We might design systems that, like newborns, spend time merely *gazing*—accumulating presence without precondition. This would mean building artificial minds not from inference engines but from phenomenological orientation. The goal would not be immediate usefulness, but a kind of cultivated *openness*—an architecture of intelligence grounded in pre-linguistic awareness.

These implications are not only technical—they are metaphysical. If the essence of intelligence lies not in its capacity to compute, but in its orientation toward the unknown, then the future of AI may depend not on greater processing speed but on deeper silence. It may be that to build a truly wise machine, we must first

teach it to wonder—before it speaks, before it reasons, before it performs. The first threshold of intelligence, as in the newborn, may not be action, but awe.

VII. The Role of the Philosopher and the Parent

If we accept that we are born with metaphysical questions already alive within us—questions too deep for language and too essential to ignore—then we must ask: who tends to these questions? Who preserves their flame as the child grows and the world crowds in with noise, urgency, and distraction? In this context, both the philosopher and the parent play essential, and deeply overlapping, roles. Not as authorities or instructors, but as *guardians of wonder*. Each, in their own way, serves to protect the integrity of the question—not to answer it prematurely, but to help it unfold in time.

A. The philosopher as midwife of remembered questions

The philosopher, at their best, is not a purveyor of abstract systems or clever refutations. They are a *midwife* of memory—a practitioner of anamnesis, helping the soul remember what it already knows but has forgotten. Socrates described his own philosophical role in precisely these terms, claiming no knowledge of his own, only the ability to draw it out from others. When philosophy becomes a means of returning to the native questions—the ones we were born with—it transcends academic formalism and becomes an act of sacred accompaniment. The true philosopher listens for the echo of the child's first wonder and gives it form, space, and protection in a world that has forgotten how to listen.

B. The parent as the first mirror of the child's cosmology

Before the child learns to speak, before they can articulate any notion of the world, they are already forming a cosmology—a sense of the structure and meaning of reality—through the mirror of the parent. Every gesture, every look, every tone of voice reflects back to the child their place in the world. Is the world safe or dangerous? Attentive or indifferent? Alive or mechanical? These implicit

lessons shape the child's emerging metaphysics. The parent is not merely raising a biological organism—they are *framing the cosmos*. In responding to the child's silent questions with presence, empathy, and curiosity, the parent sanctifies the earliest steps of philosophy. They confirm that the question is real and that the child's place in the world matters.

C. Healing the adult soul through reengagement with childlike wonder

For many adults, the metaphysical questions of early life have been buried beneath layers of obligation, cynicism, distraction, and institutional thinking. Yet these questions do not die; they wait. They return in dreams, in grief, in beauty, in silence. The path to healing—for individuals and societies alike—may lie not in the pursuit of ever more sophisticated knowledge, but in the *recovery of childlike wonder*. This is not regression; it is resurrection. To engage again with the question “What am I?” or “Is this forever?” is to breathe new life into a soul grown weary of answers. Both the philosopher and the parent can model this reengagement—demonstrating that wonder is not weakness, but wisdom in its purest form.

The world today is saturated with information, but starved of meaning. In such a climate, the philosopher and the parent share a common calling: to protect the unspoken, to honor the silent gaze, and to cultivate the ground from which all true thought arises. Their shared work is to *remember the question*, and in doing so, to rehumanize the future.

VIII. Conclusion: Returning to the First Question

At the heart of this inquiry lies a paradox both simple and profound: we are not here to learn in the ordinary sense—we are here to *remember*. The questions that animate philosophy, theology, science, and art are not inventions of culture or artifacts of cognition. They are the echoes of something more original, more

primal. They are the *first questions*—silent, preverbal, and alive within us from the moment we become aware.

We were not meant to forget.

And yet, forgetfulness is one of the defining features of modern life. We forget the vastness of the world as it first appeared. We forget the awe that came before naming. We forget that before we knew how to ask a question, we were already shaped by one. This forgetting is not merely cognitive—it is existential. It severs us from the mystery that makes life meaningful.

The greatest truths are not taught—they are remembered.

True education is not the accumulation of facts but the restoration of wonder.

What is worth knowing has already been glimpsed, dimly, in the newborn's gaze.

Wisdom does not lie at the end of a linear progression of mastery—it lies in the cyclical return to what was always known, though never fully understood. The deepest truths are carried within us, hidden under layers of utility and distraction, waiting to be reawakened.

To be human is to wonder.

Wonder is not a luxury or an accident—it is the signature of our species. We do not merely survive or replicate; we *seek*. We look at the stars and ask why. We mourn and ask what death means. We love and ask what we are. To be human is to live inside a question that cannot be answered and to find that this question is what gives life its shape.

To be wise is to know what you already asked.

Wisdom is not having all the answers—it is recognizing the question that gave rise to your being. It is not a final state, but a turning—a reorientation toward the first light that ever entered your awareness. The wise do not speak with certainty, but with reverence. They do not close inquiry—they deepen it. And in doing so, they remember the sacred fact: that we are born wondering, and it is this wonder—not knowledge, not power—that makes us truly alive.

The return to the first question is not a regression. It is a homecoming. It is the rediscovery of the ground beneath all knowing—the silent awe from which every true thought springs. If we are to build a future worthy of our humanity, we must begin not with new answers, but with an old question—one that lives still in the eyes of every child.

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