

Signals, Signals, and More Signals

Introduction and Definition

What hours, what memories!
The vestiges they leave behind are enough
to fill us with belief and enthusiasm,
as if they were visits of the Holy Ghost.

—HENRI FRÉDÉRIC AMIEL¹

Sudden ecstatic experiences strike our conscious minds. They come without being called, they come when not expected, they come from who knows where. Almost all of us have them, some of them so profound that they change our lives; others so deep that their memory stays with us from here to eternity; others so frequent we learn to live with them as constant companions. Still others are quickly dismissed because they are not striking enough to be ecstatic nor recognized as anything but quirks of the mind. In this case it never dawns on us that these odd experiences might be signals of genuine *transcendence*. Maybe this best describes the experience of the pure naturalist who never sees anything that doesn't have a material explanation.

We will not argue the case for *transcendence* here. We will rather take these experiences as potential clues to the reality beyond the natural,

1. Quoted by James, *Varieties*, 303.

though some of them may indeed be nothing more than the malfunctioning of our mind. And we will begin this study of *signals of transcendence* modestly by first understanding what just a plain, ordinary *signal* is, at least as we will be using the concept in this book.

Signals

A *signal* can be any action, event, thing, image, sound, taste, touch, smell, word, metaphor, or idea that sparks curiosity beyond its own identity. In other words a *signal* is anything that calls out to anyone who is struck by what they perceive and wants (becomes curious) to know more about it, more about how it fits into the context in which it occurs, in short, what it is in relation to what it is surrounded by.

If, for example, I suddenly look up from my computer screen and see my bookcase, it reminds me of where I am. I am no longer lost in the thoughts I am transferring to black letters on a white background. I am no longer paying attention solely to my writing, but I am also taking in my setting, my location in the world that surrounds me. At this point my world is not just the world of words but the world of my den. If I then begin to be aware of constant low, mumbled words in the background, I know that the TV is on in the living room. A *signal*, then, is whatever I am seeing and hearing, everything from my computer to other objects in the den, everything from my sensation of keyboard touch to the constant parade of my inner thoughts, some of which are being captured in an English language text. Every impression is indeed a signal of more than itself. All are signals of my being conscious of my inner and outer world. In short, everything I perceive is signaling something more than itself, but, in the present example, there is not much that strikes me as special. For years, this is just how writing has been for me and how I think it will be for some time (who knows how much?) to come.

Of course, the number and kinds of *signals* increase as soon as my environment becomes larger and richer, when, for example, I step outside the room, see and talk with my wife, or notice that my grandson has come without my noticing. I begin to realize how his coming makes my world more complex. If I leave my house, get in the car, and drive through busy streets to the Dairy Queen, the signals multiply dangerously, but they still signal nothing out of the ordinary.

Suddenly a police siren stirs my emotion. But even the blaring siren that *signals* that I should pull to the side of the street is not out of the ordinary. It may have caused a sudden shiver up my spine, but it has not taken me out of this world. Cops are always after some errant driver. Nothing for me to be concerned with. If, however, I see that the police are rushing past me to an accident that has happened just ahead, or if I see a body bleeding on the pavement, I see something that takes me a long way from both the reasonably quiet world of my den and the busy world of suburban driving. I am now in two places—the normally normal world and the world of human tragedy, the world of ordinary life and the world of, perhaps, sudden death. I don't know yet if death has occurred or is occurring just ahead of me. But the events have signaled more than what I see and know. They have launched in me a reminder that my world and my life, even life itself, is tenuous; that, when I am driving or riding in a car, pain is potentially inches away and so is death.

Here, then, the siren, the accident and the whole context I am in are *signals of transcendence*. They take my mind to issues that are highly relevant to my own survival, to the meaning of my life, to the realization that those I love, those I live with, could be gone in a flash. Indeed, death itself is one of the most powerful *signals* that there may be something somewhere in the totality of reality that is not just ordinary (purely physical) material. The consciousness of death may easily trigger thoughts of God, not experiences of God himself, but experiences that raise the issues of who he is, or if he is, or even if God is a he or a she or an it. And is God there for the accident victims and for *me*?

With these two illustrations we begin, first, with ordinary this-worldly *signals, signals* that trigger a thought or image or intuition that remains in the ordinary world. My impressions in my den take me no further than the material world, albeit a world of ideas as well as of physical things. The same is true of those perceptions I have when I am driving. The siren, however, acts not only as a *signal* that suburban policemen do what suburban policemen do (mostly handle the failure of drivers to keep the law), but the blinking lights and the ensuing events *signal* something more—the possible *presence* of pain, suffering, dismemberment, and death. They place me solidly in a world that extends beyond the physical. They are *signals of transcendence*. Still, for precision and clarity, in fact, we can identify at least four levels of these *signals*.²

2. William James also identifies four levels of religious experience, but his levels

Level—1: Signals Per Se

Let me begin at the bottom level and repeat what I said above:

A Level 1 signal, a signal as such, is any action, event, thing, image, sound, taste, touch, smell, word, metaphor or idea that sparks curiosity beyond its own identity.

Examples are endless. Every identifiable thing in the universe can be a *signal* of not only its own identity but of its place in the ordinary world of human thought and experience. A leaf *signals* the existence of a tree, an acorn of an oak, a headache of a disposition I don't like and would like to be rid of. There is nothing mysterious about a *signal per se*. We live and move and have our being in a world of *signals*. Sometimes, of course, there is so much more to these "eureka" moments, as David Lyle Jeffrey and Gregory Maillet call them. Poet Richard Wilbur, for example, sees in a sudden helter-skelter flight of birds "the cross-purposes" by which the "world is dreamt," thus evoking a truly *transcendent* insight. But here I leap three levels ahead in this discourse.³ We should first consider the next level.

Level 2

As soon as we move away from the material world to matters of distinctly human significance, that is, matters that involve more than the mere fact of a *signal's* own existence and its place in the seemingly neutral (to human interest) material world, we begin to experience glimmers of *transcendence*.

A Level 2 signal of transcendence is anything that when what it signals is properly understood turns out to require (or seem to require) a non-material foundation.

are stages in the subjective depth of experience rather than of metaphysical transcendence. Moreover, he writes from what he takes to be a neutral or scientific standpoint, that is, one that is uncommitted to the accuracy of any particular metaphysical conclusion that those who have these experiences might have. Readers should avail themselves of Williams's massive evidence and conclusions, but should notice as well the incoherence of his explanation of their epistemological authority (*ibid.*, 292–328). See my analysis in chapter 10 below.

3. Jeffrey and Maillet, *Christianity and Literature*, 132.

This definition is intentionally a reflection of Peter Berger's definition: "By signals of transcendence I mean phenomena that are to be found within the domain of our 'natural' reality but that appear to point beyond that reality."⁴ We will look in more detail at Berger's own examples. Here we need to note only three of the four he mentions. First is the apparent *order* in daily life, one demonstration of which is the calming love of a mother for her child terrified in the night. Against all prospect that the child's life along with her own will ever end, she says, "There, there. It's all right. Everything is all right." That can only be true if there is more to reality than material.

Every parent (or, at any rate, every parent who loves his child) takes upon himself the representation of a universe that is ultimately in order and ultimately trustworthy. This representation can be justified only within a religious (strictly speaking a supernatural) frame of reference.⁵

Second is *play*. Play takes place in a Secondary World with its own rules, its own order; time is suspended; eternity is assumed. Third is *hope*. From birth to death we live in hope of a future, one that is challenged by suffering and death but not conquered, for we project our lives out into eternity and see beyond for a satisfaction of our longings.

Another example of a Level 2 *signal* is humankind's universal moral sense, the sense that there is often a difference between that which is and that which should be. Unless there is some standard outside our human sense of right and wrong by which we can know that our sense is really correct, morality becomes relative to each person or society's sense of right and wrong. If there are no absolutes outside our own judgment as either ourselves as individuals or our society (no matter how large), there is no foundation for thinking that our sense of right and wrong participates in anything other than the historical moment in which decisions are made and their effect is registered among us. The very existence of the moral sense itself is as present in Stalin as in Mother Teresa, in a serial killer as in those who sacrifice their own life to save another's. Such a sense cannot be moral if it can sense utter opposites to be good. In other words, the existence of the moral sense is a *signal* that there is an *ought*, something other than, and *transcendent* over, what *is*. We will look again at this *signal* when we examine how atheists (those who do not believe a

4. Berger, *Rumor*, 53.

5. *Ibid.*, 57.

transcendent of any kind exists) deal with what some of them take to be the fact of morality.

On a more intellectual note, the question, Why is there something rather than nothing? puzzled philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716). Every thing or event or idea in the universe is caused by something prior. That is, every thing that exists must have a sufficient cause. Even an infinite string of natural causes can't cause itself. It must be caused by something beyond the chain of causes. What is that? Leibniz concluded that “[O]ne Being dominating the universe not only rules the world but he creates and fashions it, is superior to the world, and, so to speak, extra mundane, and by this very fact is the ultimate reason of things.”⁶ In other words the very existence of finite, contingent being (matter and energy or whatever else might constitute physical reality) *signals* the existence of an infinite *Cause* or *Being* as its cause. *Being* itself needs no cause because it contains within itself the reason for its own being. It is the eternal.⁷

A child's version of this puzzle begins with the question, “Mommy, where did I come from?” A complete answer to this question will have to deal somehow with an infinite *transcendent*. Most mothers, in the Western world at least, will perhaps say, “God made you.” Then, if the mother is pious, she may add, “Isn't God good to do that?”⁸

A complex, let alone complete, theistic theology does not flow from these simple experiences or even from the conclusions of sophisticated philosophy. Rather, we get merely the distinct impression that there is more than machinery to the universe. Somewhere *behind* it or *beyond* it, there simply must be some meaning or purpose, something that explains why the things we experience are as they are—from the ordinary sticks and stones that break our bones, to our bones themselves, and on to the glorious dome of the sky. The starry sky on a cloudless, moonless night viewed from a glen deep in the woods, or better, the aurora borealis on a summer midnight in northern Minnesota, or, while one is hiking, the sudden appearance of a Swiss valley with chalets dotting

6. Leibniz, “Of the Origin of Things,” 100.

7. Leibniz's argument for the existence of God has been challenged. But so has every other philosophic or theological argument. The point is to notice that this sophisticated argument for the existence of God begins with a potential *signal*—a wonderment, a puzzle—that triggers a mental process that leads to the conclusion that this material world can only be explained by the existence of a *transcendent*.

8. Sire, *Rim*, chapter 3.

the mountainside and a village at its base, like a set of perfectly carved and painted toys placed with intent on a brilliant green backdrop: In all these, beauty and design, complexity and unity, intensity and significance come together to say, “Here is something that is beyond the sum of its parts. Here is more than matter. Here is mind; here is *transcendence*.” At this point little personality shines through, little of moral goodness, but lots of aesthetic grandeur. “The world is charged with the glory” of WHAT? Perhaps not Yahweh or Christ or Allah or Krishna. Perhaps just *transcendent* Glory itself. Perhaps the inherent Glory of the universe, a universe that is announcing to us its own *self-transcendence* or perhaps itself enjoying its own immense beauty.⁹

Those with a deep and prior understanding of a religious tradition may well conclude that much, much more than mere matter is present or being signaled. The experience is not so much of a personal God as of an awesome, magnificent nature that is more than nature, that is, perhaps, itself spirit manifest in matter. The deistic and pantheistic God of some scientists, especially physicists, goes no further than this. Neither do some of the experiences of William Wordsworth, Wallace Stevens, Loren Eiseley, and Annie Dillard, though, as we shall see, some of their experiences go much further.

Level 3

With Level 3 the personally transcendent comes into play.

At Level 3 the signal points more explicitly to something other than the obviously material—some “presence” from beyond ordinary reality but manifest within it, something “personal” that seems to be there (or here) just behind the surface of what we are directly experiencing, often something with which one feels at peace or even at one, or, perhaps, as dangerous or threatening.

William James cites numerous experiences that suggest that the subject of the experience is not just living in an ordinary world of people and things but is profoundly connected to this reality in a way unaccounted

9. Of course, how an impersonal “thing,” the universe, can enjoy “itself” is a question worth contemplating. Enjoy? Does that not imply a “personal” being “who,” not “what,” enjoys? Language itself and the ways we use it are also *signals of transcendence*.

for by any or all of his five senses. Here is one of James's accounts. It comes from Henri Frédéric Amiel's *Journal*:¹⁰

One day, in youth, at sunrise, sitting in the ruins of the castle of Faucigny; and again in the mountains, under the noonday sun, above Levey, lying at the foot of a tree and visited by three butterflies; once more at night upon the shingly shore of the Northern Ocean, my back upon the sand and my vision ranging through the milky way;—such grand and spacious, immortal, cosmogonic reveries, when one reaches the stars, when one owns the infinite! Moments divine, ecstatic hours; in which our thought flies from world to world, pierces the great enigma, breathes with a respiration broad, tranquil, and deep as the respiration of the ocean, serene and limitless as the blue firmament; . . . instants of irresistible intuition in which one feels one's self great as the universe, and calm as a god. . . . What hours, what memories! The vestiges they leave behind are enough to fill us with belief and enthusiasm, as if they were visits of the Holy Ghost.¹¹

The Jewish scholar-poet-philosopher Martin Buber identified this manifestation of personal transcendence as a *Thou* that addresses us as a *Thou*. We always have, as he says, an *I-It* relationship with material things, but we can also have *I-Thou* relationships not only with other people but with fundamental reality. We must not think of this reality as an *It*. Rather when we are truly human, fundamental reality addresses us as *Thou* and we respond to that reality as *Thou*.¹²

William Paley's well-known and much more intellectual argument for the existence of a designer God is also a *signal*, at least for those who see either the necessity or the high probability of Paley's conclusion. In brief the argument goes like this. If I find a watch in the forest, it is highly likely that, rather than appearing there as a product of the forest doing what forests do or as having no cause for its appearance at all, the watch has had an intelligent designer as its maker. This by analogy is extended to the universe itself. Given the apparent vastness of the universe and the complexity and seemingly purpose-driven nature of living matter, it

10. Amiel (1821–1881), according to Wikipedia, “was a Swiss philosopher, poet, and critic . . . descended from a Huguenot family,” whose private journal (*Journal Intime*) was published after his death.

11. James, *Varieties*, 203.

12. Buber in *I and Thou* is famous for elaborating on this relationship in highly poetic as well as philosophic and theological language.

is more likely that the universe and the biosphere in particular has had its origin in the intentions of an intelligent designer with many of the characteristics of the traditional theistic notion of a personal, omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent God. The universe itself suggests this.¹³ As the psalmist says, “The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork” (Ps 19:1).

When the *Thou* of Martin Buber or the sense of the Holy Spirit of Amiel are understood to have more and deeper personal characteristics than mere mind or intelligence, the *signals* are approaching *Level 4*.

Level 4

Level 4 takes us deeper and more fully into the personal and holy character of the divine.

At Level 4 comes direct experience of the profound depths of Thou, the Person who is Ultimate Being and should be described in terms of the holy, the numinous, and the mysterium tremendum.

I wish I could describe this level without the special language employed by the German theologian Rudolf Otto. But his somewhat arcane terminology has been found useful by many subsequent philosophers, theologians, and spiritual writers who comment in depth on the nature of religious experience, especially in its deepest and most personal form.

The holy: For Christian theologians, the *holy* is the utter separateness, perfect righteousness, and exhaustive intelligence of God.

The idea of the holy lies deeper than “pure reason”: [It lies in] the *fundus animae*, the “bottom” or “ground of the soul” (*Seelengrund*). The ideas of the numinous and the feelings that correspond to them are (quite as much as the rational ideas and feelings) absolutely “pure,” and the criteria that Kant suggests for the “pure” concept and the “pure” feeling of respect are most precisely applicable to them.¹⁴

13. Wiker and Witt, *Meaningful World*, chart a wide range of meaningful elements in the world. So too does Karl W. Giberson as he focuses on the cosmos, physics and the fine-tuning of the universe, in *Wonder*, 95, where he writes: “If we find the world filled with wonders that move us spiritually or point beyond themselves or inspire us in ways not captured by our ordinary nets, we need not simply shrug our shoulders about what that might be. I think we can reasonably embrace the idea that there must be a transcendent reality in which these experiences are grounded.”

14. Otto, *Idea*, 129.

The numinous: Otto wants to be clear that the idea of the *holy* includes more than righteousness, more than morality. We need, he says, “to invent a special term to stand for ‘the holy’ *minus* its moral factor or ‘moment,’ and . . . minus its ‘rational’ aspect altogether.”¹⁵ The *numinous* is that word, coined from the Latin *numen* in the same way *omen* gives us the word *ominous*.¹⁶ It denotes the transcendent itself, that which is the Totally Other but which manifests itself (or himself) as a powerful Presence.

But how much further can we go in properly understanding the numinous? Not much, for it turns out that “this mental state is perfectly *sui generis* [utterly unique] and irreducible to any other; and therefore, like every absolutely primary and elementary datum, while it admits of being discussed, it cannot be strictly defined.”¹⁷ The term *numinous* is like the terms *substance*, *meaning*, *being*, and a host of other terms; in the final analysis we can only define them in terms of themselves.¹⁸ We either immediately grasp what they signify or we don’t understand them. The *numinous* cannot be taught; it can only be evoked or awakened.

Moreover, Otto says:

The numinous . . . issues from the deepest foundation of cognitive apprehension that the soul possesses, and, though it of course comes into being in and amid the sensory data and empirical material of the natural world and cannot anticipate or dispense with those, yet it does not arise *out of* them, but only *by their means*.¹⁹

15. *Ibid.*, 20.

16. *Ibid.*, 21.

17. *Ibid.*

18. Otto is working within the framework of post-Kantian thought. The *numinous* is a Kantian-like category; we can’t think without these terms but we can’t, strictly speaking, define them. As he writes, “The rational ideas of absoluteness, completion, necessity, and substantiality, and no less so those of the good as an objective value, objectively binding and valid, are not to be ‘evolved’ from any sort of sense-perception. . . . Rather, seeking to account for the ideas in question, we are referred away from all sense-experience back to an original and underivable capacity of the mind implanted in the ‘pure reason’ independently of all perception” (*ibid.*, 129). And again, “Now this is the criterion of all *a priori* knowledge, namely, that, so soon as an assertion has been clearly expressed and understood, knowledge of its truth comes into the mind with the certitude of first-hand insight” (*ibid.*, 154).

19. *Ibid.*, 130.

Indeed, the *numinous* makes us conscious that we are not our own; we are creatures. The *numinous* evokes “the emotion of a creature, submerged and overwhelmed by its own nothingness in contrast to that which is supreme above all creatures. . . . The numinous is thus felt as objective and outside the self.”²⁰ There is no way that the *numinous* can be taught; it must rather be “‘awakened’ from the spirit. . . . induced, incited, and aroused.”²¹ There are many ways in which this arousal can be sparked. Otto, however, suggests that one way is direct:

If a man does not *feel* what the numinous is, when he reads the sixth chapter of Isaiah, then no “preaching, singing, telling,” in Luther’s phrase, can avail him. . . . He who “in the spirit” reads the written word lives in the numinous, though he may have neither notion of it nor name for it, nay, though he may be unable to analyse [*sic*] any feeling of his own and so make explicit to himself the nature of that numinous strand running through the religious experience.²²

The *numinous* may also be sparked through the arousal of the fearful or the horrible: “The hard, stern, and somewhat grim pictures of the Madonna in ancient Byzantine art attract the worship of many Catholics more than the tender charm of the Madonnas of Raphael.”²³ There are the experiences of grandeur and sublimity in nature, art, and architecture, especially the Gothic. Then too, darkness in art, silence in music, emptiness and empty distances may also open one to the *numinous*.²⁴ The witness of what can only be thought of as a miracle will do so as well.

Otto identifies many instances of the *numinous* in the Old and New Testaments and in the works of Luther. We will examine some of the biblical examples in chapter 2.²⁵ The *mysterium tremendum* in Otto’s analysis provides a more detailed exegesis of the *numinous*.

The mysterium tremendum: First Otto gives a general description:

The feeling of it [the *mysterium tremendum*] may at times come sweeping like a gentle tide, pervading the mind with a tranquil

20. *Ibid.*, 24–25.

21. *Ibid.*, 75.

22. *Ibid.*, 75–76.

23. *Ibid.*, 77.

24. The holy in Bach is in the silences, illustrated by his Mass in B Minor, esp. the “Incarnatus” more than in the “Sanctus,” says Otto, *ibid.*, 85.

25. *Ibid.*, 120.

mood of deepest worship. It may pass over into a more set and lasting attitude of the soul, continuing, as it were, thrillingly vibrant and resonant, until at last it dies away and the soul resumes its “profane,” non-religious mood of everyday experience. It may burst in sudden eruption up from the depths of the soul with spasms and convulsions, or lead to the strangest excitements, to intoxicated frenzy, to transport, and to ecstasy. It has its wild and demonic forms and can sink to an almost grisly horror and shuddering. It has its crude, barbaric antecedents and early manifestations, and again it may be developed into something beautiful and pure and glorious. It may become hushed, trembling, and speechless humility of the creature in the presence of—whom or what? In the presence of that which is a *mystery* inexpressible and above all creatures.²⁶

When he describes the *mysterium* part of the pair of terms, he emphasizes the positive, yet dark obscurity of what is being experienced: “Conceptually *mysterium* denotes merely that which is hidden and esoteric, that which is beyond conception or understanding, extraordinary and unfamiliar . . . [W]hat is meant is something absolutely and intensely positive.”²⁷

The *mysterium* denotes the Wholly Other and triggers “blank wonder, an astonishment that strikes us dumb, amazement absolute.”²⁸

Elements of the *tremendum* include:

- (1) Awefulness—tremor, fear, notably fear of God, dread. This began in primitive man with the uncanny, the weird, a shudder, a sense of the impending wrath of God;²⁹
- (2) Overpoweringness—“absolute unapproachability,” majesty, a feeling of nothingness, of being dust and ashes, consciousness of createdness and creaturehood, annihilation of the self, or, as in mysticism, identification of “the personal self with the transcendent Reality”; “[T]here is the feeling of one’s own submergence, of being but ‘dust and ashes’ and nothingness.”³⁰

26. *Ibid.*, 26.

27. *Ibid.*, 27.

28. *Ibid.*, 40, 45–55.

29. *Ibid.*, 27–33.

30. *Ibid.*, 34–37.

- (3) Energy or Urgency—“vitality, passion, emotional temper, will, force, movement, excitement, activity, impetus.”³¹

The nature of the *numinous* as characterized by the *mysterium tremendum* may give us a clue to which *signals of transcendence* are most likely to point unambiguously to the existence of a specifically Christian notion of God. But we will return to this later.

Ontology and Epistemology

There are several ways to classify *signals of transcendence* as experienced by Christians. One way is to rank them as we have done above, Level 1 to Level 4. This categorizes by the depth (or height) of the *transcendence* they signal.

A second way is to divide them into (1) *ontological signals* that record a profound sense of the *presence of transcendence* and (2) *epistemological signals* that stimulate a curiosity that leads to learning more about the *transcendent* dimensions of reality.

Among the *signals* that we have already noted, those that are *ontological* include my experience of the three thunderheads (Preface) signaling the Trinity; astonishing scenes in nature signaling the presence of God as creator; Amiel’s “cosmogenic reveries” pointing to the presence of the Holy Spirit; and, most notably, Otto’s idea of the holy, his *numinous* and *mysterium tremendum*.

Those *signals* that are *epistemological* include Peter Berger’s parent comforting a child, his notion of hope and sense of morality; Leibniz’s case for the existence of God; William Paley’s intellectual move from the universe as a clock or as behaving with evolutionary convergence to his conclusion that some *telos* (purpose) must be behind the existence of this universe (Paley).

The final effect of both types of *signals* is, of course, the same. They point to an *ontological* end—the first directly, the second by way of human reason that concludes in a deep sense that an intellectual argument could and does lead to this conclusion.

31. Ibid., 37.

Form and Content

A third classification looks at the forms in which the deeply private experiences of *transcendence* are made public. Do we learn about them (a) through our personal experience (b) by relatively straightforward narrative prose or (c) by carefully crafted poetry?

Which form they embody will have an effect on how we evaluate their power to be *signals* for us as well as for those who have had the experiences. As we examine these experiences in the pages to follow, we would do well to remember the differences in the form of their transmission.

We turn now to those *signals of transcendence* that have been highly significant in the tradition of Jewish and Christian experience. For Christians these *signals* should form the base evidence for the relevance and meaning of any other claim to the significance of any other experience bidding to be treated as a *signal* of the Presence of God. Chapter 10 will expand on this notion. Suffice it now to look more closely at some highly significant examples.

SAMPLE