



[Enrico Fermi](#) [1]

1954

Responsabilità del sapere 31 (1979), pp. 21-23.

Many years have passed, but I remember it as though it were yesterday.

I was very young, and I had the illusion that human intelligence could penetrate all things. That's why I immersed myself in my studies to the exclusion of everything else. Reading extensively wasn't enough for me, and I spent the good part of each night meditating on the most abstruse questions.

An intense neurasthenia forced me to stop and to leave the city, full as it was of temptations for my exhausted brain, and take refuge in the remote countryside in Umbria.

I was reduced to a nearly vegetative, though by no means animalistic, life. I read a bit, prayed, and took many walks in the flowering countryside (it was May) joyfully contemplating the thick green crops shot through with scarlet poppies, the rows of poplars stretching along the canals, the blue mountains closing in the horizon, and the tranquil human work carried on in the fields and farmhouses.

One evening, or rather one night, as I was waiting for sleep which was late in coming, I sat down in a field, listening to the quiet conversation of some farmers nearby. They spoke of very simple things, though none of which was coarse or frivolous as happens in other social classes. Our farmers rarely speak and when they do it is to say something necessary, sensible, and at times, wise. Eventually they became silent, as if the serene and solemn majesty of the night, moonless but teeming with stars, had cast down a mysterious enchantment upon those simple souls. Rupturing the silence, but not the spell, the rustic voice of a burly, rough farmer, who was lying stretched out on the grass, his eyes fixed on the stars, exclaimed, almost as if he were obeying a profound inspiration, "How beautiful! And yet some say God doesn't exist."

I have repeated it to myself many times since, that phrase of an old farmer in that place, at that time. After months of barren study, it so vividly touched my mind and heart that even now I remember that simple scene as if it were yesterday.

A venerable Hebrew prophet some three thousand years ago decreed: "The Heavens declare the glory of God." One of the most celebrated philosophers of modern times wrote: "Two things fill me with awe, the starry sky above me and the moral law within me."

That Umbrian farmer did not even know how to read. But in his heart, safeguarded by an honest and hard-working life, there was a small corner in which the light of God descended with a power not much inferior to that of the prophets and perhaps greater than that of philosophers.

M. Micheli, "Enrico Fermi e Luigi Fantappiè. Ricordi personali," *Responsabilità del sapere* 31 (1979), pp. 21-23, Eng. transl. by Laurie Malashanko.

[Contemporary Scientists on Science and Religion](#) [2]

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