**Philosophy as Embrace of Mystery**

In modern times, the notion of mystery has been plagued by the negative connotations of escapism; a bad excuse for lazy minds to remain idle; something blocking intellectual progress; a barrier to be removed. This attitude has for centuries now served in the minds of many as a fulcrum for the denigration of religion and the advancement of science as our definitive escape from millennia of ignorance which had been standing in the way of the advancement of human society. In this view of things, the role philosophy was to play was as the iconoclast, demasking our lingering narratives of ineffable forces guiding fate and the preservation of our being and the world around us to show them for the superstitions they really are, paving the way for them to be replaced by sound scientific explanation.

This movement came to a head in the twentieth century at the hands of philosophers of a neo-positivist bent, such as Ludwig Wittgenstein, A.J. Ayer, and Bertrand Russell. If these or their like gave some role to religion at all – and some did – it was a role that had nothing to do with truth or the way things really are. In particular, they were averse to the notion that there are genuine mysteries to be pondered in a manner that could increase our knowledge without dispelling the mystery itself. Within this tradition of thought, mysteries were seen as sham constructions obscuring our understanding of things rather than enlightening us, setting us off-track from the progress we could be making.

To be sure, those of this particular tradition opposing the notion of genuine mysteries might have accepted that there were some things we just cannot know, but if there are such things, then they are things the incessant wondering and marveling about will bring us no profit while wasting our time and effort and possibly even muddling our thoughts.

In this regard, Bertrand Russell’s characterization of the relationship between science on the one hand and religion, theology, etc. – what we might call the “(pseudo-) sciences of mystery” – was that the latter served as place keepers for the former; that earlier on, the mystery sciences gave us accounts of things just to have a unified account of them that would allow us to get by in our everyday dealings, speech and conversation; but that as time goes on, science would gradually replace these narratives with non-mysterious explanations of its own, until finally there presumably would be no mysteries left. Engendered in this idea is the expectation that religion was but a temporary phenomenon of human experience. This expectation of the eventual obsolescence of religion was popular throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and to this day is still embraced in some form or other by more than a few. Again, not all the neo-positivists were convinced that religion had no permanent role to play in our lives, but they all agreed that that role, whatever it may be, had nothing to do with gaining knowledge.

All of this prompts the seeking of clarification on what mystery is in the first place. I suspect that once we make this clarification, we will notice that the argument against “mystery science” has been in large part a “straw man” effort, relying on the worst assumptions of what mystery can be taken to be in order to railroad it out of existence in the public forum. Instead, I propose we play fair and give ourselves the best shot at grasping what mystery is or can be before we decide whether mystery science is a productive or counterproductive enterprise.

We can start by noticing that something taken to be a mystery is something taken not to be finitely explainable. Mysterious things are infinite things, (whose correct explanation, if it could be had, would be an infinite truth). The problem this creates is that we know ourselves to be capable only of finite, not infinite, explanation.

To be sure, we are capable of defining or explaining some infinite things, but only in the sense of giving a finite iterative account of it, such as we do in characterizing the quantity $π$, which we know is an irrational number with a never-ending, unpatterned, decimal readout, as the solution to the following equation: 4/1 – 4/3 + 4/5 – 4/7…. The ellipsis at the end instructs us to keep on going with the same series of items: 4 divided by all the odd natural numbers in succession, while alternating subtraction with addition, *ad infinitum*. Likewise, we can conceive of all countable numbers in the form of “mathematical inductions” similar to the one defining the natural numbers: 0 is a natural number and any natural number plus 1 is a natural number. But we should not mistake such things as infinite explanations; they are not, since we can adequately characterize them in finite terms.

This leaves us at a crossroads. If there are things with genuinely infinite explanations yet we can only carry out explanation finitely, are we to consider on this account that infinite things are utterly incomprehensible (to us), or that they are infinitely comprehensible? If we choose the former, then we put ourselves in the position of saying that there exist some great infinite truths that are entirely incomprehensible. But if they are entirely incomprehensible, then how are we warranted even in asserting their existence? This is what we can call the opaque acceptance of mystery, or opaque mystery.

If, on the other hand, we choose the latter, then we can characterize mysteries not as incomprehensible, but as infinitely comprehensible; that is, infinitely more comprehensible even than the finite constructions of our own minds. This is what we can call the transparent acceptance of mystery, or transparent mystery.

This brings us to the point of recognizing that the verdict on whether mystery science – and here I mean the term ‘science’ in the sense of ‘query’ rather than in the modern empirical sense - can be progressive or not hinges on which of these two possible senses of ‘mystery’ is the correct choice. We may discover that we have always been wobbly in our use of this term, and that the resulting ambiguity may have provoked the anti-mystery movement into existence in the first place.

Using religion as a chief case in point of an institution reliant on mystery, let us note that there are two ways of participating in religion: either as a fideist or as a non-fideist. Although some particular religions may favor one approach over the other, it is possible and in fact does not rarely occur that the same religion may be accepted by one member in one way and another member in the other. Fideism is the belief that faith is not, ought not, and cannot be supported by reason, but must be accepted as a “leap” away from or beyond reason, as the nineteenth century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard put it; in other words, that faith is independent from reason.

The case for fideism dovetails well with the notion of mystery as opaque or beyond reason, while the transparent acceptance of mystery is the basis of the non-fideist mindset of mystery as infinitely reasonable. Which acceptance is correct is based on to what extent, if any, the human mind is able to behold the infinite enough to make a study of it, even though, of course, it will never be a complete study.

Since the Renaissance, growth in the tendency toward fideism has been driven by a finitist bias in metaphysics and epistemology to the effect that the infinite is not noticeable by us, nor is it actual in nature or even in numbers. If this is so, then all that we can even begin to comprehend is finite, with the result that our faith in God, the infinite being, and in mystery generally, cannot be aided by reason.

The finitist bias was so strong that until the late nineteenth century and the work of Georg Cantor from circa 1874, mathematicians routinely denied the reality of infinite cardinality or even of irrational numbers, considering them only as asymptotic ideals. Since they can never be finitely stated irrational numbers were accepted as if as black holes in the number line, which, if true would entirely obliterate the line, since the infinite bulk of all real numbers are irrational, and since between any two rational numbers there is an irrational number.

The denial of the infinite in nature is hard to separate from the question of our notice of the infinite, since if the infinite is absent in the first place, there could be no notice of it. Likewise, if there is notice of the infinite, this would settle the metaphysical question as well in the other direction, all leading to a verdict against fideism and the acceptance of mystery as opaque, favoring rather the transparent notion of mystery as infinitely comprehensible.

The finitist bias faded in mathematics rather quickly thanks to the remarkable genius of Georg Cantor and those who followed him. But it hung on in our thinking in other areas, to the point that even late-twentieth century linguistic anthropologists took seriously the notion that human language might be the result of gradual evolution from previous animal forms of communication, bolstering confidence in the notion that human language could be successfully taught to other animals. The finitist bias in this confidence is the denial of rather clear evidence that human language and the ability to learn it is in fact based on our routine and immediate awareness of the infinite, the cornerstone of rational awareness and something that no other organism of which we are aware shows any signs of possessing.

The evidence of our routine and immediate awareness of the infinite is that as infants we acquire language not principally by the labelling (with words) of individuals and finite classes, which give us our repertoire only of proper terms (proper nouns, etc.), but mainly by the labelling of infinite classes of things, which gives us our repertoire of common terms and requires a ready, steady prelinguistic awareness of those classes. For a small child to learn what ‘dog’ means does not require the observation of hundreds of dogs, non-dogs, and near-dogs (if it did, we would all die long before being able to speak as we do now), but only a good quick look at one or two, after which the distinctive pattern of doghood will be locked into by the child as representing the class of all possible dogs, an infinite class.

There is no getting around it: human language is a system of communication involving the assignment of arbitrary sound labels not just to individuals and finite classes, but chiefly to infinite classes. Moreover, language is not acquired until these labels have been affixed, which entails prelinguistic awareness of the things to be labelled – chiefly among them, infinite classes of things. Thus, the existence of human language implies our immediate, routine awareness of the infinite.

One problem in our accepting this simple fact is that we somehow tend to equate awareness with full awareness, or at least ignore the value of our initial less developed awareness of a thing, what Aristotle called the “rudimentary universal”, the basic initial notice of a thing as distinct from other things which allows us to lock in on it and make a lifelong study of it. Thus, we knew what dolphins were before we knew they were mammals. Our eventually coming to know that dolphins are in fact mammals was only made possible by our ability to lock in on dolphins as an infinite class to be studied further.

In short, it is only the post-Renaissance plague of finitism that eventually caused to fade the notion of the mysterious as infinitely comprehensible, forcing us to choose the remaining option of opaque mystery, clearly inimical not just to science and knowledge, but to genuine religion as well. Fideism, an outgrowth of finitism, is the resulting scourge on religion, by its own self-convicting admission an unreasonable choice, dividing not only faith from reason but, through the destruction of the grounds for dialog between them, God from man, turning God into a mere idol in the process.

It is, then, the task of philosophy to embrace mystery, not as opaque, which s psychologically impossible to do, but as transparent, bottomlessly comprehensible truth to be discovered in all things, little by little, *ad infinitem*.