

USAGES OF THE TERM MYSTERY

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There is today a remarkable resurgence of interest in "mystery" as an aspect of reality — among philosophers, scientists, theologians, but especially among our youth of the Counter Culture¹, and of what Charles Reich calls Consciousness III². Unfortunately, however, while the word is used by many people and in many ways, only rarely does anyone state explicitly what he means by it. Almost never is it indexed in a book, even if it is mentioned in the text, and comprehensive discussions of it are exceedingly scarce. Not one of ten major encyclopedias that I have consulted has a general article on the subject. Dictionaries offer little more — even the Oxford.

In view of this sparsity of definitive material, it is surprising how many meanings appear in the profusion of words that refer to it. A list of such words, one that I have actually encountered in the literature, would be amazingly long. Some of those are presented herein italicized and grouped so as to help in identifying what seems to be major meanings. Let us survey these in some detail.

First, there are three rather common usages that should probably not be regarded as signifying genuine mystery. According to the first of these "mystery" is *anything that arouses curiosity*: the *problematic*, *as-yet-unexplained*, *not-yet-understood*, the *still-to be solved*, the *un-comprehended*, the *riddle*, the *puzzle*, or that which seems *as-yet-inconsistent* with what is known, the *as-yet-incongruous* or *temporarily paradoxical*. Here we have only provisional "mystery," i.e., until explanation is forthcoming, and usually an implication of particularity: *a mystery*, *the mystery*, or *these mysteries*. Gabriel Marcel³ and others have urged that in such cases the term *problem* be used rather than mystery. I shall hereafter follow that practice.

Next is the taboo concept: "mystery" as *forbidden secrets* declared to be inappropriate for human investigation, the preserve of the gods. One is reminded here of the familiar warning heard in some religious circles: "This is not for man to know."

Finally there is the "mystery" taken to be *superstition*, *relegated-*

¹Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture*, Doubleday, Anchor Books; 1969.

²Charles A. Reich, *The Greening of America*, Random House, 1970.

³Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, 2 vols., Regnery; 1960, Gateway Edition.

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to-limbo, to-be-disregarded as not worthy of serious study. In the 19th century this usage was fairly common, especially among "men of the enlightenment." The intent was: "Let's not bother with it. It's only superstition anyway, without real significance."

Now we come to mystery proper, where we can recognize at least seven major meanings. First, there is the strong sense of the *inexplicable, unexplainable, unanswerable, insoluble, incomprehensible, unknowable*. Here presumably is permanent mystery. To illustrate, Munitz⁴ employs this meaning in speaking of the "mystery of existence." He asks: Is there a reason-for-the-existence-of-the-world? And argues persuasively that this is a legitimate question, that it does have meaning, yet cannot be answered — and is therefore more than a problem. Such mystery, like all genuine mystery, arouses not only curiosity, but the realization that it cannot be satisfied.

The second meaning takes us one conceptual step further, to what seems not only inexplicable, but even *imperceptible, unperceivable, though-presumably-existent, unavailable, unreachable, inscrutable, and unsearchable*. Thus Einstein has often been quoted as saying that "existence in its profoundest depths is *inaccessible* to man."

At this point we introduce a break in the classification scheme. The two meanings just noted, the inexplicable and the inaccessible, have this in common, that they have an essentially *negative* connotation: the mysterious is that which *is not* and *cannot* be known or understood — the accent being on the what we do *not* know. Pelikan has suggested therefore that mystery is conceived here as "the quantity of the unknown."⁵ But there is more to mystery than that. As all the other usages, to be considered presently, imply, the term mystery has also a more positive connotation, namely that wonder is evoked not only by the unknown, but even more by the mysterious grandeur, meaningfulness, and power of the known.

This shift becomes apparent at once as we pass to the third category of mystery: the *limitlessness, unboundedness, infinity, and unfathomability* of the reality that we do perceive and have come to "know" — that is seemingly endless in its extension, content, range of qualities, and in its *depth dimension*. Here too we note the *ever-receding-horizon* of our knowledge and understanding; no matter how far we press the analysis of the known, the end of it remains out of sight. Always it has more to reveal of itself. Hence the strong sense of its utter unfathomability as to its content and meaning — even though there is no certitude of this. Clearly the accent of connotation here is on what we do know. Pelikan speaks of this aspect of mystery

⁴Milton K. Munitz, *The Mystery of Existence*, Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1965.

⁵Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Intellectual*, Harper & Row, 1965; p. 69ff.

as a "quality of the known." I myself like to call it the glory aspect of mystery, in contrast to the unknowability aspect suggested by the first two usages. What the third usage refers to more specifically is the immensity or infinity aspect of mystery's glory. There is, of course, a caution to be observed in this connection: while these distinctions, those between the negative and positive, and between the quantitative and qualitative features of mystery are indeed cogent and helpful, they must not be delineated too sharply, for after all they are not actually separate or utterly distinct in man's awareness of mystery. As would become abundantly clear if we were to apply these rather abstract notions to the concrete realities of nature, mystery seems always to elicit a mixed response of wonder: wonder at how tremendous, and even boundless, is the unknown of anything we observe, and yet how incredibly and unfathomably wondrous and extensive is also the known of it. Without the recognition of both of these facets of mystery, our understanding of it would be most inadequate.

The distinction between them is made even more evident by the many terms that identify the fourth aspect of mystery. I am presenting these below in five subgroups, each to a line, to indicate how profusely varied are the mystery qualities of reality to which this particular sense of mystery responds, and how exquisitely differentiated are the shades of meaning that emerge from men's sensitivity to those qualities:

*wondrous, awesome, glorious, radiant, illuminating, effulgent;
ineffable, non-conceptual, non-cognitive;
nonrational, transrational, irrational;
elusive, tantalizing, enigmatic;
fascinating, numinous, tremendous, fearsome.**

Clearly each succeeding line discloses a different large scale qualitative aspect of the known — from the wondrous to the ineffable, to the non-rational, elusive, and fascinating — and each individual term a different facet of it.

This list gives vivid meaning to a perceptive remark by Hocking,⁶ that there is a "difference between the sense of ignorance and the sense of mystery." . . . and that the latter may be thought of "as the discerning of something beyond the bounds of ignorance." One may become conscious of an absence, or of a presence. It is not only the opacity or darkness of mystery that evokes awe, but also its trans-

*Some of these terms appear frequently in the writings of Rudolf Otto, Friedrich Heiler, Mircea Eliade, and others, concerning the holy, sacred, and profane.

⁶William Hocking, *The Meaning of God in Human Experience*, Yale University Press, 1955; p. 236f.

lucency, radiance, and glory. This is why this and the next meanings of mystery are for the most part non-cognitive. They stem not from awesome knowing or not knowing, but from an awesome awareness that somehow transcends both. Wheelwright says it this way⁷:

Now awe in the most adequate sense of the word,
is a feeling appropriate to the presence of
Mystery; and Mystery is no puzzling riddle
with a solution to be published . . . , it is a
That which intrinsically and majestically
transcends the possibility of finite
comprehension. The mysterious — *i.e.*,
the radically enigmatic, not the temporarily
puzzling — is that character or quality or
relationship in things which, however much
'explained,' always transcends in its essence
any totality of explanations given. The two
elements are deeply interrelated, but
analytically distinguishable.

It is often said that as knowledge grows mystery is dissolved. Actually, however, with increased understanding genuine mystery deepens. Certainly that is what this fourth usage implies. The more we come to know, the more we sense of the mysterious ineffability and glory of that known.

No doubt, as all this implies, there is but one transcendent Mystery that envelops and imbues all of life and reality, even though it has different aspects. Much is known and much is not known. About both much can be said; but both comprehend more than can be known or said. This then is the fourth aspect of mystery: *the glory of the more than can be said or reasoned*. As Reinhold Niebuhr wrote recently, "a penumbra of mystery surrounds every realm of meaning."⁸ No doubt this refers in part to the negative, unknowing side of mystery; but, suggests John H. Hayward,⁹ "the mystery itself is pregnant with potential meaning. It is a positive mystery, a power — not a void or empty cipher." This is its positive, glory side. Bringing these together Niebuhr offers the following definition:

"Mystery in short is the shadowy realm
of twilight where both coherence and
incoherence are known or intimated, as

⁷Philip Wheelwright, *The Burning Fountain*, Indiana University Press, 1954; p. 295, 74.

⁸Reinhold Niebuhr, *CHRISTIANITY AND CRISIS*, June 13, 1966; p. 127.

⁹John H. Hayward, *ZYGON*, March 1966; p. 32.

well as the threshold of glory which
gives light but does not reveal its
nature."

This reference to "the threshold of glory that gives light" recalls another (fifth) meaning of mystery. This comes from the sense of the *givingness*, the *creative future-directedness*, or the *becomingness* of being, or of "life,"¹⁰ or "the world."

It is this sense of mystery that seems to be articulated by the biblical concept of continuous creation — an ever-active bringing forth of reality. The perennial figure of the vast, bottomless abyss is transformed into that of the inexhaustibly effluent fountain or source whence comes all light, meaning, and reality. Perhaps too this is what has brought forth the symbols of "cosmic fire," "the burning fountain," and the "river of fire."¹¹

There is here, however, a sense not only of the coming forth of the stream of life from the inexhaustible Source, but of its ceaseless, inexorable flowing on into the mysterious future. This is then the glory-mystery of the perpetual dynamic effluence of known reality: its *giving, creating, bringing forth, outflowing, outpouring, pushing on, effluence, emanation, becoming*. This sense of the mysterious creative flow into the future seems to be coupled with a sense of the *glory* of the *open future*. There is power in this mystery, for when it is seen for what it truly is, it generates commitment to openness. As Pelikan suggests, "To acknowledge that mystery means to open oneself to the unknown future."¹²

For many men mystery has a sixth dimension of meaning: *teleological purposiveness* in the over-all scheme of things, as well as in some of its detailed features. They sense that the effluence and becomingness of reality has a preferred direction, indicating a cosmic pressure toward ever enriching existence — toward increased possibilities for actualization of novelty in the future, toward enhanced interdependence, mutuality, community, and "goodness". This is for them a glory-aspect of mystery of the profoundest significance, and they tend to think of it as revealing purpose and meaning in the *ground of being*. Moreover, the encounter with it may, or may not, seem essentially personal in character, and inescapably *searching* and *demanding*.^{*} If so, reflection upon it may lead to a theistic philosophic and theological position, whereas if not to a non-theistic one.

¹⁰In this context the term "life" is used in Paul Tillich's sense, as in the third volume of his *Systematic Theology*, University of Chicago Press, 1963.

¹¹Wheelwright, *op. cit.*, Ch. XIV.

¹²Pelikan, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

^{*}See, for instance, Psalm 139.

Marcel, for instance, feels that the sensing of this personal aspect is crucial for his understanding of mystery. Munitz sees this clearly in Marcel's thought and expounds it as follows¹³:

This contrast between "problem" and "mystery" is not a contrast between two kinds of questions that the human mind can raise. It is a contrast between what can be expressed, on the one hand, as a question, and what, on the other, has the form of faith in divine or human presence. . . .

Hocking takes a similar position. In the passage quoted partially earlier (footnote 6), he says (we now quote more completely):

Religion is bound up in the difference between the sense of ignorance and the sense of mystery: the former means, "I know not," the latter means "I know not; but *it is known*." . . . "I know not; but he knows"

Julian Huxley, on the other hand, does not sense any personal dimension of mystery — though, as I interpret his writings, he is keenly conscious of the others, including those of the numinous, non-rational, and of the directional development of the world (though without actual "purpose")¹⁴ Hence his consistent espousal of a humanistic position.

It is possible, of course, to assume a stance that is both non-theistic* and non-humanistic, as does Paul Tillich, who certainly discerned all dimensions of mystery in history, and all save the personal in nature.

However it may be in regard to a possibly *personal* element in it, the sense of direction or purposiveness in the over-all scheme of things (this sixth category) provides the basis for a confident sense of the *glory of a good, and open future*, and of an adequate, personal orientation toward it. Again we may refer with profit to a remark by Pelikan¹⁵.

"It would be a mistake to conclude that faith looks upon the future as mysterious merely because it is inscrutable. . . . The deepest meaning of the divine mystery is not insight into the future, but openness toward the future. . . . The future now becomes one dimension of the mystery disclosed in the past and operative in the present". . . .

¹³Munitz, op. cit., p. 31.

¹⁴Julian Huxley, *Religion Without Revelation*, Parish, London, 1957; also "The Humanist Frame," in book of same title, Harper, 1961.

*Tillich repeatedly disavowed theism, at least in its traditional form; yet some theologians regard him as a theist in the most fundamental meaning.

¹⁵Pelikan, op. cit., p. 78.

It may well be, therefore, as suggested recently by Harvey Cox, Michael Novak, and others, that the most potent approach to an adequate conception of "God" may be through the sense and concept of the open future and of the mystery-reality that brings it into being.

It has been asserted that without the recognition of a personal element in this component of mystery it is impossible to make any sense out of a large group of others that are more specific, such as: the *mystery of creation, of redemption, of Christ, of the Scriptures, of the Eucharist*, and others related to them (not to speak here of those encountered in non-Christian religions). May it not be too that it was the awareness of this aspect of mystery that led early translators to render the NT Greek *mysterion* into the Latin *sacramentum*?

The last, and seventh, usage of the term mystery that I have encountered is that of *radical questionableness* (*radikale Fraglichkeit*), which introduces certain overtones of connotation that seem not to have been intended by any of the terms mentioned earlier. There are apparently at least two aspects and depths of this. To begin with, while we have insisted that problems are in themselves not genuine mystery, it is one of the remarkable characteristics of real mystery that it does arouse amazement and curiosity, and the desire to ask questions and to solve problems. To him who senses it at all adequately mystery — far from repelling or forbidding investigation of it — perpetually invites the quest, and then is inexhaustibly rewarding, yielding answer after answer, allowing solution after solution of problems or so-called *mysterries*, while yet itself remaining unmoved, unfathomable mystery. While it lures and beckons, the more insight it yields, the more gloriously mysterious it seems. Every question answered simply leads to others, and still others. Surely this is what de Lubac meant when he asserted that

... it is one of the forms of the fruitfulness of the mystery that it gives birth in man's mind to a movement which can never end.¹⁶ While he is talking here specifically about the mystery of God, I dare say he would not deny that all genuine mystery is infinitely questionable and fruitful in this way.

Second, as Gerhard Ebeling sees it,

The understanding of that to which the term "God" refers has its locus in the realm of radical questionableness. The question of how God comes to be experienced, of how it can become clear what God means with regard to the reality one faces, can be answered initially only by saying: God enters experience as ques-

¹⁶Henri de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, Herder and Herder, 1967; p. 216.

tion. . . . He who does not question is thereby cut off from understanding what the term God means.¹⁷

Juergen Moltmann puts it this way, after asserting that a comprehensive analysis of reality must recognize and take into account its radical questionableness:

In the radical questionableness of reality there appears the problem of transcendence, or simply the question of God, in the face of which the Christian affirmation of God must prove and authenticate itself.¹⁸

However, he explains, *this* "question of God" is not primarily about the existence and character of God, but about how and why the question of God arises so compellingly. He then observes:

What the name "God" means can be intelligibly shown only when it is related to a radical, and therefore necessary, questionableness of reality. "*God*" is *what we are talking about in and with this questionableness of reality*. (Emphasis mine)¹⁸

This is, of course, a tricky theological point with much chance for misunderstanding, and this is not the place for an exposition of it. At least this much should be said, however, namely that one of the fundamental mystery-attributes of reality is its "radical questionableness," and that the meaning of the terms "God" and "transcendence" is inextricably enmeshed with it. There are at least three reasons for designating this questionableness as *radical*. *First*, it invokes a querying and questing toward the ultimate root or ground of being. *Second*, reality is taken to be fundamentally (radically) questionable in the sense that it will never be otherwise than questionable; no supposedly final formulation of answers could stop the flow of questions; the questioning leads forever to new formulations of both question and answer. *Third*, the questionableness is radical because it relates not only to objective reality, but also, and especially, to personal existence, that of the questioner. Clearly this refers to genuine mystery, indeed ultimate mystery, infinitely evocative of radical questioning, infinitely fruitful of experience and insight, yet never ground for claims of finality therein.

This then brings to a close our survey of the major meanings of "mystery" of which I have become aware. We have been able to identify seven clearly distinguishable ones, the first two pertaining primarily to the extent of the unknown, and the others to the glory of

¹⁷Gerhard Ebeling, *Wort und Glaube*, J.C.B.Mohn (Paul Siebeck), Tuebingen, 1960; p. 364f.

¹⁸Juergen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, Harper & Row, 1967; p. 272.

the known. They are (1) the *inexplicable*, (2) the *inaccessible*, (3) the *infinite*, (4) the *ineffable*, (5) the *inexhaustibly effluent*, (6) the *ultimately purposive*, and (7) the *radically questionable*. There are also three common usages we have declined to attribute to genuine mystery: (a) the *problem*, (b) the *forbidden* (taboo), and (c) what is taken to be *superstitious nonsense*. It should be emphasized that these distinctions are valid for analysis only. Surely mystery and the experience of it are unitary even though many-sided.

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