

## The logic of mystery

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**Abstract:** This paper proposes an analytical taxonomy of ‘mystery’ based upon what makes a mystery mysterious. I begin by distinguishing mysteries that depend on what we do *not* know (e.g. detective fiction) from mysteries that depend on what we *do* know (e.g. religious mysteries). Then I distinguish three possible grounds for the latter type. The third and most provocative ground offers a mathematical analogy for how rational reflection can be appropriate to mystery without compromising its intrinsically mysterious character. I conclude with reflections on the metaphysical presuppositions that this understanding of mystery requires.

In his 1997 book *Senses of Mystery*,<sup>1</sup> Bernard Verkamp made a laudable, because all too rare, attempt to untangle the wild and woolly concept of ‘mystery’<sup>2</sup> by explicating five different understandings of the term as used by scientists, philosophers, and theologians. Verkamp’s taxonomy is rooted in how mystery is experienced or with what it is associated – a helpful approach in certain respects, but one that devotes singularly little attention to logical analysis or to comparison of the different senses.<sup>3</sup> I propose in the present paper to try to take a few more steps in this more comparative and analytical direction. I wish to set forth a taxonomy that grows out of investigation, not of how mystery is experienced, but of the different ways that, so to speak, the ‘logic’ of mystery functions. What is it that makes a mystery ‘mysterious’ – that makes it (according to Webster’s dictionary) ‘defy reason’, in some sense? This approach allows us to investigate not just the different ways that (it is claimed) we experience mystery, but also the different connotations that attach to the term, connotations that often entail fundamental metaphysical and theological commitments.

### **Mystery unknown and known**

For those who are counting, I shall identify five ‘kinds’ of mystery in all, beginning with a two-fold distinction (unrelated to Verkamp’s taxonomy) that

addresses one common misconception regarding mystery; and then suggesting an additional threefold sub-division (with parallels in Verkamp) that addresses another problem.

Consider first what is probably the most common, if least religiously significant, sense of ‘mystery’, the kind associated with detective novels and TV crime shows. I shall refer to this first kind of mystery as ‘investigative mystery’, for it is clear that the crucial logical element here is found in the state of affairs that obtains when the perpetrator (or sometimes the method or motive) of a crime is unknown. We, as readers or viewers, join with the police, or private detectives, or whomever in investigating the facts of the case in order to figure out what happened or ‘whodunit’. While Sherlock Holmes may be the paradigmatic instance of the attempt to address a mystery of this sort, the logic of this kind of mystery is much broader. Any time we are faced with an intriguing riddle or conundrum and we begin to attend to the relevant ‘clues’ in order to work out the solution to the puzzle, we are engaged with an investigative mystery. I might be trying to explain the most recent ‘appearance’ of Elvis, or I might be trying to find my daughter’s missing shoe. But insofar as I am investigating a situation in order to find the currently unknown answer to a question or problem, I am involved in an investigative mystery.<sup>4</sup>

Now, the investigative is a fairly prosaic kind of mystery, one without any necessary religious significance. But we see another and rather more interesting kind when we consider how the provocative term *mystērion* is used in much of the ancient Mediterranean world. In that context, a mystery refers not just to unknown things generally (such as missing shoes), but to eternal or heavenly secrets that have been made known to humanity. The so-called ‘mystery religions’ of Greece were, of course, heavily rooted in this concept, but Michael Foster points out that it also characterized Greek science and philosophy.<sup>5</sup> Central to the Greek mind was the conviction that access to the undying, unchanging, eternal realm really was available, through intellectual contemplation or esoteric devotion or some other means of communion, and the secrets of this communion were now known to the few who became initiates. The early Christian writings make use of a logically similar understanding of *mystērion*.<sup>6</sup> The central idea in the New Testament is that the unknown plan or purpose of God that was originally formulated in the heavens has now been revealed on earth. A mystery, in this usage, is a marvellous heavenly secret that has been declared, as when Jesus says that his disciples have ‘been given the *mystērion* of the kingdom of God’<sup>7</sup> – to them the ‘secret’ of the kingdom has been revealed.

Since this second kind of mystery always involves the *revelation* of the secret, I propose to refer to it as ‘revelational mystery’. But there is something odd about this revealed *mystērion*, something that makes its characterization as a ‘secret’ rather problematic.<sup>8</sup> A secret, as everyone knows, is a fact or a titbit that is kept from the knowledge of others or that is shared confidentially with only a few.

‘Shhh – it’s a secret’, we say, meaning that it should be hidden from ‘outsiders’, that it should be kept private, not widely or publicly divulged. Thus, the secret can be made known, but only to the privileged few, and so it remains a mystery to those outside that circle. But notice that a secret is in no way mysterious to the insiders. If I am throwing a surprise party for my wife’s birthday, I will of course keep it a secret from her, but everyone who is invited to the party is ‘in’ on the secret – and therefore they understand it perfectly well. My wife might think that I am ‘acting mysteriously’, but to our friends there is nothing mysterious about my behaviour. In this respect, we see that while a secret is the sort of thing that the insiders *know*, they know it very *unmysteriously*. Of course, they might know only part of the secret – say, only the time, but not the place, of the party. But what they know, they know absolutely, without any mystery involved at all. Knowing the secret eliminates the mystery – and this is a suspicious indicator that the logic of a mere secret is really *investigative* logic.

Something different seems to be going on in the New Testament (and also in the mystery religions, though we shall not be focusing on them). According to the biblical sense of ‘mystery’, the heavenly ‘secrets’ may have leaked out, but they never quite make themselves at home on earth: there is always enough of the heavenlies about them to leave even those who know them overwhelmed. And this is the fundamental difference between a mere secret and a full-fledged revelational mystery. Where a secret is hidden from outsiders, a mystery is hidden – period. It remains incomprehensible even to those who know it. No one who watches the disciples in the gospel stories can think that they actually *understand* the mystery that Jesus says they have been ‘given’. Even Paul, who is among the ‘stewards of God’s mysteries’,<sup>9</sup> who makes bold to proclaim mysteries in his preaching and in his letters,<sup>10</sup> to whom ‘the mystery was made known ... by revelation’,<sup>11</sup> whose whole commission from God is to make known ‘the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed’<sup>12</sup> – yes, even this apostle, who is so ‘in’ on the heavenly secrets, is led to the awe-struck confession, ‘O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!’<sup>13</sup> While an investigative mystery defies reason for the moment, until I have figured it out, a revelational mystery defies reason in some sense even *after* it is (so to speak) ‘figured out’. This kind of mystery involves real knowledge, and yet a knowledge that is always reflexively aware of its own incompleteness or inadequacy. The reality known is always known as enigmatically larger or deeper than our knowledge of it. In other words, revelational mystery is revealed precisely *as* mystery. The defining feature of mystery in this sense is that its mysterious character is not undercut by being made known.

Note well the very great and decisive difference we see here between the two kinds of mystery we have thus far considered: the one is a mystery only insofar as it is *unknown*, whereas the other is a mystery even after it is *known*. Once an

investigative mystery is solved, once the detectives have cracked the case, it is a mystery no longer. We start to speak in the past tense: 'Yes, that *was* a real mystery. Fortunately we've solved it now: here is what happened ...'. A revelational mystery, by contrast, can be known without forfeiting its status as a mystery. It may be 'known', but it is never 'solved', in the sense of 'cleared up' or 'rendered no longer mysterious'. Instead, it is known precisely *as* a mystery. Prior to its being made known, it might not have been a mystery at all: it might not have risen even to the status of an 'unanswered question', might not have been the faintest blip on my epistemological radar screen.<sup>14</sup> Yet when it is revealed, it is revealed *as* a mystery: the depths have been discovered, and they are simultaneously discovered to be too deep to penetrate.

Of course, we still need to ask why this is so, why it is that Paul did not say about the mysteries God had revealed, 'Ah, now I understand it – glad to have that mystery cleared up.' But at this point, it is plain at least that he did *not* say that – and neither do religious people generally. Indeed, William Alston rightly observes that those religious people who might be thought of as the most emphatic proponents of divine ineffability – namely, mystics – are in fact 'among the most verbose and prolific of theologians'!<sup>15</sup> However we account for this fact, if we are going to understand what 'mystery' means, we shall have to acknowledge a kind of mystery – what I have called revelational mystery – that is mysterious not *until* it is known, but *because* it is known. In this case knowledge is the foundation, not the abolition, of mystery.

Now even with only this preliminary distinction in mind, I submit that at least one significant confusion may be cleared up. One hears all too often that the affirmation of mystery in matters religious requires the abandonment of claims to 'knowledge' in those matters, as if mystery and knowledge were mutually exclusive notions. Consider, for instance, the complaint of Delwin Brown, in an article entitled (sarcastically, it seems to me) 'Knowing the mystery of God'.<sup>16</sup> Brown's central aim in this article is to guard against the destructive absolutizing of religious belief in contemporary society, but our concern is not with his constructive proposal so much as with his construal of the failed logic within Christianity that raises the absolutizing problem in the first place. In a section significantly entitled 'Human arrogance and the mystery of God', Brown sadly reports that while Christianity has consistently recognized and affirmed the mystery of God, 'this apophatic note has been overwhelmed by a kataphatic chord in most versions of the Christian vision' (241). Because God has been 'revealed' in Jesus Christ, 'the doctrine of the mystery of God has lost its power to negate human claims to absoluteness' (241).

Note the juxtaposition here of talk about 'revelation' and talk about 'mystery' – with the one serving very explicitly (and very unfortunately, in Brown's view) to curtail or limit the other. This way of relating revelation and mystery persists throughout the article. Brown says, for example, that the mystery

of God has been 'tamed' by the notion of revelation (242), and that it needs to be protected against such 'compromise' (244). Over against what has been revealed, he speaks of 'the *remaining* margin of divine mystery' and of 'that portion of the divine that *remains* inscrutable' (242, italics added), implying that the 'parts' now revealed used to be mysterious, but are so no longer because they have now been made known. In light of the emphasis on revelation in Christian thought, he is somewhat surprised that 'the apophatic insight' was able to persist throughout Christian history, since it has all along existed 'in considerable tension with other elements of the tradition' (242). He quotes Augustine and Anselm and Aquinas to the effect that God is a mystery greater than we can know, and then he laments the fact that they 'and the many others, ancient and modern, who have voiced similar conclusions about our knowledge of God' have proceeded 'to compromise the apophatic insight, and to do so quite obviously' (243). By their 'contradictory practice', he says, 'the mystery of God is ... substantively circumscribed', because 'some positive knowledge of God is salvaged' (243).

Now this criticism of much of the Christian intellectual tradition makes a great deal of sense *if* the 'mystery of God' we are dealing with is an investigative mystery. If someone gives me 'positive knowledge' of who committed the murder in the Agatha Christie novel I just picked up, I am rightly irritated, for the mysterious element in the novel is correspondingly reduced and undermined. The novel *is* a mystery only by virtue of its solution not being positively known, and so I do not want such knowledge ahead of time: I want to remain, so to speak, 'agnostic' so that the mystery can persist a while longer. But as soon as we move to *revelational* mystery (which is pretty obviously what Christianity, at least in its sacred texts, affirms), such agnosticism loses all of its appeal, for the conflict between revelation or knowledge, on the one hand, and the mystery of God, on the other, dissolves. There is no radical disjunction, no mutually exclusive 'either-or', between them. Of course, there may still be other questions and issues to face, and one of them may very well be 'How can we protect ourselves and our society from an idolatrous absolutizing of religious belief?'. But it is clear that this question cannot be answered simply by appealing to the mystery of God as the trump card that disallows every possible claim to 'positive knowledge of God'. That is not what 'mystery' means in theological, or generally religious, discourse.

Or at least, that is not what it usually means. Investigative mystery does turn up occasionally in religious discourse. Some philosophical debates (e.g. divine 'hiddenness'<sup>17</sup>) and some popular maxims (e.g. 'the Lord works in *mysterious* ways') revolve around what are essentially investigative mysteries: if we found out the answer, the mystery would be solved and we would no longer be puzzled by why God seems hidden or by why God allowed such-and-such to happen.<sup>18</sup> So my point here is not that investigative mystery is necessarily irrelevant or inappropriate to religious discourse; it is simply that, if we are to talk sensibly

about the mystery of God, we must be clear about what we mean. One might clear up any number of investigative mysteries and still affirm, in a different and perhaps a deeper sense, that the revelational mystery of God remains. And this revelational mystery is perfectly consistent with all sorts of positive theological affirmations, for it is precisely as *known* that the revelational mystery is a mystery.

### **Varieties of revelational mystery**

So how might we give an account of *why* a revelational mystery is a mystery? If it has been revealed or made known, then how can it continue to ‘defy reason’, in some sense? My answer requires a threefold subdivision of this category.

First, let us consider what we might call ‘extensive mystery’, a mystery that defies reason by virtue of the fact that it is quantitatively more vast than we are able to manage. One thinks of the mystery that might be associated with exploring outer space (if space is infinite), or with grasping exhaustively the set of whole numbers. The problem here is not that something is hidden or unavailable for knowledge, as in an investigative mystery, but that I find myself unable to draw together the total extent of the thing into a fully articulated, comprehensive whole. There are too many aspects, or the internal complexity is too great. Any particular bit of data I might be able to understand, but there is always some other bit that I have not grasped or attended to. The whole thing has been ‘revealed’, but I cannot take it all in, or at least not simultaneously.

In a sense, this sort of mystery resembles the investigative, insofar as we might naturally say that there is always more to ‘discover’ – which makes it sound as if discovering it would solve and thus eliminate the mystery. But the difference lies in the fact that, in an extensive mystery, I *cannot* know any more. There are limits to what the knower can attain – and there is something more beyond or outside those limits. This kind of mystery is roughly parallel, then, to what Verkamp describes as the ‘sceptical sense of mystery’, one rooted solely in our limited capacity as finite knowers, and therefore one devoid of serious religious significance. Of course, anything that is limitless or infinite will necessarily be an extensive mystery for finite minds. To say that an extensive mystery ‘defies reason’ is not to say that reason does not ‘work’ when applied to such things; it works just fine, and in that sense those things are knowable. But they always include something more that reason must be applied to, and in this way they continue to defy reason, even after they have been made known.

Second, one might think of what I shall inelegantly call ‘facultative mystery’. This phrase describes something that has been made known, but that defies reason by virtue of a kind of qualitatively non-rational opacity that makes knowledge in the normal sense rather irrelevant. In other words, ‘knowledge’ (in the rational, analytical sense) turns out not to be the appropriate avenue of

approach to such a mystery; reason is not the ‘faculty’ by which access is available. Instead, some other, non-rational mode of encounter is called for. This seems to be what Verkamp has in mind when he speaks of the ‘aesthetic sense of mystery’, according to which one perceives beauty in a manner different from the application of technical reason. But the more obvious example is that of sense perception. Even if we have perfect rational *knowledge* of, say, a rose, the sensory experience of *smelling* a rose is not ours until we actually smell it. The smell of a rose does not come to us by means of rational knowledge. So also, when we speak of the ‘mystery of love’ or the ‘mystery of suffering’, I take it we have in mind mystery in this facultative sense. Everyone ‘knows’ what it is to love or to suffer, but rational deduction or analysis or calculation is not what either love or suffering is really about.

Now the mention of aesthetics in Verkamp’s arrangement might remind us of another common but rather elusive sense of ‘mystery’ that (perhaps surprisingly) I will not try to classify here. I mean the familiar association of mystery with particular things that evoke awe or wonder or astonishment – in fact, an awe or wonder or astonishment so intense that it might suggest a profound religious significance. Despite this significance, I do not include this usage of ‘mystery’ in my logical taxonomy for the simple reason that it is not rooted in a single, distinctive pattern of logic, but is instead a phenomenological description. There may very well be something ‘mysterious’, something awe-inspiring, something that reason cannot master or penetrate, in experiences of a starry night sky, or of a Bach concerto, or of a raging storm, or of the birth of a child, and I am happy to acknowledge that any of these experiences might offer some connection to or insight into the ultimate meaning of things. But with respect to the *logic* of mystery – i.e. to *why* a particular experience evokes wonder – these cases may be quite different from one another.

In the case of the night sky, I suspect that part of our wonder derives simply from its vastness, from what Kant called the ‘mathematical sublime’ (i.e. the awareness of overwhelming size, such as many people feel when they first stand beside and look up at a sky-scraper):<sup>19</sup> the logic here would be the quantitative logic of extensive mystery. In the case of the storm, we are perhaps awe-struck by the raw power that we witness, by what Kant called the ‘dynamical sublime’ that overwhelms us,<sup>20</sup> in which case the more qualitative logic of facultative mystery may be at work. In the other cases (and perhaps in the cases of the night sky and raging storm, too), the wonder derives from what we may describe generically as the perception of beauty – i.e. from an aesthetic impulse, as Verkamp’s labelling suggests. These could then be construed as facultative mysteries – or they could be so construed *if* one supposes that aesthetic appreciation is a purely non-rational mode of perception. This supposition would be disputed in some corners, and so it is fortunate that we need not resolve that question for the sake of our purposes here.<sup>21</sup> It is enough to say that if one does regard aesthetic

awareness – or moral awareness, for that matter (recall Kant’s double wonder at ‘the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me’<sup>22</sup>) – as something *other than* a mode of rational perception, then the beauty or power or coherence of things may be understood as facultative mysteries. If aesthetical (or moral) awareness ought to be thought of as a peculiar mode of rationality, then I suspect that these occasions for awe or wonder would fit more comfortably in my third and final logical classification.

The third possible ground for referring to something as a mystery even after it is known or revealed is difficult to describe, and so I begin with an analogy. Consider a two-dimensional shape – say, a circle – and the way that geometry allows one to reason about it. If I know the shape, then geometry allows me confidently to perform various calculations and draw various conclusions about it. By measuring its radius, I can calculate its circumference or its area; then I can compare it with other figures of various sizes; and so on. If there were anything ‘geometrically mysterious’ about the shape, we would be able to categorize the relevant features using the categories already noted. Thus, if I have not seen the shape in question and do not know that it is a circle, then I have an investigative mystery on my hands – I hope to discover the answer and eliminate the mystery soon. Or perhaps the shape is too immense for me to take it all in, and then it is an extensive mystery – I can measure and examine various parts of it, but the whole remains outside my grasp. Or perhaps the shape is bright blue in colour, and then its colour would be a facultative mystery – I can perceive its blueness, but by means of a faculty other than geometrical reasoning.

But now consider another possibility. How would this same kind of geometrical reasoning be useful if the figure in question were not a circle, but a cylinder? Think about the way a three-dimensional object like a cylinder would be investigated by a mathematician who experienced in only two dimensions (i.e. length and width, but not depth).<sup>23</sup> The circular end of the cylinder would have a very precise shape, and planar geometry would allow exactly the same conclusions with respect to that shape that it allowed in the case of the circle plain and simple – the same calculations, the same comparisons, and all with the same kind of confidence about accuracy. In other words, I could know *anything that is two-dimensional* about the cylinder with a kind of comprehensive totality. Yet even if I knew everything that planar geometry could tell me about the cylinder, it is clear that I would be ignorant of the third dimension – that is, of the dimension that is decisive for complete or adequate knowledge of a three-dimensional object *as three-dimensional*. Though I knew everything there is to know in two dimensions, there would still be ‘more’ to know – but not ‘more’ in the normal two-dimensional sense that planar geometry must assume. It is not the quantitative or extensive ‘more’ of a larger circle or of an additional two-dimensional shape. Yet it is also not a qualitative or facultative ‘more’ to which geometrical reasoning is irrelevant: on the contrary, the laws of planar geometry apply with



perfect consistency to every plane in the cylinder. What we have, instead, is a 'more' that transcends the individual circle that geometry understands, without in the least ceasing to be geometrical in character.

By means of this analogy, I hope we can see what it might mean to say that a mystery could defy understanding by virtue of the fact that it transcends 'dimensionally' the normal workings of human reason. Thus, even when reason knows the thing in its entirety, there might remain 'more' to be known. The mystery defined by this peculiar kind of 'more' I am calling 'dimensional mystery'. A dimensional mystery can be revealed and yet still defy understanding not for any quantitative reason, for we *do* know all of the 'quantity' there is to know about a dimensional mystery, just as a two-dimensional geometer sees all of the two-dimensional 'quantity' there is to see in the cylinder; nor because of a qualitative distinctness that calls for approach via a different human faculty, for human reason *is* a faculty appropriate to a dimensional mystery, just as planar geometry is appropriate – though not adequate – to a cylinder; but because of an intrinsic density or depth that transcends narrowly rational exploration, just as a cylinder transcends the standard categories of two-dimensional geometry.<sup>24</sup>

The logic of dimensional mystery may very well stand behind all three of the senses that remain in Verkamp's arrangement, viz. the 'sacral' and the 'immanentist' and the 'transcendent' senses. The 'sacral' sense of mystery describes the unclassifiable otherness of the sacred – an otherness exactly parallel to the enigmatic 'more' that the logic of dimensional mystery perceives. The 'immanentist' and 'transcendent' senses associate the mystery, respectively, with all of existence (especially as experienced in the realm of nature) and with what is inscrutably beyond existence, and these twin perspectives may be understood as akin to the debates we might envision among two-dimensional mathematicians regarding whether the circle they perceive is 'the same as' or 'different from' the mysterious cylinder they have heard rumours of – thus, again, the logic of dimensional mystery seems to shed some light. There is no space here to give extended arguments that the 'mystery of God' ought normally to be construed in the dimensional sense, but it strikes me as an eminently sensible and fruitful possibility.<sup>25</sup> In some religious usage, the logic of investigative (noted earlier) or extensive or facultative mystery might also be operative, but I suspect that dimensional mystery might cast a shadow or penumbra over all the others, thus granting them a 'depth' that their own logic, taken in isolation, cannot readily justify.<sup>26</sup>

### **Mystery and the philosophy of clarity**

The peculiar logic of dimensional mystery invites another, surprisingly far-reaching insight, one that moves us a long way toward understanding why the whole topic of mystery is such an irresistible source of fascination and

consternation for so much contemporary philosophy and theology. For as we begin to consider dimensional mystery, we find ourselves aware of a fundamental assumption that, as it turns out, underlies all of the *other* understandings of mystery that we have discussed. I mean the assumption that every individual chunk of reality is either knowable or not knowable *absolutely*. This assumption can be construed metaphysically, and then it states that reality itself is the sort of clear, definite, mathematically analysable entity that one either ‘gets right’ or not, just as one gets any mathematical problem either right or wrong. Or it can be construed epistemologically, and then it insists that clear and plain and obvious knowledge is the only kind of real knowledge there is. This approach to both metaphysics and epistemology is pilloried by Michael Foster as ‘The Philosophy of Clarity’, which assumes that ‘nothing is really puzzling and that therefore there cannot be anything unclear that we can legitimately want to say.’<sup>27</sup> It derives, of course, from René Descartes, whose quest for mathematical certainty and clarity dominated philosophical and theological reflection for three centuries, but whose work is today subject to fairly frequent and fairly sharp criticism. The odd thing about our current situation is that, while many contemporary thinkers believe that Descartes’ philosophy is wrong, talk about mystery overwhelmingly proceeds as if he were right.

We can see this Cartesian approach in most of our discussion of mystery so far. Let’s consider. Any investigative mystery will (if all goes well) be eventually ‘solved’, so that we will know who committed the crime and how it was done and for what reason<sup>28</sup> etc.: in other words, everything will be perfectly clear. If such a mystery is solvable at all, then it is solvable precisely in the sense that it is capable of being ‘cleared up’, and the power of reason is nothing other than this deeply Cartesian *clarifying* power. If an investigative mystery is *not* solvable, then that simply means that reason has failed in its task of rendering things clear – the task itself has not changed. This is exactly why construing the mystery of God in an investigative fashion leads so quickly (as we have seen) to agnosticism. It is a zero-sum game. If the mystery of God is investigative, then ‘knowing’ it would leave no more mystery; to affirm the mystery, we must remain without knowledge.

This same Cartesian understanding of reason is at work in our first two varieties of revelational mystery, too, though here it has learned to co-exist with the mystery rather than seeking to eliminate it. In an extensive mystery, reason finds itself quantitatively insufficient, yet it works in the same way, by rendering clear as much as it is able to render clear. Finitude means that not everything can be so rendered – certainly an infinite God cannot be – but reason is applied for no other purpose than to render clear as much as possible. Therefore, to construe the mystery of God in an extensive sense is, it seems to me, an implicitly rationalistic (and thus a quintessentially modern) move: the *size* of God means that mystery must be acknowledged, but reason approaches God in the same old way it

approaches anything else. It renders clear and distinct. Again, with a facultative mystery, the mystery persists because some things (for instance, sensation) are meant not to be known analytically or discursively, but to be experienced via some other mode or avenue. Reason here can say, 'That's not my department' – but everything that *is* in its department is subject to the same kind of clarifying work. Therefore, to construe the mystery of God in a facultative sense is, it seems to me, an implicitly *irrationalistic* (and thus a quintessentially *post-modern*) move: if the nature of God requires mystery, then reason must be set aside or bracketed precisely because the Cartesian goal of reasoning – to make things clear in an analytical mode – remains unchallenged.

So in an investigative mystery of God, reason *intends* to 'clear things up' (even if it has not successfully done so yet); in an extensive mystery of God, reason intends to 'clear up' as much as it can (even if not the unmanageably bulky whole); in a facultative mystery of God, reason does not 'clear things up', but that is because 'clearing up' is not really desirable and hence reason is not welcome to do its work. In all three cases, to 'exercise reason' or to 'know rationally' *means* 'to clear up', to eliminate vagueness or fuzziness or indefiniteness; and reality is assumed to be such that it can be 'cleared up' in this way. Descartes is undisputed master.

By contrast to this whole approach, a dimensional mystery is one in which reason is appropriate and is legitimately exercised, just as two-dimensional geometry is legitimately applied to a cylinder – yet no ultimate 'clearing up' is expected or hoped for. A dimensional mystery welcomes rational investigation, but expects reason itself to testify to an unfathomable depth or dimension that it can perhaps investigate or even illuminate but never explain or make clear. The exercise of reason here is not the removal of conceptual vagueness or fuzziness; it is the reasonable exploration and on-going penetration into a kind of depth or thickness. Knowledge is not just a matter of organizing clear and distinct ideas, but also a matter of acknowledging and finally of entering into an unfamiliar medium or dimension – almost of entering into a new world. Reality displays a depth or thickness that reason can enter into, without ever expecting to master or exhaust or domesticate. Indeed, to 'know' reality without an awareness of this inexhaustible depth would be to falsify it, to get the two-dimensional shape right while missing the three-dimensional object. The goal of 'knowing' or 'reasoning' here is always a kind of penetration, a fuller habitation of this uncharted and unchartable realm of depth.

Now, as everyone knows, to talk this way is to move consciously out of the Cartesian world, and many, many philosophers and theologians are making just this move.<sup>29</sup> This means that the approach to reality that dimensional mystery adopts turns out to be a central issue that drives much contemporary reflection. Of course, not everyone uses the language of 'mystery', and certainly not everyone uses it very clearly. But that is just the point. My contention here is that

contemporary ways of thinking about mystery have not kept pace with other philosophical and theological developments. Sometimes academic talk about the mystery of God is marked by inappropriate investigative overtones, with a presumed agnosticism the erroneous result. Other times, talk about the mystery of God tends to be inappropriately quantitative, thus leading to a modernistic rationalism in which Cartesian logic can master at least a 'part' of God; or inappropriately qualitative, thus leading to a postmodern irrationalism in which logic has no place at all because knowledge of God is called 'knowledge' only in an equivocal sense. And all of these ways of thinking about mystery tend to obfuscate rather than illumine, for they all reduce the mystery of God to a mathematically precise something that one knows either absolutely or not at all.

By contrast, when thoughtful religious people talk about mystery, they seem to mean a dimensional depth of reality that calls for a rationality that is both logical and more than logical. Knowledge of this mystery is genuine rational knowledge, but it also involves a penetration into or a participation in a depth that is the source of nourishment and life. Clarity is important, but the goal is not merely to clarify or to organize. The goal is to feed upon the mystery and be nourished, just as the goal when one sits down to dinner is not just to understand nutrition, but to eat and to savour and to grow strong. On this view, mystery also can make us strong, for it neither capitulates to reason nor discards reason. Instead, it places reason into a larger philosophical and experiential context, thus inviting a paradoxically fuller comprehension precisely by acknowledging what is incomprehensible.<sup>30</sup>

## Notes

1. Bernard J. Verkamp *Senses of Mystery: Religious and Non-Religious* (Scranton PA: University of Scranton Press, 1997).
2. Following this initial use of quotation marks simply for emphasis, I shall try to use 'mystery' (in quotation marks) for the word and *mystery* (without quotation marks) for the thing that the word signifies.
3. Edward L. Schoen, in his review of Verkamp's book (*International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 45 (1999), 195–196), faulted it for just this reason, rightly noting that little systematic study had been done on 'mystery' and therefore comparing Verkamp's effort to a map drawn by any early explorer: it is 'sketchy, broad in outline and blurry in details' (196).
4. According to the well-known distinction made by Gabriel Marcel, an investigative mystery is not really a mystery at all: it is instead only a 'problem' – i.e. something that (epistemologically speaking) 'bars my path', that is 'before me in its entirety', that can 'be reduced to detail', that allows for 'progress' toward grasping a 'mechanism' that will result in some sort of solution; *Being and Having*, Katharine Farrer (tr.) (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1949), 100–101.
5. Michael B. Foster *Mystery and Philosophy* (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 1980; repr. of first publication London: SCM Press, 1957), 31–37, especially 32.
6. To recognize logical similarity is not, of course, to minimize the significant differences between the two. For an account of the major differences, see *ibid.*, 41–42. It has been convincingly argued that the biblical usage is not dependent on the Greek, but grows independently out of Hebrew roots. See especially Raymond E. Brown *The Semitic Background of the Term 'Mystery' in the New Testament* (Philadelphia PA: Fortress Press, 1968).

7. Mark 4.11. All biblical quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1989, by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA.
8. See Jean Paillard *In Praise of the Inexpressible: Paul's Experience of the Divine Mystery*, Richard J. Erickson (tr.) (Peabody MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 105–106.
9. I Corinthians 4.1.
10. See, for instance, I Corinthians 15.51; Romans 11.25; Colossians 4.3; Ephesians 5.32; 6.19. I happily leave aside the thorny question of Pauline authorship of various texts as irrelevant to our investigation: the point has to do with the *nature* of early Christian understanding of 'mystery', not with who was using the term in a particular epistle.
11. Ephesians 3.3.
12. Colossians 1.26.
13. Romans 11.33. Notice that this confession immediately follows Paul's explanation of a particular *mystērion*, namely, the mystery of God's plan for both Jewish and Gentile salvation. Paillard observes that this sort of doxological move is not at all uncommon in Paul's writings: Paul frequently 'goes from affirmation to affirmation, even to superaffirmation. That is, he multiplies superlative adjectives: "overwhelming," "beyond knowledge". He uses comparative formulations: "how much greater ...", "how much richer ...", and he avails himself of hyperbolic phrases that exceed the limits of normal linguistic usage: "an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure ...", or "not worthy to be compared with ...". In this way he preserves the exalted mysteriousness of God, while at the same time being bold enough to say something about it'; Paillard *In Praise of the Inexpressible*, 155–156.
14. G. Bornkamm makes this point about the use of *mystērion* in the New Testament. 'It is not as though the mystery were a presupposition of revelation which is set aside when this [the act of revealing (?)] takes place. Rather, revelation discloses the mystery as such'; *mystērion, myēō*, in Gerhard Kittel (ed.) *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Geoffrey W. Bromiley (tr. and ed.) (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1967), iv: 820–821.
15. William Alston 'Two cheers for mystery!', in Andrew Dole and Andrew Chignell (eds) *God and the Ethics of Belief: New Essays in Philosophy of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 107.
16. Delwin Brown 'Knowing the mystery of God: Neville and apophatic theology', *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*, 18 (1997), 239–255.
17. As exemplified in J. L. Schellenberg *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), or in Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul K. Moser (eds) *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
18. Of course, many theists who discuss either question might want to make some substantial connection between what we do *not* know and what we *do* know, thus moving beyond investigative and toward revelational mystery. This move does not affect my basic point, but it does illustrate the fact that a particular mystery can sometimes be characterized as *either* investigative *or* revelational, depending on the angle from which it is considered. (To take one additional instance, we noted above that God's plan of salvation for both Jews and Gentiles is treated as a *revelational* mystery in Romans 11.33; but prior to God's making it known to Paul, this plan was an *investigative* mystery as well – i.e. its 'content' was simply unknown to anyone.) In this respect, my entire taxonomy reflects ideal types more than mutually exclusive alternatives. In much actual discourse about mystery, discrete logical 'kinds' tend to overlap or intermingle quite readily.
19. Immanuel Kant *The Critique of Judgment*, James Creed Meredith (tr.) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), §§ 25–27.
20. *Ibid.*, § 28.
21. See the difficult but provocative discussion by David Bentley Hart *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2003), especially 43–92 ('The veil of the sublime'). The relation of the non-rational to the rational in religious experience is addressed with great care, but never fully resolved, in Rudolf Otto's classic, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*, John W. Harvey (tr.), 2nd edn (London: Oxford University Press, 1950). Verkamp himself inadvertently alludes to the problematic character of this relation when he describes the 'aesthetic sense of mystery' as mystery 'of the cognitive/emotive sort' (xii), but he leaves untouched the glaring question of how 'cognitive' and

- 'emotive' are related to one another. In his extended discussion, Verkamp illustrates the aesthetic sense of mystery by reference to scientists (like Einstein or Carl Sagan) who perceive a beauty or glory in the ordered *rationality* of the cosmos, and this interest in rationality might be a hint that there is an implied connection between the aesthetic capacity that perceives beauty and the rational capacity that perceives truth.
22. Immanuel Kant *Critique of Practical Reason*, Lewis White Beck (tr.) (Indianapolis IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1956), 166.
  23. One can hardly help being reminded of Edwin A. Abbott's masterfully creative treatment of this theme in *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* (London: Seeley & Co., 1884; repr. New York: Dover Publications, 1992).
  24. Scientific speculation about additional mathematical dimensions is sometimes used to offer some account of the relation between God and the universe, as in astrophysicist Hugh Ross's provocative book *The Creator and the Cosmos: How the Greatest Scientific Discoveries of the Century Reveal God*, rev. edn (Colorado Springs CO: NavPress, 1995), especially ch. 17, 'Extra-dimensional power'. I have no competence by which to judge the scientific merit of these arguments, but their reliance on other 'dimensions' is certainly different from mine, for their 'dimensional' explanation is a literal rather than an analogical one, and as a result their approach seems to me to make the dimensional disparity between God and the world a matter of merely extensive, or perhaps even of investigative, mystery. I think the analogical appeal to a higher dimension is more radical, and therefore more fruitful.
  25. For a more fully developed account of how construing the mystery of God dimensionally helps to make sense of much that is otherwise inexplicable in Christian theology, see Steven D. Boyer and Christopher A. Hall *Through a Glass Darkly: Theology and the Mystery of God* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, forthcoming), especially Part 2. Of course, no formal proof that God is a dimensional mystery is possible in the nature of the case, since every proof necessarily appeals to just that logic that a dimensional mystery exceeds. Similarly, it would be impossible to prove to a two-dimensional geometer that a three-dimensional object exists, since any plane of the object can, in principle, be fully understood simply as a plane – i.e. as two-dimensional. The 'more' that the third dimension adds cannot be deduced by any manipulation of ordinary two-dimensional mathematics. In the novel *Flatland*, the two-dimensional narrator must receive first a verbal 'revelation' and then an ecstatic vision in which he is transported right out of Flatland (i.e. out of the plane in which he lives) before he believes that the third dimension really exists – and even then he is unable to convince most other Flatlanders.
  26. Cf. Kant's acknowledgement (though with different conclusions drawn from it) that a full account of the sublime must involve more than merely an intuition of magnitude (*Critique of Judgment*, § 27) or an intuition of might (§ 28).
  27. Foster *Mystery and Philosophy*, 17.
  28. Of course, we might have to admit that motives are a complex affair, and so we might be hesitant to say that this is all *perfectly* clear. In this respect, motives might shade off into revelational mysteries of the first two kinds. (1) We might say that, while we understand the general motive behind the crime ('he wanted money'), the details are far too complex for us to sort out perfectly. This turns into an extensive mystery. (2) We might say that the motive was some sort of passion ('he got angry and lost control') and that passion is not the sort of thing that one can 'understand' with perfect clarity. Then we have on our hands a facultative mystery. But in both cases, the goal and expectation of rational knowing is the same: clear and distinct perception.
  29. So very many are making this move that it is hard to know whom to cite in a brief footnote. Perhaps the most direct and explicit philosophical treatment is that of Bernard Lonergan, whose critiques of the 'cognitive myth' and the 'ocular metaphor' have generated substantial conversation. See especially his *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990, repr. New York NY: Herder and Herder, 1973). On the theological side, see Nancey C. Murphy *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism: How Modern and Postmodern Philosophy Set the Theological Agenda* (Valley Forge PA: Trinity Press International, 1996). For a wide-ranging commentary that has become influential in both philosophical and theological discussion, see Jean-Luc Marion *God Without Being: Hors-Texte*, Thomas A. Carlson (tr.) (Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991).
  30. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2006 meeting of the Midwest Division of the Society of Christian Philosophers at the University of Notre Dame. Thanks to interested colleagues there (especially William Wainwright) and also to an anonymous reviewer for this journal.