

# I

## Philosophy of Mystery



The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of all true art and science. Whoever does not know it and can no longer wonder, no longer marvel, is as good as dead, and his eyes are dimmed.

—Albert Einstein

What don't we currently know about our situation in the world? And what can't we know in principle? What is unknowable in principle about reality constitutes philosophical mysteries. These are not historical mysteries that we are not in a position today to answer, nor are they like the mysteries in murder novels—they are mysteries about the fundamental nature of reality that we do not currently know even how to approach. Whether we are in the position to crack the mysteries surrounding the Big Questions of philosophy and science is the subject of this book.

One might argue that all philosophical issues are mysteries since basic issues in philosophy today are unresolved—individual philosophers may believe they have resolved the issue of, say, the relation of our mind to our body, but their opponents are not convinced and instead advance well-argued counterpositions. However, many philosophical issues do not touch the Big Questions about being human and about the natural world that most people with a philosophical bent think of when they contemplate the reality of their lives and our world; instead, philosophers today most often busy themselves with more technical matters—such as, whether propositions or possibilities are real—that are at best only very distantly related to the Big Questions. When people reflect on their existence and keep pushing for deeper explanations, they end up with these central mysteries:

- Where did we come from, and why are we here? Why do we suffer? Do our lives have an objective meaning? Are our moral, intellectual, and aesthetic values objective parts of reality, or are they only our own creations?
- What is fundamentally real in a human being? Is our apparent “consciousness” really nothing but material events? Do we survive death?
- Are all actions determined by physical forces alone, or do we have free will?
- Do we have any genuine knowledge of reality as it exists in itself, or do our claims even in science merely reflect our cultural or personal interests?
- Does a creator god or other alleged transcendent realities exist?
- Why does anything exist at all?

This book will identify today’s key mysteries and some of the answers given by philosophers, but its main thrust is a deeper philosophical question: Are we capable of supplying well-grounded answers to these questions, or at least of reducing them to more manageable problems? Or are these questions we are posing questions that we simply cannot answer? That is, the objective here is not to canvas all the positions today on a given mystery and try to determine which is currently the best option, but to determine whether we have the mental and technologically enhanced capacities to dispel the mystery, at least in principle. For example, when it comes to the “meaning of life,” no particular answer will be defended here; rather, the issue here is what that question means exactly, and are we in a position to know whether there is in fact a meaning of life? In short, this book asks whether we can answer the Big Questions at all. In that way, this is a work in metaphilosophy.

### **Mystery and Knowledge**

The Big Questions provoke emotions connected to a sense of mystery—wonder, awe, and humility before reality. But mystery relates to our claims of knowledge. Mysteries arise from our attempts to understand and explain the world and our lives. Thus, they are products of our inquiring into what is real. The sense of philosophical mystery is an intellectual reaction to what we do not know. It does not come merely from ignorance—that is, the lack of knowledge or evidence—or from simply assuming that there is more to reality than we currently know. This sense of mystery can arise even if science provides answers to

all the questions of how a phenomenon occurs: we may thoroughly understand all the steps and mechanisms by which a seed becomes a blooming flower and still wonder why reality is set up to do that and why we have a mind that can comprehend it. A starry night or the birth of a child may produce similar reactions—the “why” of the events remains after all the “how” questions have all been answered in a way that explaining how a magic trick works does not.

Not knowing something need not provoke a sense of mystery if we think that we know how generally to search for an answer or at least how to address the problem. Nor are philosophical “why” mysteries inherently religious—that is, they need not lead to a religious reaction of answering the questions in terms of a god or another transcendent reality. The majesty of the universe can cause atheists such as Carl Sagan to marvel at being alive on a planet like ours in a galaxy and universe like ours. Even when the “why” type mysteries do not provoke any sense of awe, there is still an almost visceral, “felt” quality to a sense of mystery that ordinary unanswered questions do not provoke. It is not merely the trivial point that there is always more to learn about virtually anything (including ourselves)—it is a sense that the true significance of something is being missed and that we cannot grasp it. That is, we have a sense that there is something more of significance about something that is as yet unknown and that at present we do not know how even to address trying to comprehend it. Problems get solved or at least diminished with study, but mysteries seem to get only greater and more ingrained in reality the more clearly that we see they are there.

### **Mystery versus Problems**

Problems present matters that we do not know but that we think we know how to tackle—we may not know the answer today, but we know how to determine an answer through reasoning and experience. Problems may be difficult to solve—or even impossible to solve as a practical matter—but at least we have an idea of how to proceed against them. Thus, there are many issues in science that are properly labeled “problems,” even if we do not have the technology or mathematics to solve them today. Mysteries, on the other hand, present greater difficulties. They are issues that we have more trouble grasping intellectually. We do not know how to get a handle on them, or how to formulate fruitful questions, or even how to approach them. Thus, with mysteries something is incomprehensible and inexplicable—something seems to remain hidden and to defy our attempts at understanding

and explanation. We may well not possess the conceptual apparatus to see how to grasp a mystery, and thus we may have difficulty even in articulating what the mystery is. Such mysteries would then be “brute facts” for us—that is, things for which we are incapable of providing any further explanation, and thus things we simply must accept unexplained no matter how arbitrary they may seem.

Thus, the basic criterion for a philosophical mystery is our inability to know how to attack something unknown—a mystery is a puzzle about reality that we, either currently or permanently, do not know even how to address. We may never reach the far side of our galaxy, and so there may be many questions concerning our own galaxy, let alone the rest of the universe, that may remain forever unanswered, but this lack of knowledge does not grab us existentially and thus does not constitute a philosophical mystery. However, theories that postulate “multiple universes” do pull at us as a mystery: the possibility of entirely different universes affects our existence in a way that simple ignorance about other parts of our own universe does not. So too, we may speculate wildly. A classic example is H.G. Wells’s suggestion that our entire universe may be only a molecule in a ring on a gigantic hand in some larger universe. Such fantasies do not provoke a sense of not knowing something that is actually real and so does not qualify as a genuine mystery. They remain a product of our imagination untied to anything empirical. But speculations around the edges of scientific theories may broach subjects that we think we should be able to master and thus may present the possibility of mystery.

Something may be an ontic mystery—something in the world that is itself inherently unknowable or paradoxical. Or something may be an epistemic mystery—something that lies beyond our ability to grasp but that otherwise is not mysterious in itself and thus knowable by beings with a different set of cognitive abilities or in a position transcending the natural universe. Our uncertainty by itself does not indicate which type of mystery may be involved or whether the issue may simply be a currently unresolved problem. So too, something may be an epistemic mystery to one person but not to another. What is a mystery also changes over time as our knowledge expands. But the subject for this book is what remains mysterious today generally in a scientifically informed culture.

Since mystery is a matter of our knowledge and understanding, one may think that all mysteries are epistemic and not ontic. Of course, there would be no ontic mysteries to the natural world for an omniscient creator god: such a being would presumably know all the basic aspects of the natural world. But mysteries may persist for all beings within the phenomenal universe, no matter what their mind or sensory apparatus is. That is, there may be aspects of the natural world that any finite beings may not

be equipped to solve. Nor is it clear that all of the natural world must be expressible consistently in at least some conceptual system. Thus, there may be brute facts not only for human beings but for all beings existing within the natural universe. Such mysteries would be ontic in nature, not merely epistemic.

Either way, identifying something as a mystery is a conclusion that we are lacking knowledge where we think that something significant exists but that we are stuck on how to conquer that gap in our picture of reality. Declaring something to be a mystery does not give us any knowledge at all of the subject that we are trying to grasp—it only designates an area where our inquiries are stymied. We cannot say of something “It’s a mystery” and believe we have understood or explained anything. Mystery is not an explanation and cannot be used to explain any phenomena or another mystery—it is just a blank where we want knowledge. In sum, it is a gap in our knowledge in which we believe something important dwells and that we would very much like to fill but cannot.

“How” mysteries may arise in science concerning the workings of nature. And since philosophical “why” mysteries concern the significance of a natural or human phenomenon, science may prompt “why” mysteries concerning why the world is set up the way it is. This may also lead to mysteries in metaphysics. Science has no direct control over metaphysical questions, although it has an indirect bearing since metaphysics must also account for the best current scientific findings. Chief among the metaphysical mysteries is why there is anything at all rather than nothing. The other major area of “why” mysteries relates to existential responses to our lives. Questions of meaning are foremost here and quickly lead to the entire question of whether transcendent realities exist and affect our lives.

Such philosophical mysteries arise at the limits to our knowledge. This raises the prospect of permanent limitations to our abilities to understand reality. Mysteries may point to aspects of reality that we either have no access to or that we are apparently unable to wrap our minds around. However, apparent mysteries may only be puzzles that we ourselves create by how we currently conceptualize phenomena and therefore by our questions being misguided. Many philosophers see all alleged mysteries as such misguided puzzles that will be dispelled either by science or by a conceptual clarification through philosophical analysis. But genuine mysteries are questions we cannot answer either because of the very nature of reality or because of limitations on our ability to comprehend or analyze reality. They are left standing after all scientific and philosophical analyses are exhausted.

Thus, there are several possibilities: perhaps there is no answer to a given question; perhaps we cannot even know if there is an answer

or not; perhaps there is an answer, but we are incapable of knowing it because of our cognitive limitations; perhaps we simply do not know the answer at present but will eventually solve the problem. This in turn presents problems about problems: How do we know that we are currently asking questions that no amount of human ingenuity will ever be able to answer? How do we know at present what is a genuine mystery and what is a solvable puzzle? How do we know we are not artificially generating a false mystery by misconceptualizing a situation? In the case of genuine mysteries, are we so enwrapped in certain problems that we cannot get any distance from them to examine them as phenomena distinct from ourselves? That is, if we cannot separate ourselves from a problem, how can we ever explain it? Will we ever be in a position to answer definitively that something is or is not a mystery?

### Identifying Mysteries

Labeling a mystery may give the illusion of understanding it. Naming a problem does help us focus and organize our attention, but labeling a problem only identifies the problem and does not increase our understanding in any way. The method in science for resolving a problem is to “seek the causes.” Explanation in science is often equated with the ability to predict a phenomenon’s occurrence, but more than a thousand years of accurate predictions apparently confirmed the erroneous Ptolemaic cosmology. Thus, consensus has no authority: it does not necessarily mean that we are converging on the truth. Equally important, whether prediction is always needed for a scientific explanation is open to question—geologists can explain earthquakes even though their predictions are only very rough. And it is very hard to see prediction as even possible in the case of metaphysical mysteries. Explanation more generally is a matter of giving a reason for believing something that is the case should be the case—providing an account that “makes sense” of a phenomenon to us and puts to rest our curiosity for a “why” or a “how.” In our everyday lives, we do not look for an ultimate explanation of something; rather, we tend to rest satisfied once we find any connection to something that we take to be unproblematic. With mysteries, however, we do not have that option. We must reach a point where we believe that we have reached the ultimate justification for believing something and where no further explanation seems to us to be needed or even possible. Only when we are thoroughly satisfied that we have reached the bottom do we think that we have finally understood something that we previously found mysterious and thus no mystery remains. But this means that a resolution depends on our feeling content

with an explanation—further study of a phenomenon or an advance in science may upset that contentment and lead to new bafflement. Thus, finding mysteries and defusing them can be open ended—what is mysterious and what is not mysterious can change with history.

Whether a particular conundrum is a solvable problem or a genuine mystery is not always obvious even after extensive study. History is full of examples of problems that were once deemed philosophical or theological mysteries that ended up being amenable to scientific analysis. Today perhaps what seems mysterious may be dispelled in the future by a new conceptual approach to the subject being studied; that is, if we conceptualize an issue differently, we may be able to formulate answerable questions and thereby enable science or philosophy to move forward. Thus, some things that seem mysterious to us today because our current reasoning cannot penetrate them may not be an epistemic mystery for all sentient beings or eventually even for ourselves.

Thus, declaring something to be “in principle beyond our understanding” is always risky. Perhaps there are no permanent, indefeasible mysteries, as many philosophers argue, even if there are no prospects for resolving a particular mystery at present. However, the starting point for addressing philosophical mysteries is our current reasoning and empirical study. Theologians may start with revelations, but to address mystery philosophically we cannot take that approach. Any conclusion that something is a mystery is the end of a discussion, not the occasion for invoking a god. (Whether revelations or invoking a god can dispel mysteries will be an issue in chapters 5 and 14.) It is affirming that there are limits to what we can know while believing that there are important aspects of reality yet to know. Identifying something as a potential philosophical mystery will depend on the circumstances of each subject-matter, but in all cases a conclusion that there is a mystery will reveal limitations on our abilities to know—not merely limitations on our current technology, but something that we cannot properly grasp at all. Our capacity to tackle basic questions may well be meager. If so, then some mysteries are indefeasible—matters that our finite minds currently and perhaps permanently cannot master. There would then be limits to our knowledge that we simply cannot pass.

### **Mysteries Today**

It will be maintained here that mysteries surround our knowledge of ourselves and of the universe—in fact, that our big picture of things is permeated with mystery. We do not know if some well-formed questions

have unknowable answers or no answer at all. This is certainly not to disparage the genuine knowledge of reality that we do have—it is not to claim “All you know is wrong!” Nor is it to suggest that we curtail philosophy or science in any way in order to preserve a domain for some mystery in our lives. Philosophy and science should be pushed as hard and as far as we can, and anyone who would attempt to limit them should not be listened to. Nevertheless, even if philosophy and science advance as far as is humanly possible, some genuine mysteries to reality still appear to remain—we cannot demystify reality totally no matter how hard we try.

But it must be noted that people generally resist any mystery in their lives—our minds try to explain anything unfamiliar to keep puzzles away so that we can proceed with our daily work. So too, people who are not philosophically minded can simply ignore the whole matter and proceed with their lives undisturbed. (It is worth remembering what Søren Kierkegaard said: one way God punishes people is by making them philosophers.) Moreover, it must also be noted that today philosophers in general hate mysteries: all legitimate questions of reality can in principle be answered either by science or by philosophical analysis. To them, claiming “It’s a mystery!” is defeatist. Granted, the conclusion that something is a mystery does end conversations and thus leads only to silence—again, a mystery is not an explanation of anything but only an indicator of a hole in our knowledge where we think something important should be. For many philosophers, a mystery is at best only an attempt to put a positive spin on our ignorance, and to discuss it further only shows a willingness to plunge forward into something that we admit we cannot know. At worst, mysteries are an admission of the defeat of the intellect or an attempt to obfuscate something that can be addressed clearly and defused—any question is meaningless if we cannot know how even to begin to address it, and so any question leading to a claim of mystery can be dismissed out of hand. Thus, the place to begin to determine whether the Big Questions end in mystery is to examine how philosophers have dealt with mysteries in the past.