



Five Mysteries

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Abstract

In this essay, I outline 5 aspects that indicate a great mystery that pervades the universe. These mysteries are as such because no further knowledge can be gained which would explain them once and for all, in the way that accruing knowledge might dispel a false notion. They are insoluble and sit at the base of what we can know, a limit point to what can be grasped, but awareness of them, is at least the solid vessel within which knowledge can be poured metaphorically speaking, though in themselves not solid, as one can only but be aware of them and not grasp them as one would a cup. Nevertheless, recognition of our limits is the first step to gaining knowledge with the feelings of awe and wonder. This leads to humility, which is necessary to stave off the arrogance of human achievement and know-how.

Keywords: *Creation; Death; Design; Language; Will*

INTRODUCTION

At the far reaches of knowledge, there is a frontier, a horizon line beyond which the human mind cannot traverse or explore. It is the limit point. At this juncture, reason and intuition reach an impasse. In this essay, I outline five moments where this occurs. They remain indissoluble, problems that have no solution. The problem can be articulated and grasped, but an answer is elusive. This is not due to poor tools or simply the state of knowledge at this time. Rather they remain perennial problems that will remain undecided for the grasping mechanism of the human mind is incapable of answering them just as one cannot move one's arms up and down and hope to fly. It is important to recognize and acknowledge these limit points for even though they yield no satisfying solution, they are the gateways to mystery, to the mysterious and the inescapable beauty of that which cannot be quantified and processed by our puny mind. This ought to result in humility. More than this, it means that the underlying substrate of all knowledge hitherto and all knowledge to be gained lies on a foundation which is itself unknowable and mysterious. It is here that a portal to the divine may be found. Just as an ant cannot fathom a human being, so the human mind cannot fathom the divine, and it is these five moments of limit that enable the thinker to define what is in fact undefined. This is tantamount to the intellectualization of that which exceeds the intellect, an intuition that is beyond the pale of words, symbols, quantification and analysis. Here our tools break down, as it were, and we find ourselves in uncharted territory. And then all is dark. Still, we can be in the light of knowledge, only such a light is circumscribed and penetrated by that which cannot be seen and known.

Something from Nothing

Cosmologists postulate the seminal "big bang" as the origin

point of a life, a singularity of infinite density and potential that somehow gave birth to the universe about 14 billion years ago or so. There is some evidence for this, and it remains the current and prevailing theory of origins. But does it solve the problem of how it all began? One could still ask: but where does the matter or energy for that magical moment (though time itself is a creation) come from? If, we answer religiously that it comes from God, this simply begs the question – from whence comes God, i.e. we can always ask of any defined "thing" what is the cause of that and if, following Aquinas, one postulates an "Uncaused Cause", that which halts the infinite regress, the question remains – what created that or at least what is that, and insofar as something is something, there must be that which precedes it and so on ad infinitum.

Or one can claim, as the ancient Greeks did that God or the universe is eternally existing and avoid the question of a beginning and origin, but the question is still persistent: how did the universe come to be; where did the matter, energy, time-space; and so on come from and how can it come to be, with or without the need for a first cause or beginning (although it seems likely given the expansion of the universe that there was an earlier point in which all was one, unified point).

The problem then may be more accurately framed as follows: why is there something (matter, time etc.)? It cannot arise from another something as that begs the question. Thus, we conclude something came from nothing. This appears absurd. Yet it is inescapable, though apparently without sense. And no matter how far down the rabbit hole of knowledge we get, we are always just dealing with "somethings" or producing form from form (one something from another) like a sculptor who molds clay into various shapes. The sculptor does not

conjure the clay out of thin air to begin with - to extend the metaphor further.

Thus, knowledge only deals with formations, how “something” changes over time or how further processes might evolve or be manipulated but cannot deal with how it is that such a “something” is in the first place. Even as we enter the most abstract, fundamental and simple terrain – the area of physics and say the lightest element such a hydrogen, it is still a definable “something”, and even more refined and essential, within the atom itself – more “somethings” – and in the domain of the abstract, it is the quantifiable abstractions of mathematics – still it is a statement of the form – “there exists a...” – such is even the realm of number. One never gets to “nothing and naught”, much less how this “nothing and naught” can give rise to “somethings”, and existence.

This hiatus may be framed as the mystery of existence itself. Enveloped in the world of things, the average mind is not even aware of this quandary. Yet lurking within existence, at all levels from the inanimate to conscious, sentient life, is the fact that one cannot even begin to fathom how – let alone why – this all is – that is to say, what existence really is and how it is that there is such life. Whatever descriptions the veneer of knowledge provides - physics, chemistry, biology, social and cultural expressions of various kinds – all this appears to describe what we know, but in fact it is what we know of the already existing, not the nature of existence in itself. It is like knowing how a friend looks or what his name is or how his body and mental process function, but being unable to account for how it is he came into being. Of course, humans come from other humans and that in turn from a series of evolutionary steps that in wild imaginative jumps perhaps may be traced to a primordial soup. But where did the “soup” come from? The big bang? And where are back to where we started. Simply unable to grasp.

Death

I have seen a lifeless body. It is quite shocking. Where did the person go? The simple answer, if you are a die-hard physicalist is that the person is gone forever. Dead. Yet for far longer than any rigid account of life – and in particular human life – is an understanding that “something” exited the now lifeless body. In English we call this the soul (of the person) and that this soul survives death, existing now in another state, perhaps another kind of world, less material and encumbering than this one.

Even if one is loath to accent such a religious-cultural formulation, it appears everything in the universe – from atoms to human, from stars, to cells and so on and so forth – appear to be born, exists for some duration and then pass on or die – only transforming into other bits of matter. The seed decomposes in the ground – it dies, only to give birth to what will become a plant. The plant grows and lives, using the energy of the sun and soil, of water and other nutrients but it too must pass on, whence its matter feeds and sustains some other part of existence, in a never-ending cycle. Or perhaps

that cycle too has an expiry date, in which case the universe is born and will eventually die, just as the sun will one day run out of fuel.

Death is a great mystery. No one has come back from “that country” to tell us about what it entails or whether there may in fact be life after death. There are accounts of near-death experiences and people who claim to contact the dead and commune with spirits from the “other side”. It is unlikely that all are charlatans so there is likely to be some truth to all of this. It appears then there is some kind of other world and spiritual survival subsequent to physical death.

Human evolution shows evidence of rituals surrounding death and certainly from the time of recorded history there has been a fascination with death and religious sentiment surrounding it that spans all cultures and persists in the modern world. This innate sense that death is some kind of passage, of reward and punishment, of communion with the gods or God, of another world, less material and more spiritual, appears to be built into the human psyche, and such inherent sensibilities perhaps mean that there is some truth to this phenomenon, and that it taps into something true, real and abiding. Nevertheless, it is based on the fact that we simply do not know what awaits the dead, whether one can have influence on the souls of the dead by funeral processions, communion with the dead or burial procedures. The great religions have defined methods and beliefs surrounding this and this continues to be the case irrespective of development in knowledge, technology and changing lifestyles in a globalized world.

Language

While one might be able to argue that there is some level of communication even between inanimate objects (i.e radiation of energy waves, forces between particles, a certain vitalism if you like), this is more pronounced in the living world of plants, and certainly of animals. But there is a quantum leap in the human world. Here, not only the organs of speech, such as the larynx, tongue, teeth, palate and throat are molded by evolutionary processes to support highly nuanced verbal articulation and the development of complex language systems. This has enabled the rapid prowess of human development and conquering of nature as the dominant species.

Moreover, the ability to fix speech through a written correspondence – the alphabetical systems – are an ingenious symbolic notation that has enabled cultural and social development of tremendous import and power. Other symbolic system such as mathematics; art and the digital revolution with its use of the binary code has enabled the storage, retrieval, development of knowledge-systems and the widespread education of the masses such that “language” is the very mechanism by which food, social structures, shelter – once rudimentary and primitive – have now progressed to the point of complexity, spawning cities, political frameworks; system of communication, tremendous

engineering feats and cultural diversity (although it may be argued that every age is dominated by a paradigm and is highly conformist, manipulated and repetitive or fashionable and often immoral and lacking in values as the history of warfare and conflicts attest).

This unique ability to communicate and develop symbolic language structures is indeed a great mystery. Certainly, one can explain it in terms of evolution, biology, neurological structures, cultural development, but the source of it: that first mark on a cave wall; that verbal utterance indicating some meaning; that ecstatic dance; counting – these embryonic stages of language development similarly appear to “come from nowhere”, a sophisticated animal that demonstrates cognitive abilities that exceed his physical limitations in the hierarchy of the animal world.

Design

The notion that there is order in the universe should not be taken lightly. We speak of cosmos, intelligent design. There is the idea of the “laws of nature” said to operate as universal truths or principles. Why should it be? It could be that someday the sun rises and the next day it does not. Or one day it arises in the East and sets in the South. The fact that we assume regularity and order is not a given, but a deep and enduring wonder. It is also a mystery. There is no reason that it should be so.

Mathematicians, physicists, chemists, biologists will confirm that had the precise quantities of specific universals or properties of specific chemical or qualities of specific materials been any different, life on earth simply could not be. It is this precision that may be referred to as the design within the universe and in particular on the blue planet. Tired eyes fail to perceive this and lose awe and wonder in creation.

But the fact is, it is the uncanny exactness of magnitude and other properties that allows things to be; some things glue and amalgamate; some things repulse and draw apart; some things consume or are consumed; other things relate and work symbiotically, while many things travel fast, other more tedious and cumbersome. Blood flows: gravity attracts; electromagnetic forces are powerful while the strong and weak forces even more so, though they act at short distances. Quantum realities suggest the “entanglement” of particles, a seeming attunement of one part of the universe with another.

To explain such tremendous design and impute mere chance and randomness as an explanation, that somehow a series of cataclysmic events resulted in the universe and in particular our blue planet is as preposterous as expecting a thousand monkeys to produce poetry while typing on computer keyboards. One might salvage such an absurd argument by saying that there are infinite monkeys and keyboards but that defies Occam’s razor, and it appears the universe is finite and that therefore even if there were a multiverse that too would be finite. In any event, it is uncanny that this universe

is ordered and not random: the very premise on which all science is based in the first place.

It is indeed a great mystery that there is a cosmos. It is at once wonderful and beautiful. To deny such is to ignore the facts. To recognize as such is to enter into the biblical oasis of Eden. However, destruction, death, decay and human evil are also part of this universe and would appear to mar the argument from design. However, just as a painting is made up of light and dark elements, so too design includes dark elements, but still there is an overall image that emerges as clear as the brilliant sun that rises every morning even though nighttime will follow. Sickness will follow too, but medicine and healing are the antidote, at least keeping death at bay for a while, sometimes. Still, one may sound the horn and proclaim: “beauty”, “design” and the mysterious turning of the earth as it orbits the sun in a moving galaxy and expanding universe.

Will

If one is to try account for this order, then one would have to ascribe to all entities, even those which do not exhibit life as such, such as the inanimate, some kind of guiding force or mechanism, some expression of intelligence. A vitalism. Rather than be esoteric, one might simply call this the movement of will. The desire...An apple wills to be attracted to the earth coerced of course by gravity just as I will (or desire) an ice cream to satisfy my hunger and drive for pleasure. This simple account can in fact explain everything that occurs. However, it is not that simple and becomes weird and strange.

Does it not mean that just as fish will to be in water, DNA organizes itself because it wills to become a fish for example, or social systems collectively will to be say Capitalist fulfilling the aggregate will of the people that are constituted by autonomous wills of individuals. How far does will as a metaphor of causation go? How deterministic and how free? Does it mean forces and laws and energy patterns in the universe – stars coalescing; planets and moons orbiting; bees seeking honey; sharks seeking meat; humans seeking mates; birds willing a nest for home and all manner of forms that this may assume, are guided by this curiously notion of will. Does it mean atoms “know” how to arrange themselves as electrons will to orbit the universe all little subatomic particles are somewhat “aware” of their function? That seems strangely animistic, as if the matter-world is a spirit-world. Yet how else to account for the regularity in the universe and in nature and the properties of materials?

Then there is the question: Is there free will and here there has been no solution in philosophical speculation. Free or not, or free within certain limits or completely deterministic, the concept of the will appears to be fundamental, yet out of reach insofar as this is strange indeed – it is not simply intelligence or whim, that is, just emotion; it is some kind of separate power of volition, a knowing, a desiring, a willing to function in a certain way. Where does this come from? How

is it programmed into the system as twisting DNA configure and reconfigure forming now bark and now a sea gull and now a lion. Endless forms and formation willing to exist, willing to be – but how does materials “stuff” know what forms to produce, to become. Indeed, it is a mystery.

CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have outlined 5 dimensions that can be described as unknowable but pervasive. In the first instance, the concept of creation, that is to say, the production of matter, cannot be understood for all one can grasp is form being changed into other varieties of form, and not the coming into being of form itself. The second great mystery is death of course and it is unclear if there is survival once something does – there is, if the notion of the soul is true, but in materialistic framework even without such a concept, it appears that matter and energy never quite die but change form – one thing gives way so another can be as the maggots and worms feast on a decaying body so life goes on and the mechanism of birth, youth, maturity, decay and death leads to rebirth, renewal and a new cycle. Then I argued that human language, both oral and written, and including a broad conception of human ingenuity spanning mathematics (the language of counting); art (the language of representation) and the sciences

(explaining nature with recourse to its methods of inquiry) has endowed human beings to dominate the planet, yet this ability to produce such varieties of language cannot be easily grasped or understood. I then argued that design is the very basis of existence, that is to say – without an intelligent order there cannot be life as we know it and thus the fact that there are such plenitudes (at least on earth) indicates there is a fundamental quality of design, the very premise on which any science can be based. Finally, I argued for will as an underlying drive that motivates all strata of being, even the inanimate, a seemingly preposterous notion that accounts for things striving to be and to create – an unseen force if you will that seems somewhat metaphysical – for how can matter or stuff “know” how to function this way and not that – a curious mystery it is.

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Citation: Dr. Daniel Shorkend, “Five Mysteries”, Universal Library of Multidisciplinary, 2024; 1(1): 14-17.

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