



John Henry Newman on Mystery as a Hermeneutical Problem

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Abstract

John Henry Newman believed that all Christian doctrines must be accessible to all Christian believers, both the intellectually sophisticated and the uneducated. This implied that the intellectually simple must be able to apprehend and assent to mysteries, such as that of the Trinity. This paper discusses what Newman understood by the idea of mystery. Mystery for Newman was primarily a hermeneutical problem. Mystery was a result of the human incapacity and inability to grasp the fullness of truth. In Newman, the hermeneutical problematic is one of the limitations of language thus leading to submission of intellect to a sublime truth.

Keywords

John Henry Newman, Hermeneutics, Language, Mystery, Knowledge, Faith and Reason

John Henry Newman believed that it was necessary for religious precepts and doctrines to be intellectually simple and straightforward in order to *really* apprehend and thus assent to the Christian faith.¹ For this reason Newman had to deal with the problem of mysteries such as that of the Incarnation, the unity of body and soul, and the Trinity, all essential Christian doctrines in his estimation.² Christianity, in his

¹ For Newman's view on assent and apprehension see his *An Essay in the Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1903): available online at <http://www.newmanreader.org/works/grammar/index.html>; hereafter cited as *GA*. All Newman's works quoted in this article are available online at www.newmanreader.org, a website maintained by the National Institute of Newman Studies.

² 'I ask, then, as concerns the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, such as I have drawn it out to be, is it capable of being apprehended otherwise than notionally? Is it a theory, undeniable indeed, but addressed to the student, and to no one else? Is it the elaborate, subtle, triumphant exhibition of a truth, completely developed, and happily adjusted, and accurately balanced on its centre, and impregnable on every side, as a scientific view, "totus, teres, atque rotundus," challenging all assailants, or, on the other hand, does it come to the unlearned, the young, the busy, and the afflicted, as a fact which is to arrest

view, had to be simple enough for the intellectually ‘unsophisticated’ to grasp, not simply for the sake of gaining knowledge but for the sake of clarity.³ For worship to be authentic, mysteries need to be devotionally accessible to all Christians.

This discussion will focus on Newman’s view of mystery and the phenomenology of belief in mysteries. First this discussion will focus on defining mystery in Newman’s terms. Next, this paper will situate Newman’s concept of mystery as the result of the interface between faith and reason which leads to a recognition of religious truths beyond the human capacity to articulate. I will then proceed to a discussion on the issue of consistency and mystery. The final part of the paper will explore Newman’s phenomenology of belief in mystery, specifically, the mystery of the Trinity.

Presence and Absence and the Emergence of Mystery

John Henry Newman described mysteries as things that are ‘too deep for human reason, or inconsistent with their self-devised notions.’⁴ Mystery is closely and primarily identified with the intellectual darkness that results from our human limitations.

As we proceed to discuss Newman and his view of mystery, I would like to explore how mysteries arise. The initial context for mysteries is the interplay between presence and absence. In an 1838 sermon,⁵ Newman noted how we speak differently about people in

them, penetrate them, and to support and animate them in their passage through life? That is, does it admit of being held in the imagination, and being embraced with a real assent? I maintain it does, and that it is the normal faith which every Christian has, on which he is stayed, which is his spiritual life, there being nothing in the exposition of the dogma, as I have given it above, which does not address the imagination, as well as the intellect.’ *GA*, 126–7.

³ ‘There are then no terms in the foregoing exposition which do not admit of a plain sense, and they are there used in that sense; and, moreover, that sense is what I have called real, for the words in their ordinary use stand for things. The words, Father, Son, Spirit, He, One, and the rest, are not abstract terms, but concrete, and adapted to excite images. And these words thus simple and clear, are embodied in simple, clear, brief, categorical propositions. There is nothing abstruse either in the terms themselves, or in their setting. It is otherwise of course with formal theological treatises on the subject of the dogma. There we find such words as substance, essence, existence, form, subsistence, notion, circumincession; and, though these are far easier to understand than might at first sight be thought, still they are doubtless addressed to the intellect, and can only command a notional assent.’ *GA*, 127–8.

⁴ Newman, ‘Sermon 16: The Christian Mysteries,’ *Parochial and Plain Sermons* 1: 203–14, at 205; preached 14 June 1829; hereafter cited as *PPS*, sermon number, page number. For background on this sermon see Thomas Poyner, ‘“How Can These Things Be?” Newman’s Anglican Sermon on “The Christian Mysteries”,’ *Newman Studies Journal* 5/1 (Spring 2008): 51–62.

⁵ Newman, ‘Sermon 2: Reverence, A Belief in God’s Presence,’ *PPS* 5: 13–28, at 25; preached 4 November 1838.

their presence and absence. In the presence of people, speech is guided by the knowledge that they are aware of what is being said about them and how they would react. In their absence, Newman noted that one assumes a different mode of speech. For instance, we speak of the dead as absent, even though Christian faith in the afterlife accepts their actual presence in an after life. With the dead, we believe that they are now in a different state which evokes a sense of awe. This awe inspired by absence is multiplied in the case of God.

Apply this to the subject before us, and you will perceive that there is a sense, and a true sense, in which the *invisible* presence of God is more awful and overpowering than if we saw it. And so again, the presence of Christ, now that it is invisible, brings with it a host of high and mysterious feelings, such as nothing else can inspire. The thought of our Saviour, absent yet present, is like that of a friend taken from us, but, as it were, in dream returned to us, though in this case not in a dream, but in reality and truth.⁶

God's mysteriousness here is tied to a sense of God's presence which overcomes the existential sense of God's absence, thus pointing to certain characteristics of God that amaze the Christian. God's mysteriousness has roots in His invisibility, not *qua* invisibility, but invisibility as absence leading to greater sense of presence. As I will discuss, the mystery here is not the awe one feels, but the limits one experiences when we try to articulate the truth of what we experience. How can Christ be unquestionably absent, but so present that our being is dependent on him?

The mysteriousness of Christ's presence in absence elicits contradiction in speech: 'See what an apparent contradiction, such as attends the putting any high feeling into human language?'⁷ This describes an essential characteristic of mystery, a situation or state of affairs that evokes wonder and evades precise articulation in human terms—in fact, it elicits an apparent contradiction when articulated.

Mystery and the Limits of Human Articulation

Mystery for Newman is more of a 'negative' attribute. It is not a word used primarily as a positive attribute or definition of God or the faith,⁸ although there are occasions in which Newman does

⁶ *PPS* 5: 25.

⁷ Newman, 'Sermon 2: Reverence, A Belief in God's Presence,' *PPS* 5: 26. On the subject of mystery and apparent contradictions, see, James Anderson, 'In Defence of Mystery: A Reply to Dale Tuggy,' *Religious Studies* 41 (2005): 145–63; See Steven D. Boyer, 'The Logic of Mystery,' *Religious Studies* 43 (2007): 89–102.

⁸ I offer Karl Rahner as a contrasting figure. Rahner had a positive view of mystery in the sense that the human subject and the transcendent ground of being we call God

speak of an ‘incommunicable attribute’ of God.⁹ Newman invokes the word ‘mystery’ to signify that one has reached the limits of one’s expressive capabilities. Mystery in Newman primarily has to do with comprehension and the inability to articulate certain things that one encounters.¹⁰ Mystery, thus, in a theological sense, is primarily a hermeneutical problem for Newman.

For instance, Newman was very interested in the mystery of the union of the body and soul. The body and soul are, without question, distinct from each other, and yet form a unity. For Newman, this was a fact of human existence. The problem, however, is the mystery that arises when we try to articulate this ‘unit’ of truth succinctly:¹¹

are genuine mysteries. The mystery of the human person and of God were not simply hermeneutical ambiguities, but referred to actual incomprehensibility. Rahner viewed God as an incomprehensible mystery. The holy mystery that is God, in Rahner, is not God as a mysterious being, but God who in his being is understood as mystery. See Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: Crossroads, 1998) 1–89. Rahner is concerned that we do not objectify God, who is absolute holy mystery, or achieve mastery of God through knowledge. Newman, on the other hand, does not see acquisition of knowledge about God or clarity in expression about God as a threat to God because God has chosen to reveal himself.

⁹ Newman, *GA*, 226. ‘This is the very aspect, in which God, as revealed in Scripture, is distinguished from that exhibition of His glory, which nature gives us: power, wisdom, love, long suffering—these attributes, though far more fully and clearly displayed in scripture than in nature, still are in their degree seen on the face of their visible creation; but self-denial, if it may be said, this incomprehensible attribute of Divine Providence, is disclosed to us only in Scripture.’ Newman, ‘Sermon 7: The Duty of Self-Denial,’ *PPS* 7: 91. ‘First, let it be assumed as agreeable both to reason and revelation, that there are Attributes and Operations, or by whatever more suitable term we designate them, peculiar to the Deity; for instance, creative and preserving power, absolute prescience, moral sovereignty, and the like. These are ever included in our notion of the incommunicable nature of God;’ John Henry Newman, *The Arians of the Fourth Century* (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1908) 152; hereafter cited, *Arians*.

¹⁰ ‘Mysteries in religion are measured by the proud according to their own comprehension, by the humble, according to the power of God; the humble glorify God, the proud exalt themselves against them,’ Newman, ‘Sermon 19: The Mysteriousness of Our Present Being,’ *PPS* 4: 283.

¹¹ Another example of the problem of the articulation of mystery in the Christian life is the co-habitation of joy and fear or reverence in a believer. ‘How joy and fear can be reconciled, words cannot show. Act and deed alone can show how. Let a man try both to fear and to rejoice, as Christ and His Apostles tell him, and in time he will learn how; but when he has learned he will be as little able to explain how it is he does both, as he was before. He will seem inconsistent, and may easily be proved to be so, to the satisfaction of irreligious men, as Scripture is called inconsistent. He becomes the paradox which Scripture enjoins. This is variously fulfilled in the case of men of advanced holiness. They are accused of the most opposite faults; of being proud, and of being mean; of being over-simple, and being crafty; of having too strict, and, at the same time, too lax a conscience; of being unsocial, and yet being worldly; of being too literal in explaining Scripture, and yet of adding to Scripture, and superseding Scripture. Men of the world, or men of inferior religiousness, cannot understand them, and are fond of criticizing those who, in seeming to be inconsistent, are but like Scripture teaching.’ ‘Sermon 5: Equanimity,’ *PPS* 5: 66–7; was preached 22 December 1839.

Unless the soul were in every part, they would not form one body; so that the soul is in every part, uniting it with every other, though it consists of no parts at all. I do not of course mean that there is any real contradiction in these opposite truths; indeed, we know there is not, and cannot be, because they *are* true, because human nature is a fact before us. But the state of the case is a contradiction *when put into words*; we cannot so express it as not to involve any apparent contradiction; and then, if we discriminate our terms and make distinctions, and balance phrases, and so on, we shall seem to be technical, artificial and speculative, and to use words without meaning.¹²

The soul, here, is the form of the body. Thus the statement that the soul must be in every part otherwise it would not “form one body.” The soul is the reason why the thousands of parts that form the body are identified as part of a person. So anything we counter that does not house this soul is not part of the person in question. This for Newman is a fact of existence. The soul gives the body its definition and singular unity or uniqueness but in so doing the soul is then at risk of being incorrectly defined as something divisible, which it is not. The issue here is a simple articulation of what is experienced. The complexity of the body-soul union is such that any proposition or set of propositions describing the body-soul union necessarily involves contradictions. This is what makes the union of body and soul a mystery. It is not the fact of the union that is the mystery, but the articulation of the union makes it a mystery.

Another example that Newman provides is with regard to Christ. In speaking about Christ’s subservient actions as God and man, Newman states:

Thus He possessed at once a double assemblage of attributes, divine and human. Still he was all-powerful, though in the form of a servant; still He was all-knowing, though seemingly ignorant; still incapable of temptation, though exposed to it; and if anyone stumble at this, as not a mere mystery, *but in the very form of language a contradiction of terms*, I would have him reflect on those peculiarities of human nature itself, which I just now hinted at.¹³ (Emphasis added)

Christ is both human and divine. Thus, a creature in the form of a servant was all powerful and all-knowing, yet he appeared ignorant and was exposed to temptation. The grammar or logic of the case

¹² Newman, ‘Sermon 19: The Mysteriousness of Our Present Being,’ *PPS* 4: 286. Cf. ‘You will say, How can He be present to the Christian and in the Church, yet not be on earth but on the right hand of God? I answer, that the Christian Church is made up of faithful *souls*, and how can any of us say where the soul is, simply and really? The soul indeed acts through the body, and perceives through the body; but where is it? Or what has it to do with place?’ Newman, ‘Sermon 10: The Spiritual Presence of Christ in the Church,’ *PPS* 6: 120–35, at 127; preached 6 May 1838.

¹³ Newman, ‘Sermon 12: The Humiliation of the Eternal Son’ *PPS* 3: 156–72, at 166–7; preached 8 March 1835.

is contradictory. How can someone be all-knowing and yet appear ignorant? How can one be all-powerful and yet be exposed to temptation implying a form of weakness? Yet, we do have Christ who in fact was the living embodiment of these contradictory ideas. The fact of the manner of Christ's existence was real but the articulation of it yields mystery. The mystery of Christ emerges when the state of affairs is brought into articulation.

We see now the general idea of mystery in Newman; a state of affairs that yields apparent contradictions when put into words.

I do not of course mean that there is any real contradiction in these opposite truths; indeed, we know there is not, and cannot be, because they are true, because human nature is a fact before us. But the state of the case is a contradiction *when put into words*; we cannot so express it as not to involve an apparent contradiction; and then, if we discriminate our terms, and make distinctions, and balance phrases, and so on, we shall seem to be technical, artificial and speculative, and to use words without meaning.¹⁴

The fundamental assumption is that there are truths given to us, either through human agency or by means of revelation. So in these cases in which we encounter a truth or state of affairs about which we have no doubt, but yet elicit contradictions in expression, we get mystery.

Mystery, then, is what it is by virtue of the inability of our reason to accept the whole picture. Stated differently, mystery is the result of the inadequacy of human logic and grammar, that is, if one's reason did not strive to articulate and communicate its experiences, then no mysteries would arise because one would accept mysteries such as the body-soul union as plain facts.¹⁵

I should note that the limits of articulated reason are not the limits of genuine knowledge. Thus, when Newman speaks about the failure of comprehension, it has more to do with the ability to articulate the state of affairs than with the ability to obtain a real apprehension of the situation. When one speaks of one's human limitations as defining mystery, our epistemic capability is not being undermined. The idea of limitations is with reference to articulating what is experienced. For instance, in speaking about the human state, Newman noted that there are 'things in us which we know to be really and truly,' however, we are unable to put all we know 'into words.' One is unable to communicate this knowledge to those who do 'not experience them.'

These are a few, out of many remarks which might be made concerning our own mysterious state, that is, concerning things in us which

¹⁴ Newman, 'Sermon 19: The Mysteriousness of Our Present Being,' *PPS* 4: 286.

¹⁵ 'It is certain, then, that experience outstrips reason in its capacity of knowledge, why then should reason circumscribe faith, when it cannot compass sight?' Newman, 'Sermon 19: The Mysteriousness of Our Present Being,' *PPS* 4: 285.

we know to be really and truly, yet which we cannot accurately reflect upon and contemplate, cannot describe, cannot put into words, and cannot convey to another's comprehension who does not experience them. Let a man consider how hardly he is able and how circuitously he is forced to describe the commonest objects of nature, when he attempts to substitute reason for sight, how difficult it is to define things, how impracticable it is to convey to another any complicated, or any deep or refined feeling, how inconsistent and self-contradictory his own feelings seem, when put into words, how he subjects himself in consequence to misunderstanding or ridicule or triumphant criticism. . . .¹⁶

Substituting 'reason for sight' is impractical. Words cannot hope to capture the vividness and instantaneity of sight. Nonetheless, the object of sight is not undermined because of one's inability to express it, much less express it correctly. By the same token, a phenomenological exploration of one's feelings exposes the difficulty of the possibility of a clear explanation or description of what appears to be a limited, finite, and contained experience.

Human language has its limits and must labor or learn to better and more clearly express the human experience. However, the limits of language do not undermine the fact of experiences and encounter or even apprehension. The fact that we cannot fully articulate an experience does not mean that it is not valid. It simply makes the experience a mystery.

Mystery as Inevitable Ambiguity

The presence of mystery is an essential component of human existence—mystery signals the human inability to comprehend and understand the whole. Newman sees mystery as a subjective state of affairs paradoxically ushered in by spiritual enlightenment—mystery is initiated by absence, an absence that intensifies a presence. When this enlightenment and presence in absence of and by God encounters our reason, we have mystery.

The mysteries of the Christian faith are not proposed or introduced to us as mysteries *qua* mysteries. They are presented as what they are. The mystery of the Trinity is not mysterious in itself. The doctrine as revealed to us is clear, but the mystery is a function of our limitations. The mystery arises from the fact that our imperfect natures prevent us from attaining full knowledge.

And it is important to observe that this doctrine of the Trinity is not proposed in Scripture as a mystery. It seems then that, as we draw forth many remarkable facts concerning the natural world which do

¹⁶ Newman, 'Sermon 19: The Mysteriousness of Our Present Being,' *PPS* 4: 291.

not lie on its surface, so by meditation we detect in Revelation this remarkable principle, which is not openly propounded, *that religious light is intellectual darkness*. As if our gracious Lord had said to us; “Scripture does not aim at making mysteries, but they are shadows brought out by the Sun of Truth. When you knew nothing of revealed light, you knew not revealed darkness. Religious truth requires you should be told *something*, your imperfect nature prevents your knowing *all*; and to know *something*, and *not all*,—*partial knowledge*,—must of course perplex; doctrines imperfectly revealed must be mysterious.”¹⁷

The problem of mystery is essentially a problem of revelatory ambiguity. For a sharp and articulate writer and thinker, it must have seemed improbable that God, the author of wisdom would allow such ambiguity in essential doctrines. So we see then that the burden or problem of mystery lies, not in the doctrine revealed, or in a defect in God or his revelatory capabilities, but in the human situation. Mysteries are valid and necessary part of the Christian faith even though God revelation is clear and without ambiguity or confusion. Why then is there mystery? Why must it be in the nature of Christian doctrine to be unclear?

Christianity depends on revelation, the fact that God calls and requires duties and obligations from us. Thus to enter into this world of divine instruction and fellowship, we must be provided with truths that are not readily apparent to human beings who do not enter into this world of divine fellowship. This necessarily creates a situation in we receive knowledge that is authentic and useful but incomplete. We only, at any given time, have a limited and partial grasp of the whole. Thus a situation exists in which the offer of great stores of knowledge meets the inability to accept all knowledge, thereby creating a situation of perplexity, or mystery. One then must accept mystery as an essential part of the human experience of religion.

Mysteries “perplex.” They are ‘shadows brought out by the Sun of Truth.’ The shadow is an incontrovertible indication of the true presence of its cause, a two-dimensional expression of a multi-dimensional reality. It reveals a truth, but also points at a reality that transcends the expressive capability of shadows. The shadows of mystery are a revealed darkness—revealed in the sense that the shadow is evidence of its cause, light. This shadow of mystery exposes our present lack of capacity to absorb the fullness of truth.

For Newman, ‘the light of the Gospels does not remove mysteries in religion.’¹⁸ The Gospels and the message and presence of Christ actually intensify the mystery of God and other religious

¹⁷ Newman, ‘Sermon 16: The Christian Mysteries,’ *PPS* 1: 210–1.

¹⁸ Newman, ‘Sermon 16: The Christian Mysteries,’ *PPS* 1: 205.

mysteries. The Christian tends to focus on the shadows because of limited human capabilities even though, through Christ's illumination, the Christian actually exists in a region of light.¹⁹ Spiritual 'light' or revelation, or the knowledge imparted by the presence of the Holy Spirit, only serves to expose the Christian's intellectual limitations:

There is much instruction conveyed in the circumstance, that the Feast of the Holy Trinity immediately succeeds that of Whit Sunday. On the latter Festival we commemorate the coming of the Spirit of God, who is promised to us as the source of all spiritual knowledge and discernment. But lest we should forget the nature of that illumination which He imparts, Trinity Sunday follows, to tell us what it is not; not a light accorded to the reason, the gifts of the intellect; inasmuch as the Gospel has its mysteries, its difficulties, and secret things, which the Holy Spirit does not remove.²⁰

We should note that it is not God's intention to keep us in darkness. We do have the Holy Spirit who is given us for the precise purpose of spiritual enlightenment. But not even the Holy Spirit's presence can automatically alleviate the ambiguity of revelation. This darkness relieves itself only through our spiritual development.

While mystery is created by the interface of religious truth with an imperfect nature, another way to understand mystery is that it is the interface between two types or orders of enlightenment: the light of reason and the light of the Holy Spirit. The light of reason is unable to fully interpret and translate the light of the Holy Spirit, thus creating an atmosphere of intellectual darkness. Mystery is not a restraint on one's intellect, but is rather recognition of human imperfection and inability to absorb truths superior to its capacity to receive.

The Consistency Test: Distinguishing between Mystery and Nonsense

If mystery is then a hermeneutical problem, then how do we distinguish between legitimate mystery and confusion? We have mystery when our articulation of state of affairs contains apparent contradictory or incompatible notions. The contradictions and incompatibility are apparent ones and not reflective of the state of affairs. So when we encounter propositions that appear to contradict each other, is there a way to distinguish mystery from grammatical nonsense?

¹⁹ See also, Newman, 'We are no longer then in the region of the shadows: we have the true Savior set before us, the true reward and the true means of spiritual renewal.' Newman, 'Sermon 3: Unreal Words,' *PPS* 5: 30; preached on 2 June 1839.

²⁰ Newman, 'Sermon 16: The Christian Mysteries,' *PPS* 1: 203.

I believe that for Newman's answer we can look to the issue of consistency

The contradictory notions that define mystery are grammatical and logical issues. However what helps us realize that religious propositions or teaching are mystery is the fact that they resonate and are consistent with the general body of revealed truths. Mystery, though a hermeneutical issue, arises only because our eyes have been opened to a world of faith and revelation. So a creed or body of belief statements contains statements that appear to contradict each other. However, if there is consistency between the truth of each statement and the general truths of revelation, then we have mystery and not confusion or nonsense.

Newman prized consistency. He noted that 'The very test of a mature Christian, a true saint, is consistency in all things.'²¹ For Newman, the perfection of one's Christian walk lies in the degree to which she is 'consistent.'

A man serves with a perfect heart, who serves God in all parts of his duty; and, not here and there, but here and there and everywhere; not perfect indeed as regards its extent; not completely, but consistently.²²

In his view scripture 'reproves . . . inconsistency' and holds it as hypocrisy.²³ The double-minded, insincere man is such because he is inconsistent.²⁴ So, for instance, Peter's fault lay in his inconsistency. As Newman stated:

They had not known Him all through His ministry. Peter, indeed, had confessed Him to be the Christ, the Son of the Living God; but even he showed inconsistency and changed of mind in his comprehension of this great truth.²⁵

Newman was aware that consistency was 'not always the guarantee of truth.'²⁶ Nonetheless, Newman believed that consistency in the Christian faith added a significant measure of assurance to the practice of the faith.

²¹ Newman, 'Sermon 13: Judaism of the Present Day,' *PPS* 6: 174–189, at 186; preached on 28 February 1841.

²² Newman, 'Sermon 17: The Testimony of Conscience,' *PPS* 5: 239.

²³ Newman, 'Sermon 21: Offerings for the Sanctuary,' *PPS* 6: 295–312, at 303; preached on 23 September 1839.

²⁴ 'On the other hand, a double mind, a pursuing other ends besides the truth, and in consequence an inconsistency in conduct, and a half-consciousness (to say the least) of inconsistency, and a feeling of the necessity of defending oneself to oneself, and to God, and to the world; in a word, hypocrisy; these are the signs of a merely professed Christian.' Newman, 'Sermon 16: Sincerity and Hypocrisy,' *PPS* 5: 222–36, at 224; preached 16 December 1838.

²⁵ Newman, 'Sermon 16: Warfare the Condition of Victory,' *PPS* 6: 222–3.

²⁶ *GA*, 256.

Men who fancy they see what is not are more energetic, and make their way better, than those who see nothing; and so the undoubting infidel, the fanatic, the heresiarch, are able to do much, while the mere hereditary Christian, who has never realized the truth which he holds, is unable to do anything. But, if consistency of view can add so much strength even to error, what may it not be expected to furnish to the dignity, the energy, and the influence of Truth!²⁷

Here he noted that consistency shows its natural usefulness in that it even strengthens those in error and energizes their faith in whatever system it is they accept. If consistency in doctrine can strengthen and energize errors, how much more, Newman argues, can it ‘be expected to furnish to the dignity, the energy and the influence of the Truth.’

In his composition of the *Grammar*, Newman’s desire was to defend the validity of belief or assent to mystery—something that one does not understand. The argument in the *Grammar* turns on Newman’s distinction between apprehension and understanding. Apprehension is recognition of a state of affairs, without necessarily resolving it. Understanding, on the other hand, is recognition and resolution of an articulated state of affairs.²⁸ Mysteries cannot be understood, but they may be apprehended.

For Newman, there is activity on two levels in the recognition of mystery. There is the apprehension of the state of affairs and then the conscious articulation of it. The articulation is essentially linked to the state of affairs and thus establishes its credibility. So not only must one consider consistency among the propositions that contain apparently incompatible notions, there must be a fundamental consistency between the state of affairs and the propositions. This foundational consistency differentiates between mystery and nonsense.

This leads me to the question, whether belief in a mystery can be more than an assertion. I consider it can be an assent, and my reasons for saying so are as follows—A mystery is a proposition conveying incompatible notions, or is a statement of the inconceivable. Now we can assent to propositions (and a mystery is a proposition), provided we can apprehend them; therefore we can assent to mystery, for, unless we in some sense apprehended it, we should not recognize it to be a mystery, that is, a statement uniting incompatible notions. The same act, then, which enables us to discern that the words of the proposition express a mystery, capacitate us for assenting to it. Words which make nonsense, do not make a mystery.²⁹

²⁷ John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (New York: Longmans, Green & Co. 1907) xviii.

²⁸ *GA*, 19–20.

²⁹ *GA*, 55.

One notes that ‘words which make nonsense, do not make a mystery.’ Thus, one must keep in mind the underlying substrate or truth of mystery, or perplexing propositions. Incompatible notions expressed in a proposition or, system of propositions, are nonsense. However, incompatible notions expressed in propositions that emerge from and register a unified substrate reality, or the actual state of affairs, are mysteries. This unified substrate is something that is ‘really’ apprehended, which roots propositions in actuality.³⁰ Mystery for Newman has a basis in history and real faith. Thus the propositions that define a mystery must arise out of a religious state of affairs and cannot be random accumulations of notional ideas with no basis in a coherent historical or real event. Mystery, as such then, for Newman, arises at the level of articulating experience.

The Limits of Philosophy and its Submission to Mystery

We have seen that our limited capacity is the reason for the ambiguity of revelation that Newman understands as mystery. The question then arises, in what sense do we understand our limited capacity or capabilities? Is it a physical limitation, i.e., that we simply cannot literally see or hear spiritual things and can only translate them analogically or allegorically? Or is the limitation intellectual and spiritual so that even if we could see or hear spiritual things, we still would have this limited capability to grasp the whole of revelation?

There is a spiritual aspect to our lack of capability but in this paper, I wish to focus on our intellectual capacity to receive revelation. This focus on our intellectual capacity brings us to the intersection of faith and reason in Newman. The problem of the previous section, i.e., that mysteriousness arises from the situation in which complete revelation interacts with a limited capacity to receive. This can also be understood in terms of the issue of faith and reason. Christian revelation comes to us exclusively by means of faith, while reason represents the natural human capacity to know and understand our world. So when revelation through faith meets the natural human

³⁰ Real apprehension for Newman was a cognitional recognition of an individual thing as opposed to notional, universal or formal things. Ultimately formal or notional statements have their roots in the apprehension of individual things. ‘Now, there are propositions, in which one or both of the terms are common nouns, as standing for what is abstract, general, and non-existing, such as “Man is an animal . . .” These I shall call notional propositions, and the apprehension with which we infer or assent to them, notional. And there are other propositions, which are composed of singular nouns, and of which the terms stand for things external to us, unit and individual, as ‘Philip was the father of Alexander,’ ‘the earth goes round the sun,’ . . . these I shall call real propositions and their apprehension real.’ *GA*, 9–10.

capacity of reason, mystery or ambiguity in revelation arises. To explore this idea further in Newman, let us first see how he conceives of the relationship between faith and reason.

And thus we are led on to consider, how different are the character and effect of the Scripture notices of the structure of the physical world, from those which philosophers deliver. I am not deciding whether or not the one and the other are reconcilable; I merely say their respective *effect* is different. And when we have deduced what we deduce by our reason from the study of visible nature, and then read what he read in His inspired word, and find the two apparently discordant, *this* is the feeling I think we ought to have on our minds;—not an impatience to do what is beyond our powers, to weigh evidence, sum up, balance, decide, and reconcile, to arbitrate between two voices of God,—but a sense of utter nothingness of worms such as we are; of our plain and absolute incapacity to contemplate things *as they really are*; a perception of our emptiness, before the great Vision of God; of our ‘comeliness being turned into corruption, and our retaining no strength;’ a conviction, that what is put before us, in nature or in grace, though true in such a full sense that we dare not tamper with it, yet is but an intimation useful for particular purposes, useful for practice, useful in its department, ‘until the day-break and the shadows flee away,’ useful in such a way that both the one and the other representation may at once be used, as two languages, as two separate approximations towards the Awful Unknown Truth, such as will not mislead us in their respective provinces. And thus while we use the language of science, without jealousy for scientific purposes, we may confine it to these; and repel and reprove its upholders, should they attempt to exalt it and to ‘stretch it beyond its measure.’ In its own limited round it has its use, nay, maybe to fill a higher ministry, and stand as a proselyte under the shadow of the temple; but it must not dare profane the inner courts, in which the ladder of Angels is fixed forever, reaching even to the Throne of God, and ‘Jesus standing on the right hand of God.’³¹

First we notice that Newman sets up a dichotomy between the truth of scripture with respect to the physical world and the truth we gain from philosophers. Given that Newman is a nineteenth century Victorian, we can include science in his understanding of philosophy. Philosophy deduces facts from the visible world, while scripture provides truths by means of inspiration. Both philosophy and inspired scripture are “voices of God.” However, the knowledge from both sources appears “discordant.” There is an apparent disharmony between them and this is a good thing for us to feel. Instead of over-confidence in our ability to arbitrate between both voices, we

³¹ Newman, ‘Sermon 18: Mysteries in Religion,’ *PPS* 2: 206–16, at 208–9; preached year end 1834.

should feel overwhelmed by both, which in turn should lead to the appropriate reverence.

Scripture and science are the contrasting terms that describe faith and reason. Science, or reason, gains its truths about the world from observation. Scripture speaks of an inspired truth which is revealed and which flourishes in the hearts of the faithful.³² Because they are both ‘voices of God,’ both languages of truth are different approximations towards the one truth.

Science, or in a general sense, philosophy, can probe into the nature of things. It is a genuine path to truth but is limited in scope. The use of reason is valid within the sphere of reason, but reason is out of its depth when it comes to the issues of religious mystery. Newman decried any attempt to solve spiritual mysteries by use of philosophy.³³ The human intellect takes us very far in our knowledge, but not far enough, especially when the dimension of the divine is introduced.

Religious knowledge such as knowledge of the divine is not simply a quantitative extension of knowledge; rather, it is a qualitatively new dimension of truth. In the presence of such a qualitatively new and unfamiliar dimension, the human intellect is at a loss in its approach to the data of this new world. However, even though the human intellect fails in the presence of this new dimension of faith experience, the role of the intellect is not diminished. The intellect, in the presence of mystery, takes on the new role of worship.

In the very impressive Psalm from which these words are taken, this is worth noticing among other things,—that the inspired writer finds in mysteries without and within him, a source of admiration and praise. ‘I will *praise* Thee, *for* I am fearfully and wonderfully made; marvellous are Thy works.’ When Nicodemus heard of God’s wonderful working, he said, ‘How can these things be?’ But holy David glories in what the natural man stumbles at. It awes his heart and imagination, to think that God sees him, wherever he is, yet without provoking or irritating his reason. He has no proud thoughts rising against what he does not understand, and calling for his vigilant control. He does not submit his reason by an effort, but he burst forth in exultation, to think that God is so mysterious.³⁴

³² ‘God does good to those who are good and true of heart; and He reveals His mysteries to the believing. The earnest heart is the good ground in which faith takes root, and the truths of the Gospel are the dew, the sunshine, and the soft rain, which make that heavenly seed to grow.’ Newman, ‘Sermon 11: The Eucharistic Presence,’ *PPS* 6: 136–152, at 136; preached 13 May 1838.

³³ ‘Attempt to solve this prediction, according to the received theories of science, and you will discover their shallowness. They are unequal to the depth of the problem.’ Newman, ‘Sermon 18: Mysteries in Religion,’ *PPS* 2: 210.

³⁴ Newman, ‘Sermon 19: The Mysteriousness of Our Present Being,’ *PPS* 4: 282–94, at 282; preached 29 May 1836.

At the limitations of reason, where our intellect is confounded by mystery, we should not let our perplexity ‘provoke or irritate reason.’ In this situation, the human intellect can learn by submission in reverence. The bursting ‘forth in exultation’ emphasizes Newman’s devotional focus that in the presence of God’s wonder, the proper response is devotion and worship.³⁵

Concluding Remarks

As much as Newman recognized and proclaimed the necessity of mystery as part of the Christian faith, it was important to him that mystery not be used as an excuse to diminish devotional curiosity and theological investigations. Newman noted:

But, however this contrast of usage is to be explained, the Creeds are enough to show that the dogma may be taught in its fullness for the purposes of popular faith and devotion without directly insisting on that mysteriousness, which is necessarily involved in the combined view of its separate propositions. That systematized whole is the object of notional assent, and its propositions, one by one, are the objects of real.³⁶

The faith may be taught and explained ‘without directly insisting on that mysteriousness’ that one views in one’s experience with the divine. In other words, in the encounter with God, the Christian’s mind articulates a system of propositions to express the encounter with the knowledge that the fullness of what is encountered cannot be expressed in words. Nonetheless, it is accepted that there is a consistent and useful truth that emerges in one’s intellectual probing of the encounter with God. Mystery temporarily interrupts our understanding of God, but the interruption is intended to lead us into a deeper encounter with the divine. The idea of mystery in Newman is very much a hermeneutical and phenomenological problem. The fact

³⁵ ‘Above all, let us pray Him to draw us to Him, and to give us faith. When we feel that His mysteries are too severe for us, and occasion us to doubt, let us earnestly wait on Him for the gift of humility and love. Those who love and who are humble will apprehend them;—carnal minds do not seek them, and proud minds are offended at them;—but while love desires them, humility sustains them. Let us pray Him then to give us such a real and living insight into the blessed doctrine of the Incarnation . . . Blessed indeed are they who have not seen, and yet have believed. They have their reward *in* believing; they enjoy the contemplation of a mysterious blessing which does not even enter into the thoughts of other men; and while they are more blessed than others, in the gift vouchsafed to them, they have the additional privilege of knowing that they are vouchsafed it.’ Newman, ‘Sermon 11: The Eucharistic Presence,’ *PPS* 6: 151–2.

³⁶ *GA*, 119.

that God or the Trinity is a mystery is not an apophatic statement but a reflection of human limitations.

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