from H.N. Malony (Ed.), Psychology of Religion: Personalities, Problems, Possibilities. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, pp. 407-412. (1991)

The Mystery of the Ordinary

> "As a rule," said Holmes, "the more bizarre a thing is the less mysterious it proves to be. It is your commonplace, featureless crimes which are really puzzling."
>
> Sir Arthur Conan Doyle,
> *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes,* 1891–92

At the core of the religious impulse is a sense of awe, an attitude of bewilderment, a feeling that reality is more amazing than everyday scientific reasoning can comprehend. Wonderstruck, we humbly acknowledge our limits and accept that which we can not explain.

For many religious people the ultimate threat of science is therefore that it will demystify life, destroying our sense of wonder and with it our readiness to believe in and worship an unseen reality. Once we regarded flashes of lightning and claps of thunder as supernatural magic. Now we understand the natural processes at work. Once we viewed certain mental disorders as demon possession. Now we are coming to discern genetic, biochemical, and stress-linked causes. Once we prayed that God would spare children from diphtheria. Now we vaccinate them. Understandably, some Christians have come to regard scientific naturalism as "the strongest intellectual enemy of the church."

We can also understand why such people therefore grasp at hints of the supernatural—at bizarre phenomena that science cannot explain. Browse your neighborhood religious bookstore and you will find books that describe happenings that defy natural explanation—people reading minds or foretelling the future, levitating objects or influencing the roll of a die, discerning the contents of sealed envelopes or solving cases that have dumbfounded detectives. Whether viewed as a divine gift or as demonic activity, such phenomena are said to refute a mechanistic worldview that has no room for supernatural mysteries.

For several reasons, most research psychologists and professional magicians (who are wary of the exploitation of their arts in the name of psychic powers) are skeptical: (1) in the study of ESP and the paranormal there has been a distressing history of fraud and deception; (2) most people's beliefs in ESP are now understandable as a by-product of the efficient but occasionally misleading ways in which our minds process information; (3) the accumulating evidence regarding the brain-mind connection more and more weighs against the theory that the human mind can function or travel separately from the brain; and, most importantly, (4) there has never been demonstrated a reproducible ESP phenomenon, nor any individual who could defy chance when carefully tested. After one hundred years of research, and after hundreds of failed attempts to claim a $10,000 prize that has for two decades been offered to the first person who can demonstrate "*any* paranormal ability," many parapsychologists concede that what they need to give their field credibility is a single reproducible phenomenon and the theory to explain it.

We Christians can side with the scientific skeptics on the ESP issue. We can heed not only the repeated biblical warnings against being misled by self-professed psychics who practice "divination" or "magic spells and charms," but also the scientific spirit of Deuteronomy: "If a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD and what he says does not come true, then it is not the LORD's message" (18:22 GNB). We believe that humans are finite creatures of the one who declares, "I am God, and there is none like me" (Isa. 46:9 KJV). We are aware of how cult leaders have seduced people with pseudopsychic tricks. And we affirm that God alone is omniscient (thus able to read minds and know the future), omnipresent (thus able to be in two places at once), and omnipotent (thus capable of altering—or better yet—creating nature with divine power). In the biblical view, humans, loved by God, have dignity, but not deity.

If our sense of mystery is not to be found in the realm of the pseudosciences and the occult, then where? Having cleared the decks of false mysteries, where shall we find the genuine mysteries of life? We can take our clue from Sherlock Holmes, who was fond of telling people, "It is a mistake to confound strangeness with mystery. The most commonplace crime is often the most mysterious. . . . Life is infinitely stranger than anything which the mind of man could invent. We would not dare to conceive the things which are really mere commonplaces of existence."

The more scientists learn about sensation, the more convinced they are that what is truly extraordinary is not extrasensory perception, claims for which inevitably dissolve upon investigation, but rather our very ordinary moment-to-moment sensory experiences of organizing

formless neutral impulses into colorful sights and meaningful sounds. As you read this sentence, particles of light energy are being absorbed by the receptor cells of your eyes, converted into neural signals that activate neighboring cells, which process the information for a third layer of cells, which converge to form a nerve tract that transmits a million electrochemical messages per moment up to the brain. There, step by step, the scene you are viewing is reassembled into its component features and finally—in some as yet mysterious way—composed into a consciously perceived image, which is instantly compared with previously stored images and recognized as words you know. The whole process is rather like taking a house apart, splinter by splinter, transporting it to a different location, and then, through the work of millions of specialized workers, putting it back together. All of this transpires in a fraction of a second. Moreover, it is continuously transpiring in motion, in three dimensions, and in color. Ten years of research on computer vision has not yet begun to duplicate this very ordinary, taken-for-granted part of our current experience. Further, unlike virtually all computers, which process information one step at a time, the human brain carries out countless other operations simultaneously, enabling us all at once to sense the environment, use common sense, converse, experience emotion, and consciously reflect on the meaning of our existence or even to wonder about our brain activity while wondering. The deeper one explores these very ordinary things of life, the more one empathizes with Job: "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me" (42:3 RSV).

To be sure, sometimes we use the word *mystery* not in its deep sense as when the mind seeks to fathom its brain, but rather to refer to unsolved scientific puzzles. When wonder is based merely on ignorance, it will fade in the growing light of understanding. Science is a puzzle-solving activity. Among the still unsolved puzzles of psychology are questions such as, Why do we dream? Why do some of us become heterosexual, others homosexual? and How does the brain store memories? The scientific detectives are at work on these "mysteries," and they may eventually offer us convincing solutions. Already, new ideas are emerging.

Often, however, the process of answering one question exposes more and sometimes deeper questions. A new understanding may lead to a new, more impenetrable sense of wonder regarding phenomena that seem further than ever from explanation or that now seem more beautifully intricate than previously imagined. Not long ago scientists wondered how individual nerve cells communicated with one another. The answer—through chemical messengers called neurotransmitters—raised new questions: How many neurotransmitters exist? What are the functions of each? Do abnormalities in neurotransmitter functioning

predispose disorders such as schizophrenia and depression? If so, how might such problems be remedied? And how, from the electrochemical activity of the brain, do experienced emotions and thoughts arise: *how does a material brain give rise to consciousness?* Deeper and deeper go the questions, the deepest one of all being the impenetrable mystery behind the origin of the universe: *why is there something and not nothing?* (If a miracle is something that cannot be explained in terms of something else, then the existence of the universe is a miracle that dwarfs any other our minds can conceive.)

Human consciousness has long been a thing of wonder. More recently, wonder has also grown regarding the things our minds do subconsciously, automatically, out of sight. Our minds detect and process information without our awareness. They automatically organize our perceptions and interpretations. They respond (via the right hemisphere) intelligently in ways that we can explain only if our left hemisphere is informed what is going on. They effortlessly encode incoming information about the place, timing, and frequency of events we experience, about word meanings, about unattended stimuli. They ponder problems we are stumped with, and they occasionally spew forth a spontaneous creative insight. With the aid of hypnosis, they may even, on orders, eliminate warts on one side of the body but not on the other. There is, we now know, more to our minds than we are aware. And how fortunate that it should be so. For the more that routine functions (including well-learned activities such as walking, biking, or gymnastics) are delegated to control systems outside of awareness, the more our consciousness is freed to function like an executive—by focusing on the most important problems at hand. Our brains operate rather like General Motors, with a few important matters decided by the chair of the board, and everything else, thankfully, handled automatically, effortlessly, and usually competently by amazingly intricate mechanisms.

The more they explore, the more language researchers, too, have been awestruck by an amazing phenomenon: the ease with which children acquire language. Before children can add two plus two, they are creating their own grammatically intelligible sentences and comprehending the even more complex sentences spoken to them. Most parents cannot state the intricate rules of grammar, and they certainly are not giving their children much formal training in grammar. Yet before being able to tie their shoes, preschoolers are soaking up the complexities of the language by learning several new words a day and the rules for how to combine them. They do so with a facility that puts to shame many college students who struggle to learn a new language with correct accents and many computer scientists who are struggling to simulate natural language on computers. Moreover, they, and we, do so with the minimal comprehension of how we do it—how we, when speaking,

monitor our muscles, order our syntax, watch out for semantic catastrophes risked by the slightest change in word order, continuously adjust our tone of voice, facial expression, and gestures, and manage to say something meaningful when it would be so easy to speak gibberish.

Our womb-to-tomb individual development is equally remarkable. What is more ordinary than humans reproducing themselves, and what is more wonder-full? Consider the incredible good fortune that brought each one of us into existence. The process began as a mature egg was released by the ovary and as some 300 million sperm began their upstream race towards it. Against all odds, you—or more exactly the very sperm cell that together with the very egg it would take to make you—won this 1 in 300 million lottery (actually one in billions, considering your conception had to occur from that particular sexual union). What is more, a chain of equally improbable events, beginning with the conception of your parents and their discovery of one another, had to have extended backwards in time for the possibility of your moment to have arrived. Indeed, when one considers the improbably sequence of innumerable events that led to your conception, from the birth of the universe onward, one cannot escape the conclusion that your birth and your death anchor the two ends of a continuum of probabilities. What is more *im*probable than that you, rather than one of your infinite alternatives, should exist? What is more certain than that you will not live on earth endlessly?

Most beginnings of life fail to survive the first week of existence. But, again, for you good fortune prevailed. Your one cell became two, which became four, and then by the end of your first week an even more astonishing thing happened—brain cells began forming and within weeks were multiplying at a rate of about one-quarter million per *minute*. Scientist-physician Lewis Thomas explains the wonder of that single cell, which has as its decendents all the cells of the human brain.

> The mere existence of that cell should be one of the great astonishments of the earth. People ought to be walking around all day, all through their waking hours, calling to each other in endless wonderment, talking of nothing except that cell. . . .
>
> If you like being surprised, there's the source. One cell is switched on to become the whole trillion-cell, massive apparatus for thinking and imagining and, for that matter, being surprised. All the information needed for learning to read and write, playing the piano, arguing before senatorial subcommittees, walking across a street through traffic, or the marvelous human act of putting out one hand and leaning against a tree, is contained in that first cell. All of grammar, all syntax, all arithmetic, all music. . . .
>
> No one cell has the ghost of an idea how this works, and nothing else in life can ever be so puzzling. If anyone does succeed in explaining it,

> within my lifetime, I will charter a skywriting airplane, maybe a whole fleet of them, and send them aloft to write one great exclamation point after another, around the whole sky, until all my money runs out. (1974, 156–57)

Human life—so ordinary, so familiar, so natural, and yet so extraordinary. Looking for mystery in things bizarre, we feel cheated when later we learn that a hoax or a simple process explains it away. All the while we miss the awesome events occurring before, or even within, our very eyes. The extraordinary within the ordinary.

So it was on that Christmas morning two millennia ago. The most extraordinary event of history—the Lord of the universe coming to the spaceship earth in human form—occurred in so ordinary a way as hardly to be noticed. On a mundane winter day at an undistinguished inn in an average little town the extraordinary one was born of an ordinary peasant woman. Like our human kin at Bethlehem and Nazareth long ago, we, too, are often blind to the mystery within things ordinary. We look for wonders and for the unseen reality—the hand of God—in things extraordinary, when more often his presence is to be found in the unheralded, familiar, everyday events of which life is woven.

References

Thomas, L. 1974. *The lives of a cell: Notes of a biology watcher.* New York: Viking.

———. 1979. *The medusa and the snail.* New York: Viking.

———. 1983. *Late night thoughts on listening to Mahler's Ninth Symphony.* New York: Viking.

Physician-scientist Thomas's collections of short essays describe scientific wonders with beautiful, awestruck prose.