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Review of Jones, *Curing the Philosopher's Disease* (University Press of America, 2009)

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Review of Richard H. Jones, *Curing the Philosopher's Disease: Reinstating Mystery in the Heart of Philosophy*

**New York: University Press of America, 2009,
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In this wide-ranging study, Richard H. Jones diagnoses the social and natural sciences with a will toward closure and certainty. Modifying Wittgenstein's phrase, Jones calls this trend 'the philosopher's disease': the effort to dispel all mysteries by attributing reasons where none exist (8). To counteract this malady, Jones aims to point out unresolved, perhaps unresolvable 'mysteries in philosophy, science, and religion' (9). These range from time to consciousness, to quantum entanglement, and are rooted in the 'most basic mystery'—that anything exists at all (125). By uncovering the mysteries these disciplines reveal and conceal, Jones gestures toward a philosophy that might someday cure its own disease.

The book's most outstanding trait is its breadth. In under 300 pages, Jones sweeps through discursive regimes as diverse as logical positivism and evolutionary biology, string theory, and apophatic theology. Perhaps inevitably, this formidable scope sets the stage for a few shortcomings. Because it aims to cover so much ground ('philosophy, science, and religion'), the argument works mainly in broad generalizations. Rather than close readings of particular thinkers, we find a complex but unsubstantiated dance of realists, idealists, empiricists, skeptics, nominalists, positivists, materialists, dualists, and critical realists (among whom the author, careful to remain dispassionate, seems to count himself). While this approach provides a helpful introduction to the Anglo-American philosophical landscape, it also prevents the reader from entering into the worlds of any of the thinkers assembled under these categories, or from following the steps Jones makes to declare them either friends or enemies of mystery.

A particularly illustrative example of this is Jones's use of the term 'postmodernism.' Without naming particular scholars or texts, Jones states some 'postmodern' positions (linguistic determination, social construction, moral relativism) and concludes that they all end in nihilism (46). He goes on to assert that although one might expect anti-foundationalism to revel in mystery, 'mystery does not figure in postmodern thought at all' (48). At this juncture, it

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would be helpful to know who is being charged with neglecting mystery and why. But despite brief references in these pages to Richard Rorty, Hilary Putnam, and Alan Sokal, there are no ‘postmodernists’ cited here at all. This non-engagement means that the positions attributed to ‘them’ are convoluted (no one would argue she could make herself a Yankees pitcher by saying it’s so [51]—performativity does not amount to voluntarism), and that the mystery-laden work of thinkers Jones might call ‘postmodern’ is never even mentioned (I am thinking here of Derrida, de Certeau, Levinas, Serres, Irigaray, and Butler).

A similar problem emerges in the section on ‘theology,’ which allegedly becomes ‘the enemy of mystery’ by resorting to positive statements about the transcendent (218). A slew of contemporary theologians from Marion and Lossky to Keller, Caputo, Kearney, Rivera, and Hart have staged varying critiques of academic theology’s allergy to transcendence, yet their work is absent here. Apart from brief references to Tillich and Otto, the only ‘theologians’ engaged here are ‘Advocates of the Cosmological [and Teleological] Argument[s]’ (1145), who have frankly been in short supply among serious theologians since the publication of Hume’s *Dialogues*. One senses these continentally-inflected philosophers and theologians would not fit Jones’s bill—that he might charge them with obscuring more than they clarify, etc.—but one wishes the book had turned its powerful critique toward some recent texts that have indeed explored the limits of language, thinking, and ethics.

Promisingly, ‘science’ is credited here with the deepest attunement to genuine mystery, perhaps because Jones is so well versed in the latest and most baffling developments in particle physics and cosmology. In these disciplines, Jones finds a delicate balance of explanation and fascination, so that reflection is left neither in helpless amazement nor in self-satisfied complacency. For as Jones points out, even a Theory of Everything could never explain *why* these four forces govern the universe, or more fundamentally, why the universe exists at all. In short, science reveals an inexhaustible ‘sea of mystery’ surrounding all the smaller ‘how-mysteries’ it solves (124). The task of scientists is therefore akin to that of philosophers and theologians: to be aware of this mystery, to point to it at every turn, and to leave it open. In Jones’s words, ‘the end of all explorations has to be an acceptance that the ultimate questions remain alive and unanswered perhaps forever’ (272).

While this seems quite agreeable, the reader is left a bit uncertain as to why. What is wrong with abolishing mystery, and what good would come of sustaining it? Jones offers two subtle suggestions. The first is that with our ‘conceptual barriers’ lifted (35–6), ‘we’ might be ‘more receptive to the true fullness of reality,’ which opens itself more completely to experience than to reflection (284). Those of us left wondering here what ‘reality’ is and whether we can ever experience ‘what is really there’ (243) might find more promising the more ethical valence to ‘reinstating mystery in the heart of philosophy.’ As Jones suggests in the section on religion, a sustained uncertainty might lead to ‘more tentativeness and humility about one’s own...pronouncements’ and prompt members of rival schools, traditions, and disciplines to behave more compassionately toward one another (229). While this reader would have liked to see this possibility developed, it hardly seems fair to ask Jones to have taken on *more* in such an expansive, compelling, and learned book.