

The background of the book cover is a close-up photograph of thin, dark, and spiky plant branches, possibly thistles, covered in a layer of white frost or snow. The branches are out of focus, creating a bokeh effect with soft, white, circular light spots. A large, solid black circle with a thin white border is centered on the cover, containing the title and author's name in white text.

# **SENSES OF MYSTERY**

ENGAGING WITH NATURE AND  
THE MEANING OF LIFE

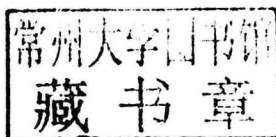
**DAVID E. COOPER**

David E.

# Cooper

## Senses of Mystery

Engaging with Nature and the  
Meaning of Life



 **Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group  
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2018  
by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge  
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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*British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Names: Cooper, David E. (David Edward), 1942– author.

Title: Senses of mystery : engaging with nature and the meaning of life /  
David E. Cooper.

Description: Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY : Routledge is an imprint of the  
Taylor & Francis Group, an Informa Business, [2018] | Includes bibliographical  
references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017009811 (print) | LCCN 2017030048 (ebook) |

ISBN 9781315112060 (E-book) | ISBN 9781138078727 (hbk : alk. paper) |

ISBN 9781138078734 (pbk. : alk. paper) | ISBN 9781315112060 (ebk)

Subjects: LCSH: Philosophy of nature. | Life.Classification: LCC BD581 (ebook) |  
LCC BD581 .C6665 2017 (print) | DDC 128—dc23

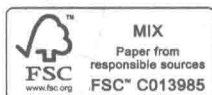
LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017009811>

ISBN: 978-1-138-07872-7 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-138-07873-4 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-11206-0 (ebk)

Typeset in Joanna MT  
by Apex CoVantage, LLC



Printed in the United Kingdom  
by Henry Ling Limited

# Senses of Mystery

In this beautifully written book, David E. Cooper uses a gentle walk through a tropical garden – the view of the fields and hills beyond it, the sound of birds, voices and flutes, the reflection of light in water, the play of shadows among the trees and the presence of strange animals – as an opportunity to reflect on experiences of nature and the mystery of existence.

Covering an extensive range of topics, from Daoism to dogs, from gardening to walking, from Zen to Debussy, Cooper succeeds in conveying some deep and difficult philosophical ideas about the meaning of life in an engaging manner, showing how those ideas bear upon the practical question of how we should relate to our world and live our lives.

A thought-provoking and compelling book, *Senses of Mystery* is a triumph of both storytelling and philosophy.

**David E. Cooper** is Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at Durham University. He has been a Visiting Professor at universities in several countries, including the USA and Sri Lanka. His many books include *The Measure of Things: Humanism, Humility and Mystery*, *A Philosophy of Gardens* and *Convergence with Nature: A Daoist Perspective*.

‘Cultivation of a sense of mystery has venerable precedent in ancient spiritual traditions, and runs through modern writings on animals, gardens, nature, art, and music. In this personal, humane book, David E. Cooper describes the rhythms and tones of a life shaped by mystery. Gathering the wisdom of sages, composers, gardeners, nature lovers, and others, this book reveals the ways that reflective appreciation of creatures, places, and practices can reveal the depth and mystery that underlies human life.’

**Ian James Kidd**, University of Nottingham, UK

‘This world is, indeed, one vast mystery, containing only, here and there, a few scattered islands of human knowledge. Past philosophers have not attended enough to this paradoxical situation, but Cooper now does so. We had better read him.’

**Mary Midgley**, Newcastle University, UK

‘Senses of Mystery is a superb book – inspiring, beautifully written and packed with insights about a remarkably wide range of topics, from meditative walking to the mystery of existence. I recommend it to anyone who wishes to understand what it means to live in harmony with the natural world.’

● **Simon P. James**, Durham University, UK

‘This book is a gentle and beautiful evocation of the well lived human life, and the role of familiar practices such as listening to music, walking and gardening in leading us into a transformed appreciation of the everyday world. In Cooper’s hands, philosophical reflection has become a spiritual practice.’

**Mark Wynn**, University of Leeds, UK

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I am very grateful to Simon P. James, Ian James Kidd and Graham Parkes for their warm and helpful remarks on the typescript of this book. I want to thank, too, Peter Cheyne and Guy Bennett-Hunter for commenting on papers on which the book draws. Finally, I am grateful to the ever efficient team at Routledge – Rebecca Shillabeer, Gabrielle Coakeley and Fiona Hudson – with whom it has been a pleasure to work.

## CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vii
1 In a garden	1
2 The truth of mystery	3
<i>Ineffability</i>	3
<i>The scientific image</i>	6
<i>The world as fiction</i>	9
<i>The world as gift</i>	12
3 Religion, nature and mystery	16
<i>Religion, faith, mystery</i>	16
<i>'Nothing special'</i>	19
<i>Senses of mystery</i>	21
<i>Nature and culture</i>	23
4 Animals	27
<i>Animal worlds</i>	27
<i>The opacity of animals</i>	31

	<i>Animals, mystery and world</i>	34
	<i>Animals and 'the Open'</i>	37
5	Music	41
	<i>Music and experience</i>	41
	<i>Music and nature</i>	44
	<i>Music, culture, environment</i>	47
	<i>Music and the mystery of emergence</i>	50
6	Walking	55
	<i>Meditation on the move</i>	55
	<i>Body, mind and involvement</i>	58
	<i>Communion and holism</i>	60
	<i>Walking and senses of mystery</i>	63
7	Gardening	69
	<i>The way of the garden</i>	69
	<i>Gardens and meaning</i>	72
	<i>'In the head' and 'in the hands'</i>	75
	<i>Garden, 'gift', mystery</i>	77
8	Life and mystery	82
	<i>Ethics</i>	82
	<i>Removing obstacles</i>	85
	<i>Humility and compassion</i>	88
	<i>Emulation</i>	92
9	In a garden again	96
	INDEX	100



# 1

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## IN A GARDEN

I am slowly walking down the steps of a garden, alongside a low, moss-covered stone wall beyond which a paddy field stretches towards the hills. It is still light, but soon it will be dark, for here in the tropics – in Sri Lanka – the sun descends quickly. For the moment, rays of sunshine stream through narrow spaces in the thick foliage of the trees. This light is reflected by the surface of the pool that lies at the bottom of the steps, and by the scales of the small red fish that swim just below this surface. As well as the slight plopping sounds made by the fish, I can hear the calls and chatter of birds – crows, parrots, babblers – that briefly stop over in the trees on the way to their roosts. I can also hear the soft sounds of a solitary flute and, still more faintly, the chanting of monks from the temple on a hillside beyond the paddy field.

As I climb ~~back~~ up the steps, the light has already faded. The little world around me is becoming shadowy, its contents indistinct. The sounds, too, have changed. Gone is the calling of the

birds, replaced by the incipient rustling and croaking of the creatures that emerge at dusk.

A pleasant early evening stroll? Yes, of course. But on this evening, at least, rather more than that – an occasion for a quiet, undramatic sense of something I want to call a sense of the mystery of things. The gentle walk through the garden, the view of the fields and hills beyond it, the sound of birds, voices and flute, the reflection of light in water, the play of shadows among the trees, the felt presence of strange animals – these come together to provide an opportunity for attunement to the mystery of existence.

Opportunities like this are ones to seek out and cultivate. First, because there is a compelling case for regarding the way of things – reality ‘as such’, as metaphysicians say – as being mysterious, ineffable. Hence, to experience a sense of mystery, to be attuned to it, is to be in the truth. Second, because it matters to the quality – the flourishing or otherwise – of a human life whether it is led in appreciation of mystery. This is an appreciation that has atrophied in modernity, replaced by a hubristic subordination of everything to human instruments of understanding and measure. This subordination is complicit in some of the moral debacles of modernity – in the devastation of natural environments, for example, and in ‘the eternal Treblinka’ endured by billions of industrially farmed animals.

‘Nothing special’, as Zen masters like to put it, is necessary for inviting in and cultivating a sense of mystery. This sense is not a Eureka-like vision of the supernatural. Nor is it the reward for the privations, feats and techniques of ascetic virtuosos and other adepts. Walking, gardening, attention to animals, listening to the sounds of nature and music, watching the play of light and shadows – in none of this is there anything special. But as Zen Buddhists, Daoists and followers of other traditions of wisdom suggest, such simple practices are ones that, mindfully conducted, inspire attunement to mystery.

This book is an elaboration and defence of that suggestion.

# 2

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## THE TRUTH OF MYSTERY

### INEFFABILITY

There's a compelling case, I just wrote, for regarding the way of things – reality 'as such' – as mysterious, as ineffable. That last word is important, for the mystery of the way of things is not something that we could hope – with more effort and research – to understand and articulate. The way of things is mysterious in the strong sense of being inaccessible to description, at least in literal terms. It is forever resistant to conceptual articulation and understanding. It is, in short, ineffable. Such, famously, is the teaching of the opening verse of the *Daodejing*, which tells us that the way (*dao*) is 'nameless' (Laozi 2003: Ch. 1). It is the teaching, too, of Mahayana Buddhist texts: reality is 'signless' and 'inaccessible to discursive thought' (Conze 1990: 349). It is 'something ineffable coming like this' (Dōgen 1996: Ch. 22).

I want briefly to make the case for mystery, but without the detail and responses to objections that I have supplied in other

writings (Cooper 2002). My aim in this book is less to convince readers of the truth of mystery than to communicate, to people already receptive to the idea, some of the ways in which intimations of mystery may be cultivated and integrated into our lives.

Let's return to the garden I walked through and think about some of the terms I used in my description of it. Take, for instance, 'flute', 'temple', 'wall' and 'garden' itself. None of these terms could figure in a description of the world 'in itself', of a world independent of human purposes and perspectives. A hollow length of wood with holes in it is a flute only because of its role in a human practice – music. A pile of stones is a wall only in virtue of its practical function – to separate a garden from a field, say. The point is not that flutes, walls or temples are man-made. In fact it is perfectly possible for a natural site – a cave, say, or a forest clearing – to serve as a temple. A narrow, naturally formed mound of earth could act as a garden wall. The point, rather, is that things count as flutes, walls, temples and the like only in relation to how they are understood and used, how they are regarded from the perspective of human agency. A world without creatures like us – ones who have purposes and perspectives – would be devoid of gardens, flutes, walls and temples.

But, you'll say, it would certainly still contain the trees, rocks, moss and other natural things I came across during my walk in the garden. So the names of these things, you'll insist, will still figure in a description of the world as it is independent of human practices and points of view. Reality, you'll conclude, isn't therefore ineffable.

But what you're saying is unconvincing. Surely it isn't difficult to imagine creatures whose lives – whose perceptions, interests, purposes and practices – are so different from ours that trees and rocks would not figure for them among the things they notice, register and have names for. The world would present

itself quite differently to these creatures; it would be structured and organized for them in ways entirely alien to us. It would be silly – parochial, hubristic, invidious – for us to suppose that these creatures have got the world wrong, and that only the perspective of we (modern) human beings offers a true mirror of reality. No less silly, as Friedrich Nietzsche observed, than for a gnat to imagine that the gnat's-eye view of the world is privileged, the view that uniquely corresponds to reality (Nietzsche 1979: 79).

What is emerging is that *none* of the terms we employ in everyday descriptions of the world has a claim to refer to the world as it is 'in itself' or 'as such' – to a world that, as Buddhists put it, is 'not conditioned' by human perception and purpose. It is impossible, as William James rightly remarked, to 'weed out the human factor' from such descriptions (James 1977: 455). And it is impossible to imagine how the world might present itself to a creature who was entirely without interests and perspectives – one who was an absolutely pure and detached spectator of the passing scene. This is impossible, not because our powers of imagination are stunted, but because it makes no sense to suppose that a world would be present at all to such a creature. Things stand out for us and light up for us – and for any other creatures – only through the significance they have within a web of life, a life that is charged with desires, goals and values. A world, one might say, is a theatre of significance. For a world – a structured whole of things – to be anything for us it must be experienced, and experience is inseparable from a web of life, a network of meanings.

So any world that can be described is not unconditioned reality, not the way things are 'as such'. This unconditioned reality – this way of things – must be nameless, ineffable, mysterious. At any rate, this is a conclusion we should accept once we have addressed and rejected a couple of alternative proposals, to which I briefly turn.

## THE SCIENTIFIC IMAGE

Everyday terms of ordinary English – ‘flute’, ‘tree’, ‘bird’, ‘temple’ – do not, we’ve seen, describe the way of things, the way they are independent of interest-driven perspectives. But perhaps we’re looking in the wrong place, at the wrong sort of vocabulary. Perhaps there’s another kind of language that does have a legitimate claim to capture reality ‘as such’, one that has shaken off the constraints imposed by all-too-human interests and perspectives.

If I were a biologist, I might return from my walk through the garden and describe the plants and creatures I encountered in a specialist vocabulary. I would speak – not of trees and birds – but of cells, neurones, DNA processes and so on. And if I was familiar with state-of-the-art theoretical physics, I might try to translate this vocabulary into one referring to sub-atomic particles, quantum events or whatever. I might then insist that this vocabulary of physics, unlike that of everyday experience, provides a uniquely and objectively true description of the way of things.

But I would be deluding myself, and it is a conceit to imagine that the language of science is a privileged one that provides an accurate mirror of nature. The conceit is not that of science itself. There is no need to reject the biochemist’s description of a tree in terms of cellular structure and biochemical processes – no more than there is to reject everyday descriptions of the tree that employ words like ‘leaf’, ‘trunk’ and ‘lichen’. It is not science, but what is sometimes called *scientism*, that is guilty of conceit. Scientism is an attitude towards science, to the effect that science – and science alone – can furnish an objective, fundamental account of reality in itself. The way of things, according to this conceit, is the way that physics presents it as being.

Philosophers sometimes speak of ‘the scientific image’ of the world. The phrase is an apt one, for it suggests, rightly, that science is just that – one image, among many possible ones, of how

things are. It is an image that it is especially useful to employ for certain purposes – notably those of predicting events and controlling them. Probing what things are made of – molecules, DNA ribbons, or whatever – and the statistical regularities they obey is very helpful in finding out what they are likely to do and how we may influence what they will do. Without such enquiries, cars and bridges could not be built. Technology is more than applied science; it is the ground on which the edifice of science is erected.

That scientism is a conceit becomes apparent when we further reflect on the immense amount of luck that was needed for science ever to have developed and then become entrenched in the manner it has. History might easily have gone differently, and if it had human beings would have developed schemes of understanding and explanation quite different from those of the natural sciences. The confident assertion that, unlike the sciences, these other schemes of understanding would not have mirrored reality, is no more warranted than the conviction of Nietzsche's gnats that their perspective alone gets it all right.

We should reflect, too, on how parasitic upon our ordinary experience of the world the scientific image is. It's only because experience presents us with a world of trees, birds and other inhabitants of nature that scientists have anything in front of them to get to work on, to dissect, analyse and hypothesize about. Had the world presented itself to us very differently – as it presumably does to gnats – there is no reason to think that enquiry into this world would yield anything remotely like the natural sciences as we know them.

Reflect, too, that our interests and aims might have been very different from what they now are. Suppose, say, we had lived in a land of milk and honey, where everything we needed for survival, comfort and pleasure was readily supplied, without planning or effort on our part. Predicting and controlling events would then have mattered to us much less. These practices are imperative

only in a world of shortage, uncertainty and peril. Lotus-eating, aesthetic appreciation of nature might have mattered much more to the men and women we are imagining than the achievement of practical mastery of nature. In the unlikely event that science, in a form that we could recognize as science, had developed in such a culture, it would have been a pastime of marginal interest. It would have been of no more moment and importance for these people than literary criticism, for example, is for most of us today in our own more pragmatic culture. Certainly it would have been nothing that people would have regarded as delineating the fundamental contours of reality.

My lotus-eating aesthetes would be unwilling, I'm confident, to subordinate their everyday, sensory experience of the world – a world of colours, smells, tastes – to a scientific account of the world that avoids all mention of these sensory items. And, in this respect, we should be on the side of the lotus-eaters. It is an implication of privileging the scientific image of the world that what is sometimes called our 'manifest' image of it is relegated to the realm of illusion. Leaves and bird-calls manifest themselves to us as green or brown, loud or soft. But colours and sounds do not feature in the scientific image – not if by colours and sounds we have in mind, as of course we generally do, the simple sensory features that we see or hear. The scientist might define green and loud in terms of emissions of light-waves or sound-waves that impinge on eye or ear. But that's not what you or I mean by colours and sounds, not what is presented to our experience.

In the scientific image, the vibrant world of colours, sounds and tastes is a screen, a veil, between us and the real – colourless, soundless, tasteless – universe of particles and quantum processes. And, of course, in that image the qualities of beauty, elegance, wonder and meaning with which the manifest world is also replete – these, too, belong only in the realm of illusion, as 'subjective' effects, as happenings 'in the mind' that, pathetically,



we suppose to belong to the world itself. There is an irony in those many television science programmes where a wide-eyed, gobsmacked presenter invites us to gaze at or listen to such ‘wonders of nature’ as the aurora borealis or the singing of whales. For, on the physicist’s conception of the world assumed in such programmes to be true, the colours and sounds that we, like the presenter, experience do not belong in the world at all. We are being invited to wonder at what isn’t there.

This relegation of the manifest and the ordinary is something we should resist. Indeed, none of us seriously accepts, when we are engaged in the thick of life, the thought that the world as ordinarily experienced is a façade beyond which lurks the real thing, the universe of the physicist. More likely, we’ll think of that universe, along with Goethe, as a ‘grey, corpse-like spectre’ (Goethe 2011: §XI).

The scientific image, however, is not the only rival to a doctrine of mystery. I want now to turn to a fashionable view that rejects mystery and the scientific image alike.

## THE WORLD AS FICTION

‘But a garden, you see, is actually a text – something you need to “read” as you stroll through it.’ Remarks like this, not only about gardens, but about towns, human history, clothing and food, natural environments – about everything, in effect – were very popular not so long ago in the corridors of French and American universities crowded with disciples of the movement known as postmodernism. The metaphor of the world as a text was, perhaps, the essential expression of the philosophical wing of this movement. But how is the metaphor to be unpacked?

First, it conveys the sensible thought that to recognize walls as walls, flutes as flutes, and so on, is to understand their significance. Just as the lines in a poem are understood through the contribution they make to the text as a whole, so items like