Every now and then, the discipline of management throws up some intriguing questions, which hold the interest of practitioners and academicians for some time, and then give way to newer questions. A 2009 *Forbes* article by Albrecht Enders explained the ‘The Simple Reason Most Companies Can’t Handle Major Change’ using the psychologist Robert Cialdini’s concept of social proof: when faced with uncertainty, people seek cues on behaviour from others. This can be disastrous when an entire industry is faced with discontinuous change since the till-then successful peers are themselves paralyzed. Or, as a December 2015 article in *strategy+business*, a management magazine published by PwC Strategy&LLC, asked: ‘How do organizational habits and individual habits affect each other?’ ‘What is the nature and value of organizational maturity?’ ‘How do flows of capital and management prowess affect each other—in a way we can reliably understand?’ ‘What is the ideal form of regulation?’ But what if the questions are in the nature of mysteries—questions that do not permit straightforward answers are widely known but hold on to their mysteriousness, and persist as ‘unexplained knowns’? And what if such mysteries were to be used for the pedagogical purpose of ‘encouraging questioning, nurturing curiosity, and instilling the spirit of wonder about what we do not know?’ They form part of a course titled ‘Mysteries in Management’, designed by Ajeet N. Mathur, professor of management at the Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad (IIMA). And 10 mysteries discussed in that course are now available as a book for the benefit of management practitioners and teachers.

The word ‘mystery’, with its emphasis on the ‘secret’ and a sense of wonder for the initiated, has a special place in the religions of many ancient cultures. It derives, through the ancient Greek *mustērion*, from *muein*, which, though literally meaning having the mouth or eye closed in a secular situation, implies saying or seeing in a sacred situation. As is evident from a conversation in Philostratus’s *Heroicus*, this way of saying/seeing happens so fast—in the blink of an eye, when the eye is momentarily closed—that you really cannot say or see anything—for instance,
you cannot see the cult figure, in this case Protesilaus, actually consuming the food you leave for him. But this way of ‘saying/seeing’ initiates you into the mystery, here the mystery of the cult figure’s resurrection. ‘Mystery’, therefore, focuses on the moment of wonder, the transition from ‘unknowing’ into understanding or realization. The author has rightly applied this term to certain phenomena which are ‘unknown’ to the extent that they are ‘unthought’, or deliberately ignored, but which nevertheless, in the pedagogical sense, provide moments of wonder and initiation for the reader.

This focus on the moments of initiation that mysteries facilitate helps the author challenge the epistemological assumptions that have come to underpin contemporary management education, a key task that the book performs admirably.

Thinking always implies a degree of not knowing. For this reason, teaching becomes a formidable defence against learning if it is organized around instruction about a finite range of discrete solutions, products or outcomes of inquiry because it misses out on experiential elements of discovery. (p. xv)

This statement is no doubt provocative. Perhaps ‘management education’ as a discipline cannot afford the vulnerability that emerges when it assumes that knowledge is always evolving and reveals that it does not have all the answers. Imagine a hard-nosed executive who, while attending a professional development programme, demands ‘solutions’ and evaluates them using something called ‘applicability to practice’. What does a professor do? He or she creates a knowledgeable persona, a role that is demanded by the context—the executive is after all a customer who has paid for a service, and admitting to vulnerability is just not on. A second assumption derives from the episteme—to borrow from Foucault’s use of the term as a fundamental code to culture which gives rise to discourses of knowledge creation—that, in contemporary professional education, is bound up with what has been termed ‘scientism’. Scientism operates through objectification, rationalization, and most importantly, demystification. Shaped by such a discourse, the dominant model of management education seeks to freeze the process of knowing, often through theoretical prescriptions that may be just full of sound and fury. In such a context, this book is a welcome call to reinstate the ‘unthought, unexplained knowns’, the mysteries in management, as valid doorways to exploring ways of teaching and learning which emphasize the open-endedness of the discovery of knowledge and are not constrained by the arrogance which comes with certainty. The third assumption that this book challenges is the dominant focus on ‘puzzle solving’. The introduction opens with a distinction between puzzle solving and understanding mysteries. The former, the author says, are basically about ‘locating information to fill out incomplete patterns’; the latter requires ‘inquiries into understanding the “logic” underpinning the patterns from partially revealed patterns and making judgement calls of discernment’ (p. xiii). By implication, the usual form that management classrooms take is that of puzzle-solving rather than the understanding of mysteries, frequently leading to a conviction about certain solutions which ‘freezes the knowing’ (p. xv). As an aside, one may add that challenging these three assumptions underpinned the case method of management education as it was originally envisaged: contemporary use of the method in many places seems to be unaware of the uncertainty that comes with exploration of unfamiliar situations, the anxieties that one has to deal with when playing unusual roles, and the encouragement that the method offers to making informed judgements. How often have we heard learners claiming they have ‘solved’ a case, or asking, ‘But what is the solution?’ Thus, apart from those concerned about management, people involved in management pedagogy would benefit from reading this book.

The demystification that Mathur attempts is of the kind that does not provide neat solutions to puzzles. Each of the 10 mysteries is addressed through a number of examples from a variety of contexts and a wide literature base, which is often dominated by psychology. Thus, the reader will read about Operation Market Garden, the disastrous attempt to take the ‘bridge too far’ at Arnhem, companies such as Pfizer, Reuters, and Nirma, and the debate between Einstein and Freud on how to prevent future wars. And, the reader will be taken through powerful explanatory tools such as the twin drives of Freud, Eros or the life-preserving drive and Thanatos, the aggression drive or death drive; the coping and defending responses to anxiety states, with the functional and dysfunctional uses of defences often important in explaining some aspects of a mystery; the four primary organizational tasks: normative (to do
with the formal purpose), existential (attracting people seeking assurances about a particular work life), phenomenal (the purpose as it actually plays out, especially in the minds of the actors), and the hermeneutic (the ability to generate hypotheses about the ‘unthought knowns’); and the combination of negative capabilities (the ability to disengage from a situation to engage in reflective inaction) and positive capabilities in leadership. The reader unfamiliar with the field of psychology, and management students, would do well to pay attention to such conceptual frameworks and the way in which they are used to illuminate aspects of the mysteries discussed. All this discussion, however, may not lead to definitive answers. Some mysteries are left open for further exploration. Thus, Mathur’s demystification is not scientism’s project of a triumphant rationality but a work-in-process that helps students deal with the fluidity of knowledge creation and the uncertain environment in which knowledge is created in the context of ‘phenomena around social, cultural, political, psychological, economic and military organizations involving human civilizational endeavours of cohabitation in groups...’ (p. xvii). Within this context, Mathur asserts, there is no definite outcome that can be predicted with certainty because ‘the cohering cement is essentially behavioural.... The challenge here is to make the invisible visible, the tacit and unarticulated expressible and to enable enactment of what is withheld’ (p. xvii). Hence, the importance of understanding mysteries and his quotation of Friedrich von Hayek’s warning about the ‘pretence of knowledge’ and the reluctance to accept mysteries. ‘True but imperfect knowledge, even if it leaves much indeterminate and unpredictable, is preferable to the pretence of exact knowledge that is likely to be false’ (pp. xviii–xix). However, such a project has to be forever in search of new mysteries to decipher; the author promises that there are hundreds of mysteries awaiting demystification. One should not bemoan the loss of some mysteriousness; the pedagogical worth of the process of enabling students to tackle those questions to which conventional models and solutions cannot be applied should be obvious to management educators.

‘Is 7 really a lucky number and 13 unlucky?’ The author presents a lot of evidence to show why groups that have 7–12 members perform better and leverage the potential of ‘group’ functioning productively when ‘command and control or obedience to routines’ are not called for. He also extends the significance of 7 to 7! (7 factorial, $7 \times 6 \times 5 \times 4 \times 3 \times 2 \times 1$, that is, 5040). Did you know that this is the threshold number for a sustainable autonomous community or that it is the number of chimes in a church bell ringing sequence called Stedman Trebles? This chapter demonstrates how cumulative experience gets codified into easy-to-understand adages that guide action. It also illustrates how, perhaps through something akin to reverse reification, concrete experiences are cloaked with maxims that move them into a mystified world of supernatural commands.

Why are women under-represented in the higher levels of governance? The author believes that the usual explanations that rely on cumulative disadvantage, arising out of the biases and discrimination characterizing patriarchal structures and ways of thought, have to be complemented by an understanding of the way in which women mobilize power and strategies. The way such mobilization happens is underpinned by patterns of psychological responses, coping with and defending against anxieties, that vary across the genders. These, in turn, are moderated by cultural factors such as gendered identities, the family, nurturing the young, and so on. Thus, a better understanding of these psychological and cultural factors would perhaps make mobilizing for power easier.

In answer to the question of why nations compete, the author draws on Freud’s theorization of two drives—the drive of life and preservation of the species, Eros, and ‘Thanatos’, the drive of aggression and violence and death—to conclude with a sense of pathos that ‘it seems impossible to find safe containers to channel Thanatos anxieties by delegating some modicum of national sovereignty...there aren’t enough incentives for governing elites to be more sensitive to the needs of majorities that may abhor destructive competitive conflicts’ (p. 69). Echoing Freud who, in Civilization and its Discontents, noted that though the Jewish people ‘deserve recognition [for] the development of culture in the countries where they settled...unfortunately not all the massacres of Jews in the Middle Ages sufficed to procure peace and security for their Christian contemporaries’, Mathur says ‘it is easier to mobilize...aggressive energies by inventing the “other” as an enemy rather than a neutral object’.

Lack of space precludes discussion of the other seven mysteries; we hope readers will enjoy unravelling the interconnections that hold each mystery together.
'Are emotions in organizational life a nuisance?' The chapter helps us understand why the emotional stratum of any organization contributes to both effectiveness and well-being. 'What is the “DNA” of an organization?' Organizations do exhibit patterns of behaviour, which are like scripts being enacted. Five factors—the identity of an organization, the collective ways of thinking and acting that result, the attribution of importance to the purpose being achieved by the organization, the processes that ensure task achievement with harmony, and the ecological dimension—interact to form the core of the organization’s meta-culture, the DNA. If this is pathologically affected, the hermeneutic purpose of the organization has to come into play to defend the normative and existential tasks from being pathologically overtaken by the phenomenal primary task. Mathur quotes Adi Bhathena, owner of Wanson India turned down a distribution offer for Stella Artois beer, on the grounds that it was not in harmony with the DNA of Wanson that was woven around engineering. Wanson’s descendant Thermax ventured into bottled water and dispensers with severe negative results. ‘Is management a science, an art or a craft?’ As the reader would expect, it is all three, but the chapter will explain how discovery, judgement, and skill, which correspond to the science, art, and craft buckets, interact to result in what we call ‘management’. ‘Are strategies invented or discovered?’ After discussing 10 different schools of strategy—interestingly each is associated with an animal; for instance, if strategy is seen as anchored in planning, the animal metaphor would include the squirrel—the author concludes that the mystery is still to be resolved. ‘Can managerial productivity be measured?’ We really cannot say until we have measures that distinguish value-creating interventions from value-appropriating ones. ‘Why does the popularity and effectiveness of leaders decline with the passage of time?’ The author offers 11 hypotheses, which taken together, throw light on the relationship between a particular instance of decline and its context. The author emphasizes the importance for leaders of a negative capability to engage in reflective inaction.

Finally, ‘Why is there no management theory for optimal task partitioning?’ Mathur presents many examples of task partitioning but concludes that ‘there is no best way to partition a task, partly because there are so many different considerations that have varied subjective priorities’ (p. 229). But these priorities persist because practitioners fear that paying attention to task partitioning might ‘take away the glamour and glory of dwelling in unpartitioned complexity… [challenging] those managers pretending to be heroes and [making them] logical technicians’. Perhaps managers need to be wary of believing in the cult of the hero. This general warning, supported by certain observations such as ‘hope often triumphs over experience’, is a recurring theme in the book. In sum, the reader is initiated into 10 mysteries. Initiation does not mean coming away with a definite answer to a question, the satisfaction of putting in place the final piece of the puzzle. It means embarking on a journey to understand the significance of the mystery, its location and impact, the reasons for its persistence, and the imprisonment that the actors involved often undergo; the reader will note that many mysteries involve actors playing out fated scripts, with a return to the hermeneutic primary task of an organization often suggesting ways to overcome the limits imposed by mysteries. The book certainly achieves its aims of illuminating some ‘unexplained knowns’ and ‘encouraging questioning, nurturing curiosity and instilling the spirit of wonder about what we don’t know’. And in the process, it demonstrates that no knowledge-making process can afford to hanker exclusively after, or rest in, certainties.

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