THE LIMITS OF THOUGHT AND THE MIND–BODY PROBLEM

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Abstract: This paper gives an account of Colin McGinn's essay: "Can We Solve the Mind–Body Problem?" McGinn's answer to his own essay title is that the problem is forever beyond us, due to the particular nature of our cognitive abilities. The present author offers a number of criticisms of the arguments which support this conclusion.

INTRODUCTION

Common to all disciplines studying the mind is the rather obvious, but pertinent fact, that the object studied and that which is engaged in the study are of the same kind and sometimes even coextensive. Whether we are collecting data on the mind, via observation or introspection, or when theorising on that data, our own minds are ineluctably involved. A question is if the particularity of this epistemic situation has any consequences for the study of the mind?

There seem to be at least two ways in which these circumstances may limit our knowledge and understanding. First, there may be

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difficulties inherent in and arising from a special feature of the situation: the sameness (in kind or of identity) between the object studied and the studying object. Second, there may be limits posed by the particular characteristics of the object studied, and/or of that which is studying.

An example of the first type of difficulty are some of the problems belonging to introspection. When the mind studies itself through this faculty it will always be observing a mind which is introspecting, never quite able to catch itself as it ordinarily functions. Another difficulty belonging to this first type, is that of any finite mind trying to understand itself, or minds similar to itself. A full understanding of the mind may well exceed the capacity of minds of the same kind. In the case of a mind studying itself, it could not come to know everything there is to know about itself, since it would then need to know that it knew everything about itself and that it knew this and so on *ad infinitum*.

The second type of difficulty is exemplified by the fact that when we gather data or theorise on the mind, the nature and extent of our own cognitive apparatus will shape and constrain the results of this endeavour. It seems reasonable to suppose that our minds have certain limitations; we already have extensive knowledge of some of these: we know that our mind has a limited capacity and that it is geared to form and handle a certain range of concepts.[1] We cannot take it for granted that this capacity is sufficient to solve all problems, or even just those pertaining to the mind (there may even be problems that we are forever barred from formulating). In fact, the study of the mind may be so far removed from those tasks for which our minds were originally selected in the evolutionary process, that the concepts we are able to form turn out to be inadequate for the task.

This last point is, as yet, nothing more than a possibility and some may find the idea fruitless to pursue. Indeed if we are constrained to think in only certain ways, then we cannot of course transcend those to conceive the inconceivable.[2] But another avenue may remain open to us. Perhaps

[1]The range of concepts available to us may also be further restricted by cultural and historical factors.
[2]Apologies to mystics everywhere.

we could come to a better understanding of our type of mind if we were able to chart its boundaries; to measure our cognitive space from within in some way. It could turn out that some problems we have been trying to solve are permanently out of our reach and we could then set these aside, not so much having solved them as having disbanded them.

A recent proposal, by the philosopher Colin McGinn (1989) is that the solution to the ontological mind–body problem is such that it precludes beings with minds like ours of ever grasping it. I want therefore to take a closer look at how McGinn develops his thesis.

THE INSOLUBILITY OF THE MIND–BODY PROBLEM

McGinn chooses to formulate the problem as the question of how it is possible for conscious mental states to depend on brain states. Or more specifically, how the experiential or phenomenological aspects of consciousness can arise from the matter of the brain. Shunning supernatural and eliminativist solutions, McGinn feels it must be in virtue of some natural property of the brain that organisms are conscious. In the same way that life arose through a gradual process of evolution, consciousness must just be a subsequent development, the result of some further rearrangement of matter. Therefore, there must exist some natural property, call it "P", in virtue of which the brain is the basis of consciousness, and it is some theory T, referring to P, which would fully explain the dependence of conscious states on brain states. This theory, if successful, would provide a constructive solution to the mind–body problem, but what McGinn then goes on to argue is that we can never achieve a grasp of the nature of P because of the specific limitations of our cognitive apparatus. In order to show this, McGinn investigates what he sees as the only two possibilities open to us in trying to reveal the identity of P: one is to search for P by investigating consciousness directly; the other, is to approach P through study of the physical brain.

IDENTIFYING P BY STUDYING CONSCIOUSNESS DIRECTLY

It would not seem as if introspecting into our consciousness could solve the mind–body problem, looking inwards there is nothing which would appear to be P. According to McGinn this is because introspection only gives us access to one term of the mind–body relation and no such access to the crucial link. Introspection does not present conscious states as depending on brain states.

But there is also a further, more philosophically dire reason that prevents access to P through the introspective faculty. It seems that the range of concepts of conscious properties we are able to form are restricted to those forms of consciousness available to us: the blind man cannot fully grasp the concept of a visual experience of red and neither could he or we know what it would be like to sense the world by echolocation, in the manner of bats.

What McGinn then argues is that this specific limit on our concept formation, stands in opposition to what would be the case if we could know P. He has an argument to the effect, that a grasp of the physical property that subserves a specific subjective experience, would also confer a grasp of the subjective character of that experience; be it the experience of an echolocating bat or otherwise. The reasoning runs as follows: he presumes that knowing P would also confer a grasp of the theory T, the theory explaining how consciousness depends on P. But to understand T we must also understand the terms included in it, one of those being the subjective quality of the brain state. And to fully understand a subjective quality is *to grasp its character.*

Thus, knowing P would confer on us knowledge we cannot have because of the limits on what we can conceptualise, and therefore (by *reductio ad absurdum*) we cannot in fact come to know P.

THE ABOVE ARGUMENT QUERIED

Let us pause here for a while to question this argument.[3] A stage in the

[3]A quick way with the argument, is to simply deny that it is a *reductio* and accept the

reasoning above was that knowing P brought with it a knowledge of the subjective quality of any known brain state. I have at least two difficulties with this.

First, McGinn appears to slide between the idea of property P as some general property subserving consciousness and P as a specific brain state, subserving a specific experience. Must it not be in virtue of different properties that a brain state is conscious and that it is the particular experience that it is, or how else could conscious experiences be differentiated? If we allow this is not the *reductio* avoided? Knowledge of the physical property that subserves consciousness in general, would then only entail a grasp of what it is like to be conscious, a quality well within our conceptual ability. One objection that might be made, is that what it is like to be conscious and what it is like to be conscious *of* something, might not be conveniently peeled apart in this way. Regardless, it is questionable whether knowing P would actually confer this type of knowledge, which brings me to the second difficulty.

In one of the first steps of his argument, McGinn seems to presume that if we knew P, we would also know T, the theory explaining how consciousness depends on P. Elsewhere he also speaks of P "accounting" for the psychophysical link. Does this seem reasonable? If we were able to grasp P and should stumble upon it by accident, would we then simply see that it was the property subserving consciousness and how it did this? Maybe the answer to this is something self–evident which eludes me alone. However, since P and T are distinct things, some justification seems to be in order for why T, which encompasses P, should follow from just knowing P. I believe the question is a rather tough one, requiring clarification of (amongst other things): *what it means to grasp a property*, which in turn is partly dependent on *what a property is*. Then there is the question of *what one knows when grasping a property*; and whether a knowledge of T follows from this must in turn be contingent on *what relation there is between the property and consciousness*.

consequences.

I shall not venture any complete elucidation, suffice it to say that McGinn does not provide one. I will however pursue one of the many possible ways in which the question might be resolved, in order to illustrate that the outcome need not be in McGinn's favour.

DOES KNOWLEDGE OF T FOLLOW FROM KNOWLEDGE OF P?

What it means to grasp a property must partly depend on what properties are. One suggestion that has been proposed by Sydney Shoemaker (1984) is that the essential nature of a property is its potential for contributing to the causal powers of the things that have it. Each of the potentialities that make up the property can be specified by stating the combination with other properties that give rise to a specific causal power.[4] An example given is the property of being knife-shaped. This property is partially specified by saying that anything having this property together with the property of "being made of steel," has the power to cut wood when applied with a certain pressure. Shoemaker also suggests that if we could indicate all the ways in which having a property contributed to the causal powers of the things possessing it, we would have said everything there is to be said about the intrinsic nature of the property. What I wish to contend, is that to grasp a property might then plausibly be to know, all the (or some of the, or the typical) causal potentialities it possesses. But a knowledge of these causal potentialities is not the same thing as (and does not entail) a knowledge of how, or by which mechanisms these powers act. Thus, there are things relating to a property which do not follow from knowing its intrinsic nature and the question is whether this is also the case with T? The answer to this depends on how P is related to consciousness. If for example, P is the cause of consciousness (as McGinn at times seem to imply[5]) then knowledge of P would not imbue us with insight into how this was

[4]This definition obviously contains some circularity, in that it includes that which is to be defined.
[5]For example: McGinn (1991, p.6.)

achieved. Or if, for example, the property P and consciousness were *identical*, then knowing P's causal potentialities would be equivalent to knowing those belonging to consciousness. We would still be no nearer an understanding of how this identity was possible.[6]

I find it intuitively plausible that we might actually know P without knowing *how* the particular property subserved consciousness or even *that* it was the property subserving consciousness. If so, then our problems are not with P, but reside with T. There is still of course the possibility that T is beyond the grasp of our cognitive constitutions, but I think this would have different consequences.

IDENTIFYING P BY STUDYING THE BRAIN

The other possible route to P that McGinn envisaged was through study of the brain side of the mind–body relation. He asks whether we might come to introduce P in the course of empirical investigation and argues that P is neither a perceptible property, nor one that could be inferred from a perceptible property.

His reason for concluding that P is not perceivable by us, is that we cannot imagine anything perceptible in the brain that would make it comprehensible how it gave rise to consciousness. We are challenged to do so, and McGinn suggests that it would be like conceiving of a perceptible property of a rock that would render it apparent that it was conscious. Our senses are geared to register properties that are essentially spatial and these properties seem to be precisely the wrong kind needed to resolve the problem.

The brunt of McGinn's argument seems to rest with the challenge to come up with the desired property. Although I share his inability to do so, this is not a strong enough reason to entitle us to presume that this is *principally* impossible. Also, as I argued above, our inability to conceive of a property that would make the mind–body link intelligible, may reflect our lack of explanatory theory rather than the inadequacy of the physical properties we may propose. I am not arguing that P has to be a

[6]There are of course more than these two possible ways of relating P to consciousness.

perceptible property, only that it could be.

The concluding part of McGinn's argument, which cuts our last thread to P and spins it into inaccessible mystery, is the claim that no coherent method of concept introduction could ever lead us to P.

We do not need consciousness to explain our observations of the brain and its physical effects[7] and neither will any inference to the best explanation force us to introduce the concept; a purely physical explanation can be given of what is observed. Since consciousness is not needed to explain the data, the property explaining consciousness is not needed either. McGinn also argues that no other kind of inference from what is observed could lead to P, because of the way in which we generate theoretical concepts. His proposal is that theoretical concepts are formed by a sort of analogical extension of what we observe. The concept of a molecule, for example, is simply the concept of a macroscopic object but conceived on a smaller scale. He maintains that any analogical extensions of the kinds of properties we find in the brain would be just as "hopeless" as the original properties were in resolving the mind–body problem.

This theory of concept formation is rather reminiscent of the classical empiricist view, which McGinn himself criticises at one point in his paper. This is the view that concepts ultimately rely on what is perceptually available. But we need not feel compelled to share in this conviction since there may be additional ways of forming concepts (for instance, on the basis of what is introspectively available). McGinn himself admits, that the ways in which we think about mathematical concepts do not seem tied to either perception or introspection.

SUMMARY AND MCGINN'S CONCLUSIONS

There exists some perfectly natural property of the brain, in virtue of which we are conscious and if we could only come to know the property, the mind–body problem would be solved. But unfortunately this property is such that we cannot conceive of it because of the way that

[7]A point familiar from the Problem of Other Minds.

our concept formation is essentially tied to space. McGinn concludes that the problem is insoluble for all minds whose concept formation is even partly tied to perception or introspection. There is no mystery, no metaphysical problem, it is simply that the solution is inherently beyond us: not in its complexity but because of the *kind* of problem it is. The actual solution, he feels, may be rather simple by some objective standard. It may be noted for instance that consciousness is something occurring fairly early on in evolution and is shared by a broad range of organisms, whilst the type of biological engineering required for language comes later and is more advanced.

The mind–body problem is thus insoluble and this very insolubility is its solution.

CONCLUSIONS

Having read through the above, and having seen that I disagree with McGinn on almost every detail, it might be asked if my concern with his thesis is other than critical? On reading his paper for the first time, I was appalled at what seemed like defeatism in face of the problem and I also took the thesis to support a new kind of mysticism; however frequent the explicit denials. A feature I came to appreciate later, was that McGinn went further than the customary acknowledgement of our epistemological limitations, to actually specify a problem and to outline the reasons for *why* that problem is beyond us.

Although McGinn doesn't sketch a general method applicable to other problems that have been eluding us,[8] his own suggests a possible strategy.[9] We need to specify exactly what is needed to solve a particular problem and then see whether this falls within the bounds of our cognitive capacity. Clearly, this requires a far more developed theory of concept formation than the one provided, but how could we even begin to specify what needs to be known, if this thing should happen to

[8]It has been pointed out to me, that since writing this essay, McGinn has written a book in which (I am told) he does just that: McGinn (1993).
[9]For a selection of unsolved problems, just pick a random philosophy book.

be beyond our reach? McGinn's reason for postulating that the property needed to solve the mind–body problem is unknowable, was simply the felt inadequacy of those physical properties we can conceive of. But in approaching a problem in this way, can we be sure that there is not some other formulation of it which avoids relegating the solution to some cognitively unreachable realm? The perplexity confronting us when dealing with the mind–body problem may well stem from some other source; after all the problem is rather dissimilar to most other problems.

McGinn mentions one other possible account of our bafflement.[10] This is the idea that our acquaintance with consciousness and our acquaintance with the brain are mediated by different faculties, namely introspection and perception. It is because neither faculty alone will allow us to apprehend the dependence between the two terms, that the link remains obscure. We have to shift between the two modes and it is this necessity that produces the illusion of inexplicability. McGinn dismisses this on the grounds that he can see no reason for why we shouldn't recognise connections between concepts just because these were ascribed using different faculties. I agree that at least some concepts are independent of the faculty used to apprehend them. I could, for example, count the apples in a basket by using touch alone and then again by sight alone. Afterwards I should be able to determine whether the same quantity was arrived at each time. The possibility remains, however, that the phenomenological aspect of consciousness, is not something that is apprehended by introspection, but instead something which is given by the employment of this faculty.

Since there are still several alternatives to positing noumenal properties in order to explain the mind–body link, I think we should explore these before setting the problem aside. But neither should we prematurely reject the idea that the problem might be beyond us, and McGinn's strategy might prove more successful in some other sphere.

[10]I have already mentioned the possibility that our perplexity could be chiefly due to our lack of explanatory theory.

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