

McGinn's "Can We Solve the Mind-Body Problem?"

Henry Nikogosyan

University of Nevada

A satisfactory account of the relation between mental states and physical states has historically eluded many, if not all, thinkers. The human body can be explained in scientific terms in great detail; however, consciousness does not enjoy the same intelligibility. The explanations of phenomena of consciousness are couched in psychological and cognitive terms and thus far are not reducible to the terms of physical science. However, there is correlation between mental states and brain states suggesting that there is some intimate link between the two. Uncovering what this link actually is, known as the mind-body problem, has proven to be terribly difficult and central to understanding the mind. In 2005 Colin McGinn published a paper, "Can We Solve the Mind-Body Problem?"¹, in which he proposes to resolve the question in a rather unorthodox manner. In this paper McGinn attempts to relieve the philosophical enigma without providing a solution to the problem of how consciousness is related to the brain. The theory that would resolve the mind-body problem is unknowable to us human beings because of our cognitive limitations or what he calls *cognitive closure*. In this paper I will show McGinn's conclusion that we will never be able to understand the theory that resolves the mind-body problem is wrong and I will propose more reasonable explanations and expectations for a proper theory of mind.

In "Can We Solve the Mind-Body Problem?" McGinn makes the following argument:

#1 There is some scientific theory, *T*, which provides a

¹ McGinn, Colin. "Can We Solve the Mind-Body Problem?" *Philosophy of Mind Classical and Contemporary Readings*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. 394-405.

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naturalistic explanation of the mind-body problem.

#2 To know theory *T*, it is necessary to discover property *P*, which is the property of the brain that allows consciousness to arise.

#3 Human beings can never come to discover *P* due to cognitive closure.

#4 If humans can never come to discover *P*, then they can never know *T* and the solution to the mind-body problem.

#5 Therefore, humans cannot know *T* and discover the solution to the mind-body problem.

McGinn is a physicalist, and a physicalist account of the mind not only gives context to the argument but also provides an explanation for #1. The first premise is a consequence of his physicalism. He insists on certain points about the nature of consciousness that eliminate the possibility of dualism and any non-physical to physical interactions. "We know that brains are the de facto causal basis of consciousness, but we have, it seems, no understanding whatever of how this can be so" (McGinn 395). McGinn concedes that mental states or properties are a product of the brain; that the "soggy grey matter" (McGinn 394) in our heads allows "technicolour phenomenology" (McGinn 394) to arise. It is unclear what particular features of brains are responsible for the mental phenomena which other organs such as lungs and skin lack. Furthermore, McGinn insists on another point that puts his view entirely within the domain of physicalism: "Resolutely shunning the supernatural, I think it is undeniable that it must be in virtue of some natural property of the brain that organisms are conscious" (McGinn 396). Since physicalism is true, there must be some physical scientific theory that can account for the observed correlation between brain states and mental states. Looking at the development of life can give us a reliable indication of the physical basis of consciousness; mental states are "just as a further biological development" making them another product of evolution "and so it too must be susceptible of some natural explanation" (McGinn 396). The phenomenon of consciousness, as McGinn sees it, is rooted in the physical world and is, in principle, explicable by science.

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Premise #2 claims that if there is a theory which explains and solves the mind-body problem, then there are features of that theory/facts of the world that we must understand if the theory is to be understood.

Let us then say that there exists some property *P*, instantiated by the brain, in virtue of which the brain is the basis of consciousness. Equivalently, there exists some theory *T*, referring to *P*, which fully explains the dependence of conscious states on brain states. If we knew *T*, then we would have a constructive solution to the mind-body problem.
(McGinn 397)

It seems quite clear that what McGinn is purporting here is true. To solve the mind-body problem (know *T*) you must know the link (*P*) between the mental and physical. McGinn's interest is in our ability to discover *P*.

In premise #3 *cognitive closure* roughly refers to the limits of our knowledge. It means that there are certain facts out in the world that we are incapable of understanding. A perceptual analogue would be our inability perceive gamma rays – we can only experience optical rays. Similarly the fact there is in principle a natural explanation of the mind-body relation does not mean that we are able to know that explanation. The possibility that we can never understand *P* is quite controversial, but McGinn argues that it is actually the case.

His support for premise #3 comes from analyzing what he considers to be the two methods that seem to have the best prospects for identifying and understanding *P*: direct inspection of consciousness or introspection, and physical investigation of the brain (McGinn 397). His assessment, as expected, is rather pessimistic.

Introspection allows us to access our own mental states directly but that seems to be it. The mind-body problem concerns the relation the mind has to the brain and direct inspection of consciousness gives us access only to the mental so that we must extract *P* by only analyzing mental states somehow. McGinn rightfully has his reservations, "Neither does it seem feasible to try to derive *P* from the concept of consciousness we now have by some procedure of

conceptual analysis – any more than we could solve the life-matter problem simply by reflecting on the concept of *life*.” (McGinn 397)

Direct inspection of consciousness as a method to form concepts is *closed*, or has the property of *closure*, in respect to *P* since no amount of analytic reflection can discover information external to the intellectual domain of introspection. Furthermore, direct inspection of consciousness only concerns the mind of human beings and not of any other creatures that seem to experience cognition. So even in the unlikely case that somehow *P* is discovered it would only be *P* for humans and not *P* in general, which is necessary for *T* (recall that *T* is a theory of the dependence of consciousness on brain states in general, not for only humans).

On the other hand, the latter method, physical investigation of the brain, is an empirical science so that what can be learned through neuroscience or related studies is shaped by observations that can be objectively verified by third parties. Scientific study of the brain can identify only what we can observe and can explain our observations only with concepts that are confined to the limits of observation. Given these restrictions the mind-body problem presents an insurmountable challenge since “the property of consciousness itself (or specific conscious states) is not an observable or perceptible property of the brain” (McGinn 398). The empirical sciences, though they may discover a wealth of information about the brain, do not have access to all of its properties. Objective observation is *closed* to certain properties of the brain that link them to subjectively experienced mental states. Therefore human science cannot recognize and explain those properties.

However, simply claiming that these properties are beyond the scope of our observations is not enough. McGinn owes us decent justification, and what he provides is rather interesting.

I think, it is because the senses are geared to representing a spatial world; they essentially present things in space with spatially defined properties. But it is precisely such properties

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that seem inherently incapable of resolving the mind-body problem; we cannot link consciousness to the brain in virtue of spatial properties to the brain. (McGinn 399)

According to McGinn observation is limited to analyzing brain processes in terms of other or smaller spatial processes; however consciousness, he claims, is a non-spatial phenomenon that cannot be explained or understood in spatial terms.

Observable or perceptual closure seems to eliminate our empirical sciences quite strongly as feasible methods for resolving the mind-body problem. The only obvious avenue to pursue from here is to examine what other methods we use in the sciences, or even generally, to learn about the world. Perhaps there are methods that do not have the same restrictions as observation – McGinn certainly acknowledges this possibility. Even if the feature of the brain that allows consciousness to arise is unobservable, other methodologies can allow us to construct ideas of what we cannot observe. "Perceptual closure does not entail cognitive closure, since we have available the procedure of hypothesis formation, in which unobservables come to be conceptualized" (McGinn 399). However, McGinn does not think that there is any procedure that can form a hypothesis that will explain *P*.

He considers *inference to the best explanation* or *abduction* (a procedure of hypothesis formulation) to be incapable of discovering *P* since the methodology posits theoretical explanations of the same kind as the phenomena to be explained. Explanations of perceptual data rely on theoretical properties of perceptual phenomena thus they will not include any properties that are outside the scope of perception. Accordingly, human beings would not be cognitively closed to postulates reached via abduction from perceptual information. But McGinn insists, "So the property of consciousness is cognitively closed with respect to the introduction of concepts by means of inference to the best explanation of perceptual data about the brain" (McGinn 399). What is needed is a form of inference to the best explanation that would posit theoretical properties

beyond the scope of perceptual closure. Unfortunately, this would demand data of consciousness that we do not have. All data is observable data, and explanations of it do not need to advert to properties to which we are perceptually closed. Certainly one can posit non-perceivable or unobservable entities in an explanation but it is unnecessary. A complete explanation of perceivable data (observations of the brain) can be given in terms of entities that are, in principle, observable. Since properties we are perceptually closed to will never come up and P is a property we are perceptually closed to, P will never be postulated – as there is no need for it.

Indeed, McGinn has given strong reasons for accepting premise #3 – that we can never come to discover P . Since discovering P is necessary for knowing the solution to the mind-body problem, T , it is a trivial matter that premise #4 is a consequence. This establishes the consequent giving us proposition #5 – the conclusion, “This is, indeed, why it seems that consciousness is theoretically epiphenomenal in the task of accounting for physical events. No concept needed to explain the workings of the physical world will suffice to explain how the physical world produces consciousness.” (McGinn 399) With the methodologies we are capable of, the discovery of P is unattainable (premise #5).

McGinn provides additional fortification for his view in case he is mistaken about our cognitive closure and we do discover P . He attempts to show that if you reject premise #3, then you still have to accept the conclusion. We must have a single faculty by means of which we may comprehend the link between the mental and physical in order to make sense of P , a faculty which we do not have. The link between the mental and physical is a link between observation and introspection (McGinn 400). Since we lack the needed faculty, P will remain unintelligible, that is, even if the gap in the theory were somehow properly filled, we would not be able to understand how it is filled. We still would not know T and understand the solution to the mind-body problem.

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McGinn's conclusion, the view that human beings are permanently unable to form the proper concepts to understand *P*, would be a boost for philosophy at the expense of the sciences, "My position is both pessimistic and optimistic at the same time. It is pessimistic about the prospects for arriving at a constructive solution to the mind-body problem, but it is optimistic about our hopes of removing the philosophical perplexity." (McGinn 401)

McGinn's view is pessimistic about finding an answer to the mind-body problem but more importantly it claims that the answer is impossible, not only very difficult, for human beings to discover. There will never be a theoretical solution to the problem of consciousness. The optimism is that this explanation largely removes the philosophical question by maintaining a physicalist account of the correlation between mental states and brain states. It does not pick out which particular theory is right (e.g. identity theory, non-reductive materialism, etc.) but insists that *P* – if it could be understood – would resolve the philosophical obstacles that the correct theory would appear to have. McGinn's position resolves our philosophical problem particularly by holding fast to a naturalistic explanation of the mind-body problem despite the apparent difficulties, essentially dismissing them as shortcomings of human cognition, "What I want to suggest is that the nature of the psychophysical connection has a full and non-mysterious explanation in a certain science, but that this science is inaccessible to us as a matter of principle." (McGinn 401)

However, there seems to be two major flaws in McGinn's argument.

First in premise #3 he purports that we cannot discover *P* through observation because of the spatiality of human observation while the mind is something non-spatial. That is essentially the reason why McGinn believes that our various epistemic methodologies will never grant us knowledge of *P*, and ultimately *T*. The only justification for this that he provides in his paper is that we cannot observe mental states when we are inspecting brains. This is a problematic justification.

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The idea we cannot observe mental states (I disagree with this and will address it later) does not justify the proposition that the mind is non-spatial. Most people, if you were to ask them where their mind is, would point towards their head. And tampering with materials in that region results in altered conscious states such as overindulging in alcoholic beverages. Most definitely McGinn would grant that the mind is dependent on the brain which is in the head and that is why excessive drinking can alter consciousness but he would maintain the mind is nonetheless a non-spatial product of the brain. However, this seems mistaken. A non-spatial mind sounds like an idea far more sympathetic to dualism than to physicalism. McGinn has the responsibility of establishing how non-spatial physical things can be nomologically possible. If it can be done, then McGinn must go one step further and provide convincing evidence that it is reasonable to think the mind is actually among those non-spatial physical things. He does not present sufficient justification for this; however, there are also strong reasons against thinking the mental is non-spatial.

The mind is a product of the brain, McGinn would agree. He also agrees that brains and humans are products of evolution. Being a physical process, evolution begins with simple spatial life and builds up to slightly more complex versions of life. This process goes on, and at each step the next life form is spatial. Adding complexity to a spatial biological organism results in another spatial biological organism at each evolutionary step. At some time a species develops consciousness. So it would seem that consciousness would not be an exception, after all, how can evolution produce something that is non-spatial? This is a problem. One would not anticipate evolution would produce a non-spatial mind. It is much more reasonable to expect consciousness to be spatial just as the remainder of the products of evolution are.

McGinn could retreat to a point he has already raised, the inability to observe consciousness. He can argue that thus far explanations of consciousness in spatial terms are insufficient for a complete theory of mind. Perhaps the

hypothesis of a non-spatial mind is required. There are no other options to consider. It certainly is possible for minds to be non-spatial, whether they would be physical or not is another issue but the notion can be entertained. However, the conclusion that minds are non-spatial is premature in the present state of a rapidly science. Furthermore, the implications of the idea raise a philosophical wall that McGinn is unable to penetrate, an account of evolution as producing non-spatial processes. On this point there are no or very few resources at our disposal, and a concession is in order.

If minds are spatial, as it can reasonably be supposed, the claim that we are unable to make physical observations of mental states seems to conflate an epistemological explanatory gap with a metaphysical gap. It is not surprising that subjective mental experiences are unobservable by the methods of empirical science. We would not expect otherwise.

But observing mental states shouldn't be construed as a matter of revealing the subjective facts of experience or of what it is like to feel something from the outside, as it were. The feature of the brain that consciousness is in virtue of can be observed; it would appear like other physical phenomena even though it realizes the activity or being of consciousness. A process of isolation would be able to identify exactly what feature or quality is shared by all cases of consciousness. How this observable phenomenon is consciousness or allows consciousness to arise involves epistemological issues, not ontological. The observation of consciousness would be from the outside, outside of the subjective experience. There is no reason to expect to find a ontological gap thought it is certainly possible. Instead, what we expect to find must be motivated by what we do know about life and how the world appears to unfold.

This discussion of what is plausible to believe about the nature of mental states and how they would be observed prepares us for the second criticism, again aimed at premise #3. McGinn fails to account for the capacity of science and technology to widen the range of phenomena and information

that we can experience. The example of perceptual closure is about the optical rays that humans can perceive and all the other electromagnetic waves that humans are incapable of perceiving. This is presented as an analogy for cognitive closure. However, it is noteworthy how the development of technology has allowed us to overcome this limitation. It is still true that we cannot perceive, for instance, radio waves; however, we can still understand and develop accurate concepts of their complex physical nature. Technology allows electromagnetic waves to be converted and organized into information that can be accurately interpreted – we do not see these waves with our eyes, but with science.

If science and technology can compensate for our perceptual closure, then the possibility it can compensate for our cognitive closure ought to be recognized. McGinn would claim that in this regard the analogy no longer holds and for reasons that I am greatly sympathetic towards. Science and technology compensate for perceptual closure by using other cognitive means to further inquiry but there is nothing outside of cognition that humans can appeal to. Cognitive closure is the ultimate closure. There is not a broader methodology of inquiry that could circumvent these limitations. Despite our clever nature, we seem to run out of strategies at this epistemological obstacle.

Currently, it is unclear how science and technology will unfold. It is possible that McGinn is right but we cannot say so with any notable degree of confidence. We simply lack sufficient information to draw a definite boundary around the capabilities of science. It is only proper to remain neutral on this point, but McGinn's position cannot afford him the space for reserve; he insists, unreasonably, that science and technology will not be able to find a way to produce data on *P*. But if he were to adopt a neutral stance, he would have less justification for claiming that *P* is undiscoverable.

Thus far, I have justified the rejection of the third premise. Typically, this would be enough to refute McGinn's argument (as presented in the first

paragraph). However, if we recall, McGinn does not believe that rejecting the third premise is enough to reject the conclusion. In order to solve the mind/body problem, according to McGinn, we must not only discover *P*, but also understand how *P* fills the explanatory gap in theory *T*. Doing so requires a single faculty that can apprehend *P* which humans lack. Therefore, humans can never come to understand how *P* fills the explanatory gap.

But McGinn is mistaken. The resolution to the explanatory gap will not be straightforward, instead, it will not be unintelligible but it will be counterintuitive. There are aspects of the world that have proven to be counterintuitive, which have seemed impossible or at least highly implausible. The human brain is adapted to handling medium-sized objects and our intuitions make sense of things at that level of analysis. On the extremely large and extremely small our intuitions no longer keep their grip. In quantum mechanics a single thing can exist at two places at once. That is not to say that we do not understand the theories of quantum physics, rather that the facts and concepts of quantum physics are counterintuitive. McGinn would agree that evolution has disadvantaged us for understanding *T* but he insists that we cannot understand *T* rather than that we find it counter-intuitive.

Similarly, how *P* fills the explanatory gap in *T* will also be counterintuitive because we have not evolved in such a way that the resolution of the mind-body problem would make intuitive sense to us but that does not mean that we would not understand *T*. In fact, we would.

McGinn would agree evolution has disadvantaged us for understanding theory He insists that we are unable to process the facts of *P* rather that we merely find them counterintuitive. He thinks that to process information, intuitive or not, there must be a single faculty for apprehending the facts. The facts accessible to introspection and the facts accessible through the empirical sciences remain conceptually isolated from each other; like hearing the color blue as an F sharp musical note, correlation is possible but not unity of

apprehension. Even a super-science, if you will, that has isolated the feature responsible for consciousness and identified the functions of this feature would still not understand how it creates consciousness. Imagine the feature being picked out and the scientist can "look" at consciousness. How the creation of this feature is also the creation of subjective experience would still escape the minds of these scientists.

This counter-objection, however, is erroneous. Not being able to connect the concepts in our minds other than by mere correlation is not a problem. Lacking a single faculty through which *P* can be understood is, *pace* McGinn, not really an obstacle to understanding *T*. In fact, it only spells out in detail what it is to be counterintuitive. We lack the faculties to understand many features of quantum physics. A single entity being in two places at the same time seems like nonsense, but it is not. Being counterintuitive is being hard to imagine, to visualize: when we try to entertain the idea of a single entity being in two places at once, we visualize what seems no different than two separate entities. Despite this cognitive deficiency we understand quantum physics. The mind-body problem is similar; conceptually theory *T* will be odd. When the researchers using this super-science "look" at consciousness and observe how it arises, they will not see the subjective experience even though it is subjective experience. They won't be able to visualize it. Nevertheless, the super-sciences will provide the proper explanation of consciousness including its necessary and sufficient conditions. Theory *T* would be complete, understood but, most importantly, counterintuitive.