

What does McGinn think we cannot know?

Exactly what is McGinn (1991) saying when he claims that we cannot solve the mind-body problem? Just what is cognitively closed to us? The text suggests at least four possibilities: (A) we are cognitively closed to the brain property in virtue of which the brain is the basis of consciousness, (B) we are cognitively closed to recognizing that brain property as the property in virtue of which the brain is the basis of consciousness, (C) we are cognitively closed to the nature of the relation holding between consciousness and the brain, and (D) we are cognitively closed to how it is that brains generate consciousness. Finer distinctions might be made, and we could get a whole flock of closure candidates flying, but these are the likeliest possibilities. In what follows, I work through each them in some detail, and I come to two principal conclusions. First, by McGinn's own understanding of the mind-body problem, he needs to show (D) that we are cognitively closed to how brains generate consciousness, but he argues for something else, (A) that we are cognitively closed to the brain property in virtue of which the brain is the basis of consciousness. Second, it turns out that McGinn is not entitled to (A), (B), (C), or (D). Nothing he says gets him the conclusion that we cannot solve the mind-body problem, given any of these interpretations of what is cognitively closed to us. I begin with his understanding of the mind-body problem.

It is obvious from the first page of McGinn 1991 that McGinn wants to prove that some version of (D) is true, that we are cognitively closed to how brains generate consciousness. He writes:

The specific problem I want to discuss concerns consciousness, the hard nut of the mind-body problem. How is it possible for conscious states to depend upon brain states? How can technicolor phenomenology arise from soggy grey matter?...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. (1991: 1)

Judging by these lines, what McGinn means by the mind-body problem is the problem of specifying how consciousness depends on brains, how subjective experience arises from brains, how brains cause consciousness. So when McGinn concludes that the solution to the mind-body problem is cognitively closed to us, he is asserting proposition (D), that we cannot say how brains generate consciousness.

But the main argument McGinn presents seems to be geared toward demonstrating proposition (A), that we are cognitively closed to the brain property in virtue of which the brain is the basis of consciousness. Consider the following distilled version of McGinn's main argument, formulated primarily in his own words:

(i) '...there exists some property P, instantiated by the brain, in virtue of which the brain is the basis of consciousness.' (1991: 6)

(ii) 'There seem to be two possible avenues open to us in our aspiration to identify P:...investigating consciousness directly...or...the study of the brain....' (1991: 7)

(iii) Direct investigation (introspection) cannot identify P.

(iv) Empirical study of the brain (perception) cannot identify P.

(v) Therefore, we cannot identify P.

Despite the headlines, McGinn is only arguing that we cannot identify P, the property of the brain in virtue of which the brain is the basis of consciousness. So even if this argument works, McGinn has not established that we cannot say how it is that consciousness arises from brains. Thesis (D) does not immediately follow from (A). It even seems possible to understand how a particular process works without being able to identify the property responsible. Consider this example.

I have a fairly good understanding of how older xerox machines work. I know that the process involves photoconductive semiconductors, plates that retain a residual positive or negative charge corresponding to areas of light or dark projected from a backlit, printed page. I know that the copy is made by passing something called toner over the photoconductive plate, putting blank paper on the other side, electrically charging that paper from the back, and, thus, pulling bits off the toner and onto the page. Those bits get heated and somehow fixed to the page, and the result is a copy of the initial projected image. I know all about the steps of the process, but I do not know much about toner. I have no idea what its chemical composition is, or what it looks like, or how much is needed for good photocopying, or where it is located in photocopiers. I can neither identify toner nor even say what properties toner has in virtue of which it is so fundamental to photocopying. 'Toner' is just my word for a photocopier property that I cannot identify but in virtue of which a process I nevertheless understand, photocopying, is facilitated. [\[1\]](#)

Now the passage I quoted at the beginning of this discussion shows that McGinn takes the mind-body problem to be the problem of specifying how consciousness arises from brains. But he has only argued that we cannot identify the brain property in virtue of which the brain is the basis of consciousness, and that is not enough for the conclusion he wants. Arguing for (A) does not get him (D). In words, showing that we do not know the property in virtue of which a process takes place fails to establish that we do not know how that process takes place. So, McGinn's argument does not entitle him to claim that we are cognitively closed to the solution of the mind-body problem as he understands it.

But has he nevertheless established (A) that we are cognitively closed with respect to the brain property, P, in virtue of which the brain is the basis of consciousness? How we answer this question depends largely on what McGinn means by property P, and it is difficult to say just what he means. If we take him for the naturalist he purports to be and construe P as a natural property of the brain, then premiss (iv) seems obviously false. If P is a straightforward, physical property of the brain, then of course we can identify P by studying the brain. We have no reason to suppose that any given natural property should remain hidden. Surely if we slice up enough brains and poke around with enough scanners we are bound to bump into it.

Perhaps one could respond to this by arguing that we might identify property P, but not be able to recognize it as the property in virtue of which brains are the basis of consciousness. In other words, maybe McGinn can shift to thesis (B) and conclude that, though we can come to know P, we cannot recognize P as that property in virtue of which brains are the basis of consciousness. But this move will not work for McGinn, for two reasons.

First of all, if we could identify P, it is not clear what could possibly stand in the way of our identifying it as the basis of consciousness. What prevents us, in this instance, from observing correlations between the presence and absence of the property in question and the presence and absence of consciousness? This is what legions of neuroscientists are up to even now: seeking correlations between brain properties and conscious states. It might be true that discovering such correlations does not constitute an explanation of how consciousness arises from brain states. Nevertheless, recognizing those correlations as correlations is not ruled out by anything McGinn says. Further, we have seen that McGinn has not produced an argument for (D), the claim that we cannot know how brains generate consciousness. Theorizing about psychophysical correlations might well lead to the explanations we seek.

But second, the move is not open to McGinn, because his claim is not that we are unable to recognize P as the crucial property when we perceive it, but that P is not perceptible as such. In other words, the mind-body problem is insoluble not because we cannot recognize P when we perceive it, but because we cannot perceive P full stop.

In making this claim, it becomes clear that McGinn has jettisoned his naturalist outlook. He explains that P is not perceptible because P is not a spatial property of the brain (1991: 12). That, presumably, is why perception cannot deliver P. Our perceptual faculties are geared to deliver spatial properties, and P is not a spatial property.

He supports this conception of P with two linked claims:

...nothing we can imagine perceiving in the brain would ever convince us that we have located the intelligible nexus we seek. (1991: 11)

...no spatial property will ever deliver a satisfying answer to the mind-body problem. We simply do not understand the idea that conscious states might intelligibly arise from spatial configurations....(1991: 12)

The idea seems to be this: P cannot be spatial because we cannot imagine and cannot understand how a spatial property could underwrite consciousness. This is an alarmingly weak reason for a premiss that does so much heavy lifting for McGinn. It is a familiar point that appeals to what we can imagine or understand do little in the way of establishing what is or could be the case. Whether something is imaginable or comprehensible depends upon, among other things, our capacity to imagine and our background of theory and experience. That accelerating meter sticks shrink, that the earth is round and that it moves are commonplace propositions to us that were once incomprehensible and unimaginable. Perhaps, at the moment, we cannot imagine locating a spatial property of the brain that explains the mind-body connection, maybe we cannot now understand how conscious states might arise from spatial configurations. But these failings give us no reason to think that there is no spatial property of the brain that explains consciousness or that conscious states do not arise from spatial configurations.

In short, an appeal to what we can imagine or conceive cannot establish that P is not a spatial property of the brain. Without support for this claim, support for premiss (iv) of McGinn's main argument, that studying the brain cannot reveal P, is undermined. So McGinn has not established the conclusion of that argument, thesis (A), that we are cognitively closed to the brain property in virtue of which the brain is the basis of consciousness. [\[2\]](#)

But can McGinn still lay claim to thesis (C), that we are cognitively closed with respect to the nature of the relation holding between consciousness and the brain? No, McGinn cannot hold (C) in light of the following claims:

We know that brains are the de facto causal basis of consciousness....(1991: 1)

...some theory must exist which accounts for the psychophysical correlations we observe....Brain states cause conscious states, we know, and this causal nexus must proceed through necessary connections of some kind. (1991: 6)

The link between consciousness and property P is not, to be sure, contingent-- virtually by definition....(1991: 20)

So McGinn knows a great deal about the nature of the relation holding between consciousness and the brain. He knows that the relation is a causal one-- brains are the causal basis of consciousness. He knows that there are observable psychophysical correlations that must proceed through necessary connections of some kind. And he knows, virtually by definition, that the link between consciousness and P is a necessary one. So McGinn has no right to claim (C). Apparently, he believes that we are not cognitively closed with respect to the nature of the relation holding between consciousness and the brain.

But McGinn does try to hold something like thesis (C), call it thesis (C)*: that we are cognitively closed with respect to how P is related to the ordinary, spatial properties of the brain. He seems to think that this conclusion follows from his main argument, that (C)* is an immediate consequence of (A). (1991: 20-21) In words, he thinks that the claim that we cannot know how P is related to the ordinary properties of the brain follows from the claim that we cannot know the brain property in virtue of which the brain is the basis of consciousness.

We know McGinn is not entitled to (A), but even if he were, there is a problem here. We can know how two things are related even if we do not know one of those things. For example, suppose we know that a certain bathtub is full of water. If we now see water spilling out of it, then we know that something is inside the bathtub displacing water, even though we do not know what that thing is. We can tell by the movements of a distant star that it is near something, even if we cannot identify that something. We can, in general, know that some event was caused by another, even though we do not know what the cause is. Scientific enquiry is often the business of looking for whatever it is that is doing the causing. Not being able to identify or know a thing does not deter us from saying exactly how that thing, whatever it is, is related to something else. So, clearly, even if McGinn could establish (A), he would not thereby have established (C)*.

There are two principle conclusions to draw from all of this. First, by McGinn's own understanding of the mind-body problem, he needs to show (D), that we are cognitively closed to how brains generate consciousness, but he argues for something else (A), that we are cognitively closed to the brain property in virtue of which the brain is the basis of consciousness. Second, McGinn is not entitled to (A), (B), (C), or (D). In short, he is not entitled to the claim that the mind-body problem is insoluble on any of the interpretations of what is cognitively closed to us that we have examined. It seems that nothing McGinn says should lead us to believe that the solution to the mind-body problem is cognitively closed to us. [\[3\]](#)

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