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Mysterianism

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Mysterianism is a term coined by Owen Flanagan (1992) for a view devised, developed, and largely associated with Colin McGinn. McGinn's position is characterized by two features:

1 *Ontological naturalism*: the view that holds (inter alia) that consciousness is a natural feature of the world;
2 *Epistemic irreducibility*: the view that holds that there is no explanation of consciousness available to us.

McGinn also thinks it likely that a stronger, modal version of the second claim will also turn out to be true:

2* There *can* be no explanation of consciousness available to us.

However, he acknowledges that his arguments do not entirely preclude the possibility of our eventually developing an explanation of consciousness – although they do make this highly unlikely. It is the claim of epistemic irreducibility that constitutes the specifically *mysterian* aspect of McGinn's position.

McGinn's mysterianism can perhaps be best delineated by comparing it to three other, superficially similar, views. All of these views claim to identify serious problems with attempts to incorporate consciousness into the natural order. However, the nature of the problem is, in each case, different. Characteristic of McGinn's view is the idea that the problem with naturalizing consciousness stems from the fact that we are, as we might put it, *faculty-poor*. This is a distinct, and more serious, form of deficiency than simple conceptual poverty. For McGinn, consciousness poses a problem for naturalism not simply because we lack the requisite *concepts* to apply to the natural order – concepts that would allow us to see how the natural order (or simply "nature"?) produces or constitutes consciousness. This is true, but the real problem is that we don't have the appropriate faculties – concept-forming capacities – that would allow us to form the requisite concepts. Thus, McGinn's position differs from views such as Levine (1983), which identify the problem of consciousness as one primarily of conceptual mismatch (see also Levine chapter 29).

McGinn's view is also to be distinguished from that of Chalmers (chapter 17 and 1996). Chalmers, in effect, understands the problem of consciousness as one stemming ultimately from the *ontological poverty* of the sciences of consciousness (although this is reflected

in an associated conceptual poverty also). That is, the various sciences of consciousness simply do not posit the right sorts of entities to make consciousness intelligible. It is as if we were to try and understand the nature of physical things without positing the existence of protons, neutrons, or electrons. To rectify this, Chalmers advocates what he calls *Naturalistic Dualism*. He allows that there is an explanation of consciousness we can understand. But to get this explanation we have to be willing to expand our catalog of basic entities (see Chalmers, chapter 17). From McGinn's perspective, such a move is likely to replicate precisely those features of physical explanations that render them inadequate – this would be most obviously true, for example, if the newly posited entities were spatial.

Rowlands (2001) also defends a form of Mysterianism. McGinn's position shares with traditional approaches the idea that consciousness is part of a region of reality. In itself, this region is entirely quotidian – it is not, in itself, a place of mystery. Moreover, it is a region to which we have cognitive access. But the appearance of mystery arises from the fact that this access is, for whatever reason, *idiosyncratic*. It is this idiosyncratic access that, for McGinn, is responsible for consciousness being presented to us nonspatially. While a cat may occupy a certain portion of physical space, and may in turn be located on the mat, an item that also occupies a certain region of space, our experience as of the cat being on the mat does not seem to occupy space in this way at all. Of course, an identity theorist would claim that experiences do in fact occupy space, being identical with some or other configuration in the brain. However, McGinn's point is that they do not *seem* to occupy space in this way. That is, they do not *present themselves* as occupiers of space in the way that physical objects do. This idea of idiosyncratic access would also explain features such as subjectivity that play an important role in the work of Nagel.

Rowlands argues that consciousness is not a region of reality to which our access is idiosyncratic, but rather it exists only in the *accessing* itself. There is no region of reality to which subjective phenomena belong; they simply belong to our accessing of regions of reality that are, in themselves, perfectly objective. For Rowlands, consciousness is essentially *hybrid* – it can be both the *act* and *object* of experience. Consciousness can be both that upon which awareness is *directed* (i.e., inner sense is possible) and the *directing* of awareness (the act of inner sensing is numerically distinct from the states or facts that it reveals to the subject). And what it's like to undergo an experience, Rowlands argues, is something that attaches to consciousness as an *act* not *object*. What it's like to have an experience is not something *of* which we are aware in the having of that experience but, rather, something *in virtue of* which we are aware of distinct, and nonphenomenal, objects.

This view of consciousness has Kantian roots – consciousness is a condition of possibility of objects being presented to a subject under a mode of presentation, and in this sense is a *transcendental* feature of the world. This 'transcendentalist" view of consciousness, when pushed, has a striking consequence: *consciousness is real but nowhere at all*. In this, the position shares McGinn's emphasis on space as the problematic feature that undermines reductive explanations of consciousness. But, unlike McGinn's form of mysterianism, it also entails that there can be no explanation of consciousness at all – even if our conceptual repertoire were Godlike.

In the rest of this chapter I shall focus specifically on McGinn's form of mysterianism.

The Intuition

McGinn's position on consciousness is perhaps best understood as a series of developments, explications, refinements, and defenses of an intuition (henceforth, *The Intuition*):

> How is it possible for conscious states to depend on brain states? How can Technicolor phenomenology arise from soggy grey matter? What makes the bodily organ we call the brain so radically different from other bodily organs, say the kidneys – the body parts without a trace of consciousness? How could the aggregation of millions of individually insentient neurones generate subjective awareness? We know that brains are the de facto causal basis of consciousness, but we have, it seems, no understanding whatsoever of how this can be so. It strikes us as miraculous, eerie, even faintly comic. Somehow, we feel, the water of the brain is turned into the wine of consciousness, but we draw a total blank on the nature of this conversion. (1991b, p. 1)

The defense McGinn provides of this intuition is not a traditional deductively valid transition from premises to conclusion, and any attempt to evaluate his argument in these terms will miss the point. So, for example, it would be a mistake to object to McGinn's position on the grounds that he has not *proved* or demonstrated that consciousness cannot be explained in neural terms. As he acknowledges, he has attempted no such thing (see especially the introduction to McGinn 2004).

In understanding how McGinn's argument works, one should take seriously his admonition that,

> No one should become a mysterian over night, after a single exposure to the view; it is something that creeps up on you until, one crepuscular dawn, you find yourself thinking, "Yes, it really *has* to be so, doesn't it – nothing else works, and it certainly makes sense of it all." (2004, p. 2)

So, the aim of the arguments is not so much to convince an opponent of the mysterian position of the error of their ways, but to show to someone who has been engaged in prolonged wrestling with this problem why the problem is such a tenacious one and to point in the direction of a resolution. In this sense, the argument is not deductive but palliative. To this end, McGinn's arguments are presented with the aim of showing why the suspicion expressed in the intuition is a good one. The arguments serve to deepen our understanding of the intuition by explicating and rendering more precise its content.

Can We Solve the Mind–Body Problem?

McGinn's mysterianism was initially propounded in, "Can we solve the mind–body problem?" – a paper largely responsible for restoring phenomenal consciousness to the forefront of philosophical concern (McGinn 1991b). The argument developed here looks like this:

1 "There exists some property P, instantiated in the brain, in virtue of which the brain is the basis of consciousness" (1991b, p. 6).
2 "There seem to be two possible avenues open to us in our aspiration to identify P . . . investigating consciousness directly . . . or . . . [through] study of the brain (1991, p. 7).
3 Direct investigation of consciousness cannot identify P.
4 Empirical study of the brain cannot identify P.
5 Therefore, we cannot identify P.

The controversial premises are, of course, 3 and 4. Consider premise 3. 'Direct investigation" of consciousness would proceed by way of introspection. It is fairly obvious, McGinn argues, that introspection alone cannot enable us to identify P. If it could, we would be able

to solve the problem of consciousness simply by introspecting. Introspection gives us access to only one term of the mind–body problem: it reveals our experience to us, but does not reveal the way in which this experience depends on the brain. Nor does it seem possible, McGinn argues, to extract P from the concepts of consciousness with which introspection does bequeath us by some procedure of conceptual analysis. It seems no more plausible that we could, by conceptual analysis, identify the way in which consciousness depends on the brain than we could discover, by such analysis, how life depends on more basic physical processes. Therefore, P is closed to introspection.

Defense of premise 4 comes in two parts. First, McGinn argues that P is *perceptually* closed to us; P is not an observable feature of the brain. Second, he extends this claim from perceptual to conceptual closure by arguing that no form of inference from what is perceived in the brain can lead us to P. The argument for perceptual closure begins with the thought that, "nothing we can imagine perceiving in the brain would ever convince us that we had located the intelligible nexus we seek" (1991b, p. 11). No matter what property, no matter how complex and abstruse, we could see instantiated in the brain, we would always remain mystified as to how it could give rise to consciousness. The reason is that the senses are geared to representing a spatial world and, as such, essentially represent things as existing in space and with spatially defined properties. It is precisely such properties that are incapable of solving the problem of consciousness.

This claim is then extended to one of conceptual closure by way of the claim that the introduction of theoretical concepts in any given domain of inquiry obeys a principle of *homogeneity*. For example, we arrive at the concept of an atom by taking our perceptual representations of macroscopic objects and conceiving of smaller objects of the same general kind. However, this will not work in the case of P, since analogical extensions of whatever properties it is that we observe in the brain are precisely as useless as the original properties were in explaining how the brain produces consciousness. If observable properties, being spatial, are inappropriate for explaining consciousness then, given the principle of homogeneity, so too will any properties we postulate on the basis of observable properties. The combination of perceptual and conceptual closure yields, in McGinn's terminology, the claim that P is *cognitively closed* to P.

Perhaps the hardest part of this idea to understand is that, for McGinn, P is there, right *under our noses* so to speak. P is not something that can be discovered by poking and slicing our way around a brain (compare Ryle 1949, p. 18). No matter how much we poke around in various colleges, libraries, playing fields, museums, and administrative offices, we will not see the university. To identify P we must not merely *look*, but must look *in the right way*. That is, in looking we must deploy concepts that carve up the brain in a manner suitable for allowing us to see how it produces consciousness. McGinn's argument for cognitive closure, then, is intended to yield the conclusion that such concepts lie outside of our concept-forming capacities. In our investigation of the brain, it is as if we tried to see the university by staring more and more intently at the various buildings that constitute it.

Later Developments

McGinn's later development of the mysterian position consists in articulation, refinement, and defense of the three major strands of the above argument. The *first* strand is concerned with differences in the ways we know about consciousness and the natural world (including

the brain). The *second* strand develops the idea that consciousness has a nonspatial character. The *third* strand revolves around inherent limitations to our cognitive capacities: limitations which make the problems of consciousness unavoidable and, in any constructive sense, insoluble.

The strands are connected in the following way. We know about consciousness through *introspection*. In this, consciousness is unique (the first strand). In this way of knowing about consciousness, consciousness presents itself to us as *nonspatial*. And, in this, consciousness is again unique (the second strand). Thus an idiosyncratic mode of access to consciousness yields an idiosyncratic feature of consciousness. Because of this idiosyncratic feature of consciousness, we will encounter major problems trying to incorporate consciousness into the natural order. This is not, however, the disaster many have supposed. To the extent there is a disaster, it is an epistemic, not an ontological one. That is, the disaster is one that pertains to our knowledge of the way things are, but does not extend to the way things in fact are. The problems ultimately stem from natural limitations on our cognitive capacities (the third strand), limitations which make the problem of consciousness insoluble for us, but not for a creature with the appropriate cognitive faculties.

The Role of Introspection

Our access to consciousness is *introspective*, and consciousness is the only thing we access in this way. Our access to the external world (including the body) is perceptual, or inferential-perceptual. These modes of access are very different, and this difference is ultimately responsible for the problem of consciousness. Roughly speaking, we have *the intuition* because the way introspection reveals consciousness to us is radically different from the way perception reveals brain processes to us. This makes it impossible to understand how the former could be produced or constituted by the latter.

In recent work, McGinn has developed the idea that the knowledge of consciousness revealed by introspection is a form of *knowledge by acquaintance*: direct, non-inferential, and not mediated by way of any identifying descriptions (2004, pp. 5–12). Our introspection-based knowledge of consciousness is, therefore, independent of any descriptive or propositionally-expressed truths we might endorse concerning consciousness. This knowledge is a specific type of knowledge in its own right, and, crucially, gives us insight into the *essence* of consciousness. The fact that we know consciousness – and only consciousness – by acquaintance is, McGinn argues, sufficient to ground both our sense that there is a problem of consciousness, and why we feel that our sense of the problem outstrips our ability to articulate it (2004, p. 9).

Consciousness and Space

The importance of introspection consists in the way it reveals consciousness to us as nonspatial. Of course, we typically do not think of conscious experiences as occurring nowhere – their relation to space is not entirely unconstrained. They occur, for example, somewhere in the vicinity of the body. But, McGinn argues, to the extent that we are capable of making locational judgments about consciousness, these judgments are parasitic and causally based. For example, we judge that visual experiences occur somewhere in the vicinity of

the eyes. In such judgments, there is no independent way of judging mental location. Moreover, to allow that consciousness can be roughly located is not to allocate to it the full array of spatial properties: shape, size, etc. So the way consciousness is presented to us in introspection is nonspatial in this sense: we may have a derivative and causally-based sense of its rough whereabouts, but apart from this it is nonspatial through and through.

Perception, on the other hand, reveals to us a world extended in space. *The Intuition*, therefore, ultimately turns on understanding how something essentially nonspatial could be produced or constituted by something essentially spatial. McGinn speculates that the only way this can happen is if space has, in effect, a hidden nature. What we will require, in order to solve the problem of consciousness, is a new conception of space.

> That which we refer to when we use the word 'space' has a nature that is quite different from how we standardly conceive it to be; so different, indeed, that it is capable of "containing" the nonspatial (as we now conceive it) phenomenon of consciousness. (2004, p. 105)

However – and here is the rub – there is no guarantee that we will ever attain this new conception of space. Indeed, there are good reasons for supposing that such a conception lies beyond our intellectual powers.

The Limits of Human Knowledge

The reason for our inability on this score lies in inherent limitations on our knowledge-acquiring faculties. McGinn's position here has a Chomskyan background. Chomsky regards our cognitive system as a set of special purpose modules. These have specific areas of competence and, as a result, other areas of incompetence. The language faculty is one of these. But Chomsky also adopts the same position with regard to what he calls our "science-forming" faculties. These are contingent, cognitive structures, formed by the vicissitudes of biological history. And so there is no reason whatsoever for thinking that they are capable of understanding everything there is to understand about the natural world (Chomsky 1988).

However, is there any positive reason for thinking that consciousness is specifically one of the areas of competence these faculties will fail to target? McGinn argues that there is, and once again, the nonspatial character of consciousness lies at the core of the problem. McGinn develops the Chomskyan speculation in terms of what he calls the CALM conjecture: Combinatorial Atomism with Lawlike Mappings. We can understand a given region of reality only if it is the sort of thing that can be broken down into simpler and simpler elements (or until a basic level is reached). These elements must, in addition, be the sort of things that can combine together so that the properties of complexes in which they occur emerge, in a lawlike way, from the properties of their elements. This conjecture, then, is that we can understand entities that conform to CALM principles but not those that do not. And consciousness, being nonspatial, does not. McGinn's most comprehensive defense of this idea is contained in his *Problems in Philosophy* (1993), where the CALM conjecture is applied not only to the issue of consciousness, but also to the self, meaning, free will, the a priori, and empirical knowledge.

Another important strand in McGinn's defense of the Chomskyan cognitive limitations thesis consists in the development of a line of thought associated with Strawson. McGinn

argues that our entire conceptual scheme is thoroughly permeated by spatial concepts. In particular, our ability to identify two particulars as distinct requires us to determine that they are in distinct places. So, without this spatial resource, we would not be able to entertain the concept of multiple instances of the same property. And without this ability, the very notion of a proposition would be unavailable to us.

The result is that when we think about consciousness we are forced to do so through a prism of spatial concepts that are entirely unsuitable vehicles for this purpose. In our attempts to think about consciousness we find ourselves required (by the act of thinking) to impose a framework of concepts that are entirely alien to consciousness's intrinsic nature. Understanding of consciousness as it really is would require us to jettison the spatial skeleton of our thought – leaving us with no propositions and so nothing with which to think (see McGinn 1995 for a detailed development of this idea).

The cognitive limitations thesis plays a crucial role in McGinn's position on the mind–body problem. The nonspatiality of consciousness, he argues, entails that "nothing we can think of has a chance of explaining what needs to be explained" (2004, p. 62). As a result, philosophical attempts to understand consciousness tend to vacillate between four typical positions, offered in response to this lack of understanding – positions that, together, form a DIME shape. "D" stands for "deflationary reductionism"; "I" stands for "irreducibility"; "M" stands for "magical," and "E" stands for "eliminativism." This configuration of conceptual options is, McGinn argues, the hallmark of a philosophical problem (see his *Problems in Philosophy* for a development of this idea).

However, each response is unsatisfactory. And the way to avoid being impaled on the DIME shape is provided by the cognitive limitations thesis and the associated idea that the problem of consciousness is merely an epistemic, but not ontological, one.

Objections to McGinn's Mysterianism

McGinn's position involves two logically distinct claims:

1 An explanation of consciousness must proceed by way of identification of a *mechanism*.

If an explanation of consciousness required only correlations between neural and conscious states, there would be no deep problem of consciousness. Furthermore, if this underlying mechanism is to explain consciousness, it must do so by eliciting in us a certain kind of insight:

2 The neural mechanism that explains consciousness must allow us to see *how* consciousness is produced by the brain.

Accordingly, a genuine explanation of consciousness works only to the extent that it allays, "the feeling of mystery that attends our contemplation of the brain–mind link" (1991b, p. 11). Neither (1) nor (2) are unassailable.

One possible objection to (2) is that it involves a conflation of the concept of *explanatory adequacy* with what we might call *epistemic satisfaction* (see Rowlands 2001, ch. 3, for a development of this line of argument). Some explanations produce in us a feeling of *epistemic satisfaction*: a *Eureka!* feeling of "Now I understand!" or, in a more Wittgensteinian

mode, "Now I can go on!" The molecular explanation of the macro-properties of graphite provides a good example of an explanation likely to elicit this sort of feeling. Graphite consists of layers of carbon arranged into hexagonal rings. The atoms in each layer are covalently bonded to three neighboring atoms at an angle of 120 degrees to each other. Within each layer, the covalent forces binding each atom to its neighbor are relatively strong. However, the layers themselves are bound together only by the very weak van der Waals forces. As a result, adjacent layers can slide over each other – resulting in the soft, flaky, nature of graphite, its ability to mark paper, act as a lubricant, etc.

A focus on explanations of this sort might tempt us into thinking that the adequacy of an explanation is to be judged by whether it elicits in us a feeling of epistemic satisfaction. And this assumption is questionable. Consider, for example, the molecular explanation of solidity in terms of a rigid lattice structure of atoms held together by ionic binding. How, one might reasonably ask, can a solid object be made up mostly of empty space? How could such an item, for example, retain its volume? An obvious response is to explain away any lack of epistemic satisfaction in terms of our empirical ignorance – specifically, of relevant atomic or quantum level facts and laws. For example, we might explain the disposition of solids to retain their volume in terms of the characteristics of the specifically ionic bonding that seems to be responsible for this ability. Ionic bonding involves electron transfer of electrons, rather than merely their sharing, and so ionic bonds are very strong. But this merely pushes the problem back a step. Why should bonds that involve transfer of electrons be any stronger than bonds which merely involve their sharing? What reasons are there for supposing that *this* explanation will be any more epistemically satisfying than the original?

We can push the explanation back further, and explain the salient characteristics of ionic bonding in terms of wave interaction, superposition, and so on. Perhaps, once we acquaint ourselves with the relevant laws of wave dynamics, then everything else will fall into place? But, once again, the same question will arise. Why *must* explanations cast at this level be any more epistemically satisfying than the original molecular explanation? Is it *obvious*, for example, why waves should obey the laws of wave dynamics? More generally, why should the world, at a fundamental level, be an epistemically satisfying place?

The dialectic here is tricky because McGinn will, of course, argue precisely that the world is not an epistemically satisfying place, at least not for us; and this is the basis of his mysterianism. The present point, however, is that a lack of epistemic satisfaction need, in itself, be no impediment to recognizing that something is an explanation of a given phenomenon, and an adequate one at that. We can accept that a wave dynamical account of a phenomenon such as solidity is both true *and* an explanation even if it does not produce in us – in *any* of us – the sort of feeling occasioned by the molecular explanation of the macro properties of graphite. If this is correct, then explanatory adequacy is not a function of epistemic satisfaction: explanatory adequacy does not consist in a *specific inner process*.

Some explanations – ones that we recognize as adequate – possess a sort of inchoate proto-version of epistemic satisfaction: *proto-epistemic satisfaction*. At the core of this concept is the notion of *analogy*. Many of our best theories have their origin in provocative initial analogy; one that may be seriously flawed, but subsequently proved to be a fruitful vehicle of understanding (Kuhn 1957; Hesse 1966). Consider, again, the molecular explanation of solidity. While this may not occasion the sort of epistemic satisfaction elicited by other explanations, it does produce a certain form of enlightenment carried, to a considerable extent, by the relations between properties of the reduced domain and those of the

reducing. Thus, suppose we accept that a given solid is composed of a lattice structure of atoms tightly bound together, each oscillating around a fixed point. We can then, with relative ease, accept that the addition of energy to this structure might increase the frequency of this oscillation. And then, also, that the addition of sufficient energy might increase the oscillatory frequency to such an extent that the bonds break down. And the addition of further energy might increase this breakdown further. So, *if* we accept that solids are made up of a rigid lattice structure of oscillating atoms, then we can also see that the difference between this sort of structure and one where the bonds are more diffuse is something like, somewhat *analogous* to, the difference between a solid and a liquid. And, in virtue of this sort of rough analogy the molecular explanation of solidity possesses a certain proto-epistemic satisfaction.

While it is plausible to suppose that any explanation we recognize as an explanation must elicit some or other psychological states in us, the precise nature of these states may vary considerably from one explanation to another – varying from, at one extreme, the full-blown "Eureka!" feeling to, at the other, a nebulous, imprecise, and analogy-based form of proto-epistemic satisfaction. The latter form of understanding can then be reinforced by the sorts of social pressures characteristic of education (i.e., "that's the way it is and you had better accept it if you want to get on/pass the exam," etc.).

Consider, now, claim (1). This is the claim that mere correlation of neural and conscious states is not sufficient for an explanation of consciousness. That would require identification of a mechanism. The distinction between mechanisms and correlations is, however, a questionable one. Specifically, the sort of enlightenment provided by mechanisms consists in the breaking down of a correlation into a structured series of smaller correlations, where each of the smaller correlations is more readily intelligible than the original one (see Rowlands 2001, ch. 3).

Mechanistic explanation is not something radically different from, or opposed to, the identification of correlations. On the contrary, mechanistic explanation is a specific form of correlation-based explanation. It may be that a correlation between two items can be rendered intelligible by the uncovering of an underlying mechanism. But this is not to replace the correlation with something fundamentally different; it is to break down, and thus explain, the correlation by means of further correlations.

With these points in mind, the best case that can be made for reductive naturalism, and hence against mysterianism, involves three claims:

1 There is no fundamental opposition between mechanistic explanation and the identification of correlations.
2 The explanatory adequacy of correlation-based explanation does not require that it elicit in us epistemic satisfaction in any full-blooded sense.

To these principles, we can add a third:

3 There is not *an* explanation of consciousness. Rather, there are many such explanations – as many as there are features of consciousness that require explanation.

Even in the case of properties such as solidity, there is not necessarily any such thing as *the* explanation of solidity. Rather, there seem to be at least two. There is an explanation of rigidity (i.e., a disposition to resist deformation) and an explanation of the disposition to

retain volume. Since not all rigid structures retain volume, an explanation of the former is not, in itself, an explanation of the latter.

We might expect this general point to be reiterated in the case of consciousness. The concept of consciousness almost certainly fragments, upon analysis, into several distinct concepts, including phenomenality, subjectivity, non-relationality, and so on. If this is so, then it is likely that separate explanations will be required for each of them.

With (3)–(5) in mind, consider the much maligned claim of Crick and Koch (1994) to have explained consciousness in terms of 40 Hz oscillations in the sensory cortex. Taken in itself, such a claim is, of course, laughable. However, 40 Hz oscillations might be able to play a role in explaining not consciousness as such, but one of its features: its *gestalt* character or, as we might put it, its *all-at-onceness*. Conscious experience is not presented serially – like, for example, a description of that experience in the form of a sentence. It is presented all at once. Part – though presumably not all – of explaining this feature of consciousness almost certainly involves explaining the brain's capacity for *binding* information together into a unified whole. And this is precisely what the identification of a single oscillatory frequency might enable us to understand. It would do this not in the sense of providing us with full-blooded epistemic satisfaction with regard to the production of consciousness. Rather, it may yield a form of proto-epistemic satisfaction with regard to one aspect of consciousness. That is, we can see that the gestalt character of experience is *something like*, somewhat *analogous to*, disparate information that has been bound together in various ways. Consequently, we can understand, in a somewhat nebulous manner, that changes in the quantity and types of information that are bound together at any given time might systematically vary with changes in the content of the visual gestalt.

In short, the best case that can be made against McGinn's form of mysterianism, I think, involves arguing (a), that McGinn is committed to principles (1) and (2), but that (b), these principles should be rejected in favor of principles (3), (4), and (5), and then arguing that (c), principles (3), (4), and (5) are precisely the sort of principles that drive, in an admittedly non-reflective manner, current scientific research on consciousness.

McGinn is unlikely to be concerned with these objections. One natural response is to undermine the divide and conquer strategy favored by the reductive naturalist. Thus, while McGinn can accept that we might be able to achieve proto-epistemic satisfaction for certain features of consciousness – such as its gestalt character – these are all peripheral aspects of consciousness. The core of consciousness lies in its phenomenality. Then, he can argue that (i), there is not the slightest reason to suppose that we can even get on nodding terms with proto-epistemic satisfaction when we try to explain this property in its unanalyzed form, and (ii), this property cannot be broken down, in under-laborer fashion, into distinct properties which might be plausible candidates for proto-epistemic satisfaction when correlated with neural states. This is not the place to decide these issues – even if I could. But the dispute does at least illustrate the enormous gulf between mysterians and reductive naturalists. The dispute is characterized by the absence of a firm agreement not only on what would constitute an adequate explanation of consciousness – the criteria it would have to satisfy in order to count as an explanation – but even on what constitutes consciousness itself.

See also 17 The hard problem of consciousness; 28 Naturalistic dualism; 29 Anti-materialist arguments and influential replies.

Further Readings

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