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mysterianism It has often been felt, mostly by philosophers but also by scientists, that explanatory theories of consciousness have been unsatisfactory, in a rather principled and systemic way. This sentiment has led some philosophers (notably Colin McGinn) and scientists (notably Noam Chomsky) to the view that there are principled and systemic reasons why the achievement of a satisfactory explanation of consciousness is not humanly possible. Perhaps we can expect a satisfactory explanation of the *mechanics* of consciousness—how conscious episodes interact among themselves and with non-conscious events—but not of the *experiential* aspect of consciousness, the fact that there is something it is like for us, from the inside, to *be* conscious. This is sometimes known as mysterianism about consciousness, or 'mysterianism' for short. A pessimistic outlook with venerable history, mysterianism goes back at least to the 1860s, when it was clearly articulated by T. H. Huxley, John Tyndall, and Emil du Bois-Raymond.

Conceptually, it is worth distinguishing two versions of mysterianism, one ontological and one epistemological. The former would hold that consciousness is mysterious in and of itself. The latter is the more modest claim that the mystery does not lie in consciousness itself, but rather flows from certain constitutional limitations of the human intellect. McGinn and Chomsky are epistemological mysterianists. They hold that there is nothing deeply mysterious about consciousness itself, which is as natural a phenomenon as any; it is just that we humans are incapable of understanding it. They thus combine ontological naturalism with epistemological mysterianism.

Central to their view of consciousness is the thesis of *cognitive closure*. According to this thesis, some aspects of the world are cognitively closed to some kinds of cognitive system. Just as a colour-blind dog is *perceptually* closed to colour, so it is *cognitively* closed to some phenomena and features of the world: it cannot understand algebra, for example, or market economics. These failures are, moreover, chronic and incontrovertible. They are part of the canine condition.

Mysterianists maintain that it is prejudicial hubris to suppose that humans are somehow spared this predicament and are cognitively closed to nothing. As a natural, evolved system, the human cognitive system must have its own constitutional limitations. Thus the initially reasonable position is that some phenomena and features of the world are bound to elude human comprehension. Just as a lack of understanding of algebra is part of the canine condition, so a lack of understanding of some other phenomena is part of the human condition.

Consciousness is a prime candidate for being such a phenomenon. There is a feeling that what stands between us and a naturalistic understanding of consciousness is not some further empirical discovery. The notion that someone might scurry out of a laboratory one afternoon and declare they have solved the problem of consciousness seems silly. The sense is that no amount of empirical information would demystify consciousness for us, and an insight of an altogether different order would be needed if we are to come to terms with the challenge posed by consciousness. Mysterianism offers the epistemology of cognitive closure as that insight.

Mysterianism represents an unusual approach to the intellectual problem raised by consciousness. Rather than offering an explanation of consciousness, it attempts to quell our intellectual discomfort by offering an explanation of why we cannot obtain such an explanation. It thus combines first-order pessimism with second-order optimism: although we have no clue about consciousness, we have a clue about why we have no clue about consciousness! And this may suffice to neutralize our sense of intellectual embarrassment in the face of this recalcitrant phenomenon.

The primary motivation for mysterianism may be captured by an inductive inference from the evident and flagrant inadequacy of all known theories of consciousness, coupled with the aforementioned sentiment that the inadequacy is unusually profound. But McGinn also adduces a deductive argument in favour of mysterianism. McGinn's argument is basically this. *Introspection is our only channel to the properties of consciousness, but it does not afford us any access to the

properties of the brain. Sensory perception is our only channel to the properties of the brain, but it does not afford us any access to the properties of consciousness. There is no third channel that affords us access to both consciousness and the brain. Therefore, our concept-producing mechanisms cannot in principle produce a concept for the connection between consciousness and the brain. Consequently, our knowledge of consciousness and our knowledge of the brain are doomed to be insulated from one another. More specifically, we can have no knowledge of the manner by which the brain produces or yields consciousness. The connection between the two is necessarily opaque to us. Therefore, we cannot possibly grasp the solution to the problem of consciousness.

The literature on mysterianism has so far been somewhat dogmatically dismissive. Critical discussions of the merits and demerits of the view are few and far between. In particular, McGinn's argument is rarely if ever engaged. This is unfortunate, although perhaps understandable from a heuristic viewpoint. Nonetheless, some problems with, and suspicions about, the view have emerged in the literature.

Perhaps the main suspicion (aired by Daniel Dennett among others) is that the view is based on a mistaken conception of the relationship between an intellectual problem and its corresponding solution. We may well understand a problem but not know its solution, or be unable to understand a solution to a problem we do not fully grasp. But it is incoherent to suppose that we cannot in principle understand the solution to a problem we can and do understand and fully grasp. Plausibly, understanding what a problem is involves understanding what would count as an appropriate solution to it (if not necessarily a correct one). It is true that dogs cannot in principle understand algebra; but that is precisely why algebraic problems do not pose themselves to dogs.

As experimental and theoretical work on consciousness advances over the next few decades and becomes methodologically and conceptually more sophisticated, the sense of mystery surrounding consciousness may gradually dissipate. But it may also turn out that the ever-growing abundance of empirical findings about consciousness will only serve to further the spectre of mysterianism, as the sense of empirical impenetrability becomes more pronounced and acute. Trivially perhaps, time will tell if our inability to understand consciousness is chronic and principled or provisional and contingent.

URIAH KRIEGEL

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