

MYSTERIES OF MIND AND MATTER IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF COLIN MCGINN'S PHILOSOPHY

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The paper discusses the approach to the mind-body problem that was developed by Colin McGinn and is known as “mysterianism”. The basic thesis of this approach, which McGinn opposes to both materialism and dualism, is that consciousness and its relationship to physical reality is an inscrutable mystery that cannot be get over in principle, because of insurmountable, constitutive limitations of human mind. In this paper, the critical analysis of McGinn’s approach is given. It is pointed out that McGinn’s thesis of the inscrutability of the mind-body relationship is based on the ungrounded idea that a mediating substance is necessary. An argument is made that the mind-body relationship is better understood as interaction that is mediated only by natural psychophysical laws. McGinn’s hypothesis of the origin of physical space in a non-spatial reality that has the same nature as consciousness is explained in the context of different interpretations of the Big Bang theory. It is argued that McGinn’s hypothesis does not provide a solution to the problem of the origin of human consciousness, because consciousness belongs to mental individuals whose emergence is just as unexplainable by the hypothesis of non-spatial reality as it is by physical processes.

Keywords: mind, matter, consciousness, mysterianism, dualism, uncognizable, non-spatial.

Colin McGinn is one of the most prominent figures of the direction of modern philosophy of mind called “mysterianism”. In the discussions about the mind-body problem (understanding the relationship between the mind and the body, or physical reality in general), McGinn argued for the view that consciousness and its relationship to physical reality is an inscrutable mystery that cannot be get over in principle, because of insurmountable, constitutive limitations of human mind. He opposed this view to both materialism and dualism. Besides, McGinn have advanced an interesting hypothesis about the origin of physical space in a non-spatial reality that has the same nature as consciousness. In this paper, I propose a critical analysis of these McGinn’s ideas.

Mysterianism vs Dualism

McGinn has made his central thesis the idea that the nature of consciousness cannot be known at all, that it is an *unknowable mystery*, because the structure of human cognitive abilities as a whole do not fit this task. Let me emphasize: *not merely unknown, but unknowable*, – that is, such that we *are incapable in principle (never will be able) to know*. McGinn contends that although consciousness “is not explicable in terms of electrochemical processes of the familiar kind”, nevertheless “it is some {natural} property of the brain that is responsible for consciousness”, – so dualists are mistaken to think “that no brain property can do the job” of explaining the mind [McGinn, 1999: p. 29]. At the same time, according to McGinn’s theory, this property (as well as the nature of consciousness) is unknowable: “it is the very

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unknowability of this property that generates all our perplexities” (in understanding consciousness). So, we have a rather queer theory: it says that there is some brain property that *can do the job* of explaining the mind, but this property is *unknowable*, from which it follows that it *cannot do the explanatory job*. Or, if to express this thought more precisely: there is some natural brain property that could do the job of explaining the mind if it was knowable; but as it unknowable, it cannot do the job.

It has to be noticed that in fact, the existence of “some property of the brain that is *responsible for consciousness*” does not contradict dualism, if the statement about the existence of such a property is not understood in the sense that some property of the brain is consciousness. (An analogy: of course, I am responsible for this book as its author, but I am not this book.) Dualists admit that some brain processes are *causally* responsible for our mental states. For example, the dualist-interactionist Karl Popper advanced and argued for the hypothesis that the human self is directly connected with the speech centre located in the left hemisphere of the brain, directly interacts with this centre; in this sense, Popper could say that this part of the brain is responsible for consciousness.

McGinn hopes to avoid dualism by means of the supposition that the brain is by its nature different from what we conceive it to be [McGinn, 1999: p. 66-68]. But this supposition does not help, because the very concepts of consciousness and brain, plus minimum knowledge about the brain (the fact that it is a complex physical system, which consists of atoms and smaller microparticles) is enough to understand that consciousness is not the brain or some its structures, processes or functions.

What the brain “really is”? It is something that corresponds to the meaning of the concept “brain”. The concept means some complex physical system located in the head (this is, of course, a rough definition; the details do not matter here; all that matters is that by the meaning of the concept, the brain is a *purely physical* system).

If something is not what is meant by the *concept of the brain*, it is not the brain. Surely, the sense that we attribute to a concept is conventional and is determined by considerations of convenience. We could use the concept of the brain in the sense different from the one that means a purely physical system — for example, in a sense that would encompass both the physical system and consciousness. But this would not solve the problem at all, and would not make it possible to avoid dualism. It would be a mere changing the meanings of the words, uniting under one concept “brain” what is now divided between two concepts — of the brain (as a physical system) and of consciousnesses. The brain in the new sense would be merely the conjunction of the brain in the usual (physical) sense and of consciousnesses. It would be an object of a dual — physical and mental — nature. (This would mean either substantive or property dualism. These alternatives are discussed in details in section 9 of Book 2.) So McGinn’s purported avoidance of dualism of the brain and consciousness seems to boil down to a mere substitution of the meanings of words; the dualism remains as it was, it just needs, for its expression, new words instead of old.

In fact, though McGinn tries to avoid self-identification with dualism, to find some “middle way” between materialism and dualism, he does not seem to succeed in this. In particular, many his statements are manifestly dualistic.

For example, when McGinn writes that human “cognitive faculties are not designed to fathom what *links* mind to brain” [McGinn, 1999: p. 51], this is a

downright dualism, because this statement tells about two things — mind and brain — that are somehow *linked*. In yet other places, McGinn writes that “the brain houses consciousness”, “the brain is the seat of consciousness” [McGinn, 1999: p. 52-53] — obviously, this presupposes the existence of two different things — a house and its inhabitant, a seat and a sitter, the brain and consciousness. So, despite McGinn's efforts to present his point of view as “a middle way” between materialism and dualism, in fact it turns out to be some form of dualism.

One of the above-adduced McGinn's statements deserves a special attention: “cognitive faculties are not designed to fathom what *links* mind to brain” [McGinn, 1999: p. 51]. This mysterious link is where McGinn locates the mystery and unknowability in the context of the mind-brain problem. In McGinn's view, we have faculties to comprehend, on the one hand, physical reality (in particular, the brain) and, on the other hand, consciousnesses as it is given to us introspectively, but our faculties do not permit us to comprehend what links them — the mysterious “link”.

As we see, McGinn takes the idea of the link literally — as if it is some third thing — a mediating substance that connects a mind with a brain. I think that the idea that such a mediator is necessary, and that it is unknowable, is a vestige of the naive mechanicism of the pre-Newton times, and it leads McGinn to a number of mistaken reasonings. There is no such “third thing”; there is an *interaction* between the mind and the brain. (See Book 2, Section 10 about the problem of interaction.) Admittedly, the notion of interaction involves a connecting link — the laws of nature that govern the interactions at issue; however, there is nothing in principle incomprehensible about such laws.

It hardly makes sense to look for some other, more substantial mediator between the mind and the brain. The supposition about the existence of such an intermediary cannot help us with understanding of the relation between the mind and the body. After all, if such a mediating substance existed, it should be either physical, or not. Whatever the case, the problem of understanding the interaction between the physical and the non-physical remains. We only 1) violate the “Occam's razor” principle (“not to multiply entities without need”; “it is vain to do with more what can be done with fewer”) — we introduce an additional — unknown and unknowable — entity without any need, and 2) we shift the problem from the question about the relation of two well familiar entities (the mind and the brain) to the question about the relations between each of these entities and some hypothetical unknown and unknowable substance. No wonder that seeing the problem in such a light makes its unsolvable.

Accordingly, McGinn's reasoning that “we need an additional faculty if we are going to understand the mind-brain link”, because “the faculties we have provide us with both terms of the mind-brain relation, but they do not give us what binds the two terms together” [McGinn, 1999: p. 52] expresses a mistaken understanding of the problem. As there is no such a mediating substance, so we do not need any additional faculty to perceive and understand it. The real problem is different: *how to fit, to reconcile* our knowledge, theories, ideas, intuitions about the two sides of the mind-brain relation? How to make fit between, *on the one hand*, our introspective (first person) knowledge and intuitions about ourselves and, *on the other hand*, scientific knowledge and theories about the physical world, about our bodies (in particular, about biological evolution that, according to Darwin's theory, is the creator of our bodies), and about correlations between bodily and mental states?

Instead of some mystical unknowable brain property postulated by McGinn, we have to do with two well familiar things — the mind and the brain. The problem of understanding their relation arises not because we lack some faculty of perception and understanding of some (nonexistent) intermediary connecting substance, but because our available knowledge and intuitions about the mind, the brain, and empirical correlations between them do not agree well, resist all attempts to integrate them into a uniform theoretical whole. (Problems of the fit are discussed in details in Book 2, Section 14) We do not know whether we will ever succeed to solve this problem, to eliminate all its essential conflicts, but there are no strong reasons to think that such a solution is impossible in principle.

Eventually, McGinn arrives at an interesting theory: both mind and space (as the core of the physical) are not what we think them to be. What we consider as the mind is part of something larger, mysterious and unknowable, and this something is what the mind “really is”. And what we consider as space is also part of something larger, mysterious and unknowable — the “real” space. Although what *we consider* as the mind and space seems to be phenomena of absolutely different natures that have nothing common with one another except causal interrelations, what the mind and space *really are* — “real”, that is unknown and unknowable, mind and space — make something uniform.

Schematically, this theory can be represented — and compared with dualism — as follows. Let us designate as “mind” and “space” the mind and space in the usual sense. Let us introduce additional concepts of MG-mind and MG-space to designate those mysterious and unknowable things that McGinn considers as “real” mind and space.

Then the relation between what is designated by these four concepts looks so:



To compare, from the point of view of usual dualism-interactionism, the relation between the mind and space (the physical) looks so:



To remind, those intermediate links that are presupposed by McGinn’s conception (the transitive grey zone: part of MG-mind that does not coincide with mind, and part of MG-space that does not coincide with space) fulfil *no* explanatory function, they designate something not merely *unknown*, but unknowable (such that we, human beings, cannot, in principle, come to know, because we do not have the cognitive faculties necessary for its grasp). But if so, then the supposition that there is such a “grey zone” has no rational grounds. It is just “multiplying entities without need”, and has to be cut off by “Occam’s razor”.

Anyway, mind and space in the normal sense of the words remain in McGinn's scheme just as different as in the scheme of usual dualism. So, McGinn's theory is a dualism — only, so to say, a “blurry”, “fuzzy” dualism (and lacking self-awareness — “dualism against one's will”). McGinn just tries to mediate the relation between two entirely different things by something “transitional”, and postulate the impossibility (for us, human beings) to grasp what this “transitional” can be like: it is unknowable.

I think that the idea of the transitional “grey zone” between mind and space cannot be correct. Transition is possible between properties of the same kind (blue — green, big — small, round — square, hard — soft), but not between entirely different, incommensurable properties (thick — wooden, white — square, spatial — subjective). The latter can only be conjoined as different properties of one thing, but cannot grade one into another; there are no transitional properties in between them, because they are incommensurable. The mind and the physical are characterized by two entirely different kinds of properties — subjectivity and spatiality, which do not pass one into another. With any particular object, properties of one or both of these kinds are either present, or not. A certain thing either has spatial properties (is located somewhere in space), or it does not have them. It either has subjective mental states, or not. If there are properties (states) of only one of the two kinds, then there is either a mind or a physical object; if there are properties (states) of both kinds, then there are both a mind and a physical object, either as two different things (substance dualism) or as two different kinds of properties of the same thing (property dualism).

The Idealistic Hypothesis of the Origin of Physical Space

In the book *The Mysterious Flame*, Colin McGinn attempts to explain the possibility of the emergence of mind in the physical world as a result of organisation of the brain. For this purpose, he proposes a hypothesis that, I think, very much reminds Hegel's theory of Absolute Spirit that creates its otherness — alienates itself in nature, and then comes back to itself in human consciousness.

To begin with, McGinn explains that consciousness is non-spatial by its internal nature: thoughts, feelings, desires, *etc.*, and the human self as their subject-bearer are not things that occupy a certain place in physical space, have a certain size and form (in more details, see the last subsection of Section 1). That is why it seems impossible to understand how consciousness, which is non-spatial by its internal nature, can emerge from matter, the internal nature (essence) of which consists in spatiality. To imagine such a possibility, McGinn advances a hypothesis: space is not what we think it to be — not a fundamental reality, but a transformation of something non-spatial.

This idea is explained and substantiated with the help of modern scientific theories of the origin of the Universe as a result of the Big Bang. McGinn refers to the opinion of cosmologists who “tell us that this was the point in time at which matter and space came to be created. An infinitely dense ‘singularity’ erupted into a mighty explosion that flung matter out in all directions, bringing space along with it.” [McGinn, 1999: p. 119].

In fact, cosmologists often tell even more. Stephen Law summarises the interpretation of the Big Bang theory that is most widely accepted among scientists-astrophysicists as follows: “About twelve billion years ago an unimaginably violent explosion occurred. Expanding outwards at incredible speed, this cataclysmic blast

gave birth to space, energy, matter and indeed time itself. The universe we see around us is the debris from this Big Bang.” [Law, 2003: p. 1].

McGinn also mentions that “many cosmologists don’t like people... wondering what things were like *before* matter and space were thus created”. That is, many scientists-cosmologists (astrophysicists) adhere to the theory that the Big Bang was the beginning not only of matter and space, but of time as well.

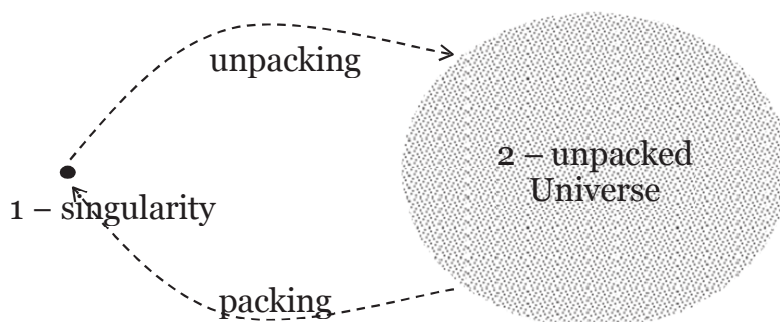
McGinn does not support this interpretation about time: “we can’t help wondering what things were like *before* matter and space were thus created?” [McGinn, 1999: p. 119].

For there to be the Big Bang, there should have been something that has exploded. And some processes – which have resulted in the Big Bang – should have been occurring in this “something”, or with it, before the Big Bang.

Karl Popper also noted the unintelligibility of the idea of the emergence of time: “The physical universe bears – or so it seems – several independent and consistent traces of having originated in a violent explosion, the ‘first big bang’. Moreover, what seems to be the best of our contemporary theories predict its ultimate collapse. These two terminal events have even been interpreted as the beginning and the end of space *and time* – though obviously when we say such things we hardly understand what we are saying.” [Popper, 1977: p. 150].

The italics are Popper’s and, I conjecture, are meant to emphasize that the statement about the beginning and the end *of time* is especially unintelligible – more than the statement about the temporal beginning and end of space.

Really, the statement about the beginning of space and matter, unlike the statement about the beginning of time, can be made sense of, even if with difficulty. So, the moment of the Big Bang is often described as a state in which all matter and space were packed into a single point-singularity with infinite density. If the state of singularity really took place, then the statement about the emergence of matter and space at the moment of the Big Bang is correct. The singularity itself is not yet space and matter (physical reality) proper, because these concepts presuppose spatial relations between parts of matter, and within one point-singularity there is no place for such relations. And if the Universe will pack itself back into a singularity, it will be the end of the existence of matter and space as such. However, this beginning and end need not be absolute. It may be that a singularity is but a moment in the infinite repetition of the cycles of expansion and compression of the Universe. Perhaps, the ending moment of the compression of space and matter into a singularity in one cycle is the beginning moment of the expansion of space and matter in the next cycle (i.e., the moment of the next Big Bang).



In this scheme, the history of the Universe from the moment of the Big Bang till the moment of the compression into a singularity has two stages: the unpacking ($1 \rightarrow 2$) and the packing ($2 \rightarrow 1$). If so, then there are two possible alternative answers to the question about “before” and “after”:

1) The process $1 \rightarrow 2 \rightarrow 1$ is unique (happens only once). Nothing occurred before it, and nothing will occur after. That is, the Universe was in the state of singularity infinitely before the Big Bang, and after returning to this state will be in it infinitely. Such an answer, although it is logically possible, looks very implausible, for it means that the singularity existed infinitely long in an absolutely static, with-no-changes state; then suddenly, *without any cause at all*, it has exploded; yet later it will return to this absolutely static, with-no-changes state, and will never explode again.

2) The process $1 \rightarrow 2 \rightarrow 1$ is repeated, cyclic. The Universe is a cyclically pulsing system that now extends to huge volumes and then is compressed in a compact pointlike explosive mass. Because in the end of the process $1 \rightarrow 2 \rightarrow 1$ the Universe returns in the same state from which the Big Bang (1 – singularity) has begun, it is natural and reasonable to suppose that such a return will be followed by a new Big Bang. It is just as natural and reasonable to suppose that the same occurred in the past too: the Big Bang with which our cycle has begun was preceded by the infinite sequence of other cycles with their own Big Bangs at their beginnings. At least, there are no weighty reasons to deny such a possibility.

However, the theory of the Big Bang does not really tell unequivocally what the Universe was like at the moment of the Big Bang, and what is its future. The Nobel Prize winner in physics Steven Weinberg, in the book “The First Three Minutes”, describes the moment of the Big Bang as a state with infinite density of matter, but hastens to make the reservation: “One possibility is that there never really was a state of infinite density. The present expansion of the universe may have begun at the end of a previous age of contraction, when the density of the universe had reached some very high but finite value.” [Weinberg, 1993: p. 148-149].

With the same uncertainty he writes about the size of the Universe at that initial moment: if the Universe is infinite, then it was such at the moment of the Big Bang too; and if the Universe is finite (“curves back on itself like the surface of a sphere”), then it was finite (although many times smaller than now) at the moment of the Big Bang too [Weinberg, 1993: p. 5]. With the question of whether the expansion of the Universe will ever end and be followed by compression, the answer is uncertain too: it depends on the average density of matter in the Universe; if it is below the critical value, then the expansion will continue infinitely (although gradually slowing down); if it above the critical value then the expansion will stop after some time and a period of compression will follow; the available estimations of the weight of the known matter in the Universe give the average density of matter below the critical value; however, it may be that there is matter of other kinds, which modern scientific theories and estimations do not take into account, and consequently the total density may turn out to be much higher. Against the theory about the infinitely cyclically pulsing Universe, Weinberg points out that, as far as modern physical theories allow to judge, as a consequence of a kind of friction, one of the key physical parameters (the ratio of photons to nuclear particles) should increase with each cycle – “so it is hard to see how the Universe could have previously experienced an infinite number of cycles” [Weinberg, 1993: p. 154]. But this may be objected by pointing

out that modern physical theories are, most likely (as testified by the history of the development of science), imperfect, and do not give a full and exact picture of reality, especially when applied to such conditions (like the Big Bang) that radically differ from all those conditions in which these theories were tested. Weinberg writes also that “although we do not know that it is true, it is at least logically possible that there was a beginning, and that time itself has no meaning before that moment.” [Weinberg, 1993: p. 149] To make this possibility more plausible, Weinberg mentions, as an analogy, temperature, which has absolute zero, corresponding to the full stop of movement of microparticles. This analogy seems to me unpersuasive. I think that the supposition “that there was a beginning, and that time itself has no meaning before that moment” is unintelligible, because whatever moment of time and the corresponding state of the Universe we consider, (as C. McGinn fairly notices) “we can’t help wondering what things were like *before*?”

Let us return to Colin McGinn’s hypothesis. McGinn declines the idea that time has emerged at the moment of the Big Bang, and that before this absolutely nothing happened. However, he accepts the idea that matter and space have emerged at the moment of the Big Bang. Hence his hypothesis:

1) Matter (physical reality) and space have emerged out of something non-spatial (non-physical); the moment of their emergence is the Big Bang.

2) After the Big Bang, this non-spatial “dimension” was somehow present in the spatial Universe, hidden behind space and matter until

3) this matter got organised into the brain, which has created conditions for the manifestation of this non-spatial “dimension” in its congenial non-spatial forms — forms of the human mind: “The non-spatial ‘dimension’ was, so to speak, resurrected by the brain and took on the garb of consciousness.” [McGinn, 1999: p. 121]

Now, if you replace the word-combination “non-spatial ‘dimension’” with “Absolute Spirit”, you will have Hegel’s theory.

I think that this theory has a big drawback — it does not explain the emergence of the human mind (consciousness) — my or your mind. Generally, the defect of many theories of the mind is that they consider mind as some “mind in general” rather than as what any mind really is — an individual (my, your or McGinn’s) mind. They treat the mind on the analogy with matter — as some universal stuff from which many different things can be moulded. You need just to cut off a chunk of Absolute Spirit, and so you get a mind of a person. (It is interesting that McGinn, just a few pages before advancing the hypothesis we discuss here, rightly argued that it is just as impossible to understand the emergence of the mind from some non-material stuff, as from a material one.) The mind is a self, a mental individual such that it is impossible to cut off several pieces of it and arrange them into a new self. For this reason, the emergence of human selves from some spiritual ground of the world is just as unintelligible as their emergence from matter, — at least, if we do not think of this spiritual ground of the world as a spiritual “dimension” in which these selves *are already present* as mental individuals. On the other hand, if we do think of the spiritual ground of the world as a non-spatial “dimension” replete with mental individuals, we get back to usual dualism: on the one hand, there is space and matter, on the other — there are human selves (souls) that belong to a “non-spatial dimension”; the spatial and the non-spatial “dimensions” interact in the sense of interaction between minds, or selves, and their brains.



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