

Colin McGinn and the inexplicability of consciousness

by Astro Calisi

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The need to use some kind of trick when dealing with problems of mind within the conceptual categories we have got, presents itself as something unavoidable; it seems can't be solved even with a radical change of perspective. Philosopher Colin McGinn shows to have grasped in its full dimension the insurmountable difficulties we encounter every time we try to tackle the problem concerning the relationship of mind with its material basis, finding no way out but concluding that the solution of this problem lies beyond the capacity of human intelligence.

According to McGinn, there is no doubt that consciousness is the result of brain activity. It should therefore be some theory able to show us the causal link between the two orders of phenomena³⁰. Unfortunately, because of our cognitive limitations, we can't develop such a theory, because it lies beyond our understanding. Mind-body problem, for McGinn, then, is not mysterious in itself, but originates from a "dark area" in our intelligence that prevents us to devise an explanatory model which can account for the relationship between brain processes and conscious experiences.³¹

It is interesting to note that McGinn doesn't bring any "strong" argument in support of his thesis: he doesn't analyze the characteristics of our cognitive faculties in relation to our ability (or inability) to solve certain types of problems, he doesn't explain why the relationship mind-body should be destined to remain forever unsolved. He merely take note of our current difficulties, extending them also to the future, thus making them an absolute limit.

His conclusions are undoubtedly boosted by a rough and, not infrequently, misleading use of some terms and concepts. This means that his arguments are unclear, if not ambiguous, making it difficult to grasp the arbitrary concepts and inconsistencies in them are hidden.

Let us consider, for example, the notion of "problem". McGinn distinguishes between *cognitively closed in an absolute sense* problems, when it is objectively impossible to solve them, and *cognitively closed in a relative sense* problems, when in fact they are potentially solvable but the solution is not accessible to certain types of minds³². This distinction would seem more than plausible; however it assumes that problems exist independently of men who detect them. McGinn doesn't seem to realize that problems are not found as such in the world of nature. Nature is not problematic in itself, because in it are only observable objects and phenomena, which can, in some cases, counteract each other, in the sense that the action of one tends to cancel out the other's action. Problems

will take root only in the mind of man in the form of determinations that appear irreconcilable: problems originate from the perspective with which man looks at the empirical facts of which he is a witness and the ideal constructions developed by himself.³³

Let us examine from the perspective just outlined McGinn's distinction between objectively insoluble problems (cognitively closed in an absolute sense) and relatively insoluble problems (when the solution is not affordable for certain types of minds). One easily understands that this distinction is built specifically for the position that the author intends to defend, but it can't be supported by any argument having any empirical substance. However, there is a lot more.

McGinn seems to ignore that Turing, in the wake of Gödel's work, has amply demonstrated that there is no reliable criterion to determine in advance whether a given problem, we don't know how to deal with, has a solution or not. Take, for example, the classic problem of "squaring the circle" or the one to determine a general rule for the sequence of prime numbers. So far nobody has been able to find a solution to these problems, but we are not in the position to affirm with absolute certainty that they can't be solved, neither in the objective sense, nor with respect to our intellectual abilities. Similarly, among the 23 problems listed by David Hilbert in 1900, some of them have been resolved satisfactorily, even after years of trying, other problems have a solution that is not accepted by all, at least a couple of them are still open. No one can say whether they will someday be solved, or whether they are solvable.

The limit identified by Turing is valid for all kinds of problems, not only for logical-mathematical ones, which the cited examples belongs to. It applies to purely empirical problems, which arise from a conflict between our theoretical constructs (and, more generally, between our beliefs) and certain events we observe in the outside world or in the experience about ourselves; the contrast between the expectations arising from the systems (explicit or implicit) with which we orient ourselves in reality and the actual observation data is what constitutes the "problem". It also applies to typically "philosophical" problems, such as ethical, religious, aesthetic, etc... For them we haven't got criteria by which judging the goodness of the solutions we arrive. It applies, finally, to practical problems that we face in our daily lives. This is true as long as for "problem" is meant a problem for which we don't yet have a set of criteria and rules that can lead to a solution with relative certainty.

Obviously, a problem can be solved, not only finding a solution, but also dissolving it, recognizing that it is inconsistent. Many problems seem insoluble simply because they originate from incorrect assumptions. Let us consider again the problem of "squaring the circle". If it was "objectively insoluble" (but we don't know if this really is), this would depend on the fact that it is impossible to draw a square with the same area of a circle only using a ruler and a compass. The problem would be by believing something that really is not.

In conclusion, we can't solve a problem when we approach it in a wrong way, ie when we use inadequate concepts or models, or when the problem comes from baseless assumptions. The solution is related, respectively, to the development of new concepts and frameworks that allow us a different classification of significant facts or a discovery of one

or more errors in our departure assumptions. In both cases, the difficulties we meet with depend on us. Indeed, the very problem is created by us, because there are no problems in the world.

Every solution to a problem, since in the same problem definition is implicit the non-availability of procedures coded to deal with success, can't be achieved on the basis of mere logical reasoning. We also need a commitment, more or less important, of creative faculties, the only ones able to move beyond the patterns and reference principles available at a given time.

Creativity can't be traced back to pre-defined rules or procedures: for this reason its results are not amenable to prediction. That's why we can't determine in advance whether a given problem will never be a solution: the solution (if any) is beyond the boundaries defined by existing knowledge and the coded procedures.

This brings us to McGinn's distinction between objectively insoluble problems and relatively insoluble problems (with respect to certain intellectual skills). Is such a distinction sustainable in light of the relief that problems don't exist in the world of nature?

If problems originate from man's reflection in relation to adopted guidance systems or the use of some assumptions, then it makes nonsense talking about objectively insoluble problems, with the meaning they are inherently insurmountable. All the problems we are facing are derived, in fact, from our way of framing certain issues. These determinations are created by man and not objective realities, independent of us. In this context, a problem that seems unsolvable can't be anything but a problem we persist in a wrong way to deal with, or a problem that exists only because we refuse to call into question some assumptions we believe absolutely certain.

Maybe we will never find a correct way to solve the problem, or discover a flaw in our starting assumptions, but we can't establish this in advance, as it doesn't depend on the nature of the problem, but on our future conduct .

About relatively insoluble problems, ie problems whose solution would depend on the limit of our intelligence that faces them, this is a completely arbitrary specification. It is senseless to believe that any being, endowed with a certain degree of intelligence, is able to grasp the contours of a problem without at the same time, having the potential ability to find a solution to the problem itself. It is possible that the being in question can't actually overcome that problem, because he lacks the conceptual tools needed or because he is firmly anchored to misconceptions, but he certainly would be able to understand the solution if, after adequate preparation aimed at him acquire new concepts or eliminate his unfounded assumptions, the solution was exposed to him fully.

A dog is not able to explain why a stone thrown in the air always falls on the ground, but surely the problem for it doesn't even arise, and neither the dog would be able to grasp its contours if someone tried to explain it. The conformation of its mind doesn't allow the dog to support the necessary concepts to enable it the understanding of the problem, and still less, to solve it. Quite different is the case in which the intelligence level enables somebody to understand the problem, as this immediately propels us to the previous situation, related to the so-called "objectively insoluble problems".

We can therefore conclude that McGinn's thesis is untenable, not only because there is no reliable criterion for determining whether a given problem will ever have a

solution or not, but also because it is meaningless to distinguish between problems not solved by their very nature and problems that can't be resolved for an intelligence disability. It is senseless because problems do not exist as such in nature, unlike McGinn shows to believe, therefore, their solutions don't depend on how reality is made, but on our understanding of problems and our dealing with them.

With regards, finally, to the problem of relationship between conscious experience and nervous activity of the brain, which McGinn ranks among the problems whose solution is not accessible to certain types of intelligence, if we accept the principle that problems are man's creations, this location is revealed entirely meaningless, since - as we have seen - we can't grasp a given problem, in its essential lines, and at the same time not to have, at least potentially, the intellectual resources allowing to overcome it. No problem can be considered *objectively insoluble*, if this is intended *because of its intrinsic nature*. The qualification of "insoluble problem" can be accepted only if it means a problem with it is designed (by man) so that it can't be resolved. So if mind-body problem presents itself unbeatable (or overcome only by devices that do violence to our rational abilities), this should lead us to conclude that difficulties are the result of an inadequate way to deal it with, or of some baseless assumptions. By adopting a similar point of view, even McGinn's skeptical conclusions take on a wholly different connotation. They no longer appear as an extravagant position of a philosopher in search of originality at all costs³⁴, but must be seen as the inevitable outcome of any attempt which, by refusing to resort to gimmicks conceptual, maintains the belief that mind-body problem must necessarily be overcome within the existing categories of science.

One can say that McGinn merely take note of a situation that presents itself in all its drama to any person who, by taking seriously the most characteristic manifestations of mind, take it for granted that the current way of representing mind-body is the only possible, therefore, to be taken as an essential basis for any attempt at explanation. To McGinn then we can only blame to cultivate the belief that this situation is permanent, since it is linked to a cognitive inability of man, ie to a congenital deficiency not be overcome, rather than a consequence of an inappropriate way to consider mental phenomena.

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