

The Puzzle of Consciousness*

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Abstract

In this article, I aim to present some of the reasons why consciousness is viewed as an intractable problem by many philosophers. Furthermore, I will argue that if these reasons are properly appreciated, then McGinn's so-called *mysterianism* may not sound as far-fetched as it would otherwise sound.

Key Words: Consciousness, Mental Causation, Physicalism, Mysterianism

Bilinç Bilmecesi

Özet

Bu makalede bilincin çok sayıda felsefeci tarafından çözülemez bir problem olarak görülmesinin sebeplerini sunmayı hedeflemekteyim. Bunun yanında, bu sebepler uygun bir şekilde değerlendirilirse McGinn'in *gizemcilik* olarak adlandırılan düşüncesinin çok da inanılması güç bir düşünce olmadığını iddia edeceğim.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Bilinç, Zihinsel Nedensellik, Fizikselcilik, Gizemcilik

Consciousness is mysterious in various ways. In our waking lives, we human beings are conscious of the things around us and also of our own bodily states. It seems that it just requires a little reflection to realize what it is to be conscious but when it comes to defining consciousness in informative terms, what we typically feel is a sense of deep discomfort. It seems that there is nothing closer to us than our own consciousness; however, putting it into words in a way that would substantively inform someone lacking consciousness seems to elude our conceptual powers.

Many philosophers take it that the central mystery of consciousness is not really about how to give a substantive definition of consciousness but that it is a phenomenon that we know is *somehow* related to the physical body without having any idea as to *how* this is possible. In this article, I will mainly focus on

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the latter mystery. A natural starting point for introducing the mystery concerning the relation between the conscious mind and the body is by taking note of what some philosophers call “a non-negotiable datum,” the idea that there is a causal interaction between the conscious mind and the body. Fodor writes:

If it is not literally true that my wanting is causally responsible for my reaching, and my itching is causally responsible for my scratching, and my believing is causally responsible for my saying..., if none of that is literally true, then practically everything I believe about anything is false and it's the end of the world (1990, p. 156).

According to Fodor, it is *literally* (not just figuratively or metaphorically) true that mental states can have causal effects in the physical world. There are a variety of philosophical theories that deny that there is any literal causal interaction between the mind and the body (e.g. epiphenomenalism and Leibnizian “pre-established harmony” account), which Fodor holds must simply be treated as unbelievable: if there is any causal relation that we think we know holds between any two things, then at least the relation between mental states and physical states must count as a prime candidate.

I believe that Fodor is right to insist that the default position is that mental states and physical states do causally interact. Absent any powerful reasons to the contrary, the causal interaction at hand must be taken as a *datum* by reference to which alternative philosophical theories can be assessed. Philosophical theorizing about anything must start from somewhere, and if there is anything that may plausibly count as a starting point for philosophical theorizing about the mind-body relation, the causal interaction between the two shines as one of the brightest candidate.

Of course, to say that something is a datum is not to say that it does not require any explanation. For instance, suppose that it is a fact that the seemingly random guesses a friend of mine makes about the numbers I have in mind are always correct. Now, this is a fact that cries out for an explanation: how is that possible? What are the underlying mechanisms in virtue of which those guesses are true? Similarly, many philosophers hold that it just cannot be a brute fact about our world that the mind and the body causally interact. There are basically two questions in this regard that are typically of special concern to philosophers of mind. Firstly, how can a given mental state be the cause of a physical state? And, secondly, how can a given mental state be the effect of a physical state?

Starting with the first question, let us note what Kim says:

If your mind is going to cause your limbs to move, it presumably must first cause an appropriate neural event in your brain. How do beliefs and desires manage to cause little neurons to fire? Somehow your beliefs and desires cause your limbs to move in appropriate ways so that for instance, in ten seconds you find your whole body, made up of untold billions of molecules and weighing over a hundred pounds, displaced from bedroom to kitchen (2011, p. 195).

In order to appreciate the problem Kim puts his finger on here, it is not required to be a substance dualist that holds that there are two distinct realms of entities (two kinds of stuff) the qualities of which are irreducibly different. Kim's question "How do beliefs and desires manage to cause little neurons to fire?" seem to make sense and raise an important problem even on a quite rudimentary or commonsensical understanding of what beliefs and desires are. From an intuitive standpoint of view, beliefs and desires just do not seem to be the sort of things that can cause billions of molecules to move in certain ways.

Moving on to the second question, the following quotation from McGinn helps us realize what seems so problematic to many philosophers with taking mental states as effects of physical states:

How is it possible for conscious states to depend upon 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 neurons generate subjective awareness? 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. It strikes us as miraculous, eerie, even faintly comic. Somehow, we feel, the water of the physical brain is turned into the wine of consciousness, but we draw a total blank on the nature of this conversion (1989, p. 349).

It is safe to say that we *know* that a physical organ like a brain causes conscious mental states. However, McGinn claims that we do *not* know or even have a rudimentary understanding of how such causation is possible. The central problem is that brains do not seem to be radically different from other bodily organs in a way that would support an explanation of how the former but not the latter give rise to conscious mental states. Of course, a brain is different from, say, a kidney in terms of its physical features and structures; however, the point

is that *the way it is different* seems not to provide an explanation of what makes it responsible from conscious mental states.

Given this not-so-radical difference between brains and other bodily organs, Huxley's following remarks may not seem so far-fetched:

How it is that anything so remarkable as a state of consciousness comes about as a result of irritating nervous tissue, is just as unaccountable as the appearance of the Djinn, when Aladdin rubbed his lamp (1986, p. 193).

I believe that the qualms given voice to by many philosophers of different strands about the possibility of the mind-brain interaction need to be taken seriously. Conscious mental states just seem to be so remarkably different from physical states that we know give rise to them that our epistemic situation with respect to the causal interaction between the two seems to be on a par with our epistemic situation with respect to religious miracles (McGinn) or supernatural stories (Huxley). In the latter case, we know that there are people that believe in such miracles and stories but we plausibly think that such beliefs in miracles and stories can be accounted for without assuming that there are *really* miracles or supernatural facts. However, in the former case, it seems that we cannot really doubt that we have conscious mental states that are somehow caused by brain states. So, we are left with a miraculous phenomenon that we cannot just set aside as we do with religious miracles and supernatural stories.

Physicalism is a time-honored and venerable way of dealing with the astonishment one may feel about the relation between conscious states and physical states. Note that it appears that what lies at the root of one's feeling at a loss about accounting for the mind-body interaction is the assumption that conscious qualities, those qualities the having of which makes some of our mental states conscious, are radically different from good old physical properties. However, one might reasonably think that this assumption is false and further that conscious qualities are identical to physical properties. The feeling of astonishment can be circumvented if we have good reasons to believe in the mind-brain identity thesis: if conscious qualities are physical properties, then the causal relation between the mind and the body is reduced to neuron-neuron interactions. And whilst it is evidently true that neurosciences are not currently sufficiently well-developed to answer every question that we may raise about the nature of neuronal interaction, there does not seem to be any principled obstacles to their being able to do so at some time in the future.

What reasons do we have to believe in physicalism? There are at least two strong reasons that support physicalism. One appeals to what is known as “Occam’s Razor,” the famous principle of parsimony according to one understanding of which our ontologies should not be populated with entities and laws beyond necessity. If we respect this principle, then among theories that otherwise provide equally satisfactory explanations we should choose the one whose ontology is least populated. Now it might reasonably seem that a theory that takes conscious qualities as identical with some set of physical properties may provide an equally satisfactory explanation of the events in the world as a theory that takes them to be radically different. Holding that conscious qualities are different from physical properties does not seem to play any explanatory role similar to holding that triangularity is a different property from rectangularity: if you take triangularity as rectangularity, you will fail to explain many facts in the world (why for instance, the sum of the interior angles of *that* triangular thing is not 360 degrees). But it is hard to imagine analogous explanatory deficiencies that might be given rise to by taking conscious qualities as identical with physical properties. So, given Occam’s Razor, a theory with a purely physicalist ontology may reasonably seem to be preferable to a theory taking conscious qualities as different from physical properties.

Another reason for thinking that physicalism is true is due to what is known as “the causal argument” in the literature. A rough and ready version of the argument is given by Papineau as follows:

Many effects that we attribute to conscious causes have full physical causes. But it would be absurd to suppose that these effects are caused twice over. So the conscious causes must be identical to some part of those physical causes (2004, p. 17).

The idea is that if conscious states have physical effects, and if all physical effects are fully caused by antecedently occurring purely physical states, then barring the possibility of causal overdetermination, conscious states are physical states. This conditional statement is clearly true and many philosophers think that its antecedent statements are sufficiently well supported.

It seems that we have some good reasons to think that conscious qualities are identical to physical properties; and if we adopt the identity thesis, the intractable problem of mental causation simply dissolves by getting reduced to the tractable problem of neuronal causation. However, many philosophers hold that the identity

thesis is just as astonishing as the possibility of mental causation¹ and that *theremust be something wrong* with the arguments that are designed to establish that thesis. What Papineau calls “the intuition of distinctness” (the intuition that conscious qualities are not identical to physical properties) is an extremely powerful one, which does not seem to be alleviated by any argument to the contrary. It might appear that no argument that purports to show the identity of conscious qualities and physical properties may be more obvious (or less doubtful) than the intuition that the two are distinct.

The following dialogue between *A* and *B* helps to pump the intuition of distinctness. *A* and *B* are aliens from a distant planet; and after her careful investigation of human beings on Earth, *A* is reporting the findings to her superior officer *B*:

A: They are made out of meat.

B: Meat?

A: There is no doubt about it. We picked several from different parts of the planet, took them aboard from our recon vessels, probed them all the way through. They are completely meat.

B: That is impossible. What about the radio signals? The messages to the stars?

A: The signals came from the machines.

B: So who made the machines? That’s who we want to contact.

A: They made the machines. That’s what I am trying to tell you. Meat made the machines.

B: That is ridiculous. How can meat make a machine? You are asking me to believe in sentient meat.

A: I am not asking you, I am telling you. These creatures are the only sentient race in the sector and they are made out of meat.

B: Maybe they are only part meat. You know like Weddilei. A meat hear with an electro plasma inside.

¹ Francis Crick calls the idea that the mind and the brain are identical *the Astonishing Hypothesis*: “The Astonishing Hypothesis is that “You,” your joys and sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules” (1995, p. 3).

A: Nope, I told you, we probed them. They are meat all the way through.

B: No brain?

A: Oh, there is brain all right. It is just that the brain is made out of meat.

B: So...what does the thinking?

A: You are not understanding, are you? The brain does the thinking. The meat.

B: Thinking meat! You are asking me to believe in thinking meat!

A: Yes, thinking meat! Conscious meat! Loving meat. Dreaming meat. The meat is the whole deal! Are you getting the picture?

This short dialogue from Terry Bisson's science fiction story² nicely illustrates what seems to be so problematic to many philosophers with identifying the mind with a physical system, say, the brain. The conscious qualities that sentient beings like us have do not seem to be *the right sort of thing* that can plausibly count as a candidate for being identified with the physical properties of the brain. The brain as a piece of meat has some physical properties that distinguish it from other physical objects like kidneys, but the difference in physical properties between brains and kidneys does not seem to be radical enough to support the identification of conscious qualities with the properties of the former but not with the latter. How can a piece of meat feel the pangs of disappointed love? How can a piece of meat feel excruciating pain? How can a piece of meat create Cantor's paradise? How can a piece of meat have the wildest fantasies? Once these questions are raised in the required, philosophical tone of voice, it is hard not to be impressed by their forces. Identifying the mind with the brain may help to dissolve the problem of mental causation but it does not remove but only relocates the astonishment that one may feel about the mind-body relation. The bafflement that one may feel about the possibility of identifying conscious qualities with physical properties need not be less than the bafflement that one may feel about the possibility of mental causation.

The lesson is that we have good reasons to believe that mental states and physical states do causally interact but it appears to us that we can have no adequate explanation of how that sort of causal interaction is possible (especially

² The story first appeared on the internet. It is quoted here from Colin McGinn (1999).

given that the identity thesis goes blatantly against a fundamental conception we have of mental states). If this is where we are left after having a synoptic look to the worries expressed by various philosophers about the mind-body relation, then McGinn's *mysterianism* may not sound very far-fetched. According to McGinn, the correct account of how the mind relates to the brain is *cognitively closed* to us: because of our specific cognitive constitution, we will never be able to understand what it is that makes the brain responsible from our conscious states. McGinn writes:

I do not believe we can ever specify what it is about the brain that is responsible for consciousness, but I am sure that whatever it is it is not inherently miraculous. The problem arises, I want to suggest, because we are cut off by our very cognitive constitution from achieving a conception of that natural property of the brain (or of consciousness) that accounts for the psychophysical link. This is a kind of causal nexus that we are precluded from ever understanding, given the way we have to form our concepts and develop our theories (1989, p. 350).

According to McGinn, there must be an explanation of how the mind relates to the brain but we are not in the favorable epistemic position of being able to have it. There need not be anything inherently miraculous about the relation in question but there is something miraculous about it *from the epistemic standpoint we human beings have*. McGinn's *mysterianism* can be taken as a call to a sort of epistemic modesty, according to which some explanations may be beyond our cognitive reach. Just as a frog will never be in a position to have an adequate account of its anatomical features, we human beings may similarly never be in a position to have an adequate account of how some of our features (the mind) relates to some of our other features (the brain).

What is it, according to McGinn, about our very cognitive constitution that puts us in the unfavorable epistemic condition that renders our access to an explanation of the mind-body relation impossible? The answer is the difference between the ways in which we form our concepts of physical properties and concepts of consciousness. McGinn writes:

[T]he senses are geared to representing a spatial world; they essentially present things in space with spatially defined properties. But it is precisely *such* properties that seem inherently incapable of resolving the mind-body problem: we cannot link consciousness to the brain in virtue of spatial properties of the brain. There the brain is, an object of perception, laid out in space, containing spatially distributed processes; but consciousness defies explanation in such terms. Consciousness does

not seem made up out of smaller spatial processes; yet perception of the brain seems limited to revealing such processes. The senses are responsive to certain *kinds* of properties – those that are essentially bound up with space – but these properties are of the wrong sort (the wrong *category*) to constitute *P* [the property that is responsible for the psychophysical causal nexus] (1989, p. 357).

The idea here is that the most fundamental way in which we form our concepts of ordinary physical properties is through having perceptions of their instantiations and our perceptions represent those properties as spatially distributed. However, introspection, “the faculty through which we catch consciousness in all its vivid nakedness” (McGinn 1989, p. 351), does not represent our conscious qualities as spatially distributed. (After all, it does not make much of sense to ask, for instance, whether the pain that I am feeling now is rectangular or triangular.) The deep perplexity that we feel when the question of how a conscious quality may arise from a physical property of the brain is raised is generated by the radically different ways in which concepts of conscious qualities and concepts of physical properties are formed. Perception and introspection are two radically different sources of conceptualization, the former of which is responsible from the formation of physical concepts and the latter of which is responsible from the formation of concepts of consciousness. At the root of our bafflement lies the fundamental incongruity between these different kinds of concepts representing the properties they refer to in radically diverse ways.

I believe there is something fundamentally right about McGinn’s diagnosis of our predicament. By noting that there are radically different mechanisms that are operative in the formation of our concepts, the diagnosis at hand explains our bafflement about the mind-body relation and why it seems to us that *we* will never have an adequate understanding of that relation. Further, by tying our bafflement to our cognitive constitution but not to there being something *inherently miraculous* in the world, McGinn’s diagnosis is in accord with our reasons for thinking that there must be something that explains the possibility of the mind-body relation. Once it is realized that the source of our bafflement is not the world but ourselves, we are in a position to consistently endorse both that there is something essentially miraculous about the mind-body relation (*from our own point of view*) and there need not be anything miraculous about it (*from the point of view of a possible mindful creature with a different cognitive constitution*).

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