

**Minds Sans Miracles:
Colin McGinn's Naturalized Mysterianism**

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Minds sans Miracles

Colin McGinn's Naturalized Mysterianism

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In a previous issue of *Philosophia Christi*, Charles Taliaferro¹ responded to Colin McGinn's objections to substance dualism, and especially "theistic dualism," the advancement of theism to assist substance dualism. In this article, I continue this discussion by focusing on problems for McGinn's own view of the mind. To present the flow and unity of McGinn's overall argument, I offer an extended and uninterrupted précis of his case, followed by an assessment and critique. In-text page citations refer to his *Mysterious Flame: Conscious Minds in a Material World*.²

1. McGinn's Naturalized Mysterianism

McGinn argues that despite appearances to the contrary, the mind is not miraculous but merely mysterious.³ The inexplicable and seemingly supernatural nature of the mind-body relationship does not threaten atheistic naturalism, but only indicates our cognitive closure to the natural medium in virtue of which the mind and brain relate. To his credit, McGinn is forthright in admitting the categorical difference between mental and material states, and is careful to denote precisely what he means by "consciousness."⁴

Consciousness is the having of sensations, emotions, or thoughts; it is not *reflecting that* you are having experiences, it just is *the having* of experiences. Nor is having a conscious state the same as applying a mental con-

¹ Charles Taliaferro, "Mysterious Flames in Philosophy of Mind," *Philosophia Christi*, Series 2, 1 (no. 2, 1999): 21-32.

² Colin McGinn, *The Mysterious Flame: Conscious Minds in a Material World* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

³ "Naturalized Mysterianism" is McGinn's own phrase.

⁴ McGinn generally uses "mind" and "consciousness" interchangeably.

cept of that state to oneself; being conscious is not the same as characterizing oneself as conscious. While consciousness may be *of* a spatial object, consciousness itself is not spatial, does not stand in spatial relations to other experiences, and lacks solidity or mass. Although it depends upon and has a causal basis in the spatial world, the mind itself “refuses to set its foot in space” (111). Consciousness, then, is necessarily imperceptible to the senses. McGinn argues that consciousness is characterized by its dependence upon the brain—having a brain is necessary for consciousness. “Consciousness is locked to the brain, rooted in its tissues” (3).⁵

According to McGinn, the foregoing understanding of consciousness generates the mind-body problem, which may be understood in terms of the heterogeneity of mental and physical properties or the incommensurability of mental and physical concepts. First, being essentially different kinds of things and having essentially different kinds of properties, it does not seem *possible* for the mind and brain to relate. And, without a necessary connection between their respective kinds, it does not seem *necessary* that the mind and brain relate. Second, without any semantic overlap between mind and brain concepts, we have no conceptual resources for explaining how the mind and brain relate, that is, there are no necessary predictive/explanatory entailments between the mind and the brain.

Having noted the nature of the mind-body problem, McGinn goes on to dismiss two traditional solutions: materialism and substance dualism. McGinn rejects the former, which he aptly dubs “meatism,” because it denies that the mental and physical are essentially different. Meatism implies that we are under an illusion about the nature of the mind; introspection is a distorting lens. Neural processes do not cause conscious processes—they just *are* conscious processes. Although our awareness (say, of pain) does not represent itself as merely neural activity, this is an error of perception.

Against meatism, McGinn argues that brain states and mental states cannot be identical since one can know everything about the former and yet know nothing about the latter. A possible rebuttal is that despite being non-synonymous, mental and physical concepts do refer to the same entity, similar to the non-synonymous concepts of “water” and “H₂O.” However, this assumes a difference at the level of appearance and a sameness at the level of fact—a dubious assumption, McGinn thinks, because consciousness *consists* of appearances. Pain, for instance, just *is* an appearance. A difference

⁵ I will discuss the justification for this claim later; for now, it is worth noting that *this* claim about consciousness—unlike the others—is not and cannot be known by examining consciousness itself. McGinn himself acknowledges that while “I can be certain of the existence and nature of my conscious experiences, ... I cannot be certain of what causes them” (*Mysterious Flame*, 4).

at the level of appearance *is* a difference at the level of fact. Thus, physical concepts do not refer to the same facts as mental concepts.

Next, McGinn dismisses substance dualism on the grounds that it fails to account for the various ways in which the mind and brain relate and implies that the mind and brain relate in a naturally impossible, supernatural/miraculous way. According to McGinn, dualism⁶ denies a logical connection between the mind and the brain, but admits that the mind and the brain are correlated. The mind and the brain are distinct realms which cannot be collapsed, run in tandem, and are contingently connected.

McGinn's principal objection to substance dualism is that it fails to take the brain seriously. By declaring the mind to be independent of the brain, dualism "renders the brain irrelevant to the mind in a way it cannot be" (23-4). It misrepresents, in particular, "the hard realities of the mind-brain connection" (25). McGinn raises two problems for dualism: the "zombie problem" and the "ghost problem."

The zombie problem is that on dualism the mind makes no causal difference. If the brain and mind exist independently, then zombies are possible: unconscious beings who are physically exactly similar to their conscious counterparts. This, however, implies epiphenomenalism. McGinn asks us to imagine two beings who are physically exactly similar—both biologically and behaviorally. The first being, which I'll call Frank, has mental experience; the other, Frankenstein, does not. Frankenstein's brain states/events and the speech mechanisms they trigger are sufficient to cause the effect of his self-report: "I, Frankenstein, am having an experience of red." Since Frankenstein and Frank are physically exactly similar, the same etiology must be true of a similar self-report by Frank. That is, Frank's brain events and the speech mechanisms they trigger are sufficient to cause his behavior. Yet Frank, unlike Frankenstein, has mental experience. This mental experience, however, is not necessary to produce the effect, since the brain event is sufficient. Frank's mind makes no causal difference—it is epiphenomenal. Thus, McGinn concludes, "we get the perplexing—and ultimately unsatisfying—result that my experiencing red has nothing to do with my saying that I experience red. Dualism makes my mind into an idle spectator of what happens to my body" (26).

Similarly, McGinn argues, dualism divests the brain of any relevance for the mind. This is the ghost problem: Dualism implies the real possibility of disembodiment. But, if disembodiment were possible, then the mind could "go about its business without the machinery of the brain to assist it" (28). He admits that we can imagine disembodiment, but claims that the

⁶ In what follows, unless otherwise noted I use the terms "dualism" and "substance dualism" interchangeably.

idea is fraught with *conceptual* difficulties: If brains are dispensable, then why do we have them? If minds do not owe their existence to brains, then why does brain damage obliterate mental faculties? Why are all mental changes actually accompanied by brain changes? “A disembodied mind,” he notes, “is difficult to tie down to the physical world” (27).

In sum, McGinn rejects substance dualism because it cannot account for the alleged ways in which the mind and brain relate. To be specific, McGinn has implicitly and explicitly argued that the mind and brain 1) stand in a diachronic generative relationship (brain-tissue preceded and generated minds), 2) stand in an synchronic emergence relationship (the mind emerges upon the brain), and 3) stand in a reciprocal causal relationship (the mind and brain causally commune and epiphenomenalism is false).

These relationships are important because they imply that—the apparent incommensurability of our current concepts notwithstanding—there must be *some* intelligible natural explanation for the mind-body relationship.⁷ Thus, McGinn argues that the brain must have some property, C*, that explains how the mind naturally emerges from it. Whatever has C* must necessarily have consciousness.

McGinn admits that for the naturalist, merely describing or summarizing the correlations between mind and matter (by way of, say, nomological “necessity”) will not suffice as an explanation, since it is precisely the astounding correlations that need to be explained (215). Rather, naturalism requires an explanation that is *conceptually necessary*. McGinn is very candid on this point:

It would have to be as obvious that consciousness could arise from the brain as it is obvious that bachelors are unmarried males. ... If the mind-body problem is to be solved, something like this kind of conceptual connection has to exist between mental concepts and concepts of the brain. ... The very concept of consciousness has to be connected to concepts of the brain in an internal way. Only then would we have an intelligible explanation of the nature of the link. (215-6)

There must, for instance, be a conceptual link between the concept of pain and the concept of the brain.

Of course, given the heterogeneous categories and incommensurable concepts, the naturalist is hard-pressed to show any, much less a necessary,

⁷ Unfortunately, McGinn does not state explicitly what he means by “miraculous” or “super-natural.” He seems to have in mind an event or relationship that transcends the modal constraints of the kinds of its constituent members. Thus, a mind (qua mental entity) is not the kind of thing which can stand in a (generative, emergence, or causal) relationship to a brain (qua physical entity). The putative miracle seems to be the fact that they do stand in a relationship; the explanation for which cannot be gleaned from the explanatory resources of the respective kinds of the relata. He seems to mean that a property, relation, or event is “natural” if its existence or behavior can be adequately explained, viz. shown to be in some adequate sense necessary, without reference to God or “mystical absurdities” (*Mysterious Flame*, 70).

connection between the mind and brain. On our current conceptions, mind and matter are categorically different kinds of things. Thus, it seems impossible, yea miraculous, that mind and matter relate in the ways that they do. The mind-brain relationship seems magical or supernatural and thus threatens atheistic naturalism.

However, rather than conceding that the mind-body relationship is miraculous or supernatural (which he “resolutely shuns”⁸), McGinn concludes that it is mysterious. Since traditional solutions fail, and since there must be an intelligible natural explanation, our inability to solve the mind-body problem must be due to the inadequacy of our (mental and physical) concepts and their respective modes of apprehension—introspection and perception. Each of these modes provides “a partial and skewed picture of what they are directed toward, and hence fail to disclose the underlying unity of the mind and brain. Cognitive closure results from the fact that this partialness is inherent in the two modes of apprehension” (51). Thus, we are cognitively closed to C*.

As McGinn explains,

If our current conception of the brain were really close to a complete representation of it, then indeed there would be a miracle at the very heart of consciousness. The ability of the brain to conjure consciousness from its crevices would be like the ability of Aladdin’s lamp to bring forth the djinn. But the world cannot really work like that, so there has to be some aspect of the brain that we are blind to, and deeply so.(68)

McGinn’s conclusion that we are cognitively closed to the solution of the mind-body problem is an explicit attempt to save naturalism and avoid supernaturalism.⁹ In his mind, cognitive closure is a sufficient way out for the naturalist, since traditional theories are inadequate and since cognitive closure is plausible. In reality, he argues, mind and matter must share a “covert essence,” or hidden structure, which is necessarily hidden from us (140). In addition, our mental and physical concepts are incommensurable in virtue of their being informed by the two distinct modes of apprehension. If we did know all the properties of mind and matter, our concepts would be commensurable and we would see their natural and necessary relationship.

⁸ Colin McGinn, *The Problem of Consciousness*, (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1993), 6.

⁹ See for example *The Mysterious Flame*, 70, 84-5, *The Problem of Consciousness*, 2, 6, 27-8, and especially page 105, where he writes, “What I should especially urge now is that our inability to specify the nature of this hidden structure [which mediates the mind-brain relationship] is not a good reason to spurn the philosophical benefits the hypothesis of its existence brings us. Knowing that it is there, ticking away, relieves us of the fear that we might have to admit that there is no such thing as consciousness—on the ground that there is no room for the supernatural in this godless world.”

McGinn's thesis, then, is that the mental and physical relate in virtue of a common hidden structure or "covert essence." In virtue of this hidden structure, the mind and the brain are essentially related. The mind depends upon the brain. Having knowledge of this structure would be or at least would provide resources sufficient for an adequate explanation for the mind-body relationship. One could infer the mental properties from the brain properties.

To support his thesis, McGinn argues that cognitive closure is surely possible, given our evolutionary history, and plausible, given the apparent hidden structure of both space and consciousness. Indeed, given the perennial and intractable nature of the mind-body problem, one may be readily sympathetic to the suggestion that we *cannot* solve it. Assuming an evolutionary etiology, it would not be surprising that we are "constitutionally ignorant" of many things. If human intelligence is an "evolutionary contrivance," and science and philosophy are "biological overspill," then cognitive closure is a real possibility (45, 41).

To evince the plausibility of there being a hidden structure to space, McGinn ventures a couple of "daring speculations" (123). First, McGinn notes, contemporary cosmology indicates that matter and space came to be created at the point in time of the Big Bang. Thus, the *cause* of the Big Bang must have operated in a state of reality that preceded the creation of matter and space; the cause of space was not itself spatial. This suggests that the non-spatial and the spatial can and did stand in a causal relationship. The primordial non-spatial ingredients, he argues, "are what got transformed into matter at the time of the Big Bang, and they are what enables matter in the shape of brain tissue to generate consciousness" (121). Big Bang cosmology, therefore, suggests the existence of a natural property by which matter and mind can relate.¹⁰

As a second possibility, McGinn suggests that "we are deeply wrong about what space is really like. It is not that consciousness is *non*spatial, after all; rather, space is quite other than we think, and consciousness fits comfortably into the nature of space as it *really* is" (123). Thus, "space is just that which contains all causally interacting things," and has a natural and smooth way of containing mind and matter which is beyond our current understanding of space (127-8, 124).

To evince the plausibility of our cognitive closure with respect to consciousness, McGinn exhibits two kinds of evidence that consciousness has a hidden structure: the logical form of thoughts and the phenomenon known as "blindsight." McGinn argues that thoughts have an underlying logical structure that diverges from their surface appearance. Drawing upon

¹⁰ On these points, proponents of the Kalam argument for the existence of God might find McGinn an unwitting ally.

Bertrand Russell's theory of descriptions, according to which the surface structures of ordinary sentences diverge from and conceal their underlying logical structures, McGinn argues that the surface structure of thought conceals its underlying logical form. Russell noted that since it is possible for a meaningful sentence's surface components to fail to refer, the sentence's meaning must derive from an underlying logical structure. For example, while the "The Queen of America is bald" is a meaningful sentence, its subject term has no real referent. Thus, Russell argued, there must be an underlying logical structure, such as "There is a queen of America, and there is only one queen of America, and she is bald." McGinn suggests that the same is true for conscious thoughts. The surface grammar of thought conceals its underlying logical form, which must be inferred to explain what overtly appears. Thoughts, therefore, have an essential logical supporting structure which is "not open for the inner eye to see" (147).

Second, McGinn argues that the phenomenon of blindsight indicates that experience has a hidden structure not subject to introspection. In blindsight, a damaged visual system partly operates as it did before the damage, despite the absence of visual sensations. Despite the lack of visible sensations, the person is able to judge the shape of objects with a degree of accuracy far greater than by chance. "The environment is still feeding into his ability to make judgments about what is around him, despite his visual blankness" (148). "Visual experience," McGinn concludes, "necessarily contains information that is not open to introspection" (150).

Thus, having marshaled evidence to support the hidden structure of the mind, McGinn assures the naturalist that consciousness, far from being magical, is merely mysterious and beyond our naturally-selected cognitive capacities.

2. *The Virtues of McGinn's Approach*

In an intellectual climate so obeisant to imperialistic scientism, it is refreshing to hear the sustained claim that there are limits to what we can know. For this, Colin McGinn is to be applauded and recommended. Furthermore, in a guild so pervaded by obstinate obfuscations of consciousness, it is encouraging to find a philosopher who takes consciousness seriously—so much so, in fact, that consciousness, on our current conceptions, is seen as a formidable threat to atheistic naturalism. McGinn, to his credit, admits that the atheist is without a plausible explanation for the mind-body relationship. This lacuna notwithstanding, he is assured that postulating cognitive closure is sufficient to shunt a slide into theistic dualism. As I will now argue, however, McGinn's way out seems to be a dead end.

3. *Justifiability Conditions for Cognitive Closure*

There seem to be several necessary conditions for justifiably asserting cognitive closure. First, it is necessary that a cognitive closure thesis be internally coherent and consistent with what we *do* know. Of course, it may be a point of dispute as to what we know—but a cognitive closure thesis must at least be consistent with what *it* affirms to be true. Second, a cognitive closure thesis cannot justify beliefs which are broadly logically inconsistent. For example, if a thesis includes the assertions that A is essentially X and that A is not essentially X, it is dubious to claim that we are cognitively closed as to how the theory is internally logically consistent—for we know that both assertions cannot be true.

Obviously, for any given phenomena a cognitive closure thesis would be dubious if an adequate explanation was available. Thus, a third necessary condition for the plausibility of a cognitive closure thesis is the absence of any adequate explanation. Of course, whether or not an explanation is “adequate” will be determined by prior philosophical commitments. The naturalist, for example, may reject as inadequate any explanation that does not involve physical descriptions and physical covering-laws. McGinn shuns any explanation that involves miracles or magic. The question-begging potential of such commitments notwithstanding, we may agree to leave the question of adequacy aside (and discuss it on a case-by-case basis) and note that a cognitive closure thesis is justified only to the extent that extant explanations are relatively inadequate; cognitive closure, in other words, must be at least as plausible as any extant explanation. Since these justifiability conditions for cognitive closure theses seem fair and reasonable, I will apply them to McGinn’s case.

4. *McGinn’s Dismissal of Substance Dualism*

Since the plausibility of a cognitive closure thesis requires the inadequacy of other explanations, a critical plank in McGinn’s argument is his rejection of traditional solutions. Although others may wish to take issue with his arguments against “meatism,” I found his objections to be persuasive. Thus, I will focus on his objections to substance dualism.

Frankly, McGinn’s objections to dualism seem question begging. Consider McGinn’s “zombie problem.” His *reductio* argument is that zombies are possible on dualism and that this implies epiphenomenalism. However, McGinn’s stipulation that Frank, although conscious, is biologically and behaviorally exactly similar to Frankenstein flatly denies the dualist doctrine of causal interaction between the mind and the brain. Frank and

Frankenstein would be biologically and behaviorally exactly similar *only if* the mind did *not* have independent causal power and top-down causal input into the causal nexus of the brain—causal input which is not itself necessitated by a brain event. If the mind did have such power, as the dualist asserts, then it would be impossible for their brain activity to be exactly similar.

It may be that dualism implies that the static physical structure of the brain is what it is independent of the mind, but dualism does not *not* imply that the activities and capacities of the brain are what they are independent of the mind. Thus, McGinn wrongly asserts that “dualism says that we can coherently imagine that your brain stays the same while we ‘suppose’ your consciousness away” (25). The dualist, then, is within his or her rights to assert that zombies (of the sort in view) are impossible; dualism is not a sufficient condition for the possibility of zombies. In fact, this objection to McGinn may be made emphatically by a Thomistic dualist, who claims that a human body stands in an internal relationship to its mind or soul. That is, a body is a *human* body only if it is informed by a human mind; a body whose soul has become disembodied is, strictly speaking, no longer a human body. Thus, there are no possible worlds in which a human body exists without a soul.¹¹

In addition, neither is substance dualism a necessary condition for zombies. In fact, McGinn himself seems to allow for their possibility. He admits that “while it is not conceivable to me that my consciousness does not exist, it is conceivable to me that yours may not: you might just be a mindless robot for all that I can know” (198). Thus, if the possibility of zombies implies epiphenomenalism, then McGinn’s view does so as well—and his position is not a version of substance dualism.

McGinn’s “ghost problem” seems equally question begging. He argues that dualism falsely assumes that the mind has no need of the brain to “go about its business” (28). The mind needs the brain to do its business, and since dualism denies this fact, dualism is false. This objection amounts to two distinct claims: first, that the mind needs the brain to do its business, and second, that dualism denies this.

The first claim is ambiguous, and whether or not dualism denies it depends upon the kind of “business” in view. Dualists need not assume that the mind has no need of the brain to causally “do business” with the body (e.g., the mind may need the brain to contract a muscle). If McGinn charges dualism with this assumption, then he has constructed a straw man. On the other hand, the dualist will insist that certain mental “business” (e.g., intentional states, intendings, qualitative experiences) may be done independently of the brain. Richard Swinburne, for example, has argued that the logical

¹¹ I am indebted to J. P. Moreland for this observation.

conceivability of a conscious person's continuing to exist after the destruction of her body implies the existence of a non-bodily soul upon which her existence depends.¹² Thus, while McGinn is correct to notice that dualism implies the possibility of disembodiment, he fails to appreciate that the possibility of disembodiment implies dualism. Furthermore, the belief that disembodiment is possible is based upon the same epistemic ground McGinn employed in his arguments against meatism: our knowledge of ourselves via introspection. He argued that mental states and brain states cannot be identical since the former are introspectively accessible but the latter are not. Introspection also presents the conceivability of disembodiment, and indicates that consciousness *does* require certain things—such as a self and intentionality, as McGinn admits¹³—but *does not* indicate that consciousness requires a brain or body.

5. McGinn's Epiphenomenalism

It is ironic that McGinn would charge dualism with epiphenomenalism, when his own commitments seem to imply it. McGinn, for example, rejects a non-theistic version of dualism ("hyperdualism") because of his commitments to the causal closure of the physical and to the dependence of mental properties on physical properties. However, taken together with his claim that the mental and physical are metaphysically distinct, these commitments seem to preclude the mind from having any causal relevance for the brain at all. That is, McGinn's commitments seem to imply what Jaegwon Kim calls "mental property epiphenomenalism."¹⁴

McGinn argues against the dualist notion that "mental events...change the course of the universe from the outside" by noting that this would imply that "physics cannot in principle explain the course of physical events in the universe" (93). Furthermore, he argues, "causation in the material world works by energy transfer of some sort: transfer of motion, electrical energy, gravitational force. But pure consciousness could not give off energies of *these kinds...*" (92). Rather, he argues, mental causation works "by means of the physical features of the brain, its electromagnetic properties" (92-3). McGinn is explicit on these points: "the mind of an organism is causally dependent upon its brain, no matter how hard it is to penetrate the nature of this dependence. ...What happens in consciousness is minutely controlled by brain activity" (87).

¹² Richard Swinburne, *The Evolution of the Soul*, revised edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 145-60, 322-32.

¹³ *The Mysterious Flame*, 157, 189.

¹⁴ Jaegwon Kim, *Philosophy of Mind* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1998), 138.

It should be noted that McGinn here again begs the question against the dualist—this time by assuming the physical is causally closed and that only material causes can produce material effects. It is these assumptions, however, which seem to imply epiphenomenalism. First, if every physical effect must have a sufficient physical cause (i.e., the physical is causally closed), then no mental event, qua mental event, can be the cause of a brain event. The mind, in other words, is denied a point of causal entry into the brain. Thus, since the mind is metaphysically distinct from the brain (on McGinn's view), it can only be epiphenomenal with respect to brain events. Second, even if mental events could cause brain events, the doctrine of physical causal closure would render such mental causation overdeterminative and superfluous. Since the said doctrine requires a sufficient physical cause for every brain event, every mental causal contribution would overdetermine its effect. Mental causes would not be necessary for the brain events they supposedly effect. Third, on McGinn's dependency thesis, every mental event is determined by a brain event. Thus, even if mental events were allowed to effect brain events, the fact that such mental events have sufficient physical causes would render their causal efficacy epiphenomenal due to the transitivity of causation.

Finally, McGinn's cognitive closure thesis does not preclude or mitigate the epiphenomenal implications of his view. Even if our understanding of space *is* wrong or inadequate, we *can* recognize and imagine causally deterministic systems. Whatever else may be true of a deterministic system, we do know that its effects are necessitated by their antecedent causes. Either the brain—as we know it—is such a system or it is not. In other words, either brain events are determined by physical properties or they are not. If they are not, then we must reject the causal closure of the physical. If they are, then whatever else may be true (but cognitively closed to us) about mental events, we know that they are ultimately epiphenomenal with respect to brain events.

6. McGinn's Dependency Thesis

Thus, epiphenomenalism seems to be implied by McGinn's views, rather than by those of the substance dualist. As I have already noted, for McGinn to justify his cognitive closure thesis, he must show the inadequacy of alternative explanations such as dualism. If dualism provides a suitable explanation for the mind-body relationship on our current concepts and knowledge, then the cognitive closure thesis is unnecessary and unwarranted. McGinn's case, therefore, requires the defeat of dualism. His critique of dualism, however, turns on what I will call his *dependency thesis*: "consciousness depends upon an unknowable natural property of the brain" (28).

McGinn explains that “the brain is what enables the mind to exist at all. ... Consciousness is locked to the brain, rooted in its tissues” (5). The dependence is also causal; brain activity minutely controls mental activity (87).

Furthermore, while McGinn claims that “minds don’t merely occupy brains, [but] are somehow constituted by them” (28), he insists that “the mind does not depend upon the brain as a whole depends upon its parts ... The mind is simply not a combinatorial product of the brain. ... The mind does not depend upon the brain in the mode of spatial aggregation” (58-9). The dependence thesis is also what drives McGinn’s requirement that the form of the solution be conceptually necessary. Since the mind depends upon the brain, an adequate explanation for this dependence must do more than describe their *de facto* relationship, it must explain why the mind *requires* the brain. An adequate explanation must show how the brain is *necessary* for the mind.

6.1 *The Justification for the Dependency Thesis*

Unfortunately, however, McGinn’s evidence for the dependency thesis does not *require* it. The evidence does not necessarily show that the mind necessarily depends upon the brain. In fact, his justification for the dependency thesis is tangential and quite tenuous. McGinn seems to offer two kinds of arguments for the dependency thesis.

His first argument is based on introspection:

... it is because changes in, and injuries to, the brain result in changes in consciousness, as revealed to the faculty of introspective awareness, that we select the brain as the seat of consciousness. ... We know that the brain is the seat of consciousness ultimately because changes in the brain correlate most directly with how our mind seems to us from the inside. (52-3)

His second argument is inductive:

It is reasonable to assume that there is a strong connection between consciousness and organic tissue for the simple reason that there are no actual exceptions to this rule. All the cases of consciousness we know of are associated with organic brains. Induction therefore suggests that this assumption is backed by some kind of necessary truth. ... In actual fact all the known cases of consciousness are organic in nature, so it is reasonable to suppose that organic tissue is necessary, although in ways we do not comprehend. I say ‘reasonable,’ not ‘infallible,’ because maybe it is just an accident that all minds are organically based, a consequence of technological backwardness on our part. ... Still, I think it is a fair bet, given what we observe, that consciousness needs an organic basis, although I would not be amazed if this turned out to be incorrect. ... Meat-based consciousness might be the only possible kind, or it might be just one instance of many possible kinds of physical basis for consciousness. (200-1)

At the outset, it must be noted that his dependency thesis does not follow from the evidence cited. His first argument moves from the (true) premise that there are correlations between brain changes and mental changes to the conclusion that the mind necessarily depends upon the brain. It is surprising to find McGinn reasoning in this manner, especially given his claim elsewhere that a “solution [to the mind-body problem] would have to go beyond merely saying what consciousness is correlated with and tell us about the very *essence of consciousness*” (215). As McGinn recognized, mere correlations are not the *explanans* but the *explanandum*! Besides, dualism just as adequately explains mind-brain correlation. The mind and brain may causally effect one another without the former depending upon the latter.

His second argument seems to beg the question against the dualist and actually undermines the justification for the dependency thesis. Even if it was true that “all the cases of consciousness we know of are associated with organic brains,” it would not imply the dependency thesis unless one assumed that “being associated with” requires “being dependent upon.” The dualist, of course, would agree to the mind-brain association while denying mind-on-brain dependence. Furthermore, if anything follows from his comments, it is that the mind does *not* necessarily depend upon the brain. Conceding the metaphysical possibility that minds and brains are accidentally related is to deny the dependency thesis. Minds which are possibly accidentally dependent upon brains cannot be identical to minds which are necessarily dependent upon brains. Thus, if *our* minds are possibly accidentally dependent upon brains (as McGinn admits), then our minds cannot be necessarily dependent upon brains. Thus, not only is the dependency thesis wanting in warrant, it seems contradicted by what even McGinn admits is conceivable.

6.2 *Conceivability and the Dependency Thesis*

McGinn’s dependency thesis also seems unwarranted in virtue of its being at odds with his admission that it is both conceivable and possible that brains are not necessary for minds. He concedes the conceivability of both God and angels¹⁵—whose minds lack *any* physical base, and the possibility of aliens¹⁶—whose minds may have an entirely different sort of physical base than brain tissue.¹⁷

¹⁵ *The Mysterious Flame*, 193, 229.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 201, 229.

¹⁷ These concessions are remarkable in light of his objection that dualism made the brain irrelevant to the mind, and his claim that the conceivability of (dualistic) disembodiment is illusory.

Since he concedes that other kinds of minds do not necessarily depend upon brains, McGinn must show why it is that *human* minds do. This, however, requires showing how human minds are essentially different from other kinds of minds. For human minds to depend *necessarily* upon brains, then they must be *essentially* different from other kinds of minds which do not necessarily depend upon brains and those which do not necessarily depend upon *any* physical base. If human minds are not essentially different, then they must also not be necessarily dependent upon brains. Thus, since it is essential to his dependency thesis, McGinn owes us an account of the essential differences between these different kinds of minds. In addition, since McGinn grants that the mind and brain are distinct, he must show an essential difference between human and non-human minds at the level of the mind, and not at the level of whatever their bases may be (if they have one).

6.3 Cognitive Closure and the Dependency Thesis

Finally, McGinn's cognitive closure thesis cannot help to justify his dependency thesis. He may, for instance, wish to claim that we are cognitively closed to the justification for believing that the mind *necessarily* depends upon the brain. Not only, however, would such a claim undermine his many claims that we "*know* the mind depends upon the brain" (52-3, 67, 87, etc.), it also would beg the question against the dualist.

One may wish to modify McGinn's dependency thesis to the claim that the mind necessarily depends upon *some* physical state (and not just the brain). This claim, however, seems hopelessly empty. As the so-called problem of multiple realizability shows, there are no necessary criteria for membership in the set of conditions which are sufficient for mental states. Thus, while each member of the set may be sufficient, no one is necessary. However, an entity (or property) cannot properly be said to *depend* upon another particular entity (or property) which is not *necessary* for its existence. For example, there is an infinite set of conditions sufficient to cause a scale to register "100 pounds." One can arrange various ingredients in various proportions to amass this weight. However, none of the particular ingredients are necessary. Four twenty-five pound bricks of brass will suffice just as much as twenty-five four pound saltwater bass. Thus, it would be dubious to claim that for a quantity to weigh 100 pounds it must necessarily include a four pound saltwater bass.

However, it *does* seem correct that a quantity weighing 100 pounds necessarily depends upon the quantity including the *kinds* of things which can be *weighty*. This suggests that if there are necessary conditions for mental entities (or properties), they must themselves be mental. This is, in fact, what introspection suggests. Any qualitative or intentional experience, for

example, is necessarily had by a subject. A subject is a necessary condition for an intentional experience.

The foregoing points suggest that the dependency thesis cannot find support in a cognitive closure thesis. As a final objection, however, we may note how these two theses actually stand at justificatory odds. The cognitive closure thesis claims that we are blind to the deep essence of both consciousness and matter. The problem, however, is that the justification for this thesis stands in negative correlation with that for the dependency thesis. If its essence is beyond our ken, what justifies us in claiming that consciousness necessarily depends upon the brain? This problem is especially acute given the fact that what we *do* seem to know about consciousness—and what McGinn claims is illusory—is that it does *not* depend upon the brain (i.e., disembodiment is possible). Thus, McGinn must argue that what seems obviously true is actually false, and what seems highly speculative is necessarily true—and all this while maintaining that we have severe cognitive closure to the subject at hand!

7. McGinn's Hidden Structure Thesis

Furthermore, our cognitive closure is alleged to be most acute with respect to the hidden structure constituting the necessary link between the mind and the brain. This suggestion, what I will call McGinn's "hidden structure thesis," seems problematic and without much to commend it. This can be demonstrated, first, by noting its relationship to the cognitive closure thesis; second, by considering McGinn's observations about consciousness and space which are supposed to suggest a hidden structure; and third, by considering whether his suggestion does justice to the nature of conscious states. First, then, we should note that like the dependency thesis, the hidden structure thesis seems to stand at justificatory odds with the cognitive closure thesis. If the essence of consciousness is beyond our ken, what justifies us in claiming that it has an essentially hidden structure?

Second, McGinn's employment of Russell's theory of descriptions and the phenomenon of blindsight does not seem to help his case. Russell's theory, for example, hardly implies that consciousness, qua consciousness, has a hidden structure. At the most, it would imply that *some* mental representations of *sentences* have a more basic logical structure—but not all conscious states represent sentences, or are even propositional. Besides, the logical structure Russell *discovered* is not hidden. It is available to consciousness via other mental processes.

Although interesting, blindsight does not seem to imply that consciousness, qua consciousness, has an essentially hidden structure. At the most, blindsight only indicates that *perception* has a hidden element, not that *con-*

sciousness does—since not all conscious states are perceptual ones. One could also reasonably argue for doxastic involuntarism with respect to perceptual beliefs, which would imply that perceptual judgments can be involuntary, dispositional or reflexive events. Thus, while perceptual judgments may be *accessible to* consciousness—one might choose to reject one's involuntary perceptual judgments in light of known defeaters—they are not *constitutive of* consciousness.

A third problem for the hidden structure thesis is the claim that consciousness *necessarily* depends upon this structure. If consciousness necessarily depends upon the hidden structure, then the hidden structure is part of the essence of each and every conscious state. At least some conscious experiences, however, *consist in appearances* (as McGinn himself insists). Thus, the dependency thesis requires that appearances essentially have and depend upon a hidden structure. But, since no such dependency appears in conscious appearances, the dependence is not itself part of the appearance, qua appearance. McGinn must argue that there is essentially more to an appearance than what appears—namely, its dependence upon the brain. However, he himself rightly rejected materialism precisely because it required a distinction between the way a conscious experience appears and what it is. Of course, if there can be no essential difference between an appearance and its nature, then whatever does not appear in an appearing is not essential to it. Thus, even if there is a common hidden structure in virtue of which the mind and body relate, the mind's relation to this structure seems contingent.

8. Conclusion

McGinn's naturalized mysterianism, while an intriguing approach to the mind-body problem, seems lacking in substantial evidential and conceptual support. In short, the characteristics of consciousness continue to remain recalcitrant to attempts to tie them down to other kinds of things. In contrast, substance dualism is commendable precisely because it does not require a mind-on-brain dependence. Thus, substance dualists can affirm that the mind-brain relationship is mysterious without also having to affirm it is necessary.¹⁸

¹⁸ I wish to thank J. P. Moreland, Nate King, Ken Hobson, Amy MacLeod, and the journal referees for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article.