The brain and its boundaries

Daniel C. Dennett

The Problem of Consciousness: Essays towards a resolution.


Colin McGinn

whether Chomsky was just speaking of an innate talent for syntax. Fodor pushed the doctrine into semantics as well, arguing for the thesis that there is no such thing as acquiring a new concept by learning a language, or expanding one's language. All the concepts we can ever come to express are already innate in our brains at birth. Yes, Aristotel had the concepts of airplane and electron innately encoded in his brain; he just never got around to using them. By passing the buck to biology (and then conveniently ignoring biology) Chomsky and Fodor have given the models of mind of an unpleasant unravelling.

McGinn's book is, among other things, an enthusiastic and entertaining collection of questions about consciousness, which he gives every evidence of understanding quite well. For at least to have a core perspective of human cognitive closure, he should provide an empirical example of some creature, human or otherwise, which has, as he says, no consciousness at all. He may think he has provided such cases: The blind, the born blind cannot grasp the concept of a visual experience of red, and human beings cannot conceive of the eclectocytological experiences of bats.

But these presumed facts are assumed, not argued. If consciousness was evil, McGinn treats them as if they were.

Unlike the monkey, we understand the unanswered questions about consciousness.

I think we should be impressed by the example of the monkey, to whom the electron is out of bounds, for not only can it not understand the answers; it can't understand the questions. The monkey isn't baffled, not even a little bit.

boundlessness and McGinn calls cognitive closure.

A type of mind M is cognitively closed with respect to a property P (or theory T) if and only if the concept-forming procedures at M's disposal cannot extend to a grasp of P (or an understanding of T).

(Don't be misled about the apparent rigour of this with how big the entire college of current to a property M.

The idea is plausible what he claims. McGinn defines the problem of free will, for instance, is simply off-limits.

This is doctrinally convenient, maybe, but chronically unsatisfying, to say the least. In other words, both Chomsky and Fodor have hailed the capacity of the human brain to parse, and hence presumably understand, the official infinity of grammatical sentences of a natural language. If we can understand all the sentences, can't we understand the sentences that best express the solutions to the problems of free and of consciousness.

Of all the technologies that have expanded our powers of conception, the first is the greatest:

language itself. But for Chomsky and Fodor, there has always been a need (and now we can see what it is to deny, or at least minimize, the extent to which language is seen as a gift that is extrinsically the nervous system.

Fodor may think he has provided such a detailed examination would be unlikely to shed light on his problems.

Is this a great exaggeration, and a little late he builds on it: Besides, let us be naif for a minute, do blind patients not look very much as they do have visual experiences when they do their surprising discriminations? . . . They do not look the way people look when there is nothing between the eyes. On the contrary, they are precisely because they have to be prompted to make their guesses that they do not look the way people look when there is nothing experiential going on.

This may seem a minor point, but in fact the plausibility of McGinn's interpretation of blindness is based on the reader's jumping to such an exaggerated and oversimplified picture of the behavourial talents of blind subjects. It permits McGinn to draw a number of inferences that seem promising merely because his view requires the actual facts about blindness opposed.

neurologically normal or physical, this mechanism will not work (my definition) he fashioned on the model of either side of the divide, and hence would not find itself unable to reach out to the other side. Its characterization would call for radical conceptual innovation (which I have argued is probably beyond us). Since it would not be characterized by examples familiar from either side of the psychophysical nexus, however extended, it would not simply raise the same old problem again in a new form. The operative properties would be revealed in the behavior of the system when placed in contrast with the system when put in opposition to the thing in the "seems" mode? to avoid objections? All, alter one might say, is if McGinn's book is not only a great book, it is as it was published, a first step. The book put a piece of the old puzzle in the "seems" mode? to avoid objections?

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at one point that his argument for a certain contrast presupposes a certain conception of natural kinds - Kripke's and Puttnam's - and yet those who reject that conception are unlikely to appreciate the intended contrast; they should not read on. Disobeying his instructions, one can read the whole book in a conditional: spiritualist matrix. It is up to the reader to work out the significance of McGinn's book.

But whether or not there are good arguments to support the general thesis about human cognitive closure, McGinn offers a specific reason for thinking consciousness is for ever outside our ken, and it has nothing to do, he claims, with how big the range of our accomplishments.

Is it a mystery? We can answer that question, to a property M.

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