

An Analysis on McGinn's Mysterianism: Reply to Erhan Demircioglu¹

Sena Işıkgil

Abstract: This paper discusses Erhan Demircioglu's approach to McGinn's mysterianism. Demircioglu argues that the reasons why McGinn considers his cognitive closure idea to be true with respect to the solution of the mind-brain problem are not compatible with his claim about the existence of a naturalist solution to the mind-brain problem. However, I consider such a criticism to be the result of missing some important details in McGinn's thesis on cognitive closure. In this study by analysing McGinn's mysterianism I show that no contradiction exists between the reasons why McGinn presented his cognitive closure thesis and the existence of a naturalist solution to the mind-body problem.

Keywords: Cognitive closure, naturalist solution, objective space, Colin McGinn, Erhan Demircioglu

Özet: Bu makale Erhan Demircioğlu'nun McGinn'in gizemcilik görüşüne yaklaşımını tartışmaktadır. Demircioğlu'nun iddiası şudur ki; McGinn'in beden-zihin probleminin çözümüne ilişkin olan bilişsel kapalılık görüşünün doğruluğunu göstermek için öne sürdüğü gerekçeler, beden-zihin probleminin doğalcı bir çözümü olduğuna ilişkin görüşü ile çelişik durumdadır. Fakat ben bu gibi bir eleştirinin McGinn'in bilişsel kapalılık tezinde ortaya koyduğu bazı önemli detayların gözden kaçırılmasının bir sonucu olduğunu düşünmekteyim. Bu makalede McGinn'in gizemciliğini analiz ederek göstereceğim şey şudur ki; McGinn'in bilişsel kapalılık tezi için sunduğu nedenler ile beden-zihin probleminin doğalcı çözümünün varlığı arasında herhangi bir çelişki yoktur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Bilişsel kapalılık, doğalcı çözüm, nesnel uzam, Colin McGinn, Erhan Demircioğlu

According to McGinn's mysterianism, although a naturalist solution to the mind-body problem exists, we are cognitively closed to the natural solution of this problem in principle because we, as human beings, have limited cognitive faculties. In his article, *Against McGinn's Mysterianism*, Demircioglu argues that the reasons why McGinn considers his cognitive closure claim to be true contradict his other claim about the existence of

Işıkgil, Sena. (2017). An Analysis on McGinn's Mysterianism: Reply to Erhan Demircioglu. *Kilikya Felsefe Dergisi* (1). pp. 11-18.

¹ This issue has also been briefly discussed before in the fourth chapter of my MA Thesis, *A Study on McGinn's Mysterianism*.

a naturalist solution of the mind-body problem (2016, p:1). However, I believe that such a criticism is a result of missing some important details in McGinn's thesis on cognitive closure. By examining McGinn's mysterianism in detail I show that no contradiction exists between McGinn's reasons for his cognitive closure thesis and the existence of a naturalist solution to the mind-body problem.

McGinn explains that there is a natural property P, instantiated by the brain, through which conscious states can naturalistically emerge from the brain. However, we cannot grasp this property because we have two possible avenues to achieve it. We can formulate McGinn's cognitive closure idea as follows:

- i. We cannot get to P through the direct investigation of the mind (introspection).
- ii. We cannot get to P through the empirical study of the brain (perception).
- iii. For these reasons, we cannot get to P in principle.

In the second stage of this formulation, McGinn argues that P is perceptually closed for human beings. Just as conscious states are imperceptible, P is also imperceptible to us. As we cannot see the conscious state itself even if we look into the brain, we cannot achieve P when we conduct an empirical study on the brain. Objects of perception are spatial things, and the reason for the imperceptibility of P is its non-spatial nature. According to McGinn, P is non-spatial because of the following reason:

[...] nothing we can imagine perceiving in the brain would ever convince us that we have located the intelligible nexus we seek. [...] senses are geared to representing a spatial world; they essentially present things in space with spatially defined properties. [...] such properties that seem inherently incapable of resolving the mind-body problem. [...] no spatial property will ever deliver a satisfying answer to the mind-body problem. We simply do not understand the idea that consciousness states might intelligibly arise from spatial configuration of the kind disclosed by perception of the world. (1989, p: 357-8)

As mentioned in the above quotation, McGinn claims that the spatial properties of the brain cannot explain the causal relation between mind

and body. However, McGinn does not merely make a baseless claim that this property cannot be spatial because we cannot imagine how spatial property performs this job. He asserts it on the grounds that a property providing a solution to the mind-body problem, must have a mediating character to be able to connect two distinct states and something spatial cannot perform such the mediating role of explaining the mind-brain connection (1991, pp: 103-4). Therefore, in the same way that conscious states have a non-spatial character, P must also have a non-spatial character to make the psychophysical link possible.²

However, Demircioglu argues that the non-spatial nature of this property is inconsistent with the other claim of McGinn about the naturalist solution to the mind-body problem (2016, p: 7)³. According to Demircioglu, if the property explaining the mind-brain relation in McGinn's thesis has a non-spatial character, then there will be no naturalist solution to the mind-body relation. Demircioglu defends this idea by comparing McGinn's thesis with the supernatural character of Cartesian dualism. He explains that according to Cartesian dualism, the solution to the mind-body problem is possible only if mental states are taken as the states of the non-spatial substance. That is, in dualism, mental states cannot be states of spatial things (brain), and thus something spatial cannot be responsible for consciousness. According to Demircioglu, we assume the Cartesian dualism to be non-naturalistic not because it is a form of substance dualism; rather, we assume it as super-naturalistic because one of its substances is non-spatial (2016, p: 8, n: 6). For the same reason, we assume that McGinn's solution is also not naturalist. Demircioglu's remark about this issue is as follows:

[...] the reason why we do not classify Cartesian dualism as a naturalist solution is that it is committed to the thesis that nothing spatial could do the job of solving the mind-body problem. Now, if this is so, then by parity of reasons, McGinn's mysterianism that holds that nothing

² I must say that, at the beginning, my aim is not to defend McGinn with respect to the nature of the property he uses in his thesis, as I think that there is an incompatibility between the non-spatial character of property and its mediating role in his thesis. This issue may be a good subject for another study, but in this work, I only insist that the non-spatial nature of this property does not create any problem for the naturalist solution to the mind-body problem.

³ In his article Demircioglu argues that the non-spatial nature of the brain property contradicts not only the naturalist but also the constructive solution to the mind-body problem. However, as I mentioned earlier, I only focus on the first stage of his argument in this study, but this does not mean that the second stage is unproblematic.

spatial could do the job is also committed to the thesis that there can be no naturalist solution of the mind-body problem. (2016, p: 8)

I consider this criticism for McGinn's claim about naturalistic solution to be strong and serious.

On the other hand, McGinn gives some details about the naturalism of his non-spatial property in his thesis. With these assertions, I think that McGinn wants to protect his thesis from the accusation of being non-naturalistic. He claims that the problem of how consciousness emerges from the mind arises from the clash between the nature of the mind and the brain. In other words, whereas consciousness is non-spatial (i.e. it does not have solidity, physical dimension or perceptibility), the brain is spatial (i.e. it has solidity, three dimensions, perceptibility and the other spatial features). The problem arises from their completely distinct characteristics, as we have not yet found an answer to the question of how something that is not spatially located in space emerges from a spatially located thing. If we can place consciousness in space, then a naturalist solution to this problem will be possible. McGinn considers this possible because "...we are deeply wrong about what space is really like" (1999, p: 123). That is, he asserts that we have a concept of space, but it does not represent what objective space is. We describe space as only three-dimensional and consider that solid things can fit in it. However, McGinn asserts that real, objective space includes non-spatial things⁴ as well. He gives the following explanation:

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. So, when I repeated that the mind has no spatial properties, I must be taken to have meant that it does not have the spatial properties we attribute to space, which is consistent with saying that it has the properties that space objectively has. (1999, p: 123)

As can be deduced from the above quotation, we only have partial knowledge of objective space, and therefore, consciousness or other non-spatial properties of the spatial brain seem like they are not denizens of space. However, although consciousness or other non-spatial properties

⁴ That is, they are described as non-spatial things because of our partial knowledge of space.

do not have dimensions, such as height, depth and solidity, they can be fit into space because objective space also has a “non-spatial dimension”⁵.

McGinn mentions that the non-spatial characteristic of the mind is related to our ignorance of space. He exemplifies that there are unobservable spatial objects in space, and since we know the conceptual framework of space, even though we don't perceive them, we know that how the existence of unobservable objects is possible. However, suppose that there are beings that perceive only physical objects in the world, and ignore the conceptual framework of space. These beings can only comprehend the existence of perceivable objects, but they cannot understand how unobservable objects are possible. They may think that unobservable objects exist in reality, but they do not have the concept needed to achieve this reality. For this reason, these beings find themselves in a philosophical puzzlement about how unobservables exist (2004, p: 65-6). Their confusion emerges from their cognitive closure about the framework of space. Similarly, if our concept of space had included only two dimensions, then we would have had problems about three-dimensional objects because we would have been confused about how three-dimensional things, such as an apple, can fit into two-dimensional space. If this is so, it does not mean that an apple is a non-spatial thing; it only seems as if it is out of space although it is included by objective space (1999, p: 125). These examples show that things described as non-spatial, such as consciousness or some other properties of the brain, are not outside of space but rather can be fitted into objective space naturally although we do not have the knowledge of real space because of our cognitive limitations. “We experience space in a certain way, by means of our senses, and think about it in that way, but that may not represent what space is really like in itself” (McGinn, 1999, p:124).

⁵ McGinn arrives at the idea of objective space by making a distinction between pre-Big Bang and post Big Bang universe. He claims that if cosmologists are right, there is no spatial universe before the Big Bang as matter emerged after the Big Bang. According to McGinn this means that the cause of spatial is not spatial itself, and spatial emerges from the non-spatial or pre-spatial. However, with the emergence of the physical, the non-spatial (i.e. the earlier state of the universe) was not entirely eradicated. For example, the non-spatial dimension is preserved in some forms like consciousness in the brain after the Big Bang. Although the pre-Big Bang universe became extinct, its remains are generally preserved by human and animal minds in the post-Big Bang universe (1999, p: 119-22). As can be deduced from McGinn's ideas, in reality, objective space includes not only spatial things but also the earlier state of the universe even if we cannot perceive such real space because of our limited cognitive faculties.

According to McGinn's explanation, the non-spatial characteristic of the property that provides a solution to the mind-brain problem does not affect the naturalist characteristic of this solution. In my opinion, by claiming that the objective space contains non-spatial things in itself, McGinn blocks the criticism about the incompatibility between the non-spatial property and a naturalistic solution. He argues that non-spatial consciousness is an ontologically natural thing that fits in space, and the non-spatial but natural properties of the brain, as denizens of real space, explain the relation between the mind and the body in a simple way. McGinn asserts that the brain can generate consciousness because it is not only how we conceive it to be, but it also contains some hidden aspects (1995, p: 6). There are no ontologically supernatural or miraculous things in the world, but because we are cognitively closed to the real nature of space, we are cognitively closed to the non-spatial properties of the brain as well. For this reason, there are only epistemologically mysterious things for human beings. We can easily infer that McGinn does not associate naturalism with physical or spatial things because the physical or the spatial comprises only one part of real space. I also agree with McGinn about his claim that space may not be composed of spatial entities only, as spatial entities can form only one part of real space. And through our limited epistemological faculties, we achieve only that part of the real space. Whiteley also explains this issue as follows:

[...] [physical] description [of space] cannot be complete, though it does seem to be sufficient for the purpose of causally accounting for what happens in material world, including (there is reason to believe) human nervous systems. Nothing can be completely described by its spatial properties only; what moves must be something of some sort. (1990, p: 289)

Therefore, I believe that there can easily be a naturalist solution to the mind-body problem with McGinn's non-spatial property.

On the other hand, it may be asserted as a possible objection that if McGinn's non-spatial property is naturalist, then the non-spatial substance of Cartesian dualism can be naturalist in the same way, and we cannot classify dualism as a super-naturalist solution either. I consider this a plausible criticism because non-spatial substance and mental states of dualism can also fit into the objective space. However, despite the objective space idea, McGinn still insists on the supernaturalism of dualism in his

studies. We present his claim about dualism in the following remark:

The other form [of the solutions to the mind-brain problem], which has been historically dominant, frankly admits that nothing merely natural could do the job, and suggests instead that we invoke supernatural entities or divine interventions. Thus we have Cartesian dualism and Leibnizian pre-established harmony. (1989, p: 350)

As indicated in the above quotation, McGinn classifies dualism as a supernatural solution because it admits that “nothing merely natural could do the job”. However, by saying that dualism is a supernatural solution because it admits “nothing merely natural could do the job” McGinn does not imply that it is a supernatural solution as it admits that nothing spatial could do the job. By saying that “nothing merely natural could do the job” he implies that dualism admits “no brain property” could do the job, and therefore, it invokes supernatural entities. McGinn asserts “The dualists are right to doubt that the brain as currently conceived can explain the mind, but they are wrong to infer that no brain property can do the job” (1999, p: 29). That is, McGinn agrees with dualism about the claim that the spatial properties of the brain as currently conceived brain cannot solve the mind-brain problem; however, he argues that our current conception is enough to grasp the nature of the mind-brain nexus according to dualism (1999, p: 29). Although the unknowable natural brain properties are responsible for consciousness, dualism assumes that none of the brain properties can do this job. A “quite different agency” like God, not some natural brain properties, is responsible for the existence of the mind (1999, p: 118). As a consequence, according to McGinn, dualism is a supernatural attempt. Although McGinn’s property is non-spatial as a Cartesian non-spatial substance (i.e. it is not located in the spatial world), it fits naturally into real space unlike the Cartesian non-spatial substance. For these reasons, the non-spatial nature of McGinn’s property seems to be harmless for a naturalist solution to the mind-brain problem.

In conclusion, McGinn claims that there must be a mediating property to be able to explain the mind-brain relation. However, the nature of this property must not be spatial; spatial property is not suitable for performing a mediating function because consciousness does not include any features of spatial space. This mediating property should be non-spatial similar to its effect, consciousness. The non-spatial characteristic of P supports

McGinn's thesis of cognitive closure because human beings cannot arrive at it by perception. And by using the objective space idea, McGinn also places non-spatial things in space naturally. As this idea indicates that space is not only what we conceive it to be, space cannot be described only by its spatial properties in reality. And brain, as a spatial thing, does not include only spatial properties; there are also its natural non-spatial properties as its hidden structure. Through this explanation, McGinn supports his claim that a naturalist solution of the mind-body problem exists and blocks the criticism about this issue.

Sena Işıkgil, Orta Doğu Teknik Üniversitesi, Türkiye

References

- Demircioglu, E. (2016). Against McGinn's Mysterianism. *Cilicia Journal of Philosophy*, (1), pp: 1-10
- Işıkgil, S. (2016). A Study on McGinn's Mysterianism. (Unpublished Master Thesis). METU/Graduate School of Social Sciences, Ankara. <https://tez.yok.gov.tr/UlusalTezMerkezi/>
- McGinn, C. (1989). Can we solve the mind-body problem? *Mind*, 98 (391), 349-366.
- McGinn, C. (1991). *The Problem of Consciousness: Essays toward a Resolution*. Oxford: Blackwell
- McGinn, C. (1999). *The Mysterious Flame: Conscious Minds in a Material World*. New York: Basic Books
- McGinn, C. (1995). "Consciousness and Space", in *Conscious Experience*, ed. T. Metzinger. Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh
- McGinn, C. (2004). *Consciousness and its objects*. New York: Oxford University Press
- Whiteley, C. H. (1990). McGinn on the Mind-Body Problem. *Mind*, 99: 289