Mysteriousm and Skepticism

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The idea of a full conception of reality that explains our ability to arrive at it is just a dream.

Thomas Nagel

Abstract: The article discusses the proposals for replying to the skeptical challenge developed by the so-called Neo-mysterians, and more particularly by the most eloquent of them, Colin McGinn. McGinn’s version of mysterianism, which he labels “Transcendental Naturalism,” is a very candid and rigorous form of scientific naturalism since (contrary to the standard naturalistic views) it is prepared to concede both that the attempts to reduce philosophically controversial phenomena – such as knowledge, free will, consciousness, meaning and the self – do not work and that those phenomena cannot be eliminated from our worldview. But McGinn is criticized nonetheless since he concludes from such irreducibility and ineliminability that, for our species at least, philosophical riddles will always remain unsolvable “mysteries.” It is argued that a much more plausible conclusion would be to question the legitimacy of some of the premises from which McGinn draws his “mysterious” conclusion. More specifically, it is claimed that McGinn’s thesis that genuine explanations have to have a bottom-up, aggregative format is an unreasonable one.

I.

An original attempt – perhaps one that has not been discussed enough – at addressing the skeptical challenge has recently been made by the so-called neo-mysterians.1 The original inspiration of this view comes from Noam Chomsky’s famous distinction between “problems” (i.e., questions that can be understood and potentially solved) and “mysteries” (i.e., questions that are not only unsolvable but also unintelligible).2 In general, mysterians tend to offer an epistemological interpretation of their view, not an ontological one.

1 O. Flanagan, The Science of Mind, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 19912, pp. 8–11 distinguishes the “new mysterianism” from the “old mysterianism,” a conception that he attributes to Gottfried Leibniz, Emil du Bois-Raymond and Thomas Huxley (but one could also mention Arthur Schopenhauer and, at least with regard to the free will issue, Lorenzo Valla).

— that is, they do not claim that *intrinsically* unsolvable riddles exist, but only that, given the epistemic limitations that biologically characterize the human species, there are riddles that are unsolvable for that species.

The prototype of a “mystery” in this sense is the traditional question of how the phenomenological features of consciousness “come out,” “derive,” or “emerge” from physical properties. Another typical example of an alleged mystery (one that is discussed by Chomsky himself, Peter van Inwagen and Thomas Nagel) is the question of free will. For example, in a paper eloquently entitled “The Mystery of Metaphysical Freedom,” van Inwagen wrote that the free will problem is so evidently impossible of solution that I find very attractive a suggestion that has been made by Noam Chomsky (and which was developed by Colin McGinn in his recent book *The Problems of Philosophy*) that there is something about our biology, something about the ways of thinking that are “hardwired” into our brain, that renders it impossible for us human beings to dispel the mystery of metaphysical freedom.

II.

The most interesting figure of this movement is probably Colin McGinn, since he has developed a view he calls “Transcendental Naturalism,” which applies mysterianism across the philosophical board. According to McGinn, with regard to the most relevant philosophical problems — including consciousness, the self, free will, meaning and the one that matters here the most, i.e. knowledge — human beings experience a species-specific cognitive closure. For us, therefore, these problems will always remain unsolved; and this is why one should not consider them as genuinely solvable problems. Instead, they are *mysteries*. In this light, the same idea of progress in philosophy is of course a chimera. We do not make progress in philosophy for the same reason that we make so little progress in unassisted flying — that is, we lack the requisite equipment. We have gaps in our cognitive skills as we have

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gaps in our motor skills – though in both cases we can see what we are missing
and feel the resulting frustrations.⁶

In the following, we will first consider how McGinn justifies his pessimism with regard to philosophy in general and then how he specifically deals with the skeptical challenge in epistemology.

The first important thing to notice is that, even if the mysterian view is epistemological in character, McGinn offers an account of its ontological sources. In his opinion,

nature is a system of derived entities, the basic going to construct the less basic;
and understanding nature is figuring out how the derivation goes. […] Find the
atoms and laws of combination and evolution, and then derive the myriad of
complex objects you find in nature.⁷

Given this derivative view of ontology, McGinn argues that our understanding of the fields in which we have achieved the greatest cognitive successes (such as physics, linguistics and mathematics) has depended on our using bottom-up, aggregative theories, which he calls “CALM theories” (where the word “CALM,” clearly ironic, is the acronym of “Combinatorial Atomism with Lawlike Mappings”). In McGinn’s view, grasping a “CALM Theory” for a specific domain is a necessary and sufficient condition for obtaining genuine understanding of that domain.

According to McGinn, therefore, the predicament of philosophy is due to the fact that no CALM explanation is remotely plausible for any of the phenomena it is interested in. In fact,

there are yawning gaps between these phenomena and the more basic phenomena they proceed from, so that we cannot apply the [CALM] format to bring sense to what we observe. The essence of a philosophical problem is the unexplained leap.⁸

According to McGinn’s Transcendental Naturalism, insofar there is an “unexplained leap” between, say, consciousness, on the one hand, and the physical and biological structure of human beings, on the other hand, there is no hope to make any progress in understanding consciousness – or, for that matter, any of the other traditional problems of philosophy. In fact, “the CALM structure is to philosophical problems what human grammar is to

⁸ Ibid., p. 209.
nonhuman languages – an unavoidable but unsuitable mode of cognition.”

Therefore, since philosophical problems are structurally unsolvable, “philosophy is hard in the way it is for the same sort of reason human children would have trouble learning Martian languages – the task and the toll are not made for one another. It’s like trying to crack nuts with a feather duster.”

Consistent with this view, McGinn claims that all the traditional views through which philosophers have tried to solve their riddles (such as supernaturalism, reductionism, eliminationism, emergentism) are doomed. McGinn’s blunt conclusion is that philosophy is nothing more than a futile activity.

Let us now see how this general argumentation is applied to the issue of skepticism. This is how McGinn presents the skeptical challenge against our claim to knowledge:

Once we absorb the fact that we are beings in the world, with certain restricted receptivities and powers, and with only those few pounds of neural meat to rely on, then we must wonder whether we are really in a position to form an objective picture of the world around us. For why should that vast independent world yield up its secrets to squirming evolutionary parvenus such ourselves? […] We cannot properly justify what we are inclined to believe about what lies outside us.

In the case of the skeptical challenge too, McGinn claims that all the traditional philosophical strategies fail irredeemably. More specifically, the supernaturalist views are not worth considering because of their unbearably antiscientific attitude; the eliminationist views, by declaring knowledge impossible, simply succumb to the skeptical challenge; the reductionist proposals by the scientific naturalists fail to respond to the essence of the skeptical challenge; and the liberal naturalists’ attempts at developing quietis-

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9 McGinn, Problems in Philosophy, p. 20.
13 Ibid., pp. 111-133.
Mysterianism and Skepticism

According to McGinn, the skeptical challenge comes in two main forms (both of which can be posed from either the first or the third person point of view). The first form the skeptical challenge can assume concerns whether our conscious intentional states do in fact acquaint us with real phenomena out there, in the external world, as suggested by our pre-philosophical intuition. The second form of the skeptical challenge concerns the rationality and reliability of our modes of inference. In both cases, we face an unsolvable obstacle with regard to the normative component of knowledge, i.e., with its justification. Specifically, regarding the first challenge, McGinn writes that “we cannot properly justify what we are inclined to believe about what lies outside us.” Between our beliefs and the external world there is, in fact, an unbridgeable gap. However, as with mysterianism in general, the gap regarding the justification of knowledge is also interpreted as epistemological, not ontological, in character.

No matter how profound the gap may appear to us, even to the point of necessary unbridgeability, it is always epistemological, not ontological in origin. Something objective spans the gap; it is just that we cannot incorporate this into our scheme for making the world intelligible to ourselves (CALM regularly comes into this).

For McGinn, this is a gap that a species smarter than ours could bridge (regarding this issue, he frequently appeals to the idea, made popular by Chomsky, of a species of Martians that would be cognitively very different from ours). Analogously, regarding the second skeptical challenge – which concerns our inferential strategies – McGinn argues that our reasonings are in general rationally warranted, even if we are biologically unequipped for understanding why they are. In this sense, what we need, as survival machines, is knowledge of how the physical world and other sentient beings are apt to behave; nothing ensures, however, that we should be capable of knowledge of how we acquire such knowledge [...] After understand how to apply the CALM structure (which is the one that should be used in cases like that) for domesticating the notion of epistemic justification.

19 Ibid., p. 110.
all, we do not expect other cognitive animals to be epistemologists as well as knowers. [Transcendental Naturalism] is clearly the correct theory for canine knowledge (say): the dog knows but it cannot know how it knows.\footnote{Ibid., p. 115.}

Thus in this case too McGinn claims that as dogs are to us, so we are to a smarter species (e.g. Martians), which would understand how to justify our inferential practices. Interestingly enough, McGinn also offers an evolutionary argument in favor of this view (the argument is mentioned with regard to the issue of understanding language, but it clearly has a general scope).

It is […] entirely consistent to suppose that knowledge of language of the ordinary kind should coexist with principled theoretical ignorance of what constitutes and makes possible this knowledge. What we know as speakers might not be accessible to us as theorists. And why should it be, since the biological advantages of explicit theoretical knowledge of language are moot at best?\footnote{Ibid., p. 115.}

By applying this kind of argument to epistemology, one would wonder what evolutionary advantage there could be in having second-degree (justificatory) knowledge of our epistemic practices. “Practically none,” McGinn would certainly answer. Therefore, according to McGinn’s Transcendental Naturalism, on the one hand, we do know the external world and we are able to reason correctly; on the other hand, we cannot articulate the meta-theory that would account for those capacities and would justify our epistemic practices. But, according to McGinn, this discrepancy proves that the skeptic’s challenge is ill-founded. The problem is that, from the fact that humans cannot articulate the meta-theory that would explain how they are able to know, the skeptic wrongly infers that humans cannot know at all. Summarizing, for McGinn,

the resources for a successful rebuttal of skepticism exist only in a theory whose content is inaccessible to human cognition […] [S]kepticism is false but unknowably so: that is the root of our philosophical difficulties about knowledge.\footnote{Ibid., p. 117.}

\textit{III.}

Undoubtedly, Transcendental Naturalism is an original and intellectually stimulating view. However, it faces several objections. Let us start with its general version. Later we will consider its epistemological version with the
intention of replying to the skeptical challenge. First, even if it is an often-
repeated claim, it is very doubtful that philosophy does not make any real
progress. It is a historical truism, for example, that many sciences, and argu-
ably the most important ones (from mathematics, logic and physics to biol-
ogy, sociology and computer science), developed as spin-offs of philosophical
reflections. It would be absurd to say that the appearance of these sciences did
not represent, in itself, a fundamental contribution that philosophy has made
to our epistemic progress. Moreover, in terms of progress in philosophy, it is
at least controversial that we do not have a significantly better understanding
of, say, ethics or the mind-body problem or causation than the Middle Ages
or the nineteenth century had – and for this reason alone one could legiti-
mately think that McGinn’s charge against philosophical progress is unjusti-
fied. In general, McGinn seems to assume that we only have real cognitive
progress when we completely solve a problem (when we reach its complete
explanation), but not when we get a better understanding of it. However,
by using this standard, one should wonder whether, say, microphysics has
really seen any progress, since it does not seem to have completely solved the
problem of explaining the subatomic world. Not to mention the fact that the
social sciences have done much to clarify very complicated issues such as, for
example, the dynamics of the financial markets, even if they have certainly
not explained them entirely. But does this really mean that we cannot speak
of cognitive progress in economics or sociology?

Let us now consider McGinn’s more specific strategy against the skeptic’s
challenge. Indeed in this case too there are some reasons for believing that
this proposal is unconvincing, even if it is brilliant. In particular, it is not
clear why one should accept the two claims McGinn makes, i.e., that a meta-
theory exists that in principle accounts for our cognitive abilities and that
we will never be able to understand that meta-theory. At least prima facie,
the assumption that such a theory exists seems to beg the question against the
skeptic. Moreover, even granting that it exists, it seems dogmatic to claim
that humans will never be able to grasp it. Who are we now to determine
what our species could understand in centuries to come or, if the human
species survives long enough, in the next millennia? In his own time, could
Aristotle (notwithstanding his prodigious mind) have predicted the theory
of relativity or Gödel’s theorem? Could he even understand what these great
scientific achievements are about?

In order to account for his intuitively very doubtful twofold claim,
McGinn uses an analogy. He says that we know that animals do have cogni-
tive abilities they cannot account for. So why should we not find ourselves
in the same situation? Prima facie, this argument may also be plausible, but it
should be noted that its plausibility is based on the application of an inductive
And McGinn himself grants that the justifiability of our inferential practices (including, of course, induction) is at stake in the discussion with the skeptic. Thus our the prima facie impression is confirmed: appealing to an inductive argument in order to counter the skeptic is a clear case of petitio principii. Moreover, once it is granted that only the CALM format could purport to explain all meaningful questions (thus including the philosophical one), it is unclear why it could not be the case that those explanations are simply too difficult (for computational reasons, for example) for any finite rational beings. To put it differently: who says that a smart Martian must in principle be possible who could account for, say, the free will issue by offering an adequate bottom-up, aggregative theory?

Something could also be said regarding McGinn’s appeal to the Darwinian theory of natural selection in accounting for linguistic competence (an argument that, as we have indicated, could easily be adapted to the case of skepticism). In this regard, it is worth reiterating what McGinn says: “What we know as speakers might not be accessible to us as theorists. And why should it be, since the biological advantages of explicit theoretical knowledge of language are moot at best?”

It is indeed very plausible that, while the knowledge of our surroundings undeniably offered a significant evolutionary advantage to the human species, the meta-theory that would have explained this knowledge would not have offered any particular advantage. To put it differently, it is undoubtedly true that knowers are better suited to their environment better than non-knowers (and thus can survive longer and reproduce more); and it is very plausible that meta-knowers do not enjoy any relevant evolutionary advantage over non-meta-knowers (actually, the former could even be disadvantaged because of the time they have wasted in learning so many notions that are entirely irrelevant from an evolutionary point of view). This fact, however, cannot be mobilized against the skeptic, who is questioning the legitimacy of all our empirical knowledge – including, of course, the theory of natural selection. Moreover, in general the application of evolutionary considerations in order to explain the emergence and the possibility of sophisticated scientific theories is not very promising. What evolutionary advantage could ever come to us from pure mathematics, for example? (Remember the famous toast to pure mathematics attributed to H. J. S. Smith, “May it never be of use to any man!”). In general, notwithstanding the promises of some of the boldest evolutionary psychologists, it is extremely doubtful that the emergence of the vast majority of our theories will ever be accounted for by using the conceptual tools of the theory of evolution.

What I have just said is not intended to prove the falsity of McGinn’s theory (we have knowledge of the world, but we will never acquire the corre-
sponding meta-knowledge, even if this may be available for smarter species). Actually, this theory may well be true. However, McGinn has not given us any convincing evidence that this is the case. For this reason, Transcendental Naturalism cannot offer a promising strategy against the skeptic.

IV

I would like to conclude with some general remarks concerning McGinn’s Transcendental Naturalism (and, in some measure, mysterianism in general). First, it should be noted that the use of the term “mystery” by the advocates of this view is very peculiar – and perhaps self-indulgent. Normally, when we speak of a “mystery,” we refer to something that is intrinsically difficult – perhaps even impossible – to explain, but with regard to which we can, at least, conceive of some potential solutions, even if we cannot prove that they are correct. For example, the mystery of the origins of the Ebola virus would be explained if we found out, say, that it was created as a bacteriological weapon at an MIT biology lab; the mystery of the identity of Jack the Ripper would be finally solved if we found a written confession by the Prince of Wales; the mystery of the Ankylosaur would be solved if we found more remains of this extinct animal. Yet when mysterians face the problems of consciousness, free will and knowledge, they claim that human beings will never have a clue about how to explain them. Thus the attitude toward philosophical phenomena which is adopted by McGinn and Chomsky might be better characterized as “absurditarian” than “mysterian,” since from their perspective those phenomena are plainly inconceivable. And it does not help much to add that some Martians, much smarter than us, would know how to solve those mysteries, since – as we indicated earlier – this only amounts to an unjustified claim.

Even so, mysterianism should be praised as long as it can be seen as the most rigorous and consistent form of scientific naturalism. Let us consider again how McGinn frames his Transcendental Naturalism. For him, any entity that cannot be explained through the CALM format – that is, any phenomena that cannot be reduced to kosher scientific phenomena or eliminated altogether from our ontology – is an unsolvable “mystery.” In saying that, McGinn is honest enough to notice both that attempts to naturalize philosophically controversial phenomena (by reducing them) do not work and that those phenomena cannot be eliminated from our worldview. Thus McGinn bites the bullet of scientific naturalism much more candidly than those scientific naturalists who claim they can reduce this or that philosophically controversial phenomenon; and he is also more honest than those who proclaim that we should give up our beliefs in, say, freedom, moral responsibility or
knowledge – as if these beliefs were not in a better situation epistemologically than the belief in the phlogiston after Lavoisier had initiated modern chemistry. McGinn resists these fashionable, but dogmatic, strategies, and should be praised for that. He recognizes that the concepts of the manifest image simply do not fit the scientific image, but cannot be eliminated.

McGinn, however, fails to notice another way in which one could interpret the impossibility we encounter in accounting for the fundamental phenomena of the manifest image by using the CALM format of explanation. That is, instead of concluding as a result of that failure that the philosophical phenomena are “mysteries,” one could question the legitimacy of the premises from which this paradoxical conclusion is drawn. In fact, given the predicament in which mysterianism puts us, would it not be legitimate for us to conclude that the proposal of accepting the CALM format as the only acceptable form of explanation is too restrictive, and should therefore be abandoned?

If so, it may be a good idea to explore an alternative view: that of liberal naturalism. According to the liberal naturalist perspective, in order to account for the world we live in, the explanations of the natural sciences cannot be contradicted, but do not tell us the whole truth. Therefore, philosophically controversial phenomena can be taken as irreducible and indispensable, without concluding that they represent mysteries, or absurdities: one can, in fact, accept them at face value, as long as they do not contradict what the sciences tell us about the natural world. This, of course, is not much more than a slogan; but the task of turning it into a developed argument is certainly not one that can be attempted here.23

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