



Naturalism of consciousness: A dialogue between Colin McGinn and Owen Flanagan

Obiora Anichebe¹ & *Christian Nnabuike Onoja¹

¹Department of Philosophy, University of Nigeria Nsukka

***Corresponding author**

christian.onoja@unn.edu.ng

Abstract

Opinions are divided among naturalists on whether we can specify any property of the brain as the basis of consciousness. This is the question of naturalism of consciousness. While constructive naturalists hold that naturalism is possible, anti-constructive naturalists don't think so. Owen Flanagan falls within the former camp, while McGinn is an anti-constructive naturalist. In this study, we assess the contributions of McGinn and Flanagan with respect to the possibility of naturalising consciousness. The research demonstrates that constructive naturalism is more plausible than anti-constructive naturalism. We do this through the following routes: 1) highlighting the weaknesses in McGinn's postulation of the "hidden structure" of consciousness; 2) projecting the explanatory relevance of Flanagan's use of brain scanner technology in consciousness studies; and 3) demonstrating, on the basis of science, how the immaterial can emerge from matter. The paper concludes that through the science of consciousness, we can achieve possible naturalism of consciousness.

Keywords: brain, consciousness, constructivism, mysterianism, naturalism.

Introduction

There seems to be no obvious *connection* between the states of consciousness and the brain processes because the former is largely believed to be immaterial, while the latter is material. If this is the case, it gives the impression that there is no intimate connection between them since they belong to different ontological realms. However, we also notice that when someone gets involved in an accident or chronic illness that affects the brain, it automatically affects the individual's state of consciousness. This leaves us with the question: if there is no connection between the brain processes and consciousness, why is it that whatever affects the brain affects the state of consciousness? And again, if there is a connection between them, why is this connection not obvious for direct observation? It is because of this seeming lack of *logical* connection between consciousness and brain processes that culminated in the problem of the mind-body relationship.

For naturalists of any kind, "the only true reality is the physical reality. Social institutions and cultural phenomena (including language) can just exist so far as they are realised in the behaviour and the mental states of people in the flesh. Mental states can exist in their turn only if they are implemented in cerebral physical states" (Nannini, 2000). To hold that consciousness and brain interact is to advance one form of

naturalism or the other¹, while those who do not believe that such interaction is possible endorse a form of supernaturalism.²

According to Barry Stroud (1996), naturalism is opposed to supernaturalism.

Supernaturalism refers to "the invocation of an agent or force which somehow stands outside the familiar natural world and so whose doings cannot be understood as part of it" (Stroud, 1996, p.44). It is not within the scope of this study to respond to the argument raised by the supernaturalists regarding consciousness. Its focus is limited to the naturalist views of Colin McGinn and Owen Flanagan.

As naturalists, McGinn and Flanagan hold that the mind is part of the real world because it is neither a supernatural product nor can it be explained by reference to anything that operates outside the real world. Whereas McGinn holds that we acquire some reliable knowledge of the world through the empirical sciences, he believes that there is a realm of reality that sciences cannot penetrate, namely, the areas of consciousness. He insists we know that consciousness exists but has not been scientifically discerned. No method is promising when dealing with the subjective aspect of reality. On the contrary, Flanagan opines that with the right method, we can get to know a lot about consciousness. Thus, McGinn's position that consciousness is natural and unknowable is not only

unconvincing but also inconclusive and contradictory.

The focus of this study is to assess the contributions of McGinn and Flanagan. The courage for the use of dialogue in the title of this paper is drawn from the observation that the entire argument of Flanagan's *Consciousness Reconsidered* (1992) is a reaction against the sweeping arguments of McGinn in his *Problem of Consciousness* (1991). McGinn admitted that "new mysterianism" was coined by Flanagan to refer to his (McGinn's) position that consciousness is terminally *mysterious*, that is, forever unknowable by the human mind, as a matter of principle (McGinn, 1997; McGinn, 2002). Whereas McGinn is described as an anti-constructivist naturalist, Flanagan is an avowed constructivist naturalist.

The research demonstrates that constructive naturalism is more plausible and convincing than anti-constructive naturalism. We are to achieve this by 1) highlighting the weaknesses in McGinn's postulation of the "hidden structure" of consciousness; 2) projecting the explanatory relevance of Flanagan's use of brain scanners technology in consciousness studies; and 3) demonstrating, on the basis of science, how the immaterial can emerge from matter, that is, how consciousness can proceed from the brain since this should be the basis of naturalism.

Besides the introduction and the conclusion, this study is divided into three sections. The first section is an exposition of McGinn's position. The second section is an exposition of Flanagan's position. The third section is an evaluation and comparison between their views. In conclusion, the study observed that the constructive naturalism of consciousness espoused by Flanagan is more plausible and tenable than the anti-constructive position of McGinn.

Colin McGinn on the question of naturalism of consciousness

McGinn (1991) is committed to the task of rendering a "naturalistic" account of consciousness. Again, we recall that naturalism is the thesis that every property of the mind can be explained in broadly physical terms. It takes evolution as the best account of the origin of consciousness. McGinn outlines "Three Great Upsurges", which provoke a sense of awe and wonder in us: matter, life and consciousness. The first two, according to him, have yielded to naturalistic accounts. The worry is that "we do not know how consciousness might have arisen by natural processes from antecedently existing material things" (McGinn, 1991). According to McGinn, though we cannot provide a scientific natural account of consciousness, we are sure that there is a way in which consciousness came into the physical universe in a natural way. Therefore, he insists that we have to strive towards naturalising it.

A naturalist philosopher is one who does not believe that we need to invoke anything supernatural in order to explain any phenomenon. His belief is that minds proceed from biological organs—the brain. More so, minds come in different kinds as a corollary that they are “biological products” (McGinn, 1991). This implies that the mind and the brain are intricately linked in such a manner that the more sophisticated the brain, the more sophisticated the mind, as in the case of dolphins. And the more developed the brain, the more mature the mind, as in the case of an infant’s mind and an adult’s mind. If the brain is not miraculous, why should the mind then be?

McGinn holds evolution as the best explanation for the emergence of consciousness because the brain’s emergence is a product of the same evolution. It is by virtue of some natural property of the brain that organisms are said to be conscious. McGinn maintains that the brain states are conscious states, and the causal nexus must proceed through necessary connections of some kind—the kind that must provide a solution to the hard problem of the mind-body relationship (Chalmers, 1996). He compares consciousness to life, which springs from inorganic matter, stressing the need for an explanation of this process while shunning supernaturalism. For him, we must insist that *it should be in virtue of some natural property of organised matter* that parcels of life get to be alive. In like manner,

we must insist that it should be in the virtue of some natural property of organised matter that consciousness becomes a biological development, and so it must be amenable to some natural explanation (McGinn, 1991; Chalmers, 1996). Branding (2017) strengthens this point by saying that we recognise that mental states are linked in some fundamental way to the states of the brain. Furthermore, it is argued that consciousness is just a further biological development, and so it must be amenable to some natural explanation—whether or not we are capable of arriving at this explanation (McGinn, 1991; Corcoran, 2001). Therefore, as a natural entity, consciousness has to possess two properties: 1) it has to align itself with the brain, and 2) it has to present itself to the subject (McGinn, 1991).

In addition, McGinn did not believe that we need to import the idea of a divine element in order to solve the problem of mind-brain relationship—we have to shun supernaturalism.

Much as McGinn shares a strong belief in the naturalism of consciousness, he loses faith in it for some obvious reasons. Again, he is an anti-constructive naturalist by which he holds that we cannot specify any brain property that is a necessary and sufficient condition for consciousness. It is on this basis that we fault his position as contradictory. He is a naturalist because he holds that consciousness is a by-product of the brain; at

the same time, he believes that we do not know how it can spring from the brain. For him, the problem of the mind-body relationship is such that it is forever insoluble. He thinks, *inter alia*, that the problem lies with us—we are “cognitively closed” with respect to the solution. McGinn’s discredit of naturalism amounts to the following: that no property of the brain can account for the subjective states which characterise consciousness; therefore, consciousness is unknowable. According to him, “the approach I favour is *naturalistic* but not *constructive*: I do not believe we can ever specify what it is about the brain that is responsible for consciousness. I believe that whatever it is, it is not inherently miraculous (McGinn, 1991).”³ For him, constructive naturalism is an extreme type which insists that consciousness can be “constructed” from brain states. He says that no property we can ever ascribe to the brain on the basis of how it strikes us perceptually seems capable of perspicuously rendering how it is that damp grey tissue can be the crucible from which subjective consciousness emerges fully formed (McGinn, 1991). This is another way of saying that we cannot solve the problem of consciousness *naturalistically*. But McGinn insists that there must be some property of the brain that accounts non-magically for consciousness since nothing in nature happens by magic.⁴ Our methods of empirical concept formation are geared towards properties of kinds that cannot, in principle, solve the problem of how consciousness

depends on the brain. For him, honest reflection strongly suggests that nothing we could ever empirically discover about the brain could provide a fully satisfying account of consciousness (McGinn, 1991).

All the same, he thinks that when it comes to consciousness problems, our faculties of perception and introspection are fundamentally weak. There is a particular property, which he called the property *P*, of the brain which perception cannot penetrate. And there is also a property, *P*, of consciousness which the introspective faculty cannot permeate. This is one and the same property which should link consciousness to matter, to the natural world. His general attitude towards this property is that it is hidden. He calls it “the hidden structure of consciousness” (McGinn 1991). He believes that the consciousness problem is insoluble because we are “cognitively closed” to *P*. Branding (2017), on his part, reflects that the conclusion that McGinn and many other “mysterians” reach is that since we lack the means of studying the mind-brain relation because we are perceptively and introspectively limited, we will never arrive at a satisfactory solution.

Again, McGinn has debunked dualism and materialism because of their inability to give a convincing account of consciousness. Dualism, in its extreme, imports the idea of miracle or divine to explain consciousness and insists that “there is no logical relation

between brain and mind" (McGinn 1999). On the other hand, materialism, in its extreme, is weak in that it reduces consciousness to brain processes. McGinn insists that there is no part of the brain which is the necessary and sufficient condition for the emergence of consciousness.

Why does McGinn think that anti-constructive naturalism is true? His defence against the possibility of naturalism is simply captured in his principle of "cognitive closure" (Kriegel 2003; Vlerick 2014; Vlerick & Boudry 2017). A phenomenon, an idea, or a property is said to be cognitively closed when we do not know its ultimate reality; we cannot penetrate into the core property that underlies the quiddity of such a phenomenon. The single tenet of this principle is that we are cognitively ill-endowed to solve the problem of consciousness. At any rate, he recognises that perception and introspection are the only faculties at play in matters of consciousness apprehension. These two faculties are inadequate to give the full understanding of the different shades of reality they represent. While we have the knowledge of consciousness through introspection, we come to the *full* knowledge of the brain through perception. Both of them are unable to reveal a particular property—the same property *P*—which should link the brain and consciousness together and then solve the "hard problem" of the mind-body relationship. It is on account of this cognitive constraint that McGinn prides

himself as an anti-constructive naturalist. His position is that we suffer cognitive closure towards that particular property—of either brain or consciousness or even both—whose distinctive function is to link consciousness and brain together.

Flanagan on the naturalism of consciousness

Owen Flanagan also acknowledges that the mind is fundamentally mysterious. He speaks of three profound events that are of great perplexity to us. These events are to be captured in the following questions: "Why is there something rather than nothing? [*emergence of matter*]; How did some of the stuff come to be alive? [*emergence of life*]; How did some of the living stuff come to be conscious? [*emergence of consciousness*]" (Flanagan, 1992). One shall recall that it is these same events that McGinn spoke of as the "three great upsurges" (McGinn 1991). The first and second events have been explained scientifically through the accounts of the Big Bang Theory and the principle of evolution respectively. Consciousness is said to be the last surviving mystery— "the last bastion of occult properties, epiphenomena, immeasurable subjective states..." However, this sort of mystery, in the opinion of Flanagan, is yielding itself to the science of consciousness. He describes his efforts as an attempt to make less puzzling the idea that consciousness is a natural phenomenon (Flanagan, 1992).

According to Flanagan, naturalism is the view that the relationship that coexists between mind and brain is definable in terms of the states, processes and operations of the brain. It holds that every property that consciousness has is to be accessed through the brain mechanism. The naturalist pictures the world, and everything there is as comprising of physical objects, their properties, and their relationships (Flanagan, 1991). In the first place, the position that Flanagan advances regarding the naturalism of consciousness is "constructive" (Flanagan, 1992). By this, as against the anti-constructive naturalism of McGinn, he believes that there is a reason to nurse the optimism in our ability to understand the relation between consciousness and the brain. He offers the claim that we can make intelligible the existence of consciousness in the natural world. This sort of optimism is drawn from interdisciplinary approaches. Naturalism of consciousness is made possible when findings of other disciplines are harnessed (Frank, 2019). Flanagan opines that "consciousness is a natural phenomenon, and we can construct a theory about its nature, forms, roles, and origins by blending insights from phenomenology, psychology, cognitive science, neuroscience, and evolutionary biology" (Flanagan, 1992).

According to Flanagan, naturalism as a theory of consciousness is not blind to the subjective state of an individual. As a matter of fact, those who object to the glory of the

science of consciousness pride their view on the basis that science cannot tell us how a physical *thing* can be the basis of subjectivity. It is on account of this seeming incongruity between the physical and subjective aspects of consciousness that led David Chalmers to make a distinction between easy and hard problems of consciousness (Chalmers, 1996). The easy problem centres on how the brain processes environmental stimulation or how it integrates information. The hard problem is the real issue: how can the brain give an account of the phenomenal experience? How can it be the basis of subjectivity? In the words of McGinn, how can the water of the brain turn to the wine of consciousness? Therefore, Flanagan rightly thinks that the science of mind requires an account of self-consciousness and self-representation. This view is not the type that recognises consciousness as ontologically separate from something physical. Thus, Flanagan faults the conception of qualia as essentially and exclusively qualitative, having only subjective qualities. For him, qualia are always realised in the brain, and they typically have behavioural effects (Flanagan, 1992).

The focal claim of constructive naturalism is that we can "construct" a property of the brain which can reveal the basis of consciousness. The best picture of the mind, according to the naturalism of Flanagan, is one in which the mind is the brain and the brain is the mind. The investigation into the

power of the brain becomes of paramount importance because any ambitious inquiry into the nature of consciousness that ignores the profundity of the brain is bound to fail (Valverde, 2019).

According to Flanagan, "the brain is a network in which fundamentally segregated neuronal groups respond in parallel to various aspects of some stimulus and pass the information they compute back and forth to each other and to various other regions involved in perception and cognition" (Flanagan 1992). The nervous system comprises the brain, the nerves, the spinal cord, etc. What has been held to be mysterious and secretive about consciousness has been proved otherwise through the power of the nervous system and the brain. By paying attention to "emerging knowledge about the nervous system," the mystery that surrounds consciousness could be dispersed.

Again, the science of consciousness is possible because the instruments for carrying out the research are of recent availability (Edelman & Tononi, 2000). Positron emission tomography (PET), Turbo-charged magnetic-resonance imaging (MRI), CT scanners, etc., are some of the available instruments. Flanagan (1992) says that PET and MRI "provide an amazing opportunity to watch thought in action, to map experiences onto brain processes, and thus to practice the natural method of coordinating the phenomenological, psychological and neurological levels of analysis" (Flanagan,

1992). The usefulness of these instruments is reliable because, for instance, PET scanners produce reliable images of blood flow, which is a measure of consciousness. Anybody without blood flow can hardly be said to be conscious.

The problem of consciousness studies is that 'what it is like', that is, the subjective character, is not something which is accessible to another person. Nobody can access the interiority that is the basis of the rich, subjective life we enjoy. Now, how can these instruments reveal that John likes rice while yam irritates him? Which property of the brain will vibrate to show that Peter is an introvert, not an extrovert; that he is different from Paul who is an extrovert? Meanwhile, both of them have the *same* brain configuration. The insistence of those who oppose naturalism of this kind that Flanagan espouses is that it might likely be the same part of the brain that may vibrate when I see the colour red and when I see the colour white. If this is the case, the use of instruments cannot reveal some states of consciousness, and so the science of consciousness might not be possible as Owen Flanagan supposes.

In response to this, Flanagan opined that there is robust evidence which shows that differences are obtained in brain activity in persons who are in "phenomenologically distinct mental activities." What this implies is that differences in brain activities may

mean differences in conscious life, which in turn establishes the fact that physical states can account for subjective states. According to Flanagan,

listening to music, imagining a tune, solving arithmetic problems, and remembering a conversation light up different brain parts or, in certain cases, light up the same parts to different degrees. Too many different areas light up (sic) for us to think that anyone is the center of consciousness....Activity of lots of processors in different locations is required if certain kinds of thoughts are to occur (Flanagan,1992).

The brain is often described as a computer because it performs functions that are akin to those of computers. However, there is some property that the brain has, which makes it a vastly different object from the computer. It is the "neurotransmitters and the family of other neurochemicals" which permeate the nervous systems. According to Flanagan, neurotransmitters, which comprise "neuromodulators" and "neuropeptides," do not just function to turn neurons on or off; they are also involved in how things feel qualitatively (Flanagan, 1992).

For him, the best picture of the mind is one in which the mind is the brain⁵. In fact, according to Flanagan, consciousness is in the brain. You feel the pain in your toe not because the pain is in the toe but because

the nerves in the toe tell you that something is wrong with your toe (Flanagan, 1992).

This sort of thinking from Flanagan is sure to receive a sweeping objection from McGinn and the anti-constructive naturalists. McGinn's insistence that consciousness should be largely distinguished from the body is this: "that a pain or a thought could not really just be a mere arrangement of molecules [in the brain] That which pertains to consciousness seems just different in nature from any physical facts about a person's body" (McGinn, 1996). However, Flanagan might respond that the supposition that the mind is the brain is borne out of the shared wisdom that any harm done to the brain reflects immediately on the state of consciousness. Even if McGinn were right, would there be pain at all if there is no firing of C-fibre? It is unwarranted for him to think that there would be pain without any arrangement of molecules. In the opinion of Flanagan, the solution to the problem will come not only from philosophy but also from other disciplines that make the study of the brain its bedrock. In this light, he submits that he favours "neurophilosophy" as the best theory, nay, the best method of consciousness (Flanagan, 1992).

New mysterianism: on the comparison between McGinn and Flanagan

The "dialogue" is sustained by the sharp disparity between the views of McGinn and

Flanagan. As naturalists, however, they share the view that consciousness is a natural phenomenon, not a supernatural by-product. Whatever thing that makes a subject conscious is to be accounted for by operations of the brain. However, McGinn is an anti-constructive naturalist who thinks that, though naturalism is true, there is no property of the brain that is capable of instantiating consciousness. No property of matter is an explanatory property of consciousness. The only property of consciousness that can naturalise it is the "hidden" property that is not only non-spatial but also transcendent. On the other hand, Flanagan is an avowed constructive naturalist. He advances the view that is in utter contrast with McGinn. He passionately believes that with the right method (natural method) coupled with the use of instruments, we can solve the problem and naturalise consciousness (Flanagan, 1992).

Mysterianism is the doctrine that consciousness is predominantly a "mystery", a concept coined by Flanagan and attributed to McGinn's idea of consciousness (McGinn, 1997; McGinn, 2002; Flanagan, 1992). As against the "old mysterianists" or "contemporary supernaturalists" who were dualists and thought that consciousness could not be explained scientifically because it operates according to non-natural principles and possesses non-natural properties (Flanagan, 1992), the new mysterianists hold the mind to be

fundamentally *natural*. Both McGinn and Flanagan share one version of mysterianism or the other; the difference is their attitude. As seen above, while McGinn is a radical anti-constructive naturalist, Flanagan is a constructive one. By virtue of this, a robust intellectual line demarcates these two; a division into pessimism and optimism, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, into permanent and temporal mysterianism respectively. In like manner, we can fit McGinn and Flanagan into "necessary ignorance" and "contingent ignorance" about mental causation respectively (Frank, 2019; Valverde, 2019).⁶ As an anti-constructivist, McGinn is a pessimist, a permanent mysterianist and a proponent of necessary ignorance because he does not believe that humans with the type of our cognition can ever arrive at the solution to the problem of consciousness (McGinn, 1991; Flanagan, 1992; Branding, 2017). For him, the "cognitive closure" we suffer is terminal; our incapacitation is permanent. What separates McGinn's (new) mysterianism from the old mysterianism (since both make the claim for insolubility of consciousness) is that the former does not attribute anything miraculous or divine to the mind. Consciousness is largely natural, a product of evolution. According to McGinn, to say that a phenomenon is mysterious does not imply any invocation of supernaturalism. Thus, the use here falls short of its use in religion, which means that such phenomenon so attributed is "supernatural." Following Noam

Chomsky (1975). McGinn makes a distinction among four kinds of areas of inquiry that confront us: problem, mystery, illusion and issues (McGinn, 1993). For the purpose of this study, my emphasis will be on the first two. For him, both are all-natural questions or conundrums. The difference boils down to the capacity of human cognition. While humans are capable of solving "problems", mysteries are insoluble *problems*. Therefore, for McGinn to say that consciousness is mysterious simply means that we are not imbued to know it, to naturalise it, not because it is supernatural, but because we are cognitively constituted that way. But Flanagan has a different approach to mysterianism that is diametrically opposed to McGinn. For him, consciousness is not as mysterious as McGinn presupposes because it is knowable if we appeal to the structure and operation of the brain.

Flanagan, as a constructivist, advances the claim that the consciousness problem can be solved; naturalism is possible, and McGinn is, therefore, wrong in his closure thesis. He, too, recognises that consciousness is a mystery: "the very idea of consciousness materializing, of subjectivity being realised in the activity of a physical organism, is puzzling." However, he is optimistic and expresses "contingent ignorance" that we have the cognitive wherewithal to unearth the thorny issue when we channel our attention to the science of consciousness, which is basically

interdisciplinary (Flanagan, 1991; Gulick, 2020).

With respect to the naturalism of consciousness, both McGinn and Flanagan make the strong claim that consciousness springs from the evolutionary episode. This is compatible with and a good attempt at naturalism, but it is much unconvincing how something as phenomenal as consciousness could come from such a spontaneous "blind" occurrence. How can consciousness come from something that is not conscious at all? McGinn has dislodged the proof of God's existence from the point of view of sentience: sentience (a corollary of consciousness) came into the world through God who alone is conceived of being conscious and capable of giving consciousness. For him, to hold this claim is to entertain the retort: who gave God sentience...? And this would amount to infinite regress (McGinn, 1999). He asks, "How did evolution convert the water of biological tissue into a wine of consciousness?" However difficult this question seems, both McGinn and Flanagan advance the claim that we owe any theory of the origin of consciousness to evolution. But McGinn argues that we cannot solve the problem of consciousness because evolution did not give us the faculty capable of apprehending the link between the brain and consciousness. But Flanagan argues quite the contrary. He opines that, beyond evolution, we have

succeeded in developing ourselves with some other ways of apprehending consciousness.

There is a point with respect to evolution that is worthy of highlighting. Is our cognitive power a product of evolution, or have we transcended beyond what evolution bequeathed us? McGinn's reply is that why we cannot naturalise consciousness is that, since we are furnished with the faculties of perception and introspection and outside these faculties, we are incapable of knowing the link between consciousness and the brain. Consequently, he counselled that we stop trying to solve the problem of the mind-body relationship (McGinn, 1991). He believes that everything about consciousness is reducible to the cognitive faculties of perception and introspection. And since these faculties are unable to reveal the property that should link consciousness to the brain (property P), then we are, in principle, incapable of naturalising consciousness. However, Flanagan does not think that McGinn's cognitive philosophy is exhaustive. He introduces a certain kind of "epistemological diagnosis", which should overcome the limitations of McGinn's faculties (Flanagan, 1992). Flanagan rightly thinks McGinn's cognitive philosophy is but primitive. This is because it ignores a distinction between assisted and unassisted minds (Michael Vlerick, 2014). This does not mean that human beings are not limited in cognition or any other capacity; as Vlerick and Flanagan rightly argue, it simply means

that they have gone beyond evolution. For instance, humans cannot fly by flapping their arms, like birds do, but they can actually fly with aeroplanes. Humans have made massive advancements because they were "assisted". With the use of communicative gadgets, humans can communicate among themselves millions of kilometres apart. They can also travel to vastly distant places in the shortest possible time; they can even travel to Space. In the same vein, it can be fairly argued that humans can know beyond their evolutionary entitlements. In fact, our potential human epistemic capacity should not be gauged by looking at the unassisted minds and senses (Vlerick, 2014). Flanagan believes that with the use of instruments coupled with experimental procedures, we can get to know how the brain is the basis of consciousness; we can naturalise consciousness. While McGinn is pessimistic about naturalising consciousness, Flanagan is optimistic.

On the method of consciousness study

McGinn holds that evolution bequeathed to humans the faculties of perception and introspection as the only available faculties at their disposal for consciousness apprehension. He insists that the solution to the consciousness problem will never be found because these faculties are field-specific (McGinn, 1991). Perception focuses on matter on brain states, whereas introspection is the faculty for the subjective. The problem with these faculties is that they are unable, individually, to reveal the

property *P* that should link consciousness to the brain and/or vice versa. But what about combining them? To this, McGinn answers that it is unfruitful because it would amount to trying to coordinate different kinds of cognitive faculty. Flanagan faults McGinn and thinks that there is a need to explore this "methodological requirement" that they be combined. "McGinn relishes pointing out the poverty of either approach taken by itself, but curiously fails to explore the prospects of mutual coordination" (Flanagan 1992). For him, the faculties can be combined to offer us an endeavour he calls "neurophilosophy". Such a field is the type that would take perception and first-person point of view into consideration. New mysterianism or anti-constructive naturalism upholds the view that no method is promising. But Flanagan offers the "natural method" that draws on three main approaches: phenomenology (and/or introspection), empirical psychology, and empirical neuroscience (Flanagan, 1992; Gulick, 2017). In his later work, Flanagan buttresses his natural method as follows:

Start by treating three different lines of analysis with equal respect. Give phenomenology its due. Listen carefully to what individuals have to say about how things seem. Also let the psychologists and cognitive scientists have their say. Listen carefully to their descriptions about how mental life works, and what jobs, if any, consciousness has in its overall economy. ... finally listen

carefully to what the neuroscientist say [sic] about how conscious mental events of different sorts are realised, and examine the fit between their stories and the phenomenological and psychological stories (Flanagan 1997b).

It is not only one method that should be employed in solving the problem of consciousness but different methods drawn from various disciplines—philosophy, cognitive psychology, neurology, cognitive science, evolutionary biology, etc. In his opinion, Flanagan says that any "source worth paying attention" would count in formulating a theory of naturalism of consciousness (Flanagan, 1997b). While we acknowledge Flanagan's fantastic efforts at naturalising consciousness with his "natural method(s)", a lot of problems are extant in this proposal. Let us take the first proposal of listening "carefully to what individuals have to say about how things seem." One may argue that this sort of method would not only complicate issues but also obfuscate the inquiring individual. It will complicate issues because individuals who are enjoying the same mental state may not be able to accurately report what is happening to them. And even when it comes to pain, for instance, how can the listener understand the extent and depth of the pain? And again, what if the suffering individual lacks the power of speech? Or what if they tend to report

entirely different things with the deliberate intention to thwart the sincere effort of the naturalist philosopher? On using the brain scanner technology, what if it is the same part of the brain that vibrates when the individual perceives the colour red and when he perceives the colour green? Even at that, the individuals are to report "how things seem", which, one may argue, is different from how things *are*. It is exactly because of these difficulties that McGinn rejected the promise of any method. What the individuals report are the outcomes of their introspection, which, for McGinn, cannot be instantiated by another person. What the neuroscientist and cognitive scientist will report is nothing but the physical properties of the brain (through the method of perception). McGinn has argued that what we perceive in the brain are the sorts of materials that cannot embody consciousness; you cannot know that somebody perceives the colour red by observing the operation/vibration of their brain. For him, naturalism is real and true: consciousness is as natural as any other natural phenomenon in the world. But he insists it is not given to us to understand the extent of its naturalness (McGinn, 1991). He insists that no method can do the magic: nothing observable in the brain is the necessary and sufficient condition for consciousness because it contains something *hidden*. But how correct is McGinn in postulating the hidden as a sufficient ground for naturalism? What is Flanagan's reply?

Rejection of the Hidden structure and acceptance of the prospects of the science of consciousness

With respect to McGinn's postulation of the hidden property of consciousness, two things should be noted here: 1) His postulation of the hidden structure is to demonstrate that consciousness is a natural phenomenon; 2) it is this same hidden structure that makes naturalism impossible because we cannot penetrate the hidden. We have reacted to the first claim in various ways, of which the prominent is his insistence that there is no place for the supernatural or magical in matters of consciousness. But somehow this is the sort of argument that the supernaturalists put up. They believe that consciousness cannot be naturalised simply because it has a nature that is concealed by the divine. In this case, there is no difference between McGinn and the supernaturalists. Thus, his insistence that we should strive towards naturalism is not sustainable. Again, McGinn insisted that naturalism of consciousness is impossible because there is a certain property that is hidden. This leaves us with some difficult questions to answer, such as (1) whether this property he refers to as the "hidden structure of consciousness" is *hidden* in consciousness or in the brain; (2) how this hidden property links the brain to consciousness; and (3) how we know the nature of this hidden. In Flanagan's view, McGinn is not quite correct in thinking that there is a hidden property *P* that should be

the basis of true naturalism. The problem with this hidden is that we do not know if the problem is that we cannot know *P* or how *P* links consciousness with the brain (Flanagan 1992). However, McGinn holds that the property *P* is of non-spatial character. If this is the case, then it can be argued that there is no naturalist solution since what will link consciousness with the brain cannot be an immaterial substance (Işikgil, 2017).

The problem with McGinn's position is that he is already convinced that we are forever incapable of arriving at the solution to the problem of consciousness. In his opinion, it is about time we accepted the fact that we could never naturalise consciousness, however sophisticated the method. But Flanagan points out that when the mind is assisted with the use of instruments such as Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI), CAT and PET (Positron emission tomography) scanners, enhanced electronic encephalogram (EEG) etc., researchers would try to identify the neural differences associated with conscious mental states (Flanagan 1992; Gulick 2020). One may agree with Flanagan that if this is possible, then McGinn fails in his thinking that there is no part of the brain that is a necessary and sufficient condition for consciousness. The human brain is seen as a neural network. According to Wang (2020), in cognitive science, there is a widespread belief that psychological phenomena can be explained using neurological phenomena

because the former is caused by the latter. This is to demonstrate that consciousness can be studied scientifically when we pay attention to the neural work of the brain.

To sustain any naturalistic position, the brain should not be taken in isolation. But this is what McGinn did. McGinn has lost faith in the power, structure and mechanism of the brain. He believes that the brain, *prima facie*, is incapable of embodying consciousness, and so the brain is irrelevant, or reference to it is irrelevant. He maintained that there is something in consciousness that is far and above the brain. For him, this property is not only natural but also dominantly transcendent. It is the hidden structure/property of consciousness that naturalises consciousness. But it is exactly this claim, the identification of something hidden and transcendent, that renders McGinn's position untenable. According to Valverde (2019), if we declare the brain an organ of unknown structure and possibly irrelevant, we can never get to its function regarding consciousness.

Deriving the Immaterial from Matter

The position of McGinn is that there is an explanation for the connection between consciousness and the brain, but we cannot come up with that explanation (because consciousness is always mysterious) (Frank, 2019). His point is this: we cannot derive immaterial consciousness from the brain, a material object. This position will be dispelled

once we are able to construct a theory of how something immaterial can proceed from matter. Of course, there are many scientific theories which we imagine can prove this to be possible. An example here is the theory of magnetic force. Granted that this example suffices, it is likely to suffer an attack from a pro-McGinn. The problem faced by this example is that one can argue that what proceeds from the bar magnet is not an immaterial effect but material. When you bring two bar magnets and allow two like poles to face each other, you will experience a very heavy force of propulsion. When two unlike poles face each other, you will experience the force of attraction. What one experiences is not what is perceptible by the eyes, but it is amenable to the sense of touch. Anything that is sensuous cannot be said to be largely immaterial, and so the example may not be adequate. However, one can respond to this that when we observe the operation of consciousness, it is something that plays upon our senses—at least, we believe mind and body interact, and the body can wield some influence on the consciousness. Therefore, we can interpret such force obtained from bar magnets as immaterial. If the above claim is true, then it is possible that the mind can come from matter. Flanagan argues exactly this point: that neurotransmitters also spell what something is like for the subject. In fact, anti-constructive naturalism will be proved wrong when we understand that the mind is the brain *in a way*. Flanagan rightly reiterates

that it is a category mistake, if not an illusion, to understand consciousness as being part of an *immaterial* world.⁷

Conclusion

Opinions are sharply divided among naturalists of consciousness. Constructive naturalists hold the view that the full picture of consciousness can be known when we construct/specify the property of the brain that instantiates it. Anti-constructivists believe naturalism is not possible because there is no property of the brain that is a direct correlate of consciousness. By rendering the brain incapable of having any necessary property that can instantiate consciousness, McGinn professes anti-constructivism. Sequel to this, he believes that there must be a property of the brain that is the basis of consciousness, which we cannot know. This sort of position renders his claim to naturalism indefensible. But Flanagan advances the contrary view by maintaining that humans do not suffer the level of cognitive closure McGinn advances. With the use of the right instrument, that is, when the mind is assisted, we can know beyond our evolutionary inheritance. In this study, we showed that the constructivism of Flanagan is more plausible than McGinn's anti-constructivism, predominantly because McGinn thinks that something that is forever hidden can justify naturalism. A good account of naturalism demands a rejection of the hidden property of consciousness. Relying on the background of this study, which

appeals to our common experience that brain states are connected to the conscious states (because severe damage to the brain affects the state of consciousness), we conclude that constructive naturalism is more defensible than anti-constructive naturalism. It is committed to the view that only the future history of the science of the mind will solve the hard problem of the mind-body relationship (Gulick, 2020). McGinn's claim

that no property of the brain is a necessary and sufficient condition for consciousness is spurious and highly inflated. When McGinn has a portion of his brain cut off, would he even be conscious to know that he might have lost his consciousness? For Flanagan, there is an inference to the best explanation that what is perceived in the brain can lead us to McGinn's *P*

Endnotes

¹This tends to mirror dualistic interactionism. Of course, naturalism of the kind we profess here is subsumed under dualism but differs from other forms of dualism, though which uphold the distinction between mind and matter, yet deny any causal interaction, for instance, Leibniz's pre-established harmony.

²In this study, we contrast naturalism with supernaturalism or non-naturalism. We hold supernaturalism as the doctrine which either rejects the interaction between brain and consciousness or accepts that such interaction is possible, thanks to a divine agent at work. Naturalism rejects these two tenets of supernaturalism.

³The emphasis put in Italics is ours. The words so italicized, at deeper reflection, are in disparity with each other, and so McGinn's argument gets weakened. For sure, to profess naturalism of consciousness is to profess constructivism. However, though, McGinn holds on to the former, yet he debunks the later. His insistence is that there is a way in which consciousness emerges from the brain (naturalism), however, there is no way in which (we can observe how) parcels of the brain ("soggy grey matter") can generate consciousness. Underlying this McGinn's position is the following: not that there is no way in which consciousness is a byproduct of brain processes (a tenet of naturalism) but it is not given to us to know this way (anti-constructive naturalism).

⁴Nothing happens in nature by magic is another way of saying that the universe is governed by stringent laws of nature. This is a strong form of scientism where anything outside the explanatory laws of physics is dislodged.

⁵We don't think Flanagan should be interpreted here to be a monist or an identity theorist. He makes the commitment to a dualistic conception of the mind. He believes that there is subjective aspect as well as objective aspects of the mind. (See Flanagan, 1997a).

⁶Valverde also speaks about three schools that explain consciousness—neuroscience, quantum mechanics and skepticism. From the way he explains them, Flanagan belongs to neuroscientific school while McGinn, to the sceptic school. The sceptical school holds that science can never interpret and understand consciousness; Flanagan as a neuroscientist is a constructive naturalist.

⁷Sadro Nannini opines that the dualists regard it as a "category mistake" when the materialists identify phenomenal consciousness with brain activity. The materialists, too, regard it as a "category mistake" when the dualists identify consciousness as not being part of the material world. Whichever way, one would see that it is this sort of tension that heightens the consciousness problem: is consciousness a form of matter or is it immaterial? (See Nannini, 2015).

References

- Branding, J. (2017). Mental causation under two types of closure. *Compos mentis: Undergraduate Journal of Cognition and Neuroethics*, 5(1), 1-12.
- Chalmers, D. J. (1996). *The conscious mind: In search of fundamental theory*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Chomsky, N. (1975). *Reflections on Language*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Corcoran, K. (2001). The Trouble with Searle's biological naturalism. *Erkenntnis*, Provide journal issue number 55(3), 307-324.
- Flanagan, O. (1992). *Consciousness reconsidered*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Flanagan, O. (1991). *The science of the mind*. 2nd Ed. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Flanagan, O. (1997a). The robust phenomenology of the stream of consciousness. In N. Block, O. Flanagan & G. Güzeldere (eds.), *The nature of consciousness: philosophical debates*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Flanagan, O. (1997b). *Prospects for a unified theory of consciousness*.
- Frank, J. F. (2019). The double challenge to naturalistic conceptions of the mind. In P. A. Gardiulo & H. L. Mesones-Arroyo (eds.), *Psychiatry and neuroscience update (vol. 3)*. Switzerland: Springer Nature.
- Gulick, R. V. (2020). *Consciousness reconsidered reconsidered*. In E. Nahmias, T. W. Polger & W. Zhao (eds.), *The natural method: Essays on mind, ethics, and self in honor of Owen Flanagan*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Işikgil, S. (2017). An analysis on McGinn's mysterianism: reply to Erhan Demircioglu. *Kilikya Felsefe Dergisi/Cilicia Journal of Philosophy* (1), 11-18.
- Kriegel, U. (2003). The new mysterianism and the thesis of cognitive closure. *Acta Analytica*. 18 (30/31), 177-191.

- McGinn, C. (2002). *The making of a philosopher: My journey twentieth-century philosopher*. New York: HarperCollins.
- McGinn, C. (1999). *The mysterious flame: Conscious minds in a material world*. New York: Basic Books.
- McGinn, C. (1997). *Mind and bodies: Philosophers and their ideas*. New York: Oxford University Press
- McGinn, C. (1996). *The character of mind: An introduction to the philosophy of mind*. 2nd Ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McGinn, C. (1993). *Problems in philosophy: The limits of inquiry*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- McGinn, C. (1991). *Problem of consciousness: Essays towards a resolution*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Nannini, S. (2015). Time and consciousness in cognitive naturalism. *Rivista Internazionale Di Filosofia E Psicologia*, 6, 458-473.
- Nannini, S. (2000). *Naturalism in Cognitive Sciences and the Philosophy of Mind*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang.
- Stroud, B. (1996). The charm of naturalism. *The American Philosophical Association*. 70(2), 43-55.
- Valverde, R. (2019). Quantum Consciousness and Spirit. *Scientific God Journal*, 10(3), 167-181.
- Vlerick, M. (2014). Biological constraints do not entail cognitive closure. *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences*, 48, 21-27.
- Vlerick, M. & Boudry, M. (2017). Psychological closure does not entail cognitive closure. *Dialectica*, 71, 101-115.