



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Problems in Philosophy: The Limits of Inquiry. by Colin McGinn
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The Philosophical Review, Vol. 105, No. 2. (Apr., 1996), pp. 253-256.

Stable URL:

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The Philosophical Review, Vol. 105, No. 2 (April 1996)

PROBLEMS IN PHILOSOPHY: THE LIMITS OF INQUIRY. By COLIN MCGINN. Oxford: Blackwell, 1993. Pp. viii, 163.

Here are some things we understand, at least pretty well: planetary orbits, cell division, rainbows, electrical conductivity. Here are some things we don't understand at all: conscious awareness, knowledge, free will, understanding things. That is, we are, as a species, pretty good at mathematics and science and no good at all at philosophy. Why is this?

Kant, the logical positivists, Wittgenstein, and the ordinary-language philosophers, all in their own ways, tried to answer this question (in Wittgenstein's case, twice). Unfortunately, their answers were "just more philosophy": they exhibited the very defects they were supposed to diagnose.

In this fascinating book, Colin McGinn offers an empirical theory to explain the futility of philosophy (not his phrase). The theory is empirical in the sense that it predicts the absence of certain observable phenomena and would be refuted by their occurrence. (And it looks to me as if it would be confirmed to a significant degree by the continued, long-run absence from the scene of these phenomena.) If McGinn is wrong, his theory will be a wrong scientific theory and not "just more philosophy."

McGinn thinks of philosophy as not so much an attempt to construct arguments for the truth or falsity of certain propositions as an attempt to construct theories that articulate the nature of certain things that most of us believe in and regard as important—or else theories that represent these things as illusions and articulate the nature of the illusion. His central examples are conscious experience, knowledge, and free will. These things play, or seem to play, important roles in human life and thought, but they raise knotty philosophical problems. The attempts of philosophers to resolve these problems produce a "philosophical geography" that exhibits what McGinn calls the DIME shape. 'DIME' is an acronym whose four letters represent four ways of responding to the apparently insoluble problems raised by the attempts of philosophers to construct theories about things like consciousness, knowledge, and free will. D-philosophers (for example, the aptly initialed Daniel Dennett on free will) say that the "target concept"—consciousness, knowledge, free will—must be domesticated, defanged, demythologized, denatured, desiccated. I-philosophers (Richard Taylor—the Taylor of *Action and Purpose*—on free will) say that facts or propositions involving the target concept are in no way mysterious but simply irreducible, indefinable, inexplicable in other terms. M-philosophers (Roderick Chisholm on free will: the appeal to "agent causation") hold that these facts involve something magical, miraculous, mystical, mysterious—although, of course, they would not themselves use these dyslo-

gistic words. E-philosophers (C. D. Broad on free will: the concept *seems* self-contradictory because it *is* self-contradictory) say that the target concept must be eliminated—ejected, excluded—from our thought, or at least from our serious thought. But none of these positions is really satisfactory, and if the individual philosopher who holds one of them does not always realize this, the philosophical community as a whole does. The perceived deficiencies of each position lead to an identifiable pattern in the history of philosophy (dialectical in more or less Marx’s sense, but the dialectical movement is circular rather than linear) that could be called the DIME dance. When a useful concept raises philosophical problems, the obvious thing to try first to resolve these problems is something in the D line. But this approach is almost never really successful, and D yields reluctantly to I. I encourages a flirtation with M, M propels the philosopher (or the next generation of philosophers) to E, and outraged common sense then demands a reexamination of D.

McGinn proposes an alternative to the DIME positions, an alternative he calls “transcendental naturalism” (TN). According to TN, reality is “flatly naturalistic,” and consciousness, knowledge, and free will are realized in, are real parts of, this flatly naturalistic reality. The DIME dance is not due to any defect in these concepts; it’s rather that we human beings lack the cognitive capacities that would enable us to understand how that realization works. When we try, despite our best efforts, we find ourselves in the DIME dance. Our cognitive capacities, although they are very well fitted to the task of figuring out how cell division and rainbows work, are not at all fitted to the task of figuring out how consciousness and free will work. “Scientific questions” are just those general, theoretical questions that we are cognitively properly fitted out to answer, and “philosophical questions” are just those that we are not.

‘Reason’ is one name for the capacity that we use to do science and try unsuccessfully to use when we do philosophy. Reason has a sort of grammar that is biologically innate in us and abstractly representable by us. Its relation to reason is analogous to the relation of innate, universal grammar to language. (McGinn is not a disciple of Chomsky only in his view of the relation of innate, universal grammar to language. *Problems in Philosophy* is a systematic and detailed development of some ideas Chomsky had briefly set out in *Language and Problems of Knowledge* and elsewhere.) McGinn calls this grammar of reason “Combinatorial Atomism with Lawlike Mappings”—“CALM” for short.

CALM leads us to approach all theoretical questions by using the following abstract model. There are certain fundamental things that are—in the order of explanation, if not the order of understanding—our starting point. More complex things are represented in the model as spatial aggregates of the simple things. (The “space” may be literally *space*, as in me-

chanics, or it may be something abstract that can be visualized as and formally represented as a space, as in thermodynamics and probability theory.) The properties of the aggregates are explained in terms of the intrinsic properties and arrangement in space (literal or abstract) of the fundamental things. If the objects of which a theory treats change over time, CALM leads us to try to devise laws that describe the ways in which the fundamental things rearrange themselves in space (or “space”) over time and thus produce new aggregative phenomena.

Sometimes attempts to use the CALM model lead to understanding, and then we have science. But the CALM model yields only intellectual tangles when we attempt to apply it to consciousness, knowledge, and free will. Nevertheless, we continue to try to apply it to these things because it is *all we have*. Its inapplicability to these things (and many others: the ontology of mathematics, personal identity, . . .)—combined with the inability with which some of us are afflicted to leave questions about these things alone—leads to the DIME dance. We should not be surprised to discover, McGinn tells us, that something natural selection has supplied us with (reason and its underlying “grammar”) is philosophically useless, for why should the ability to understand consciousness or free will lead to differential reproductive success? The amazing thing is that reason—whose biological function is to enable us to respond flexibly to environmental surprises—does anything theoretical for us at all.

McGinn argues that his theory would be strongly confirmed by the following development: Over the next million years (say), philosophers continue to be trapped in the DIME dance, whereas science comes to an “end.” (Physics is complete, and the special sciences have nothing to do but determine, by ancient and well-understood methods, the inner natures of recently discovered objects and phenomena.) And, he argues, it is now reasonable for us to believe that this is how things are going to turn out—barring the catastrophic end of our species or a relapse into barbarism.

Whether or not one agrees with McGinn, one has to admit that *Problems in Philosophy* addresses a real problem about philosophy—one that philosophers are inclined to ignore. And it does seem that the time has passed when there can be much hope that some new development *within* philosophy (Cartesian doubt, transcendental philosophy, phenomenology, the logical analysis of language) is going to transform philosophy into something that produces results in the sense in which quantum chemistry and algebraic topology produce results. If anything is to have any hope of explaining the apparent futility of philosophy, it will have to take the form of an empirical theory about the limits of our cognitive abilities.

In my view, this is an admirable book. It is concise, well organized, and clearly and vigorously written. It presents a real solution (wildly speculative, to be sure; but wild speculation—recognized as such—has a place at the

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beginning of an inquiry) to a real and extremely important problem. It is perhaps the only solution to this problem that is currently available.

I have only two criticisms. The first has to do with "packaging" rather than content. The title and general appearance of the book, and a publisher's blurb on the back cover, encourage the idea that *Problems in Philosophy* is an introductory textbook. It is nothing of the sort.

Secondly, McGinn continually implies that "naturalism" is an essential part of his thesis. I don't see it. I am myself a thoroughgoing supernaturalist, and, as I have implied, I am strongly inclined to think that McGinn is right about causes of what I have (and he has not) called the futility of philosophy. I do not fit into the M slot in the DIME geography of philosophy because I do not think that an appeal to supernatural or nonnatural beings or processes *helps* with philosophical problems. Consciousness is indeed a mystery. But does saying that conscious beings are immaterial or otherwise outside the natural order help to penetrate or dispel that mystery? No, because the consciousness of an immaterial being is as much a mystery as the consciousness of a material being. It must be conceded that McGinn is fully aware that postulating nonnatural beings, properties, or processes is of no use in philosophy—and not primarily because there are no such beings (that's as may be) but because, whether or not there are such beings, we're left with the same problems once we've postulated them. I wonder, however, whether he has fully thought through the implications of this fact for his theory of philosophy. The implications seem to me to come down to this: his frequent assertions of his allegiance to naturalism play no real role in his argument.

But these are minor reservations about an excellent book.

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The Philosophical Review, Vol. 105, No. 2 (April 1996)

UNDERSTANDING THE INFINITE. By SHAUGHAN LAVINE. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994. Pp. ix, 372.

Understanding the Infinite is a loosely connected series of essays on the nature of the infinite in mathematics. The chapters contain much detail, most of which is interesting, but the reader is not given many clues concerning what concepts and ideas are relevant for later developments in the book. There are, however, many technical cross-references, so the reader can expect to spend much time flipping backward and forward.

The first five chapters are historical, and the material varies in originality and clarity. As Lavine admits, much of it is culled from secondary sources