

The Paradox of “New Mysterianism” vs. Esotericism: An Approach in Philosophy of Mind

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In 1995, David Chalmers published in *Scientific American Revue* his famous essay called “The Puzzle of Conscious Experience”, where he analyses the hard and easy problems of consciousness, and objected at the same time against the “esoteric” that claim to be impossible understand consciousness. In fact, Chalmers is just presenting a position that became known from the works of Colin McGinn (The Problem of Consciousness, 1991) and Owen Flanagan (The Science of the Mind, 1991) as the “New Mysterianism”. According to this philosophical position, the hard problem of consciousness cannot be solved by humans (it is impossible to explain the existence of *qualia*). Although esotericism may refer to an exploration of the hidden meanings and symbolism in various philosophical, historical, and religious texts, the new mysterianism is however nothing more than a profound paradox, since there is no knowledge to preserve or meanings to discover. However, if this argument is true, then the esotericism is wrong. The purpose will discuss this topic through the philosophical literature produce in the last years.

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Introduction to the New Mysterianism in Philosophy of Mind

Esotericism can be defined as a study of religious or philosophical movements whose proponents distinguish their beliefs, practices, and experiences from mainstream which institutionalizes traditions and generally preserved or understood by a small group. Can it be possible to exist some kind of esotericism in the philosophy of mind?

The mind-body problem puts the general question of knowing the relationship of the mind to the body, which is translated in many ways and through different forms, for instance, how consciousness is possible if we only have biological matter? How can a mind exist outside the body? What is the nature of particular mental states? And so many others (McGuinn, 1989; Levine, 1983; Jackson, 1986; Place, 1956).

Taking a general presentation and to respond to such “hard problem”, we have two major perspectives concerning philosophy of mind (which dedicates to study the nature of mind or mental events, and specifically consciousness and their relationship to body, that is, with the brain): One, identified as dualism, and can be traced back to Plato, but more precisely formulated by René Descartes in the 17th century. As is known, Descartes divides human being in two distinct substances, one, material, the *res extensa*, and the other one, the soul or spirit, the *res cogitans*, and the two substances united form man. So, in this perspective, it is argued that the mind is an independently existing substance, and therefore (even that there are some dualists that admit their relation to the

brain) cannot be reduced to the brain (once brain is part of the body). Monism or reductionism is the position that asserts that the only existing substance is physical; it states that mind is the result of the brain activity, and therefore, there is only one “substance” (or also called *monad* that comes from Leibniz) (Armstrong, 1968; Smart, 2002; Putnam, 2000; Stanton, 1983).

However, a variety of formulations are possible, either for dualism either for monism, just to mention a few: For dualism, we have the *qualia*, psychophysical parallelism, occasionalism, property dualism. In monism, we have behaviourism, identity theory, and functionalism. For instance, Hilary Putnam and Jerry Fodor developed the functionalism as a reaction to the limits of identity theory. But identity theory, developed by John Smart and Ullin Place, was also as a reaction to failures of behaviorism. These philosophers stated that, if mental states are something material (therefore, not behavioral), then mental states are probably identical to internal states of the brain. In very simplified terms, a mental state such as “desire for a chocolate bar” would thus be nothing more than the activity of certain neurons in certain brain regions. These philosophers saw the question of mental states in terms of a computational theory of the mind (Block, 1980). But even that most of modern philosophers of mind adopt either a reductive or non-reductive position, maintaining in theirs different ways that the mind is not separate from the body, they seem to have and cultivate a certain esotericism disposition about it.

Some philosophers take a kind of epistemic approach and say that the mind-body problem is currently unsolvable, and perhaps will always remain unsolvable to human beings, like Thomas Nagel that holds that the mind body problem is currently unsolvable (that is, at the present stage of scientific development) but it might be possible in a new future scientific paradigm or cognitive revolution to bridge the “explanatory gap” (Nagel, 1974). In this term, this is usually termed as new mysterianism.

Colin McGuinn holds that humans are (somehow) cognitively closed in regards to their own minds. For human minds, according to McGuinn (1989), it lacks the concept-forming cognitive procedures to fully grasp how mental properties such as the phenomenon of consciousness arise from their causal basis (p. 350), meaning in simple terms, that humans do not have the right (adequate and fully operational) cognitive structures to capture such a phenomenon, for example, it would be the same to ask how a dog can be cognitively closed in regards to particle physics.

The true is that physicalists maintain various positions on the prospects of reducing mental properties to physical properties, and the ontological status of such mental properties remains unclear. One example of this is the position of Hilary Putnam, the founder of functionalism, that has also adopted the position that the mind-body problem is an illusory problem which should be dissolved according to what Wittgenstein stated decades ago. Well, one must not forget the idealists that maintain that the mind is all that exists and that the external world is either mental itself, or an illusion created by the mind.

Esotericism vs. Mysterianism: The Paradox of a (Non-)Hard Question

So, leaving temporarily the philosophical literature and taking a closer look at cinema world, we find different films that address such themes. For instance, the movies *Blade Runner* (1982), *Matrix* (1999), *AI* (2001), *I, Robot* (2004), *Avatar* (2009), *Surrogates* (2009), *Inception* (2010), *Timeless* (2011), *Transcendence* (2014), or *Lucy* (2014), just to quote a few ones, are dealing with the hard question of the mental entities existence or in other words, how does exist such a thing called consciousness? The mind-body problem is present and it is transversal to all of these kinds of movies; they not only reflect about it but they also illustrate

the problem in a way that everybody seems to understand. So, is it possible to speak about a new kind of esotericism?

Esotericism (or esoterism) signifies the holding of esoteric opinions or beliefs, that is, ideas preserved or understood by a small group of those specially initiated, or of rare or unusual interest. It is also used to refer to the academic study of esoteric religious movements and philosophies, or to the study of those religious movements and philosophies whose proponents distinguish their beliefs, practices, and experiences from mainstream exoteric and more dogmatic institutionalized traditions. Taking this into account, one can ask: What is wrong about the new mysterianism?

Although esotericism may refer to an exploration of the hidden meanings and symbolism in various philosophical, historical, and religious texts, the new mysterianism is however nothing more than a profound paradox, since there is no knowledge to preserve or meanings to discover. However, if this argument is true, then the esotericism is wrong. In a different way: If the knowledge is not produced because we may not have the cognitive conditions, if there is no knowledge at all (just the premises and arguments testifying our limit horizons), if there is no technologies capable of creating the sufficient knowledge, then we have the conditions to say that the new mysterianism can be a profound paradox. However, if this argument is true, then the esotericism is possibly wrong (at least in the philosophy of mind mysterianism).

In Sort of Conclusion

The argument that holds the position of new mysterianism can be valid if the esotericism is not. Explaining: If new mysterianism has nothing to hold than the argument of the impossibility of knowledge, then there is no esotericism which is this so-called mysterianism. So, there is nothing wrong with esotericism unless you enter the hard problems of philosophy of mind. However, it must be remembered that in this case, discovering that life is no longer a matter of finding and understanding consciousness in the world but simply being aware of its existence, may be the most esoteric knowledge we have ever attained.

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