

Readings Tutorial 9
The Mind-body problem.

There are two very different papers assigned for reading here. The first is McGinn, 'Can we solve the mind-body problem.'

McGinn's answer is, simply, no. We are fundamentally incapable of knowing what it is about the brain that creates consciousness, because our 'cognitive constitution' is such that we cannot know this. 'No wonder' he says, 'we find the problem so difficult!' Now McGinn says himself that this is 'not constructive' and I totally agree. All his hypothesis serves to do is to obviate the need for further discussion. I feel, however, that this sort of discussion can point out misconceptions and confusion in our thinking.

In contrast, the Gunderson paper is much more constructive, in that it doesn't attempt to argue that it is in principle impossible to know how the brain creates consciousness, but that it is in principle, impossible for us to study ourselves, because we are unable to observe our own mind in the same way in which we observe the minds of others. Gunderson uses the analogy of eyes to explain this. We have no way of being *sure* what our own eyes look like. We can make a strong inference, based on data such as the eyes of others, and the fact that everything other than our eyes seems to be reflected accurately in a mirror. But we are incapable of studying ourselves.

The difference between the two is subtle but real. McGinn says that the problem is insolvable, period. Gunderson says that the problem is not really a problem because it is created from an asymmetry in our perceptions caused by the fact that it is impossible for us to directly study ourselves in the same way we can study others.

Personally, I feel that the mind-body problem is reflective of a problem with a physicalistic philosophy. The intuition of most people is that their cognitive functions are separate from the world. Now I am not arguing that Gunderson's argument is not a good argument. I think it is excellent, and would be persuasive, if I fully agreed with physicalism. However, since I have no problem with the existence of non-physical things, then the mind-body problem is not a problem at all.