About the concept of "problem"

The philosopher Colin McGinn seems to have grasped in its fullest dimension the insurmountable difficulties we encounter every time we try to face the problem of the relationship of mind with its material base, finding no other way out than to conclude that the solution to this problem is beyond the capacity of human intelligence.

According to McGinn, there is no doubt that consciousness is the result of brain activity. There must therefore exist some theory able of showing the causal link between the two orders of phenomena (1). Unfortunately, due to our intrinsic cognitive limitations, we are not able to develop such a theory because it is beyond our capacity for understanding. Mind-body problem, therefore, for McGinn, is not mysterious in itself, but derives from a sort of "dark zone" in our intelligence that prevents us from conceiving an explanatory model that can account for the relationship between brain processes and conscious experiences. (2)

It is interesting to note that McGinn does not bring any "strong" argument in support of his thesis: he doesn't analyze the characteristics of our cognitive faculties in relation to the ability (or inability) to solve certain types of problems, he doesn't explore the reasons why the mind-body relationship should remain forever unsolved. He merely takes note of our current difficult situation, extending it to the future, thus making it an absolute value limit.

His conclusions are undoubtedly favoured by an approximate and, not infrequently, misleading use of certain terms and concepts. This makes his arguments unclear, if not ambiguous, making it difficult to grasp the arbitrary concepts and inconsistencies that lie within them.

Let us take, for example, the concept of "problem". McGinn distinguishes between problems that are cognitively closed *in the absolute sense*, when it is objectively impossible to solve them, and problems that are cognitively closed *in the relative sense*, when they are potentially solvable but the solution is not accessible to certain types of minds (3). This would seem to be a very plausible distinction; in reality, it assumes that problems exist independently of the men who detect them. McGinn seems not to understand that problems do not lie as such in the world of nature. Nature is not problematic in itself, since within it only objects and phenomena are observable, which can, in some cases, contrast each other, in the sense that the action of one tends to cancel out the action of the other; but this does not constitute a "problem" at all, since it is part of the behaviour described by the laws of science. Problems take shape in human mind in the form of determinations that appear irreconcilable with one another: problems originate from the perspective with which man looks at the empirical facts and at the ideal constructions he elaborates. (4)

If we consider from the perspective just outlined McGinn's distinction between objectively insoluble problems (cognitively closed in an absolute sense) and relatively insoluble problems (when the solution is not accessible to certain types of minds), it is easy to understand that this distinction is

tailored to the position that the author intends to defend, but it cannot be supported by any argument having empirical consistency.

Besides, McGinn seems to be unaware that Turing, developing some of Godel's ideas, has amply demonstrated that there is no reliable criterion for a priori determining whether a given problem, which we do not know how to deal with, has a solution or not. Let us consider, for example, the classic problem of "squaring the circle" or the one of determining a general rule for the succession of the prime numbers. So far, no one has been able to find a solution to these problems, but neither we are in a position to state with absolute certainty that they cannot be solved, either objectively or in relation to our intellectual abilities. Similarly, among the 23 problems listed by David Hilbert in 1900, some have been solved satisfactorily; other problems have had a solution that is not accepted by everyone; at least a couple of them are still open. No one can say whether these will one day be resolved, or whether they will actually be resolvable.

The limit identified by Turing is valid for all types of problems, not only for the logical-mathematical ones, to which the cited examples belong. It is true for purely empirical problems, which originate from a conflict between our theoretical constructions (and, more generally, between our beliefs) and certain events that we observe in the world or experience about ourselves; the contrast between the expectations deriving from our systems (explicit or implicit) of orientation in reality and the actual observation data is what constitutes the "problem". It also applies to typically "philosophical" problems, such as ethical, religious, aesthetic, etc., where there are not even defined criteria by which to judge the goodness of the solutions we reach. Finally, this applies to the practical problems we face every day in our existence. Provided that "problem" means a difficulty for which there is not yet a set of criteria and rules capable of leading with relative certainty to a solution.

Obviously, a problem can be overcome, not only by finding a solution, but also by dissolving it, demonstrating that it is inconsistent. Many problems seem to us to be insoluble simply because they derive from incorrect assumptions. Let us once again consider the problem of *squaring the circle*. If it were "objectively insoluble" (but we don't know if it is really so), this would depend on the fact that it is impossible to build a square that has the same surface as a circle using only row and compass. The problem would be to think that something could be done while it is not.

Ultimately, we cannot solve a problem when we address it in the wrong way, that is to say when we use inappropriate concepts or models, or when the problem itself stems from unfounded assumptions. The solution is linked, respectively, to the elaboration of new concepts or reference schemes that allow a different classification of significant facts, or to the discovery of one or more errors in our starting assumptions. In both cases, the difficulties encountered in dealing with the problem depend on us. The same problem is created by us, because there are no problems in the world around us.

Any overcoming of a problem, given that the very definition of a problem implies the unavailability of codified procedures to deal with it successfully, cannot be achieved on the basis of mere logical reasoning. It is also necessary to involve our creative faculties, the only ones capable of going beyond the patterns available at a given moment.

Creativity cannot be traced back to predefined rules or procedures, because its results are not predictable. This is why we cannot establish a priori whether a given problem will ever have a solution: the solution (if it exists) lies beyond the boundaries delimited by the knowledge and codified procedures we have.

Let's go now to McGinn's distinction between objectively insoluble problems and relatively insoluble problems (compared to certain intellectual abilities). Is such a distinction sustainable in view of the fact that problems do not exist as such in the world?

If the problems originate from man's reflection, linked to the reference systems, then we cannot speak of "objectively insoluble problems", meaning by this any problem *by its nature* insurmountable. Indeed, all the problems we face stem from our way of framing certain issues. These are determinations made by man and not objective realities, independent of us. From this point of view, a problem that seems to us to be insoluble can only be a problem that we persist in dealing with in the wrong way, or a problem that is insoluble only because we refuse to question certain assumptions that we consider to be absolutely certain. It may be that we will never be able to find the right way to solve the problem, or find a fault in our starting assumptions, but we cannot establish this in advance, because it does not depend on the nature of the problem, but on our future behaviour.

As for the relatively insoluble problems, i.e. problems whose failure to solve them would depend on the intrinsic limits of the intelligence that deals with them, this is a completely arbitrary specification.

If problems don't exist as such in the world, deriving from the way certain issues are framed, then it makes no sense to believe that any being, endowed with a level of intelligence that allows him to grasp the essential contours of a problem (or even to create the problem), does not at the same time have the potential capacity to find a solution to the problem itself. It is possible that the being in question may not actually be able to overcome that problem, because it lacks the necessary conceptual tools or because it is firmly anchored in erroneous convictions, but he would certainly be able to understand the solution if, after adequate preparation aimed at the acquisition of new concepts and/or the elimination of unfounded assumptions, it were to be explained to him in detail.

A dog cannot understand why a stone thrown into the air always falls to the ground, but certainly there is no problem either; nor would he be able to grasp its contours if someone tried to explain it to him. The conformation of his intelligence does not allow the dog to support the necessary concepts that allow him to understand the problem and, even less, to solve it. The case in which the level of intelligence allows to understand the problem is very different, because it immediately projects us into the previous situation, relative to the so-called "objectively insoluble problems".

We can therefore conclude that McGinn's thesis is unsustainable, not only because there is no reliable criterion for determining whether a given problem will ever have a solution, but also because it is meaningless to distinguish between problems that cannot be solved by their very nature and problems that cannot be solved by an intellectual deficit. It makes no sense, because problems don't exist as such in nature, unlike what McGinn seems to believes, so their solutions don't depend on how reality is done, but on how we conceive problems and we deal with them.

Finally, with regard to the problem of the relationship between conscious experience and the nervous activity of our brain, which McGinn places among the problems whose solution is not accessible to certain types of intelligence, if we accept the principle that problems are a creation of man, this position is completely meaningless, since - as we have seen - it is not possible to grasp, in its essential lines, the contours of a given problem and at the same time do not have, at least potentially, the intellectual resources to overcome it. No problem can be considered objectively insoluble, if with this we mean by its intrinsic nature. The qualification of "insoluble problem" can only be accepted if it means a problem that is conceived (by man) in such a way that it cannot be solved. Therefore, if the problem of the mind-body relationship is insurmountable (or can be overcome only thanks to artifices that make violence to our rational qualities), this should lead us to conclude that the difficulties encountered are the consequence of an inadequate way of dealing with it, or of some assumption without foundation. Taking such a view, McGinn's sceptical conclusions also take on a very different connotation. They no longer seem to be an extravagant finding of a philosopher in search of originality at any cost (34) , but they must be seen as the inevitable outcome of any attempt which, refusing to

resort to conceptual expedients, nevertheless maintains the conviction that the mind-body problem must necessarily find a solution within the current explanatory categories of science.

NOTES

(1) McGinn, " Possiamo risolvere il problema mente-corpo", in Marco Salucci, *La teoria dell'identità. Alle origini della filosofia della mente*, Le Monnier, Firenze, 200, p. 179: "Presumably, there exist objective natural laws which in some way explain the rise of consciousness. Consciousness, in short, must be a natural phenomenon, which arises naturally from certain organizations of matter".

(2) See also p. 182 and p. 190.

(3) *Op. cit*, p. 188.

(4) These affirmations are in clear contrast with Karl Popper's thesis according to which problems (at least, the problems connected to knowledge) would have an existence of their own in a Platonic world - which Popper calls the *World Thre*e - for which man would not be the creator of problems, but only their discoverer. (cfr. Popper, *Conoscenza oggettiva. Un punto di vista evoluzionistico,* Armando, Roma, 1975, p. 165 and p. 216). Such a conception is a consequence of the "objectivistic turning point" impressed by Popper on what we could call the second phase of his epistemological reflection: a conception that - in my opinion - constitutes a real negation of the principles expressed in the falsificationist proposal developed previously.

(5) Flanagan, to indicate the philosophers who, for various reasons, support the inexplicability of consciousness, coined the term "mysterians" (Owen Flanagan, *Consciousness Reconsidered*, The MIT Press, Cambridge (MA), 1992)

[from Astro Calisi, *Oltre gli orizzonti del conosciuto...*, pp. 256-260 – English translation by the author]