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Are There Unanswerable Questions? Mysterianism and its General Limitation Theorem in the Philosophy of Mind

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Abstract

The problem of mysterianism can be considered from two perspectives. The first is the attitude to the question of determinability of the mystery or the issue of consciousness that can be called the mysterian dispute. The second issue is the formulation of the problem itself, which can be called the limitation theorem. In the paper the author describes from the second point of view and concludes that problem of mysterianism is based on equivocation. On the one hand, the explanation is sometimes understood as a complete solution to the problem (as when one can present a correct proof of a theorem), on the other, as acceptable and satisfying the conditions of a well-formed theory. There is no one and definite explaining theory – In the sense that the classic ideal of science, which is based on the architectural model of knowledge, gives to the term definitive explanation. At the same time, there are many explanatory concepts, empirical hypotheses, and speculations that explain mental phenomena.

Keywords: mysterianism; limits of knowledge; philosophy of mind, Brentano's thesis; limitation theorem

1. Introduction: What is it like to be a mysterian?

In *The Science of the Mind*, Owen Flanagan uses the term *mysterianism* to describe the beliefs of those thinkers who consider the problem of consciousness cannot be solved by the means available to modern science or by empirical methods. Flanagan distinguishes between two types of mysterianism, an old one and a new one. The modern rationalists, such as Descartes, Leibniz, and Huxley are the old mysterians. The precursor of the new mysterian movement is supposedly Thomas Nagel with his famous article *What is it like to be a bat?* (Nagel, 1979; Flanagan, 1991; 313; 314). Both types have one feature in common, they claim that the methods of science and empirical investigations cannot be applied to consciousness and mind. It

does not necessarily mean that there is no solution to the problem of consciousness or the famous body-mind problem (although many of them used to claim that). It means only that this solution, according to mysterians, cannot be elaborated upon by empirical methods.

The notion “mysterianism” is picked up by Daniel Dennett. In *Sweet Dreams* he builds an opposition between the reactionary philosophers who “surround consciousness with adoration as a secret slipping away from science,” and researchers who “can explain what consciousness is as deeply and completely as other natural phenomena: metabolism, reproduction, continental drift, light, gravity, etc.” (Dennett, 2005, p. 61).

The author of *The Science of the Mind* maintains that the mysterian standpoint is neither preposterous nor incoherent, but, in his opinion, it is an unsuccessful attempt to apply similar limitative theorems known to science as Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle and Gödel Incompleteness Theorem in the philosophy of mind (Flanagan, 1991, p. 314). Flanagan believes however that “[a]s a result of some recent work in neuropsychology, cognitive science, and philosophy we have, I think, the beginnings of a unified theory of consciousness...” (Flanagan, 1991, p. 314).

The limitations of knowledge have always aroused emotions. Not only when it comes to the problem of justifying specific empirical theories, but this was especially true when it concerns conscious human beings. Unraveling the mystery of the mind and consciousness comes to be the dispute between the supporters of the view that a satisfactory description of the functioning of the mind is entirely achievable by the means available to modern science and the so-called mysterians who claim that it is beyond our ability. Dennett's opposition appeals to the difference between problem and mystery made by Noam Chomsky in his *Reflections on Language*, where he stated that the “problem appears to be within the reach of approaches and concepts that are moderately well understood” but mysteries “remain as obscure to us today as when they were originally formulated” (Chomsky, 1998, p. 137). Chomsky mentions here some examples of mysteries, namely, causation of behavior, creative aspect of language use and problem of other minds (Chomsky, 1998, p. 139). According to him, we can formulate scientific questions but rather fail while grappling with them, as in the case of mysteries.

Colin McGinn distinguishes between problems that are “questions that fall within our cognitive bounds”, mysteries that are questions “that do not differ from a problem in point of the naturalness of its subject-matter, but only in respect of the contingent cognitive capacities that certain beings possess: the mystery is a mystery for that being” illusions which is a pseudo-question that “suggest an answer of a kind that does not objectively exist” and issues which are a question, typically of a normative character” (McGinn, 1993, p. 3).

According to Chomsky and McGinn, mystery seems to be something in between well-formulated scientific problems and paradox. On the one hand, it can be formulated as a meaningful, understandable scientific question, but on the other, we will never be able to answer them, although there is no contradiction in them. There are for sure many examples of it in the sciences: What are two natural numbers that will never be added by humans? What had happened when the first Cro-Magnon human being met Neanderthals for the very first time in the history of the Planet? One can freely give other examples of such mysteries in science. What could be interesting here is the question if there are any crucial and important mysteries. I think that

answer is in the negative. Although there are mysteries in science there is no general limitative theorem about mind among them, because it simply does not meet conditions of a well-formulated scientific problem.

This dispute about limitations in science of the mind is based on a fundamental misunderstanding. The participants of the dispute assume that we can unambiguously and in indisputable terms formulate the initial problem and what is even more important is that we do have a single and unambiguous method of solving such problems. I think both assumptions are false.

Mysterianism covers at least four areas of issue: body-mind problems, the question of naturalization of intentions, reduction problems, and questions related to biological explanations. Some are inclined to add to this list the problem of free will (cf. De Caro, 2009, p. 450) and as a separate issue the question of first-person cognition and the sufficiency of conceptual means at the disposal of today's science (Nagel, 2013, p. 16).

It is difficult to highlight a single dominant problem thread. An important distinction between these ontological, epistemological, and methodological issues also affects the list. The limitation may relate to knowing what the relationships between mental and physical properties (ontological level) are, whether the cognitive system can represent these relationships (epistemic level), and the interrelationships between the theories of different levels and possible reduction of one group of theories to another (methodological level). Moreover, some standpoints – such as the famous Donald Davidson's anomalous monism – concern both the body-mind problem and issues related to reduction. While operating on the ontological level (mental events vs. physical events) Davidson denies on the methodological level the existence of bridge laws reducing or translating mental events into physical events (Davidson, 1980, p. 212).

Yet, multiple complications do not prove the impossibility of raising one general limitation problem. They merely indicate that it would be extremely difficult to do so. To overcome this difficulty, we need a particular method that would enable work on what the mentioned issues have in common. As far as I know, such a method does not exist.

There are specific problems regarding explanatory gap, reduction, supervenience, or emergentism (cf. Kim, 2008, p. 118; Poczobut, 2009, p. 137; Fodor, 1981, p. 131). We do not know exactly how to translate them into the body-mind problem (Kim 1993, p. 89). Still, there is no way to address all the issues. Moreover, as Ernest Nagel points out, to make reductions the existence of complete and finished theories is necessary, but such a theory has not yet been achieved (Nagel, 1961, p. 337). The problem, therefore, seems too complicated to be posed in the form of one general dilemma.

Although mysterianism can be considered (by mysterians themselves as well as their opponents) to be a limitative opinion according to which:

- a) there are persistent philosophical problems and their solution lies beyond the limits of human cognition,
- b) these problems include the issue of the complete explanation of the mind,
- c) it is possible to state proof of the complete explanation of the problem of the mind, and so-called limitative thesis, or a proof, against it.

The difficulty lies in formulating the limitative thesis that covers all the indicated problems, grasping what they have in common. It seems impossible. Mysterianism forms a complex of opinions rather than one standpoint, so there can be no general formulation of the mystery.

2. What is the dispute about?

The problem of mysterianism can be considered from two perspectives. The first is the formulation of the problem itself, which I call a limitation theorem perspective. The second is a formulation of the question regarding explanation possibility of consciousness and mind within the scientific framework. I will call it a mysterian dispute perspective.

Taking limitation theorem perspective, one must notice that many mysterians formulate limitation theorem in many different ways and using many different concepts. Just to give some examples of such formulations:

- a) Consciousness cannot be completely explained (Flanagan, 1993, p. 313),
- b) The notion of mind cannot be naturalized (Seager, 2000; 106; 2013, p. 184),
- c) The scope and nature of explanations available to people are limited (Chomsky, 2013, p. 664),
- d) The phenomenon of consciousness cannot be explained in terms of currently prevailing scientific orthodoxy (Nagel, 2012, p. 42).

If one examines this modest choice of formulations – one can easily notice that the relationships between them are not always logical – defining the logical value of any statement does not always involve the indication of the value of another. If we assume, for example, that sentence ‘c’ is true, then its truth will not tell us anything about the logical value of the other statements. The dispute as to whether the problem of the mind and consciousness can be completely solved or not can continue even after we have determined (solely as an example) that the notion of mind cannot be naturalized. In turn, the fact that the scope and nature of explanations available to people are limited does not mean that consciousness cannot be completely explained. It shows that there is no single, strict formulation of mysterian standpoint, not to mention the limitative theorem.

From the perspective of the dispute, mysterianism is a spectrum of questions and argumentations regarding limitative hypotheses and the possibility of the complete empirical explanation of the mind. Arguments usually are trying to support one of the above-mentioned formulations. Questions are applying a wide range of many different concepts that situate the problem in many different paradigms and frameworks. Here are some examples of the main formulations:

- “How can living physical bodies in the physical world produce such phenomena [as consciousness – W.M.]? Is it possible to explain the problem of consciousness in terms of natural sciences?” (Dennett, 1992, p. 25).
- “Is it possible to predict certain properties of the mental level n based on the knowledge of the laws and properties of level $n - 1$?” (E. Nagel; 1961, p. 319).

- “The issue is whether there can be a general notion of experience that extends far beyond our own or anything like it” (T. Nagel, 1986, p. 21).
- “Is it possible to naturalize the notion of mind without referring to mentalistic notions?” (Seager, 2000, p.107) .
- “How do phenomenological properties "originate", "derive", "emerge" from physical properties?” (DeCaro, 2009, p. 450).
- “Are there any strict psychophysical laws that enable us to indicate causal relationships between mental and physical events?” (Davidson, 2005, p. 192).
- “How do conscious states depend on brain states?” (McGinn, 1994, p. 100).
- “How are the characteristics of a given (mental – W.M.) level related to those of neighboring levels (e.g., chemical or biological – W.M.)?” (Kim, 1993, p. 16).
- “How can we explain the causation of human behavior?” (Chomsky, 1998, p. 138).

Some of the terms used above relate to the famous body-mind problem, others focus rather on intertheoretical reduction problems. It is also clear that they use very different notions that can be introduced with some further difficult questions such as: would the indication that there are no strict psychophysical laws mean that it is impossible to explain the problem of consciousness in terms of the natural sciences (e.g. neuroscience)?

Is it possible to translate the terms of one question into the terms of the other? Are phenomenological properties mentioned by DeCaro the same as Davidson’s mental events? Is it possible to reduce or translate one theory or model into the other – e.g., to determine how phenomenal qualities relate to physical events? The possibility of multiplying such issues and doubts suggests that the answer to any of these questions does not resolve the mysterian problem. Supposing that Daniel Dennett is right and his question about the possibility of explaining the problem of consciousness in terms of natural sciences finds a positive answer, does not mean yet that there are any strict psychophysical laws that enable us to indicate causal relationships between mental and physical events (as in Davidson’s question). Answering one of these questions would not close the dispute. There is no mystery of consciousness and mind because it cannot be unambiguously and generally formulated either in a question or in a single thesis.

3. About three arguments in a dispute

This thesis is confirmed by the mysterians' argumentative practice itself. They use very different types of arguments and these arguments – if they are acknowledged – present different standpoints. I will discuss three of them here: evolutionary, modularity and transcendental.

Noam Chomsky, reflecting upon *What can we understand* (2012), claims that what is called mysterianism is trivial. In his opinion, both Locke and Hume were mysterians, as well as Descartes – who “suggests that we may not have intelligence enough to discover the nature of mind” (Chomsky, 1988, p. 140). Though for some other reasons, anyone who considers the theory of evolution to be correct is a mysterian, because of obvious premises that every or-

ganism (and body system) has cognitive limitations (is limited in its functions) and because a human being is an organism, it must be concluded that a human being has cognitive limitations too. After all, the cognitive apparatus was shaped in the finite time of evolution for specific environmental tasks that our ancestors struggled with. "If we are biological organisms, not angels – Chomsky writes – then our cognitive faculties are similar to those called physical capacities and should be studied much as other systems of the body" (Chomsky, 2012, p. 664).

What Chomsky proves is only the existence of some cognitive limitations resulting from the development of organisms. However, this argument does not prove at all that full knowledge of the mind is beyond human reach and, even if it is today, that it will always remain an evolutionary mystery.

Colin McGinn begins his argumentation with a similar strategy when he writes "for the same reason that we make so little progress in unassisted flying – that is, we lack the requisite equipment. We have gaps in our cognitive skills as we have gaps in our motor skills – though in both cases we can see what we are missing and feel the resulting frustrations" (McGinn, 1993, p. 13).

There is weak point in evolutionary argumentation. Amoeba cannot see colors, a dog cannot do multiplication and a chimpanzee does not know how to extract root. They simply do not know that they are unable to do this. However, humans, in contrast to other organisms are aware of their ignorance. We can at least indicate what we do not know, and according to the mysterians we can even present proof that we would never know. So, the analogy between human and other organisms' ignorance seems to be weak.

In order to avoid this weakness McGinn's argumentation appeals to Russell's distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and conceptual knowledge (Russell, 1910). McGinn points out that our knowledge of consciousness comes from direct experience, which cannot be expressed by any theoretical terms: We know what consciousness is only by acquaintance, but this knowledge by acquaintance can be hardly transferred into conceptual knowledge. "If this is correct, then we can say two things: first, that this knowledge is enough to ground our sense that there is a mind-body problem; and second, that it explains why we feel that our sense of the problem outstrips our ability to articulate because its articulation would transfer it from the sphere of knowledge by an acquaintance to conceptual knowledge, where it does not originally belong" (McGinn, 2004, p. 9). It is a bit like wanting to play Gödel's proof on the piano.

In this respect dog and chimpanzee do know that there are a certain number of given things (for example members of their pack) by acquaintance, but they have no concept of the number. According to McGinn we can represent the objects in the world (in some cases perhaps better than other vertebrates) but we are rather unable to represent how our representation works. Scientific description covers a wide range of problems but unfortunately not all of them – there are some mysteries about our representation capacities that involve the question about consciousness, body-mind, *a priori*, self, and knowledge. All of them seem to be aspects of the main mystery of how our mind represents the world. What enables us to be aware of it? McGinn formulates the conditions of limitation theorem in terms of his transcendental naturalism (TN): "According to TN about a certain question Q with respect to a being B, the subject-matter of Q has three properties: (i) reality, (ii) naturalness and (iii) epistemic

inaccessibility to B. Q does not harbor an illusion (hence (i)), nor does it refer to entities or properties that are intrinsically non-natural (hence (ii)), yet the answer to Q is beyond the capacities of B creatures (hence (iii))” (McGinn, 1993, p. 4).

One can formulate the general limitative theorem only if one adopts strong realism, and naturalism. Besides this, there is a further assumption required to follow McGinn’s mysterianism: modular theory of mind which claims that every single cognitive function is either the product of a module or complex of modules. We do not have a module to solve the problem of mind, we can only know it by acquaintance. That is why the mystery appears.

I venture to suggest that these assumptions are very strong, not obvious and simply cannot be acknowledged as general. The modular theory of mind applied by McGinn is also very vague. Diana Inez Perez notices that it is not obvious that the modular architecture of the mind entails this kind of mysterianism and McGinn hardly characterizes the modules of mind (Perez, 2005, p. 46). In my opinion, there is a basic failure in McGinn’s representation of our understanding of the world. McGinn uses terms like ‘human’ or ‘species’ in an evolutionary sense. He understands the human being as a limited animal because of evolution. Perhaps we can solve more mathematical problems than chimpanzees but still, many problems remain mysteries for us. But this model works in a shorter perspective of time too. McGinn would have to agree that human beings in the twenty-first century are different from medieval people because we can solve many more problems (in mathematics and physics) and we are aware of many more issues. But it is an absurd from the point of view of evolution.

The transcendental argument is the most frequently presented. Flanagan (Flanagan, 1991, p. 62), followed by Michael Gazzaniga (Gazzaniga, 2018, p. 18), calls it Brentano’s thesis. I will call it transcendental because it is based on the belief that mind is (as in Kant’s philosophy) the elementary condition of the possibility of knowledge about anything (including itself).

William Seager has recently invoked this argument. He calls it Plato’s problem, the paradox of consciousness, or methodological mysterianism (Seager, 2000; Seager, 2012). According to him, the argument is based on the belief that any explanation or theory significantly contains or implies intentional terms. Seager starts by imposing the following conditions on naturalization:

- (1) X has been explained in terms of Something Else.
- (2) The Something Else does not essentially involve X.
- (3) The Something Else is *properly* natural” (Seager, 2000, p. 96 cf. 2013, p. 151).

According to Seager, fulfilling these conditions of naturalization is impossible in the case of mind. If we assume that the set of intentional terms X is explained by a set of terms SE (something else), then, even if we assume that SE does not contain any terms from the set X, the very notion of explaining can be understood only intentionally. “It is possible – Seager writes – that those are the conditions of naturalization that block naturalization. I take this to be so — Rule 2 cannot be satisfied in the case of mind (intentionality, meaning, content, etc.) since a variety of mentalistic notions must be understood for any explanation to be given” (Seager, 2000, p. 106).

Every explanation uses primary notions and rules and their assumption is essential to present a given explanation. The very notion of explanation can be reduced to mental notions only (the category of the intellect for Kant), which cannot be further explained, but can only be transcendently deduced, based on the knowledge we possess.

In another book, *Natural Fabrications* – Seager calls this situation a paradox. He uses the notion of mentally dependent features – i.e. higher-level features (they are such features as being money or consciousness). The notion of consciousness seems to be so ungrateful that it must be assumed – according to Seager at every level of explanation: “the conscious deployment of an explanatory system is one more high-level feature which itself is a mere epistemic potentiality unless it is taken up into a further consciously deployed explanatory system. This seems to be a vicious regress that leaves consciousness as nothing but merely potential, never 'actualized'. Each standpoint, as a high-level feature, requires a conscious appreciation of it to transcend mere potentiality, but if consciousness itself is a high-level feature then each consciousness requires a further consciousness to appreciate it” (Seager, 2012, p. 184).

4. Metamysterianism – why we cannot formulate the general problem of consciousness

If I am right, then the mysterian discussion revolving around a whole series of issues covered by the common slogan of the mystery of mind resembles a plot, which unfortunately Hans Ch. Andersen did not follow in the famous fairy tale about the emperor's new clothes. This plot is a dispute between those who praise the new outfit and those who believe that showing up in such a colorful garment is inappropriate for the head of state. Both parties can hardly see that the emperor is naked and their problem cannot be formulated.

At first sight, the claim that it is impossible to indicate a general limitative thesis must seem absurd. There is nothing as simple as articulating the problem. Here it is: the mystery of consciousness cannot be completely solved. In fact, the limitative issue can be indicated with the help of this and other expressions, but it will not be an unambiguous and general problem.

Why? It would be necessary to define the concept of complete solution and define when we can have a complete solution. When attempting to define it, we will fall into futile disputes.

The concept of complete solution (applied by Daniel Dennett in *Sweet Dreams*) has a different meaning for mysterians and critics of mysterianism. For antimysterians the complete solution is a situation in which consciousness and mind will be defined as one of empirical problems of science. It does not have to be completely explained and it does not require completed knowledge about it. It is enough when the method of dealing with a problem is completed and when we can say that we have a physical or biological framework of experimenting, describing and predicting the phenomena concerned with mind and consciousness. Complete solution of a problem means here complete method for solving a problem.

Mysterians seem to understand complete solution in a very different way. They require a single theory that would explain everything about mental phenomena. This one single theory would be a complete solution according to them. For one of them the complete solution means a well-formed method of explaining and for the other a final explanation.

This equivocation however, leads to the false dilemma. Which of the problems of natural science have been solved completely? Is it possible to solve problems completely outside deductive theories? For these difficulties, it is impossible to formulate the limitative problem in the theory of mind in an unambiguous and general way.

The problem can only be formulated using certain notions and a specific language. Therefore, for each formula that would potentially formulate a problem, it should be proven that its notions and language are translatable into other formulas or that there are other candidates for formulating the elementary limitative theorem.

Of course, these requirements must be laid down in advance, several regulatory definitions must be introduced, because psychological, mental, or intentional features create a class of dramatically inaccurate notions. Any such definition would become a separate problem, the basic one being the issue of arbitrariness in defining vague terms. The reduction of any term belonging to a natural language may prove impossible for quite trivial reasons – the terms of natural languages are vague and their reliable use usually requires clarifications and so-called regulatory definitions (Ajdukiewicz, 1975, p. 77).

This, in my opinion, applies to such terms as mind or consciousness, but I will use a simpler example. Let us consider two terms: maturity and old age. They are not foreign to such sciences as biology or medicine – they develop a whole range of theories related to the process of aging – from the concept of free radicals, through the hypothesis of a genetic or accidental aging process, to the indication of aging biomarkers such as the frailty index. Any explanation of the term old age will be arbitrary due to its vagueness – it will omit some features and some individuals that we would like to deem old. A common sign of aging is muscle and bone weakness which accompanies a certain age of an individual of a certain species. Thus, instead of one problem, we end up with two: the arbitrary determination of the age at which the weakness is to occur and the arbitrary determination of the term weakness itself. Therefore, perhaps it is the simplest feature of the natural language which eliminates the possibility of the general limitative thesis.

The history of struggling with the topic suggests that these difficulties are extremely hard to overcome. In addition to vagueness and arbitrary choice of notions, there is one more important reason why it is impossible to formulate the general problem. Questions may turn out to be false dilemmas. False dilemmas can show spectrum extremes, chosen elements of a numerous collection, which may not necessarily be opposites. Such questions as *Are mental features reduced to physical features?* remain unanswered for a simple reason – they require several clarifications. For example, mental features may be defined in various ways therefore the answers will be different depending on the initial definition. Thus, it may happen that we will have two good theories, one of which will answer similar questions in the affirmative, the other in the negative, due only to the difference in the initial regulatory definitions.

5. Conclusion: Why is there no limitative theorem in the philosophy of mind?

The problem of mysterianism is based on equivocation. On the one hand, possible explanations are understood as a complete solution to the problem. On the other, to reveal the mystery is to have one single and coherent theory that could explain everything about mind and consciousness. Antimysterians are satisfied with many competitive empirical explanations, while mysterians try to prove that a single coherent empirical explanation is not possible. Although both understand the complete solution in a very different way, both seem to assume the existence of a basic theory as it was in the classical ideal of science.

According to the classical ideal, science is a hierarchically structured system. There is a set of basic concepts, items or entities, and they are combined through primary relationships. In a history of philosophy from Plato to Kant metaphysics was acknowledged as a fundamental and basic theory. In the nineteenth century it was formal logic, and at the beginning of the twentieth century Edmund Husserl introduced the idea of phenomenology. In the middle of the past century, physics was claimed to be a fundamental science.

In the classical ideal of science this fundamental theory is necessary for any further explanations and all possible science is a kind of extension, specification or application of this basic theory. For antimysterians the basic theory is a galaxy of empirical methods with neuroscience grounded in physics at the centre – every explanation is good as far as it applies measurements, observation and some mathematics. In such a framework every phenomenon, including mind and consciousness, not only can but must be explained by the means of current science.

Mysterians claim that an empirical framework cannot be applied to mind and consciousness, but they still appeal to the classical ideal of science – it can be the general theory of evolution (as in Chomsky's argumentation), modular theory of mind (as in Mc Ginn's work) or methodology (as in transcendental argumentation). Both parties assume the existence of basic privileged theory.

But the existence of such a basic explanation is doubtful or better to say it is a very strong and radical assumption. There are for sure many explanatory concepts, empirical hypotheses, and speculations that explain mental phenomena. Examples may include the concept of cerebral cortex development under the Baldwin effect or statistical models of propagation of neural signals. There are attempts to explain how mind and consciousness work that give us an increasingly close look at the neural fundamentals of perception and cognition. However, there is still no one single theory. Therefore, the mysterian dispute is pointless. Mysterians seem to expect a spectacular final proof which ends the mind-related discussion. Whereas their opponents seem to claim that it is possible to build many models explaining how the mind (or selected cognitive functions) works without propounding metaphysical notions and the mere fact that we have such theories sufficiently proves the falsehood of mysterianism.

Both are mistaken. The general presupposition of the dispute is the existence of the elementary theory, and then the existence of the elementary problem which could only be developed in such a theory. However, the existence of such a theory is the legacy of the classical ideal of science. It is not clear what such a theory would be: universal mathematics, protological calculus, physics, quantum physics, or phenomenology?

Solvable or not, the global and general mystery of mind simply cannot be formulated, although it can be pointed out in natural language. This, in turn, lets us believe that it does not exist at all, that it is magic, lost in many stories' philosophical stone.

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