

Churchland on “The Ontological Problem”

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On the back cover of my now-tattered copy of Paul Churchland’s *Matter and Consciousness* is a remarkably prescient blurb from Ned Block: “My prediction is that the word about this book will spread, and it will soon be a standard textbook.” Now nearing the 30th anniversary of its first printing, the book continues to be a staple on the syllabi of introductory philosophy of mind classes. This third edition is thus most welcome – and one might even say overdue, as the book was last revised in 1988. (To put that in perspective: The current crop of first years arriving on campus this week were at that time still seven years away from being born. Or to put it in perspective another way: At that time, David Chalmers had not yet even begun his graduate studies in philosophy and cognitive science at Indiana University.) At any rate, though my own philosophical leanings are quite a long way away from Churchland’s, I have long admired his work – I have learned a lot from it, and it has consistently challenged my own thinking about a whole spectrum of issues in philosophy of mind. His clear writing style and incisive argumentation – which are on display throughout *Matter and Consciousness* – should serve as a model for us all. So it is a genuine pleasure to be taking part in this symposium celebrating the release of the book’s third edition.

My commentary here will concern itself wholly with the book’s second chapter – *The Ontological Problem (the Mind-Body Problem)* – which is the part of the book with which I am most familiar. I will focus on what’s changed in the chapter, and what hasn’t, and offer some reflections about Churchland’s treatment of the dualist view throughout his discussion.

Many of the changes in this chapter are relatively minor ones that simply reflect the passage of time. A reference to pocket calculators costing \$50 (\$50!) has been adjusted downward to \$15. There is now a parenthetical reference to Siri, “the newly popular ‘app’.” And so on. Among other relatively minor – but nonetheless welcome – changes, Churchland now explicitly credits philosophers for their arguments and thought experiments. So, for example, we’re no longer simply asked to imagine a future neuroscientist who comes to know everything there is to know about color without having experienced color or told just that “one writer” asks us to imagine a homunculi-headed robot; these arguments are now explicitly credited to Jackson and Block, respectively. The “Suggestions for Further Reading” at the end of each section of the chapter have also been lightly updated to include work published in the last 25 years such as Chalmers’ *The Conscious Mind* and some of Churchland’s own more recent articles on eliminative materialism. Here one might well have hoped for greater updating. Among other things, it’s worth registering that of the 35 articles and books listed as “Suggestions for Further Reading” throughout the chapter, the representation of women is limited to one article co-written by Paul and Patricia Churchland. (Just to give a few quick suggestions, there are important recent papers related to the mind-body problem by women such as Barbara Montero, Louise Antony, Brie Gertler, Martine Nida-Rümelin, and Katalin Balog, any of which could have been listed – and of course historically there is also the correspondence between Descartes and Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia.) Although I am here

focusing on Chapter Two, it's worth noting that the dearth of citations to female philosophers is not confined to this chapter. (It's perhaps also worth noting that one might reasonably have hoped for a revision of the book's opening sentence: "The curiosity of Man, and the cunning of his reason, have revealed much of what Nature held hidden.")

Some of the changes to Chapter Two are more significant. Churchland has expanded his treatment of the argument from evolutionary history against dualism (pp. 33-4) and also his treatment of the arguments in favor of eliminative materialism (pp. 79-82); the latter now includes discussion of non-human animals and pre-linguistic children. He has also added discussions of Nagel's bat argument and Chalmers' zombie argument in the section on arguments against the identity theory (pp. 52-55, pp. 58-61).

Unsurprisingly, much of the argumentation of the chapter is retained from the previous edition. (I was glad to see that one of my favorite parts of the book -- his masterful takedown of the argument from introspection when discussing objections to the identity theory -- remains unchanged.) Also unsurprisingly, Churchland's assessment of the relative strength of the variety of views on the mind-body problem has not changed. He still thinks that "We are creatures of matter." (p. 35) It remains his view that the arguments for eliminative materialism are "stronger than is widely supposed," (p. 79) and that "our collective conceptual destiny lies substantially toward the revolutionary end of the spectrum" from pure reduction to blanket elimination (p. 84). Along similar lines, he still believes that the prospects for the "nice one-to-one matchups" required by the identity theory seem dim. (p. 73)

In the remainder of this commentary, I would like to take issue with another one of Churchland's views that has not changed, namely, his assessment of the strength of the arguments in favor of dualism: "Upon critical evaluation, the arguments in support of dualism lose much of their force." (p. 28) The dualism in play in the early 21st century is quite different from both historical substance dualism and also from the dualism that was in play when Churchland was first writing this text in the 1980s (insofar as there was a form of dualism that was in play in the 1980s). To my mind, the revisions in this third edition do not take adequate notice of this fact, nor do they adequately grapple with the case that contemporary dualists make for their position. Let me give a few examples.

First, consider the emphasis that Churchland continues to put on the argument from religion. How accurate is it to say that religious belief is "a major source of dualistic convictions"? Though I don't dispute that this is true amongst laypersons, religious considerations have not of late played much of a role in the philosophical case for dualism. Certainly the most prominent arguments for dualism in play in the philosophical literature of the last 20 years are entirely independent of religious concerns. Churchland is fully cognizant of this point -- as he himself notes, "professional scientists and philosophers concerned with the nature of mind ... do their best to keep religious appeals out of the discussion entirely." (p. 24) But the treatment of the argument from religion alongside other philosophical arguments might well give the reader a misleading impression of its role in the contemporary debate.

Second, in assessing the explanatory resources of dualism, Churchland argues that “no detailed theory of mind-stuff has ever even been *formulated*.” (p. 31) In one sense, this is certainly true. But of course only the substance dualist owes us a theory of mind stuff, and most dualists today are property dualists. More importantly, I take this kind of remark to be a symptom of Churchland’s disregard of contemporary work on dualism (or, more generally, on nonphysicalist views). Consider how he elaborates the point:

Compared to the rich resources and the explanatory successes of current materialism, dualism is not so much a theory of mind as it is an empty space waiting for a genuine theory of mind to be put in it.

Perhaps he thinks that Chalmers’ naturalistic dualism does not work, but Chalmers has at least made a serious start of showing us what a nonreductive theory of consciousness looks like (see Chalmers 1996, esp. Ch. 6). Another detailed attempt is offered by Gregg Rosenberg 2004. As noted above, Churchland does now discuss Chalmers’ zombie argument in the context of considering arguments against the identity theory. But zombie-style arguments – as well as the Knowledge Argument -- might not just be seen as negative arguments against an identity theory but as positive arguments for dualism in their own right. By delaying treatment of them, Churchland might well have left the reader with another misleading impression, namely, that the dualist does not make a case for her position. In brief, it is important to recognize that recent work offers not just negative arguments against other views but also positive arguments for and development of a non-physicalist position.

Finally, consider the fact that one important area of discussion in recent philosophy of mind has been whether and how we can understand the divide between dualism and physicalism. (See, e.g., Montero 1999; 2001) Part of this concerns the question of how the notion of the ‘physical’ is to be understood. (See, e.g., Dowell 2006 for a survey of the issue.) Among some physicalists there has been a growing worry that we cannot explain consciousness in terms of physical *theory* at all. (See, e.g., Stoljar 2001) Relatedly, there has also of late been a resurgence of interest in Russellian monism. Though none of this work makes a case for dualism, per se, it is all important for the evaluation of the viability of physicalism. Yet none of it is mentioned in Chapter Two.

As I’ve suggested, then, there are various ways that this chapter could have better reflected the work that’s been done in philosophy of mind since the previous edition. But that said, I should also stress that none of the considerations that I’ve raised here are meant to take away from the fact that the revised edition of *Matter and Consciousness* is a welcome addition to the available offerings for introductory philosophy of mind texts. Block was right almost thirty years ago to predict that the earlier edition would become a standard offering, and I would not be surprised to see it still in wide use in another thirty years.

References

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