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Paul Churchland

For over three decades, Paul Churchland has been a provocative and controversial philosopher of mind and philosopher of science. He is most famous as an advocate of “eliminative materialism,” whereby he suggests that our commonsense understanding of our own minds is radically defective and that the science of brain demonstrates this (just as an understanding of physics reveals that our commonsense understanding of a flat and motionless earth is similarly false). This collection offers an introduction to Churchland’s work, as well as a critique of some of his most famous philosophical positions. Including contributions by both established and promising young philosophers, it is intended to complement the growing literature on Churchland, focusing on his contributions in isolation from those of his wife and philosophical partner, Patricia Churchland, as well as on his contributions to philosophy as distinguished from those to Cognitive Science.

Brian L. Keeley is an Associate Professor of Philosophy at Pitzer College in Claremont, California. His research has been supported by the National Science Foundation, the National Institute for Mental Health, the McDonnell Project for Philosophy and the Neurosciences, and the American Council of Learned Societies. He has published in the *Journal of Philosophy*, *Philosophical Psychology*, *Philosophy of Science*, *Biology and Philosophy*, and *Brain and Mind*.

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Preface

Philosophy is, among other conceptions no doubt, a human quest for comprehension, particularly *self*-comprehension. Who am I? How should I understand the world and myself? It is in this context that the philosophical importance of Paul M. Churchland (PMC) is most evident. For three decades and counting, PMC has encouraged us to conceive of ourselves from the “Neurocomputational Perspective” – not only as a minded creature, but also as minded due to our remarkable nervous system. Our brains, ourselves. This represents a unique and interesting way to approach this hoary philosophical enquiry.

However, his lasting intellectual contribution as we enter a new millennium is not so much some particular way of seeing ourselves, but rather his unwavering belief that we are capable of perceiving the world and ourselves in ways very different from the norm. PMC has made a career as a sort of Patron Saint of Radical Re-conceptualization. Again and again he argues that we do not *have* to see ourselves in ordinary and well-worn terms. Copernicus had us throw out our commonsense framework of a flat, motionless Earth, wandering planets, and a sphere of fixed stars and showed us how to see the night sky with new eyes. PMC urges us to consider the possibility that many more such conceptual revolutions await us, if only we would give them a fair hearing.

The invocation of Copernicus is fitting. PMC is a philosopher of mind whose intuitions and ideas are primarily informed by science and the philosophy of science. As he put it in the preface to his 1989 *A neurocomputational perspective: The nature of mind and the structure of science*, “The single most important development in the philosophy of mind during the past forty years has been the emerging influence of philosophy of science. . . . Since then it has hardly been possible to do any systematic work in the philosophy of mind, or even to understand the debates, without drawing heavily on themes, commitments, or antecedent expertise drawn from the philosophy of science” (xi). Whereas for many, philosophy of psychology (or philosophy of cognitive science) is primarily a branch of philosophy of mind, PMC

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sees it as a branch of philosophy of science; that is, as the exploration into the unique philosophical problems raised in the context of the scientific study of the mind/brain.

In the pages of this collection of papers, a number of Paul Churchland's contemporaries explore and assess his contributions to a variety of discussions within philosophy. The various authors will discuss his views both with an eye toward explicating his sometimes counterintuitive (and therefore often provocative) positions and another toward critiquing his ideas. The result should be a deeper appreciation of his work and his contribution to the present academic milieu.

In addition to a number of articles over the years, there have been a small number of book length works and collections on the philosophy of Paul Churchland (jointly with that of his wife, Patricia). Notable among these has been McCauley's 1996 collection, *The Churchlands and their critics* (McCauley 1996), which brings together a number of philosophers and scientists to comment critically on various aspects of their philosophy along with an informative response by the Churchlands. A very accessible, short-but-book-length exploration is Bill Hirstein's recent *On the Churchlands* (Hirstein 2004). While both of these are recommended to the reader interested in learning more about Churchland's philosophy, the present volume attempts to be different from, while at the same time being complementary to, this existing literature.

As with Hirstein's volume, the present collection attempts to be accessible to the nonexpert on the neurocomputational perspective. But unlike it, we do so from the multiple perspectives of the contributors and cover a wider array of topics. Where Hirstein's volume has the virtue of a single author's unified narrative, the present volume has the virtue of a variety of perspectives on the philosopher at hand.

The McCauley volume is also a collection of papers by various authors, but the goal there is explicitly critical; whereas in the present volume, the critical element is strongly leavened with exegetical ingredients. All the authors here spend a good amount of space spelling out Churchland's position before taking issue with it. Also, the explicit target here is to understand the work of Paul Churchland *as a philosopher*. Because Churchland works in the highly interdisciplinary field of Cognitive Science and spends much of his time engaging neuroscientists of various stripes, it is often useful to consider his contributions to the world as a cognitive scientist. While a laudable endeavor, that is not the approach taken here. Here we are attempting to come to grips with Churchland's contribution to the philosophical realm, although this should not be taken as devaluing his contributions elsewhere.

Finally, other secondary literature dealing with the work of Paul Churchland – including the two volumes discussed previously – often consider his work as of a piece with that of his wife, Patricia Churchland. That is not the approach here. Instead, we have set our sights on the work of Paul, although his wife’s work is discussed as is necessary to understand Paul’s philosophical insights. While their work is clearly interdependent at a very deep level – often Paul’s work is the *yin* to Pat’s *yang* – each is a clear and cogent thinker in his and her own right. To avoid having it seem that Pat acts as the mere handmaiden to Paul’s work (or vice versa), we primarily deal with Paul’s work here.¹

Brian L. Keeley, Pitzer College

Note

1. Although see Note 1 of Chapter one for more on the difficulties of separating the discussion of either philosopher from that of the other.

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Acknowledgments

Approximately a decade ago, I was sitting in Pat and Paul Churchland's hot tub – yes, the rumors are true: West Coast philosophy does occur under such conditions. I asked Paul to reveal to me the key to a successful career in philosophy. “Get other people to write about *you*,” is my memory of his response. Although this advice might seem as useful as “Buy low; sell high,” to a graduate student spending his days writing about this or that philosophical figure, it did convey an important message about how one needs to think about one's future scholarship. That out-of-the-classroom lesson explains in part why I took on the project of editing this book. It offers me the chance to pay back in a very appropriate way the debt for this and many other lessons Paul has taught me over the years.

Much of what I learned about Paul's work came not from him, but through my contact with Pat Churchland. She was one of the two chairs of my Ph.D. dissertation committee; and, as a member of her Experimental Philosophy Lab, and in countless classrooms, office hours, talk receptions, and so on, I have learned from Pat not only how to be a scholar and philosopher, but quite a lot about how her and Paul's views have developed over a long, fruitful career. I would not have had the confidence to undertake a volume like this if it were not for her influence.

I owe a big debt of gratitude to the contributors to this volume who hung in there, despite the seemingly slow process.

Bill Bechtel was, as always, an early and indefatigable supporter of my own work in general, and this volume in particular. Carrie Figdor read over portions of my contributions and offered valuable feedback.

I should acknowledge the financial support the *McDonnell Project in Philosophy and the Neurosciences*, as directed by Kathleen Akins, while I was working on this collection. The group of scholars she gathered together for that project resulted in the initial contributors to this volume.

Some of the early work of my Chapter was carried out while I was in residence as a Fellow of the *Center for Philosophy of Science* at the University of Pittsburgh. The members of the Center, along with the faculty, staff,

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and students of the History and Philosophy of Science Department there, deserve my thanks for both a pleasant as well as edifying four months in Fall 2003. I should thank Sandy Mitchell (not incidentally, the *other* of the two chairs of my Ph.D. dissertation) in particular.

Finally, my thanks goes to my friends and colleagues at Pitzer College for their continuing support of faculty scholarship, specifically in the form of several awards from the Research & Awards Committee and the granting of my sabbatical leave in Fall 2003.

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Contributors

JOSÉ LUIS BERMÚDEZ is Professor of Philosophy and Director of the Philosophy-Neuroscience-Psychology program at Washington University in St. Louis. He is the author of *The Paradox of Self-Consciousness*, *Thinking without Words*, and *Philosophy of Psychology: A Contemporary Introduction*.

GARRISON W. COTTRELL is Professor of Computer Science and Engineering at the University of California, San Diego. His main research interest is in building working models of cognitive processes using neural networks. His most recent work has been on understanding face and object processing. His work has been published in *Journal of Neuroscience*, *Nature*, *Philosophical Psychology*, *Psychological Science*, and the *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience*, among others.

DANIEL C. DENNETT is University Professor and Director of the Center for Cognitive Studies at Tufts University. His most recent awards are the Barwise Prize, presented by the American Philosophical Association's Committee on Philosophy and Computers, the Bertrand Russell Society Award for 2004, and Humanist of the Year, 2004, from the American Humanist Association. He is the author of many books, including most recently, *Freedom Evolves* and *Sweet Dreams: Philosophical Obstacles to a Science of Consciousness*.

C. A. HOOKER holds a Chair of Philosophy at the University of Newcastle, Australia. He is a Fellow of the Australian Academy of Humanities. He has published eighteen books and more than one hundred research papers, including *Reason, Regulation and Realism: Toward a Naturalistic, Regulatory Systems Theory of Reason*, and *A Realistic Theory of Science*.

BRIAN L. KEELEY is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Pitzer College in Claremont, CA. He is a member of the McDonnell Project in Philosophy and the Neurosciences and has recently been awarded a Charles A. Ryskamp Fellowship from the American Council of Learned Societies. He

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has published a number of papers, including two in *Journal of Philosophy*: “Making Sense of the Senses: Individuating Modalities in Humans and Other Animals” and “Of Conspiracy Theories.”

WILLIAM H. KRIEGER is a Lecturer in Philosophy at the California State Polytechnic University, Pomona. He is the author of a forthcoming book on philosophical and archaeological explanation: *Can There Be a Philosophy of Archaeology? Processual Archaeology and the Philosophy of Science*. He is also a field director at Tell el-Farah, South Archaeological Excavations.

AARRE LAAKSO is a Postdoctoral Fellow in Psychology at Indiana University, Bloomington. His research concerns links between psychology and philosophy, such as cognitive architectures and the nature of psychological explanation, spatial representation and reference, and language acquisition and nativism. His work has appeared in *Philosophical Psychology*, *Psychology*, *Metapsychology*, and *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*.

PETE MANDIK is Associate Professor of Philosophy and Coordinator of the Cognitive Science Laboratory at William Paterson University. He is a member of the McDonnell Project in Philosophy and the Neurosciences. His work has appeared in *Cognition and the Brain: The Philosophy and Neuroscience Movement* and he is an editor of *Philosophy and the Neurosciences: A Reader*.

JESSE J. PRINZ is Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He has research interests in the philosophy of cognitive science, philosophy of language, and moral psychology. His books include *Furnishing the Mind: Concepts and Their Perceptual Basis*, and *Gut Reactions: A Perceptual Theory of Emotion*.