

Title: “The impact of Neuroscience on Philosophy” Author: Patricia Smith Churchland

Possible Applications:

Philosophy of science, esp. relation between science and philosophy
Free will/determinism
Moral responsibility
Political/social philosophy and science

Readability: Easy

Complimentary Texts/Resources:

Roskies, Adina. "Neuroscientific challenges to free will and responsibility"
For a more “considered” consideration of the relation between neuroscience and philosophy on moral responsibility.

Dennett, Dan. *Elbow Room*.

Engages sympathetically with contemporary science on issues of freedom and responsibility but offers a more “philosophy-friendly” conclusion than Churchland does.

*** It would be helpful to do some traditional moral philosophy prior to reading this piece, especially on freedom and responsibility, to serve as a foil. Likewise, it would be interesting to have read some political philosophy in order to think about this piece in reference to Hobbes or Rousseau, (for instance). It would be interesting to read some feminist philosophy of science alongside this piece. Feminist critiques of science in general could be used to generate criticisms of Churchland’s view.

Thesis: Philosophy is little or nothing more than a stop-gap measure until experimental science can tell us how things really work. This transition is beginning in moral philosophy (and moral philosophers would do well to recognize this and start learning how to do science?).

Key Definitions: None needed.

Summary:

Churchland claims that experimental science has gradually (and rightfully and successfully) replaced philosophical investigations of the world, and suggests that the time has come for philosophy of mind and moral philosophy to “cede” to experimental science. She claims that conceptual analysis has been undermined by “a torrent of neuro-psychological results” that contradict folk psychology (i.e. intuition). Thus, self-respecting philosophers of mind have begun to engage with experimental science. Moral philosophers have not yet realized that their field is going in the same direction, and that their stories are about to be superseded by a “naturalistic framework for looking at human morality and decision making” (409). She gives some examples from animal studies bearing on social behaviour and organization like monogamy, trust and cooperation, social attachment, group cooperation or amalgamation. One central point is that moral rules play only a partial role, if at all, in the “brain’s decision” when faced with “constraint-satisfaction problems” (410).

Class Activities:

I think this piece provides a provocative argument that could be productively debated, especially if the class can draw on other moral or political philosophy or philosophy of science.

Group discussion questions:

What does moral philosophy aim to do? can it accomplish this on its own terms?

Can/could experimental science accomplish all the aims that moral philosophy has? What reasons might we have to reject an entirely naturalistic moral account?

Consider examples of moral problems and use as test cases. Ex. moral responsibility for the mentally ill. Is moral responsibility (whether one has it or not) something that experimental science can tell us? Or (borrowing from Dennett) is it a line we need to draw somewhat arbitrarily?

What is the role of philosophy of science in Churchland's view? Do we agree with that? Would philosophers of science feel the same? (I doubt many feminist philosophers of science would).