**The Conscious Problem**

The idea of consciousness is both familiar yet unfamiliar; it is something that most individuals experience but it is also an area that philosophers and scientists continue to research and study. In understanding the conception of consciousness, one has to first start with our own introspection before moving into the physical sciences such as neurology. In the article, “The Hornswoggle Problem,” Patricia Churchland argues against David Chalmers’ conclusion about the physical sciences and the extent of using the physical to explain consciousness. One of Chalmers’ main arguments is that there are easy and hard problems. He states that physicalism, neuroscience, and hard sciences, can only solve the easy problems. The hard problems are the ones that question “how physical processes in the brain give rise to subjective experience” (16). In this paper, I will examine Chalmers’ argument of the extent of utilizing physical sciences as a method to explain consciousness and argue that Churchland has provided reasonable doubt on Chalmers’ distinction of hard and easy problems of consciousness.

Churchland first argues against Chalmers’ by attacking his distinction between the easy and hard problems. Churchland disagrees with Chalmers’s argument to the extent that physical science approaches would never explain consciousness. As a result, whatever is left unanswered by a physical science approach is considered a ‘hard problem’ or a leftover hypothesis. Churchland would argue that this implies that even in the distinct future, when technology advances significantly, the ‘hard-problems’ would still remain unresolved and only thought-experiments could potentially answer those problems. It seems that she is arguing that Chalmers’ conclusion is depending heavily on the current relativity limitation of physical science. Chalmers’ conclusion relies heavily on his assumptions that physical science will not progress to a point where only physical science can answer the consciousness problem, and that the physical science is only limited to answering the easy questions. If we question his skepticism, then we are also wary of his entire conclusion on the easy and hard problems of consciousness and how we go about solving these problems. This casts doubts on how Chalmers is distinguishing between easy and hard problems.

Chalmers’ classifies easy problems as problems that are solved from the current understanding of the sciences; while, the hard problems are what appears to be harder and unsolvable because of current limitations to physical sciences. This suggests that there is no differences between the “easy” or the “hard” problems but the extent to the current ability to provide a scientific answer. If we are skeptical of the distinction of easy and hard questions, then shouldn’t we also be wary of Chalmers’ Left-Out Hypothesis. His hypothesis focuses on the fact that despite answering all the easy questions, the hard problems would not be understood. Where is the evidence for this hypothesis, especially, if we are never certain of the capacities of physical sciences? If it were accepted that physical sciences is continuously evolving and improving, the limitation of physical sciences would have to be constantly reexamined and amended. Churchland argues that “the nature of consciousness is an empirical, not a problem that can [be] untangled by semantic gerrymandering,” meaning physical methods can provide the facts to understanding of consciousness while other methods like thought-experiments are thought manipulations (29).

Churchland strongly opposes Chalmers’ claims; however, Chalmers does not disagree that the physical sciences cannot explain consciousness. In fact, Chalmers believes that physical sciences can answer the easy problems of consciousness such as perceptual information. However, our concept of physical sciences is limited to only “structure and function,” whereas the hard problems are beyond the domain of structure and function. Opposed to Churchland, Chalmers states the limitation of the physical sciences arises when it has to explain the subjectivity versus objectivity of consciousness (15). To illustrate his claim, Chalmers uses the famous Mary thought-experiment, where Mary knows all physical process (structure and function) to defend Chalmers’ idea that, “there are facts about conscious experience that cannot be deduced from physical facts about the functioning of the brain” (17). In other words, he believes that physical events are controlled by physically governed laws, whereas, hard questions are governed by psychophysical laws. Therefore, in Mary’s thought-experiment, Mary is a scientist that understands everything physically about color like wavelength, perception, and etc., but she is unable to understand the experience of color. The experience of color is something that cannot be deduced from “physical facts,” so looking at the picture of a wavelength in red does not elicit the feelings or experience of seeing red.

In general, Chalmers’ skepticism of physical sciences and the use of thought-experiments are convincing as a whole. His thought-experiment with Mary definitely draws some speculations that there is something like color experiences that cannot be understand by the physical sciences since the color experiences goes beyond the structure and function. Churchland does not necessary have the best claim, but Chalmers’ is too reliant on a premise which Churchland cast doubts on. Chalmers’ claim relies on the limitation of science and proposes thought-experiments to generate outcomes for scenarios for Mary and Zombies which eliminates the need for scientific approaches. This approach allows for philosophers to gain insight by conceiving scenarios that would be currently hard to find or do, and this allows them to understand more of consciousness through introspection and reasoning. However, in this case, Churchland’s criticisms are more convincing as it introduces some skepticism on Chalmers’ assumption of the physical sciences, which casts a shadow of doubt on Chalmers’ conclusion.

My biggest takeaway from Churchland’s argument is that in the position of current ignorance in regards to scientific methods, we cannot make premature boundaries on what cannot be solved. After Churchland’s criticism, Chalmers’ skepticism towards scientific methods is assumingly unwarranted. Furthermore, with recent discoveries, physical sciences are looking promising. Many current psychology researches are examining mental functions that are close to the consciousness like memory, attention, and conscious related problems like blind sight and amnesia through the use of physical methods. As a result, I find Chalmers’ definition with easy and hard problems also lacking. If I am to accept the possibility that science can eventually explain consciousness, then there is no such thing as an easy or a hard problem. Eventually, the problem would only be able to solve through scientific methods and it is not possible to label a problem as easy or hard.

The basic disagreement between Chalmers and Churchland stems from the basic idea of our current understanding of both physical sciences and conscious and whether physical science methods are sufficient in providing an explanation for consciousness. Chalmers believes that physical sciences can only answer the easy consciousness problems such as structure and functions, and thought-experiments are necessary in order to understand the hard consciousness problems. Churchland contends Chalmers’s conclusion by claiming that physical science is always developing and we cannot make pronouncements on whether physical science can solve the “hard problem” of consciousness. In either regard, both philosophers assert claims that raise awareness to the intricate nature of discussing the study of the consciousness.