

Review of Mark Rowlands' *The Nature of Consciousness*

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In *The Nature of Consciousness*, Mark Rowlands argues that phenomenal properties, which constitute what it is like to have a conscious experience, are "transcendental": that they are properties by which we are conscious of the non-phenomenal world, but they are not objects of conscious awareness or even linguistic reference. He uses that conclusion to support a mysterian position on the explanatory-gap problem: that it is impossible to understand how phenomenal consciousness arises from physical systems such as the brain.

Rowlands distinguishes between *objectualist* and *actualist* accounts, or "interpretations", of phenomenal properties. He writes, "The objectualist interpretation treats the what it is like of conscious experience as an object of consciousness..." (p. 137). On the actualist interpretation, which Rowlands favors, "what it is like is not an object of consciousness but, rather, a feature or complex of features that exist in the directing of consciousness towards a quite distinct object" (p. 138). Take, for example, the experience of seeing a red tomato. On the objectualist interpretation, the perceiver is directly acquainted with the phenomenal properties of her experience. On the actualist interpretation, she is aware of the tomato, but not the phenomenal properties of her experience. Those are properties *with* which she is aware of tomato; they are not items *upon* which her conscious experience is, or can be, directed.

Rowlands' actualism has some affinity with representationism, versions of which have been advocated by Fred Dretske (1995), Michael Tye (2000), and others. He characterizes representationism as the view that an experience's phenomenal character reduces to its representational content. Actualism and representationism agree on what he calls *Brentano's thesis*: all conscious states are representational states. But the views are not equivalent. The actualist need not hold that phenomenal properties reduce to representational properties; and indeed Rowlands rejects that claim. Likewise, the representationist need not deny that phenomenal properties can be among the objects of conscious acquaintance. At one point (pp. 214-15) Rowlands argues that the representationist *cannot* deny that proposition (though on page 161 he suggests otherwise). But that seems incorrect. Granted, some representationists claim that we are directly acquainted with the representational content of our experiences. But there is no apparent reason why representationists must so claim.

In one of his main arguments for actualism, Rowlands assumes that materialism is true. Yet he believes that it is impossible to explain how phenomenal consciousness is produced by what is not conscious. He arrives at that conclusion

by combining actualism with the view (for which he provides scant support) that possessing a reductive explanation would require adopting an objectualist conception of consciousness – and with the tacit assumption that only a reductive explanation could be adequate (thus excluding the possibility of an adequate non-reductive explanation, on which consciousness is treated as a basic component of reality; see Chalmers 1996, Part III). The resulting mysterianism is stronger than Colin McGinn's (1991) well-known version. For McGinn, understanding how the brain generates phenomenal consciousness probably lies beyond the scope of our cognitive capacities, but in principle the phenomenon can be understood. For Rowlands, however, "not even God can understand how the what it is like of conscious experience is produced by the brain..." (p. 221).

Rowlands develops his views on actualism and its consequences in the second half of the book. In the first half, he criticizes competing approaches. He spends two chapters attacking higher-order-representation theories, including both Armstrong-style higher-order-perception theories and the higher-order-thought theories of Rosenthal and others. Here he raises original objections and elaborates on known objections. In two other chapters, he criticizes two well-known attempts to show that consciousness cannot be reductively explained: McGinn's and David Chalmers'.

According to McGinn, devising an adequate explanation of how the brain generates phenomenal consciousness would require identifying not just correlations but an underlying mechanism. Rowlands rejects that requirement on the grounds that, "Mechanisms are not opposed to correlations... Any mechanism is, in all essentials, constituted by a series of correlations that are structured so as to make their explanandum more intelligible than it otherwise would have been" (p. 68). The idea that correlations alone might bridge the explanatory gap runs contrary to the assumptions of many, if not most, participants in the debate. His discussion provides a useful challenge to received wisdom.

Rowlands saves his harshest words for Chalmers' (1996) discussion of supervenience. For Chalmers, in cases of natural (as opposed to logical) supervenience the natural laws partly determine the distribution of the supervenient facts. Rowlands rejects that idea as "incoherent" (pp. 29-35) because it contradicts an idea that he regards as essential to the concept of supervenience: that the subvenient facts *alone* determine the distribution of the supervenient facts. But the concept of supervenience is not generally regarded as being so rigid. Even if it were, the most that would follow is that Chalmers should avoid using the word "supervenience" in explicating his notion.

Rowlands also criticizes Chalmers' views on logical supervenience. Chalmers argues that, since (at the global level) the macroscopic truths supervene logically on the microphysical truths, it follows (given certain qualifications) that there is an *a priori* entailment from the microphysical truths to the macroscopic truths. Thus, Laplace's demon – which knows all the microphysical truths, has unlimited logical acumen, and possesses the relevant biological concepts – could “read off” the non-basic biological facts from the basic physical facts. Chalmers' views do raise substantive issues, which have been recently debated in the *Philosophical Review* (Block and Stalnaker 1999, Chalmers and Jackson 2001). But Rowlands' objections are unconvincing. For example, he complains that in order to possess the biological concept of giraffehood, Laplace's demon would have to be given exactly the sort of biological information that it was supposed to be able to infer, such as information about the giraffe's genetic structure or interbreeding capacities (p. 46). But that is much too quick. Laplace's demon needs enough information about giraffehood to enable it to identify the concept's extension, by using its comprehensive microphysical knowledge. It is far from clear that such information must include empirical information of the sort Rowlands mentions, as opposed to information about the giraffe's superficial characteristics (i.e., information associated with what Chalmers calls primary intensions).

*The Nature of Consciousness* is a good book. It makes a reasonably strong case for an unpopular view with potentially far-reaching consequences. It is elegantly written, clearly organized, provocative, and, for the most part, well argued.

## References

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