


Guest of the issue





Mark Rowlands

AVANT editors and co-workers had a chance to meet Mark Rowlands in Toruń, Poland a year ago in 2011. He gave two talks at *Philosophers' Rally*, the first one on "Intentionality and the Extended Mind" (involving the discussion of his latest book *The New Science of The Mind: From Extended Mind to Embodied Phenomenology*, 2010) and the second – less formal, on his *The Philosopher and the Wolf* (2008) memoirs.

Professor Rowlands is certainly a man of many (philosophical) interests. His works may be divided into three categories: the philosophy of the mind and cognitive science (starting from *Supervenience and Materialism* (1995) and *The Nature Of Consciousness* (2001), followed by the 2006 and 2010 books already mentioned), ethics, the moral status of non-human animals and problems of natural environment (*Animal Rights* (1998), *The Environmental Crisis* (2000) and *Animals Like Us* (2002)), and broadly construed cultural criticism and philosophy 101-style books (*The Philosopher at the End of the Universe* (2003), *Everything I Know I Learned from TV* (2005) and *Fame* (2008)). Rowland's article *Representing without Representations* published in this issue is related to his earlier book, *Body Language* (2006).

Mark Rowlands is currently the Professor of Philosophy at the University of Miami. He began his academic career with an undergraduate degree in engineering at the University of Manchester and then switched to philosophy. He was awarded his PhD in philosophy at the University of Oxford. Apart from his official publications, he runs his own blog, found at rowlands.philospot.com and remains active on academia.edu, where his recent papers can be found (see: miami.academia.edu/MarkRowlands). Mark Rowlands's website: www.markrowlandsauthor.com/ and blog: <http://rowlands.philospot.com/>

Jakub R. Matyja

Picture source: Mark Rowlands's archives.

Of wolves and Philosophers

Interview with Mark Rowlands

Tadeusz Ciecierski

If wolves were capable of philosophizing what would be their favorite philosophical method and/or theory?

I'm afraid I have no idea. I think the question has moved so far from the actual world that I have no idea of what an answer would even look like.

Relatively recently your book *The Philosopher and the Wolf* was translated into Polish. It has received very good reviews. However, when reading the book, one cannot get rid of the impression that the picture of human nature sketched in it is – euphemistically speaking – not very positive. Do you really think that there are so few truly admirable things about human nature?

It's nice to hear the reviews were good.

Yes, I think it's fair to say that I didn't dwell for very long on the human virtues. But, of course, there is no shortage of humans who are willing to extol the virtues of human beings. Much of the history of human thought has concerned itself with these things. There are comparatively few who have been willing to question these virtues, or point out our fairly obvious flaws, in any sustained or systematic way. So, the book was, in part, an attempt to redress the balance.

But, if you read between the lines of the book, it actually presupposes, rather than denies, that humans have many admirable qualities. In fact, I argued that some of our most impressive qualities – in particular, our intelligence and our moral sense – can evolve out of some of our worst qualities. I think Nietzsche once claimed that what is best about us comes from what is worst. *The Philosopher and the Wolf* carries on this theme. That is, the project was not so much to deny the admirable qualities of humans, but to dig down into the roots of those qualities and see what we find.

Various considerations included in the book are described by you as attempts of calling into question parts of „the mythology of the ape” - consisting of, among other things, a certain idea of happiness. Do you have any positive ethical or anthropological proposal hidden behind the revaluation of the myth in question?

The philosophical focus of the book was provided by the stories we tell to distinguish ourselves from, and elevate ourselves above, other animals. I wasn't really concerned with the truth or falsity of these stories, but with what our acceptance of them revealed about us. There is, as far as I am aware, no hidden positive ethical or anthropological proposal.

If you were asked to advertise your book to a possible reader – how would you do that?

When I was twenty-seven, I did something really rather stupid. Actually, I almost certainly did many stupid things that year – I was, after all, twenty-seven – but this is the only one I remember because it went on to indelibly shape the future course of my life. When I first met Brenin, I was a young assistant professor of philosophy at the University of Alabama, and he was six-week old, a cuddly little teddy bear of a cub. He was sold to me as a wolf, but I all likelihood he was a wolf-dog mix. Whatever he was, he grew up, and with this came various, let us call them, *idiosyncrasies*. If I left him unattended for more than a few minutes, he would destroy anything he could lay his jaws on – which, given that he grew to be thirty-five inches at the withers, included pretty much everything that wasn't screwed to the ceiling. I don't know if he was easily bored, had separation anxiety, or claustrophobia, or some combination of all of these things. But the result was that Brenin had to go everywhere I did. Any socializing I did – bars, parties, and so on – Brenin had to come too. If I went on a date, he would play the lupine gooseberry. I took him to lectures with me at the University. He would lie down and sleep in the corner of the lecture room: most of the time anyway – when he didn't things would get interesting. I mean, you can probably imagine the circumstances that caused me to append this little cautionary note to my syllabus:

NOTE: Please do not pay any attention to the wolf. He will not hurt you. However, if you do have any food in your bags, please ensure that those bags are securely fastened shut.

As a result of having to share a life with a rootless and restless philosopher, Brenin became not only a highly educated wolf – the recipient of more free university education than any wolf that ever lived – but also, I suppose, a rather cosmopolitan wolf, moving with me from Alabama to Ireland, on to Wales, England, and finally to France.

The Philosopher and the Wolf is the story of those years we spent together. But it is also a philosophical examination of the ways in which we differentiate ourselves from other animals – the stories we tell to convince ourselves of our superiority. Each story, I argued, has a dark side – each story casts a shadow. And in each case, what is most revealing is not the story itself, but the fact that we believe it and think it important.

I focused on three common stories. The first is that we are better other animals because we are more intelligent. The second is that we are better because we have morality – we can understand right and wrong – and they do not. The third is that we are superior because we, and we alone, understand that we are going to die. Intelligence, morality and our sense of our own mortality were the three major themes of the book. I am far from convinced that any of these stories can establish or underwrite a critical gulf between us and other animals. But, in *The Philosopher and the Wolf*, I was more interested in what each story reveals about us. That is, I was interested in what our valuing of these things says about us. I argued that when we dig down far enough into the roots of each of these things, we find features of ourselves that are deeply unflattering. At the roots of our intelligence we find manipulation and machination. In the roots of our morality we find power and lies. And our sense of our mortality renders us fractured creatures, unable to understand ourselves in any satisfactory way.

What can a philosopher learn from a wolf?

Well, it is not as if a wolf can teach a philosopher anything directly. But, indirectly, as a result of living with Brenin, my life took on a certain shape, and as a result of this shape, my thought traveled down certain paths that, I suspect, it otherwise would not have traveled. That is the only sense in which I “learned” anything from Brenin.

Do you believe that the ethics of respect for all sentient creatures can gain universal (or at least common) acceptance in the world we live in?

My heart says yes, but my head tells me this is unlikely – certainly not in my lifetime.

Quite recently we had here in Poland a visit of Peter Singer who, like you, is perceived as an advocate of animal rights (or, more adequately: the rights of sentient creatures). Do you share his ethical views as well as their utilitarian foundations?

Singer and I converge on many of our views on animals. I agree that the way humans currently treat animals (in the form of factory farming, and so on) is unconscionable. More generally, we both agree that animals are morally considerable: they have interests that should, morally speaking, be taken into account when decisions are made that impact on them. However, Singer is a utilitarian. I am not. So, we disagree with respect to theory.

Others often think that I am a contractarian (of a neo-Rawlsian sort). This is because I have developed a contractarian case for the moral status of animals). But I am, in reality, more eclectic. I find much that is good not only in contractarianism, but also virtue ethics and the capabilities approach. I think all these theories have true things to say about different aspects of morality.

In *The Philosopher and the Wolf* you sketch the contrast between the ape's and the wolf's world perspectives – and what about Mark Rowlands' world perspective?

I'm not sure my beliefs fall together in a sufficiently unified way for them to coalesce into a world perspective. Let's see if I can put it all together ...

With regard to the mind, I believe, and have defended, the Sartrean thesis that consciousness has no content. There is no such thing as mental content. Therefore, given one or two more plausible premises, I am committed to the Wittgensteinian claim that the word is a totality of content (i.e. facts) not things (if we don't think mental content, we must think worldly content).

For this reason, I am committed to thinking of intentional directedness towards the world as a form of revealing activity, broadly understood. I am the subject of intentional states to the extent that I entertain worldly content in a certain way (credulously, desirously, emotively, and so on). And my endorsement of embodied and extended cognition follows directly from this – revealing activity often straddles neural, body and environmental processes. (All this is discussed at much greater length in my recent book, *The New Science of the Mind: From Extended Mind to Embodied Phenomenology* (MIT Press, 2010).

My view that consciousness is, in the above sense, empty leads me to at least look favorably on no-self views of the sort associated with Buddhism and Derek Parfit – and therefore, also the ethical consequences of these views (no absolute distinction between one's own suffering and that of others, etc). Although this is the topic of future work - I haven't thought enough about it to have the right to an opinion yet!

So, who knows? Perhaps it is all starting to hang together? Perhaps I am in the process of developing a world perspective. Perhaps I'm not. If I am, I haven't got there yet.

Today, as in the past, it is still expected that philosophers be persons capable of addressing the most fundamental questions. On the other hand most professional philosophers stand aloof from such questions while paying a lot of attention to small philosophical puzzles. What do you think about this situation?

I suppose I find it in some ways regrettable. Part of the reason I have, in recent years, woven together philosophy with autobiography is as an attempt to reconnect philosophy with life and the art of living. So, *The Philosopher and the Wolf* is a book about life – in particular, it's about growing up. I have a book coming out next year called *Running with the Pack* – and that's about growing old. (I suppose there's a natural trilogy to be written here, but I hope I don't have to write the third part for a while yet).

For a while, philosophers abandoned these sorts of themes. Maybe they still have – I don't know. Perhaps it was part of a perceived process of professionalization. As Julian Barnes once remarked, we are all amateurs when it comes to our own lives, and this sort of personal examination was excised in the (poorly conceived) aim of becoming a professional discipline (which basically amounted to dealing with issues and questions that only someone with an extended formal training in philosophy could understand). I think (I may be wrong) that things are changing, and this can only be a good thing. Philosophy, in the final analysis, is the art of thinking clearly. And even if we are all amateurs when it comes to our own lives, this does not preclude thinking clearly about those lives and what is important in them.

Your book „Philosopher at the End of The Universe” is the introduction, based on science fiction films, to philosophical theories, problems and ideas. Is that your favourite cinema genre?

I'm not sure I have a favorite cinema genre any more – although when I wrote *The Philosopher at the End of the Universe* sci-fi was probably what I liked most. Science fiction is an ideal medium for talking about philosophy. What unites the two is the thought experiment. It is characteristic of philosophy to use thought experiments, and many science fiction stories/films are simply large scale, and exceptionally vivid, thought experiments.

Do you consider yourself more of a philosopher who occasionally practices literature or a novelist who occasionally practices philosophy?

It depends on what earns me the most money in any give year. I'm joking. Of course. Most of my writing has been solidly in philosophy. That is, of the 15 books I have written (two are in press and will be out late this year/early next), 10 have been straightforward philosophy research monographs. Two have been autobio-

ographies/memoirs with strong philosophical content. The other three were popular books in philosophy. Based on this evidence, I have to conclude that I am a philosopher.

It is expected that a philosopher ought to be an acute and keen observer of the surrounding reality. What is your opinion on all the recent stir and commotion caused by the slogan of "crisis"? Do you think that it indicates the truly alarming nature of certain truly alarming events, or rather that it indicates the "spiritual" condition of the typical representatives of Western civilization?

The term "crisis" is raised in so many different contexts these days – economic, environmental, spiritual, moral, and so on – that it has become a devalued currency. If we switch from talk of crisis to talk of the major problems that are going to face humans and their planet in the next century, then I am pretty sure it is the environmental problems that are going to drive the others. At the root of it all, of course, is the unsustainable size of the human population.

What is the status of philosophy in the age of galloping empirical sciences? Are philosophers still needed today?

Is there any major philosophical problem that has been solved by the empirical sciences? What is the nature of right and wrong? What is justice? What is knowledge? What are objects? What are events? What is intentionality? What is meaning? Even problems that seem amenable to empirical solution – the nature of consciousness provides an obvious example – seem to resist this sort of solution. Thus, while fMRI studies can show us the correlates of conscious states, they fall short of explaining, exactly, how these states are produced by the brain activity. And even if this is disputed, this dispute will rest on further philosophical questions such as, what is an explanation? What constitutes an adequate explanation of an event?

Of course, it goes without saying that familiarity with empirical studies is helpful. But philosophical problems can't in general be solved by these alone because they involve, in part, the question of how these results are to be interpreted. And that means, in effect, working out how these results are to be conceptually organized or structured.

What is your opinion concerning the condition of contemporary philosophy?

There is interesting stuff being done. However, the older I get, the more insular, needlessly technical, and uninteresting much of it seems. This is worrying, because this happens to a lot of philosophers as they get older, and it may be a symptom of my decline rather than the decline of philosophy. Either much of philosophy is getting worse, or I am (or, logically, both!).

Contemporary philosophy – as divided into the camps of so-called analytic and so-called continental philosophy – strongly polarizes the opinions of persons with philosophical background or philosophical interests. The reader of your books may have an impression that you are intentionally attempting to break out of this division: your work contains many elements characteristic of the analytic tradition as well as many continental inspirations (you mention, among others, Heidegger, Camus and Nietzsche in this context). How would you place your philosophical investigations on the contemporary philosophical map?

Yes, I am trying to break out of – or, perhaps, simply take no notice of – this division. I think the idea that one half of the philosophical world can afford to ignore what the other half is doing is very silly. My philosophical training was solidly within the so-called analytical tradition. And I suppose there is a clear sense in which I write in an analytic way (at least in my works of professional philosophy). However, some of the biggest influences on me have been from within the so-called continental tradition – in particular, the phenomenological tradition has played a big role in shaping my thought. Some of the truly great ideas of twentieth century philosophy came from this tradition. I work within that tradition, and with those ideas, but do so in, I suppose, an analytic way.

Of course, these terms ‘continental’, ‘analytic’ don’t really make much sense. The idea that Husserl, for example, is not an analytic thinker is absurd. And in *Being and Time*, to take just one more example, we find some pretty spectacular feats of analysis.

It is time for some trade questions. As you frankly admit, in the philosophy of the mind you are one of the proponents of the idea of embodied and environmental cognition (*The Body in Mind*, 1999) . Do you still think that the idea in questions gives us the best tools to account for phenomena such as intentionality, consciousness, learning and – generally speaking – cognition?

Yes. This is a good example of the sort of combination of analytic and continental I mentioned in my answer to the previous question. My version of embodied/extended cognition follows directly from my analysis of intentionality. But this is an analysis that fits far more comfortably with certain themes in the phenomenological tradition, in particular, the noetic/noematic framework developed by Husserl. Roughly, I argue that cognition is embodied and extended because intentionality is a form of revealing activity – activity whereby the world is revealed to a subject as falling under a given mode of presentation – and revealing activity often straddles processes occurring in the brain, in the world, and in the wider environment.

Your adventure with philosophy was preceded – just like in the case of Wittgenstein – by polytechnic studies. Did this fact leave a mark on your philosophical investigations?

Yes, I also read engineering and like Wittgenstein, it was at Manchester University. Perhaps I should have gone to Cambridge afterwards, instead of Oxford. What effect this had on my subsequent philosophical choices, I suppose I can never really know because I have no point of comparison. That is, I have no idea what my investigations would have been like if my past had been different. On the face of it, however, it strikes me as implausible that an unsuccessful foray into engineering should have left that much of a mark on my philosophical thinking.

As many contemporary philosophers you are considered a „naturalist”. How do you understand „naturalism”? What are your reasons for favouring the naturalistic approach?

I'm not a naturalist. This is not because I am opposed to naturalism, but because I don't think it is useful to conceptualize things in this way. First, naturalism has so many different meanings as to effectively render it an ill-defined concept. Second, it is not clear what it is being opposed to. How many would like to describe themselves as “supernaturalist”? There may be a few, but not many.

Intentionality (capability to represent) or consciousness? Which phenomenon is, in your opinion, more complex and fascinating?

I do not think you can separate the two. At its core, I think intentionality should be understood as disclosing or revealing activity. Consciousness is a type of disclosure. So, there is no question of one being the more complex or fascinating.

Two types of disclosing or revealing activity: causal and constitutive. Sub-personal cognitive processes disclose the world *causally* in the sense that they provide a physically sufficient condition for the world to be revealed in a given way to a subject. For example, if Marr's theory of vision were true, then certain processes that begin with the retinal image and conclude with a 3D object representation would be physically sufficient for the world appear a certain way to a subject. These processes would not be logically sufficient. The subject might be a zombie, and so on. But the processes do form a physically sufficient condition. Conscious experiences, on the other hand, disclose the world *constitutively* in the sense that they provide a logically sufficient condition for the world to be revealed in a given way. Thus, if an experience with a certain phenomenal character – a certain what it is likeness – occurs, then that is logically sufficient for a certain portion of the world to be revealed in a given way (even if the experience is illusory or hallucinatory). Consciousness is, fundamentally, constitutive disclosure of the world, and as such is a species of intentionality.

In your book *The Nature of Consciousness* (2001) you advocate the view that the essence of consciousness lies in the fact that it can be both the act and the object of experience. How would you explain this idea to persons unfamiliar with the modern philosophical jargon?

I can think. I can also think about my thinking. That is, I might think that my thought is troubling, or perplexing, or liberating. So, my thought can be an object of my consciousness – in this case, an act of thinking. But at the same time, I am thinking about my thought. So, as well as being an object I am aware of, my consciousness is also an act of awareness – an act of being aware of my thought.

As I mentioned in my answer to the previous question, I actually think the essence of consciousness is intentionality. And we will not understand intentionality by looking at objects of awareness. Intentionality is the directing of consciousness towards objects. It is not that upon which consciousness is directed – even when these items are mental ones. To understand intentionality, we need to understand consciousness as act. As act, consciousness is the constitutive disclosure of the world. It is a type of revealing activity.

Will machines think?

Yes.

And the last question: how do you recall your recent short visit to Poland?

I had a lovely time. Torun is a beautiful city. I appreciate the hospitality of the organizers of the Philosopher's Rally, and also the great job they did in whisking me up to Kadyny in time for my wife's brother's wedding. I hope to return before too long.