Book Review

Neither Brain nor Ghost: A Non-dualist Alternative to the Mind-Brain Identity Theory

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Rockwell argues in this broad-ranging text that mind ought not to be identified with the brain. More generally, Rockwell argues for the rejection of “Cartesian materialism,” his term for any attempt to identify mind with any particular part of the “brain-body-world nexus.” It is the partitioning of that nexus that is problematic. Rockwell argues first that, given the inseparability of brain and body processes, mind is not confined to “neurons in the skull” but is pervasively present throughout the body; he then argues that mind cannot be bounded by the skin, either, given the organically necessary interactivity of “inner” processes with “outer.” Mind is thus only to be identified with the entire brain-body-world nexus.

One problem with the thesis is that the key concept, mind, remains unexplained. Given this, it is impossible to give an unqualified yea or nay to Rockwell’s thesis. It is plausible, indeed, necessarily true, that when “mind” is understood in precisely the way required by his thesis, it is exactly as Rockwell describes it to be. A different conceptualization of mind—say, as a certain set of capabilities of an organism—would lead to a different conclusion, and we are given no compelling and independent reasons for taking the concept of mind in Rockwell’s chosen holistic sense.

Rockwell rejects pan-psychism; it is only that portion of nature in close interaction with the organism, its “world,” that participates in constituting its mind. However, since any narrowly described portion of nature is itself in intimate interaction with larger portions, it would seem by parity of reasoning that we can-
not unarbitrarily confine an organism’s mind at all. If this admittedly unpalatable consequence is to be avoided, limits to “mind” there must be. The fundamental question is conceptual—Which delimitations should we decide to place on the use of the term “mind”?—rather than, as would appear from Rockwell’s treatment, empirical—What does contemporary science tell us about the nature and location of mind? But Rockwell construes the problem as empirical, in his calls for experiments “that are expressly designed to falsify the claim that the mind is the brain,” without which “we cannot say that this claim has been scientifically established” (18) and his claim that “a non-cranial mind is a genuine empirical possibility” (19).

Yet even fundamental conceptual decisions should be informed by the strongest of contemporary science. Pragmatists will agree and will find Rockwell’s adoption of a version of Deweyan pragmatism and commitment to Dewey’s “empirical method” of doing philosophy a strength of the work. Rockwell’s exposition of the relevant neuroscience is welcome, but ultimately disappointing. There is a disconcerting naivete in Rockwell’s admonitions that the brain should not be privileged as the sole embodiment of mind, that it has “no right” to be so construed given that neuronal activity occurs elsewhere in the body; the brain is not strictly isolated from the rest of the body; it is not “autonomous”; it does not possess “intrinsic powers” making it causally independent; it is not a “closed system”; and it is thus not “entirely responsible” for an organism’s mental states. These observations are true—no one biologically informed would suggest otherwise. But Rockwell is doing ardent battle with a straw man, for, though he attributes the view to “modern physicalists,” it’s unlikely that anyone actually holds the “Cartesian materialist” view of an independent substance-like brain that he argues against.

Accepting that the brain is not autonomous, it is still puzzling that Rockwell pays so little heed to the stunning level of sheer complexity of the neuronal activity occurring “in the skull.” Rockwell is derisively dismissive about the brain, while curiously mystical about the mind. Consciousness, Rockwell holds, is a dynamic and abstract pattern that emerges from brain-body-world interactions, a pattern that can be “embodied by different stuffs at different times” and that perhaps “ripples through the world even though there is a biological creature at its center.” It is not, he says, “a piece of meat in the skull” (103). Students of functional neuroanatomy and –physiology may reasonably find fault with such insouciance about the intricate processes in the brain that are necessarily involved in the generation of the conscious experience of any organism. Yet Rockwell asserts that advanced neuroscience could even “end up eliminating the whole concept of brain” (10).

Rockwell argues that the pattern that is mind/consciousness should be understood as “. . . what Dewey called a system of tensions and what is now called a dynamic system . . . ,” (13) or, in other words, a “behavioral field.” Rockwell considers contemporary dynamic systems theory the most promising route to modeling mind, for a “dynamic system” can be broadly described to include all the elements that in any way influence the system’s change over time. Such a description of a cognitive dynamic system fits well with Rockwell’s externalist conception of
mind. Rockwell conjectures that it should be possible to describe mathematically
the basins of attraction that constitute the behavioral field of an organism, and
thus possible “to quantifiably study how such a field radiates out from the organ-
ism into its environment” (206).

Rockwell draws on Dewey’s conception of the continuity, or “connectedness,”
of nature, and considers his account of mind to be in the Deweyan tradition. But
Dewey’s claim is that “mind” is a particular way of interacting with its environment
that an organism might have. “Mind appears in experience as ability to respond
to present stimuli on the basis of anticipation of future possible consequences,
and with a view to controlling the kind of consequences that are to take place.”1 It
is the organism that has the ability, and thus the characteristic “mindful” way of
interacting; the nervous system is its mechanism for integrating its activity in the
required way.2 Psychological states are “functions of a live creature as it lives in its
natural surroundings.”3 The organism with a mind interacts, of course, in and with
the environment, but Dewey does not seem to conceive mind in Rockwell’s holis-
tic, externalist fashion. Recognizing the primary continuity of literally everything,
Dewey still finds value in the analytic distinctions of “self” and “world.”

In developing his thesis Rockwell ranges widely over contemporary philo-
sophy of mind. Yet problems in interpretation often arise. For example, in discus-
sing John Searle’s “Background,” Rockwell describes the background as a special
kind of commonsense experience, a shared, lived social context, a “background of
meaning” (138). Searle’s Background, though, is a set of nonintentional capacities,
including neurophysiological capacities, required for any intentional phenomena,
including experience. Though Rockwell finds common ground, his account is nei-
ther the same as, nor consistent with, Searle’s, for Searle’s account is internalist,
while Rockwell’s is radically externalist.

Rockwell’s arguments are marred too often by reliance on empirical asser-
tions backed by limited acquaintance with requisite scientific knowledge. To give
but one example, Rockwell concludes that the basic physical properties of the uni-
verse would probably not exist absent purposive conscious beings. His argument is: 1) energy is “defined as the ability to do work”; and 2) “I have never seen a de-
finite of work that makes no reference to purposeful activity, and cannot imagine
what one would look like.” Plus, 3) entropy is “usually defined” in a way that also
includes reference to work. And thus 4) “it is probably just not true that energy
and entropy would still exist if there were no purposeful beings in the universe.”
Rockwell then goes on to employ his conclusion: in light of this, he asserts, “we are
justified in dismissing Searle’s distinction between the observer-relative and the in-
trinsic…” (145), there being nothing, even in physics, that is not observer-relative.
The argument is internally flawed, moreover; it is not clear how it relates, at all, to
the Searle contention Rockwell is disputing, namely, that syntax is not intrinsic to
physics, but is always observer-relative.

Rockwell’s main thesis—that experience, consciousness, and mind emerge
from the interaction of organism and environment—and not from a brain con-
ceived to exist in isolation—is a sound one, and a pragmatic one as well. The excursion he takes the reader on in its support is remarkably wide-ranging and thoroughly thought-provoking, and, though troubled at times, is well deserving of the reader’s careful study.

Notes


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