

Chapter Three: A Visit to the Phenomenological Garden

Briefly, Dennett performs two tasks in this chapter: he begins to prepare us for the more radical, deflationary moves to come, and takes a casual look at the phenomenology of our various sensory modalities.

What are we supposed to think of someone who has a theory of animals which so radically changes our views of their nature that we might no longer want to go on calling them animals? It is certainly conceivable that zoologists, confronted with the fact that this crazy someone was correct, might say, “It turns out that animals—you know: those familiar things we all have seen at the zoo—are not what we once thought they were. They’re so different, in fact, that we really shouldn’t call them animals. So you see, there really *aren’t* any animals in the ordinary understanding of that term.”(p.44)

Dennett has a radical re-interpretation of the things we have in our own phenomenological zoos: “I wanted to say, ‘It turns out that the things that swim by in the stream of consciousness—you know: the pains and aromas and daydreams and mental images and flashes of anger and lust, the standard denizens of the phenom—those things are not what we once thought they were. They are really so different, in fact, that we have to find some new words for them.’”(p. 45)

And it is claims of this sort which get distorted by others as “Dennett doesn’t think there are any pains or aromas or daydreams!”(p.45).

In the pages that follow, Dennett alerts us to important facts about our beliefs concerning phenomenology, and makes a point about what counts as a robust explanation.

We do not have phenomenology in the sense that we have zoology—an agreed upon body of work about what pains and aromas and lusts are like. Instead, there seem to be as many phenomenologies as there are people. And this is, in part, because our natural intuitions about what things are like “from the inside” are often just wrong. This is brought out in the playing card experiment, which I really encourage everyone to try.

(As an aside, let me tentatively suggest that the metaphor of the Cartesian Theater may have snuck into probeman’s language in the passage where he describes the experiment:

“So, you’ve just proved to yourself (I hope) that *almost all of our field of vision is a gray blur*—yet instead we intuitively believe that the entire field is uniformly detailed and colorful.”

The part I emphasized in italics is where the Theater metaphor crops up, but it isn’t obvious why I’d think this, and maybe I could be persuaded that I’m guilty of judicial excess. I would take Dennett’s points about “epistemic hunger” in chapter one, combined with his arguments against “filling in”—chapter five—and wonder why we have to think the brain goes to the bother of drawing “grey” for us instead of another color. Where there are no color detectors in those regions, there is nothing to report or draw. Despite appearances to the contrary, our visual field really isn’t like a movie screen or picture at all—as Dennett is taking pains to point out when he observes that in order to draw an image, we must struggle to make our visual field operate more like a picture than it normally does (p. 53))

The other point Dennett makes was something my philosophy of mind professors brought up constantly, years before *Consciousness Explained* came out. It’s related to the utility and dangers of using progressively more stupid homunculi in your model, and is brought out in the footnote about Moliere’s *La Malade Imaginaire*.

Just as it’s no explanation to say that opium causes drowsiness because of it’s “virtus dormitiva (sleep causing power), “any account of pain that left in the awfulness would be circular—it would have an undischarged virtus dormitiva on its hands.”(p. 64). This must be the reply to those who claim that an entirely biomechanical account of consciousness would leave out the very subjective experiences it was supposed to explain, but how that works in practice will come out later. The point here is that just as an explanation of liquidity must contain elements that have no such property, a scientific account of experience must model experience on things that are entirely un-mindful.

A neutral method for getting phenomenological entities into the theory is discussed in chapter four, which I'll summarize tomorrow.

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