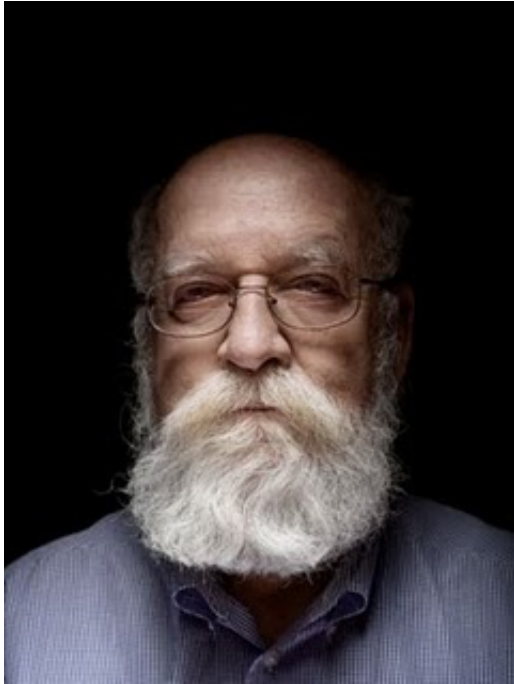


# Has Dennett gotten it right?



I just finished the first draft of a paper on Daniel Dennett's so-called heterophenomenology; actually against it. It bears the title "Phenomenological Skillful-Coping: Another Counter-Argument to Dennett's Heterophenomenology" and I go on to explain the gist of Dennett's heterophenomenology in order to criticize it from the point of view of European phenomenology. As everybody knows, with heterophenomenology Dennett attempts to provide a neutral method accounting for people's utmost subjective

experiences, what Dennett persistently calls their 'own phenomenologies'. He has described heterophenomenology as "the neutral path leading from objective physical science and its insistence on the third-person point of view, to a method of phenomenological description that can (in principle) do justice to the most private and ineffable subjective experiences, while never abandoning the methodological principles of science" (*Consciousness Explained*).

I really don't want to get into technicalities. Suffice it to say that there's nothing easier than weeding out Dennett's interpretation of phenomenology as introspection because—as Dan Zahavi [has consistently pointed out](#)— "all the major figures in the phenomenological tradition have openly and unequivocally denied that they are engaged in some kind of introspective psychology and that the method they employ is a method of introspection" (for example, Husserl, Heidegger, Gurwitsch and Merleau-Ponty in several passages). Moreover, introspection is actually antiphenomenological from

the outset for the very point of departure of phenomenology in Husserl's breakthrough work, *Logische Untersuchungen* (1900-1901), was precisely a call to abandon the dichotomy (*Scheidung*) between inner and outer perceptions, which Husserl associated with a naïve commonsensical metaphysics left behind with the concept of intentionality. And of course, introspection is parasitic of this *Scheidung* which endorses the idea that consciousness is somewhat inside the head and the world outside.

So when for example Thomas Metzinger, following Dennett, affirms (cf. *Being No One*, 2003) phenomenology is so absurd for it must clumsily settle conflicting statements such as the following: "This is the purest blue anyone can perceive!" versus "No, it *isn't*, it has a faint but perceptible trace of green in it!" or, "This conscious experience of jealousy shows me how much I love my husband!" versus "No, this emotional state is not love *at all*, it is a neurotic, bourgeois fear of loss!"... well, then we laugh with scorn. By 'we' I mean, of course, the ones acquainted with the phenomenological tradition.

I must admit I don't agree with Dennett in almost anything, but I have learned a great deal reading his books (but not really from *Breaking the Spell*), and I have had a lot of fun reading him because, you know, he's very imaginative and a great writer. But it's so disturbing how he's influenced some people who have bought the idea that phenomenology is some sort of "introspectionist bit of mental gymnastics" (cf. *The Intentional Stance*, 1987). So all of a sudden, I have to be clarifying some folks that my research being carried out under the auspices of the *German Society for Phenomenological Research* in Würzburg has nothing to do with observing my inner thoughts closely or anything.

In Dennett's [exchange with David Carr](#) (1994), a Husserl scholar who has translated *Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft* into English and who has

been blurting out Dennett's ignorance of phenomenology, we read: "Part of what I thought I learned from those early encounters is that reading the self-styled Husserlians was largely a waste of time; they were deeply into obscurantism for its own sake". Although Dennett has admitted he is not, strictly speaking, acquainted scholarly with the phenomenological tradition nor has kept up with the relevant literature ("If I can figure out at least most of it without having to subject myself to all that stuff, why should I bother raking through it for further good bits? Life is short"), he has quickly disregarded any accusation as to whether he has been involved in the suspicious attitude of bad reading habits and prejudice: "It is precisely because my disregard has *not* been complete that it has been, and continues to be, so confident". This is really puzzling, to say the least.

Now that I find out there's a category on this blog on the "analytic-continental divide and its overcoming", I ask myself if just reading, plain reading, that is, being acquainted with the tradition one supposedly is against, would help a bit in that direction of overcoming divides. Perhaps this shows that much of the discursive work that is to be found in philosophical journals (a percentage which I cannot wholly determine, but it must be huge) has to delay in basic explanations to sort out fundamental misunderstandings, because philosophers tend to criticize authors they simply have not read and whose work they ignore.

Well, I just wanted to say that I find this very disturbing.

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**ADDENDUM.** [Here's the draft of my paper.](#) Comments and criticisms are more than welcome!

**Abstract.** *This paper deals with Daniel Dennett's well-known charges against phenomenological philosophy as an endeavour to restore the rights*

*of introspection: that is, the attempt, albeit doomed to failure, to contribute to the science of the mind from a purported incorrigible, ineffable and 'subjective' (interpreted as 'private') first-person perspective. According to Dennett's heterophenomenology, only a strict third-person method is possible when it comes to the scientific study of the mind.*

*I will dispute Dennett's method in order to do both: correct Dennett's caricaturization of phenomenological philosophy as naïve introspection and offer not only a clarification of phenomenology's true aims and scope, but also a case in which phenomenology will stand as a crucial option in the new studies of the mind, under the sigh of fresh air that can be found in the new approaches to cognitive science (the so called 4EA approaches: embodied, embedded, extended, enacted, affective). By way of introducing the 'phenomenological skillful-coping concept' to affirmatively respond to Dennett's own question: "Is there anything about experience that is not explorable by heterophenomenology? I'd like to know what", the answer should be firm: Yes there is! No less than the most basic non-theoretical, non-representational, embodied and embedded, human experience or coping.*