Chapter Three: A Visit to the Phenomenological Garden

1. WELCOME TO THE PHENOM

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 conceivable that zoologists, confronted with empirical evidence which supported this crazy someone, might come to 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)

Claims of this sort are often distorted by others as "Dennett doesn't think there are any pains or aromas or daydreams!"(p.45). In a sense, one's position on this issue would depend in part on your view of the following: when a proposed change to a concept makes it radically different from ordinary usage, do we say "X's exist but aren't what we thought they were", or do we instead want to say "The reality of the things we called X's is so different than we thought, that we should really say there aren't any X's"? I think it's fair to say that Dennett equivocates on this issue.

Phenomenology as a term came, as the sciences developed in the nineteenth century, to refer to "the merely descriptive study of any subject matter, neutrally or pre-theoretically." (p. 44) Capital-P Phenomenology was the attempt in the early twentieth century to provide the ground for all knowledge through the introspection of the "pure" objects of consciousness. But the Phenomenologists failed to uncover an agreed upon method of introspection that could clear away presuppositions and leave pure, untainted conscious experiences behind.

So we have a loose phenomenology of consciousness but not Phenomenology. The "garden of phenomenology" in this chapter's title refers to the taxonomy of our phenoms Dennett begins to put together. It is meant to capture and categorize what people say is going inside of them during conscious experiences in as theory-neutral language as possible.

Tentatively, he divides our phenom into three categories: experiences of the external world (sights, sounds, smells, etc.), experiences of the internal world (daydreams, recollections, sudden hunches) and experiences of emotion or "affect" (pains, tickles, hunger, anger, joy, etc.). (p. 45) This division is offered merely as a starting point and may contain the sorts of mistakes one might find in early zoology—grouping bats with birds and dolphins with fish. (p. 46) Each category gets its own section.

2. OUR EXPERIENCE OF THE EXTERNAL WORLD

For most of this section, Dennett ticks off various sensory modalities one by one (taste, smell, touch, kinesthesia, hearing, sight) and comments on the pre-neural machinery that allows us to perceive them. I'm going to skip the anatomy lessons and just relate a few of the interesting observations he makes along the way.

In the section on hearing, Dennett mentions the common wisdom that the properties of sensory experiences seem unanalyzable or ineffable. But with a little work, something that first seemed unified and unanalyzable can seem a little less so. Take a guitar, he suggests, and pluck the bass or low E string open, listening carefully. Introspect the phenomenology of this sound. He asks, "Does it have describable components or is it one and whole and ineffably guitarish? Many will opt for the latter way of describing their phenomenology." (p.49) Now try it again, this time bringing a finger down lightly over the octave fret. This will create a "high harmonic"—a new sound that is somehow more pure and one octave higher. Next pluck the string again, just like the first time. This time you will be able to detect the presence of the overtone that you isolated the second time. It was there all along, but now you are in a position to describe elements of something that before was indescribable. (One has to wonder—is the

phenomenology the same from the first to the third pluck, or did the intermediate experience create a new phenom when the first pluck was repeated?)

This example shows that hearing isn't just a matter of responding to sounds. It is also a matter of categorizing them on the basis of prior experience. That is, there is no such thing as "pure" hearing without higher level cognition. Take language, for example. When you hear speech in your native tongue, you perceive distinct words separated by gaps. But a neutral analysis of the actual sound waves shows a dramatic miss-match between the perceived gaps and the objective, auditory gaps.

The lesson here, one that will be repeated throughout the book, is that how things seem to us is not always how things really are. The surprising thing is that this doesn't just apply to our perceptions of the outside world, but the interior world as well.

For instance, our visual field seems to us to be uniformly detailed, with color vision extending all the way to the periphery. But we can quickly dissuade ourselves of this illusion with a simple experiment involving a deck of playing cards. (p.54) Stare straight ahead by fixing your gaze on a convienent spot on the wall in front of you and keeping your eyes absolutely locked, remove a card face down, holding it at arm's length behind your head. Turn it so that the card faces towards you and very slowly bring it from behind to directly ahead of you. At first you will be able to tell only that something is moving. If your eyes shift (saccade) at all, place the card back in the deck and start over again- it takes practice to keep ones eyes totally stationary. Eventually as you bring your hand slowly forward, you will be able to see that it is a card, but not until it is very close in front of you will you even be able to tell if it is black or red—that is how poorly your color vision extends from the center of vision. This cone of color vision has been measured and is about 30 degrees in extent and decreases as one gets older! The area in which you can actually see detail (in our experiment that would be to see what number the card is) is much smaller- about 10 degrees.

Vision is not, it seems, like a picture in the head. But that it really does seem that way is something to be explained.

3. OUR EXPERIENCE OF THE INTERNAL WORLD

Vision is our primary sensory modality, and we use visual metaphors for almost everything. The act of comprehension can be accompanied by the phrase, "I see now", for instance. And in our "mind's eye", different visualizations can accompany understanding of the same proposition. However, they cannot be said to be necessary in the sense that everything gets translated into visual imagery, because you can't draw a picture of many words (what does "yesterday" look like?), and at any rate visual imagery doesn't accompany every instance of understanding.

So an internal conscious state like sudden comprehension doesn't necessarily have a visual phenomenology, but it has some kind of phenomenology. There is an "Aha!" moment we've all experienced when solving a problem.

But this is just an aside, for experiences that are purely internal rather than stimulated by the senses do have a phenomenology. It may be wrong to think of mental images as pictures in the head or a remembered tune as music in the head, but they can nevertheless bring about results similar to those of "real" sensations.

4. AFFECT

This leads to another thought experiment suggested by Dennett: imagine that someone has just kicked you in the shin with a steel-toed boot. Go into as much, intensive detail as you can possibly conjure. If you are like most people, no matter how strong the powers of your imagination are, you will fail to conjure an instance of real pain in yourself.

What if you dreamt the same thing and suddenly found yourself so shocked that it woke you up—is that a pain? Or what if, during sleep, you rolled over on your arm, bending it at an awkward angle, something that would normally cause you pain during waking hours. Unconsciously, you roll over and make an adjustment—does it make sense to say you had an unconscious pain?

Leaving issues of that kind aside for the moment, if any phenom in this category seems obviously a product of

evolution—because its helpfulness seems so darn obvious—it is certainly pain. But what of anger, fear, hatred, sympathy, or joy (just to get started)? Any behavior or feature of an organism that causes it to consume energy screams for the sort of reverse engineering that evolutionary explanations seek. Are there direct evolutionary benefits for these, or are they merely consequences of features which evolved for other reasons?

Laughter seems a uniquely human behavior that seems especially resistant to evolutionary analysis. In fact, we can't seem to be able to offer an explanation for individual cases of laughter that are not somehow self-defeating and circular: "We laugh because of joy, and delight, and out of happiness, and because some things are hilarious. If ever there was a virtus dormitiva in an explanation, here it is: we laugh because of the hilarity of the stimulus." (p. 63)

Dennett makes this particular point about folk non-explanations for laughter because it is a trap that any theory of consciousness must avoid when dealing with various phenom. To this end, it's worth looking at the origin of the expression "virtus dormitiva"—Moliere's last play, Le Malade Imaginaire. In the play, the character Argan decides to "become" a doctor not by studying medicine, but by learning some tortured Latin. During an oral examination, the examiner asks how opium puts people to sleep. Argan replies that it has "virtus dormitiva"—Latin for "sleep causing powers"—a classic circular non-answer.

It will become important later in the book, because any theory of consciousness that seeks to explain a particular phenom—pain, let's say—will be offering little better an answer if there is still something pain-like in the explanation. Explanations of pain that have intrinsic awfullnes, and explanations of laughter that have intrinsic hilarity, all have un-discharged virtus dormitiva in them.

Having surveyed the garden of phenomenology, Dennett sets forth some of the challenges any theory must face when dealing with phenoms: "For some, the great puzzle is the special intimacy: how can we be incorrigible or have privileged access or directly apprehend these items? What is the difference between our epistemic relations to our phenomenology and our epistemic relations to the objects in the external world? For others, the great puzzle concerns the unusual "intrinsic qualities"—or to use the Latin word, the qualia—of our phenomenology: How could anything composted of material particles be the fun that I'm having or have the "ultimate homogeneity" (Sellars, 1963) of the pink ice cube I am now imagining, or matter the way my pain does to me? (p. 65)

Faustus