

Heterophenomenology: Heavy-handed sleight-of-hand

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Abstract We argue that heterophenomenology both over- and under-populates the intentional realm. For example, when one is involved in coping, one's mind does not contain beliefs. Since the heterophenomenologist interprets all intentional commitment as belief, he necessarily overgenerates the belief contents of the mind. Since beliefs cannot capture the normative aspect of coping and perceiving, any method, such as heterophenomenology, that allows for only beliefs is guaranteed not only to overgenerate beliefs but also to undergenerate other kinds of intentional phenomena.

Key words heterophenomenology · coping skills · belief · intentionality

Phenomenology faces problems concerning the content and legitimacy of its introspective reports. It would be much appreciated if Daniel Dennett's heterophenomenology could avoid them, but, while it avoids the problem of the status of introspective evidence, it turns out heterophenomenology both over and under populates the intentional realm.

Husserl originally thought of phenomenology as a descriptive science of the content of everyday consciousness based on a special method of reflection. However, the very idea that phenomenological description makes available what was already implicit in everyday experience begs the question of just how much the reflective stance transforms what it allegedly articulates.

Later Husserl (1960) came to realize that things are experienced differently when I am involved with them than when I reflectively bracket their existence and report my beliefs about them. He acknowledges that "therewith, to be sure, an essentially

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changed subjective process takes the place of the original one. Accordingly it may be said that this reflection *alters* the original subjective process” (p. 34).

Husserl faced this problem in *Cartesian Meditations*. There he held that one must practice phenomenology “without participating as reflecting subjects in the natural existence-positing that the originally straight forward perception contains or that the Ego, as immersing himself straightforwardly in the world, actually executes” (p. 34). In other words, the phenomenologist must separate his reflective experience from naive-involved experience so that the involved experience can be left unaltered. “We can,” he says,

describe the situation in the following manner. If the Ego as naturally immersed in the world, experiencingly and otherwise, is called “*interested*” in the world, then the phenomenologically altered – and, as so altered, continually maintained – attitude consists in a *splitting of the Ego*: in that the phenomenological Ego establishes himself as “*disinterested onlooker*,” above the naively interested Ego (Husserl, 1960, p.34).

This ego-split, however, like dancing while observing where one is placing one’s feet, is easier described than done, and does not seem to have had any following among phenomenologists, most of whom seem to have reverted to Husserl’s earlier view that reflection articulates what is already implicit in experience without transforming it.

In *The Transcendence of the Ego* Sartre offered a more plausible proposal as to how to describe prereflective experience in spite of the transformation brought about by reflection. He focused on the specific example of the emergence of the ego in reflective experience. Sartre (1957) describes his ego-less experience when absorbed in running to catch a streetcar: “When I run after a streetcar...there is no I... I am plunged into the world of objects...which present themselves ...with attractive and repellant qualities—but me, I have disappeared” (p. 48).

Sartre further claims that even though in normal thetic memory I remember myself as the subject of my experience – that I was trying to catch the streetcar – the involved experience leaves an ego-less non-thetic memory trace of itself as it was prior to reflection, a memory trace that itself can be accessed without positing it as an object of reflection. He claims that this non-thetic memory trace can be accessed without transforming it, so long as the subject doesn’t posit it as an object. As he puts it:

[E]very unreflected consciousness, being non-thetic consciousness of itself, leaves a non-thetic memory that one can consult. ... That consciousness must not be posited as object of a reflection. On the contrary, I must direct my attention to the revived objects, but *without losing sight of the unreflected consciousness*, by joining in a sort of conspiracy with it and by drawing up an inventory of its content in a non-positional manner (Sartre, 1957, p. 46).

By means of this non-positional access to the still-present memory of his previous mental state, the phenomenologist can describe the experience of the retreating streetcar-to-be-caught, without introducing an ego.

But why should we believe that this special sort of non-objectifying description is possible, and, even if it is, why believe that this special sort of description of the

content of our immediate memory hasn't somehow transformed our experience? This seems a fair question and Sartre's merely metaphorical reference to a "conspiracy" between the detached phenomenologist and the pure unreflected involved memory is not a helpful response. Sartre never returns to the subject, and his approach, like Husserl's ego-split, seems to have few followers among current phenomenologists.

To phenomenologists who find Husserl's and Sartre's techniques unworkable, Dennett's heterophenomenology seems to offer a promising alternative. The heterophenomenologist instructs the subject to report exactly what he is experiencing as he experiences it. For example, the heterophenomenologist can put a microphone on Sartre running to catch the streetcar and let him report as he runs. If he pants, "I'm straining every muscle to catch the thing," he has to be told to be more careful and only report what he directly finds in his experience prior to reflection. Finally, like a Beckett character speaking in the impersonal first person, he simply gasps—"getting closer, getting closer." Thus, the subject recounts his involved experiences, while the heterophenomenologist remains a neutral observer and simply writes down what the subject says. As Dennett proudly proclaims, this is a way of performing Husserl's phenomenological reduction while moreover (he could add) avoiding recourse to the ego split or to Sartre's non-objectifying reflection.¹

Heterophenomenology overgenerates beliefs

Dennett's (2003) heterophenomenology might well be an improvement on Husserl's and Sartre's implausible proposals. The subject studied by the heterophenomenologist does not have to reflect in order to report on his experience, so the heterophenomenologist can legitimately take the utterances of his subjects to be *unreflective* reports on all and only the content of their experience. Thus Dennett claims that heterophenomenology "leaves out no objective phenomena and no subjective phenomena of consciousness" (2003, 20).

Furthermore, Dennett (2003) points out that, like Husserl's detached spectator of his own involved experience, the heterophenomenologist "*reserves judgment* about whether the subject's beliefs, as expressed in their communication, are true..." (p. 22). But Dennett makes a further move the significance of which will become clear in a moment. Dennett stresses a crucial point:

What this interpersonal communication enables you, the investigator, to do is to compose a catalogue of *what the subject believes to be true about his or her conscious experience* (p. 20).

That is, instead of simply recording the subject's utterance "getting closer," the heterophenomenologist writes down for example: "The subject *believes that* he is getting closer." In this way, Dennett (2003) assumes, heterophenomenology

¹ The Gestalt psychologists, in effect, were practicing heterophenomenology all along without a name for it. The Gestaltists, like Dennett's heterophenomenologist, didn't introspect; they asked their subjects to report on their experiences, and took these reports as their data.

“handsomely covers the ground – *all* the ground – of human consciousness, doing justice to *all the data...*” (p. 19).

Dennett (2003) is clear that “the *primary* data are the utterances, the *raw*, uninterpreted data” (p. 21). A possible objection to this is that the data are not raw but already interpreted and the heterophenomenologist misinterprets them from the start. Dennett’s only response to this objection is that the heterophenomenologist’s “interpretation [of the utterances of his subject] is as neutral as possible between different theories of what is actually happening in the subject” (p. 21). And he adds disarmingly:

Just what kinds of things does this methodology commit us to? ... just to *beliefs*—the beliefs expressed by subjects and deemed constitutive of their subjectivity (p. 20).

Here it is crucial to be clear as to what is *nominally attributed* to the subject by the heterophenomenologist and what is *described as literally a part of the subject’s mental content*. If the heterophenomenologist is merely *calling* the utterance “Getting closer” a belief as a shorthand way of attributing the assertion to the subject, he need not be attributing actual beliefs to an actual ego. But if, the heterophenomenologist takes his notes to be his *data*, as Dennett insists, the heterophenomenologist is not just conveniently *attributing* the assertion, “getting closer,” to the subject; he claims the subject is *expressing* a belief he actually holds, viz. that he is getting closer. The heterophenomenologist is thus adding specific intentional content to the mind of the subject – an addition for which he has no evidence at all.

This ambiguity of attribution might be an accidental feature of the use of verbal reports that could be eliminated by some more direct form of reporting, say the subject’s drawing a picture of what he is experiencing. But Dennett insists that, even in cases where one would not normally speak of beliefs, the heterophenomenologist attributes actual mental content to the subject. Indeed, Dennett is prepared to count *any* action of the subject – for example how wide he holds his fingers apart when he reaches for a Tichener circle – as the expression of a belief. In the case of the Tichener circles, therefore, agents act in a way that shows that they *believe* the circles are the same size, even though they *perceptually judge* that they are of different sizes. But this is an unsatisfactory situation. Either the heterophenomenologist holds that the action is not a report of the subject’s intentional relation to the circles or he holds that it is. If the action is *not* a report, then, according to the heterophenomenologist, only *verbal* reports count as evidence of intentional commitment. This seems overly restrictive. But if the action *is* a report, then the subject *believes* the circles are the same size. We also know, however, that the subject believes they are of different sizes (indeed, that’s what he says). So, is this a case of irrationality? That seems like an odd diagnosis of the situation, but one to which the heterophenomenologist is driven because he attributes a belief where there is merely a motor intentional directedness.

The problem for the heterophenomenologist, then, is not Sartre’s problem that reporting requires reflection and so introduces an ego into the experience of the previously empty involved subject, but rather that the heterophenomenologist treats the subject’s reports *as if* they were the *result of reflection*. Thus, the

heterophenomenologist has successfully avoided the ego-split since the subject *is not required to reflect*, but he is now *attributing* reflecting to the subject, and so introducing the distortion the ego-split was meant to avoid. The problem, in short, is not that the subject's experience is transformed by his having to give a report, but that the experimenter augments the data by understanding the agent's utterance *as a reflective report*. The heterophenomenologist understands the agent as in effect reporting: "*I believe* the streetcar is getting closer." In so interpreting the raw data the heterophenomenologist adds both that there is an "I" having the experience being reported and that the experience is properly characterized as the subject's *belief* that he is having the experience. These additions are only legitimate if there is an independent reason to assume that the "I believe" is implicit in the subject's report. One might be committed to this idea if one believes Kant's claim that all my representations must be capable of being accompanied by an 'I think.' But to believe this is precisely to beg the question whether reflection introduces new content into the pre-reflective experience.

Wittgenstein (1958) homes in on the phenomenological illegitimacy of the attribution of propositional content to the involved subject. He warns against attributing to a person beliefs that we too easily imagine that person might have.

Can't we imagine a rule determining the application of a rule, and a doubt which *it* removes—and so on? But that is not to say that we are in doubt because it is possible for us to *imagine* a doubt (p. 84).

Wittgenstein's criticism applies neatly to Dennett's heterophenomenological method: just because we can imagine that the streetcar-chaser's panted outburst is the expression of a belief is no reason to think that he *actually has* that belief. Or, in the same vein, consider an example of someone walking out of a room. We can observe him marching confidently toward and through the door. If we want to make sense of his behavior, we might imagine him having the *desire* that he leave the room and, among many other beliefs, the *belief* that one does that by using the door. Furthermore, if asked to reflect on his experience and given a forced choice as to whether or not he believed the floor extended beyond the room, he might well have to conclude he believed that the floor, not a chasm, was on the other side of the door. But, if we trained him to report his experience as he left the room, we would discover, as Sartre and the psychologist J. J. Gibson would have predicted, that he just responded to the "to-go-out" without giving a thought to the door or to the floor on the other side. In fact, no beliefs at all need be involved.

Dennett (2003) gives us no *reason* to justify his heterophenomenologist's interpretation of the raw data. It is important to appreciate that in fact his interpretation is, as he puts it when criticizing his opponents, "ideology-driven, not data-driven" (p. 29). His *motive as a behaviorist* is clear since, once he converts all subjective experience into beliefs, he can then argue that beliefs are not mental content but attributed by the intentional stance. He continues:

And what kind of things are beliefs? ... [T]he position I have defended (Dennett, 1971; 1987; 1991) treats beliefs from the *intentional stance* as *theorists' fictions*... (p. 20).

With this two-step sleight-of-hand the heterophenomenologist, as understood by Dennett, neatly empties the mind of experiential and intentional content altogether.

So it turns out that Dennett's heterophenomenologist cannot help the phenomenologist to find a non-distorting way of acquiring his data. Rather, heterophenomenology interprets mental phenomena – both the ego and its beliefs – as neutral data and so overpopulates the mind. As we shall now see, it turns out that Dennett's third-person stance leads him to underpopulate the intentional realm as well.

Heterophenomenology undergenerates intentional phenomena

As we have seen, the central strategy of the heterophenomenologist is to attribute a belief to his subject whenever the subject reports an experience of the world (or of himself), and not otherwise. The result is that the heterophenomenologist overgenerates intentional phenomena: he attributes beliefs when in fact there are none. But another problem is that the subject's differential responses, though they do track *what* object or property in the environment the subject is responding to, may nevertheless fail properly to characterize the subject's *way of experiencing* it. Insofar as the heterophenomenologist fails to capture the subject's way of experiencing objects or properties, he *excludes* a vast array of intentional phenomena. In addition to overgenerating beliefs, therefore, the method of heterophenomenology seems to undergenerate some intentional phenomena as well.

One natural response to the undergeneration problem is to point out that the heterophenomenologist is not a rank behaviorist; in particular he is not restricted only to the domain of differential responses. After all, the whole point of heterophenomenology is explicitly to encourage experiments in which the subject interacts verbally with the experimenter, telling him what the experience is like. Surely these reports about what the experience is like are sufficient to capture not only what object or property the subject is responding to but also his way of experiencing it. The subject can say not only that the penny *is* round, for example, but that it *looks* a certain way from here.

The problem with this response is that there are some ways of experiencing objects and properties that are not identical with the beliefs a subject has about what those ways of experiencing are. In short, not all conscious experiences are beliefs. In developing this claim we will look closely at the subject's experience of what Gibson calls an "affordance." *Sensing* an affordance is not the same as *believing* the world is a certain way. Before we get to this example, however, it is important to draw a distinction between two different types of claims one might be making when one says that not all conscious experiences are beliefs.

One position familiar in the area is held by Joe Levine (1994), whose view Dennett (2003) discusses. Levine's view is that the primary data to which a theory of mind must answer are the "conscious experiences themselves," not just our beliefs about those experiences. In drawing the distinction between experiences on the one hand and beliefs about experiences on the other, Levine is affirming that not all conscious experiences are beliefs. What he intends to be pointing towards in making this distinction, however, is a domain of non-intentional qualitative aspects of

consciousness, or what are typically called qualia. Believing in the existence of qualia is one way of believing the claim that not all conscious experiences are beliefs, though it is importantly different from the interpretation of this claim that we will give.

In affirming that all conscious experiences are beliefs Dennett takes himself to be denying the existence of qualia. Dennett has always been strongly opposed to the existence of qualia, at least when these are understood as *non-intentional* aspects of consciousness. Dennett (2003) argues against qualia on the grounds that they are completely inaccessible to us except through the beliefs we have about them. As a result the beliefs, rather than the qualitative experiences themselves, should be the primary data for a theory of mind. According to Dennett, the inaccessibility of qualia has two aspects:

(A.) I couldn't have a qualitative experience unless I believed I was having it; if I didn't believe I was having the experience then it would be just as inaccessible to me as if I were having no experience at all.

(B.) I couldn't believe I was having a qualitative experience unless I was having one; the apparent existence of such a belief is evidence that we need to explain how our beliefs have gone awry rather than that we need to admit the existence of qualia.

Understood as claims about qualia, these arguments seem to us to have some merit. Despite Ned Block's objections (see his 2004), it does seem to us that a subject must believe he is having a qualitative experience in order to be having it; so we accept (A).² And although it is clear that we are fallible about what the various features of our experiences are, so Descartes' strong infallibility claim is implausible, nevertheless it seems right to us that we could not be mistaken about the basic question *whether I am having an experience at all*. In this sense we are willing to accept (B) as well. Still, there is another interpretation of the claim that not all conscious experiences are beliefs, an interpretation that is not motivated by intuitions about qualia at all. We turn to this interpretation now.

When we claim that not all conscious experiences are beliefs we mean that there are some conscious *intentional* experiences that are not beliefs. We believe that there are some conscious intentional experiences, in other words, that a subject could have without believing that he's having them. Indeed, these experiences depend on the subject's not having a belief about them: if the subject were to *believe* he was having the experience, instead of merely having it, the intentional content of the experience would be different.

In claiming that there are some conscious intentional experiences that are not beliefs we take ourselves to be denying something like the Kantian claim that a representation couldn't be mine unless I were capable of attaching the "I think" to it. We believe, in other words, that there are experiences with intentional content – call the content of such an experience <p> – such that the experience belongs to the

² Perhaps it's enough to doubt that or wonder whether I am having an experience, or to have some other attitude towards it. But even this would be enough for Dennett to be justified in turning the purely qualitative into the intentional.

subject even though he is not capable of being in the mental state of believing that <p> or thinking that <p>. For reasons that we will discuss below, even though the subject cannot believe that <p> the experience with the content <p> is not completely inaccessible to him. In the case of these kinds of conscious intentional experiences, in other words, accessibility – or Kantian “mine-ness” – is not identical with (the capacity for) self-attribution.

The experiences that have this peculiar quality are experiences of an “affordance,”³ i.e., experience in which the world solicits a certain kind of activity. We use the Gestaltist’s term “solicits” to refer to a datum of phenomenology. To say that the world solicits a certain activity is to say that the agent *feels immediately drawn* to act a certain way. This is different from *deciding* to perform the activity, since in *feeling immediately drawn* to do something the subject experiences no act of the will. Rather, he experiences the environment *calling for* a certain way of acting, and finds himself responding to the solicitation.

We sense the world’s solicitations and respond to their call all the time. In backing away from the “close talker,” in stepping skillfully over the obstacle, in reaching “automatically” for the proffered handshake, we find ourselves acting in definite ways without ever having decided to do so. In responding to the environment this way we feel ourselves giving in to its demands.

A central feature of affordances is that they present themselves only when you’re not looking for them. If I am trying to figure out what the appropriate conversational distance is, I will immediately lose all sense of what the situation calls for. If I watch my hands carefully as they’re forming their grip, I’m sure to change the way my hand responds to its object. Affordances draw activity out of us only in those circumstances in which we are not paying attention to the activity they solicit. As we have seen already, this is how they are not like beliefs.

Despite not being the focus of my attention, affordances nevertheless play a positive role in my phenomenology. In particular, they create an experienced tension in the situation that my body is immediately drawn to reduce. Consider the example of walking along the wall at a museum and having your attention caught by an enormous picture just to your right. At first one is simply overwhelmed by its size, perhaps confused about how to respond. Quickly, though, one feels oneself pushed to step away from the wall in order to get the painting into view. One does not decide to step away, as if it were a pure and spontaneous act of the will. Rather, one responds immediately to a felt demand of the situation; one is moved to retreat from the picture as if it were repelling one. As one steps back, and the painting comes into better view, the tension that was created by being too close to it is reduced. In such a situation the painting itself leads you to stand at an appropriate distance for seeing it.

As we’ve seen, Sartre notices the “attractive” and “repellent” character of experienced objects, but unlike his interlocutor Maurice Merleau-Ponty he doesn’t make much of it. Merleau-Ponty’s central idea is that we experience the distance to

³ Gibson himself did not emphasize the phenomenology of affordances, and indeed explicitly denied that affordances are defined in terms of their phenomenology in his arguments with the Gestaltists. There he claims that it is an objective fact that food affords nourishment even when I’m satiated and so not drawn to it. It is important to emphasize that for us, in contrast with Gibson, an affordance is defined in terms of its phenomenology.

an object in terms of how comfortable it is to see it (or otherwise interact appropriately with it) from where we are. Merleau-Ponty (1962) thinks that our perceptual relation to all objects, not just paintings, is like this. As he says in the *Phenomenology of Perception*:

For each object, as for each picture in an art gallery, there is an optimum distance from which it requires to be seen, a direction viewed from which it vouchsafes most of itself ... The distance from me to the object is not [experienced as] a size which increases or decreases, but [as] a tension which fluctuates round a norm (p. 302).

Objects, in other words, require our taking up certain stances with respect to them in order to get an optimal grip on them. We experience our current bodily situation as a tension away from that optimal stance.

If this account of the phenomenology is correct, then there is an irreducibly normative component to the experience of perceptual objects. By “normative” we do not mean anything like an ethical norm. If it is “right” or “appropriate” to stand a certain distance from a picture, it is not so in any ethical sense; I am not doing anything morally wrong when I stand too close or too far away to see a picture well. But there is a normative aspect to the experience nonetheless. In particular, the subject feels immediately drawn to stand further from or closer to the picture given his perceptual needs and desires; it just feels right. Furthermore, standing at someplace other than the appropriate distance causes the subject to experience a certain amount of tension in the situation, as if he were a coil pressed or stretched out of its natural state. Since seeing an object is always seeing it at some distance or another, this normativity is an irreducible aspect of object perception.⁴

With this idea in mind we can return to Sartre’s (1954) example of running after a streetcar. “When I run after a street car ...there is no I. There is [merely] consciousness of the streetcar-having-to-be-overtaken,” he tells us. Since, according to Sartre, there is no ego, no beliefs, and no goals in the runner’s mind when he is absorbed in reaching the streetcar, Sartre and Dennett would seem to agree that consciousness has no content. It is, as Sartre puts it, “all lightness, all translucence” (p. 42). It is a “*nothing... since all physical, psycho-physical, and psychic objects, all truths, and all values are outside it*” (p. 91).⁵ But, if Merleau-Ponty is right, the experience of chasing the streetcar does not leave the mind empty. It essentially involves a felt solicitation to act in a certain way with respect to the streetcar.

Moreover, as I’m chasing after the streetcar, I do not just get closer to it as a matter of fact; I also experience this as a reduction in a tension away from a norm – a movement towards equilibrium. We have seen already that Sartre thinks we can find a memory trace of ego-less activity in this example, one in which there is no “I” who is doing the running. And we have seen also that there is no evidence for Dennett’s claim that the subject has a belief about the streetcar or about his own relation to it. But the normativity of the experience establishes something more. It is not just that there is no *evidence* for a belief; rather, a belief has the wrong kind of structure

⁴ See Kelly (2004) for further discussion of this point.

⁵ Note that with this claim Sartre denies the importance of the phenomenological observation he made earlier, that experienced objects have attractive and repellant qualities.

altogether. For beliefs make claims about the way the world is, whereas the experience of the streetcar essentially involves a sense of where *I ought to be* with respect to it.

The distinction between belief and the experience of a solicitation to act is crucial, so let us be as clear about it as we can. Returning to the example of the picture, notice that it is an essential aspect of my experience of the picture not just that I am as a matter of fact a certain distance from it, or even that I am too close to it, but rather that I am immediately compelled to step back from it. This compulsion to act in a certain way is essential to the experience of grasping a perceptual object. But it is incompatible with the nature of belief. I could believe that I am too close to the painting while feeling no particular need to do anything about it. I could even believe that the picture is soliciting me to back away from it while having nothing of the phenomenology of repulsion. Beliefs tell me how the world is, or what the features of my experience of it are. But it is one thing to report that there is a tension, and quite another to experience it as such.

If this account of the normative aspects of phenomenology is right, then we have isolated a whole range of intentional phenomena that the heterophenomenological method in principle excludes. Because *sensing* an affordance is not the same as *believing* the world is a certain way, and because for the heterophenomenologist every conscious intentional experience is interpretable as a belief, heterophenomenology is guaranteed to undergenerate intentional phenomena.

In conclusion, we first saw that when one is involved in coping one's mind does not contain beliefs. Since the heterophenomenologist interprets all intentional commitment as belief, he necessarily overgenerates the belief contents of the mind. But to deny that skillful coping involves belief is not to deny that it lacks intentional content altogether. There is a form of motorintentional content that is experienced as a solicitation to act. This content cannot be captured in the *belief* that I'm experiencing an affordance. Indeed, as soon as I step back from and reflect on an affordance, the experience of the current tension slips away. Since beliefs cannot capture this normative aspect of coping and perceiving, any method, such as heterophenomenology, that allows for only beliefs is guaranteed not only to overgenerate beliefs but also to undergenerate other kinds of intentional phenomena.

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