

# The critique of pure phenomenology

Alva Noë

© Springer Science + Business Media B.V. 2007

**Abstract** The topic of this paper is phenomenology. How should we think of phenomenology – the discipline or activity of investigating experience itself – if phenomenology is to be a genuine source of knowledge? This is related to the question whether phenomenology can make a contribution to the empirical study of human or animal experience. My own view is that it can. But only if we make a fresh start in understanding what phenomenology is and can be.

**Key words** phenomenology · epistemological autonomy · first-person methodology · theory · introspection

## Autonomous phenomenology

Philosophers sometimes suppose that phenomenology is *free standing* in the sense that phenomenological facts are logically and conceptually independent of empirical or metaphysical facts. The phenomenological facts can be settled, on such a conception, without settling any other questions about the natural world. Phenomenology, so conceived, is a matter of how things seem to us. How things seem to us leaves open how things are beyond the limits of our consciousness. This autonomy of phenomenology has a methodological upshot: it is possible to undertake a phenomenological investigation without making any empirical or metaphysical assumptions. We can bracket science and metaphysics when we do phenomenology. On one reading, this was Husserl's view. The purpose of the phenomenological reduction, or epoché, for Husserl, on this reading at least, is to neutralize the full cast of empirical and metaphysical commitments.

---

A. Noë (✉)

Department of Philosophy, University of California, 314 Moses Hall #2390,  
Berkeley, CA 94720-2390, USA  
e-mail: noe@berkeley.edu

Pure phenomenology represents phenomenological disputes as insulated from matters of fact drawn from other domains. One problem with such a conception is that it is unclear how phenomenological disputes can themselves be adjudicated. It's hard to see how phenomenology could be anything more than earnest pleading as to the supposed revelations of one's own inner searchings. One phenomenologist says: "when I look at a circular coin tilted away I see something elliptical." Another phenomenologist demures: "circular coins seen tilted don't look elliptical; rather, they look like circular titled coins." Such a dispute, if it even rises to the level of genuine dispute, does not – indeed, *cannot* – engage with matters beyond its basic terms; it floats free of questions about the natural world. Phenomenology, conceived this way, makes no meaningful epistemic commitments.

The trouble with pure phenomenology, then, is not that it is reflective, or introspective, or focused on experience and the subjective, or even that it relies on first-person warrant (whatever exactly that is supposed to be). The trouble, rather, is that pure phenomenology conceives of its subject matter as autonomous. It is this epistemic isolation of phenomenology, more than anything else, that threatens to undermine its claim to be a serious kind of intellectual pursuit. At best, it seems, it is the fantasy of such a pursuit.

### Not so pure phenomenology

Does anyone actually believe in pure phenomenology? Maybe not. However philosophical practice suggests that the idea that experience is in some sense autonomous has definite pull on philosophical argument. Consider: it not infrequently happens that philosophers with radically different beliefs about mind and nature take themselves to be in agreement on phenomenological matters. So, for example, it might happen that a direct realist about perception – who holds that perceiving is an actual encounter with the object of perception – and a representationalist – who holds that in perception we experience a way things appear to be – can think of themselves as in full agreement on perceptual phenomenology, e.g. that the phenomenology is broadly realistic. Or to give a different example, it is frequently assumed that theorists with radically different conceptions of the nature of color (e.g. physicalists, for whom color is a property of physical things, and subjectivists, for whom colors are properties of experiences) can be in agreement about the phenomenology of color, i.e. they can be united in the conviction that colors are represented in experience as simple, manifest, mind-independent qualities.<sup>1</sup> Such agreement on phenomenology could only be possible if the phenomenological facts are neutral in respect of the empirical or metaphysical ones.

<sup>1</sup> Consider, for example, Chalmers (2006), who proposes that color *phenomenology* is 'primitivist' (in the sense of Campbell). And he seems to think that this can be settled independently of settling the question of the nature of color.

Even if pure phenomenology lacks genuine support, it is likely that many philosophers and scientists in fact endorse a weaker, methodological variant of the doctrine of pure phenomenology. According to this weaker view, phenomenology is a merely descriptive *preliminary* to theorizing about the nature of consciousness. Phenomenology, on this weaker conception, is something like crime scene description. A detective needs carefully to describe the scene of a crime before he or she can begin to theorize about what actually happened. The detective works back from the evidence of the senses, as it were. In the same way, according to the methodological variant of pure phenomenology, you need to gather phenomenological data before you attempt to uncover the physical or causal substrate of experience. Such an approach to phenomenology grants, crucially, that phenomenology is *not* an autonomous domain of inquiry – after all, experience does depend (causally, metaphysically) on the brain and the physical world. What such an approach allows is that in practice it is possible and necessary to “bracket” worries about the theoretical upshot of the phenomenological facts.

In the last few years there have been calls for the development of “first-person methods” in cognitive science (e.g. Chalmers, 1999; Thompson & Varela, 2001; Varela, 1996), and it has been argued, by thinkers with different points of view, that it is necessary for the science of consciousness to rely on “introspective reports” (e.g. Jack & Roepfstorpf, 2002). We can take proponents of these lines of argument to be committed to the moderate form of methodologically pure phenomenology we are considering here. And there can be no reasonable controversy, I think, about the legitimacy of something like this approach. Only an ideological commitment to behaviorism, or some kindred ideology, could give you a reason not to take reports of subjects seriously in theoretical work on consciousness. Two examples will suffice. If one is interested in learning about the temporal dynamics of perceptual oscillations in binocular rivalry, then it is necessary to learn, from subjects, when binocular oscillations occur. Or, if one wishes to understand the structure of human color space, it is necessary to use information, provided by subjects, about the perceived similarities and differences of sample lights. As far as I can tell, it is now established practice to rely, in this way, on what subjects tell you. Some writers (Lutz & Thompson, 2003) have gone so far as to argue, persuasively I believe, that sophisticated subjects – subjects who have been trained to pay attention to their experiences – can collaborate with researchers to advance understanding of the neural basis of experience.

It goes without saying, I assume, that one can take subjects seriously without thinking that what subjects tell you about the character of their own experience is, as it were, the last word. What is important is that we admit that, at least sometimes, it is the first word. So, for example, the fact that subjects tell you that two lights match in hue, does not establish that subjects experience them the same in color. (Perhaps the subjects are not in a normal state, or that there is some background influence affecting their experiences or their reports.) But this does little to alter the fact that what subjects say and do is a guide to the character of their experience, one that we can hardly afford to ignore. For this reason it is appropriate that investigators seek to devise methods to enhance the informativeness and reliability of subject reports.

It is important to be remain vigilant against the assumptions of autonomous phenomenology, to prevent them from tacitly shaping our forays into phenomenol-

ogy. Researchers may betray tacit reliance on a conception of experience as autonomous when they find themselves unwilling to take seriously the possibility that they or their subjects have misrepresented their own phenomenology. Consider, as an illustration, an issue I have discussed elsewhere (Noë, 2004; Noë, Pessoa, & Thompson, 2000): the phenomenon of change blindness. Research in this area has tended to take its start from an assessment of visual phenomenology according to which that phenomenology is *pictorial*. The idea is that it seems to us, when we see, as if we are confronted by a representation of *all* the environmental detail in sharp focus and uniform detail from the center out to the periphery. Change blindness has been taken (whether validly or not) to provide *prima facie* evidence that the internal substrate needed to support the existence of picture-like experiences is lacking. On this basis, then, a number of thinkers (Blackmore, Brelstaff, Nelson, & Troscianko, 1995; O'Regan, 1992; Rensink, 2000; Simons & Levin, 1997) have argued that normal perceivers are the victims of a kind of “grand illusion.” They are confused. It seems to them as if they see all that detail, when they don’t see all that detail.

The claim that experience is a “grand illusion” may rely on the tacit assumption that phenomenology – *how things seem to the subject* – is independent of the other facts on the ground. We can bring this out by asking why researchers find it more reasonable to suppose that perceivers have a phenomenology that is false to the actual facts of perception, than to suppose that we might have been wrong in our (and subjects’) characterization of what the phenomenology is? We might have thought that the fact that subjects lack the internal neural substrate necessary for detail-rich experience would give us a reason to question whether we’ve gotten the phenomenology right. Perhaps the mistake is the idea that it seems to subjects as if they see *everything* in sharp focus and uniform detail from the center out to the periphery of the visual field? Indeed, it may be hard for any of us to see that this latter alternative is a live option. This is because we find it so natural to assume that the facts about perception (the ones that get revealed in science) are irrelevant to the question of the content of the phenomenology. And this assumption is tantamount to the idea that the subject matter of phenomenology is an autonomous domain of mere seemings.

The upshot is that even a weaker, empirically-minded conception of phenomenology as a preliminary to theoretical work about the mind must be careful not to collapse back into the more extreme conception of pure phenomenology as an autonomous discipline. The basic idea of pure phenomenology is that experience is a matter only of how things seem. To give up the conception of pure phenomenology, one must seek to articulate a conception of phenomenology as concerned with nature itself.

## Experience and the natural world

If phenomenology is to be relevant to science or philosophy, then, it needs to separate itself from the idea that it can be free standing in the way we have been considering. It must frame a conception of its own subject matter – experience – as itself belonging squarely to the natural world. Experience, on such a conception,

belongs to the causal nexus.<sup>2</sup> On such a conception of phenomenology, the investigation of experience would emerge as a way of probing nature itself, how things are.

Let me give an example to illustrate what it could mean to say that phenomenology is an investigation of the natural world. My purpose is not to defend in detail a specific set of phenomenological claims; rather, I seek to exemplify the manner in which a phenomenological investigation can have far-reaching epistemic commitments. As it happens, I am persuaded by the sorts of phenomenological claims I am about to put forward; moreover, I take these claims, if they are true, to support the general account of phenomenology as world-directed that I am advancing here – for they offer a picture of experience as world-involving. But if the distinct phenomenological claims I make are wrong, then that fact can also, in itself, help to demonstrate that phenomenology is a domain for substantive dispute.

It is often noticed that perceptual phenomenology is realistic. Let us suppose that this is what phenomenology teaches. Phenomenological reflection demonstrates that perceiving is, for us, an encounter with situations and things; it is not, for us, an encounter with mental images or some other kind of interior data of sense.

This claim about the world-involving character of perceptual experience – that experience is an encounter with things and situations – is *not* compatible with any old metaphysical or empirical picture of perception and its nature. For in presenting perceptual experience as a kind of *involvement* with or *entanglement* with situations and things, the phenomenology presents experience as something that could not occur in the absence of situations and things. Phenomenology reveals perceiving, then, to be a condition whose nature depends *essentially* on the presence and involvement of the world encountered. If there were no object, or no situation, then there could be no contact with or involvement with them, which is just to say that there could be no perceptual experience.

The perceptual phenomenology by itself entails that a physical duplicate of me would not be in the same experiential state that I find myself in, if he were not, like me, confronted by the very same situation. The phenomenology is silent as to whether my duplicate would be having *some* experience – perhaps he would be having an experience that he cannot discriminate from the experience that he would have if he were in my situation – but what the phenomenology does commit us to is the proposition that the experience of my duplicate is not (indeed, could not be) an experience of the same *basic kind* as my experience.<sup>3</sup>

These phenomenological commitments, then, are at once themselves commitments to matters of fact that are independent of me and my subjective condition. It

<sup>2</sup> Dan Zahavi reminds me that there is a third position hereabouts as well. According to ‘transcendentalists,’ experience does not belong to the causal nexus because experience is something that we must presuppose in any attempt to investigate causal relations themselves. Such a conception of experience as transcendental does not treat experience as autonomous in the way I have been criticizing, for on such a conception, experience is not thought of as free-standing in relation to nature, even if it is not taken itself to be an element in the natural order. I am somewhat skeptical of this idea, but I do not discuss it further in what follows.

<sup>3</sup> Here I mean to be referring to ideas about discriminability and the classification of experience into kinds of Mike Martin. See Martin (2004).

might be objected, *how could you think that reflection on your experience could give you insight into basic facts about nature and our place in the world?* But this challenge betrays a misunderstanding. Phenomenology, or the investigation of experience itself, on the conception I am proposing, is only, if it is anything at all, a kind of investigation of the world. In particular, it is an investigation of the world in so far as the world – the things and situations in which we find ourselves – gives contour to human experience. Crucially, then, the basis for my phenomenological assertions is not, say, reflection on how things are with me subjectively, or how things are in my own case. My grounds for thinking that experience is an encounter with things and situations is an evaluation of *perception and its nature*, an evaluation subject to re-evaluation in light of anything else we might know or come to learn about perception and its character.

And of course, crucially, I may be wrong, even *wildly* wrong, about the character of experience. There is no particular reason to think that it should be easy reliably to discern the nature of perception and the nature of our perceptual relation to the world. The immediate point is that it is precisely getting right about how things are that forms the burden of phenomenology.

It is sometimes said that phenomenology shows perceptual experience to have an existentially generalized content along the lines of, e.g. “there is a soda can on the table.” Such an analysis has far-reaching implications for our understanding of the nature of experience in so far as it suggests that perceptual content is descriptive and representational. An experience of a qualitatively identical soda can would be qualitatively identical. And presumably one could be in this particular representational state even if there were no soda can there. If I am right about what phenomenology teaches, then such a representationalist account of the content of experience is mistaken; it is mistaken in part because it belongs to the phenomenology itself that the experience is object-involving in ways that this characterization of the experience leaves out.

## Phenomenology and theory

It will be objected that the account of phenomenology I offer obscures the difference between questions about the character of a particular experience – questions that fall within the purview of phenomenology – and more theoretical questions about the nature of experience, e.g. questions about the correct taxonomy of experiences. Questions of the latter sort, it will be insisted, belong to science, or to metaphysics, but not to phenomenology. Mere reflection, or speculation, has no authority where such questions are at stake. The objection that I am considering now grants that phenomenological reflection might warrant my judgment that I could not have a particular experience – a visual experience of *this* pencil, say – if there were no pencil at hand. Phenomenology, it might be granted, suffices to show that the pencil-experience itself is one that I couldn’t have if there were no pencil present. But what phenomenology can’t establish, on its own, is the more theoretical claim that visual experiences generally depend constitutively on their objects (that the object is itself a constituent of the experience); in particular, phenomenology can’t demonstrate that I couldn’t have an experience of the same theoretical kind in the absence of the

perceived object. The character of present experience cannot fix the outcome of important theoretical disputes.

This objection misunderstands the claim I am making. Phenomenology doesn't fix the outcome of important theoretical investigations. I grant this. My point is that phenomenology bears on such disputes without fixing them, just as other information about how things are may bear. Consider that if indeed it is the case that, phenomenologically speaking, my experience presents me as *entangled* with a pencil, then phenomenology is enough to reveal that nothing could be the same kind of experience as this experience – at least as far as object-entanglement goes – in the absence of the pencil or an object just like it. The phenomenology *itself* gives me a reason to think that my experience and a corresponding hallucination (an hallucination that I could not tell apart from the veridical experience) would be of different kinds. Indeed, this is just the distinction in kinds between perceiving and hallucinating that we mark from the standpoint of everyday thought.

Of course, it is an open question whether I get it right that perceiving and hallucinating are mental events of different *kinds*. But what this openness reveals – I would argue – is that it is also an open question whether I am right about the phenomenology itself. Crucially, or so I would like to insist, what is *not* left open is that my phenomenology itself takes a stand on the fundamental difference (or at least apparent difference) between seeing something and failing to see it. If it turns out that it is possible for me to have an experience of the same kind as the visual experience of a pencil in the absence of a pencil, then it turns out that I am wrong about my phenomenology itself. Which is just to say that if I am wrong about the pencil-involvingness of my pencil experiences, then my world-view would be turned upside down. I take a stand on the theoretical question when I take a stand on the phenomenology.

It is commonplace, in analytic philosophical circles at least, to suppose that phenomenology is concerned with “introspection.” And introspection has nothing more to teach than that things seem some way or other. Given this common assumption, the revelations of phenomenology must therefore be neutral at least in so far as they can't serve as grounds for this or that metaphysical claim. Consider what Martin (2004: 25) writes:

What I have resisted here...is the claim that there is any simple move from the recognition that particular objects and events figure in the phenomenal nature of particular experiential episodes to the conclusion that they must thereby be constituents of the experiences. The latter claim concerns the metaphysical status of experience. It is here that a Naïve Realist about experience and an intentionalist will disagree. I doubt that simple introspection of one's experience, unaided by further theorising could reveal which view has a better grip on this issue.

We can agree that introspection does not settle which philosophical theory of perception has a better grip on the issue. But that is not relevant to the point I want to establish. Whether or not the phenomenology settles the theoretical issue is independent of whether or not, as I claim, the phenomenology has a bearing on its outcome. I claim the phenomenology itself takes a stand on the theoretical question, whether or not it is dispositive. As a matter of fact, I don't believe that

phenomenology can settle such issues, but not because phenomenology concerns introspection which is, in turn, free-standing in respect of the theoretical issues. Rather, phenomenology fails to settle the issues precisely because the theoretical issues on which phenomenology *does* take a stand are not confined to matters of simple introspection. It seems to me that objects are constitutive of my experience of objects. The question is, am I right? In so far as a representationalist (Martin's *intentionalist*) says that object-directed experience is something I can have when there is no object, then such a position challenges the adequacy of my phenomenological commitments.

Granted, this is not how phenomenology is usually discussed. It is usually supposed that phenomenology only raises questions about how things seem, for me, on the basis of introspection. But that conception of phenomenology – one stripped of theoretical commitments and relevance – is not one we are compelled to accept. Indeed, it strikes me as crazy that we should assume we have a grip on our perceivings (for example) as anything less than episodes of contact with the world.

### Heterophenomenology and first-person perspective

The conception of phenomenology that I am sketching treats its subject matter not as autonomous but rather as, as I shall put it, integrated. Experience, on such a conception, is not a matter of what is happening in a private, subjective, interior sphere. Experience is the domain of transactions between interested active agents and a challenging, meaningful environment. To do phenomenology, on this integrated, natural conception, is not to look inward. It is, rather, to seek to understand the ways in which reality is disclosed in experience thanks to the person's (or animal's) involvement.

Phenomenology, as I understand it, explores the world and the ways objects and properties and matters of significance for us can become manifest or available. It is worth remarking that such a non-introspective conception of phenomenology is very likely Husserl's actual conception. The purpose of the *epoché*, on a different interpretation from the one mentioned earlier, is not to enable *introspection* unencumbered by concern with matters of fact, but rather, to enable one to attend to the world in a new way, with an interest in the world as it presents itself for us in experience.<sup>4</sup> In any case, it is certain that neither Heidegger nor Merleau-Ponty, phenomenologists both, had any use for a conception of phenomenology as directed to the interior goings-on of consciousness.

Dennett's criticism of phenomenology (Dennett, 1991), and his championing of an approach to human experience that is, as he puts it, consistent with "the rules and methods of experimental science that have succeeded so well in other areas," has been criticized for misrepresenting the standpoint of the traditional phenomenology of Husserl (e.g. by Zahavi, this issue). I am sympathetic to this line of criticism. If this is right, then we needn't saddle Husserl or the phenomenology he spawned with the task of defending a disastrous conception of phenomenology as autonomous. But

<sup>4</sup> Here I rely on Zahavi (2004), as well as on contributions to this special issue by Marbach, Zahavi and Drummond.

to recognize this, then, is to recognize that traditional phenomenology and Dennett are in agreement.

I take the conception of natural phenomenology that I have articulated here to be in harmony with Dennett's own "heterophenomenological" approach, at least in broad outlines. Dennett's aim, as I understand it, is to make the world safe for a science of consciousness. We can think of his perspective – this is how he thinks of it himself – as a framework within which to give *due weight* to what subjects say about their own experience. It is a pity that Dennett is frequently criticized for *failing* to take what subjects say seriously, when his main concern, as I am reading him, is to show that in order to take what they say seriously – in order to take seriously the possibility that they are right when they describe their experience – we must conceive of experience as something subjects can be wrong about. I wholeheartedly endorse Dennett's project in this regard.

Dennett's demand that we seek to *confirm* what subjects say about their experience is sometimes given as evidence that he believes that there is no role, within the theoretical study of the mind, for special, first-person warrant. And this in turn is taken to suggest that somehow he is eliding what is really at stake when we try to study experience. This criticism strikes me as unfair. To challenge first-person authority, or the idea that there is some special first-person warrant that can license theoretically weighty assertions about experience, is not to deny the value, interest and even ineliminability of statements by subjects about experience. Indeed, it is to do just the opposite; it is to respect subjects by taking them on their own terms.

Like Dennett, I doubt that the investigation of human experience makes or could possibly make any special requirements on the first-person perspective. In phenomenology, at least as it emerges on the integrated, natural conception I am outlining here, we are interested in the way things are. What reason is there to think that there are theoretically interesting facts about how things are that can only be expressed (or entertained or thought) in the first person? When we do phenomenology we are interested in the way that perceiving, for example, can be itself a mode of encounter with things and situations. Our subject matter, in this sort of case, is perceiving itself, not our own attitudes or assumptions or impressions of what perceiving is.

I say that phenomenology does not rely on distinctively first-person warrant. But nor does it disallow garden-variety first-person warrant. I learn how many passengers are in the car sitting outside by looking. When I report that there are three passengers, I base my report on personal (first personal) knowledge. Similarly, when I dispute that perception is for us an encounter with a representation of how things might be on the grounds that it is untrue to our experience, I rely on personal knowledge. I judge, after all. But the accidental facts of my own perspective, however much they influence what I take to be the case, do not thereby make up my subject matter.<sup>5</sup> What justifies my statement, if anything does, are intersubjectively evaluable matters of fact such as: to perceive something is to be in a condition that one could not be in if that which one perceives did not exist.

<sup>5</sup> This is related to a broader issue in the theory of intentionality. The fact that my thinking about a particular subject (experience, Zeus) reflects my ideas of the subject does not entail that what I am thinking about is my idea. A fortiori, it doesn't follow that I need to *introspect* in order to get clear about what I am thinking about.

I reject the idea that the first person has a special role to play in phenomenology and I take myself, in making this claim, to be in broad agreement with Dennett. It is worth emphasizing, though, that in rejecting special first-person warrant, I do not mean to be supporting the suggestion, attributed to Dennett, that the *third* person has a privileged role to play in science. As far as I can see, the contrast between first and third person is a grammatical one of no relevance to the issues that ought to concern us. What matters for science is not grammar but subject matter. What a scientific approach to consciousness requires is intersubjectively available subject matter which can be investigated as to truth and falsity.

Even phenomenologists whose own official conception of the domain of phenomenology is close to what I've laid out here seem to think that there is something distinctively first-personal about phenomenology and its project. Marbach (this volume), for example, endorses the idea that experiences can only be known "from the inside." And he explicitly rejects Dennett's idea that a third-person methodology, *by itself*, is able to cover the ground – "all the ground" – of human consciousness. Marbach offers what he says is an "amazingly simple reason" for rejecting Dennett's third-personalism: "What consciousness in itself consists in...is nothing to be discovered in the objective world, period." The only way to know consciousness, says Marbach, the only way even to have concepts concerning consciousness, is through knowing it from the inside.

When Marbach turns to the details of phenomenological analysis, he does not rely, as far as I can tell, on introspection or self-reflection. His analyses presuppose nothing more than that we understand the difference between seeing something (say), and imagining it in its absence, or looking at a real picture of it. But why should one think that that sort of understanding depends on a first-person perspective?

Marbach explains that we only have concepts of experience thanks to the fact that we *have* experience. But this does not show that our concepts of experience are underwritten by special "knowledge from the inside" of what it is like to have experience. It shows only that the ability to think about and reflect on experience depends on knowing what experience is. Now it may be true that we couldn't know what experience is, if we had never had experience. But what does this show? Consider a different kind of example. It is sometimes said, I think rightly, that a blind person cannot know what red is, at least, he or she cannot know redness in the way a sighted person can. That this is true doesn't show that red is a quality in an interior domain, only knowable from the inside. It merely shows that to know what red is you need to make its acquaintance, and that that is something you can't do if you are blind. The point is not so much one about intrinsic qualities of perceptual experience as it is one about the importance of acquaintance. And so for experience itself.

But there is another related point to be made here. Thinking, perceiving, indeed normal living, depend on experience in the sense that we enact experience in doing these different things. Given this, the fact that you need to have experience to know what experience is is underwritten by the idea that any thinking about anything at all depends on our being awake, alert, conscious. But to say that our knowledge presupposes our consciousness, in this sense, is not to say that our warrant itself derives from subjectively revealed features of our internal lives.

I believe that what moves Marbach and other critics is the suspicion that Dennett doesn't really believe in experience at all. The worry is that if a science of human consciousness could be conducted in the third person, then the subject matter of such a science could only be behavior or the brain. I certainly hope that that is not what Dennett believes, for such a view is indefensible. Dennett never claims anything like that.

The crucial point is that it is a mistake to think that the status of behaviorism hangs on what we say about the first person/third person asymmetry. It is true that my reports about what I am thinking, or seeing, or feeling, do not rely on self-observation (of oneself in the mirror, say). But that is not because they rely, in fact, on a kind of inner self-observation. The point, rather, is that thinking a thought, or seeing something, or feeling something, are not themselves episodes of *coming to know* or *learning* how things are with one or in one. They are events in consciousness, yes, but not events of which I am or one is an observer. In contrast, it is never the case that the events in consciousness *of another* are, thereby, events in my consciousness. Knowing of another's suffering, for example, must always rely on some kind of perception of the other. But this doesn't mean that the basis of our attribution to others of feelings or experiences is the observation of their mere behavior, their brute movements, squints and the like.

The first person/third person distinction is supposed to be relevant for it is supposed, mistakenly, that we have a special first person access to our own inner states, and we have a limited, more mediated access to the consciousness of others. For the reasons I have just given, both of these ideas are mistaken. In the sense in which I can perceive another's feelings or experiences, there is *nothing* mediated or indirect about it; and in no sense is it the case that we perceive or have access to our own experiences.

What we are left with then is the fact that there is a difference between seeing something, and someone else's seeing something, there is a difference between suffering a pain, and someone else's suffering of a pain. It is that fact, and nothing else, that gets marked in a distinction between the first and third person

## Experience is not a representation

I mentioned above that there is a tendency, even among cognitive scientists whose commitments regarding the status of phenomenology are methodological, to view descriptions of experience as somehow autonomous. And I suggested that this is why some thinkers find it more plausible to suppose that human phenomenology is misguided (e.g. we think we have picture-like experiences when we do not) than to think that we are mistaken about what our phenomenology is. In particular, I think Dennett himself has made this mistake. He argues that change blindness (among other findings) shows that ordinary visual phenomenology is misguided (Dennett, 1991, 2001, 2002).

I and others (Noë, 2004; Noë et al., 2000; Pessoa, Thompson, & Noë, 1998) have criticized this claim, on the grounds that it confuses widespread theoretical assumptions about visual phenomenology for the teachings of phenomenology itself. It is just not the case that experience is picture-like, that as perceivers we tend to think of our experience as picture like. So no evidence that experience is *not*

picture-like can be used to convict us of being misguided about our own phenomenology.

Dennett's (2001, 2002) rejoinder is that when it comes to phenomenology there is only theory. The illusion in question may be a theorist's illusion, but when it comes to perception "it turns out that we are all theorists" (1998: 754). There just isn't a fact of the matter about the true character of experience, so the worry whether experience strikes us as picture-like or not is empty. If this is the right way to read Dennett, then here he comes perilously close to denying that there is experience.

My view is that if by "experience" you mean something like "the subjective, interior, introspectibly knowable qualia," then Dennett may be exactly right. Certainly I would say that the fact that we find ourselves so strongly compelled to say that there is such a private domain of personal reality may just be a reflection of our Cartesian socialization.

Whether that's right or not, there is another sense we can give to "experience." This latter sense is what we inherit from the phenomenological tradition, and it is one that I want to endorse. On this conception of experience, experience is not internal and it is not private. It belongs to the natural order in the way that sexual reproduction and foraging for food belong to the natural order. To do phenomenology on such a conception of experience is not to look inward, but it is to look outward to the way the world shows up for the person or animal. If we think of experience this way, as a phenomenon of nature, then one thing is very clear: seeing is not picture-like. It doesn't seem to us, when we see, that we represent environmental detail in our heads all at once in the way that detail can be present, all at once, in a picture. I suspect Dennett will agree with me on this. What I am trying to do is to open up a domain for the investigation of experience *as natural*.

It will be objected: can I seriously maintain that the natural scientific investigation of perceiving has a bearing on what we take perceptual phenomenology to be? Yes. A more sensitive phenomenology would have *predicted* that we lack detailed internal representations of the whole scene. This would be so *not* because personal-level reflections on experience give us a miraculous insight into the brain, but because such reflections would show there is no need to expect to find detailed internal representations, for there is nothing we need to call upon them to produce (in the way that we might have thought we needed them to give rise to picture-like experiences). The sort of phenomenological knowledge about experience to which I am alluding is in fact very familiar and always has been to those who have had an interest in paying attention to it, like magicians and theater directors. And by the same token, the realization that (if indeed it is true that) the brain does not produce and update a detailed representation of all environmental detail in real time should give us reason to question whether it is true that it seems to us (as it certainly might) that we have so much picture-like detail in our minds at once when we see.

## Theory and phenomenology

It now turns out, then, that Dennett's point about theory is, in a way, deeper than has been appreciated (at least by me). From the standpoint of integrated natural phenomenology, we reject the suggestion that experience, properly conceived, is a

theoretical confabulation. But in doing so we recognize that experience itself belongs to the world and that, therefore, our concern with experience is a concern with the world. Phenomenology, like our common sense knowledge of physical reality, is always open to and indeed in need of theoretical reevaluation. Moreover, our judgments about our environment, and our relation to the environment, must reflect our background theoretical commitments. In a sense, then, it is true after all that experience is always and everywhere saturated with theory.

Dennett is a Quinean, so he will welcome this characterization of common sense and “common phenomenology” as *continuous with science*. Where Dennett is Quinean, however, I think we should be Wittgensteinian. And this has an important upshot. Wittgenstein saw that conceptual terrains are like cities. There’s no underlying system thanks to which one can understand the topography. To know your way around you need to know the irregular details of your specific locale. There is nothing, in a Wittgensteinian intellectual framework, that corresponds to Quine’s distinction between the peripheral commitments and the more deeply embedded commitments, as if there were *one* network comprising *all our commitments*. So I reject, with Wittgenstein, the idea that our thoughts about our lives, our judgments about the nature of experience, or everyday evaluations of the scenery, have the character of *theoretical statements* such that we could conceive of changing our attitude to them in order to bring about a “better fit” with the facts in the way Quine envisaged. But for all that, and here Quine, and Dennett, are right, there are no sacred cows; so experience itself, if it is to be a domain of knowledge, must be one whose every thesis is vulnerable to criticism in light of what we learn about reality.

### **The possibility of error**

One upshot of the theoretically weighty version of phenomenology that I have pressed in this paper is that, as Dennett has argued, “there is no proposition about one’s own or anybody else’s conscious experience that is immune to error.” I have argued that how things are in experience is never just a matter of how things seem to me. I could no more be immune to error in my statements about experience, my own or someone else’s, than I could be immune to error in my statements about cars.

Of course, to say that there is no immunity to error in my statements about cars or consciousness is not to say that it always makes sense to think that I might be in error about my conscious experience. It is hard to think of a situation in which it makes sense to wonder whether I could be mistaken in my thought that something looks red to me. This is an important observation, but not one that should lead us to think that we enjoy after all a special first-person authority about our own experience or that knowledge of chromatic qualities of experiences is somehow foundational. Not at all. Importantly, the difficulty of imagining error here does not turn on anything special about experience or consciousness. It is just as difficult to make sense of the possibility that I might be mistaken about, say, whether this is a pencil (asked about a pencil in my hand in normal lighting). As Wittgenstein noted, our judgments of this sort are almost always more certain than anything we might call on to verify or justify them. What grounds my judgment about the pencil before me is

not so much *further* judgment (about, e.g. the properties of what I see), as the blunt fact that I can see it. Likewise, what grounds my claim that the thing looks red to me is nothing other than the fact that I understand what red is.

This is a familiar Wittgenteinian theme. Justification, like explanation, comes to an end. To demand a justification, where justifications have run out, may not be to make a clear demand at all. Consider this case. How many chairs are in this room? You look around. You count. You recount. Now you answer: “there are three chairs in this room.” Of course, you may be wrong. That’s a logical possibility. But can you be wrong that you now take there to be three? Not really. Or rather, yes you can be, but only on the assumption that you are confused or that in some way your abilities or your sanity or your cognitive machinery have broken down.

This is a general point about justification. And it applies to the special case where what is in question is how I take my own experience to be, what I take it to be like. I *can* be mistaken about the nature of my experience – about how I, in experience, take things to be. One of my aims in this paper is to show this. But it would be a different kind of mistake for me also to be mistaken about how I *take* my experience to be. I can be wrong then about how things seem but not wrong about how I take things to seem.

Such a position is unavailable to those who think of consciousness as somehow self-verifyingly evident to introspection. But if we conceive of experience as objectual, in the way that I am recommending, then the possibility opens up that we cannot intelligibly wonder whether we are mistaken about how we take experience to be (barring the possibility of cognitive breakdown) even though we can (and as scientists we must) always intelligibly worry whether we are right about experience itself.

This is a background against which to defend Dennett from criticism sharply developed by Schwitzgebel (in his contribution to this volume). Schwitzgebel applauds Dennett’s insistence that there is no infallibility about experience but doubts that this can be made compatible with Dennett’s further insistence that he will grant subjects authoritative infallibility about how things seem to them. Dennett can do this, at least if I am right in the foregoing, for we must distinguish the cases where justification comes to an end from those where it does not. But we are also in a position to see why Dennett feels that he needs to grant subjects the sort of authority that he does. Dennett’s aim, at least as I read him, is to construct a framework within which we can take subjects seriously and at their word when investigating consciousness. So Dennett needs us to think about the context (e.g. the explanatory or justificatory context) in which subjects say what they say to us, in which they offer their opinions on what they experience. It would be outrageous to challenge subjects about whether they were sure that they were speaking their minds when they made reports about how things seem.

Dennett is often criticized for eliminating experience. If I am right, then Dennett in fact works to spell out a strikingly realist picture of experience. Or perhaps it would be better to say, he articulates a conception of experience as fully natural. And that makes experience real enough. Real enough, at least, to sustain a distinction between the appearance and reality *of experience*. This is a distinction that an integrated natural phenomenology must also install, at least if phenomenology is to be a genuine source of knowledge.

**Acknowledgements** Thanks to James Genone, Farid Masrour, Eric Schwitzgebel, Charles Siewert, Evan Thompson and Dan Zahavi for helpful critical discussion.

## References

- Blackmore, S. J., Brelstaff, G., Nelson, K., & Troscianko, T. (1995). Is the richness of our visual world an illusion? Transsaccadic memory for complex scenes. *Perception*, 24, 1075–1081.
- Chalmers, D. J. (1999). First-person methods in the science of consciousness. *Arizona Consciousness Bulletin*.
- Chalmers, D. J. (2006). Perception and the fall from eden. In T. S. Gendler, & J. Hawthorne (Eds.), *Perceptual experience* (pp. 49–125). Oxford: Oxford University Press. Campbell on color.
- Dennett, D. C. (1991). *Consciousness explained*. Boston: Little Brown.
- Dennett, D. C. (2001). Surprise, surprise. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 24, 982.
- Dennett, D. C. (2002). How could I be wrong? How wrong could I be? In A. Noë (Ed.), *Is the visual world a grand illusion*. Thorverton, UK: Academic Imprint.
- Jack, A. I., & Roepstorff, A. (2002). Instropsection and cognitive brain mapping: from stimulus-response to script-report. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 6, 333–339.
- Lutz, A., & Thompson, E. (2003). Neurophenomenology: Integrating subjective experience the brain dynamics in the neuroscience of consciousness. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 10, 31–52.
- Martin, M. G. F. (2004). The limits of self-awareness. *Philosophical Studies*, 120(1–3), 37–89.
- Noë, A. (2004). *Action in perception*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Noë, A., Pessoa, L., & Thompson, E. (2000). Beyond the grand illusion: what change blindness really teaches us about vision. *Visual Cognition*, 7, 93–106.
- O'Regan, J. K. (1992). Solving the “real” mysteries of visual perception: the world as an outside memory. *Canadian Journal of Psychology*, 46, 461–488.
- Pessoa, L., Thompson, E., & Noë, A. (1998). Finding out about filling-in: A guide to perceptual completion for visual science and the philosophy of perception. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 21, 723–802.
- Rensink, R. A. (2000). The dynamic representation of scenes. *Visual Cognition*, 7.
- Simons, D. J., & Levin, D. T. (1997). Change blindness. *Trends in cognitive sciences*, 1(7), 261–267.
- Thompson, E., & Varela, F. J. (2001). Radical embodiment: neural dynamics and consciousness. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 5, 418–425.
- Varela, F. J. (1996). Neurophenomenology: A methodological remedy to the hard problem. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 3, 330–350.
- Zahavi, D. (2004). Husserl's Noema and the Internalism-Externalism Debate. *Inquiry*, 47, 42–66.