

Surprise, surprise

Daniel C. Dennett

Center for Cognitive Studies, Tufts University, Medford, MA 02155.

ddennett@tufts.edu ase.tufts.edu/cogstud/

Abstract: The authors show that some long-standing confusions and problems can be avoided by thinking of perception in terms of sensorimotor contingencies, a close kin to my heterophenomenological approach (Dennett 1991). However, their claim that subjects do not have any commitments about the resolution of their visual fields is belied by the surprise routinely expressed by subjects when this is demonstrated to them.

Many tributaries lead into the view of “sensorimotor contingencies” that **O’Regan & Noë (O&N)** urge on us, as they are at pains to acknowledge. I particularly applaud their citation of Donald M. MacKay (1962; 1967; 1973) and Gilbert Ryle (1949/1990), two thinkers who were ahead of their time, but did manage to inspire some of the other contributors, myself very much included. It is somewhat surprising that this sensible view, which in its outlines is over half a century old, has not long since been acknowledged to be the mainstream position. But as O&N show, there are powerful misleaders that have prevented it from being more widely accepted. What is especially valuable in O&N’s discussion is that they don’t just refute the objections: they diagnose their allure in detail, which is the key (one hopes) to preventing another generation of theorists from falling into these traps.

The value added in their detailed presentation of what it means to recast perceptual processes into terms of sensorimotor contingencies, and in their acute discussions of the problems that beset “qualia” objections, “explanatory gap” objections, and the so-called “hard problem,” takes us well beyond my own views, which are, as

they say, “very similar.” Do they also correct an error of mine? I don’t think so. They claim (in sect. 7.3) that their method differs from my heterophenomenology in offering a better account of subjects’ beliefs about their own experience.

But is it really true that normal perceivers think of their visual fields this way [as in sharp detail and uniform focus from the center out to the periphery]? Do normal perceivers really make this error? We think not. . . . normal perceivers do not have ideological commitments concerning the resolution of the visual field. Rather, they take the world to be solid, dense, detailed and present and they take themselves to be embedded in and thus to have access to the world.

Then why do normal perceivers express such surprise when their attention is drawn to facts about the low resolution (and loss of color vision, etc.) of their visual peripheries? Surprise is a wonderful, dependent variable, and should be used more often in experiments; it is easy to measure and is a telling betrayal of the subject’s *having expected something else*. These expectations are, indeed, an overshooting of the proper expectations of a normally embedded perceiver-agent; people shouldn’t have these expectations, but they do. People are shocked, incredulous, dismayed; they often laugh and shriek when I demonstrate the effects to them for the first time. These behavioral responses are themselves data in good standing, and in need of an explanation. They are also, of course, highly reliable signs of their “ideological commitments” – the very commitments that elsewhere in their article the authors correctly cite as culprits that help explain resistance to their view. They themselves point out several times that the various effects their view predicts are surprising. Surprise is only possible when it upsets belief. I think **O&N** need not try so hard to differ with me. If they don’t like the awkward term, “heterophenomenology,” they needn’t use it, but we are on the same team, and they are doing, well, what I think we should do when we study consciousness empirically.