

This article originally appeared in:

Dennett, Daniel. 1998. Reply to Nicholas Humphrey, Cave Art, Autism, and the Evolution of the Human Mind. *Cambridge Archeological Journal* 8(2): 184-185.

It is not available online from the publisher.

This is Daniel C. Dennett's final draft before publication. It has been modified to reflect the pagination of the published version of the work.

From

**Daniel C. Dennett**

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

The audaciousness of Humphrey's hypothesis shows, by itself, how frail the factual basis is for any interpretation of the Ice Age cave paintings, including most definitely the received interpretation. This negative, or gadfly, part of his project seems to me to be entirely successful: he has indeed shown us 'something important we should not assume about the mental capacities of the cave artists'. Now we must hedge - if not discard - the standard appreciations of these artists, as expressed in the opening quotations from Gombrich, Mithen, Neumann and Deacon. (I am assuming that there is no impressive body of evidence supporting the received view that has for some reason not been deemed worthy of mention till now. It will be interesting to see if the defenders of the received view have such facts in reserve to salvage their case, or whether they will have to fall back on simply citing various eminent opinions in favour of the received view.)

Exposing the speculative nature of the received view does nothing to show that Humphrey's alternative is anything better than a counter-speculation, of course. It is not as if there were only two alternatives, A or B, after all. The meagre evidence is consistent (so far as I can see) with others:

(C) There was a small minority of (proto-)autistic people then, just as there is now, and like autistic savants today, they tended to have special talents (though music and calculation are unlikely to have found any way of manifesting themselves then). Rarely one was discovered to be, like Nadia, an amazing draughtsperson, and was thereupon treated as a sort of shaman or possessed person, and was permitted, or encouraged, to decorate the special places – the caves.

(D) The proto-autists of the Ice Age were the graffitists of their era, covering every available surface with their obsessive drawings. Only those done deep in caves have survived, of course.

(E) The caves in which this art appears were not simple holes in a cliffside; venturing deep into their pitch-dark, stalactite-festooned depths with only a flaming brand for illumination must have been a spectacularly fear-inducing mind-trip. Those who made the trip fortified themselves with rituals and hallucinogenic herbs that induced an altered state that enabled a sort of trance-art that bears striking similarities to the

productions produced (in a somewhat trance-like way) by today's autistic artists. (This is my re-invention, Nicholas Humphrey tells me, of David Lewis-Williams' hypothesis about the sources of recent Bushman rock art: e.g. Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1988.) These three hypotheses are unappealing in various ways, compared to the competition. Humphrey's alternative has the exciting virtue of raising a genuinely revolutionary prospect for our understanding of the evolution of language and mind. The received view has the virtue of being, well, the received view. I suspect that what weighs most heavily on those who resist Humphrey's hypothesis is simply the fact that nobody else thought of it earlier. It would be embarrassing, would it not, for us to acknowledge that the great Gombrich and others simply rushed headlong into their rave reviews and thereby missed a trick, never pausing to consider what must, in hindsight, appear to be not just a logical possibility, but a serious possibility.

One could go on inventing yet further hypotheses, but these are probably enough alternatives to serve as a background for the question: Does either the received view, or Humphrey's view, fit the available evidence better? Much better?

It seems to me that the most critical piece of evidence Humphrey offers for his exciting hypothesis is his claim that 'the art stopped' about 11,000 years ago. This is a truly perplexing fact, on any of the other hypotheses, but do we know this? It is one of those negative claims that I (for one) cannot assess. I do not know how likely it is that we may find a 9000- or 6000-year-old cave next year with remarkably similar art in it. Perhaps others can say why this can be treated as a secure fact. But there is a leftover puzzle for Humphrey (and for the rest of us) even if it is a fact. Have there been no other Nadias over the years? Let modern language descend like a curtain on our artistic/autistic golden age. Shouldn't this curtain provide the background against which early Nadias would stand out, now the rare exceptions rather than the rule? Are there no records of ancient Egyptian or Sumerian or Attic or Carolingian Nadias? If Nadia is an unprecedented twentieth-century phenomenon, this in itself would be a cause for consternation. Surely her condition must have been rarely instanced over the last five thousand years or so of recorded history, but do we have any accounts to put alongside Selfe's?

One can readily imagine ways to explain these perplexing gaps: after the Ice Age, as modern language developed, there were no more Nadias because they were routinely killed in infancy. Or (a possible repair for the received view): about 11,000 years ago our ancestors moved into a mundane, utilitarian phase, in which improving, repairing and decorating their tools captured their creative energies until they had forgotten the aesthetic that had supported the cave art. (No doubt I find this plausible because I went through such a phase myself, abruptly abandoning sculpture - 'the art stopped' - for more than a decade because all my manual creativity was channeled into building, improving, and repairing farming tools and buildings when I took up hobby farming in 1970.)

I confess that I do not want to see the received view triumph. Humphrey's alternative is just the sort of lightning stroke of imagination that can open up a new intellectual territory. (It reminds me of the initially much derided hypothesis of Walter and Luis Alvarez that the Cretaceous extinction was due to a catastrophic meteor.) But wishful thinking is what it will have to remain for the time being, until much more evidence can be assembled, one way or another.