**Establishing Illusionism**

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**ABSTRACT**

In his recent paper on the meta-problem of consciousness, Chalmers claims that illusionism is one of the best reductionist theories available and that it is not incoherent even if it is implausible and empirically false. The paper argues against this. The first part introduces the reasoning leading to illusionism, i.e. it describes the initial conditions and relations among them for establishing it. The second part of the paper argues that strong illusionism is not set up in a satisfactory way and calls the flaw in establishing it the pre-illusion problem.

**Keywords**

Consciousness, illusionism, phenomenal properties, knowledge argument, first-person perspective.

# INTRODUCTION

When we reflect on what it means to be conscious or what it means to undergo a certain qualitative experience we are faced with the following problem: the subjective aspect of the first-person experience is not compatible with physicalism. Traditionally, phenomenality is understood as a cluster of ‘what it’s like’ properties that determine the phenomenal character of a mental state. There is a consensus among most philosophers that the phenomenal states threaten the truth of physicalism. The phenomenal cluster consists of phenomenal properties being, among other things, ineffable, irreducible, intrinsic, direct, subjective, private etc. So, the problem of relating such properties to something purely physical emerges naturally: How does conscious experience emerge from physical processes in the brain? The problem framed this way and called by Chalmers the hard problem poses a great threat to any physicalist strategy [1]. In the contemporary philosophy of mind, the discussion regarding the hard problem has been radicalized to the point that mainstreem traditional physicalism is losing its proponents. We see fewer philosophers who are ready to maintain a compatibilist position, that mental, phenomenal states are real and can be placed within the physicalist ontology. On one hand we have the realists about mental states, who maintain that the placement problem of mental states is indicative of their special nature, namenly thier non-physical nature [1, 2, 7, 11]. Since we cannot fathom how can mental states, if real, be placed within the physical framework, this means that the mental states must somehow be something extra-physical. On the other hand we have philosophers, who realized that one cannot be a realist about mental states and at the same time hold that physicalism is true, and therefore their physicalist position is radicalised to the point that they deny the reality of mental states [4, 5, 9, 10,].

One of these strategies is called illusionism. It does not try to solve the hard problem but to dissolve it by showing that something like phenomenality as described does not exist at all. And, if there is no phenomenality then there is no hard problem of consciousness. Chalmers sees it as the best reductionist approach to the explanation of consciousness [2]. According to his line of thinking, what we are left with is the so-called illusion problem: “Why does it seem that we have phenomenality when we really don’t” [5]. There are several answers to the question of how the illusion of phenomenality[[1]](#footnote-1) arises but they will be left aside [8, 9, 14]. The focus of the paper is on the reasoning leading to illusionism, more precisely, the evaluation of the contemplation process establishing the illusionist position. Firstly, the paper describes how strong illusionism is set up. Secondly, it argues that there is a flaw in setting it up called the pre-illusion problem.

# SETTING-UP ILLUSIONISM

We introduce the illusionistic modifications to phenomenality as uncovered by Frankish through a simulation of the reasoning leading to illusionism [5]:

1. Phenomenality is/seems anomalous.

2. A commitment to an explanatory strategy that relies on existing theoretical resources without major revisions.[[2]](#footnote-2)

∴ (3) Phenomenality does not exist.

The first premise is understood as “phenomenality is anomalous” by strong illusionism and as “phenomenality seems anomalous” by weak illusionism. Weak illusionism claims that the mere possibility that phenomenality is anomalous is already enough and ties it to certain suspected anomalous characteristics that phenomenal states possess, i.e. they are private, ineffable, immediately apprehended, intrinsic, direct. However, some authors think that strong illusionists are right in saying that weak illusionism either collapses into strong illusionism or it cannot do the job that it sets out to do [5]. The second premise emphasizes the importance of relying on existing theoretical resources, its mantra is “first exhaust, then propose” [4, 5]. According to this methodology, one should deal with a problem by, firstly, trying to exhaust all the existing theoretical resources, and, secondly, making radical theoretical revisions (the second step is made only in case of the failure of the first one). The exhaust/propose approach is somewhat straightforward as it is present even in the radical realist camp.[[3]](#footnote-3) Nevertheless, according to strong illusionism, the fact that phenomenality (as standardly characterized) is anomalous and since physicalists (realists about phenomenal states)[[4]](#footnote-4) have a problem explaining phenomenal consciousness, illusionism lends itself as a good radical explanation of phenomenality. To preserve physicalism, it must explain phenomenal states as illusory [3, 5].[[5]](#footnote-5) One of the best course of action in dealing with anomalous phenomena is to declare them illusions, especially if one has good reasons to stay committed to the current explanatory framework provided by physical sciences. This way illusionists do not banish consciousness but modify it to fit the physicalist world. On their view, conscious states do not possess real phenomenality but merely, the so-called, quasi-phenomenality [5]. These quasi-phenomenal properties are functional properties of brain states. We get tricked by consciousness[[6]](#footnote-6) as our introspective self-representation mischaracterizes the physical/functional properties as phenomenal. There really are no phenomenal properties instantiated in our mental states, we only wrongly think that the essential characteristic of consciousness is ‘what it’s like’. The research project for illusionism is, therefore, to explain and identify mechanisms that are responsible for phenomenal misattribution.

As far as the hard problem is concerned, its position is obvious and very straightforward: there is no such problem because there is no true phenomenality.[[7]](#footnote-7) The next step is to explain why then we are prone to phenomenal judgements,[[8]](#footnote-8) why we think that we are phenomenally conscious, and why the illusion of phenomenality is so powerful. There are already several theories that deal with the questions at hand: some identify the underlying firmware of our introspection as a candidate for the misattribution [8, 9, 14], some find the perpetrator in the flawed inferential mechanism [10], and some combine the misaligned introspective mechanism with philosophical prejudices [4] in order to account for the misattribution. Still, what we are concerned with in this paper is not an answer to the question of why the illusion of phenomenality arises but with identifying a mistake in the sheer concept of illusionism. Because the incoherence in conception can be a source for the incoherence in perception, what is called the meta-illusion problem [13], we will analyze the initial establishing conditions of illusionism.

# INCOHERENCE OF ILLUSIONISM

Illusionism sees phenomenality in general to be incompatible with physicalism and, therefore, turns it into quasi-phenomenality that is supposed to align with physicalism. In what follows, we are not going to argue for such functional transformation of phenomenal properties but are going to show that illusionism is built on false initial assumptions. We will introduce the central thesis (T) of our argument first and then work backwards to construct it.

T*: To be justified in denying phenomenality, one must accept the claim that phenomenality exists.*

It is a puzzling situation for illusionism as the following question nicely shows: If there really are no such things as phenomenal states how do we know that they are incompatible with physicalist metaphysics? One of the essential characteristics of phenomenal consciousness is that we must have the first-person perspective ‘what it’s like’ experiences to know that they have a phenomenal character. There is no other way to know what something is phenomenally like but to have a private subjective experience of it. And this is exactly the feature of phenomenality that threatens to reject physicalism once and for all. The famous Knowledge argument [11, 12] is one strong example of how to dismiss physicalism on the ‘what it’s like’ ground. Phenomenal states have a devastating characteristic from the physicalist/illusionist point of view: they are by their nature the first-person perspective states. No amount of careful speculation and imagination can reveal what they are like. This characteristic is what makes them anomalous and it is what gives such a striking power to the hard problem of consciousness. We get to know what phenomenal states are by having ‘what it’s like’ subjective experience of them, and illusionists are no exception. Yet, someone might say that our objection does not affect illusionism since they deny the existence of the phenomenal character of experiences, i.e. there is no ‘quale’ involved in no matter what mental states. It is clear why illusionists have to refuse it, but the question is how can they dismiss something, i.e. ‘what it’s like’, without experiencing it? Given the nature of phenomenal states, they cannot. And does not then having the subjective qualitative experience mean that something like phenomenality must exist before it is denied? Given the nature of phenomenal states, it must. We call this the pre-illusion problem. Let us now recapitulate the story of how someone becomes an illusionist. First, she has something like phenomenal experience whose nature is, in the light of physicalism, anomalous, which generates the hard problem. Second, since she wants to keep the theoretical advantages of the physicalist explanatory repertoire, the only natural thing to do seems to reject the existence of phenomenality and to become the illusionist. But to deny phenomenality illusionists must have the first-person perspective experience of it, they must be subjectively acquainted with it. How else would they know that phenomenality is anomalous? Illusionists cannot say that phenomenal states are not revealed through phenomenal experience, or that they are not tied to the first-person perspective experience since the elimination of their supposed properties undermines the case for strong illusionism: if phenomenal states do not have these characteristics then they are not anomalous and the motivation for illusionism is lost. But what is in the first place that is anomalous? It seems that to conceptualize the anomalous nature of phenomenal experience one must first have it: we cannot conceptualize the phenomenal character of mental states in any other way, and this is exactly what makes phenomenality anomalous. Moreover, why would physicalists deny the existence of phenomenality if it did not have the problematic ‘what it’s like properties’ that makes it anomalous? It turns out that strong illusionism is left with the catch-22 situation:[[9]](#footnote-9) on the one hand it refuses the existence of phenomenal states, but on the other hand it accepts it to be justified in denying them. However, we are not justified to reject something that exists, therefore strong illusionism, as it is set up now, is not a well-founded theory.

# CONCLUSION

We introduced the pre-illusion problem as a real threat to the truth of illusionism because it prevents it from being established in the first place. It shows that the argumentation leading to a creation of illusionism is flawed: to know that phenomenal properties are anomalous requires to be subjectively familiar with them, i.e. to experience their ‘what it’s like’ from the first-person perspective, a condition that is not met by illusionism. The very anomalous nature of phenomenal properties, the one that is incompatible with physicalism, is not a reflective by-product of our metaphysical imagination but something that we experience. Illusionism can be seen as a good dialectical position; it recognizes the metaphysical allure of phenomenality and tries to save physicalism by turning the phenomenal nature of mental states into the functional one. Unfortunately, it seems that to get to know the anomalous nature of phenomenal properties we must undergo qualitative private experiences, which renders a denial of phenomenality by illusionists impossible. This means trouble, so the pre-illusion problem must be solved if they want their theory to be plausibly established at all.

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1. There are no instantiated phenomenal properties. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Major theoretical revision would be some metaphysical modification of physicalism to accommodate phenomenal consciousness, e.g. panpsychism, where consciousness is a fundamental property of matter. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Those who are already making radical theoretical revisions and are modifying the existing metaphysics in a nonphysical way simply follow the described methodology: physicalism is exhausted so bring out some new, i.e. nonphysical, explanation of phenomenality. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. E.g. phenomenal concepts strategy [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The analogy drawn here is the one with paranormal powers, such as telekinesis. The phenomenon of telekinesis is anomalous to our scientific understanding of the world; thus, we can modify the naturalistic framework to accommodate telekinesis or we explain it away as an illusion. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Consciousness can be understood in functionalist terms, e.g. access consciousness, where a mental state is not qualitatively present to the organism, but it is generally available to it**.**  [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In other words, phenomenal consciousness does not need to be explained since it does not exist, i.e. there is no phenomenal consciousness instantiated in our world. This is the so-called meta-approach (denying or questioning the hard problem) to the explanation of consciousness within the physicalist framework. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Chalmers calls them phenomenal reports [2]. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Catch-22 is a situation from which an individual cannot escape because of contradictory rules. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)