

Establishing Illusionism: a Rejection

Abstract

In his recent paper on the meta-problem of consciousness, Chalmers (2018) 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 it. The first part introduces the reasoning leading to strong 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*. The third part shows that the existing defense of strong illusionism does not save it from the pre-illusion problem. The fourth part of the paper outlines two strategies to fight the pre-illusion problem and indicates that they fail to do it.

Keywords: consciousness, illusionism, phenomenal properties, knowledge argument, first-person perspective.

0 Introduction: The Illusion of Consciousness

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. The phenomenal states possess a cluster of ‘what it’s like’ properties that determine the phenomenal character of that 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? Or, as T. H. Huxley has famously put it: “How it is that anything so remarkable as a state of consciousness comes about as a result of irritating nervous tissue, is just as unaccountable as the appearance of the djinn when Aladdin rubbed his lamp in the story.” (Huxley, 1866/1986: 193) The problem framed this way and called by Chalmers (1996) *the hard problem* poses a great threat to any physicalist strategy while dealing with consciousness.

One of these strategies is called *illusionism*.¹ 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 (2018) sees it as the best reductionist approach to the explanation of consciousness. 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” (Frankish, 2016: 27). There are several answers to the question of how the illusion of phenomenality arises (e.g. Graziano, 2013; Humphrey, 2011; Pereboom, 2011) but they will be left aside. 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*. Thirdly, it confronts the pre-illusion problem

¹ The term illusionism always refers to strong illusionism unless stated otherwise.

with the existing defense of illusionism to show that the existing defense does not keep up with the argument for the flaw. And, fourthly, the paper sketches two approaches to combat the pre-illusion problem and shows that they are not up to the task.

1 Setting-up Illusionism

The chapter introduces the illusionistic modifications to phenomenality as uncovered by Frankish (2016) through a simulation of the reasoning leading to illusionism:

1. Phenomenality is/seems anomalous.
 2. A commitment to an explanatory strategy that relies on existing theoretical resources without major revisions.
- ∴ (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 (Frankish, 2016: 15).

The second premise emphasizes the importance of relying on existing theoretical resources, its mantra is “first exhaust, then propose” (Dennett, 1991; Frankish, 2016). According to the

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.²

Nevertheless, according to strong illusionism, the fact that phenomenality (as standardly characterized) is anomalous and the fact that not yet all physicalist explanations have been exhausted implies that phenomenality itself is an illusion (Dennett, 1991; Frankish, 2016; Garfield, 2015).³ The only 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 (Frankish, 2016: 15). These quasi-phenomenal properties are functional properties of brain states. We get tricked by consciousness 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.

² Those who are already making radical theoretical revisions and are modifying the existing metaphysics in a non-physical way simply follow the described methodology: physicalism is exhausted so bring out some new, i.e. non-physical, explanation of phenomenality.

³ The analogy drawn here is the one with paranormal powers, such as telekinesis.

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.⁴ The next step is to explain why then we are prone to phenomenal judgements,⁵ 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 (Graziano, 2013; Humphrey, 2016; Pereboom, 2016), some find the perpetrator in the flawed inferential mechanism (Rey, 2016), and some combine the misaligned introspective mechanism with philosophical prejudices (Dennett, 2005) 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* (Kammerer, 2017), we will first analyze the initial establishing conditions of illusionism.

2 Flaw in Initial Establishing Conditions for Illusionism

Illusionism sees phenomenality in general to be incompatible with physicalism and, therefore, turns it into quasi-phenomenality that is supposed to align it with physicalism. In what follows, we are not going to argue for such functional transformation of phenomenal properties but are

⁴ 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.

⁵ Chalmers calls them *phenomenal reports* (Chalmers, 2018:7).

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* (Jackson, 1982, 1986) is one strong example of how to dismiss physicalism on the 'what it's like' ground.

However, it is clear that the obvious answer to the question how we know what something is phenomenally like that rests on a speculative imagination of what phenomenal states are like and on a deduction of a fact that they are anomalous from it is ruled out. As mentioned before, 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 'qualia' 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 the 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*:⁶ 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. It follows that its dissolution of the hard problem begs the question.

3 The Existing Defense of Illusionism and the Pre-Illusion Problem

Let us look at Frankish’s defense of illusionism, i.e. at two of his answers to two common objections and see if it holds up to our argument.

(i) Denying the direct acquaintance theory

For many philosophers (Goff, 2017; Chalmers, 1996; Strawson, 2006) phenomenal states are data and not theoretical constructs and as such their existence cannot be questioned. Frankish agrees to some degree since phenomenal properties can be thought of as data if viewed as intentional objects: “Our introspective reports define a notional introspective world which is as we take it to be” (Frankish, 2016: 30). It means that phenomenal properties do not exist or are not instantiated in the world. Illusionists agree that we have a strong inclination to accept phenomenality as an introspective givenness but the commitment to the conservative explanatory strategy rules out everything that conflicts with the theory. Illusionists stress out the importance of the idea that the best explanation might be the one that challenges the reliability of our introspective reports

⁶ Catch-22 is a situation from which an individual cannot escape because of contradictory rules.

about phenomenal consciousness. Since explaining consciousness is such an elusive task it seems reasonable to question the reliability of the very faculties that are responsible for the reports. This goes against the acquaintance theory as held by Chalmers (1996, 2003). It claims that we have a special epistemic direct access to the data of phenomenal consciousness which suspends any possibility of error. Frankish attacks the acquaintance theory by pointing out that it makes phenomenality psychologically inert: being directly acquainted with phenomenality is not enough to talk or think about it, we need to form mental representations in order to do that, but they could be fallible. The acquaintance theory carries a heavy metaphysical baggage since it is hard to see how physical properties could be revealed to us unless they are extra-physical (Frankish, 2016: 30).

Given our argument, stripping phenomenality of its anomalous properties (being directly acquainted is one of the constitutive properties of phenomenality which is denied by Frankish in the above introduced defense of illusionism) works against the illusionist project and not for it. The more we de-mystify phenomenality the more we lose coherent grounds and a motivation to reject it in the first place. If we are not directly acquainted with the data of phenomenal consciousness then the anomalous nature of phenomenal consciousness deflates, and if the anomalous nature of phenomenal consciousness deflates we lose the starting motivation for denying its existence.

(ii) Introspective vs. intrinsic subjectivity

One of the core characteristics of phenomenality is 'what it's like' of (certain) mental states. The subjective character is also one of the anomalous properties of phenomenality, so illusionists have to get rid of it as well. Frankish makes a distinction between *introspective subjectivity* and

intrinsic subjectivity (Frankish, 2016: 31–32). Introspective subjectivity is a misleading focal point generated by our representational mechanisms. This allows us to talk about ‘what it’s like’ and misleads us to think that what really allows us to talk about ‘what it’s like’ is something called intrinsic subjectivity. The latter is the anomalous part of phenomenality, it is something that is not generated by our representations but simply arises from us being what we are (Frankish, 2016: 31). According to Frankish, the ‘what it’s like’ talk is possible because of introspective subjectivity, i.e. because the mechanisms that give rise to it misrepresent it as intrinsic subjectivity.

But it seems that to identify something as misrepresenting something else, first we must have a sense of what that something else is. How do we know what intrinsic subjectivity is if we do not have it? And if we do not have it how are we justified in saying that there is a misrepresentation involved in the first place? It seems that the talk of intrinsic subjectivity is impossible since to talk about it means to have a sense of what it is. Therefore, inferring the metaphysical consequences of intrinsic subjectivity that are not compatible with physicalism requires having some knowledge about what intrinsic subjectivity is. This gives rise to the following question: where did the knowledge about intrinsic subjectivity come from? The answer cannot be that it came from other philosophers because they derived the metaphysical consequences from the knowledge about ‘what it’s like’, something that illusionism rejects tout court.

4 Combating the Pre-Illusion Problem

One might argue that trying to overcome the incoherence in establishing conditions can strengthen the illusionist approach and make it even more attractive to pursue. The answer to

the pre-illusion problem might also give rise to answers to the meta-problem of illusion. As Kammerer observes, we are having a tough time imagining what it means for consciousness to be an illusion (Kammerer, 2018). Even if illusionism were true it would still seem highly implausible: we have a hard time adopting a scenario that pictures our feelings of rich inner lives as illusory. Explaining the weird epistemic situation means giving an answer to Kammerer's meta-problem of illusion.

Another answer to the pre-illusion problem leads to weak illusionism. One might simply reject the claim that phenomenality is anomalous. This approach rests on the objective that it is merely the anomalous nature of phenomenality that is an illusion but not phenomenality itself. However, such a compatibilist approach that combines the idea that the hard problem is a pseudo-problem (Carruthers and Schier, 2014) with the idea that phenomenality is metaphysically neutral (Benovsky, 2013) does not warrant extra-physical modifications. Given that, compatibilists must explain why phenomenality seems anomalous and they must accept the existence of the explanatory gap. Still, accepting all that mysterianism is just around the corner, which makes the compatibilism from a dialectical point of view neither useful nor inviting.

5 Conclusion

We introduced the pre-illusion problem as a real threat to the truth of strong 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. 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. Strong illusionism can be seen a good polemical 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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