

What is Illusionism?

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Abstract: *In recent years, the name “illusionism” has been widely adopted for the view that consciousness does not involve awareness of special “phenomenal” properties and that belief in such properties is due to an introspective illusion. The name has served to focus attention on the position and its attractions, but it has also misled some people about what illusionists believe. This paper aims to clarify the situation. It explains how illusionists conceive of consciousness, what exactly it is they claim to be illusory, and why they talk of illusion rather than theoretical error.*

1. Introduction

Illusionism is a theory of consciousness, or, more accurately, a broad theoretical approach to consciousness. It is not a new approach; forms of it have been defended by (among others) Brian Farrell, Paul Feyerabend, Nicholas Humphrey, Derk Pereboom, Ullin Place, Georges Rey, Richard Rorty, Alf Ross, and, pre-eminently, Daniel Dennett (e.g., Dennett, 1988, 1991, 2005; Farrell, 1950; Feyerabend, 1963; Humphrey, 2011; Pereboom, 2011; Place, 1956; Rey, 1995; Rorty, 1965; Ross, 1941).¹ But until recently the position did not have an accepted name. Picking up on analogies in Dennett's work, I proposed the term “illusionism” in a 2016 article (Frankish, 2016a). The term has caught on, helping to focus attention on the position and its attractions. But – like any simple label – the name has its disadvantages, and it has misled some people about what illusionists believe. In this piece, I shall clarify what illusionism claims and explain why I still think that “illusionism” is a good name for the position.

2. Some questions about illusionism

Illusionism comprises two theses and a research programme. The first thesis is the rejection of a conception of consciousness which I shall refer to as *phenomenal realism*. This is the view that conscious experiences are marked by the presence of introspectable mental properties of a certain kind (“phenomenal properties” or “qualia”), which make it “like something” to undergo them.

¹ More recent defenders of illusionist positions include Andy Clark, Gary Drescher, Brian Fiala, Jay Garfield, Michael Graziano, Francois Kammerer, Amber Ross, Wolfgang Schwarz, Daniel Shabasson, and James Tartaglia (see, e.g., Clark, 2018; Drescher, 2019; Fiala, Arico, and Nichols, 2011; Garfield, 2016; Graziano, 2013; Kammerer, 2021; Ross, 2016; Schwarz, 2019; Shabasson, 2022; Tartaglia, 2013).

Illusionists deny that such properties exist. The second thesis is a concession to phenomenal realists. It is that phenomenal properties *seem* to exist, in some sense of “seem”. They are analogous to perceptual illusions. The research programme is an invitation to develop alternative conceptions of consciousness and to explain why phenomenal realism has proved so seductive – that is, to explain how and why the illusion arises.

Note that I did not say that consciousness itself is illusory, only that phenomenal properties are. Those who think of consciousness as constituted by phenomenal properties will say that this is equivalent to denying consciousness itself, and in their sense of the term it is indeed that. But the objection assumes that there is no other way of thinking of consciousness, and so begs the question at issue. Even if phenomenal realism were universally endorsed, it would be open to illusionists to propose a revisionary view of consciousness rather than eliminating the notion altogether. Such conceptual revisions are common in the history of science.

This brief summary raises several questions, relating mainly to the first two elements. First, what do I mean by “consciousness”? As I have framed it, the disagreement between illusionists and phenomenal realists is over the nature of consciousness. This presumes a conception of consciousness that is neutral between the two sides. What is this conception? Second, what exactly is it that illusionists claim to be illusory? I used the terms “phenomenal properties” and “qualia”, but these terms are used in more than one sense, and “qualia” in particular often carries strong theoretical commitments. Do illusionists deny phenomenal properties only in a theoretically loaded sense, or do they deny them tout court? Third, why say that phenomenal properties are illusory rather than non-existent or uninstantiated? In what sense do phenomenal properties *seem* to exist? Are illusionists claiming that our introspective systems are hard-wired to represent experiences as having phenomenal properties in the way our visual systems are hard-wired to generate certain optical illusions?

I shall address these questions in the following sections, outlining what I think an illusionist should say in response. I shall focus on clarifying what the illusionist view is and shall not attempt to defend the view or to propose a specific illusionist theory of consciousness. I do not presume to speak for everyone in the illusionist camp, but I hope that what I say will be congenial to most of them. It will be couched in broad terms which leave plenty of scope for debate over the details.

3. What do illusionists mean by “consciousness”?

There is a natural sense in which illusionists can affirm the reality of

consciousness. They can identify consciousness with the state we enter when we awake from deep sleep or anaesthesia and become perceptually engaged with our environment and our own bodies. This state is sometimes called “creature consciousness”, since it is a state of creatures as a whole (a “personal-level” state). In this sense, consciousness consists in having experiences, understood in an everyday sense to include states of attentively perceiving, feeling, imagining, remembering, and so on. We can reliably recognize such states when they occur in ourselves and in others, and we can affirm their reality without committing to any specific theory of what they involve. Compare how a person might identify stars and affirm their reality while having no idea of what stars really are – without knowing whether they are holes in the sky or gigantic plasma spheres billions of miles away. In this sense, “experience” is topic neutral, both ontologically and between different conceptions of what experience involves.

When I say that we can recognize our experiences, I mean that we can do so in an apparently direct, introspective way, without explicit theorizing at a personal level. However, I do not assume any specific account of *how* we do this – of the subpersonal processes involved – or of what properties introspection is sensitive to. (Note, too, that the ability to recognize experiences directly, without explicit theorizing, is not restricted to the first-person case; often, we can just *see* that another person is, for example, happy or in pain.) Further, I do not assume that introspection provides us with any privileged insight into the nature of the states it tracks. I may introspectively recognize that I am in a certain experience state (say, smelling strawberries) and having certain associated reactions (remembering last summer, feeling hungry, wondering if there are strawberries in the fridge), but have no clue as to the nature of the state itself. For illusionists, the idea that introspection reveals the nature of the properties it tracks is all part of the illusion.

Of course, this way of thinking of consciousness is not completely neutral theoretically. It employs folk-psychological concepts (of experience and of specific experience types), which assign experiences a certain role in guiding belief and behaviour. This folk-psychological framework may need to be refined, revised, or even replaced as cognitive science develops, but it offers a rough-and-ready grip on the explananda for psychological theorizing, and phenomenal realists are unlikely to reject it.

Moreover, phenomenal realists and illusionists can agree on much. They can agree that experiences have representational content and play functional roles, guiding belief formation and evoking a host of other psychological reactions. (When I speak of *psychological* states, processes, and reactions, I mean mental ones that can be characterized in purely functional terms.) Both groups

can also agree that some experiences evoke psychological responses that are strongly aversive, and that we have an ethical obligation to avoid causing creatures to undergo such experiences. None of these claims presupposes any specific view of what experiences are. Similarly, both sides can agree that it is meaningful to talk about what our experiences are *like* – that a pain is unbearable, say, or a smell evocative. Illusionists do not deny the usefulness of such talk, differing from phenomenal realists only in how they interpret it. I shall say more about this later.

In the sense just outlined, consciousness is a property of creatures: it is the undergoing of certain personal-level mental states. But it is also common to think of consciousness as a property of those mental states themselves – the property in virtue of which they are conscious. Can illusionists affirm the reality of such a property? In a loose way they can. They can do so by contrasting experiences in the sense just described with episodes of subliminal or nonconscious perception, in which a stimulus is registered by sensory systems and has some appropriate psychological effects but cannot be introspectively detected and reported.² Such episodes are known to occur under experimental conditions and in disorders such as blindsight. Then we can use “consciousness” for whatever property it is that experiences proper possess and these latter episodes lack. Of course, this assumes that there is a common distinguishing property, and this assumption may turn out to be incorrect. Experiences form a hugely heterogeneous class, and they may not divide cleanly into two subgroups, conscious and nonconscious, marked by the presence or absence of a single, if complex, feature. But the assumption affords a starting point for theorizing. As cognitive science progresses, we shall probably need to distinguish different types of consciousness and different grades of each, replacing the binary notion of conscious and nonconscious with a multi-dimensional space of experience state types.

To sum up: there is a deflationary notion of consciousness that does not assume the truth of either phenomenal realism or illusionism and which can serve as a neutral explanandum for theories of consciousness. This way of thinking of consciousness is rooted in folk-psychological practice, and it is compatible with talking about what experience is like and assigning ethical significance to consciousness. It is a loose notion, and for scientific purposes it may be no more than a placeholder till better motivated concepts are available, but it is in no worse shape than other folk-psychological notions.

² Note that I say *cannot* be introspectively detected, rather than *is not* introspectively detected, as might happen during habitual activity. I do not think it is helpful to define consciousness in terms of actual introspective detection at a personal level, though a distinction between conscious states that are, and are not, so detected might be useful for some theoretical purposes.

Of course, phenomenal realists think that we can already make an important distinction between types of state consciousness. They hold that, while there are functional differences between mental states that are and are not conscious, introspection allows us to identify another form of state consciousness, *phenomenal consciousness*, which consists in the presence of phenomenal properties and is central to our everyday notion of experience. It is the wisdom of this move that illusionists challenge. This is a good moment to turn to our second question and clarify what it is that illusionists deny.

4. What do illusionists deny?

I said that illusionists reject phenomenal realism. But what exactly do I mean by that? I'll begin by sketching a basic form of phenomenal realism, which is endorsed by the bulk of phenomenal realists, including those that are physicalists.

It goes like this. Experiences possess introspectable mental properties corresponding to the perceptible properties of things in the world. The experience of seeing something yellow has a mental yellow property, the experience of smelling coffee has a mental coffee-smell property, the experience of pain in one's toe has a mental toe-pain property, and so on. These mental properties (*phenomenal* properties) constitute the subjective "feel" of the experience – what it's like to see yellow, smell coffee, feel pain in one's toe, and so on, and they supply something that is missing from the non-mental world. (Considered as non-mental features, colours are dispositions to reflect or emit certain kinds of electromagnetic radiation, smells concentrations of odour molecules, pains patterns of tissue damage.)³ Phenomenal properties are often described as *intrinsic* features of experience, which are at least conceptually distinct from functional and representational ones, even if they happen to play representational and functional roles. (Block likens them to paint, which has an intrinsic character independent of what it represents; Block, 2003.)⁴ They have a substantive nature – an identity or character – which is clearly revealed to

³ This is of course vastly oversimplified. For example, to get a sense of the complexity and context-relativity of the physical conditions that smell tracks, see Barwich, 2020.

⁴ Here I am thinking of representational properties as extrinsic ones, which are grounded in causal relations to worldly objects and other mental states. It is true that many phenomenal realists think of phenomenal properties as representational in another way. They think of them as inherently presenting things as being a certain way and as constituting intentional properties (the "phenomenal intentionality theory"; for a survey, see Bourget and Mendelovici, 2019). However, even these theorists typically make at least a conceptual distinction between the phenomenal and intentional aspects of experience – between its feel and its aboutness.

attentive introspection. However, this nature resists characterization in standard scientific terms (essentially, structural and dynamical ones), and phenomenal properties present a deep explanatory problem for cognitive science (a *hard problem*, or at least an *explanatory gap*).⁵

Some phenomenal realists endorse further claims about phenomenal properties, including that they are knowable only from the first-person perspective (private); that they are known in an immediate way, with a special degree of completeness and certainty (via direct acquaintance); that they are indescribable in non-relational terms (ineffable), and that they are non-physical. Non-physicalist realists, such as Chalmers and Goff, typically endorse versions of these, though physicalist ones, such as Block, typically do not (see, e.g., Block, 2003; Chalmers, 1996, 2010; Goff, 2017).

Adding such claims generates increasingly stronger versions of phenomenal realism, corresponding to increasingly weaker versions of illusionism, formed by denying them. When I speak of *illusionism* tout court, I mean a strong version, which rejects even basic phenomenal realism. Illusionists deny that we are introspectively aware of anything that fits even the basic profile of phenomenal properties. Illusionism thus stands in opposition to all non-physicalist theories of consciousness, including panpsychism, as well as to physicalist theories that posit brute identities between phenomenal and physical properties.⁶

I want to stress that illusionists do not deny that we are sensitive to our own experiences (understood in the neutral way as personal-level mental states). As I noted, we can recognize our experiences introspectively, and we talk in an everyday way about what they are like – whether an experience was pleasant, for example. We are able to do this, I assume, because our brains have self-monitoring systems, which are sensitive to features of our experiences and generate reactions to them, including judgements about their phenomenal properties. But – illusionists maintain – the properties to which these systems are sensitive are not the ones posited by phenomenal realists. They are not distinct from functional and representational properties, are not clearly revealed to introspection, do not resist scientific description, do not present a deep explanatory problem, and, a fortiori, do not possess any of the further features

⁵ Because they conceive of phenomenal properties as distinct from all psychological functions, phenomenal realists find it coherent to suppose that inanimate objects might be conscious, and thus that some form of panpsychism might be true. It is this *depsychologization* of consciousness that illusionists resist (Frankish, 2021).

⁶ It is often said that Dennett's case against qualia turns on strong claims about their nature. But while Dennett does note such claims at the start of his 1988 paper, he does not rely heavily on them, focussing instead on showing that facts about qualia would be inscrutable even from the first-person perspective (Dennett, 1988).

sometimes attributed to phenomenal properties or qualia. In so far as they seem otherwise, this is because our self-monitoring systems, or the cognitive systems that consume their outputs, misrepresent them.

The upshot is that our judgements about the phenomenal properties of our experiences are false, systematically distorting neural reality. It does not follow that they are idle, however. Distorted representations may still carry useful information; think, for example, of a caricature portrait. Indeed, for some purposes a distorted representation may be more effective than an accurate one (think of a caricature again). And by interpreting phenomenal judgements in the light of cognitive theory we may be able to construct a more accurate picture of what is occurring. Think of how we might use optical theory to correct a perceptual judgement that a partially submerged stick is bent.

I have dubbed the properties to which our self-monitoring systems are sensitive *quasi-phenomenal properties* (Frankish, 2016a).⁷ “Quasi-phenomenal” is a theoretical term; it refers to whatever properties phenomenal judgements ultimately track. Introspection itself, considered as a personal-level process, may reveal very little about these properties. Compare how we can use colour terms in an objective way, to refer to whatever worldly properties our perceptual colour judgements track, without having any idea what those properties really are. (This definition officially allows that quasi-phenomenal properties might turn out to be phenomenal ones, but illusionists will of course discount that possibility.) It is an empirical question what quasi-phenomenal properties actually are. There are plenty of candidates, including aspects of sensory processing, features of attentional control, and the wider cognitive effects of sensory information. Specific illusionist theories will offer different accounts. My own hunch is that introspection tracks reactive aspects of experience and binds the information to the relevant perceptual contents, so that we are simultaneously aware both of what we are perceiving and of what psychological impact the perceived features are making upon us.

So far, I have focussed on a basic version of phenomenal realism, which omits strong theoretical claims. But might there be an even more basic version? Phenomenal properties are supposed to constitute the subjective feel of experience – *what it's like* to see yellow, smell coffee, and so on. Can't we focus on that and identify a minimal notion of phenomenal consciousness, which consists in possession of experiences that are *like something* for the subject? Do illusionists say that even this is illusory?

We can certainly talk meaningfully about what our experiences are like. The question is what such talk does. The answer, I think, is that it does many

⁷ I have also used the term “zero qualia” (Frankish, 2012).

different things. Some of it reports the content of experience; if you ask a person what their visual experience is like right now, chances are they will simply tell you what they can see. Other what-it-is-like talk reports psychological reactions to experience; asked what it was like to witness an accident, I may reply that it was upsetting and brought back traumatic memories. In a similar vein, we may use such talk to gesture in an inchoate way at the overall impression an event makes on us; a fan may say that they cannot tell you what it was like to meet their hero. Illusionists have no problem with such usages. They do not deny that experiences have representational content and psychological effects, including ones that are not easy (though not impossible) to articulate, and they can allow that we have some introspective access to facts about these features.

It is only when what-it-is-like talk is used to refer to something *distinct* from representational contents and psychological effects that it poses any question for the illusionist. This is, in fact, how it is typically used in the philosophical literature. Typically, we are asked to consider simple, contextless perceptual events – seeing yellow, smelling coffee, feeling toe pain – and to focus on what the experience is like *in itself*, on its what-it-is-likeness. We are invited to focus on (say) yellow experience, not as an indicator of worldly yellowness, nor as a state with certain characteristic psychological effects, but as a state with its own subjective character. It is hard to see what such talk could be directing us to if not to introspectable properties that are intrinsic, non-functional, and non-representational – that is, to phenomenal properties. And if that is what it is doing, then illusionists will of course say that it fails to pick out such properties, though it may carry information about other, non-phenomenal aspects of experience tracked by our self-monitoring systems.

In parallel, illusionists may propose that we reconceptualize this type of what-it-is-like talk. Instead of taking it to pick out intrinsic phenomenal properties of experience, they may say that we should think of it as having a looser, more metaphorical function. I myself propose that we construe it as providing an overall assessment of the psychological significance of an experience, including its content and the psychological responses it evokes (beliefs, desires, intentions, emotions, memories, associations, and so on) (Frankish, 2020). Compare talk about what a holiday was like. In telling you what my holiday was like, I am not reporting a perceptible property of the event as a whole but giving a summative evaluation of the events composing it and how they affected me.

Could there be a third thing that what-it-is-like talk picks out, distinct both from content and reactions on the one hand and from intrinsic phenomenal properties on the other? I can't see what it might be, and the onus is on those

who can to provide us with some account of it, so that illusionists can decide what view to take. A bare appeal to introspection won't suffice here, since illusionism involves deep scepticism about the reliability of introspection. Unless something more substantive is provided, illusionists should lump what-it-is-like properties in with phenomenal properties and deny their existence.⁸

5. Why talk of illusion?

Why say that phenomenal properties are illusory? After all, I started off by presenting phenomenal realism and illusionism as rival theories of what consciousness is. So why do I not simply say that phenomenal properties are misconceived theoretical posits and propose to eliminate them? Why speak of illusion rather than error?

The answer is that I want to concede to realists that phenomenal properties *seem* to exist. A thing seems to exist for a person if the person is undergoing psychological effects that are similar to those an encounter with the thing would produce and that at least *incline* them to believe that the thing does exist. (Phenomenal realists will say that phenomenal properties accompany these psychological effects, but illusionists will of course deny that; seeming need not be *phenomenal* seeming. There is thus no circularity in claiming that phenomenal properties seem to exist.) When we introspect our experiences, I suggest, we undergo psychological effects that are similar to those that phenomenal properties would produce and that incline us to believe that such

⁸ Eric Schwitzgebel has attempted to define a minimal notion of phenomenal consciousness that might be thought to meet the challenge posed in this paragraph (Schwitzgebel, 2016). He asks us to reflect on various examples of states that are conscious and states that are not, and then to focus on “the most folk-psychologically obvious thing or feature” (p. 229) present in the positive cases and absent in the negative ones – “the *obvious* feature, the thing that kind of smacks you in the face when you think about the cases” (p. 230). This feature, he says, is phenomenal consciousness. In a reply to Schwitzgebel, I suggested that illusionists need not deny the existence of consciousness in this sense, since the feature in question might be the property of disposing us to make phenomenal judgements, and illusionists agree that this property is real (Frankish, 2016b). I now think this was a mistake on my part. The property that disposes us to make phenomenal judgments may not be introspectively obvious at all. One might infer its presence from the fact that one is disposed to make phenomenal judgements, without having any idea of what it is (without it introspectively smacking one in the face). In fact, what Schwitzgebel's method picks out is, I think, simply phenomenality in the standard realist sense – a property of experience that resists analysis in representational/functional terms. This is evident from the fact that Schwitzgebel insists that the target feature should meet the *wonderfulness condition*: it should “retain at least a superficial air of mystery and epistemic difficulty, rather than collapsing immediately into something as straightforwardly deflationary as dispositions to verbal report, or functional ‘access consciousness’” (p. 225). Illusionists grant that experiences seem to possess such a feature, but they deny that the feature is real. The appearance of wonderfulness is real enough, but it is a consequence of our introspective limitations.

properties exist. Notice that I say “similar to” and “incline”; further conditions may have to be met in order for the belief in phenomenal realism to be generated, including possession of relevant concepts, intuition pumps, and philosophical theory (Frankish, 2016b). Note, too, that I speak of illusion, rather than hallucination, since I assume that the seemings involved are misrepresentations of real things (quasi-phenomenal properties), rather than aberrant representations with no real object at all. If introspection is an evolved psychological process, like perception, then the idea that we are subject to introspective illusions should be no more surprising than the idea that we are subject to optical ones.

This is the positive aspect of illusionism. The evidence for it is simply that many people are firmly convinced that introspection directly acquaints them with phenomenal properties. If they are wrong about this, then they are in the grip of an introspective illusion of some kind, and, assuming they do not differ radically from the rest of the population, this suggests that there are features of human introspection which at least dispose humans to conceptualize its deliverances in the phenomenal realist way.

This leaves plenty of scope for construction of more specific illusionist theories, which attempt to identify the nature of the introspective misrepresentation involved and the conditions under which it generates full-blown belief in phenomenal properties. I shall not attempt such theory construction here but merely make a few preliminary remarks.⁹

An illusionist theory will, I assume, have at least two components: first, an account of how introspective systems monitor and model experience, and, second, an account of how the outputs of these systems are processed by other systems, including belief-forming ones. For talk of illusion to be appropriate, there must be systematic distortion at the former level; introspective systems must model the neural processes of experience in a way that is radically simplified and schematic. Dennett has proposed a useful analogy here, which invokes another kind of illusion. He compares the brain’s introspective model to the *user illusion* created by the graphical interface on a personal computer – the desktop, with its icons for files, folders, waste bin, and so on (Dennett, 1991, pp. 311–2). The icons do not correspond directly to anything within the machine, but they allow the human operator to manipulate the data strings stored there

⁹ An example of the sort of theorizing I have in mind is Michael Graziano’s work on the attention schema (e.g., Graziano, 2013; Graziano, Guterstam, Bio, and Wilterson, 2020). Graziano argues that brain systems automatically monitor the processes of attention and construct a simplified, distorted model of them, designed to facilitate attentional control. As a side effect, this model disposes us to form a dualistic conception of the mind as a ghostly substance which can grasp information, flow out to attended objects, and directly move our bodies.

in a quick and intuitive manner. In a similar way, introspection represents the neural processes of experience in a radically simplified and distorted way, adapted to the purposes of communication and higher-level control. The phenomenal properties with which we seem to be confronted are no more real than the files and folders depicted on the computer desktop, but, like them, they provide access to and control over real structures and processes. (Of course, this neural interface is not pictorially rendered for viewing, like the computer one; there is no inner eye to view it. It is a functional interface, and the representations that constitute it are consumed directly by control systems.)

This is only an analogy, of course, and it will take a great deal of work to establish the exact nature of these introspective models. A basic question is whether introspection positively represents its targets as intrinsic, phenomenal states, much as the visual system represents the lines in the Müller-Lyer illusion as being of different lengths, or whether it simply fails to represent them as complex informational/reactive states, tempting us to *infer* that they are phenomenal states.¹⁰ In the former case, introspection will strongly dispose us to believe that our experiences have phenomenal properties, and belief in phenomenal realism is likely to be widespread. In the latter case, the disposition to believe in phenomenal realism will be weaker, and belief in phenomenal realism may be restricted to those with suitable theoretical priming.¹¹

A related question is whether introspection is cognitively penetrable. Can concepts and beliefs have a top-down effect on introspective processes? Have we *learned* to introspect experiences as phenomenal states, through application of philosophical concepts? Could we learn to introspect them as functional states instead? Can we use attentional and meditative practices to sensitize ourselves to new features of experience and so dismantle the user illusion? Illusionism brings such questions into the spotlight.

I shall wind up this section by considering a couple of objections. The first is that we do *not* in fact seem to be introspectively aware of phenomenal properties. Pete Mandik has objected that the notions of phenomenal properties, qualia, what-it-is-likeness, and so on have no substantive content, and thus that claims about their existence, non-existence, or apparent existence have

¹⁰ For defence of the view that the introspective illusion is a positive (“rich”) one, see Kammerer, 2022.

¹¹ It is for empirical investigation to determine how widespread belief in phenomenal realism is, and how easily it can be induced in those who lack it. Current evidence is ambivalent, with some studies suggesting that non-philosophers do conceive of consciousness in the phenomenal realist way (e.g., Knobe and Prinz, 2008), and others that they do not (e.g., Sytma and Machery, 2010).

none either (Mandik, 2016).

One response for the illusionist would be to retrench and say that if anyone *does* seem to be acquainted with phenomenal properties, then they are under an introspective illusion. But given what I have said earlier, such retrenchment may not be necessary. I have provided a definition of phenomenal properties (as clearly introspectable intrinsic properties of experience that pose an explanatory problem), which gives content to the realist thesis and thus to the illusionist denial of it. And I have at the same time conceded that introspection itself may not positively represent experiences as having phenomenal properties but merely generate a simplified model of them (a *proto-illusion*, we might say), which invites us to infer that they have phenomenal properties. I shall make a further concession in responding to a second objection.

This second objection is that, while perception does seem to acquaint us with intrinsic properties that present an explanatory problem, these properties do not seem to belong to our *experiences*. When I look at a ripe banana, I seem to be aware of a rich yellow *quality*, whose character isn't captured by an account of the physical properties of the banana's surface. But this quality seems to belong to the banana itself, not to my experience of it. Similarly, with smells, sounds, tastes, pains, and other sensory qualities. The coffee smell seems to be in the air, the pain in my toe, and so on. I think illusionists should accept this. The belief that these qualities are located in our minds is, I suspect, a product of philosophical theorizing, prompted by the realization that they are not features of the physical world described by science.

This doesn't make talk of illusion inappropriate, however. These qualities are no more present in the world around us than they are in our brains. Moreover, the illusion could still be rooted in introspective misrepresentation. Our judgements about these qualities may still carry information about us, even if the qualities themselves seem to belong to external objects. Take the view I suggested earlier, according to which introspection tracks our psychological reactions to stimuli and binds the information to perceptual contents, so that we perceive objects as having a certain psychological impact on us – an impact we gesture at with our talk of their qualities. If this is right, then such talk expresses something subjective after all, something we bring to the perceptual encounter. It is a figurative way of indicating the significance perceived objects have for us – the way they dispose us to respond, and thus the opportunities for action they present (their *affordances*, to use Gibson's term) (see Clark, 2018; Dennett, 2013, 2015). This view is thoroughly illusionist in spirit.

Finally, a word about the politics of the word "illusion". Friends of illusionism sometimes object that the name is a bad one, which alienates potential converts. It is true that the word has its costs. It can lead people to think that

illusionists hold that even creature consciousness is an illusion – that we are all blind, deaf, insensitive to pain, and so on. It also provokes the misconceived, though understandable, objection that illusionism is self-defeating, since the illusion of phenomenal properties would itself have to be a phenomenal state, and the subject of the illusion a phenomenally conscious self.

Despite this, I recommend sticking with the term. If introspection does systematically mislead us about the nature of our own experiences, then it is not inaccurate to say that we are subject to an introspective illusion. And the fact that some find the term “illusionism” provocative is a *good* thing. Illusionists *are* making a strong claim. They are denying the existence of consciousness in the phenomenal sense. And they are asking people to rethink what it is to be conscious and to revise their conception of themselves and their own minds. If the term underlines the radical nature of the conceptual shift required, this is all to the good.

Later, as we learn more about our perceptual processes and the introspective mechanisms that model them, we may develop new frameworks for conceptualizing the deliverances of introspection, which enable us to resist the temptation to endorse phenomenal realism, or even, if introspection is cognitively penetrable, to dispel it altogether. Then talk of illusion will no longer be needed or appropriate. In the meantime, though, such talk serves the dual purpose of warning against introspective credulity and indicating a constructive path for consciousness studies. Seen this way, illusionism is a version of what Dennett calls “meanwhilism” – a proposal designed to ease a difficult but necessary process of reconceptualization (Dennett, 2022). We may eventually be able to throw away the illusionist ladder. But we need to climb it first.

6. Conclusion: Like a rainbow

I shall conclude with an analogy. Are rainbows real or illusory? Considered as meteorological phenomena, constituted by the illumination of airborne water droplets, they are real. We can detect them, point them out to others, photograph them, and construct precise scientific explanations of them. But considered as multicoloured semi-circular arcs in the sky, they are illusory. There is nothing special in the sky at the location where a rainbow appears to be. The appearance of a banded arc at that location is an effect of the way in which low-angled sunlight from behind the observer is refracted and reflected by water droplets distributed throughout the mass of air in front of them, and observers in different places see arcs at different locations. If an observer claims that there really is a multicoloured arc at some specific location in the sky, then they are simply wrong. (And if they set out to look for physical correlates of it at that

location, then they are on a fool's errand.) Yet the claim that there is an arc there is not devoid of information. It says something about how the meteorological conditions are affecting the observer, and it carries information about the meteorological conditions themselves – about the location of the sun relative to the observer, the moisture content of the air, even the chemical composition of that moisture (sea spray rainbows have a smaller radius than rainwater ones, owing to the different refractive index of salt water; Cowley, n.d.).

Consciousness is like a rainbow. Considered as a set of functional processes – a hugely complex informational and reactive engagement with the world – it is perfectly real. Considered as an internal realm of phenomenal properties or what-it-is-likenesses, it is illusory. The appearance of such a realm is created when the functional processes are modelled for the purposes of higher-level control, and the resulting representations consumed by other cognitive systems. And, as with claims about sky arcs, claims about phenomenal properties are not strictly true, though they carry information about real states and processes.

Consciousness is like a rainbow: wonderful but not what it seems.¹²

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