

Keith Frankish

Editorial Introduction

The topic of this special issue is the view that phenomenal consciousness (in the philosophers' sense) is an illusion — a view I call *illusionism*. This view is not a new one: the first wave of identity theorists favoured it, and it currently has powerful and eloquent defenders, including Daniel Dennett, Nicholas Humphrey, Derk Pereboom, and Georges Rey. However, it is widely regarded as a marginal position, and there is no sustained interdisciplinary research programme devoted to developing, testing, and applying illusionist ideas. I think the time is ripe for such a programme. For a quarter of a century at least, the dominant physicalist approach to consciousness has been a realist one. Phenomenal properties, it is said, are physical, or physically realized, but their physical nature is not revealed to us by the concepts we apply to them in introspection. This strategy is looking tired, however. Its weaknesses are becoming evident (see, for example, James Tartaglia's contribution to this issue), and some of its leading advocates have now abandoned it. It is doubtful that phenomenal realism can be bought so cheaply, and physicalists may have to accept that it is out of their price range. Perhaps phenomenal concepts don't simply fail to represent their objects as physical but *misrepresent* them as phenomenal, and phenomenality is an introspective illusion (this is, in a sense, the physicalist counterpart to the panpsychist approach currently gaining popularity among anti-physicalists — whereas panpsychists think that phenomenal properties are everywhere, illusionists think they are nowhere).

Despite this, it is not easy to persuade people to take illusionism seriously. In part, this is because it is easily caricatured as denying that we have sensations in the everyday sense (it would be more accurate to say that it rejects a certain conception of what sensations are). Moreover, there are some obvious objections to the view. It is often

Correspondence:
Keith Frankish, The Open University, UK. Email: k.frankish@gmail.com

said that consciousness cannot be an illusion since if it *seems* to us introspectively that we are having a certain conscious experience, then we *are* having it: there is no appearance/reality distinction for consciousness. There is some work to be done, then, just to make illusionism seem worth considering. One aim of this special issue is to do this work.

The issue is focused around a target article, in which I introduce illusionism, sketch the case for the view, and respond to some familiar objections to it. The rest of the issue consists of commentaries on the target article and my reply to them. Many of the commentary authors are sympathetic to illusionism, and their contributions extend and refine the case for the view, exploring it from different perspectives and offering new arguments, insights, and, in some cases, qualifications. The issue is not wholly devoted to defending illusionism, however, and a representative sample of critical perspectives is included as well. Taken together, the issue should give a good sense of the potential of illusionism as a theory of consciousness. I hope it will stimulate interest in the topic and foster a concerted illusionist research programme.

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