

# Consciousness: That Feel Hanging in the Air

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Our conscious experiences carry feels, giving each experience its unique qualitative character such as the feel of pain. However, there is an ongoing philosophical debate about consciousness. One prominent position, articulated by Chalmers (1995), is phenomenal realism, which contends that the qualitative character of consciousness is phenomenal in nature. According to this view, no functional processes can fully explain why exactly there should be pain feel accompanying these processes.

In contrast, thinkers like Dennett (1991) reject phenomenality, by reconceptualizing conscious feels in purely functional terms. They argue that consciousness can be understood as a product of functional processes without invoking any intrinsic phenomenal qualities.

Given the difficulty in explaining consciousness with the physical terms that we know, why shouldn't we simply reject the idea of phenomenality altogether and embrace illusionism, which posits that the qualitative character of our experiences is illusory? In this essay, I will defend that illusionism is not merely a conservative stance on physicalism; rather, it offers a theoretical framework for understanding how experiences appear to have phenomenal properties despite being purely functional. This is known as the *illusion problem*, notably articulated by Frankish (2016). With such pursuit, they offer a more coherent and elegant research program than phenomenal realism which comes with the high cost of introducing non-physical ingredients into consciousness research.

My argument in this essay will be built upon the central claim of illusionism: that our introspective reports are unreliable. I will leverage the magic show metaphor of consciousness stated by Rey (1992) and propose a hypothesis suggesting that there are missing introspective representations that prevent us from accessing the cognitive processes underlying our experiences'

qualitative feels, and hinders demystifying the illusion.

The essay's structure is as follows: first, I will present the case for phenomenal realism to understand why we are inclined to believe in the phenomenal nature of our experiences. Second, I will outline the illusionist perspective, which challenges the intrinsic nature of consciousness and its self-evidence. I will then introduce my own hypothesis of missing representations and argue that the apparent qualitative feels of experiences are neither intrinsic nor self-evident, but rather ineffable (not allowing for direct first-person access to express) and private (not allowing for third-person access to go under the same illusion). Finally, I will discuss some ethical and societal implications of the illusionist view of subjective experiences.

## 1 Understanding Phenomenal Realism<sup>1</sup>

The qualitative aspect of our experiences, known as qualia, gives each experience its unique character. For example, the color red has a distinct quality that sets it apart from other colors, just as the scent of a rose or the feel of tooth pain are qualitatively different. Why do we tend to think qualia is phenomenal, beyond physical? Consider tooth pain: when decay touches the nerve endings, it causes a stimulus. However, a stimulus is neutral until it is interpreted as good or bad in a specific context. So, where does the subjective feel of pain come from? One might argue that the stimulation is transmitted to the brain, activating pain circuits because the decay threatens the organism's health. But we only label these circuits as "pain circuits" because we knew their activation correlates with the feeling of pain in the first place. If the accompanying feel was pleasure, as with the scent of a rose, we would call them "pleasure circuits." This raises the question: why should the activation of certain neural circuits lead to the feeling of pain or pleasure? Functional processes are based on physical properties lacking any intrinsic quality of good or bad; they are simply functions. So, beyond these physical properties, there must be something else, some phenomenal properties that give experiences their qualitative character—the qualia.

All the functional processes involved in experiencing tooth pain could be raw physical activities that could occur in the absence of the felt quality of pain. Why, then, are these activities accompanied by a feel rather than no feel

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<sup>1</sup>I deliver this section of the essay by adopting a phenomenal realist narrative, which is the view I object in the latter parts.

at all? This poses *the hard problem of consciousness*. An obvious conclusion is that there must be some secret immaterial ingredient that gives conscious experiences their qualitative character; consciousness is phenomenal.

Phenomenal realism often attributes some characteristics to consciousness. It suggests that consciousness is intrinsic, ineffable, directly acquainted, and private. Consciousness is considered intrinsic because the felt quality is inherent to the experiences themselves; the feel accompanies the experiences rather than being a product of the functional processes involved.

Consciousness is ineffable because words are insufficient to fully describe the felt quality of an experience. For instance, the experience of smelling a rose cannot be adequately described by "pleasurable." It would require a more nuanced description, maybe involving some fragrance notes like earthy, powdery, fruity, floral etc. This leads to an endless chain of questions, such as what-it-is-like fruity or what-it-is-like powdery, just like a child overwhelming the parents, trying to understand the essence of things. This indicates that consciousness transcends mere physical descriptions and is therefore ineffable.

In the knowledge argument for phenomenal consciousness, Jackson (1982) presents a thought experiment involving Mary, a scientist who has extensive knowledge of color perception but has never experienced color herself as she lives in a black-and-white room. Besides the scientific facts, let us say she also reads anecdotal stories on what it is like to see red, green etc. One day she steps out of that room and experiences color the first time. Jackson argued that with this new perceptual experience, she acquires a new knowledge even though she previously knew all the physical facts about color perception. Mary's experience is ineffable as she would add no new word to her vocabulary of color experiences, as the richness of her experience is beyond physical descriptions.

The phenomenal aspect of consciousness is also described as being directly acquainted, meaning it is self-evident and obvious. Even Descartes, while being skeptical about the nature of reality, did not doubt the reality of consciousness. He famously concluded that the one thing he could not doubt was that he was thinking, which launched Cartesian (dualist) thinking—the idea of a physical substance for the body and a non-physical substance for the immaterial soul. Phenomenal realists argue that consciousness is a datum, a fact that is so evident that it would be absurd to deny it.

Consciousness is also considered private due to its subjective nature, making it inaccessible to objective perception or analysis, and thus closing the doors to third-person access.

## 2 Understanding Illusionism

Let us now delve into the perspective of illusionism, which denies the existence of the qualitative character of consciousness. This position is so counterintuitive that even materialists often lean towards a dualist interpretation, a phenomenon Dennett (2017) describes as *Cartesian gravity*.

Referring to the illusionist stance, I avoid the term eliminativism which asserts consciousness does not exist. Instead, illusionists reconceptualize consciousness purely in functional terms while denying its phenomenality. According to illusionism, consciousness devoid of qualitative properties still exists. Illusionists do not deny the apparent phenomenality that shapes our inner world. We are conscious in the sense that we have an inner world that influences our actions and behaviors: there is something to be like a human. However, illusionists reject the idea that having an inner life is equivalent to having phenomenal consciousness. The inner world depends on the ability of introspective self-awareness, which is rooted in purely physical processes.

Illusionism acknowledges that our experiences seem to have qualia, but it claims that this belief is mistaken. Nonetheless, illusionists recognize the functional roles of our beliefs, as they strongly influence our behavior, akin to how ancient tribes' beliefs in demonic spirits influenced their rituals to combat them.

So, what exactly is the illusion at play in consciousness? It is an illusion to think that the feel of our experiences has phenomenal ingredients that are immaterial. Our impression that we have a non-physical inner life is an illusion. Illusionism emphasizes that experiences have introspectable properties which characterize what it is like to have them.

For an experience to be like something, the individual must be aware of their experience through introspective activities. Both the illusion—the seeming felt quality—and our self-awareness are products of introspective mechanisms. The apparent qualitative feel does not accompany our experiences as if it is intrinsic; instead, it arises from certain functional processes. The main hypothesis behind the illusion is that our awareness is either partial or distorted. Our introspective mechanisms constantly misrepresent our experiences as phenomenal.

The illusion of phenomenality can be better understood through Rey's metaphor of the magic show for consciousness. The illusion depends on what the audience does not see in a magic show. Similarly, introspection lacks access to the sleight-of-hand-like cognitive processes, so the seeming

phenomenal consciousness is a product of the limitations of our introspective capacities.

After all, we do not have the mechanism to check the validity of our introspective representations. This fact undermines the direct acquaintance argument of phenomenal realism which asserts our experiences are intrinsically epistemic. As a skeptic, Descartes was cautious about the external world, yet he released the epistemic caution about the internal world even though there was nothing guaranteeing that his introspection is veridical. Such view doubting the reliability of our introspective reports is known as new skepticism, and it is considered quite marginal.

An argument against illusionism, employing direct acquaintance is known as Moore's argument. It posits that illusionism is false since phenomenality of experiences is self-evident. If illusionism was true, we would not feel pain. Kammerer (2022) counters this by suggesting that those who assert the obviousness of phenomenal consciousness presuppose its truth without adequately addressing the challenges posed by illusionism. Accordingly, he asks, "How can you be so sure?"

Kammerer also emphasizes that illusionists acknowledge the existence of pain in a functional sense, which drives the subject to act upon the pain by avoiding or fleeing from painful conditions. His understanding of feel is based on patterns of reactions to the world rather than on the phenomenality of the feel.

Due to the illusion, there is a what-it-is-like-ness in our inner world. Therefore, for a functionally identical zombie to me, including identical introspective functions, her experiences would be like something. She would also be under some illusion. Otherwise, for a creature to have no inner world at all, for its experiences to be like nothing; it must lack introspective representational mechanisms. This is the functional processes minus the introspective mechanisms, referred to as representational zombie by Frankish. Would the behaviors of a representational zombie be similar to a human's?

As Kammerer suggests, the illusion, the seeming feel, serves as a strong functional motivator for patterns of actions. Phenomenal realists leave an explanatory gap: how phenomenal properties, if non-physical, would interact causally with the physical world. Thus, they overlook the psychological significance of consciousness: the strong influence of the feel on behaviors. At the very least, Descartes attempted to explain such interaction between physical and non-physical properties. He believed the pineal gland was responsible for their interaction, serving as the conduit through which the mind

controls bodily actions.

Illusionism addresses the ambiguity regarding how phenomenal properties, if non-physical, would be involved in physical causal processes. Illusionists negate the explanatory gap by stating that there are no phenomenal properties with which to interact. Therefore, they acknowledge the psychological significance of the illusion—the seeming feel—on actions as well as the significance of actions on the feel.

With all the objections and defenses raised against phenomenal realism in mind, illusionists propose that instead of the hard problem, we should concentrate on the illusion problem: why our experiences seem to be phenomenal even though they depend solely on physical terms. Specifically, they aim to clarify how the seeming vividness and richness of phenomenal consciousness are captured by false introspective representations.

### 3 The Missing Introspective Representations

I propose a hypothesis that addresses the illusion problem, building upon the idea of misrepresented experiences and employing Rey’s magic show metaphor. Consider street performers who create the illusion of floating in the air <sup>2</sup>. Despite knowing that the illusion lies in the hidden support mechanism, we remain engaged in the show.

Similar to the hidden support mechanism underlying the illusion, I hypothesize that the feel of our experiences results from missing introspective representations<sup>3</sup>, which prevent us from cognitively accessing the functional support of the feel. This lack of access hinders perceiving experiences as they are, purely in functional terms, devoid of an absolute quality like good or bad, painful or pleasurable. Without this access, all that remains is the feel, much like the performer hanging in the air without any visible support mechanism.

Why have we not developed these missing representations? According to Humphrey (2011), our perception is shaped by evolutionary mechanisms

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<sup>2</sup>See an image of one: <https://images.app.goo.gl/aJxAsiPScBXpDp9U8>

<sup>3</sup>Introspective representation is in the meaning that representation allowing introspective access. Not every representation allows introspection by default, for instance, by learning biking we develop a representation, however, this representation is not introspectively accessible: it is not possible to describe the biking activity, you just do it, thus the only way to learn biking is practicing.

that depend on survival and reproduction. The illusion creates a sense of self and ego through subjective feels, which are crucial for survival and the evolutionary process. All that inner life, the phenomenal feel we are engaged in motivates us to stay alive and to pay attention to the complex patterns signaling some life threatening conditions, which inherently contribute to the wheel of evolution.

If the audience saw the hidden support mechanism of the street performer, they would not be engaged in the show. They would not react as it would be meaningless to react in anyways. Similarly, the seeming feel of our experiences enriches our lives. Living would be meaningless without the feel of our experiences.

If we had access to these cognitive processes, it would neutralize the felt quality of experiences and demystify the illusion. Therefore, I hypothesize that we did not develop these missing representations because they were either unnecessary or threatening for sustaining evolution. I speculate that such hypothetical cognitive access would be demotivating for sustaining life and reproduction. From an evolutionary perspective, I suggest that we are not descendants of those who somehow developed these missing representations and saw the hidden underlying mechanisms of the illusion because they were reluctant to sustain life or reproduce.

Recall Frankish's representational zombies, who have functional processes identical to humans but lack introspective mechanisms, so it is like nothing to be them. Building on this, I propose another hypothetical scenario: zombies with functional processes identical to humans, including introspective mechanisms, and possessing the missing introspective representations that humans lack, making them not under any illusion. Let's call these zombies neutral zombies. Considering they have the ability of introspection, what is it like to be a neutral zombie? They should have some form of self-awareness, yet the quality of the feels is neutralized.

Can we consider neutral zombies as emotionally super-intelligent humans? After all, they possess perfect introspective mechanisms, even those that humans lack, allowing them to have complete self-knowledge. Perhaps they can control what they feel, developing a free will to choose what-it-is-like. If emotional regulation is possible through emotional awareness practices, and if alleviating pains is possible through mindfulness practices, perhaps these practices are for developing such missing representations. If so, I would like to interview masters of these practices and ask what it is like to be them.

Moving from this hypothetical scenario to reality, where illusions happen,

I would like to scrutinize the interpretation of the missing representations hypothesis for consciousness in terms of being intrinsic, directly acquainted, private, and ineffable.

The missing representations hypothesis denies that the seeming feel is intrinsic to the experience; rather, it claims that the seeming feel is the outcome of unaccessed cognitive processes. One might question how the richness and vividness of the phenomenal feel can be produced by limited introspective representations. I argue that this question is under illusion or Cartesian gravity: the felt quality is not as rich as it is believed, but rather it is partial. I will argue that what it is like to be neutral is richer than any felt qualities. This can be understood with an analogy of prism which refracts white light into different colors. The imperfect introspective mechanism, due to missing representations, is not transparent of experience yet refracts it into different felt qualities.

The missing representations hypothesis denies direct acquaintance with consciousness because it posits that we are not directly acquainted with our experience due to unaccessed cognitive processes. If first-person has limitations in introspecting the experience as it is, how can third-person access it? Anyhow, I claim that the third-person may never undergo the same illusion as the first person. In this sense, I argue that consciousness is private. Therefore, we will never know what it is like to be a bat, as it is impossible to implant the exact introspective abilities of a bat, even if we implant sensor mechanisms in a transhuman way and know all the physical facts about bat's functional processes.

Revisiting Frank Jackson's thought experiment with Mary, the color scientist, it is claimed that she gains new knowledge with her first color experience, even though she knew all the physical facts about color perception. Jackson later retracted this conclusion, adopting a physicalist and representationalist approach (Jackson, 2003). He now states that she does not gain new propositional knowledge but rather a new ability, a new representation.

One might argue that a new representation implies new internal knowledge. This is fair, yet we need to distinguish between accessed and unaccessed knowledge. In terms of the missing representations hypothesis, we can say that Mary cannot express her experience by adding new phrases to the body of knowledge about color perception because she lacks the introspective access of the new knowledge to do so. Due to the limitations of introspective capacities, the experience remains ineffable: first-person accessed knowledge is insufficient to describe the experience. Therefore, the new knowledge is



unaccessed knowledge<sup>4</sup>. In this sense, I assert that the felt experience is ineffable but with a negative connotation, rather than suggesting that the underlying properties of consciousness are beyond words.

## 4 Ethical implications of illusionism

Finally, let's explore the ethical and societal implications of illusionism. While adopting an illusionist perspective may seem counterintuitive, it could potentially address some societal and individual challenges we face. Illusionism denies the intrinsic nature of the felt qualities of experiences, leading to a question: why would illusionists care about alleviating pain and suffering if they are just illusions? Contrary to trivializing or ignoring pain and suffering, the illusionist view takes the seeming feel of experiences seriously, emphasizing their functional role and psychological significance.

Firstly, adopting an illusionist perspective could help overcome the discourse of eliminativism about emotions. One might question the benefit of discussing emotions if they are mere mental fictions. However, modern psychology suggests that emotional awareness and discourse about one's emotions are crucial for achieving emotional regulation and maintaining a healthy mental life. According to illusionism, emotions are not intrinsic to experiences; they are not mysterious phenomena that accompany our experiences. Instead, they have physical foundations and impact our behaviors. Recognizing this can support the possibility of emotional regulation.

In contrast, a phenomenal realist understanding of emotions reinforces the belief that emotions are real with immaterial roots, which can hinder emotional regulation by perpetuating the idea of emotional experiences as unchangeable. As Frankish suggests, the felt experiences are intentional objects with physical origins, serving as mental fictions that motivate us toward certain actions. Illusionism encourages us not to be embarrassed about our emotions but to understand them as motivators for action.

Secondly, illusionist thinking may help overcome fixed mindsets and embrace growth. The feel of experiences is not intrinsic but relational. This means that as we engage with experiences, we develop our own sense of them by relating data points to each other. For example, through practice, our repertoire of scents can expand, as can our vocabulary to describe them. With time, we can become better at distinguishing one scent from another

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<sup>4</sup>Here, I specifically mean access for reporting.

and develop our own preferences. An experience that initially feels like indifferent may begin to feel significant as we keep involve in the same kind of experiences. Experiences that are initially challenging or uncomfortable may become more comfortable with practice. The feel of experiences can change and develop through actions, as they are not determined by intrinsic properties.

In conclusion, embracing illusionism may initially seem radical, given its denial of the seemingly obvious phenomenality of experiences. It requires courage to adopt such a counterintuitive stance, as it challenges deeply ingrained beliefs about consciousness. However, by relaxing Cartesian thinking, one can appreciate the simplicity and elegance of the illusionist framework. In contrast, phenomenal realism introduces more assumptions and leaves more gaps than it resolves, making illusionism a more coherent approach. Following Occam’s razor, illusionism emerges as a plausible and promising research program worthy of further exploration.

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