

What is the function of the illusion of phenomenal consciousness?

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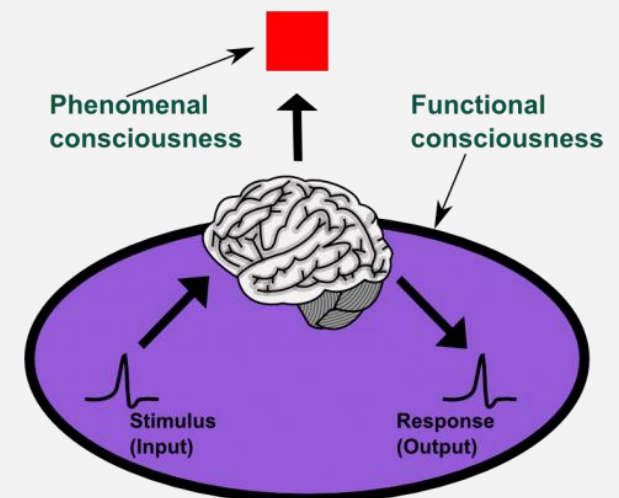
The contemporary nature of the problem

The “**Hard problem**” as the problem of explaining the phenomenal character (= "what it is like", qualia) of experience:

(...) even when we have explained the performance of all the cognitive and behavioral functions in the vicinity of experience—perceptual discrimination, categorization, internal access, verbal report—there may still remain a further unanswered question: ***Why is the performance of these functions accompanied by experience?***
(Chalmers 1995, 5)

3 positions (Frankish 2016, 2017):

1. **Phenomenal realism (mystery)** – P exists; explanation is nonphysical.
2. **Conservative realism (mechanism, reductive realism)** – P exists; explanation is physical.
3. **Illusionism (illusion)** – P is an illusion, explanation is physical – conscious experience and illusion of phenomenal consciousness can be explained by standard scientific research.



Illusionism as a theoretical position

Illusionism was first introduced by Frankish (2016, 2017), but this position is not new, and its main features can be observed in the many philosophical theories of consciousness (Dennett 1991, 2018; Humphrey 2006, 2011, 2022; Graziano 2017, 2019 a i.)

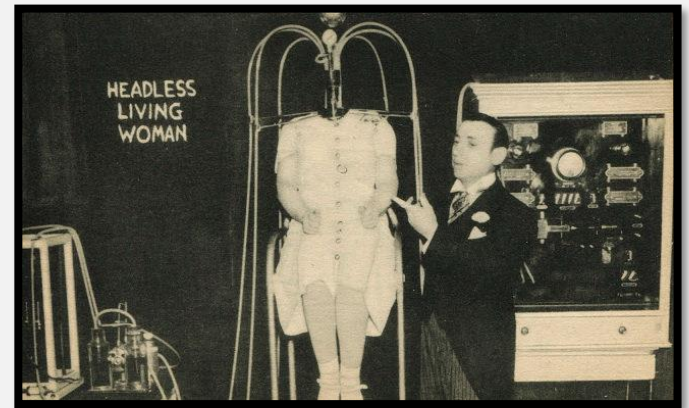
Two main theses of illusionism:

- a) P **does not exist**.
- b) P **seems** to exist (it is an **illusion**).

The “Illusion problem”:

- The problem of explaining the **origin** and **causes** of the illusion of phenomenal consciousness.
- *How does the illusion of phenomenality arise? What is the basis of the illusion? Why is it so powerful?*
- **Main assumption:** the illusion arises because of the **limitations of introspection**.

“phenomenal consciousness is an introspective illusion – it is an artefact of the **limitations of introspection**” (Frankish 2017, 22)



Illusionism as an theoretical position

introspection delivers a **partial, distorted view** of our experiences, misrepresenting complex physical features as simple phenomenal ones. Sensory states have complex chemical and biological properties, representational content, and cognitive, motivational, and emotional effects. We can introspectively recognize these states when they occur in us, but **introspection doesn't represent all their detail**. Rather, it bundles it all together, representing it as a **simple, intrinsic phenomenal feel**. Applying the magic metaphor, we might say that introspection sees the complex sleight-of-hand performed by our sensory systems as a **simple magical effect**. And, as with a conjuring trick, the illusion depends on what the audience does not see as much as what they do. (Frankish 2016)

Other analogies:

- Dennett (2018) – **Cartesian Gravity** – wherever there is a conscious mind, there is *a point of view*;
- Humphrey (2006, 2011) – *consciousness as an “ipsundrum”* – neural state that appears relatively unremarkable but generates the illusion of phenomenality when viewed introspectively.



Illusionism as an theoretical position



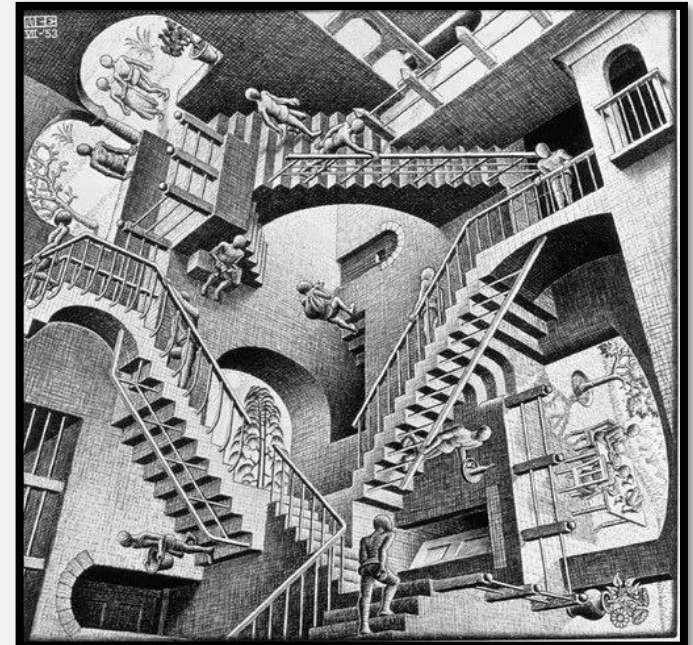
Penrose's impossible triangle and "Gregundrum"
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gcw1IIGSGMM>

Illusionism – the function of the illusion

Illusion problem: *What is the **function** of the illusion and **why** is it so powerful?*

2 questions:

1. What is the function of consciousness?
 2. **What is the function of the illusion of phenomenal consciousness?**
- some illusionists argue that **the illusion probably has no special function** – it is an "**epiphenomenon**" or "**by-product**" of introspective processes that have evolved for another purpose (Frankish 2022);
 - however, others have argued that the term 'illusion' evokes that **there is something wrong with consciousness** (as with perceptual illusions) - on the contrary, the illusion should not be understood as an error, but **can be/is highly adaptive** (Humphrey 2011, 2016);
 - other names – "*phenomenal surrealism*" (Humphrey 2016); "*useful caricature*" (Graziano 2016) etc.



Illusionism – the function of the illusion

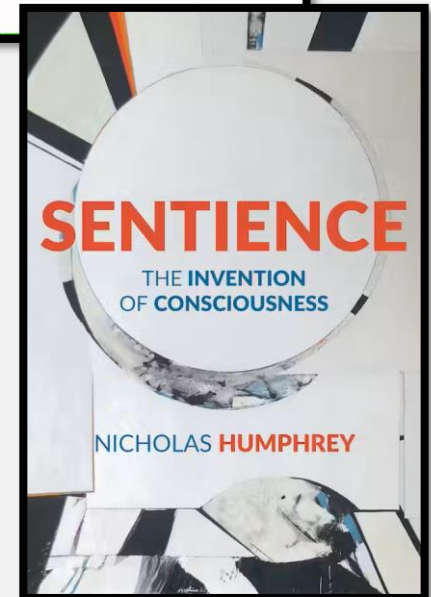
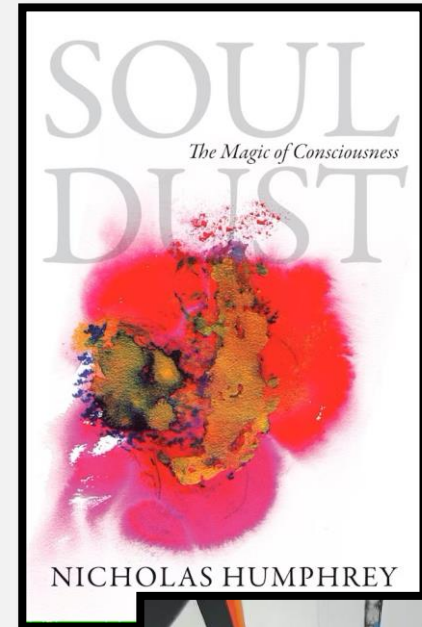
Humphrey's evolutionary theory of consciousness

- Since consciousness is the result of natural selection, it can be assumed that it evolved because it provides a selective advantage. But which one?

Psychological significance of consciousness

- Humphrey posits that consciousness is **not a new mental skill** (like wings enable birds to fly), but rather **changes the psychology of beings and their relationship to the world** as such;
- in other words, consciousness seems so magical and important to us because its primary function is to **value** - to make us "**matter**" - **about life, the world and ourselves**:

I think that what the natural history reveals is that consciousness – on several levels – makes **life more worth living**. Conscious creatures enjoy **being** phenomenally conscious. They enjoy **the world** in which they are phenomenally conscious. And they enjoy **their selves** for being phenomenally conscious (Humphrey 2011, 75).



Illusionism – the function of the illusion

1. Conscious creatures enjoy being conscious: “*Joie de vivre*”

- “**presentism**”, “**sensualism**” – conscious creatures are happy to be in a “thick moment”, they are happy that there is something “what it is like” to be them - this basic emotion is not related to culture, but to the development of sensations (Humphrey 2011);
- this feeling, that is, “to exist in the thick moment”, is biologically adaptive, because through it, conscious creatures build the “**will to live**” - it is not an instinct to preserve one's own existence, but rather a **desire to want to live** – *life itself becomes the goal*:

“You will not just live well, you will **want a life** because **you want to feel**” (Humphrey 2011, 88-89)

- through this feeling, creatures also build the concept of the so-called “**core self**” - **the psychological entity** that is the occupant of the “thick moment” of the illusion of phenomenal consciousness - through the core self, human beings (and only human beings) have **created a fear of death**.



Illusionism – the function of the illusion

2. Conscious creatures enjoy being in the (enchanted) world:

- the illusion of phenomenal consciousness **significantly changes our relationship with the world** because we **project** phenomenal properties onto the external world and the objects in it;
- e.g., when we have the experience of a night sky, we associate our sensation with the objects itself, resulting in the illusion that the sensation is a property of the object, i.e., the sky seems to have phenomenal properties, such as blueness.
- *The question is whether perceiving the world in this way was/is an evolutionary advantage?*
- Similarly, to the first case, Humphrey argues that enjoying the world **deepens our will to live** and at the same time **inspires us to explore, discover** and **assign value** and **meaning** to the objects in it:



“(…) **the externalization of value** that results from projecting sensations onto objects (...) provides a whole new basis for believing that life has meaning.” (Humphrey 2011, 121)

Illusionism – the function of the illusion

3. Conscious creatures enjoy being conscious selves

- the illusion of phenomenal consciousness places a **new and important emphasis on the meaning of the "individual" or "personal" self** - the "core self" provides the **psychological basis** for the so-called an extended personal Self that not only feels, but also thinks, perceives, remembers, dreams, desires, etc. – **it unifies different selves in the mind.**
- **individualism** – the illusion of phenomenal consciousness changes our psychology by encouraging us to believe in our own **metaphysical importance**— we see ourselves as **individual Egos** (“souls”) whose fate and development are crucial to us.
- **Suma summarum:**

(...) for conscious creatures there is a real biological value in all this. The added *joie de vivre*, the new enchantment with the world they live in, and the novel sense of their own *metaphysical importance* has, in the course of evolutionary history, dramatically increased the investment individuals make in their own survival. (Humphrey 2011, 75)



Illusionism – the function of the illusion

THE SOUL NICHE

- The term “niche” – an environment to which a species has become adapted and where it designed to flourish, i.e., wolves live in forests, cods in the ocean etc.
- human beings live in the **SOUL NICHE** – an environment where **we represent ourselves** and other human beings as individual Egos (souls) that have an **inner and rich phenomenal life**;
- **social aspect** – “*society of selves*”: human beings approach other human beings as persons with phenomenal consciousness;
- **the result of cultural evolution** – this change in "spiritual worldview" had to be psychologically, ethically, politically highly adaptive and marked a breakthrough in the development of our species - the idea of the individual Self and soul can be observed across all cultures (Humphrey 2011, 160-164).



Illusionism – the function of the illusion

THE SOUL NICHE

Anyone who studies the natural history of human beings must recognize that this spiritual territory is not only where almost all humans do live but where they *give of their best*. There can be no question that **this is the niche to which the human species is biologically adapted**, where individual men and women are able to make the most of their opportunities for leaving descendants. And yet this niche is in many ways *cultural* product, by no means a given of the natural world. Human beings have largely *invented* the soul niche. (Humphrey 2011).

- **negative effect:** the more inflated the view of the individual Self, the greater the fear of death - this can lead to damage to biological fitness, i.e., different kinds of psychological disorders etc. – human beings responded to this fear by creating the **concept of an immortal soul**.



Conclusion – additional thoughts and problems

- **Two levels of illusionism:**
 1. **negative** – rejecting the hard problem by proposing several arguments against phenomenal consciousness
 2. **positive** – formulating a naturalistic explanation of conscious experience and explaining the illusion problem
- Humphrey's evolutionary theory of consciousness **offers one of the possible explanations** for the function of the illusion of consciousness (among others, for example, Grazian's Attention schema theory).
- I believe illusionists should formulate a **positive naturalistic account** of **HOW** and especially **WHY** the illusion of consciousness arose without necessarily convincing people that their inner lives and individual selves do not exist.
- **Thus, if illusionism offers a strong alternative to other theoretical positions, it will be more defensible and intuitively acceptable.**

“I would point out that some illusions are so well structured that they are effectively immune to invasion by scientific truth.”(Humphrey 2011, 202).

**Thank you for your
attention**

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Resources

Pictures:

<https://www.quora.com/How-can-we-solve-the-hard-problem-of-consciousness>

<https://kalamvant.wordpress.com/2019/11/27/self-introspection/>

<https://discover.hubpages.com/games-hobbies/Real-Optical-Illusions>

<https://press.princeton.edu/books/paperback/9780691156378/soul-dust>

<https://www.amazon.com/Sentience-Invention-Consciousness-Nicholas-Humphrey-ebook/dp/B0B1BRG238>

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d0/Carl_Gustav_Carus_-_Blick_auf_Dresden_bei_Sonnenuntergang.jpg

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