

Phenomenal Consciousness as an *Evolutionary Invention*: Explaining the Positive Function of Illusionism

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The article's main objective is to analyse the positive aspect of illusionism and the so-called "illusion problem" that lies at its heart – the problem of explaining the *origin* and *causes* of the illusion of phenomenal consciousness. I argue that a key aspect of the illusion problem is explaining the *function* of the illusion of phenomenal consciousness. Some authors suggest that the illusion probably has no particular function but is a by-product of introspection, whereas others have pointed out that it has played an important role in the evolution of consciousness. I focus on Nicholas Humphrey's evolutionary theory of consciousness, "phenomenal surrealism," in emphasizing this crucial part of the illusionist program.

Keywords: consciousness – Humphrey – illusionism – illusion problem – phenomenal surrealism

Introduction

Illusionism relating to consciousness was first introduced by Frankish (2016), but the approach is not new: its key features were developed earlier in the work of some prominent philosophers (Dennett 1991, Humphrey 2006, 2011).¹ At the heart of this type of illusionism lies the *thesis* that "phenomenal consciousness" does not exist; it only *seems* to exist – it is an illusion.² Illusionists therefore seek to address the so-called "illusion problem" – the problem of

¹ Some theorists claim that the first versions of illusionism can be found in Feyerabend or Rorty (see Tartaglia 2016; Kammerer 2022).

² Frankish made a distinction between "strong" and "weak" illusionism – the former rejects the existence of phenomenal consciousness as such, and the latter rejects some of the supposed *features* of phenomenal consciousness, such as intrinsic, private, ineffable, etc. (Frankish 2017a, 17 – 19).

explaining the *origin* and *causes* of the illusion of phenomenal consciousness. In the article, I argue that a key aspect of the illusion problem is explaining the *function* of the illusion of phenomenal consciousness. Although some authors (Frankish 2022) suggest the illusion probably has no particular function but is a by-product of introspection, others (Dennett 1991, 2018; Humphrey 2011, 2016, 2023; Graziano 2016, 2019; Graziano and Webb 2017) have pointed out that it has played an important role in the evolution of consciousness. I think this is crucial because if illusionists formulate a *positive account* of why we have the illusion of phenomenal consciousness and, significantly, of why the illusion has evolved, then illusionism will present a strong alternative to other theoretical approaches to consciousness.

The article is divided into three main parts. In the first part, I examine the key features of the positive aspect of illusionism, focusing on the illusion problem. In the second part, I analyze Nicholas Humphrey's evolutionary theory of consciousness and suggest the possible answer to the naturalistic question about the function of the illusion of phenomenal consciousness. In the last section, I discuss the possible shortcomings of the theory and illusionism in general.

I. "Positive Aspect" of Illusionism

Consciousness is a multifaceted property that refers to several phenomena, such as "wakefulness," "awareness," and "self-consciousness." However, in recent decades, philosophical discussions have centered around one particular aspect of consciousness – "phenomenal consciousness" or the "phenomenal character" of experience. In general, phenomenal consciousness refers to the *inner qualitative properties* of experiences characterized by "what it is like" to undergo them.³ For example, when you are watching raindrops falling on the windowpane, listen to Chopin's Nocturnes, and sip a hot coffee, there is something "what it is like" for you to have these experiences – "what it is like" for you to *gaze* at the falling rain, *listen* to the piano notes, or *tasting* the freshly brewed coffee.

Many philosophers (Chalmers 1995, 2018; Goff 2016, 2019; Strawson 2019) claim that phenomenal consciousness poses a so-called "hard problem" for contemporary scientific research. The main reason is that phenomenal

³ In the article, I distinguish between "phenomenal consciousness" and "conscious experience" – I use phenomenal consciousness to refer to the inner qualitative properties of experience, and I use conscious experience in a non-phenomenal, functional-representational way to refer to the cognitive capacity of information processing.

consciousness is characterized as *prima facie* unknowable from the point of view of the observer – it is only through introspection that we become *directly acquainted* with the phenomenal properties of experience (Chalmers 1995, 2018).⁴ However, this creates an “explanatory gap” in consciousness research – if phenomenal consciousness is knowable only from a first-person perspective, current scientific research that relies on third-person methods (e.g., brain imaging techniques, computational modelling) will never explain conscious experience (Levine 1983).

Illusionism (Frankish 2016, 2017a, 2022; Dennett 1991, 2016, 2018) rejects the claim that experiences have mysterious properties that pose a hard problem for contemporary scientific research and, conversely, posits that scientific research can explain conscious experience. At the heart of illusionism lies the following *thesis*: phenomenal consciousness does not exist; it only *seems* to – it is an *illusion*. In other words, although illusionists deny the existence of phenomenal consciousness, they claim that, from the first-person perspective, experiences *seem* to possess phenomenal properties.

Thus, the illusionist program has two main aspects: *negative* and *positive* (cf. Frankish 2023). The negative focuses on rejecting the hard problem, whereas the positive focuses on formulating a *naturalistic explanation* of conscious experience consistent with contemporary scientific research. A *crucial part* of the positive aspect is solving the so-called “illusion problem” – the problem of explaining the *origin* and *causes* of the illusion of phenomenal consciousness (Frankish 2016, 2017a).

Illusionists have offered various answers to the illusion problem; however, most claim that the illusion arises because of the limitations of introspection (Frankish 2016, 2017a; Dennett 1991, 2016, 2018; Humphrey 2006, 2011). The crucial point of this claim is that introspection is neither direct nor precise but gives us a caricatured view of our own conscious experiences. Frankish (2017a, 21) argues that introspection delivers a partial, distorted view of our conscious experiences, misrepresenting complex physical features as simple, phenomenal ones. For example, when we visually experience a cup of coffee or a raindrop falling on the windowpane, we can recognize them when they occur in us through introspection. However, introspection does not contain all the details – it does not represent the brain processes behind these

⁴ “Direct acquaintance” is characterized by two main elements – one is the sense of presentation through which we are immediately presented with our experiences, and another is the sense of revelation through which the phenomenal properties are fully revealed to us in introspection (cf. Chalmers 2018, 25).

experiences. Instead, it gives us a simplified model in which complex brain processes are represented as simple “phenomenal ones” (Frankish 2017a, 21).⁵

To stress this point, illusionists (Dennett 2016; Frankish 2016, 2017a; Humphrey 2006) often compare the illusion of phenomenal consciousness to the illusions used in stage magic – in the same way that magician uses various tricks to make you believe that you are seeing a woman being sawn in half, introspection makes you believe that experience has phenomenal properties. However, just as every stage magic trick relies on actual physical mechanisms to create the illusion, the illusion of phenomenal consciousness is created by complex brain processes that introspection monitors and misrepresents as phenomenal.

Thus, the term “illusion” can be characterized in two ways – “quasi-phenomenal” and “cognitive” (Frankish 2017b, 335 – 336). “Quasi-phenomenal” refers to *actual brain processes* we misrepresent as phenomenal through introspection. The illusion is “cognitive” because introspective illusion leads us to judge that our experiences have inner phenomenal properties. In “cognitive” illusion, illusionists often speak of a mistake occurring, whereas in the former case, the introspective representations may be highly abstract and distorted and, in that sense, illusory; but they may also carry valuable information for the system and be carefully designed by evolution (cf. Frankish 2017b, 337).

Based on this analysis, we can ask three main research questions to address the illusion problem:

1. How does the illusion of phenomenal consciousness arise?
2. What is the source of the illusion of phenomenal consciousness?
3. Why does the brain create the illusion of phenomenal consciousness?

The first and second questions focus on explanations of the brain processes that create the illusion of phenomenal consciousness.⁶ As stated above, most illusionists assume that the illusion arises out of the limitations of introspection – introspection monitors the complex brain processes behind conscious experiences and misrepresents them as “phenomenal.”

⁵ This is not to say that illusionism rejects introspection as a method in consciousness research; rather, it points out that introspection is prone to distortion and illusion, so it cannot be considered an authoritative method in the research. Other illusionists gave similar explanations (see Dennett 1991, 2018; Graziano 2016, 2019).

⁶ I have addressed the first two questions in another article (see Sklutová 2022).

However, that leaves the question of which brain processes are the source of the illusion. In other words, what are the processes that introspection monitors and thereby create the illusion that experiences have phenomenal properties? Illusionists have proposed different explanations – Frankish (2020) formulated the “response schema,” in which introspection monitors *patterns of reaction* that experiences evoke; Graziano (2016, 2019) proposed the *attentional processes*, and Humphrey (2011) posited the “*ipsundrum*” – a neural state that initially seems to possess phenomenal properties.⁷

The third question focuses on the function of the illusion of phenomenal consciousness.⁸ This question points to two types of explanation – a *cognitive one*, which centers on the *causal* and *functional role* of the illusion in the cognitive system, and a broader *evolutionary explanation*, which centers on the evolutionary function of the illusion in human beings and possibly other animals.⁹

In recent decades, theorists (Dennett 1991, 2018; Humphrey 2006, 2011; Graziano 2016, 2019; Graziano and Webb 2017) have proposed detailed evolutionary theories, arguing that even if introspection offers us only a partial and incomplete model of what is going on in the brain when we have a conscious experience, that does not mean that it is a mistake. Indeed, illusion is *useful* precisely because we do not need to know all the details of our brain’s processes to experience something consciously. Therefore, some authors, for whom the third question is particularly important, are critical of the use of the term “illusion,” preferring such terms as “phenomenal surrealism” (Humphrey 2016) or “useful caricature” (Graziano 2016).

I think this is important because rather than denying phenomenal consciousness, we can formulate a *positive naturalistic explanation* of *how* and especially *why* conscious experiences seem to possess inexplicable and mysterious properties. In the following part of the article, I focus primarily on Humphrey’s evolutionary theory of consciousness to suggest a possible solution to this part of the illusion problem.

⁷ Humphrey rejects the analogy in his latest work (2023).

⁸ However, as Frankish (2022, 306 – 307) has pointed out, it is necessary to distinguish between two questions: a) what the function of conscious experience (understood in a functional, non-phenomenal sense) is and b) what the function of the illusion of phenomenal consciousness is, which is the part of the illusion problem. Although the first question is as important as the second, this article focuses on the latter.

⁹ These are not mutually exclusive, and the answer to one may shed light on the other. A similar distinction can be found in Chalmers (2018). I want to thank the anonymous reviewer who brought this to my attention.

II. Humphrey's Phenomenal Surrealism

Humphrey developed his theory of consciousness in several works (2006, 2011, 2023), focusing mainly on the evolutionary origin of consciousness in human beings. In particular, Humphrey proposed an evolutionary explanation of how sensations (sensory experiences) evolved and why they seem to possess phenomenal properties, involving an ancient system called "*sentition*" – "*evaluative responses*" to sensory stimuli which evolved to become *internalized* and *privatized*, leading to the "*feedback loops*" between sensory and motor regions in the brain – the activity becomes "*recursive*" (going round and round) and stretched out in time as to create a "*thick moment*" of experience. Humphrey (2011, 2023) argues that these loops were crucial for evolution because the recursive activity could settle into an "*attractor*" state named an "*ipsundrum*" – a complex pattern of neural activity that repeats itself — creature, introspectively monitoring and reading the activity, creates an impression that there is a "*phenomenal*" dimension to experiences.

An essential part of this evolutionary explanation is that these evaluative responses are *meaningful* in the sense that they represent what the stimulation *means* for the subject:

when considering whether sensations are or are not "*real*," we must never let go of the fact that sensations do indeed represent *our take* on stimuli impinging on the body. In doing so they represent some of the objective facts about what's happening: the what, where, and when, for example. But, crucially, they also represent how we *evaluate* what's happening, how we *feel* about it. And this is where phenomenal properties come into their own. Sensations represent how we relate to stimulation using, as it were, a paintbox of phenomenal concepts to depict what it's like for us... (Humphrey 2016, 118)

Thus, according to Humphrey's evolutionary theory, phenomenal consciousness arises when the sensations represent how we *evaluate* or *feel* about the stimuli.¹⁰ I think this is important, because it does not matter whether phenomenal consciousness exists; what matters is how it *affects* you. For example, if you think the piano tones are beautiful or that the coffee has a great

¹⁰ This definition of sensations is based on Humphrey's crucial distinction between "*perception*" and "*sensation*" – perception is the way we represent the objective world and sensations are ideas that not only represent what is happening inside our sense organs but also represent how we *feel* about the stimuli. The inspiration for this distinction came from Thomas Reid (Humphrey 2011, 44; Humphrey 2023, 77 – 79).

flavor – you have those feelings because the sensation represents how you feel at that moment. In this sense, these feelings may even be mysterious – it all depends on how you interpret the stimuli from a first-person point of view.

Therefore, in his most recent work (2016, 2020, 2023), Humphrey distances himself from illusionism because even though phenomenal properties are more of a representation of how the subject feels about the stimuli, that does not mean that the brain is making a mistake:

sensory feelings...are your *idea* of what it feels like to have this happening to you. And, as such, they can have whatever properties have proved in the course of evolution to be appropriate to describing the subjective state. If these properties turn out to be non-physical or even para-physical, that's just what we might expect. It doesn't mean that these properties should be written off as invalid or "illusory." Instead, we should welcome them for *what they are* and *what they do for your sense of your own being* (which, of course, our theory is going to have to explain) (Humphrey 2023, 81).

To clarify this point, Humphrey (2016) named his theory "*phenomenal surrealism*" – the phenomenal properties of experience are "*sur-real*" because the addition of the *relational dimension* of how we *feel* about the stimuli means that they represent *more* than just physiological processes behind the stimulation.¹¹

I think the reason for this is that Humphrey, an evolutionist, wants to focus primarily on the positive naturalistic question of why the illusion of phenomenal consciousness has evolved. This is confirmed by the fact that Humphrey uses the term "*invention*" (instead of "illusion") to stress this point further – phenomenal consciousness is an invention in the sense that it is "*a fantasy, conjured by the brain, designed to change how we value our existence*" (Humphrey 2020, 14). I will show later that such an approach does not necessarily contradict illusionism.

Thus, the crucial part of Humphrey's evolutionary theory is not *how* but *why* phenomenal consciousness was invented by evolution. In other words, Humphrey focuses on the question of what selective advantage, if any, the invention of phenomenal consciousness had in the evolution of human beings. In what follows, I focus on this part of Humphrey's evolutionary theory of consciousness.

Humphrey (2006, 2011, 2023) argues that the invention of phenomenal consciousness has played an essential role in the development of human

¹¹ Humphrey was inspired by Picasso's meaning of the term 'surreal,' which he compares to "*resemblance*," characterized as something *more real than reality* (see Humphrey 2016, 121).

psychology and its relationship to other human beings and the world. In other words, the invention of phenomenal consciousness does not give humans a new “mental skill” in the same sense as other cognitive functions, such as memory, but rather enhances or enriches our lives on a higher *psychological level*. That is, phenomenal consciousness creates reasons for us to want to live and value life *per se*:

What if phenomenal consciousness, rather than making us more intelligent or more productive *on the outside*, makes us somehow *bigger on the inside* – emotionally and spiritually bigger?...could it be that Nature, when she invented qualia, did it so that we conscious creatures should *amaze ourselves*? (Humphrey 2020, 19)

To better understand this, I examine *three primary levels* on which the invention of phenomenal consciousness had *psychological significance* for human beings (see Humphrey 2011, 2023).

The first level is the enjoyment human beings take in being conscious through the invention of phenomenal consciousness – humans enjoy “what it is like” to be them when they experience something. In other words, we do not just exist but enjoy our existence because we give it meaning. But why is that the case? As I said above, Humphrey (2011, 81 – 83, 125) argues that taking “delight in existence” or simply living in a “thick moment” of experience is the most basic emotion, which evolved early on in the development of sensations.

Furthermore, the development of sensations goes hand in hand with the development of the so-called “*core self*” – the psychological entity that occupies the “thick moment” of experience:

By lifting sensory experience onto that mysterious, non-physical plane, qualia deepen and enrich your sense of your own presence. You find yourself living in thick time. You become the owner of a self that you want to expand and preserve for its own sake – in short, a *self worth having* (Humphrey 2020, 20).

This feeling, existing in a thick moment of experience, is biologically adaptive because, through it, conscious beings build the “will to live” – it is not just the instinct to preserve one’s existence, but rather the *desire to want to live*, so 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).

For example, Humphrey studied blindness in a woman named H.D. – she was blind from childhood but underwent eye surgery in her twenties,

which partially restored her vision even though her visual cortex was no longer functioning – she could recognize objects around her and was recovering the ability to use her eyes to guide her through space (cf. Ackroyd, Humphrey, and Warrington 1974). However, she still insisted that she was blind – she was unaware that she could see these objects. This case is similar to a clinical syndrome named “blindsight” caused by lesions in the primary visual cortex – people and other animals with blindsight can develop the ability to respond to visual stimuli, even though they are unaware of it.

Humphrey (2006, 65 – 70; 2023, 50 – 53, 130) argues that the surgery gave H.D. back her *visual perception*, that is, the ability to detect the properties of objects, but did not return her *visual sensation*, the ability to detect what was happening inside her sense organs and how she *felt* about it. In other words, H.D. was unaware that she could see – there was no “what it is like” for her to see. In the end, she became depressed because her vision lacked *the thing that mattered most to her* – the phenomenal quality of sensory experience. This explanation draws on Humphrey’s *sensualism* – what matters to us is not existing itself but *feeling* that we exist.

The second level is that human beings have “*enchanted*” the world around them, through the invention of phenomenal consciousness. This idea derives from the assumption that phenomenal consciousness significantly changes our relationship with the world because we *project* phenomenal properties onto the objects in it (Humphrey 2011, 111; 2023, 81 – 84). For example, when we are walking through a meadow on a summer night, we have many experiences – we see the night sky, feel the summer breeze, and smell wildflowers – we associate our sensations with the objects themselves, resulting in the impression that the sensation is a property of the object, i.e., the night sky seems to have phenomenal properties, such as the *blackness* of the sky or the *brightness* of the stars.

Now, the question is, what is the selective advantage in perceiving objects in this way? Similarly to the first case, enjoying the world strengthens our will to live whilst also inspiring us to explore, discover, and assign value 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). Therefore, even if these objects do not have phenomenal properties, that does not mean it is a mistake – rather, it means that phenomenal consciousness *changes how we perceive the world*, by *changing our psychology*: “What matters is psychological impact, not philosophical

rectitude. And, psychologically, the result is that you come to inhabit an enchanted world” (Humphrey 2011, 117).

The third level is humans placing key emphasis on their sense of self, through the invention of phenomenal consciousness. First, there was the “core self,” “the subject of the thick moment of experience,” which monitored the responses on the body surface, and that later on in evolution became internalized. As I said above, sensations are *personal* and *private* because they represent how you *feel* about the stimuli – what it means for you to have sensory experiences from a subjective perspective. However, with the invention of phenomenal consciousness, there was a giant leap in how sensations contribute to the sense of self, creating the “phenomenal self” – the Cartesian self that we discovered through introspection to be the subject of our mental states (cf. Humphrey 2023, 114).

In short, the evolutionary story goes like this – the “core self” provided the psychological basis for the inflated “phenomenal self” – a multifaceted entity that not only *feels* but has other cognitive states, such as thinking and remembering. In other words, the core self unifies the different components of the mind that create the whole person or individual Ego (cf. Humphrey 2011, 142 – 148). When we introspectively reflect on the phenomenal self, it seems *unique* in its own right – it is something that only I, as an individual, own. Simply put, we humans are sentient beings.

Thus, the invention of phenomenal consciousness also changes our psychology by encouraging us to believe in our metaphysical importance in the world – we see ourselves as individual egos whose fate and development are crucial to us. Returning to the patient H.D., she was not depressed because her vision lacked sensation, but because she lacked the sensation, there was no “what it is like” for *her* to be *the subject* of the thick moment of experience. In other words, at that moment, her sense of self was low or even completely absent.

The question is, why would evolution invent the phenomenal self? One of the main explanations is that the invention of the phenomenal self was the main driver of *social cognition* in human beings.¹² Humphrey (2023, 74 – 75, 118 – 124) argues that because of the phenomenal self, we are better “natural psychologists” and can develop a “theory of mind” – if we can imagine ourselves in someone else’s place, we can better model and “read minds” of others, and thus consider others as individual “Egos”:

¹² Similar approaches have been adopted by other illusionists (see Dennett 2018; Graziano 2016, 2019; Graziano and Webb 2017).

Mind-reading, as humans practice it, revolves around self-knowledge. We discover by introspection the intimate story of our selves. Then, when we want to model the mind of someone else, we construct the other's mind in the image of our own. We assume the other to be a conscious subject who thinks and feels in the way we've learned that we do...We can do this because – but only because – we've experienced these very states of mind ourselves and seen for ourselves how they connect. (Humphrey 2023, 74 – 75).

Humphrey (2011, 2023), therefore, argues that the invention of phenomenal consciousness led human beings to invent the so-called 'soul niche' – an environment where we represent ourselves and other human beings as individual Egos or 'souls' that have an inner, rich phenomenal life. This was crucial because it changed human lives on many levels, but significantly it "transformed human relationships, encouraging new levels of mutual respect, and greatly increasing the value individuals placed on their own and others' lives" (Humphrey 2011, 152). However, the invention of the soul niche was the result of cultural rather than biological evolution:

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 a *cultural* product, by no means a given of the natural world. Human beings have largely *invented* the soul niche (Humphrey 2011, 159).

Thus, in this respect, the soul niche is a *cultural invention* unique to human beings. Humphrey goes further and argues that this change in "spiritual worldview" has both *positives* and *negatives* – on the one hand, the soul niche was highly adaptive and marked a breakthrough in the development of the human species – the concept of "human beings" having a phenomenal self can be observed across cultures (cf. Humphrey 2011, 160 – 164); on the other hand, the idea of the phenomenal self-created fear of death can a) damage biological fitness through, for instance, various psychological disorders, but also, b) through the fear itself, that human beings created the idea of an "immortal soul" (Humphrey 2011, 204).

III. An Illusion(ism) Worth Having

Humphrey's evolutionary theory of consciousness offers one possible explanation, among other powerful propositions, such as Graziano's (2016, 2019) attention schema theory or Dennett's (2018) evolutionary theory of consciousness.¹³ However, his theory is speculative in parts and raises several questions. The limited scope of this article prevents me from addressing all the objections to his evolutionary theory, so I will mention only those relevant to the discussions about illusionism.

The main objection is that it is not clear that the invention of phenomenal consciousness *alone* has played an essential role in the development of the psychology of human beings and other animals. The counter-response to this objection is relatively straightforward – although Humphrey himself does not insist that phenomenal consciousness alone played this role, there is a good reason that it did (cf. Humphrey 2023, 125 – 126). As I have pointed out, the invention of phenomenal consciousness significantly changed human psychology – and the invention of the “phenomenal self” is particularly important – it is through the phenomenal self that we believe in the *metaphysical significance* of our lives and the lives of others.

The first objection relates directly to another that assumes that even if an animal lacks phenomenal consciousness, it could still develop some sense of self and, therefore, become a natural psychologist, as mentioned above. *So why would evolution take this extra step and invent phenomenal consciousness?* This objection relates to a more complex discussion on animal consciousness.¹⁴ But it also plays an important role in explaining *why* the invention of phenomenal consciousness provided a *selective advantage* to those possessing it.

On the one hand, Humphrey agrees with the objection – in the sense that an animal lacking phenomenal consciousness is still “*cognitively conscious*”: it has introspective access to its mental states, such as sensations or desires, and displays the accompanying intelligence – but, it will have only a limited sense of self and hence a limited theory of mind (cf. Humphrey 2023, 146 – 147).

On the other hand, Humphrey (2011, 72; 2020, 19) argues that this question misses its mark. It assumes that phenomenal consciousness was

¹³ For example, Dennett (1991, 309 – 314; 2018, 340 – 346) argues that phenomenal consciousness is a “user-illusion” – a *digested version* of complex cognitive processes, accessible to us through introspection for communication purposes.

¹⁴ In Humphrey's theory, animal consciousness is disputed. Humphrey argues that we can draw a crude line between sentient and insentient animals, assuming that warm-bloodedness was crucial in the development of phenomenal consciousness (see Humphrey 2023).

invented because it provides a new *mental skill* – that it *enables* us to perform some tasks that can be performed *only* by virtue of being phenomenally conscious. However, according to Humphrey, the invention of phenomenal consciousness confers *new interest* in our life rather than new abilities; more specifically, it *enhances* and *enriches* the psychology of human beings and, therefore, profoundly changes our *take* on ourselves and the world around us. He goes further and argues that the invention of phenomenal consciousness resulted in a “consciousness paradigm” – a Kuhnian paradigm shift in which human ancestors adopted new instruments and looked in new places – we can observe this paradigm shift across different cultures (cf. Humphrey 2011, 73).

The reasoning behind this is that natural selection *continually searches for new opportunities* to improve the biological fitness of animals by adopting ways of life that were previously out of reach – just as birds developed wings to enter the ecological niche to become airborne (even though life on land was not, *in principle*, problematic), humans and other sentient animals invented phenomenal consciousness to enter the niche where they represent themselves and others as phenomenal selves (cf. Humphrey 2023, 127 – 128). In other words, evolution did not have to make this move, that is, to invent phenomenal consciousness, but it made it to *increase the biological fitness* of human beings and possibly other animals.

Finally, one could object that it is not the “illusion” of phenomenal consciousness but phenomenal consciousness *per se* that has played an essential role in the development of human psychology. On the one hand, this is partly true because, as I mentioned above, Humphrey, in his most recent works, distances himself from illusionism and calls his theory “phenomenal surrealism.”

On the other hand, I do not think Humphrey’s phenomenal surrealism necessarily contradicts illusionism. The reason is that according to his theory, phenomenal consciousness arises when the sensations represent how the subject *evaluates or feels* about the sensory stimuli – it represents the *relational dimension* of what stimulation *means* for the subject. Therefore, it is not whether phenomenal consciousness is real that matters, but how it *affects* the subject (recall the case of patient H.D.). In this sense, phenomenal consciousness could even be magical – it all depends on how the subject interprets the sensory stimuli from a first-person perspective. As Frankish (2017b, 343) argues, “When Humphrey defends his realism, it is the reality of our *relation* to stimuli that he stresses, not the reality of phenomenal feels themselves....” Furthermore, as mentioned above, according to Frankish, the term “illusion” does not necessarily imply that phenomenal consciousness is a mistake; on the contrary,

quasi-phenomenal illusions could carry valuable information for the system and be carefully designed by evolution.

Despite these objections, the main hypotheses of Humphrey's evolutionary theory are based on years of empirical research, such as his work on phosphenes, social intelligence, natural psychology, and the psychology behind paranormal beliefs (Humphrey 2023). However, Humphrey's most significant contribution to the science of consciousness was his participation in neurophysiological research on "blindsight" in Helen the monkey and later in human beings (the case of H.D). I think this is important because many philosophers claim to respect scientific research, but few apply these findings to their theorizing about consciousness. On the other hand, based on this research, Humphrey made a crucial philosophical distinction between perception and sensation in sensory experience. It became central to his evolutionary theory because it shows that sensation is not a side-effect of perception but a significant phenomenon. As I pointed out, this emphasis on sensation is essential to Humphrey's explanation of how phenomenal consciousness arose and why it was invented by natural selection. Thus, in this regard, Humphrey's evolutionary theory gives a possible answer to the function of the illusion of phenomenal consciousness.

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, I want to emphasize two main points relating to why I consider the illusion problem, a key aspect of which is to explain the function of the illusion of phenomenal consciousness, to be a crucial part of the illusionist program.

First, the illusion problem is a strong *proxy* for the hard problem. The reasoning is that instead of addressing the *explanatory gap* between phenomenal consciousness and brain processes, illusionists can explain *why* we think that phenomenal consciousness creates the gap. Even some realists (Chalmers 2018, 9) are sympathetic to the illusionism argument because the illusion problem is similar to the so-called "metaproblem of consciousness" – the problem of explaining why we think that there is a hard problem. Chalmers assumes that if a consensus solution between metaproblem and the illusion problem were to emerge, then illusionism would be the more attractive and stronger position (Chalmers 2018, 9).

Moreover, the illusion problem is more tractable within the scientific investigation of consciousness. For example, Graziano et al. consider illusionism and other cognitive theories (global workspace theories, attention schema

theory, higher-order theories) as the “standard model” offering a naturalistic explanation for conscious experience (Graziano et al. 2020).

Second, I think that by addressing the positive aspect of illusionism, especially the illusion problem, illusionists could offer a strong alternative to other theoretical approaches to consciousness. Many critics (Balog 2016; Stenner 2022; Strawson 2019) regard illusionism as a radical position because it eliminates something we know for sure – that through introspection, we are directly acquainted with phenomenal properties of experience.

However, it is my view that this criticism stems from the fact that while there has been a detailed discussion of the negative aspect of illusionism (Dennett 1988; Frankish 2012), the positive aspect is an open research project that may be formulated in a variety of different ways (Humphrey 2011, 2016, 2023; Graziano 2016, 2019). For this reason, I think that if illusionism focused on the positive aspect, especially the *naturalistic question* of *why* the illusion of phenomenal consciousness has evolved, it would be more defensible and intuitively acceptable.

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