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Defining Consciousness and Denying its Existence. Sailing between Charybdis and Scylla[1]

Abstract: Ulysses, the strong illusionist, sails towards the Strait of Definitions. On his left, Charybdis defines "phenomenal consciousness" in a loaded manner, which makes it a problematic entity from a physicalist and naturalistic point of view. This renders illusionism attractive, but at the cost of committing a potential strawman against its opponents – phenomenal realists. On the right, Scylla defines "phenomenal consciousness" innocently. This seems to render illusionism unattractive. Against this, I show that Ulysses can pass the Strait of Definitions. He should sail straight towards Scylla. Supposedly innocent definitions land a concept that makes illusionism attractive without committing a strawman. Indeed, this concept, which captures what the phenomenal realist means, is explicitly innocent but implicitly loaded. Beyond the Strait lies another danger: the Sirens of Redefinitions. They incite our hero to redefine his terms to salvage verbally (weak) phenomenal realism – judged preferable to overt strong illusionism. Ulysses should resist the Sirens' songs and choose overt strong illusionism over its weak realist reformulation.

Introduction

Ulysses is a strong illusionist: he thinks that phenomenal consciousness does not exist, although it seems to exist. Denying the existence of an entity requires *defining* the entity denied. This seems to lead to a dilemma. On the left ("Charybdis"), Ulysses defines phenomenal consciousness by mentioning conditions something must meet to count as phenomenal. Plausible conditions include, for instance, intrinsicality, ineffability, immediate introspectability, non-physical character, unexplainability, etc.

These conditions are *problematic*: they make phenomenal consciousness at odds with physicalism and/or current scientific approaches to the mind. With such a loaded definition in mind, Ulysses can build a strong argument against the existence of phenomenal consciousness. However, his opponents – phenomenal realists, who believe in phenomenal consciousness – will accuse him of committing a strawman. On the right side ("Scylla"), Ulysses defines phenomenal consciousness innocently, without appealing to any problematic condition – for instance, by merely directing our attention to examples. This better captures what Ulysses' opponents have in mind. However, the illusionist argument seems to become impossible to build.

Is there a way to pass the Strait of Definitions? If not, the prospects of strong illusionism are bleak. I argue that the Strait of Definitions can be passed, on the side of Scylla. The definition of phenomenal consciousness which purports to be innocent, and captures what the phenomenal realist means, also makes phenomenal consciousness sufficiently problematic for illusionism to be attractive. This definition is *explicitly* innocent, but it lands a concept *implicitly* loaded in a problematic manner. This challenge met, Ulysses faces another difficulty. Beyond the Strait, he encounters the *Sirens of Redefinition*. They incite him to redefine "phenomenal consciousness" to verbally salvage phenomenal realism. I show that he has good reasons to refuse this semantic adjustment and prefer overt strong illusionism over this weak realist reformulation.

I first present strong illusionism about phenomenal consciousness (§1). Next, I describe the difficulty strong illusionists face, presenting the Charybdis of loaded definitions (§2) and the Scylla of innocent ones (§3). Then, I show that our concept of phenomenality *could be* both explicitly innocent and implicitly loaded, allowing Ulysses to pass the Strait (§4), before arguing that it is indeed so (§5). I examine and rebuke objections (§6). Finally, I present Ulysses' last challenge, embodied in the Sirens of Redefinitions: the temptation of reformulating strong illusionism in a phenomenal realist vocabulary. I show that this temptation should be resisted (§7).

Section 1 – Illusionism about Phenomenal Consciousness

Strong illusionists (or "eliminativists"[2]) claim that phenomenal consciousness does not exist but seems to exist (Dennett, 1991; Frankish, 2016a; Kammerer, 2021; Rey, 1997). For them, phenomenal states – phenomenal experiences of pain, visual phenomenal experiences of colors, emotional phenomenal

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[2] "Eliminativism" is ambiguous between a view asserting the *inexistence* of a sort of entity (entity eliminativism), and a view claiming that we should *stop* using certain sorts of words (discourse eliminativism). Illusionism entails entity eliminativism about phenomenal consciousness, but not discourse eliminativism (Irvine & Sprevak, 2020).

experiences of joy, etc. – are not to be found anywhere in reality. Phenomenal properties (or *qualia*) – putative properties of phenomenal states in virtue of which they are phenomenal states of a certain kind – are never instantiated. Strong illusionists concede that, while phenomenal states are not real, we usually *believe* that they are, notably because we *introspectively represent* them. Phenomenal consciousness is an illusion.[3]

Strong illusionism differs from weak illusionism (Frankish, 2016a, p. 15), the view that phenomenal consciousness exists but lacks specific properties that it seems to have. On a liberal reading, most views of phenomenal consciousness are weak illusionist ones. On a more distinctive reading, weak illusionism states that phenomenal consciousness lacks some key properties it appears to have. Here "illusionism", left unspecified, means "strong illusionism". "Phenomenal realism" (or just "realism") is the view that phenomenal consciousness exists. Weak illusionism is a variety of phenomenal realism, which we can call "weak phenomenal realism" to distinguish it from strong phenomenal realism – the view that phenomenal consciousness exists with all the properties (or all the key properties) it seems to have.

Illusionism does not deny the existence of consciousness *simpliciter*, since "consciousness" denotes many things aside from phenomenal consciousness: access-consciousness, self-consciousness, monitoring consciousness (Block, 1995), etc. – forms of consciousness which are usually understood functionally and about which illusionism has nothing to say. Illusionism also fails to imply that our representations of phenomenal states do not track something real. It just states that what they track is not phenomenal. To refer to the real non-phenomenal states tracked (and mischaracterized) by representations of phenomenal states (e.g., in introspection), illusionists talk of "quasi-phenomenal states" (Frankish, 2016a, pp. 15–16). Phenomenal states have phenomenal properties, but quasi-phenomenal states have quasi-phenomenal properties, mischaracterized (e.g., in introspection) as phenomenal properties. When I introspect a phenomenal experience of pain, I do not have phenomenal pain, but I am probably in a certain type of brain state (quasi-phenomenal pain), which is not phenomenal but which my introspection mischaracterizes as such.

Illusionism's attractiveness mainly comes from its capacity to solve vexing issues. Indeed, phenomenal consciousness is the best candidate counterexample to *physicalism*, an otherwise plausible metaphysical thesis (Chalmers, 1996; Jackson, 1982). Phenomenal consciousness also seems uniquely hard to explain in the framework of our current scientific approaches to the mind. Other cognitive phenomena lend themselves to these approaches, while an "explanatory gap" (Levine, 1983) or a "hard problem" (Chalmers, 1995) subsists in the case of phenomenal consciousness. Illusionism eliminates the threat to physicalism created by phenomenality. It removes the need to explain phenomenality for current

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[3] That the illusion of phenomenality arises in introspection is not implied by the illusionist thesis, but it is a part of most plausible illusionist views.

scientific approaches to the mind: the explanatory gap and the hard problem evaporate. For an illusionist, all that needs explaining is the (non-phenomenal) *illusion* of phenomenal consciousness (Frankish, 2016a, p. 37), which seems less deeply puzzling.

The current interest in illusionism, after a first wave of research decades ago (Dennett, 1979, 1988, 1991; Rey, 1983), shows in the number of illusionist (or illusionist-friendly) views developed recently (Clark et al., 2019; Dewhurst & Dolega, 2020; Drescher, 2006; Frankish, 2016a; Graziano, 2013; Humphrey, 2011; Kammerer, 2016, 2021; Pereboom, 2011; Schwarz, 2018; Shabasson, 2022).[4] It also shows in the comments of prominent proponents (Daniel Dennett called it "the obvious default theory of consciousness" (Dennett, 2016)) and some distinguished opponents ("If I were a materialist, I would be an illusionist" (Chalmers, 2018, p. 9)), even if illusionism remains a minority position.[5]

Illusionism faces many objections. Objections to the effect that illusionism is contradictory (because illusions require phenomenality, or because an appearance/reality gap is impossible for phenomenality (Searle, 1997)), or obviously false (Chalmers, 2018; Frances, 2008), or that it leads to unacceptable moral consequences (Strawson, 2018), have found answers from illusionists (Dennett, 1991; Frankish, 2016a, pp. 29–37; Kammerer, 2020, 2022; Pereboom, 2011). However, a *definitional* difficulty has plagued illusionism since its origins. This difficulty recently resurfaced in the literature. In my mind, it has never been satisfyingly answered.

Section 2 – Charybdis: Illusionism and Loaded Definitions

Go back to Ulysses, the (strong) illusionist. Ulysses must define what he denies – phenomenal consciousness. This is a prerequisite to the debate – to even disagree, the illusionist and the realist must agree on *what* entity they disagree about (Irvine & Sprevak, 2020, pp. 348–350).

Here is a first way to approach the definition. Ulysses can provide a set of conditions something needs to fulfill to count as a phenomenal state – at least necessary ones. An argument for illusionism must then show that nothing satisfies at least one of these necessary conditions.

What conditions could Ulysses mention? One superficially attractive option defines "phenomenal consciousness" with synonymous but less jargony expressions, such as "what it's like", "subjective

experience", "how things feel", etc. For instance, Ulysses could claim that something is a phenomenal state if and only if there is something it's like to be in that state.

This option is doomed. These expressions (contrary to "phenomenal consciousness") contain only ordinary terms. However, they are under-determinate. There are many readings of expressions such as "what it's like" or "how things feel", etc.[6] Some refer to things different from what we think of under the label "phenomenal consciousness".[7] Consider the most natural reading of a sentence like: "Juan tells the children what it was like when there were no computers": this that we cannot use these expressions to refer to phenomenality without engaging in *semantic narrowing* of the expression, which requires an antecedent grasp of the concept we try to define (Liu, 2023). It could be, of course, that even if these expressions do not suffice to refer to phenomenality distinctively, they are still useful to focus our attention appropriately. This interpretation of the use of such expressions is examined later.

Illusionists can try making the definition more precise.[8] They might define phenomenal properties (or qualia) as ineffable, intrinsic, private, and immediately apprehensible in introspection (Dennett, 1988, p. 47). They might also talk of properties that are intrinsically subjective, non-physical, primitive, irreducibly qualitative and feely, non-describable in structural and functional terms, or properties creating a hard problem, leaving an explanatory gap, etc.

These conditions describe features that are *problematic* for physicalism or the current scientific approach to the mind – which I call "problematic" features. Definitions using such conditions characterize phenomenality as problematic. This makes illusionism attractive. Indeed, it is plausible that we are antecedently sympathetic to physicalism, and the view that current scientific approaches to the mind are valid. Here, I presuppose that we are. This gives us a reason to deny that there are problematic entities and – therefore – that phenomenal consciousness exists. In what follows, I assume that characterizing phenomenal consciousness as problematic is both *necessary* and *sufficient* to make illusionism attractive (although, of course, not *inescapable*).[9]

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[6] For a semantic analysis of "what it's like" talk, see notably (Snowdon, 2010; Stoljar, 2016).
[7] See Keith Frankish who grants that there is a "plausible reading of the phrase" *what it's like* for which illusionism admits that some of our mental states are like something for us (Frankish, 2016a, p. 23). A similar point can be made about "feeling" – see (Kammerer, 2022, Section 4; Niikawa, 2021, pp. 7–9).
[8] Most explicitly, Daniel Dennett (Dennett, 1988) and, somewhat more cautiously, Keith Frankish (Frankish, 2012, 2016a).
[9] Standard illusionists argument presuppose that phenomenality is problematic (Dennett, 1988; Frankish, 2016a). Some have argued for illusionism without this presupposition (Irvine & Sprevak, 2020, pp. 354–359), but I am skeptical of these attempts. David Chalmers' debunking argument for illusionism (Chalmers, 2018, pp. 44–49) does not presuppose that phenomenality is problematic, but only supports a disjunction of weak and strong illusionism. To build an argument for strong illusionism, he presupposes that phenomenal consciousness creates the hard problem (Chalmers, 2018, pp. 49–52) – i.e., he understands it as problematic.

These definitions have a flaw: Ulysses' opponents often reject them. They claim that, when they claimed that phenomenality is real, they *never meant* to assert the reality of ineffable, intrinsic, non-physical, etc., properties of mental states. "Some of us *believe* that phenomenality has problematic features, but others do not, and at any rate, we do not make it a matter of definition" is their answer. If they are right, illusionists just committed a strawman against their opponents. Ulysses falls in the bloody fangs of Charybdis.[10]

This problem was noticed early on. Dennett examined a neighboring objection he associates with Sydney Shoemaker (Dennett, 1988, pp. 47–48). Joseph Levine made a similar point by distinguishing between bold and modest qualiophilia (Levine, 1994)[11]. D.C. Williams might have made a comparable point early on when arguing against eliminativist interpretations of behaviorism (Williams, 1934). Recently, other realists insisted that they define "phenomenal consciousness" (or "qualia") without appealing to problematic conditions (Carruthers, 2000; Kind, 2001; Tye, 2002; citations taken from Irvine & Sprevak, 2020, p. 354; see also the examples reviewed in Frankish, 2012, pp. 669–673).

Illusionists have a standard response to this objection. They insist that their problematic definition of phenomenality is the one employed by everyone in the debate. Dennett claims that, faced with the task of defining phenomenal consciousness (or "qualia") *without* these problematic conditions, his opponents encounter difficulties. They fail to articulate a satisfying alternative definition, which suggests that their appeal to a minimal understanding of "phenomenal" is nothing but "a gesture in the direction leading back to ineffable, private, directly apprehensible ways things seem to one" (Dennett, 1988, p. 48). Frankish concurred (Frankish, 2012), stressing that phenomenal realists struggle to define a concept of qualia that is *less* than the problematic concept, but does not collapse into a concept so unspecific that even illusionists think it is satisfied – say, the concept of dispositions to believe in problematic qualia. For Frankish, such a minimal concept of phenomenal consciousness cannot be articulated. It has "no distinctive content at all" (Frankish, 2012, p. 675). Phenomenal realists must be using the problematic concept, and illusionists are *not* committing a strawman.

There is a core of truth in this illusionist response, but it is unsatisfying in its current form. First, it suggests that phenomenal realists do not know what they mean, or that they are insincere. This seems

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[10] It does not help Ulysses to use problematic conditions in mere intensional contexts and define phenomenal properties as the properties *usually thought* to be ineffable, immediately introspectable, etc: illusionism still looses attractiveness, as phenomenal consciousness can easily be identified with some unproblematic entity (say, a set of brain states) about which we have mistaken beliefs. This leads to weak realism. See Takuya Niikawa on what he calls the E-TE definition of phenomenality (Niikawa, 2021, pp. 12–13).

[11] Levine saw the question as vexing: "I think it's terribly difficult to get clear about just what is being affirmed or denied in this debate" (Levine, 1994, p. 108). Note that he thought a characterization I deemed "problematic" ("phenomenal consciousness is something that leaves an explanatory gap") is acceptable and would not make illusionism attractive. I disagree: while this definition would not allow for illusionist arguments appealing to physicalism, one could built illusionist arguments from the premise that our current scientific approaches to the mind can capture all cognitive phenomena.

uncharitable. Second, the claim that phenomenal realists are actually using the problematic definition of phenomenality is supposedly supported by the fact that attempts at articulating a minimal definition of consciousness fail. But, plausibly, we sometimes use substantive and contentful concepts even if we are unable to articulate their definition. It is doubtful that we can articulate a definition of *knowledge* (as shown by the failure of post-Gettier analyses (Gettier, 1963; Williamson, 2000)), but the concept of knowledge still seems substantive and contentful. The same might hold for concepts of cause, existence, goodness, etc. Our concept of phenomenal consciousness could also be a substantive and contentful concept whose definition we cannot articulate.

This illusionist response does not defang Charybdis. Ulysses must turn to starboard.

Section 3 – Scylla: Illusionism and Innocent Definitions

Ulysses sails in the opposite direction. He tries to capture what phenomenal realists mean: he avoids defining "phenomenal consciousness" in a loaded, theoretical manner, and tries an innocent, pre-theoretical approach. Appealing to ordinary expressions such as "what it's like" does not suffice (see above), but there are other pre-theoretical approaches. They appeal to examples or inner ostension.

Eric Schwitzgebel (Schwitzgebel, 2016) recently made a thorough attempt at providing such a pre-theoretical, purportedly innocent definition. He provides a set of "positive" examples (sensory perceptions, mental imagery, emotional experiences, dreams, etc.) and a set of "negative" ones (the growth of our fingernails, dispositional beliefs, dreamless sleep, etc.). He then makes the definitional claim that *phenomenal consciousness* is the "most folk-psychologically obvious thing or feature" that the positive examples (are assumed to) possess and that the negative examples (are assumed to) lack (Schwitzgebel, 2016, p. 229).

Note that Schwitzgebel originally formulates his definition without using the qualification in parenthesis ("are assumed to"). However, it is necessary. As he acknowledges, if some non-intuitive view of the distribution of consciousness (e.g., panpsychism) is correct – something our definition should not rule out – then many negative examples have the feature (Schwitzgebel, 2016, p. 233). The definitional claim should accommodate this possibility.[12]

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[12] Schwitzgebel does not mention a similar qualification for the positive examples, but it is needed to make the concept adequate to even discuss illusionism. Moreover, the concept resulting from such qualification is more adequate to the spirit of the innocent definition, as it remains neutral about a greater number of substantive claims.

Schwitzgebel thinks that, if we are provided with enough positive and negative examples, if we do not try to be "too clever and creative" – if we think about the "obvious feature, the thing that kind of smacks you in the face when you think about the cases" – then the examples make us able to latch on to the same concept and think about the same feature (Schwitzgebel, 2016, p. 230). This feature is called "phenomenal consciousness".

This definition is not idiosyncratic. It captures the spirit of previous definitional attempts by prominent phenomenal realists (Block, 1995, pp. 230–231; Chalmers, 1996, p. 4; Searle, 1992, p. 83) – arguably, it is nothing but a more elaborated and reflective version of these. This definition is pre-theoretical and does not use theoretical concepts – excluding folk-psychological ones. I take it that the "folk psychology" Schwitzgebel mentions must be understood liberally, as equivalent to "our intuitive understanding of mental states", and without taking a stance on whether this understanding corresponds to an innate module,[13] or to a genuine theory empirically developed in childhood;[14] nor on whether introspection can be the source of this understanding.[15] Schwitzgebel's definition does not explicitly appeal to inner ostension,[16] but inner ostension is plausibly mobilized in our consideration of the examples (many are *our* mental states).[17] Finally, it does not use expressions such as "what it is like", or "feelings", but these could be used in the spirit of Schwitzgebel's definition, if we treat them as mere dispensable definitional props designed to help us pay attention to the relevant "obvious" feature.

Schwitzgebel claims that this definition is "*innocent*". It avoids building problematic assumptions into the definition. Hence, it is "*wonderful*", in the semi-technical sense that it does not settle, as a matter of definition, various debates. It does not assume that phenomenal consciousness is *problematic* (ineffable, non-physical, impossible to explain, etc.), but it also does not assume that it is *unproblematic* (and fails to be ineffable, non-physical, etc.). It leaves these questions open, so that we can *wonder* about the correct answer. This is why this definition can capture most debates and most views.

If successful, this definition answers Frankish's criticism against minimal concepts of phenomenality. Indeed, the concept supposedly delivered by Schwitzgebel's definition is *less* than the problematic concept (which explicitly defines its referent as problematic). Still, it is also distinct from concepts explicitly characterizing unproblematic entities (e.g., it does not *define* its referent as a particular disposition to believe).

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[13] (Baron-Cohen, 1995; Scholl & Leslie, 1999).
[14] (Gopnik & Meltzoff, 1997; Gopnik & Wellman, 1992).
[15] For a view on which introspection is the self-application of a modular folk psychology theory, see (Carruthers, 2005). For a general presentation of debates on folk psychology, see (Ravenscroft, 2010).
[16] Contrary to some neighboring non-theoretical definitions of phenomenality (see for instance Niikawa, 2021, pp. 10–12)
[17] Multiple acts of inner ostension would be needed to define "phenomenal consciousness". Therefore, definitions appealing only to inner ostension are *also* definitions by examples (taken from a restricted set).

I presuppose here that Schwitzgebel's definition (1) allows people to latch on to the same single concept; (2) is simply a particularly reflective and elaborated version of previous influential definitions and lands a concept capturing what realists mean when they discuss phenomenal consciousness. Hence, I treat it as the paradigmatic innocent definition.

With this definition, Ulysses would escape Charybdis – capture what realists mean. But here's the rub. It seems that, if we define phenomenality so innocently, illusionism loses its attractiveness. We can assume that everything is physical or that current scientific approaches can explain the mind – it seems that this does not support the view that phenomenal consciousness is inexistent, since we did not define it as problematic. Granted, Schwitzgebel's definition does not *entail* that phenomenal consciousness is unproblematic, but it seems *compatible* with it. Using this a definition, it seems that we could, at most, conclude that phenomenal consciousness lacks some non-definitional properties it is sometimes (often?) believed to have – intrinsicality, ineffability, etc. – thus merely vindicating *weak* illusionism (a form of – weak – realism). More generally, with such a definition, it is hard to see how illusionism could ever be justified. If our concept of phenomenal consciousness says so little about the nature of phenomenality, phenomenal realism can accommodate most views of reality. Ulysses falls into the sharp claws of Scylla.

This specific anti-illusionist argument from innocent definitions is merely suggested in Schwitzgebel's article, but he makes it explicit in later work. (Schwitzgebel, 2024, Chapter 6, draft). Comparable recent anti-illusionist considerations are found elsewhere (Levine, 1994, 2001, Chapter 5; Niikawa, 2021).

Illusionists noticed this difficulty. Frankish, answering Schwitzgebel, concedes that defining "phenomenal consciousness" in this innocent manner deprives us of reasons to deny its existence. However, he insists that "precisely because the definition is so innocent, it is not incompatible with illusionism" (Frankish, 2016b, p. 277). Frankish's view is that illusionists do *not* deny the existence of consciousness *in Schwitzgebel's sense*. They grant that Schwitzgebel's consciousness is real and might be nothing but (say) quasi-phenomenal consciousness. (The claim is not that Schwitzgebel's concept *is* the concept of quasi-phenomenality, but that quasi-phenomenality can satisfy it). This move requires the strong illusionist to define "phenomenal consciousness" otherwise – for Frankish, through a loaded, problematic definition. Illusionists avoid the claws of Scylla but fall back into the fangs of Charybdis.

It might seem that Ulysses cannot pass the Strait of Definitions. Either he uses a loaded definition, which makes phenomenal consciousness problematic and illusionism attractive, but he commits a strawman; or he uses an innocent definition, but then it seems that illusionism stops being attractive.

Section 4 – Innocent Definitions and Implicit Ladenness

Against this, I show that Ulysses can pass the Strait. Here is how. I show that it is possible that, by sailing straight to Scylla, Ulysses ends up meeting a helping friend instead of a threatening monster. This happens if the concept produced by so-called "innocent" definitions is explicitly innocent but implicitly problematically loaded. I show that there is no obvious way to rule out this possibility. Then, I argue that this possibility is actual.

Go back to innocent definitions – with Schwitzgebel's as a paradigm case. Provided with positive and negative examples, we latch on to a folk-psychologically obvious concept – call it concept C.[18] Arguably, this concept is either *already possessed by us* before the definition – the definition simply makes us understand *which concept* we should associate with the expression – or we are at least antecedently disposed to form it. This follows from the idea that this is the concept of a folk-psychologically obvious feature, which "smacks us in the face" when we think about it (and this is why we need ten examples, not a thousand).

Now consider other neighboring concepts. Take D: the concept of whatever property is actually possessed by the positive examples and lacked by the negative examples (or, alternatively, of the most salient natural kind property possessed by the positive examples and lacked by the negative examples). Or take E: the concept of whatever property causes activations of C (or, alternatively, of the most salient natural kind property causing activations of C).

We must differentiate C from both D and E. D and E do not make the same appeal as C to what is folk-psychologically obvious. Even E does not, as it mobilizes C in a merely intensional context – its definitional condition mentioning, but not using, C. C also makes it possible for its referent to *be lacked* by the positive examples and *had* by the negative examples – hence, C is not D. C does not explicitly characterize its referent *via* a causal role – hence, C is not E.

Now that C is isolated: is it an innocent concept? Does it avoid characterizing its referent as problematic? Schwitzgebel and other realists claim it is. But how are we supposed to know? Here are two possible answers.

The first is suggested by Schwitzgebel. Maybe we know that C is innocent because we know its origin. We know we reached C through a careful and thorough definition by examples, during which we made

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[18] Schwitzgebel sometimes say that the concept itself is obvious, and sometimes that the concept is the concept of an obvious feature. I take these to be equivalent, and consider that "obvious concept" really means "concept of an obvious feature".

sure *not to import* any problematic condition. Metaphorically speaking: we put no problematic ingredient in the soup, so the soup cannot be problematic itself.

This is unconvincing. Our definition of C crucially appealed to our folk-psychological understanding of mental states. If our folk-psychological understanding itself makes problematic assumptions, these are imported into C. But then C is not innocent, even if *our definition itself* does not add anything problematic to the concept. Metaphorically speaking: folk psychology is part of the soup, so if it is problematic, the soup is, too. It might be that folk psychology itself is innocent, but this is a substantive presupposition, which we cannot establish simply by being careful in our definitional attempt.

Here is another answer. Maybe we know that C is innocent by looking, not at its *origin*, but at its *functioning*. Assume that phenomenal realists express C by "phenomenal consciousness". Many believe that phenomenal consciousness is *not* problematic – it is not ineffable, immediately apprehensible in introspection, non-physical, it does not leave an explanatory gap, etc. But it seems that if C were not innocent, they *should be unable* to believe this without contradiction: If C characterized its referent as problematic, denying its problematic nature should be contradictory. But assuming that numerous philosophers commit such contradictions seems uncharitable. Worse: supposing they commit them, we should be able to *point them out*. But we cannot. For instance, the view that phenomenal consciousness is physical is a coherent view, in the sense that it creates no contradiction.[19] The same is true for other denials of problematic features. This might show the innocence of C.

However, this reasoning supposes that the (putative) problematically loaded nature of C should be explicit. None of this threatens the view that C is *implicitly loaded*.

Here, I need to say more about the distinction between explicit and implicit ladenness. I take it that a characterization-as-X is borne by a concept A iff mastering A makes it *a priori* for the subject (i.e., justified independently of empirical data) that As are X. The characterizations borne by A are what renders A loaded in certain ways.

A given characterization-as-X (call it B) borne by concept A is *explicit* when (1) competent users of A can normally articulate B; (2) competent users of A, faced with a proposition contradicting B (e.g., "some As are not X"), normally take the proposition to be logically contradictory. On the other hand, B is *implicit* when (1) and (2) are not fulfilled: it is *not* the case that competent users of A can normally

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[19] "Anti-zombies" (Frankish, 2007) or "shombies" (R. Brown, 2010) are conceptually coherent and create no contradiction. On one standard understanding of negative conceivability (Chalmers, 2002), this means that they are negatively conceivable.

articulate B; and it is *not* the case that, faced with a proposition contradicting B, they normally take it to be logically contradictory.[20]

Some concepts characterize their referents explicitly. For instance, it is typically the case of *composed* concepts (as well as concepts explicitly defined as equivalent to composed concepts). The concept of a blue chair characterizes its referent as blue and as a chair. Anyone who masters the concept can articulate this characterization, and takes the thesis that a given blue chair is not a chair to be contradictory.

At the same time, it is very plausible that *some* concepts bear implicit characterizations. Take our concept of knowledge. It is plausible that, together with concepts of belief, truth, and justification, it characterizes its referent so that it is *a priori* that some justified true beliefs fail to constitute knowledge. Yet, this characterization is not explicit. It is certainly not the case that competent users of the concept of knowledge can articulate it. It is not the case that these competent users take the negation of this characterization (that is, the JTB view of knowledge) to be contradictory; otherwise, the JTB view of knowledge would have been manifestly incorrect long before Gettier's counterexamples. This characterization is implicit.[21]

Take a color concept, such as our concept of *pink* (as a property of surfaces). We can define it by examples, providing positive and negative examples and stating that *pink* is the obvious feature that the positive examples are assumed to have and that the negative examples are assumed to lack (Schwitzgebel, 2016, pp. 234–235). A typical sighted person will thus latch on to the right concept. Suppose that in our negative examples, orange was never shown. Hence, proposition P: "A surface cannot be fully pink and fully orange" is not explicitly given with the definition. And, arguably, we do not see the negation of P as logically contradictory, as there is no formal contradiction in the claim that a surface is fully pink and fully orange. Yet, as has long been noted, P has a very strong claim to being *a priori*.[22] We do not need to check all colored surfaces to justify it. Plausibly, P stems from the way

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[20] In my view, subjects who think that propositions contradicting an implicit characterizations are not *logically* contradictory are correct. Propositions contradicting implicit characterizations are *not* logical contradictions, although they contradict propositions that are *a priori* justified. For instance, to anticipate on a later example: there is no logical contradiction in the proposition that a given surface is fully pink and fully orange, but this proposition contradicts an *a priori* justified proposition – that a surface cannot fully have two colors simultaneously. This last proposition is a priori justified because our color concepts implicitly characterize colors as such that a surface cannot fully have two colors simultaneously.

[21] For this example, see (Chalmers & Jackson, 2001, pp. 320–323) who insist that some JTBs failing to constitute knowledge is *a priori* without following from some "explicit analyses" or even "explicit sufficient conditions" associated with the concept of knowledge – what I call explicit characterization. I will not take a stance here on whether the concept of knowledge *also* bears explicit characterizations, although I find it plausible that it does not.

[22] Traditionally, claims like P have been seen as typical examples of *synthetic a priori* truths. Husserl saw them as a matter of material/synthetic *a priori* (Husserl, 1913/2013, p. 19). For a slightly different approach to this notion, see also (Pap, 1944). For the idea that such statements about colors are typical plausible examples of synthetic a priori truths, see (Hanna, 2016; Russell, 2020; Steup & Neta, 2020).

our color concepts implicitly characterize colors – as such that a surface cannot fully have two colors simultaneously.[23]

Finally, take our ordinary concept of numbers and our ordinary concept of birth. It seems *a priori* that no number is ever born. We do not need to examine numbers one by one to know it. Even if I do not have a theory of numbers as, say, abstract objects, I can grasp that numbers cannot be born. Yet, there is no contradiction we can point out in the claim that number 182 was born ten thousand years ago. Plausibly, that numbers cannot be born must result from – implicit – characterizations borne by our concepts of numbers and birth.

These examples are not intended to lay the basis for a theory of the a priori or conceptual characterizations. I wish to remain neutral on various key issues: what exactly grounds the implicit characterizations borne by concepts? Are all *a priori* propositions analytic propositions, or are there synthetic *a priori* propositions?[24] Is there a tenable distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions anyway? Are all *a priori* propositions – i.e., propositions justified independently of empirical data – true? Is *a priori* justification defeasible? I simply want to stress, with the help of the examples I mentioned, that it is very plausible that some concepts, outside of the phenomenal case, bear some implicit characterizations in the sense defined.

That some concepts bear some implicit characterizations is arguably required for there to be non-trivial conceptual analyses, able to make us grasp a priori propositions that were nevertheless not entirely immediately obvious – which is why the conceptual analysis, requiring work, effort, careful use of thought experiments, etc., was useful. The view that some concepts bear implicit characterizations is also a key presupposition of various influential theories of concepts (even if I want to stress that this view is very plausible, independently of any particular theory). For instance, this is the case of Frank Jackson's theory, on which concepts get their identity through their place in networks constituted by folk theories, which are partly explicit, but also mostly implicit – the reflection on cases being precisely what allows us to "tease out of us" the "implicit bits" (Jackson, 1998, p. 130; see also Chalmers & Jackson, 2001). It is also the case in Christopher Peacocke's theory of concepts, in which certain "implicit conceptions" are part of what constitutes the possession of certain concepts (Peacocke, 1998b,

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[23] This is compatible with the claim that this property of color concepts is explainable by features of our visual system or by the way we are taught color words. Besides, this is not threatened by experiments inducing perceptions of "forbidden colors", such as reddish greens or bluish yellows. Indeed, those seem reported as new colors, not as coexistence of two distinct colors on the same surface (Billock et al., 2001).This is also not threatened by grapheme-color synesthesia, during which subjects attach two distinct colors to a given perceived grapheme (the color of the ink, and a supplementary synaesthetic color). These subjects distinguish two colors in such a way (Johnson et al., 2007, pp. 1406, 1419) – one belonging to the surface, and one present "in the mind's eye" (associator synaesthetes) or on an overlay bound to the surface (projector synaesthetes) – that for these subjects too, it appears that a given surface (or layer) can only fully have one color at a time.

[24] One could choose to say that the implicit characterizations borne by concepts I mentioned ground synthetic a priori truths. Other might prefer seeing them as unobvious analytic truths. I do not take a stance on this here.

1998a, p. 140), or in Georges Rey's approach (Rey, 1993), who claimed our deployment of concepts might be governed by tacit sub-doxastic rules that are not straightforwardly accessible and could be extremely hard to articulate.[25]

If indeed, as I think is plausible, and as is implied by various theories, some concepts, outside of the phenomenal case, bear implicit characterizations, it seems that our concept of phenomenality – C – could also bear some problematic implicit characterization while being explicitly innocent.

If C is such, it would capture what realists mean. Indeed, they do not mean to talk about something problematic – but this is accounted for on this view, since C does not explicitly characterize its referent as problematic. (Similarly, when we think about knowledge, we do not *mean* to think of something that a JTB can fail to constitute). Besides, if C is such, the unproblematic nature of phenomenal consciousness is logically coherent. Indeed, since the problematic characterization is implicit, negating problematic features generates no contradiction. Yet, if C is such, it characterizes (implicitly) its referent – phenomenal consciousness – as problematic, which renders illusionism attractive. If C is such, Ulysses, sailing towards Scylla, passes the Strait.

Section 5 – The Implicit Ladenness of our Concept of Phenomenality

I showed that C *could be* explicitly innocent but implicitly problematically loaded, and that there does not seem to be an obvious way to rule out this possibility. This is already valuable, since this means that we cannot show that illusionism is not attractive simply by avoiding explicitly building problematic features in our concept of phenomenality. But we can go further. We have reasons to believe that C is indeed explicitly innocent and implicitly problematically loaded.

My starting point is that we have *intuitions* that phenomenal consciousness has problematic features. These intuitions could be explained naturally if they are *a* priori and stem from the way our concept of phenomenality implicitly characterizes its referent. Of course, there are other possible explanations. Most notably, these intuitions could be *a* posteriori and stem from various beliefs that we happen to have about phenomenality, irrespective of the characterizations borne by our concepts. However, there are reasons to reject the second type of explanation, and to accept the first.

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[25] Although the idea that concepts bear implicit characterizations is more prominent in classical or neo-classical conceptions of concepts, which are more friendly towards conceptual analysis and the a priori, it is also compatible with most other conceptions of concepts, such as the theory-theory conception, and at least some version of the prototype theory. Are there views of concepts that entirely preclude the possibility of concepts bearing implicit characterizations? Conceptual atomism might be the only clear example (for a presentation of these options and their difficulties, see Laurence & Margolis, 1999; Margolis & Laurence, 2023).

Here is the argument. Our intuitions that phenomenal consciousness is problematic have two features which signal that they are best accounted for by the first explanation rather than the first.

The first feature concerns their *distribution*. Many who *believe* that phenomenality is not really problematic still have these intuitions. But if our problematic intuitions stemmed from our beliefs, we should not expect this wide distribution.

The second feature concerns their *character*. We seem to face difficulties when we try to form a positive, coherent idea of phenomenal consciousness devoid of problematic features. But difficulties of this sort plausibly signal implicit conceptual characterizations to the contrary.

Indeed, difficulties in forming a representation without contradiction is a hallmark of explicit characterization to the contrary: concept A explicitly characterizes its referent as X when "Some As are not X" is contradictory, in a way that can be normally noticed by competent users of the concept. On the other hand, difficulties in forming a positive, coherent, and intelligible representation seem a hallmark of implicit conceptual characterizations to the contrary. A given concept A implicitly characterizes its referent as X when we cannot form a positive, coherent, and intelligible representation of a situation satisfying "Some As are not X".[26]

Some examples can help make this plausible. We can think that a surface fully has two colors simultaneously without noticeable logical contradictions. However, we cannot form a positive, coherent, and intelligible idea of such a surface (e.g., a surface entirely pink *and* entirely orange). Likewise, we can think of a number being born without noticeable contradictions, but we struggle to form a positive, coherent, and intelligible idea of it. Slightly differently because of the nature of the relevant characterization,[27] we can think that all JTBs constitute knowledge without contradiction. However, for some JTBs (those JTBs described in Gettier cases), we simply cannot form a positive, coherent, and intelligible representation of them as knowledge.

I will now show that at least two of our intuitions that phenomenality is problematic appear to have these two features – when it comes to their distribution and their character. They concern the *non-physical character* and the *immediately introspectable nature* of phenomenality.

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[26] See for instance (Peacocke, 1998a, p. 138). for the view that the "right kind of unintelligibility" indicates that the implicit conception associated with a concept (in my vocabulary, the implicit characterization borne by a concept) is violated. Note that, if one understands "negatively conceivable" as meaning "not contradictory", the distinction between the situations that can be represented without contradiction and those that can be represented in a positive, coherent, and intelligible manner, corresponds to a distinction between negative and positive conceivability. If one understands "negatively conceivable" as meaning "impossible to rule out *a priori*", this distinction does not straightforwardly correspond to distinctions of kinds of conceivability. For more, see (Chalmers, 2002).

[27] As I assume here that our concept of knowledge, truth, justification and belief characterize their referent such that some JTBs are *not* knowledge.

Non-physical character first. Anti-physicalist intuitions about phenomenality are widespread. They seem independent of beliefs, since many convinced physicalists report them:

> "I know the intuition [that consciousness does not reduce to something physical] well. I can feel it myself. […] I feel it, but I don't credit it." (Dennett, 2018, p. 456)

> "This [anti-materialist] intuition continues to operate even in those, like myself, who are otherwise persuaded that there are good arguments for materialism, and stops us really believing the materialist conclusion". (Papineau, 2002, p. 95)

Similar examples abound (Balog, 2012; Hill, 1997; Loar, 1997; Tye, 2003). This shows that the anti-physicalist intuition has the distribution I described.

Moreover, it also has the character I claimed: while *physicalism* is not noticeably contradictory, we seem to have difficulties forming a positive, coherent, and intelligible idea of the situation it describes. Thomas Nagel famously claimed that "physicalism is a position we cannot understand because we do not at present have any conception of how it might be true" (Nagel, 1974, p. 446).[28] Joseph Levine stressed that the idea that phenomenal properties might be identical to neurological properties "seems unintelligible" (Levine, 2007, p. 148). Recently, Brian Cutter (Cutter, 2022) made the case that we do not merely have what is called the conceivability intuition (that physical states could occur without phenomenal states) but also what he calls an *inconceivability* intuition (that phenomenal states could *not* be nothing over and above physical states).[29] I concur: I am utterly unable to represent positively and coherently to myself what it would be for, say, a phenomenal experience of red to be nothing over and above a certain electro-chemical activation. I understand the words in the sentence, and I do not see any formal contradiction in this claim, but I cannot form a positive, coherent, and intelligible idea of the situation it describes.

Second, immediately introspectable nature. We have the intuition that phenomenal consciousness is immediately introspectable – that there is no gap between phenomenal reality and (introspective) phenomenal appearance. Again, this intuition appears to have the distribution I described: it seems widespread and shared even by many who reject it. For instance, David Lewis famously granted that the view that having a phenomenal experience makes us "know exactly [what it is …] in an uncommonly demanding and literal sense of 'knowing what'" (a view very close to the view that phenomenality is immediately introspectable) seemed "obvious" and was part of our "folk theory" – while himself forcefully rejecting the view (Lewis, 1995, pp. 468–469).

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[28] Nagel thought an extension of our understanding of the physical could make physicalism understandable. This is compatible with my point, understood as the view that C is implicitly loaded as to make phenomenal consciousness non-physical *given our current understanding of the physical*.

[29] Cutter uses this for an "inconceivability argument" against physicalism.

Moreover, this intuition also has the right character. We apparently struggle to form a positive and coherent idea of phenomenality without such immediate introspectability. Nagel wrote: "The idea of moving from appearance to reality seems to make no sense [in the case of consciousness]". John Searle stressed that "*where consciousness is concerned the existence of the appearance is the reality*" (Searle, 1997, p. 112). Saul Kripke noted that "in the case of mental phenomena there is no 'appearance' beyond the mental phenomenon itself" (Kripke, 1980, p. 154). Continental philosophers had a similar take, from Husserl ("In the psychical sphere there is, in other words, no difference between appearance and Being" (Husserl, 1910/2002, p. 312)) to Merleau-Ponty ("a being that is for itself as soon as it is because appearing, and therefore appearing to itself, is its whole being—that is the being we call mind" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 30)). Again, I concur with these assessments. I find it very difficult to positively think of a phenomenal experience of red that would entirely *fail* to be introspectively given to the subject who has it; or that would introspectively appear differently from what it is (say, as an experience of green) to the subject.[30]

So, we have two problematic intuitions, which are distributed in a way suggesting that they are independent of our beliefs about phenomenality, and which have certain specific character – we struggle to form a positive, coherent idea of phenomenal consciousness without the corresponding problematic features. This supports the view that these intuitions stem from the way our concept of phenomenality implicitly characterizes its referent. Hence, this concept, which might be explicitly innocent, is implicitly loaded. Ulysses passes the Strait.[31]

My appeal to our problematic intuitions to support the claim that our concept of phenomenality characterizes its referent as problematic (and thus renders illusionism attractive) should not surprise those familiar with other debates, such as the debate on free will. Within this debate, indeed, some think that hard determinism – the view that there is no free will – is attractive if and only if free will is problematic in a certain sense: if it is *incompatible* with determinism. Philosophers then debate whether our shared concept of free will characterizes its referent as incompatible with determinism. Since compatibilism (the view that free will is compatible with determinism) does not seem logically contradictory, the relevant characterization, if it exists, must be implicit and revealed only in certain patterns of intuitions. These intuitions then become the focus of lively debate: are we "natural

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[30] What is arguably hard to represent is *not* a phenomenal experience different from what we judge it to be. See the fraternity case (Hill, 1991, pp. 128–129; Pereboom, 2011, pp. 22–23), where a student judges that a sensation of cold (created by an icicle on his throat) is a sensation of pain (as he thinks the icicle is a razor). We intuitively admit that the student is wrong here. However, we struggle to represent discrepancies between the introspective *appearance* of an experience and the experience.

[31] The view that our grasp of phenomenal states is implicitly problematically loaded by folk psychology is not new for defenders of illusionism. Michael Graziano thinks our representation of consciousness "may have been shaped by an implicit theory of mind" (Graziano et al., 2020), which makes us represent phenomenality as creating a hard problem. I also defend the view that our (introspective) representations of phenomenal states are implicitly loaded by our (innate, modular) naïve theory of mind in (Kammerer, 2016, 2019b, 2021).

compatibilists" (Cova, 2023; Murray & Nahmias, 2014; Nahmias et al., 2005) or "natural incompatibilists" (Nadelhoffer et al., 2020; Nichols & Knobe, 2007)?[32] This question is judged highly relevant on the assumption that, if we are "natural incompatibilists", it is plausible that our shared concept of free will makes it incompatible with determinism, making the denial of free will attractive to some.

Assuming that our concept of phenomenality is indeed implicitly loaded in the way I described, we can see the core of truth in the standard illusionist answer to accusations of strawmanning. This answer was that phenomenal realists cannot articulate a minimal definition of phenomenality and must be using the loaded concept. It was uncharitable to realists, and relied on the (debatable) premise that if someone cannot articulate the definition of a concept, the concept is contentless. However, in my view, while the realists' concept of phenomenality is explicitly innocent and thus *conceptually distinct* from the explicitly loaded concept, it still bears a similar characterization of phenomenal consciousness as problematic – only at the implicit level.

We also understand why the illusionist's reaction to Schwitzgebel's purported innocent definition of phenomenality should depart from Frankish's. The output of such definition – C – is only as "neutral" as folk psychology. If indeed C is problematically (implicitly) loaded, the so-called "innocent" concept does not give us (*pace* Frankish) a "neutral" *explanandum*. Illusionism about its referent remains attractive.[33] Other concepts, such as D or E (see above), might give neutral *explananda* acceptable for illusionists – but this is a different matter.

Section 6 – Objections

Here, I examine two responses to my argument that C is implicitly loaded. One denies the existence of the intuitions I claimed signal the loaded nature of C. The other accepts their existence but explains them differently.

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[32] This debate takes place within experimental philosophy. It does not seem currently settled. More below on the corresponding experimental debate regarding our intuitions about phenomenal consciousness.

[33] Frankish recently amended this line (Frankish, 2023, Note 8). He now sees his previous response to Schwitzgebel as too concessive, and claims that illusionists deny consciousness in Schwitzgebel's sense, as the concept this definition lands is equivalent to the standard realist concept of qualia (i.e., the loaded one). For Frankish, this is revealed by the fact that Schwitzgebel's concept meets the "wonderfulness" condition – it allows us to wonder whether or not phenomenality is problematic. I disagree with Frankish. That Schwitzgebel's concept is (implicitly) loaded is not shown by the fact that it allows us to wonder whether or not phenomenality is problematic. After all, a neutral concept N referring to "whatever most distinctive property is instantiated by a mental state at time t" also meets the wonderfulness condition (and we can wonder whether this property is problematic). Yet, this concept N is not loaded. What indicates the loaded character of our concept of phenomenality is the distribution and character of our problematic intuitions.

6.A. Denying the problematic intuitions or their shared nature

It is sometimes noted that the intuitions people report on a topic correlate closely with the *opinions* they hold on a topic and/or the opinions of the person eliciting their intuitions (Rosenthal, 2019). This casts doubt on my claim regarding the distribution of our problematic intuitions regarding phenomenality (and their independence from beliefs). In response, note that the correlation between intuitions and opinions is also explained if opinions are downstream of intuitions. This second explanation accounts better for the striking fact, mentioned earlier, that, in the case of phenomenality, many people report problematic intuitions which they do not endorse.

One could appeal to empirical evidence that problematic intuitions about phenomenality are not widespread. However, the relevant empirical evidence – from experimental philosophy – seems contrasted. It suggests that *some* problematic intuitions, such as the one feeding the Knowledge Argument, are widely shared (Gregory et al., 2022), but that others are not – e.g., the intuition that phenomenal consciousness is non-physical or creates a hard problem (Díaz, 2021). However, many studies supposedly showing the scarcity of problematic intuitions, such as the one just cited, seem, on a closer look (e.g., given the formulation of the questionnaires), to measure people's *opinions*. But again, one can have an *intuition* without holding a corresponding opinion. Measuring intuitions is difficult (for relevant remarks, see Chalmers, 2020, pp. 241–242). Moreover, it is doubtful that the subjects in these studies appropriately understand the questions, which feature various ambiguous concepts. For instance, "explanation" is ambiguous between reductive and non-reductive explanations. (Liu, 2022). When we balance these considerations with the fact that numerous theorists from different cultural, linguistic, and disciplinary backgrounds have expressed problematic intuitions since at least the 1860s, if not the 1700s,[34] and that a majority of professional philosophers report them,[35] claiming that these intuitions are demonstrably rare seems unjustified.

6.B. Alternative explanations of our intuitions

Problematic intuitions could be widely distributed, independent of our beliefs, and be manifested by difficulties to positively represent phenomenality without problematic features, while stemming from

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[34] For a review, see (Chalmers, 2020, pp. 230–236). The earliest 19th century formulation close to contemporary ones I found comes from the German psychiatrist Wilhelm Griesinger: "How a material, physical process going on in the nerve fibers or the ganglion cells could become a representation, an act of consciousness, is completely incomprehensible […]. If we knew everything that happens in the brain during its activity, if we could see through all the chemical, electrical, etc. processes, down to their last detail – what use would it be?" (Griesinger, 1861, p. 6, my translation). Thanks to Smaïl Bouaziz for the reference. The standard 1700s' formulation is Leibniz's mill argument in the section 17 of the *Monadology*.

[35] In the 2020 Philpapers survey, a mere 16,40% of philosophers judged *zombies* to be inconceivable, and only 29,76% denied the hard problem of consciousness. Since one can have unendorsed intuitions, the proportion of philosophers entirely lacking problematic intuitions is probably lower (Chalmers & Bourget, 2020).

factors others than the implicit characterizations borne by our concepts. Here, I examine some popular alternatives.

First, our difficulty (say) to positively represent the physical nature of phenomenality could result from a cognitive illusion rather than from the way our concepts characterize their referents. (Papineau, 1993, 2002; Tye, 1999).[36] Against this, three things. First, the most popular account of this cognitive illusion faces convincing counterexamples (Sundström, 2008; Papineau, 2011; Kammerer, 2018b). Second, various competent thinkers have expressed persistent puzzlement about the physical nature of phenomenality. Assuming that they all kept committing fallacies (even after these were pointed out) seems uncharitable (Chalmers, 2018, p. 32). Third, the functional profile of the psychological process leading to the intuition that phenomenal consciousness is problematic is quite different from the profile of cognitive illusions and fallacies and seems much closer to the profile of valid reasoning (Kammerer, 2019a).

Similarly, alternative accounts have been offered of our difficulty in positively representing discrepancies between phenomenal experiences and their introspective appearances. Maybe, for instance, our mere *de facto* incapacity to check the accuracy of our introspective representations – and not the implicit characterizations borne by our concepts – leads us to see them as infallible (Pereboom, 2011, pp. 23–24). Against this, there are plausible cases where we cannot check the accuracy of representations and yet do not intuit their infallibility (Kammerer, 2018a; for counter-objections, see Pereboom, 2019).

Section 7 – Ulysses and the Sirens of Redefinition

If indeed, as I claimed, concept C is explicitly innocent but implicitly loaded, Ulysses, sailing towards Scylla, manages to pass the Straight. His concept of phenomenality captures what the realist means, while making illusionism attractive.

However, his odyssey is not over. Beyond the Strait, waters are populated with strange marine creatures: the Sirens of Redefinition. Reliable sources report their seductive song:

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[36] This view is associated with the "Phenomenal Concept Strategy" (Balog, 2012). The canonical version of the strategy accounts for our intuition of conceivability (e.g. that zombies are conceptually coherent and non contradictory) by the conceptual independence of our phenomenal concepts (Hill, 1997; Loar, 1990). This version cannot explain the phenomenon I focused on – our difficulty to positively represent the physical nature of phenomenality. Indeed, that physical states without phenomenal states can be represented without contradiction does not explain that we struggle to represent positively phenomenal states as grounded in physical states (Levine, 2007; Papineau, 2011).

"We grant that concept C is explicitly innocent but implicitly problematically loaded. This makes the view that C is not satisfied attractive. But this does not mean that outrageous statements such as 'phenomenal consciousness does not exist' are attractive! If C is not satisfied, we can still *redefine* the terms and associate 'phenomenal consciousness' with another – satisfied – concept – D, or E, etc. C can then still be expressed by an expression such as 'phenomenal consciousness as it seems to be'"

If Ulysses follows the Sirens, he will avoid endorsing *overt strong illusionism*. He will prefer a position that is *substantively* equivalent to strong illusionism, but is verbally a weak realist and weak illusionist one and includes claims such as "phenomenal consciousness exists, but it is different from what it seems to be".

Should Ulysses jump out of the ship and follow the Sirens? By stipulation, the issue is verbal. We wonder whether one formulation of a single substantive view is preferable to the other. I admit that the song of the Sirens is tempting for two reasons. However, on close examination, neither should convince Ulysses.

First, the realist reformulation seems better aligned with historical practice. Think of what happened with *colors* after the Scientific Revolution. Our color representations plausibly characterize colors as primitive qualities inhering in surfaces – as "Edenic" colors (Chalmers, 2006). Following Galileo and Descartes, we admitted that there are no such qualities in the world but only non-primitive, non-qualitative properties of surfaces affecting our sense organs. This could be expressed by saying that "nothing is colored". Some thinkers said things in the vicinity.[37] We now find these statements uselessly extreme. We rather say that things *are* colored, even if their colors are not the primitive qualities they seem to be. On a plausible interpretation, we redefined our terms. "Color" ceased to express the concept of a primitive quality and came to express, for instance, the concept of the complex property causing representations of primitive qualities. Why not do the same with "phenomenal consciousness"?

In response, we did verbally salvage color realism – or realism about time, matter, etc. – but in such cases, the terms involved were all *common*, *ordinary* terms. This created pressure to redefine – to avoid massive linguistic revisions. However, "phenomenal consciousness" or "qualia" (as opposed to the determinable "consciousness") are not ordinary terms, but terms of art, introduced by scholars precisely to refer to specific mental features. Historical practice does not suggest the same sort of redefinition for terms of art. We remained eliminativists about the referent of terms of art like "phlogiston" or "ether" (as opposed to "colors"). So much for alignment with historical practices.

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[37] For instance, Galileo, Descartes, Locke, etc. (Maund, 2022)

The second reason is strategic and rhetorical. Strong illusionism *sounds* radical, if not crazy. Some agree with its substance but wish for more presentable formulations. Redefining our terms leads to an alternative to strong illusionism, which is substantially equivalent but rhetorically (and strategically) superior, as it maximizes acceptability without substantive loss. Michael Graziano, among others,[38] expressed this sort of idea. After admitting that his own Attention Schema Theory is "a kind of illusionism" and that the "illusionist approach" is "essentially correct" ("illusionism" meaning here "strong illusionism"), he warns against illusionist formulations: "In my experience […] calling consciousness an illusion is the kiss of death for a theory" (Graziano, 2019, Chapter 7).[39]

If really the weak illusionist reformulation of overt strong illusionism maximizes acceptability without loss of substantive content, it is preferable. This seems common sense: if you think a view is true, you want others to accept it, and you choose formulations that make this acceptance likely.

However, on close examination, this does not justify the redefinition – quite the contrary. Indeed, where does this superior acceptability of weak illusionist formulations come from? It is unlikely to stem from an attachment to the *terms* "phenomenal consciousness" or "qualia". As I noted, there are mere terms of art, only used in their current senses in the last decades – at most, the last century. What makes strong illusionism hard to accept is its *substantive content*: the fact that it denies the existence of something that seems obvious, that "smacks us in the face"; something, moreover, that seems immediately introspectively presented to us. But this substantive content is *entirely upheld* by the weak illusionist verbal alternative under discussion, which claims that C – which refers to the *obvious thing*, the thing that smacks us in the face, etc. – is not satisfied. Remember, overt strong illusionism and its weak illusionist reformulation deny the same thing – but name them differently.

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[38] Nick Humphrey agrees with strong illusionism on the substance while rejecting the label (in favor of "phenomenal surrealism") for rhetorical reasons (Humphrey, 2016). Derk Pereboom thinks that the difference between his form of weak illusionism and overt strong illusionism is "merely verbal and non-substantive" (Pereboom, 2019, p. 188), but does not provide reasons to choose one formulation over the other. Christopher Brown and David Papineau recently defended a similar position (C. D. Brown & Papineau, 2024). Daniel Dennett (Dennett, 1991, p. 459) saw the choice between eliminativist and reductivist formulations of his views as a matter of "diplomatic policy"

[39] Graziano discusses illusionist formulations denying *consciousness*, while I use his remarks to discuss formulations denying *phenomenal consciousness*. Regarding consciousness *tout court*, I am closer to his position. "Consciousness", taken alone, is a mongrel term, arguably expressing various concepts (or a multi-criterion concept mobilizing these various concepts). These various concepts can then be distinguished: concepts of phenomenal consciousness, but also access-consciousness or self-consciousness, etc. I think illusionism is only attractive about phenomenal consciousness. Illusionists about phenomenal consciousness should then admit that consciousness *tout court* exists in some senses, but not in others. However, since "consciousness" is an ordinary term, we are under pressure to avoid denying the existence of consciousness (to avoid massive linguistic revisions). This should make us reserve "consciousness" (tout court) to talk about the existent and unproblematic forms of consciousness, and "phenomenal consciousness" to talk about the problematic inexistent one. I do not think this semantic choice, contrary to the one corresponding to the verbal form of weak illusionism discussed below, obfuscates the meaning of the claims at hand.

So, strong illusionism is hard to accept because its substantive content is counterintuitive. However, the weak illusionist reformulation has the same substantive content. This suggests that, if the weak illusionist reformulation is more acceptable than its strong cousin, it is because it seems to have a *different content* – because it disguises or obfuscates its substantive content. Weak illusionist reformulations only maximize acceptability at the cost and *in virtue of* a loss of intelligibility. The resulting position is more likely to be accepted because it is more likely to be misunderstood – because people are more likely to overlook its denial of something apparently obvious.

In philosophical contexts, intelligibility should never be sacrificed to acceptability. Therefore, this second reason to prefer weak illusionist formulations over overt strong illusionism should, in fact, motivate illusionists to stick to their guns. Ulysses must remain on the ship, accept to be called "crazy", and resist the song of the Sirens. Strong illusionism is hard to swallow, but it probably *should be* if understood correctly.

Conclusion

Ulysses – and other illusionists – can pass the Strait of Definitions, and define phenomenal consciousness in such a way that the concept they reach captures what phenomenal realists mean while making illusionism attractive. The Sirens' song must be resisted: overt strong illusionism should be preferred over substantively equivalent weak illusionist reformulations.

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