# Emergent Illusionism: A New Paradigm for the Hard Problem of Consciousness

# Introduction

What is consciousness? We ponder, dissect, and theorize. Is it the spark of sentience, the luminous thread that binds us to existence? Or perhaps a cosmic secret, veiled behind neural networks and synaptic symphonies? Consciousness implies awareness: subjective, phenomenal experience of internal and external worlds. Consciousness also implies a sense of self, feelings, choice, control of voluntary behavior, memory, thought, language, internally-generated images and geometric patterns.

Different philosophers from ancient Greek philosophers to contemporary thinkers tried to present unique views on consciousness. But what consciousness actually is remains unknown. Scientists today study neural firing patterns, neurotransmitters, fMRI scans map neural constellations and brain circuits. Yet, the bridge between neurons and the fragrance of rain or the taste of chocolate remains elusive. How does a network of cells conjure the magic of qualia? This makes the hard problem of consciousness. In this situation, emergent illusionism proposes a new paradigm for the hard problem of Consciousness.

# 1. Exploring the Hard Problem of Consciousness

The hard problem proposed by David Chalmers enters into the essence of subjective experience. It poses the question, “Why and how do certain patterns of physical and chemical processes in the brain give rise to conscious experience?” T.H. Huxley famously said “How it is that anything so remarkable as a state of consciousness comes about as a result of irritating nervous tissue, is just as unaccountable as the appearance of *Djin* when Aladdin rubbed his lamp.”[[1]](#footnote-1) We do not see how to explain a state of consciousness in terms of its neurological basis. This is the Hard Problem of Consciousness. The hard problem suggests that there would still be an explanation gap for the “what it’s like” component of consciousness even if we completely understood the neurological systems behind perception, memory, and other cognitive tasks. It’s akin to knowing every detail of how a piano works but still not comprehending why a particular melody evokes emotions.

Chalmers, who introduced the term “hard problem” of consciousness, contrasts this with the “easy problems” of explaining the ability to discriminate, integrate information, report mental states, focus attention, etc. Easy problems are easy because all that is required for their solution is to specify a mechanism that can perform the function. That is, their proposed solutions, regardless of how complex or poorly understood they may be, can be entirely consistent with the modern materialistic conception of natural phenomena.[[2]](#footnote-2) What makes the ‘hard problem’ hard and almost unique is that it goes beyond problems about the performance of functions. To see this, let us note that even when we have explained the performance of all the cognitive and behavioural functions in the vicinity of experience, Chalmers would say there may still remain a further unanswered question: why is the performance of these functions accompanied by experience? This makes consciousness a hard problem to solve.

**2. Emergentist Conception of Consciousness**

Emergentism presents that new and unique properties can emerge from the interactions within a system that are not predictable from the properties of the individual components alone. This concept has found relevance in various disciplines, notably in biology and cognitive science. For instance, the emergent behavior of flocks of birds or the functionality of an ant colony surpasses what could be inferred from studying an individual bird or ant. Such phenomena underscore emergentism’s central claim: the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

When applied to the study of consciousness, emergentism suggests that consciousness itself could be considered an emergent property of the brain’s intricate network of neural processes. This perspective is grounded in the observation that while individual neurons exhibit simple electrical and chemical activities, the collective behavior of billions of such neurons interacting leads to the human consciousness.[[3]](#footnote-3) This includes the spectrum of thoughts, emotions, and experiences that constitute our subjective reality. Theoretical models and empirical research within neuroscience support this view, indicating that specific patterns of neural activity correlate with conscious experiences.

**2.1. Parallel Neuroscientific Theories to Emergentism**

Several contemporary studies go in line with Emergentism. Research on Neural Correlates of Consciousness (NCC) aims to identify specific brain mechanisms associated with conscious experience. Studies have shown that consciousness emerges from specific types of neural activities, particularly in the cerebral cortex, supporting the idea of emergence.[[4]](#footnote-4) Integrated Information Theory (IIT) proposed by Giulio Tononi, suggests that consciousness emerges from the integration of information across neural networks.[[5]](#footnote-5) Bernard Baars’ Global Workspace Theory (GWT) suggests consciousness arises from the integration of information across diverse neural networks, becoming accessible to memory, decision making, and reportability.[[6]](#footnote-6) This supports the emergent nature of consciousness.

**2.2. The Insufficiency of Emergentism**

Emergence theory, while powerful, struggles to bridge the explanatory gap between physical processes and the ineffable richness of subjective reality. Subjective reality is the undeniable sense that our conscious states are real and directly experienced by us. Some philosophers argue that consciousness is irreducible and fundamentally distinct from physical properties. Emergence theory struggles to provide a clear answer. Thus, it falls short in fully addressing the “hard problem of consciousness.”

# 3. Illusionism as a Theory of Consciousness

Illusionism states that consciousness, as commonly conceived, is an illusion—a compelling but ultimately misleading narrative created by the mind. Basically, illusionism is inspired by the idea that consciousness itself is an illusion, or at least not what it seems. Philosopher Daniel Dennett is a prominent advocate of this view. He argues that the self is a “center of narrative gravity,” a construct the brain uses to weave together a coherent story of one’s life. From this perspective, instead of being a fundamental and irreducible aspect of reality, consciousness is framed as a cognitive illusion generated by the brain. Thus, consciousness is a product of the brain’s storytelling, a useful fiction that helps us navigate our social and experiential worlds. Dennett claims that the conscious mind is developed from the unconscious processes of natural selection.[[7]](#footnote-7)

## 3.1. Keith Frankish on Illusionism: Revisiting the Nature of Consciousness

In the realm of contemporary philosophy of mind, Keith Frankish’s stance on illusionism has emerged as a captivating and provocative perspective. Center to Keith Frankish’s philosophy is the thesis of illusionism about consciousness. Frankish contends that what we commonly perceive as phenomenal consciousness—the subjective, qualitative aspects of our conscious experiences, often referred to as “what it’s like” to experience something—is illusory. In essence, he challenges the very existence of these ineffable and private aspects of consciousness.[[8]](#footnote-8) Frankish is in line with the belief that philosopher Chalmers’ “hard problem of consciousness” is a misdirection. He contends that realizing that phenomenal awareness is an illusion produced by the brain’s cognitive processes would help to overcome the challenges presented by this issue. Frankish proposes that the cognitive unconscious is a key factor in creating the illusion of awareness, as opposed to advocating a fundamental separation between conscious and unconscious thoughts. He contends that the brain generates self-representations or self-models that give rise to the perception of conscious awareness. These self-models construct a narrative of a conscious self, even though, according to Frankish, there is no subjective experience accompanying these processes.[[9]](#footnote-9)

## 3.2. The Prospect of Zombies

Political Philosopher Robert Nozick, in his book *Anarchy, State and Utopia (1974),* introduced the concept of zombies. Later David Chalmers popularized “philosophical zombies” through his book *The Conscious Mind*. One of the pillars supporting illusionism is the idea of philosophical zombies—hypothetical beings that are behaviorally indistinguishable from conscious humans but lack subjective experience. The very conceivability of zombies, according to illusionists, implies that conscious experience is not necessary to explain behavior. The argument runs as follows: If we can imagine beings that behave precisely as conscious individuals do but lack consciousness, it suggests that consciousness might not be an essential ingredient for explaining those behaviors.[[10]](#footnote-10) Susan Blackmore, a contemporary philosopher of mind, then uses the concept of zombies in her illusionistic view of consciousness, where a *conscie* and *zombie* would do exactly the same things, and therefore, evolution cannot distinguish between them.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Thus, illusionism challenges the conventional understanding of subjective experiences by suggesting that qualia do not have an objective basis in the same way physical properties do. Studies on Phantom Limbs Phenomena shows that the amputees experience sensations from missing limbs and this provide evidence of the brain’s capacity to generate illusory experiences of the body, lending credence to illusionist views.[[12]](#footnote-12) From an illusionist viewpoint, the ‘hard problem’ of consciousness—how and why we have these subjective experiences—is reframed. If qualia are illusions, then the hard problem dissolves; we’re not tasked with explaining how subjective experiences arise from physical processes, but rather, how and why such illusions are produced by the brain. Although Illusionism seems convincing, it does not totally give an explained solution to the hard Problem. Thus, we look for a synthesized view from Illusionism and emergentism.

# 4. Consciousness as Emergent Illusion

Consciousness could be reasonably understood as emergent illusion. Fundamentally, the idea is that our sense of self is an emerging and illusionistic rather than a solid, static reality. Descartes advocates dualism, Locke sees it as rooted in sensory experiences, William James defines it as a dynamic stream of thoughts, Kant stresses the role of perception and conceptual understanding, and Gilbert Ryle challenges consciousness as a separate entity, and still many different viewpoints which does not necessarily solve the hard problem. But consciousness as emergent illusion, a synthesized form of emergentistic and illusionistic theories would solve the hard problem of consciousness.

From the Emergent illusionistic viewpoint, consciousness is really emerging through a constellation of mechanisms and experiences that create the illusion of the internal ‘you-ness.’ This understanding of consciousness goes along with Nietzsche’s conception of self. According to him, the concept of self as the permanent substance is an interpretation imposed upon the flux of becoming. Thus, consciousness is necessarily a reality that is emerged as well as it is an illusioned creation for practical life purposes of human kind.

Emergent illusionism recognizes consciousness as an emergent phenomenon that arises from the complex interactions of physical processes within the brain. These interactions give rise to subjective experiences, perception, and the sense of self, which are real in the sense that they emerge from the organization and dynamics of neural networks. However, emergent illusionism also acknowledges that our subjective experiences may not accurately represent the underlying reality. Instead, consciousness is understood as a constructed narrative or illusion generated by the brain. This perspective emphasizes that while consciousness is a real phenomenon that emerges from physical processes, it is also subject to cognitive biases, limitations, and distortions.

**4.1. Continual Evolution and Adaptation**

The word “emergent” also implies apart from the emergentistic view, that we are in a state of perpetual evolution, adaptation, and response to the ever-shifting conditions of existence. Our sense of self can change when we come into new encounters, pick up information from our interactions with others, and acquire new experiences. These are really what our consciousness is made of. Our self gets evolved from time-to-time and that’s essentially what our consciousness really is. We cannot understand consciousness, self, personal identity as distinct entities, but rather they are all entangled together.

**4.2. Understanding Qualia in Emergent Illusionism**

Emergent illusionism recognizes that qualia is not necessarily direct representations of external reality. Instead, they are constructed narratives or illusions generated by the brain. Emergent illusionism acknowledges the diversity and variability of qualia across individuals, cultures, and contexts. It suggests that qualia emerge from the unique configuration and dynamics of neural networks within each individual’s brain, resulting in subjective experiences that are inherently subjective and peculiar. Furthermore, emergent illusionism invites contemplation of the relationship between qualia and the illusory nature of consciousness. It suggests that qualia are part of the constructed narrative or illusion that constitutes conscious experience, serving as building blocks for the subjective reality we perceive.

**4.3. The Illusory Nature of Consciousness**

The term “illusion” does not imply that consciousness is unimportant or denies its existence in the everyday sense. we do not deny the subjective experiences of seeing, hearing, feeling, tasting, smelling, etc. But deny that the experiences involve awareness of non-physical, private mental qualities, presented like a show to some kind of inner observer or a personal identifier within the body that implies duality of body and mind. The conscious experience is essentially an informational process. It is like a news report. This report isn’t in a human language, but it is in the brain’s internal language of neural signaling. Sensory systems pass their reports directly to the brain’s control systems, which generate the psychological, physiological and behavioral responses. This creates consciousness, the self as the sum of all activity.[[13]](#footnote-13)

**Conclusion**

Emergent illusionism represents a promising paradigm in the quest to solve the hard problem of consciousness. Emergent illusionism synthesizes elements of emergentism and illusionism. This opens up new avenues for research into the nature of consciousness. Unlike traditional emergentist theories, emergent illusionism acknowledges the illusory nature of subjective experience. It recognizes that our perceptions and interpretations of reality may not always align with objective truth, highlighting the role of cognitive biases and limitations in shaping our conscious experience. Emergent illusionism reconciles the subjective nature of consciousness with the physicalist view that all phenomena ultimately arise from physical processes.

By emphasizing the emergent and illusory aspects of consciousness, the gap between subjective experience and the underlying physical mechanisms are bridged. Emergent illusionism enables us to understand the qualitative aspects of consciousness, such as qualia and subjective experiences. By incorporating elements of illusionism, it acknowledges that these qualitative aspects may be constructed of illusion by the brain rather than directly reflecting external reality. The question, “why and how do certain patterns of physical and chemical processes in the brain give rise to conscious experience?” is answered by emergent illusionism. Yet there are still mysteries to be explored about consciousness for which our conception of Emergent Illusionism may shed light.

**Bibliography**

Baars, Bernard J. *A Cognitive Theory of Consciousness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

Blackmore, Susan. “State of the Art – The Psychology of Consciousness.” *The Psychologist* (British Psychological Society) 14 (2001): 522–525.

Chalmers, David. “Facing Up to the Problem of Consciousness.” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 2, no.3 (1995): 200–219.

———. *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.

Crick, F. and C. Koch, “Consciousness and Neuroscience.” *Cerebral Cortex* 8 no.2 (1998) 97–107.

Dehaene, S. and L. Naccache. “Towards a Cognitive Neuroscience of Consciousness: Basic Evidence and a Workspace Framework.” *Cognition* 79 no.1–2 (2001):1–37.

Dennett, Daniel. *Consciousness Explained.* New York: Little Brown, 1991.

———. *From Bacteria to Bach: The Evolution of Minds.* London: Penguin Books, 2018.

Frankish, Keith, ed. *Illusionism as a Theory of Consciousness.* Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2017.

———. “The Meta-Problem is The Problem of Consciousness.” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 26, no. 9/10 (2019): 83–94.

Huxley, T. H. *Lessons in Elementary Physiology*. London: Macmillan, 1986.

Ramachandran, V.S. and William Hirstein, “The Perception of Phantom Limbs. The D.O. Hebb Lecture,” *Brain* 121, no. 9 (1998): 1603-1630.

Tononi, Giulio, Melanie Boly, Marcello Massimini, and Christof Koch, “Integrated Information Theory: From Consciousness to its Physical Substrate.” *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* 17, no. 7 (2016): 450–461.

1. T. H. Huxley, *Lessons in Elementary Physiology* (London: Macmillan, 1986), 193. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. David Chalmers, “Facing Up to the Problem of Consciousness,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 2, no.3 (1995): 210. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. F. Crick and C. Koch, “Consciousness and Neuroscience,” *Cerebral Cortex* 8 no.2 (1998): 103. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. S. Dehaene and L. Naccache, “Towards a Cognitive Neuroscience of Consciousness: Basic Evidence and a Workspace Framework,” *Cognition* 79, no.1-2 (2001): 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Giulio Tononi, et al., “Integrated Information Theory: From Consciousness to its Physical Substrate,” *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* 17, no. 7 (2016): 457. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Bernard J. Baars, A Cognitive Theory of Consciousness (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Daniel Dennett*, From Bacteria to Bach: The Evolution of Minds* (London: Penguin Books, 2018), 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Keith Frankish, ed., *Illusionism as a Theory of Consciousness* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2017), 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Keith Frankish, “The Meta-Problem is The Problem of Consciousness,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 26, no. 9/10 (2019): 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. David Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 139. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Susan Blackmore, “State of the Art: The Psychology of Consciousness,” *The Psychologist 14*, (2001): 523. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. V.S. Ramachandran and William Hirstein, “The Perception of Phantom Limbs: The D.O. Hebb Lecture,” *Brain* 121, no. 9 (1998): 1618. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Daniel Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (New York: Little Brown, 1991), 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)