

How can you be so sure? Illusionism and the obviousness of phenomenal consciousness

Abstract: Illusionism is the thesis that phenomenal consciousness does not exist, but merely seems to exist. Many opponents to the thesis take it to be obviously false. David Chalmers has articulated this reaction to illusionism in terms of a “Moorean” argument against illusionism. This argument contends that illusionism is false, because it is obviously true that we have phenomenal experiences. I argue that this argument fails, by showing that its defenders cannot maintain that its crucial premise (properly understood) has the kind support needed for the argument to work, without begging the question against illusionism.

1. Introduction¹

Illusionism about phenomenal consciousness states that phenomenal consciousness does not exist, but merely seems to exist. Many philosophers, even amongst those who think that the view is coherent and supported by strong arguments, think that it can be ruled out conclusively, as it is *obviously false*. David Chalmers has recently articulated this reaction to illusionism in the form of a “Moorean argument” against the view (Chalmers, 2018). The crucial premise of this argument is that people sometimes feel pain. On the basis of this premise, and together with definitional claims to the effect that illusionism entails that no one feels pain, Chalmers concludes that illusionism is false. The crucial premise of this argument is supposed to be obviously true, and particularly strongly supported (more than *any* considerations that might support illusionism), in a way that is independent of the prior acceptance of any philosophical views potentially entailing the falsity of illusionism (which is why the argument arguably does not beg the question against illusionism).

Does the Moorean argument allow us to rule out illusionism, even if we admit that the view might be coherent, and independently supported by strong arguments? I will argue to the contrary. The Moorean argument fails, because its defenders cannot ultimately maintain that its

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crucial premise (properly understood so as to support the conclusion of the argument) is justified in the way required for the argument to succeed, without at some point relying on the antecedent acceptance of contentious philosophical views, which arguably begs the question against illusionism. Put otherwise, the Moorean argument fails to rule out illusionism without begging the question.

I present illusionism about phenomenal consciousness (§2), as well as Chalmers' Moorean argument against illusionism (§3). I then argue that, whilst illusionism is committed to denying the existence of phenomenal pain, it does not deny that people feel pain in other senses (functional and normative). This restricts the domain of seemingly obvious claims that illusionists must deny (§4). Focusing on the core of the Moorean argument, I argue that, given the nature of the illusionist arguments (scientific-cum-philosophical arguments, and not purely philosophical arguments), the key premise of the Moorean argument against illusionism needs to be considerably more supported than the premises of "standard" Moorean arguments (§5). I show that the defender of the Moorean argument owes us some sort of justification, to the effect that their crucial premise is appropriately supported, and that this very justification will face the same constraints and difficulties as the justification of the key premise of the Moorean argument against illusionism. Taking the dialectical battle to the second-order level, and then third-order level, etc. I argue that the defender of the Moorean argument ultimately has no choice but to appeal to some contentious philosophical view, which arguably begs the question against illusionism (§6).

2. Illusionism about phenomenal consciousness

Phenomenal states (or "conscious experiences") are putative mental states endowed with phenomenal properties. In virtue of these phenomenal properties, there is "something it is like" to be in these states. Seeing a red apple, smelling honeysuckle, feeling a sudden pain in the elbow – these are supposed to be typical examples of phenomenal states. A subject who enters such states is phenomenally conscious. Many philosophers think that phenomenal states can be distinguished conceptually (if not in reality) from access-conscious states, which are defined as mental states bearing content available for use in reasoning and the rational control of speech and action (Block, 1995).

Illusionism about phenomenal consciousness is the thesis that phenomenal consciousness does not exist, but merely seems to exist. For illusionists (as opposed to realists) about phenomenal consciousness, we never enter phenomenal states, and there is nothing it is like to

be anyone. Rather, we simply enter introspective states that incorrectly represent that we are in phenomenal states, thus creating the illusion of phenomenal consciousness. First versions of this view were suggested in the 1960's (Feyerabend, 1963; Rorty, 1965). It found prominent defenders in the late 1980's (Dennett, 1988, 1991; Rey, 1995), sometimes under the label "eliminativism".² The view has, in recent times, received a fair amount of attention (Dennett, 2017; Graziano, 2013; Humphrey, 2011; Kammerer, 2019; Pereboom, 2011), as well as the label "illusionism" (Frankish, 2016).

Two things must be kept in mind about illusionism. First, what I describe here is what Keith Frankish calls "strong illusionism" (Frankish, 2016, p. 15-16), distinct from the position he dubs "weak illusionism". For weak illusionists, phenomenal consciousness exists, but does not have many of the properties it is often thought to have – it merely *seems* to have these properties. In what follows I will concern myself only with strong illusionism, and so will henceforth use "illusionism" (without qualification) to refer to *strong illusionism*. Second, illusionists think that there are no phenomenal states in reality. To talk about the *real* states and properties which are usually thought to be phenomenal (but which are *not* phenomenal), they might talk of "quasi-phenomenal" states/properties (Frankish, 2016, p. 15). A quasi-phenomenal property is a *non-phenomenal*, physical property (possibly a wildly disjunctive property and plausibly a brain property) that we typically misrepresent as phenomenal through introspection. States that have quasi-phenomenal properties are quasi-phenomenal states. For an illusionist, when I open my eyes in front of a red apple, I merely have a quasi-phenomenal perception of red, endowed with quasi-phenomenal redness.

Interest in illusionism has grown in recent years, partly because it provides a robust defense of physicalism regarding the human mind – an attractive metaphysical position, threatened by arguments and thought experiments focusing on the alleged non-physical nature of phenomenal consciousness (Chalmers, 1996; Jackson, 1982). For years, most philosophers of mind have endorsed physicalism, whilst favoring a realist view of consciousness. Typically, these philosophers countered anti-physicalist arguments by adopting what David Chalmers dubbed "type-B" physicalism (Chalmers, 2002): the view that phenomenal consciousness ontologically reduces to physical processes, although such reduction always remains somewhat opaque to us – maybe to the point that consciousness will always *seem persistently distinct* from physical processes (Aydede & Güzeldere, 2005; Balog, 2012; Kriegel, 2009; Loar, 1997; Papineau,

² I do not distinguish between eliminativism and illusionism, although it can be argued that illusionists, contrary to eliminativists, insist that consciousness genuinely *seems to exist*, in some sort of significant pre-theoretical sense.

2002; Sturgeon, 1994). This last view (often associated with the “Phenomenal Concept Strategy” (Stoljar, 2005)), which promised a way to defend physicalism while accounting for the genuine difficulties encountered by reductive theories of consciousness, has been intensely criticized in recent years (Chalmers, 2007, 2018; Frankish, 2012; Goff, 2011; Levine, 2001, 2007; Nida-Rümelin, 2007). The debate is still very much alive (Diaz-León, 2014; Elpidorou, 2016), but the idea that this approach succeeds now seems less plausible than it once did. Strong illusionism, on the other hand, allows one to defend physicalism in a simple but radical way – by straightforwardly denying the existence of phenomenal states. It then found vocal support from both proponents (some describing it as the “obvious default theory of consciousness” (Dennett, 2016)) as well as from opponents (“if I were a materialist, I would be an illusionist” (Chalmers, 2018, p. 9)).

As for the positive arguments for the view, two of them seem particularly strong. The first is the *argument from the anomalousness of phenomenal consciousness* (Frankish, 2016, p. 27-28). It starts with the premise that phenomenal consciousness is anomalous with respect to “standard” properties (such as the physico-functional properties described by natural science): it resists explanations in physical or structural terms (there is a “hard problem of consciousness”), and seems detectable only from a certain perspective (the “first-person perspective”). One then adds the premise that apparent anomalousness is strong evidence for illusion, and thereby concludes that, if consciousness *could be* an illusion (i.e. illusionism is a coherent possibility), then we have good reason to believe that it is one.

The second is the *argument from coincidence* (Chalmers, 1996, p. 186-187, 2018, p. 44-49; Frankish, 2016, p. 27).³ It starts from the premise that it is possible to explain all our intuitions about phenomenal consciousness (including the intuition that we are phenomenally conscious at all) in a way that is independent of consciousness (at least descriptively independent, that is: without having to mention consciousness itself, and using a purely physical/structural vocabulary). This premise is supposedly justified by our (present and forthcoming) scientific theories (of phenomenal introspection, intuitive dualism, etc.). It then adds the premise that, if one can explain our intuitions about consciousness independently of consciousness, and if these intuitions are correct, their correctness is a coincidence. Assuming that their correctness cannot be a coincidence (which seems extremely likely), the conclusion is that our intuitions are not correct. This leads to the view that we are not phenomenally conscious.

³ Here I follow the version given in (Chalmers, 2018, p. 47).

3. The Moorean argument against illusionism

Illusionism remains a minority position. This is only partially explained by the force of the numerous objections mounted against illusionism. Some have argued that illusionism is incoherent (Nida-Rümelin, 2016). Others have claimed that it is theoretically weaker than the alternatives (Balog, 2016; Mandik, 2016; Merlo, 2020; Prinz, 2016; Schwitzgebel, 2016), or that its apparent attractiveness relies on some definitional confusion (Niikawa, 2020) or contestable assumptions (Schwitzgebel, draft).

However, the main reason why illusionism is rejected by most philosophers of mind, is probably that it simply seems obviously false to them. This intuition, sometimes also at play in the arguments mentioned above, has been articulated by David Chalmers in terms of a direct “Moorean”⁴ argument against illusionism. Chalmers grants that illusionism is coherent and supported by powerful arguments (Chalmers, 2018, p. 44-49). However, he also thinks that it is false, and that the best argument against it goes as follows:

Premise 1: People sometimes feel pain

Premise 2: If illusionism⁵ is true, no one feels pain

Conclusion: Illusionism is false

Premise 2, according to Chalmers, follows from the claims that feeling pain is a conscious experience, and that illusionism denies that there are conscious experiences. This seems true as a matter of definition, although Chalmers points at possible quibbles. A sophisticated illusionist could deny that illusionism implies that there are no *conscious experiences* – insisting that illusionism only denies that there are *phenomenally conscious experiences*. Alternatively, the illusionist could admit that they deny the existence of conscious experiences, but insist that in the most important senses of *feeling pain* (functional senses) they do not deny that *people sometimes feel pain*. However, I think that we should grant Chalmers that there is at least a significant reading of “feeling pain” (the *phenomenal* reading) for which they deny that anyone feels pain.

As for premise 1, Chalmers takes it to be obviously true. He concedes that we sometimes discover – for example, through scientific inquiry – that some claims that seemed obviously

⁴ As it somehow resembles Moore’s famous “proof of an external world” (Moore, 1939). More on “Moorean arguments” later.

⁵ Chalmers talks about ‘strong illusionism’ in his argument.

true are really false. One canonical example can be found in the history of physics: while it seemed obviously true, say, that two spatially distinct events can sometimes happen *at the same time* in some absolute sense, modern physics (special relativity) showed that this is in fact not the case (there is no absolute simultaneity). However, Chalmers thinks that this does not undermine the argument. In his view, what makes his argument especially strong is that premise 1 is not only obvious, it is: (a) more obvious than any scientific or philosophical view that might support illusionism; moreover, (b) this premise is antecedently supported – its particularly strong support does not depend on any contentious philosophical view or consideration (potentially implying the falsity of illusionism). Both of these two conditions are crucial to the success of the argument. Indeed, if the claim that people feel pain were not more obvious than any scientific or philosophical consideration that might lend support to illusionism, the *modus tollens* proposed by Chalmers would not be stronger than the opposed *modus ponens*. Besides, if this particularly strong support did not hold independently of any contentious philosophical views (potentially implying the falsity of illusionism), the argument would beg the question.

This Moorean argument articulates a very strong anti-illusionist intuition, which I think explains the relative lack of popularity of illusionism. It is representative of the kind of reasoning that many philosophers spontaneously make (sometimes explicitly (Frances, 2008, p. 241; Searle, 1997; Strawson, 1994, p. 101)), when they recognize that illusionism has theoretical virtues, while thinking nevertheless that they can conclusively reject it, as phenomenal experiences are obviously real. What also makes this argument particularly interesting is that its success is not supposed to depend on the exact force of the arguments in favor of illusionism. We do not have to examine the subtleties of illusionist theories to know that it is false. We can be fully confident of it, because it is simply obvious that we are phenomenally conscious.

Because the Moorean argument is representative of a widespread reaction to illusionism, it is particularly useful to examine – it provides a way to discuss a very popular reason to reject illusionism, which is (explicitly or implicitly) very often operative in anti-illusionist positions. Here I intend to show that, upon close examination, the argument fails.

4. Pain, pain, and pain – what the illusionist really denies

I grant Chalmers this: there is a reading of “feeling pain” (the phenomenal reading) on which illusionists deny that anyone ever feels pain. Moreover, it seems obvious that people feel pain in this phenomenal sense. However, contrary to what Chalmers suggests, this phenomenal sense

is *not* the only sense in which it appears obvious that people feel pain.⁶ There are at least two other such senses of “feeling pain”, about which the illusionist does not need to deny anything. We must start with a clear conception of these two senses, which contrasts them with the phenomenal one, to know what the illusionist really denies – to avoid making illusionism seem more counterintuitive than it is.

A. *Pain – phenomenal*

“Feeling pain” has a *phenomenal* reading, which corresponds to phenomenal pain – the felt quality of pain, represented through introspection (when, say, I slam a door on my fingers and focus upon what I feel). As is often noted, it is difficult (if not impossible) to define phenomenal qualities in linguistic terms: many have judged them to be ineffable. I assume here that we nevertheless have a clear introspective grasp of what phenomenal pain is, which allows us to distinguish it from other phenomenal qualities, and to think, in a cognitively significant way, that it (as a case of phenomenal consciousness) might create a hard problem.⁷ I grant that it seems obvious, introspectively, that we sometimes enter phenomenal pain. Illusionists deny that there are feelings of pain in this sense.

B. *Pain – functional*

However, “feeling pain” also has a *functional* reading. In that sense, it means (roughly) entering a state playing a certain functional role. We might presently have a vague and incomplete understanding of the details of this functional role; yet it seems obvious that, in this functional sense, people sometimes feel pain. It seems obvious that, when people suffer bodily damage, psychological distress, etc., they often enter states that tend to generate avoidant or fighting behavior. It seems obvious that the tokening of these states cannot always be known “from the outside” (with ordinary means) and that people themselves are often in a better position than others to assess whether or not they are in such states. It also seems obvious that these states are usually what makes me say that I am in pain, what makes me complain, cry, scream, etc., that they tend to capture my attention and generate specific streams of thoughts,

⁶ Although he limits his claim to *introspective obviousness*: “But crucially, the sense in which it is introspectively obvious that we feel pain is the phenomenal sense” (Chalmers, 2018, p. 53-54).

⁷ And maybe also allows us to imagine zombies, etc.

hopes, desires and intentions (e.g. “I hate this, I hope this will stop soon, I want to kill this dentist, I should have asked for anesthesia”).

We know that people sometimes feel pain in this sense on the basis of introspection⁸, empathy, testimony, our naïve theory of mind, scientific inquiry, etc. The claim that no one feels pain in this sense would be really quite an extraordinary one to make – at least as preposterous, say, as the claims that there are no trees in the world (all apparent trees are painted concrete sculptures!) or that Tuesdays never take place (we go directly from Mondays to Wednesdays and generate false Tuesday-memories). Luckily, illusionists do not deny that people feel pain in that sense. They think that feelings of pain, in the functional sense, are perfectly real, although they happen to be merely (or merely accompanied by) quasi-phenomenal states instead of phenomenal states.⁹

C. *Pain – normative*

Finally, our talk of “feeling pain” often comes with associated normative connotations.¹⁰ When we say that people feel pain, we often speak about the fact that people sometimes (e.g. when they intensely burn their fingers) enter mental states which are *awful* for them; mental states which are in themselves bad, independently of their causal consequences (they are *intrinsically* bad). These states are typically conceived of as justifying or rationalizing certain behaviors (e.g. avoiding behaviors: we put gloves on when removing trays from the oven, as this averts our undergoing the experience of burning our fingers). We often think of them as states which make their bearer a proper object of empathy, and maybe thus create certain duties for others (e.g. we ought to tell someone to put on gloves before removing plates from the oven).

Thus, we can then isolate a *normative* reading of the expression “feeling pain”, which corresponds to states normatively characterized as above: states that are intrinsically bad, rationalizing certain behaviors (avoiding, fighting, etc.), calling for empathy, and maybe creating duties.

⁸ Of course, introspection *also* presents these states as phenomenal.

⁹ This is not to say that there is a single interesting psychological kind corresponding to functional pain (a question best left to cognitive science).

¹⁰ Although it is unclear whether these connotations constitute an independent standard reading of the term, or if they are usually entangled in the functional and/or the phenomenal reading.

The claim that people sometimes feel pain, in the normative sense, seems obvious.¹¹ It seems obvious, say, that I feel (normative) pain when the dentist touches my nerve, or that my friend feels (normative) pain when they burn their fingers while removing plates from the oven with their bare hands. More dramatically, it seems obvious that victims of illness, abuse, violence, rape and torture, all feel very intense physical and psychological (normative) pain. All this seems obvious to us for a variety of reasons: we know that people sometimes feel such pain on the basis of introspection (we know that things are awful for us just by focusing on what happens to us!), testimony (others tell us!), empathy (we *see* and *hear* others having these awful episodes). It is one of the most well-grounded pieces of commonsense that people *sometimes feel normative pain*. Denying that people feel pain in this sense would be denying something awfully obvious. Such denial could also easily appear morally perverse.

Illusionists *do not have to deny* people feel pain in this normative sense. *Some* illusionists might deny it (although I failed to see any illusionist endorsing such denial), and it could be that avoiding such denial would generate serious theoretical constraints for illusionists, as it would force them to reject some (arguably intuitive) principles connecting the *negative value* of pain to its *phenomenality*.¹² However, it is simply not a part of the illusionist view that normative pain does not exist.

So, there are at least three readings of “feeling pain”, and illusionists only have to deny that people feel pain in one of them. While it is often recognized that illusionists do not deny the reality of *functional pain*, one might be tempted to underestimate the *obviousness* of this functional pain.¹³ This could in turn lead one to overestimate the extent to which illusionists deny *what is really obvious* about pain. This appears to be what Chalmers does when he insists that the *phenomenal* sense of pain is the introspectively obvious one. Besides, philosophers discussing illusionism do not distinguish explicitly between the phenomenal sense of pain and its normative sense. However, the distinction is crucial. Indeed, it is plausible that many philosophers are inclined to *believe* that normative pain requires, in some strong (metaphysical?) sense, phenomenal pain, in a way in which functional pain might not. We can see this clearly when we consider *zombies*: most philosophers recognize that they can (at least superficially) conceive of zombies and they grant that zombies have functional pain but lack phenomenal pain. However, many might also intuit that zombies necessarily lack normative

¹¹ I take here the various normative characterizations corresponding to this normative sense as constituted by a vaguely defined cluster of aspects – not all of them have to be strictly satisfied in order for the term to apply.

¹² I discuss this point at length (Kammerer, 2020), which is why I will not say more about it here. In the article cited, I explore various routes that an illusionist might take in order to avoid denying the reality of normative pain.

¹³ Keith Frankish makes a similar point (Frankish, 2019, p. 92).

pain, precisely because they lack phenomenal pain, so that, for example, when a zombie burns their fingers, nothing really intrinsically bad ensues. People with such intuitions might think that illusionists deny that there is normative pain. Illusionists would then deny not only *one*, but *two* obvious things, which would in turn provide its detractors with two supplementary reasons to reject illusionism: one epistemic reason (the existence of normative pain is itself obvious) and one moral reason (denying the existence of normative pain seems morally perverse).¹⁴ This last reason might be seen as overwhelming and incommensurable with reasons to embrace illusionism (reasons to believe illusionism are purely epistemic, while this reason to reject it has a moral dimension). However, as illusionists do not have to deny normative pain, these extra reasons do not hold.

5. The obviousness of phenomenal states and the Moorean argument

Illusionists do not deny the reality of functional or normative pain – only that of phenomenal pain. Is that enough to get the Moorean argument going?

Consider Moorean arguments in general. Contemporary philosophers (as opposed to many Great Dead Philosophers¹⁵) seem overall willing to accept such direct defenses of common sense beliefs against philosophical arguments to the contrary (Fine, 2001, p. 2; Gupta, 2006, p. 178; Kelly, 2005; Lewis, 1973, p. 88; Lycan, 2001; references taken from Rinard, 2013), usually traced back to Moore’s “proof of an external world” (Moore, 1939) – although there is not much agreement regarding precisely how such “Moorean” arguments are supposed to work.¹⁶ One point which is usually agreed upon, however, is that Moorean arguments can be successfully mounted against purely philosophical arguments attacking common-sense beliefs, but not against *scientific* arguments. As Lycan puts it (Lycan, 2001, p. 40-41):

Common-sense beliefs can be corrected, even trashed entirely, by careful empirical investigation and scientific theorizing [...] Common sense must yield to evidence, as I

¹⁴ This is what Galen Strawson suggests when he writes about Dennett’s illusionism: “If [Dennett is] right, no one has ever really suffered, in spite of agonizing diseases, mental illness, murder, rape, famine, slavery, bereavement, torture, and genocide. And no one has ever caused anyone else pain [...] We must hope that [this idea] doesn’t spread outside the academy, or convince some future information technologist or roboticist who has great power over our lives” (Strawson, 2018).

¹⁵ Such as Kant and Hegel (Rinard, 2013, p. 185-186).

¹⁶ In a nutshell: some claim that Moorean arguments are a matter of simply preferring the most plausible premises (Lycan, 2001, p. 38-39), some state that they rely on the idea that we should pay attention to judgments about particular cases as opposed to general principles (Kelly, 2005), and some think that they can be justified by a general principle of theoretical conservatism (Harman, 2003). (See (Rinard, 2013, p. 198-211) for extensive presentation and discussion). In what follows I adopt the first interpretation, which I take to be the least committal, but I do not think anything crucial hangs on this choice.

have said, but it need not yield to bare metaphysical pronouncement [...] No *purely philosophical* premise can ever (legitimately) have as strong a claim to our allegiance as can a humble common-sense proposition such as Moore's autobiographical ones. Science can correct common sense; metaphysics and philosophical "intuition" can only throw spitballs.¹⁷

However, if this is correct, it is quite doubtful that one can build a Moorean argument against illusionism. Illusionism is not supposed to be supported by purely philosophical *a priori* arguments, but by scientific-cum-philosophical arguments, with some crucial premises supposedly justified by science. This is particularly clear when one considers the illusionist argument from coincidence (although I suspect the same could be said for the argument from the anomalousness of phenomenal consciousness). It crucially relies on the premise that it is possible to explain all our intuitions about phenomenal consciousness without ever mentioning consciousness (in purely physical/structural terms, say). But this premise is not an *a priori* premise, and is rather taken to be justified by science – and we are betting that it will be ultimately fully vindicated by the results of future research (say, on phenomenal introspection, or on intuitive dualism) carried out by scientists (psychologists, neuroscientists, etc.).

If this is correct, a Moorean argument against illusionism would be more akin to a hypothetical Moorean argument defending the view that absolute simultaneity is real (going against the scientific argument based on special relativity), and less like the standard Moorean argument defending the view that we know that the external world exists (against *a priori* skeptical arguments). This would be bad news for the defender of the Moorean argument against illusionism.

(Note that this reasoning does *not* presuppose that there is a clear and cut distinction between science and philosophy (Lycan, 2001, n. 11). There might be borderline cases.)

How would the defenders of the Moorean argument answer? Maybe they could deny that arguments in favor of illusionism are scientific in the same sense as those against the reality of absolute simultaneity. They could say that: (a) the supposedly 'scientific' premises of illusionist arguments are not as well justified; or (b) arguments for illusionism always include, on top of their scientific premises, philosophical premises (for example, the epistemological principle that one should not believe in extraordinary coincidences). However, there are serious problems with such answers, which is probably why Chalmers himself does not seem to take this route. Indeed, (a) would make the Moorean argument against illusionism very vulnerable to potential future scientific progress (no particular view of phenomenal introspection is

¹⁷ This quote is to be found in (Rinard, 2013). She also mentions (Gupta, 2006, p. 178) and (Kelly, 2008) as holding similar views.

currently as well justified as special relativity, but we can very reasonably bet that one of them ultimately will be), which would seriously undermine the very project of the Moorean argument. Illusionists could also consider the basis of their argument to be, not a particular scientific theory (of, say, introspection), but the (much better-confirmed) disjunction of the scientific theories which have the appropriate features (i.e. they do not mention phenomenal consciousness as an *explanans*). As for (b), it will have to face up to the fact that many received scientific arguments against common sense beliefs *also* make some implicit appeal to philosophical (epistemological) principles. In other words, many of these scientific arguments, including the canonical argument against the reality of absolute simultaneity, are themselves scientific-cum-philosophical arguments. Susanna Rinard (Rinard, 2013, p. 189-198) makes a very convincing case for this, by stressing that the scientific argument against absolute simultaneity itself crucially appeals to philosophical assumptions (in a nutshell, it requires preferring special relativity over the empirically equivalent neo-Lorentzian alternative, and this preference can itself only be justified by appealing to a philosophical principle favoring views that are metaphysically simpler).¹⁸

Hence, because this kind of response faces serious difficulties, and because it is not the one used by Chalmers, I will not focus on it in what follows.

The second, more attractive possibility consists in stating that the Moorean argument against illusionism is just of a different kind than the other Moorean arguments. One could grant that in “normal” cases, scientific-cum-philosophical arguments can overturn obvious commonsensical claims (rendering Moorean arguments ineffective), but the case of consciousness is different. On this view, the Moorean argument against illusionism is really a “super-Moorean” argument, its crucial premise endowed with “super-Moorean” certainty – a kind of certainty that is stronger than “standard” Moorean certainty, and which allows one to counter even arguments which crucially appeal to science. Such position appears to be adopted by Chalmers, who concedes that apparently obviously true claims have sometimes be shown to be false, but stresses that this should not be worrisome for the Moorean argument against illusionism. The reason for this is that its crucial first premise is *more obvious* than *any scientific*

¹⁸ Rinard goes further than that, arguing that, if science-cum-philosophy can overturn common sense, so does philosophy alone (as she thinks that scientific-cum-philosophical arguments can only be as strong as their weakest premise – by hypothesis, the philosophical ones). One can accept that scientific arguments against commonsense are always scientific-cum-philosophical while rejecting her stronger conclusion. There might be something peculiar that comes from having amongst your premises some crucial and surprising empirical premise, which changes the way in which the whole argument should be assessed (so that scientific-cum-philosophical arguments have a peculiar strength that pure philosophical arguments lack).

or *philosophical* view that might support illusionism. This is tantamount to the claim that we know this premise with what I called “super-Moorean” certainty.

When the contrast between standard Moorean arguments and the Moorean argument against illusionism is thus clarified, proponents of the Moorean argument against illusionism seem to lose some dialectical ground. They cannot as easily benefit from the support of the (numerous) philosophers who put their trust in Moorean arguments and agree that philosophy alone cannot overturn common-sense. One can concede this while insisting that *science* can overturn common-sense, and then note that arguments for illusionism are *a posteriori* in nature (and make a crucial appeal to science). Beyond their superficial resemblance, there is a crucial difference in status between the Moorean argument against illusionism and more standard Moorean argument. The two do not stand or fall together. The Moorean argument against illusionism must thus be assessed on its own merits.

The upshot of the forgoing is that the defender of the Moorean argument must claim that the existence of phenomenal pain is not only obvious, but super-obvious: *uniquely obvious*, in a way that grounds the “super-Moorean certainty” mentioned earlier. “Mere” obviousness grounding “mere” Moorean certainty is not enough.

What would such unique obviousness consist in? It cannot simply come down to the fact that many of us *believe* in the existence of phenomenal states considerably more strongly (or more stubbornly) than they believe “standard” Moorean facts, and so that they would never abandon their beliefs – not even when faced with scientific arguments. This putative unique strength of their beliefs would be a mere psychological fact. It is not clear why it should have any epistemic import.¹⁹ Interpreting this unique obviousness as amounting to a stronger belief would also imply that the Moorean argument against illusionism works for some (the true believers!), but not for the others, which seems like an uncomfortable consequence.²⁰ So, this unique obviousness has to go beyond mere psychological confidence, and be something of epistemic import: the defender of the Moorean argument against illusionism must claim that the existence of phenomenal states is uniquely obvious, in the sense that we *should* believe in

¹⁹ See (Kelly, 2005) for a convincing criticism of the view (ascribed to (Pollock & Cruz, 1999; Soames, 2005)) that what the obviousness of Moorean premises consists in is some sort of high degree of psychological confidence.

²⁰ This point is independent of the debate on whether Moorean arguments can play offense against the skeptic (taking up the burden of proof and providing a successful positive argument for the non-skeptic conclusion) or can only play defense (merely showing that skeptical argumentation fails). Indeed, the uncomfortable consequence I am pointing out is *not* that this interpretation of the Moorean argument against illusionism makes it incapable of converting already-convinced illusionists, but that it renders it ineffective even for the phenomenal realist whose faith is not sufficiently unshakable – the one who is open to discussion.

it more than we should believe in standard Moorean facts (or in the conclusion of scientific arguments to the contrary).

This captures the way in which Chalmers thinks about the conditions of success of the Moorean argument. It is also similar to the way in which Bryan Frances – who, ten years before Chalmers, endorsed something close to the Moorean argument against illusionism (“eliminativism about feelings”)²¹ – articulated his reasoning:

“Even if all the philosophers of mind and cognitive scientists were screaming at my door ‘No one has ever had a painful feeling! There are no feelings! No one has ever been in pain!’ I would still know that I have had loads of painful feelings. My “access” to my painful feeling is so reliable or direct that I can epistemically neutralize, without even thinking about it, any hypothesis that says I have no feelings. I might be wrong about the location of the feeling, but there’s no way in hell I’m wrong that I have a painful feeling”. (Frances, 2008, p. 588)

The best answer available to the defender of the Moorean argument against illusionism then seems to consist in stressing the uniquely obvious character of phenomenal states (interpreted in an epistemic sense). How convincing is this answer?

6. Unique obviousness called in question

The proponents of the Moorean argument against illusionism must claim that the existence of phenomenal states is uniquely obvious, in some epistemic sense. Moreover, this epistemic superiority must be independent of the prior acceptance of philosophical views potentially implying the falsity of illusionism – on pain of begging the question.

Now, here’s the rub. Chalmers (as well as Frances) claims that we have such super-Moorean certainty regarding the existence of phenomenal states. If he is right, his anti-illusionist argument succeeds. However, at this point, I think that we can legitimately question this claim, and wonder: do we *really* have such super-Moorean certainty about phenomenal states? Should we *really* believe in the existence of phenomenal states more strongly than we do in other Moorean facts, and more strongly than in the conclusions of scientific-cum-philosophical arguments to the contrary?

²¹ Although it is not entirely clear that Frances’ realist argument really concerns *phenomenal* feelings (Frances, 2008, n. 8).

The question could at first glance appear illegitimate – or, at the very least, it might appear that we are not owed an answer. After all, isn't the idea behind Moorean arguments simply that – one makes a claim so obvious that one can escape the burden of articulating an independent justification for it at all? However, the demand for justification here does not concern the premise used in the Moorean argument itself. Rather, it concerns the second-order claim that this premise has the required *super-Moorean* status needed for the argument to succeed. That such a question can legitimately be asked when faced with any new putative Moorean argument is quite obvious – otherwise, one could provide convincing super-Moorean arguments for absolutely anything. Moreover, as stated earlier, one can very well accept all standard Moorean arguments, without questioning the status of their premises, whilst being more cautious about this one, which seriously departs from its more modest cousins. Finally, that this question can – and should – be raised can be made even clearer when thinking about past failures of arguments purported to rebuke scientific-cum-philosophical claims on the basis of obvious and immediately accessible facts. Think, for example, about a philosopher like Bergson (Bergson, 1999), who in the 1920's attacked the relativistic claim that there can be no absolute simultaneity between distinct events, by appealing to some sort of direct and intimate epistemic relation to time – or more precisely to what he called “duration” (*durée*).²² What Bergson then tried to do was rebuke the conclusion of a scientific-cum-philosophical argument by appealing to something obvious – something so obvious, and so immediately grasped, that he thought it should be believed over any scientific theory. Bergson, a great philosopher of the past, sincerely believed that he had the required kind of certainty regarding the existence of absolute simultaneity to maintain that it indeed exists. Yet, most people now think he was mistaken. The lesson of this cautionary tale is that we should be wary when great philosophers nowadays sincerely believe that they have a similar kind of certainty regarding the existence of their phenomenal states.

As such, I think that we can legitimately ask: is the existence of phenomenal states really uniquely obvious in the appropriate sense?²³ Many philosophers would answer “yes” and claim that we can be uniquely certain of the reality of our phenomenal states, and that we do have the

²² It is not clear, however, that Bergson attempted to defend *inter-subjective* absolute simultaneity.

²³ Asking this question comes close to raising what Keith Frankish calls the “hard meta-problem” (Frankish, 2019): the problem of determining what could ground the confidence of phenomenal realists that something more than their intuitions about consciousness needs explaining. Frankish defends illusionism by focusing on the exact kind of metaphysical facts – e.g. regarding acquaintance – that would have to obtain in order for this confidence to be grounded. He argues that they do not plausibly obtain. My strategy, as will be made clear, instead leaves out the details of the exact account needed by the realist, and further pursues the dialogue with the realist at a higher-order level (regarding what grounds their confidence in this confidence, etc.) until the realist's intuitions give up.

appropriate kind of epistemic relation to phenomenal states (sometimes articulating this idea in terms of acquaintance, given-ness, immediacy, direct presentation, etc.). They could even claim that it is *obvious* that we have this epistemic relation. Let's grant here that it seems obvious that we have this epistemic relation to experiences. On this topic, however, we will receive bad news from science. Indeed, scientific views which putatively lend support to the first premise of the coincidence argument for illusionism (typically, scientific theories of phenomenal introspection, intuitive dualism, etc.) will also draw a picture of phenomenal introspection and phenomenal judgment which features no such unique epistemic relation to consciousness (as phenomenal consciousness does not even need to be mentioned in these views) – nor, arguably, to anything of this kind. These views would also hypothetically explain our strong intuitions regarding our unique epistemic relation to consciousness independently of any such unique epistemic relation (and of consciousness) – as the intuition that we have a peculiar epistemic relation to consciousness arguably features amongst our intuitions regarding consciousness (or at the very least in on a par with them).

So, illusionists will easily build a *second-order* coincidence argument against the correctness of our intuition that we have an appropriate unique epistemic relation to phenomenal states (they could also probably build a second-order argument from the *anomalousness* of this relation, but let's set that aside here). And this powerful scientific-cum-philosophical argument, mounted against the correctness of our intuition that we have an appropriate unique epistemic relation to phenomenal states, should be able to overturn this intuition (as we admitted that strong scientific-cum-philosophical arguments are enough to overturn seemingly obvious claims). At this stage of the dialectical situation, we should thus conclude that we *do not have* such unique epistemic relation to phenomenal states – and the burden of proof would now lie on the anti-illusionist to defend that we do.

One tempting way to defend the claim that we really have this unique epistemic relation to phenomenal states would be, for the friends of consciousness, to claim that this epistemic relation is not only obvious (mere obviousness is not enough against scientific-cum-philosophical arguments), but that it is also uniquely obvious. We also have super-Moorean certainty regarding this very relation. Thus, they would build a second-order Moorean (or, rather, super-Moorean) argument for the existence of this epistemic relation.

(Of course, the friends of consciousness could also try to defend the existence of such epistemic relation in another way – without simply relying on an appeal to its unique obviousness. I will come back to that later).

One can already see where this is going. Illusionists will wonder whether this second-order unique obviousness really obtains. They will argue, again, that this (*third-order!*) question is legitimate, and that scientific views (say, of introspection) deliver bad news in this respect (as a third-order coincidence argument will show). The friends of consciousness, again, will be led to stating that it is *obvious* that this second-order unique obviousness obtains – and even, as will be required, *uniquely obvious*. Thus, they will have to claim that it is uniquely obvious that it is uniquely obvious that they are phenomenally conscious. The same dialectic can then be reiterated at the fourth-order, fifth-order, sixth-order, etc. *ad infinitum*.

However, the crucial point is this: at some level, the friends of consciousness *will not be able to pull off one of their key moves anymore*. Indeed, at some level n , it simply will *not be obvious* that they really have the required unique epistemic relation at the level $n-1$. That they really have the required unique epistemic relation at $n-1$ will simply *not plausibly feature* in their strong pre-theoretical intuitions – it will not fall in the domain of what seems obviously true. Consequently, it will cease to be an obvious commonsensical claim. This *must* occur at some stage in the dialectic, as there are no obvious commonsensical claims that involve arbitrarily high levels of complexity. Whether this happens at the fourth-order, tenth-order or fifty-fifth-order is irrelevant here – the important point is simply that there has to be a level at which one cannot anymore plausibly claim that they have correspondingly complex strong and nevertheless pre-theoretical intuitions. But, if at some level n one cannot reasonably claim that it is obvious that one has the required unique epistemic relation at $n-1$, then there is no way to counter the strong scientific-cum-philosophical argument against the existence of this relation at $n-1$. And if one denies the reality of this epistemic relation at $n-1$, one cannot counter the strong scientific-cum-philosophical argument against the existence of this relation at $n-2$, etc. Travelling back down levels, one will ultimately be led to admit that we do not have the unique epistemic relation to phenomenal states required for the Moorean argument against illusionism to work.

Will this fast round trip across levels convince the friends of consciousness to abandon the Moorean argument against illusionism? Maybe. Some of them could be convinced, and turn to other ways to defend their view against illusionism – or, why not, change their mind and embrace illusionism! Others might maintain that they do really have the unique epistemic relation to phenomenal states needed for their argument to succeed. As they cannot just state that it is *uniquely obvious* that this epistemic relation obtains (this would lead to the dialectics I just described), they could claim: (a) that it is not legitimate (or intelligible) to call this

epistemic relation in question. Given that similar questioning is obviously acceptable and intelligible in neighboring cases, such as Bergson's, they will have to say that the case of consciousness is special. Or (b) they could concede that this questioning is intelligible and legitimate, but try to make the case for the reality of our unique epistemic relation to consciousness without appealing to the claim that this unique epistemic relation is itself uniquely obvious.²⁴ For example, (b.1) they could try to defend the idea that we have a unique epistemic relation to phenomenal states with some sort of other argument – say, a transcendental argument, stating that this unique epistemic relation to phenomenal states is a necessary condition for the existence of very crucial things that everyone, including illusionists, probably have to accept (this relation to consciousness might be necessary, say, for the possession of justified beliefs – including the justified scientific beliefs upon which the illusionist is reliant for their own arguments to succeed)²⁵. Alternatively, (b.2) they could claim that the unique epistemic relation to consciousness they posit is transparent *ad infinitum*: it gives us super-Moorean certainty that consciousness is real, *and* super-Moorean certainty that we have this first super-Moorean certainty, *and* super-Moorean certainty that we have this second kind of super-Moorean certainty, *and* super-Moorean certainty that we have this second kind of super-Moorean certainty, etc. This position might attract philosophers who are sympathetic to understanding of consciousness based on acquaintance. Russell, for instance, famously claimed that we are not only acquainted with sense-data, but also with our very acquaintance with them (Russell, 1912, chapter 5). One could take things further and thus claim that we are acquainted with our experiences, and at the very same time with our acquaintance with our experiences, with our acquaintance with this second acquaintance, etc. *ad infinitum*. By claiming that all the required certainties are given at the same first-order level, the friends of consciousness could try and avoid the difficulties which arise from having to contend that complex *n-th*-order level claims are intuitively obvious.

However, these answers all suffer from the same flaw. They all crucially appeal to contentious philosophical views. Indeed, it *could be* that the unique obviousness of phenomenal consciousness cannot legitimately be called into question (as opposed to what happens in other cases wherein someone claims that something is similarly obvious), or that this unique obviousness is a condition of possibility of justification itself, or that it involves a transparent presentation of infinite epistemic relations, etc. However, none of these claims can be reasonably contended to be found in the domain of obvious commonsensical, pre-theoretical

²⁴ Such a move could also be made at some higher level the dialectics (third-order, fourth-order), but my response would be the same.

²⁵ (Merlo, 2020) might be read as providing suggestions in that direction.

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claims – they all traffic in contentious, debatable, and highly theoretical philosophical claims. If indeed one of them is needed to defend the Moorean argument, then the corresponding defense is worth no more than the claim itself. And if each of them happens to entail the falsity of illusionism (which is something I find rather plausible, although I do not intend to argue for that here), this means that the defense of the Moorean argument against illusionism will end up simply begging the question against illusionism.

Two important things to be noted. First: of course, there might be other potential ways to defend the Moorean argument that I did not consider here. For instance, they might be *other* arguments for the claim that we do really have the appropriate unique epistemic relation to consciousness. Note, however, that at this stage the burden of proof lies on the proponent of the Moorean argument: given the existence of a strong scientific-cum-philosophical argument against the existence of this unique epistemic relation (strong enough to counter the “mere” obviousness of this relation), the onus is now on them to provide a reason to believe that it in fact really holds. Besides, note that, even if it is of course impossible to say anything against their hypothetical argument before it is put forth, one can already see that such an argument will face serious constraints. If this argument consists in deducing the existence of such a unique epistemic relation from a philosophical thesis, the illusionist could arguably find ways to point out that the thesis is itself contentious and potentially implies the falsity of illusionism – thus accusing the proponent of the Moorean argument of begging the question. Maybe one could devise a strong argument that combines *intuitive premises* and *philosophical premises* (that do *not* imply the falsity of illusionism and that are, hopefully, not contentious), and concludes to the reality of this epistemic relation (without having to claim that this relation is itself uniquely obvious). Note that the intuition mobilized here would have to be such that the illusionist could not build a strong scientific-cum-philosophical argument opposing it. Not also that the resulting argument would really need to be quite strong, so that, when opposed to the second-order scientific-cum-metaphysical illusionist argument, the rational outcome must be a low credence for the negation of this epistemic relation (less than 0.5). Finally, note that, if we are left with a low but non-negligible credence for the negation of this unique epistemic relation (say, 0.2), the friends of consciousness will have to accept that there is a non-negligible epistemic possibility that the Moorean argument does not succeed. They would have ruled out illusionism, but not in a clearly conclusive manner. Whether or not they should consider that a success is better left to future discussion, as the onus is anyway now on them to provide an appropriate argument in defense of the relevant unique epistemic relation.

Second: the reader can notice that I did not argue that the justification of the first premise of the Moorean argument itself begs the question (or fails), but that the *defense* of the argument against the illusionist worry begs the question (or fails). And indeed, it is clear that, if any of the contentious philosophical views I described were true, e.g. if we were really acquainted in this peculiar infinite way with phenomenal states, we would have super-Moorean certainty regarding these phenomenal states, and this certainty would not depend on the antecedent acceptance of any philosophical view, so that the premise of the Moorean argument would be appropriately justified in a non-question-begging manner. But what matters here is whether or not we should believe that it is the case that this justification obtains – and I attempted to show that, if we do not presuppose the truth of some contentious (and potentially question-begging) philosophical views, we should not.

What does this “more meta than thou” reasoning, appealing to seemingly complex discussions through potentially infinite levels, really consist in? The idea, in a nutshell, is quite simple. The most natural interpretation of our current best science opposes a picture in which our standard intuitive judgments about our phenomenal states are correct (this is the standard illusionist argument). One might want to fight this argument with brute, strong intuitions regarding the existence of phenomenal states, as well (maybe) as regarding our epistemic relation with them: this is the Moorean argument canvassed here. However, the most natural interpretation of our best science also opposes a picture on which our judgments regarding our epistemic relation to phenomenal states are correct, and also a picture on which our judgments regarding our epistemic relation to this epistemic relation are correct, and a picture in which our judgments regarding our epistemic relation to this epistemic relation to this epistemic relation are correct, etc. *ad infinitum*. Along this potentially infinite chain of debunking arguments, our intuition has to break at some point, as we enter domains in which we have no pre-theoretical inclinations (of course, some will have decided in advance that *they should report no such break of intuition*, or that they should refuse to move across levels, but, as I tried to show, they probably do so just because they have adopted some appropriate contentious philosophical view in the first place). Once we have reached this point, we realize that we should not have been so very sure about the existence of phenomenal states in the first place – their existence becomes an *open question*.

7. Conclusion

If illusionism is coherent and well-supported by strong scientific-cum-philosophical arguments, then it cannot be ruled out without begging the question simply because it seems obviously false.

My argument does not purport to show that one should accept illusionism. Nor does it purport to show that illusionism really is coherent or well-supported. Moreover, everything I have said is compatible with the view that there are convincing non-Moorean arguments against illusionism. My argument is also compatible with the view that some of the question-begging contentious philosophical theses needed to defend the anti-illusionist Moorean argument against my attacks might happen to be true, and/or defensible by some strong, independent and themselves non-question-begging arguments. It is also compatible with the view that there might be some strong, independent and non-question-begging argument, which would successfully defend the claim that we have the unique epistemic relation to phenomenal experiences needed for the Moorean argument to succeed (but it is now up to the friends of consciousness to come up with this argument).

Besides, everything I said is compatible with the view that the existence of phenomenal states indeed seems obvious (but not uniquely obvious) and that this apparent obviousness should have some dialectical weight in the debate around phenomenal realism – just not enough to rule out illusionism! My argument is therefore compatible with the view that standard Moorean arguments (opposing the counter-intuitive conclusions of purely philosophical arguments) are successful. What I said is in fact even compatible with the view (that I am independently inclined to reject) that there are topics on which *we do possess* the super-Moorean certainty needed to reject even the conclusions of strong scientific-cum-philosophical arguments – for example, when, contrary to what happens with consciousness, we do not *also*, at the same time, face a strong scientific-cum-philosophical challenge against our possession of such super-Moorean certainty. My attack against the anti-illusionist argument was only made possible by the fact that the basis of good arguments for illusionism is identical to (or very close to) the basis of good arguments against the view that we have the kind of certainty needed to rule out good arguments for illusionism, and the basis of good arguments against the view that we have the kind of certainty to rule out these second-order good arguments, etc. *ad infinitum*. But my reasoning does not presuppose that the situation is necessarily the same for all other putative cases of super-Moorean certainty outside the domain of consciousness.

So, what I hope to have shown is really not much – although it might mean a lot: we should not be *so sure* of the existence of phenomenal states. The truth of illusionism is thereby left an open question.

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