

## PANPSYCHISM AND ILLUSIONISM

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### Résumé

Le panpsychisme et l'illusionnisme sont unis par leur rejet de l'idée apparemment évidente que les humains, et une certaine proportion d'animaux, sont les seuls sujets conscients sur notre planète. Les panpsychistes pensent que la conscience est bien plus répandue que cela ; l'illusionniste pense que cela n'existe pas du tout. Je fais remonter ce désaccord frappant à ses racines dans deux conceptions opposées de la matière et de la façon dont la matière peut se connaître : les illusionnistes conçoivent la matière en termes physiques conventionnels, comme épuisés par ce que la science naturelle en dit ; ne trouvant pas de place pour la subjectivité dans un monde de matière ainsi conçu, ils la bannissent complètement. En revanche, les panpsychistes conçoivent la matière comme quelque chose qui peut se manifester à lui-même, de sorte que les cerveaux faits de matière connaissent quelque chose sur leur propre nature qui va au-delà des descriptions formulées dans les termes des sciences naturelles.

### Abstract

Panpsychism and illusionism are united by their rejection of the seemingly obvious idea that humans, and some proportion of animals, are the only conscious subjects on our planet. Panpsychists think consciousness is much more widespread than that; illusionist think it doesn't exist at all. I trace this striking disagreement to its roots in two opposing conceptions of matter and how matter can know itself : illusionists conceive of matter in conventional physical terms, as exhausted by what natural science says about it ; finding no room for subjectivity in a world of matter so conceived, they banish it altogether. By contrast, panpsychists conceive of matter as something that can be manifest to itself, such that brains made of matter know something about their own nature that goes beyond descriptions formulated in the terms of natural science.

The relationship between panpsychism and illusionism is, in my view, surprisingly intricate. If read naively, they appear to disagree about as much as any two views could disagree: one says that something called 'phenomenal consciousness' is everywhere, the other that it's nowhere. One says such consciousness is a, perhaps *the*, fundamental reality of the universe, the other says there's no such thing. This stark opposition could yield a sense of vertigo : if both of these are serious options, what secure common ground is there to argue from ? Or, to reason in the other direction, surely if we take a firm stance in shared common sense, should we conclude that neither panpsychism nor illusionism is a serious option? After all, philosophers discussing consciousness will often define the term using contrastive examples : that familiar state you're in when you're awake, but which random bits of matter

lack – *that's* consciousness<sup>1</sup>. Both illusionism and panpsychism deny one of the presuppositions here (that awake people are conscious, or that random bits of matter aren't), so it might seem that they are absurd at best, meaningless at worst.

One of my aims in this paper is to defend panpsychism against criticism from illusionists, but before doing this I'll need to spend some time on the preliminary question of what their competing claims even mean. I'll try to shed light on both views by interrogating their apparent disagreement, following the question of what 'consciousness' can possibly mean if this radical disagreement about its extent can make sense. I'll suggest that the surface disagreement, about how much consciousness the world contains, is downstream from, and enabled by, a more basic disagreement between rival conceptions of consciousness. Both sides can recognise that the other represents the most consistent working-out of the opposing conception of what conscious experience involves.

Keith Frankish, an illusionist, writes that « panpsychism is a good answer to a bad question » (2021, p. 51), meaning that if we accept the conception used to pose the Hard Problem of consciousness (the supposedly bad question), we ought to accept panpsychism as a result. Panpsychists might say the same in reverse : if someone is really committed to a reductive physicalist picture of reality, illusionism is the natural endpoint of that view. In that sense, it is a good answer to a bad question : what do we do with consciousness, in a world which we insist on conceiving as devoid of consciousness in its fundamentals ? The debate between panpsychism and illusionism is thus really a debate over these two bad questions. What answer makes sense depends which question you ask.

## 1. Is There an Agreed Referent for 'Consciousness' ?

Let's start by getting clearer on these two views. Illusionism is the view that « phenomenal consciousness does not exist but merely seems to exist » (Kammerer 2021, p. 891 ; cf. Frankish 2012, 2016-a). It's important to note the restriction here : illusionists don't claim that nothing exists which we could usefully call 'consciousness', just the specific thing that philosophers have termed 'phenomenal consciousness'<sup>2</sup> and have claimed is especially hard to explain. Illusionists accept that there are many states of human brains which display various special sorts of cognitive accessibility: information about these states is systematically available for a range of functions, such as verbal report, intentional action, long-term planning, and so on. They just deny that these states have the sort of qualitative, experiential property that philosophers introduced terms like 'phenomenal consciousness' to refer to.

Panpsychism is also a claim specifically about phenomenal consciousness. To a first approximation, it says that everything is conscious, though with qualifications on both 'everything' and 'conscious'. On 'everything' : what panpsychists are committed to is that the fundamental constituents of matter (particles, strings, spacetime, or whatever they turn out to be) have phenomenal consciousness. In my view the most systematic and defensible form of panpsychism would go further and accept universalism, the view that every collection of

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<sup>1</sup> For examples of this way of introducing consciousness through examples, see e.g. Kirk 2003, p. 75 ; Gennaro 2012 ; Tononi 2012, p. 290 ; List 2018, p. 295.

<sup>2</sup> The term originates with Block 1995 ; closely connected terms include 'qualia', 'subjective experience', and 'what it is like' or 'what it feels like' to be in a certain state.

conscious parts forms a conscious whole (see esp. Goff 2013, Roelofs 2019, pp. 91-100, Buchanan and Roelofs 2019, pp. 3006-3009). On that version of panpsychism, any portion of the material world is conscious; on alternative versions, only the fundamental constituents and then some restricted subset of larger things (perhaps just animals, perhaps just organisms) are conscious. But either way, there's a lot of consciousness out there. On 'consciousness': just as illusionists don't deny that there are lots of complex psychological properties that we could usefully call 'consciousness', so panpsychists don't deny that humans and animals have lots of distinctive, complex, psychological properties that we could usefully call 'consciousness'. Humans and animals have 'access-conscious' states which can guide behaviour, memory, report, planning, and so on; fundamental particles don't. Indeed, particles are functionally too simple to be capable of planning, decision-making, memory, or any similar mental processes. What panpsychists maintain is that nevertheless each particle has (or better, each particle *is*) some incredibly simple sort of subjective experience, qualia, 'raw feeling': i.e. this thing that we are calling 'phenomenal consciousness'.

In between panpsychism and illusionism is the standard view, on which some minority of things – paradigmatically, humans and animals – are phenomenally conscious. For want of a better term, we could call this 'oligopsychism': consciousness for some, not for all and not for none.

But what is phenomenal consciousness? Ideally, when two views disagree over the distribution of something, we might hope for an agreed-upon definition of that thing. So in this case we might hope for some way of filling in 'phenomenal consciousness is X' such that panpsychists think everything is X ('everything' in the qualified sense noted above) and illusionists think nothing is X. And at first glance it might seem like we have a good candidate for X in the form of Frankish's definition of 'classic qualia':

Classic qualia: Introspectable qualitative properties of experience that are intrinsic, ineffable, and subjective. (Frankish 2012, p. 668; compare « qualia are supposed to be... (1) ineffable, (2) intrinsic, (3) private, (4) directly or immediately apprehensible », Dennett 1988, p. 47, « phenomenal properties are ineffable, intrinsic, radically private, and so on », Frankish 2016-b, p. 275.)

Can't we just say that illusionists think nothing has this sort of property, while panpsychists think everything does? Not quite. First, this definition is potentially too demanding. Lots of people who explicitly reject illusionism could deny that anything has properties meeting all of these conditions: they might say that there are qualia, but they're not ineffable, or not intrinsic, or not subjective.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, some panpsychists might say this: I've argued, for instance, that phenomenal properties are not *radically* private, because two subjects might have, and thus directly know, one and the same experience, if they shared, for example, part of their brains (Roelofs 2019, p.63 ff, Goff and Roelofs forthcoming; cf. Hirstein 2012 for a physicalist case for the same).

Could we just relax the definition by turning the 'and' into an 'or', saying e.g. that panpsychists think everything has properties that are *either* intrinsic, ineffable, or subjective,

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<sup>3</sup> Of course, Frankish's aim is to put pressure on exactly these physicalists. To the idea that a state could be reportable, accessible, etc. without being phenomenally conscious, he asks « what exactly would be missing? Well, a phenomenal character, a subjective feel, a what-it-is-likeness. But what is that supposed to be, if not some intrinsic, ineffable, and subjective qualitative property? » (2012, p. 669) Frankish doubts that there is any stable middle ground between illusionism and embrace of classic qualia - any coherent notion of what he calls 'dier qualia'. But we shouldn't accept such a radical claim while still just trying to identify the positions.

while illusionists think nothing does? No. After all, most philosophers, whatever their views about consciousness, would accept that everything has *some* intrinsic properties (with ontic structural realists being the notable exception<sup>4</sup>). It's a fairly common thought that matter generally has some sort of intrinsic nature.

A final worry is that many of the key terms used in definitions like this, when scrutinised, seem to lead back to the notion of consciousness – like 'subjective' and 'properties of experience' (cf. Mandik 2016). We could likely make some progress in spelling these out, by saying, e.g. 'subjective properties are those which are directly knowable only from certain perspectives'. But the progress may be only slight: if we then ask what sort of 'direct knowledge' is meant, or what sort of 'perspective', the answer is likely to be something like 'the phenomenal kind'. So we have not really managed to dispense with reliance on an initial, intuitive, sense of the meaning of 'phenomenal consciousness'.

## 2. Is This a Merely Verbal Disagreement?

Maybe it's a mistake to view this as a straightforward disagreement about a term with an agreed-on meaning. Maybe, instead, we should view this whole debate as a merely verbal disagreement: a disagreement about how to use the word 'consciousness', between opposing sides who have basically the same view of how the world is<sup>5</sup>. As Niikawa puts it, « the terminological hypothesis is [that] the anti-illusionist camp adopts an indubitable sense of 'phenomenal consciousness'... [while] the illusionist camp adopts a dubitable sense » (2021, p. 18).

One way to motivate this reading is to illustrate how far we can get with what Chalmers (2011, p. 526) calls the 'method of elimination': if we refrain from using the words 'phenomenal consciousness' or its near synonyms ('qualia', 'experience', etc.), how much of the opposition disappears? Once we articulate what panpsychists, illusionists, and the 'oligopsychists' in between could agree on, it might seem like the only remaining disagreement about which thing to apply the term 'phenomenal consciousness' to.

The 'merely verbal' reading might go something like this. According to many panpsychists, illusionists, and oligopsychists alike, the world is built up out of one ultimate type of fundamental stuff: 'matter'. Matter is not necessarily tied to any kind of complex psychology, but a small number of systems made out of it – brains – have certain sorts of psychological states characterised by some combination of cognitive accessibility, introspective reportability, and so on. Oligopsychists think that 'phenomenal consciousness' refers specifically to the latter: the complex psychological states of certain brains. Illusionists and panpsychists don't disagree that there are such states, or they are what we usually have in mind when we say 'consciousness', but do disagree dispute what the term 'phenomenal consciousness' refers to. Illusionists think it refers to nothing; they prefer to call the relevant brain states 'quasi-phenomenal'; panpsychists think it refers to the above-mentioned

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<sup>4</sup> For discussion of ontic structural realism – the idea that the world consists ultimately just of structures, without anything non-structural that they are the structure of – see McKenzie 2017; for discussion of its relationship with panpsychism, see Seager 2006.

<sup>5</sup> For an exploration of some interesting convergences between at least some panpsychist and illusionist theories, see Roelofs 2021.

fundamental stuff: they think matter is conscious, and human and animal consciousness is just the most complex form.

Setting aside these terminological differences, both illusionists and panpsychists might agree with oligopsychists on several claims about the status and significance of these two things (matter and certain brain states). Both might agree, for instance, that moral status is tied primarily to the latter of the two, not the former<sup>6</sup>, and that we should only expect introspective reports of the latter, not the former. It might well be that for all empirical tests, these opposing perspectives might give the same predictions – they might agree perfectly, for instance, on which specific neural states underlie this second, complex, important, reportable, thing. Moreover, they might conceivably agree about the *boundaries* of the second thing in nature : they might agree that mammals and birds have it, agree that plants don't, and agree, perhaps, in identifying the processes in various other organisms as borderline cases of it.<sup>7</sup>

Frankish, in a talk entitled « An Illusionist Manifesto », articulates some of the practical implications he sees illusionism having for neuroscience, animal ethics, and other fields. What's striking is that many of them dovetail with what panpsychists (especially universalist ones) might recommend :<sup>8</sup>

- Don't search for the neural processes that correlate with phenomenal consciousness... Do search for the neural processes that explain the responses symptomatic of what we call 'consciousness'... Do devise frameworks for representing different forms and degrees of consciousness...
- Don't ask if animals are conscious *tout court*... don't assume that there is a sharp division of creatures into the conscious sheep and the non-conscious goats... do map creatures' distinctive patterns of sensitivity and psychological reaction... and identify the similarities and differences between them and us along multiple dimensions...
- Don't ask if an AI is conscious... Do ask where a specific AI is located in the multidimensional space of forms of perceptual consciousness. (Frankish 2022)

In each case, where the illusionist thinks 'is it phenomenally conscious or not?' is a bad question because nothing is, the panpsychist might think that it's a bad question because everything is. In both cases, the interesting questions are about the particular forms and ways that matter can organise itself into self-awareness.

We can even add that there is some property that nothing really has but which we are all naturally inclined to think we have. All sides can agree that humans are prone to a certain sort of self-importance (for much of history we thought the universe literally revolved around us...). So while illusionists might say 'phenomenal consciousness is a magical property we wrongly take ourselves to have', a panpsychist or oligopsychist could potentially agree that there is *something* that we don't have but tend to think we do ; they

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<sup>6</sup> See Buchanan and Roelofs 2019, and Roelofs 2022, for discussions of whether panpsychists should limit moral status to a subset of conscious subjects, not all, and Kammerer 2019, 2022, for an argument that illusionists should treat quasi-phenomenal states as at least somewhat connected to moral status - see also Lee 2014 and Cutter 2017 for discussion of whether mainstream physicalists can maintain the intuitive moral value of consciousness.

<sup>7</sup> For discussions of the vagueness or precision of physical consciousness, see Goff 2013, Simon 2017, Hall 2022, Schwitzgebel Ms.

<sup>8</sup> Note that here Frankish uses 'consciousness' in a deflationary way, as meaning merely the brain states that cause our introspective reports – not as meaning 'phenomenal consciousness'.

won't call it 'consciousness', but they might call it 'a soul', or 'immaterial consciousness', 'unitary indivisible consciousness', etc. They might link it with libertarian free will, or immortality, or supernatural origins, or similar, but they can agree that we are prone to some sort of illusion about our own nature.

Given all of this potential agreement, it might start to seem like the remaining disagreement has shrunk to being merely verbal : it's just a matter of which, if either, of the things everyone accepts (the basic stuff of nature, and the mental states we can report, or some special immaterial magic we wrongly thought we had) we decide to call 'phenomenal consciousness'. Have we just been wasting our time arguing about words ?

It's undeniable that there *is* a lot of terminological messiness in this area. There are, famously, half a dozen different things people mean by 'consciousness', and a profusion of other terms that get roped in to try and clarify it ('experience', 'subjectivity', 'qualia'). The meanings of 'mind', 'matter', and virtually every key term are similarly open to dispute. And yet I don't think it's plausible that the whole debate is just semantic. People can get caught up on words sometimes, but part of what is striking about the mind-body debate is the degree to which you can see people making the same moves, following the same arguments, arriving at the same conclusions, even when using completely different vocabulary. Early modern philosophers like Descartes, for instance, are rightly seen as prefiguring many of the major dynamics of the debate as it still goes on, even though they make relatively little mention of 'conscious experience'. Spinoza, Leibniz, and Schopenhauer can be relatively easily identified as panpsychists (including making some of the same argumentative moves that modern panpsychists make) but none of them speaks in terms of 'consciousness' being omnipresent. This suggests that the debate is not simply created by any specific english-language word.

To put it another way : there does still seem to be a difference between the panpsychist saying that the fundamental stuff that's everywhere is conscious, and the illusionist (and others) denying it. Specifying the difference clearly without using the word 'conscious' is hard, but it doesn't feel like a distinction without a difference. So while regimenting terminology can certainly be helpful, I don't think it will dissolve the disagreement between illusionists and panpsychists.

### **3. Can 'Consciousness' Be Defined by Pointing ?**

Here's a third approach : treat 'consciousness' as defined ostensively, by a sort of 'pointing'. Maybe we don't refer to it based on grasping an informative definition, but nor is it a meaningless word that means whatever we want it to. It means, to put it crudely : '*this* thing that I've got going on here.' Of course, I noted earlier that some example-based approaches end up ruling out both panpsychism and illusionism at the outset, as when Tononi confidently declares that consciousness « is what vanishes every night when we fall into dreamless sleep and reappears when we wake up or when we dream » (Tononi 2012, p. 290). Panpsychists might well think that phenomenal consciousness persists through dreamless sleep, unremembered because it lacks the psychological complexity it has in dreams and waking life (if an electron can be conscious in such a crude and inert way, why not a brain ?) ; illusionists deny that anything phenomenal 'appears' when we wake up or dream. But maybe a more sophisticated version of this approach can work.

Schwitzgebel attempts a more sophisticated version, arguing that « Phenomenal consciousness is the most folk-psychologically obvious thing or feature » shared by all the paradigmatic positive examples he gives, namely « sensory experiences, imagery experiences, emotional experiences, dream experiences, and conscious thoughts and desires », and not shared by certain negative examples such as « the release of growth hormones in your brain... early auditory processing... [and] dreamless sleep » (Schwitzgebel 2016, p. 229). He recognises the danger of these negative examples ruling out panpsychism at the outset, and so tries to make space for a wider range of views : « if the putative negative examples failed to be negative, as in some versions of panpsychism, we might still be able to salvage the concept, by targeting the feature that the positive examples have and that the negative examples are falsely *assumed to lack* » (Schwitzgebel 2016, p. 223, emphasis added).<sup>9</sup> That would make it compatible with panpsychism : panpsychism says that a property that is manifestly present in the positive cases is in fact present, though not as obviously so, in other cases.

What about illusionists ? For his part, Frankish responds thus :

« precisely because [Schwitzgebel's] definition is so innocent, it is not incompatible with illusionism... illusionists do not deny the existence of the mental states we describe as phenomenally conscious, nor do they deny that we can introspectively recognize these states when they occur in us. Moreover, they can accept that these states share some unifying feature. But they add that this feature is not possession of phenomenal properties » (Frankish 2016-b, p. 277).

So at least on the face of it, Schwitzgebel's ostensive definition seems to have failed to do what we wanted: if illusionists can agree that consciousness *in this sense* exists – if all it requires of them is to accept that states we can introspectively recognise « have some unifying feature » – then we haven't yet nailed down their disagreement with panpsychists (and others). Conversely, if illusionists have to deny *this*, their position becomes much harder to motivate (Kammerer, this volume). However, I think there are ways to strengthen this definition so as to make it pick out something that illusionists will deny, by building on some remarks Schwitzgebel makes about the notion of 'obviousness'.

#### 4. A Refined Ostensive Definition

Schwitzgebel says that when trying to unify his positive examples,

« [...] you could pick out a feature of the sort Frankish suggests, like 'quasi-phenomenality' or presence of the disposition to judge that one is having wonderful conscious experiences. None of those are the feature I mean. I mean the obvious feature, the thing that kind of smacks you in the face when you think about the cases. That one ! » (Schwitzgebel 2016, p. 230).

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<sup>9</sup> Kammerer suggests (Ms.) a parallel qualification of the positive side - to say « the feature that the the positive examples (are assumed to) have » – so as not to rule out illusionism by definition.

I want to dwell on the thought that consciousness must be something obvious, something that can smack you in the face. Consciousness, whatever it is, is something you're aware of<sup>10</sup>. At a few points we also get, alongside the official appeal to obviousness, remarks that what is needed is an « obvious or natural category » (Schwitzgebel 2016, p. 227) : that is, 'consciousness' should refer to an objective division of reality, not something arbitrary, gerrymandered, or interest-relative. It should be the sort of property that good scientific theories talk about, the sort that gets at the real structure of reality, that 'carves nature at the joints'. Finally, there is « The Wonderfulness condition », which is that it should be « not straightforwardly obvious as a matter of definition how consciousness relates to cognitive, functional, or physical properties. » (Schwitzgebel 2016, p. 233). It's not clear exactly how many of these remarks are meant to be definitional requirements – Schwitzgebel's says he aims to define the term as « as innocently as I can manage » (2016), and the intention seems to be that although these remarks help clarify the definition and emphasise some of its virtues, they are not themselves clauses built into it. But we might try taking them that way – indeed, Kammerer (Ms.) argues that the best way to make sense of illusionism as an attractive position is to suppose that attempts to define consciousness 'innocently' (like Schwitzgebel's) are actually incorporating a lot of 'implicit content': even when we try to 'just look', we are bringing substantive assumptions to bear. So let's try strengthening the definition using Schwitzgebel's remarks:

Phenomenal Consciousness = the highly natural property shared by all the positive examples that is both introspectively obvious and not definable, in any obvious and straightforward way, by reference to cognitive functioning.

My hope for this definition is that illusionists will say that there is no such property. According to illusionists, the only natural property that is introspectively obvious in all the positive examples is something like their quasi-phenomenality, i.e. whatever disposes them to produce certain sorts of introspective reports. And quasi-phenomenality is obviously and straightforwardly defined by reference to cognitive functioning. On the illusionist view, we are able to produce the reports but we have no real insight into *why* : the properties that make something available to be referred to introspectively are hidden machinery working 'behind the scenes'. And there are, of course, also some highly 'natural' properties that are shared by all neural states: properties like 'having mass' or 'being composed of matter'. But these, illusionists will assume, are not introspectively obvious, not something that smacks us in the face and hence not something available for introspective reference.

Moreover, this definition lets illusionists characterise the illusion they think we are subject to : the illusion that there is some natural property common to all these states, which *allows* them to be introspectively referred to and reported, and about which we know something that goes beyond how it relates to cognitive functioning (we know 'how it feels'). That is, illusionists can say that all the positive examples appear to us to share a highly natural, introspectively obvious, property that isn't straightforwardly defined by cognitive function, but this is an illusion.

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<sup>10</sup> Among his negative examples Schwitzgebel includes « pain experience... in regions outside your body » and « other people's thoughts and images » (Schwitzgebel 2016, p. 229). Presumably these are things that in fact *are* phenomenally conscious, but are not phenomenally conscious *for me* – precisely because they have no features that are immediately obvious to me, and thus cannot smack *me* in the face.

Here is another way to look at things. Defining something ostensively, by saying ‘this thing here’ works best if there’s only one thing available to refer to. If I say ‘this guy here’ while pointing at a corner where a single man is standing alone, it’s clear who I’m referring to. But if I say ‘this guy here’ while pointing at a crowd, nobody will know who I mean. Maybe I know who I mean, because while I point I am mentally focusing on one of the men in particular, but if my mental state is as loose and gestural as my words, I might fail to determinately refer to any of them.

Here’s the kicker : recall the distinctions we’ve been drawing, between on the one hand various psychological structures (like self-awareness and cognitive access), and on the other the ubiquitous fundamental stuff that panpsychists call ‘consciousness’ and others just call ‘matter’. At any moment when I internally point to ‘what’s going on in me right now’, all of these properties are present in my brain. They’re like the crowd in the corner when we point and say ‘that guy there’. Which of them do we refer to?

This depends on which of the properties that are *instantiated* in my brain when I have this thought are *available* to refer to. It seems obvious that some are not : my brain might instantiate the property of ‘being equidistant between Ottawa and Washington D.C.’, but that’s not something I can refer to by inner ostension. It’s instantiated but, we might say, it’s not ‘manifest’, not ‘on display’.

Now we can give an informative characterisation of where panpsychists differ both from illusionists and from oligopsychists, without using the word ‘consciousness’. They think that at least one of the fundamental properties of physical stuff in general (perhaps the whole essence of physical stuff itself) is available for inner ostension. Something about the nature of matter is manifest to creatures made out of matter : it is ‘right there’ for us to introspect. We can introspectively refer to the inner nature of brain matter, which is the same as the inner nature of matter generally.<sup>11</sup> That doesn’t mean that all matter will be able to introspect: introspection is obviously a complex psychological ability that has evolved only in certain animals. It just means that when a material system develops that ability, its inner nature will be available for it to refer to. The most natural property shared by all of Schwitzgebel’s positive examples, that is both introspectively obvious and not definitionally tied to any cognitive function, is the property of being made of matter.

Illusionists and oligopsychists are committed to denying this. They can of course accept that the fundamental physical properties of brain matter are present in our brains when we experience and introspect. But they are not manifest to introspection. They’re here but we can’t point at them ; they make up every part of everything we do but they are, in this sense, invisible to us. The panpsychist position is simply that matter is not invisible to itself.

## 5. The Depsychologised Conception of Consciousness

If the above argument is right, then there’s an important sense in which the disagreement between illusionism and panpsychism turns out to not really be a difference in what is ‘out

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<sup>11</sup> That doesn’t require panpsychists to say that every aspect of every fundamental property of every piece of brain matter is available for introspective reference. We can see matter and touch matter, even though we can’t see or touch everything about it ; likewise we can introspect matter, but perhaps only certain subsets or aggregates of its intrinsic features.

there' but a different analysis of what's going on 'in here'. The basic conflict isn't really about where experience is, but about what it is..

Frankish recognises this : for a certain conception of consciousness, « panpsychism has a strong claim to being the best solution to the problem it poses », and his case for illusionism is that we should reject that whole conception. The conception in question is what he calls the « depsychologized » one :

The phenomenal concept of consciousness is a depsychologized one – one stripped of all *a priori* connections with psychological functions... no matter how complex and sensitive [a set of functional] processes are, they could conceivably occur without any real phenomenal feel being present. No system of introspective representations and reactions... entails the presence of phenomenal feel. Such phenomenal subjectivity is conceptually distinct from the psychological forms of subjectivity, introspective as well as perceptual. (Frankish 2021, p. 53-54)

I agree : panpsychism is the natural endpoint of realising that phenomenal consciousness does not logically entail any particular psychological functions. This contrasts with the conception that Frankish commits to (what we might call a 'psychologised' conception). I think this clash of conceptions comes out clearly in the following passage, asking how we could be aware of depsychologised consciousness :

« To be aware of something is to be sensitive to its presence. And sensitivity requires a causal mechanism, triggered by the presence of the thing... how could we be sensitive to the intrinsic nature of things ?... I assume that the panpsychist will reply that this misses the point, and that our awareness of our own conscious experiences is different from our awareness of other aspects of the world. It is not a matter of causal sensitivity, they will say, but of immediate acquaintance... We know our intrinsic nature, not by possessing mechanisms that are sensitive to it but simply by being the things we are. It's what it is like to be us... But it is a baffling claim all the same. How could simply being something be sufficient for anything remotely like awareness? How could a thing gain insight into its own nature simply by existing ? » (Frankish 2021, p. 66)

Frankish here states the position he rejects quite aptly: we are aware of our own consciousness not because we have some detector mechanism that it somehow triggers, but « simply by being the things we are »<sup>12</sup>. Consciousness is present to itself in a very different way than other things are present to it. To me, this sounds virtually truistic : of course consciousness doesn't work like other properties. Of course I don't find out about it because the consciousness detector in my brain went off. Indeed, it's not clear that such an idea is really coherent : after the detector goes off, how do I find out ? Do I need a further detector to detect when the first goes off ? Surely we don't want an infinite regress of detector-detectors, so at some point it seems we must say that there is a state whose occurrence we are simply aware of directly, not by it affecting us further (cf. Mihalik Ms.).

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<sup>12</sup> For discussions of this idea, often referred to as being 'directly acquainted' with features of our experiences, and traced to Russell 1910-11, and its relations to the mind-body problem, see esp. Balog 2012, Foff 2015, Mihalik 2022.

But to Frankish this is « baffling » : he demands to know *how* that could be the case. Implicitly, the demand is that if consciousness is to be real, it must work like other properties studied by science, must be either the triggering of a causal mechanism or else something that triggers a causal mechanism. There can't be anything to the story other than the triggering of causal mechanisms. I don't think we should accept this starting point, but I can see why, if one did, one would find oneself ineluctably led to illusionism.

## 6. Defending the Depsychologised Conception

Frankish makes a further claim : panpsychism stands as a *reductio ad absurdum* for the depsychologised conception, because it renders consciousness impossible to study or understand. If consciousness is not essentially tied to some set of psychological capacities (the way that 'quasi-phenomenal states', or 'access-consciousness', are), then how can we ever learn anything about it ?

I want to close by saying a bit about this accusation, because I think Frankish seriously underestimates the resources available to panpsychists. The accusation can be usefully divided into the following three strands of criticism :

1. Supposedly, depsychologising consciousness makes it impossible to know anything about how simple minds collectively form complex minds (the combination problem).
2. Supposedly, depsychologising consciousness makes it impossible for empirical science to study the neural correlates of consciousness.
3. Supposedly, depsychologising consciousness makes it impossible to identify which systems are, and which are not, complex conscious subjects with moral status.

### 6.1. Can We Understand How Minds Combine?

On the first point, Frankish fears that mental combination must be utterly mysterious, because both the ingredients and the connections among them are completely unknown :

« [...] to have any hope of solving the combination problem... we would need some grasp of either the basic phenomenal elements themselves or of the process by which they bond, and we lack both. Both must be distinct from any known feature of the world, and we have no way of determining their nature. » (Frankish 2021, p. 57-58).

Here he is following Nagasawa, who writes that the combination problem :

« [...] is analogous to a situation in which we fail to explain how a certain dish is cooked... while we know very well what the dish (macrophenomenal properties) is, we cannot identify the ingredients (microphenomenal properties) or describe the cooking process (how an aggregate of microphenomenal properties yields macrophenomenal properties). » (Nagasawa 2021, p. 37)

But it isn't true that both 'ingredients' and 'cooking process' must be 'distinct from any known feature of the world'. A lot of work on the combination problem proceeds precisely by analysing aspects of our own experience that might give us an idea of how minds combine.

For example, Nagasawa and Frankish both assume that the ‘phenomenal bonding’ relation posited by Goff (2017) is a completely opaque theoretical posit. But many writers have suggested that this relation might simply be the sort of phenomenal unity, the experienced hanging-togetherness of different sensations and feelings, that we know introspectively from our own case (see e.g. Miller 2018, Roelofs 2019, p.103-104 ; cf. Chalmers 2017, p. 200-201). Likewise, my discussions of both ‘phenomenal binding’ (2019, p.170-182, cf. Woodward 2021) and ‘phenomenal blending’ (2014, 2019 p.121ff ; cf. Coleman 2017, p. 264) are explicitly analysing relations that are manifest within our experience and can help explain mental combination. This approach is enabled by accepting *experience-sharing* : my consciousness isn’t somehow generated ‘on top of’ or ‘in place of’ the experiences of my parts, it is literally constituted out of them, meaning that their experiences are my experiences too. This requires re-thinking a lot of common assumptions about the privacy and unity of experience, but it is not self-contradictory or absurd (for defence of this approach see Roelofs 2019, p.60 ff, Roelofs 2020, Goff and Roelofs Forthcoming), and it completely sidesteps the worries raised by Frankish and Nagasawa.

More broadly, it’s a mistake to think that mental combination is a uniquely panpsychist issue. The more we learn about the brain and the ways its parts can be dissociated ; the more we accept consciousness at a variety of scales of life ; the more we become able to build, connect, and restructure minds using technology, the more we’ll have to grapple with the puzzles posed by minds made out of other minds. That’s why in *Combining Minds* I devote only two chapters to issues specific to panpsychism, putting them in context alongside problems raised by split brains, mental dissociation, collective intentionality, neurotechnology, and more. As Mendelovici (2020, p.303) puts it, « panpsychism’s combination problem is a problem for everyone » – or at least, for every non-illusionist view.

## 6.2. Can We Study Consciousness Empirically ?

Next consider point 2, about empirical study. Frankish uses an example to dramatise his claim that the neural correlates of consciousness cannot be studied if panpsychism is true :

« Suppose scans reveal that a certain brain region is active when people are tickled on the back of their neck... When we stimulate the region, the patient reports a tickling sensation even when they are not being tickled, and when we disrupt it, they do not report a tickling sensation even when they are being tickled. Would this establish that activity in the region is the neural correlate of the phenomenal feel of being tickled ? No. Maybe stimulating the region causes a person to react as if they are being tickled but does not produce the phenomenal feel of being tickled, and disrupting it blocks the reactions but does not suppress the feel. How could we tell ? » (Frankish 2021, p. 59-60)

The suggestion is that if we view conscious experience (e.g. of a tickle) as something that *logically* could occur with or without playing a particular causal role (e.g. causing reports of feeling a tickle), we can have no basis for identifying it as the thing that plays that role in a particular case. But this is not, in general, a reasonable inference. Logically, the universe as we see it could have been divinely created a moment ago, complete with false memories and misleading evidence: the present doesn’t *logically* entail the past. Yet it does not follow that

we have no basis for either believing in history or not: believing in history a far more unifying, more elegant, more explanatory belief than an inexplicable recent creation of misleading evidence. Likewise, panpsychists can accept the logical possibility of bizarre worlds where experiences and report are completely uncorrelated, while reasonably believing that we do not live in such a world. In Frankish's example, by far the simplest and reasonable explanation of why stimulating a given brain area uniquely and reliably causes reports of tickles is that it is the neural correlate of conscious tickles – the alternative is to needlessly complicate our theory by having *both* conscious tickles and something else that causes conscious tickles.

Frankish considers this sort of response in a footnote, but suggests that panpsychists cannot consistently make it :

« It might be suggested that we are entitled to the assumption of phenomenal-psychological parallelism, since it plays a basic structuring role in our thinking – comparable, perhaps to the belief that there is an external world or the assumption that induction is justified. Whatever the merits of this suggestion, it is doubtful that panpsychists are in a position to avail themselves of it, given that they posit phenomenality in inanimate objects. » (Frankish 2021, p. 63, n9)

The suggestion is that since panpsychists posit that inanimate objects (with a very different functional structure than brains) have *some sort* of consciousness, they cannot believe in a systematic 'parallelism' between phenomenal consciousness (what it's like to be a given entity), and psychological/functional structure (how an entity behaves). But this does not follow. All that follows is that whatever form of consciousness inanimate objects have, it must be very different from (and much simpler than) that had by humans, in proportion as the object's functional structure is very different from (and much simpler than) that of a human brain. 'Depsiologising' consciousness, as Frankish terms it, doesn't mean treating consciousness as something separate from all psychology : it means accepting that in addition to the psychologically structured forms of it we enjoy, it can take other forms in differently structured entities.

### 6.3. Which Things Are Conscious, and Does It Matter ?

Finally, consider point 3 : how do we identify which beings are, and which are not, the sort of conscious subject that we should care about? Frankish notes that questions abound :

« Why shouldn't other complex systems such as plants, cities, hurricanes, and ecosystems be conscious subjects too? Why shouldn't rocks?... There is a case... for seeing universalism as a logical development of a depsiologized view of consciousness. But, of course, the view completely undermines our commonsense assumptions about the rarity and significance of conscious subjects. If universalism is true, then conscious subjects are not just ubiquitous but hyper-ubiquitous : every set of microparticles forms a conscious subject. A property so ubiquitous cannot in itself have any ethical significance. Whatever it is that makes us and other animals objects of ethical value, it cannot be that we are conscious subjects in the depsiologized sense. » (Frankish 2021, p. 62-65)

I think panpsychists should agree with the core claim here: what gives humans and other animals moral status is something rarer and more significant than merely being a conscious subject in the depsychologized sense. In my work I've defended that exact line, distinguishing mere subjects of phenomenal consciousness from what I call 'intelligent subjects' (Roelofs 2019, p.149-165), who combine phenomenal consciousness with familiar sorts of psychological complexity. Moreover, panpsychists can adopt the very common thought that what is morally relevant is not consciousness *per se* but specifically hedonic and/or motivational consciousness (which I argue they should in Roelofs 2022-a), because that's what makes things matter to an entity from its own perspective. If they also maintain that our pre-theoretic intuitions are a decent guide to the presence of hedonic and motivational sorts of consciousness (which I argue for in Buchanan & Roelofs 2019) because we are familiar with their typical behavioural effects from our own case, then the ethical threat Frankish perceives evaporates<sup>13</sup>.

## Conclusion

Panpsychism and illusionism disagree about something called 'consciousness' : what is this? I've argued that what at first looks like an extensional disagreement, about a certain property being either everywhere or nowhere, is really a clash of different conceptions of that property, tracing ultimately to different ideas about what is going on – what properties are available to refer to – when we introspect. We can express this clash without using the word 'consciousness', if we say that panpsychists think that we can refer to the inner nature of matter itself introspectively. Illusionism denies this, and holds that the only real properties we can refer to introspectively are ones that either trigger a causal detection mechanism or consist in the triggering of such a mechanism.

Both panpsychism and illusionism are viewed by many as *reductiones ad absurdum*. It may be that we live in a strange enough world that all the viable answers we have are *reductiones* of the assumptions that lead to them.

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<sup>13</sup> Frankish also wonders : « Which part of the physical organism constitutes the conscious subject? Its whole body, its central nervous system, its sensory systems, or what? Do our bodies support a single conscious subject or many separate ones, corresponding to different physical structures within them? » Philosophers familiar with the problem of the many, and related puzzles, will recognise that these questions arise with or without panpsychism : they are challenges for any view except substance dualism, and there are, if anything, more solutions available to panpsychists than to their opponents, because panpsychists often accept experience-sharing (see esp. Unger 2004, Zimmerman 2010, Sutton 2014, Blackmon 2016, Simon 2017, Roelofs 2022-b).

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