

The Realist Dilemma: A Critical Discussion of the Illusionist-Realist Dialectic

Arianna Beghetto

University School for Advanced Studies IUSS, Pavia

Abstract

This paper has two objectives. The first is to critically analyze the illusionist-realist debate about the existence of phenomenal consciousness. The second objective is to show that refuting illusionism is not as easy as most realists suppose. Many realists argue that illusionism is incoherent because it entails the falsity of a thesis that they take to be irrefutably true: when it comes to phenomenal properties, their appearance and their reality are indistinguishable. I label this thesis “No-Gap”. I explain that illusionists can oppose No-Gap, and accordingly conceive of introspection as capable of misrepresenting unproblematic “quasi-phenomenal properties” (Frankish 2016: 18) as authentic phenomenal properties. I then consider Anna Giustina’s introspective knowledge by acquaintance account, which can potentially disarm this illusionist argument against No-Gap. In her view, what she calls “primitive introspection” should provide a form of infallible knowledge of phenomenal appearances that can falsify the illusionist hypothesis. I claim that Giustina’s move fails to neutralize the illusionist hypothesis because the notion of infallible knowledge she proposes faces a knock-down dilemma: either it exploits a notion of infallibility that concedes that illusionism is a coherent possibility, or it relies on a notion of infallibility that jeopardizes primitive introspection as a source of infallible knowledge. Either way, the realist fails to support the existence of an infallible form of phenomenal knowledge that successfully rules out the illusionist hypothesis.

Keywords: Acquaintance, Illusionism, Introspection, Infallibility, Phenomenal knowledge.

1. Introduction

There is arguably no phenomenon more puzzling than phenomenal consciousness. This puzzlement is well represented by the so-called “Hard Problem” (Chalmers

1996): is there a physicalist explanation of why there is something it is like to be in certain mental states, e.g.: sensory experiences?¹

Among the several proposed solutions to the hard problem, one stands out as particularly radical. Illusionism proposes to dissolve the hard problem, by claiming that phenomenal consciousness is an illusion. The focus of this paper is illusionism in its most radical stance, and by “illusionism” I shall always mean “strong illusionism”, unless otherwise specified.²

According to strong illusionism (cf. Kammerer 2018, 2021; Shabasson 2022), there is *nothing* mysterious preventing us from solving the hard problem, because we are merely *deluded into believing* that phenomenal consciousness exists. More precisely, we are deluded into believing that what we typically refer to as “phenomenal experiences” instantiates special “what-it-is-like properties”, “phenomenal properties” as they are often called in the literature. According to illusionists, experiences merely instantiate ‘quasi-phenomenal properties’ (Frankish 2016: 18), that is, ‘non-phenomenal, physical’ properties that ‘introspection typically misrepresent as phenomenal’. Quasi-phenomenal properties can be claimed to be the “causal prompt” of the representational illusion of phenomenality.

Thus, illusionists aim to explain phenomenal consciousness away by outlining an introspective mechanism that targets quasi-phenomenal experiences and deceptively represent them as instantiating phenomenal properties they do not have in fact. In this respect, illusionists claim that we should solve the “illusion problem” rather than the hard problem (Frankish 2016: 44). That is, we need to explain why experiences are *introspectively misrepresented* as phenomenal in nature.

Although promising, the illusionist proposal strikes us as nearly incredible, to the point that we find it extremely difficult even to consider its viability (Kammerer 2016, 2018). In fact, the illusionist proposal implies that experiences appear to instantiate properties they actually lack. But how could we be *deluded* in our belief that an experience instantiates a certain *phenomenal* property? Consider for instance an experience of pain, specifically as regards the “what-it-is-like” property the illusionist claims delusional. How am I supposed to be *deluded* into thinking that I have a painful experience if, as illusionists argue, there is actually nothing it is like to be in pain? This sounds deeply counterintuitive.

Illusionists admit that their hypotheses sound deeply counterintuitive; however, as Frankish points out (2016: 44), we ought not blindly trust our intuitions, as they could be in error. Instead, we ought to believe what it is rationally compelling. Phenomenal experiences are too anomalous, he argues, to intelligibly

¹ This way of expressing the hard problem of consciousness frames it as a difficulty that affects physicalism specifically. However, it is not clear that endorsing a non-physicalist view makes the hard problem easier to solve. Given the great importance physicalism-preserving considerations play into the illusionist dialectic, I would stick with this particular interpretation of the hard problem, which is arguably the most discussed within the debate on phenomenal consciousness.

² Illusionism comes however in many kinds. The most important watershed can be drawn between weak and strong illusionism. Differently from stronger advocates of illusionism, weak illusionists (cf. Pereboom 2011, 2019; Graziano 2016) argue that phenomenal experiences really instantiate phenomenal properties; however, phenomenal properties merely appear to have an “anti-physicalist” nature. See also Frankish 2016 and Chalmers 2018 on the distinction between strong and weak illusionism. For a critical discussion of it, see also Beghetto 2023: Chapter 4.

explain their existence within a physicalist framework (Frankish 2016: 30-32).³ But is it sensible to radically revise our metaphysical framework in order to make room for phenomenal properties?

Frankish (2016: 28) contends that ‘we should not make radical theoretical moves if modest ones will do’, and that illusionism promises to provide a *modest* explanation of why we’ll never solve the hard problem: phenomenal properties merely appear to exist.⁴ Attempting to solve the hard problem or to close the explanatory gap is a fool’s errand. This is why, Daniel Dennett claims (2016: 65), illusionism should be our ‘default theory’. When it comes to phenomenal experiences, as long as the illusionist hypothesis is a viable “solution” to the hard problem, we should endorse it with no hesitation. Illusionists can hence claim that the realist has the affirmative duty to rule out their skeptical challenge. Short of the realist doing that, we should by default consider the non-existence of phenomenal consciousness as our best working hypothesis.

Anti-illusionists (“realists” who oppose illusionism) may disagree amongst themselves on whether it is possible to fully naturalize phenomenal consciousness,⁵ but they are united in their conviction that modesty-based illusionist

³ In this respect, Frankish agrees with those realist authors (i.e., radical realists) according to which the existence of phenomenal properties is inconsistent with physicalism. In Frankish’s words (2016: 16), these realists consider phenomenal consciousness as ‘inexplicable without theoretical innovation’, because it seems impossible to intelligibly explain (Levine 1983) how a physical state (e.g., a brain state) could be identical, or even realize, what it is like to be in a certain phenomenal state. Derk Pereboom (2016: 182) lists some paradigmatic reasons, among the many others, for which authentic phenomenal properties are said to ‘resist integration into a physical account of reality’: they appear to be intrinsic properties; they seem to be ‘revealed with accuracy in introspection’ as non-physical properties; the way in which they are given to us appears (nearly) indisputable. All these reasons clash with a physicalist perspective of the mind, for which every mental fact should be explainable within the extrinsic architecture of the brain-body-world configuration and for which the possibility of misrepresentation is inherent to the physical structure of the cognitive system.

⁴ As an anonymous reviewer correctly suggested, this way of phrasing the strong illusionist thesis is imprecise, because it may suggest a commitment to the existence, or even to the very appearance, of authentic phenomenal properties. By contrast, strong illusionists do not commit to the existence of phenomenal properties, but only to the existence of quasi-phenomenal properties that are misrepresented as phenomenal. In discussing the illusionist stance, I will show that strong illusionism contends that what the realist calls “phenomenal properties” *don’t appear* in a phenomenal way and that, as a consequence, they *don’t exist*. However, the caption “phenomenal properties appear to exist” well posits the thesis for the discussion with the anti-illusionist, highlighting why she may be ready to rule illusionism out a priori. It is hence enough to keep in mind that the expression “phenomenal properties merely appear to exist/characterize experiences” is just the same as “experiences are represented as if they *had* phenomenal properties” or “experiences are represented as if they appeared in a phenomenal way”.

⁵ Frankish (2016: 15-16) distinguishes two forms of realism, conservative realism (e.g., Balog 2016, Papineau 2019) and radical realism (Goff 2016, 2017; Nida-Rümelin 2016). According to the former, phenomenal properties can be explained within a physicalist framework. According to the latter, their existence falsifies physicalism. In this paper I consider a general realist thesis that is neutral on this specific issue, which identifies with an anti-illusionist thesis that all realists as such share as regards phenomenal properties (cf. Beghetto 2023: Section 1.1): the no appearance/reality gap thesis. The realist author I

arguments are too weak to cast into doubt what they take to be the obvious and undeniable fact that phenomenal properties exist. According to these realists, the illusionist hypothesis can be ruled out *a priori*. As a matter of fact, by claiming that phenomenal experiences are represented as instantiating phenomenal properties they actually *fail* to instantiate, illusionists imply that phenomenal properties can *appear* different from what they are—e.g., existent versus nonexistent, phenomenal versus quasi-phenomenal (see footnote 4).

Realists counterargue that illusionism is incoherent because it is impossible to distinguish between the appearance and the reality of phenomenal properties. As Searle (1997) famously stated, “where consciousness is concerned, the existence of the appearance is the reality”.⁶ This realist conviction can be summed up in the following thesis, which I call “No-Gap”:

No-Gap: when it comes to phenomenal properties, their appearance and their existence/reality are indistinguishable.

The No-Gap thesis, if it were true, would indeed rule out illusionism *a priori* because illusionism needs to claim that there is a gap between the appearance and the reality of phenomenal properties. No-Gap, if true, would hence nip the illusionist claim in the bud.

My first aim in this paper is to show that dismissing the illusionist position as incoherent is not as easy as some realist might suppose. This anti-illusionist strategy, pivotally hinging on the truth of No-Gap, involves a misreading of the illusionist proposal. Secondly, I show that the notion of introspective infallibility realists relies on to counter this illusionist attack turns out to be highly problematic and eventually brings the anti-illusionist to a knock-down dilemma.

Here’s a section-by-section breakdown of the realist-illusionist confrontation I’m discussing. In Section 1, I spell out the No-Gap objection through two anti-illusionist arguments pivotally grounded on the truth of No-Gap, according to which introspection of phenomenal properties cannot be misrepresentational. In Section 2, I explain how the illusionist can cast doubts on the truth of No-Gap, and accordingly contend that phenomenal appearances are the result of an introspective misrepresentation. In Section 3, I consider Anna Giustina’s introspective knowledge by acquaintance account, which can potentially forestall this illusionist attack on No-Gap. On her view, subjects are provided with infallible knowledge of authentic phenomenal appearances, which No-Gap correctly describes.

In Section 4, I consider a possible illusionist counter move to this infallibility claim, according to which Giustina’s account cannot discount the illusionist claim that we are merely deluded into believing ourselves to be infallible. In addition, the illusionist specifies some “introspective inaccuracy” cases meant to cast doubts on her claim that introspection is infallible.

Giustina must explain away these cases of “introspective mistakes” to preserve her claim that we are introspectively infallible when it comes to phenomenal appearances. In Section 5, I consider two anti-illusionist answers Giustina can provide. However, I argue that they both fail. Giustina’s first solution, which I consider in Section 5.1, cannot rule out the illusionist claim that we are merely deluded into believing that we are infallible. Giustina’s second solution, which I

mainly consider (Giustina 2021, 2022) promotes indeed an acquaintance theory of introspection, which is potentially compatible both with radical and conservative realism.

⁶ Cf. also Nagel 1974 and Kripke 1981 for seminal elaboration of the no appearance/reality gap thesis.

consider in Section 5.2, faces a dilemma: either it exploits a notion of infallibility that is consistent with the possibility of the illusionist claim being true, or it relies on a notion of infallibility that undermines Giustina's notion of introspective knowledge. Therefore, primitive introspection cannot provide a form of infallible knowledge that rules out the illusionist skeptical hypothesis.

2. The No-Gap Objection to the Illusionist Claim

In the previous Section, I spelled out the No-Gap thesis as a threat to the viability of illusionism. As I explained, a realist might argue that the truth of No-Gap rules out the illusionist claim because it would be impossible for a phenomenal property to be presented non-veridically.

(1) No-gap → Illusionism is impossible.

This insight fuels many anti-illusionist arguments, and a major known objection against illusionism draws indeed on the impossibility of an appearance/reality gap (Frankish 2016, 2021: Lecture 4). Among the others, Giovanni Merlo (2020) claims we have good a priori reason to accept No-gap, on which he ultimately grounds his anti-illusionist argument. According to him (Merlo 2020: 123), any experience P provides the subject with immediate justification to believe that P. This is preliminary true despite the experience at issue may turn out to be hallucinatory, illusory or veridical.⁷ In addition, if the resulting belief is a *phenomenal* belief, the content of such belief will necessarily be true.

Given that according to the realist phenomenal beliefs mainly result from phenomenal experiences,⁸ it is possible to interpret Merlo's claim as a clear anti-illusionist stance, according to which subjects cannot form false beliefs about their own phenomenal experiences: if we believe that phenomenal experiences instantiate phenomenal properties, we cannot be mistaken.

In order to justify his stance, Merlo calls into play Saul Kripke's (1981) argument against materialism, for which "to be in the same epistemic situation that would obtain if one had a pain *is* to have a pain" (Kripke 1981: 152, my italics). Evidently enough, Kripke's considerations are based on No-Gap: in his view, it is impossible to come to believe that you are in pain without being in pain because it is impossible to distinguish between the case in which you merely appear to be in pain and the case in which you actually are in pain. Thus, in Merlo's anti-illusionist view, as long No-Gap is true, the illusionist hypothesis is not viable.

Similarly relying on the No-Gap thesis, Matt Duncan (2023) argues that we should dismiss illusionism because phenomenal appearances cannot be the result of an introspective misrepresentation.

⁷ As an anonymous reviewer rightfully pointed out, this is true only if the subject has no good reason to believe that the experience is delusional. Illusionists indeed argue that we have good reasons to believe that our phenomenal experiences are delusional, provided they appear to instantiate properties that are at odds with our best scientific views. Merlo seems however to take for granted that the way in which phenomenal properties appear leaves no room for similar doubts, and his argument therefore potentially begs the questions against the illusionist.

⁸ This intuition is related to a thesis according to which the only way to know phenomenal properties is by experiencing them. This thesis arguably finds its first expression in Jackson's (1986) Knowledge Argument.

According to Duncan, the introspective process with which we access phenomenal appearances (henceforth, “phenomenal introspection”)⁹ is best understood as involving a factive acquaintance relation with authentic phenomenal properties. In virtue of this “factivity”,¹⁰ if a subject is acquainted with the appearance of a phenomenal property, it cannot fail to exist. Duncan takes this phenomenal appearance as granting *objectual knowledge* of their authentic phenomenal *reality*. This is true despite whatever we may come to *believe* about them, because the acquaintance relation provides a form of non-propositional knowledge that is not affected by doxastic cognitive states.

Following this intuition, Duncan proposes an acquaintance-based anti-illusionist argument. On his view, the illusionist claim won’t ever undermine our realist beliefs¹¹ because we are *directly* acquainted with properties that *essentially* display an authentic phenomenal appearance. In light of No-Gap, this entails that we are directly acquainted with properties that would not appear phenomenal if we weren’t acquainted with their authentic phenomenal *reality*.

Relying on No-Gap, realists conceive of phenomenal introspection so as to rule out the possibility of introspective misrepresentation of phenomenal properties.

No-Gap states that the appearance and the reality of phenomenal properties are *indistinguishable*; accordingly, the relation between a phenomenal appearance and its phenomenal reality is one of identity: the appearance of a phenomenal property *just is* its existence. The identity of the indiscernibles principle establishes indeed that if two entities share all their properties, they are numerically identical. It is possible to contend that the principle doesn’t hold on an epistemic reading of the term “indistinguishable”, because the mere fact that a subject cannot distinguish between two entities does not entail that they are the same entity. However, it is safe to claim that the realist would read “indistinguishable” on a metaphysical interpretation, because according to her phenomenal properties have no further reality than their phenomenal appearance.¹²

⁹ I use the term “phenomenal introspection” for all the introspective acts targeting *either* authentic phenomenal properties or deceiving quasi-phenomenal properties. As I explain below, phenomenal introspection can hence target properties that do appear in a phenomenal way and properties that merely appear to appear in a phenomenal way. It is hence possible to state that “phenomenal introspection” targets either authentic or deceiving “phenomenal appearances”.

¹⁰ According to Duncan, the acquaintance relation as such is factive because it can never happen that we are *acquainted with* something that turns out to be nonexistent. In this regard, the acquaintance relation suits particularly well an anti-illusionist move, because being acquainted with authentic phenomenal appearances entails the existence of their veridically presented reality.

¹¹ This strategy is usually labeled as the “debunking strategy” for illusionism (Chalmers 2020). This strategy aims at debunking realist beliefs, showing that we would believe they are (undeniably) true even in a world in which no phenomenal property exists. In this sense, debunking arguments for illusionism follow the structure of traditional debunking strategies (cf. Korman 2019).

¹² It is actually possible to claim that a strict identity between the appearance and the reality of phenomenal properties is highly problematic. As an anonymous review suggests, the notion of appearance seems to require something that appears; on a coherent reading of the notion of “appearance”, however, the thing that appears cannot be identical to the appearance itself. Accordingly, it is possible to contend that as long as the realist relies on such an identity claim, she is not making use of a coherent notion of “appearance”. As I

In the light of this identity structure, the realist can prevent any (mis)representational relation between phenomenal properties and their introspective presentation. As a matter of fact, representations are traditionally conceived as *causal* relations between a represented object, which prompts the representation, and a representational state, whose content can fail to appropriately depict its own object.

By contrast, No-Gap appears to rule out the very possibility of a representational relation. If No-Gap is true, the target/object of the introspective representation is in fact *indistinguishable from* its introspective representation; given that traditional causal relations require their relata to be *numerically distinct*, this prevents any causal interaction.¹³

This is why many acquaintance theorists, such as Duncan himself (2023: 4), prefer to claim that phenomenal properties are not represented, but rather *presented* in introspection, that is, accessible without any causal mediation.

In this respect, the acquaintance relation perfectly suits an anti-illusionist model of phenomenal introspection. On this realist perspective, illusionists are wrong from the very beginning: phenomenal introspection is not a fallible *causal mechanism*; phenomenal introspection, the realist contends, is better understood as a *process* that excludes the possibility of error, even though it is mysterious as to how it works. If introspection presents phenomenal experiences as instantiating phenomenal properties, this is thereby undeniable.

3. Beyond the “Cartesian Theatre” Interpretation of Illusionism and the No-Gap Objection

In the former Section, I discussed an anti-illusionist strategy based on the truth of the No-Gap thesis. According to this strategy, No-Gap rules out a priori the very possibility of illusionism, defusing its skeptical challenge. But how do we know that No-Gap is true?

Realists usually think that it is simply inconceivable that No-Gap might be false, and therefore they are not concerned with the task of justifying it. However, this anti-illusionist attitude is grounded in a seminal “Cartesian theatre”¹⁴ misinterpretation of the illusionist claim. Frankish exemplifies and discuss this misinterpretation,

will argue in the next part of this section, the realist relies exactly on such a strict identity to counter the illusionist claim. If the realist is actually compelled to stick with this identity claim to hinder illusionism, it is possible that getting rid of illusionism makes the realist view prone to incoherence.

¹³ It is possible to argue that No-gap allows for a representational relation, as long as it is not causally characterized. As an anonymous reviewer rightfully suggested, acquaintance theorists are not committed to a physicalist picture of the world and may accordingly choose to characterize phenomenal introspection as a representational process that doesn't involve a causal characterization. It is however doubtful that a representationalist account of phenomenal introspection can assure it is a source of infallible knowledge. Infallibility clashes indeed with a representationalist account of phenomenal introspection because any representational relation requires, by definition, the possibility of misrepresentation.

¹⁴ According to Daniel Dennett (1991: 107-108), when we think about the way in which sensory experiences are processed and presented to us, we are prone to believe that there exists a common mental space where all the perceptual information is assembled in a coherent and integrated display. Accordingly, we are prone to conceive of our conscious experience as a magical qualia show displayed in this ‘Cartesian theatre’. As I shall explain, illusionists actually deny that there exists anything like a Cartesian theatre.

which he relates to a well-known objection to illusionism: “the phenomenal representation problem” (Frankish 2016: 18-20; 2018: slide 16). According to this problem, illusionism seems inevitably flawed because it is impossible to introspectively represent a phenomenal appearance without the introspective representation bearing phenomenal properties. It seems indeed that, in order to be deluded that, e.g., there is a tree in front of me, there must be some tree-like appearances that can deceive me into believing that a tree is in front of me. Analogously, the objection continues, in order to be deluded into believing that a phenomenal property exists, it seems that there must be some phenomenal-like appearance that can deceive me into believing that phenomenal properties exist. In both cases, the misrepresented object might turn out to be nonexistent. However, it would be incoherent to claim that the illusion itself, the deceiving appearance, turns out to be nonexistent. Accordingly, the realist concludes, it is impossible to explain how we may be deluded into believing that phenomenal properties exist if the deceiving appearance doesn’t instantiate some phenomenal properties. And given that the deceiving appearance must exist, phenomenal properties will exist in turn.¹⁵ Notice that No-Gap appears in the background: phenomenal properties cannot be represented without thereby existing.

If this were right, illusionists would be just replacing the hard problem of explaining phenomenal properties with the hard problem of explaining their alleged illusory representation.

However, as anticipated, these No-Gap style objections actually depend on a ‘Cartesian theatre’ misreading of the illusionist claim.¹⁶ As Frankish (2021: Lecture 4, 56:10-59:55) specifies, the realist envisions the illusion of phenomenality as an authentic phenomenal show displayed within a ‘Cartesian theatre’, which will thereby host authentic phenomenal properties. According to the illusionist, however, there is nothing like a deceiving phenomenal appearance shown in a Cartesian theatre, for illusionists *deny* the existence of any such Cartesian theatre.¹⁷ Frankish (2021) contends that the realist objectors misread what illusionists mean by “You *seem* to have an experience of pain”, because they are trapped within a *phenomenal* interpretation of the verb “to seem”, for which the representation necessarily displays an authentic phenomenal appearance (that is, a phenomenal appearance that

¹⁵ For a critical discussion of the phenomenal representation problem, see also Pereboom 2016: 185 and Shabasson 2022: 441-42.

¹⁶ Frankish (2021: Lecture 4) discusses this Cartesian interpretation as a reply to the “phenomenal representation problem”. It is however possible to interpret this problem as a kind of No-Gap objection, for which nothing can appear phenomenal if it doesn’t instantiate a phenomenal nature. See also Beghetto 2023: Section 4.3.

¹⁷ The “Cartesian Theatre” interpretation is also usually associated with a regress argument against illusionism. As Frankish (2021: Lecture 4) additionally explains, the realist can argue that in order to have the illusion as of a ‘magical show’ displayed in a Cartesian theatre, we would need a second Cartesian theatre where such a show can be displayed. This opens to an infinite regress because any new display as of a magical show in a Cartesian theatre will need a further meta-Cartesian theatre to be displayed. For the sake of conciseness, I directly related the Cartesian interpretation with the No-Gap objection, to highlight the anti-illusionist power of the No-Gap thesis. Accordingly, in the next part of the discussion I frame the illusionist reply specifically against the No-Gap objection, rather than against the Cartesian theatre objection. However, these two replies are closely related because they both contend that when it comes to the illusion of phenomenality there is nothing that should be “phenomenally shown”. For a critical discussion about the illusionist attitude towards the notion of ‘Cartesian theatre’, see also Frankish 2023: 6:15-13:25.

do abide by the truth of No-Gap). Hence, realists read the illusionist as claiming that we “have an experience with *the same phenomenal feel* of a painful one” (Frankish 2021, my italics). As Frankish himself mentions, this would drive illusionism to incoherence.

However, if illusionism is true, there is nothing in the world that displays an authentic phenomenal appearance. As a consequence, the verb “to seem”—just as all the words related to the same semantic field—must receive an epistemic reading:¹⁸ the representation of a deceptively phenomenal appearance is a mere *disposition to judge* that something appears phenomenal, with no further what-it-is-like properties involved.¹⁹

In order to better denote the two readings, I will use two different prefixes: the prefix “e-” to mark the epistemic reading and the prefix “ph-” to mark the phenomenal reading. E.g.: By “red ph-appears to me”, I mean that a red what-it-is-like property appears; on the contrary, by “red e-appears to me”, I mean that I’m disposed to judge that something red is appearing. It is also possible to combine the captions in order to obtain the strong illusionist claim: “Red e-appear to ph-appear”, as to say, “red quasi-phenomenal properties dispose us to judge that there is something it is like to have experiences of red”.

Thanks to this disambiguation, illusionists can posit a mismatch between the appearance and the reality of what the realist calls “phenomenal properties”. In a nutshell, the key move to introduce this mismatch is distinguishing between the content of the illusory introspective representation (how phenomenal properties are represented as appearing, their deceiving “phenomenal appearance”) and the mode of presentation of the representation (the real way in which they appear, their “epistemic representation”).²⁰ Illusionism can hence claim that “quasi-phenomenal properties are e-represented as phenomenal/e-appear as phenomenal”,²¹ that is, that we are merely disposed to judge that there is something ph-appearing. Given that on their view there is nothing ph-appearing, nothing phenomenal actually exists.

But is it in fact legitimate to introduce a mismatch between how phenomenal properties are represented to appear and how they actually appear, as the illusionist propose? On the realist view, No-Gap’s identity claim was meant exactly to prevent this move on the part of the illusionist. If No-Gap is true, it is impossible for a phenomenal property to merely e-appear phenomenal; on the contrary, No-

¹⁸ For a more precise characterization of the phenomenal and epistemic distinction as regards ‘seemings’, see Chisholm 1957.

¹⁹ Daniel Shabasson (2022) offers a similar argument to overcome the phenomenal representation problem—although he doesn’t frame his discussion against a realist interpretation, but as a refinement of the strong illusionist claim itself.

²⁰ For further discussion on the important role played by the mode of presentation of the illusory representation, see Pereboom 2016, 2019. For a more systematic discussion of the relation between the representational content and the mode of presentation as key features for introducing an appearance/reality gap when it comes to phenomenal properties, see Beghetto 2023: Section 4.3.

²¹ It is worth noticing that the epistemic reading can be attributed both to the mode of presentation of the targeted states (experiences e-appear phenomenal) and to the mode of presentation of the introspective representational state (introspection e-represents experiences as ph-appearing). I leave these complexities aside here, focusing on the mode of presentation of the introspective representation—the “real” epistemic appearance of quasi-phenomenal properties—as contrasted with the content of the representation—the deceiving phenomenal appearance of alleged phenomenal properties.

Gap theorists hold that if a phenomenal property appears phenomenal, it ph-appears phenomenal, that is, its *reality* is a phenomenal appearance.

The illusionist can however argue that No-Gap fails to justify this anti-illusionist stance, because it is built on a reading of the notion of “appearance” that begs the question against the illusionist. In particular, the realist builds her anti-illusionist moves on a *phenomenal* interpretation of No-Gap, which misconstrues what the illusionist means by “appearance”:

Ph-No-Gap: when it comes to phenomenal properties, their ph-appearance and their ph-reality are indistinguishable.

If the illusionist hypothesis is in fact viable, it is an open possibility that “appearance” can be coherently interpreted as an e-appearance, rather than a ph-appearance. The illusionist would favor an epistemic interpretation of the No-Gap thesis:

E-No-Gap: when it comes to phenomenal properties, their e-appearance and their ph-reality are indistinguishable.²²

If illusionism is correct, the epistemic interpretation of the No-Gap thesis is the most accurate; moreover, e-No-Gap is *possibly* false, because it seems that a subject *may judge* that some experiences appear in a certain way, while they actually don't.

The realist can fight back that No-Gap must receive a phenomenal interpretation, because No-Gap is about authentic phenomenal properties, that is, properties for which there is, by definition, no possible mismatch between their appearance and their existence. However, how can the realist justify her construal of “appearance” as ph-appearance without begging the question against illusionism? To the extent that illusionism is viable, an e-appearance reading of “appearance” is viable too. Based on this discussion, it is possible to sum up the illusionist position on No-Gap as follows:

(2) **Illusionism is possible** → **No-Gap is false.**²³

²² A strong illusionist may not discuss the No-Gap thesis as I do here. In her view, No-Gap is simply as such, because it is premised on the notion of something appearing in a Cartesian theatre that, in fact, fail to exist. However, I think the realist would claim that denying the existence of a Cartesian theatre is not enough to get rid of the impression we have of something authentically phenomenal appearing. Accordingly, the realist would insist that it is impossible to deny No-Gap, despite whether the properties it refers to appear in a Cartesian theatre or not. Disambiguating the No-Gap thesis aims hence to show that the illusionist can indeed cast doubts directly on it; moreover, I think this move allows to express the strong illusionist position more precisely. As a matter of fact, I think that the strong illusionist would claim that ph-No-Gap is a true (but empty) conditional that describes properties that fail to exist. Were there be authentic ph-appearances, they would be indistinguishable from their ph-reality. However, it is exactly because no authentic ph-appearance is given that there is nothing that ph-exist. By contrast, the illusionist can claim that the right interpretation of the No-Gap thesis is epistemic, and that e-No-Gap is not only possibly false, but false indeed. Hence, going deeper about the No-Gap thesis allows to set the debate with the realist and to better exemplify the strong illusionist position.

²³ A more precise way to state (1) and (2) would include a disambiguation between ph-No-Gap and e-No-Gap. Indeed, while illusionism is ruled out by ph-No-Gap in (1), the viability of illusionism rules out e-No-Gap in (2). However, (1) and (2) result from two mutually exclusive interpretations of No-Gap, each depending on whether we claim illusionism viable or unviable. (1) hence implicitly draws on an argumentative passage for which ph-No-

It is now possible to appreciate the well-known illusionist-realist impasse by contrasting (1) and (2), which are equally potentially true and mutually exclusive. Illusionists can however enforce their dialectical advantage to tip the balance, claiming that if illusionism is viable, endorsing it is the most sensible option. Thus, the mere viability of (2) is enough for the illusionist to establish her skeptical challenge against the realist, who arguably cannot contrast it by simply pointing at (1).

What's even worse for the realist position is that, as long as (2) is an open possibility, it is likewise possible to consider of phenomenal introspection to be a mechanism subject to misrepresenting its targets (i.e., misrepresenting quasi-phenomenal properties as phenomenal).

As discussed in Section 1, No-Gap is an efficacious antidote to the illusionist claim because it maintains that the appearance and the reality of phenomenal properties are identical. In the light of this identity relation, the illusionist was prevented from distinguishing between the appearance and the reality of a phenomenal appearance; in illusionist terms, she was not allowed to coherently distinguish between its *deceiving phenomenal appearance* and its *actual appearance*, its *accurate epistemic* mode of presentation. By failing to set up this distinction, illusionists were prevented from establishing a causal relation between the two identical items, because canonical/natural causal relations require their relata to be numerically distinct. In turn, this hindered the illusionist from claiming that the alleged object and the alleged content of the illusionist representation could be coherently related through a (traditional, causally characterized) representational relation. In the end, because of No-Gap, the illusionist could not coherently claim that phenomenal appearances result from an introspective mechanism targeting quasi-phenomenal e-appearing properties and misrepresenting them as ph-appearing properties.

On the hypothetical falsehood of No-Gap, the illusionist can by contrast open up to a representational characterization of phenomenal introspection, according to which it would be possible to distinguish between the real appearance of phenomenal properties and their deceiving introspective representation. And it would be possible to suppose that phenomenal introspection is causal in nature. Derk Pereboom (2011: 16) argues that it is indeed reasonable to suppose that phenomenal introspection is a causal mechanism, just as many other cognitive mechanisms are, such as, e.g., perception of the external world. By establishing an analogy with perception, Pereboom suggests that we may be systematically deluded by phenomenal introspection into thinking²⁴ that what we introspect bears phenomenal properties, just like we are systematically deluded into believing that external objects bear secondary properties. This perceptual systematic misrepresentation, Pereboom claims (2011: 19), is made possible precisely because of the

Gap is the only correct interpretation of No-Gap, while (2) lies on a similar argument for which e-No-Gap is the only correct interpretation.

²⁴ The expression "deluded into thinking" may favor a strong illusionist reading of Pereboom's illusionist stance. However, as I should explain, Pereboom's perspective is better understood as weak illusionist position. As such, he may claim that we wrongly believe that authentic phenomenal properties exist, but he would not stress on an epistemic reading of the mode of presentation of the illusion, for which we are disposed to judge that phenomenal properties ph-appear. Given that this difference is not relevant for the present discussion, and given that I focus on strong illusionism, I overlook this distinction here. For a discussion on the relevance of the strong and weak distinction, in particular as regards Pereboom's position, see Beghetto 2023, Section 4.5, 5.2 and 5.2.3 specifically.

causal nature of visual representations. Likewise, quasi-phenomenal properties, by being introspectively targeted, may *cause* a systematically illusory introspective representation.²⁵

Rejecting No-Gap is hence key to make the illusionist misrepresentational hypothesis viable. First of all, it allows one to conceive phenomenal introspection as a natural and causal *mechanism*, rather than as a (debatably infallible) process. Accordingly, this makes phenomenal introspection potentially *fallible*, because it is reasonable to argue that natural and causal mechanisms are hardly immune from error. As a matter of fact, this causal characterization is the hinge of the illusionist misrepresentation because it guarantees that the content of the representation can represent the targeted experience as different from how it is, without thereby *affecting* the experience itself.

Notice that this causal and “decoupling” characterization is crucial to *any possible mistake* when it comes to phenomenal introspection. Were the targeted state numerically identical with its own representational state—as No-Gap would imply²⁶—the latter would not be able to misrepresent the former, because by being indistinguishable the object and the content would necessarily share all their features.

In the light of the above discussion, it seems that the illusionist claim has traction as long as it is possible that phenomenal introspection satisfies the following condition:

The detection condition: [phenomenal introspection] engages in some kind of “detection” of a pre-existing and ontologically independent mental state or event.

This condition comes from Schwitzgebel’s (2019) discussion on the nature of introspective mental states broadly regarded.²⁷ I have modified its letter slightly to fit the illusionist proposal, but not its spirit. As an anonymous reviewer suggested, Schwitzgebel considers introspection as a cognitive *process*, which is more neutral and inclusive as a characterization than “mechanism”. However, as I argued, it is exactly the detection condition that allows illusionism to characterize phenomenal

²⁵ In this passage, the reader may appreciate that there are indeed two objects of the misrepresentation: the properties of the experiences and the mode of presentation of the representation. Both these objects prompt and hence undergo a misrepresentation. Quasi-phenomenal properties are represented as ph-appearing, while they merely e-appear. On the other hand, the representation itself appears to display a phenomenal mode of presentation: phenomenal properties appear as if they were ph-represented, while they are actually e-represented. For further discussion on the matter, see Beghetto (2023: Section 4.3).

²⁶ As I suggested in footnote 12, it is possible to argue that No-Gap features an identity between the appearance and the reality of phenomenal properties that is highly problematic. This problem becomes even worse if we want to claim that phenomenal introspection is representational in nature, because this would imply that the represented ph-appearance and the introspective representation are necessarily numerically distinct. Given that the acquaintance relation is per se compatible with a representational characterization, it is important to highlight this potential incoherence that may force a representationalist realist to reject No-Gap and its anti-illusionist power.

²⁷ Eric Schwitzgebel (2019) inquiries about the existence and characterization of introspective mental states. In particular, he individuates a set of conditions mental states *must* satisfy to qualify as introspective, and then a list of conditions that an introspective state can be *claimed* to require. The “detection condition” is among the latter group and can hence be rejected by an anti-illusionist.

introspection as a (causal) mechanism. As regards the “pre-existing” and “ontologically independent” characterization, Schwitzgebel is quite elusive about their exact meaning. I interpret his specifications as approximately signifying that the introspective state is *numerically different* from the targeted mental state, which hence exists independently from (and possibly before) the introspective one. In Schwitzgebel’s words, the introspective state can depend ‘causally but not ontologically’ on the target mental state (Schwitzgebel 2019: Section 1.1).

Accordingly, an introspective state that satisfies the detection condition can represent the object of the representation without thereby altering its features. This allows in turn for a *misrepresentation* of such features, which characterize the targeted states even though introspection may fail to represent them accurately. The illusionist can hence claim that the delusive introspective mechanism can represent properties that merely e-appear phenomenal as properties that ph-appear phenomenal, without thereby *making* these properties ph-appear phenomenal.²⁸

The bottom line is that, by undermining No-Gap’s undeniable truth, the illusionist can endorse the detection condition, conceiving of phenomenal introspection in a way that makes her claim viable and coherent. As a consequence, those realist stances—such as Merlo’s and Duncan’s—that claim to rule out illusionism a priori by arguing that phenomenal introspection must be conceived of through the lens of No-Gap are likewise undermined. As a matter of fact, these realists appear to *assume*, without sufficient justification, that No-Gap is undeniably true, or more precisely that its phenomenal interpretation is the only possible and accurate one. However, simply stating that this is so begs the question against illusionism, whose viability actually allows to interpret No-Gap on an epistemic reading and possibly falsify it.

4. Anna Giustina’s Primitive Introspection Account: We are Phenomenally Infallible, and Hence No-Gap is True

The realist and the illusionist find hence themselves on an impasse, which can be summed up by contrasting (1) and (2):

- (1) **No-Gap → Illusionism is impossible.**
- (2) **Illusionism is possible → No-Gap is false.**

As I argued, the realist cannot rule out illusionism simply by choosing (1) over (2), because this begs the question against it.

To counter the illusionist insinuation, the realist must *show* that (1) is better than (2). That is, the realist needs to argue for the truth of No-Gap and cannot simply assume that it is true.

Likely, the realist’s most natural argument in favor of No-Gap would maintain that phenomenal properties just *ph-appear*, that is, they just appear as properties whose appearance is identical to their reality. According to the realist, No-Gap would hence simply *describe* an evident and undeniable fact about phenomenal appearances, which is sufficient to rule out illusionism.

²⁸ Notice that if by contrast the appearance of phenomenal properties is numerically identical to their reality, introspective phenomenal mistakes are prevented not only in practice, but *in principle*; thus, provided that the subject grasps the appearance of the object, she will necessarily access the object reality.

However, this realist argument is insufficient to undermine illusionism. Illusionists freely grant that experiences deliver the *impression* of existing properties that do abide by No-Gap, but they contend that such an impression is erroneous. Thus, if the realist argues that No-Gap has its source of justification in how phenomenal properties *appear*, the illusionist can counter that we may be *deluded* into believing that phenomenal properties *ph-appear*, just as if No-Gap were true. It seems thus crucial for the realist to show that the way in which phenomenal properties appear cannot be the result of a misrepresentation.

In order to succeed, the realist may well argue that phenomenal introspective processes are *immune from error*. To effectively refute illusionism, however, we would require a realist account of phenomenal introspection that doesn't draw this infallibility claim from the question-begging assumption that No-Gap is true. The realist must *justify* No-Gap on the basis of some independent evidence or argument.²⁹

Notice that this doesn't compel the realist to argue that *every* introspective process is infallible, but only that *phenomenal introspection* is infallible. Distinguishing between different kinds of introspective processes is exactly the realist key move to show that we are infallible when it comes to introspection *of* phenomenal properties. With this specification in mind, it is possible to claim:

(3) Phenomenal infallibility³⁰ → No-Gap is true.

I cannot think of an existent realist account that openly makes use of phenomenal infallibility to justify the No-Gap thesis, and specifically with an anti-illusionist purpose. Nonetheless, Anna Giustina's introspective knowledge by acquaintance of phenomenal properties account promises to suit this aim well. As a matter of fact, Giustina argues that subjects are equipped with a very special form of phenomenal introspection that guarantees unmediated access to phenomenal appearances, which in turn grants *infallible knowledge* of their phenomenal reality. However, unlike Merlo and Duncan, she doesn't explicitly rely on No-Gap to establish that we have such a direct access. If this is true, her account may succeed in establishing that we are phenomenally infallible, saving (1) from the illusionist impasse.

According to Giustina (2021: 408), mainstream discussions on phenomenal introspection assume that it can only result in introspective *judgments* about the phenomenology of our conscious mental states. By contrast, she argues that this traditional view fails to acknowledge a form of phenomenal introspection that doesn't require judgments, recognition or even conceptualization.

Throughout her paper (2021: 414-24), Giustina extensively argues for the existence of such a nonconceptual and immediate form of introspection. Her discussion pivotally hinges on an 'Argument from Phenomenal-Concept Acquisition'

²⁹ It is actually possible to doubt that the truth of No-Gap is something 'phenomenally manifest' (cf. Kriegel 2007). Maybe the realist can argue that we infer No-Gap from the way in which phenomenal properties appear/are represented—and it is hence possible to ask whether such an inference is accurate. Either way, realists take authentic phenomenal appearances to be the ultimate source of the No-Gap thesis.

³⁰ "Phenomenal infallibility" should be broadly conceived as the condition in which phenomenal introspection provide infallible knowledge of phenomenal appearances. I'm coming back to furtherly clarify what the realist means by "phenomenal infallibility" in the last part of this section, after having considered Anna Giustina's primitive introspection account. Phenomenal infallibility may be specified differently to fit other realist accounts, but I think that Giustina offers one of the most promising anti-illusionist perspectives.

(Giustina 2021: 414). In a nutshell, she claims that if any phenomenal introspective act were conceptual in nature, we'd fall short from explaining how we could ever acquire phenomenal concepts. Relying on the spread (realist) conviction according to which we can *acquire* phenomenal concepts only by experiencing a specific phenomenal property (see footnote 8), Giustina argues that we would not be able to experience such a property for the very first time, if not through a process that doesn't require *any antecedently acquired* phenomenal concept.³¹

In this light, Giustina (2021: 408) distinguishes between a conceptually driven form of introspection, she labels 'reflective introspection', and a non-conceptual form of introspection she calls 'primitive introspection'.

Both of these forms of introspection may be described as forms of "phenomenal introspection", because they both let us access *the phenomenal features* of our mental states. However, primitive introspection allows the subject to access phenomenal properties in their intrinsic phenomenal nature, affording the subject an *immediate and non-conceptual grasp* of their what-it-is-likeness. Primitive introspection as Giustina conceives it sustains any reflective phenomenal introspective state that may furtherly involve deploying phenomenal concepts.

As Giustina rightfully suggests, if primitive introspection is a real psychological phenomenon, its existence has prominent philosophical outcomes, among which one stands as particularly suited to impugn the illusionist claim. According to her (Giustina 2021: 424), primitive introspection can play a foundational role in arguing against "skepticism about the justification of phenomenal beliefs". In Giustina's view, sharply distinguishing between reflective and primitive introspection allows us to safely confine 'errors and uncertainty' to the domain of categorization and recognition, that is, to the domain of reflective introspection. In her words, "if introspective error turned out to be always due to misapplication of concepts, then primitive introspection would turn out to be, in itself, immune to error" (Giustina 2021: 425), as it does not rely on any concepts.

Hence, by implicitly relying on the existence of primitive introspection, Giustina (2022) builds her own introspective knowledge by acquaintance account, according to which we can *infallibly* know what-it-is-like to have a certain phenomenal experience. As a matter of fact, she argues, primitive introspection allows subjects to be immediately acquainted with the phenomenal appearance of phenomenal properties, which deliver *objectual*, non-propositional knowledge of them. Thanks to primitive introspection, this acquaintance relation results in a kind of *sui generis* knowledge of the authentic way in which phenomenal properties appear, that is, a form of knowledge that cannot be exhausted—nor affected—by any kind of propositional knowledge.

³¹ It is worth noting that Giustina's Argument from Concept-Acquisition presupposes two intuitions that illusionists won't share. First, illusionists would reject that we can learn a certain phenomenal concept only by experiencing its proper phenomenal fact, and hence that we should have access to such a fact *before* acquiring the proper concept, because this intuition presupposes that *there exists* a specific phenomenal fact we may fail to grasp; hence, it presupposes that phenomenal realism is true. Secondly, Giustina's argument assumes that phenomenal concepts, as concepts that help to discriminate and recognize authentic phenomenal properties, exist; however, the illusionist would deny that such authentic phenomenal concepts exist. As I shall argue, illusionists do counter Giustina's argument in akin terms. However, I will partially overlook these one-side assumptions to focus on how the illusionist can defuse this realist attack directly.

This infallibility Giustina attributes to the acquaintance knowledge of phenomenal appearances pivotally relies on the assumption that primitive introspection is unmediated. Crucially, she argues that this kind of, so to speak, “primitive knowledge” is particularly secure because it results from an introspective access that is both *epistemically* and *metaphysically* direct. On the one hand, Giustina (2022: 128) specifies, we access authentic phenomenal appearances without any inferential mediation, and importantly without “the subject forming any *judgment*” about them. On the other hand, she adds, we can know authentic phenomenal appearances without any metaphysical mediation, because “no state or process (including causal)” can intervene in the relation with phenomenal appearances (Giustina 2022: 125).³²

It is hence important to stress that the directness of primitive introspection, rather than No-Gap itself, is Giustina’s anti-illusionist hinge. If ph-appearances are primitively introspected, they cannot be the result of an introspective illusionist *misrepresentation*, because this would require that we introspect them through a process that is both metaphysically (causally) and epistemologically (conceptual-like) mediated—features primitive introspection lacks by definition.

We can thus specify Giustina’s understanding of what I labeled “phenomenal infallibility” as grounded in the directness of primitive introspection, and in particular in terms of a sort of “absolute impenetrability” of the phenomenal domain, for which nothing but something authentically phenomenal can intervene and affect the way in which phenomenal appearances are primitively given to us.

As a consequence, it is possible to specify Giustina’s phenomenal infallibility as follows:

Primitive infallibility: it is impossible that something different from an authentic phenomenal appearance intervenes in the primitive introspective relation we establish with phenomenal properties.

Giustina can hence specify her anti-illusionist move as follows:

- (3) **Primitive introspection exists** (Giustina argues).
- (4) **Primitive introspection exists** → **Primitive infallibility** (by definition of primitive introspection).
- (5) **Primitive infallibility** (3,4 modus ponens).
- (6) **Primitive infallibility** → **Phenomenal infallibility** (primitive introspection provides infallible phenomenal knowledge).
- (7) **Phenomenal infallibility** (5,6 modus ponens).
- (8) **Phenomenal infallibility** → **No-Gap is true** (if we are infallible about phenomenal appearances, we can trust that they appear as abiding by No-gap).
- (9) **No-Gap is true.**³³

Thus, if primitive introspection is a real phenomenon, we are phenomenally infallible, because the unmediated nature of primitive introspection prevents any misrepresentation as regards phenomenal appearances. The existence of primitive introspection can therefore undermine the illusionist hypothesis, because if we are

³² Giustina quotes Gertler (2011) for these specifications about what she means by ‘epistemically’ and ‘metaphysically’ direct.

³³ Notice that the illusionist won’t accept (3), (5) (7) and (9). All the other claims are by contrast accepted both from the illusionist and the realist, because they all feature a conditional that can be undermined as long as primitive introspection doesn’t exist.

phenomenally infallible, and phenomenal properties appear to ph-appear, they *do* appear according to an authentic phenomenal mode of presentation, that is, a mode of presentation that proves No-Gap true in its phenomenal interpretation.

5. Illusionism Strikes Back: We Are Not Phenomenally Infallible

In the previous Section, I presented Giustina's primitive introspection account as a possible antidote to the illusionist insinuation. On Giustina's realist stance, we can infallibly know that phenomenal properties appear according to an authentic phenomenal mode of presentation. Thus, we infallibly know that No-Gap is true, because No-Gap simply describes a *true fact* about authentic phenomenal appearances.

Can the illusionist contend that we are not primitively infallible, that is, that we don't immediately access authentic phenomenal appearances as we may seem to do?

Giustina, as a realist, is not concerned with the reliability of phenomenal appearances. The illusionist can however maintain that Giustina's anti-illusionist move doesn't rely on some *true phenomenological fact*. There is no doubt, illusionists argue, that subjects *believe* that they have such a direct access to phenomenal appearances; however, this is just a deceiving impression, yet another effect of the delusive misrepresentational mechanism. In this illusionist view, primitive introspection is merely e-represented as direct together with ph-appearances themselves, and thus we are merely *disposed to judge* that we are primitively infallible.

Giustina's argument for the existence of primitive introspection doesn't however rely only on phenomenological considerations; it also relies on an argument from Phenomenal-Concept acquisition, which is meant to independently support the existence of primitive introspection. If to acquire phenomenal concepts we need a form of phenomenal introspection that is not already conceptually mediated, it must be always possible to access some phenomenal appearance even in absence of epistemic mediation. Accordingly, the realist may argue that if every delusive representation requires some epistemic mediation, the illusionist therefore finds herself in predicament: subjects would have to acquire some concept crucial to the illusory introspective representation *before* the illusory representation can ever take place.

The illusionist can however rebut that we are merely deluded into believing that we have such a nonconceptual access to phenomenal experiences, while phenomenal introspection is always conceptually mediated.

Moreover, they can specify that illusionism is not compelled to explain how we *acquire* phenomenal concepts, because we don't need what realists call "phenomenal concepts" to realize the epistemic misrepresentation. Illusionists won't ever deny that we have the *impression* of acquiring real and informative phenomenal concepts from alleged phenomenal experiences. However, it is one thing to ask how we may have the impression of acquiring this special kind of concepts and it is another thing to ask whether we need to acquire certain concepts to realize the epistemic misrepresentation. As regards the first question, Frankish (2016: 42-44) claims that we can "acquire" (deceiving) phenomenal concepts from the delusive representation of phenomenal appearances. In this view, phenomenal concepts would be actually a result of the illusory mechanism, rather than a

fundamental component of it. If the illusionist is right, what we usually regard as “phenomenal concepts” are *empty* concepts, and therefore there is no phenomenal fact we can *learn* from their (putative) acquisition or deployment.³⁴

As regards the concepts required for the epistemic misrepresentation, illusionists can argue that it is realized with concepts that don’t need to be acquired neither from authentic phenomenal properties nor from e-represented phenomenal properties. For instance, Kammerer (2021: 854-55) argues that a built-in, hard-wired concept of “experience” is everything we need to develop a plausible illusory mechanism.³⁵

At this point, Giustina may insist that we have no evidence to claim that some epistemic mediation intervenes in primitive introspection. By contrast, she can argue, we have plenty of evidence to believe that nothing epistemic is involved in phenomenal introspection, because subjects can perfectly well distinguish between experiences and judgments about them. However, as the reader may expect, this stance is not enough to defeat the illusionist claim, which can contend that the realist is once again unilaterally assuming that subjects *can trust* what is phenomenologically manifest for them. By contrast, this is exactly what is at stake in the debate: that it is possible to reliably distinguish between authentic appearances and mere e-representations of them. By denying No-Gap, the illusionist *rejects* exactly that this distinction is viable.

Giustina’s arguments for the existence of primitive introspection appears ineffective against the illusionist claim because they cannot rule out that we are merely *dehuded* into believing that we are primitively infallible. The illusionist can hence call into question the existence of primitive introspection, and accordingly undermine that we are primitively infallible.

In addition, illusionists can argue that we indeed have some empirical evidence that can speak against the fact that we are primitively infallible. These

³⁴ As suggested (footnote 31), some illusionists may want to deny that phenomenal concepts exist at all. However, this attitude appears not straightforwardly shared among the illusionists. E.g., Frankish himself (2016: 42-44) discusses the “task of construing a theory of content for phenomenal concepts” as regards illusionism, testifying that according to him phenomenal concepts exist, at least to some extent. I think that this apparent tension within the illusionist perspective can be understood by noticing that even the most radical illusionist won’t deny that we have some concept to describe the deceiving way in which phenomenal properties are given to us. In this view, existent “phenomenal concepts” are nothing like those concepts that faithfully grasp what-it-is-like to have a certain experience (i.e., authentic phenomenal concepts), but they nonetheless may play a role in how we conceive experiences and within the illusory mechanism itself, as they do, e.g., in Kammerer’s (2021) illusionist account.

³⁵ According to Kammerer’s strong illusionist theory (2021: 854-55), “phenomenal introspection consists in the application of phenomenal concepts, which are Theoretically determined Concepts of Epistemologically special states”. Kammerer’s phenomenal concepts are “governed by [...] a naïve theory of knowledge”. In this regard, phenomenal concepts have two components: a ‘recognitional’ component that refers to “detectable properties of external object (or of the body)” and a “general theoretical operator <experience>” that applies automatically to certain mental states Kammerer calls ‘receptive affections’—that is, states that “do not constitutively depend, for their existence, on any bodily or mental “action” of the subjects”. These phenomenal concepts are hence nothing like realists’ authentic phenomenal concepts, which by contrast need to be acquired from experiencing authentic phenomenal properties.

circumstances, illusionists argue, can be interpreted as cases of introspective “phenomenal inaccuracy”, that is, scenarios in which it is *possible* that phenomenal experiences are represented in introspection differently from how they (actually) appear. These scenarios would hence support the illusionist claim, for which we are *not* phenomenally infallible, and suggest that it is possible to deny No-Gap.

One of the most famous cases meant to question that we are phenomenally infallible goes under the name of “The Fraternity Case” and can be found discussed by Derk Pereboom (2011: 22):

The Fraternity Case: A freshman is blindfolded and is told that a knife is going to touch his skin; when his friend tricks him using an icicle, he screams in fear because he thinks that he is feeling pain.³⁶

In order to properly understand this illusionist challenge, it is important to keep in mind the following specifications.

First of all, as Pereboom acknowledges (2011: 22), this example is not meant to serve as a fully developed pro-illusionist argument. Pereboom’s aim is indeed to show that this case *allows for an interpretation* that rules out phenomenal infallibility, and not necessarily that it shows that the illusionist interpretation is the right one.

Secondly, this example is usually misunderstood as poorly supporting the illusionist claims. As an anonymous reviewer correctly suggested, it appears to fall short from establishing that we may wrongly e-represent existent ph-appearing properties. On the contrary, it seems to merely suggest that we may confuse one ph-appearing property with another authentically phenomenal one.

Part of this misunderstanding is due to the fact that Pereboom’s illusionist account is actually weakly illusionist (see also footnote 24), and hence compatible with the claim that phenomenal properties do exist.³⁷ It would take too much time to delve into Pereboom’s illusionist stance; for the time being, it is enough to notice that in his view the mistake described by the Fraternity Case is everything we need to show that it is at least *an open possibility* that we are not phenomenally infallible. Despite his weak illusionist inspiration, Pereboom’s example has indeed some prominent strong illusionist outcomes: if it is true that we may happen to mistakenly introspect ph-cold by representing it as ph-pain, it is also an open possibility that we mistakenly introspect that a certain experience ph-appears while it actually e-appears.

There is however a further overlooked aspect of the Fraternity Case, which threatens *primitive infallibility* specifically. The freshman in the example is arguably frightened because he *believes* that a knife is going to hurt him. The illusionist can hence argue that it is because of this belief that the freshman mistakenly introspects his experience. In other words, the illusionist may claim that some epistemic state—like a belief—could “break” the presumed impenetrable barrier of the experience,

³⁶ This example originally comes from Hill 1991.

³⁷ It is possible to doubt that Pereboom’s account is weakly illusionist, because even though he claims that phenomenal properties exist, he also argues that they don’t have a qualitative nature. If we think that phenomenal properties are essentially qualitative in nature, then Pereboom’s account appears to fit into the strong illusionist view. It is very likely that this ambiguity as regards Pereboom’s account mirrors an ambiguity that is intrinsic within the weak illusionist stance (see, e.g., Chalmers 2018: 49-50). For a critical discussion of the weak illusionist perspective and of Pereboom’s account as a weak illusionist perspective, see Beghetto 2023: Sections 4.4 and 5.2.3.

actively affecting what the realist would regard as the inviolable phenomenal domain (more on this in the next Section). The strong illusionist can hence exploit examples like the Fraternity Case to argue that it is at least possible that we may fail to properly distinguish between experiences and judgments—and likewise, that any realist argument grounded on such a distinction is actually flawed.

If this is correct, the illusionist appears in a good position to argue that it is an open possibility that we are not primitively infallible, because it is possible that something different from an authentic phenomenal appearance mediates the introspective relation with phenomenal appearances. As a consequence, we may be merely deluded into believing that we are primitively infallible.

We can hence sum up the previous discussion as follows:

- (10) **It is possible we are deluded into believing that we are primitively infallible** → **It is possible that we are deluded into believing that we are phenomenally infallible.**
- (11) **Fraternity Case** → **Illusionism is possible** (Nothing in the Fraternity Case essentially rules out the illusionist explanation).³⁸
- (12) **Fraternity Case** (Cases of introspective inaccuracy like the one described are relatable).
- (13) **Illusionism is possible** (11,12 modus ponens).
- (14) **Illusionism is possible** → **It is possible that we are deluded into believing that we are primitively infallible** (as the illusionist argues).
- (15) **It is possible that we are deluded into believing that we are primitively infallible** (13,14 modus ponens).
- (16) **It is possible that we are deluded into believing that we are phenomenally infallible** (10,15 modus ponens).
- (17) **It is possible that we are deluded into believing that we are phenomenally infallible** → **It is possible that we are deluded into believing that No-Gap is true** (if phenomenal appearances can be misrepresented, they may deceptively appear as abiding by No-Gap).
- (18) **It is possible that we are deluded into believing that No-Gap is true** (16,17 modus ponens).

Once again, the debate ends in an impasse, which can be summed up with the following opposing propositions:

- (9) **No-Gap is true.**
- (18) **It is possible that we are deluded into believing that No-Gap is true.**

The realist strategy was meant to show that we should favor (9) over (18) because we are phenomenally infallible, but the viability of illusionism concedes that we may be merely deluded into believing that we are phenomenally infallible. As a consequence, the realist cannot prefer (9) over (18) without begging the question against illusionism. By contrast, the illusionist just needs to argue that (18) is

³⁸ Realists disagree with (11) and (13), and hence with their illusionist consequences. It is important to remember that the Fraternity Case is not meant to prove illusionism true, but only to show that the illusionist interpretation is among the viable one. As a consequence, as long as the realist doesn't rule out the illusionist interpretation, the Fraternity Case does entail the possibility of illusionism. In section 5, I will discuss exactly whether and how the realist can rule out the illusionist hypothesis.

viable and that the realist has no good reason to prefer (9) over (18), establishing once again her dialectical impasse.

6. The Realist Knock-Down Dilemma: “Infallible Knowledge of Phenomenal Appearances” Is Possible only as long Illusionism Is Possible

Realists must now decide what to do. One option is to deny that cases of “introspective inaccuracies” like the one described by the Fraternity Case are possible. However, these cases seem relatable and quite widespread. Dennett (1991, 1992), for instance, describes several cases that makes us doubt that introspection is reliable as it can be affected by an agent’s doxastic state.³⁹ All these cases, the illusionist argues, potentially support the claim that we are not primitively infallible; accordingly, they indirectly provide support to the illusionist claim according to which introspection would be e-misrepresenting the appearance of the corresponding experience.⁴⁰

The only way out for the realist would be to insist that we are primitively infallible *despite* these cases suggesting that we might not be. Giustina cannot deny that in the Fraternity Case *something* goes wrong. However, she can aim at providing an explanation that leaves phenomenal infallibility unquestioned. In other words, Giustina must show that these introspective inaccuracies are not cases of “phenomenal inaccuracies”, that is, cases in which we mistakenly introspect the *very appearance* of phenomenal properties. Moreover, she should aim at showing that her new explanation rules out the illusionist hypothesis, because as long as illusionism is a coherent possibility, it is possible to argue that the realist is not justified in what she believes to be true about ph-appearances. Without this justification, it is hard to see how we can ever trust ph-appearances as a reliable source of knowledge.

In order to prove that we are primitively infallible, the realist must hence show that the alleged introspective inaccuracy doesn’t affect the way in which the experience is primitively introspected, that is, that the directness and safeness of the acquaintance relation is still preserved.

Giustina seems to have two options. On the one hand, she may argue that the source of error lies in reflective introspection. On the other hand, Giustina may choose to ignore the illusionist claim, arguing that once established that we

³⁹ Among the many cases Dennett proposes, one stands as particularly representative of his skepticism about our ability to distinguish between ph-appearances and e-appearances: the expert coffee tasters’ case. In this though experiment (Dennett 1992: 50-51), two expert coffee tasters have the duty to check that the taste of the coffee they produce doesn’t change day-by-day. One day, the protagonists realize that they don’t like the coffee they produce as they used to. However, they are not sure about what happened: did the coffee’s ph-appearance changed so gradually they couldn’t notice? Or did they change their attitude towards the coffee, so that now it e-appears different for them? Dennett aims at shaking our intuitions according to which it is clearly possible to tell apart these two scenarios, and accordingly to tell apart experiences from judgments.

⁴⁰ It is also possible to spot some suitable examples in the scientific literature, e.g., the McGurk effect (McGurk and MacDonald 1976) and the Rubber Hand illusion (Botvinick and Cohen 1998). In both of these illusory cases, phenomenal experiences undergo distortions that cannot be attributed to the sensory apprehension of the stimulus. Accordingly, it is possible to argue that the source of the distortion is an introspective misrepresentation.

are phenomenally infallible, the illusionist hypothesis is automatically ruled out. As anticipated, both these strategies fail to establish that we have infallible knowledge of phenomenal appearances.

6.1 It is a Matter of Mistaken Judgment

The first option for Giustina is to argue that, even though something went wrong during the freshman's introspective act, his mistake has nothing to do with primitive introspection.

As a matter of fact, it is quite common on the realist side to deal with this kind of introspective inaccuracies by claiming that the subject is *merely misjudging* what she is accurately introspecting on a phenomenal basis (cf. e.g., Giustina and Kriegel 2017: 11).

This solution draws on a classical opposition between *error of ignorance* and *error of judgment* (Hill 1991), which suits the case of perception well.

Suppose that there is a tree in front of me but, given that I'm not wearing my glasses, I fail to acknowledge that this is so. In this case, I'm dealing with an error of ignorance, because there is something wrong with my perceptual ability to see the tree. By contrast, suppose that my sight works perfectly but that for some reason I fail to *judge* that there is a tree in front of me—maybe I'm strongly convinced that the tree was cut down. In this case, I make an error of judgment.

On the realist side, we can sharply distinguish these two kinds of errors, just as we can distinguish experiences and judgments.⁴¹ As a consequence, Giustina may exploit this difference to explain why the freshman is still primitively infallible.

Giustina would therefore reply that the freshman has been *feeling* cold the whole time, because it is impossible for a sensation of cold to be presented as pain in primitive introspection. By contrast, she would claim that the freshman couldn't decide what he was feeling *because of an error of judgment*, caused by his fearful expectations.

This judgment, she would specify, cannot however constitute, nor prompt, an error of ignorance—that is, some “phenomenal inaccuracy”—because from the realist perspective judgments cannot affect the way in which phenomenal appearances are *primitively* presented. The immediacy of the acquaintance relation doesn't in fact leave room for such an intervention. As a consequence, Giustina may conclude, the illusionist hypothesis according to which the Fraternity Case threatens primitive infallibility should be dismissed.

Does this proposal *suffice* to rule out the illusionist stance? Recalling the discussion provided in the previous Section, the reader can foresee that the illusionist is far from feeling challenged.

Indeed, this solution rules out the illusionist hypothesis only as soon as a sharp distinction between judgments and experiences is clearly individuated. However, a clear and infallible distinction between e-appearances and ph-appearances is exactly what is at stake here. According to the illusionist, every phenomenal appearance is indeed a mere epistemic representation of such an appearance, that is, a mere *disposition to judge* that something phenomenal appears. As a consequence, the illusionist would happily agree that the freshman's mistake consists

⁴¹ It is not straightforward that any realist would regard judgments and experiences as sharply distinguished/distinguishable. It is hence interesting to notice that the requirement for such a clear distinction is prompted by the illusionist skeptical challenge.

in an introspective judgment, and that he is *disposed to judge* that he is feeling pain; however, the illusionist would add, the introspective misjudgment *just is* the phenomenal inaccuracy, and this is hence enough to claim against phenomenal infallibility. Arguing that the freshman is merely making an error of judgment cannot thus rule out the illusionist claim.

6.2 Despite the Illusionist Insinuation, We Are Primitively Infallible

The most traditional realist explanation of supposed phenomenal inaccuracies fails hence to rule out illusionism, because it is still compatible with the possibility that we are merely disposed to judge that we are primitively infallible.

Giustina can however endorse this traditional *error of judgment* explanation and decide to willingly ignore the illusionist point. As much as she might recognize that the illusionist point is coherent, she may insist that the illusionist hypothesis cannot outweigh the powerful phenomenal evidence that militates in favor of the view that experiences authentically ph-appear. On this view, the realist chooses to trust the phenomenological evidence for which we can unerringly distinguish experiences from judgments; consequently, she can firmly maintain that the possibility of introspective inaccuracy is limited to the domain of what Giustina calls ‘reflective introspection’. Giustina can hence insist that the Fraternity Case doesn’t undermine the freshman’s primitive infallibility because primitive introspection doesn’t allow for errors of ignorance, and that primitive introspection assures all the justification we need to claim that primitive knowledge exists.

It is important to notice that, in making this argument, the realist gives up to any form of neutrality, maintaining her realist position at the cost of begging the question against the illusionist claim.

I leave the reader free to judge whether this is a good move. The illusionist will be sure to maintain it is just a desperate attempt to preserve our realist convictions, because it builds on a potentially delusive source of evidence—phenomenal appearances. The realist can however insist that, if we accept that phenomenal appearances do ph-appear, it is undeniable that we are phenomenally infallible. Thus, for the realist, the illusionist’s skeptical claim is falsified on the basis of (what the realist takes to be) the obvious and completely evident fact that there are authentic ph-appearances. Phenomenal infallibility should hence bring two positive outcomes to the realist: overruling the illusionist claim and granting an infallible form of knowledge of phenomenal appearances.

In this last Section, I argue that the realist cannot reach both these outcomes at the same time.

As explained, Giustina argues that we have infallible objectual knowledge of ph-appearances, which is essentially grounded on primitive introspection. I labeled it “primitive knowledge”. Provided that primitive knowledge results from an infallible process, there are at least two different senses in which a cognitive process, e.g., an inference, can be held infallible: infallible in practice and infallible in principle.

Let’s examine infallibility *in practice* first. If an inference is infallible in practice, there exists at least one metaphysically possible world in which I happen to infer a wrong conclusion from a set of true premises; however, my inferential process is infallible in the actual world, meaning that it is nomologically impossible for me to make a mistake in this world. There may exist an omniscient logician who is too expert to fail in the actual world when inferring some propositions, but the fact that she is too advanced to make mistakes won’t ever make the very possibility of a

mistake incoherent. Notice that the existence of this world in which mistakes are metaphysically possible doesn't rule out infallibility in practice, because infallibility in practice describes a situation in which mistakes are conceivable in theory but impossible in practice.

On the other hand, an inferential process may be infallible *in principle*. In this second case, there are no metaphysically possible worlds in which the logician infers a wrong conclusion. It is not only that she doesn't *happen* to make mistakes: mistakes are *incoherent* as such. By being infallible in principle, the inferential process at issue cannot be wrong by definition, because whatever the logician infers, there is not a possible world in which she derives a wrong conclusion. Interestingly enough, in a similar scenario it is not the case that, consequently, all her inferences are *right*. On the contrary: as I shall argue, every answer becomes irrelevant from an epistemic point of view, to the extent that it is ultimately impossible to single out conclusions that are properly right or wrong. In order to grasp why this is the case, the reader must first of all resist the (usually correct) intuition for which every conclusion that is not wrong is, thereby, right.⁴² This would be the case only if an inference that is infallible in principle could be performed within a logical system that is provided with valid rules, namely, rules we can possibly violate (the rule of the exclusion of the third middle, in this specific case). However, infallibility in principle makes mistakes incoherent by definition and thereby prevents us from violating any possible rule. Therefore, an infallible in principle process cannot be performed within a system that is governed by valid rules. Thus, if the logician is "deriving" a conclusion through a process that is infallible in principle, there is no way in which she could be either right or wrong in her inferences.

As an anonymous reviewer rightfully suggested, it may seem indeed that an inferential process that is infallible in principle, though logically prevented from delivering wrong answers, would still provide right answers: even though there can't exist a world in which the logician derives a wrong conclusion, it seems that she is still capable of delivering good conclusions in every world in which she exists, as long as she doesn't diverge from some law. The problem with this line of thought is that it overlooks that the notion of infallibility in principle *forecloses the existence of any coherent law* the infallible in principle process may try to follow. As mentioned, the existence of a valid law entails the metaphysical possibility of diverging from that law, that is, it entails the existence of possible worlds in which agents can fail to abide by the law at issue. By contrast, there is not a possible world in which a process that is infallible in principle can fail to abide by the putative law, because the existence of such a world would make the process at issue infallible in practice, rather than in principle.

⁴² It may be difficult to see how we could ever refrain ourselves from this intuition. It seems indeed that a claim C can be either correct, incorrect, or meaningless, and no further options appears available. I agree that, in a scenario in which we care to reach some kind of knowledge, it is necessary to sharply distinguish between right and wrong answers, and to label as "meaningless" any statement that is neither right nor wrong. As a matter of fact, I think that this is what the illusionist would suggest about primitive "knowledge": that it is meaningless. Anyway, in this specific passage of my discussion, I'm just trying to explain why infallibility in principle makes every epistemic output epistemically irrelevant. In order to come to grasp why this is the case, the reader should simply refrain from thinking that something "not wrong" is, *thereby*, necessarily right. Something "not wrong", for instance, may be precisely *meaningless*.

It is hence possible to conclude that a process that is infallible in principle necessarily fails both in breaking and in abiding by any coherent law, because infallibility in principle rules out any coherent law as such. On the one hand, this means that every answer it delivers cannot be wrong, because there is not a rule from which it can deviate. At the same time, however, these non-wrong answers are not strictly speaking “right”, because the process fails to abide by a rule that, if followed, would prevent it from making a mistake. In the end, these non-wrong answers provided by an infallible in principle process appears to lose any epistemic relevance and, accordingly, it is unclear that the process at issue manages to deliver an authentic form of knowledge.⁴³

Let’s come back to the main thread of the paper. Is primitive introspection as Giustina conceives it an infallible in practice or an infallible in principle process? As I shall discuss, both these options appear to bring undesirable outcomes for the realist party.

If my analysis above is correct, it doesn’t seem wise for Giustina to argue that primitive introspection is infallible in principle, because this would potentially cast doubts on the epistemic relevance of its output, i.e., “primitive knowledge”. Thus, she appears forced to claim that primitive introspection is infallible *in practice*. She might try to argue that there is something special about the awareness relation (i.e., the infallible in practice cognitive process) that explains why primitive knowledge is immune from phenomenal inaccuracies. However, as I show in the next part of this Section, she cannot in fact claim that primitive introspection is infallible in practice, because this would entail the existence of possible worlds in which it is conceivable that a subject could be wrong about her own experience. Thus, claiming that primitive introspection is infallible in practice would crash against the No-Gap thesis.

In order to better appreciate why Giustina cannot rely on infallibility in practice, let the illusionist and the realist confront once again about the Fraternity Case.

As already argued, Giustina would stress that the freshman is infallible when it comes to primitive introspection, and hence that his mistake is a matter of reflective introspection. Suppose that the freshman is phenomenally infallible in practice. If this is the case, there exist at least a metaphysically possible world in which the experience *ph*-appears cold to him, but he fails to primitively introspect it.

It is however hard to see how the realist can accept the existence of this metaphysically possible world without letting the illusionist claim spread in all the possible worlds in which we are phenomenally infallible in practice. As I argued in Section 2, in order to claim that it is metaphysically possible to make phenomenal mistakes, it is necessary to admit that his phenomenal experience can *ph*-appear cold *independently of* whether he introspects that this is so. This would however posit the existence of a possible world in which an introspective mental state and a targeted experiential state are *numerically distinct*, that is, a possible world in which primitive introspection satisfies *the detection condition*. As the reader may recall, an introspective state is claimed to satisfy the detection condition as long as it ‘engages in some kind of “detection” of a pre-existing and ontologically independent mental state or event’. By satisfying the detection condition, primitive introspection would allow for a coherent mismatch between the introspective presentation of the *ph*-appearance and the *ph*-appearance itself, making phenomenal mistakes metaphysically possible.

⁴³ I want to sincerely thank an anonymous reviewer, whose suggestions helped me to work out in a clearer way why infallibility in principle makes every epistemic output irrelevant.

Thus, conceiving of primitive introspection to satisfy the detection condition has a prominent illusionist consequence: it opens to an ontological distinction between the phenomenal appearance and its introspective presentation. The existence of a logical world in which I might make a phenomenal mistake would thus open to a conceivable distinction between the reality and the appearance of phenomenal appearances; that is, it would make No-Gap possibly false. Phenomenal infallibility in practice implies hence that there exists a possible world in which agents make phenomenal mistakes about their experiences, and this entails that illusionism is coherent.

Why should this be problematic? By choosing to argue that we are primitively infallible *despite* the illusionist claim, Giustina would have already accepted that illusionism may be remotely true.

The problem is that the realist *fails* to confine the illusionist hypothesis in a world that can never be the actual one. Characterizing primitive introspection on a notion of infallibility *in practice* requires indeed to revise the structure of primitive introspection itself, so that it can satisfy the detection condition in every metaphysically possible world in which we are primitively infallible, the actual world included.

Can Giustina make room for the detection condition in primitive introspection?

It is possible to doubt that this is so, given that its metaphysical and epistemological unmediated nature was actually meant to prevent *the very possibility* of phenomenal mistakes. It would be nonetheless impulsive to claim that a realist cannot embed the detection condition into her acquaintance-based introspective knowledge picture. Maybe the realist can find room for the distinction required by the detection condition without thereby accepting that primitive introspection is causally or epistemologically mediated, preserving the direct access primitive introspection grants to phenomenal appearances.

Hence, the question is not whether Giustina *can* conceive of primitive introspection on the detection condition, but whether this is a *palatable* solution for a realist, because it would make the No-Gap thesis false *in every world* in which primitive introspection exist. Illusionism would not hence be a remote possibility, but an actual threat the realist cannot reasonably just ignore: if illusionism is still metaphysically possible, ph-appearances may fail to provide enough justification to primitive knowledge *even if* primitive introspection is infallible in practice.

Primitive infallibility in practice doesn't hence succeed in ruling out the illusionist hypothesis because it implies the existence of a possible world in which No-Gap is false.⁴⁴ By contrast, we can expect Giustina to prefer a scenario in which rejecting No-Gap is inconceivable. Accordingly, she would argue that phenomenal inaccuracies are metaphysically impossible. This would force Giustina into claiming that primitive introspection is infallible *in principle*, and that phenomenal mistakes are as incoherent as the rejection of the No-Gap thesis. The

⁴⁴ With the aim of preserving the spirit of the No-Gap thesis, Giustina might try to argue that even though the ph-appearance and its introspective presentation are numerically distinct, they are still ontologically intertwined in such a way that introspective infallibility still justifies primitive knowledge. This is a possible move, but it seems quite ad hoc, and I cannot think of a coherent way in which Giustina may conceive of this ontological link without bringing back the harmful consequences either of infallibility in practice or of infallibility in principle.

freshman would hence have a form of undefeatable knowledge for which the very possibility of phenomenal mistakes is ruled out as incoherent: if his experience introspectively appears ph-cold, it is necessarily ph-cold.

As anticipated, being infallible *in principle* is a quite suspicious feature when it comes to something we want to properly call “knowledge”. As I argued, infallibility in principle appears indeed to make any output of a process *epistemically irrelevant*, because it contextualizes the process into a scenario in which it is impossible for it to deliver either wrong or right answers.

In order to fully appreciate how infallibility in principle would undermine the epistemic status of primitive knowledge, let’s consider the argument Giustina provides to explain why we should regard “primitive knowledge” as a proper—even though *sui generis*—form of knowledge. According to Giustina (2022: 7), primitive knowledge qualifies as knowledge because it explains certain ‘epistemic asymmetries’. For instance, if I never happened to taste papaya while a friend of mine did, there appears to be an epistemic asymmetry between us, which can only be related to the different phenomenal information we had the opportunity to primitively introspect. As a matter of fact, I can fix the described epistemic imbalance only if I taste a papaya and primitively introspect its *specific* phenomenal appearance; primitively introspecting the ph-appearance of *anything* else, like a mango or a tomato, won’t ever make a relevant difference.

Giustina highlights that this kind of epistemic asymmetries involve exactly the kind of non-conceptual information primitive introspection allows to access, a purely phenomenal information that results from being primitively presented with phenomenal appearances, which *univocally* distinguishes a certain experience from any other. In scenarios like the one described, primitive introspection appears hence to grant access to specific phenomenal *facts*, that is, to the unique and intrinsic way in which certain experiences appear. This unique ph-appearance is what critically determines whether a specific phenomenal fact is *the correct one* that would fix the assessed epistemic asymmetry or not. Notice however that this picture works coherently only on the assumption that *there is a correct way* in which these different experiences should ph-appear in introspection; otherwise, it is not clear why primitively introspecting what it is like to taste a tomato, rather than a papaya, won’t make a relevant difference. Primitive introspection can hence play an epistemically relevant role in explaining the mentioned epistemic asymmetries only as long as it is possible to distinguish between accurate and inaccurate primitive introspective acts, that is, between correct and incorrect ways in which phenomenal appearances are introspectively presented. As I argued, however, characterizing primitive introspection as infallible in principle makes impossible to single out *a correct way* in which ph-appearances should be introspectively presented. As a matter of fact, the existence of a correct way in which experiences must be ph-presented in introspection entails the existence of an *incorrect way* in which ph-appearances can be ph-presented in introspection. As to say, if there is a correct way in which ph-appearances should be ph-presented, it must be possible to be wrong about the way in which they ph-appear. Yet, if primitive introspection is infallible *in principle*, introspective inaccuracies are metaphysically impossible. Thus, even though an infallible in principle primitive introspective process would be prevented from delivering incorrect ph-presentations, it is unclear that it would deliver some *correct* ph-presentations either. As a result, an infallible in principle form of primitive knowledge falls short from making a real epistemic difference when it comes to the epistemic asymmetries Giustina describes, because if there is nothing I can fail to know, there is

arguably nothing I need to learn. Once characterized as infallible in principle, primitive knowledge appears hence to lose all its epistemic relevance. But if this is the case, is the very idea of a *right* introspective presentation still coherent on an infallible in principle characterization? It seems that even if there might be something it is like to taste a tomato, it is impossible to claim that there is something right or wrong about its ph-appearances, and hence nothing I can strictly speaking know or fail to know about it.⁴⁵

The bottom line of this confrontation is that even claiming that primitive introspection is infallible appears insufficient to stop the illusionist insinuation. A proper form of primitive knowledge would require characterizing primitive introspection as infallible *in practice*. However, as I argued, primitive introspection can be claimed infallible in practice only as long as it satisfies the detection condition, that is, only as long as illusionism is a coherent possibility; and if illusionism is a coherent possibility, we could be merely deluded into believing that we immediately access ph-appearances in a way that leaves no room for misrepresentations. In the end, if we are infallible in practice, we are not justified into believing that ph-appearances reliably and unconditionally support No-Gap, because we cannot distinguish between a world in which those appearances actually ph-appear and a world in which their appearance is just a deceiving e-representation.

By contrast, claiming that primitive introspection is infallible in principle appears to disqualify the very idea of an authentic form of introspective knowledge of phenomenal *facts*, indirectly supporting the illusionist hypothesis. The illusionist would indeed claim that there is nothing like a phenomenal fact, nothing true or false, accurate or inaccurate, about ph-appearances. As a consequence, there is nothing I can learn about what the realist regards as the rich phenomenal realm.⁴⁶

Even the claim that primitive introspection is infallible in principle can't hence rule out the illusionist claim: with no possibility of mistake in sight, we may well be merely deluded that we are acquiring some relevant information about the mental world, while we are actually locked up within the illusions of our minds. Primitive infallibility cannot hence rule out the illusionist hypothesis.

7. Conclusion

In this paper, I outlined a confrontation between the (strong) illusionist and the realist parties, with the aim of providing a clarificatory discussion into their

⁴⁵ It is also possible to offer an argument to show that the notion of "infallible in principle primitive knowledge" is incoherent in itself. If it is true that there are no possible worlds in which primitive introspection presents ph-appearances incorrectly, this can be either because the introspective presentation and the ph-appearance are strictly identical or because they are metaphysically distinct. If they are strictly identical, as No-Gap would imply, there would not exist a ph-reality the presentation can fail to present. Accordingly, no properly *accurate* introspective act would be possible in this scenario, but only at best introspective acts that cannot really assure a form of knowledge. On the other hand, the ph-appearance and the presentation may be metaphysically distinct; however, this would imply conceiving of primitive introspection in the light of the detection condition, making illusionism metaphysically possible as well. In conclusion, it seems that infallibility in principle makes no sense either if the introspective presentation is identical to the ph-appearance or if they are metaphysically distinct. Given that there seems to be no alternative scenarios, an introspective process that is infallible in principle appears inevitably flawed.

⁴⁶ As explained, this is coherent with how illusionists, such as Frankish (2016), conceive phenomenal concepts.

dialectics. In particular, I wanted to show that the illusionist hypothesis, as much as counterintuitive, cannot be easily ruled out.

First of all, the realist cannot rule out the illusionist hypothesis by claiming that it opens a wedge between the appearance and the reality of phenomenal properties, falsifying the No-Gap thesis. The No-Gap thesis *would* rule out illusionism, but only as long as it is impossible to deny it. This begs the question against the illusionist, who can actually argue that the No-Gap thesis is possibly false.

Secondly, the realist can try to *show* No-Gap is undeniably true. The realist would hence ground No-Gap into its source: (authentic) phenomenal appearances. Illusionists can however contend that this source is actually a product of the misrepresentational mechanism, to be distrusted as part of the illusion. If this is true, we may be merely disposed to judge that phenomenal properties appear as abiding by the truth of No Gap.

A further option for the realist is arguing that phenomenal appearances cannot be the result of a misrepresentational mechanism. Anna Giustina's primitive introspection account appears a promising anti-illusionist stance in this regard, because according to it we can infallibly know of authentic phenomenal appearances.

The illusionist can however reiterate her skeptical challenge, arguing that Giustina's account is compatible with the illusionist insinuation. We may be merely disposed to judge that we are primitively infallible. Moreover, the illusionist can furtherly argue that we have plenty of evidence that introspection is not as reliable as the realist would claim, and that many cases—like the Fraternity Case—allow for a possible illusionist explanation.

The realist should hence try to account for these alleged “introspective inaccuracies”, providing an explanation that preserves primitive introspection and its infallibility. However, as I argued, the realist fails. Claiming that cases of introspective inaccuracies are mere “errors of judgment” doesn't rule out the illusionist hypothesis, and hence cannot get rid of the claim that we may be merely deluded to be primitively infallible.

The realist can in the end try to ignore the illusionist insinuation as helpless against our realist intuitions. According to her, the illusionist hypothesis is just a theoretical possibility that is evidently falsified by the undeniable givenness of ph-appearing properties, which assures that No-Gap is undeniably true.⁴⁷ This solution clearly begs the question against the illusionist, but the realist may give up to

⁴⁷ It is possible to notice that the realist view is quite ambiguous when it comes to the role the No-Gap thesis play in their position. Most of the time, she assumes No-Gap as an undeniable presupposition that justifies realism against illusionism. However, given that it seems possible for the illusionist to dispute No-Gap, the realist is compelled to offer a justification for No-Gap itself. As I argued, realists would hence arguably look for a justification in how phenomenal properties appear to the subject. However, I showed that this choice brings in several issues, and it may end up contending that realism is less obvious than it may *prima facie* seem. Nevertheless, the general realist attitudes towards these doubts is usually to go back once again to the No-Gap thesis, stating that it is intuitively undeniable. No-Gap is hence regarded as the milestone of the realist position, and any hypothesis against it is claimed to reject what is too evident to be false. Most people may agree with the realist that our realist intuitions towards No-Gap are irresistible. However, it is important to highlight that realists have nowadays never provided an argument that shows either that No-Gap is true or that it is incoherent to deny it. If indeed the realist-illusionist confrontation is in the end a matter of brute intuitions, I think that my discussion suggests at least that the illusionist has a dialectical advantage in it, because she can always argue that these brute intuitions are a product of the illusory mechanism.

neutrality and insist that, once provided that we are primitively infallible, illusionism can be peacefully ruled out.

Trying to counter the illusionist skeptical hypothesis by claiming that primitive introspection is a source of infallible knowledge brings however the realist to a knock-down dilemma. As I argued, the realist can claim that primitive introspection is either infallible in practice or infallible in principle. In order to qualify primitive introspection as an authentic source of knowledge, the realist should claim it infallible *in practice*; however, this leads the realist to conceive of primitive introspection as abiding by the detection condition, deeming the No-Gap thesis false in every world in which we are primitively infallible. Claiming that primitive introspection is infallible in practice is hence compatible with the illusionist hypothesis, for which we may be merely deluded into believing that we have unerring access to authentic ph-appearances. If by contrast primitive introspection is infallible *in principle*, primitive introspection is prevented from providing either wrong or right outputs, losing its epistemic relevance. Accordingly, it is possible to contend that primitive introspection provides no knowledge at all, but only meaningless epistemic yields (see footnote 42). It seems hence that the realist has two options: either claiming primitive introspection infallible in practice, giving up to No-Gap and letting the illusionist hypothesis in, or claiming primitive introspection infallible in principle, vindicating the No-Gap intuition, and stripping primitive knowledge of any epistemic relevance. The first path deprives primitive knowledge of its privileged source of justification, i.e., unquestionably trustworthy ph-appearances. The second path undermines primitive knowledge's epistemic status, letting us doubt that there exists some phenomenal fact it can actually let us access. Either way, it seems that even by claiming that we are primitively infallible, the realist fails to rule out the illusionist skeptical challenge.

References

- Balog, K. 2016, "Illusionism's Discontent", *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 23, 11-12, 40-51.
- Beghetto, A. 2023, *The Radical Problem of Consciousness: A Critical Clarification of the Illusionist-Realist Debate*, Unpublished PhD dissertation, Pavia.
- Botvinick, M. and Cohen, J. 1998, "Rubber Hands 'Feel' Touch that Eyes See", *Nature*, 391, 756.
- Chalmers, D.J. 1996, *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Chalmers, D.J. 2018, "The Meta-Problem of Consciousness", *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 25, 9-10, 6-61.
- Chalmers, D.J. 2020, "Debunking Arguments for Illusionism about Consciousness", *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 27, 5-6, 258-81.
- Chisholm, R.M. 1957, *Perceiving: A Philosophical Study*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Dennett, D.C. 1991, *Consciousness Explained*, Boston: Little-Brown.
- Dennett, D.C. 1992, "Quining Qualia", in Marcel, A.J. and E. Bisiach, E. (eds.), *Consciousness in Contemporary Science*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 42-77.
- Dennett, D.C. 2016, "Illusionism as the Obvious Default Theory of Consciousness", *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 23, 11-12, 65-72.

- Duncan, M. 2023, "How You Know You're Conscious: Illusionism and Knowledge of Things", *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*, 14, 185-205.
- Frankish, K. 2016, "Illusionism as a Theory of Consciousness", *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 23, 11-12, 11-39.
- Frankish, K. 2018, *What Kind of Illusion is the Illusion of Consciousness?* Workshop: Illusionism as a Theory of Consciousness. LABEX IEC, Institut Jean Nicod, Paris, 25 May 2018.
- Frankish, K. 2021, *A Course on Illusionism*. Workshop: The Illusionist View of Consciousness (6 Lectures), organized by the Moscow Center for Consciousness Studies and Philosophy Faculty of Lomonosov Moscow State University https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y2ns6C1iYQ&list=PLhgvALi0LQGXI7cKNmGNTiQ7dpS-7dLw&ab_channel=MoscowCenterforConsciousnessStudies
- Gertler, B. 2011, "Self-Knowledge and the Transparency of Belief", in Hatzimoysis, A. (ed.), *Self-Knowledge*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 125-45.
- Giustina, A. 2021, "Introspection Without Judgment", *Erkenntnis*, 86, 2, 407-27.
- Giustina, A. 2022, "Introspective Knowledge by Acquaintance", *Synthese*, 200, 128.
- Giustina, A. and Kriegel, U. 2017, "Fact-Introspection, Thing-Introspection, and Inner Awareness", *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*, 8, 1, 143-64.
- Graziano, M. 2016, "Consciousness Engineered", *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 23, 11-12, 98-115.
- Goff, P. 2016, "Is Realism about Consciousness Compatible with a Scientifically Respectable Worldview?", *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 23, 11-12, 83-97.
- Goff, P. 2017, *Consciousness and Fundamental Reality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hill, C. 1991, *Sensations: A Defense of Type Materialism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jackson, F. 1986, "What Mary didn't Know", *The Journal of Philosophy*, 83, 5, 291-95.
- Kammerer, F. 2016, "The Hardest Aspect of the Illusion Problem—and How to Solve It", in Frankish, K. (ed.), *Illusionism as a Theory of Consciousness*, Exeter: Imprint Academic, 154-74.
- Kammerer, F. 2018, "Can You Believe It? Illusionism and the Illusion Meta-Problem", *Philosophical Psychology*, 31, 1, 44-67.
- Kammerer, F. 2021, "The Illusion of Conscious Experience", *Synthese*, 198, 1, 845-66.
- Kriegel, U. 2007, "The Phenomenologically Manifest", *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 6, 1-2, 115-36.
- Kripke, S. 1981, *Naming and Necessity*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Korman, D.Z. 2019, "Debunking Arguments", *Philosophy Compass*, 14, e12638.
- Levine, J. 1983, "Materialism and Qualia: The Explanatory Gap", *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 64, 4, 354-61.
- McGurk, H. and MacDonald, J. 1976, "Hearing Lips and Seeing Voices", *Nature*, 264, 5588, 746-48.
- Merlo, G. 2020, "Appearance, Reality, and the Meta-Problem of Consciousness", *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 27, 5-6, 120-30.
- Nagel, T. 1974, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?", *The Philosophical Review*, 83, 4, 435-50.
- Nida-Rümelin, M. 2016, "The Illusion of Illusionism", *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 23, 11-12, 160-71.

- Papineau, D. 2019, "Response to Chalmers' 'The Meta-Problem of Consciousness'", *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 26, 9-10, 173-81.
- Pereboom, D. 2011, *Consciousness and the Prospects of Physicalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pereboom, D. 2016, "Illusionism and Anti-Functionalism about Phenomenal Consciousness", in Frankish, K. (ed.), *Illusionism as a Theory of Consciousness*, Exeter: Imprint Academic, 215-31.
- Pereboom, D. 2019, "Russellian Monism, Introspective Inaccuracy, and the Illusion Metaproblem of Consciousness", *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 26, 9-10, 182-93.
- Searle, J.R. 1997, *The Mystery of Consciousness*, The New York Review of Books.
- Shabasson, D. 2022, "Illusionism about Phenomenal Consciousness: Explaining the Illusion", *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*, 13, 2, 427-53.
- Schwitzgebel, E. 2019, "Introspection", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.