

I Am X

Philosophy has several names for views that accept experience as real while questioning irreducible phenomenal consciousness. This essay asks whether an ordinary word for the person is missing.

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The philosophy has a name. Why doesn't the person?

I am an illusionist, which is slightly inconvenient because that sentence means two different things in my life.

I have always loved magic. I like misdirection, perception, and the strange fact that knowing you are being fooled does not necessarily stop the trick from working. A good illusion does not require your perceptual system to fail. Quite the opposite: the machinery works, processes real information, and produces a model of what happened that can still be wrong.

Only recently did I discover that *illusionist* is also the philosophical label closest to a position I seem to have held for much of my life.

In philosophy of mind, illusionism challenges the idea that phenomenal consciousness — the supposedly irreducible private quality of experience, the extra “what it is like” — exists in quite the way introspection tells us it does.

That description immediately causes trouble, because saying that you do not believe in phenomenal consciousness sounds remarkably like saying that experience itself is not real.

That is not what I mean.

Pain is real. Memory is real. Dreams, attention, perception, fear, thought and the sense of being yourself are real phenomena. They change behaviour, reorganise priorities, leave memories and alter what happens next.

What I doubt is that we need an additional irreducible ingredient on top of those processes.

If we can describe what a system senses, remembers, predicts, avoids, attends to and models about itself, I want to know what explanatory work remains for the additional thing called *phenomenal consciousness*.

That is not a proof that it does not exist. I do not have such a proof, and I am not sure what one would look like.

It is simply where my skepticism begins.

How much explanatory work can we remove before we should ask what the remainder is doing?

I did not arrive at that question by reading philosophy.

I remember being around twelve and taking part in a pain-threshold test during a health visit. What stayed with me was not simply the pain. It was that the whole thing suddenly looked like a system: stimulus, threshold, processing, response. Similar inputs could lead to different responses in different people.

That obviously did not settle the philosophy of consciousness for a twelve-year-old. Something merely clicked: the word *pain* named something real, but naming it was not the same as explaining how it worked.

Later, before deciding whether I wanted to be confirmed, I read the Bible because I wanted to understand what I was being asked to affirm. I came away with more questions than answers and decided against confirmation.

The subjects were completely different, but the habit was the same. If a concept is supposed to explain something important about reality, I want to know what work the concept actually performs.

Years later that habit entered my research. Large nouns make me suspicious when they begin replacing mechanisms. “Evolution” is not enough if we cannot identify what is evolving. “Agency” becomes slippery if we cannot identify the actor.

Consciousness increasingly gives me the same feeling.

None of this is especially original. That was another surprise.

There are philosophers who have spent decades arguing over positions close to mine. Keith Frankish calls his view *illusionism* (<https://www.keithfrankish.com/illusionism/>). David Chalmers has written about neighbouring positions under labels such as *type-A materialism* (<https://consc.net/papers/nature.html>). Other terms include *deflationism*, *phenomenal anti-realism* and various forms of skepticism about qualia.

So philosophy does not lack vocabulary.

My problem is more mundane.

What do you call the **person**?

If I say:

I am an atheist.

the sentence works immediately.

You know roughly which kind of claim I reject. The word does not prove atheism, settle theology or tell you everything else I believe. It simply makes the position socially legible.

Now try:

I am an illusionist.

That sentence already means something else.

In my case, absurdly, the other meaning also fits.

But even without the stage-magic problem, *illusionist* carries an unfortunate implication. It sounds as though the person is claiming that experiences themselves are fake.

The distinction I care about is almost the opposite.

The experience is real. The process is real. The question is whether the system's account of the **nature** of that process is necessarily correct.

That is why the magic analogy works so well for me. An illusion does not mean nothing happened. A complicated sequence of very real events happened. The possible error lies in the model produced by the observer.

Perhaps introspection deserves the same caution.

Perhaps not.

But if I tell someone I am an “illusionist”, none of that distinction comes for free. I have to spend the next five minutes explaining that I do, in fact, believe pain exists.

“Phenomenal non-realist” solves the ambiguity by creating another problem: almost nobody is going to say it in ordinary conversation.

“Type-A materialist” sounds like a building specification.

“Deflationist” already has jobs elsewhere in philosophy.

“Qualia skeptic” is intelligible, but it sounds more like a description than an identity.

And perhaps this does not matter.

Academic terminology does not have to function as everyday identity language.

But I suspect the gap is becoming more relevant.

Questions about minds and experience are moving rapidly out of philosophy departments. Artificial systems are forcing ordinary people to talk about memory, self-models, perception, agency, aversion and perhaps eventually suffering in entities that do not fit comfortably into categories developed around humans.

We are going to need better distinctions than simply:

conscious

not conscious

And language matters. A distinction that requires half a lecture every time it is mentioned has difficulty surviving outside specialist literature.

“Atheist” did not solve theology.

It made one position easy to state.

I wonder whether there is an equivalent word missing here.

Before inventing one, the sensible thing is to ask someone who actually works in the field. Keith Frankish has spent years developing and defending contemporary illusionism, so the question I want to send him is deliberately small:

Is there an established ordinary noun for a person who accepts perception, pain, memory, dreams and other experiences as real physical or functional phenomena, while rejecting phenomenal consciousness or qualia as an additional irreducible property?

And if the closest answer really is just *illusionist*, is there a terminology problem here — not a problem with the theory, but a gap between philosophical vocabulary and ordinary identity language?

Perhaps his answer will simply be:

You are an illusionist.

In which case I will have to accept that I am one twice.

There are worse outcomes.

But until then, I have a placeholder.

I am X.

The philosophy has names.

I am still looking for mine.

RELATION MEMORY

NEARBY [Closing the Loop Is Not Waking Up](#) · Keeps operational capability separate from phenomenal experience when the essay briefly turns toward artificial systems.

NEARBY [The Readable Mind](#) · Connects the limits of introspection and surface readability to the wider question of what can be inferred about minds.

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