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Paul Stenner's response: Four clarifications on the soft problem of 'qualia as illusions'

I thank Keith Frankish for his response to my critique of illusionism. I won't repeat the main thrust of my argument here, but simply add four clarifications on those points about which he notes a sense of puzzlement or lack of certainty.

Clarification 1: Am I criticising Frankish or a caricature?

'I'm puzzled. I don't recognize Stenner's account of what I am doing or why I am doing it. Indeed, after reading Stenner's reply, I wasn't sure whether he disagrees with my actual views, as opposed to the caricature he presents.'

What I disagree with are Frankish's actual views in so far as I can determine them from their expression in print. But I *also disagree* with the views of the 'caricature' I present. A good caricature is an objectification designed to accentuate distinctive features of the model so as to bring them out sharply for attention. For sure the caricature is *my* way of objectifying Frankish's views. Frankish's views themselves exceed the limits of my objectification. This is because I am not Frankish. Frankish is Frankish. Frankish exists in my environment and is one of many elements that form my experience (let us follow an old tradition and call this my *formal* existence). For him and his views to enter my experience he must become an object of my experience, which means that I must objectify him. I can do that only via his public expressions (e.g. his publicly expressed views on illusionism, art, etc). This means that *in my experience* Frankish has a reality we can call, following this same tradition, *objective*. Formal reality is hence broader than mere objective reality. For me Frankish is *merely* objective (he exists as an object for me). For Frankish himself, his own reality is more than objective. He exists *formally* in and as his own reality. And from his perspective, it is me whose reality is merely objective. So, I have presented Frankish with a picture of his views which puzzles him. I do not present him in the way he would like to be presented. Perhaps my way of objectifying him (my caricature) unsettles his preferred self-narration and introduces alien elements from an outside with which he is only dimly familiar. My intent is to exhibit something of the bigger picture within which his contributions knowingly or unknowingly participate.

Clarification 2: Is Frankish motivated by a desire to defend materialism?

'Stenner thinks I am motivated in this aim by a desire to defend a crude form of materialism, which ignores modern physics.'

Frankish makes this observation more than once. For example he concludes with the following: 'Stenner's hostility to illusionism seems to stem from the impression that it is a radical form of eliminativism, motivated solely by a crude and strongly reductionist form of materialism.' Now I am quite aware that no one likes to think of their own position as 'crude'. Especially if you are a philosopher, it is not a nice thing to think of your own position

as 'crude'. If one knew one's position to be crude one would change that position to something more sophisticated. But to me this word 'crude' is not the issue. The issue, for me, is that Frankish offers one more in a long line of defences of physicalism. I don't think he ignores modern physics. As I said in my critique, his position is a 21st century variant on the sort of physicalism articulated by Galileo at the birth of modern physics (I'm not saying it is the *same* and nor does it matter if Frankish is aware or not of Galileo's position). Of course, not having met him, I do not know Frankish's actual desires. It is possible that he is motivated by noble educational virtues or by a desire to perform and to grab a bit of attention. I simply don't know. Perhaps he is not terribly invested in the content of the argument he makes, and would switch sides in a moment if it profited him in some other way, and perhaps he is deeply committed. Again, I do not know. What I do know is that the argument he makes has a life of its own and a history of its own. Frankish participates in this genealogy whether he is aware of it or not. So let me rephrase. Whether aware of it or not, Frankish's argument defends a purely physicalist materialism.

Clarification 3: Does Frankish's position really only allow for physicalist entities and forces?

'Stenner thinks this is a trick too, saying that I wouldn't accept an argument as strong enough unless it was a physicalist one... I don't understand this.'

Again, a commendable acknowledgement of lack of comprehension. My clarifying answer is that Frankish does indeed only allow room for physicalist explanations *within science*, but at the same time he implicitly assumes the existence of what he thinks of as 'non physical' entities. This 'having his cake and eating it' necessarily leads him into difficulties (he can actually neither have his cake nor eat it). He wants to affirm the existence of the non-physical things, but he also wants to keep them out of science based on an argument for their non-existence (non-existence as *physical* things). For example, in clarifying his physicalism during his riposte he insists that '*everything is physical* [my emphasis] in the broad sense of being ultimately grounded in the entities posited by physics'. But then he immediately adds a footnote saying: 'More accurately, every *spatiotemporally located* thing; abstract entities are another matter'. So, much like Descartes, he divides the universe into things located in space and time (physical things) and things not located in space and time (so-called 'abstract entities' like his beloved 'qualia', but perhaps also like the *theories* of physics themselves). It seems, therefore, that in the universe according to Frankish there are (at least) two kinds of things: a) concrete 'spatiotemporally located' things and b) abstract things. Physical things and qualia. Because he frames the world in these well-established dualistic terms, these spooky metaphysical 'abstract things' leave him puzzled. His illusionist version of eliminativism repeats the long-established gesture of *eliminating* these puzzling things that to seem to him undeniably to exist and yet do not fit the materialist picture (because they seem to him not to exist in time and space). But he doesn't eliminate them after Galileo's fashion (a thought experiment involving removing ears, tongue, eyes etc). Rather, the supposed 'non-physical' things assumed to exist are presented as *in principle* (if not in practice) explainable by purely physical means, and hence the thoroughly dualistic position is magically transformed (via the hypothetical scientific elimination) into a position that can think of itself as physically monistic or anti-dualistic.

This might be difficult to grasp because it means that Frankish is a physicalist *because he is a dualist*. His physicalism is what allows him to eliminate the things that fall on the abstract side of his dualism. In short, the abstract things are dealt with as if they were *illusions* generated by the physical things. In this account qualia both exist (as in the quotation above) and do not exist. As Frankish explains in his riposte, unlike the ‘qualia illusionist’ (who recognises that qualia *do exist*, but merely as illusions), only the ‘qualia realist’ believes that qualia *actually exist*. Everywhere, Frankish insists on this trick of dividing things into variants of this simple duality. In *Galileo’s Real Error* (Frankish, 2021), for example, he identifies two philosophical camps. The camp with which he agrees maintains ‘a *materialist* [my emphasis] line... *sensory properties are brain properties* [my emphasis]’ whilst the other is rejected because it retains a distinction between brain and a soul-like mind. In the story Frankish likes to tell, the materialist view must win out because some time during the mid-20th Century ‘mind-body dualism’ was allegedly ‘widely rejected in favour of some form of *mind-brain identity* [my emphasis]’. To give a second example, in his riposte he can envisage *only two* views of consciousness: the ‘reactive view’ (which assumes qualia can be reduced to physical processes) and the ‘intrinsic view’ (which doesn’t). He rejects the ‘intrinsic’ view because it remains dualistic in the sense that it is committed to ‘qualia realism’. Frankish’s illusionism eliminates the ‘abstract’ side of the presupposed dualism by assuming that the abstract things are reducible to the effects of the physical things. When assumed in this way, the result is not only a physicalist theory, but one which includes as valid only physicalist explanations.

So, despite Frankish’s riposte, I think it is safe to repeat my observation that he is indeed defending a purely physicalist materialism and indeed that this thesis is his way of resolving a problematic dualism that he takes completely for granted. When he ‘sets the record straight’ in the conclusion of his riposte, he describes his actual position as ‘a modest, ontologically deflationary view, which brings consciousness within the scope of scientific investigation.’ This makes it seem as if his physicalism has disappeared before our eyes. But it has not disappeared because the modest ‘ontological deflation’ is nothing but the promise of one day achieving a physicalist explanation of ‘qualia’ (i.e. a deflation-by-elimination) which brings ‘consciousness within the scope of scientific investigation’ only by means of this empty promise of a fully materialist explanation. The only condition upon which he would accept that qualia are irreducible to physical processes is irrefutable experimental proof that these ‘produce changes in the physical state of the brain that cannot be explained in terms of known physical forces’ (in this respect Frankish might find it useful to begin by reading the classic neuropsychological work of Roger Sperry and his followers, or the New York neuroscientist Jason W Brown).

Clarification 4: Why do I suggest that nobody in fact seriously argues that qualia are ‘all in the mind’?

‘The choice between the two views depends on whether you think qualia exist — whether you are a *qualia realist* — so I shall say a little about this. Stenner doubts that anyone is a qualia realist...’

Yes indeed. For Frankish, everything seems to hang on questions about ‘qualia’. He creates just this impression and makes us imagine that there are only two options: qualia illusionism

and qualia realism. As I explained in my critique, the notion of qualia is just one side of a long-redundant metaphysics of substance for which the world is composed of self-contained *substances* which are *qualified* by *attributes* (size, shape, colour, weight, smell etc). Plato and Aristotle took for granted that this stone (substance) *is* hard and grey (qualifying attributes). Galileo knew better, but to develop modern physics he did not need to seriously trouble himself with questions concerning the relationships between animal senses and the physical variables with which they are adapted to resonate. He could happily eliminate them from his physics. We now know much more about how experiences of colour, smell etc arise in the relationship between organism and world. I suggested that Frankish falsely assumes a widespread belief (especially amongst philosophers it seems) that, say, the smell of bacon is 'actually a private mental quality'. For Frankish the 'qualia realist' is one who believes such experiences to be *purely private mental qualities*. He thinks such beliefs are running rife and need to be countered by a dose of illusionism because such experiences are actually the outcome of physical processes. I disagree, but not because I don't think 'physical processes' are involved: they quite obviously are. I disagree because I do not see a plague of 'qualia realists' insisting that the smell of bacon exists only in their minds and has nothing to do with their noses or brains or with the sizzling pan in front of them. Indeed my criticism of Frankish was based on observing the 'sleight of hand' by means of which he substituted these interminable debates about 'qualia' for the much broader notion of 'subjectivity' (here I merely note that in my view an adequate notion of subjectivity must go far beyond Frankish's notion of matters 'shaped by the subject's biology, psychology, and personal history' and must indeed grapple with distinctions between privacy and publicity, intrinsic and extrinsic – subjectivity is poorly understood as mere expression of opinion, or as mere reaction).

I will spare the reader a reiteration of my argument here, and will finish by returning to the importance of the reality of this broader notion of subjectivity. In his riposte, to illustrate quite how rife 'qualia realism' is amongst philosophers, Frankish makes an example of Chalmers (1996). Chalmers quotes Nagel's famous argument which invites his reader to wonder what it feels like to be a bat. The Chalmers / Nagel style of argument seems to be at the root of Frankish's concerns because Chalmers uses the term 'qualia' to get at this idea of a qualitative or phenomenological 'feel' for another creature's perspective. But actually this whole debate is poorly understood as if it were a discussion about the ontological status of 'qualia'. At root, it seems to me, it is about the capacity of one creature to recognise that another creature may or may not be understandable as a centre of agency in its own right, with its own preferences and inclinations. The question: 'What's it like to be a bat?' is a way of inviting the interlocutor to wonder if a bat might be a creature with its own way of *feeling the world*. If the answer is affirmative, then the interlocutor has found a way of imagining what it might feel like to be that bat. The same would apply to the question: 'What's it like to be Keith Frankish? Indeed, this brings us full circle because it returns us to the distinction I introduced in clarification 1 between formal and objective reality (which is one route to a richer notion of subjectivity). It is one thing for me to observe a bat, or Frankish, from the outside. As I watch the bat flutter I am objectifying it as one of many elements that form my experience (i.e. *my* formal existence as a feeling observer). But – contra Frankish's mythical 'qualia realist' - I also know that the bat does not exist *only* as objectified in my experience (i.e. as something *purely private*). The bat – considered as its own real centre of experience - also has its own *formal* reality. Indeed, while I am busy objectifying it, the bat may well be in

the process of objectifying me (doubtless with the help of its built-in sonar equipment). From this perspective, what Nagel is actually doing is inviting us to wonder if, in its own bat-like way, the bat may also be engaged in the business of producing objectifications of the world around it. It is this capacity for perspective taking that is actually at stake in asking the question *is there something it is like to be that being?* It is to credit that there are things in nature (including human beings) which, like us, are *capable of feeling* other things in nature.

Hence I address Frankish not as a mere object of my experience, but as a being himself with his own reality that exceeds my objectifications because he is *more than* objective. He exists *formally* in and as his own reality. The formal reality is that of the subject who objectifies. And to be ethical is to take care with one's objectifications. To be ethical, as Buber made clear, I must recognise Keith Frankish not merely as an objectified 'it' but as a full-fledged *thou* – a recognised centre of agency in his own right, struggling like the rest of us to make sense of the world around him. This, along perhaps with the preoccupations of Chalmers and Nagel, is not a matter of misplaced belief in the 'reality of qualia'. It is a matter of the reality of the world and the reciprocal dignity of those who inhabit it. Does a leader recognise the rights of citizens or simply instrumentalise them (or worse)? Reciprocal dignity requires recognition of the subjectivity proper to each of us that exceeds objectivity. The physical sciences are marvels of human ingenuity and production, but they have not served us well in this respect and are, whilst essential, not adequate to the significant human socio-political challenges we face. It is in this context that tricksters are taking on an ever more problematic complexion.