

DESCRIPTION FOR THE GENERAL PUBLIC

The project addresses the fundamental question of the relation between phenomenal consciousness and the physical world. Does consciousness have physical nature? And can we intelligibly think that consciousness is physical? I argue that the answers to both questions are negative. This is related to the fact that it is conceivable that consciousness is not physical (that conscious states occur in the absence of physical states or that physical states occur in the absence of conscious states). This conceivability entails that there are possible zombie worlds, that is, worlds identical to our world in all physical respects but lacking consciousness, which implies further that consciousness is not dependent on physical facts. The conceivability of mind-body distinctness also entails that we cannot conceptually grasp the claim that consciousness is physical.

In the context of the first issue, I argue that it is hard to accept that zombies are impossible despite being conceivable. We have no good reason to believe that there is a space of possible worlds that does not correspond to a space of ideally conceivable worlds. Moreover, it is *ad hoc* to suppose that zombies are both conceivable and impossible. This is because it is hard to explain why the conceivability of zombies – by contrast to other conceivability intuitions – should be unreliable as a guide to possibility.

In the context of the second issue, I defend two claims. First, we do not understand how consciousness can be dependent on physical facts, because we do not understand how zombies can be impossible despite being conceivable. We do not understand this, because we cannot explain this. Secondly, we cannot intelligibly think that conscious states are identical with physical states, because there is incoherence between the claim that we can think this and the conceivability of mind-body distinctness. I explain this incoherence by analyzing conceivability in modal terms within the framework of the so-called two-dimensional semantics.

The issue of the metaphysical nature of consciousness is particularly interesting to me, because the philosophical notions that we use when we talk about consciousness are quite different from the philosophical notions that we use when we talk about natural kinds. For example, phenomenal concepts (the concepts we use when we introspect our own conscious states) function differently than the concepts of natural kinds, and the conceivability of mind-body distinctness is semantically quite different than the conceivability of the distinctness of natural kinds and their corresponding theoretical kinds (such as water and H₂O). These differences are the subject of analysis in my project.