1. The Canonical Conceivability Argument (presented inferentially).

[Where P stands for the totality of Facts couched in physical terms and Q stands for some phenomenal truth]

(1) P & ~Q is (robustly) conceivable. (Zombies are conceivable)

(2) Thus P & ~Q is Possible. (Zombies are possible)

(3) Thus Materialism is false. (Instead, we should be “Super”-Materialists.)

2. A Catalog of Responses

Deny that there are any phenomenal facts like Q: Type-E Eliminativism

Deny first step: Type-A Materialism (Analytic Functionalism)

Deny first step: Type-B Materialism

Deny third step: Type-??  [Chalmers doesn’t dignify this with a letter.]

3. Most of the recent action concerns the inference from conceivability \( \rightarrow \) possibility, and thus the viability of a Type-B response:

And here’s the apparent difficulty:

On the assumption that identities between kinds are necessary, then we have to explain away apparent contingencies of such identities. In the case of mundane material kinds, we can explain away the felt sense of contingency by claiming we conflate a certain kind with the marks or criteria by which we identify something as belonging to that kind. [We mistake a “primary intension” of a term for its “secondary intension.”] In the case of phenomenal kinds, however, such a maneuver seems unavailable, since no such wedge can be drawn between phenomenal kinds and the marks we use to identify them as such. Phenomenal types seem self-presenting; we cannot help but identify sensations or pains as such.

4. The focus in this paper is on several responses that Chalmers (2003) has recently found “hard-to classify,” primarily because they don’t reject the conceivability or possibility of zombies – at least not in the standard fashion:

   - Reverse-Zombie Arguments (Frankish, Brown)
5. Anti- (or Reverse) Zombie Considerations (Brown and Frankish)

The Basic Idea: The original conceivability argument cannot be sound, because we can just as easily concoct parallel arguments purportedly establishing the falsity of dualistic “super-materialism.”

The parallel argument begins with the conceivability of a purely physicalistic world that contains consciousness. So think here of an anti-zombie as a minimal physical duplicate of us that IS conscious

(1’) Anti-Zombies are (equally) conceivable.

(2’) Anti-Zombies are thus possible

(3’) Thus Dualism is false.*

*The third step is a product of the broadly Kripkean idea that true identities between kinds are necessary: So if there is a possible identity between physical and phenomenal kinds, then that identity must hold in all possible worlds (including, presumably the actual one).

6. Note that to the extent that the anti-zombie arguments parallel the original conceivability argument, they suggest the unsoundness of that argument, without pointing out exactly where it goes wrong. In that respect, it resembles Gaunilo’s rejection of the ontological argument.

But one interesting point of departure is that unlike Gaunilo, it isn’t clear that Frankish and Brown really reject their own parallel arguments. Brown, for instance, thinks that the parallel shows that we ought to question the conceivability of Chalmers’ Zombies, while Frankish thinks it challenges their possibility. Brown thus rejects (1) but not (1’), while Frankish puts more pressure on (2) but not (2’).

By way of reply, Chalmers seems to say that if it’s a contest between the robust conceivability of zombies or anti-zombies, then his bet is that zombies win, hands down. (And I think he might win that contest.)

7. Speaking of the ontological argument....
Yablo brings up a similar argument (which he attributes to Hartshorne): On the Anselmian idea that if God exists, then God exists necessarily, it would seem that we could establish the actual existence of God simply by showing God’s possibility. And since God is conceivable...

However, Yablo points out that Hartshorne’s argument is equally threatened by the bare possibility that such a God doesn’t exist. Since it seems just as conceivable that there isn’t a God as that there is, Yablo warns us that in cases like these, with strong modal implications, we should be extra wary of the leap from conceivability to bonafide metaphysical possibility, for it leads (in this case) to contradictory conclusions. This, of course, is also the message of the anti-zombie chronicles.

[By way of reply, Chalmers tells us that he’s not convinced of the robust conceivability of a necessarily existing deity.]

8. With respect to the conceivability argument, Yablo claims that there is a slide from epistemic to metaphysical possibility.

Specifically, there is a slide from

“It is conceptually possible that there be zombies.”

To

“There is a conceptually possible zombie world.”

[A slide, I would suggest, that is facilitated by the idea that the concepts animating the [ZOMBIE]concept (and their negations have settled secondary intensions.)]

9. Conditional Analysis (Hawthorne and Braddon-Mitchell)

The Basic Idea. From our epistemic position (or “As far as we know”), we can rule out neither materialism nor super-materialism. An “oracle” could tell us either way. So we must at least entertain the thought that a thoroughly materialistic world is actual.

Thus Hawthorne fangles phenomenal* concepts with explicitly conditional structures, and then argues that we cannot rule out that our own ordinary concepts depart from these:

IF our (the actual) world is materialistic, then our substantive talk about experiences will refer to the stuff of physicalistic discourse.

IF, on the other hand, the actual world is supermaterialistic, then our substantive talk about experiences just might refer to a supermaterial dimension of reality that lodges somewhere in the nooks and crannies not investigated by traditional materialistic sciences.
In effect, conditional analysis tries (rather clumsily) to soften the rigidity of phenomenal concepts, by stipulating that they can refer to different “stuff” in different possible worlds.

10. Stalnaker’s “What is it Like to be a Zombie?”

Like Hawthorne, Stalnaker also suspects that disagreements between supermaterialists and their foes reflect different understandings of the terms animating the debate. Thus disputes between different camps might just be verbal. Moreover, apparent agreement might be an artifact of underlying semantic and substantive disagreements offsetting one another.

“The question is not whether a certain conceivable situation is metaphysically possible; it is whether a certain situation that is agreed to be metaphysically possible is correctly described in a certain way.” (p. 389)

Stalnaker attempts to ferret out the various points of contact by envisioning a conversation between a representative super-materialist (Dave), a Type A materialist (Sydney), an eliminative materialist (Pat), and a Type-B materialist (Anne).

11. Stalnaker’s finding: Type-A Materialists, Eliminativists, and Super-materialists each have conceptions of phenomenal consciousness that carry theoretical baggage in their tow. The eliminativist and Type-A materialist might have the same overarching theory in mind, yet differ in their respective opinions about the fate of such a theory. The supermaterialistic conception of consciousness carries in its wake distinct theoretical commitments.

The type-B materialist, by contrast, (at least according to Stalnaker) pleads for us to adopt a much less theory-laden notion of consciousness that is equally applicable to materialistic and supermaterialistic conceptions. To avoid begging the question, we need to conduct the debate in a context which considers both materialism and supermaterialism as live possibilities: “What we will try to do is to consider both the z-world and the a-world as actual: as possible worlds that are compatible with the context in which our debate is framed.”

12. Here’s what he has “Anne” has to say to Dave:

So, if you are going to take our materialism seriously, you must consider the world that we think we are in as actual, which means entertaining the possibility that our thesis is actually true. Now of course you might argue that our position is incoherent – that there is no possible world of the kind we think we are in. But you grant that the z-world is possible. You think of it as a zombie world, but suppose you discovered that the z-world is possible. You think of it as a zombie world, but suppose you discovered that the z-world was not only possible but actual? (God reveals to you that all there is, is supervenient on the physical.) Would you conclude that you are a zombie – that your consciousness is an illusion? Of course not.
13. So we get something that looks very much like conditional analysis:

“If we are in fact in an a-world, as Dave believes, then there are counterfactual zombie worlds. But if the materialists are right, and we live in a z-world, then there are no possible worlds correctly described as zombie worlds. Whether or not Dave’s dualism is true, if we can coherently suppose that it is true, then we can coherently suppose that zombies are possible, and so can form a coherent conception of zombies. But if this is the only sense in which zombies are conceivable, their conceivability will provide no argument against materialism, since we must assume that materialism is false to be justified in inferring that zombies are possible from the fact they are conceivable.” (p. 399)

Note that Stalnaker thinks that pressure should be put on the C→P inference (step 2 of the original argument. However, I want to suggest that that ISN’T the only option available…

14. Anne might as well be Kati: Balog’s “Zombie Refutation”

Balog tries to gain mileage from what Chalmers calls “The Paradox of phenomenal judgement.” Zombie Jackson (and also zombie Dave Chalmers) will go through the standard anti-physycalist arguments, and by supermaterialist lights, seem to get it all wrong!

(1) Since Zombie-Jackson’s argument is clearly unsound, one of the premises (or steps) must be unwarranted.

(2) But (given some plausible assumptions about Zombish concepts), the truth or falsity of Zombie-Jackson’s premises seem to stand or fall with the truth of Jackson’s premises.

So (3), one of the steps of Jackson’s argument must be unwarranted.

[Chalmers, BTW, denies the parallel: To him, Q just does not hold in a zombie world. But that kinda plays into her overall point, which is that proponents of the conceivability argument are forced to adopt an unintuitive and inappropriately uncharitable attitude toward zombie talk. From the supermaterialistic perspective, zombie talk would have to be either altogether incoherent, meaningless, or just plain false.

The upshot: The conceivability of zombies just goes to show that it isn’t inconceivable after all for concepts that play the same conceptual role as our phenomenal concepts to refer directly to physiological states (thus we get the conceivability of Balog’s “Yogis.”)

15. And so we come full circle

The Common Thread: Each of the replies I’ve canvassed tries seriously to envision the perspective of a minimal physical duplicate of our world (a “z-world”), and it is found that this
perspective isn’t nearly as “dark inside” (or as inconceivable) as Supermaterialists would have us believe.

The general complaint: Proponents of the conceivability argument have a remarkably ambivalent attitude toward such a world. While conceivably possible they just cannot be conceivably actual.

What the proponents of the conceivability argument fail to do is to adequately close off this admitted possibility as actual. That is, the conceivability argument fails because it is unable to inoculate our own world from potential zombification. This is the central insight behind what I now call “Type-Z responses” to the conceivability argument.

16. Elsewhere, I’ve cheekily suggested that the best materialistic strategy to pursue against the conceivability argument is to embrace not only the conceivability and possibility of zombies, but also their (potential) actuality.

- The reply simply is to point out that for all we know, we might just happen to live in a z-world: We are, in effect zombies (if we have to talk that way) - just what Chalmers envisions when he so stridently asserts the possibility of a zombie world).

17. But the claim that we just might be zombies requires a whole lot of backpedaling and qualification as soon as it is presented.

Chalmers: Anyone who seriously entertains the idea that our epistemic position is equivalent to that of a zombie “just doesn’t understand” the concept of a zombie:

Here, the natural response is that this scenario is simply not what we are conceiving when we conceive of a zombie. Perhaps it is possible to conceive of a being with another sort of state – call it “schmonsciousness” – to which it stands in the same sort of epistemic relation we stand in to consciousness. Schmonsciousness would not be consciousness, but it would be epistemically just as good. It is by no means obvious that a state such as schmonsciousness is conceivable, but it is also not obviously inconceivable. However, when we ordinarily conceive of zombies, we are not conceiving of beings with something analogous to consciousness that is epistemically just as good. Rather we are conceiving of beings with nothing epistemically analogous to consciousness at all.

Put differently, when we conceive of zombies, we are not conceiving of beings whose inner life is as rich as ours, but different in character. We are conceiving of beings whose inner life is dramatically poorer than our own.(p. 179)
18. So here’s the qualification: It’s not that we lack consciousness altogether; it’s only that we lack consciousness as Super-materialists are wont to talk about it.

We need to keep in mind that there are actually 2 ways of talking in play in the conceivability argument, Zombish (the language of what Chalmers calls “schmonsciousness”) and “Angelic” (the language of what he calls “consciousness”), which correspond to two distinct open epistemic possibilities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Zombish World</th>
<th>Angelic World</th>
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<tr>
<td>P &amp; ~Q(sm)</td>
<td>P &amp; Q(sm)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P &amp; Q (m)</td>
<td>P &amp; ~Q(m)</td>
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[Note the departure here from Hawthorne’s Conditional Analysis. Since his *-Concepts apply equally well to Angelic Worlds, he’s committed to the truth of Q* there. By contrast, I would like to say that such worlds do not have consciousness as materialists would like to understand it. The distinction is between one overarching concept that may apply to two distinct substances, and two distinct homophonic concepts.]

19. Minding our P’s and Q’s:

Now it’s interesting to see just what Chalmers does in order to block the second, materialistic way of speaking in his (2003). Here’s what he has to say:

A familiar complication arises from the observation that physicalism about our world is compatible with the possibility of dualism in other worlds, and in particular is compatible with the possibility of a physically identical world that contains extra, nonphysical phenomenology. This means that if Q is a negative truth about our world — say, the truth that no-one instantiates a certain phenomenal property — then materialism about our world is compatible with the possibility of P&~Q. To finesse this point, we can stipulate that in the argument above, Q is a positive truth (one that holds in all worlds that contain a duplicate of our world; see Chalmers 1996, p. 40): if Q is a positive truth, then materialism is incompatible with the possibility of P&~Q. Alternatively, we can conjoin P with a "that’s-all" statement T, stating that the world is a minimal world that satisfies P (see Jackson 1998, p. 26). Then even when Q is a negative truth, materialism is not compatible with the possibility of PT&~Q (where PT is the conjunction of P and T).

Notice that in effect this is tantamount to saying that “positively construed phenomenal facts just couldn’t obtain in a minimal physical duplicate of our world. This stipulation has the effect of closing off materialism from the very outset!!

20. And Chalmers General Complaint to these hard-to-classify responses is similarly question begging.
He tells us that these replies do not grant the genuine conceivability of zombies, but rather their mere “metaconceivability.” (Thus they really are ways of rejecting the first premise, even though their proponents claim to be challenging the second.)

And so he claims more generally that materialism is not as directly conceivable as Supermaterialism. It’s only conceivable in some attenuated or indirect, “meta” sense (or as I like to say, it’s only conceivable “at arms length”).

However, whether a possibility is only conceivable” at arms length” presupposes that we know where it is we stand!

Chalmers own distinction between primary and secondary intensions (between evaluating truth in a world considered as actual as opposed to as counterfactual), presupposes that we have some grip on the contours of the actual world. But the epistemic uncertainty signified by the conceptual possibility of zombies just goes to show that we lack this requisite grasp of reality.

21. So we’ve achieved a more considered diagnosis of what’s going wrong. The proponent of the conceivability argument gets supermaterialistic mileage only by insisting from the outset that the argument be conducted in a way of talking about conscious experience that is appropriate only to supermaterialistic, angelic worlds or that presupposes that our own concepts could not be zombish concepts.

Once again, the complaint calls to mind one of Stalnaker’s pleas for a theoretically neutral starting point: “We believe, for instance, that there is no water on counterfactual twin earth, but we beg the question if we assume this in a discussion with someone who thinks that we actually are in such a world.” (p. 393)

As well as a similar remark by Hawthorne: “The more metaphysical baggage one builds into a mentalistic concept, the less one can discern whether it applies to oneself simply on the basis of experience.” (p. 42)

22. It is crucial to point out this infelicity in the conceivability argument is NOT to challenge the supermaterialists’ space of either conceivability or possibility. Instead, as Stalnaker points out, the type-Z materialist should question the manner in which the supermaterialist describes these spaces.

The complaint is that the supermaterialist describes these spaces in a manner that illicitly shifts the actual world off of a z-world. The proponents of the conceivability argument insist that the argument be conducted within a perspective from which zombies are both conceivable and possible. It is granted by these “hard-to-classify” responses that this perspective is epistemically possible but nevertheless optional. There is, at the same time, a possible materialistic perspective which seems to closes off the robust conceivability and possibility of zombies.
23. Once again, Chalmers renders this possibility invisible by his stipulation that in the conceivability argument, phenomenal facts need to be construed positively – and so be true in all possible worlds containing duplicates of our own. That is, any supermaterial world would have to contain consciousness as we talk about it. Not only does that stipulation saddle materialism with unwarranted modal commitments, I would submit that it goes well beyond our “ordinary” sense of consciousness.

24. So the Type-Z reply is to grant the conceivability (and possibility!) of both material and supermaterial worlds, and yet to say that ours still might be just a thoroughly material world. And if the latter possibility holds, then the minimal physical duplicate of our world would happen to be the actual one. By Lewis’ lights, then, physicalism just might be true of our world.

- Recognizes the idea that materialism is advanced here as a modest, contingent thesis (the possibility of a zombie world also suggests this): The connection between the physical and the phenomenal here falls short of entailment. That is, an appropriately construed physicalism should not imply the necessity of the “Psycho-physical conditional.”

[** Caveat: defending this last claim might well call for an analysis of phenomenal concepts whereby they turn out not to have to denote substantial kinds or properties in their own right. Perhaps they have more of an insubstantial, expressive function or that they function more like descriptions. Note that the conditional Analysis also tries (rather clumsily) to get around the rigid designation of phenomenal concepts. Phenomenal Concepts can apply to different stuff in different ]

25. And so in this more modest guise, the Type-Z reply is to question the move from (2) to (3) [and also (2’) to (3’)]. The mistake is to think that physicalism needs to carry in its wake excessively strong modal commitments. That’s the flaw in both the zombie and the anti-zombie arguments.

26. However, claiming that the mistake is in the third premise or inference is still a little misleading, for it suggests that the proponent of this response accepts both the conceivability and possibility of zombies. But that is so, only if the proponent is forced to engage the conceivability argument in its own terms. Actually, the lesson is that we should reject the concepts animating the conceivability argument altogether. And that is what really makes responses in this vicinity so hard to classify by Chalmers’ lights, as a simple rejection of one premise or another.
Specifically, we should reject those steps of the argument that mention either zombies (or positively construed phenomenal facts). Note that the third step in the argument (presented inferentially) does not contain either of these concepts.

27. So what is so wrong with |ZOMBIES|? The concept licenses unwarranted, suspiciously ampliative inference tickets from minimally physical duplicates of our world to the lack of phenomenal concepts. That is, the very concept embodies inferences which the Type-Z materialist (indeed, any materialist) is bound to question:

Entrance Rules: A minimal materialistic duplicate of us $\rightarrow P$ (and that’s all!) is true of it $\rightarrow$ It is a Zombie.

Exit Rule: It is a Zombie $\rightarrow$ Q does not hold of it $\rightarrow$ It Lacks Phenomenal Consciousness.

Thus, embodied in this concept is the idea that Minimal Physical Duplicates must lack Phenomenal Consciousness. That is, the very concept licenses the claim that consciousness must be supermaterial.

- Note that it isn’t that the materialist of this stripe fails to understand the zombie concept; the Type-Z materialist understand it all too well perfectly well. That’s the whole problem!!

28. Importantly, the attitude of rejecting a concept is not to say that things answering to it are either inconceivable or impossible.

Consider Dummett’s hidebound example of |BOCHE|. We reject the concept, not because boches are inconceivable or impossible. We reject it because the inferences substantive or real-world applications of the concept license just don’t happen to be robust in our world.

To be sure, the odd thing about |ZOMBIE| is that unlike |BOCHE| it is engineered to have only counterfactual application. But we can make the same point if we turn our attention instead to the specific, supermaterialist conception of consciousness, |Q|, that breathes life into the |ZOMBIE| concept. Like |PHLOGISTON|, this concept might turn out not to have a secondary intension (an application in the actual world) from which we can project counterparts into other possible worlds. Still, that doesn’t mean that we must refrain from deploying that concept “hypothetically speaking.” Thus while zombies might not happen to infest any minimal physical duplicates of our world, that doesn’t preclude us from conceiving or countenancing their genuine possibility. [That’s just good cinema!] Pace Dennett, they aren’t “unimaginably preposterous.”

29. In short, the type-Z materialist simply rejects the inferences that the |ZOMBIE| concept embodies (without denying that those inferences are robust from the perspective of other possible worlds. Thus this attitude is meant to countenance the genuine contingency of materialism (or – the same thing – the bonafide possibility of supermaterialism).
It's a strategy of “hypothetically granting” the first two steps of the conceivability argument, while denying that the third step follows.
References


