

The 'philosophical zombies' argument

PROPERTY DUALISM

Property dualism is the view that, although there is just one kind of substance, physical substance, there are two fundamentally different kinds of property, mental and physical. Mental properties are possessed by physical substances; but at least some mental properties do not depend on physical properties in the way physicalism claims. The form of property dualism that is most discussed defends property dualism for phenomenal properties of consciousness. Property dualism claims that these properties, such as pain, the smell of coffee, the visual experience of a red rose, the feeling of joy, and so on, can't be reduced to physical, behavioural or functional properties. These properties, at least, are a completely new, irreducible type of property.

Property dualism rejects physicalism. First, it argues that the properties identified by physics do not form the *complete* fundamental nature of the universe, because in addition, there are properties of consciousness. Physics misses something fundamental. When all the physical properties of the world are finalized, there is still work to be done - properties of consciousness have not been fixed. Property dualists are happy to allow that there may be correlations, even natural (though not physical) laws that connect particular physical and mental properties. But, they argue, mental properties are nevertheless distinct - an entirely new kind of property in the world. Second, some property dualists argue that these mental properties have their own causal powers, which can affect physical events. This threatens physicalism's claim that non-physical causes do not contribute to the way the physical world changes over time.

Chalmers distinguishes between what he calls the 'easy' and the 'hard' problems of consciousness. The 'easy' problem involves analysing and explaining the functions of consciousness, e.g. the facts that we can consciously control our behaviour, report on our mental states, and focus our attention. Chalmers thinks that understanding how the brain works will eventually provide the solutions. So this doesn't threaten physicalism. The 'hard' problem relates to the phenomenal properties of consciousness, what it is like to undergo conscious experiences. How and why are certain physical processes in the brain associated with such experiences?

The physicalist says that these conscious experiences *just are* certain physical processes or certain physical states playing a particular functional role. But, Chalmers argues, a physical account of something can only explain its physical structure and function - how something is constituted and how it works. And this, he objects, is not enough to explain phenomenal consciousness. Such explanations miss out how experiences 'feel', what it is like to undergo them, their subjective or first-personal aspect. There is more to phenomenal consciousness than structure and function.

POSSIBLE WORLDS

To understand the 'zombie' argument for property dualism, we first need to understand the idea of a possible world.

A 'possible world' is a way of talking about how things could be. Propositions describe 'states of affairs'. Propositions can be true or false. A proposition that is true describes the actual world, the way things are, a true state of affairs. A proposition that is false describes the way things are not, a false state of affairs. However, false propositions can be necessarily false or just contingently false. A proposition that is necessarily false cannot be true - it is impossible for it to be true. A proposition that is only contingently false describes a state of affairs that is possible, but false, given how the world actually is. For example, 'I was born in Kenya' is false, but could have been true. A contingently false proposition describes a way things could be, if they were different. We can say that in some other 'possible world', a contingently false proposition is true, the state of affairs it describes is part of the way that world is. In some other possible world, I was born in Kenya.

Possible worlds are distinct from one another depending on what we are supposing to be true in that world. So the possible world in which I was born in Kenya is different from the possible world in which I was born in Argentina which is different from the possible world in which I don't exist at all. In different possible worlds, different things exist and the things that exist can have different properties from the properties they have in the actual world. We can also imagine possible worlds in which the laws of nature are different, e.g. in which light travels at a different speed.

THE ARGUMENT

A 'zombie', in the philosophical sense, is an exact physical duplicate of a person - you, for instance - but without any experiential consciousness. It therefore has identical physical properties to you, but different mental properties - it has no phenomenal consciousness.

Of course, zombies are not possible in the actual world, i.e. given the laws of our universe, any being that has identical physical properties to you will also have consciousness. What we are thinking about when thinking about zombies is a different possible world - a world which has all the physical properties of our world but without consciousness. To talk of different possible worlds is to talk of 'metaphysical possibility' - what could exist, but not in this world.

But is such a world really (metaphysically) possible? To argue that a world with zombies is possible is to argue for property dualism. The argument concludes that the properties of consciousness cannot be physical properties. How does it work?

First, it seems that zombies are at least conceivable. I've just described them, and there isn't an obvious contradiction in the idea. Second, given their conceivability, we may argue that zombies are therefore metaphysically possible. There is a possible world which has all the same physical properties as the actual world, but

has no properties of consciousness. Now, if consciousness were *identical* with physical properties, it would be impossible for a creature to have the same physical properties as you but not have consciousness. This is Leibniz's principle of the indiscernibility of identicals. If *A* is identical to *B* - if *A* is *B* - then you can't have *A* without *B* or vice versa; they are the same thing. So if zombies are possible - if a creature could be physically identical to you but not have consciousness - then consciousness is *not* identical to any physical properties. So, if zombies are metaphysically possible, then consciousness is not identical to any physical properties, and property dualism is true.

1. It is conceivable that there are zombies.
2. If it is conceivable that there are zombies, it is metaphysically possible that there are zombies.
3. If it is metaphysically possible that there are zombies, then phenomenal properties of consciousness are non-physical.
4. Therefore, property dualism is true.

Put another way: according to physicalism, everything that exists is either physical or depends on what is physical. So if physicalism is true, a world that is an exact physical duplicate of our world, with nothing else in addition, will be an exact duplicate of our world *in all respects*. Therefore, if there is a possible world that is an exact physical duplicate of our world but is different in any way, e.g. it has different (or no) psychological properties, physicalism is false. If two physically identical worlds have different properties of consciousness, those properties of consciousness don't depend on physical properties. So if zombies are possible, physicalism is false and property dualism is true.