

*Zombies and Consciousness*

By ROBERT KIRK

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We imagine Zombies as beings identical to us with respect to all physical and behavioural facts but different with respect to phenomenal facts. For example, zombies might say, just like us, ‘this grapefruit is really sour’ or ‘my left knee hurts’, but, unlike us, they have no phenomenal experiences corresponding to these utterances or to the relevant physical states. The idea of zombies has been used to construct the following argument against the physicalist approach to consciousness:

- (1) It is conceivable that there are zombies;
- (2) If it is conceivable that there are zombies, then it is possible that there are zombies;  
Therefore,
- (3) It is possible that there are zombies;
- (4) If it is possible that there are zombies, then physicalism is false;  
Therefore,
- (4) Physicalism is false.

Robert Kirk, the author of *Zombies and Consciousness*, is rare among philosophers in having recognized the importance of this argument as far back as the 1970s. The book is divided roughly into two parts. In the first part, i.e., from Chapters 2–4, Kirk discusses the zombie argument and provides his own objection to it. First, he accepts premise (4) of the argument. He says that if the existence of zombies were possible that would indeed undermine physicalism, even the most minimal version of it. He then argues not only that there is no good argument for the possibility of zombies, but that there is a good argument *against* the possibility. He maintains that “a proposition or situation is conceivable only if no amount of a priori reflection on it would reveal contradiction or other incoherence” (p. 28) and that in fact we can show that the existence of zombies will lead to “the fundamental incoherence of the conception of phenomenal consciousness” (p. 4). Kirk concludes, therefore, that while zombies might be *seemingly* conceivable, they are not really conceivable and, a fortiori, not possible.

Even if Kirk’s objection to the zombie argument were successful, that would not solve the general problem of phenomenal consciousness. Hence, in the second part of the book, i.e., from Chapters 5–11, he develops and defends a functionalist solution, which he derives in part from the failure of the zombie argument. In formulating his framework he notes that it would be naïve to expect our explanation of consciousness to be complete in the way that “the scientific formulas of chemical compounds” are. Instead, he says, “we can look for broad necessary and sufficient conditions in terms of everyday psychology” (p. 76). He contends that, if an organism is to have perceptual consciousness, it must be a “decider”, capable of exercising the “basic package” of six capacities, namely, capacities to (i) initiate and control its own behaviour on the basis of incoming and retained information; (ii) acquire and retain information about its environment; (iii) interpret that information; (iv) assess its situation; (v) choose between alternative courses of action on the basis of retained and incoming information; and (vi) have

goals (p. 89). Kirk argues that if a decider's acquisition of incoming perceptual information is "directly active", then the decider *is* phenomenally conscious. Kirk calls a decider with directly active perceptual information a "decider-plus" and contends that being a decider-plus is necessary and sufficient for having perceptual phenomenal consciousness. He claims that his functionalist solution is more tenable than existing alternatives, such as pure representationalism and higher-order thought theory.

I question Kirk's objection to the zombie argument. According to Kirk, this argument entails that qualia are epiphenomenal, and this in his view should trouble proponents of the zombie argument. If qualia were epiphenomenal, then "we could not think, talk, or know about the qualities of our experiences" (p. 44). The problem with Kirk's objection is the unmotivated assumption that knowledge of qualia and qualia themselves are distinct. Contrary to what he thinks, there might be no gap between knowledge of qualia and qualia themselves because having knowledge of a certain qualitative state is *identical* to being in that state.

Given the impression that the title gives, one might find the structure of the book slightly unbalanced. Kirk discusses the zombie argument in detail only in the first part, which constitutes about one quarter of the whole book. Nevertheless, every chapter of the book provides refreshingly original ideas and ingenious arguments. In spite of my doubts about certain particulars of Kirk's arguments, I can recommend the book to anyone who is interested in the problem of consciousness.

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