

Zombies & Essence

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Abstract

In the last few pages of *Naming and Necessity*, Kripke presents an argument against the thesis that mental properties are identical to physical properties. This argument crucially involves the claim that it is metaphysically possible for the physical realizers of conscious states to exist without being accompanied by any conscious experience (Kripke, 1980, *Naming and Necessity*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p. 146). That is to say, Kripke defends the metaphysical possibility of zombies, physical duplicates of conscious beings who lack consciousness (Chalmers, 1996. *The Conscious Mind*. Oxford: Oxford University Press). Thus, his argument tells against not just the mind-brain identity theory, but the thesis that the mental supervenes on the physical, which is accepted by most physicalists. Though there are many ways to cash out supervenience, most physicalists are committed at least to the view that any metaphysically possible world that is a duplicate of our world in physical respects (and contains no non-physical ‘extras’) is a mental duplicate of it.

Unfortunately, Kripke says less than one might like to justify the claim that zombies are metaphysically possible. One well-known way to argue for the possibility of zombies is to appeal to their conceivability (Chalmers 1996). We adopt a different albeit compatible approach, taking as our starting point Kripke’s claims about the essence of pain together with a framework involving an essentialist approach to metaphysical modality and an analytic essentialist approach to modal knowledge. After providing some motivation for adopting this framework, we argue from within it that zombies are metaphysically possible because they are logically compatible with all of the facts about essence, and hence that the mental does not strongly supervene on the physical.

What about the physicalist’s intuition that the mental is in some sense ‘nothing over and above’ the physical? We argue that this intuition can be given its due, even in the face of the failure of supervenience, if the mental is contingently grounded in the physical, that is, if the relation between the mental and physical is mediated by contingent, metaphysical laws.