

# Dispatches from the zombie wars

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Daniel C. Dennett

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Gregg Rosenberg

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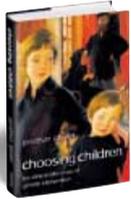
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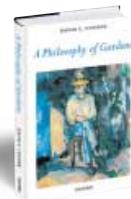
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In the philosophy of mind, as in the cinema, "zombies" are everywhere. But the philosophers' zombies do not gibber and drool and eat brains. A philosophical zombie is a creature that is outwardly and behaviourally exactly like a normal human being, and is even perhaps identical in its internal physical make-up, but is somehow completely devoid of conscious experience. Philosophers tell stories about these imaginary creatures, hoping to shed light on the relationship between mind and matter. Some think that serious reflection upon them undermines orthodox materialism – this is Gregg Rosenberg's contention in *A Place for Consciousness* – and most philosophers of mind accept that thinking about zombies raises important issues with which materialist theories of the mind must deal. Daniel C. Dennett, however, is flabbergasted. In *Sweet Dreams*, he predicts that future generations will find it "scarcely credible" that philosophers wasted their breath on such a "preposterous idea as zombies".

Both of these books are about conscious experience, especially the distinctive "way that it feels" to have experiences of different kinds – the "phenomenal aspects" of conscious experience. Some mental events have no distinctive phenomenal aspects (there is, for example, no single, characteristic "way that it feels" to believe the Pythagorean Theorem). Experiences, however, do include phenomenal aspects (or, in philosophers' jargon, "qualia"). The most prominent of the qualia experienced when looking at a stop sign is usually "phenomenal redness" – the quality (or "quale") that fills an octagonal part of one's visual field when looking at the sign, and which also turns up in red after-images or hallucinations. Similar things can be said about the phenomenal aspects of tastes, smells, sounds, pains, tickles and so on.

Qualia make trouble for materialists. Today's materialists have learned to live with little agreement among themselves about the nature of mental states; and they would not presume to guess what physics will finally say about the nature of matter. In the absence of a positive consensus, they have rallied the troops around the following more general doctrines, under the banner "physicalism": The universe consists entirely of "atoms in the void", or particles and fields, or hyper-dimensional superstrings, or whatever physics ultimately settles upon as the terms of the most fundamental causal transactions. These basic physical entities, they suppose, do not include minds or anything remotely mental. And everything that happens in the universe boils down to nothing but mindless, physical interactions among these basic entities.

There is controversy about what "boiling down" requires, but most who accept the label "physicalist" seem to agree upon two components. First, "higher level" phenomena – biological, psychological, sociological and so on – are determined by what goes on at the basic physical level; a universe that exactly duplicates our distribution of matter throughout space-time must include organisms, thoughts and political movements exactly like ours. Second, "higher

level" phenomena must be ultimately explicable in basic physical terms. It may not be very useful, given our usual purposes, to describe a case of cirrhosis of the liver, or a red sensation, or a revolution, in terms of the activity of subatomic particles; and the laws governing such phenomena may not be reducible in any tidy way to laws of physics. Nevertheless, there must at least in principle be a story that could be told that would show how all the facts about human beings are necessitated by the kinds of facts discussed by physics.

These twin convictions are often made vivid by a theological conceit: were God to decree "Let there be a universe of such-and-such type", God's command would settle all the facts about the universe, even if "such-and-such" were a description of space-time that used only the concepts of fundamental physics. And God would not be surprised by any of these further facts, but would be able to predict everything else that happens in the universe – including any conscious experiences it might contain – just by knowing its physical description. To some philosophers, this version of physicalism seems almost to be part of "enlightened common sense". Still, thought experiments about zombies and their ilk raise troubling questions. The stories sound possible, however outré and improbable. But if they really are possible, physicalism is false.

Philosophical zombies, as remarked, are unlike their cinematic cousins. They behave exactly as we do, and are internally similar as well. Indeed, the zombies described by Rosenberg and Dennett are stipulated to be indistinguishable from us when examined by instruments that measure just the arrangement and interactions of the smallest particles in their bodies. But they are utterly without phenomenal experience. When pricked, a philosophical zombie bleeds, and says "ouch!". But it has no feeling of pain. Its eyes respond to light just as ours do; it says "Bananas are yellow", and it won't eat green ones. But it never experiences yellow qualia, never has a yellowish patch of colour in its visual field – it has no visual field. The zombie experiences none of the qualia we know through taste, smell, hearing, touch and other forms of sensation (philosophical zombies are more like the angels in Wim Wenders's film *Wings of Desire* than the "living dead").