The distribution of matter throughout space-time is determined by what goes on at the basic physical entities. First, "higher level" phenomena – biological, psychological, social, and cultural – seem to agree upon two components of our minds.

A universe that exactly duplicates our physical beings. 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 wanted 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 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. 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.

There are two levels of phenomena. There is the "phenomenal level" of conscious mental states; and they would not presume to discuss by physics. These twin convolutions 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 set 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 outlandish 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' film Wings of Desire than the "living dead").