



Sympathetic Imagination,
Conceivability Arguments,
and the Metaphysics of
Mind





Overview

I'm going to discuss some links between the imagination and the metaphysics of mind, then note some implications for some recent debates about physicalism and panqualityism.

Section 1: Four points where the metaphysics of mind intersects the philosophy of imagination

Section 2: Do conceivability arguments against physicalism rely on inappropriately conjoining disparate types of imagination? (No)

Section 3: Are unexperienced phenomenal qualities inconceivable? (Not obviously)

Section 4: Does the Q-zombie argument against panqualityism work? (Yes)



Section 1: Where Metaphysics Intersects Philosophy of Imagination

Four intersections to explore:

1. Imagination can be involved in definitions of consciousness
2. Imagination is involved in conceivability arguments against physicalism
3. Claims about imagination can be used to undermine such arguments
4. Variant conceivability arguments have been used in recent post-physicalist discussions



Section 1: Where Metaphysics Intersects Philosophy of Imagination

First: imagination can be involved in definitions of consciousness:

Conscious beings are often characterised as those which ‘it is like something to be’; here ‘like’ is not used in a comparative sense.

The primary other example of this non-comparative use is in ‘imagining what it is like to be X’ (equivalently, ‘imagining being X’).

A natural thought: if X is conscious (if there is something it is like to be X), then it makes sense to ‘imagine what it is like to be X’ (and, equivalently, to ‘imagine being X’).



Section 1: Where Metaphysics Intersects Philosophy of Imagination

So:

X is conscious iff there is a possible act of the right kind of imagination which would be accurate if directed at X.

Note that 'one could' does not imply that anyone could - things might be unimaginable to me, or to any human, but imaginable to other creatures.



Section 1: Where Metaphysics Intersects Philosophy of Imagination

A related idea is that a being is conscious iff one *must* (be able to) imagine being them to fully understand them. E.g.

“...phenomenological facts... are subjective... in the sense that [an] objective ascription of experience is possible only for someone sufficiently similar to the object of ascription to be able to adopt his point of view - to understand the ascription in the first person as well as in the third, so to speak... [we can attempt] to transcend inter-species barriers with the aid of the imagination...”

(Nagel 1974, p.442)



Section 1: Where Metaphysics Intersects Philosophy of Imagination

So the idea that there is a sort of imagination ('imagining being X') such that:

- A being is conscious just if one could imagine being them;
- One understands a conscious being only if one can imagine being them;
- It is harder to imagine being someone the more different from oneself they are.

Call this idea 'the I-C (Imagination-Consciousness) link'.



Section 1: Where Metaphysics Intersects Philosophy of Imagination

Second: imagination is involved in conceivability arguments against physicalism.

The most prominent set of arguments against physicalism go like this:

- A scenario is claimed to be 'conceivable';
- From this its metaphysical possibility is inferred;
- Its metaphysical possibility is argued to be incompatible with the actuality of physicalism.

(Standard scenario: 'philosophical zombies', physically and functionally identical to humans but completely devoid of consciousness.)



Section 1: Where Metaphysics Intersects Philosophy of Imagination

The term ‘conceivable’ here can be read in negative or positive ways; the positive way makes it equivalent to ‘imaginable’:

“S is negatively conceivable... when there is no (apparent) contradiction in S... Positive notions of conceivability require that one can form some sort of positive conception of a situation in which S is the case. One can place the varieties of positive conceivability under the broad rubric of imagination: to positively conceive of a situation is to in some sense imagine a specific configuration of objects and properties.”

(Chalmers 2002, pp.149-150)



Section 1: Where Metaphysics Intersects Philosophy of Imagination

So the idea that for some sort of imagination (‘imagining a specific configuration of objects and properties’):

- Our ability to imagine something is, in general, evidence for its possibility, and
- Our ability to imagine P-zombies etc. is evidence, in particular, for the falsity of physicalism.

Call this the ‘C-P (Conceivability-Possibility) link.’



Section 1: Where Metaphysics Intersects Philosophy of Imagination

Third: Claims about imagination can be used to undermine such arguments

You might wonder whether the two preceding connections involve different sorts of ‘imagining’, and whether that serves to undermine the arguments against physicalism. For example:

*“We may imagine something by representing it to ourselves either **perceptually**, **sympathetically**, or **symbolically**. I shall not try to say how **symbolic** imagination works, but... To imagine something **perceptually**, we put ourselves in a conscious state resembling the state we would be in if we perceived it. To imagine something **sympathetically**, we put ourselves in a conscious state resembling the thing itself. (This method can be used only to imagine mental events and states...)”*

(Nagel 1974, p.446, emphasis added)



Section 1: Where Metaphysics Intersects Philosophy of Imagination

Clearly, **sympathetic** imagination is the sort that has a special relationship with consciousness: X is conscious iff it makes sense to *sympathetically* imagine being X.

But it looks like the sort of imagination involved in inferring from conceivability to possibility is typically **symbolic** or **perceptual**.

Nagel suggests that conceivability arguments against physicalism rely on mixing up these “disparate types”. Whether this criticism is correct will be the topic of the next section.



Section 1: Where Metaphysics Intersects Philosophy of Imagination

Fourth: Variant conceivability arguments have been used in recent post-physicalist discussions.

By 'post-physicalist' I mean discussions among participants who accept that physicalism is explanatorily inadequate, as the conceivability arguments show, but are not attracted to standard sorts of dualism.

Such discussions start from the idea that some additional ingredient in nature is needed to account for consciousness. The question is: what is this ingredient?



Section 1: Where Metaphysics Intersects Philosophy of Imagination

Many post-physicalists are ‘pan-’ something: rather than positing something that sets humans apart from nature, they posit that the extra ingredient must be somehow inherent in matter.

This ingredient might be:

- Very simple forms of consciousness (‘panpsychism’ - this is the best one, trust me)
- The phenomenal *qualities* present in conscious experience, but unexperienced (‘panqualityism’ - this will be examined more closely in sections 3 and 4)
- Something unknown but somehow relevant to consciousness (‘panprotopsychism’).



Section 1: Where Metaphysics Intersects Philosophy of Imagination

One way to evaluate such theories is to try conceiving of an appropriate sort of zombie: a being just like us in all the respects which are claimed to be explanatorily relevant, but still lacking consciousness.

Hence you get qualitative zombies, micro-experiential zombies, panpsychic zombies, and other more exotic undead.

But what it takes to properly conceive of such beings is not always agreed upon. Section 4 examines a particular example, the qualitative zombie or Q-zombie.



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Section 2: Conceivability Arguments and Disparate Types of Imagination

Here is Nagel's method of "explaining why [the mind-brain relation]... appears contingent":

"When we try to imagine a mental state occurring without its associated brain state, we first sympathetically imagine the occurrence of the mental state: that is, we put ourselves into a state that resembles it mentally.

At the same time, we attempt to perceptually imagine the non-occurrence of the associated physical state, by putting ourselves into another state unconnected with the first: one resembling that which we would be in if we perceived the non-occurrence of the physical state."

(Nagel 1974, p.446)



Section 2: Conceivability Arguments and Disparate Types of Imagination

He concludes:

“Where the imagination of physical features is perceptual and the imagination of mental features is sympathetic, it appears to us that we can imagine any experience occurring without its associated brain state, and vice versa. The relation between them will appear contingent even if it is necessary, because of the independence of the disparate types of imagination.”

(Nagel 1974, p.446)



Section 2: Conceivability Arguments and Disparate Types of Imagination

Note: you might think Nagel is wrong to take *perceptual* imagining as crucial here; maybe it's symbolic imagining instead. But it doesn't matter.

Given the I-C link, there is a form of imagining (sympathetic) which must be used for imagining conscious states, and cannot be used for anything else.

So whatever our taxonomy of imagination, there must be at least two different types involved in conceiving of zombies.



Section 2: Conceivability Arguments and Disparate Types of Imagination

Call this the ‘disparate types’ analysis: conjoining disparate types of imagining in one argument will always make the target scenario seem conceivable, whether or not it is really possible. Here is one way to schematise the argument:

1. The imaginative act involved in anti-physicalist conceivability arguments conjoins imaginings of disparate types.
2. Imaginative acts that conjoin individually-successful imaginings of disparate types will always seem to succeed, whether or not their target scenario is really possible.
3. *Therefore* The imaginative act involved in anti-physicalist conceivability arguments does not show the anti-physicalist scenario to be possible.



Section 2: Conceivability Arguments and Disparate Types of Imagination

I agree with claim 1, but disagree with claim 2. Here is an apparent counter-example to it.

- There are two beings, A and B, who have exactly the same experiences.
- A is unreservedly happy right now.
- B is abjectly miserable right now.

Each of these is individually imaginable, but the first is presumably to be imagined symbolically, and the second and third sympathetically. But they are not jointly conceivable: I cannot imagine them all being true together.

So things that are individually conceivable, in disparate modes, are not always jointly conceivable. So claim 2 is false.



Section 2: Conceivability Arguments and Disparate Types of Imagination

Claim 2 looks more plausible if we think of different types of imagination as unrelated mental capacities. I prefer to view imagination as a single capacity to take different mental states ‘offline’:

- We form mental images by running our perceptual systems offline;
- We predict people’s decisions by running our decision-making systems offline;
- We empathize with someone’s distress by running our emotional systems offline;
- Etc.

In particular, what Nagel calls ‘symbolic imagining’ can be thought of as recreating beliefs and running our reasoning systems offline with them (cf. Goldman 2006, p.48).



Section 2: Conceivability Arguments and Disparate Types of Imagination

Call this the ‘recreativist’ view of the imagination (cf. Currie and Ravenscroft 2002, Goldman 2006).

One implication is that different types of imagining will often not be sharply separate, because the states they recreate work together.

E.g. perceptions, emotions, and beliefs interact closely, so any good recreation of perception, emotion, or belief should include those interactions.



Section 2: Conceivability Arguments and Disparate Types of Imagination

This picture of imagining does not make claim 2 seem plausible.

- It says different forms of imagining are routinely intertwined; consequently we cannot disqualify all imaginings that conjoin disparate types as invalid.
- It says different forms of imagining draw on the same basic mental mechanisms; consequently we should not want to thus disqualify them.



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Section 3: Are unexperienced phenomenal qualities inconceivable?

One non-physicalist view recently discussed is Sam Coleman's 'panqualityism'.

This view analyses conscious experience as 'awareness of phenomenal qualities', and then posits that the 'qualities' part exist unexperienced, as a fundamental ingredient of nature, but become conscious only when brains evolve the right functional structure for awareness.

Consciousness is 'matter becoming aware of itself.'



Section 3: Are unexperienced phenomenal qualities inconceivable?

A natural objection:

Unexperienced phenomenal qualities are impossible, because inconceivable, because to conceive of a phenomenal quality can only be to conceive of an experience of it.

This objection is too quick: if valid, it would vindicate the Berkeleyan argument:

Unperceived objects are inconceivable, because to conceive of an object can only be to conceive of it being perceived/conceived.

So where do arguments like this go wrong?



Section 3: Are unexperienced phenomenal qualities inconceivable?

Here's a schematic versions of the argument against panqualityism:

1. For unexperienced phenomenal qualities to be possible, it must be possible to conceive of them in a way that differs from conceiving of experienced phenomenal qualities.
2. The only way to conceive of phenomenal qualities is to recreate an experience of them.
3. Recreating an experience which presents a quality is exactly what one would do if one set out to conceive of an experienced phenomenal quality.
4. *Therefore* It is not possible to conceive of unexperienced phenomenal qualities in a way that differs from conceiving of experienced phenomenal qualities.
5. *Therefore* Unexperienced phenomenal qualities are not possible.



Section 3: Are unexperienced phenomenal qualities inconceivable?

And here's a schematic version of the Berkeleyan argument:

1. For unperceived physical objects to be possible, it must be possible to conceive of them in a way that differs from conceiving of perceived physical objects.
2. The only way to conceive of physical objects is to form a mental representation of them.
3. Forming a mental representation of a physical object is exactly what one would do if one set out to conceive of a perceived physical object.
4. *Therefore* It is not possible to conceive of unperceived physical objects in a way that differs from conceiving of perceived physical objects.
5. *Therefore* Unperceived physical objects are not possible.



Section 3: Are unexperienced phenomenal qualities inconceivable?

Bernard Williams accuses the Berkeleyan argument of “a confusion of two modes of the imagination: that of imagining with regard to a certain thing, distinct from myself, that it is such and such; and that of imagining being such and such... the fantasy enactment of [a] role”. (1973, p.44)

Confusing the two leads to a misunderstanding of imagining being someone (Williams’ running example is Napoleon), by making us think it involves imagining that something is true.



Section 3: Are unexperienced phenomenal qualities inconceivable?

What could be the proposition I imagine to be true, when I imagine being Napoleon?

Is it 'that I (Luke Roelofs) am Napoleon'? No: that's plausibly *unimaginable*: what would have to be different about the world for Luke Roelofs to be Napoleon?

The question is misconceived: imagining being Napoleon is directing one's imaginings at a different *kind* of target from a proposition, namely a person's perspective.



Section 3: Are unexperienced phenomenal qualities inconceivable?

This distinction among kinds of target is independent of what states are recreated (perceptual, emotional, belief-like, etc.).

The Berkeleyan argument neglects this: ‘imagining an object’ and ‘imagining perceiving an object’ have different kinds of target, even when they involve the same mental image.

The 3rd premise is thus false: both imaginative acts would form the same representation of an object, but they would not be *exactly* the same act, since they would be targeted at different things: an object or a representation of one.



Section 3: Are unexperienced phenomenal qualities inconceivable?

A similar point applies to the argument against panqualityism:

Premise 3 is false because different imaginings could involve recreating the same experience, but not be *exactly* the same:

- One might target the experience (sympathetic imagining);
- One might target something that looks the way the experience presents things (perceptual imagining);
- One might target *the fact that* an experience happens, or happens twice, or happens at a particular time (symbolic imagining);
- And one, perhaps, might target the quality, by itself.



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Section 3: Are unexperienced phenomenal qualities inconceivable?

This defence of panqualityism requires a fourth type of imagining, which is not symbolic, perceptual, or sympathetic: ‘qualitative imagining’.

We recreate an experience that presents some quality, and take this as representing that quality by itself, as opposed to the experience, what the experience represents, or the proposition that the experience occurs.

This doesn’t show that unexperienced qualities *are* conceivable: it just shows that the easiest way of showing them to be inconceivable is *too* easy.



Section 4: Does the Q-zombie argument against panqualityism work?

Panqualityism has been attacked by the Q-zombie argument.

My Q-zombie twin is exactly identical to me in every physical and functional respect, and *moreover* in every qualitative respect - it, and every part of it, instantiates exactly the same phenomenal qualities as I and my parts do. And *yet* it is not conscious at all; there is nothing it is like to be a Q-zombie.

If Q-zombies are conceivable, then an argument exactly analogous to the anti-physicalist zombie argument would show that panqualityism is false.



Section 4: Does the Q-zombie argument against panqualityism work?

Here is Coleman's response:

“zombie scenarios depend on there being a sensory quality ‘toggle’ between the actual world and putative zombie world... It’s not possible to construct a zombie scenario without framing the target or explanandum in sensory quality terms... It follows that any item not associated with a set of sensory qualities is not a valid target for a zombie argument... as awareness has no proprietary sensory quality associated with it, I’m simply unsure what someone could be conceiving of who [claimed to conceive of a Q-zombie], since zombie-style conceiving requires a sensory quality toggle between the actual world and the relevant zombie world—some qualitative content that we can subtract, in conception, from the zombie world. In this sense, ‘awareness zombies’ are inconceivable.”

(2017, Footnotes 72 and 93)



Section 4: Does the Q-zombie argument against panqualityism work?

The suggestion here is that Q-zombies cannot be conceived of because there is no difference between the mental acts involved in conceiving of an ordinary human and conceiving of a Q-zombie.

This claim of equivalence is based on the principle that differences between conceivings must involve differences in qualities (a sensory quality 'toggle'):

The Toggle Principle: For conceiving of X and conceiving of Y to be different conceivings, there must be a difference in the qualities that feature in the conceiving.



Section 4: Does the Q-zombie argument against panqualityism work?

I think the defence of panqualityism requires that the Toggle Principle is false, so Coleman's response fails.

Yes, conceiving of an ordinary human and conceiving of a Q-zombie do involve recreating experiences of the very same qualities. But this fails to fix what is being imagined.

According to the last section's argument, recreating an experience of quality Q might be:

- A way to imagine (symbolically) that someone is aware of Q,
- A way to imagine (sympathetically) being aware of Q, or
- A way to imagine (qualitatively) Q.



Section 4: Does the Q-zombie argument against panqualityism work?

Note: this does not undermine the Toggle Principle *simpliciter*. It just shows that it is incompatible with panqualityism, since panqualityists must posit qualitative imagining.

One consistent position is that Q-zombies are inconceivable because unexperienced phenomenal qualities are inconceivable.

Another is that unexperienced phenomenal qualities are possible, and maybe even all-pervasive like panqualityism says, but do not by themselves explain consciousness.

But the panqualityist position is neither of these. It thus seems to me untenable.



References

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