



# Phenomenal Concepts and the Explanatory Gap

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# Consciousness

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- Consciousness: what it is like to be a sentient being.
  - The subjective experience of
    - Perception
    - Bodily sensation
    - Imagery
    - Emotions
    - Thought
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# Explaining Consciousness

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- Q: Can consciousness be explained in physical terms?
  - Can neuroscience explain why and how brain processes give rise to consciousness?
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# The Epistemic Gap

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- Let P = complete microphysical truth
- Let Q = a truth about consciousness
- Then there is an apparent *epistemic gap* between P and Q.

# Thought-Experiment: Mary

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- Mary the colorblind neuroscientist
    - Knows all the physical facts
    - Doesn't know what it is like to see red
  - Mary knows P, but can't deduce Q.
    - Epistemic gap between P and Q!
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# Thought-Experiment: Zombies

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- Zombies: physical duplicates of us without consciousness.
  - Zombies probably don't exist
  - But it seems that zombies are conceivable
    - There's no contradiction in the idea.
  - So  $P \& \sim Q$  is conceivable.
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# The Explanatory Gap

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- Many: the conceivability of  $P \& \sim Q$  entails an *explanatory gap* between P and Q.
    - Why, given that P is the case, is Q the case?
    - Physical account is epistemically compatible with absence of consciousness, so doesn't wholly explain consciousness.
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# Responses

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- Dualist: infers ontological gap from epistemic gap
    - $P \& \sim Q$  is conceivable and so is possible
  - Type-A materialist: denies epistemic gap
    - $P \& \sim Q$  is not conceivable (and not possible)
  - Type-B materialist: accepts epistemic gap, denies ontological gap
    - $P \& \sim Q$  is conceivable but not possible.
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# Type-B Materialism

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- Type-B materialist:
    - conceptual dualism: phenomenal concepts fundamentally distinct from physical concepts
    - ontological monism: phenomenal properties are identical to (or constituted by) physical properties.
  - $P \supset Q$  is an a posteriori necessity
  - Many:  $P^* = Q^*$  is an a posteriori identity  
(where  $P^*$ =physical term,  $Q^*$ =phenomenal term)
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# Kripkean Necessities?

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- Analogy: Kripkean a posteriori necessities
    - Water=H<sub>2</sub>O, etc
  - This doesn't help
    - All are false at a possible world considered as actual
    - Leads either to dualism or to Russellian “panprotopsychism”.
  - Type-B materialist needs primitive *strong necessities* instead.
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# Phenomenal Concepts

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- Alternative strategy: appeal to special features of *phenomenal concepts*
    - Gap stems from our concepts of consciousness, not consciousness itself
    - These concepts are unique in a way that yields epistemic gap
    - But they still refer to physical properties
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# Proponents

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- Proponents of this strategy include
    - Loar (1990): recognitional concepts
    - Hill (1997): independent conceptual role
    - Perry (2000): indexical concepts
    - Papineau (2002): quotational conceptsand others
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# General Form

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- Key: a thesis C about conceptual/psychological features of conscious beings, such that
    - (i) C explains our epistemic situation with respect to consciousness
    - (ii) C is explainable in physical terms
  - Not a direct explanation of consciousness.
  - Rather, an explanation of the explanatory gap!
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# Counterargument

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- I'll argue that no account can simultaneously satisfy (i) and (ii).
  - Either:
    - C is not physically explainable
    - or
    - C doesn't explain our epistemic situation.
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# Key Question

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- Question: Is  $P \& \sim C$  conceivable?
    - E.g.: Can we conceive of zombies that don't satisfy C?
      - N.B. No assumption that zombies are possible.
      - Silicon zombies may suffice.
  - I'll argue: problems either way.
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# Master Argument

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- (1) Either  $P \& \sim C$  is conceivable or it is not.
  - (2) If  $P \& \sim C$  is conceivable, then  $C$  is not physically explicable.
  - (3) If  $P \& \sim C$  is not conceivable, then  $C$  cannot explain our epistemic situation.
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- (4) Either  $C$  is not physically explicable, or  $C$  cannot explain our epistemic situation.



# First Horn

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- Premise 2: If  $P \& \sim C$  is conceivable, then  $C$  is not physically explicable
    - Explanatory gap between  $P$  and  $C$ .
  - Analogous to original reasoning:
    - $P \& \sim Q$  conceivable, so e-gap between  $P$  and  $Q$ .
    - Conceivability is criterial for epistemic gap.
  - Phenomenal concepts pose as much of an explanatory gap as consciousness itself!
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# Argument for Second Horn

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- (5) If  $P \& \sim C$  is not conceivable, then zombies satisfy C.
  - (6) Zombies do not share our epistemic situation.
  - (7) If zombies satisfy C but do not share our epistemic situation, then C cannot explain our epistemic situation.
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- (3) If  $P \& \sim C$  is not conceivable, then C cannot explain our epistemic situation.

# Epistemic Situation

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- Key premise: Zombies don't share our epistemic situation ( $P \& \sim E$  is conceivable)
  - Epistemic situation E: includes truth-values and epistemic status of our beliefs, and epistemic connections among them.
  - Zombies satisfy E iff their corresponding beliefs have the same truth-values, epistemic status, and epistemic connections.
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# Zombie Epistemology

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- Intuitively: if zombies have beliefs at all, they have a less accurate self-conception than we do.
  - Arguably: when a zombie says “I am phenomenally conscious”, it says something false
    - Zombie eliminativists are correct.
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# Zombie Mary

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- Clearer example: Zombie Mary.
    - When she looks at something red, does she gain knowledge analogous to Mary's?
  - No: any knowledge gained is much poorer
    - E.g. indexical knowledge, or know-how
    - No analog of lucid phenomenal knowledge
  - So: Zombie Mary's epistemic situation differs from Mary's.
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# Upshot

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- Zombies don't share the epistemic situation of conscious beings
    - They are epistemically impoverished.
  - P&~E is conceivable.
  - So argument goes through.
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# Shorter Version

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- (1)  $P \& \sim E$  is conceivable
  - (2) If  $P \& \sim E$  is conceivable, then  $P \& \sim C$  is conceivable or  $C \& \sim E$  is conceivable.
  - (3) If  $P \& \sim C$  is conceivable,  $P$  cannot explain  $C$ .
  - (4) If  $C \& \sim E$  is conceivable,  $C$  cannot explain  $E$ .
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- (5)  $P$  cannot explain  $C$  or  $C$  cannot explain  $E$ .

# Options for Type-B Materialists

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- (1) Accept e-gap between P and C
  - (2) Accept e-gap between C and E
    - Back to ungrounded explanatory gaps
    - Phenomenal concepts aren't doing any work.
  - (3) Hold that zombies are our epistemic twins (with an analog of consciousness?)
    - Counterintuitive, doesn't capture zombie intuition.
  - (4) Deny that zombies are conceivable
    - Type-A materialism
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# Applying the Dilemma

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- Any given account of phenomenal concepts is at best:
    - “thin”: physically explicable, but doesn’t capture our epistemic situationor
    - “thick”: captures our epistemic situation, but isn’t physically explicable.
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# Papineau's Account

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- Papineau:
    - Phenomenal concepts are “quotational”
    - Concept tokens embed a phenomenal state R.
    - State = R, concept = “R”
    - That experience: R.
  - Can be read as either a thin or thick account.
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# Thin Quotational Concepts

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- Work “bottom-up” with physical materials.
    - Neural state N, gets embedded into token “N”, or “that state: N”.
  - We’ d expect: mere indexical reference to N.
    - Intrinsic nature of N has no epistemic impact.
    - If different state M is embedded in functional duplicate, we’ d expect same epistemic situation.
    - So: no substantive knowledge of N, akin to Mary’ s knowledge of phenomenal character.
  - Doesn’ t capture our epistemic situation.
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# Thick Quotational Concepts

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- Start “top-down” with conscious state Q.
    - Embed Q into token concept “Q”.
  - May yield: substantive knowledge of Q
    - But this requires special epistemic features of conscious states.
    - E.g., they are apt for direct acquaintance with intrinsic nature.
  - These features are not predictable from physical account.
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# Other Accounts

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- Loar's recognitional concepts
    - Either thin (demonstrative) or thick (substantive knowledge of nature)
  - Perry's indexical concepts
    - Thin (Mary's knowledge isn't just indexical)
  - Hill's independent conceptual roles
    - Thin (doesn't deliver substantive knowledge)
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# Conclusion

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- There's not just an explanatory gap between physical processes and consciousness.
  - There is also an explanatory gap between physical processes and phenomenal concepts.
  - So no account of phenomenal concepts can physically explain the explanatory gap.
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