

## THE CONCEIVABILITY-TO-POSSIBILITY ENTAILMENT: HOW IT DOES (NOT) WORK

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Conceivability arguments for metaphysical possibility play a considerable role in philosophical discussions, especially in the philosophy of mind. The most famous classical example is Rene Descartes' conceivability argument for the possibility of the unembodied mind; the most outstanding recent example is David Chalmers' conceivability argument for the logical possibility of phenomenal zombies (as part of the zombie argument against materialism). Also, general discussions about the conceivability-entails-possibility thesis (in the rest of the paper, I refer to it as CP), including highly sophisticated accounts and defenses by Chalmers, are not lacking. Nevertheless, the way the entailment works—and whether it really does work—remains obscure.

### II. THE KIND OF POSSIBILITY AT ISSUE

The kind of possibility at issue is usually called “metaphysical possibility.” This should be clearly distinguished from what Chalmers calls “natural possibility.” Natural possibility is a matter of what is possible in the actual world, given the laws of nature. Metaphysical possibility is not a matter of the actual world but a matter of possible worlds, which may differ from the actual world in a lot of ways, including fundamentally (having different laws of nature, for example). Such worlds are usually referred to as metaphysically possible. Thus, when philosophers talk of something as metaphysically possible, they mean that it could exist (or happen) in some metaphysically possible worlds. However, this

does not get us far in understanding what it takes for something (be it a world, a situation, or an event) to be metaphysically possible.

David Chalmers, in his *magnum opus*, *The Conscious Mind* (1996), and in several later papers, argues that metaphysical possibility should be identified with logical possibility. Metaphysically possible worlds (or situations or events) are just logically possible worlds (or situations or events):

... the space of logically possible worlds ... suffices to account for all of the modal phenomena that we have reason to believe in and that we might invoke possible worlds to explain. ... there is no good reason to postulate a separate space of metaphysically possible worlds. There is no clear explanatory work left for such a space to do. The space of logically possible worlds, which we have independent reason to postulate, explains all the untendentious modal data.<sup>1</sup>

In what follows, I will proceed from the supposition (which seems to me very plausible in the light of Chalmers' arguments, which I cannot recount here in appropriate detail) that metaphysical possibility—the kind of possibility relevant to the arguments having to do with the CP entailment—is logical possibility. (Of course, arguments to the contrary are invited.)

### III. THE CIRCULARITY PROBLEM AND IDEAL CONCEIVABILITY

Chalmers is probably the most prominent modern defender of the conceivability arguments. He has elaborated a sophisticated “supporting structure” that is apparently based on the concept of “ideal conceivability.” I think that there are good reasons to be skeptical about it.

My principal objection to this major line is that it makes the move from conceivability to logical ( $\equiv$ metaphysical) possibility a hidden tautology. The tautology is that what is logically possible (not *a priori* false, as a matter of incoherence) is logically possible (not *a priori* false, as a matter of incoherence).

One can start worrying on reading one of Chalmers' earlier papers, “Materialism and the Metaphysics of Modality” (1999). In it, Chalmers explains the connection between “conceivability” and “logical possibility” as follows: “On my usage, ‘logically possible’ ... is tied by stipulation to conceivability.” After this statement, Chalmers quotes the passage from *The Conscious Mind* where he wrote that he “will henceforth take this for granted as a claim about logical possibility; any variety of possibility for which conceivability does not imply possibility will then be a narrower class,” and explains again that ““taking for

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<sup>1</sup> David Chalmers, “The Two-Dimensional Argument Against Materialism,” *The Character of Consciousness*, ed. D. Chalmers (New York: Oxford UP, 2010) 141–205, 187. See also: D. Chalmers, “Does Conceivability Entail Possibility?,” *Conceivability and Possibility*, ed. T. Gendler and J. Hawthorne (New York: Oxford UP, 2002): 145–200.

granted' here is stipulative."<sup>2</sup> Now, if it is just a matter of stipulation that logical possibility is tied to conceivability, we cannot expect anything non-trivial here, and no argument that conceivability entails logical possibility is needed. It is just a matter of using two terms interchangeably in nearly the same meaning (so that if there is any difference, it does not matter for the argument).<sup>3</sup> In this case, it is obviously useless to make the conceivability-to-possibility entailment into a sort of foundation for the zombie argument and to spend much time and effort inventing sophisticated arguments for the entailment. However, does not Chalmers do exactly this in some of his later papers? Or has he changed his construal of the relationship between conceivability and possibility, so that it lost its stipulative (tautological) character and became substantial?

Let us consider first the explanation Chalmers gives in the paper "Imagination, indexicality, and intensions" (2004). According to it, the zombie argument is based on two premises: "the first premise is that zombies are conceivable, roughly in the sense that there is no *a priori* contradiction in the idea of a zombie," and "the second premise is that if zombies are conceivable in this sense, then they are possible." Chalmers specifies that "possible" of the second premise means "'primarily possible,' in that there is a possible world satisfying the relevant primary intension."<sup>4</sup> Given this explanation and supposing that nothing essential for the argument hangs on the qualifier "roughly,"<sup>5</sup> what is the difference in the meanings of the first premise, that zombies are conceivable, and the conclusion, that they are possible? I fail to see any. Let us look into this matter more closely.

Suppose that "conceivability" is used as a purely logical category to mean nothing but "no *a priori* contradiction." (Remarkably, there is nothing psychological about it, such as someone's capability to conceive of something.) On the other hand, there is "primary logical possibility," which means "that there is a possible world satisfying the relevant primary intension." However, what does the latter mean?

Of course, the phrase "there is a logically possible world" does not mean that such a world is somewhere over there; we are not talking about really existing parallel worlds; the phrase is just a loose way of saying "a world is logically possible." All that Chalmers ever says about what he means by the logical possibility of a world involves nothing besides the coherence of the description that specifies

<sup>2</sup> D. Chalmers, "Materialism and the Metaphysics of Modality," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 59 (1999): 473–96, 477–78.

<sup>3</sup> Indeed, I think that Chalmers' exposition of the zombie argument in *The Conscious Mind* fits well with such a construal.

<sup>4</sup> D. Chalmers, "Imagination, Indexicality, and Intensions," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 68 (2004): 182–90, 182–83.

<sup>5</sup> Otherwise, the explanation would be glaringly inadequate, in omitting what is crucial for the argument.

the properties of the world. The requirement that the world should satisfy the relevant *primary intension* (as opposed to *secondary intension*) means that the terms in the description are construed (their referents in the possible world at issue are picked out) according to the way we understand these terms before (prior to) or independently of empirical discoveries of their non-apparent identities.<sup>6</sup> This requirement sets aside, at this stage of the zombie argument, appeals to so called “*a posteriori* necessities,” because they are irrelevant for primary possibility.<sup>7</sup> In other words, the primary logical possibility of a world means that its specifying description, construed aprioristically (without *a posteriori*, empirical considerations and semantic twist involved), is coherent—there is no *a priori* contradiction in it. However, if we take Chalmers’ explanation at face value, “conceivability” means (“roughly”) the same.

Now, after making replacements (of “conceivable” and “possible”) with equivalent meanings (“no *a priori* contradiction” or “logically possible”), we may rewrite Chalmers’ argument as follows:

Premise 1. There is no *a priori* contradiction in the idea of (a world with) a zombie.

Premise 2. If there is no *a priori* contradiction in the idea of (a world with) a zombie, then there is no *a priori* contradiction in the idea of (a world with) a zombie.

Conclusion. Hence, there is no *a priori* contradiction in the idea of (a world with) a zombie.

Or equivalently:

Premise 1. A (world with a) zombie is logically possible.

Premise 2. If a (world with a) zombie is logically possible, then a (world with a) zombie is logically possible.

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<sup>6</sup> For example, “water” under primary intension picks out, in a possible world, the transparent drinkable thirst-quenching (if not salty) liquid in rivers, lakes, and seas, be it H<sub>2</sub>O or whatever (XYZ), whereas “water” under secondary intension picks out H<sub>2</sub>O, whether it is transparent and liquid and drinkable or not.

<sup>7</sup> Chalmers deals with such appeals separately. First, he argues that Kripkean *a posteriori* necessities do not engender a space of metaphysically possible worlds distinct from the space of logically possible worlds; they only prescribe that we should describe logically possible worlds taken as counterfactual in a way that involves “*a posteriori* semantic twist,” so that the terms in which a world is described refer according to their secondary intensions. (Accordingly, there is no real difference between what is primarily possible and what is secondarily possible; the possibilities are the same, but the same possibilities go under different descriptions, and verbally the same description may designate different possibilities, if construed first under primary and then under secondary intensions. Second, he argues against *ad hoc* postulating of unexplainable “brute” necessities (that do not fit the Kripkean pattern and defy two-dimensional analysis). Third, he allows that there may be sort of hidden identities on the physical side—namely, the intrinsic nature of the basic microphysical entities—that is relevant for the zombie argument, leaving open the possibility that Russellian monism (panpsychism or panprotopsychism) can be true.

Conclusion. Hence, a (world with a) zombie is logically possible.

So, it seems that we have no substantial argument involving the conceivability-to-possibility entailment. At best, there is just a translation of “no *a priori* contradiction” into a more technical language of two-dimensional semantics.

Can it be that there is, nevertheless, some subtle difference in what Chalmers means by “there is no *a priori* contradiction” and “there is a possible world satisfying the relevant primary intension” that evades the above analysis and that makes the conceivability-to-possibility entailment non-trivial? Of course, such a possibility cannot be excluded. However, if it were the case, Chalmers should have explained what the difference is and made an argument that despite the semantic difference, the two descriptions are necessarily coextensive. As I do not find such an explanation and argument, I tentatively conclude that there is no relevant difference.

In the paper “Does Conceivability Entail Possibility?” (2002) Chalmers develops a more sophisticated explanation and defense of the move from conceivability to logical (metaphysical) possibility.

He makes three kinds of distinctions about conceivability:

1. *Primary and secondary conceivability.* Primary conceivability of S means that S is conceivable *a priori* under “primary intensions.” Secondary conceivability of S means that S is conceivable under “secondary intensions” that correspond to Kripkean “*a posteriori* necessities.”
2. *Negative and positive conceivability.* “S is negatively conceivable when S is not *ruled out a priori*, or when there is no (apparent) contradiction in S.” S is positively conceivable if “one can form some sort of positive conception of a situation in which S is the case,” “in some sense imagine a specific configuration of objects and properties,” “imagine situations in considerable detail.”<sup>8</sup>
3. *Prima facie, secunda facie and ideal conceivability.* “S is *prima facie* conceivable for a subject when S is conceivable for that subject on first appearances. . . . S is ideally conceivable when S is conceivable on ideal rational reflection.”<sup>9</sup>

As for *secunda facie* conceivability, Chalmers gives no explicit definition, but he uses the term to signify conceivability “on second appearances,” on “a little

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<sup>8</sup> D. Chalmers, “Does Conceivability Entail Possibility?” 149–50.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid: 147.

reflection,” though the examples he adduces are examples of considerably more than “a little” reflection. Roughly, we can say that *secunda facie* conceivability is conceivability on good reflection. The difference between *prima facie* and *secunda facie* conceivability is due to the possibility that S is incoherent (self-contradictory), but this incoherence is not obvious, so that S may seem coherent *prima facie*, but its incoherence is revealed on better thought. So, some situations may be *prima facie* conceivable, but *secunda facie* (and ideally) inconceivable.

The difference between *secunda facie* and ideal conceivability is of the same character: it is in principle possible that incoherence in S is so deep that it is not revealed even on better thought, but would be revealed on ideal rational reflection. Chalmers claims that such cases “seem to be extremely thin on the ground”; perhaps, there are some such cases in mathematics (e.g., Frege’s set of all sets).<sup>10</sup>

I think that there is a grave problem with this Chalmers’ claim. The problem is that we are not ideal reasoners; hence, we do not know what is ideally conceivable (except by begging the question, i.e., on the assumption that what seems conceivable in the light of real current-state reflection is very probable to be ideally conceivable); hence, we cannot judge whether the claim is true. We do not know what would be revealed on ideal rational reflection. All we know are results of real current-state reflection, but we do not know whether a result of real current-state reflection coincides with the would-be result of ideal reflection.

Chalmers summarizes his discussion with four conceivability/possibility theses:

- (1) *Ideal primary positive conceivability entails primary possibility. . .*
- (2) *Ideal primary negative conceivability entails primary possibility. . .*
- (3) *Secunda facie primary positive conceivability is an extremely good guide to primary possibility.*
- (4) *Ideal secondary (positive/negative) conceivability entails secondary possibility.*<sup>11</sup>

As far as I can judge, Chalmers has failed to escape trivialization (or tautologization) of the link between conceivability and possibility in the case of *ideal conceivability*. The reason is that ideal conceivability presupposes “ideal rational reflection”; while the ideality of rational reflection seems to mean nothing but that the reflection in question is a perfect-infallible guide from what *prima facie* seems possible to what *is* possible. At least, I do not see from Chalmers’ discussion how the ideality of rational reflection can be interpreted independently of its

<sup>10</sup> Ibid: 155.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid: 171.

being such a perfect-infallible guide. But if so, the conceivability/possibility theses (1), (2), and (4) collapse into the statement that logical (metaphysical) possibility entails logical (metaphysical) possibility. Conversely, if “ideal reasoning” is not taken to be a perfect-infallible guide, then (1), (2), and (4) may well be false.

From Chalmers’ explanation about the meaning of “ideal rational reflection,” I gather that his answer may be that by “ideal rational reflection,” he means not a perfect-infallible guide but reflection that cannot be defeated by further reflection. But if so, there are two obvious objections. *The first* is that for (1), (2), and (4) to be true, we must assume that if reflection is undefeatable, it is a perfect-infallible guide. It does not follow logically. And without this assumption, (1), (2), and (4) may well be false. *The second objection* is that we can never know that some reasoning is undefeatable; the most we can know is that it was not defeated so far. Hence, Chalmers’ attempts to support the theses (1), (2), and (4) by the absence of counterexamples fail, because no possible example is relevant.

Generally, I do not see what does this ideal-reflection stuff matter at all, since our real reflection is inescapably non-ideal (fallible) or, at least, is never known to be ideal, and we cannot know what would ideal reflection lead to.

Andrew Bailey (2007) made a similar objection,<sup>12</sup> summarized by Chalmers as follows: “arguments from ideal conceivability are toothless, as non-ideal creatures such as ourselves cannot know whether or not a given statement is ideally conceivable.” Chalmers disagrees:

I think that there is little reason to accept this claim. Although we are non-ideal, we can know that it is not ideally conceivable that  $0 = 1$ , and that it is ideally conceivable that someone exists. We know that certain things about the world (say, that all philosophers are philosophers) are knowable a priori, and that certain things about the world (say, that there is a table in this room) are not so knowable even by an ideal reasoner. Likewise, reasoning of this sort above gives us very good reason to think that there is no a priori entailment from physical to phenomenal truths and that zombie hypotheses are conceivable, even for an ideal reasoner.<sup>13</sup>

But now I wonder: how do (can) we know “that it is not ideally conceivable that  $0 = 1$ , and that it is ideally conceivable that someone exists”? Can such knowledge be prior to the knowledge that it is impossible for 0 to equal 1, and that it is possible for someone to exist? Do we, in these cases, make inferences from would-be results of “ideal rational reflection” about conceivability to the conclusions that 0 cannot equal 1, and that it is possible for someone to exist? Or vice versa, as *we* (non-ideal reasoners) know (*a priori*) that 0 cannot equal 1, and that

<sup>12</sup> Andrew Bailey, “The Unsoundness of Arguments from Conceivability,” *University of Guelph, Andrew Bailey, Research, Draft Papers* 14 June (2007) <<http://www.uoguelph.ca/~abailey/Research/draftpapers.html>>.

<sup>13</sup> D. Chalmers, “The Two-Dimensional Argument Against Materialism,” 155.

it is possible for someone to exist, so we can conclude that on “ideal rational reflection” (by an ideal reasoner), it is inconceivable that  $0 = 1$ , and it is conceivable that someone exists? I think that the second is the case. But if so, then the concepts of “ideal rational reflection” and “ideal reasoner” do no job whatever.

If you think that (CM) it is not ideally conceivable that  $0 = 1$ , it is only because you think that (M)  $0$  cannot equal  $1$ . You cannot make a plausible argument for CM that would not rely on the truth of M. And this holds for all cases about “ideal conceivability.” In cases where an analogue of M—let it be designated as N—is not so obvious and needs arguments, CN needs them no less, and can hardly be plausibly argued for without incorporating arguments for N.

Chalmers could object that an argument for the ideal conceivability of X can rely not on the possibility of X, but on the *secunda facie* conceivability of X. But this makes ideal conceivability an entirely superfluous mediator between *secunda facie* conceivability and possibility. Instead of Chalmers’ thesis (3) that *secunda facie* conceivability is an extremely good guide to possibility, we would have two theses:

- (3.1) *Secunda facie* conceivability is an extremely good guide to ideal conceivability.
- (3.2) Ideal conceivability entails primary possibility.

It logically follows from (3.1) and (3.2) that (3). But to consider (3) as an inference from (3.1) and (3.2) would be turning things upside down. (3.1) may be plausible only insofar as (3) is plausible. If you do not think that *secunda facie* conceivability is a good guide to possibility, then you have no reason to think that *secunda facie* conceivability is a good guide to ideal conceivability.

I have sent these critical remarks to David Chalmers by e-mail, and he has replied:

no circularity as there’s no need to mention possibility in the analysis of ideal conceivability. E.g. for ideal negative conceivability,  $p$  is conceivable iff it’s not a priori that  $\sim p$ . No need to mention possibility there.

I wonder about this reply: does not “not a priori that  $\sim p$ ”  $\equiv$  “logically possible that  $p$ ”? Is it not the very *meaning of the term* “logical possibility”?

Thus, it seems that Chalmers’ “ideal conceivability” cuts no ice. Is there anything in his account of the conceivability-to-possibility entailment to do a better job? The only plausible candidate seems to be the thesis “(3) *Secunda facie primary positive conceivability is an extremely good guide to primary possibility.*” However, it still remains for us to find out how—and whether—it



works. I will return to this question after a digression on a more specific problem.

#### IV. THE PROBLEM OF UNKNOWN (AND, POSSIBLY, UNKNOWABLE) LOGICAL NECESSITIES

Here, we are to confront the problem of unknown necessities as purported counterexamples to the move from conceivability to possibility. The examples adduced are always from mathematics. Most usually, it is Goldbach's conjecture that every even integer greater than 2 is the sum of two primes.<sup>14</sup> Mathematicians do not know whether it is true; they have not found out a proof of the truth or of the falsity of Goldbach's conjecture. Possibly, there is a proof, but it is not found as yet; possibly, there is no proof at all. It is possible that some mathematical truths are not provable and, hence, are not knowable (for in mathematics, the only way to know a truth is to prove it); it seems that Gödel's theorem proves that there are such unprovable and unknowable truths for any formal system. How unknown, or even unknowable mathematical truths can be treated in terms of conceivability and logical possibility, and does not their existence undermine conceivability arguments? Let us examine the question carefully.

To begin with, let us note that whatever be those mathematical truths, they are *a priori*, i.e., *logically necessary*. They do not depend on empirical facts; they are constituted by the foundational principles, concepts, axioms of the formal system to which they belong. If Goldbach's conjecture is true, it is *a priori* true; it is logically impossible for it to be false; there are no logically possible worlds in which it is false. Otherwise, if Goldbach's conjecture is false, it is *a priori* false; it is logically impossible for it to be true; there are no logically possible worlds in which it is true.

Nevertheless, it seems that it is in some sense possible that Goldbach's conjecture is true, and possible that it is false. This possibility is neither natural nor logical. We may call it *epistemic possibility*. Epistemic possibility can be defined as follows: X is epistemically possible if we do not know that X is not the case. As far as logical and mathematical relations are concerned, epistemic possibility is wider than logical possibility. For example, both the truth and the falsity of Goldbach's conjecture are epistemically possible, but only one of these possibilities (we do not know which one) is logically possible. Epistemic possibility is not projectable into the space of logically possible worlds: no logically possible world corresponds to some epistemic possibilities. For example, if Goldbach's conjecture is true, it is true in all logically possible

<sup>14</sup> See for example, Edward Jonathan Lowe, "Substance Dualism: A Non-Cartesian Approach," *The Waning of Materialism*, ed. R. C. Koons and G. Bealer (New York: Oxford UP, 2010): 439–61, 443.

worlds—there are no logically possible worlds in which it is false; otherwise, it is false in all logically possible worlds—there are no logically possible worlds in which it is true.

Whether a situation—or a world—in which Goldbach’s conjecture is true is conceivable? And whether a situation—or a world—in which it is false is conceivable? It is not clear whether—and how—the notions of negative and positive conceivability are applicable here at all.

Let us begin with *negative conceivability*.

Is Goldbach’s conjecture, or its negation, negatively conceivable on Chalmers’ definition? (To remind, the definition is: “S is negatively conceivable when S is not *ruled out a priori*, or when there is no (apparent) contradiction in S.”) It depends on how we read the definition.

On one reading (“S is negatively conceivable when there is no *apparent* contradiction in S”), both are negatively conceivable, even *secunda facie*. (The best mathematicians reflected on the problem for a long time, and they failed to discover a contradiction either in the conjecture or in its negation.) However, only one of the two is logically possible. So on this reading, (*secunda facie*) negative conceivability is not a guide to possibility for such cases.

On another reading (“S is negatively conceivable when S is not *ruled out a priori*, or when there is no contradiction in S”), either Goldbach’s conjecture or its negation is not negatively conceivable, but we cannot know which one until we discover a proof of the truth (falsity) of either the conjecture or its negation. If we discover such a proof, we would know which one of the two is conceivable and which one is not. But then the conceivability would be of no use, as we already know which is true (and so logically possible) and which is false (and so, as all false mathematical statements, logically impossible).

Now, if we try to apply the notion of *positive conceivability* to the cases of Goldbach’s conjecture and its negation, it is not clear what would count as forming “some sort of positive conception of a situation in which S is the case,” how “to positively conceive of a situation,” “imagine a specific configuration of objects and properties . . . in considerable detail.”<sup>15</sup> How can one positively conceive a situation in which Goldbach’s conjecture is true, as distinct from a situation in which it is false? I, for one, have no idea. So, I suppose that the notion of positive conceivability is inapplicable to such cases (perhaps, to mathematics and other formal systems generally).

Let us compare this with Chalmers’ approach to the problem.

Chalmers remarks that in philosophy, “the conceivability judgments that are usually taken as evidence of possibility are almost always positive conceivability judgments,” and that “for just this reason, the Goldbach case was never a very

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<sup>15</sup> D. Chalmers “Does Conceivability Entail Possibility?” 150.

compelling counterexample to this practice.”<sup>16</sup> This fits well with my suggestion that the notion of positive conceivability is inapplicable to such cases, but Chalmers’ explanation is different.

Chalmers proposes that “a mathematical claim will be positively conceivable insofar as there is rational reason to accept that claim.”<sup>17</sup> I am not sure that this fits well with the definition of positive conceivability. More importantly, on this approach the positive conceivability of a mathematical claim is *not a guide to the possibility* of its truth but a loafer. If “there is rational reason to accept that claim,” then this reason is a guide to truth (and, hence, to possibility), and there is no further epistemic job to do for “positive conceivability.”

The conclusion is that on the one hand, cases like Goldbach’s conjecture are not counterexamples to the thesis that conceivability entails possibility; on the other hand, in such cases, conceivability cannot serve as a guide to possibility, because to judge whether a situation is conceivable, one need first to find out whether it is possible. This result may be suggestive about other cases as well.

## V. IS CONCEIVABILITY A GUIDE TO POSSIBILITY?

Now we return to Chalmers’ thesis “(3) *Secunda facie primary positive conceivability is an extremely good guide to primary possibility.*”

It should be noted that the entailment asserted in this thesis is not from conceivability to possibility but from *secunda facie* conceivability to something like *there being extremely good reason to believe in the possibility*. It should also be remarked that *secunda facie* conceivability means “seems conceivable on good reflection.” And, of course, “seeming” is a personal psychologistic matter. Taking all this into account, CP arguments take the following form:

Premise 1. If X seems to P to be primarily positively conceivable on good reflection, P has extremely good reason to believe that X is logically possible.

Premise 2. X seems to P to be primarily positively conceivable on good reflection.

Conclusion. P has extremely good reason to believe that X is logically possible.

However, there are a lot of problems with such arguments. For one, it is not obvious that premise 1 is true. What is the status of the asserted connection between seeming conceivability and the reasonableness of the belief in logical possibility? Is it a factual correlation or a logical entailment? If the first, how can it be tested? If the second, how does it work? What counts as good reflection? Is it enough that it seems to a person that his/her reflection is good? How can such seeming

<sup>16</sup> Ibid: 161.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid: 155.

be challenged? (Should I argue that what you think seems to you does not really seem to you?) Further, to begin with, what does “conceivability” mean? What seems to a person when it seems to him/her that X is conceivable?

## VI. AN ANALYTICAL CASE FOR THE CP ENTAILMENT AND ITS USELESSNESS

What is the relevant meaning of “conceivability” (to be distinguished from just seeming to be conceivable)? It certainly will not do to define conceivability as “no *a priori* contradiction in the idea” (as Chalmers did), because this would make the CP entailment a straightforward tautology. “No *a priori* contradiction in the idea” is a purely logical relation, and I take it to be exactly what “logical possibility” means. Conceivability should not be a purely logical relation; it should have something to do with psychology, with our (mental) ability for something, that is, for conceiving.

On the other hand, analyzing our use of the term shows that conceivability is not a matter of mere psychology, too. It is not a term to designate some (feature of a) mental state of a person. This should be obvious from the following facts on the usage of the term:

1. We distinguish “conceivable” from “seems conceivable” and may argue that X is not really conceivable even if it seems so *prima facie*.
2. In such an argument, we do not invoke mental (phenomenal) properties of the conceiver’s mind; we invoke logical relations within the content of the statement that describes the situation one tries to conceive of.

Let us try the following thought experiment. There is a statement S that describes a purportedly logically possible situation. You hear (or read) the statement, seem to understand it clearly, and notice no incoherence in it. The situation seems conceivable to you. You think that it is conceivable. Then someone explains to you that there is a hidden incoherence (*a priori* contradiction) in the statement. Once you see that there is such incoherence, you no longer think that the situation is conceivable. You think that it is not. Moreover, you will not say that the situation was conceivable but ceased to be so. Rather, you will say that the situation *did seem* conceivable to you, but it turned out that it is not.

If this account is right, then “conceivability” works not as a psychological but as a logical term, in roughly the same way as “no *a priori* contradiction in the idea.” Are not we got caught in a magic circle?

I think that there is a simple way out of the circle: “conceivability” is a success term that has both “internalist” (subjective) and “externalist” (objective) aspects.

### A. Internalist (Subjective) Aspect

To judge whether a situation is conceivable, a person attempts to conceive of the situation. If he/she judges that he/she succeeds in conceiving of the situation, then he/she judges that the situation is conceivable. (Of course, if a situation *was* conceived, then it *is* conceivable!) Otherwise, the person either judges that the situation is inconceivable or defers judgment. Now, the crucial questions are: “How (based on what considerations) does a person judge whether he/she succeeds in conceiving of a situation?” and, for the negative judgment, “How does a person choose between judging that the situation is inconceivable and deferring judgment?” Here, the externalist (objective) aspect comes in.

### B. Externalist (Objective) Aspect

“Conceivability” is a success term such that *the success at issue crucially depends on the logical coherence of the description* of the situation (just as “seeing” is a success term such that the success crucially depends on there being a thing that one thinks he/she sees).

If this interpretation is right, then although “conceivability” (“being within our ability to conceive—or to form a clear idea—of”) means not the same as “logical possibility” (“no *a priori* contradiction in the idea”), the judgment of conceivability is the same as—or wholly dependent on—the judgment of coherence. We cannot judge the coherence of a description (the logical possibility of a situation) in any other way except by trying to conceive—to form a clear idea—of the situation as described. We judge a situation as conceivable if and only if we understand its description and it seems coherent to us. If we see a description as incoherent, we judge the situation as described as inconceivable. If we do not understand a description clearly enough, or if it seems to us that the description leaves space for a hidden incoherence (as in cases like Goldbach’s conjecture, for example), we would say that it is unclear whether the description is coherent, that is, whether the situation as described is logically possible.

The point of “positive” (as distinct from “negative”) conceivability is that to make a considered judgment of whether a description is coherent and whether there is space for a hidden incoherence in it, one should think of details that may be relevant to the issue and see whether filling the description with such details can make it incoherent. Let us take, for example, the issue of the logical possibility of a phenomenal zombie. Given the definition of a phenomenal zombie as a creature that (1) is the exact physical copy of a human being and (2) has no consciousness (phenomenal mind), one would need to think of what it may take to be the exact physical copy of a human being, that is, what details of the human body constitution and functioning may be relevant to the issue and whether some

such (perhaps unknown at present) details can make the description of a phenomenal zombie incoherent.

If this account of how “conceivability” works is right, then “conceivability arguments” gravely misrepresent the conceivability–possibility relationship. Although conceivability does entail logical possibility, this entailment is trivial and just as useless as the entailment from logical possibility to itself. This does not mean that all such arguments fail; rather, this means that, for them not to fail, they need to be reinterpreted so as not to be dependent on the substantially empty CP entailment.

The possibility of such reinterpretation remains insofar as the thesis that the relevant kind of possibility is logical possibility is not affected by the failure of the CP enterprise.

The CP part of the purported CP arguments should be discarded; the logical possibility premise should either be proposed directly in virtue of its intuitive plausibility (on the presumption that one can “see” that the description of the situation is coherent and that there is no space for a hidden contradiction) or be grounded in some further considerations. For example, in the case of the zombie argument, the relevant consideration seems to be that, as Chalmers remarks, the logical impossibility of brain-duplicates that are not mind-duplicates (phenomenal zombies or inverts) would “require an *a priori* entailment from physical to phenomenal, which will require an analysis of phenomenal concepts that can support that entailment,” and this “requires a structural or functional analysis of phenomenal concepts,” whereas “there is good reason to believe that any such analysis of phenomenal concepts is a misanalysis.”<sup>18</sup> Other relevant considerations can be found in the earlier exposition of the zombie argument by Chalmers, in *The Conscious Mind*, which has little to do with the conceivability-to-possibility entailment but proposes that “an assertion of this logical possibility comes down to a brute intuition,” “obvious coherence” just as in the case of the statement “that a mile-high unicycle is logically possible.”<sup>19</sup> Besides, in that exposition, Chalmers invokes some indirect arguments to bolster the case for the logical possibility of phenomenal zombies.

The invitation to try to conceive of a hypothetical situation remains a legitimate and useful device. However, it should be construed as a way to make a judgment about the logical possibility of the situation (the coherence of the description) that *does not involve logical inference* from a conceivability premise to a possibility conclusion.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid: 196–97.

<sup>19</sup> D. Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory* (New York: Oxford UP, 1996) 96.