

Liam Gibbons

Matthias Michel

24.09

April 8, 2025

Why Conceivability Does Not Entail Possibility


Conceivability is a prevalent argumentative technique in philosophy. Arguments that utilize conceivability to make a statement about possibility. There is an important distinction here for what possibility means. For the rest of the paper, when I mention possibility it will refer to “logical possibility”. If something is “logically possible”, this means that in a different world with different laws of nature, it could be possible. For example, a human jumping a mile into the air is impossible in our world, but it is “logically possible” because, in a different world, a human could have the power to jump that high. This entails the question, “What could be logically impossible?” Logical impossibility is focused on identity. A four-sided triangle is logically impossible because a triangle is a 3-sided shape. No matter what laws of nature or other dimensions are in, a triangle can never have 4-sides, so it is logically impossible.




What conceivability premises argue is that if something is conceivable, then it must be logically possible. An example of a common statement using this logic is below:

1. We can conceive of a world where animals talk.
2. Therefore, it must be logically possible for animals to talk.

In this paper, I will explore the merits of conceivability argumentation by exploring two explanations for how the mind and the body interact: physicalism and dualism. First, I will introduce physicalism and discuss its merits as a theory for how the mind and body relate. Then, I will introduce Descartes’ conceivability argument for dualism. Finally, I will do an in-depth

analysis of the conceivability premise of Descartes' argument to show why it is not valid in proving dualism. This essay is not meant to prove physicalism, instead, it is to show Descartes' argument is not a valid reason to discard physicalism. 

Physicalism is the theory that the mind is equal to the body. Proponents of physicalism argue that the mind is the body and that all mental processes are physical processes in some way or another. This theory opposes the idea that there are any non-physical components of the mind. One argument for physicalism is the “best explanation argument.” To discuss the best explanation argument, we first turn to science. In many experiments done in the last few centuries, scientists have empirically revealed strong correlations between mental and brain properties. The best explanation argument states that the best and most logical explanation of these findings is that the mind and the brain are the same thing. If that were not the case, it would require much more research and explanation to reconcile the mind being non-physical despite the strong correlations we have already seen.

For example, imagine you are sitting at work one day and your computer dies. After trying to turn it back on, the computer shows a “no battery” sign. Without much thought, you assume that the computer ran out of battery through use. At no point do you consider the possibility that there is a mysterious or non-physical force that drained the battery. The battery dying of physical causes is the “best explanation,” so without reason to believe otherwise, the physical theory is most likely true. This is the same for physicalism. Physicalism is the best explanation for the correlations between the mind and the brain. With no reason or proof to believe that our mind works using mysterious non-physical things, physicalism is the best explanation for how the mind and body relate: they are the same. 

While physicalism is an inviting theory, there are many proponents of an opposite theory called dualism. Dualism argues that the mind and the body are distinct entities. From this, it follows that there are some non-physical properties of the mind. One popular argument for dualism comes from Descartes. Here is that argument:

1. If X is identical to Y, then X is *necessarily* identical to Y
 2. Thus, if the mind is identical to the body, then it is *necessarily* identical to the body
 3. But, the mind *could* be distinct from the body
- C. Thus, the mind is not identical to the body



To break it down, Descartes first introduces how he will explain identity. He states that if two things are identical, they must be completely identical. Premise two follows directly from premise one but inputs the mind and body for X and Y. At this point, Descartes has set up that if we can find some part of the mind and the body to be different, then we will prove that the mind and body have to be distinct. The significant premise is three. Premise three introduces the conceivability aspect of the argument that the mind “could” be distinct from the body. If this is true, then the mind cannot be identical to the body and Descartes’ conclusion holds. One example used to help motivate premise three is as follows: Imagine you wake up and walk into your bathroom. You go to brush your teeth and as you look into the mirror, you see nothing. Your body is not there. Your mind is, but your body is not. From this thought experiment, it is clear that you can conceive of the mind without the body. You can think of the mind in an environment without a body. This leads you to believe that the mind could be distinct from the body, and therefore premise three holds that the mind is not identical to the body. However, for premise three to be true the reader must accept that conceivability entails possibility.



It is easy for anyone to accept premise three at face value that “the mind could be distinct from the body.” The deeper problem is the implication that accepting premise three produces. If you accept premise three in the context of this argument, you are accepting that conceiving of something means something in relation to its possibility. Now, I will focus on premise three and why its assumption that conceivability entails possibility is incorrect. Let's start with a comparison between water and H₂O. From science, we know that H₂O is the chemical compound of water. Water is H₂O and H₂O is water, it is an identity. Thus, it is logically impossible to have water without H₂O. Now, imagine a dimension called Dimension X. Dimension X is similar to ours, except that water is not H₂O. Instead, it is X₂O with some element specific to that world called X replacing the hydrogen in our compound. X₂O is for all intents and purposes water. Now, I have just shown that water without H₂O is conceivable. If conceivability entails possibility, then that must mean that water without H₂O is possible, but because it is an identity, water without H₂O is impossible. So what is the problem here? The issue arises as to what we define water as. Water is a representation we use to understand what H₂O is. The water in Dimension X is not identical to the water in our dimension because both "waters" represent different things. H₂O and X₂O are different, so even though we *may call* their representations the same thing, that does not mean that their representations *are the same thing*. Thus, we can conceive of water representing X₂O, even though for us water is H₂O. This allows for the conceivability while still holding that water without H₂O is impossible.


The reason why we have these differing ideas between water and H₂O is because H₂O is a scientific discovery. As a child, we can understand water without knowing it is H₂O. To understand these differences, I will introduce two kinds of identity statements: *a priori* and *a posteriori*. *A priori* statements can be known without experience or observation. For example,

the fact that all bachelors are married or that all triangles have three sides are *a priori* identity statements. For our water example, stating that **water exists** or water is water are *a priori* statements. Even if we don't call it water, as a child we know that the liquid others call "water" exists and is itself. Conversely, *a posteriori* identities require experience and observation such as the concept that Bruce Wayne is Batman. It is possible to know Bruce Wayne and Batman and not know that they are identical. Knowing this identity requires learning, experience, or observation. In our water example, we need to learn or discover that water is made from the chemical compound H₂O to know that *a posteriori* identity. Water can be represented in either of these two identities, which is why we can conceive of water (*a priori*) without H₂O (its *a posteriori* identity), even though it is impossible to have water with H₂O.

Another example to illustrate this point is energy and matter. For a long time, humanity believed energy and matter to be two different physical quantities. They were represented and thought about entirely differently. We knew that energy was energy and matter was matter by *a priori* identities. However, with Einstein's work, we discovered that energy and matter were the same thing. We learned a new *a posteriori* identity that energy equals matter. **If energy is matter, then it is logically impossible to have energy without matter.** However, we were able to conceive of energy without matter or vice versa. How do we reconcile these two things? This is because conceivability does not entail possibility. We can think about matter and energy being different as much as we want, yet just because we can imagine that has no bearing on whether we can have one without the other.

Now that we have these thought experiments in mind, I will turn the discussion back to physicalism and dualism. The idea that the brain is the brain and the mind is the mind is an *a priori* identity. Anyone would agree without any experience or knowledge that those two identity

statements hold. Descartes argues that because it is conceivable that the brain and mind are distinct means it is logically impossible for them to be the same thing. However, as I have shown, conceivability is not the same thing as possibility. The mind and the brain may be like water and H₂O, energy and matter, or Bruce Wayne and Batman. Without any knowledge, we can conceive and understand them as different things even though they are one and the same. In the future, we may discover through advanced scientific and technological methods not yet available that the mind and the brain are identical. In this case, the mind and the brain would be different representations of the same thing. Furthermore, if the mind and the brain could be identical despite it being conceivable that they are distinct, then premise three of Descartes' argument for dualism does not support the conclusion. It does not follow that if the mind could be distinct from the body that the mind and body are distinct.

From the arguments discussed above, I present a counter argument for Descartes' conceivability argument in favor of physicalism. This is based on the premise that conceivability does not entail possibility. Imagining water as a different chemical substance does not mean water is not H₂O; imagining energy and matter are different does not mean they are distinct; just so, the mere fact that you can think about the mind and brain distinctly does not mean that they cannot be the same thing. While many arguments for dualism may still be valid, the above arguments show Descartes' argument is not among them. 

This discussion of conceivability also broadens beyond the scope of just Descartes' theory. Other theories in the philosophy of the mind utilize conceivability to prove a point such as Chalmers' philosophical zombie or Nagel's conceivability argument. Both of these arguments focus on conceivability and how it relates to consciousness being non-physical. Chalmers asks the reader to conceive of a "zombie," a physical copy of a person just without consciousness.

Nagel argues that conceiving of physical processes without consciousness prevents a certain type of physicalism about consciousness. Taking the arguments presented in this paper could lead to holes or distrust in the conclusions found in those well-respected arguments for non-physical consciousness as well.

