

Stephen Lumsden, essay for Units 1-3, Program B: Philosophy Of Mind

(Essay for Question 5. What is the philosophical significance of the idea of disembodiment and/or the idea of a 'zombie'?)

What is the philosophical significance of the idea of the idea of a 'zombie'

In this essay I will briefly summarise the origin of the idea of philosophical zombies and explain what they are. Arguments for their relevance in philosophical enquiry will be then made in order to gauge whether they are a useful tool to use.

The idea of a philosophical zombie is a fully functioning person who exists without any inner life or consciousness. This was first put forward by David Chalmers a form of thought experiment and goes as follows:

P1: I can consistently conceive of a beings that are physically identical with us, yet have no conscious experience.

P2: Conceivability implies possibility

C: Therefore we are not purely physical beings

In accepting the conceivability of the argument this implies possibility and therefore zombies are possible. In turn the possibility of the zombies will counter the physicalist view that consciousness can be solely defined in functional terms. In turn this can be seen as a victory for supporters of Cartesian Dualism (the idea that the mind is a separate immaterial entity which exists independently of the physical body, as outlined by Descartes in his *Meditations on First Philosophy*).

This argument raises questions in relation to two areas in the philosophy of mind, namely that of Dualism vs physicalism and the problem of other minds. Chalmers only posits the possibility of zombies in relation to the question of the hard problem of consciousness, namely that of qualitative subjective experience. He accepts that the area of soft consciousness will be common to zombies and ourselves. The soft problems of consciousness include the abilities to explain our ability to discriminate, to categorize, and to react to environmental stimuli and integrate that information into our own mind. Also it would include how to explain how a system can have access to its own inner states, how a system can report on its own mental states and how a system can focus attention and control behaviour. We are obviously talking about a highly functional zombie in this case, and for this reason we are forced to question what our definition of full consciousness could really support.

Only in looking closer at the premises of the argument above do the arguments for and against become clear. Can we really conceive of supposedly intelligent beings who have no idea of self such as we do? Chalmers forwards the idea that zombies may agree to subjective assertions that we make, thus giving the impression that they are just like us. For instance, they may agree with us that the smell of coffee smells good at a certain time of day, but does this mean they are lying? Even if, like the psychopath who feigns empathy to integrate themselves into normal society, they are simulating such feelings, why do they feel compelled to do so? There would have to be some level of consciousness to do this, even if it was much less than ours. For this reason also the idea of the zombie in discussing the problem of other minds may appear inconceivable also. Additionally the argument by analogy would also imply that we need to trust the utterances of others as true expressions of their own identity also. We may accept that every action that we execute in our daily routine may not include feelings or thoughts that we associate with the subjective qualitative

experience of our own selves, i.e. qualia, but there will always be a point where we are forced to re-address our actions at some stage. For instance ones daily commute is usually done without any notable memories that promote self reflection. However one cannot assert that such mundane tasks can be done without any level of subjective experience. Degrees of qualia should not be confused with a total lack of it.

Even if we accept the premise P1, does conceivability really imply possibility? Imagining something does not necessarily follow it is logically possible, from a metaphysical perspective. For instance, we can imagine the moon made of cheese, but how logically possible is this? In any possible world? Daniel Dennett believes those who say we can conceive the idea of the zombie have failed to imagine them thoroughly enough:

“They invariably underestimate the task of conception (or imagination), and end up imagining something that violates our own definition.”

If we do accept the possibility, we are impelled to accept some form of Dualist argument. We must live in something more than a merely physical universe and this brings in some level of mystery to the experience of being human. This in turn may evoke questions of the nature of the immaterial soul. The possibility of the soul is often forwarded in discussions in relation to out of body experiences. Those who believe in such occurrences again would see these as sufficient evidence for the existence of something essentially non-physical to the essence of being. The author believes that the notion of the out of body experience serves as the flip side of the coin to the argument for philosophical zombies. If out of body experiences do happen, is the body left behind at that moment in time essentially a zombie (albeit a not very active one)? This would depend of the functions driven by the soul, but this is something we can only imagine.

In concluding we are still left asking more questions. For instance, if we refute the argument for zombies, are we then accepting the functionalist's argument? If we do not refute the idea of the zombie, are we obliged to accept some form of Dualism? The whole idea seems to force one to take sides. Also, from an evolutionary perspective, why have we, as a species, developed consciousness? Would there be any advantages found comparing a real person with their zombie equivalent? Such questions encourage further discussion into the areas of soft vs hard problems of consciousness that need to be re-addressed and re-evaluated. In extending the limits of the thought experiment, the zombie raises questions in relation to imagination, conceivability and possibility, but that is its purpose and therein lies its essential importance.

References

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