

Capilano University

Philosophical Zombies: Physicalism Untroubled

A Criticism of the Zombie's defeat of physicalism

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Abstract

In analysis of the argument which states: 1. Zombies are conceivable. 2. If zombies are conceivable, then they are possible. 3. Therefore, zombies are possible. 4. If zombies are possible then physicalism is false. 5. Therefore, physicalism is false. An analysis of this argument will discuss how the fourth premise is not valid, and therefore the conclusion as well. The analysis will follow an evolutionary discussion of how consciousness evolved to establish how a physicalist might understand the existence of sensory consciousness, and how they might intuitively argue against zombies. There will then be an analysis of the conceivability of zombies and their issues in criticizing physicalism that will feature some of Dennet's analogy of health and consciousness. The conclusion will follow under the premise that the possibility of zombies does not contradict the possibility that physical structures are mental states, under the basis that neither provide a justifiable burden of proof on the other, and therefore physicalism is not justifiably challenged by zombies.

The conceivability of zombies is a troubling issue for physicalists due to the nature of their conceivability, which would demonstrate identical brain states as our own, but without the corresponding conscious experiences. In this conception of zombies, they are beings who are identical in every structure as our own, who act as we do, and who you might not be able to distinguish from an individual with conscious experiences, but nevertheless these beings do not have conscious experiences despite having the corresponding brain structures that most neurologists and evolutionary biologists normally correlate with being the source of conscious experiences in humans. This existence of zombies poses an issue for physicalism because it would provide an example of mental states not arising from physical brain states, and there being a functional being in place of a conscious one. Physicalism in essence says that mental states are products of their corresponding brain state, and that brain states are necessary for mental states to occur. Therefore, the existence of zombies (who do not have conscious mental states, but have the corresponding brain state), acts to demarcate brain states from mental states. Physicalists must look to deny this existence of zombies by logical means, but it often becomes the case that they are stuck arguing in a manner that begs the question of their view. Such is the case of the analysis of x and y , where x is identical to y , and therefore x equals y . In the case of zombies, they argue that if regular humans are physically and functionally identical to zombies, then it goes without saying that zombies have conscious states, and therefore zombie is just a synonym for human. This physicalist argument fails though because it acts on the premise of its own argument, that mental states come from physical states, something that cannot be confirmed definitively by current empirical evidence, and rather by correlational evidence (evidence which will be analyzed later on). I would suggest that the conceivability of zombies is not detrimental to physicalism based on the premises that their conception assumes metaphysically understood

mental states which support David Chalmers' assertion of the possibility of zombies ruling out physicalism (86). And furthermore, that a zombie is not a burden of proof for physicalism, and does not inherently justify its own existence. To reiterate though, it should be found from these arguments that zombies are not particularly troublesome to physicalism.

Firstly, it should be understood what physical structures are considered responsible for consciousness, as to understand why physicalists believe it is a mental state. For this discussion we will focus on sensory consciousness which is the experience of sensing qualia, and consequently having conscious experiences as a result of sensing qualia. The reason for focusing on this form of consciousness, is that it is generally regarded as the first and simplest form of consciousness that gives rise to image forming brains with the only requirement for the experience being the existence of a "forebrain (but not necessarily a developed cerebral cortex/pallium), midbrain, and hindbrain" (Feinberg and Mallat, 1). It is also regarded that sight was the first sensory experience to evolve among vertebrates in the Cambrian period, and the first sense to give rise to sensory consciousness with the corresponding brain structures of a forebrain, midbrain, and hindbrain. So, to explain the common physicalist argument on zombies, they see zombies as beings who have these brain structures that can allow for sensory consciousness, but in a more complex fashion. They also have all the sensory ability that their brains and physical structures allow, and that ours allow. As a result, they think that it would be impossible for zombies to exist without these structures that give rise to consciousness if they do not have consciousness, or if they have these structures, that consciousness would arise as a consequence of the existence of the structures in the brain, so then a zombie would truly be the same as a human. They may also state that if a zombie were to not have consciousness, then it is

the case that there is some defection in the brain which causes its permanent unconscious functionalism, and thus the zombie would not be physically different.

All these arguments fail because they act under the premise that physicalism is correct in asserting that physical brain structures give rise to mental states, and therefore they beg the question. In the case of labeling brain structures as the responsible party for mental states, physicalists can only make correlational conclusions about how the physical and the mental interact, and therefore before they can ever act under the premise of their own view, more empirical evidence is necessary. I will assert though that to argue against zombies, one must analyze the possibility of zombies, and how such possibility criticizes physicalism, because it seems that the existence of zombies falls into their own trap.

On the issue of correlational evidence, physicalism cannot definitively show that mental states arise from physical states, and the possibility of zombies would indeed demarcate physical states from mental states. In this conclusion though, it seems that those who are quick to defend zombies see that they have a definitive idea of mental states themselves, and how they come to appear. It would seem that in the case of zombies, they show a being whose mental states are not tied to their physical ones. This is intuitively conceivable, that mental states might not be tied to physical ones, an intuition like heat is not molecular movement, something that was conceivable before they were discovered to be tokens of each other. In the case of sensory consciousness though, we do not know if it is equal to forebrain, midbrain, hindbrain, and structures for perceiving qualia, that much is evident. I can certainly conceive of the idea that sensory consciousness is equal to those things, all one has to do is hypothesize that sensory consciousness is equal to those structures, essentially, when one has those structures, they have sensory consciousness, because sensory consciousness is a phenomenon of those structures.

But nevertheless, if we conceive the possibility of things to further arguments, we would be here all day in a physicalist/non-physicalist tango. In this conception of sensory consciousness though, the only limitation is empirical evidence, and I would surmise that such a limitation occurs for zombies too, being that they are limited by metaphysical evidence which shows that mental states are not physical ones. I am not attempting to shift the burden of proof in this case, I would argue both sides have the burden of proof for each others idea, and for their own as well. I have shown what proof the physicalists require, it is empirical evidence, and zombie supporters believe that zombies are falsifiable evidence against physicalism. But in the conception of zombies, on the conceivability that sensory consciousness is the before mentioned physical structures, it would be the case that zombies would have sensory consciousness, because having those brain structures, when identical to an individual who has conscious experiences, would be equivalent to having conscious experiences, therefore, such example is a burden of proof equal to that of zombies against physicalism. It is therefore the case that to truly conceive of the possibility of zombies, more metaphysical evidence is required to falsify the possibility that brain states are not mental states, because, like heat not being molecular movement, zombies without consciousness is a hypothesis as much as sensory consciousness is just a phenomenon of physical structures. To compare with the premise against physicalism, that being if zombies are possible then physicalism is false, the premise does not prevail because the possibility of zombies is not possible without further evidence of mental states. Essentially, one can only conceive of zombies in the case that mental states are not in fact a phenomenon from physical states.

Daniel Dennet's analogy of health is particularly important for understanding why the conception of zombies relies on evidence that has not yet been founded (176). His assertion is

that we cannot add or subtract health from an individual whose parts are all in proper working order and function, because health is a phenomenon of those parts working as cogs, and in the case of a healthy person, cogs that run efficiently, essentially being that health is a product of working parts, just as consciousness could very well be of brain states (DenNET 176). If the case is that we can conceive of physical parts giving way to mental processes such as consciousness, zombie supporters must show that it is in fact the case that consciousness can be removed from working parts, because they must show that those parts are irrelevant to the arrival of conscious states, and therefore they require more metaphysical evidence to support the premise of the possibility of zombies being troubling for physicalism.

This is not to say that physicalism is off the hook, or unscathed forever by criticism, but nevertheless, it seems that I am able to note that zombies will not be haunting physicalists in the night any more, at least if they can get more empirical evidence that is. But nevertheless, the burden of proof is on both the physicalists, and the zombie fans to prove their own views, and disprove the others, and it seems to me that the only way to do that is by collecting evidence, whether it be metaphysical, or physical.

Works Cited

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