

Could there be a philosophical Zombie? A brief attempt to analyze a controversial issue

*PhD Candidate Florin George POPOVICI
“Ştefan cel Mare” University of Suceava
popovicifloringeorge@yahoo.com*

Abstract

The following article provides the reader with a challenge, sharing the purpose of a brief examination of some unfamiliar but debatable questions: what are “philosophical zombies”? To what extent should we really accept the existence of these creatures? Are they a fruitful intellectual creation or just another useless and counterproductive appendix to a classical conundrum? This concept is both admired and strongly contested. At the same time, it requires re-examination, because it can be relevant as a philosophical issue, as it is as a thought-experiment with specific virtues in the context of problematizing consciousness and the understanding the relationship between body and mind.

Keywords: *Zombie, thought-experiment, consciousness, body and mind.*

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to clarify the main coordinates of the “philosophical zombie concept” and to evaluate the weighty role of both the “zombie and anti-zombie arguments” into the philosophical debate about the nature and functions of consciousness. Regardless of the authors who claim that the zombie issue is nothing more than a “seductive but radically mistaken way of thinking” (Kirk, 2006, p. 1), we tend to consider this topic as being extremely relevant if we encompass it into the context of understanding the difficult “mind-body” problem. Or, as Chris Frith and Geraint Rees admits, “zombies retain a surprisingly strong influence on contemporary philosophers of consciousness” (Velmans, 2007, p. 17). In order to investigate “the logical supervenience of consciousness”, we have a cognitive tool at our disposal: “to consider the logical possibility of a zombie” (Chalmers, 1997, p. 84). Our main assumption is that the “philosophical zombie” can be seen as being closely intertwined with the rejection of the reductionist theories of mind.

First of all, let us take into consideration how the “philosophical zombie concept” is defined. Far away from the Hollywood imaginary creations, the philosophical zombie is “someone or something physically identical to me (or to

other conscious being), but lacking conscious experiences altogether” (Chalmers, 1997, p. 84). There are no obvious physical differences between a zombie and a human being, on the contrary, they are perfectly identical. As Michael Tye says, “a philosophical zombie is a molecule-by-molecule duplicate of a sentient creature, a normal human being, for example, but who differs from that creature in lacking any phenomenal consciousness” (Velmans, 2007, p. 27). A philosophical zombie could be conceptualized as a useful cognitive tool giving us valuable help regarding *qualia*, the existence of the phenomenal experience, subjective feelings or sensations. Obviously, from the reductionist physical point of view, there are no *qualia* at all, but a materialistic universe with humans part of it. On the one hand, the materialist science supports this assumption. Assuming the logical conceivability of the zombies could be, as Robert Kirk (2006) points out, “a major source of confusion and distorted thinking”. The same author admits, in a different place, that “whatever you may think about that idea, it forces you to think deeply about consciousness. It also helps to make clear that scientific research by itself will not be enough to answer the question of what it takes for something to be conscious” (Kirk, 2017, p. 65). On the other hand, common sense challenges us to accept the subjective experiences of “what it is like to be something” (Nagel, 1974): the way we perceive the red color of a rose, the way we feel pain or smell a ripe tomato and so on. From a dualistic point of view, *qualia* exist as an irreducibile quality of sensations that we have about things, reffering to the psychological or mental states. For dualists, *zombie* is a seductive idea brought against the physicalist reductive view about the relation between human mind and the external world. From a broader perspective, the zombie arguments are essentially dualistic attempts to argue the existence of the phenomenal consciousness. So, the zombie issue arises between two confronting philosophical perspectives: dualism and monism. “There is a long philosophical tradition, epitomized by Cartesian dualism, according to which minds are distinctly outside the natural order. There is another tradition, materialism, exemplified by Descartes’s contemporary Hobbes, and which has since achieved the status of consensus (...), according to which mental phenomena are ultimately natural, physical phenomena.” (Levine, 2004, p. 4) Both positions seem to have plausible arguments and dedicated followers. A relevant question arises: could the philosophical zombie bring some clarity into this debate or, on contrary, should it be abandoned?

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Pros and Cons of Philosophical Zombies

Even if the term was launched into the philosophical circuit by other thinkers, such as Robert Kirk or Keith Campbell, for David J. Chalmers philosophical zombies are not empirically possible, but they are at least logically conceivable or, to put it differently, they are coherent entities in an obvious manner (Chalmers, 1996, pp. 84-85). The Australian philosopher popularizes *phenomenal zombies* in order to prove that materialist explanations about consciousness are wrong. His strategy is to transform these hypothetical creatures in a valuable tool in order to investigate the way our consciousness *supervenes* in complex biological systems. First of all, he defines a phenomenal zombie as „someone or something physically identical to me (or to any other conscious being), but lacking conscious experiences altogether.” (Chalmers, 1996, p. 84) Then, he clearly establishes the identity relation between a zombie and a human being through three dimensions: *physical*, *functional* and *psychological*. But, as the author of *The Conscious Mind* argues, there is a major characteristic of a phenomenal zombie, because even if he reacts in a similar way with humans, “none of this functioning will be accompanied by any real conscious experience” (Chalmers, 1996, p. 85). Much more, there is a logical possibility for us to live in *a zombie world*: “a world physically identical to ours, but in which there are no conscious experiences at all. In such a world, everybody is a zombie.” (*ibidem*). Criticizing physical reductionism through this thought-experiment, Chalmers proves to be a follower of dualism: if we can conceive something, it means that it is possible for such thing to exist, because whatever is conceivable is possible. There is an inseparable ontological distinction between mental states and physical states. These states are not reducible one to another. His philosophical belief is that consciousness or mental states *supervene* in a well-developed biological system. *The hard problem of the consciousness* (the explanation of the way phenomenal consciousness supervenes) seems to resist against any reductionist attack from materialism, behaviorism, functionalism and so forth.

Also, Joseph Levine is one of the philosophers who admits “the conceivability idea” of philosophical zombies, even if accepting this plausible premise could make the argument evolving to the conclusion that, regarding consciousness, materialist explanations are false. Appealing to common sense intuitions, Levine (2001, p. 44) concludes that the zombie argument “is not formally contradictory, nor does it contain any semantic incoherence.” Even if “materialism rules out the metaphysical possibility of a «zombie»” (Levine, 2001, p. 43), Levine takes very seriously into consideration the idea that an

epistemological assumption could have ontological implications. The logical level of analysis is changed with the metaphysical one in order to prove that we can not establish an identity between mental subjective states and physiological or brain states.

Similar to Rene Descartes' *automaton* or much more to *Frankenstein's monster* created by Mary Shelley, a philosophical zombie tends to be perceived more than a cultural icon. This hypothetical entity is a symbol of a paradigm shift in the way we think about mind-body relation and the problem of consciousness. In the middle of the *qualia* debate, it reassumes the classical dualistic point of view – mind distinct from matter and *consciousness as a property that supervene in the matter* – and also orchestrates new responses to the behavioristic and materialistic supremacy, which postulates the matter without any mind at all. „Perhaps there is vital essence that turns a zombie into a human. There are various proposals as to the nature of this vital essence.” (Velmans, 2007, p. 18) The *functionalists* admit that consciousness is the same as complex computational algorithms. From this assumption there could be derived the idea that the material support of the consciousness is not so important. Brain is just *hardware*, and mind or consciousness is just a complex program or a *software*. And if we succeed in creating a mechanism with a sufficient level of complexity, then we have produced a conscious machine. It is quite difficult here to avoid the spectrum of dualism.

From a materialistic point of view, exemplarily theorized by Daniel C. Dennett, a philosophical zombie is nothing more than a logical fallacy. For the author of *Consciousness Explained*, by indulging fantasy through their thought-experiments, dualist philosophers only struggle to produce such imaginary and odd entities in order to build a convincing theory about consciousness. This strategy suffers, as Dennett argues, a fatal logical incoherency and we should dismiss without delay the so-called “zombie problem” (Dennett, 1992, p. 95). For Dennett, robots like Shakey are paradigmatic zombies, they seem to perform all kinds of tasks, they navigate in an intelligent manner, they adapt to the environment, they monitor their own activities, even express or report on their internal states. But these internal states are not conscious states at all. At this point, Dennett replaces the zombie with the *zimbo*, this is “a zombie that, as a result of self-monitoring, has internal (but unconscious) higher-order informational states that are about its other, lower-order informational states. (...) A zimbo is just a zombie that is behaviorally complex, thanks to a control system that permits recursive self-representation” (Dennett, 1992, p. 310). Translating all the internal states into the behavioristic language, Dennett concludes that zombie is nothing more than a philosophical nonsense: “I don't think either the concept of a zombie or the folk-

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psychological categories of higher-order thoughts can survive except as relicts of a creed outworn” (Dennett, 1992, pp. 313-314). Denying the existence of the phenomenal consciousness, and implicitly the dualist perspective, Dennett dismisses in an accurate way the zombie problem because it is not “a serious philosophical idea but a preposterous and ignoble relic of ancient prejudices” (Dennett, 1992, p. 406). His materialistic account of the subjectivity is not the only methodical rebuttal of the qualia. Analysing the philosophy of Daniel Dennett, Christopher S. Hill declares that “Zombies are ridiculous!” (Hill, 1994, p. 540).

In another field of philosophical ideas, Michael Tye observes that if we, as humans, experience phenomenal consciousness, meaning that we must have sensory experiences about the external world. The question is: could a twin zombie, which is a perfectly physical duplicate of us, experience no conscious states at all? “Since my twin is an exact physical duplicate of me, his inner psychological states will be functionally isomorphic with my own (assuming he is located in an identical environment).” (Velmans, 2007, pp. 27-28) “I and my zombie-duplicate must have the same behavior or to respond in the same way to the stimuli. From this functionalist perspective, which identifies phenomenal psychological states as functional states, there is no difference between me and my duplicate-zombie. (...) my zombie twin has just the same beliefs, thoughts, and desires as I do.” (Velmans, 2007, p. 28) Tye construct an argument about the condition of possibility of the philosophical zombie. It is very important to make the difference between the real existence of the zombies and the logical possibility of these creatures. Even if we cannot accept the real existence of the zombies because they deny natural laws, we must admit the hypothesis of the logical possibility. For Michael Tye, philosophical zombies seriously threaten the physicalist view about consciousness. The physicalist problem is to explain how the physical states determine the mental states. The solution is to reduce the mental to the physical. “Phenomenal states, it seems, are not identical with internal, objective physical states, nor are they determined by physical states. This is the problem of microphysical duplicates.” (Velmans, 2007, p. 28) So the problem with physicalism is to explain how and, if at all, mental states are determined by the physical states. The physicalists reject the idea that there are experiences (mental facts) that are not determined by the microphysical states or facts. To fight against the functionalistic view about phenomenal consciousness, Tye imagines a thought experiment: *the inverted spectrum*. He imagines a person, Tom, who, after an operation, whenever he sees red objects, he experiences the feeling of “greenness” in the same way we experience the feeling of “redness” without being aware of this inverted quality. Despite the identical functional qualities, Tom experiences

different mental states in comparison to the rest of us. “So the phenomenal quality of Tom’s experience is not a matter of its functional role.” (Velmans, 2007, p. 29) Tye’s conclusion is that the functionalist view about phenomenal consciousness is wrong. Another author, Robert Kirk, in *Robots, Zombies und Us*, assumes a version of functionalism, pledging that consciousness is just a matter of functions of the complex organisms or, as he puts it, “a matter of the performance of certain functions” (Kirk, 2017, p. 14).

Being a philosopher gives you the privilege to imagine and navigate into the possible worlds. In one of these worlds, everyone around you could be nothing more than a zombie. There is a provocative mission to prove with strong arguments if they are conscious or not, even if they act like us. The behavioristic way of conceiving human nature is far away from being flawless: seeing actions and reactions, observing the behavior gives you small chances to analyze and understand the realm of subjectivity or the inner non-physical life. The zombie issue seems to arise in the controversial space that lies between first-person perspective and the third-person perspective. But when it comes to us, each of us could say that we are not zombies, we are actually conscious beings, which means that we possess phenomenal experiences.

Conclusion

The concept of the “philosophical zombie” could be understood as an intellectual device that stimulates new ways of thinking about the mind-body relation and also as a thought-experiment that pinpoints strong empirical programs and unsettling findings about consciousness. Even if some of us do not accept that it brings significant value to the scientific study of the mind, we have to admit that it fuels one of the strongest debate about the nature and functions of “what it is like to be something” (Nagel, 1974). The “philosophical zombie” could serve as a valuable tool against any form of reductionism. In our attempt to analyze this philosophical conundrum (the mind/body problem), we might discover that consciousness could be more than a brain state or function. Confronting ourselves with a challenge about identical beings which have no phenomenal experiences at all might enable us to envision, beyond puzzles and paradoxical reflections, some forthcomings of the truth. One of them is that the science about consciousness is still at its inception. Against the reductionist point of view, we might accept, as Plato, Descartes or other philosophers did, that the world has two fundamental substances: matter and consciousness. If we accept this dualistic attitude, we risk bringing ourselves into the area of implausibility or inconsistency. Also, we have

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to pay serious attention to some materialistic arguments which are built by physicalist philosophers such as Daniel C. Dennett and others. Neurophysiology offered provocative ways and instruments about processes in our brain, about neural correlates or substrates of the consciousness, establishing a view about the mind which is build on chemical and physical reactions, electric processes and so forth. But that seems not to be enough. Against the dualistic view, which assumes a fundamental difference between physical states and conscious experiences, both with specific attributes, the physicalist approach affirms only the physical states. And where the science ends, bold philosophical hypothesis arises.

Based on the many common sense intuitions, the concept of the “philosophical zombie” warns us about the danger of confusing two levels of understanding. One is the logical analysis and the other is the ontological one. Even if we can conceive some beings without subjective experiences, it is not necessary to admit that these beings are actual ontological possibilities. Logical conceivability should not be confused with ontological or natural possibility. In this case, a willing confusion could bring the philosophical thought into a paradoxical situation. The existence of the phenomenal experiences might be admitted only as a mental experiment or hypothesis. This has not only major implications about the scientific value of our findings, but on the deepest beliefs and attitudes of the common sense.

Bringing the topic to the present day: should we talk about our smart devices or strong AI artifacts as “tehno-zombies”? Or, could we accept that an intelligent robot to be considered conscious? Or is it just a mechanism that is successfully doing its job? Even the functionalists are trying to convince us that being intelligent is not enough for being conscious. Behaving in a proper way or acting *like* a sentient being is not equivalent to be a real conscious being. Also, conceivability is not enough for the possibility, and even less, for the actual existence.

The concept of the “philosophical zombie” brings us paradoxically closer and further from a major problem in the philosophy of mind: the possibility to identify and describe the nature of consciousness. It is not easy at all to understand and convince in a scientific way about what we consciously experience or about *qualia*. At the same time, the “philosophical zombie” brings us to the odd revelation that consciousness could remain for a long time from now just an elusive or an unexplained human phenomenon. Even so, it keeps our curiosity alive, it also keeps our intellectual struggles to understand and explain the unexplainable on the right track.

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