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The anti-zombie argument for physicalism

Keith Frankish

The Open University, UK

1. Terminology

Physical property: either a microphysical property or a property that is microphysically realized.

Physicalism: the view that phenomenal properties are physical ones.

Dualism: the view that phenomenal properties are not physical ones.

Microphysical property: a property of the sort invoked by physicists.

Bare microphysical duplicate: *a* is a bare microphysical duplicate of *b* if *a* is a duplicate of *b* in all and only its microphysical aspects.

Zombies: beings which are bare microphysical duplicates of us and which inhabit a universe which is a bare microphysical duplicate of ours, but which lack phenomenal consciousness.

2. The zombie argument

- 1) It is conceivable that there be zombies.
- 2) If it is conceivable that there be zombies, it is metaphysically possible that there be zombies.
- 3) If it is metaphysically possible that there be zombies, then consciousness is nonphysical.
- 4) Consciousness is nonphysical.

(From Chalmers 2002a, 249)

(2) is an instance of *The CP thesis*: if a situation is conceivable, then it is metaphysically possible.

3. The anti-zombie argument

Anti-zombies: beings which are bare microphysical duplicates of us and inhabit a universe which is a bare microphysical duplicate of ours, but which nonetheless have exactly the same conscious states we do.

- 5) It is conceivable that there be anti-zombies.
- 6) If it is conceivable that there be anti-zombies, it is metaphysically possible that there be anti-zombies.
- 7) If it is metaphysically possible that there be anti-zombies, then the microphysical features of our world are metaphysically sufficient for the existence of consciousness.
- 8) The microphysical features of our world are metaphysically sufficient for the existence of consciousness.
- 9) If the microphysical features of our world are metaphysically sufficient for consciousness, then consciousness is physical.
- 10) Consciousness is physical.

The P-world: a bare microphysical duplicate of the actual world.

Zombists and *anti-zombists* disagree as to whether the P-worlders are conscious.

- If the P-worlders are not conscious, then zombies are possible; if they are, then anti-zombies are possible.
- The possibility of zombies is incompatible with that of anti-zombies.
- Assuming the CP thesis is correct, the conceivability of zombies is incompatible with that of anti-zombies.
- If both zombies and anti-zombies are conceivable, then the CP thesis is false.
- One of the following is false: (a) The CP thesis, (b) Zombies are conceivable, (c) Anti-zombies are conceivable. Zombists must reject (c).

4. Are anti-zombies conceivable?

Terminology from Chalmers 2002b:

Prima facie conceivable: conceivable on first appearances.

Ideally conceivable: such that it remains conceivable after ideal rational reflection.

Negatively conceivable: such that it cannot be ruled out a priori.

Positively conceivable: such that we can form a clear imaginative conception of it.

- Anti-zombies are prima facie negatively conceivable. (Physicalists are not that wrong!)
- Anti-zombies are prima facie positively conceivable. The intuition of distinctness can be explained away as arising from the nature of our phenomenal concepts.

The point is, how can I tell, merely from facts about my own cognitive situation, including facts about various conceptual relations among my representations, that what one representation refers to is distinct from what another one refers to? ... The bottom line is that my representations seem to present me with two distinct properties. But the possibility that distinct representations really refer to the same thing must always be an open one. (Levine 2001, 91)

5. Is there a non-obvious a priori argument against the anti-zombie scenario?

Strategy 1: Argue that zombies are ideally conceivable, the CP is true, so anti-zombies are not.

Reply: Simply pits one conceivability intuition against another.

Strategy 2: Argue that, on analysis, the concept of a phenomenal property is that of a non-physical property, so it is a priori that phenomenal concepts do not apply to anything in the anti-zombie world.

Reply: It is question-begging to use such theoretically loaded concepts. If phenomenal properties are defined as non-physical, then physicalists will deny that consciousness is to be characterized in terms of them.

Strategy 3: Appeal to an a priori argument for the falsity of physicalism. The anti-zombie world is defined as one in which physicalism is true. So if it is a priori that physicalism is false, then it is a priori that the description of the anti-zombie world is incoherent.

Reply: The strategy is sound, but zombieists face a dilemma. If they appeal to the zombie argument itself, then this proposal faces the same objection the first one. If they appeal to an independent anti-physicalist argument, then the zombie argument is redundant.

6. Lessons

1. The CP thesis is a two-edged sword.
2. The zombie argument cannot be the fundamental anti-physicalist one.
3. Considerations of conceivability have little role to play in establishing the truth or falsity of physicalism.

Closing thought: The anti-zombie argument was conceived simply as a tactical device to neutralize the zombie argument. But might it be actually be sound?

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Contact

k.frankish@open.ac.uk