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Background on zombies

In philosophy, a zombie is exactly like a normal human being apart from the fact that it is completely devoid of experience. This means that the zombie will have the exact same physical make up as a normal human, but there is nothing 'it is like' to be him. Usually, the concept of the zombie is used to argue for dualism; the idea that conscious experience cannot be explained in purely physical terms. Dualism is pitted against physicalism; the claim that conscious experience can be fully explained by the physical. If zombies are possible, the argument goes, then consciousness is at least partly caused by something other than the physical. The claim that zombies are possible usually rests upon the claim that they are conceivable. If this is the case, then dualism is correct. A physicalist can respond to this in two ways: he could either argue that conceivability does not entail possibility, or he could argue that zombies are not in fact conceivable. David Chalmers presents one of the most detailed zombie arguments against physicalism. He states that there is no contradiction in the idea of a zombie, therefore they are ontologically possible.[1]

Introduction

Despite the fact that the possibility of the zombie is very much up for debate, the concept seems to have been under-utilised as a philosophical tool. In this article, I would like to set aside the dualism/physicalism debate. Instead, I would like to use the notion of the zombie to try to understand further the ontological nature of consciousness and the role it plays in being human (if any). The notion of the zombie I will be using is that which is exactly the same physically as the human being, as opposed to 'homunculus' zombies sometimes talked about in the literature.[2] The homunculus zombie is too physically different from the human brain to be considered relevant in this investigation. Of course, it is plausible that tiny men inside a head following the correct rules could replicate the behaviour of a human being, but it is not clear that it would constitute a being that is truly human.

My line of enquiry will be twofold. Firstly, I will discuss whether a zombie really would behave exactly the same as the conscious human. In this section I will ask the question "do zombies listen to music?". The purpose of this section will be to attempt to establish whether consciousness plays a causal role in the human mind. The answer

[1] (Chalmers, 1996)
[2] (Block, 1980a)

will also have the implication of confirming or denying epiphenomenalism. This is the claim that consciousness is essentially an inert by-product of physical brain activity. If true, it means that consciousness plays no causal role in reality.

Then, in the second line of enquiry, I will assume the behaviour of the zombie is exactly the same as the conscious human. I will discuss whether the zombie and the conscious human really can be considered to be exactly the same. In this section I will ask the question "do zombies like music?". This may help us to understand the ontological nature of consciousness.

Do zombies listen to music?

Firstly, an important issue to address is whether or not it is possible for something non-physical (consciousness) to have a causal effect on something physical (the brain). According to classical physics, it is not. Since all physical phenomena (human behaviour included) can be accounted for by other physical phenomena, there is no room for consciousness to have any causal effect on the physical. In the nineteenth century, support for this belief grew; forcing many to accept that consciousness is just a causally inert by-product of the physical processes going on in the brain.

However, quantum physics (a theory concerning elementary particles) allows for an element of 'randomness' which classical physics does not allow. The exact behaviour of the most elementary known particles cannot be accurately predicted, even when all of the relevant physical information is available. This opens the door for the possibility of something non-physical being able to have a causal effect on the physical. This may seem an implausible claim, but it is supported by common sense. When I decide to lift my arm up, it really does feel like I made the conscious decision to do so. Therefore, we will not rule out the idea that consciousness can have a causal effect on the physical. Quantum theory can be used to reinforce a view called 'panprotopsychism', which holds that the metaphysical reality is not fundamentally made up of the physical.[3]

If we are utilising the concept of the zombie to try to identify the role played by consciousness, we cannot do so without mentioning Descartes. He conducted a thought experiment similar to ours to establish the necessity of consciousness. He believed that all animal behaviour could be accounted for in terms of physical processes; they are essentially purely mechanical. However, he denied that human behaviour could be accounted for in the same way. In his investigation, he imagines a machine built to behave just like a human (though he did not refer to it as a zombie). He states that the machine would not be able to behave like the human in two ways. Firstly, it would not be able to use language creatively. Secondly, it could not behave appropriately in arbitrarily various situations.[4] Descartes concludes that, for

[3] (Chalmers, 1999)
[4] (Discourse V)

something to behave like a human, an immaterial mind is necessary. The immaterial mind equates to consciousness. It is important to remember that the technology in Descartes' time was relatively crude by today's standards. He may not have felt that machines could be capable of learning and changing, as they are today. Perhaps with an adequately powerful computer, Descartes' machine could use language creatively and act appropriately. However, that is not the focus of this investigation. We are not concerned with machines which are programmed to replicate human behaviour. Instead, we are concerned with actual humans which are devoid of conscious experience and how it would affect their behaviour. While Descartes' thought experiment sought to establish the necessity of consciousness, we are seeking only to describe the role and nature of consciousness.

Returning to the zombies. Imagine we are observing a fully conscious, fully functioning human being named Claire. Imagine also that we are observing another version of Claire in a parallel world; Claire 2. Claire 2 is exactly the same as Claire, except she has no subjective experience. Physically, she remains the same as Claire. The question is, would Claire 2 continue to behave in exactly the same way as Claire?

Claire 2 still has a fully functioning physical brain. We can assume that her autonomic nervous system still functions the same. Her autonomic nervous system controls her digestion, breathing, heart rate, swallowing and arousal. All of these functions are controlled without any conscious input. Claire does not have to consciously make her heart beat, meaning that Claire 2's heart will continue to beat even though she has no conscious experience. However, Claire can control her breathing if she wants to. If both of the Claires decide to go swimming, their breathing will need to be temporarily paused while they are under the water. From a medical point of view, taking over from the autonomic nervous system and stopping breathing is considered to be 'conscious' control. But does this mean that phenomenal consciousness is necessary for the Claires to have this control?

The urge to pause breathing while under the water presumably comes from learning that you cannot breathe underwater. Both Claire and Claire 2 can be considered to know this fact, despite the fact that they are not always consciously aware of it. It seems then that the knowledge is physically stored in the brain. In fact, it would seem that all knowledge is stored in the brain physically. It also seems logical that Claire 2's brain would physically link the knowledge that she is swimming with the knowledge that she cannot breathe under water. The command to the lungs to stop breathing would also be sent through a physical connection. At this point, we can conclude that there is a high probability that phenomenal consciousness is not necessary in this scenario.

But would Claire 2 have gone swimming in the first place? This can be equated with the question 'do zombies listen to music?'. Unless Claire 2 was forced to swim away

from a threat on her life, she probably went swimming for the sheer fun of it. Would a human, completely devoid of experience, do something just for fun or enjoyment?

If we accept the claim that consciousness is epiphenomenal, it would seem that the brain is simply a computer which has been programmed by evolution. On this picture, the brain genetically mutates and causes certain behaviours. If those behaviours aid survival, then they are passed on to more offspring. If the brain genetically mutates to cause behaviour which hinders survival, then the behaviour is passed on to less or no offspring. In an evolutionary sense, would the pursuit of fun or enjoyment aid or hinder survival? That is all dependent on what it is that is being pursued. Some activities pursued for enjoyment would not hinder survival at all, such as spending time with friends. Others, however, would hinder survival. Many activities pursued for their enjoyment are extremely dangerous. In fact, that is what makes them so enjoyable. A modern day example is bungee jumping. It is safe to assume that activities such as this would have been more dangerous in the past, before regulations and advanced safety technology. If these behaviours do not aid survival and reproduction, it seems that epiphenomenalism cannot account for these behaviours. So, from an evolutionary point of view, why do people engage in these activities?

The evolutionary reason people pursue these activities is because they make us scared. This in turn causes a release of adrenaline. Adrenaline, in a physical sense, prepares the body for a fight or flight reaction. In a phenomenal sense, it feels really good. The feeling is the sole reason why someone would go bungee jumping. So why would someone devoid of all phenomenal consciousness pursue something for the feeling alone? It seems strange that they would. Returning to the Claires, Claire 2 may have gone swimming to maintain her fitness, or to practice in case she fell in the sea at some point, but it is difficult to see why she would have gone just for the feeling of enjoyment.

Lots of ends which we pursue can be explained from an evolutionary perspective. For example, spending time with friends is good because working in groups aids survival. Having sex for enjoyment is explainable from an evolutionary perspective for obvious reasons. In these cases, one could argue that the feeling is just an inert by-product of evolutionary advantageous behaviour. However, this is not the case with many other activities. They really are pursued solely for the way they feel. If that is the case, and phenomenal feeling is the sole reason we pursue certain goals, then we must conclude that consciousness really can have a causal effect on physical behaviour.

So, do zombies listen to music? It seems unlikely that a zombie would listen to music. The zombie would be able to understand the lyrics and it would gain the information concerning the frequency of the sound waves. It would be able to identify the drums, guitar and vocals. However, it would not be able to hear it. One could state that perhaps listening to music would have a physical, calming effect for the zombie, but

it is difficult to comprehend how music would have this effect without being able to hear it.

Do zombies like music?

Let us say, for the sake of our investigation, that both Claire and Claire 2 listen to a song. Claire really likes the song. Does Claire 2 also like the song? Claire 2 would be able to identify the various instruments and understand the vocals, but she would not be able to hear the song. She would not be able to derive any sensuous pleasure from it. Can she really be said to like it?

It seems difficult to say how she could possibly be said to enjoy the song. This is because she is essentially a physical machine. As a physical machine, things can only have an instrumental value. For example, a computer which utilises a certain line of code often cannot really be said to 'like' that line of code, but the code can still be said to have instrumental value to the computer. For the sake of analogy, let us say that Claire 2 'listens' to music because the sound waves have the effect of somehow lowering her blood pressure. Even if this were the case, it would only have instrumental value to her. It would be valuable to her in the same way that a knife and fork are valuable to her, or in the same way that toilet paper is valuable to her. Without the ability to experience the music, she cannot attribute any intrinsic value to it, and cannot be said to 'like' the music. Without consciousness, things can only be said to have a value in the sense that they contribute towards the overall goals of life (dictated by evolution) which are survival and reproduction. With consciousness, things can be considered to have an intrinsic value in the sense that they provide experiential pleasure. If zombies and machines cannot attribute value to anything in the world other than instrumental value, then any intrinsic value must stem from consciousness. Even if epiphenomenalism is true, this is a non-causal role played by consciousness. The ability to attribute an intrinsic value to something is an ontological feature of consciousness which the physical cannot account for.

Conclusions

In answer to the question 'do zombies listen to music?', I said no. This means that consciousness does play a causal role in influencing human behaviour. This was on the grounds that music is generally listened to for the pleasure of hearing it. Both hearing and pleasure are dependent on the senses. One may argue that the zombie, while not conscious, still has the physical capacity for emotion, which could be stirred by the music. However, the answer to 'do zombies like music?' shows that without the capacity to feel that emotion, it has no value beyond its instrumental value. There would be no grounds for the zombie to pursue an emotion for the sake of feeling the emotion. I therefore conclude that epiphenomenalism is false. Furthermore, it seems that consciousness is ontologically different from the physical. It is the source of all intrinsic value. If non-conscious beings had evolved, the only value attributed to

anything would be to something which enables survival and reproduction. We clearly attribute value to many things which do not aid survival or reproduction in any way. These values are intrinsic. Things such as music and art would have no value if it weren't for the way they made us feel. A purely physical machine would have no capacity to attribute value to these things.

I said at the beginning of this article that I would set aside the physicalism/dualism debate. However, these topics are inextricably linked. My conclusion that consciousness is the source of intrinsic value, something which the physical cannot account for, clearly has the implication of refuting physicalism. However, if it is the case that consciousness plays a role in constituting human behaviour, zombies are not possible. This removes the zombie argument for dualism.

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