ZOMBIES AND EPIPHENOMENALISM

Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between the claim that zombies are metaphysically possible and the notion that phenomenal consciousness is epiphenomenal. It is often taken that the former entails the latter, and that therefore any implausibility or incoherence in the notion of conscious epiphenomenalism thus calls into question the genuine possibility of zombies. Four ways in which the zombie might respond are examined; I argue that two are inadequate but the others more forceful.

A) Causal overdetermination?

- The zombie possibility leads to epiphenomenalism only if causal overdetermination is not the case.
- But causal overdetermination probably is not the case.
- Even if it were, ‘epiphenomenalism’ would still be true: the elimination of consciousness would make no difference to how things go in the physical world.

B) Panprotopsychism?

Suppose that:

i. Though causal laws relate things extrinsically, causality itself depends upon the intrinsic nature of the things related.
ii. The intrinsic nature of everything in the actual world is protophenomenal.
iii. Consciousness is agglomerated out of the intrinsic protophenomenality of brains, and hence inherits the causal relevance of the protophenomenal.
iv. There is at least one other species of possible intrinsic essence—call it haecceity—such that all the protophenomenal could be replaced by haecceity leaving the physical structure of the world unchanged.

On this view, the zombie hypothesis is consistent with non-epiphenomenalism.

C) The contingency of physicalism?

The proper way to think of the zombie world is: a possible world specified according to the physicalist’s best guess about the physics of the actual world but in which phenomenal consciousness is absent.

i. If physics is (relevantly, including causal closure) as specified by the physicalist, then physicalism must be false because of the zombie possibility.
ii. If physics is not (relevantly, including causal closure) as specified by the physicalist, then physicalism is (trivially) false.

Seen in this light, the zombie possibility sidesteps commitment to epiphenomenalism in the actual world.

D) Gap-filling / gap-bridging?

Suppose that:

i. Non-physical instances of consciousness (Xs) cause physical events (Ys) in the actual world.
ii. There is a possible world—a zombie world—in which there are no Xs but in which all the Ys occur just as in the actual world.
iii. In this zombie world, all the Ys are either:
   a) uncaused (they happen ‘by magic’), or
   b) caused by exemplifications of some new type of property (i.e. neither physical nor mental) that occurs in the zombie world but not in the actual world and fills these causal ‘holes.’

On this view, the zombie hypothesis is consistent with non-epiphenomenalism.

Conclusion

The zombie hypothesis does not unproblematically entail the epiphenomenalism of phenomenal consciousness, and four complications can be raised. But there are clear inadequacies with responses A and B, and worrisome aspects of C and D.