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Being Mindful of Zombies and Phenombies

[Zombiler ve Fenombilere Zihnimize Yer Açmak]

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Abstract: “Philosophical zombies” often figure in the contemporary philosophy of mind literature to argue for or against some theories of the nature of mind and mental states. In this paper we draw on zombies to illuminate certain aspects of our common, ordinary concepts of consciousness and mind. We also call in, for the same purpose, the help of a hypothetical being that we created, which we call “phenombie.”

Keywords: zombie, phenombie, blindsight, intentional mental states, qualitative mental states, consciousness, mind.

Many discussions in contemporary analytic philosophy of mind feature zombies. Philosophical zombies are imaginary creatures indistinguishable from a normal human as far as their appearance, behavior and biology are concerned, except they lack qualia and consciousness.¹ The big issue is whether they are conceivable or metaphysically possible. Some philosophers think that, even if zombies are not actual creatures, their

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¹ For a concise account of the use of the concept of zombie in philosophy of mind, see Kirk (2015). Kirk also has a full-size book on zombies; see his (2005).

mere possibility poses a threat for the physicalistic views of the mind, such as the identity theory and the supervenience theory, and makes epiphenomenalism a viable option in philosophy of mind.

Our concern here will not be whether the conceivability of zombies is a defeat for physicalism and victory for any species of dualism, such as epiphenomenalism. We will give our reasons to think that they are perfectly imaginable and conceivable (even nomologically possible) and focus on the question of what zombies can teach us about our intuitive concept of mind. We will look into the conceivability or imaginability of zombies with an interest towards understanding our ordinary concepts of mind and of consciousness, rather than test any philosophical theory of mind. By trying to imagine what a zombie is like—and not, of course, *what it is like to be a zombie*, for *ex hypothesi* there is nothing it is like to be a zombie—we can learn about the content of our common concepts of mind and of consciousness, and their relation. In this attempt we will be aided, as we shall see, by another creature too.

Imagining what a zombie is like is not an easy matter—which could partly explain why we have all this controversy about their conceivability—but there are ways of easing our way into imagining a zombie. Ned Block says that “blindsight” patients can be considered as real examples of “very limited sort of partial zombie” (Block, 1997: 385). A blindsight patient is someone with a neurological disorder which disables him to see in the normal way some regions in his visual field. If the patient is questioned about what he sees in such a region of his visual field, he will sincerely say that he sees nothing. But if we insist him to nevertheless make a guess about what may be in that region, the patient’s “guesses” like “There is something blue there” or “There is a red light there” or “There is a rectangular object there” turn out to be more frequently correct than guesses made totally at random. When asked how he can make guesses with such statistically significant frequency of correctness, the patient typically answers that he doesn’t know how he does that; he simply “feels it.” It seems that the patient can in some unusual way “see” the colors and shapes that correspond to those “blind” areas of his visual field. This seeing appears to be a seeing without qualia, i.e. seeing of a color, for example, without any attending “raw feels,” viz. the phenomenal character of the sensation of that color found in people with normal vision. An alternative way of putting this is to say that a patient with blindsight syndrome has *unconscious experience* of the colors and shapes that fall in the blind areas of his visual field. Another well-known phenomenon called “subliminal (or below-threshold) perception” shows that humans with normal vision can also perceive things without being aware or conscious of them. This means that there are moments when we all exhibit a touch of zombiehood.

There are other actual cases where humans come even closer to being zombies than blindsight patients or people experiencing subliminal perception do. Certain medical procedures like endoscopy may require that the patient be anesthetized in such a way that allows him to obey the doctor's commands like "Turn to right," "Turn to left," or "Open your mouth" while he is under what appears to be a deep "state of unconsciousness"—in doctors' own description. The patient does not remember anything after he regains consciousness. It seems at least imaginable that under this kind of anesthesia, the patient lacks any experience of qualia, although he can understand and respond to spoken language (hence possess at least some intentional states), like a zombie would.

Now we would like to introduce another creature, a "phenombie,"² which in a sense is the diametrical opposite of a zombie. A phenombie is capable of phenomenal experiences but utterly lacks intentional mental states like understanding, remembering, believing or desiring. Are phenombies conceivable? They may be harder to imagine than zombies, but we can facilitate our imagination of them with the help of some real examples of what may be considered as "partial phenombie" cases. One such example involves patients nearing coma or death. Shortly before a total state of coma or death occurs, a patient may respond to some stimuli by grimace or moaning, which seems to indicate that he is feeling pain, while his whole ominous condition and appearance suggests that he lacks any mental states like thoughts, beliefs, hopes or desires. It may be that such patients can experience a limited range of qualia, such as pain qualia, without possessing any intentional mental states.³

Another example of a—perhaps total, or almost total, as opposed to merely partial—phenombiehood episode may be taking place during fetal development. It seems plausible to suppose that, at a certain point during its development, a human fetus begins to experience pain and auditory or gustatory qualia for the first time (not necessarily all of them at the same point in time), although it is too early for the fetus to harbor any intentional states like thoughts, beliefs or memories. This may be true even about newborn infants.

Some psychological experiments with normal adult human subjects also suggest that they can experience visual qualia without being able to develop any thoughts or beliefs

² We owe the term "phenombie" to John Bolender.

³ Some patients in such conditions may possess at least some *unconscious* intentional mental states. But it seems plausible to conjecture that in some severe or terminal cases the patient may totally lack any intentional states, whether conscious or unconscious.

about those qualia. Block mentions George Sperling's and some others' experiments as illustration (Block, 1997: 405-406). He also gives a closer-to-home example:

Suppose that you are engaged in intense conversation when suddenly at noon you realize that right outside of your window, there is—and has been for some time—a pneumatic drill digging up the street. You were aware of the noise all along, one might say, but only at noon are you *consciously aware* of it. (Block, 1997: 386)

All this shows that there may be times when we all exhibit a touch of phenombiehood as well.

Like zombies, phenombies can be thought of as extensions in our imagination of certain real cases that have only *some* characteristics of a phenombie. Such imaginary extensions or exaggerations of the reality seem to give nomological or metaphysical plausibility to thought experiments involving zombies and phenombies. Our imagination of phenombies is further helped by some other examples that may be less realistic than the previous cases though still nomologically possible. Imagine a person with an exceptionally serious case of progressive amnesia. Not only has he lost all records of his past memories (including his name, occupation, the language he speaks, etc.), but he also has problem storing any new information in his memory for long. Thus, he sees, hears or tastes something but forgets a minute later what he saw, heard or tasted. (Not unlike some fish which are believed to have very short-lived memories of certain things.) Suppose his condition gets progressively worse, and his memory span becomes shorter and shorter. Eventually he loses his ability to remember entirely, and as a consequence of his totally blank memory, loses his capacity to reason, think, believe and so on. In short, he turns into a phenombie—a passive perceiver of qualia without any sense of significance of or connection between those qualia.⁴

Block has a famous four-fold classification of kinds of consciousness: phenomenal consciousness, access consciousness, monitoring consciousness and self-consciousness. His example involving the noise of a pneumatic drill is a case of phenomenal consciousness in the absence of access-consciousness before noon (Block 1997, p.386). Block might say that our phenombies have, in terms of his classification, “phenomenal consciousness but no access consciousness.” In contrast to the examples of phenomenal consciousness without access consciousness that Block gives, however, a phenombie

⁴ Metaphors can also be employed to aid our imagination of a phenombie. The mind of the extreme amnesiac can be likened to a TV screen, which is caused to host a flux of changing colors and patterns, but doesn't have any ability to reflect upon or give meaning to those colors and patterns. Metaphors and analogies are not meant, of course, to contribute to the empirical or metaphysical plausibility of the thought experiment concerning phenombies; they can only serve as psychological help to our imagination. The plausibility component of the thought experiment comes from the above-mentioned actual cases that approximate to phenombies to some extent and from the nomologically possible cases like our consummate amnesiac.

never has any “access” to its phenomenal experiences. It doesn’t have anything to “monitor” either, nor is it “self-conscious.” So, *pace* Block, we don’t think we could impute any consciousness whatsoever to a phenombie. As for a zombie, Block states that zombies lack phenomenal consciousness, but they can have access and monitoring consciousness, which are functional/intentional in character and do not require experience of qualia. (The latter two kinds of consciousness can be found even in some machines, according to Block.) As Block explains, his aim in his classification of consciousness types is to introduce some terminological regulations and discipline for talking more precisely about these issues, and hence his classification is partly stipulative. Our concern, on the other hand, is to investigate the content of our *ordinary*, intuitive concept of consciousness.

Having thus imagined both zombies and phenombies, we can now ask whether we want to attribute, (1) consciousness and (2) mind, to these creatures. We agree with the commonly accepted view that zombies lack consciousness—again, contrary to Block—because they can’t experience qualia. Our answer to the same question about phenombies is also negative: a phenombie doesn’t have consciousness either, despite its/his/her capacity for experiencing qualia. It seems to us that in order to possess consciousness, an organism needs to have both qualitative states and intentional states. Furthermore, these two kinds of mental states need to be causally *related* to one another in appropriate ways, for otherwise it is possible to imagine creatures that are seats *both* of a zombie and a phenombie at the same time, but still lack consciousness.

Our thought experiments involving zombies and phenombies reveal that qualia and intentionality are each necessary for consciousness, but not sufficient. Thus, we conclude that to be conscious is to be at least a minimum “mixture” of a zombie and a phenombie. Pure zombies on the one hand, and pure phenombies on the other, are the two termini that mark the borderlines of the content of our ordinary concept of consciousness.⁵

As for the second question, the question whether zombies and phenombies have minds, our answer will be that they both have minds. It seems to us that our ordinary concept of mind would impute some kind of mind to a phenombie, which can perceive different colors, sounds and has other sensations, even though it cannot make any sense of them or develop any beliefs, thoughts or higher-order mental states about them. As it has

⁵ The conceptual, metaphysical and even nomological possibility of a phenombie seems to support the higher-order-thought theory of consciousness: a phenombie has first-order states but no second-order states. The higher-order theory states that an experience is phenomenally conscious only if there is another mental state in the subject *about* the experience. A phenombie has a representation of red but that representation is not conjoined with a thought in the phenombie about its having the experience of red.

intentional states, a zombie should also be attributed a mind, in our view. A patient under anesthesia that we mentioned earlier, who comes close to being a real-life zombie, cannot be devoid of a mind, intuitively speaking. A zombie that has sufficiently many intentional states (whatever counts as “sufficiently many” in this context) should be regarded as possessing a mind. This shows that our two concepts, the concept of consciousness and the concept of mind, which are sometimes conflated with one another, are distinct: “mind” is a broader concept than “consciousness,” the latter being a modality of the former. Every conscious being has a mind, but not every being that has a mind also has consciousness. Thus, our discussion of zombies and phenombies illustrates that having a mind is not sufficient for consciousness, although it is necessary for having consciousness.

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Öz: “Felsefi zombiler” günümüz zihin felsefesi literatüründe zihinle ve zihinsel hallerle ilgili bazı teorileri destekleme veya onlara karşı çıkma amaçlı olarak sıkça karşımıza çıkar. Biz burada zombi kavramına umumi ve sıradan bilinç ve zihnin nosyonlarımızın bazı yönlerini aydınlatmak için başvuruyoruz. Aynı amaçla, kendi yaratımımız olan ve “fenombi” adını verdiğimiz başka bir hayalî varlığın yardımından da yararlanıyoruz.

Anahtar Kelimeler: zombi, fenombi, körgörü, yönelimsel zihin halleri, nitel zihin halleri, bilinç, zihin.

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