

Comments on Fischer and Sytsma (2021)

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Fischer and Sytsma (F&S) suggest that using the word "zombie" in the zombie argument against materialism makes a big difference to the force of the argument. It's an interesting hypothesis, but I'm skeptical. People made zombie arguments for years with labels like "absent qualia" (Block) and "imitation man" (Campbell) instead and they didn't seem notably less effective.

F&S's crucial salience bias hypothesis (p. 4) is that using "zombie" rather than "duplicate" biases competent language users to accept an imagined situation as verifying both **P** (a physical state) and '**~Q**' (not conscious), in particular biasing them toward **~Q** when one would normally have expected **Q**.

F&S's hypothesis seems obviously correct. "Zombie" is stipulated to entail **~Q** (not conscious), and even in normal usage strongly suggests the absence of a normal mental life, while "duplicate" is neutral on **Q**. So of course people will tend to interpret "zombie" descriptions as verifying **~Q** much more strongly than they interpret "duplicate" suggestions.

As a result, the result of F&S's experiment is pretty unsurprising. Using "zombie" strongly enforces an interpretation where consciousness is absent. Using "duplicate" does not. It's true that F&S say things are "dark inside" in both cases – but still, there are basically five reinforcements of **~Q** on the "zombie" version and just one brief mention on the "duplicate" version. So it's no surprise at all that subjects say that consciousness is absent much more often with the first description than the second. Maybe "zombie" exerts some extra subterranean influence of rotting flesh and the like on conceivability intuitions – but I don't think this experimental result does much to show that.

Another way to put the point is that at least setting aside the "dark inside" sentence, F&S are basically asking the questions: (1) Would a zombie duplicate of you be conscious? and (2) Would a duplicate of you be conscious? Here even my answers would be (1) No, by definition and (2) Yes, of course! (Because in any nearby world, a duplicate of me will be conscious.) But these are the wrong questions to ask for the zombie argument. One basically asks "if **P&~Q**, is it the case that **~Q**?" while the other basically asks "if **P**, is it the case that **~Q**?" Adding the "dark inside" sentence nudges the second a little more toward **~Q** but it's no surprise that a strong effect remains. Neither question asks whether **P&~Q** is conceivable or anything in the vicinity, which is what's crucial for the zombie argument.

So, I agree entirely that the "zombie" language is slanted toward lack of consciousness – that's the whole point! Saying "zombie" is like saying "non-conscious duplicate" instead of "duplicate". If we put the zombie argument in terms of the conceivability of non-conscious duplicates, F&S might correctly observe that the use of "non-conscious" biases the user toward an interpretation in which the being is not conscious. But that would do nothing to undermine the conceivability argument.

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