

## ***All is Dark Inside:***

### ***Commentary on ‘Zombie Intuitions’***

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Eugen Fischer and Justin Sytsma (‘F&S’ henceforth) take their study to demonstrate two main findings with respect to the conceivability of philosophical zombies: (1) linguistic salience bias, evidenced by the framing effects shown in their main study, contributes to rendering philosophical zombies *prima facie* conceivable when the relevant creature (which is physio-behaviourally indistinguishable from us, i.e. ‘P’, but lacks consciousness, i.e. ‘~Q’) is described as ‘zombie’; (2) for a majority of their participants philosophical zombies are not *prima facie* positively conceivable when the relevant creature is described as ‘duplicate’. F&S take these two findings to problematise the conceivability premise of the zombie argument. My disagreement is with respect to (2). (1) on its own poses no genuine threat to the conceivability argument since the argument can be formulated without mentioning the word ‘zombie’. But (2) would cast doubt on the conceivability premise of the zombie argument. However, I don’t think their study has successfully shown that a majority of their participants cannot positively conceive ‘philosophical zombies’. My commentary focuses on the use of the metaphor ‘all is dark inside’ in F&S’s vignette.

F&S claim that their study is an implementation of Chalmers’s POSCON test. Their vignette in the Duplicate condition seeks to prompt participants to imagine physio-behavioural duplicates of us that lack consciousness. In order to avoid shallow processing when participants were asked to make conscious attributions, i.e. processing ‘without attempting to integrate information from different parts of the vignette’ (p. 5), the vignette in fact asked participants to imagine a physio-behavioural duplicate where ‘all is dark inside’, without explicitly mentioning their lack of consciousness. Their results showed that only 15%-20% of participants made the requisite verification judgements that the physio-behavioural duplicate lacks conscious experience, i.e. ‘P&~Q’. F&S take this to show that ‘for a majority of [their] lay participants philosophical zombies are not *prima facie* positively conceivable’ and take the latter to undercut the force of the zombie argument. F&S briefly discuss (see p. 8) the objection that the metaphor ‘all is dark inside’ has interpretations other than the intended one, i.e. the imagined being lacks conscious experience (‘~Q’). However, they dismiss the thought that other formulations could have been better at prompting the requisite scenario that verifies ‘P&~Q’, citing experimental data from Peressini (2014). I think the response is inadequate and the objection can be strengthened.

Let’s take a closer at F&S’s vignette (p.5), pasted below:

Imagine that in the future scientists are able to exactly scan a person’s body, including their brain, at the molecular level. Using this information, they can then create an exact physical duplicate of that person’s body and brain, molecule by molecule. The resulting [‘zombie’/duplicate] will have a body and brain just like the original person’s. The [zombie/duplicate] will also behave just like that person. *But, when it comes to the [zombie/duplicate], all is dark inside.*

Imagine that scientists successfully scan and duplicate an average person in this way. What, if anything, do you think the resulting [zombie/duplicate] would be like? (italics added)

The first two sentences introduce a futurist scenario where one’s entire body can be copied. The third and fourth sentences explicitly state ‘P’, i.e. the creation of a physio-behavioural identical duplicate. The next sentence, in italics, marks a sudden contrast and is supposed to rely on the metaphor ‘all is dark inside’ to convey the idea of ‘~Q’, that the relevant creature lacks consciousness.

Now, some preliminaries on metaphor are needed. In a metaphor one thing (the ‘topic’ or ‘target’, which can be an object, property, event or situation) is represented or thought of as another thing (the ‘source’). While there are different models for explaining how we understand metaphorical utterances, all models explain it in terms of how topic and source interact (see Camp 2006 for a review). The topic of a metaphor is sometimes *explicitly mentioned*, as in ‘Life is a journey’, which is a noun-noun construction where the first noun – ‘life’ – is the topic and the second noun – ‘journey’ – is the source. The topic is also often *unmentioned*, in which case it may be implicitly identified in some way. Sometimes, it is made clear within the metaphorical utterance itself. Consider: ‘The ripples danced across the pond’. The verb ‘dance’ is a metaphor for the movement of the ripples, which is the topic. Sometimes, the topic can be implicitly identified given the wider context in which the metaphorical utterance is embedded. Consider Gerard Manley Hopkins’ poem ‘I am like a slip of comet’ and the clause ‘But when she sights the sun she grows and sizes/And spins her skirts out’. The whole clause is a two-layered metaphor with two unmentioned situations as topics. On one level, it is a metaphorical description of a comet approaching the sun and forming a tail, which is being represented as a lady spinning her skirts out when sighting the sun. On another level, it is a metaphorical description of the poem’s speaker owing any significance in their insignificant life to the divine power, which is being compared to a comet forming a tail when nearing the sun. Although Hopkins’ use of metaphor is complex, the interpretation isn’t hard to come by because the two unmentioned topics in the clause are made clear with the help of the first line of the poem, ‘I am like a slip of comet’.

Let’s now turn to F&S’s use of ‘All is dark inside’. The entire sentence is a metaphorical description of philosophical zombies’ attribute of *lacking conscious experience*. The topic of the metaphor is philosophical zombies’ consciousness (or lack thereof), which is represented or thought of as *being all dark inside*. But this topic is not explicitly mentioned, nor is it implicitly identified in any way – no information about experience is foregrounded in the vignette, making it difficult for the hearer to interpret the metaphor. This is made worse by the fact that the adjective ‘dark’, which identifies the source of the metaphor, is itself a polyseme that is open to various interpretations (‘dark’ can mean ‘little or no light’, ‘sinister’, ‘pessimistic’, ‘mysterious’, etc.). Contrast F&S’s use of the same metaphor with Chalmers’ (1996, p. 96):

A zombie is just something physically identical to me, but which has no conscious experience – all is dark inside.

Here, the topic of experience is foregrounded and the metaphor itself is only introduced after a statement of its literal meaning. Though well-known to philosophers, ‘all is dark inside’ is by no means a conventional metaphor familiar to ordinary speakers of English. Without providing clues for what target domain the metaphor is supposed to describe or which sense of ‘dark’ one is supposed to latch onto, participants cannot be expected to comprehend the metaphor, which requires the identification of both the topic and the source.

When faced with a vague metaphor in the absence of contextual cues, the hearer might latch onto an *ad hoc* interpretation. One of F&S’s pre-studies observed that participants attributed conscious experiences to beings where ‘all is dark inside’, leading F&S to conjecture that the latter phrase has the interpretation ‘full of bad thoughts and feelings’. So the latter could be an *ad hoc* interpretation that some participants latched onto after having failed to process the intended meaning. But, more likely, one might simply ignore the metaphor and thus miss the information provided by it. In both cases, participants, failing to take into account the intended meaning of the metaphor, would still be influenced by the inference from ‘P’ to ‘Q’ in further judgements about whether the physio-behaviourally identical

duplicate has conscious experience. Consequently, it is no surprise that a majority of participants took the duplicate to be conscious, inferring ‘P&Q’.

Given these considerations, the conclusion to be drawn is *not* (2), i.e. ‘for a majority of ... lay participants philosophical zombies are not *prima facie* positively conceivable’ (p. 9). Among the majority who failed to make the requisite verification judgements (‘P&~Q’), there may be many who would have made those judgements had they been sufficiently prompted to latch onto the intended meaning of the metaphor.

In addressing the objection about their choice of metaphor, F&S seem pessimistic that there are better formulations that could have prompted more participants to imagine scenarios that would verify ‘P&~Q’. They cite Peressini’s paper (2014, pp. 874-5) which directly asked participants whether the following two imagined scenarios are *possible*: ‘a medical procedure that would remove your inner experience without affecting your brain, so from the outside you would remain unchanged physically and behaviourally’ and ‘a person physically and behaviourally identical to you in all ways but who had no inner experience at all’. A majority of the participants did not judge these imagined scenarios to be possible. I am not confident that laypeople make clear distinctions between different kinds of possibilities (nomological, metaphysical, logical). These scenarios certainly seem nomologically impossible, but nomological possibility is not the notion featured in the zombie argument. It is not clear that the participants latched onto the appropriate notion of possibility. But, either way, Peressini’s study, which explicitly asked participants the possibility of ‘philosophical zombies’, is irrelevant to the question of whether there are better formulations than the one F&S used, i.e. formulations that are better at prompting participants to latch onto the idea of lacking consciousness without explicitly stating it.

I think there may be ways to make the required improvements. The metaphor ‘all is dark inside’ is problematic for two reasons: first, it on its own does not establish the topic of the metaphor, and second, ‘dark’ is unhelpfully polysemous. Comprehension checks could be added at the end to see whether participants have latched onto the intended target domain of the metaphor as well as the intended meaning of ‘dark’. I think a better suggestion is to avoid this metaphor altogether. Consider the following replacement:

But despite being a physical and behavioural duplicate of the original person, there is something strange about the [zombie/duplicate] – when it comes to the [zombie’s/duplicate’s] mind, it is like the lights are on but nobody is home.

This formulation promotes integration with the previous content about ‘P’. It identifies what is strange about the zombie, namely, its mind. The simile ‘it is like the lights are on but nobody is home’ is aimed at describing a lack of consciousness without deploying the polysemous word ‘dark’. There is the residual worry that the simile contains an idiom – ‘the lights are on but nobody is home’ – that describes someone’s stupidity or absent-mindedness, which is usually attributed based on behaviour. But this meaning should be cancelled out by the information provided in the vignette, i.e. ‘The [zombie/duplicate] will also behave just like that person’, prompting participants to seek a new meaning of the phrase other than its established meaning.

Towards the end of their paper, F&S helpfully identify a general difficulty associated with the experimental design (p. 10):

Including in the vignette, for effectiveness, explicit statements of ‘P’ and ‘~Q’ risks verification judgements based just on recognition that the item appeared in the vignette, without taking other information into account. Conversely, avoiding explicit statements of ‘P’ and ‘~Q’ to prevent shallow processing risks to leave participants without sufficiently clear guidance for the imagination task.

I have tried to argue that F&S's use of the metaphor 'All is dark inside' is inadequate at conveying its intended meaning and hence tilts the balance much too far towards leaving 'participants without sufficiently clear guidance for the imagination task'. Given this unclarity of the metaphor in this context, the results fail to show that a majority of F&S's participants found philosophical zombies not positively conceivable. I have suggested an alternative formulation of the vignette. Though uncertainties remain, it is nevertheless worth testing. So for now, the conceivability of philosophical zombies stands undefeated.

### **References**

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