

One's *modus ponens* is another's *modus tollens*: Why the argument from zombies against physicalism is question-begging

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In this note, I argue that the argument from zombies against physicalism is question-begging unless proponents of the argument from zombies can justify the inference from the metaphysical possibility of zombies to the falsity of physicalism in an independent and non-circular way, i.e., a way that does not already assume the falsity of physicalism.

For the purposes of this note, by “physicalism” I mean something like Type Physicalism (TP) according to which “For every actually instantiated mental property F , there is some physical property G such that $F = G$ ” (Daniel Stoljar, 2009, Physicalism, in Edward Zalta, ed., *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/physicalism/>).

Proponents of the argument from zombies against TP argue that they can conceive of a possible world in which there are zombies, i.e., creatures that are physically like us in all respects but lack conscious experience. In other words, there is nothing it is like to be a zombie (Robert Kirk, 2011, Zombies, in Edward Zalta, ed., *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/zombies/>). The fact that they can conceive of such a world, proponents of the argument from zombies claim, implies that zombies are metaphysically possible, and hence that TP is false, since the zombie world is, *ex hypothesi*, physically identical to the actual world (David Chalmers, 1996, *The Conscious Mind*, NY: OUP, pp. 93-171).

To sum up, then, the argument from zombies against TP is supposed to go roughly as follows:

- (Z1) If TP is true, then zombies are metaphysically impossible.
- (Z2) Zombies are metaphysically possible.
- (Z3) Therefore, TP is false.

Unfortunately, this argument against TP is question-begging. To see why, consider doing a *modus ponens*, rather than a *modus tollens*, on (Z1):

- (Z1) If TP is true, then zombies are metaphysically impossible.
- (P1) TP is true.
- (P2) Therefore, zombies are metaphysically impossible.

Indeed, some have argued that zombies are inconceivable, and hence metaphysically impossible (Eric Marcus, 2004, Why Zombies are Inconceivable, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 82, 477-490). So proponents of the argument from zombies against TP owe us an argument as to why we should do a *modus tollens*, rather than a *modus ponens*, on (Z1).

Of course, it would be illegitimate for proponents of the argument from zombies against TP to reason as follows:

1. The antecedent of (Z1) is false.

2. So, we should not affirm the antecedent of (Z1) and derive the consequent of (Z1).
3. Instead, we should deny the consequent of (Z1) and derive the negation of the antecedent of (Z1).

For this reasoning is clearly circular. If proponents of the argument from zombies against TP were to reason this way, they would simply be assuming that TP is false—see (1)—in an argument that purports to show that TP is false. So, in order for this debate not to deteriorate to mere intuition mongering (Moti Mizrahi, 2013, More Intuition Mongering, *The Reasoner*, 7, 5-6), proponents of the argument from zombies against TP must find an independent, non-question-begging reason to justify the *modus tollens* move on (Z1). Otherwise, it is open to physicalists to argue that the right move to make is a *modus ponens* on (Z1).

Proponents of the argument from zombies might reply that they do have an independent, non-circular reason to do a *modus tollens*, rather than a *modus ponens*, on (Z1). Their reason is that they can conceive of zombies, and conceivability entails (or, at the very least, is evidence for) metaphysical possibility. So, proponents of the argument from zombies could argue as follows:

- (C1) If zombies are conceivable, then zombies are metaphysically possible.
- (C2) Zombies are conceivable.
- (Z2) Therefore, zombies are metaphysically possible.

However, in this case, too, proponents of the argument from zombies would have to independently justify doing a *modus ponens*, rather than a *modus tollens*, on (C1).

- (C1) If zombies are conceivable, then zombies are metaphysically possible.
- (P2) Zombies are metaphysically impossible.
- (P3) Therefore, zombies are inconceivable.

After all, TP entails the negation of (C2), i.e., (P3). To assume otherwise is to beg the question against physicalists. To see why, consider the morning star and the evening star. They are one and the same, i.e., the planet Venus, which is why the morning star is the evening star in every possible world (since Venus is Venus). If one thinks that one is able to conceive of a possible world in which the morning star is not the evening star, then one is simply mistaken, since Venus is Venus in every possible world. Similarly, proponents of the argument from zombies against TP think that they have conceived of the mental and the physical as distinct, which is what a zombie is supposed to be. But, physicalists could argue, this is a mere misconception. Just as it is a misconception that the morning star is distinct from the evening star, since they are one and the same thing, i.e., the planet Venus, it is also a misconception that the mental is distinct from the physical, since they are also one and the same thing. It is our ignorance that merely creates the appearance of having conceived of the mental and the physical as distinct.

If this is correct, then without independent, non-circular reasons to prefer the *modus tollens* over the *modus ponens* move on (Z1) and the *modus ponens* over the *modus tollens* move on (C1), the argument from zombies against TP is question-begging.