Athletic Zombies and the Zone Phenomenon

The ‘zone’ or ‘flow’ phenomenon is a state of mind experienced by athletes when playing sport at the highest level. The type of sport is not important, because all athletes highly trained in their discipline have the ability to put themselves in the highly focused state referred to as ‘being in the zone’, ‘having a flow experience’ or ‘producing a peak performance’. The ability of top athletes to be ‘in the zone’ while performing is well-documented and studied by sports psychologists because this particular skill is now seen as a necessary ingredient when it comes to being successful in competition. Using a different approach, I want to explain the zone phenomenon in terms of philosophy rather than drawing upon scientific explanations. I’ll do this by way of comparing and contrasting two ideas. The first is from the ‘Philosophical Zombie Argument’ made famous by David Chalmers in The Conscious Mind (1996), while the second idea is derived from the first, and I’ll call it the ‘Athletic Zombie Analogy’.

The Philosophical Zombie

In The Conscious Mind Chalmers tells us that a philosophical zombie is an imaginary being that’s exactly like us in every way except for one: it doesn’t have any experience. So unlike humans, zombies cannot experience, and therefore cannot appreciate, the beauty of a sunset, or winning a tennis match. These types of experiences can generate all sorts of feelings and emotions, but a philosophical zombie cannot have such feelings either. If we managed to win Wimbledon then we ‘know what it’s like’ to win Wimbledon and all the emotions such an achievement would generate. A philosophical zombie on the other hand has no reflective awareness, so even if he won Wimbledon he wouldn’t have any knowledge of ‘what it is like’ to do so. Similarily, a philosophical zombie can give us a scientific explanation in terms of how light is scattered in order to explain why the sky is a particular colour at sunset, or give us a technical explanation as to why he won his tennis match, but this does not mean he is actually having the experiences. If a philosophical zombie tells us he feels contented upon viewing the sunset, or he is excited by winning a tennis match, we must judge this as merely an act, as a behavioural response, because we know he lacks introspection. We could call our zombie friend an abomination of nature because he lacks experience, and the behaviour the zombie exhibited would be of a person who was hurt and offended by our harsh words; but he has no internal subjective experience to go with his look of shock

The Athletic Zombie

Unlike philosophical zombies, the ‘athletic zombie’ is not an imaginary being – he/she is a modern elite sportsperson who has the uncanny knack of playing to the best of their ability almost every time they perform in the sporting arena. Also unlike philosophical zombies, they are sentient beings. But like the philosophical zombie, they operate without certain experience – that is, they at least try to operate on the sportsfield without self-conscious reflection.

Because an elite athlete is so well-drilled in the mechanics of their sport, they don’t have to consciously think about what they are doing: they avoid the need for higher cognitive functions when it comes to performing the sheer bodily mechanics of the sport. This aspect of their performance is committed to what is known as ‘muscle memory’. And indeed, a well-drilled physical activity is best performed without deliberation or reflection, which can prevent the action from being as fluid as it might otherwise be. So ease of action appears to be distinctively different from, and to some extent, independent of, our experiential lives. So to what degree can we say that zone athletes are zombies?

There is no doubt that all elite athletes have a sense of occasion when they walk out onto the field, the court, or the arena; and in some instances it would be hard not to know ‘what it is like’ to be nervous. Unlike philosophical zombies, people tend to take the feelings generated by experiences such as big sporting occasions seriously. The experience of continual frustration on the tennis court can inspire some tennis players to smash racquets. However, most professional sports people are aware that a prolonged emotional or self-conscious state of mind is a hindrance to performance. As soon as you start to wonder if you can kick that goal, sink that basket, or throw the javelin the required distance, there is every chance you will fail to do so. In mid event, the last thing an elite sports person wants to consider is what it might be like to miss a putt, a goal, or drop a catch in the outfield. So when it’s ‘game on’, a great athlete seems to be able to put such feelings aside, and in doing so slip into a zone or flow state. To the degree of lacking self-conscious contemplation, when it comes to playing in the zone, there is no ‘what it is like to play basketball’, ‘what it is like to play baseball’, or ‘what it is like to swim a hundred metre race’. Retrospective comments from zone participants typically take the following form, regardless of the activity: ‘I don’t remember specific details’; ‘I was focused on the moment’; ‘Everything came easily’; ‘It is almost like time slowed down for me’; ‘I seemed as though I wasn’t thinking any thoughts’; ‘I just continued doing what I do best’; ‘What I was doing seemed instinctive’, and so on.

The ideal mental state for an athlete is to be an ‘epiphenomenalist’ while performing. Epiphenomenalism is a position in the philosophy of mind that says that thoughts and experiences are simply by-products of bodily (specifically brain) processes, and don’t themselves have any influence on those processes. Similarily, feelings and emotions always seem to accompany any intensive activity – we cannot help but think about what we are trying to achieve; however, whilst in the zone, the elite sportsperson looks upon such thoughts as simply inconsequential. Emotions and feelings are seen as just a by-product of the activity: in a zombielike fashion, the athlete simply views negative thoughts as an inner voice that he or she is not prepared to listen to. Emotional responses to the state of the game just drift away like steam as quickly as they appear.

Winning Reflections

The most obvious criticism of the athletic zombie analogy is that a human being can never truly be even an athletic zombie in the sporting arena because even the best athlete will have reflective experiences from time to time. There will always be experiences sneaking in associated with being behind on the scoreboard, or a certain type of feeling when you know that you’ve missed an easy opportunity to put your opponent(s) out of the game, etc. These types of feelings are hard to ignore completely, in exactly the same way as winning contains its own reflective experiences that are also hard to ignore. Just how these different types thoughts can or should be taken is the responsibility of the individual. Some sportspeople know that both positive and negative emotions can be detrimental to their performance, whilst others can use emotional self-awareness as a means of refocusing their efforts in order to get back into the zone.

Zone or flow episodes appear to be a universal phenomenon for professional sportspeople. However, there is no reason to suppose that such occurrences are limited solely to the professionals; amateur sports people also report zone or flow responses. Interestingly enough, zone or flow states are also not the sole prerogative of the sporting individual: such states can descend upon any individual undertaking almost any type of activity, ranging from playing chess to painting a picture. Being competent in a particular field of endeavour comes about by first learning, then honing the required skills, until they become fluid and automatic in their application. Competency appears to have its own rewards, as it allows the person to become immersed in what appears to them as effortless activity. This is one of the key ingredients necessary for a zone response.

The philosophical zombie is possibly the ideal mental state required to always perform to the best of one’s ability, but in any case, human beings cannot perform consistently even at the highest level of athletic zombieness on every occasion. Some athletes perform with greater consistency than others, but in the end all athletes have reflective experiences to contend with. Some personalities are just better at suppressing their emotions and self-consciousness than others. Contrasting a philosophical zombie with an athletic zombie at best serves to demonstrate that human beings appear to have the potential to be only partial zombies.

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