The Cases

Case 1: Perhaps the phenomenal facts—facts about what it’s like to see red, or to taste freshly made pesto—do not supervene with metaphysical necessity on the physical facts and physical laws. This might be because the connections between the physical and the phenomenal are entirely unprincipled. Alternatively, it might be because whatever psychophysical laws do govern those connections are contingent. Either way, the claim is that there are metaphysically possible worlds that are just like the actual world in terms of what physical laws hold, and in terms of the distribution of physical properties, but which are phenomenally different from the actual world. In some such worlds, different phenomenal facts obtain. In other such worlds, no phenomenal properties are instantiated at all. Call the latter sort of world a ‘phenomenal zombie world’, or, for short, just a ‘zombie world’.

Case 2: Perhaps the compositional facts—facts about what composite entities exist—do not supervene with metaphysical necessity on the facts about the existence and arrangement of simples. This might be because the connections between the simples and the composites are entirely unprincipled. Alternatively, it might be because whatever mereological laws do govern those connections are contingent. Either way, the claim is that there are metaphysically possible worlds that are just like the actual world as far as the simples are concerned, but which differ from the actual world in terms of what composite objects exist. In some such worlds, there are different composite objects than there actually are. In other such worlds, there are no composite objects at all.\(^1\) Call the latter sort of world a ‘mereological zombie world’, a ‘compositional zombie world,’ or, for short, just a ‘compie world.’\(^2\)

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\(^1\) Simply to fix ideas, I am supposing that there actually are some composite objects—that compositional nihilism is false of the actual world. If nihilism is true of the actual world, then the main text should read, “In some such worlds, there are composite objects. In different such worlds, there are different composite objects.” Nothing turns on this.

\(^2\) Note that people who believe in composite objects but deny unrestricted composition do not automatically count as defending this view. That is, answering Peter van Inwagen’s ‘Special Composition Question’ (1990)—when, if ever, do some simples compose a larger object?—by answering ‘only sometimes’ does not commit one to the contingency of composition in the sense I have in mind. Such people might say that simples compose a larger object only when they are sufficiently close together, or are in some other way appropriately related to each other. This position is entirely consistent with the claim that it is metaphysically necessary that there exists a composite object if
Case 3: Perhaps the causal facts—facts about which events\(^3\) are causally related to which other events—do not supervene with metaphysical necessity upon the noncausal facts and noncausal laws. This might be because the connections between the noncausal and the causal are entirely unprincipled. Alternatively, it might be because whatever laws do govern those connections are contingent. Either way, the claim is that there are metaphysically possible worlds that are just like the actual world as far as the noncausal facts and noncausal laws are concerned, but which differ from the actual world in terms of what causes what. In some such worlds, there are different causal facts than there actually are. In other such worlds, nothing causes anything; there are no causal facts at all. Call the latter sort of world a ‘causal zombie world’, or, for short, just a ‘cauzombie world’.

The first of these positions is the most familiar, but all three have been defended. The first is property dualism, most saliently defended by David Chalmers (1996; see also Kripke 1972, Kirk 1974a, b). The third is causal anti-reductionism or ‘realism’, defended by Michael Tooley (1987, 1990), David Armstrong (e.g. 2004), and John Carroll (forthcoming). The second has not yet been given a nice label; for lack of anything better, I hereby propose ‘mereological contingentism’. It has recently been defended in unpublished work by both Ross Cameron and Josh Parsons.

The point of the present note is to call attention to the similarities between those three positions, and to raise some questions for discussion. Having just done the former, I turn to the latter.

The questions

Question 1. Are any other such positions worth investigating? That is, are there other cases where someone actually defends the ‘zombie position’, or at least in which its availability in logical space might be of interest? And are there cases that seem superficially analogous, but in which no one has any inclination to defend the zombie position? Consider, for example, the fact that everyone apparently defends the supervenience of the moral facts on the nonmoral facts;

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\(^3\) Or facts, or states of affairs, or even objects. Modify the claim for your preferred choice of causal relata.
no one, to my knowledge, defends the possibility of moral zombies. What, if anything, can this teach us about the other cases?

Question 2. Are the same sorts of arguments available for each of the three positions—property dualism, mereological contingentism, and causal anti-reductionism? If not, why not?

Note in particular that it is only in the property dualism case that anyone directly appeals to the apparent possibility of zombie worlds. Chalmers (1996) argues that zombies seem possible, that conceivability of the relevant sort implies genuine possibility, and that zombies thus really are possible. No one argues for either mereological contingentism or causal anti-reductionism in quite this way. No one directly appeals to the apparent possibility of compie or cauzombie worlds to establish their genuine possibility. Instead, the possibility of compie and cauzombie worlds seems to follow more as a side effect of other motivations for the position.

Both Parsons and Cameron, for example, are primarily motivated by broader concerns about the nature of modality. They seem to share the basic thought that the principles of classical mereology have to be contingent, because there could be no accounting for their necessity. Anti-reductionists about causation do not directly appeal to the possibility of cauzombie worlds either. Sometimes they simply argue for anti-reductionism by elimination—by pointing out the failures of various particular reductionist proposals (Armstrong 2004). Sometimes they argue for anti-reductionism more directly, by means of complicated cases involving probabilistic causation, immaterial souls, and the like (Tooley 1987, 1990). However, they never simply say that it appears possible to strip the causal facts off of the world, leaving all the rest unchanged; they never just say that cauzombie worlds are conceivable, and leave the matter there.

Question 3. Are the same sorts of arguments available against each of the three positions? That is, are zombies, compies, and cauzombies equally implausible? If not, why not? What do the parallels or lack thereof tell us about the nature of the mental, the composite, the causal?

Question 4. Can a commitment to ‘mixed worlds’ be parlayed into a new argument against any of the three positions? If so, how?

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4 Though, to be fair, properly evaluating the supervenience claim requires a more precise characterization of the base set.
The commitment to mixed worlds will be hard for believers in zombie, compie, or cauzombie worlds to avoid. That is, they will have a hard time denying that there are single worlds that contain a) physically indiscernible individuals that differ phenomenally, b) otherwise indiscernible groups of simples that differ in whether they compose anything, and/or c) noncausally indiscernible pairs of individuals that differ causally. There are two reasons that they will have a hard time denying this.

First, the existence of mixed worlds might be straightforwardly entailed by the existence of zombie, compie, or cauzombie worlds, depending upon the nature of the properties and relations in question. (For the cognoscenti: assuming certain plausible recombination principles, strong global supervenience and weak individual supervenience are equivalent when the supervening set only contains intrinsic properties.) Secondly, even if that result is irrelevant to the particular cases at hand, it is hard to see what could account for the “ban on mixed worlds” (Blackburn 1985). Anyone who wishes to uphold that ban while defending the existence of zombie, compie, or cauzombie worlds owes us an explanation. What enforces the ban on mixed worlds, given that it is not the flat-out impossibility of zombie individuals? That is, if the troublesome pairs of individuals can exist in separate worlds, it is hard to see why they could not exist within the same world.

Do not be misled into thinking that appealing to a set of linking laws—psychophysical, mereological, causal—will help here. It will not. The believer in zombie, compie, or cauzombie worlds thinks that if there are any such laws, they are contingent. But if they are contingent, there are any number of worlds in which they fail. Among them are the mixed worlds. Ruling out mixed worlds consistently with a belief in zombie, compie, or cauzombie worlds requires more than an appeal to linking laws that actually but contingently hold. It requires claiming that it is necessary that some law or other hold, even though each such law holds only contingently.

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5 I leave the details of the proof as an exercise for the reader. However, all the needed tools can be found in Moyer forthcoming, Bennett 2004, and various papers cited therein. See also McLaughlin and Bennett 2005 for an overview. Beware, however, of a misleading error in Bennett 2004 (509-510).

Let me quickly flesh out how this result fits into the main text, using the familiar zombie case as the example. The existence of zombie worlds entails that phenomenal properties do not strongly (or even weakly) globally supervene upon physical properties. If phenomenal properties are intrinsic, and the recombination principles are correct, the alluded-to-result entails that phenomenal properties do not weakly individually supervene on physical properties either. That is just to say that there is at least one ‘mixed world’—a world that contains physically indiscernible individuals that differ phenomenally.
So, again, those who think that zombie, compie, or cauzombie worlds are possible will have a hard time denying that mixed such worlds are possible too. The pressing question is precisely what, if anything, is wrong with the commitment to mixed worlds. Can it be used to generate new objections to property dualism, mereological contingentism, or causal anti-reductionism? If so, how?
Discuss.⁶


http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2006/entries/supervenience


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⁶ Acknowledgements