

Donald Davidson – Swampman

Introduction

The Swampman [1] is a thought experiment first proposed by Davidson in his 1987 paper ‘Knowing One’s Own Mind’. The experiment goes like this. Suppose Davidson went for a walk in a swamp and gets hit by a lightning bolt, and consequently dies. Coincidentally, at the very same moment this happens, in another part of the swamp, the lightning rearranges some molecules into the same form of Davidson’s body, copying every structure completely. This ‘being’ is the Swampman, which looks exactly like Davidson to the smallest respects, and it walks out of the swamp. Is this being Davidson? Is this being a being, that is, is this being a person? Does this being have the same thoughts as Davidson? Does this being have thoughts at all? Davidson’s own answer leans towards negative towards all of these questions.

Davidson’s Argument in Brief

The reason Davidson opines that the Swampman is not Davidson, and in fact, the Swampman might not even be a person, is because Davidson holds that that Swampman is incapable of cognitive thought, because the Swampman has no causal history, and a being needs causal history of thoughts to have any cognizance in the first place. So while the Swampman’s utterances may feel like they have meaning, according to Davidson, they actually don’t. The Swampman’s propositions are thus not genuine according to Davidson. Davidson while claiming the Swampman’s utterances have no meaning, does not actually outright doubt Swampman’s personhood, yet refers to the Swampman as an “it” rather than as a “he” and it seems to regard the Swampman as not having meaningful qualia. So those who accept Davidson’s argument denying the Swampman having the identity of the erstwhile Davidson dead in the swamp are in two camps, those that say that the Swampman’s thoughts or propositions do not mean anything and those who doubt that the Swampman can have a mind or the capacity for cognizance at all. Also, it is not clear whether Davidson meant the Swampman is only an exact physical copy or an exact mental copy as well, because according to the representationalist camp it is possible to be one without the other.

Reactions to the Thought Experiment

There are many reactions, modifications and objections to Davidson’s conclusion to the Swampman thought experiment. Firstly, let us consider the internalists. The internalists broadly think that conscious experience and thoughts are causal conclusions of electro chemical processes that the brain produces and not merely their formal representations. Internalists are the hardest of physicalists as in they often even reject the computational, functionalistic model. Internalists, who are firmly in the camp that the Brain is the seat of the mind and the physical structure of the brain results in the mind functions as well as qualia, thus opine the medium is as important as the representations. Swampman’s brain being identical with Davidson’s brain, the Swampman is a Davidson if not The Davidson according to the internalists.

While internalist Searle himself has slightly never opined on the Swampman, he did opine on Chalmers’s p-zombies [2] which is a similar argument as the swampman, and is often the basis of all the zombie arguments against physicalism, and in this matter Searle is in the internalist camp. Searle firmly states that a p-zombie (a physically identical being with no phenomenology) while theoretically possible is an impossible construct *if there is no physical difference* from a cognitive being.

Searle argues that although it is possible to imagine a zombie doppelganger with the same behaviour as himself and no mental states it would not and cannot be a molecule by molecule duplicate of

himself, much less an atom by atom duplicate. Because according to Searle an atom by atom duplicate will have not just the structure of his brain, but the cognitive dynamic systems, whatever they are, exactly as his own. Thus, Searle, repeating his position stated in his various works, opines that the basis of functions is the electrochemical matrix itself, and if it is copied *exactly*, then the cognitive structures also get copied.

The only reservation the internalists have is with the causal truncation and how they reconcile the fact that Swampman's microstructures are the same as the original person's microstructures, whereas Swampman's brain has no causal history at all. Having the same argument as Searle they have a dual response

- a) Such a zombie is an impossibility (you can't build a molecule by molecule duplicate and not give it mental states, and if a duplicate causal history is necessary for the mental states, then this zombie can't be made without giving it the duplicate causal history)
- b) If it were a physical possibility to build this zombie as specified then it is the same as the original being. The lack of causal history does nothing to the dynamic cognitive structures.

A variant of this opinion, which is essentially the same, is that till the point of lightening, the swampman and Davidson are identical in mind, yet after that, they gain new causalities and hence they are different individuals from that point.

Another school of thought is the externalists, and a sub section of them are the representationalists who unlike the internalists think that conscious experience is not reducible to electrochemical reactions of the brain and neural structure, but is rather based on the formalisms that are being represented, not the medium of representations. Representationalism is by no means a unified position and thus evokes a lot of varied and sometimes completely opposite reactions to the Swampman thought experiment. Dretske, [3] for example takes a hard line and argues that not only is the Swampman not Davidson, the Swampman is not a person as well, there being no way it can have qualia due to a lack of causal history. There are various variants to the externalist arguments and they depend on how they interpret Davidson's thought experiment, i.e. was Davidson of the opinion that the Swampman has only molecule by molecule duplication of the original Davidson, or that it has also Davidson's cognitive dynamic systems (because unlike internalists the representationalists do believe this is possible).

However, many representationalists also object to Davidson's conclusions regarding the Swampman. Representationalists like Tye, [4] while arguing that there is a possibility of Swampman having different cognitive representations, or no representations at all, even if the Swampman has the same microphysical structure of the original person, state that there is no reason why the Swampman can't have any representations as well. Of the externalists like Tye, the opinion is primarily that if the dynamic cognitive systems of Davidson's were copied into the Swampman, then the history of dynamic trajectories needed to get the cognitive systems might also be generated and duplicated and thus Swampman will not be causally truncated and thus its thoughts and utterances will have genuine meaning.

Covering the entire spectrum of responses to the Swampman Thought Experiment is too big for this report but the ones I have read lie between these two extremes of the internalist and the externalist positions, with a common criticism across the board being that the experiment is either too ill defined or simply impossible given the physical reality this universe needs to follow. The reactions to

Swampman, and similar arguments, often make clear the opinion of that philosopher in the matter of what intelligence it.

My Observations

I would like to summarize some of my own observations and opinions to this thought experiment. First of all, I do not agree to the argument of causal truncation. Yes, the Swampman, as is defined, has no causal history of thoughts, *but Davidson did*. If the Swampman is a perfect copy of him, no matter what the underlying mechanisms for representations are, they can be copied. Over here I will agree with Searle's position on p-zombies that if you copy the being molecule by molecule, you will copy the dynamic cognitive representations as well. Saying that the Swampman is causally truncated is like saying a physical copy cannot be formed without a duplicate set of causes, which is a truism as a physical copy can't be formed anyway. We are not talking of approximate copies (like copying a hard disk), but a real, molecule by molecule copy. So the Swampman, as defined, *can't happen*. Not in this physical reality. It by some inexplicable means a perfect physical copy can be formed, then unless we believe in some form of dualism everything gets copied as well, dynamic representations and everything. I do not know which model of intelligence is the correct one, but it must obey natural laws, and for me that simply voids the entire thought experiment.

References

- [1] Davidson, Donald. "Knowing One's Own Mind." Reprinted in *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* (pp. 15–38). New York and Clarendon: Oxford University Press. Originally published in *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 60, 1987
- [2] Chalmers, David. "The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory" New York, Oxford University Press, 1996
- [3] Dretske, Fred. "How do you know you are not a zombie?" In Brie Gertler (ed.), *Privileged Access: Philosophical Accounts of Self-Knowledge*. Ashgate, 2003
- [4] Tye, Micheal. "Phenomenal Consciousness: the Explanatory Gap as Cognitive Illusion" *Mind*, 108, 1999