Comments on Philip Goff's
"Ghosts and Sparse Properties: Why Physicalists Have More to Fear from Ghosts than Zombies".

Good paper; it's a pleasure to comment on it.

Philip argues for four main theses. Before I turn to them, let me remind you of how Philip understands two key terms in his paper:

1) "Ghost". I quote:

> "A ghost is a creature that:
>
> **1.** Is conscious: i.e. there is something that it is like to be it.
>
> **2.** Is such that its mode of consciousness does not supervene on some more fundamental property or properties.
>
> **3.** Has no fundamental property other than its mode of consciousness."

2) "Funny physicalism". Funny physicalism makes two claims:

> (i) fundamental physical entities have phenomenal or proto-phenomenal properties, which constitute the categorical nature of these entities; and
>
> (ii) "[t]he conscious experience of human beings and other organisms supervenes on" these phenomenal or proto-phenomenal properties.

I

Philip's first thesis is that funny physicalism is immune to zombie arguments. I accept this thesis, so I won't mention it again.

II

Philip's second thesis is that there's a "powerful" ghost argument against funny physicalism. I think the argument he has in mind can be expressed like this:

P1. If funny physicalism is true, then the property of having a red sensation is non-fundamental in the actual world.
P2. If a property is *actually* non-fundamental, then it's *essentially* non-fundamental (i.e., non-fundamental in all possible worlds in which it's instantiated).
C1. So, if funny physicalism is true, then having a red sensation is essentially non-fundamental.
P3. But there's a possible world in which a *ghost* instantiates having a red sensation (so that the instantiation of this property is *not* non-fundamental).
C2. So having a red sensation is not *essentially* non-fundamental.
C3. So funny physicalism is not true.

I worry that P2 may be false. It turns out to be false if a property could be fundamental when instantiated in one possible world (e.g., a ghost world) but non-fundamental when instantiated in another possible world (e.g., the actual world). Could such a thing be? On at least one view, yes it could. Sydney Shoemaker has recently proposed the following account of what it is for a functional property to be instantiated:

> …for any property P that can be instantiated in a world, there is a causal profile such that a necessary and sufficient condition of P's being instantiated in that world is that *there be instantiated* in that world a property Q having the forward-looking causal features of that profile and having backward-looking causal features that are among the backward-looking causal features of that profile. Here *Q can be P itself*… (Shoemaker 2007, 15; all my italics)

On this account, it seems, a property instance in one possible world could count as an instance of functional property P because *it itself* had such-and-such causal profile, non-derivatively, while a property instance in another possible world could *also* count as an instance of P because it had that same causal profile but instead *derivatively*, in virtue of being realized by an instance of a distinct property Q. Thus, property P could be fundamental when instantiated in one world but non-fundamental when instantiated in another.

I don't know whether Shoemaker's account is true; but if it is, I don't see why a funny physicalist couldn't use it against P2 without contradicting other elements of her overall position. I agree that a funny physicalist can't accept a causal-profile account of phenomenal properties if the causal profiles in question involve only conventional physical properties, since that would open the door to standard, non-funny physicalism. But the causal profiles invoked to give an account of phenomenal properties might involve only the *phenomenal* or *proto-phenomenal properties of fundamental physical entities*. Indeed, the funny physicalist might even *require* such an account of the phenomenal properties instantiated by people, so as to *explain how* the phenomenal properties of people can supervene on the phenomenal or proto-phenomenal properties of fundamental physical entities.

III

Philip's third thesis is that there's a "powerful" ghost argument against so-called a priori physicalism. He expresses the argument he has in mind in the following direct quotation:

> **Premise 1:** Ghosts are conceivable (when we reach the end of the Cartesian doubting process we find ourselves conceiving of a ghost).
> **Premise 2:** A priori physicalism entails that it is a conceptual truth that conscious states are essentially higher-order states (it is a conceptual truth that functional states must be realised by more fundamental causal goings on).
> **Premise 3:** If ghosts are conceivable, then it is not a conceptual truth that conscious states are essentially higher-order states.
> **Conclusion:** A priori physicalism is false.

I am no friend of a priori physicalism, but I do suspect that premise 2 is false. Not all forms of a priori physicalism entail that it's conceptually true that conscious states are essentially higher-order. On David Lewis's account, for example, a mental predicate refers to the mental property it refers to because the property uniquely satisfies a certain causal description semantically equivalent to the predicate; this property, however, can perfectly well be a first-order property. You might reply that in actual fact any such property would be a neurophysiological property and hence non-fundamental. But that's beside the point, which is that it's *conceptually possible* for the property that uniquely satisfies the causal description to be first-order and fundamental.

IV

Philip's fourth thesis is that there are two "powerful" ghost arguments against so-called a posteriori physicalism. Here's the first argument, in Philip's words:

> **Premise 1:** Ghosts are conceivable (the a posteriori physicalist should agree with this premise).
>
> **Premise 2:** If ghosts are conceivable then ghosts are possible.
>
> **Conclusion 1:** Ghosts are possible.
>
> **Premise 3:** If ghosts are possible, then my mode of consciousness is a fundamental property.
>
> **Premise 4:** If my mode of consciousness is a fundamental property, then a posteriori physicalism is false (I define 'physicalism' such that any form of physicalism holds that my conscious states supervene on the nature of fundamental physical entities).
>
> **Conclusion 2:** A posteriori physicalism is false.

Premise 4 seems questionable. On the face if it, phenomenal properties could be fundamental and yet a posteriori physicalism still be true: one could be an a posteriori physicalist who identifies phenomenal properties with *physical* properties, which are fundamental. To support premise 4, of course, Philip adds parenthetically that he defines

'physicalism' such that any form of physicalism holds that my conscious states supervene on the nature of fundamental physical entities.

Here, he must be assuming that supervening properties are necessarily non-fundamental. But this assumption is false: if mental properties supervene on fundamental physical properties because they form a proper subset of the physical properties, mental properties would be exactly as fundamental as the physical properties.

I expect Philip to respond at this stage that when philosophers like Brian McLaughlin and Chris Hill say that phenomenal properties are physical properties, they mean *neurophysiological* properties, which are *themselves* functional properties, multiply realized by the properties of fundamental physics, and therefore non-fundamental. That sounds right. Multiple realization is always relative to a specified class of properties, and so phenomenal properties can *fail* to be multiply realized by neurophysiological properties, while *being* multiply realized by the properties of fundamental physics.

Let me turn now to Philip's second ghost argument against a posteriori physicalism. Again, I quote *verbatim*:

Premise 1: Ghosts are conceivable (the a posteriori physicalist should agree with this premise).

Premise 2: If ghosts are conceivable then ghosts are possible.

Conclusion 1: Ghosts are possible.

Premise 3: If ghosts are possible, then my mode of consciousness is not an essentially higher-order state.

Premise 4: If my mode of consciousness is not an essentially higher-order state, then a posteriori physicalism is false (a posteriori physicalists wish to identify actual modes of consciousness with functional or neurophysiological states; such states look to be essentially higher-order, e.g. a state which is defined in terms of billions of neurons must be realised by neurons, each of which is more fundamental than the neurophysiological state they constitute).

Conclusion 2: A posteriori physicalism is false.

Premise 4 of this argument, too, is questionable. In its contrapositive form, it says that if a posteriori physicalism is true, then phenomenal properties are essentially high-order. But consider a version of a posteriori physicalism that identifies phenomenal properties with functional properties, but understands the instantiation of functional properties as Shoemaker does in the passage I quoted earlier. This version of a posteriori physicalism can allow metaphysically possible worlds in which phenomenal properties *aren't* higher-order, even though in the actual world they *are* higher-order; this version of a posteriori physicalism, therefore, is potentially a counterexample to premise 4—at least on the assumption that the Shoemaker view quoted above is possibly true.

Another counterexample to premise 4 seems to be provided by the non-functionalist version of a posteriori physicalism that identifies phenomenal properties directly with physical properties, since physical properties aren't higher-order, let alone

essentially so. Now against this Philip argues that neurophysiological states must be higher-order, because "a state which is defined in terms of billions of neurons must be realised by neurons, each of which is more fundamental than the neurophysiological state they constitute". Philip seems here to be assuming that, in some sense of "fundamental" in which "non-fundamental" implies "essentially higher-order", the parts of a thing are more fundamental than the whole that they constitute. But it isn't obvious that they are. Indeed, the parts of a whole seem *not* to realize the whole in any familiar sense, e.g., by role-playing. But no doubt much more could be said on this issue.

As an a posteriori physicalist, I ought to say how I would resist both of Philip's ghost arguments against a posteriori physicalism. I would do so by denying their second premise, i.e., by denying that, if ghosts are conceivable, then they're possible. Of course, this denial raises complex issues that Philip's paper quite reasonably doesn't address, but I will comment on one thing that he says. He says that "Chalmers would defend premise 2 on the grounds that phenomenal concepts have identical primary and secondary intentions." But this isn't quite right. Even if phenomenal concepts do have identical primary and secondary intensions, premise 2 doesn't follow. It follows only if one assumes that the *conceivability* of, say, a ghost entails the *primary possibility* of a ghost. Moreover, this assumption is plausible only to the extent that it's plausible that competence with a concept requires one somehow to *know* the primary intension of the concept. But there are accounts of conceptual competence that *don't entail* this requirement on conceptual competence; for example, Millikan's account and Fodor's

account don't. And these accounts might be true, for all that any of us can really claim to know.

Thanks for listening!