Comments on Philip Goff's paper

Philip Goff's paper, 'Ghosts and sparse properties: Why physicalists have more to fear from ghosts than zombies', is an excellent paper. It provides an extremely clear discussion of the different versions of physicalism available in the literature and how they fare with respect to different versions of conceivability arguments, namely, the 'zombie' argument and the 'ghost' argument. Goff's aim is to show that the second argument has been unjustly neglected, because it is even more damaging to the prospects of physicalism than the zombie argument. I think this is a very welcome addition to the literature.

Goff discusses three versions of physicalism: a priori, a posteriori, and funny physicalism, and he argues that although the first two should be as scared of ghosts as they are of zombies (more or less), funny physicalism on the other hand has little to fear from zombies but should be petrified by ghosts. He concludes that ghosts pose a very considerable challenge to physicalism.

In this commentary I would like to focus on the discussion of funny physicalism, and I would like to make a few comments about his arguments for the claim that ghosts are much scarier than zombies.

First, Goff claims that funny physicalism has little to fear from philosophical zombies. The reason for this is that, on the one hand, the conceivability and possibility of physicSal duplicates without consciousness do not refute funny physicalism, and on the other hand, Goff argues, we do not have good reasons to think that deep zombies are either conceivable or possible. This is so because we have no idea what the intrinsic properties of physical entities are, specially when it comes to those intrinsic properties that ground phenomenal properties (we should recall that according to funny physicalism, physics does not tell us anything about the nature of the intrinsic properties of physical entities; only the nature of dispositional properties is revealed by science). Given these considerations, Goff argues, we have no reasons to believe that deep zombies are possible, and therefore, funny physicalism has little to fear from (deep) zombies.

I want to make a few comments about this argument. First, I agree that if we don't know anything about the intrinsic properties of physical entities, then we are not in a position to formulate a conceivability argument against funny physicalism (based on deep zombies). But at the same time, it is also true that ignorance of intrinsic physical properties allows two options: either they entail phenomenal properties a priori, or they don't. But if they don't, then funny physicalism will be in trouble because, according to it, the lack of a priori entailment implies the lack of a supervenience relation, and therefore funny physicalism would be false.

Should funny physicalists be worried by that possibility? Let me make two brief points about this. First, I believe that this depends in part on who has the burden of proof in this issue. Is it up to the opponents of funny physicalism to show that intrinsic physical properties fail to a priori entail phenomenal properties, and until there is no compelling argument in that direction, funny physicalists have nothing to worry about? Or is it up to the advocates of funny physicalism to show that intrinsic physical properties do a priori entail phenomenal properties?

Arguably, the former option seems more plausible, and this seems to be what Goff is assuming at this point. But this gives rise to two questions: First, why couldn't the advocates of standard a priori physicalism endorse a similar strategy, in order to respond to zombies and ghosts? They could argue that it is their opponents who have the duty to provide reasons to believe that physicSal properties do not a priori entail phenomenal properties, and given that there is no complete account of physicSal properties as of yet, then they have little to fear.

Goff seems to suggest that there is an asymmetry between zombies and ghosts in this respect: he argues in sect. VI that when we are discussing whether ghosts pose a challenge to funny physicalism, the onus is on funny physicalists to show that deep physical properties in fact entail phenomenal properties a priori so that ghosts are inconceivable. But as we have just seen, when it comes to zombies he seems to believe that the onus is on the opponents of funny physicalism to provide an argument against such an entailment.

Even if we accept that there is an asymmetry between ghosts and zombies in this respect (and I would like to hear more about this), we would also need some evidence for the claim that there is also an important difference between physicSal and deep physical properties, when it comes to deciding who has the burden of proof in the issue of whether the corresponding physical properties entail phenomenal properties a priori or not. It could be argued that it is obvious that there is an importance difference: physics talks about dispositional but not deep physical properties. Even if this is true, it is also true that we do not have a complete account of dispositional physical properties as of yet, and perhaps this is all that matters when it comes to deciding who carries the burden of proof.

To conclude: given that Goff is ready to maintain that funny physicalists carry the burden of proof with regards to the conceivability of ghosts but not of zombies, I wonder why, first, the advocates of a priori physicalism cannot say the same, at least with respect to zombies, and secondly, why the advocates of funny physicalism could not respond that if they do not carry the burden of proof when it comes to zombies, they don't carry it either when it comes to ghosts.

Finally, I want to discuss some positive reasons that could be offered in favour of the claim that deep physical properties do not a priori entail phenomenal properties. First of all, we should bear in mind that whether certain properties a priori entail some other properties or not is a matter of how those properties are conceptualized. It is in principle possible to have two different conceptualizations, A and B, of properties P, such that it is true that A entail some other properties Q a priori but B don't.

Given this, the relevant question is whether we have reasons to believe that there is some conceptualization of deep physical properties so that they entail phenomenal properties a priori, under that conceptualization. I think it could be argued that this is not likely to be the case. One possible argument for this could go as follows. First, many people believe that phenomenal concepts are in general not connected a priori with non-phenomenal concepts. (This claim is usually defended by advocates of the phenomenal concept strategy, but I believe that it is one the main motivations for the principle of conceptual dualism, which funny physicalists do endorse.) Secondly, many people have found very implausible the claim that the intrinsic properties of physical entities are themselves phenomenal properties. This is why some advocates of funny physicalism have argued that deep physical properties (or at least those that ground phenomenal properties) are

proto-phenomenal rather than phenomenal. What are proto-phenomenal properties? Of course we have no idea, but arguably in order to avoid the implausible claim above, we should say that they do not fall under phenomenal concepts. If so, then given the assumption that phenomenal concepts are not a priori connected to non-phenomenal concepts, we could conclude that deep physical properties do not entail phenomenal properties a priori. And this would be a serious problem for funny physicalism, as Goff explains, given that they accept that conceivability entails possibility (at least regarding phenomenal properties).
Much more would need to be said here in order to make this argument work. Perhaps, for instance, panpsychism is not as bad as it seems, and therefore we could have reasons to believe that deep physical properties fall under phenomenal concepts. In any case, my aim here was just to indicate what a possible argument against funny physicalism based on zombies would look like, and to suggest that it should be taken seriously.

Goff also argues that funny physicalists are prima facie committed to the possibility of ghosts. He suggests that one possible way of denying the possibility of ghosts would be to maintain that phenomenal states are functional or behavioural states, and therefore they are essentially higher-order states. Goff argues very convincingly that funny physicalists cannot take that route, due to their commitment to conceptual dualism. But, I wonder, could funny physicalists argue that phenomenal properties are essentially higher-order properties in a way that does not commit them to functionalism or behaviourism, and that is compatible with conceptual dualism? I am not sure but I will offer a possible, highly especulative argument to that effect.
As suggested above, I think there are at least two versions of funny physicalism. According to the first, more traditional sort, dispositional physical properties are grounded by intrinsic phenomenal properties. But it seems implausible that phenomenal properties are that widespread. According to the second version, dispositional physical properties are grounded on categorical properties, namely, proto-phenomenal properties, which are also responsible for the instantiation of phenomenal properties. How should we understand this 'being responsible for' relation? It is not clear, but one option would be to understand this in a way that is parallel to the relation between proto-phenomenal properties and physicSal properties, that is, according to the categorical/dispositional model. If phenomenal properties are understood in this way, then they require categorical properties to be instantiated. And if so, it could be argued that phenomenal properties are essentially higher-order, and therefore ghosts cannot exist.

To finish, I would like to make some comments about what kind of challenge ghosts pose to the different versions of physicalism discussed. I agree with Goff that ghosts seem to pose an additional challenge to a priori physicalism: now they do not only have to explain away the intuition that zombies are conceivable, but also the intuition that ghosts are conceivable. And it is true that a response to the first question does not automatically constitute a response to the second. Also, funny physicalism seems to face two challenges: they have to argue, first, that zombies are either inconceivable, or possible but irrelevant, and secondly, that ghosts are either inconceivable, or possible but irrelevant. And as Goff argues, it is not clear that a response to the first challenge constitutes a response to the second. But when it comes to a posteriori physicalism, I think it is clear

that the standard response to zombies, namely, that conceivability does not entail possibility, is automatically a response to ghosts. If conceivability does not entail possibility, then the conceivability of ghosts does not pose a problem for a posteriori physicalism, for exactly the same reasons that zombies do not pose a problem. When it comes to a posteriori physicalism, ghosts might pose a challenge but it is not an additional challenge. There is nothing new here to be scared of.