ABSTRACT. It is often thought that materialism about the mind can be clarified using the concept of supervenience. But there is a difficulty. A materialist should admit the possibility of ghosts and thus should allow that a world might duplicate the physical character of our world and enjoy, in addition, immaterial beings with mental properties. So materialists can’t claim that every world that is physically indistinguishable from our world is also mentally indistinguishable; and this is well known. What is less understood are the different ways that immaterial add-ons can make trouble for supervenience-theoretic formulations of materialism. In this paper, I shall present a problematic kind of add-on that has been ignored and look at three supervenience-theoretic attempts to formulate materialism in that light.

1. BLOCKERS

As we have seen, the most obvious way that an immaterial add-on can make trouble for materialist supervenience theses is by possessing a member of the family of properties that the materialist is interested in. Let us call this sort of immaterial entity a ‘Possessor’. However, another sort of immaterial trouble-maker is also prima facie conceivable. Suppose the relationship between A-facts and B-facts to be strong but not quite so strong as to hold of metaphysical necessity. In particular, let us suppose there to be just enough slack between A-facts and B-facts as to allow some immaterial entity to suspend the emergence of B-facts from A-facts. We can still imagine the relationship between A-facts and B-facts to be very intimate – for it is prima facie conceivable that the emergence of B-facts from A-facts could be prevented only were a certain kind of immaterial entity to exist; given a certain totality of A-facts and the absence of an immaterial intervener, certain B-facts must occur. Call such a relationship “weak necessity”. And let us call the immaterial interveners that figure in this prima facie conceivable scenario ‘Blockers’.2,3
Physical duplication of this world does not, thanks to possible Possessors, guarantee mental duplication. But perhaps it does so for a certain class of worlds to which this world belongs. And perhaps a restricted supervenience claim of this sort is a good way to express materialism. Frank Jackson offers the following supervenience thesis as a promising way to formulate materialism:

Any world which is a minimal physical duplicate of our world is a duplicate simpliciter of our world.

He goes on:

What is a minimal physical duplicate? Think of a recipe for making scones. It tells you what to do, but not what not to do. It tells you to add butter to the flour but does not tell you not to add dirt to the flour. Why doesn’t it? Part of the reason is that no-one would think to add dirt unless explicitly told to. But part of the reason is logical. It is impossible to list all the things not to do. There are indefinitely many of them: don’t add bats wings; don’t add sea water; don’t add ... Of necessity the writers of recipes rely on an intuitive understanding of an implicitly included ‘stop’ clause in their recipes. A minimal physical duplicate is what you would get if you – or God, as it is sometimes put– used the physical nature of our world (including of course its physical laws) as a recipe in this sense for making the world.

So if our world instantiates non-physical states of affairs, they will be absent from minimal physical duplicates of our world: in that case, a minimal physical duplicate of our world will not be a duplicate simpliciter. If, meanwhile, our world only instantiates physical states of affairs, a minimal physical duplicate of our world will duplicate our world.

The advantage of this approach is clear enough. Materialism ought not to be threatened by possible but non-actual ghosts; and on this formulation, it is not, since it is allowed that there be non-minimal physical duplicates of our world (including, for example, ones with our physical stuff plus spooks) which are not duplicates simpliciter of our world.

But what of our other kind of troublemaker? Suppose someone accepted the possibility of Blockers, though denied their actuality. Could she endorse Jackson’s supervenience thesis? It seems clear that she could. If weak necessity (but not metaphysical necessity)