

Resurrection of the Body?: Physicalism and the Possibility of Life After Death

The 2012 Winifred E. Weter Faculty Award Lecture

Seattle Pacific University

April 17, 2012



Rebekah L.H. Rice, Ph.D.

Associate Professor of Philosophy

College of Arts and Sciences

**Resurrection of the Body?:
Physicalism and the Possibility of Life After Death**

2012 Winifred E. Weter Lecture

April 17, 2012

Seattle Pacific University

Rebekah L. H. Rice, Ph.D.

Department of Philosophy

To Jeremy, Lydia, and Silas Rice

(For unparalleled love, support, and bear hugs)

To Ken Harrower

*(Who taught me that when faced with a perplexing question, one might do well to crack open a
book.)*

To Steve Layman, Patrick McDonald, and Leland Saunders

(Colleagues than which none better can be conceived!)

I. Introduction

Christians maintain that, as a result of divine grace, human persons can survive their deaths. This occurs as a result of a remarkable divine act—something we call “resurrection.” And it constitutes an important piece of the “good news” that Christians profess.

Conceptually, this is a baffling claim. How can it be that I (God willing) will exist after my bodily death? One answer is to suggest—as Rene Descartes famously did—that I am not my body, and that I am instead an immaterial mind, or “soul.” This yields the following account of post-mortem survival: Upon my bodily death, my soul persists. Since I am my soul, and not my body, I persist. Where (or in what conditions) I will persist is a matter left to divine judgment, but the fact of my persistence is owing to the fact that though my bodily processes cease and my body decays – or worse, that it is obliterated and cast into a billion pieces – my soul persists to become the occupant of a new (glorified) body, or in any case to enjoy continued existence. The view is notably Platonic in origin. And it appears to be at odds with the Apostle’s Creed which explicitly affirms the “resurrection of the body.”¹ Moreover, a significant number of those who think hard about the nature of human persons (about what sorts of beings we are), deny the very dualism upon which it is based.

The majority of contemporary philosophers today are physicalists. And I would imagine the same is true of a good number of biologists, physicists, psychologists, and neurophysiologists, as well, I understand, as a growing number of theologians.² Physicalists

¹ Indeed, in a talk delivered to the Society of Christian Philosophers in 2011, N.T. Wright claims that “for Paul, as for all Jews, Christians and indeed pagans until the rise of the Gnostics in the second century, the word ‘resurrection’ was about bodies.”

² N.T. Wright puts his own view this way: “[J]ust as I believe that we are wrong to look for a god-of-the-gaps, hiding somewhere in the unexplored reaches of quantum physics like a rare mammal lurking deep in the unexplored

believe that human beings, like you and me, are composed entirely (and only) of physical stuff. The implication, of course, is that, contrary to what Descartes and Plato thought, you and I are neither wholly nor partly constituted by an immaterial soul. Instead, you just are your body. Or, more accurately, you are some part of your body, most probably some part of your brain or central nervous system.

Consider Bob. Bob is a human being. Now, if physicalism is correct, then Bob is through and through a material, or physical thing. Perhaps a better way to put it is that Bob is his brain. After all, it won't do to insist that Bob is identical with his body, since some parts of Bob's body could go missing (he could lose an arm in an unfortunate accident, for example) and Bob would nevertheless continue to exist. What's more, suppose Bob is to undergo a radical transplantation surgery in which a significant number of his critical organs – his heart, lungs, liver, and kidneys, say – are to be switched out for new ones. I suspect Bob will be quite nervous about the upcoming surgery, but I doubt that he will wonder who it is that will exit the operating room at the surgery's completion. Of course it will be Bob because none of those particular organs are essential to Bob's being Bob. On the other hand, suppose Bob is instead facing a brain transplant surgery in which the surgeon will remove Bob's brain and replace it with someone else's. Well, I don't know about you, but if I am Bob, I am quite concerned about just who will be wheeled out of that operating room. Will it be Bob, or someone else? All of this is simply to suggest that if we are essentially physical things, then we are likely our brains, or even more plausibly, part of our brains (we know, after all, that persons can survive the loss of portions of their brains).

Amazon jungle, so I believe we are wrong to look for a soul-of-the-gaps, hiding in the bits that neuroscience hasn't yet managed to explain." (Wright, 2011)

The reasons for Physicalism's prominence in philosophical circles are varied. Some adopt the view because they have become convinced that the alternative—Substance Dualism—is flawed and perhaps even incoherent. In a famous exchange with Descartes, Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia asked how it is that “the human soul can determine the movement of the animal spirits in the body so as to perform voluntary acts—being as it is merely a conscious (*pensante*) substance.”³ What she was driving at is a question about how an immaterial thing (which the mind is purported to be) can produce effects in a body (as happens every time we act) and vice versa (as in the case where tissue damage causes a pain sensation). Descartes didn't have a satisfying answer and the problem has since become known as the “Mind/Body Problem.” The upshot is that the dualist is challenged to offer an explanation for how things belonging to distinct ontological categories – the material and the immaterial – can nevertheless causally interact. The problem is that an answer to this question is not terribly easy to come by.

Whether the problem is tractable is a matter of debate among philosophers. But this much seems true. Christians already maintain that immaterial-to-material causation is possible since they posit that an immaterial being (i.e., God) both created, and continually interacts with, the material (or physical) universe. Though she may not be able to explain how this is so, the Christian theist accepts that it is possible and, if she is right, then there is no obvious incoherence in supposing that causal interactions between minds and bodies are also possible. It is perhaps largely for this reason that Christian physicalists have not tended to list the mind-body problem among their chief motivations for denying dualism and adopting physicalism.

However, even if substance dualism is not incoherent, there may nevertheless be reason to resist it as a view about the nature of human persons like you and me. That God *could* have made beings with distinct souls and bodies doesn't imply that he did so. Some Christian

³ Written in May 1643. See Baird (2011), p. 53.

physicalists have been motivated by what they take to be theological or biblical reasons for preferring physicalism over dualism. Nancey Murphy suggests that physicalism better captures the Christian view about the nature of persons and the nature of human resurrection than does dualism which has its roots in Platonic theory and finds a home in popular Christianity as a result of philosophical influence rather than biblical or creedal adherence. Now, it is certainly an interesting question just what the Biblical view of the nature of the human person is (if indeed such a metaphysical view can be clearly gleaned from scripture⁴). But if that was the topic of this lecture, then I would be the wrong person to be giving it. Instead, my question is this: Whatever one's motivation for physicalism may be, does physicalism preclude the possibility of an afterlife? That is, can one consistently be both a Physicalist and a Christian theist?

Perhaps the most notable motivation for Christian and non-Christian physicalists alike is that science appears to strongly support a physicalist picture of the human person. Brain science tells us that there is a high degree of correlation between mental phenomena (beliefs, desires, perceptions, sensations, intentions, and so on) and brain phenomena (neural events, chemical processes, and the like). Indeed, in many cases brain science can tell us which mental states (or events) correlate with which brain states (or events). Couple this with the fact that additional discoveries are being made at an accelerated pace and it seems natural to suppose that we can eventually, with time, come to have an exhaustive list of such correlations. In other words, the empirical data makes reasonable the belief that for every mental state *M*, there is a physical correlate, *P*. Of course, this acknowledgment alone doesn't secure physicalism over dualism, as an exhaustive list of the correlations won't by itself reveal precisely how the mind relates to the brain. But additional facts regarding the apparent causal connections between the two may

⁴ Write suggests that the Biblical writers (including Paul) appear not have been especially concerned to give an account of human anthropology. See Wright (2011).

bolster the case. For example, we know that if we increase certain chemicals in the brain (e.g. serotonin), it will affect the subject's mood. And we know that damage to certain regions of the brain will result in memory loss, or impairment of speech. So, the connection between the mental and the physical appears to be quite tight; so tight, in fact, that many of the phenomena we once attributed to the mind are now routinely explained by appealing solely to goings on in the brain. It's not an enormous leap to conclude, on this basis, that the mental just is the physical, or, in any case, that it reduces to the physical, or that it utterly depends, in some other way, on the physical. Indeed, it appears to be a methodological assumption in some disciplines that if one cares to understand the mind, the thing to do is to examine the brain.

II. Varieties of Physicalism

Physicalism comes in a couple of forms. Reductive physicalists maintain that my mental life (i.e., my beliefs, desires, intentions, emotional states, and so on) is wholly reducible to neural events and chemical processes in my brain. The upshot is that there's nothing distinctive or "special" about the mental. The mental just is the physical. One concern about reductive physicalism is that it appears to be incompatible with the thesis that human beings sometimes act freely. After all, reductive physicalism implies that everything I do is caused by neural events in me. Suppose I raise my hand because I wish to hail a taxi. According to reductive physicalism, my hand's rising is not caused by my desire (to hail a cab), but rather by some neural event which sends a signal (ultimately) to my limb. But neural events, like all physical events, are governed by physical laws. And which physical laws there are, and whether they hold, are not matters that are up to me. So, it seems that my actions are not up to me. Additionally, there are

questions about whether reductive physicalism can adequately account for the fact that you and I are conscious beings, capable of being aware; of having experiences.

Nonreductive Physicalists maintain, like their reductionistic counterparts, that there are only physical substances and that I am one such. But they deny that mental states can be reduced to brain states. That's because a belief, for example, cannot be wholly described, without loss of meaning, in purely physical terms. Among other things, beliefs have intentional content. They are "about" something. Take for example, my belief that God exists. My belief is about God. But the corresponding neural event (whatever that may be) is not about anything at all. And the same is true of desires and other mental states. The mental is anomalous—truly unique and irreducible.

An increasing number of theistic philosophers argue that the second view—Nonreductive Physicalism—is compatible with Christianity. That is, they argue that one can uphold the various tenets of Christian doctrine while simultaneously believing that the human person is a physical thing, and not an immaterial soul. However, this claim is a bit puzzling. After all, if we grant that Christian Physicalism is tenable (and it will not be my aim to argue that it is), a natural question to ask is how it can be that I might survive my death if what I am is a physical thing. After all, upon death a person's body decays, sometimes it is cremated, or cannibalized, or mutilated, or obliterated in some dramatic fashion. If the physical thing which undergoes such a fate is me, then how can I possibly be said to survive? Is there a coherent story to tell about how a physical entity (like me, *ex hypothesi*) can survive bodily death?

A handful of Christian philosophers have offered such stories. Let me warn you that, as you might already be suspecting, the proposals can be rather bizarre. Of course, that a theory is bizarre does not by itself imply that the theory is impossible, or even that it is false. But we are

about to engage in a bit of abstract metaphysics. It's the sort of thing that could make your head hurt, so consider yourself forewarned. I will now take the various proposals in turn.

III. Physicalist Accounts of Resurrection

III.a. Resurrection by Reassembly

Historically, the most dominant account of the resurrection of the body is one that was defended by Thomas Aquinas (with more than a little help from Aristotelian metaphysics). The story goes like this. Upon death, bodies deteriorate and over time are eventually (and sometimes rather quickly) reduced to a heap of sub-organic matter. Resurrection, then, is the divine act whereby God reassembles the decomposed bits that once constituted John Wesley, say, so as to bring it about that Wesley exists once more. That is, the reassembled bits compose an object and that object is supposed to be identical with Wesley's pre-mortem body. The problem, according to Peter van Inwagen (and John Locke before him), is that this supposition is wrong. The object which results from the reassembly cannot be the very object that was Wesley's body before death since that would imply that a single object has multiple beginnings. Suppose a library claims to have in its possession a certain manuscript – Aquinas' *Summa*, say, written in St. Thomas' own hand. Suppose further that the library claims that this manuscript was burned in the year 1506, but that God miraculously recreated it in 1507. According to van Inwagen, the scenario sounds quite impossible. God, being omnipotent, could no doubt create an exact duplicate of the original manuscript, but the divinely created manuscript would not be identical to the original. After all, its earliest moment of existence would have been after Aquinas' death and so it could not have been written by Aquinas. The two manuscripts have distinct causal

histories. One (the original) was brought about by Aquinas. The other (the duplicate) was brought about by God. As such, there is not one manuscript, but two.

While I am inclined to agree with van Inwagen on this point, I won't argue the matter further (here), as the reassembly view is problematic for other reasons. Suppose you meet with the unfortunate fate of becoming a tasty entrée for a cannibal and some of the atoms that once made up your body now make up his. And suppose that the cannibal immediately dies. When God sets to the task of reassembling, how can he reassemble both you and the cannibal when the particular atoms in question have two claimants? Notice that the problem can be posed without introducing cannibalism. Upon a person's death, the atoms that composed her will immediately or eventually come to (at least partly) compose other items in the universe including, sometimes, other people. In the event that they do come to compose another person, God cannot resurrect both the original person (P_1) and the person with the more recent claim to those atoms (P_2) since certain atoms will have been shared by both P_1 and P_2 . This could happen in a more direct way if, for example, your organs are donated and transplanted into the body of another person. If resurrection requires reassembling all of one's material bits, then God will have to choose between P_1 and P_2 . What's more, bodies are gaining and losing bits of matter all the time so that the atoms which now compose me are altogether distinct from those that composed, say, my ten-year-old body. On this view, God could in principle resurrect both me and my ten-year-old self by reassembling each set of atoms. As van Inwagen points out, once resurrected, I could turn to my ten-year-old self, and she to me, and both of us could correctly say to the other, "I am you."⁵

III.b. Constitution and Divine Fiat

⁵ Van Inwagen (1998).

Certain more recent attempts to defend the possibility of resurrection given physicalism flow out of a general nondualistic view about human persons as things that bear some important (nonidentity) relation to their bodies. For Lynne Rudder Baker, that relation is constitution. According to Baker's Constitution View, human persons are not identical to their bodies (or to part of their bodies), but are instead constituted by their bodies. Baker's view is materialistic in so far as she claims that human persons are necessarily embodied. But it is not true, on her view, that they must have the body they in fact have. After all, a human being is a partly psychological kind. To be *human* is to be constituted by a human body. To be a *person* (whether human or otherwise) is to have a "first-person perspective" (i.e., to think about oneself as oneself and to identify one's thoughts as one's own). The requirement here is not merely that persons be conscious since a being can be conscious while lacking a first-person perspective. Such may be the case for non-human primates and other higher animals. A person, on the other hand, must be *self*-conscious, viewing herself as the subject of her experiences.

Constitution, importantly, is not identity. Consider a statue and the particular lump of matter which constitutes it. Statue and Lump can be said to differ in certain respects. For example, Lump could exist in a world without art, whereas Statue could not. And Statue could not exist without being a statue, whereas Lump can. Put differently, Statue has a property which Lump lacks, namely, the property of being a statue wherever it exists.

On the other hand, Statue and Lump are arguably not just two independent individuals. Many of Statue's aesthetic properties depend on Lump's physical properties. And, of course, the two are spatially coincident. Take the particular statue, Michelangelo's *David*. David, and the piece of marble which constitutes it (call it, "Marble"), have been located at exactly the same places at the same times since (roughly) 1504. And there are other similarities. David and

Marble have precisely the same size, weight, color, smell, and so on. And these similarities are no accident. For David does not exist separately from Marble.

There are a number of things that make the constitution view puzzling and these have been well-rehearsed in the literature. Let me mention two. First, Baker claims that constitution is pervasive: “pieces of paper constitute dollar bills, strands of DNA constitute genes, pieces of cloth constitute flags, bits of bronze constitute statues.”⁶ One way in which Baker shores up her non-identity claim is to posit that the piece of paper and the dollar bill have distinct causal powers. For example, when a large stone is placed in certain circumstances it acquires new properties and a new thing (say, a monument to soldiers who died in battle) comes into being. The constituted thing (the monument) has effects in virtue of having properties that the constituting thing (the stone) would not have had if it had not constituted a monument. The monument attracts speakers and crowds on patriotic holidays; it brings tears to people’s eyes; it sparks protests. Had it not constituted a monument, the stone would not have had any of these effects. However, if this is right, it would seem there will be widespread overdetermination of effects since, as Timothy O’Connor and Jonathan Jacobs put it, “every socially-based kind (such as currency or works of art) results in a co-located object with new causal powers – the piece of paper and the dollar bill, the lump of clay and the statue.”⁷

Second, there is a question about just what the constitution relation is and whether it is coherent. According to it, we can have, in a single spatio-temporal region, two body-shaped objects that wholly overlap so that when they get on the scale together and it registers 150 pounds, that is the weight of each of them individually and also the weight of them collectively.⁸

⁶ Baker (2007), p. 337.

⁷ O’Connor and Jacobs (2010), p. 15.

⁸ I borrow this example from O’Connor and Jacobs (2010), p. 15.

Even if these problems are surmountable, our interest is with Baker's claim that the constitution view offers an account of the resurrection which "fares better than its competitors."⁹ Remember that for Baker, John Wesley is constituted by his body, but is not identical to it. So, while it is true that Wesley must be embodied at any time that he exists (here or in the hereafter), his post-mortem self needn't have his pre-mortem body (presumably the post-mortem body could be wholly distinct and discontinuous with the pre-mortem body). What must be the case, however, is that Wesley's first-person perspective comes to be realized in a glorified body. How does this come about? Baker says, "All that is needed is God's free decree that brings about one contingent state of affairs rather than another. If God decrees that the person with body 1 have [Wesley's] first-person perspective, then [Wesley] is the person with body 1."¹⁰

From a purely Christian perspective, this move may not appear problematic. But from a materialistic perspective, it is rather unsatisfying. Baker denies substance dualism. So the picture she presents is not one in which God simply decides which body to attach a certain soul to, but rather it is one according to which God simply decides which material thing manifests my psychology. That might be, at one moment, a middle-aged, female body, at the next moment a 3-year-old, child's body, and at the very next moment, an 85-year-old male body. Baker doesn't imagine things going this way of course (perhaps, out of altruism, God would never bring about such wild results), but her view doesn't preclude such results. And for that reason, I think we should look for something better.

The physicalist, I've suggested, is motivated by a scientific picture of the human person. In particular, she believes that one's mental life depends in some rather strong way on one's

⁹ Baker (2007), p. 340.

¹⁰ Lynne Rudder Baker, "Persons and the Metaphysics of Resurrection," *Religious Studies* 43 (2007), p. 346.

physiology.¹¹ This will naturally lead, I think, to a view of the human person as dependent upon (for existence as well as continued persistence) on the existence of a single (and particular), continuous physical item (namely, her body). On Physicalism, one's body is not accidental to one. Baker's materialism imposes the very weak requirement that I need merely be embodied. So, while my mental life is in fact connected to the body that now constitutes me, it could just as well be connected to some other altogether different body.¹² The persistence of my body plays no role (indeed is not a relevant consideration) in whether or not I persist. This is at best "materialism light" and at worst "materialism in name only." Material continuity (i.e., sameness of material stuff) must, it seems to me, be a requirement for the persistence of any object that is (even partly) a *material* object.

There is more to say. Once divine fiat is brought to bear, we see that the various examples of constitution we were given to motivate and articulate the theory (statues and lumps, for example) are importantly disanalogous from the persons case. Imagine that one evening, a group of deviant but talented art students break into Florence's Gallerie dell'Accademia and remove *David*. In its place, they leave a fake which is in every way indistinguishable from the original. Indeed, let's suppose it is even crafted out of the same kind of Carrara marble of which the original is fashioned. Come the next day when the crowds gather once again, this time around the new statue, whatever emotions, thoughts, and behaviors are sparked in these onlookers by the new statue are precisely, I think we can suppose, of the sort that would have been sparked by *David*. And yet, the new statue clearly is not *David*. It is a fake (a mere duplicate). Are we to suppose that divine fiat can change matters in this case – that, by virtue of

¹¹ Leaving open whether the dependence in question is to be spelled out in reductive or nonreductive terms.

¹² So long, I suppose, as the new body is a *human* body.

simply willing that the new marble realize the various statue-properties of the original David, God can make it the case that the crowds now gathered are peering at David?

I think the answer is no. But notice that were the answer yes, it would seem to be in virtue of God's doing something else (i.e., by doing something which brings it about that the old material comes to be present in the museum once again), and so it will not merely be a matter of divine fiat. Here is an analogy. Imagine that a beaker contains a clear liquid (in this case, H_2SO_4). Can an omnipotent being make it the case that the beaker instead contains water? Of course!: By making it the case that the H_2SO_4 is replaced with H_2O . But if we are to have a case analogous to Baker's resurrection story, then the question we need to be asking is: Can an omnipotent being make it the case – merely by intending that it be so – that the H_2SO_4 in the beaker *is* water? This seems impossible. Anything that is not H_2O is not water. The upshot is that Baker's account allows for certain physical items (i.e., persons) to be exempt from the sorts of constraints imposed by their own nature (as physical items) since that which materially constitutes them is merely accidental to their being the things they are.

III.c. The “Falling Elevator” Model

Perhaps you're thinking that things can't get any stranger. I assure you, they can. The following is a view cooked up by Dean Zimmerman. Immediately prior to death, and with God's help, Wesley's body undergoes an exhaustive replication (more accurately, every particle replicates, resulting in two particle-stages). One of these bodies remains as his corpse, the other jumps through space and time to the afterlife. (Imagine here a scenario akin to what you might see in a cartoon where a person survives the precipitous drop of an elevator toward the basement floor by jumping out at the last minute.) The body which “escapes death” with an impressive

spatiotemporal leap is Wesley because, seeing as it is a mere corpse, the body left behind is not a candidate for being Wesley.

There are a handful of objections to Zimmerman's model.¹³ The objection that I want to press is related to an objection we raised for the Constitution view. Notice that the "budding off" process results in a resurrected body that is composed entirely of new material bits. That is, the resurrected body shares no atoms with the original, pre-mortem body. The view allows – indeed posits – that conjoining stages of Wesley are in every way materially dissimilar (i.e., they share no material parts). From one stage to the next – as he "crosses over" – Wesley undergoes an exhaustive replacement of constitutive material bits.

On an ontology that includes persisting objects, objects (like organisms) can lose their parts.¹⁴ When I take my car to the mechanic to have the tires changed, the car loses some of its parts (its tires) and gains new parts (new tires). But objects cannot undergo an immediate, exhaustive replacement of parts. Human bodies undergo material-replacement as part of the routine and natural course of things. A body might change drastically (e.g. double in size or disfigure to the point of being unrecognizable), but so long as the replacement takes place gradually, the body survives the changes. The idea is perhaps best understood in terms of "assimilation," where a body's surviving the gaining (say) of new atoms is due to its ability to

¹³ In addition to the two discussed here are objections launched by William Hasker and Eric Olson. Hasker's contention is that (in virtue of being committed to a closest-continuer theory of personal identity), the view rejects the necessity of identity. See, in particular, Zimmerman's discussion of Hasker in Zimmerman (2010). Olson argues that the sort of scenario Zimmerman describes is impossible. That's because no miraculous powers (including the sort of "budding" attributed to the atoms by the falling elevator model) could ensure that the atoms appearing in the next world would "find" any nonrandom spatiotemporal location (as well as the proper arrangement) so as to compose the resurrected body. Any power to bud new atoms at a determinate location would require a property analogous to momentum. But there is nothing analogous to momentum across a spatiotemporal gap. Zimmerman's reply is to resist the claim that the momentum-like property needed to point an atom to a certain location must continue to be exemplified across the gap in order to land the atom in that location. See Olson (2010) and Zimmerman (2010)

¹⁴ I am here deviating from a van Inwagen-style metaphysic since van Inwagen denies that there are (non-living) objects (e.g. tables and cathedrals). See van Inwagen (1990).

assimilate those atoms into its organizational structure. A complete replacement of atoms means that assimilation cannot occur. It is not difficult to identify clear cases in which assimilation fails to occur (e.g. when an organism undergoes a complete, or even a large-scale replacement of material parts) and there are clear cases in which assimilation succeeds (e.g. when an organism produces new skin cells to replace ones that have died). In my view, the persistence of material objects depends, in part, on the persistence of (at least some of) their constituent parts. On the falling elevator model, each of Wesley's atoms buds a new atom which then leaps across space and time to compose Wesley in the afterlife. But given that none of these atoms was ever assimilated into Wesley's pre-mortem body, they cannot compose him. Thus, the body in the afterlife is not Wesley, but a duplicate.¹⁵

III.d. The "Body-Snatcher" View

Views like Baker's and Zimmerman's materialized (forgive the pun) following a provocative paper published by Peter van Inwagen over 30 years ago. In that paper, van Inwagen offers the following "possible" account of resurrection. At a moment just prior to death, God whisks away a person's body – or more likely, some part of a person's body – to the afterlife. At the same moment, he replaces the original body with a perfect simulacrum. The result, of course, is that any post-mortem bodies that we encounter are, or in any case contain, a simulacrum. The entire process is perfectly undetectable by human beings and so is consistent with everything we apprehend in our experiences of corpses, including when we perform autopsies or otherwise give

¹⁵ Zimmerman replies that this objection is based on the assumption that there are persisting simples, an assumption, he notes, which might be denied by certain interpretations of current physics. It may be, for example, that the laws governing our tiniest bits are all statistical and that an electron that starts a track in a cloud chamber cannot properly be said to be the very same electron that finishes the track. Now, it's far from obvious that quantum mechanics cannot be squared with the existence of genuinely persisting particles, but Zimmerman appears to be assuming that even if there were no persistent particles, we should not conclude that organisms do not persist. I'm not so sure. But in any case, this issue takes us far afield into matters that, as Zimmerman agrees, are best left to physics.

them an especially careful look-over. It's a rather wild story, no doubt, but a nevertheless coherent one. A central objection to it has been that it has God engaging in widespread deception and so it violates Descartes' "no deceiver" axiom.¹⁶ On this basis, Zimmerman suggests that "the Christian materialist would surely do well to look for a better story than this."¹⁷

But this strikes me as a bit too quick. After all, van Inwagen has offered a story according to which the very physical part of me that is essential to my being me is preserved and a new (glorified) body is created around it. This is incredible, no doubt, and it is duly noted that the view implies that God is a body-snatcher who engages in rather widespread deception (since every corpse is – or in any case contains – a simulacrum). Perhaps this should trouble one a good deal. I'm not sure. Deception isn't always morally problematic. If a Nazi soldier appears at your door and asks if you are harboring Jews in your home, I think many of us will agree that one is morally permitted – perhaps morally required – to refrain from telling the truth (or even to tell a lie). Deception is thought – by nearly everyone but Immanuel Kant – to be permissible in circumstances in which other moral considerations outweigh one's prima facie duty to tell the truth. Consider the tactics that parents of young children sometimes employ in an attempt to maintain the child's safety in spite of her limited understanding of the world and its potential perils. Some friends of mine have a young son who does not yet have a general concept of danger. He has, however, had some experience with heat – enough, anyway, to know that very hot items are worth avoiding. So, in order to protect their son, when the little boy ventures uncomfortably near the street, his parents point to the street and say, "hot." And when he makes a beeline for the swimming pool, they say the same thing. Now, neither the street nor the pool is

¹⁶ See Zimmerman (1999) and O'Connor and Jacobs (2010).

¹⁷ Zimmerman (1999), p. 196.

in fact hot. So, what they're telling their son is not true. But I hardly think any of us would view them as morally deficient parents. Quite the contrary, they are clearly looking out for his best interest, which is precisely the sort of thing good parents do.

It's not terribly difficult to imagine some potentially justifying reason for God to keep us in the dark should it be the case that bits of us go missing upon death. Indeed we might here employ a familiar theistic strategy: As we are all aware, when it comes to divine activity, the mysteries abound. You and I may be unaware of what reasons justify God in allowing (for example) the suffering that exists in the world, or the fact that God chooses to keep God's self hidden (as opposed to fully revealed). But presumably, it doesn't follow that there aren't such justifying reasons. What's more, it may be unreasonable to expect that if there were such reasons, human beings would be privy to them (much like my friends' son is unaware of their reasons for lying to him about the temperature of the street). If these replies are satisfactory in other contexts, then I see no reason why they couldn't be employed to deflect the charge that such trickery as is involved in concealing from us the fact that bits of us routinely go missing upon death threatens God's perfect goodness.¹⁸

IV. Conclusion

Where do we go from here? I think the options are as follows. First, one can abandon the project of formulating a physicalist conception of resurrection and adopt dualism. Of course, to do so would be to deny that the considerations which motivate physicalism have the motivational force we might originally have been inclined to grant them (or that the challenges for dualism are as strong as we may at first have taken them to be). And I'd like to issue a warning here. On one

¹⁸ I take it this is akin to a rejection of the "noseeum" inference in reply to the evidential argument from evil. See, for example, Howard-Snyder (1999).

familiar dualistic conception of the afterlife, the soul, in virtue of being, by its very nature, immortal, persists beyond the destruction of the body. As Plato himself recognized, no doubt, the view has the attractive feature that it successfully accounts for post-mortem survival. But I think a Christian theist is wise to proceed cautiously here. If it is a feature of souls that they persist (i.e., they are immortal), then there is no need for God to resurrect one – that is, there is no special, miraculous divine act needed to make it the case that one survives death. But resurrection is surely a miraculous event, if ever there were one.

And lest one be content, in one's affirmation of dualism, that she needn't worry about how a material thing might come to live again post death, let me urge such an individual to consider (as we all must do) the possibility that her view is false. We've all been in the position of taking something to be true only later to discover otherwise. If one considers it even a possibility that physicalism is true, then we should not abandon the project of searching for an adequate account of post-mortem, *bodily* survival.

Second, one can persist in the attempt to understand how resurrection might be possible given physicalism. Indeed, the views we've looked at give us reason at least to be optimistic that it is *possible* even if we haven't arrived at a wholly satisfying account. I suggest that, of the views we've considered, van Inwagen's is the most promising. For on his view, the very physical part of me that is essential to my being me is preserved so that Wesley's resurrected body is the *same* body that composed him prior to death. The story is incredible, no doubt, but there are no glaring inconsistencies; that is, no reason to think it impossible. It is duly noted that the view implies that God is a body-snatcher who engages in rather widespread deception (since every corpse is – or in any case contains – a simulacrum). If this is the gravest objection the view faces, and one is serious in her commitment to physicalism (perhaps in light of what she

takes to be good evidence for the view), then I have offered considerations which may temper the force of the objection.

The physicalist, I've suggested, is motivated by a general scientific picture of the human person. If such a person is also a Christian theist, she wants to know if persons of the sort she thinks there are can survive death. Assuming there is a viable affirmative answer, she may be willing to put up with a little deception, assuming of course that such deception is justified.

References

- Baird, Forrest E. and Walter Kaufmann eds., *Modern Philosophy*, 6th ed. (Prentice-Hall, 2011).
- Baker, Lynne Rudder. *Persons and Bodies: A Constitution View* (Cambridge, 2000).
- Baker, Lynne Rudder. "Persons and the Metaphysics of Resurrection," *Religious Studies*, 43 (2007):333–348.
- Baker, Lynne Rudder. "Why Constitution is Not Identity" *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol XCIV, No. 12 (1997).
- Corcoran, Kevin. "Physical Persons and Postmortem Survival without Temporal Gaps" in *Soul, Body, and Survival*, ed. Corcoran (Cornell, 2001).
- Davidson, Donald. *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford, 1980).
- Hershenov, David. "Van Inwagen, Zimmerman, and the Materialist Conception of Resurrection," *Religious Studies*, 38 (2002): 451-469.
- Howard-Snyder, Daniel, "God, Evil, and Suffering." In Michael J. Murray, ed., *Reason for the Hope Within*. (Eardmans, 1999): 217-237.
- Jacobs, Jonathan D. and Timothy O'Connor. "Emergent Individuals and the Resurrection," *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 2 (2010).
- Johnston, Mark. "Constitution is Not Identity" *Mind*, Vol. 101 (1992): 89-106.
- Kim, Jaegwon, "Concepts of Supervenience" in *Supervenience and Mind*, ed. Kim (Cambridge, 1993).
- Kim, Jaegwon. *Philosophy of Mind*, 2nd ed. (Westview, 2006).
- Melnyk, Andrew, "Being a Physicalist: How and (More Importantly) Why," *Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 74, No. 2 (1994): 221-241.
- Merricks, Trenton. "How to Live forever without Saving Your Soul" in *Soul, Body, and Survival*, ed. Corcoran (Cornell, 2001).

- Murphy, Nancey. *Bodies and Souls, Or Spirited Bodies?* (Cambridge, 2006).
- Olson, Eric. "Immanent Causation and Life after Death" in *Personal Identity and Resurrection*, ed. Georg Gasser (Ashgate, 2010).
- Taliaferro, Charles and Stewart Goetz. "The Prospect of Christian Materialism," *Christian Scholar's Review*, XXXVII:3 (2008): 303-321.
- Van Dyke, Christina, "Human Identity, Immanent Causal Relations, and the Principle of Non-Repeatability: Thomas Aquinas on the Bodily Resurrection," *Religious Studies* 43 (2007): 373-94.
- Van Inwagen, Peter. "Dualism and Materialism: Athens and Jerusalem?" in *The Possibility of Resurrection and Other Essays in Christian Apologetics* (Westview, 1998).
- Van Inwagen, *Material Beings* (Cornell, 1990).
- Van Inwagen, Peter and Dean Zimmerman, eds. *Persons: Human and Divine* (Oxford, 2007).
- Van Inwagen, Peter. "The Possibility of Resurrection," *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 9 (1978): 114-121. Reprinted in *The Possibility of Resurrection and Other Essays in Christian Apologetics*, ed. Peter van Inwagen (Westview, 1998).
- Wright, N.T. (2011). "Mind, Spirit, Soul and Body: All for One and One for All, Reflections on Paul's Anthropology in his Complex Contexts." Delivered at the Eastern Division meeting of the Society of Christian Philosophers (March, 2011). Available at http://www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright_SCP_MindSpiritSoulBody.htm.
- Zimmerman, Dean. "Bodily Resurrection: The Falling Elevator Model Revisited" in *Personal Identity and Resurrection*, ed. Georg Gasser (Ashgate, 2010).
- Zimmerman, Dean, "Immanent Causation," *Philosophical Perspectives* 11, *Mind, Causation, and World* (1997): 433-471.
- Zimmerman, Dean. "The Compatibility of Materialism and Survival: The 'Falling Elevator' Model," *Faith and Philosophy* (1999).



Center for Scholarship and Faculty Development

3307 Third Avenue West

Seattle, Washington 98119

206.281.2003 | www.spu.edu/csfd