

Body, Mind and Death Michael Lacewing

Setting the scene

Many people think of the afterlife as an existence without their bodies – just their minds, somehow. But there has always been a strong tradition of bodily resurrection; and it is becoming increasingly popular in philosophy of religion. Theories of the resurrection of the body are theories about whether *I* survive the death of my body in any way. It is not enough that my body is resurrected – *I* need to be resurrected, to continue existing as my body. Theories of the resurrection of the body, then, usually presuppose two further philosophical theories: materialism and a particular theory of personal identity.

Materialism

Materialism is the theory that the only substance is matter. A substance is something that can exist independently of anything else. Materialism denies that we have souls that can exist independently of our bodies. And so, if there is life after death, we must exist as material objects, as bodies. Because matter is the only substance, everything that exists must exist as a material object. And all properties, e.g. having a mind, must be properties of something that is material.

Two theories of personal identity

Even if I can only exist if I have a body, this doesn't mean that I can only exist in *this* body. Just as a piece of computer software can be copied from one computer to another, perhaps I can exist in different bodies. On this theory, what makes me me is not what body I am in, but what is distinctive about me as a person, in particular, what psychological properties I have. So my memories, my desires, my emotions are all important to my personal identity. This is called the *psychological theory of personal identity*.

One problem with this theory can be illustrated by a thought experiment. In *Star Trek*, people 'teletransport' from the *USS Enterprise* onto the surface of a planet and back again. Suppose the teletransporter malfunctioned, and instead of 'erasing' Cpt. Kirk onboard ship before recreating him on the planet's surface, it didn't erase him, but it also recreated him on the planet's surface. Which one of these two identical Cpt. Kirk's would be the 'real' one?

The *bodily theory of personal identity* says that, although psychological properties are important, there must also be *material continuity*. At any point in time, my body is a little bit different from how it was before. Over a long period of time, it is made of completely different matter. But it is still the same body, because during each change in matter, most of my body stayed exactly the same. This is material continuity. This theory of personal identity says that I need to have material continuity in order to be the same person.

Resurrection of the body

When people talk of resurrection of the body, there are two different theories they could be referring to: *resurrection* strictly understood and *recreation* of a very similar, but not identical, body. Resurrection strictly understood says that this very body will be resurrected, brought back from the dead. Recreation says that a duplicate of this body, perhaps made of exactly the same kind of matter, perhaps made of something different, will be created. Both claim that I, the person who dies, will be that body that is resurrected.

St. Paul, in I Corinthians 15, talks of ‘resurrection’ of the body, but then says that the body that is resurrected is a heavenly body, not this earthly body. He compares this body to a perishable ‘seed’ that will be ‘raised imperishable’. It is therefore unclear whether he thinks this very body will be resurrected and then changed, or whether something completely new, but qualitatively identical, will be created.

Logical coherence

Theories of the resurrection of the body have faced numerous objections, but we are only interested in ones that relate to whether either of these theories are logically incoherent.

1. Resurrection strictly understood

To resurrect this very body, God would need to ensure *material continuity* between the body that died and the one that is resurrected. This would mean reassembling the actual atoms that made up my body at the time of death. This is not impossible for an omnipotent being, and certainly not logically incoherent. However, to do it with more than one body could prove much more difficult, because when I die, some of the atoms in my body were in the atoms of other people’s bodies when they died! God could not make two bodies out of the *very same* atoms – this is logically impossible.

If we could be resurrected exactly as we are when we die, there is another problem – we will die again immediately! Whatever state our bodies are in when we die is what caused us to die, and so this problem would need to be fixed in order for us to continue to live. You cannot resurrect a body in exactly the same state that caused it to die.

One philosopher, Peter van Inwagen, has argued that there is a way to get around these problems. At the time of death, God miraculously replaces a part of your body (van Inwagen chooses the sacrum) with a duplicate, and keeps the original one safe. When your body is ‘resurrected’, it is actually built from different atoms, except for the one original part. This part assures material continuity. This may sound far-fetched, but it is not logically incoherent.

Or is it? It requires is that God can move matter without moving it through space – but matter exists in time and space, so is this logically possible?

St Paul’s theory raises a different difficulty. If my perishable body is ‘changed in a flash’ into an imperishable body, how is it the *same* body at all? Well, perhaps just as a chemical process can make something transparent turn opaque (like frying an egg), there is some *material* process that God can perform on our bodies to give them quite different properties.

2. Recreation

Recreation doesn’t face these difficulties, since the body that dies is unimportant. But the big question is ‘am I the same person if I have a new body?’. If I am not, e.g. because the bodily theory of personal identity is true, then although recreation of ‘my body’ is logically possible, recreation of *me* is not. And since this is supposed to be a theory of my life after death, this is a problem.

A clear way to understand the question is this: if God created two of me – two bodies identical to mine when I die and with identical memories, beliefs, desires – would either of them be me? No – because I am one person, and cannot be two people. But then if God creates only one such body, would it be me? How can ‘being me’ depend on whether God creates a second person just like me??