

## The Resurrection of the Body

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Rabbinic Judaism, Christianity, and Islam agree that there is life after death. Moreover, all three religions agree that we shall not spend eternity as mere spirits or as disembodied souls. Instead, we shall have hands and feet and size and shape. For we shall have bodies. And not just any bodies. Each of us will have the very same body that he or she had in this life, although that body will be “glorified.” Each of us can have the same body because, at some point in the future, all those bodies that have died will rise again to new life. That is, dead bodies will be resurrected. Indeed, we ourselves shall be resurrected. This is the doctrine of the resurrection of the body.

This paper will focus on two questions about the doctrine of the resurrection, questions that will occur to most philosophers and theologians interested in identity in general, and in personal identity in particular. The first question is: *How?* How could a body that at the end of this life was (e.g.) frail and feeble be the very same body as a resurrection body, a body which will not be frail or feeble, but will instead be glorified? Moreover, how could a body that has passed out of existence—perhaps as a result of decay or cremation—come back into existence on the Day of Resurrection?

The second question is: *Why?* Why would anyone want a resurrection of the body? And even if the resurrection delivers something that we want—maybe one’s current body has some sentimental value and so having it back would be nice—we might

still wonder why any religion would give the doctrine a central place, as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all do.

### **I. Change and Temporal Gaps**

I have a body. And it is the very same body that I had earlier today. It is even the same body I had as a child. That is why, for example, my foot now bears a scar from an injury I suffered as a toddler. Again, the body I have now is numerically identical with—is one and the same object as—the body I had as a child. To deny this would imply, I think quite implausibly, that I literally lost one body and then acquired another at some point or other between my childhood and now.

Of course, my body is now quite different from how it was when I was a child. It has changed in size and in shape and in many other ways. That is why someone who had last seen my body when I was a child would not recognize it today. Again, my body has persisted through enormous amounts of change. And so has every other human body, at least every other body that has been around for any appreciable amount of time. So too have many other objects.

We are familiar with a single object's being one way, even though it was or will be a very different way. So the doctrine of the resurrection's implication that one and the same body is one way at death (e.g., sickly) but will be a very different way at resurrection (e.g., glorified and healthy) should not strike us as strange. So let us assume that there is nothing worrisome about this implication.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Merricks (1994) discusses, and defends, identity through change. Some might object that, while identity can be preserved through ordinary change, one's glorified resurrection body will be so different from one's

Dead bodies often pass out of existence. For example, some dead bodies decay completely; others are cremated; some are even eaten by wild animals. But, given the doctrine of the resurrection, even those bodies that have gone out of existence will one day rise—and so will one day exist—again. Thus the doctrine of the resurrection implies a “temporal gap” in the career of many bodies.<sup>2</sup>

To better understand what a temporal gap is supposed to be, consider the following story. You build a time machine that can send you—and your body—to “the future.” You push the *start* button. You disappear. You then reappear at some later date. That is, this machine sends you to some future time, allowing you to “skip” all the times between now and then. Thus this machine causes a temporal gap in your life, and also in the career of your body. Or consider a watch that is disassembled, perhaps for cleaning. Assume that, as a result, it ceases to exist. Assume further that when its parts are reassembled, the watch comes back into existence. If all these assumptions are right, the watch “jumps” a temporal gap *via* disassembly and reassembly.

The doctrine of the resurrection implies a temporal gap in the career of many bodies. So objections to a temporal gap in a body’s career are thereby objections to the doctrine of the resurrection. We shall consider two such objections.

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current body that that resurrection body cannot be identical with the body one has now. But I reply that we do not know enough about what a resurrection body will be like to conclude this, especially when we recall that some ordinary change is quite stunning, as when a single body goes from being the body of an infant to that of a full-grown adult.

<sup>2</sup> In what follows, I shall say that the doctrine of the resurrection implies a temporal gap in the career of many bodies. This is shorthand for the claim that that doctrine *and the fact that many dead bodies go out of existence* jointly imply such gaps.

My own view is that a human body ceases to exist immediately after dying (see Merricks, 2001a, 53). But nothing I say below turns on this view. The arguments below require only that at least some human bodies cease to exist at some point or other after dying.

Suppose, first, that, necessarily, whenever identity holds between an object at one time and an object at another time, something must *account for* or *ground* that identity. And suppose, second, that nothing could account for, or ground, identity's holding across a temporal gap between a body that has (e.g.) been cremated and a resurrection body. These two suppositions jointly rule out the coming back into existence on Resurrection Day of a body that has been cremated. So these two suppositions amount to an objection to the doctrine of the resurrection.

A compelling account of what grounds the identity of a resurrection body with that of a cremated body would undermine this objection. And a number of accounts have been offered. Over the centuries, the most common account among Christian philosophers and theologians, an account which was also countenanced by Islamic and Jewish thinkers, has been the following. On the Last Day, God will gather up the very small bits that composed a body at death and will "reassemble" them, which will thereby bring the body that died back into existence (see Bynum, 1995; Smith and Haddad, 2002).<sup>3</sup>

One potential problem with this account is that even a body's smallest parts might themselves sometimes go out of existence. For example, perhaps some of those parts get

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<sup>3</sup> We shall consider objections to resurrection as reassembly. But, at least until quite recently, virtually no self-styled believer in the resurrection would have raised the following objection: "What is the *point* of reassembly? Why even *try* to account for the identity of a resurrection body with a body had in this life? After all, resurrection bodies need not be numerically identical with bodies had in this life." Virtually no one would have thus objected because debates among believers in the resurrection have been over *how* (not *whether*) a body that has ceased to exist will secure identity with a resurrection body. Again, over almost all of the past two thousand years, those debates have uniformly presupposed that the very body that dies (and perishes) will rise again. This is why I say that, according to the doctrine of the resurrection, the very body that dies will rise again.

Christians have another reason to insist that the very body that dies will rise again: they believe that Christ's body at crucifixion, that is, the body that was crucified on the cross, is one and the same as the body that walked out of the tomb; and they believe that our resurrection will be patterned after Christ's.

converted (as in nuclear explosions) from matter to energy. If this were to happen, then those parts would not be around for reassembly on the Last Day, and so that body—given this account—could not be resurrected.<sup>4</sup> But every body is supposed to be resurrected.

Another objection to resurrection as reassembly trades on the many ways in which the small parts of one body can end up as parts of another body. The most sensational versions of this objection involve cannibalism. A cannibal eats me, incorporates parts of my body into his, and then dies. So some of the small bits that composed my body at my death also composed the cannibal's body at his death. As a result, when Resurrection Day arrives, God cannot (totally) reassemble both the cannibal's body and mine. So—given resurrection as reassembly—God cannot resurrect both my body and the cannibal's body. But, again, every body is supposed to be resurrected.

In the second century, Athenagoras replied to this objection by insisting that human flesh is not digestible. As a result, he would have maintained, the very small bits that compose my body at death never could become parts of a cannibal's body. So on Resurrection Day my body shall be the only one with a claim to those bits, even if a cannibal ate me and then died (Bynum, 1995, 33). Unfortunately for Athenagoras's bold reply, human flesh is (so I understand) digestible.

A final, and I think deeper, problem with resurrection as reassembly was pointed out at least as far back as Origen (Bynum, 1995, 64-66). It is that our bodies are

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<sup>4</sup> Objection: Those parts could come back into existence on the Day of Resurrection and so be available for reassembly.

Reply: To do that, the parts themselves would have to jump a temporal gap. But they could not jump a temporal gap by way of reassembly, since the idea here is that when they convert to energy (or otherwise cease to exist), so too do all their parts (if they have parts at all). So this objection requires that there are ways other than reassembly to jump a temporal gap. Thus this objection in defense of resurrection as reassembly undermines, at least to some extent, the motivation for resurrection as reassembly.

constantly changing with respect to the very small bits that compose them. (This is one way in which our bodies are quite different from inanimate objects such as watches.) Therefore, a body's identity from one moment to the next is not a matter of having exactly the same very small parts. So it seems to be a mistake to claim that its identity from death to resurrection is a matter of having exactly the same very small parts.

Look at it this way. Because my body is constantly changing its very small parts, it might be that none of the atoms that was a part of my body when I was five years old is now a part of my body. Let us suppose that none is. Now suppose that today God gathers together all those atoms that composed my body when I was five years old and reassembles them. This would produce a body, a body that looks just like mine did when I was five years old. But that body would not—could not—be my body. For that body is over there, where God did the reassembling, but my body is right here (cf. van Inwagen, 1978, 120).

We know for sure that reassembling the atoms that composed my body when I was five years old, if done today, would not produce my body. This suggests that reassembling those same atoms, if done on the Day of Resurrection, would not produce my body. And this suggests, in turn, that reassembling the atoms that will compose my body when I die, if done on the Day of Resurrection, would not produce my body. At any rate, I conclude that a Resurrection Day reassembly (of last parts, or indeed of parts from any time during a body's life) would not ground or account for the identity of a resurrection body with a body that existed in this life.

Here is an alternative to resurrection as reassembly, an alternative which was first endorsed by early rabbis. Each body has an indestructible bone at the base of its spinal

cord, and even if a body goes out of existence at some point after death, that body will come back into existence when a resurrection body is constructed around that bone (Bynum 1995, 54; cf. Smith and Haddad 2002, 131). Unfortunately for this proposal, there is no indestructible bone at the base of the spinal cord, no bone that survives cremation, decay, and every other threat to a dead body's existence.<sup>5</sup>

Some might suggest that my current body will be identical with whatever resurrection body has the *same (substantial) soul* as is had by my current body. But a soul is not part of a body. And I doubt that the identity of one physical object (such as a body) might be entirely a matter of the identity of a second object (such as a soul) when that second object is not itself a part of the first object. In this regard, taking a soul to be the guarantor of bodily identity is less plausible than taking the bone from the base of the spinal cord to be that guarantor. For at least that bone is a part of the relevant body.

Moreover, explaining bodily identity across a temporal gap in terms of the same soul seems to presuppose that having the same soul is sufficient for being the same body. This straightaway entails that it is impossible for a soul to switch bodies. But, surely, if there really are souls, it is possible for a soul to switch bodies. (Some even argue for the existence of the soul by way of the alleged possibility of a person's—and so, presumably,

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<sup>5</sup> Bones perish when a body is cremated. But some smaller parts of a body do not. For example, an electron that is now part of my body would not perish if my body were now cremated. Thus one might suggest that there is some very small part—a certain electron, say, as opposed to a very hard bone—of each body such that that body would come back into existence, if a resurrection body were constructed around that electron.

This suggestion is afflicted by analogues of the problems that afflict resurrection as reassembly. First, that electron itself might go out of existence, precluding resurrection of the relevant body. Second, that electron might become part of another body, as a result of (e.g.) cannibalism; this demonstrates, among other things, that having that electron as a part is not sufficient for being the body that originally had it. Third, human bodies are constantly changing their very small parts, including the electrons that compose them; so it seems mistaken (if not positively bizarre) to say that bodily identity across a temporal gap could be entirely a matter of having a single special electron as a part.

a soul's—switching bodies (see, for example, Swinburne, 1986, 151).) And, finally, as will become clear in the next section, the doctrine of the resurrection itself provides a reason to deny that bodily identity across a temporal gap is secured by having the same soul.

We have briefly considered three accounts of what might ground the identity of the resurrection body with the body had in this life. I do not think that any of these three accounts—or any other extant account—is plausible.<sup>6</sup> Nor do I have a novel account of my own to offer. But, as I shall now point out, none of this implies that the above objection to the doctrine of the resurrection is successful.

Recall that that objection assumes, first, necessarily, something must account for or ground every instance of identity over time; and, second, nothing could account for or ground identity across (at least some) resurrection-induced temporal gaps. As I have argued elsewhere, possibly, some instances of identity over time have no ground. Moreover, it would be no surprise if the identity of a body had in this life with a resurrection body were just such an instance (see Merricks, 2001b). If so, then the first assumption of the above objection to the resurrection is false, and so that objection fails.

Moreover, suppose we concede, just for the sake of argument, that something or other must account for, or ground, every instance of identity over time, including every instance that would result from a coming resurrection. Then believers in the resurrection can block the above objection by denying that objection's second assumption. That is,

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<sup>6</sup> Hud Hudson (2001, 190) offers a memory-based account of a physical person's jumping the temporal gap between that person's death and resurrection (cf. John Locke 1975, 542; *Essay*, IV, iii, 6). But this is not—as Hudson himself agrees—even a purported account of a *body's* jumping a temporal gap. Peter van Inwagen (1978), unlike Hudson, does believe that the very body that has died will be resurrected. And van Inwagen offers an account of how this could be. But his account rejects my assumption that dead bodies typically cease to exist. Rather, according to his account, each dead body is squirreled away somewhere by the Lord to await resurrection, while a replica decays (or is cremated, etc.) in its stead.



they can simply conclude that there will be something in virtue of which each resurrection body will be identical with a body had in this life, something that will ground or account for that identity. Crucially, they can conclude this even given their inability to discover that ground, an inability evidenced by the failure of proposed accounts such as reassembly. After all, no one should presume to know exactly how God pulls off any miracle, including the resurrection of the body.

A second objection to the temporal gaps implied by the doctrine of the resurrection, and so a second objection to the doctrine itself, claims that a certain condition is necessary for bodily identity over time. Moreover, this objection adds, when it comes to the purported identity of a body that has (e.g.) been cremated with a body that will exist on Resurrection Day, this condition cannot be satisfied.<sup>7</sup>

There are various species of this second objection, each differing from the others with respect to what is alleged to be necessary for bodily identity over time. One familiar allegation is that *spatiotemporal continuity* is thus necessary. This allegation is equivalent to the claim that, first, spatial continuity is thus necessary and, second, temporal continuity is thus necessary.<sup>8</sup> The claim that temporal continuity is thus necessary just is the claim that one and the same body cannot exist at two times without existing at all the times in between. And that claim just is the claim that temporal gaps in a body's career are impossible.

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<sup>7</sup> This second objection turns on (alleged) *necessary* conditions for identity over time. The first objection—the objection in terms of what grounds or accounts for trans-gap bodily identity—turned on (alleged) *sufficient* conditions for identity over time. Unlike the first objection, this second objection cannot be blocked by denying that identity across temporal gaps must be grounded. Nor can it be blocked, again unlike the first objection, by admitting ignorance about how God will resurrect long-gone bodies

<sup>8</sup> More precise statements of spatiotemporal continuity are offered by, among others, George Mavrodes (1977, 37) and Eli Hirsch (1982, 15-21).

So the thesis that spatiotemporal continuity is necessary for bodily identity over time says exactly that “spatial continuity” is necessary for bodily identity over time and, moreover, that temporal gaps in a body’s career are impossible. Given that this is what it says, the thesis that spatiotemporal continuity is necessary for bodily identity over time presupposes that temporal gaps in a body’s career are impossible. So that thesis is a question-begging reason to conclude that such temporal gaps are impossible. So it is not a good reason for that conclusion.

Some have suggested that, necessarily, the way a body is at one time must appropriately *cause* the way a body is at a later time, if the body at the later time is to be identical with the body at the earlier time.<sup>9</sup> This suggestion threatens temporal gaps in a body’s career, and so threatens the doctrine of the resurrection, only if the relevant sort of causation cannot occur across a temporal gap.

Suppose, once more, that the time machine sends you to the future. You arrive in the future with a familiar tattoo on your leg. That tattoo’s being on your leg was caused not only by a youthful lapse of judgment, but also—and more importantly—by your having that very tattoo on your leg before entering the time machine. This implies that causation can occur across a temporal gap, since the way your leg was before time travel causes it to be a certain way after time travel. In fact, this seems to be just the sort of causation that is allegedly necessary for bodily identity over time.

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<sup>9</sup> Van Inwagen (1978) not only endorses this causal requirement, but also turns it into a new objection to resurrection as reassembly, an objection in addition to those considered above. The key to van Inwagen’s objection is that, he argues, the reassembly of a dead body’s last parts is not sufficient for the body that has died to cause, in the relevant way, the features of the body that results from reassembly.

Now some might object that the time machine story just told is absolutely impossible. But I do not see why we should agree with them.<sup>10</sup> More generally, and more to the point, I see no compelling reason to conclude that there is any condition that is *both* necessary for bodily identity over time *and also* cannot possibly be satisfied across a temporal gap. On the other hand, the considerations raised above do not show that there is no such condition. As far as those considerations go, we should be agnostic about the existence of such a condition.

Similarly, I think that, although we might have hunches one way or the other, philosophical reasons of the sort surveyed above deliver nothing conclusive about the possibility of the temporal gaps implied by resurrection. As far as standard philosophical reflection on these matters goes, resurrection of the cremated or decayed human body might be possible, but then again it might not be possible.

Of course, those who believe in the resurrection in the first place do not believe in it because of standard philosophical reflection. Rather, we believe that God has revealed that there will be a resurrection of the body, a resurrection that—given cremation, decay, etc.—implies bodily identity across a temporal gap. And to the extent that revelation justifies belief in the resurrection, I think it also justifies belief in bodily identity across a temporal gap. So it likewise justifies the conclusion that there are no necessary conditions for bodily identity that cannot possibly be satisfied across a temporal gap.

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<sup>10</sup> Dean Zimmerman defends the possibility of the relevant sort of causation occurring across a temporal gap. Zimmerman summarizes his defense thus:

Of course the supposition that causal processes can be spatiotemporally gappy in this way is contentious. But it should be much less so than it once was, for the following reasons: there is no a priori reason to think it is impossible, and some a posteriori reason to think it happens; the theories of causation which imply that it is impossible have been exploded; and the most promising theories still in the water can accommodate it. (1999, 204)

## II. Bodies and Persons

Even in polite company, one may admit to believing in life after death, at least if one's beliefs are appropriately spiritual, involving leaving one's body behind, heading toward the light, and so on. Such beliefs are controversial, of course, but most people will maintain eye contact with you, and perhaps even murmur sympathetically, while you express your hope that, for example, your spirit will live on past the grave. Alas, the resurrection is another matter altogether. At least, my own experience suggests that averted eyes and an awkward silence are the typical results of expressing one's hope that, at some time after one's death, every dead body, including one's own, will come back to life.

The idea of a coming resurrection of every body seems strange not just to the non-religious, but also to many of the religious, including many who believe that Jesus Christ rose from the dead. Perhaps discomfort with the idea of many bodies rising from the dead is why—I merely speculate—my childhood Sunday school teachers never asked me to memorize the following passage from the New Testament, which concerns events around the time of Christ's death and resurrection:

The tombs also were opened and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. After [Christ's] resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many. (Matthew 27: 52-53; NRSV)

At any rate, it is safe to assume that the signs at sporting events that read 'John 3:16' will not soon be replaced with signs saying 'Matthew 27: 52-53'. Lots of bodies rising from the dead is just too strange.

Nevertheless, Christianity, Islam, and traditional rabbinic Judaism all teach that lots of bodies—in fact, every human body that has ever died—will rise from the dead on the Last Day. Moreover, this teaching is central to all three religions. For example—and now I narrow my focus to Christianity—the Apostle’s Creed closes with an affirmation of “the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.”<sup>11</sup> And here are the final words of the Nicene Creed: “I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.”<sup>12</sup>

These creeds are short documents, meant to summarize the most important points of Christian theology. And resurrection of the body gets explicit mention in both, which I take to be evidence of the centrality of the doctrine of the resurrection to Christianity. This centrality should bring to mind some of the questions that opened this paper: Why should anyone want there to be a resurrection of the body? And why would any religion have that doctrine at its heart?

I shall defend an answer to these questions. My defense begins with a three-step argument, each step of which is plausible, though controversial. The first step says that each of us—each human person—has *physical properties*. For example, you literally have a certain weight. You likewise have a certain shape. You have a certain location in space. And so on.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The doctrine of the resurrection is also central to Islam and Judaism. Smith and Haddad (2002, 63) tell us: “The promise, the guarantee, of the day at which all bodies will be resurrected and all persons called to account for their deeds and the measure of their faith is the dominant message of the Qur’an...” The Basic Principles of Moses Maimonides are widely taken to articulate the central beliefs of rabbinic Judaism. The thirteenth and final principle affirms the resurrection of the dead.

<sup>12</sup> The Athanasian Creed tells us that, at Christ’s coming, “all men shall rise again with their bodies.”

<sup>13</sup> Our having physical properties does not imply that our only properties are physical. For example, our having physical properties is consistent with our having mental properties, even if those mental properties

The second step says that you are neither heavier than nor lighter than your body; that is, your weight is the same as your body's weight. Moreover, you are not one shape, and your body another; rather you and your body have the same shape. Nor are you off in one corner of the room, while your body is to be found in another; instead, you are located just where your body is located.

The third step says that there is only one human-shaped object exactly and entirely located where you are exactly and entirely located, and, more generally, only one object with all of the physical properties had by you and had by your body. Once we have taken these three steps, we must conclude that you are *identical with* your body.

So if the above argument is sound, you are identical with your body. (And even if it is not sound, it is still illuminating, clarifying what your being identical with your body amounts to.) At any rate, let us suppose, just for the sake of argument, that you really are identical with your body. More generally, let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that each of us is identical with his or her body.

As was noted in the preceding section, most dead bodies (eventually) cease to exist. This implies, given our supposition that each of us is identical with his or her body, that most of us shall cease to exist after death. And this implies that, for most of us, our only hope for existence after death is the hope that our bodies (i.e., we ourselves) will come back into existence. Moreover, this implies that, for all of us, our only hope for life after death is the hope that our bodies (i.e., we ourselves) will live again, that is, that our bodies will be resurrected. The doctrine of the resurrection of the body—despite its appearing quite strange at first glance—is as motivated as belief in life after death itself.

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are themselves in no way physical. Thus our having physical properties is consistent with “property dualism” about the mental.

Look at it this way. Suppose you know that you are about to die. And you hope that death is not the end. Add that you know that you are one and the same thing as your body. Then your hope for life after death should have a very clear focus. You should hope that your body (i.e., you yourself) will one day live again. Your body's living again will not happen on its own, of course. It will take a miracle, especially if your body passes out of existence by way of (e.g.) cremation. But that miracle—and, more generally, God's raising every dead body—will not be merely some sort of spooky sideshow. Instead, it will be your only shot at life after death.

Or suppose that a close friend has just died. Suppose that you know for certain that your friend was identical with his or her body. Then you have only one hope for seeing your friend again: the resurrection. Your only hope is the hope that, someday, God will raise the dead. Thus we see once more that our being identical with our bodies makes the motivation for, and importance of, the doctrine of the resurrection perfectly clear.

If we are bodies, then when our bodies are resurrected, *we ourselves* are resurrected. This result fits with the way the creeds couple belief in resurrection with belief in everlasting life, and also with the way various passages of scripture describe the resurrection. Consider:

At that time Michael, the great prince, the protector of your people, shall arise. There shall be a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone whose name is found written in the book. Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. (Daniel 12: 1-2; NRSV)

Do not be astonished at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear [the Son of Man's] voice and will come out—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation. (John 5: 28-29; NRSV)

For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise... (1 Thessalonians 4: 16; NRSV)

If we take the above passages at face value—or take any of a number of others at face value (e.g., Matthew 14: 12-14, Acts 24, 1 Corinthians 15)—it is not just dead bodies that will be raised to life, but dead people. Our being identical with our bodies makes perfect sense of the idea that the resurrection of our bodies will be the resurrection of us.<sup>14</sup>

What if we were not identical with our bodies? Then it would be hard, if not impossible, to make sense of the idea that dead *people* will be resurrected. Moreover, the importance of the doctrine that, on the Day of Resurrection, one gets a body *identical with the body one had in this life* would be difficult to explain. Indeed, I cannot think of any plausible explanation at all, much less one that rivals the very straightforward and absolutely compelling explanation that flows directly from the claim that each of us is identical with his or her body.

I think that all of this gives those of us who believe in the resurrection of the body—and who are committed to its importance—a good reason to conclude that we are identical with our respective bodies. Thus we have a new reason to conclude that each of

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<sup>14</sup> I am not saying that the human authors of scripture, or those who formulated the creeds, believed or meant to teach that we are identical with our bodies. I am saying that they believed and meant to teach that our bodies will be resurrected, that this is intimately related to our hope for life after death, and that dead people will rise again. Because I believe what they taught, I conclude—for reasons given in this paper—that we are identical with our bodies.

Compare my approach here to scripture and the creeds with the following. A document written in 1350 describes those dying all around the author; the dying experience nausea, fever, and other symptoms of Bubonic plague. Because we believe what the author had to say, we might conclude—for reasons that a pathologist might give—that those people had an infection caused by the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*. Of course, the author of that document did not believe or mean to say anything about that bacterium; the author had never even heard of bacteria.



us is identical with his or her body, a reason in addition to my three-step argument above that began with the claim that we have physical properties.<sup>15</sup>

This is but one reason to conclude that each of us is identical with his or her body. I believe that there are further reasons to endorse this conclusion. And there are, of course, alleged reasons to reject this conclusion, including some specifically theological reasons. Below I shall respond to a few reasons one might offer for rejecting this conclusion. But I do not pretend to respond to every such reason, just as I do not pretend to present every reason one might have for affirming that each of us is identical with his or her body.<sup>16</sup>

Let us begin with what I suspect is the most common reason that many Christians, and others, deny that a human person is one and the same thing as his or her body. They deny this because they want to make sense of life after death, life after the destruction of

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<sup>15</sup> I have just argued from the doctrine of the resurrection to the claim that we are identical with our bodies. That claim implies that we lack (substantial) souls. This is why I said, in the preceding section, that the doctrine of the resurrection provides a reason to deny that bodily identity across a temporal gap is secured by having the same soul.

Those who deny that we are identical with our bodies might say that they have no idea why the doctrine of the resurrection is important, even though it is important. Perhaps this is a reasonable thing for them to say. And they might add that saying this is analogous to saying that they have no idea what grounds bodily identity across a temporal gap, even though (some might maintain) something must ground it. But I do not think that the cases are appropriately analogous. As I argued in the previous section, there is nothing remotely like a genuinely live option that, if true, would deliver a full and satisfying account of what grounds the identity of a resurrection body with a body that was (e.g.) cremated. So an appeal to ignorance here is unavoidable for believers in the resurrection, at least for those who think there must be some ground for bodily identity across a temporal gap. On the other hand, there is (what I take to be) a genuinely live option that, if true, would deliver a full and satisfying account of the importance of the doctrine of the resurrection: namely, the identity of a person with his or her body.

<sup>16</sup> For example, the Incarnation provides considerations that bear on the identity of a person with his or her body, but I shall not discuss them in this paper. Plantinga (1999) and Leftow (2002) both object that the Incarnation cannot be squared with the claim that human persons are identical with their bodies. But, on the contrary, I argue (Merricks, 2007) that it is easier to reconcile the Incarnation with the claim that human persons are identical with their bodies than with any other thesis about the relation of a person to his or her body.

one's body. And they think that this can be done only if one is not the body that will be destroyed, but instead something else, such as a soul. But as should now be perfectly clear, this "reason" is no good. On the contrary, I argued above that we are identical with our bodies precisely because this identity makes the best sense of specifically Christian claims surrounding life after death, even life after the destruction of one's body. (Our being identical with our bodies is, I confess, entirely inconsistent with the pictures of life after death found in, for example, pagan Greek philosophy and the movie *Ghost*.)

Let us turn to another objection. On the view I am here suggesting, we cease to exist at (some point after) death and then come back into existence on the Day of Resurrection. Put otherwise, my view implies that we jump ahead in time from our death to the Day of Resurrection, skipping all the times in between. And some might object that Christians are committed not just to life after death, but to life after death *and before resurrection*.

Some might thus object because of certain scriptures. For example, the book of Revelation speaks of souls, under the altar, prior to the Day of Resurrection:

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given; they cried out with a loud voice, "Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?" They were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer... (Revelation 6: 9-11)

This passage, taken completely literally, suggests that martyrs exist as souls between death and resurrection (and also that souls can wear robes). But I think we should not

take this passage completely literally. And the same goes for other passages that seem to suggest that we shall exist after our death but before our resurrection.<sup>17</sup>

I say this partly because I take different passages literally, such as those that say that dead people are raised to life. And I say this partly because I am convinced by the above explanation of the motivation for, and centrality of, the doctrine of the resurrection. In the background here is my opinion that the emphasis on resurrection as our hope for eternal life is more central to Christian scripture and creed than is the idea of an “intermediate existence” between death and resurrection.

Some might respond that intermediate existence is required for a practice central to the devotional lives of many Christians: seeking the intercession of the saints. Most of the saints have died, but have not yet been resurrected. (The exceptions that prove the rule are, assuming her assumption, the Blessed Virgin Mary, along with any saint that never died in the first place, such as unfallen angels.) So—if human beings do not exist between death and resurrection—most of the saints do not now exist. This seems to threaten the practice of asking the saints for help.

But consider the following. I ask Saint Frideswide to pray for me, to ask God to grant a certain request. God, being omniscient, knows that I have asked her this. So suppose that God, after the resurrection, will communicate my request to her. She will then ask God to have granted my petition. God even now knows that she will do this. And so he now grants my petition, on account of Frideswide’s future intercession. And so it goes, in general, with how the saints intercede for us.

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<sup>17</sup> My dying results in my literal non-existence. Nevertheless, to die is to jump ahead in time to the Day of Resurrection. Thus I could think to myself, as I am about to die, that so far as things seem to me—and only because of the resurrection of the body—this day I shall be with the Lord in paradise (cf. Luke 23: 43).

This seems to accommodate the practice, and efficacy, of asking the saints for help. More generally, I think that it offers one way of securing the “communion of saints.” But none of this requires that the saints exist right now. So I conclude that the various practices involving the saints do not require that they exist between death and resurrection.

Of course, the “mechanism” for saintly intercession I have just outlined is not what petitioners are likely to have in mind. But I am not sure what mechanism, if any, they do have in mind. After all, those who seek the help of the saints do so not only in many languages, but also often completely silently. How are the saints to know what is being asked of them? I think that the best answer is that God, in his omniscience, knows what is requested each saint, and somehow communicates that to him or her.

So I suspect that, whatever we say about the existence of human beings between death and resurrection, any petitions that reach the saints do so by “going through God” in some way or other. But once we concede this, I see nothing objectionable about the mechanism I have suggested. And that mechanism is consistent with each saint—like each of us—jumping ahead in time from his or her death to the Day of Resurrection.<sup>18</sup>

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The great fact of the resurrection of the dead was known all along the ages, and it was the hope of God's people; but a great secret was made known with regard to it by Jehovah to the Apostle Paul. Our Lord had previously given a hint of it when, coming down from the mountain of transfiguration (see the 9th chapter of Mark), he said that they should tell no man of the things they had seen until the Son of man were risen "from" the dead. The disciples would not have been puzzled if the Lord had spoken simply of resurrection. He had merely spoken of resurrection, when He told Martha that her brother should rise again. What was His resurrection body like? Well, as He came from the sepulchre the women held Him. So it was a body that could be held. Body of resurrection is a typical term of Esoteric Christianity, used to indicate a spiritual body associated with a special enlightenment or experience. Many western and Eastern traditions share a common doctrine on a spiritual and immortal body which represent the ultimate goal of many ascetical works. This concept of a spiritual and immortal body which has to be formed has many names according to several traditions. Sometimes the idea of such an immortal body has been called the resurrection body... The resurrection of the body is a fundamental belief that one day all the spirits of people who have passed on from this earth will be raised from the dead and reunited with their bodies. The resurrection of the body is one of the most important and clearly attested truths in all of Scripture, extending back to the days of the patriarchs. The Bible teaches that there are two resurrections, one unto life and one unto death, with judgment to follow each. The doctrine of resurrection, therefore, rejects...