



Persons without Immaterial Souls¹

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Abstract

Traditionally, Christians and Muslims have held that a human person is (or has) an immaterial soul. Since there does not seem to be a place for immaterial souls in the natural world, I offer an alternative view that I call 'Person-Body Constitutionalism'. Person-Body Constitutionalism holds that there are no (finite) immaterial entities like souls. Instead of distinguishing between souls and bodies, Constitutionalism distinguishes between whole persons and bodies. Human persons are essentially embodied, but do not essentially have the bodies that they in fact have at any given time. So, human persons, though spatially coincident with their bodies, are not identical to their bodies. Persons are distinguished from their bodies by having first-person perspectives essentially. I shall try to show that Constitutionalism is consistent with Christian doctrines. First, I set out Constitutionalism. Then, after critically discussing Thomas Aquinas's view of Resurrection, I discuss the compatibility between Constitutionalism and the Resurrection, and an intermediate state between death and a general resurrection (e.g., Purgatory). Finally, I have a brief discussion of

1. The late Lynn Rader Baker (1944-2017), an American philosopher and professor of the University of Massachusetts was the keynote speaker at The International Conference of Religions Doctrines and the Mind-Body Problem, held on March 9-10 at Islamic Sciences and Culture Academy in Qom, 2011 and presented the above paper. Unfortunately, the paper is published when he has passed away.
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Constitutionalism and the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation. The conclusion is that Person-Body Constitutionalism is congenial to these central Christian doctrines, and the existence of immaterial souls is not required for traditional Christianity.

Keyword

Immaterial Souls, Resurrection, Afterlife, Christian.



Introduction

Christians and many Muslims have traditionally held that a human person is (or has) an immaterial soul and a material body. Holy Scripture portrays human beings as spiritual entities, and one obvious way to be a spiritual entity is to be (or to have) an immaterial soul that can exist independently of any body. Despite the popularity of this position, I do not believe that it is required either by the Bible or by Christian doctrine as it has developed through the centuries. I want to show that there is a Christian alternative to immaterialism. I call this alternative ‘Person-Body Constitutionalism’, or just ‘Constitutionalism’ for short.

One of the deepest assumptions of Christianity is that there is an important difference between human persons and everything else that exists in Creation. We alone are made in God’s image. We alone are the stewards of the earth. It is said in *Genesis* that we have “dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” In the Christian tradition, we persons are children of the Fall and the beneficiaries of the Atonement. We persons are subject to judgment; only to us is given the promise of Eternal Life. Only we can enjoy faith, hope and love. It is difficult to see how a Christian could deny the significance of the difference between human persons and the rest of Creation. We human persons are morally and ontologically special. An appeal to immaterial souls speaks to this difference between us persons and the rest of nature.

However, immaterialism is not so successful in showing how we persons are fully a part of the nature. In the past 300 years, the sciences have exploded with knowledge that puts us human persons squarely into nature. Scientific knowledge is genuine knowledge. It would be unthinkable to me to turn my back, intellectually speaking, on the fact that the sciences have met with astonishing success. Yet,

the sciences are relentless in taking human persons to be just another part of nature: a little more complex than chimpanzees, but not essentially different—certainly not morally and ontologically special.

So, there is a tension between, on the one hand, human persons as significantly different from the rest of nature, and on the other hand, human persons as not significantly different from the rest of nature. My aim is to show how this tension may be resolved. Indeed, even apart from Christian conviction, it seems clear to me that in some ways we are like other living creatures, but in other ways we are radically different. In light of this, it seems desirable that we have a conception of human nature that allows us to be both part of nature and morally and ontologically different from every other kind of thing in nature. You might think of this as a story about how we can be “in the world but not of the world.”

What I want to do here is to set out my view of persons, according to which there are no immaterial souls, and to show how this view is congenial to a doctrine shared by Christians and Muslims—bodily resurrection and purgatory or an “intermediate state” (“*barzakh*”)—as well as to the specifically Christian doctrine of Incarnation.

1. Human Beings without Immaterial Souls

One reason, I believe, that Christians and Muslims have been drawn to immaterialism is that they think that if we did not have souls, we would be in no way spiritual beings. But if we understand ‘spiritual beings’ as beings capable of having inner lives, this does not follow. I think that it is obvious to each of us that we are capable of having an inner life. What I want to do is to set out a view according to which the capacity of having an inner life does not require that we have immaterial souls.

Person-Body Constitutionalism holds, in the first place, that human persons are necessarily constituted by bodies: to have a body is essential to a human person, but it is not essential to have the particular body that one has at some particular time. In the second place, human persons, though not identical with the bodies that constitute them, have no immaterial parts, and hence no immaterial souls that could exist separately from somebody or other. What distinguishes persons from their bodies is that persons have first-person perspectives essentially. Human persons are spiritual beings—they are capable of having inner lives—in virtue of having first-person perspectives essentially.

According to Constitutionalism, we are most fundamentally persons—whole persons—not minds, souls or brains. Our robust first-person perspectives distinguish us from all other creatures in the natural world. A robust first-person perspective is the ability to think of oneself without the use of any name, description or demonstration; it is the ability to conceive of oneself as oneself, from the inside, as it were. In English, linguistic evidence of a first-person perspective comes from use of first-person pronouns embedded in sentences with linguistic or psychological verbs—e.g., “I wonder how I will die,” or “I promise that I will stay with you.”¹ If I wonder how I will die, or I promise that I’ll stay with you, then I am thinking of myself as myself; I am not thinking of myself in any third-person way (e.g., not as LB, nor as the person who is thinking, nor as that woman, nor as the only person in the room) at all. Anything that can wonder how it will die ipso facto has a first-person perspective and thus is a person.

A first-person perspective is a conceptual ability. It is the ability to think of oneself from the first-person, as a subject of thought

1. Hector-Neri Castañeda developed this idea in several papers. See Hector-Neri Castañeda, 1966, pp. 130-57, and Hector-Neri Castañeda, 1967, pp. 85-100.

and action. This ability is exercised every time I think, “I’m pleased that I was invited to this international conference.” What pleases me is that I myself was invited, not that Lynne Baker was invited or that the oldest woman in the philosophy department at UMass was invited. No, I can entertain thoughts that are self-consciously about myself without any names or descriptions. This ability manifests my first-person perspective. Although I could not exist without some body or other, what makes me ‘me’ is not this particular body; but rather what makes me ‘me’ is having this first-person perspective. What makes any person a person is his or her first-person perspective, not the “stuff” he or she is made of.

A first-person perspective is the basis of all self-consciousness. It makes possible an inner life, a life of thoughts that one realizes are one’s own. It also makes possible moral agency, which requires understanding that one has done things for which one is responsible. It makes possible rational agency, the ability to evaluate one’s desires and to decide on which ones to act. A world populated by beings with first-person perspectives is ontologically richer than one populated by beings without first-person perspectives. The essential property of persons—first-person perspectives—does not need to be secured by an immaterial substance like a soul. A first-person perspective is the essential property of persons, whole persons.

The kind of first-person perspective that I have just described is robust; it is tied to language. A human infant who lacks a language is nonetheless a person; the infant is born with a rudimentary first-person perspective that typically develops into a robust first-person perspective. Since a first-person perspective is an essential property of persons, normally there is no person until a fetal human organism develops a rudimentary first-person perspective. A first-person perspective, whether rudimentary or robust, is a mental property; but the bearer of any mental property is the whole person, not an immaterial soul.

No soul is needed, because human brains provide the machinery to support first-person perspectives, both rudimentary and robust. Although there is much to be discovered about how the brain functions to make a first-person perspective, there is no disagreement that in (this-worldly) human persons our mental lives are made possible by our brains.

We are whole persons—subjects of experience and moral and rational agents, with inner lives made possible by our brains. How are we whole persons related to our bodies? We are *constituted* by our bodies, just as statues are constituted by pieces of bronze, or rugs are constituted by sums of threads. The threads become frayed, a few come loose altogether, but the rug may remain. Therefore, it follows that the rug is not identical to the sum of threads that constitutes it at a certain time. The rug can survive many changes of thread. Similarly, a human person can survive numerous changes. Not only are our cells continually being replaced, but also we can walk on artificial legs, see with artificial eyes; cochlear implants allow deaf people to hear. A totally paralyzed person with a brain implant can move a computer cursor merely by thinking. A human person can survive enormous changes in her body. What makes her the same person over time—regardless of the changes in the body that constitutes her—is the persistence of her first-person perspective.

Let me emphasize that Constitutionalism is not “property-dualism.” I am not saying that there are two kinds of properties, mental and physical. I believe that there are countless kinds of properties that objects have essentially: the property of being an X-ray machine, the property of being a dog, the property of being a river, and so on. Constitution is a ubiquitous relation that we are all familiar with (though probably not under that label). A river at any moment is constituted by an aggregate of water molecules. But the river is not

identical to the aggregate of water molecules that constitutes it at that moment. Since one and the same river—call it ‘R’—is constituted by different aggregates of molecules at different times, the river is not identical to any of the aggregates of water molecules that make it up. So, constitution is not identity.¹ Another way to see that constitution is not identity is to notice that even if an aggregate of molecules, A_1 , actually constitutes R at t_1 , R might have been constituted by a different aggregate of molecules, A_2 , at t_1 . But constitution is similar to identity: if x constitutes y at time t, then x and y occupy the same spatial region at t. Constitution is a relation that is in some ways similar to identity, but is not actually identity.

So, according to Constitutionalism, although a human person does not have a soul, a person is not identical to her body. But to say that a person is not identical to her body does not mean that the person is identical to the body-plus-some-other-thing (like a soul).² Michelangelo’s statue, *David*, is not identical to a piece-of-marble-plus-some-other-thing. If x constitutes y and x is wholly material, then y is wholly material.³ The human body (or human animal) is wholly material and the human body constitutes the human person. Therefore, the human person is wholly material. A human person is as material as Michelangelo’s *David* is.

Let me explain Constitutionalism about persons with an analogy: Michelangelo’s *David* is essentially a statue. It is not identical

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1. I am assuming here the classical conception of identity, according to which if $a = b$, then necessarily, $a = b$.
 2. Someone may ask: If a human person is not identical to a body or to a soul or to a body-plus-a-soul, what is she identical to? This question is a red herring. A person is identical to herself and not another thing.
 3. For details, see *Persons and Bodies*, Ch. 2.

to the *David*-shaped piece of marble that Michelangelo carved. If the *David*-shaped piece of marble had spontaneously coalesced in outer space, it would not have been a statue. After David carved the famous statue, the piece of marble that constituted it was derivatively a statue in 1503. Before 1503, the piece of marble was not a statue, even derivatively. And of course, the piece of marble was not essentially a statue; it was not a statue when it came out of the quarry. But David is essentially a statue: *David* is a statue non-derivatively; the piece of marble is a statue derivatively—during the period of time that it constitutes something that is a statue non-derivatively.

The analogy to persons and their bodies is this: Persons are related to their bodies as statues are related to pieces of marble, bronze, wood, etc. Persons are essentially persons (i.e., they essentially have first-person perspectives); during the period that a body constitutes a person, the body is a person derivatively—in virtue of constituting something that is a person non-derivatively.

There is also a disanalogy between persons and statues. There are limits to the changes that a piece of marble can undergo while the statue remains in existence. But with persons—whose essential property is a first-person perspective—the only limit on changes that a body can undergo while the person remains in existence are those that would destroy the first-person perspective. So, as long as your first-person perspective persisted, your body parts could be exchanged for nonorganic parts—robotic limbs, neural implants, synthetic organ replacements. In that case, you could continue to exist constituted by a different body from the organic body that you now have (By contrast, the piece of marble that constitutes Michelangelo's *David* could not be replaced by a piece of wood without destroying the original statue. That is one way that statues differ from persons).

Whether we are talking about human persons, statues, rivers, or countless other constituted things, the basic idea is this: When certain things of certain kinds (human organisms, pieces of marble, aggregates of water molecules,) are in certain circumstances (different ones for different kinds of things), then new entities of different kinds come into existence. The circumstances in which an aggregate of water molecules comes to constitute a river have to do with the relation of the water molecules to each other; they form a stream. The circumstances in which a piece of paper comes to constitute a U.S. dollar bill have to do with its being printed in a certain way under a certain authority. In each case, new things of new kinds—rivers, dollar bills—with new kinds of causal powers, come into being.

So, constitution is the vehicle, so to speak, by which new kinds of things come into existence in the natural world. Since constitution is an engine of novelty, it is again obvious that constitution is not identity. Although not identity, constitution is a relation of real unity.¹ Human persons are real unities: If this body constitutes me now, my body and I are not two separate things. There is just a person-constituted-at-this-time-by-this particular body.² Persons cannot be reduced to bodies or animals. Indeed, this conception is relentlessly anti-reductive.

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1. Some philosophers have held that the idea of unity without identity is incoherent. In *Baker, 2000*, I give a completely general definition of 'constitution' that is coherent.
 2. Any believer in the Christian Trinity is committed to there being some such relation that is a real unity but is not identity. This is not to suggest that a believer in the Christian Trinity must endorse constitution as I construe it; I am only suggesting that a Christian is in no position to reject my view on the grounds that a relation intermediate between identity and separate existence is incoherent.

To summarize this discussion of the idea of constitution: Constitution is a very general relation throughout the natural order. Although it is a relation of real unity, it is short of identity. (Identity is necessary; constitution is contingent.) Constitution is a relation that accounts for the appearance of genuinely new kinds of things with new kinds of causal powers. If pieces of marble constitute statues, then an inventory of the contents of the world that includes pieces of marble but leaves out statues is incomplete.¹ Statues are not reducible pieces of marble; nor are persons reducible to human bodies.²

On Constitutionalism, I am a wholly material being, constituted by, but not identical to, my body. I continue to exist as long as something has my first-person perspective; if something has my first-person perspective, then that being is a person and that person is me. At any time that I exist, I am constituted by something that can support my first-person perspective. In this life, I am constituted by a human organism with a human brain. I am a person non-derivatively; the organism that constitutes me now is a person derivatively.³

The important distinction is between persons and bodies or organisms, not between minds and bodies. What we call ‘minds’ are not entities at all, but collections of mental properties and capacities. The primary bearers of some of these properties—like being in pain, or being thirsty—are organisms; a dog can be in pain or be thirsty. The primary bearers of other of these properties—like wondering how

1. There is much more to be said about the idea of constitution. See Baker, 2000, especially Ch. 2 and Peter A. French and Howard K. Wettstein, 1999, pp. 144-165.

2. Note that this is a completely general claim. It is not “property dualism.”

3. For details on the derivative/nonderivative distinction, see *The Metaphysics of Everyday Life*, Chapter 8.

one will die, or being grateful that one is healthy (properties that require robust first-person perspectives)—are persons. So, my solution to the mind-body problem is to say that there are no minds, no finite immaterial entities that are parts of persons or that can exist apart from bodies. There are rather persons who have all kinds of complex mental properties.

Now let us turn to the question of whether Constitutionalism, this view of persons without immaterial souls, is consistent with religious doctrines of resurrection, and of intermediate states between death and resurrection. I believe so. Let us turn to the doctrine of the Resurrection of the Body.

2. The Doctrine of the Resurrection of the Body

All the great monotheistic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—recognize doctrines of an afterlife. I shall focus on doctrines of resurrection of the dead, and in particular on Christian doctrines. Christian doctrines have two sources. The first source is Second-Temple Judaism, which contributed the idea of resurrection of the body. (The New Testament mentions that the Pharisees believed in bodily resurrections, but that the Sadducees did not believe in an afterlife. Jesus endorsed the former, which was fixed as Christian doctrine by his own bodily resurrection.) The second source was Greek philosophy, which contributed the idea of the immortality of the soul (Cullman, 1973, pp. 53-85).

In what follows, I shall consider Christian views on Resurrection and souls and bodies. I shall discuss St. Thomas Aquinas's views in particular, and point to two difficulties it has. Then, I shall show how the constitution view can avoid the Thomas's difficulties and provide an understanding of the doctrine of Resurrection without immaterial souls.

To the early Church Fathers, belief in the immortality of the soul was connected with belief in resurrection of the body. The belief that Jesus rose from the dead was the belief that his soul survived death of the body and was “reinvested with his risen body” (Wolfson, Harry A, 1956-1957, pp. 7-40. Quotation on p. 8). The belief in a general resurrection was the belief that surviving souls, at the end of time, would be “reinvested” with risen bodies. During the interval between death and the general resurrection, a soul would have a life without a body, but a person’s final state would be embodied in some sense. In this general picture, belief in resurrection includes belief in immortal souls and belief in postmortem bodies (of some sort).

The Christian doctrine of an afterlife is pieced together out of hints and metaphors in Scripture. Jesus’s resurrection is the paradigm case. According to Christian doctrine, Jesus was the Son of God, who was crucified, dead and buried. The third day he rose again from the dead and ascended into Heaven. Although Jesus’ resurrection is the ground of the Christian doctrine of resurrection, many questions are left open. Perhaps the most explicit, but still sketchy and metaphorical, account of an afterlife in the New Testament is in I Corinthians 15, with its “seed” metaphor. Our bodies are said to be sown in corruption, and raised in incorruption; sown in dishonor, raised in glory; sown in weakness, raised in power; sown a natural body, raised a “spiritual” body. But this passage is notoriously open to several interpretations. What is a ‘spiritual body’? Is it made of the same flesh-and-blood particles as the pre-mortem body? of the same kind of particles if not exactly the same ones? of some entirely different kind of stuff? There is no unanimity.

According to the seed metaphor, developed by Origen (a third-century Greek Church Father), the body is dynamic and always in flux. Just as the body is transformed in life, so it is transformed in death too. The resurrected body will be radically changed, and will not

be made of the same material as the pre-mortem body (Bynum, 1995, pp. 63ff). Augustine, by contrast, insisted on the reanimation of the same bodily material, which would be reassembled from dust and previous bones (Bynum, 1995, p. 95). Thomas Aquinas rejected both metaphors for understanding the nature of the body that is to be resurrected. His concern was more with the integrity of the body than with the identity of material particles. The resurrected body will contain the same fragments and organs, if not the identical particles (Bynum, 1995, p. 265). However, Aquinas sometimes suggested that there would be material continuity of the body in the resurrection.

There are many questions to be answered about the doctrine of resurrection. E.g., is there immediate resurrection at the instant of death, or is there a temporary mode of existence (an intermediate state) before a general resurrection at the end of time? There is no general agreement. But whatever the details of the conception of an afterlife, there are three characteristics of the Christian view of resurrection: First, it is miraculous. Unlike the classical Greek doctrine of the immortality of the soul, life after death does not occur naturally, and is not subject to natural law. It occurs only by the Grace of God. Second, life after death concerns the identity of the human being, the person. The very same individual person is to exist in the afterlife as exists today. The person does not merge with the universe, or with an eternal mind. 'Survival as' in a sense of, say, psychological similarity is not enough. The person retains her particular identity after death. Third, resurrection is bodily. Resurrected people are embodied. St. Paul in I Corinthians says that resurrection bodies will be 'spiritual' or 'imperishable' or 'incorruptible', depending on the English translation.

Philosophically speaking, the question of personal identity in particular stands out: In virtue of what is a person in an afterlife

identical to a certain person in a pre-mortem state? To have life after death is to have post-mortem experiences linked to each other and to pre-mortem experiences in a way that preserves personal identity (Price, 1964, pp. 364-386. (p. 369)). Let us begin by considering the view of personal identity of one of the great Christian philosopher-theologians, St. Thomas Aquinas.

3. Thomas Aquinas on the Afterlife

Thomas Aquinas's contribution was to give an account of what happens between death and resurrection in terms of the subsistence of the rational soul. Aquinas's view has the advantage over the substance dualists like Plato and Descartes in that it gives a reason why resurrection should be bodily resurrection: The body is crucial for a complete substance.

Aquinas took over Aristotle's framework for understanding human beings, modifying it as little as possible to accommodate Christian doctrine. On Aristotle's view, all living things have souls—plants had nutritive souls, nonhuman animals had sensitive souls, and human animals (“men”) had rational souls. According to Aristotle, the soul is not separable from the body. A human being is a substance; a substance is formed matter. The body supplied the matter, the soul the form. No more could a rational soul exist apart from the body whose form it was than could the shape of a particular ax exist apart from that ax. The soul is the form of the body. So, Aristotle had no place for an afterlife.

Following Aristotle, Aquinas agreed that the soul is the form of the body. (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I Q75, ST I Q75). However, “[t]he human soul, which we will call the intellect or mind, is something immaterial and subsistent.” (ibid., ST I Q75 2 (p.5)) A soul is not a human being. The soul provides the form for the material body: A human

being is a substance; it is formed matter. Building on Aristotle's concession that the "agent intellect" is separable (*De Anima* 3.5, 430a17), Aquinas held that the soul is a substantial form that could "subsist" on its own.

Aquinas assumed that there is a general resurrection at the end of time, before which those who have died are in an "intermediate state." The human being—the substance, the individual—does not exist as such during the intermediate state. What continues through the intermediate state is only the rational soul which "subsists" until reunited with the body, at which time the human being is fully recovered. The disembodied soul can neither sense nor feel; it is only the part of the person that thinks and wills. While the soul is disembodied, the soul is *not* the person who died. It is merely a remnant of the person, awaiting reunion with the person's body. It is only when the soul is reunited with the person's body (the same one) that the person resumes life.

So Aquinas's view of a human person is rather of a composite of body and soul. He does not equate personal identity over time with identity of soul. However, Aquinas's conception of the afterlife does require separability of souls from bodies—albeit temporary—and continued existence of souls after death. So, for Aquinas, after a period in which a soul exists disembodied (and is not a person), a postmortem person has the same body and the same soul.

However, a philosopher may worry that Aquinas's account commits him to a new ontological category of being: the rational soul as a subsisting entity that is not a substance. The rational soul is not really an individual, but a kind of individual-manqué. We can say very little about this new kind of entity except that it seems to fill Aquinas's need to combine Aristotle's ideas with the Christian doctrine of an afterlife. It would be desirable to make sense of a Christian doctrine of

resurrection without appealing to a new and strange kind of entity, and later, I shall try to do so.

Putting aside the worry about subsisting entities that are not substances, another question that immediately arises about the idea of a disembodied soul concerns the question of individuating souls at a time—the synchronic problem. In virtue of what are there one soul or two? If souls are embodied, the bodies individuate. There is one soul per body. But if souls are separated from bodies—existing on their own, apart from bodies—then there is apparently no difference between there being one soul with some thoughts and two souls with half as many thoughts. If there is no difference between there being one soul and two, then there are no souls. So, it seems that the concept of a soul is incoherent.

Aquinas has a response to this question of how to distinguish between one and two disembodied immaterial souls at a single time. Separated souls are individuated by the bodies that they long for. Each separated soul has an affinity to the body with which it was united in premortem life. Even when Smith's soul is disembodied, what makes Smith's soul *Smith's* soul—and not Brown's soul, say—is that Smith's soul has a tendency and potential to be reunited with Smith's body, and not with Brown's body. This reply is not available to proponents of immaterial souls—like Plato or Descartes—who take a human person to be identical to a soul.

There remains a difficulty: If the form (soul) has separated from the body at death, then what remains is just the matter, and the matter that individuates is mere potency. It contributes to the actuality of the person, but is not itself actual. So, there is no actual “it” for the soul to long for. There is simply no way for a body to be Smith's in virtue of Smith's longing for it. What makes a soul Smith's soul cannot be the body that it yearns—because the identity of the body

(whose body it is) will depend upon the identity of the soul.

This difficulty arises from combining Aristotle's view with Christian doctrine. On Aristotle's view, a soul cannot be separated from a body. Aristotle can say that form makes something a person (a "man"), and matter makes him the individual person who he is. Aquinas agrees with Aristotle that the form of a person is the soul; however, Aquinas's Christian goal led him to hold, against Aristotle, that the soul can exist separated from the body. But when the soul is separated from the body, the individuality contributed by the body is lost. A soul separated from a body is not Smith's or anybody's soul.

On the one hand, Aquinas says that the soul without a body is only a fragment, not a human being. On the other hand, he says that the soul is a substantial form that carries our identity and can enjoy the beatific vision on its own; the body is just an expression of its glory. But if the soul accounts for the identity of the resurrected person, and if the body is merely matter (potency) of which the soul is the form, then the body of the resurrected human being that rises—*whatever* its matter—will be that human being's body, by definition. As Bynum put it, "God can make the body of Peter out of the dust that was once the body of Paul." (Bynum, 1995, p. 260). It is difficult to see how Aquinas can combine the Aristotelian view that matter individuates with his view that the soul is a substantial form that can "subsist"—and experience God—apart from a body. Now let us see whether Constitutionalism can give a better account of the Afterlife.

4. Constitutionalism and Resurrection

I believe that Constitutionalism can handle two problems that fall out of Aquinas's view: Constitutionalism does not need a new ontological category of disembodied souls as subsisting entities that are not substances. And Constitutionalism is not committed to the identity of

the resurrection body with the pre-mortem body.

Moreover, if I am right about the three features that characterize the doctrine of Resurrection—miracle, identity of person and embodiment—then Constitutionalism of human persons provides a good metaphysical backdrop for the doctrine of Resurrection.

First, consider essential embodiment. Being essentially embodied does not imply that we essentially have the bodies that we in fact have. We could have different bodies, and if we are resurrected, we will have different bodies. This is implied by St. Paul when he says, “What I mean, my brothers, is this: flesh and blood can never possess the kingdom of God, and the perishable cannot possess immortality.” (I Corinthians 15:50). Our bodies now are perishable, but in the resurrection we will have imperishable bodies. This leads to a simple argument, letting Smith be a person who will be resurrected:

- (1) The body Smith has now is perishable.
- (2) The body Smith will have in the resurrection is imperishable.
- (3) If (1) and (2), then the body Smith has now \neq the body Smith will have in the resurrection.

\therefore (4) The body Smith has now \neq the body that Smith will have in the resurrection.

Let me defend this simple argument. It is valid: The premises entail the conclusion. But are the premises true? First, consider (1): The body that Smith has now is a biological body—a carbon-based organism—and all carbon-based organisms are subject to decay and hence are perishable. Consider (2): Resurrected bodies are supposed to be eternal, and whatever is eternal is imperishable. Consider (3): (3) is likely to be more controversial. Could not God transform Smith’s body that is perishable now into a body that is imperishable? Certainly. But to do so is to effect a substantial change: Smith’s new imperishable body would not be the same body as Smith’s current perishable body.

Why not? Objects have their persistence conditions essentially: an object cannot survive a change of persistence conditions. So, the same body cannot have different persistence conditions at different times, and a single object cannot be perishable at one time and imperishable at another time. Objects with different persistence conditions are not identical. Hence, the perishable body that Smith has now is not identical to the imperishable body that Smith will have in the resurrection. I think that it follows that Smith's resurrection cannot coherently be a matter of re-joining Smith's body with Smith's soul.

Here I just want to draw attention to the point that a resurrection body cannot be the same body as a biological body, and Constitutionalism can allow for a change of body without appeal to an immaterial soul.

Now consider identity of person. On the Constitution view, identity of person is identity of first-person perspective. There is no informative criterion for identity of first-person perspective over time. It is just a brute fact about some future person that I shall be. I do not think that this is a shortcoming of my view. If there were an informative criterion of identity over time of persons, it would be in non-personal terms. That is, it would be reductive (e.g., continuity of organic functioning, or continuity of psychological states, or continuity of brain states). But there is a strong religious reason to hold that there is no reduction of persons to non-personal entities. If Christ died for our sins, or if God punishes us for our sins, the object of attention is the sinner—that is, the person, not some subpersonal features of the person, even if those subpersonal features are part of the sin. For example, suppose that Smith sinned by lusting after Mrs. Jones and that the lust was constituted by some complex brain state. God does not punish the brain state. It is the person who is the object of attention. And if the person is not reducible to subpersonal features,

then there is no informative, noncircular criterion of personal identity over time. So, we can hold that personal identity consists in sameness of first-person perspective, while recognizing that this is no informative, noncircular criterion.

Finally, consider the miraculous nature of resurrection. In the natural course of affairs, human bodies decay and are not replaced by, or changed into, resurrection bodies. However, the domain of natural laws is nature. And God is supernatural—omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good. So, there is no conflict between natural laws and God’s power to bring about resurrection.

5. Between Death and Resurrection

Some—but not all—Christians believe that there is a kind of existence after death and before resurrection. For example, the Roman Catholic Church holds that after death, those who will have eternal salvation undergo a final purification, “so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven.” (Purgatory) The dead in purgatory suffer punishment for their sins before attaining the beatific vision of God. The Roman Church offers prayers and Eucharistic sacrifice for those in purgatory and also “commends almsgiving, indulgences, and works of penance undertaken on behalf of the dead.” (Purgatory) [The doctrine of Purgatory is not ancient. It was developing in the 12th century (Le Goff) and articulated at the Council of Lyons II (1274), and was repeated at the Council of Florence (1431) and finally defined at the Council of Trent (1563). (www.catholicapologetics.org/ap090400.htm, accessed 12/30/09)]

According to St. Thomas Aquinas, as we have seen, the soul (the form of the body) is separated from the body at death. It is the separated soul (without the body) that undergoes suffering in purgatory; on Aquinas’s view it could experience corporeal fire (Bynum, 1995, p. 281).

In general, preachers and schoolmen saw nothing wrong in depicting “bodily tortures of disembodied spirits although they sometimes admitted it was odd” (Bynum, 1995, p. 281).

Aquinas’s idea of purgatory implies mind-body (or soul-body) dualism. But this is no reason to be a mind-body dualist. If one believes in corporeal suffering in purgatory, it is surely more plausible to believe that there be a body and not just a disembodied soul. And if there are bodies in purgatory, there could be whole persons and not just disembodied souls that, on Aquinas’s view, are not whole persons when they are separated from their bodies. And if we allow that there are embodied persons in purgatory, we can dispense with immaterial souls—as Constitutionalism holds. Although Constitutionalism implies that a human person has a body in order to exist, it does not imply that the body a human person has is a biological organism; it could well be something else, something that is a “spiritual body”.

We saw above the difficulty of supposing, as Aquinas does, that a separated soul can be reunited with “its” body (the body numerically identity with the earthly body). Therefore, mind-body dualism with the possibility of disembodied souls does not seem to help us understand Purgatory. Whole persons as Constitutionalism construes them can better undergo the punishments of purgatory (if there are such) than disembodied souls.

Not all Christians, as I mentioned, believe in purgatory. Protestants from Martin Luther on, rejected the notion of purgatory, and its surrounding lore (e.g., praying for and offering sacrifices for the dead). They took Purgatory to be unscriptural, and a denial of the completeness of forgiveness of sins through faith in Christ’s saving work.

Even without purgatory, some Protestants hold that there is an “intermediate state” between death and a general Resurrection at the end of time, and at least one Protestant theologian—John W. Cooper—

has argued that an intermediate state entails mind-body (or soul-body) dualism (Cooper, 1989).

The immaterial soul is taken immediately to Christ, and later when all the saved are resurrected, it will be reunited with “its” body. (We just saw difficulties with determining which body goes with which soul.)

However, I know of no reason—Biblical or philosophical—to suppose that the intermediate state must be a *disembodied* state. For all we know, persons in the intermediate state (assuming that there is one) are constituted by intermediate-state bodies. As we saw, when one is resurrected, one has a ‘spiritual’, or ‘glorified’, or ‘imperishable’ body. If God can so transform or replace our bodies once, he can do it twice. So, the arguments about the intermediate state provide no reason to prefer soul-body dualism to Constitutionalism.

6. A Brief Word about the Christian Doctrine of Incarnation

Christians believe that God is three immaterial persons—Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. The second person of the Trinity (the Son), became incarnate; he became a man, born of the Virgin Mary. He is ‘the Word made flesh,’ God who suffered, died and rose from the dead. Jesus Christ is one Person in two natures (the hypostatic union): the Son of God, of the same substance as the Father in his divine nature, and of the same substance as us in his human nature. He is fully divine and fully human, “like us in all things except sin.” The Western doctrine of the Incarnation was codified by the Council of Chalcedon in 451. In the words of the definition of Chalcedon (451), Jesus Christ is

recognized in “two natures without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union, but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person and subsistence, not as parted or separated into two persons,

but one and the same Son and Only-begotten God the Word, Lord Jesus Christ (Bettenson, 1963, p. 73).

I confess that I find this “two natures” doctrine of the Incarnation fundamentally mysterious; but as far as I can understand the Incarnation, I think that Constitutionalism is congenial to the “two-natures” doctrine.

The doctrine of the Incarnation requires a slight modification of Constitutionalism as I have presented it. In order to accommodate Christ as fully human and fully divine, the claim that every (non-derivative) human person is essentially a human person must be qualified like this: Everything that begins existence as a human person is essentially embodied. Although Christ—the Second Person of the Trinity—was embodied during his Earthly sojourn, He is not essentially embodied. To be essentially embodied means to be such that it is impossible to exist without a body. However, Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity, became a human being—and thus embodied—at a certain point in time; but He existed from eternity—“begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father....” The Second Person of the Trinity existed as an immaterial being from eternity, and He came to be constituted by a human body when he entered into time. He became embodied at the Incarnation. So, rather than saying that all human persons are essentially embodied, I say that all beings that *began existence* as human persons (i.e., were constituted by human bodies at the beginning of their existence) are essentially embodied.

With this amendment, Constitutionalism seems to be congenial to the Chalcedonian doctrine of the Incarnation. Constitutionalism can hold that Christ’s human nature is wholly material and his divine nature is wholly immaterial. By contrast to Constitutionalism, soul-

body dualism holds that human persons have immaterial minds; and since Christ is fully human and fully divine unmixed, would seem to have to hold that Christ has two immaterial minds—one human and one divine. It is surely more straightforward and elegant to treat the “two-natures” doctrine as Constitutionalism does: Christ’s human nature is wholly material and Christ’s divine nature is wholly immaterial.

7. Conclusion

This concludes my discussion of persons without immaterial souls. What makes us persons is not having immaterial souls, but having first-person perspectives. This Constitution view depicts us as ontologically different from the rest of creation, but as biologically continuous with nonhuman animals. Constitutionalism both recognizes the claims of the sciences and is compatible with Christian orthodoxy. So, if Constitutionalism is right about our place in nature, I think that would be good news for Christians—and perhaps for Muslims and Jews as well.

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