

Is Seamless Post-Mortem Existence Necessary for Survival?

P. Eddy Wilson
Shaw University
wilson-paul@lycos.com

Imagine three trapeze artists at the circus. The man on the left has a firm hold on his partner. As he swings her toward the center of the tent the man on the right swings in to receive the woman. The audience is in suspense as they await the hand-off. For a moment the woman flies through the air with no visible means of support. Her life is suspended in mid-air. Were the man on the right not in position to receive the woman she would fall to her death.

Suppose the trapeze artist on the left represents life, and the man on the right represents after-life. Were the man on the left not to release his partner until she was firmly in the grasp of the man on the right, they would complete a seamless hand-off. The hand-off would occur without allowing the woman to slip into free fall. Some non-Cartesian philosophers like Peter Van Inwagen and Kevin Corcoran have given a seamless account of the passage from life to after-life. Seamless solutions require that there be no spatial or temporal gap between life and after-life. In this essay I shall challenge the notion that seamless accounts offer the most adequate description of post-mortem survival. I want to suggest that post-mortem survival is not necessarily gapless survival.[1] Only after I have examined the assumptions made in materialists' accounts shall I suggest an alternative. The type of survival I shall argue for shall be more analogous to a hand-off where the person must enter and exit a free-fall state.

I. Survival and the Threat of the Gaps

The problem of the gaps haunts philosophers who choose to reject the Cartesian solution to the problem of survival. To be a Cartesian soul is to exist incorruptible.[2] So, William Hasker is justified in making the following claim, "*There is no metaphysical question about the identity of Cartesian souls over time.*"[3] It is this problem of identity over time that troubles the non-Cartesian philosophers.

The materialist maintains that identity over time is sacrificed if inexplicable spatial and temporal gaps arise in the life of inanimate objects. To survive persons must meet the same criteria of uninterrupted material and causal connections.[4] Peter Van Inwagen says, "If a man does not simply die but is totally destroyed (as in the case of cremation) then he can never be reconstituted, for the causal chain has been irrevocably broken." [5] Van Inwagen's illustrates this with his familiar story of the two ancient manuscripts. On the one hand, a monastery claims to have an extant autograph of Saint Augustine. On the other hand, Arians burned the same monastery and its contents in 457 AD. The available manuscript is supplied by a miracle of God. Van Inwagen claims the spatio-temporal gap between the two manuscripts renders false the claim that it is the same manuscript. Van Inwagen says,

It would immediately occur to me to ask how *this* manuscript, the one I can touch, could be the very manuscript that was burned in 457. Suppose their answer to this question is that God miraculously recreated Augustine's manuscript in 458. I should respond to this answer as follows: The deed it describes seems quite impossible, even as an accomplishment of omnipotence. God certainly might have created a perfect duplicate of the original manuscript, but it would not be *that one*. [6]

Given Van Inwagen's material criterion for survival, the gap would falsify the claim that we are dealing with the same entity. Death terminates existence for the person as the fire ended the existence of the manuscript. Suppose Sam is alive at one moment (T0). At some intervening time (T1) Sam ceases to exist, but a person composed of the same atoms and calling himself Sam is alive at a later time (T2). Is it the same person that exists at T2, if there is a gap between the times when Sam is said to be alive? Van Inwagen would say No.[7]

II. Sealing the Gaps in Post-Mortem Survival

Here I review the solutions of three well known philosophers to the problem of survival. Each requires that God intervene to insure that the person survives his or her bodily death. Van Inwagen's proposal involves body switching, while Kevin Corcoran's proposal involves body splitting. William Hasker introduces an extra-bodily account of survival.

In Van Inwagen's account it is not possible to survive one's death without the intervention of God, given the fact that the body undergoes corruption. The preservation of the body is a necessary and sufficient condition for survival in Van Inwagen's account, since the person is a material body. If the same body is not preserved intact, then Van Inwagen would contend it is only a replica. Van Inwagen says,

a former corpse in which the processes of life have been "started up again" may well be the very man who was once before alive, provided the processes of dissolution did not progress too far while he was a corpse.[8]

Van Inwagen appears to be making use of strict Aristotelian criterion for identity. Only if the individual is able to overcome the problem of the gaps is it possible to claim that he or she has survived. How could someone survive, when it is evident that at the time of death the person becomes a corpse? Van Inwagen suggests that a body switch occurs. The person is removed by an act of God. In the place of the person's corpse is a simulacrum. Van Inwagen says,

It contradicts nothing in the creeds to suppose that [total annihilation or disintegration] is not what really happens, and that God preserves our corpses contrary to all appearance. Perhaps at the moment of each man's death, God removes his corpse and replaces it with a simulacrum, which is what is burned or rots. Or perhaps God is not quite so wholesale as this: Perhaps he removes for 'safekeeping' only the 'core person' – the brain and central nervous system – or even some special part of it. These are details.[9]

Kevin Corcoran finds the body switching solution unacceptable, since it may invite the criticism that the surviving person is a mere replica. So, Corcoran has developed a body splitting theory to resolve the problem of survival.[10] Corcoran makes a distinction between human bodies and masses of cell-stuff. Masses of cell-stuff he regards as mereological sums. He says, "By the words *human body* I mean, for starters, to pick out that kind of entity usually associated with the words physical organism of the species homo sapiens." [11] A body that is a mereological sum could satisfy the material conditions for survival but not the causal conditions. Corcoran insists that there is no survival, unless the following immanent causal condition (ICC) is satisfied:

If an organism O that exists some time in the future is the same as an organism P that exists now, then the (set of) simples that compose P now must be causally related to the (set of) simples that will compose O in the future.[12]

Corcoran proposes two solutions to remedy the temporal gap problem. Corcoran devotes only part of a paragraph to the view that an individual could survive a gap in his or her existence by God's intervention. Without further detail, one must assume that Corcoran's gappy-view would fail to meet Van Inwagen's strict identity conditions for material objects.[13] The alternative that Corcoran develops at greater length is

a type of non-gappy survival that requires fission of a body's causal paths. Here I shall focus on Corcoran's second solution of non-gappy survival.

In Corcoran's view a person could be identified as the same person throughout his or her lifetime, if he or she met the material and immanent causal conditions. At the moment of death there is an event that allows the same human to exist post-mortem, and that event is body fission. The surviving human would meet the material and causal criteria to count as the same person. The fission would also produce a corpse that is sloughed off as a snake's skin. Since the corpse never was energized in the way that the body was, Corcoran maintains it would not become a contender for the identity of the dying individual. Only one survivor and one corpse are produced in this account, and the causal path of both is traceable to one human body prior to death. Corcoran says,

It seems possible that the causal paths traced by the simples caught up in the life of my body just before death can be made by God to fission such that the simples composing my body then are causally related to two different, spatially segregated sets of simples. One of the two sets of simples would immediately cease to constitute a life and come instead to compose a corpse, while the other would continue to constitute a body in heaven.[14]

The fission process is meant to safeguard against the objection that only replicas succeed the dying person. It is likewise meant as a defense against the objection that the survivor is merely the closest contender of two viable duplicates. Since the corpse is never conscious, Corcoran claims that just one human emerged from fission to survive death.

The issue of when fission occurs produces a dilemma. If the fission occurs before death, there would be two bodies to replace the original. Then one might argue that the person had ceased to exist when he or she was split apart.[15] If the fission occurs after death, there is the possibility that two replicas replaced the person who had died. To go between the horns of the dilemma Corcoran must maintain that the fission is simultaneous with death.

William Hasker raises two objections against Corcoran's body-splitting proposal.[16] First, it asks us to alter our assumptions about the continuity of matter, since the body is replaced with a corpse instantaneously. Second, Hasker believes it asks us to accept a closest contender view of identity. Corcoran thinks we are not dealing with a closest contender, since the body splitting example can satisfy the immanent causal condition. So, Corcoran thinks the claim that the survivor is the same person is warranted.

I shall not venture to guess whether that rebuttal would put down Hasker's objection. What does seem problematic to me is the notion that the body can undergo fission in this way. Even if the temporal dilemma can be avoided, I would suggest the proposal falls prey to a criticism analogous to the criticism by Eric T. Olson against compound dualism. The compound dualist must explain how a compound entity can produce an immaterial successor. Corcoran must explain how a human body can slough off an additional mereological sum, i. e., a corpse and continue as a surviving human body. To the compound dualist Olson says,

Where could this new, immaterial part come from? The only players on the stage before my death are my soul, my body and its parts, and myself. Afterwards my soul is still a soul, my body has perished, and I supposedly, am made up of the soul and something else. The destruction of my material body can't logically entail the existence of some new immaterial thing. It seems that disembodied survival would require some sort of deus ex machine.[17]

Among materialists' solutions William Hasker favors the body switching solution of Van Inwagen.[18] However, Hasker offers his own novel solution. In Hasker's emergent dualism the body is a sufficient condition for the emergence of consciousness.[19] Hasker suggests that the consciousness is analogous to a magnetic field. While the magnet is sufficient to generate the field and sustain it, the field's existence is

distinct from the magnet. I assume the field requires material to sustain it, though its continuation may not require that the same material sustain it.[20] Hasker says,

The mind, like the magnetic field, comes into existence when the constituents of its 'material base' are arranged in a suitable way – in this case, in the extremely complex arrangement found in the nervous systems of animals. And like the magnetic field, it exerts a causality of its own . . . [21]

In Hasker's view survival of an emergent mind would require that God replace the material source of the field to allow the same field to persist.[22] This suggests that the mind-field must remain constant while the bodies that sustain it are interchangeable. In that case Hasker has provided another body-switching scenario. Hasker also says, "[God] could directly sustain the field by his own power, without the need for a material 'generator' of any kind." [23]

I find the latter proposal to have the greater potential for development. On the one hand, Hasker's description requires that the mind-field continue uninterrupted. So, the threat of a temporal gap between a natural life and a post-mortem existence is remedied by an uninterrupted existence. On the other hand, Hasker's mind-field is not dependent upon the identity of matter requirement, since he is not a strict materialist. In Hasker's view the body is a necessary condition for the emergence of the mind-field only, and the body is a sufficient and non-necessary condition for its survival.[24]

III. Survival and Everyday Gaps

In the three accounts of survival examined above the authors develop views where human survival is described as an uninterrupted conscious experience. If the seamless conscious existence were interrupted, then there would be warrant for the claim that the person did not survive. The successor could be a replica or a simulacrum, but it would not be the same person. Though body switching and body fission are different accounts of survival, they both make this same assumption about the nature of survival. Hasker's view of the emergent self does suggest that the material criterion for survival may count as a sufficient condition for survival rather than a necessary condition. Even in Hasker's account of survival there is the implicit assumption that survival entails an uninterrupted conscious experience.

The gap poses a threat to survival when we make certain assumptions about time and personal existence. In the account of Van Inwagen and Corcoran one assumes that time is an uninterrupted flow and matter is located in time.[25] It is assumed that existing matter will be present in time. Individuals are situated in that flow of time as particular organizations of matter. When an individual's existence is interrupted, the conscious experience of the individual halts within time; and he or she is dead. Survival consists of not failing to be present as a body that has an uninterrupted conscious experience in time. The unstated assumption in the three accounts of survival is that time is an objective reality and that the consciousness of persons must be coextensive with time. This view suggests the following statement: No moment is a moment when a living person fails to exist as a subjectively conscious being. Both psychological and metaphysical reasons may be offered to suggest that notion is false. If the implicit psychological understanding of the survival in time is mistaken, then our concerns about survival may be misplaced. If the implicit metaphysical understanding of the survival in time is in error, then the threat of the gaps may be a gross blunder.

William James devotes some thought to the psychological notion of time. He suggests one may experience time as an uninterrupted flow. That is how I perceive time is conceptualized in non-gappy accounts of survival. In an earlier writing Corcoran claims to adopt a block view of time, but he believes that a continuous view of time would not alter his theory.[26] I am suggesting there is a fundamental difference. In the continuous-flow view time moves onward like a Greyhound bus on tour. Its passengers are survivors. As an alternative James suggests that time may be block-like discrete events or moments that are experienced with such rapidity that one moment of time cannot be distinguished from another. James, the pragmatist, concludes that for practical purposes we may find the two views indistinguishable, and we

would have no awareness of “empty time”, that is, time when we were not conscious. James says, “*we can no more intuit a duration than we can intuit an extension, devoid of all sensible content.*”[\[27\]](#)

I find it difficult to dispute the wisdom of James. If time were block-like discrete events, then there would be gaps in our stream of consciousness. We could not give a subjective account of such gaps in our conscious experience. Suppose you regain consciousness after a blow to the skull, or you awaken from sleep. Subjectively you do not question your survival, since you resume your conscious experience.[\[28\]](#) You have transcended the interruption subjectively.

Perhaps an analogy will prove helpful. Suppose we have two patients diagnosed with cardiac disease. The one is a candidate for a massive heart attack, and the other suffers from mini-strokes. I would suggest that Van Inwagen and Corcoran see the human’s predicament as an analog of the former individual’s condition. I would suggest this is a misdiagnosis. It is not just a single gap in conscious experience that threatens to undo our existence. A better analog would be the patient whose diagnosis suggests he or she is a candidate for mini-strokes. Since the danger is recurrent, one may erroneously suppose the danger is reduced. It is not.

Transcending temporal gaps subjectively may seem like child’s play. What if the gaps were not merely subjective gaps but objective gaps, that is, what if they were metaphysical gaps? In that case we would need to rethink how we account for survival. If there were metaphysical gaps in existence, then we would be mistaken to suppose that non-intermittent bodily existence supplies the necessary and sufficient condition for survival of material entities. And that is the metaphysical predicament I would suggest we face.

Quantum mechanics suggests that earlier notions of matter inherited from the Greek atomists were mistaken. One feature of the emerging world-view produced by quantum theory is the property known as wave-particle duality.[\[29\]](#) At the sub-atomic level matter lives a double life as both energy and particle. Central to this theory is the notion that these packets of energy pass in and out of existence. In other words, their life is characterized by intermittent existence. Process philosophers have endeavored to create a world-view from this insight. They see the existence of finite creatures as an intermittent or gappy existence.[\[30\]](#) If their metaphysical description of the world is correct, then it suggests that the notion of survival be revised. The difference between ordinary existence and post-mortem survival would be a matter of degrees and not a difference of kinds.

In what way could our understanding of the metaphysics of time and matter impact our understanding of survival? Van Inwagen’s account of survival relies upon strict material criterion about identity over time.[\[31\]](#) Hasker is no process philosopher. Nonetheless, he has relaxed the material requirement for survival, and I suspect that is a prudent move. Hasker says,

I believe the re-creationist should not hold that the matter of the re-created body needs to be the same as that of the body that perished. There is after all the very real possibility that some or all of the matter of someone’s body might be destroyed (perhaps annihilated in a nuclear reaction) or might become part of someone else’s body.[\[32\]](#)

Conclusion

Perhaps some critic will say I should assume a process world-view from the outset and demonstrate how one survives in that world-view. Far more space would be required for a project of that magnitude. Instead I have set out to investigate how three notable philosophers understand survival. I expose some of their assumptions about seamless or non-gappy existence. Corcoran and Hasker speculate that an account of survival could be developed that would include spatial and temporal gaps in an individual’s history.[\[33\]](#) As a prolegomenon to an alternative description of survival I suggest gappy accounts of survival would be more consistent with the nature of existence as we now understand it. [\[34\]](#)

P. Eddy Wilson October 23, 2003

Notes

[1] I suppose there may be some exceptional cases where survival would be seamless, but I take it to be the case that most cases of survival are cases where the individual must transcend some spatial or temporal gap.

[2] Rene Descartes maintains that I am a thing that cannot undergo bodily corruption. He says, "I am a real thing and really exist; but what thing? I have answered; a thing which thinks." *The Philosophical Works of Rene Descartes*, Vol. I (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 152.

[3] William Hasker, *The Emergent Self* (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 210. Hereafter cited as Hasker, Emergent Self.

[4] In this essay I shall speak of the person surviving death. I shall not here make any distinction between persons and souls. I do not assume that souls are Cartesian minds.

[5] Peter Van Inwagen, *The Possibility of Resurrection and Other Essays in Christian Apologetics* (Boulder, Colorado: Harper-Collins, 1998), p. 45. Hereafter cited as Van Inwagen, Possibility

[6] Van Inwagen, Possibility, p. 45.

[7] The problem of the gap has resulted in the laying down of no less than two conditions for survival. First, the person that survives must demonstrate that he or she has the same body. A sufficient quantity of the same matter that comprised the person at T0 must comprise the person at T2 to say that is a survivor. Second, the person who survives must demonstrate an immanent causal connection with the person he or she was said to be earlier. Although the gap threatens the causal connection between the persons in question, it is the material criterion that must be met. During extended intervals there is the possibility that Sam's atoms may be assimilated by a cannibal or some other entity. Likewise the atoms may be assimilated into the life of some person who is psychologically remote from the survivor. Van Inwagen suggests that there might be a boy of 10 years and an adult of 50 years who appear simultaneously to lay claim to his identity. The short intervals of non-existence raise the possibility that the person is replaced by a replica. So, the survivor is not the same person but the nearest contender. In both cases the gap creates a discontinuity in the material and causal connections between the phases in Sam's life, and that discontinuity is sufficient to warrant the claim that Sam has not survived the gap(s).

[8] Van Inwagen adds, "But if a man does not simply die but is totally destroyed (as in the case of cremation) then *he* can never be reconstituted, for the causal chain has been irrevocably broken. If God collects the atoms that used to constitute that man and 'reassembles' them, they will occupy the positions relative to one another they occupy because of God's miracle and not because of the operation of the natural processes that, taken collectively, were the life of that man." See Van Inwagen, Possibility, p. 47.

[9] Ibid, p. 49.

[10] Kevin J. Corcoran, "Dualism, Materialism, and the Problem of Postmortem Survival" *Philosophia Christi* 4 (2, 2002): 411- 426. Hereafter cited as Corcoran, Dualism.

[11] Corcoran, Dualism, p. 419.

[12] Corcoran, Dualism, p. 424.

[13] Even if Corcoran's survivor could meet the ICC condition, the survivor would not meet the material condition in Van Inwagen's view. The atoms that comprised the person might be put to use in another life form so that the same person could not survive.

[14] Corcoran, p. 424.

[15] I suppose Corcoran would argue that the one body was merely inert matter sloughed off. Perhaps the duplicate is like a snake's skin that is sloughed off. If so, then the claim that this is a type of materialism may come into question.

[16] Hasker, p. 227.

[17] Eric T. Olsen, in *Soul, Body, and Survival*, edited by Kevin Corcoran (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2001), p.

[18] William Hasker has endorsed Van Inwagen's body switching solution as the best available account of survival for materialists. See Hasker, *Emergent Self*, p. 231.

[19] William Hasker in *Soul, Body, and Survival*, edited by Kevin Corcoran (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2001), p. 116. Hereafter cited as *Soul, Body, and Survival*.

[20] Hasker grants that the field exists as an entity distinct from its material source. See Hasker, *Emergent Self*, p. 232. The possibility that there could be non-material energies in the universe may raise questions about the nature of the material universe. One must assume Hasker to believe it is not a universe of cold, hard matter.

[21] Hasker in *Soul, Body, and Survival*, p. 117.

[22] Hasker in *Soul, Body, and Survival*, p. 117.

[23] Hasker, in *Soul, Body, and Survival*, p. 117. I find this idea to hold the greatest potential for development. The idea that God could maintain the mind-field apart from a body is not unlike the thought of some idealist that it is God's perception of the person that sustains the person. I have great sympathy with the latter view.

[24] In Hasker's view to qualify as same person we would need to meet the material criterion for personhood only if the same body were sustaining the consciousness-field.

[25] See note 28 below.

[26] Corcoran says, "I suppose it could be objected that so far I have been working with a view of time according to which time is composed of discrete instants with very neat boundaries which bump smoothly up against one another. But suppose time is continuous and not discrete. What then? Well I think nothing much follows with respect to the view of the resurrection here entertained. . . . Either way, on a continuous or discrete view of time, the view of resurrection suggested here can be maintained." See Corcoran in *Soul, Body, and Survival*, p. 213.

[27] William James, *Principles of Psychology* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 620.

[28] David Hershenov defends the reassembly model of resurrection against Van Inwagen's objections. He believes that Van Inwagen dismissal of the reassembly model falsely assumes that any reassembly of the parts would not count as the same person. If a ten year old Van Inwagen and a fifty year old Van Inwagen

were both reassembled we would have too many Van Inwagens to count as a survivor. Hershenov believes that the continuity of matter resolves the problem. Survivors must be identifiable as the same matter that died. He says, A baseball game suspended in the sixth inning due to rain or darkness cannot resume the next day in the second inning. But just as the game can resume in the sixth inning, my intuition is that a person who died when he was eighty could exist again if the parts he had at the last time of his existence were reassembled. In my account it must be the same subjective consciousness that is resumed and not just the same atoms. See David Hershenov, "Intermittent Existence and Resurrection", *Faith and Philosophy* 20 (1, 2003): 31. Hereafter cited as Hershenov.

[29] For a lively discussion of how quantum theory has impacted our theory of human consciousness see J. Richard Eiser, *Attitudes, Chaos, and the Connectionist Mind* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1994). For his discussion of quantum theory see pp. 93-94.

[30] Alfred North Whitehead is one notable philosopher who sees the world as a process. He says, "The actual world is a process". See his work, *Process and Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1978), p. 22.

[31] Van Inwagen, *Possibility*, p. 47.

[32] Hasker, *Emergent Self*, p. 214.

[33] Corcoran says that a gappy account of survival would succeed if it could be shown that immanent causal relations could cross a temporal gap. See Corcoran, *Dualism*, p. 423. In Hasker's view this field of consciousness could be sustained by God independent of its material source. He says, "[God] could directly sustain the field by his own power, without the need for a material 'generator' of any kind. Perhaps there is no reason why God would do this. But Christians believe there is indeed reason for God to concern himself with the continued existence of rational souls." See Hasker, *Emergent Self*, p. 233

[34] If one searches, one may find in the process world-view echoes of idealism. For the idealist there is no need to resort to materialistic criteria to determine whether there is survival. Survival is determined by perception. Hasker has suggested that the field of consciousness may be sustained independent of its material origins. This strikes me as the sort of claim that an idealist could sympathize with. Unlike the Cartesian's soul that is self-sustaining, the emergent self is a contingent self. Its origins are material, but its survival is not necessarily contingent upon matter. Rather God could sustain it. How? Hasker does not give additional details, but I would suggest that the answer is as a thought.