


Resurrection

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The Judeo-Christian belief in a future general resurrection of the dead arose in late second-temple Judaism (see, for example, Daniel 12:2, and John 11:24). (Whether there would be a resurrection of the dead was one of the main points that divided the Pharisees and the Sadducees.) When the new Christian movement appeared--before it was clearly something other than a party or sect within Judaism--, it centered on the belief that the crucified Jesus of Nazareth had been, in a literal, bodily sense, raised from the dead (resurrectus) and that his resurrection was, in some way, the means by which the expected general resurrection of the dead would be accomplished. Indeed, resurrection was so pervasive a theme in early Christian preaching that it was apparently sometimes thought that Christians worshipped two gods called Jesus and Resurrection (Anastasis). (Acts of the Apostles 16:18 is probably an allusion to this widespread misconception.) The early Christians generally said that God had raised Jesus from the dead. In post-New Testament times, it became more common for Christians to say that Jesus rose from the dead. Belief in the resurrection of Jesus and a future general resurrection continue to be central to Christianity. Christians have always insisted that resurrection is not a mere restoration of what the resurrected person had before death (as in the story in the Fourth Gospel of the raising of Lazarus) but is rather a doorway into a new kind of life. The status of a belief in the general resurrection in rabbinic Judaism is difficult to summarize. It should be noted, however, that a belief in the resurrection of the dead is one of Maimonides' thirteen principles, which some Jews regard as a summary of the essential doctrines of Judaism. A belief in a general resurrection of the dead is one of many Judeo-Christian elements that have been incorporated into Islam.

1 The concept of resurrection

The concept of the resurrection of the body (or of the dead) is most easily explained by laying out the ways in which it differs from the most important competing picture of the survival of death, the Platonic picture. According to Plato, when one dies (that is, when one's body dies), one will continue to be what one has been all along, a soul: an immaterial center of consciousness, reason, and action. One's death is, therefore, an extrinsic change in one: being dead means simply no longer having a body to animate. Since one's death is an extrinsic change in one, one's survival of death is something that happens in the natural course of events: one continues to exist after death by the continued exercise of the same powers or capacities that enabled one to exist when one still animated a body. (This inference is natural and plausible, but, as Descartes would later point out, it is not logically valid: for all logic can tell us, animating a body might be essential to the existence of a soul.) Death is, moreover, not a bad thing, as the vulgar believe, but a liberation, for the body is a prison of the soul--or it might be likened to a millstone that drags the soul down into the world of flux and impermanence. The liberation of the soul by death will not, unfortunately, be permanent, for the soul is destined repeatedly to suffer the misfortune of embodiment.

Christians and Jews (and Muslims) who believe in the resurrection of the dead will accept two of Plato's theses about death: that the person does survive death, and that dead persons will not be forever disembodied. But everyone who believes in resurrection will dispute the following elements of Plato's metaphysics of body, soul, and death: that the body is a prison; that the soul must by its very nature survive the death of the body; that the embodied soul has been disembodied in the past and will experience a large,

perhaps infinite, number of reincarnations in the future. Christians, moreover, will insist that the new bodily life that awaits the soul (the saved soul, at least; perhaps this is not true of the damned) will not be of the same sort as its earlier life. The doctrine of resurrection, however, is no more than a doctrine. It is not a worked-out metaphysics of body, soul, and death. (The primary biblical data concerning the metaphysics of resurrection are found in I Cor 15:35-55. The highly poetical language of this passage, however, is open to a variety of interpretations.) There are several competing philosophical theories of the metaphysics of resurrection. Some who accept the doctrine of resurrection deny the existence of a separable, immaterial soul. (Tertullian, for example, or, in the present day, the Scottish computer scientist D. M. MacKay and the English physicist J. C. Polkinghorne.) Others accept the existence of an immaterial soul, but differ on the question whether the person, the I, is the immaterial soul. Aquinas, for example, sees the human person as essentially a composite of a human soul and a human body. According to the composite theory, a person cannot exist without a body: for one to exist is for one's soul (always numerically the same) to animate some human body or other. (In the interval between one's death and one's receiving a new body at the time of the general resurrection, one's soul exists and thinks and has experiences, but one does not, strictly speaking, exist.) Others who believe in a separable soul, however--most of the Fathers of the Church, and, probably, most Christians who have not given the matter much thought--, accept a metaphysics of soul and body that is deceptively similar to Plato's: one is an immaterial soul, and one will exist and think and have experiences throughout the interval during which one is without a body. But even the members of this party--the theologically well instructed among them, at any rate--would accept the following anti-Platonic theses: that the death of one's first body is not a natural consequence of the impermanence of material things, but is rather a result of the Fall; that the soul's survival of death is not a natural consequence of its immateriality or simplicity, but is rather a miracle, a special gift from God; that existing without a body is not a good thing for the soul, an essential part of the telos of which is to animate a body; that the life of the spiritual or glorified body that the saved soul will be given at the general resurrection will be qualitatively different from (and superior to) the life of the soul's first or natural body. (It must be emphasized that, whatever spiritual body may mean, it does not mean immaterial body.)

2 Philosophical difficulties

Each of these metaphysical theories of resurrection faces philosophical problems. Believers in resurrection who are dualists face the problems any dualist faces. Since these problems are the same whether or not the dualist believes in resurrection, they will not be discussed here. Believers in resurrection who are materialists (as regards human beings) face the problems any materialist faces. Since these problems are the same whether or not the materialist believes in resurrection, they will not be discussed here. In addition, however, believers in resurrection who are materialists face a special philosophical problem about personal identity. The remainder of this article will discuss this special problem.

It can be plausibly argued that the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead presupposes some form of dualism. For if human persons are not immaterial souls, if they are living animals, then it would seem that death must be the end of them. A living animal is a material object. A material object is composed, at any given moment, of certain atoms. But if one is composed of certain atoms today, it is clear from what we know about the metabolisms of living things that one was not composed of those same atoms a year ago: one must then have been composed of a set of atoms that hardly overlaps the set of atoms that composes one today--and so for any living organism. This fact, the fact that the atoms of which a living organism is composed are in continuous flux, is a stumbling block for the materialist who believes in resurrection.

Suppose, then, that God proposes to raise Socrates from the dead. How shall he accomplish this? How shall even omnipotence bring back a particular person who lived long ago and has returned to the dust?--whose former atoms have been, for millennia, spread pretty evenly throughout the biosphere? This question does not confront the dualist, who will say either that there is no need to bring Socrates back (because, so to speak, Socrates has never left), or else that Socrates can be brought back simply by providing his soul (which still exists) with a newly created human body. But what shall the materialist say? From the point of view of the materialist, it looks as if asking God to bring Socrates back is like asking him to bring back the snows of yesteryear or the light of other days. For what can even omnipotence do but reassemble? What else is there to do? And reassembly is not enough, for Socrates was composed of different atoms at different times. If someone says, If God now reassembles the atoms that composed Socrates at the moment

of his death, those reassembled atoms will once more compose Socrates, there is an obvious objection to his thesis. If God can reassemble the atoms that composed Socrates at the moment of his death in 399 BC--and no doubt he can--, he can also reassemble the atoms that composed Socrates at some particular instant in 409 BC. In fact, if there is no overlap between the two sets of atoms, God could do both of these things, and set the two resulting men side by side. And which would be Socrates? Neither or both, it would seem, and, since not both, neither.

It might be objected that God would not do such a frivolous thing, and this may indeed be so. Nevertheless, if God were to reassemble either set of atoms, the resulting man would be who he was, and it is absurd, it is utterly incoherent, to suppose that his identity could depend on what might happen to some atoms other than the atoms that composed him. In the end, there would seem to be no way round the following requirement: if Socrates was a material thing, a living organism, then, if a man who lives at some time after Socrates' death and physical dissolution is to be Socrates, there will have to be some sort of material and causal continuity between the matter that composed Socrates at the moment of his death and the matter that at any time composes that man. (St Paul seems to suggest, in the passage from I Corinthians cited above, that this will indeed be the case.) But physical dissolution and 'material and causal continuity' are hard to reconcile. To show how the continuity requirement can be satisfied, despite appearances--or else to show that the continuity requirement is illusory--is a problem that must be solved if a philosophically satisfactory materialist theory of resurrection is to be devised.

References and further reading

Cullmann, Oscar (1958) *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?*, London: Epworth. Reprinted in its entirety in Stendahl. (A classic and much discussed essay that contrasts the two concepts of its title and argues that the concept of the immortality of the soul is foreign to the New Testament.)

Edwards, Paul, ed., (1992) *Immortality*, New York: Macmillan. (A very useful collection, which contains an extensive bibliographical essay. Includes the relevant passages from Plato's *Phaedo* and Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*.)

Geach, Peter (1969) *God and the Soul*, London: Routledge, esp. Chapter 2, *Immortality*. Chapter 2 reprinted in Edwards. (A modern defense of the composite thesis.)

*McKay, Donald (1987) *Computer Software and Life after Death* in Richard Gregory, ed., *Oxford Companion to the Mind*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. Reprinted in Edwards. (Argues that the distinction between computer hardware and software may be used to defend a materialist account of resurrection.)

*Polkinghorne, John (1994) *The Faith of a Physicist: Reflections of a Bottom-up Thinker*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, esp. Chapter 6, *Crucifixion and Resurrection* and Chapter 9, *Eschatology*. (Recent defense of a broadly materialist account of resurrection.)

Stendahl, Krister, ed., (1965) *Immortality and Resurrection*, New York: Macmillan.

Van Inwagen, Peter (1978) *The Possibility of Resurrection*, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 9, 114-121. Reprinted in Edwards. (This essay and the following essay attempt to devise a metaphysics of resurrection that presupposes that human beings are living organisms.)
19xx) *Dualism and Materialism: Athens and Jerusalem?*, *Faith and Philosophy* x, xxx-xxx. (See previous item.)

Wolfson, Harry A. (1961) *Immortality and Resurrection in the Philosophy of the Church Fathers*, included in *Religious Philosophy: A Group of Essays*, Cambridge, Mass.: Belnap. Reprinted in Stendahl. (A very learned account of the positions of the Church Fathers on the metaphysics of resurrection.)