

A PROBLEM FOR CHRISTIAN MATERIALISM

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Peter van Inwagen and Dean Zimmerman have attempted to demonstrate the metaphysical compatibility of materialism and life after death as it is understood in orthodox Christianity. According to van Inwagen's simulacrum account of resurrection, God replaces either the whole person or some crucial part of the "core person" with an exact replica at the moment of the person's death.² This removed original person — or fragment of an original person — provides the basis for personal continuity between an individual in her previous life and her post-resurrection life in the world to come. Alternatively, Zimmerman's "Falling Elevator Model" of resurrection claims that, at the moment just before death, the body undergoes fission, leaving a nonliving lump of matter (a corpse) in the present and a living copy at some other point in space-time.³ In a recent paper, Taliaferro and I criticized these positions,⁴ arguing that each one lacks phenomenological realism, the quality of satisfactorily reflecting ordinary experience. That article focused primarily on what we consider the methodological shortcomings of van Inwagen's and Zimmerman's accounts of resurrection in materialist terms and other philosophical explanations and thought experiments which clash with ordinary experience. We also raised in passing a more substantive challenge for explanations of resurrection in materialist terms which arises from scripture rather than a priori contemplation. Here, I expand upon the latter objection and develop it into an independent challenge to van Inwagen's and Zimmerman's accounts of resurrection.

Van Inwagen's controversial "The Possibility of Resurrection," attacked what he called "Aristotelian" reassembly theories of resurrection.⁵ "Aristotelian" approaches to resurrection supposed that God could replace an object which had ceased to exist, be it a scroll or a human being, with an exact replica in such a way that the replica was in fact identical to the original object.⁶ Concerned that these theories provided an insufficient basis for personal continuity after death because they failed to preserve numerical identity between the pre-resurrection and post-resurrection individuals, van Inwagen suggested an alternative which would provide a clear basis for numerical identity: "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."⁷ Van Inwagen does not mind that many observers have deemed this view contrived or ad hoc; it is a "just-so" story which cannot be faulted for being ad hoc, as its goal is only to approximate the truth and demonstrate metaphysical possibility.⁸ Although the article in which van Inwagen first articulated this view was published four decades ago, van

1 I would like to thank Dr. Charles Taliaferro for his useful comments.

2 Peter van Inwagen, "The Possibility of Resurrection", *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 9 (1978): 121.

3 Dean W. Zimmerman, "The Compatibility of Materialism and Survival: The 'Falling Elevator' Model", *Faith and Philosophy* 16 (1999): 205–6.

4 Charles Taliaferro and Elliot Knuths, "Thought Experiments in Philosophy of Religion: The Virtues of Phenomenological Realism and Values", *Open Theology* 3, no. 1 (2017).

5 van Inwagen, "The Possibility of Resurrection", 118–20.

6 Peter van Inwagen, "Dualism and Materialism: Athens and Jerusalem?", *Faith and Philosophy* 12 (1995).

7 van Inwagen, "The Possibility of Resurrection", 121.

8 *Ibid.*

Inwagen has continued to defend it, maintaining that it approximates at least some important aspects of the truth about resurrection.⁹

Since van Inwagen's article first appeared, it has proven very provocative among philosophers and theologians. Of the many objections raised against it, the problem of divine body snatching is the most incessant and notorious. It goes something like this: the simulacrum theory of resurrection requires God to *steal* the core part of the person, the part which is dispositive for personal identity, and thus the only part that matters to a decedent's survivors. In its place, God leaves a copy of the original, a "simulacrum." This problematically implies that the omnipotent, omnibenevolent God of Christianity has no other means than outright deception by which to accomplish His greatest miracle.¹⁰

Zimmerman takes this objection to the original simulacrum argument seriously and attempts to provide an alternative formulation which avoids it while still preserving the metaphysical advantages of van Inwagen's formulation. His goal "is to tell a better 'just so' story (consistent with van Inwagen's version of materialism) according to which God insures that this very body escapes the deadly powers that would otherwise destroy it — and does so without 'body-snatching.'" ¹¹ Zimmerman's approach is as follows:

[God preserves a dying person's body] by, just before it completely loses its living form, enabling each particle to divide — or at least to be immanent-causally responsible for two resulting particle-stages. One of the resulting particle-stages is right here, where the old one was; another is either in heaven now (for immediate resurrectionists), or somewhere in the far future. But in any case, since the set of particle-stages on earth that are immanent-causally connected with my dying body do not participate in a Life, there is no danger of my 'fissioning out of existence' due to competition with my corpse. My corpse is not even a candidate for being me, since it does not participate in a Life.¹²

Thus, the core difference between Zimmerman's "falling elevator model" and the simulacrum model is that, according to Zimmerman, both the survivor and the corpse are immanent-causally connected to the original body, whereas in van Inwagen's system the simulacrum appears *ex nihilo* at God's behest and replaces the individual or the identity-preserving part of the individual. Although nothing *logically* precludes the survival of both fissioned bodies, God *theologically* (or providentially) guarantees that only one of the two bodies survives and continues to "participate in a Life,"¹³ for otherwise the original person would cease to exist (according to the non-branching view of personal identity defended by Zimmerman).¹⁴

In addition to the body snatching objection, one could raise many other challenges to van Inwagen's and Zimmerman's accounts. Generally, these challenges will either be metaphysical or theological, depending on whether they are a priori or somehow grounded in a posteriori experience or revelation. Although objections grounded in revelation are less formally threatening than ones grounded in metaphysics (one can disavow a particular verse or chapter, or interpretation of a verse or chapter, more easily than one can disavow the principle of non-contradiction), van Inwagen, consistent with his adherence to Christian orthodoxy, takes them very seriously. In addition to ardently defending his position from scriptural objections raised by critics, he has even provided biblical "proof texts" of his own to support

9 "I Look for the Resurrection of the Dead and the Life of the World to Come", unpublished manuscript, accessed January 28, 2018.

10 It would be unfair to van Inwagen to avoid mentioning the fact that he has altered his position somewhat and now believes that God has other means available to him if He wishes to resurrect persons. See *Ibid.*: "Speaking on the metaphysics of resurrection today, as a believing Christian, I should not make any such definite statement as 'I think this — the story of the corpse and the simulacrum — is the only way God could accomplish the resurrection.' My goal in 'The Possibility of Resurrection,' was to argue for the metaphysical possibility of the Resurrection of the Dead. My method was to tell a story, a story I hoped my readers would grant was a metaphysically possible story, in which God accomplished the Resurrection of the Dead. But I was, I now see, far too ready to identify the reality of the Resurrection with what happens in the story I told to establish its possibility. I am now inclined to think that there are almost certainly other ways in which an omnipotent and omniscient being could accomplish the Resurrection of the Dead than the way that was described in the story I told..."

11 Zimmerman, "The Compatibility of Materialism and Survival", 196.

12 *Ibid.*, 194.

13 Zimmerman, "The Compatibility of Materialism and Survival", 194.

14 Cf. *Ibid.*, 206.

his position.¹⁵ One of these, arising from the parable of Dives and Lazarus¹⁶ is somewhat more contrived than the objection at hand, but van Inwagen nevertheless takes time to respond to it as though it poses a genuine challenge to his theory.¹⁷ Presumably, Zimmerman, a fellow orthodox Christian, would also wish to avoid objections rooted in scripture in addition to those based in a priori metaphysics.

I quote approvingly van Inwagen's own assessment of the role of scripture in philosophical theology, which I will apply in evaluating his and Zimmerman's accounts of resurrection:

Drawing theological conclusions from Scripture is a complicated matter, just as drawing scientific conclusions from Nature is a complicated matter. In fact one can hardly ever *draw* conclusions from either — not, at any rate, highly abstract and theoretical conclusions. What one should do if one's interests are highly abstract and theoretical is to formulate abstract and theoretical positions (theological or scientific, as the case may be) and to see what sense they make of the data (the words of Scripture or the phenomena of Nature).¹⁸

When Taliaferro and I challenged van Inwagen's and Zimmerman's accounts of resurrection in “Thought Experiments in Philosophy of Religion: The Virtues of Phenomenological Realism and Values,”¹⁹ our analysis focused primarily upon the arguments' inconsistency with the principle of “phenomenological realism” (loyalty to the norms of phenomenological experience where it might be relevant in thought experiments) and with widely-held Christian beliefs about divine attributes such as honesty. We also briefly presented a scriptural objection to van Inwagen's argument, equally applicable to Zimmerman's:

[W]e propose that van Inwagen's thought experiment is more a description of an act of magic than a miracle. We are not skeptics about the possibility or even the reasonability of believing in some miracles. But note that such miracles, including Biblical [resuscitations],²⁰ do not involve substitutions. When Christ [resuscitates] Lazarus, he returns life to the corpse of the deceased Lazarus. This is impossible, per van Inwagen's view. For van Inwagen, Christ's [resuscitation] of Lazarus must involve a substitution of Lazarus' simulacrum with his already-transported body. This, however, seems inconsistent with the recollection of the miracle presented in the Gospel.²¹

The story of the death and raising of Lazarus in John's Gospel is likely the most familiar biblical account of resuscitation, but it is not the only one; testimony to miracles of this kind abounds in scripture. In the Old Testament, we witness Elijah reviving a widow's son (1 Kings 17:17-24) and Elisha raising a dead boy (2 Kings 4:32-36). Similarly, a recently-deceased prophet returns to life when his corpse comes into contact with Elisha's bones (2 Kings 13:21). In the New Testament, Jesus raises the aforementioned Lazarus (John 11:1-44), the widow of Nain's son (Luke 7:11-16), and the daughter of Jairus (Luke 8:49-56). Peter, too, performs resuscitations, first upon Dorcas (Acts 9:36-41) and then Eutychus (Acts 20:9-12). These passages establish that each of these initial deaths was no different from the deaths experienced today. Furthermore, if they were not genuine deaths, the divine power manifested by each miracle would be greatly trivialized and the majesty of God profoundly understated. Christ and Peter would seem like little more than skilled lifeguards or EMTs, saving those on the brink of terminal death but who have not actually died. Obviously, Christians believe no such thing about the miracles of Christ and Peter. Christian orthodoxy resolutely affirms that Lazarus et al. actually died, came back to life only for a while, and died again at some later time. This fact, that nobody resuscitated in scripture continues to live and indefinitely avoid death after being resuscitated, is crucial. The resuscitated person's new life on earth is not the life everlasting. It is more of the same.

15 van Inwagen, “Dualism and Materialism: Athens and Jerusalem?”, 482–85.

16 Luke 16:19–31.

17 van Inwagen, “Dualism and Materialism: Athens and Jerusalem?”, 485–86.

18 *Ibid.*, 485.

19 Taliaferro and Knuths, “Thought Experiments in Philosophy of Religion”, 169–70.

20 We erred by using the term “resurrects” in the original article. We should have used “resuscitates,” as Lazarus does not participate in the life everlasting following the miracle's occurrence.

21 Taliaferro and Knuths, “Thought Experiments in Philosophy of Religion”, 169–70.

If the stories about resuscitations in Scripture are credible, they serve as defeaters for Zimmerman's theory of resurrection since they would imply either death (via "fissioning out of existence")²² or the metaphysically impossible, namely backward causation. When Jesus resuscitates Lazarus, what happens? On Zimmerman's view, the only thing that can happen if personal identity is maintained, I think, is that Lazarus, who, upon his death was transported to the distant future, returns to a point just four days out from his initial death. Lazarus emerges from the tomb, but inside the tomb remains a bundle of nonliving matter that resembles the living, breathing Lazarus exactly. This does not work quite so well in the cases of other resuscitations, however. Consider Jesus' raising of Jairus' daughter. Sitting with Peter, John, James, and the decedent's parents, he grasps her once-lifeless body and tells her to rise.²³ On Zimmerman's view, what are we to believe happened next? Did Jesus hold the dead fissioned corpse until the living body of the girl appeared next to its nonliving counterpart? Surely, this defies a commonsense reading of the passage. Perhaps we are to believe that, at the moment of resuscitation, God replaces or somehow fuses the deceased corpse with the living copy of the girl that fissioned away from her corpse at the moment of 'death'. But this is plainly inconsistent with the biblical stories where *the same* body that dies, rather than one of two derivatives of the body about to die, is brought back to life. Moreover, in such a scenario, Zimmerman's attempt to avoid the body snatching objection resorts to its own sort of body snatching, with God removing the corpse the decedent's loved ones have cared for since the moment of death and had planned to bury. If a corpse really is a "temple of the Holy Spirit,"²⁴ then God is doing something even worse — depriving the survivors of something of great spiritual value.

Unlike Zimmerman's account, van Inwagen's is not incompatible with the occurrence of resuscitations; it just requires dramatic tweaking. The problem facing van Inwagen's account is that God must not only remove the part of the person necessary for personal continuity, but also must put it back and either remove or destroy the simulacrum or the pertinent part of it. Then, when the resuscitated person dies for the second time, God must repeat the process. Van Inwagen, whose explanation of the resurrection has already been criticized for being ad hoc, can dodge most of the objection by becoming even more ad hoc. One who is committed to a simulacrum model of resurrection will probably not object to God replacing simulacra with resuscitated persons at the moment of their revival, only for them to die again (and thus be replaced with either their original simulacra or else new simulacra).

Another problem for van Inwagen, albeit a more minor one, is that, according to him, Lazarus no longer exists on the face of the earth once he dies. Why, then, does Jesus say, "let us go to him," for *he* is nowhere to be found? Perhaps this is nothing more than a simplification or paraphrase uttered so as not to baffle the disciples with an explanation that challenges even many contemporary philosophers of religion, but there are plenty of likelier explanations.

There is one last objection for van Inwagen and Zimmerman to consider. Suppose that Lazarus had died shortly after a meal, his belly quite full. During the next several days, certain of Lazarus' digestive functions (which I shall do my best to avoid discussing in detail here) continue to operate, although the man himself is dead. There is ample unpleasant evidence that his stomach is now empty. When Lazarus rises at last, will he be hungry? My supposition is yes, but Zimmerman must disagree. For him, it is the Lazarus who has eaten just a short while ago (and who never died) who now lives. Van Inwagen's best way out is to abandon the complete simulacrum and opt for a version where God replaces only some key part of the person (which does not include the digestive tract) at death.

My point is that, even granting the metaphysical possibility of van Inwagen's and Zimmerman's views, they still fail as defenses of a materialist *Christian* resurrection, because they depart from orthodox Christian teachings. This is not to suggest that no materialist account of resurrection could meet the challenges raised in scripture, but only that no materialist account of resurrection yet exists which can respond to scriptural objections like these (to the best of my knowledge, at least). Nevertheless, scrip-

22 Zimmerman, "The Compatibility of Materialism and Survival", 196.

23 Luke 8:54–55.

24 1 Corinthians 6:19; cf. van Inwagen, "I look for the Resurrection".

tural evidence of resuscitations weighs heavily against Christian materialism. A plausible general theory of bodily resurrection, materialist or otherwise, is highly valuable, but it must be plausible in light of revealed truths, not in spite of them.

If the only viable option for the Christian materialist with respect to resurrection is the route taken by van Inwagen and Zimmerman, then the problems with simulacra and falling elevators might serve as defeaters of Christian materialism altogether. If no plausible explanations of resurrection in materialist terms remain, what plausible alternatives avail themselves to the former defenders of Christian materialism? As I have previously stated (alongside Taliaferro), I “hope that the implausibility of materialist accounts of resurrection will lead those inclined to believe in resurrection to reconsider dualism.”²⁵ I would add that other non-materialist understandings of human persons remain viable for the Christian. Like Plantinga, I believe that “Christian philosophers must be wary about assimilating or accepting presently popular philosophical ideas and procedures”²⁶ when constructing their views. Too heavy a reliance on the materialism paradigmatic in today’s analytic philosophy may hinder progress in Christian philosophy, especially when it clashes with scripture. After all, it is because of scripture that we believe that death is not ultimate and await resurrection in the first place. If scripture provides the basis for the radical belief that we shall someday be resurrected, why should we neglect it when filling in the details?

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25 Taliaferro and Knuths, “Thought Experiments in Philosophy of Religion”, 170.

26 Alvin Plantinga, “Advice to Christian Philosophers”, *Faith and Philosophy* 1 (1984).