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Life After Death and the Devastation of the Grave

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1. Life After Death

One of the fundamental questions of human existence is whether there is life after death. If we had an oracle willing to answer just one philosophical question by saying “Yes” or “No,” this is the one that many of us would ask. Not being an oracle, I am unable to tell you whether there is an afterlife. But I can say something about whether there *could* be. Is it even possible? Or is the hope that we have life after death as vain as the hope that we might find the largest prime number?

One way to think about whether there could be life after death is to ask what would have to be the case for us to have it. If it *were* possible, how might it be accomplished? Suppose you wanted to know whether it was possible for a human being to visit another galaxy and return to earth. To answer this question, you would need to know what such a journey would involve. What sort of spaceship or other means of transport would it require? How fast would it have to go, and how long would the journey take? Only once you knew such things would you be able to work out whether it could possibly be done. In the same way, we need to know what our having life after death would require in order to see whether it is possible.

Imagine that there is an omnipotent being: *God* for short. Then we can put the question like this: What would God have to do to give us life after death? What *could* he do? This question is not trivial. God can’t do just anything: he can’t make it the case that there is a largest prime number, or that he himself never existed. He can do things that are impossible for us, but not things that are absolutely impossible. Of course, the question of what it would take for us to have life after death arises even if God does not exist. But supposing that he does makes the question easier, just as imagining that the Space Agency has an unlimited budget makes it easier to think about what it would take to visit another galaxy. And any way of making a philosophical question easier is welcome.

I use the phrase *life after death* in the most literal sense. *Death* is an event in which your biological functions cease and cannot be restarted by any possible medical intervention: a fatal heart attack followed by cremation, for example. To have *life* after death is to exist following such an event in a conscious state, with a mental life recognizably similar to the one you had before you died—enabling you to remember events from that period, for example. I am not talking about

your “surviving in the memories of others” or any other harmless platitude. (We wouldn’t need to consult the oracle about that.)

Most believers in life after death take it to be what the Nicene Creed calls “the life of the world to come”: existence in Heaven or Hell, or more generally a time or place somehow removed from the one we now inhabit. But many believe in reincarnation—literal rebirth in this world. I will mainly be concerned with existence in the next world. Reincarnation faces special problems, some of which will become apparent later.

My question, then, is what it would take for someone who has indisputably died to exist afterwards in the next world (or perhaps as an infant in this one), conscious and able to remember her natural life.

2. Total Destruction

The obvious obstacle to our having life after death is what happens in the grave. I mean the fact that death is followed by decay and dissolution. No human efforts can do anything more than delay this process. It may be faster or slower, but it is brutally thorough, and in the end nothing of your characteristic physical or psychological states will survive—not even bones or fossil remains. Wait long enough and there will be only dust—atoms scattered at random across the void—and nothing about the nature and arrangement of those atoms could enable anyone to deduce that they once made up a living being. I will abbreviate this bleak description by saying that you will be *totally destroyed*. I use this phrase as a technical term: though we may say that the twin towers of the World Trade Center were totally destroyed in 2001, they were not totally destroyed in my sense, as enough of their structure remained to enable a civil engineer to get a fair idea of what the buildings were once like. *Your* remains, though, will eventually decay to the point where they are not even the recognizable ruins of a human being. You will be like a sandcastle washed away by the tide. And although we could later build another sandcastle just like it, it seems impossible for that very object to exist again. Yet that is apparently what life after death would require: you would have to exist again after being totally destroyed. How could that be?

There are two possible ways of trying to answer this question. One is to say that despite appearances, we are *not* totally destroyed. Somehow we are spared the devastation of the grave, and what happens to us when we die is radically unlike what happens to the sandcastle in the waves. Death, to a large extent anyway, is an illusion. We might call this idea *preservation*, as it says that we are preserved in death. The second thought is more daring: that we might return to life despite having been totally destroyed. What happens in the grave is no illusion. We really are like sandcastles. Yet that need not be the end: God could nevertheless restore us to being. The task is to explain what he could do to bring this about. Call this *radical resurrection*.

3. The Soul

I will start with preservation. How could death fail to cause total destruction? It's clear that *something* decays when you die. Your death leaves behind some lifeless remains, and *they* are totally destroyed. But perhaps they are not really your remains, or at least not the whole of them. In that case their decay need not result in your own total destruction. That is the idea behind preservation. There appear to be two ways in which it might happen.

The best-known account holds that each of us has an immaterial part: something not composed of the stuff that makes up sticks and stones and biological organisms. That makes it immune to the decay and dissolution that afflict material things. So although your physical remains are totally destroyed, this special thing—call it a *soul*—survives intact. It can then make its way to the next world. (Let's not worry about how it would get there.) It may then acquire a new body, though this is unnecessary for you to have life after death. Or it may become attached to a newly conceived fetus in this world—this seems to be the only way in which reincarnation could occur.

Now the mere fact that some part of you reached the next world would not get *you* there. Your carbon atoms never decay, and one of them might not only continue after your death, but become once more a part of a living human being. That would do nothing to enable you yourself to live again. And this is not merely because carbon atoms are material things: if you had immaterial atoms as well as material ones, their survival would not suffice for you to live again either.

Clearly the soul must have some special status that your other parts lack, beyond merely being immaterial and immune to decay. Its continued existence must enable you to be conscious and to remember your natural life after the rest of you is destroyed. The usual view is that the soul *is* the thing that is conscious and remembers. My soul is the author of these words, using my body as a tool to get them written down, and your soul is now reading and pondering them. Our souls, in other words, are ourselves. At death the soul becomes disembodied: owing to the devastation of the grave, there ceases to be a material object moving according to its will and supplying it with sensory information. But it continues to be conscious and to remember the events of its natural life.

This view has been endorsed by many important historical figures, and has a vast following among religious believers today.¹ We might call it the *Platonic model* of life after death after one of its early advocates. If it is possible, then life after death is possible. Today's philosophers are divided about whether it really is possible. But there is wide agreement that, possible or not, it is very unlikely to be the case. All the evidence supports the opposite conclusion.

For instance, if you could remain conscious despite the total destruction of your body, you could certainly remain conscious after comparatively minor and temporary damage to your brain (van Inwagen, 2002, pp. 196-198). We would expect a sharp blow to the head to affect the interaction between you (the soul)

¹ For a detailed contemporary defense, see Swinburne (1997).

and your body, temporarily preventing your body from obeying your will and giving you sensory information, much as damage to a remote-control aircraft might prevent its owner from operating it. You would be unable to move. Everything would go black and silent and numb. The soul itself, though, would be undamaged, and ought to remain fully conscious. You would find yourself effectively disembodied, wondering what had caused the condition and how long it might last. Yet that is not what happens: a sharp blow to the head makes you completely *unconscious*. General anesthesia does the same thing in a gentler way. But if such a minor alteration to your brain invariably causes unconsciousness, how could you remain conscious when your brain is totally destroyed?

We also know that small differences in the brain are correlated with dramatic differences in intelligence, alertness, mood, memory, recognitional abilities, sense of humor, and many other mental properties. As far as we know, every mental phenomenon varies according to the state of one's brain. Though there is much we don't know about the connections between mental phenomena and the state of the brain, there is little doubt that the connections exist. Facts like these suggest that mental goings-on are physical processes in the brain, not non-physical processes in the soul. There does not appear to *be* any soul—or if there is, it has nothing to do with our mental life, and its continuation after death is of no more relevance to the afterlife than the continuation of our carbon atoms.

For these and other reasons, the overwhelming majority of philosophers and scientists regard the Platonic model as a lost cause. If this were the only way of escaping the devastation of the grave, we could only hope that the experts are badly mistaken. Naturally we cannot rule this out: theories that were once supported by all known evidence have turned out to be thoroughly wrong, and theories once undermined by all available evidence are occasionally vindicated. But it is unwise to bet against the settled scientific consensus.

4. Body-Snatching

Here is another way in which we could be spared total destruction: at the moment of death, God might fetch you away to the next world, whole and in bodily form—healing you in the process so that you arrive in good health (van Inwagen, 1992). This would resemble the biblical stories of Jesus and Elijah physically ascending into Heaven, though there are important differences. For one thing, those departures were supposed to be visible to others, and yet we never see ordinary people rising from their deathbeds and shooting skyward (if that is the right direction). So part of the story must be that something prevents us from observing these events. But it would be easy enough for God to render them invisible to us.

Another difference is that Jesus and Elijah were said to disappear without a trace, whereas death ordinarily leaves a lifeless corpse. Where would the corpse come from if you were fetched away whole? It could not be you. It could not even be your remains. It could not be composed of the matter that made you up when you died: that matter would move to the next world and continue compos-

ing you. The corpse would have to be a sort of counterfeit, miraculously created and put in your place. That way its decay would not destroy your mental or physical states. Something would have to prevent us from observing all this, too. God would bring about the appearance that a living being is totally destroyed, while in reality a living (or freshly dead) being is carried off and instantly replaced by something else, which decays in its stead.

Call this the *body-snatching model* of life after death. It has the considerable advantage of not requiring an immaterial soul. There is no metaphysical mystery about it, or at least no more than there is about the existence of God. Think of the sandcastle again. *It* could have been invisibly fetched away intact at the appropriate moment and replaced with a replica, so that only the replica was washed away. That would enable it to survive the incoming tide, despite the appearance of being destroyed. Although the body-snatching model does not require a soul, however, it does require there to be a supernatural being. (The Platonic model, by contrast, implies that we are naturally immortal and can survive death without divine intervention.) And it's hard to see how it might apply to the case of reincarnation. Still, it appears to show that life after death is possible.

The main objections to body-snatching are theological. The problem is not that the story is incoherent or incompatible with known facts, but that it sits uneasily with the religious convictions of those who actually believe in life after death. For example, it requires there to be a continuous path through space and time from this world to the next one. The next world would have to lie at a certain distance from here, in a certain direction, even if for some reason we can't get there by rocket or other conventional means. Although the great religious traditions are vague about the location of the next world, many will find this troubling. (Platonists can avoid the worry by denying that souls have any spatial location at all.)

It also requires God to engage in systematic deception. After blinding us to the departure of the dead, he must replace them with fakes that we cannot help but take to be their genuine remains. Why should God want to fool us rather than acting openly? Of course, appearances would be plenty misleading on the Platonic model, too. But body-snatching sounds more like bad science fiction than good theology.

5. Radical Resurrection

Any way of escaping the devastation of the grave is likely to be a variant of either Platonism or body-snatching. And neither proposal is attractive. But do we really need to be spared total destruction in order to live again? What about radical resurrection? Suppose for the sake of argument that we have no immaterial soul that survives death: we are made of matter and nothing else. And suppose we are not snatched away intact from our deathbeds, but rot in the grave until only dust remains. We really are totally destroyed. Could we still get to the next world?

Well, consider what happens to a thing when it is totally destroyed. Let us have a clear and uncontroversial example. In order to have a single object with a name, I will set aside our sandcastle and consider the Colossus of Rhodes: an enormous statue that stood at the harbor of that ancient Greek city before collapsing in an earthquake. Afterwards its broken remains lay on the ground until the iron rusted away and the bronze was melted down.

Where is the Colossus today? The obvious answer is that it's gone. It hasn't merely been transformed, from a solid object to a mass of randomly scattered atoms. The atoms are still here, but the statue itself has long since passed out of existence. But is it now possible, given what has happened, for the Colossus to come back into being? Could it be restored? Imagine that the owners of a Las Vegas hotel claimed to have rebuilt it. If the result of their efforts were enough like the original, would it actually *be* the ancient statue? Would they have in their possession a genuine historic artifact—an object cast thousands of years ago in the foundries of ancient Rhodes? Could the modern-day Greeks be right to say that it was theirs and demand it back?

It certainly doesn't seem so. The hoteliers could create *a* Colossus, so to speak—an exemplar of the original design, like a particular print of a film. But it would not be the very physical object that once stood in Rhodes, no matter how much it may resemble it. It would be a thing built by modern craftsmen, not be a thing built by ancient Greeks. It would be at best a marvelously accurate replica. Given that the original was totally destroyed, no amount of reconstruction can bring it back. If many of the statue's broken pieces still existed, so that a good deal of the structure that made it what it was remained intact, there might be room for debate about whether the result of repairing and reassembling them would be the original or a replica. But as things are, the case is closed. History has ruled out the possibility of rebuilding the Colossus.

But what about God? Couldn't *he* do it? He could certainly create an object that was exactly as the Colossus was at any point during its existence, so that no one could tell the difference. He could even gather up all the statue's original atoms and arrange them as they were when it stood in Rhodes. In other words, he could do everything the Las Vegas hoteliers could do, only infinitely better. But this would no more restore the original Colossus than the efforts of the hoteliers would. The result of God's act would be nothing but an even more accurate reconstruction. And if God cannot bring the Colossus back, nothing can.

6. Irreversibility

Why is it impossible for the Colossus to exist again? The reason has nothing to do with the kind of object it was. It is not unrestorable because it was a statue or an inanimate object. Consider a pine that grew nearby, now long dead, its atoms scattered at random across the biosphere. Could *it* be brought back? Again, it is possible to create a perfect replica of the tree as it once was. God could even gather up the atoms that composed it and arrange them as they were at any point during its life. But this would no more bring back that very tree than it would

restore the original Colossus. The result would be a modern tree, not an ancient one.

Nor is the statue unrestorable because it lacked a mind. Suppose a mouse spent its life at the foot of the Colossus, and it too has long since been totally destroyed. The mouse had a mind: it was aware of its surroundings and could form beliefs based on that information, feeble though its mental powers may have been. And we might suppose that a thing physically just like it would be mentally just like it, too. Even so, creating such a thing today by reassembling the mouse's atoms would not bring that ancient animal back into being.

The reason why it is now impossible for the Colossus to exist appears to be the simple fact that it was totally destroyed. Total destruction is final and irreversible. This is not to deny that the physical processes of decay can be undone. The trajectories of the particles that once composed the Colossus (and those that have interacted with them) could be reversed, resulting in something that would look like a film of its gradual demise running backwards, with matter from far and wide improbably converging upon Rhodes and arranging itself into the shape of the god Apollo. But the result of this too would be only a replica of the statue. A thing that has been totally destroyed simply cannot be undestroyed.

If this is right, and if we too are totally destroyed after we die—that is, setting aside preservation models—then nothing could possibly bring *us* back either. There could be someone in the next world who was just like you, both physically and mentally. But if you have died and only dust remains, it is impossible for that person to be you. It could only be a replica—presumably a completely new being who never lived in this world. If your remains had not yet decayed thoroughly and many large pieces remained more or less intact, as in a medical dissection, there might be room for debate about whether the result of mending and reassembling them would be you or a new person. But if you have been totally destroyed, there is no hope. In that case we must return to the thought that somehow our remains never entirely lose the human configuration they have when we exist in this world, saving us at least to some extent from the devastation of the grave.

7. Atomic Reassembly

For all that, some people believe that one *could* be restored after being totally destroyed (Baker, 2005; Hick, 1990, pp. 122-124). So let us ask, once again, how this might be accomplished. What would God have to do to bring it about?

We have already mentioned one proposal: God need only gather up your original atoms from the four corners of the earth, transport them to the next world (if that is where you are to exist again), and arrange them there as they were when you were alive. The result would be not merely someone just like you, but you yourself. Death may disperse our atoms, but God can make us whole again by reassembling them, just as a jeweler can reassemble a watch taken apart for repair and cleaning. As long as the original atoms remain, total destruction need not be final and irreversible. Call this the *reassembly model* of

life after death. It seems to imply that reassembling the atoms of *any* long-destroyed object would recreate that very thing and not a replica, so that we could restore the Colossus in the same way. Total destruction would be a serious practical obstacle to a thing's restoration, but not an absolutely insuperable one.

But it's hard to take the reassembly model seriously. One worry is that it requires a continuous spacetime path from this world to the next, just as body-snatching does. Another is that atoms, though stable, are not indestructible, suggesting that we could prevent someone from having life after death by annihilating her atoms. In that case not even God could restore her by reassembly.

A further awkward fact is that each of us contains atoms that once belonged to other people. The most spectacular example of this is cannibalism, but in fact it is commonplace. When someone dies, her dispersed atoms are taken up by plants and enter the food chain (a process expressed in the phrase "pushing up daisies"). This makes it all but inevitable that each of us contains vast numbers of atoms that were once parts of people long dead. If *all* of one's atoms had to be reassembled in the next world, few of us could get there. And it is little help to suppose that only a certain proportion of one's atoms are needed—more than half, say. The longer there are human beings on the earth, the greater will be the proportion of their atoms that were once parts of others. If our species survives long enough, virtually all of our descendants' atoms will once have been someone else's, making it impossible for everyone to have life after death by reassembly.

Many will object to these consequences on theological grounds. But it is doubtful whether the story is even possible. The reassembly model requires God to transport your original atoms to the next world and reassemble them there. Yet there are really no such things as "your original atoms." There are only the atoms making you up at a given moment during your life. Owing to metabolic turnover, you are constantly taking in new atoms and expelling old ones, like a slow-motion fountain. Very few of your current atoms were parts of you a year ago. For you to exist at a later time on the earth, you need not retain any of the atoms that compose you now. Why should you need all or most of them in order to exist in the next world?

Your retaining the same atoms is not only unnecessary for you to survive, but insufficient as well. An extraordinary cosmic coincidence could bring it about that someone living on the earth a thousand years from now was at some moment made up of precisely the atoms that now compose you. They could even be arranged in the same way. For an instant, that person would be physically and (we may suppose) mentally just as you are right now. Clearly she would not be you. She would have existed long before she had contained any of your atoms, and the remainder of her life would probably bear little resemblance to yours. Yet the reassembly model implies that she would be you.

So God cannot resurrect you by reassembling your atoms. Does this mean that the supposedly repaired watch you collect from the jeweler's is not your original watch, but a new one? If you can't reassemble a human being by putting her atoms back together, how could you reassemble a watch? But of course a watch taken apart on a jeweler's bench is not totally destroyed. Most of its char-

acteristic structure is preserved. Otherwise there would be no difference between reassembling a watch and manufacturing a new one from raw materials. A watchmaker could examine the heap of gears, wheels, springs, and so on and tell you not only that they once composed a watch, but exactly what sort of watch it was. If the watch really were totally destroyed—melted down, say—there would be little temptation to say that it could be restored if only we could reassemble the atoms. Your atoms are not like the gears of a watch. There is no “natural” way of putting them back together. They are more like the grains of sand in a sandcastle. And when death has done its work, you will be just as thoroughly annihilated.

8. The Transporter

The requirement that you must be composed of your original atoms in the next world looks wrong because you don’t retain the same atoms from day to day in ordinary life. So why not simply do away with that requirement? Let God take *any* atoms of the appropriate numbers and sorts and arrange them in the next world as yours are arranged now. Wouldn’t the resulting person be you?

This picture resembles the story of the “transporter” in the television series *Star Trek*. When the Captain has had enough adventures on the alien planet, he radios a colleague on board the Starship Enterprise and says, “Beam me up!” He then gradually disappears, and shortly a man looking and acting just like him materializes on board the ship. This man takes himself to be the Captain, and so do the other characters. It is easy to accept, at least while watching the show, that this is true.

Suppose the transporter works like this: It first “scans” the Captain, recording his complete physical state. This process vaporizes him, scattering his atoms to the four winds. The information recorded in the scan is then sent to the ship—by radio because that’s quickest, though the effect would be the same if it were written down and sent by mail or even dictated orally. There new atoms are arranged as the Captain’s were.

The proposal is not that God “beams us up” to the next world at the point of death. But if the *Star Trek* story is possible, it would show that we could get there even after being totally destroyed. God would have only to note how your atoms are arranged at the appropriate moment during your life. (I set aside the difficult question of what moment that would be—one that arises equally on the reassembly model.) There is no reason why this would have to vaporize you as the transporter does. When you die, your atoms disperse in the usual way. At a later date, God could then use the information gathered earlier to arrange new atoms in the next world as yours were at the appropriate moment in this one, resulting in someone both physically and mentally just like you were then.² And

² Or it might be some sort of perfect, heavenly matter rather than physical atoms. The points to come are unaffected by this complication.

that person really would be you, just as the man who steps out of the transporter room is the Captain. Call this the *Star Trek model* of radical resurrection.

9. Replicas and Originals

While the *Star Trek* model avoids some of the problems facing the reassembly model, it has plenty of its own. We can see one of them by imagining a variant of the transporter, just like the original except that it scans the Captain without dispersing his atoms. For him it's like having an x-ray. The information thereby gathered is then radioed to the ship, where it is used to arrange new atoms into a man just like the Captain, as before. The result is two men, one on the planet and one on the ship.

It should be clear that in this case the Captain stays where he is and the man appearing on the ship is a mere replica. Yet the *Star Trek* model seems to imply the opposite: the man on the ship would be the Captain. If the original transporter moves him to the ship, the variant transporter should too. And in that case the man remaining on the planet cannot *also* be the Captain. The Captain cannot both move to the ship and stay where he is. If the Captain and the man on the planet are one, and the Captain and the man on the ship are one, then by simple addition the man on the planet and the man on the ship must also be one. But they're not: there are two men at the end of the story. They may be exactly alike, but there are nevertheless two of them. So if the man on the ship is the Captain, as the *Star Trek* model implies, then the man on the planet must be a newly created replica. But that is absurd: you can't make a new man on the planet by arranging different atoms—atoms that are never parts of that man—on the ship. That would be like creating a house made of yellow bricks in Kansas just by arranging red bricks in Japan.

A second objection has to do with the difference between an original object and a copy or replica. Museums may one day develop the means to make perfect copies of their collections—reproductions so accurate that no amount of examination could ever tell the difference. We might disagree about whether this difference is aesthetically important, but it certainly exists: you couldn't exhibit an object made by museum technicians yesterday as a genuine Rembrandt.

The *Star Trek* model appears to erase this difference. Imagine that our Las Vegas hoteliers, keen to avoid conflict with the Greek Ministry for Antiquities, propose to build not the original Colossus, but a perfect replica of it. And as a gesture of good will they offer to rebuild the original in modern-day Rhodes. It is certainly possible to make a perfect replica of the Colossus. The *Star Trek* model would make it possible to restore the original as well. But how would the builders ensure that they made the replica in Las Vegas and the original in Rhodes, and not the other way around? For that matter, how could they avoid making replicas in both places? What would they have to do differently to produce a copy rather than the original, or vice versa?

There is clearly nothing they *could* do. On the *Star Trek* model, the way to make a perfect replica is precisely the same as the way to recreate the original:

gather up matter and arrange it as the matter of the original was arranged. But if there is no difference in the procedure, how could there be any difference in the outcome?

There may of course be processes, like tossing a coin, whose outcome is a matter of chance, and *can* differ from one occasion to another. But it's no good saying that if we construct something just like the Colossus, we may get the original or we may get a replica, in the way that a tossed coin may come up either heads or tails. If nothing else, that would allow both the object built in Las Vegas and the one built in Rhodes to be the original, just as two tossed coins can both come up heads. But that is impossible: there can be only one original statue. (Again, if the Las Vegas statue and the original were one and the Rhodes statue and the original were one, the Las Vegas statue and the Rhodes statue would have to be one. Yet the hoteliers built two statues.)

And even if there *were* somehow a difference between making a perfect copy and recreating the original object, the *Star Trek* model would make it entirely undetectable. Imagine being sent by the Greek Ministry to verify that the statue built in Rhodes really is the original Colossus and not merely a copy, as the contract specifies. How would you find out? If the building work has been done properly, no amount of scrutiny could provide any evidence for one verdict over the other. Your task would be impossible.

The same goes for the afterlife. On the *Star Trek* model, the way for God to get you to the next world is the same as the way for him to make a replica of you there, namely to arrange matter just as yours was arranged at the appropriate moment during your life. It looks as if there could *be* no difference between your appearing there and a newly made replica's appearing. But in that case there is no difference between having life after death and not having it: an unintelligible consequence.

For these and other reasons, it looks impossible for the transporter to produce anything but a replica of the Captain. It follows that God's arranging new atoms in the next world as yours were in this one can at best create a replica of you. Why, then, do *Star Trek* viewers accept that the Captain himself appears in the transporter room? Why do we not leap from the sofa and shout, "No! That's not the Captain! He's a replica!"? The answer has to do with the nature of fiction. We accept that the Captain can be teleported because that's what the story tells us. In order to appreciate a work of fiction, we have to suspend our disbelief and accept what it says. We don't worry about whether the events depicted are possible. Or at least not unless they're so obviously impossible that we lose patience. And the idea that someone could travel by teleportation is not *obviously* impossible. But many things are impossible in unobvious ways: if an episode of *Star Trek* had the Captain discovering the largest prime number, most viewers would go along with that too, despite the existence of a mathematical proof that there can be no such number. The mere fact that we accept something happening in fiction does nothing to show that it's possible.

10. Survival and Causal Connections

Let me try to draw the threads together. Suppose we agree that the Las Vegas hoteliers cannot rebuild the original Colossus, even if they use the original atoms. Suppose we also agree that the Captain remains on the planet in the variant-transporter story, and the man who materializes on the ship is a replica. And suppose that if someone were to create a being just like you right now in some distant place, you too would stay where you are, so that the being who appeared in the new place could be only a copy of you. You simply cannot move a thing from one place to another by building something exactly like it in the new place. It follows that the reassembly and *Star Trek* models are impossible. Arranging atoms in the next world could create a perfect replica of you—a brand-new person who falsely believed that she had lived on the earth. But it could never create you. The same goes for other models of radical resurrection.³

Why is replicating a thing's atomic structure not enough to recreate that very thing? This is a hard metaphysical question, and I don't have a full answer. But I think at least part of the answer has to do with causal connections. In the variant-transporter story there are two candidates for being the Captain, one on the planet and one on the ship. These men bear very different causal relations to him. The man on the planet gets his physical and mental states *directly* from the Captain: there could hardly be a closer causal connection between a thing as it is at one time and a thing as it is at another time than there is here. The man who appears on the ship, by contrast, bears only a tenuous causal connection to the Captain. His existence and his physical and mental state derive from the Captain's only in a roundabout way that passes through the transporter's scanners, data-storage devices, and assembly modules. He exists only because of the workings of the machine, which could have created him even if the Captain had never existed. (The fact that the man on the planet has the Captain's original atoms and the man on the ship is composed of new ones is merely an effect of this difference in causal connections.) That's why the variant transporter does not move the Captain from the planet to the ship.

Why is the Las Vegas Colossus not the real thing? Again, at least part of the answer is that its existence and nature are not a direct result of the existence and nature of the original monument. It exists only because of the work of modern-day archaeologists and builders, who could have created it even if the original Colossus had never existed.

This suggests a general principle: a thing existing today will still exist tomorrow only if its existence and state tomorrow are in some way a direct result of its existence and state today. To put it differently, a thing has to *cause itself* to continue existing. Your existing in the future is not something that other beings or outside forces can do for you. They can help—you wouldn't last long without air and food, and in some cases medical assistance. But they can't do the whole job. You have to do at least some of the work yourself, though of course this need not require any intention or conscious effort on your part: stones, too,

³ For an important challenge to this claim, see Zimmerman (1999) and Olson (2010).

maintain themselves in being, in that their continued existence is not due entirely to outside forces.

There is more to be said about this principle, but if it is roughly correct it is enough to show that the *Star Trek* model is impossible. When God arranges matter in the next world as yours was at the appropriate point during your natural life, the resulting person does not exist because you did, but only because of God's act. The causal chain linking that person to you goes entirely outside of you. You haven't caused yourself, even partially and unwittingly, to exist in the next world. That prevents the one who appears there from being you.

This explains better than anything I know of what happens in the stories of the Colossus and the variant transporter. It also accounts for the main claim that I have been arguing for: that nothing once totally destroyed can ever exist again. Anything appearing after a thing's total destruction cannot be a direct effect of the original thing's existing, but must be constructed entirely from scratch by someone or something else, be it God, the *Star Trek* transporter, the Las Vegas hoteliers, or what have you. And when a thing is constructed from scratch, it can never be directly caused by the original, and will exist only because of the work of other beings. For this reason it can never *be* the original.

That rules out radical resurrection. The afterlife requires a preservation model. Those who hope for the life of the world to come can only hope that the devastation of the grave is an illusion: that despite appearances we remain at least partly intact. They must hope that we are immaterial souls—or else that when we die God will fetch us whole in bodily form and put a counterfeit corpse in the grave.⁴

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