

1 Persons, Persistence, and Postmortem Survival

Conceptions of an afterlife pervade religious traditions across the globe. Even beyond those frameworks we might categorize as distinctively religious, there are examples of metaphysical commitments to a state of continued existence beyond death. Platonism is one such example.¹ The idea that physical death may not mark the end of an individual's existence has fascinated and attracted many throughout the centuries and continues to do so presently. And it is perhaps unsurprising that we are apt to wonder what it is that happens to us when we die. Is death the end of me and all the experiences that count as mine? Or might I exist, and indeed have – or have the capacity for – experiences beyond the time of my death? Does death mark extinction and therefore oblivion? Or am I immortal? Shall I be reincarnated, or perhaps resurrected? The possibility of an afterlife – of existence postmortem – is the central concern of this Element.

And yet, deep metaphysical puzzles arise at the very suggestion that persons might continue to exist following physical death. After all, how can I, this physical thing before you, continue to exist once the physical organism has expired? Do we not regularly observe the corpses that bodies become? We bury or burn them. And they eventually break down so that the bits that once made up Pythagoras, say, go on to occupy regions of the world, perhaps making up new organisms – new people, even. What would it mean, exactly, to say that a person can nevertheless survive this? And lest we be tempted to think that death is the only impediment to persistence we face, one need only try her hand at explaining how it is that eleven-year-old Elizabeth Windsor became heir presumptive in 1937 and continues as Queen Elizabeth still today (she is, at the time of this writing, very much alive). After all, it isn't simply the question of how – or, indeed, whether – a person can persist beyond death that introduces puzzles. The question of how it is that a person existing in 2021 is the *same* person as one who existed in 1937 is one that has long perplexed philosophers. As we find the Queen in 2021, she differs in many respects from her 1937 self. The collection of material bits that now makes up Her Majesty's body may not share a single member with the set that made up her body in 1937. And she is clearly psychologically quite dissimilar, having amassed a number of experiences and corresponding memories, and perhaps having forgotten some. In virtue of what, then, is she the same person? The question of a person's persistence across temporal durations, and indeed, through material and psychological changes takes on even greater mystery when so great a change as the cessation of life, or physical death, is added to the equation. Yet the nature of the question remains:

¹ See especially Plato's *Phaedo*.

What sorts of temporal intervals and material and/or psychological changes can a person undergo?

It is worth reflecting on the sense of “can” in the preceding sentence. If the question is about what sorts of changes a person is naturally able to undergo, it will yield one kind of answer. Yet that answer will be quite different from one offered in response to a question about what is metaphysically possible. We shall focus on the latter since several of the worldviews that include a commitment to an afterlife also posit the existence of an omnipotent being, or else that a certain metaphysical picture of the world is correct, as in a cycle of birth and rebirth. Accordingly, we should not be too quick to rule out scenarios that may be physically quite impossible, but nevertheless metaphysically possible, even if their occurrence might require the performance of a miracle by some being capable of doing so.² It will not be my aim to argue for, or against, any such pictures of reality. Rather, it is my suggestion that whether it is possible for one to survive one’s death depends largely on what sort of thing one is. And, moreover, a person’s nature, along with other facts about identity, will constrain what sorts of accounts of postmortem survival are possibly true.

1.1 Persons

What, then – metaphysically speaking – am I? That is, of what am I composed? I would seem, rather plainly, to have a body. This body has limbs and organs, a head, and in that head, a brain. In addition to these various parts, the body (and, of course, each of its parts) is composed of smaller bits familiar to the biologist, and ultimately, the physicist. Indeed, my body is a material object, to use the old vernacular, or perhaps more in keeping with current terminology, it is physical. It is not a simple task to define either of these terms. As for materiality, we can rely on Descartes’ understanding, according to which the primary feature of a material object is spatial extension. Beyond that, the material objects with which we are most familiar have a good number of other qualities, as well – e.g., mass, size, shape, color. And yet, not all items of interest to the physicist have these features (waves, fields) and some even seem to lack extension (point particles). So, while some will prefer to talk about bodies and other such objects as physical objects – whereby they mean to refer to the items of interest to the physicist – rather than to material objects, it is very often the case that when referring to macrolevel objects like bodies and brains, the terms are interchangeable.

Throughout, I will use the term “materialism” to refer to a theory about the nature of human persons and I will reserve “physicalism” as a name for a theory

² I take x to be metaphysically possible iff the world might have been such that x occurs. I take x to be physically possible iff the laws of nature do not preclude x ’s occurring.

about the nature of the relationship between the mental and the physical in such (and perhaps other) beings. This follows a fairly common practice in recent decades. Some terminological history may be helpful here. Unquestionably, “materialism” is the traditional term, having been in use since at least the seventeenth century to refer both to theories floated at the time, and several in play far earlier. “Physicalism,” on the other hand, was introduced in the early twentieth century by positivists who used it to refer to the linguistic thesis that every sentence can be translated, without loss of meaning, into a sentence about the physical.³ As applied to psychological sentences, Carnap famously claims that “all sentences of psychology describe physical occurrences, namely the physical behavior of humans and other animals.”⁴ He goes on to clarify that “this is a sub-thesis of the general thesis of *physicalism* to the effect that *physical language is a universal language*, that is, a language into which every sentence may be translated.”⁵ The linguistic thesis is a notable departure from the metaphysical project of inquiring into the compositional nature of persons. Indeed, the positivists would have deemed such inquiry fruitless. Given the influence on debates in the philosophy of mind of the logical behaviorism endorsed by Carnap, Hempel,⁶ and other positivists, it is perhaps of little surprise that the term “physicalism” gained traction among philosophers of mind. Those philosophers, on the other hand, wishing to return to some of the traditional metaphysical questions about persons have tended to retain “materialism.” Such may explain certain general trends in present usage by philosophical subdiscipline. Yet even this suggestion is somewhat tenuous since current practice is far from consistent, and plenty of exceptions remain. Interestingly, one will notice an uptick in the use of “physicalism” across an ever-expanding range of contexts these days, both within philosophy and beyond.

It is also important to note that my interest throughout will be squarely on the metaphysical nature of human persons, rather than on a broader question about the nature of reality, though similar terms (“materialism,” “physicalism,” “substance dualism”) are also used to refer to theories about reality and all that it contains. Should I at any time wish to refer to an account of the nature and features of reality, I will be explicit about doing so.

Focusing the discussion again on the nature of human persons, I – and, presumably, you – enjoy a rich, inner, mental life. We have perceptual experiences and felt sensations. Indeed, David Chalmers has compared the contents of our mental lives to a movie playing inside our heads.⁷ The movie plays while we are awake, and sometimes when we are asleep and dreaming. It has 3D vision

³ For a concise and helpful discussion of the terminological history, see Stoljar (2021).

⁴ Carnap (1932/33: 107). ⁵ Ibid. ⁶ Hempel (1949). ⁷ Chalmers (1996).

and surround sound. And yet, the experiences you and I have go well beyond those afforded by any movie since they also involve taste, touch, and pains and pleasures of various kinds. In addition to these experiential features of our inner, mental lives, we also hold beliefs, have desires, form intentions, arrive at decisions, and make inferences.

These phenomena constitute my mental, or psychological, life. And, whatever their ontological status, from the first-person perspective they are as real and certain as anything in the world. Of course, my mental features enjoy some kind of relationship with my physical features. It is a central concern of philosophers of mind to articulate the precise nature of that relationship. A number of the considerations relevant to these discussions will be apt for the topics discussed here, even if they are not our primary concern. It is particularly notable that a key motivation for taking seriously materialism about human persons appears to have been the emergence of neuroscience.⁸ Indeed, it is our relatively newfound ability to account for much of what occurs mentally by appealing to such things as neuronal firings and chemical processes in the brain that has transformed the landscape. There were, of course, materialists before the dawn of neuroscience as we now know it. Yet the proliferation of materialism across so broad a swath of disciplinary fields, managing even to spread beyond the academy, is a phenomenon rather unique to contemporary reality. For this reason, even where our central focus is on the nature of human persons, rather than on the relationship between mental states and their physical correlates, how we view that relationship will be informative for how we think about the nature of human persons. As regards the latter, the primary candidate theories are substance dualism and materialism. Let us begin with the first of these.

1.1.1 Substance Dualism

Substance dualism, of the sort championed by René Descartes, maintains that there are two kinds of substance: mental substances (minds) and physical substances (bodies).⁹ Furthermore, on a Cartesian picture a person is her mind

⁸ The suggestion that a primary motivation for materialism is empirical is not new. As we will see in subsection 1.1.2, Papineau has argued that the rise of physicalism is owing to certain key scientific advances.

⁹ There are non-Cartesian versions of dualism, of course. Long before Descartes, Plato offered the first known argument for the immortality of the soul. Following Descartes, Malebranche and Leibniz retained the commitment to distinct substances, but abandoned the claim that the mental and material substances causally interact. Where Aquinas' view fits is a matter I will leave to commentators, but in so far as an immaterial component does appear to be essential to a person's persistence, certain important dualistic features (for our purposes) are retained on the Thomistic account. And of course there are contemporary iterations, like Hasker's emergent substance dualism (Hasker 2001). It is also important to mention that the view I refer to as "Cartesian Dualism" has taken shape over the centuries since Descartes offered the view. Whether it

and so it is the continuation of the mind, rather than the continuation of the body, that accounts for a person's persistence over time. In *Discourse on the Method*, Descartes reasons as follows:

Next, I examined attentively what I was. I saw that while I could pretend that I had no body and that there was no world and no place for me to be in, I could not for all that pretend that I did not exist. I saw on the contrary that from the mere fact that I thought of doubting the truth of other things, it followed quite evidently and certainly that I existed; whereas if I had merely ceased thinking, even if everything else I had ever imagined had been true, I should have had no reason to believe that I existed. From this I knew I was a substance whose whole essence or nature is solely to think, and which does not require any place, or depend on any material thing, in order to exist. Accordingly, this "I" – that is, the soul by which I am what I am – is entirely distinct from the body, and indeed is easier to know than the body, and would not fail to be whatever it is, even if the body did not exist.¹⁰

Two things here are worth noting. First, Descartes states that I am a thing "whose whole essence or nature is solely to think."¹¹ In the *Meditations*, Descartes puts it this way: "Just because I know certainly that I exist, and that meanwhile I do not remark that any other thing necessarily pertains to my nature or essence, excepting that I am a thinking thing, I rightly conclude that my essence, consists solely in the fact that I am a thinking thing."¹² Whether we assign the term "soul" or "mind" to this entity is of little import. What is key is that it is the thing that does the thinking, feeling, doubting, and so on. It is the subject of thought and experience. Indeed, it is me. And so, in this way, I am a substance – a mental substance. Richard Swinburne defines a mental substance as one "for which the possession of some mental property is essential."¹³ For such a substance to exist requires that it have a conscious experience or be in a mental state like that of belief or desire, or else be disposed to have such sensations, thoughts, or similar (mental) events.

Second, Descartes claims that this thing that I am (a soul) can persist even if my body does not, or in the event that the two somehow become detached from one another. The implication, of course, is that I am not my body, nor do I depend on my body for existence. And here it may be helpful to distinguish between one's being a person and one's being a human being. A human is any person whose body (an organism) belongs to a certain biological kind (the species *Homo sapiens*, or else a designation slightly broader, if you prefer). Or, as Swinburne puts it, "any persons who have or have had at some time a kind of

accurately represents the precise view that Descartes himself held is a matter I leave to Descartes exegetes who will have considerably more to offer on that score than I.

¹⁰ Descartes (1988: 36). ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 36. ¹² *Ibid.*, 190. ¹³ Swinburne (2013:141).

body and an ancestry similar to those persons whom we call ‘humans’ today.”¹⁴ Persons, on the other hand, may be – or else may have – biological organisms, or they may not (as in the case of beings posited by some religious traditions, like gods, angels, or demons). And if they do, those bodies may or may not belong to the species *Homo sapiens*. Indeed, they may not be of Earth at all, as in the case of an extraterrestrial that experiences pain, say.

The path to an account of an afterlife is a straightforward one. Upon death, my body becomes a corpse and eventually decays or is otherwise destroyed (immediately or eventually). Either by some miracle, or because it is by its very nature immortal, my mind nevertheless persists. Perhaps it does so in a disembodied state (à la Plato), or else it comes to inhabit a new body; perhaps a glorified one. And because I am my mind, it is I that persists postmortem. The death of my physical body needn’t be an impediment to my continued existence because I am neither identical to it, nor do I depend on it for my existence.

Swinburne, who himself endorses a neo-Cartesian view,¹⁵ states that “there seems no contradiction in the supposition that a person might acquire a totally new body (including a completely new brain) – as many religious accounts of life after death claim that men do.”¹⁶ To demonstrate, he offers two thought experiments. The first asks us to imagine that I bear a relationship to an alternative body analogous to the relationship I currently bear to the body that I now count as my own. In considering this body *mine*, I note that I can move and otherwise operate its limbs so as to produce effects in the world directly. When I intend to depress the keys on the keyboard, my fingers move so as to do so. I need not also form an intention to move my fingers or initiate a causal sequence originating with electrical firings in my brain and resulting in muscle bursts of the requisite sort. I merely intend to use the keyboard to type, and my limbs oblige. I also take in information via the eyes and ears belonging to this body. And I experience pain when parts of it are damaged. Whatever the precise nature of the connection that obtains between me and the body I now occupy, we might imagine that I bear that very relationship to an alternative body. As Swinburne puts it:

[I]s it not coherent to suppose that I might suddenly find that my present body no longer served this function, that I could no longer acquire information through these eyes or move these limbs, but might discover that another body served the same functions? I might find myself moving other limbs and acquiring information through other eyes. Then I would have a totally new

¹⁴ Ibid., 142.

¹⁵ Swinburne holds that human persons are mind–body composites, but that only the mind is essential.

¹⁶ Swinburne (1984: 525)