

# AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL PROBLEM FOR RESURRECTION

YANN SCHMITT

*CeSor, EHESS, Paris*

**Abstract.** Some theists have adopted materialism for human persons. They associate this metaphysics with their belief in resurrection and focus on problems arising from personal identity, temporal gaps or material constitution, but, in this paper, I argue that being a materialist for human persons leads to an epistemological problem regarding our knowledge of God's life. The only way to avoid this problem is to choose a particular materialist metaphysics for human persons, that is, a constitution theory that emphasizes the irreducibility of the first-person perspective.

The coherence of theism has been challenged at length, but most of the time, divine attributes are examined. The internal coherence – for example, is it possible to be omnipotent? –, the coherence between a divine attribute and the others – for example, is it possible to be free and omniscient? – or the coherence of some attributes with world features such as evil were under fire for decades. Religious language and philosophical language about God have also been strongly considered. In this article, I would like to examine a particular case of another general problem. Using philosophical tools to express theistic claims requires us to verify if this use is compatible with our practice of philosophy of religion. In Schmitt (2012), regarding divine simplicity, I tried to clarify some implications of the choice of a particular ontology. Now, I will focus on the compatibility between theistic materialism and the epistemology of religious beliefs, or more narrowly on the epistemology of philosophy of religion.

Atheism is commonly associated with materialism for human persons (MHP). By MHP, I mean an ontological theory based upon

this principle: a person is a material object without any non-material substantial part. I insist on the negation of non-material *substantial* part because we can conceive consciousness as a part of the personal life or instantiations of properties as formal parts or ontological parts of the person. But, these kinds of parts, if they exist, are not substantial. Then, if like Descartes in his letter to Regius (January 1642), we consider that a human being is a substantial union of both a soul and a material body, we are not proponents of MHP, this seems pretty obvious. But if we believe that qualia exist and that they are not supported by any non-material substance, we are indeed materialist for human persons (HP). Usually, atheism is associated with materialism and it is fair to say that atheism is generally implied by materialism. The implication here is of course indirect but I summarize what could be a powerful argument for atheism if materialism appears to be true.

Proponents of Christian materialism such as Peter van Inwagen, Trenton Merricks or Lynne Rudder Baker try to accommodate their views on HP, that is MHP, and the core doctrine of their religion, Christianity in that case. Of course, some Jews or some Muslims could defend the compatibility of MHP with their beliefs. Nevertheless, I will focus on Christian materialism, or to say it more carefully, on arguments developed by Christian philosophers, but resurrection or survival are accepted beyond Christian communities, and then I hope my argument will have a wider interest, much of what is said can be applied to other religions and traditions and of course, it concerns atheists and theists as well.

Resurrection is one of the most commonly debated subjects for those who defend both MHP and theism. If a human person is only a material substance, it seems that she will vanish when she dies, when her heart or her brain activities stop. But fortunately, God has powerful means and can keep her and us alive and let our corpses slowly disappear. For the sake of the argument, I will accept that the conjunction of MHP and theism concerning resurrection is coherent.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, this trend of thoughts, if coherent and possibly true, leads to a currently unnoticed epistemological problem. For a theist, God is a spiritual substance or a spiritual agent, even if by 'spiritual substance' or 'spiritual agent' she

---

<sup>1</sup> See van Inwagen (1998), Zimmerman (1999) and Baker (1995; 2007). See also Merricks (1999) for a sceptical position on how resurrection can take place if we adopt a MHP.

means something analogical with what is usually called 'a spiritual substance' or 'a spiritual agent'. But a materialist for HP believes that these notions are associated with false beliefs and illusions, especially the concept of a spiritual agent with mental properties. Hence, there is an epistemological objection based on MHP against theism. My point is that some kind of MHP can face out this epistemological challenge and some cannot. More precisely, taken together as complementary theories, MHP and an account of the non-reductionist first-person perspective (FPP) can lead to satisfactory theistic representations of God.

The materialist account of survival leads to an epistemological problem for MHP. In order to believe rationally that God intends to save people or wants that a miracle happens, etc., we have to master some mental concepts such as intention, preference, hope, knowledge, etc. But these concepts have an initial meaning when they apply to human persons and maybe to some animals. The difference between finite and infinite beings leads to well-known semantic problems in philosophy of religion. My point is to emphasize other difficulties in transferring mental concepts used for HP conceived as material beings to a spiritual being. No human person provides a ground for comparisons or analogies because we do not entertain any natural knowledge of a spiritual or mental substance. Neither introspection or external perception are acquaintances with a non-material substance enduring a mental and non-physical life.

Suppose you are a type-type identity proponent regarding the mind-body problem. You cannot apply your concept of knowledge to God because you already know that this concept is only satisfied by a material being, maybe a certain structure of the brain. But a materialist for HP does not have to adopt such a strong reductionist view, functionalists have already refuted the type-type theory at length and I will adopt their critiques.

Now suppose you are a token-token proponent. The problem for MHP is not related to our use of mental concepts but to events. If any mental event is a material event, or if any mental property instance is a physical property instance, how can we believe that God instantiates mental properties? I think two answers can be suggested, two unsatisfying answers indeed.

1) Some psychologists explain that young and older people are spontaneously dualists.<sup>2</sup> For people who entertain dualist intuitions,

---

<sup>2</sup> See for example Bloom (2007).

mental concepts or properties apply to an immaterial substance, their soul or simply themselves. So they entertain an attribution practice based on some illusory intuitions. But this practice is useful in everyday life, it does the job perfectly. Why could we not use it for God? Anthropomorphism could be a way to be related to God, provided some strong restrictions on what is projected from human to God. But using a global illusion to practice philosophy of religion is not satisfying at all. Suppose you want to defend the existence of free will on the assumption that we have a deceiving conception of our voluntary acts. Maybe you could deal with everyday practices and talks about volitions and freedom but you are surely not in position to argue for the existence of free will, and neither are you in position to explain free will properties.

2) The second proposal in order to solve the epistemological problem can be found in van Inwagen's papers on dualism and materialism.<sup>3</sup> He does not include events in his ontology and this exclusion could, in the first place, facilitate the development of a theistic account of MHP. Van Inwagen argues that properties and substances are the only elements of his ontology. He assumes that all substances can be and are material (except God) and that they exemplify different properties. Instead of the misleading difference between physical and mental properties, he claims that properties are different in content but not in nature. Some properties attribute mental aspects to substances which are purely material, and some attribute physical aspects. All properties have the same nature, they are abstract entities but these abstract entities have very different contents (that is, mental or physical contents). Then a material substance can have mental and physical properties, identical in nature but different in content. No dualistic conception of persons is required. The important point when we are dealing with the philosophy of religion problem is that mental properties have a content independent of the substances that instantiate them.

At this stage of reasoning, one could find an elegant way to defend mental properties attribution to God conceived as a non-material substance and, at the same time, to HP conceived as material beings. There are no physical events different from mental events in any kind of substance, but only events which are not defined by the content of the property but by the nature of the substance. So there are human events when physical and mental properties are instantiated by human beings

---

<sup>3</sup> See van Inwagen (1995; 2007).

and they are divine events when mental properties are instantiated by God. The content of mental properties that we know from our experience of ourselves and others can be attributed to God. Van Inwagen goes further. There is no need for events. A well founded attribution of mental properties to God could be assumed. God, a spiritual substance, instantiates properties with a mental content and does not instantiate properties with a physical content, all mentions of events is omitted.

Of course, the proponent of this kind of solution has to develop a very abstract account of mental properties. In a functionalist theory of mind, mental properties are more general and abstract than physical properties. Being afraid is a mental property or state more general than having a certain neurological structure. For MHP in a theistic perspective, the point is that having a mental property characterizes physical and spiritual substances, animals, human persons and God. But is it really possible or legitimate to apply a concept to a mental substance if the first thing we know is that a mental substance is just an unknown substance or worth a kind of substance about which, in the first place, we only have illusions.

Van Inwagen argues that there is a real mystery in the possibility of subjective experiences in a material entity not because of the physical nature of persons but because of the mystery of the FPP relative to thoughts. We can use an argument provided by van Inwagen. Van Inwagen explains that we cannot appeal to the mystery of the body's identity or of the life's continuity in the case of life after death. Even if God's nature is mysterious or unknowable, there is no good reason to think that we cannot understand, or almost understand, our material constitution. So we should find an explanation of bodily resurrection and that is what van Inwagen provides in his paper. If we should accept that God's nature is mysterious, why do we have to believe that our thinking nature is mysterious? I do not see strong reasons for that.

More pressing: if the instantiation of a property with a mental content is mysterious, it is far less than what a theist materialist for HP has to deal with. Maybe thinking is mysterious, but then a thinking substance is far more mysterious. Being conscious of our limits, especially when we try to think about God, is an intellectual virtue. But if the substance and the instantiation of the property are mysterious, what are we thinking about when we talk about God's intention, intentional action etc., that is when we practice philosophy of religion? Should we adopt a radical negative theology? Like Bartleby, I would prefer not to. Invoking some analogy

between our thoughts and God is also a dead end if we do not know any thinking substance and declare that thinking, even for human persons, is a mysterious event or situation.

Another solution for the materialist for HP who wants to defend theism can be deduced from the aporias of van Inwagen's account. It is a middle way between substance dualistic accounts of HP and animalism, the reduction of HP to living animals, a position assumed by van Inwagen. FPP has to be emphasized in this third way (Baker 2001; 2013) because it has persistence conditions which preclude animalism and do not imply dualism.

If a FPP characterizes HP, if a HP is a material substance, and if we have a clear theory of these facts, then we can think about God, at least analogically. I take Baker's account to be a very promising way to rebut the epistemological objection.

The FPP for a human person is defined by Lynne Rudder Baker like this:

An ability to conceive of oneself as oneself, from the first person, without recourse to a name, description, or other third-person referring device.  
(2013: 31)

The rudimentary stage of FPP can be found in mammals or infants. They do have consciousness and they act from a FPP, but they cannot conceive themselves as themselves, because of the lack of self concepts. Only adult human persons can have this ability illustrated or expressed by a reflexive use of pronouns in sentences like: 'I protested that I was overcharged.' In such cases, I conceive myself as myself, I use self concepts in order to perform self attributions. My relation to myself does not depend on a view from nowhere, neither on someone's point of view but on my singular point of view. Being able to use self concepts characterizes the robust stage of FPP. This evolved stage depends on language with first person terms mastered by adults or not too young children. It is often called self consciousness and Baker thinks FPP is essential to the person.

If FPP is not reducible to a third-person perspective or eliminable, it seems that we should defend some kind of dualism, for example a cartesian dualism for whom the FPP indicates the existence of a soul, a mental or spiritual substance different from the body which can be analyzed from a third-person perspective. Baker argues that the acknowledgment of the irreducibility of the FPP or the impossibility of eliminating the FPP does not imply any rejection of naturalism or materialism. Naturalism

in the broad sense (Baker 2000: 22) or materialism about the natural order only claim that there is no need for any soul or supernatural being if we want to understand the first-person ability. It does not exclude the possible existence of a God, but focusing on human thoughts, we can defend a genuine materialist theory of persons and the irreducible FPP as an ability of a material substance and not as an essential attribute of a mental substance separated from the body.

I accept without any further justification the irreducibility or the impossibility of eliminating FPP in a MHP because if it were not the case we would be back to some already examined claims very closed to van Inwagen's. Some could find that this strategy presupposes too much. The irreducibility or the impossibility of eliminating the FPP are strong claims that need powerful arguments which I shall not provide but my point is just to examine if, in philosophy of religion or in religious practices, someone can start a reasoning with the premise that a materialist conception of the mind is true.

Summarizing her materialist conception of HP, Baker explains:

We whole persons are constituted by whole bodies. Brains have a special role in providing the mechanisms that make possible our mental lives. But it is not my brain itself that would like to go on a river cruise; it is not my brain that regrets having offended you. I did it; I regret it. And I am not identical to a brain. Neither brains nor minds are subjects of experience or are rational or moral agents; we persons are. (2011: 63)

To understand how materialism can be defended and how FPP makes a genuine difference in contrast with third-person perspective, the constitution relation is fundamental. Every particular individual is constituted by one or more aggregates of material particles. But what constitutes an individual is not what is identical with this individual. Persons are not their body like Michelangelo's David is not the piece of marble which constitutes the statue. The primary kind of David is not the primary kind of the piece of marble, and then, there are two objects.

Constitution is a relation between identity and separated existence. Constitution is not identity because it does not satisfy Leibniz's law, that is the identity of indiscernibles. David and the piece of marble have different modal properties so they cannot be identical, they are two different objects. For example, if someone melts the piece of marble, this piece still exists but is carved into another shape, and at the same time David was destroyed. The persistence conditions of David and of the

piece of marble are different, their modal properties are not identical. So, from Leibniz's law, David and the piece of marble are not identical. Constitution is also linked to the necessity of identity, that is if  $x$  is identical with  $y$ , then necessarily  $x$  is identical with  $y$ . No need here to enter in the controversial conception of a contingent identity.

But the relation of constitution is not mere coincidence between two objects located at the very same place. David depends on the piece of marble and on favourable circumstances, its aesthetic properties depend on the physical properties of the marble, on the form taken by the piece of marble and on its relations to artists, critics and maybe other statues and artworks – those are the favourable circumstances. It is worth noting that among the properties of David, there are extrinsic but essential properties such as being an object in the artistic world. So mereology cannot deal with constitution, mereological composition is not sufficient to analyze the emergence of David's properties from the properties of the piece of marble and from the artistic world.

So constitution is an asymmetric relation that introduces an ontological hierarchy because David is more complex than the piece of marble. David does not simply supervene on the piece of marble, supervenience characterizes a relation between properties of an object and not the relation between two objects. Of course, when an object is constituted by another one, it has new properties, especially new causal powers. These new causal powers indicate the existence of a new object dependent on the former but not identical with it.

The difference between body and person is maybe clearer now: two objects belong to two primary kinds but only one constitutes the other. The persistence conditions of a body which is a human organism could be the persistence of a shape or of a life belonging to human species. The difficulty of defining clear persistence conditions for any body is that bodies always gain and lose particles and always seem to change. The person does not face this unceasing change or the change in the person does not seem to be dependent on the gain or loss of a particle. So from Leibniz's law, we should acknowledge that persons are not identical with their bodies. But human persons are necessarily embodied, that they have to have a body in order to entertain a FPP. Being necessarily embodied does not imply that this person is necessarily composed of this body. A change in the body and maybe a change of the body itself is not incompatible with the persistence of the person if mechanisms that support our person-level activities or states operate.

This point urges us to understand how resurrection is possible if we are material beings with a FPP, that is persons constituted by material bodies. Baker (1995) exposes different conceptions of resurrection coherent with different non-dualistic views about HP. If you believe in an intermediate state between death and life after death, it is not a necessary condition that you have a soul sleeping in Christ but an intermediate and pre-resurrected body can have the same role. What is more surprising in Baker's defence of a non-dualistic conception of resurrection is her acceptance of temporal gaps. If persons are not composed of a soul and a body but constituted of a body, when they die, it seems that the body disappears, and then the person constituted of it also vanishes. Baker recalls van Inwagen's treatment of this problem (van Inwagen: 1998). She agrees with his analysis of Augustine's manuscript but departs from his rejection of temporal gap for HP. Augustine's manuscript cannot be resurrected by God because in order to be a Augustine's manuscript, the piece of matter that composed it has to have Augustine in its origin and in the causes that lead to the manuscript. Therefore, even God cannot produce a genuine Augustine's manuscript by himself. But human person resurrection does not depend, says Baker, on the origin, namely two other human persons, or at least parts of them, but it depends only on some body which is able to constitute the same person God wants to resurrect.

If creation of a resurrected body is within the power of God at all, it seems to me equally in his power to produce the conditions necessary for the body to constitute Smith, where what makes Smith the person she is are her characteristic intentional states, including first-person reference to her body. The fact that a certain resurrection body would not exist without the direct intervention of God is irrelevant to whether or not it was Smith's body – just as the fact that a certain bionic body would not exist without the direct intervention of scientists and surgeons is irrelevant to whether or not it is Smith's body. (Baker 1995: 499)

Here an important point is worth to be noticed. It is not necessary for resurrection that the same body still exists or returns to life, it is more important that the same person, a material person, is still alive or returns to life. The resurrected person only needs to be constituted of a body that allows her to be the very person she was. Her materialism only implies that a person cannot exist without some body but not that a person cannot exist without any body changes (Baker 2011: 1). Michael Rea

objects that the resurrected body is a mere reincarnated body (2009: 13-4) because it is not the same body. But reincarnation depends on a preserved soul which is linked to a new body. In the constitution view, no soul is preserved, and then it is very strange to understand this theory of survival as a reincarnation. Despite this concern, I think Baker's account is more promising. It keeps together two important claims: the material person, that is a person constituted by a body, without any other entity as a soul, is preserved and it is possible that life after death would be highly different from mundane life and so the resurrected body could be very different from the mundane body provided it could make the person like she was before.<sup>4</sup>

FPP is not substantial by itself so it cannot be conserved like an autonomous entity. Even strong transformations like the one mentioned in the above quotation suppose a continuity. If a scientist practices a whole change of the particles composing a body, we generally believe he does not destroy the body and replaces it by another body worked out elsewhere. What is stipulated is that the living body is progressively transformed by successive substitutions of some parts. With that kind of change, the FPP is preserved because each function of the body that is necessary for the FPP is preserved by the thoroughness of the surgeon. Baker compares resurrection with this practice but God is not a surgeon. In one shot, he replaces the body by another one. This is a miracle performed by God which gives us a new life. If FPP depends on the proper functioning of the body and if we want to avoid the temporal gap problem, we need to say that God has to replace the dead body by a resurrected body immediately, this provides the continuity of the person we need. But here lies the problem of human nature and of the origin of the person pointed out by van Inwagen. The resurrected body is a created body and not a natural body. It no longer belongs to the primary kind 'human body'. The organism that constitutes the resurrected person does not belong to the species 'Homo sapiens' any longer since it was created by God as Augustine's manuscript in van Inwagen's story. It does not preclude that the person treats the resurrected body as her body, she can still adopt a FPP on it. It is her body, she refers to it from the inside and not from a third-person perspective. But her body is not a human

---

<sup>4</sup> Baker does not fall in the same problems as Olson (1997) or Corcoran (1998) who suppose that human beings are essentially animals or organisms and then have problems to think of a resurrection where our body is radically different.

organism. So the resurrected person is always a person because of her FPP but she is not human. Being human is a property that the person has derivatively, from her being constituted by a human organism. If the body is not a human organism, the person constituted by this body cannot be human, a member of the human species, a point unobserved by Baker. Maybe this fact is not a problem. After death, we cannot say that a human person is human in a biological sense, belonging to the human species is an earthly fact, unlike being resurrected.<sup>5</sup> Baker urges us to consider that the doctrine of resurrection cannot require identity of the earthly body and the resurrected body because the earthly body seems essentially corruptible and the resurrected body is not (2011: 9).

I can restate my point in terms of identity. After resurrection, a person is numerically the same but qualitatively very different, and this difference is manifested by her new body which is generally called a glorified one. The problem of the temporal gap can be solved. The numerical identity of the body is not presupposed by our theory. The important point is that the person is numerically the same. But there is also a problem of temporal gap for personal identity over time. This worry seems less pressing for me. I think we can find a clear and good analogy of the rebirth of the person after death in our earthly life. When a person is sleeping and wakes up, it is difficult to say that there is not a temporal gap in her life but a perfect identity over time, despite this temporal gap. It is even clearer if we imagine someone in a coma. I do not want to suggest that a psychological account of personal numerical identity over time is needed. I think I do not have to decide which criterion is required or even if a criterion is absolutely required (Merricks 1998). But there is no origin problem pointed out by van Inwagen in that case. If we allow a temporal gap and then a new production of the body, even if the resurrected body is qualitatively the same, the new body is the base of emergence or re-emergence of the person. The person is not created directly by God as Augustine's manuscript is in van Inwagen's story. The person like every human person comes into existence because of the particular structure of a body in certain environmental conditions.

With this materialist theory of HP, we find grounds for analogy between our mental life and God's one in order to rebut the epistemological objection. In our ordinary life, we grasp mental concepts

---

<sup>5</sup> For Christians, Jesus Christ would be an exception, I do not enter in this particular case, because the Incarnation is a very particular case of being a human person.

and properties and it is legitimate to think of God, at least analogically, as a mental substance. We do not project some delusions about us on God, we do not claim that there is a fundamental mystery in mental life. What has been shown is that theistic materialists have to express their beliefs, and especially resurrection, with a particular metaphysics for HP, that is a composition theory of persons which emphasizes Fp. This particular metaphysics is required to harmonize religious beliefs and their philosophical explication.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Baker, L. R. 1995. 'Need a Christian be a Mind-Body Dualist?', *Faith and Philosophy*, 12: 489–504
- Baker, L. R. 2000. *Persons and Bodies* (New York: Cambridge University Press)
- Baker, L. R. 2007. 'Persons and the Metaphysics of Resurrection', *Religious Studies*, 43: 333–48
- Baker, L. R. 2011. 'Beyond the Cartesian Self', *Phenomenology and Mind*, 1(5): 60–69
- Baker, L. R. *Naturalism and the First-Person Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press)
- Bloom, P. 2007. 'Religion is Natural', *Developmental Science*, 10 (1): 147–151
- Corcoran, K. J. 1998. 'Persons and Bodies', *Faith and Philosophy*, 15: 324–340
- Merricks, T. 1998. 'There Are No Criteria of Identity Over Time', *Noûs* 32: 106–124
- Merricks, T. 1999. 'The Resurrection of the Body and the Life Everlasting' in Michael Murray (ed.), *Reason for the Hope Within* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), pp. 261–286
- Olson, E. 1997. *The Human Animal: Personal Identity Without Psychology* (New York: Oxford University Press)
- Rea, M. 2009. *Oxford Readings in Philosophical Theology: Volume 2: Providence, Scripture, and Resurrection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)
- Van Inwagen, P. 1995. 'Dualism and Materialism: Athens and Jerusalem?', *Faith and Philosophy*, 12: 475–488
- Van Inwagen, P. 1998. *The Possibility of Resurrection and Other Essays in Christian Apologetics* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press)
- Van Inwagen, P. 'A Theory of Properties', *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics*, 1: 107–138
- Zimmerman, D. 1999. 'The Compatibility of Materialism and Survival: The "Falling Elevator" Model', *Faith and Philosophy*, 16: 194–212