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# GOD AS AN INCORPOREAL PERSON

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## 1 Introduction

A central project in analytic philosophical theology is to establish the coherence of theism – the bare logical possibility of the existence of God. Arguments against the coherence of theism are many. To give just two examples, the Paradox of the Stone is said to show the impossibility of omnipotence, while an array of arguments try to show the incompatibility of omniscience with immutability. Obviously, rebutting these arguments should be a matter of great concern for the theist. If God's existence is not even logically possible, then arguments for the existence of God and questions about the rationality of belief in God in the absence of evidence are cut short. When it comes to impossible beings, there can be no question about evidence for them or the rationality of belief in them.

This paper seeks to contribute to the project of defending the coherence of theism by rebutting three standard arguments against the coherence of the claim that God is an incorporeal person. According to *the semantic argument*, 'is corporeal' is part of the meaning of the word 'person', and so the predicate 'is an incorporeal person' cannot possibly apply to anything – including God. According to *the personal identity argument*, nothing could make it the case that an incorporeal person persisted over time, so no incorporeal thing could be a persisting person. According to *the argument from perception and agency*, no incorporeal person could perceive the world or act in it, and so incorporeality is incompatible with the divine attributes of omniscience and omnipotence.

## 2 The semantic argument

Anthony Flew (at least, the *old* Anthony Flew!) has been a leading proponent of the semantic argument. Although he directed the argument against the possibility of a human being surviving death by becoming an incorporeal person, it applies just as well to the bare idea of an incorporeal person. Here are his clearest statements of it.

...it would be quite possible to imagine all sorts of bizarre phenomena which we should feel inclined to describe as 'the activities of disembodied people'....[but] we shall be attaching sense to an expression – 'disembodied person' – for which previously no sense had been provided. We are thereby introducing a new sense of the word 'person'. Yet it may appear to us and to others as if we have discovered a new sort of person, or a new state in which a person can be. Whereas a disembodied person is no more a special sort of person than is an imaginary person, and....disembodiment is no more a possible

state of a person than is non-existence. (1956, pp. 248-9)

...we can put the crucial point this way: in expressions such as 'bodiless person' or 'disembodied person' the adjectives are alienans adjectives; like 'positive' in 'positive freedom', or 'People's' in 'People's Democracy'. (1987, p. 106)

Person words are quite manifestly and undeniably taught and learnt and used by and for reference to a certain sort of corporeal object....This was the point which I tried to epitomize in the possibly misleading slogan: 'People are what you meet.'

Wherever we may end quite certainly this is where we have to begin. Perhaps it will prove to be possible to construct a sense for the expression *incorporeal person* such that there would be sufficient resemblance between persons and incorporeal persons to justify us in using the same word to denominate both...Perhaps at the same time we might show how, and how many of, the innumerable words which are now applied only or distinctively to persons – and the meanings of which are at present taught and learnt with reference to the doings and sufferings of these familiar beings – could be predicated, either unequivocally or analogously, of such putative incorporeal persons. But it is at least not obvious that these intellectual projects could be brought to a successful issue. For it is as members of a class of material objects, albeit a very special class, that persons are identified and individuated. (1965)

Flew's argument has two basic premises. The first is an empirical premise about how we come to know the meaning of and how we typically use the word 'person' – namely, that, as Flew says, 'person words are quite manifestly and undeniably taught and learnt and used by and for reference to a certain sort of corporeal object.' The second is an unstated philosophical premise, one I suspect is derived from so-called 'ordinary language philosophy.' The unstated premise is that the meaning of a term is fixed by its acquisition and standard usage, so that we violate the rules for proper use of 'person' if we apply the term 'person' in a non-standard way or in a way that deviates too far from its original realm of application. From these premises it follows that we cannot meaningfully use the term 'person' to refer to an incorporeal thing. Because 'person words are quite manifestly and undeniably taught and learnt and used by and for reference to a certain sort of corporeal object,' it is part of the meaning of the term 'person' that a person is a corporeal thing. Flew allows that we can 'construct a sense for the expression *incorporeal person*,' but he is sceptical

that much of the core meaning of the original term 'person' would transfer over to this new-fangled linguistic creation. To state the conclusion of this semantic argument bluntly, the statement 'God is an incorporeal person' is nonsense *if* we are using the term 'person' literally.

A similar line of argument grows out of P.F. Strawson's characterization of personhood (1959, Ch. 3) as a status involving the applicability of both personalistic, or P-predicates (e.g. 'is angry,' 'thinks hard,' etc.) and material, or M-predicates (e.g. 'weighs 100 kilograms,' 'has black hair,' etc.). As we acquire and use P-predicates, we are always pointed to things such that M-predicates apply as well. Strawson takes this to suggest that if M-predicates do not apply to a thing, then neither can P-predicates. Richard Swinburne (1977, pp. 106-7) responds that this is only a problem for the coherence of theism if M-predicates could not apply to an incorporeal thing. It may seem obvious that they could not, but if we allow that an incorporeal being can control and know directly the physical world, then perhaps M-predicates can apply to that being. For example, 'parted the Red Sea' is arguably an M-predicate, insofar as it predicates activity in the material world. Likewise, 'heard the cries of the Israelites' is arguably an M-predicate, insofar as it predicates knowledge of the material world. Thus even if Strawson is right that where M-predicates do not apply, neither do P-predicates, it still does not follow that P-predicates could not apply to an incorporeal being. That would only follow if nothing incorporeal could perceive this world or act in it. This points us to the argument from perception and agency – an argument I will address at the end of this paper.

In my opinion the semantic argument faces a fundamental problem: the unstated philosophical premise is false. It is not true in all cases that the meaning of a term is fixed by its standard usage and its standard method of being taught and learnt, and it is not true that we cannot extend the application of a term beyond these standards unless we (a) use the term in a non-literal way or (b) explicitly change the meaning of the term. Specifically, this premise is not true when it comes to theoretical or technical terms. William Alston makes this point in his essay 'Can We Speak Literally of God?' (1989). He says the question of whether terms can be applied to God literally is not equivalent to the question of whether terms, in the senses they bear outside of religious discourse, can be applied to God literally. It is not generally true, Alston says, that theoretical or technical senses of terms cannot be applied literally.

I do not want to contest [the] claim about the necessary order of language learning, though there is much to be said on both sides. I will confine myself to pointing out that even if this claim is granted, it does

not follow that terms can be literally applied to God only in senses in which they also are true of human beings and other creatures. For the fact that we must begin with creatures is quite compatible with the supposition that at some later stage terms take on special technical senses in theology. After all, that is what happens in science.' (1989, p. 45)

If Alston is correct, and if religious uses of language count as theoretical or technical uses, then it will be possible that the statement 'God is an incorporeal person' is literally true – in which case, on this count at least, theism is not incoherent.

To illustrate Alston's point, let us consider some cases. Is there any reason to think we cannot apply the term 'work' *literally* to refer to the product of the force applied to a body and distance the body has moved? This is the technical meaning of 'work' in physics, but that is not the traditional, everyday meaning of the word 'work'. If a man in a quarry spends an hour trying but failing to budge a two-ton rock, the man has done work in the ordinary sense of 'work' but has done no work in the physicist's sense of 'work'. Does this show that, when the physicist says 'The man in the quarry did no work,' the physicist was not using the word 'work' literally? I do not see why.

I will go even further and say that the way in which people learn and use theoretical and technical terms oftentimes is irrelevant to the meaning of those terms. For example, the term 'adrenalin' refers to a very specific bio-chemical. To know what 'adrenalin' means, one needs to do some science, not consult the linguistic practices of everyday people. Only a relatively small, bio-chemically literate group of people know what 'adrenalin' really means. Yet everyone uses the term, and hardly anyone learns how to do so by studying bio-chemistry. They learn how to use it by watching sports on television, getting instructions from their personal trainers, and so on. Would these facts about how 'adrenalin' is learned and used warrant the conclusion that, for example, no dog could possibly produce adrenalin? After all, in the course of learning how to use the term 'adrenalin', most people never encounter anything with adrenalin pumping through it that does not also wear athletic apparel and sweat profusely (two things dogs do not do). The answer is obviously 'no.' Dogs, like many other mammals, produce adrenalin naturally. Yet this is exactly the kind of argument we would be allowed to make if the hidden premise of the semantic argument were true. The solution here, I suggest, is to abandon the idea that the meaning of a term is necessarily fixed by its common usage.

Is 'person' a theoretical or technical term? Philosophy is theory, and there certainly is a lot of philosophy being done nowadays in bio-ethics about what things are and are not people (although this

work has little to do with possibility of incorporeal personhood). Are frozen embryos people? How about foetuses? Are beings in persistent vegetative states people? The bio-ethics literature on these questions is vast. Whatever the answers are to them, I do not think they can be determined simply by consulting ordinary usage of the term 'person'. Otherwise, along the same lines as the semantic argument, we could make easy arguments for answering 'no' to all of these pressing questions in bio-ethics (e.g. 'Person words are quite manifestly and undeniably taught and learnt and used by and for reference to things with body temperatures above freezing, for things with body masses of more than several pounds, and of things that respond to their environments.') If 'person' is a theoretical term, then just because we do not ordinarily talk of incorporeal people is not a sufficient reason to think that the claim 'God is an incorporeal person' is incoherent. Of course, 'God is an incorporeal person' may be false; perhaps God does not exist. But whether or not 'God is an incorporeal person' is *true* is not the issue. The issue is whether it is *possibly* true. The conclusion of the semantic argument is that this core theistic claim is not possibly true. For the reasons stated, I think the semantic argument fails.

### 3 The personal identity argument

This argument against the possibility of the *existence* of an incorporeal person derives from an argument typically given against the possibility of the *survival* of corporeal people as incorporeal beings after their bodies are destroyed, so we will begin with a brief examination of this latter argument.

For Terence Penelhum, a claim of incorporeal survival amounts to a claim that there exists an incorporeal person in the afterlife identical with some embodied person.

...we need some way of understanding the identity of the disembodied being through various post-mortem stages, and some way of understanding the statement that some such being is identical to one particular pre-mortem being rather than with another. We shall not be able to understand either unless we can also understand the notion of the numerical difference between one such disembodied being and another one. (1970, p. 54)

Penelhum thinks we can make no sense of these ideas because the criterion of bodily continuity is our primary criterion of personal identity, whereas continuity of memory and character is not (because memory claims are logically dependent on physical, bodily checks). [The criterion of bodily continuity is roughly that person X at  $t_1$  is identical with person Y at  $t_2$  if and only if X and Y are parts of the same spatio-temporally continuous body; the criterion of memory and character is roughly that person X at  $t_1$  is identical with person Y at  $t_2$  if and only if Y

remembers being X and has the same character as X.] Penelhum concludes that our criteria of personal identity cannot apply to any putative incorporeal people.

Without the possibility of recourse to the bodily presence of the person at some past time we are unable to understand what it would be like to determine that some event or action is, or is not, part of this person's past life. So we would have no standard of identity to use of a disembodied person at all. (1970, p. 56)

Now if Penelhum is right, then it seems we generalise the argument to one against the possibility of identifying over time a non-embodied person (a person who not only does not now have a body, but never did). Augustinian theists (theists who think the divine incorporeal person does not persist over time, but rather exists outside of time) may be unconcerned about this result. Yet theists who think God is sempiternal (theists who think God exists in time, at every moment of time, and that God's life divides into past, present, and future) should care to respond to Penelhum's argument.

Swinburne responds that authors like Penelhum fail to distinguish the metaphysical issue of what personal identity consists in from the epistemological issue of how we can identify and re-identify persons. With respect to metaphysics, Swinburne thinks the diachronic identity of a person is 'something ultimate, not analysable in terms of bodily continuity or continuity of memory and character' (1977, p. 110). Even though we use a combination of facts about memory, character, and bodily features as *evidence* in determining personal identity, that does not mean that personal identity *consists* of these factors metaphysically. Hence Swinburne thinks it is coherent to claim that an earlier non-embodied person is identical to a later non-embodied person, even if we can have no evidence in support of this identity claim. Hence 'God is a persisting incorporeal person' will also be coherent. Again, whether this claim is *true* is a separate issue from whether this claim is coherent – that is, from whether this claim is *possibly* true.

Swinburne's approach is openly anti-verificationist. He uses the term 'empiricist theory of personal identity' (1977, p. 113) for any theory that claims personal identity does consist, metaphysically, of some combination of memory, character, and bodily continuity. His main objection to empiricist theories of personal identity is that they will always be such that it is logically possible for there to be no right answer to the question whether two persons are the same. Also, most of the popular empiricist theories of personal identity allow for duplication (i.e. that persons Y and Z at  $t_2$  are both identical with person X at  $t_1$ ) or allow for extrinsic considerations to have a bearing on personal identity (e.g. that whether

person Y at  $t_2$  is identical to person X at  $t_1$  will depend on whether or not person Z at some remote time and place does or does not survive a surgical operation). Since he thinks empiricist theories of personal identity never work, Swinburne concludes that metaphysical identity is ultimate and unanalyzable.

Penelhum, however, explicitly states that he is not confusing a metaphysical issue with an epistemic issue, and that verificationism plays no role in his argument against the metaphysical possibility of incorporeal personhood. In the very beginning of his book Penelhum states that he will assume verificationism is false.

...I therefore make the methodological presumption that it might be possible to make and to understand statements about disembodied persons even though we would not be in a position to specify a way of ascertaining their truth, and consider only problems that still remain if this assumption is made. (1970, p. 21)

He also is sensitive to the charge that his problems with the identity of incorporeal people are merely epistemic in nature.

...our argument is couched in terms that suggest it is at bottom an epistemological one. It seems to amount merely to the claim that we could not know whether a disembodied being was or was not identical with some past disembodied or embodied being. But we have put aside parallel epistemological considerations in dealing with problems about predication, in order to avoid making conceptual decisions hinge upon issues of very high philosophical generality. Might they not be put aside here? Surely the question is whether we can understand the belief that disembodied persons last through time, not one about how we would know that one had done so? (1970, p. 21)

Penelhum, then, is aware of the sort of charge Swinburne levels. Yet he still thinks the notion of incorporeal personhood is incoherent.

...the arguments [about the logical priority of the bodily criterion] do not show merely that we need physical tests in order to know whether men's memories can establish their identities. They also reveal that without availability of these physical tests there could be no reason for the application of the concept of personal identity. (1970, p. 68)

His basic argument for thinking that, in the absence of a body, there is no reason to apply the concept of personal identity is an argument from elimination. First, he denies that memory is the basis of personal identity; it is never the case, he thinks, that person Y at  $t_2$  is identical to person X at  $t_1$  just because Y remembers being X. [The arguments against memory being the basis of personal identity are familiar; I will not repeat them here.] Second, he assumes that sameness of body cannot serve as the basis for

personal identity in the case of an incorporeal thing, simply because an incorporeal thing lacks a body. Third, he claims that nothing else could serve as the basis for the identity of incorporeal things. In support of this third claim he attacks 'the venerable doctrine of spiritual substance'.

Beyond the wholly empty assurance that it is a metaphysical principle which guarantees continuing identity through time, or the argument that since we know identity persists some such principle must hold in default of others, no content seems available for the doctrine. Its irrelevance to normal occasions for identity-judgments is due to its being merely an alleged identity-guaranteeing condition of which no independent characterization is forthcoming. Failing this, the doctrine amounts to no more than a pious assurance that all is well, deep down. It provides no reason for this assurance. (1970, pp. 76-7)

In short, Penelhum will not allow souls as the bearers of personal identity for incorporeal beings. Penelhum will demand an 'independent characterization' of souls, and since he thinks there can be none to give, he thinks the very notion of an incorporeal person is incoherent.

In this debate I side with Swinburne over Penelhum, because I think Penelhum's argument proves too much. Penelhum's demand of any identity-guaranteeing condition that holds between two entities A and B that there be an independent characterization of it would lead to absurdities regarding physical objects. For example, we will be forced to conclude that we have no reason whatsoever to apply the concept of persistence to fundamental physical particles (henceforth FPPs).

Suppose a physicist said 'That FPP went from here to there.' This claim presupposes that the self-same entity – the FPP being referred to – persisted over time, because it takes some time for an FPP to get from one place to another. And this presupposes that we could have some reason for thinking that some FPP Y at  $t_2$  is identical to some FPP X at  $t_1$ . For the physicist rightly to apply this concept of persistence to FPPs, however, Penelhum (if he applies to FPPs the same standard he applies to souls) will demand that there be some identity-guaranteeing condition which can be 'independently characterized.'

I think this demand cannot be met, but since it is coherent to suppose FPPs persist over time, the demand is unreasonable. The problem is that there are no good candidates for that in terms of which the identity conditions of FPPs can be independently characterized. First, since FPPs are *fundamental* particles, it cannot be that what makes some FPP Y at  $t_2$  identical to some FPP X at  $t_1$  the fact that X is *composed* of the same particles of which Y is composed. Second, since FPPs are qualitatively identical

particles countless in number, it cannot be *qualitative* similarity between X and Y that makes Y identical with X. There will be countless FPPs all alike in their properties; that is part of what makes FPPs fundamental particles. Third, it cannot be that what makes some FPP Y at  $t_2$  identical to some FPP X at  $t_1$  is that a spatiotemporally continuous path can be traced from X to Y, because it is possible that FPPs do not move in spatiotemporally continuous paths (as modern quantum physics has shown us).

There do not seem to be any candidates for that which *makes* some FPP X at  $t_1$  identical to some FPP Y at  $t_2$ . It looks like X at  $t_1$  *just is* identical to Y at  $t_2$  – the identity relation is brute and unanalyzable, just like Swinburne suggests is the case with persons. It looks like there is no ‘identity-guaranteeing condition’ capable of ‘independent characterization.’ So either we accept that there just is a brute identity relation that holds between FPPs-at-times or, following Penelhum, we conclude that we have no reason for applying the concept of persistence to FPPs. To be consistent, Penelhum will have to say of the physicist’s claim that FPP X at  $t_1$  is identical to FPP Y at  $t_2$  that it rests on a ‘pious assurance that all is well, deep down.’ Now perhaps contemporary physics does face a fundamental philosophical problem here. Maybe souls have as companions in guilt FPPs, along with many other kinds of entity. But maybe the problem is that Penelhum demands too much when he asks that the ‘alleged identity-guaranteeing condition’ be capable of ‘independent characterization.’ If we reject Penelhum’s demand, we reject the key premise of the personal identity argument against the coherence of the idea of incorporeal personhood. As with the semantic argument, the personal identity argument misses its target.

#### *4 The argument from perception and agency*

The conclusion of the argument from perception and agency is that no incorporeal person could perceive the world or act in it. Hence the argument is not directed against the possibility of there being an incorporeal person, but if successful it would show that no incorporeal person could have the divine attributes of omnipotence and omniscience. A verificationist might argue that, if no incorporeal person could perceive the world or act in it, then no evidence could possibly confirm or refute the claim that an incorporeal person exists. By verificationist criteria, then, the claim that there exists an incorporeal person would be meaningless and the concept of an incorporeal person would be incoherent. Since verificationism is false, though, there seems to be no threat that the argument from perception and agency will show the concept of an incorporeal person to be incoherent. What the argument could show, though,

is that nothing could be incorporeal, omniscient, and omnipotent. That is a conclusion of obvious concern to the theist. Hence the argument from perception and agency deserves attention.

Let us begin with perception. Here is Alasdair MacIntyre on the topic of incorporeal perception.

If the dead survive and continue having visual experience, it is presumably visual experience detached from the causal conditions which in this life are necessary to sight. This is admitted in principle by the proponents of the hypothesis...but I do not think they see how much they are admitting... presumably for the dead, who possess no retina, sight is causally independent of light waves. Hence we can have no grounds for believing that with the dead it is either light or dark, and, in an important sense, to speak of sight without light is to speak incomprehensibly...in predicting survival one is involved in predicting the occurrence of light independent of light waves and this is an odd prediction.

...the prediction of visual experience after death is meaningless. And similar arguments will apply to the other senses. (1955, pp. 397-8)

MacIntyre claims that it is incoherent to speak of perception – seeing, tasting, feeling, hearing, smelling – that is independent of the causal conditions for perception (e.g. the existence of and interactions between ears and sound waves, retinas and light waves, noses and gases) which obtain in this world. Such talk ‘is meaningless,’ says MacIntyre.

Note MacIntyre thinks this objection to the idea of incorporeal perception applies equally to all forms of perception. In this he seems to be at odds with Terence Penelhum, who writes

I have no doubt that the hypothesis of disembodied touch is much more uninviting than that of disembodied hearing or vision. The reason for this is that touch is one of the senses that normally affects not only the percipient but also what he perceives. (1970, p. 34).

Yet all senses affect the world outside of the percipient, not just touch. Photons get absorbed in the process of seeing. Sound waves are dampened during the process of hearing. The concentration of a gas in a room is diminished slightly in the process of smelling. Here I agree with MacIntyre. Claims about disembodied perception are in the same boat no matter what sensory modality is under consideration. This issue is simply whether it is a conceptual truth that perception requires causal interaction between the perceiver and the perceived. According to those who run the argument from perception and agency, it is.

A similar argument can be made against the possibility of disembodied agency. It seems that acting in this world requires both an energy transfer from the actor to the acted upon and there being a spatiotemporally contiguous path between the actor and the

acted upon. Being non-physical, a disembodied being could not transfer energy to a bodily being. Being nonspatial, a disembodied being could not share a spatiotemporally contiguous path with a bodily being. Hence the very idea of a disembodied being acting upon the world is incoherent, just as is the idea of a disembodied being perceiving the world. Those, at least, are the allegations, and of course they should be very familiar ones to philosophers, for they are basically the standard objections to Cartesian dualism.

I respond by a model of disembodied perception and agency. As always, providing this model will in no way show that there is, in fact, a disembodied person somewhere. It will only show that the concept of disembodied personhood does not run into the sort of incoherence problem alleged by those running the argument from perception and agency. Before setting out this model, we must note what is *not* being challenged by the argument from perception and agency. The argument is *not* denying the possibility of nonmaterial states of mind. It is merely denying the possibility that any nonmaterial state of mind could count as a perception of a material reality or a cause of change in a material reality. And the basis for this denial is that no mental state could stand in the right sort of causal relation to a physical state for the former to count as a perception of the latter or for the former to count as having brought about the latter. I stress this point because otherwise we risk confusing the argument from perception and agency with a very different sort of argument. This would be an argument that necessarily minds are embodied – that the concept of a disembodied mind is incoherent. This argument explores very different territory. I happen to think its prospects for success are very slim, seeing as I find functionalist accounts of what minds are highly plausible. In any case, it is not the argument being made by MacIntyre and others.

Having clarified just what the argument from perception and agency is, we can ask a fundamental question. Why should we think perception and agency require a causal relationship hold between the perceiver and the thing perceived, the agent and the thing acted upon? Alternative, reliabilist models of perception and agency seem plausible alternatives to causal ones here. [For a classic exposition of what reliabilism is, see (Goldman 1979).] According to the reliabilist, what would make the experiences of an incorporeal person count as perceptions of the physical world is that those experiences are *reliable guides* about what is happening in the world. The bare fact that the right sorts of mental states are reliably correlated with the right sorts of physical states is, for the reliabilist, sufficient grounds for counting the former as perceptions of the latter, or for the former to count as bringing about the latter.

According to the reliabilist, it is not necessary that we know what grounds the reliability. Indeed, it is not necessary that there even be a causal mechanism grounding the reliability. So my very brief response to the argument from perception and agency is that it presupposes a causal theory of perception and a causal theory of agency. Since there are plausible theories of perception and agency other than causal ones, it seems to me we cannot judge the concepts of incorporeal perception and incorporeal agency as incoherent. These concepts may be incoherent *if we assume causal theories of perception and agency*. But why should we do that?

Now I realise here that I am bringing in philosophical considerations of a very general nature here in rebutting the argument from perception and agency. I hardly pretend to establish conclusively the coherence of divine incorporeal personhood in particular, much less Cartesian dualism in general. I only seek to show that there are respectable philosophical resources available to those who would defend the ideas of incorporeal perception and agency, and that if these individuals are to be convicted of believing something incoherent, the accusers have more work to do. And the same is true more generally of those who conceive of God as an incorporeal person. I hope I have shown that even if the concept of incorporeal personhood is incoherent, neither the semantic argument nor the personal identity argument nor the argument from perception and agency establishes it.<sup>1</sup>

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### Note and references

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