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I'm no soul, man: a response to Baltimore

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Abstract: **Joseph Baltimore argues that the account of postmortem survival I offered five years ago fails, based on the plausible assertion that identity is a relation that each thing necessarily stands in to itself. I believe that Baltimore is mistaken when he claims that the account I offer violates the necessity of identity, and also mistaken when he asserts that the account I offer cannot satisfy Noonan's 'only *x* and *y* principle'.**

Five years ago I offered an account of postmortem survival[1] that I claimed was logically compatible with two controversial theses. The first is that we human persons are wholly physical objects. The second is that a single human body cannot begin to exist more than once. Joseph Baltimore argues that the account I offered fails, based on the plausible assertion that identity is a relation that each thing necessarily stands into itself.[2] I believe that Baltimore is mistaken when he claims that the account I offer violates the necessity of identity, and also mistaken when he asserts that the account I offer cannot satisfy Noonan's 'only *x* and *y* principle'.[3]

Before I address the specific criticisms, I would like to point out that in fact I *deny* one of the controversial claims that I assume in offering the account of postmortem survival that Baltimore criticizes. The controversial claim that I deny is the claim that human bodies *cannot* enjoy gappy existence. I believe they can. For the purposes of the paper I wrote, however, I wanted to assume that human bodies could *not* enjoy gappy existence and show that, even if that's true, a physicalist about human persons could still plausibly believe in a postmortem existence. After saying why I do not believe that Baltimore's objections succeed against the account of postmortem existence I offered, I want to go on to show that the persistence conditions for organisms on which that account is based is itself compatible with gappy existence.

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Immanent-causal connection and the necessity of identity

I am a physical object insofar as I am wholly and essentially constituted by the living human organism that constitutes me. As a *wholly* physical object I have no immaterial parts such as an immaterial soul. I am not special in this regard. If it is true of me it is true of all human persons.[4] On such a view as this, it is not possible for me to continue to exist if my body should cease to exist. If I am to survive into an afterlife my body must survive into an afterlife.

The account of postmortem survival that I offered is meant to satisfy a particular account of the persistence conditions for organisms. According to the latter, a human body (or organism) B that exists at t_3 is the same as a human body A that exists at t_1, *in virtue of persisting from* t_1 *to* t_3, just in case the temporal stages leading up to B at t_3 are immanent-causally connected to the temporal stage of A t_1. The upshot here is that if a body B that exists at t_3 is going to be numerically the same as a body A that existed at t_1, then the physical simples that compose B at t_3 must be immanent-causally related to the simples that composed A at t_1. Thus, material continuity is not necessary for persistence. What matters for the persistence of physical objects in general is a kind of *causal* continuity, and what matters for human bodies in particular is that a *life-preserving* causal relation obtain between the physical simples composing B at t_3 and the physical simples that composed A at t_1.

The account of survival into an afterlife that I offered is the *fissioning-of-causal-paths* model, according to which the causal paths traced by the physical simples caught up in the life of my body just before death are made by God to fission such that the physical simples composing my body at that moment are causally related to two different and spatially segregated sets of simples. The one set would cease to be caught up in a life and instead come to compose a corpse, while the other would continue to constitute a body, either in heaven or in some sort of intermediate state of existence. I argued that if this is possible, and I see no a priori reason to think otherwise, then we have a view of survival that satisfies both of our controversial theses: human persons are wholly physical and wholly physical objects cannot enjoy gappy existence.

According to Baltimore, for all x and y, if $x=y$, then, necessarily, $x=y$. I agree. Identity is a relation that each thing *necessarily* stands into itself. But Baltimore claims that my account of postmortem survival is logically incompatible with that claim, saying 'Corcoran's account of resurrection violates NMI [the necessity of metaphysical identity] and, therefore, suffers from the absurd consequence of making identity contingent' (420, n. 7).

(I wish to offer the following clarificatory remark before moving on. The account I offered is *not* an account of resurrection. It can't be, as nothing dies and gets resurrected. It is an account of *survival* into an afterlife. Indeed, if one believes that the relevant Christian doctrine concerning an afterlife is that of

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resurrection, one might, for that reason alone, reject the account of survival I offered.)

To show that my account violates what Baltimore refers to as the necessity of metaphysical identity, he invites us to imagine the possibility of the requisite fissioning process producing two fission products, call them:

> B A body composed of a set of physical simples that is caught up in a life,

and,

> C A corpse composed of a set of physical simples that is not caught up in a life.

Baltimore rightly points out that, on the view I offered, B is the only viable candidate for identity with the causal ancestor to B and C. The reason is that B does, where C does not, stand in the right sort of causal relation to their mutual, causal ancestor, i.e. the immanent and life-preserving causal relation. Then, Baltimore says this:

> Now, it is [also] possible that both B at t_2 and C at t_2 survive the fission process. It seems that the same sort of causal relation that occurs between the set of physical simples that composes B at t_2 and the set of physical simples that composes [the causal ancestor to B] could be made by God to also occur between the set of physical simples that compose C at t_2 and the set of physical simples that composes [the causal ancestor to C]. (420)

Of course it's *possible* that both B at t_2 and C at t_2 survive the fission process. For in the imagined scenario they both *actually* survive the fission process, one as a corpse and the other as an organism or body. The relevant question is whether both B and C could survive *as* organisms or bodies at t_2. Baltimore thinks yes, and therefore believes that my account violates the necessity of identity. For if we have a doubly successful fission – i.e. a case in which *both* fission products are life-sustaining – then both B at t_2 and C at t_2 lay equal claim to identity with their causal ancestor, call it A. But both B at t_2 and C at t_2 cannot be identical to A as they are not identical to each other. Similarly, had the life-preserving causal relation been carried along the other branch, then A would have been identical to C (at t_2) and not to B (at t_2). Therefore, it appears as though A could be identical with numerically distinct objects, which is a violation of both the transitivity of identity and the very nature of identity as a one-term relation.

I suggested in the paper at issue that the theist can appeal to plausible claims concerning God that allows her to dodge just this sort of criticism. What I said then was that the theist who believes that God is a necessary being and who also believes that God essentially wills the good of His human creatures can plausibly argue that in the case of a single human body a doubly successful fission is impossible. It is impossible because a doubly successful fission would bring

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about the demise of the human creature that is the causal ancestor to both fission products, and that this conflicts with God's essentially willing the ultimate good of His human creatures. A doubly successful fission would bring about the demise of a human creature on the plausible assumption that the human creature that is the causal ancestor to both cannot be identical to numerically distinct offshoots. The claim here is not that God *would not* allow a doubly successful fission, on pain of bringing about the demise of one of His human creatures, but that God *could not*, given His nature of essentially willing their ultimate good.

Baltimore suggests that a human creature could be the source of such evil that God, a morally perfect being, would be forced to end that creature's existence. One clean way for God to do this, Baltimore suggests, is to bring about a doubly successful fission. For myself, I cannot imagine an omnipotent and essentially loving being such as God ever acting so as to bring about the ultimate destruction of one of His human creatures. But even if one thinks otherwise this still doesn't strike me as problematic for my view. Suppose an omnipotent and essentially loving being such as God *can* act so as to bring about the ultimate destruction of one of His *unredeemable* human creatures. Suppose, that is, there could be human creatures residing in hell and for whom redemption is no longer possible, such that the loving thing for God to do is to annihilate them. Even if that's the case, it is plausible to believe that *premortem* no human creature is in an unredeemable state and, therefore, given the nature of God's existence and His essentially willing the good of His human creatures, a doubly successful fission is not possible premortem. However, things stand on this theological issue, Baltimore asserts that there is an even deeper, *metaphysical* difficulty underlying my appeal to God.

The metaphysical difficulty Baltimore has his eye on is also one I addressed in the paper at issue. The difficulty involves a principle that Harold Noonan dubs 'the only *x* and *y* principle'. According to it, whether or not some objects *x* and *y* compose some concrete individual F should have nothing to do with events involving numerically distinct objects that are spatio-temporally segregated from F. Bringing the principle to bear on the case at issue, whether or not a human body A at t_1 survives into the future as B at t_2 (say) should have nothing to do with events involving C at t_2 (say). But on my view it sure looks like the survival of a body into an afterlife has everything to do with what happens to the *other* set of physical simples that are the causal offshoot of the original, namely, that the set *not* be caught up in a life.

What I said back then, and still hold to be a plausible response today, is that since immanent-causal connections are what matter for the persistence of physical objects, it must be the case (given the only *x* and *y* principle) that there is something in the very nature of immanent-causal connections that make the case of fission such that the immanent-causal relation goes one way, the other or

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neither. The reason is that its going both ways means the end of the human creature that is the causal ancestor.

Now Baltimore responds thus:

> First, notice that this reply dispenses with Corcoran's original argument that God's benevolent will would never allow the fission process to result in both B at t_2 and C at t_2 being causally related in the life-preserving way to [A at t_1]. On this new argument, the reason why both fission products cannot possibly survive is not found in God's will but, rather, in the nature of immanent causation. [And] … this new account fails to give any independent reason for thinking that immanent causation cannot possibly result in the survival of both fission products … Corcoran's account makes the existence of an individual dependent on factors wholly extrinsic to the individual. (423)

Here, I think Baltimore is mistaken. The reply I offer does not dispense with what I say about God's benevolent will being such that it cannot tolerate a doubly successful fission. Baltimore's mistake is like that commonly made in discussions of creation vs naturalistic explanation. Every semester I have at least one student who, after hearing a naturalistic explanation for the universe, will say, 'But I thought God created the universe'. And I wonder if after hearing a naturalistic explanation of the development of a human being in biology class (development that begins with a sperm and an oocyte, and ends up with the person before me) the same student would say to herself, 'But wait, I thought I was knit together in my mother's womb by God'. The mistake in the foregoing examples is to suppose that a naturalistic explanation is an alternative to God's being the creator of the universe or of a human being. It certainly *need* not be an alternative. God could be the creator *and* naturalistic explanations provide an account of how God did it.

Likewise, Baltimore seems to think that either God's benevolent will is the explanation for why a doubly successful fission is impossible or appeal to the nature of immanent-causal connections is the explanation, but not both. I see no reason, however, to believe that these are exclusive alternatives. Perhaps it is in virtue of the property of God's essentially willing the good for His human creatures that He builds into the nature of immanent-causality in worlds containing them this feature that makes fission such that the immanent-causal relation goes along only one or the other branch, but not both. That does not strike me as the least bit implausible. Moreover, the causal-theory-independent reason one might have for thinking that immanent causation cannot possibly result in the survival of both fission products (premortem) is precisely one's theological commitments: theological commitments of the sort already mentioned. The fact that I am unable to say precisely what the feature is in immanent causation that prevents the survival of both fission products in no way detracts from the account. The account is not viciously circular, so far as I can see. And it delivers exactly what it promised – an account of survival into an afterlife that accommodates both physicalism about human persons and the claim that a physical object cannot enjoy gappy existence.

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Postmortem survival and gaps

Although I believe that what I have said thus far provides a sufficient response to Baltimore, for the sake of clarity I would like to add the following thoughts on the matter of survival and temporal gaps. The immanent-causal condition on the persistence of human organisms is a condition that applies during any temporal stretch during which an organism exists. If our existence can have gaps in it, i.e. if we can exist, cease to exist, and then begin again to exist, then, quite obviously, the account does not apply *during* the gap, i.e. during the temporal stretch during which we do *not* exist. The condition is a condition for our *persistence* or *continued* existence.

Some philosophers, including Baltimore, hold that it is impossible for a material thing to have *two* beginnings; i.e. that a material thing like an organism cannot begin to exist, cease, and then begin again to exist. I am not among those philosophers. For I see no a priori reason to reject the possibility of gappy existence, even for physical objects. I admit, however, that absent a miracle, the prospects for gappy existence look pretty bleak. But I am a Christian theist, and I believe in miracles.

Miracle or not, it might be wondered whether it is plausible to believe that *immanent-causal* relations can cross a temporal gap. I think they can. In fact, here's an argument to that conclusion.

(1) Experience teaches that bodies cease to exist.
(2) Scriptures teach that my body is going to be raised.
(3) The immanent-causal condition on the persistence of organisms is true.
(4) Therefore, immanent-causal relations can cross temporal gaps.

Assuming that a requirement for my body to exist after ceasing is that the two relevant stages of its existence (the last stage of the pre-gap body and the first stage of the post-gap body) be immanent-causally related, it *must be* true that immanent-causal relations can cross gaps! Insofar as one justifiably believes the argument above is sound, it provides one with good reason for believing that gappy existence is compatible with the controversial claim that immanent-causal relations can cross temporal gaps.

Suppose, for the sake of argument, however, that it's not possible for immanent-causal relations to cross gaps. Does it follow that resurrection life is therefore impossible? No. Again, one might argue that the immanent-causal condition is a *diachronic* condition, i.e. it applies *across* an interval of time during which the organism exists. But take the first instant of my body's pre-gap existence. At that instant there are no stages to be immanent-causally connected. But it is *that* body which God causes to exist. Well, if God causes that body to exist once why couldn't God cause it to exist a second time? Perhaps like the first time,

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once it is brought into existence what will make it the case that some later stage is a stage of the same body is that immanent-causal relations link those stages. But what makes the first stage of the post-gap body a different stage of the same body that perished is just that God makes it so.

Alternatively, one might argue that the 'must' in – *there must be an immanent-causal link between two stages if those are stages of the same body* – needn't be a metaphysical 'must', i.e. a 'must' that applies in every possible situation. It could be a *nomological* 'must', i.e. it could be what must occur, *given the laws of nature that obtain in the world we inhabit*. In other words, one could argue that the immanent-causal condition is not a metaphysically necessary condition on the persistence of bodies, but a nomologically necessary one. And since it is reasonable to believe that the 'natural' laws that govern the postmortem world of the New Jerusalem might be quite different than those governing this world, it may not be the case that immanent-causal connections unite the last stage of the pre-gap body and the first and succeeding stages of the post-gap body. Even so, all of those stages could be stages of the *same* body.

Conclusion

The account of survival originally offered does not, I believe, violate the necessity of identity or Noonan's 'only x and y principle'. It offers a way to embrace survival into an afterlife that is compatible with both physicalism about human persons and the claim that physical objects cannot enjoy gappy existence. But the account of persistence for organisms offered in the paper, which requires immanent-causal connections between different stages of an organism's career, is also compatible with the claim that physical objects like human bodies *can* enjoy gappy existence. Either way, postmortem existence is perfectly compatible with a materialist metaphysic of human nature.

Notes

1. Kevin Corcoran 'Physical persons and postmortem survival without temporal gaps', in *idem* (ed.) *Soul, Body, and Survival: Essays on the Metaphysics of Human Persons* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2001).
2. Joseph Baltimore 'Got to have soul', *Religious Studies*, **42** (2006), 417–430. All page references in the text are to this article.
3. Harold Noonan *Personal Identity* (London: Routledge, 1989), 152.
4. One may wish to present Jesus Christ as an obvious counter-example to this claim. I would point out, however, that according to Christian doctrine Jesus Christ was (and is) not a *human* person. He was (and is) a *divine* person (as the second person of the Trinity) with a human *nature*.

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